HENRY MILLER AND THE MECHANISM OF MODERNITY

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> "The aim of life is to live, and to live means to be aware, joyously, drunkenly, serenely, divinely *aware*… By the force and power of the artist's vision, the static, synthetic whole which is called the world is destroyed. The artist gives back to us a vital, singing universe, alive in all its parts."
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> Henry Miller, "Creative Death"[1]

ABSTRACT: Like many twentieth century writers, Henry Miller diagnosed a "spiritual famine" besetting modern civilisation. This condition was, Miller believed, characteristic of a mechanistic mode of thought that viewed everything from the outside, and whose only values were strictly instrumental. This essay focuses on Miller's works from the 1930s, and seeks to present his diagnosis in its broader intellectual context.

KEYWORDS: Machanism; Modernism; Organicism

There has always been a great deal of tension in Henry Miller's received legacy, in large part due to the obscenity charges and censorship which both created and defined his fame. To the insipid question "what *are* Miller's works", there are as many answers as there are taxonomists. Erica Jong speaks of the irony that Miller, "really the heir of Thoreau and Whitman" and a "great philosophical writer", has

[1] Henry Miller, "Creative Death", *Purpose* 10, no. 2 (1938), 68.

been received as the "King of Smut"[2]. One *could* follow Jong and regard Miller as a philosopher of sorts: there are particularly clear affinities between his work and the logorrhoea of some French philosophers, notably Jean-Paul Sartre[3]. But Miller makes no pretence of *arguing* for anything.

Anaïs Nin describes *Tropic of Cancer* as "a wild extravagance, a mad gaiety, a verve, a gusto, at times almost a delirium."[4] The only word I disagree with there is *almost*. Miller is at his best raving, and at his worst merely ranting. He ranks among the twentieth century's great Schwärmer. He gets carried away and carries away. For example, in *Tropic of Cancer*, Miller writes "I love everything that flows". Then comes the deluge:

> "…rivers, sewers, lava, semen, blood, bile, words, sentences. I love the amniotic fluid when it spills out of the bag. I love the kidney with its painful gallstones, its gravel and what-not; I love the urine that pours out scalding and the clap that runs endlessly; I love the words of hysterics and the sentences that flow on like dysentery and mirror all the sick images of the soul; I love the great rivers like the Amazon and the Orinoco, where crazy men like Moravagine float on through dream and legend in an open boat and drown in the blind mouths of the river. I love everything that flows, even the menstrual flow that carries away the seed unfecund."[5]

Dysenterous sentences indeed. There's no holding back:

> "I love everything that flows, everything that has time in it and becoming, that brings us back to the beginning where there is never end: the violence of the prophets, the obscenity that is ecstasy, the wisdom of the fanatic, the priest with his rubber litany, the foul words of the whore, the spittle that floats away in the gutter, the milk of the breast and the bitter honey that pours from the womb, all that is fluid, melting, dissolute and dissolvent, all the pus and dirt that in flowing is purified, that loses its sense of origin, that makes the great circuit toward death and dissolution."

Miller is – not by turns, but at once – prophetic and scatologic. It's little surprise he's often placed alongside other "towering anomalies of authorship", especially Whitman[6]. Yet such a comparison is no sooner made than qualified.

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2 Quoted in Irene Lacher, "2 Devils at Large", *LA Times*, Mar 3, 1993.

3 Interestingly, among philosophers, it is above all the French – including Bataille and Deleuze – who have appreciated Miller.

4 Anaïs Nin, preface to Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), xxxi.

5 Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*, 257-8.

6 Lawrence Durrell, introduction to Henry Miller, *The Henry Miller Reader* (New York: New Directions, 1969), ix.

Philip Roth puts it most laconically, calling Miller "the Whitman of the twentieth century, though not as good"[7]. As good a *what*—a man of letters, a man *simpliciter*, or a visionary? I see it now—a Parnassus of the heaped corpses of the poets, and readers clambering around, some armed with altimeters, and others, like haruspices past, inspecting entrails for hallmarks of divine favour.

Lawrence Durrell avers that Miller is "rather a visionary than merely a writer"[8]. Perhaps Durrell, a serious *littérateur*, can be excused that "merely". Serious too is Karl Shapiro, with his high-flown claim that Miller writes not novels but "Wisdom literature"[9]—capital W for Worcestershire. Jong endorses Shapiro's description, regarding the fictional form as "a cloak for philosophical truths"[10]. However sceptical we might be of any claim that Miller's work "rises above literature", the view that his stories are mere pretexts to homiletics is surely nearer the truth than the reading of Henry Miller, formalist.

This last is argued by James Decker, who writes of Miller's "narratologically innovative methods of spiral form"[11]. Jolly amusing stuff that, but excepting the Miller specialist, one does not read Miller for technical innovation any more than one reads Rabelais for a geography lesson. Durrell has it right in a letter to Miller: "like all American geniuses you have no sense of form whatsoever"[12]. No, Jim. One reads Miller for the sheer litanic propulsion[13], the cockeyed rhapsodies, the buffoon apocalyptics, the full-bore primitivism, the reprobate moralism.

Yes, moralism. George Orwell acclaimed Miller in 1940 as "the only

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[7] Quoted in David Skinner, "Philip Roth", *Humanities* 32, no. 2, 26.

[8] Durrell, introduction to *The Henry Miller Reader*, ix.

[9] Karl Shapiro, "The Greatest Living Author", prefixed to Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*, v.

[10] Erica Jong, *The Devil At Large* (New York: Grove Press, 1994), 41.

[11] James Decker, *Henry Miller and Narrative Form* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2005), 30.

[12] Lawrence Durrell and Henry Miller, *A Private Correspondence* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), 253.

[13] In "Obscenity in Literature" (*New Directions* 16, 1957, 238-9), Miller quotes Arthur Machen saying that Rabelais' lists – his "cataracts of obscenity" – in their "more than frankness, that ebullition of grossness", are "either the merest lunacy, or else… sublime." Miller plainly intended the comparison to his own work. Of course, Whitman also filled his poetry with lists. A less recognised antecedent for Miller is Blaise Cendrars' *Moravagine* (mentioned in the *Cancer* quote above). What Machen said of *Pantagruel* – "the essence of the book is its splendid celebration of ecstasy" – Miller could say of all books. Those who would read Miller as "philosopher" must account for the fact that he treats even philosophical works like Bergson's as intoxicants. In *Tropic of Capricorn* (New York: Grove, 1961), 219, Miller says of *Creative Evolution* that he "never understood the book" and that he approached it like "a man going through the rites of initiation", as a means of "disorientation and reorientation". This is, to quote Aristotle on the mysteries, an encounter in which one "doesn't learn anything but suffers and becomes disposed in a certain way".

imaginative prose-writer of the slightest value who has appeared among the English-speaking races for some years past", before adding that he is a "completely negative, unconstructive, amoral writer, a mere Jonah, a passive acceptor of evil, a sort of Whitman among the corpses"[14]. But what strikes me about Miller's writing as much as its amorality is its constant moralising and its white-hot proselytism.

Miller said that "it goes… without saying that I am an essentially religious person"[15]. Yet this has been left not only unsaid but largely unseen. In *Henry Miller and Religion*, Thomas Nesbit appeals to the violent iconoclasm as explanatory[16]: Miller opens his first major work with "a kick in the pants to God"[17], and the second with the promise to "meet Him calmly and spit in His face"[18]. This *does* present a problem for the American religious mind, which inclines to unambiguous avowals, preferably in colossal neon lights.

The rejoinder comes from the Jewish mystic Eric Gutkind[19], whom Miller quotes as warning us "beware of the man who always has God on his lips, he is the furthest from God"[20]. I imagine this resonates with anyone who moves among the vapourings of professed men of spirit: those who expound endlessly on the divine are often trying to shake off doubts through the sheer action of the gums. Along similar lines, Nesbit states in passing that "Miller's project is certainly in line with the Zen practice of "killing the Buddha""[21], but doesn't deign to explain what this means. The instruction "if you meet the Buddha on the path, kill him" dates back to the ninth-century Chan master Linji Yixuan. The thought is roughly that of an iconoclastic Augustine: outward and visible signs cramp inward and spiritual graces. The divine must not be discovered without, which results in idolatry, but only within: in Miller's words, "it is not ideal, abstract, flawless or

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[14] George Orwell, "Inside the Whale", in *A Collection of Essays* (San Diego: Harvest, 1946), 251-2.
15 Quoted in Thomas Nesbit, *Henry Miller and Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 1.
[16] Nesbit, *Henry Miller and Religion*, 2.
[17] Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*, 2.
[18] Miller, *Tropic of Capricorn*, 9.
[19] Despite his influence on Miller, Gutkind is not so much as mentioned in Nesbit's book. This is in itself no great issue, except that Nesbit's work, unlike this paper, was intended to elucidate influences. Yet even major ones, like Powys, are mentioned only in passing.
[20] Quoted in conversation with Twinka Thiebaud, *What Doncha Know?* (California, Eio Books, 2011), 168.
[21] Nesbit, *Henry Miller and Religion*, 2.

permanent; rather it is tangible, immediate, flexible, quotidian"[22].

But Miller is plainly no Zennist, austere in all things, including religious avowals. He is a babbler with few equals, a prodigal who claims not only his biological father, the tailor, but many spiritual fathers, with each patrimony burning another hole in his Heinrich Miller suit. Talk of god is far from absent, it may just be that readers' attention is misdirected. Nesbit claims that an obstacle to Miller's religious reception has been that "most skip to the "dirty parts," leaving the bulk of the books unread."[23] How Nesbit knows what most readers do is beyond me, but it seems undeniable that the conspicuous sex is rather a sticking point in a culture that cleaves the sexual from the spiritual. But perhaps more importantly, with Miller, the sex is never good. That is precisely the point[24]. In *Tropic of Cancer*, he compares a couple having sex to a rotary letter press pumping out newspapers:

> "It seems to me that I'm looking at a machine whose cogs have slipped. Left to themselves, they could go on this way forever, grinding and slipping… It needs the touch of a human hand to set it right. It needs a mechanic."[25]

Miller sees even sex as having become hollow and mechanical, something to be viewed from the outside, something with "no human significance". There is no mystery even here, where our most vital connection should be: we merely apply axle-grease and go through the motions.

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Miller despises the bureaucratisation of modern life, writing that "the wonder and the mystery of life… is throttled in us" as we become programmed in the "ordered fatuity of responsible, adult life"[26]. He is especially critical of the metropolis, whose "complicated web... serves no purpose but to thwart, cramp and inhibit free spirits."[27] Miller believes that the human being disintegrates in the city: immersed in an artificial order, the body itself becomes a mere

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[22] Fraenkel and Miller, *Hamlet*, 225.
[23] Nesbit, *Henry Miller and Religion*, 2.
[24] Vidal misses this when he criticises Miller's "hydraulic approach to sex". See Gore Vidal, "The Sexus of Henry Miller," *Book Week*, Aug. 1, 1965.
[25] Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*, 144.
[26] Miller, *Tropic of Capricorn*, 145.
[27] Henry Miller, *Stand Still Like the Hummingbird* (New York: New Directions, 1962), 117

assemblage of mechanical parts, to be directed by "the blind switchboard of the will"[28].

In this essay, I will focus on Miller's diagnosis of modernity's "spiritual famine,"[29] and take up his pungent criticisms of America, which he describes as both "the schizophrenic Paradise"[30] and as a "cesspool" over which moves only the "spirit of work"[31]. For Miller, America is the envy of the world because outsiders only see the gleaming exterior, not realising that the American soul is "empty, restless and miserable"[32]:

> "Outwardly it seems to be a beautiful honeycomb, with all the drones crawling over each other in a frenzy of work; inwardly it's a slaughterhouse, each man killing off his neighbour and sucking the juice from his bones."[33]

Miller despairs of political solutions to the modern predicament, writing that "the human race is not the sort that brings itself to the point of destruction in order to experience a change of heart"[34]. Miller is not, in his own words, "an atomizer from which you can squeeze a thin spray of hope."[35] Icarus has taken flight, and his humiliation is not going to be brought about by public policy, but by the sun.

At the individual level, however, Miller is much more sanguine. Here, the artist plays a vital role: "to sow strife and ferment so that… those who are dead may be restored to life"[36]. Miller writes that art must lead us back to "the enduring fact of mystery". Here again he quotes Gutkind:

> "The stupendous fact that we stand in the midst of reality will always be something far more wonderful than anything we do."[37]

It is this reorientation towards mystery which Miller seeks in his books. For

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[28] Michael Fraenkel and Henry Miller, *Hamlet* (London: Carrefour, 1962), 386.
[29] Henry Miller, "An Open Letter to Surrealists Everywhere", in *The Cosmological Eye* (New York: New Directions, 1939), 153.
[30] Fraenkel and Miller, *Hamlet*, 266.
[31] Miller, *Tropic of Capricorn*, 12.
[32] Henry Miller, *The Colossus of Maroussi* (New York: New Directions, 1941), 6.
[33] Miller, *Tropic of Capricorn*, 42.
[34] Fraenkel and Miller, *Hamlet*, 409.
[35] Miller, *Black Spring*, 24.
[36] Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*, 253.
[37] Henry Miller, "The Absolute Collective", reprinted in *The Wisdom of the Heart* (New York: New Directions, 1941), 93.

Miller, art is not for art's sake but "only a means to life, to the life more abundant"[38]. The artist's purpose is to "revive the primitive, anarchic instincts which have been sacrificed for the illusion of living in comfort" and to bring about a "renascence of wonder"[39].

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Miller's early years were lived in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Adjacent to where he lived was Filmore Place, a single block-long street, which is described in *Tropic of Capricorn*:

> "…the ideal street – for a boy, a lover, a maniac, a drunkard, a crook, a lecher, a thug, an astronomer, a musician, a poet, a tailor, a shoemaker, a politician… each one a world unto himself and all living together harmoniously and inharmoniously, *but together*, a solid corporation, a close-knit human spore…"[40]

This organism decayed rapidly with the completion of the Williamsburg Bridge in 1903. Miller says this "brought about the disintegration of our little world" as Williamsburg became an annex of Manhattan:

> "On the New York side the riverfront was rapidly being transformed owing to the erection of the skyscrapers. On our side, the Brooklyn side, the warehouses were piling up and the approaches to the various new bridges created plazas, comfort stations, pool rooms, stationery shops, ice cream parlours, restaurants, clothing stores, hock shops, etc. In short everything was becoming *metropolitan*, in the odious sense of the word."[41]

Miller's family moved on to a "Lutheran cemetery, where the tombstones were always in order and the wreaths never faded"[42], but the undoing of Williamsburg remained for Miller a prime example of that American religion without equal, progress. In America, Miller writes, the past is "wiped out of the consciousness, trampled upon, obliterated," and the new is "a moth which eats into the fabric of life, leaving nothing finally but a great hole."[43]

For Miller, while all metropolises are unhealthy, New York is especially sick.

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[38] Henry Miller, "Reflections on Writing", reprinted in *The Wisdom of the Heart*, 24.
[39] Miller, "An Open Letter to Surrealists", 156.
[40] Miller, *Tropic of Capricorn*, 215.
[41] Miller, *Tropic of Capricorn*, 217.
[42] Miller, *Black Spring*, 3.
[43] Miller, *Tropic of Capricorn*, 217.

He argues that to live here is not to inhabit a place, but an abstraction. Not only human but geological history has been razed. Returning briefly in 1935 after several years in Paris, Miller describes the "appalling flatness"[44] of New York, a city graded in the nineteenth century, the low places exalted and the hills laid low.

Our sense of order – of how part relates to whole, and many to one – is vital. But the only order Miller finds in New York is a mechanical one. He writes that "to be local there must be a sense of place, and there must be a whole to which the parts refer," whereas in New York, "there are just millions of things unrelated one to the other, except as one part of a machine is related to another."[45] This is not so much a place that has grown organically as an assemblage of discrete parts arrayed on a rational grid, parts which are swapped out without a trace at intervals when deemed obsolete. Miller later describes New York as "spread out with senseless geometrical rigidity, an evil dream rearing itself architecturally"[46]—a city where people attempt to straighten out nature, unaware that "the world has not to be put in order: the world *is* order incarnate."[47]

Central to Miller's vision is a sense that a wholly man-made order is fundamentally dehumanising. Such an order admits nothing except instrumental values, which are everywhere confused for ultimate values. You toil to afford what promises ease and comfort, but "nobody knows what it is to sit on his ass and be content"[48]. At the day's end, you flop on the couch with a department store catalogue and dream up new excuses to work. Ben Franklin eat your heart out. The 20s and 30s saw the mass proliferation of the automobile, which Miller considers the "symbol of falsity and illusion"[49]. Every American has to have one, and "if he has enough money to own a Ford he wants a Packard; if he has a Packard he wants a Rolls Royce, and if he has a Rolls Royce he wants an aeroplane…"[50] A year's wages spent on a "shining tin chariot" to park in the lot in front of the factory—freedom, what? And on the weekend, drive it to the store

[44] Henry Miller, *Aller Retour New York* (London: Hesperus Press, 2007), 13.
[45] Miller, *Aller Retour New York*, 80.
[46] Henry Miller, *Sexus* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 374.
[47] Miller, *Sexus*, 213.
[48] Miller, *Tropic of Capricorn*, 42.
[49] Henry Miller, *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (New York: New Directions, 1945), 33
[50] Henry Miller, "Money and How It Gets that Way", reprinted in *Stand Still Like the Hummingbird*, 153.

and load up with crap you don't need. Saith the ad man: "All Cars Transfer to Bloomingdale's"—or to Macy's and further on down, but have ye hope and always a prayer on your lips for higher things: God willing, one day you may shop among the rich.

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Bloomingdale's. In the *Tropic of Capricorn*, Miller discovers in it a microcosm of New York's order:

> "All department stores are symbols of sickness and emptiness, but Bloomingdale's is my special sickness, my incurable obscure malady. In the chaos of Bloomingdale's there is an order, but this order is absolutely crazy to me; it is the order which I would find on the head of a pin if I were to put it under the microscope. It is the order of an accidental series of accidents accidentally conceived."[51]

Everything has its place, as governed by the store map. Halitosis, sir? Try Listerine. Just follow the signs! Seventh floor, right behind the electric carving knives and the potato guillotines. Can't miss it.

It is a purely external order, where things which have "nothing in common" are "welded together". In this, Miller finds an image of New York's "external civilization, visible in knobs, bulbs, brackets, racks, screws, pulleys, steel, cement"[52]. Here "you walk amidst facts day in and day out". It is a world without why. Face facts: all these things are just there because they're there and that's where they are! Miller writes that "in Bloomingdale's I fall apart completely: I dribble on to the floor, a helpless mess of guts and bones and cartilage"[53]. The department store makes him a "schizerino", as mind separates from body. Miller uses the same word to describe the effect of wandering New York's streets:

> "Being of the city, of the only city in the world and no place like Broadway anywhere, I used to walk up and down staring at the floodlit hams and other delicacies. I was a schizerino from the sole of my boots to the tips of my hair."[54]

In a letter from this period, Miller writes that "New York… threatens all unity

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[51] Miller, *Tropic of Capricorn*, 205.
[52] Miller, *Aller Retour New York*, 76.
[53] Miller, *Tropic of Capricorn*, 205.
[54] Miller, *Tropic of Capricorn*, 198.

of person" and adds that "America is the schizophrenic Paradise"[55].

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Tropic of Capricorn presents a fictional account of Miller's years in the 1920s working in New York as an employment manager for Western Union, which he baptises the "Cosmodemonic Telegraph Company". Within a few months of taking the job, Miller writes,

> "I was sitting at Sunset Place hiring and firing like a demon. It was a slaughter-house, so help me God. The thing was senseless from the bottom up. A waste of men, material and effort. A hideous farce against a backdrop of sweat and misery."[56]

It was "the fastest form of communication known to man," but toward what end? All these "energetic Americans" with "their insane rhythm"[57] were rushing about just to transmit *facts*. Buy orders. Sell orders. What price strychnine? Dinner plans cancelled. Bargain rate hamster wheels. Or,

> "…so that the moment you drop dead in the street your next of kin may be apprised immediately, that is to say within an hour, unless the messenger to whom the telegram is entrusted decides to throw up the job and throw the whole batch of telegrams in the garbage can."[58]

This telegraphic senselessness again serves as a microcosm of New York, in whose "logic there is no redemption, the city itself being the highest form of madness and each and every part, organic or inorganic, an expression of this same madness"[59].

Miller writes of New York in *Black Spring:*

> "The sky's choked with illuminated merchandise, every single article of which is guaranteed to be pleasant, healthful, durable, tasty, noiseless, rainproof, imperishable, the nec plus ultra without which life would be unbearable were it not for the fact that life is already unbearable because there is no life."[60]

There is no life because there is no culture, nothing other than clutter without and void within. As Miller puts it later, "our world is a world of *things*"—and what

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[55] Fraenkel and Miller, *Hamlet*, 266.
[56] Miller, *Tropic of Capricorn*, 19.
[57] Miller, *Tropic of Capricorn*, 289.
[58] Miller, *Tropic of Capricorn*, 72.
[59] Miller, *Tropic of Capricorn*, 121.
[60] Henry Miller, *Black Spring*, (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 123.

he takes Americans to fear most in an outbreak of war is that "we shall be obliged to give up our gew-gaws, our gadgets, all the little comforts which have made us so uncomfortable"[61]. For Miller, these "mechanical devices have nothing to do with man's real nature – they are merely traps which Death has baited for him"[62].

Miller finds this "queasy and quaky"[63] American soul expressed in the New York streets, which he walks all day without finding an inviting place to park his tochus[64]. To sit is fine if you're in transit, if you're heading somewhere else. The city prods you to move on. And what is the meaning of all this movement? As Miller writes in *Tropic of Cancer*, there is in New York "a sort of atomic frenzy to the activity... a constant ferment, but it might just as well be going on in a test tube"[65]. The energy is "absolutely uncoordinated", a blind rush nowhere in particular. It is, Miller puts it memorably, "a whole city erected over a hollow pit of nothingness."

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Backwardness is, in mainstream America, a cardinal sin. Miller is an unrepentant mossback in the megalopolis. He sees that "the future belongs to the machine, to the robots"[66]. We have falsely separated man from nature, from the animate world, and are thus transforming ourselves into "creaking machinery"[67]. But for Miller, there is at least one city that isn't so crushingly mechanistic: Paris, where he lived for most of the 1930s.

There are, to begin with, ample places in Paris to sit and watch it all go by. The *it* doesn't only rush but saunters. Even the beggars here, Miller writes, "give the illusion of being at home", something which "distinguishes the Parisian from all other metropolitan souls". This is in especial contrast to "cold, glittering, malign" New York, where "even a rich man feels his unimportance" beneath the dominating buildings[68].

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[61] Miller, *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, 17.
[62] Miller, *Colossus*, 113.
[63] Miller, *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, 17.
[64] Miller, "Glittering Pie", in *The Cosmological Eye*, 344.
[65] Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*, 68.
[66] Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*, 240.
[67] Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*, 254.
[68] Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*, 68.

In Paris, the newspaper is exchanged for a novel, and the briefcase for a baguette—what Miller calls "The Staff of Life" in a delightful essay of that title. Man does not live by bread alone, but Miller takes the prevailing indifference in America to good bread as the "prime symbol" of how "the very core of life is contaminated"[69]. What the American eats is the product of ad men and nutritionists, not bakers. It comes wrapped in cellophane, and is the product of sterile laboratories, having never encountered a human hand. With dozens of ingredients, it is essentially inedible, unless one eats the packaging—which of course is precisely what one is encouraged to do. It is, Miller writes, "a reducing bread" which is to be choked down as a medicine: "two slices… three times a day".

Miller argues that most Americans do not eat for pleasure, but "because the bell rings three times a day". Already half way to becoming a machine, the American doesn't savour, but simply recharges: "Throw anything down the hatch to stop the gnawing and swallow a dozen vitamins." The Frenchman, on the other hand, does not laud productivity for its own sake. He takes seriously these small, simple things—and has little flair for bureaucracy. Thus, upon returning to France in 1935, Miller writes: "Nothing works right. Nothing is in readiness. Or, so it seems. It's the French way, and I love it."[70]

This sounds, and is, a highly romantic view of Parisian culture. Yet it isn't born of inexperience. Miller arrived in Paris in 1930, bringing the Depression with him. This was not *la vie bohème* in any glorious sense but grinding poverty. For years, he was often homeless, usually hungry, and almost always trying to make a touch. Miller's was not the fashionable Paris of the Lost Generation, but of working-class Clichy, where he railed against the introduction of electric light into this cave-like world. Miller says that most Americans find it "impossible… to conceive of a paradise without modern plumbing"[71]. But modern comforts be damned. It was precisely those he was escaping: the world he would later describe as the "airconditioned nightmare". As Miller puts it in the book of that title, "there

[69] Henry Miller, "The Staff of Life", in *Remember to Remember* (London: Grey Walls Press, 1952), 62. What Miller writes here of "the American" applies roughly to the WASP. Just as in his celebration of sour rye in *Tropic of Capricorn* (126-132), Miller makes exceptions at the margins of American society.
[70] Miller, *Aller Retour New York*, 74.
[71] Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*, 152.

are kinds and degrees of suffering; the worst, in my opinion, is the sort one encounters in the very heart of progress"[72].

There is squalor in Miller's Paris, but also an earthen vitality. It is a world of smells, of incense and excrement, of "the odor of the menagerie" which Miller describes in the work of his beloved Petronius, Apuleius, and Rabelais[73]. In America, where the Protestant nose[74] points the way,

> "… of nothing you are allowed to get the real odor or the real savour. Everything is sterilized and wrapped in cellophane. The only odor which is recognized and admitted as an odor is halitosis, and of this all Americans live in mortal dread"[75].

Miller discovers in Paris the antithesis of the deodorised, sanitised world of his Lutheran family who, with their "doctrine of cleanliness", were "painfully clean" while "inwardly they stank":

> "Never once had they opened the door which leads to the soul; never once did they dream of taking a blind leap into the dark. After dinner the dishes were promptly washed and put in the closet; after the paper was read it was neatly folded and laid away on a shelf; after the clothes were washed they were ironed and folded and then tucked away in the drawers. Everything was for tomorrow, but tomorrow never came"[76].

Miller sees the Parisian as having a sense of the poetry of the present. Treasures are not laid up in heaven, in the beyond, but relished here and now. With this comes an appreciation of the artist, and a sense that poverty can have dignity. In America, Miller writes, "to be an artist is to be a moral leper"[77], and to be poor is – as Brassaï puts it – "a sign of moral defect, a badge of shame that society could not pardon"[78].

In contrast with what he describes as the crushing monotony of New York[79], Miller writes of the "marked lack of uniformity" in Paris: "wherever the eye falls there is color, irregularity, whimsy, individuality". This is a city which presents "a

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[72] Miller, *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, 27.
[73] Miller, *Black Spring*, 51.
[74] C.f. Anon, "Anti-Ritualism in the City", *The Saturday Review*, March 21, 1868, 382-3.
[75] Miller, "Glittering Pie", 343.
[76] Miller, *Tropic of Capricorn*, 11.
[77] Miller, *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, 16.
[78] Brassaï, *Henry Miller: The Paris Years*, trans. Timothy Bent (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1995), 7.
[79] Miller, *Aller Retour New York*, 13.

melange or stew that never fails to whet the appetite of a poet or a painter"[80].

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In Paris, Miller befriends many visual artists—among the best known: Zadkine, Kokoschka, Ernst, and Soutine. He compares the painters to the writers in his Parisian circle: because the painters live "continuously with flesh, textures, objects, and not merely with ideas, abstractions, complexes", they are "nearly always good cooks", while the writers are "so often pale, awkward, incompetent."[81] (How times have changed: who'd want to dine on the purely conceptual cooking of the contemporary artist?)

It is this immediacy, this "feeling for bone and contour"[82], that Miller praises most highly. It is a feeling he associates with the *southern*. In a 1930s letter to Emil Schnellock, Miller speaks of a "decisive turning point" in the lives of great artists "when they discover the south in themselves and live out the other hemisphere of their being":

> "All wisdom, as I see it, consists in reconciling these two faces... In the northern world: idealism, striving, Idea. In the south: life for its own sake, hedonism, action and contemplation, ideas related to living. Goethe is a marvellous example of the blending of these two hostile spirits…"[83]

The south is above all a psychological discovery, and many of Miller's examples – among the Transcendentalists, but also Goethe, Nietzsche, and Hamsun – are his fellow recovered protestants. "Recovered" not because they have lost their faith but because they have regained their animality. Miller's is here in tune with Nietzsche, who argues that "the most spiritual men are sensualists in the best faith"[84].

Like these forebears, Miller was gripped by a vision of wholeness. Not as a "pale, attenuated idea" which demands to be "fattened by slaughter"[85], but as a

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[80] Henry Miller, *To Paint is to Love Again* (New York: Grossman, 1968), 22.
[81] Miller, *To Paint is to Love Again*, 16.
[82] Miller, *Black Spring*, 50.
[83] Henry Miller, *Letters to Emil* (New York: New Directions, 1989), 150.
[84] I discuss this view at some length with respect to Goethe in Andrew Milne, *Nietzsche as Egoist and Mystic* (Palgrave, 2021), esp. 54.
[85] Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*, 97.

living reality. Miller wrote that "the man who is whole sees whole"[86], and rejected the one-sided intellectual life of the writer. While hardly a Renaissance man, Miller cultivated broad interests: he was a cyclist who paced the six-day racers, an avid ping-pong player, an amateur pianist (in later years, under the tutelage of Jakob Gimpel), and a bungling water-colourist. This last was especially important to Miller, who quoted Goethe saying that "people should talk less and draw more"[87]. This even though Miller knew, as Goethe too had known, that he had no real talent for visual art. It helped to prevent him becoming "a cold-blooded fish of the air"[88] that lacked any sense of reverence. The artist, for Miller, is "always merry and bright, because always fluid and solvent"[89]—always close to the flux, the mystery.

A fragmented man sees only fragments. In *Tropic of Cancer*, Miller endorses Goethe's prediction that "MEN WILL BECOME MORE CLEVER AND MORE ACUTE; BUT NOT BETTER, HAPPIER, AND STRONGER IN ACTION"[90]. It is this intuition that motivates Miller's bleak vision that "the day of the mind machine is dawning", a world which "belongs to the technician"[91]. Having no sense of the whole, we rush "like a herd of wild horses with blinders over our eyes," unwittingly "pulling the whole world down about our ears"[92].

What happens when the modern technician, having served his function in the mechanism of some specialised industry, clocks off for the day? He takes his place in what an Epimenides of Wall Street might call *the economy in which we live and move and have our being*. He looks to consume his way to some semblance of vitality, whether in the cinema, concert hall, or peep show. What passes for culture in modernity is, for Miller, just another dietary supplement for the malnourished:

> "I cannot imagine the robots of this age being without a cinema. Our starved instincts have been clamoring… for more and more substitutes. And as a substitute

[86] Henry Miller, foreword to Sydney Omarr, *Henry Miller: His World of Urania* (London: Villiers Publications, 1960), 19.
[87] Miller, *To Paint is to Love Again*, 5.
[88] Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*, 244.
[89] The description is applied to Jean Varda. See Henry Miller, "Varda: the Master Builder", in *Remember to Remember*, 35.
[90] Quoted in Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*, 245.
[91] Miller, "Of Art and the Future", in *The Henry Miller Reader*, 230.
[92] Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*, 308.

for living, the cinema is ideal"[93].

Anaïs Nin writes that in *Tropic of Cancer*, Miller is "nothing but a penis and a stomach"[94]. The modern man is nothing but a pair of eyes and a wallet: a voyeur, on the outside of everything, though with a collection of ticket stubs to prove he's paid the price of entry.

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Miller *does* find vital culture in America, perhaps unsurprisingly flowing from the south. In *The Colossus of Maroussi*, which Miller considered his best book[95], he presents a creation story where a "Boogie Woogie man whose name was Agamemnon" gives birth to two sons: Epaminondas and Louis Armstrong[96]. These brothers represent opposite principles: the Theban military leader stands for "war and civilization"; the jazz man, for "peace and joy".

The Colossus of Maroussi was written in 1939, immediately after Miller was forced by the outbreak of war to return to America. Here he takes an even more grim view of what he'd earlier called "the dementia of Civilization"[97]. This last word is, for Miller, synonymous with the "thwarting power"[98] that produces "death-in-life". In *The Colossus*, he writes:

> "Epaminondas sure did a swell job civilizationing everybody with murder and hatred. The whole world has become one great big organism dying of ptomaine poison. It got poisoned just when everything was beautifully organized. It became a gut bucket, the white and wormy gut of a rotten egg that died in the shell. It brought on rats and lice, it brought on trench feet and trench teeth, it brought on declarations and preambles and protocols, it brought on bandy-legged twins and bald-headed eunuchs, it brought on Christian Science and poison gases and plastic underwear and glass shoes and platinum teeth."[99]

Miller contends that "peace is not the opposite of war any more than death is the opposite of life." The opposite of life is, for Miller, the "death-in-life" that is

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[93] Miller, "Golden Age", in *The Cosmological Eye*, 50.
[94] Quoted in Brassaï, *Henry Miller*, 202.
[95] Henry Miller and George Wickes, "The Art of Fiction", The Paris Review 28, 1962. Available at: https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4597/the-art-of-fiction-no-28-henry-miller
[96] Miller, *Colossus*, 138.
[97] Miller, *Aller Retour New York*, 76.
[98] Miller, "Open Letter to Surrealists", 190.
[99] Miller, *Colossus*, 143.

mechanistic civilisation[100]. Miller sees peace not as a merely negative quality, an absence of fighting[101]. Peace is itself productive: "the joy of life comes through peace, which is not static but dynamic"[102]. It is this joy which Armstrong represents:

> "He filled his lungs again and blew a molten note that reached so far into the blue it froze and hung in the sky like a diamond-pointed star. Louis stood up and twisted the torque until it became a great shining bulge of ecstasy. The sweat was pouring down him like a river. Louis was so happy that his eyes began to sweat too and they made two golden pools of joy..."[103]

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As we have seen, Miller regards Paris as the exceptional metropolis. Still, there are places far more idyllic, including the towns along the Dordogne, especially Rocamadour, which Miller calls "the nearest thing to Paradise this side of Greece"[104]. But it is in Greece itself, that putative 'cradle of Western civilisation', that Miller finds his fullest escape *from* civilisation. It is here, he writes, that one can be most "thoroughly and discordantly human"[105].

The Colossus of Maroussi celebrates Greek humanity in many forms, including the Greek way of walking, talking, and of begging. For Miller, these are all aspects of a distinctively Greek religious sensibility and sense of order. Miller writes that "the greatest single impression which Greece made upon me is that it is a man-sized world"[106]. He especially praises that the Greek "gods were of human proportion". It is this, Miller thinks, that has sustained a vital sense of the sacred, while "in France, as elsewhere in the Western world, this link between the human and the divine is broken."

This is particularly true of the so-called "civilized world" which Miller describes as "largely irreligious", saying that the religions that prevail here are

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[100] C.f. Iain McGilchrist, who argues that "the opposite of life isn't death, but mechanism". This formulation has not, to the best of my knowledge, been published. But see *The Matter With Things* (London: Perspectiva Press, 2021), esp. ch. 9.
[101] Miller, *Colossus*, 77.
[102] Miller, *Colossus*, 78.
[103] Miller, *Colossus*, 139.
[104] Miller, *Colossus*, 4.
[105] Miller, *Colossus*, 39.
[106] Miller, *Colossus*, 235.

"always false and hypocritical"[107]. Miller focuses not just the bondieuserie and hamburger shops of Lourdes, which reminded him of Coney Island[108], but on the Lutheranism of his parents which ostensibly reviles idolatry, meanwhile—to borrow a phrase of Miller's friend Alan Watts—"pedastalizing" Jesus, "kicking him upstairs" where he becomes not a guide but a blockade[109].

It is in fact a lack of barriers that Miller admires in Greece:

> "Everywhere I went in Greece… they would hold you up openly and ask for money or cigarettes as if they were entitled to it. It's a good sign when people beg that way: it means they know how to give. A Greek has no walls around him: he gives and takes without stint."[110]

For Miller, "giving and receiving are at bottom one thing." He relates the Greek's unguardedness expressly to the country's "human proportions"[111]. Miller contends that the "empty, restless and miserable" condition of modern life results in part from the dominating scale of the metropolis: feeling threatened by their environments, men become acquisitive and miserly. They keep the doors to the soul bolted, and yet lament that nothing gets in.

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Miller's sense of Greek magnanimity is heightened in his paean to the storyteller George Katsimbalis, the eponymous colossus. Miller admires Katsimbalis' ability to pour himself out, not to share his burden, but his riches. Katsimbalis epitomises that "ingenious buffoonery" which Nietzsche called "the highest form of spirituality"[112]. Miller writes:

> "No matter how sad or morbid or pathetic the story might be [Katsimbalis] would have us laughing continuously. He saw the humorous aspect of everything, which is the real test of the tragic sense."

Katsimbalis opens up at the least sign of receptivity. Here, Miller presents a contrast between Greek and French tendencies, saying of the Frenchman that "it

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[107] Miller and Wickes, "The Art of Fiction".
[108] Fraenkel and Miller, *Hamlet*, 380.
[109] Quoted in Donadrian L. Rice and Peter J. Columbus (eds.), *Alan Watts—Here and Now* (New York: SUNY Press, 2012), 49.
[110] Miller, *Colossus*, 36.
[111] Miller, *Colossus*, 235.
[112] See Milne, *Nietzsche as Egoist and Mystic*, 192f.

may take a lifetime to make a friend of him":

> "The Frenchman puts walls about his talk, as he does about his garden: he puts limits about everything in order to feel at home."[113]

For Miller, the Frenchman is *realistic*—which is to say, sceptical: "he lacks confidence in his fellow man." Whereas the Greek is "an adventurer: he is reckless and adaptable, he makes friends easily." Rather than waiting for you to prove yourself trustworthy, "he goes out to you"[114].

Miller rejects the worldview of A.E. Housman's lines "I, a stranger and afraid / In a world I never made."[115] In "The Enormous Womb", Miller writes that in urban moderity, the "fear of death becomes a fear of life, as exemplified by the behaviour of the neurotic... Life, as it is called, is for most of us one long postponement. And the simple reason for it is: fear"[116]. To live on a war footing is not to live at all. The lesson here is captured in Juvenal's phrase "*quis custodiet ipsos custodes*?"—who will guard the guards? Paranoia breeds paranoia, walls beget walls. Out of what seems like sensible caution, one cuts off the world from which one has sprung and withers like a flower in a vase.

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Though recognising its political impracticality, Miller prescribes a treatment in *The Colossus of Maroussi* for what he calls "the infra-human specimens of this benighted scientific age"[117]: to become human again, "we need peace and solitude and idleness". We need to

> "…learn to do without telephones and radios and newspapers, without machines of any kind, without factories, without mills, without mines, without explosives, without battleships, without politicians, without lawyers, without canned goods, without gadgets, without razor blades even or cellophane or cigarettes or money. This is a pipe dream, I know. People only go on strike for better working conditions, better wages, better opportunities to become something other than they are"[118].

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[113] Miller, *Colossus*, 32.
[114] Miller, *Colossus*, 32-3.
[115] See Alan Watts, "Western Mythology", in *In the Academy* (New York: SUNY Press, 2017), 235. On Juvenal, see 80.
[116] Henry Miller "The Enormous Womb", in *The Wisdom of the Heart*, 96.
[117] Miller, *Colossus*, 77.
[118] Miller, *Colossus*, 43.

Miller regards such a rejection of modernity's traps and trappings as possible for the individual. One of his examples from the 1930s on is St. Francis of Assisi. In a letter to Durrell, Miller writes of being "delirious" after reading the first twenty pages of Joseph Delteil's *Francois d'Assise* in proof:

> "He wants us to start all over again at the beginning. Back to Paradise, no less. One can never go back? Nonsense, he cries. Why change the world? *Change worlds!* For Francis... it was a matter of throwing overboard, of rejecting completely 30,000 years of civilization. What he railed against, in praising holy ignorance, was our bookish culture, our crazy, deadly sciences."[119]

In *The Colossus of Maroussi*, Miller declared himself "crazy enough to believe that the happiest man on earth is the man with the fewest needs"[120]. If one chooses to "see no newspaper, hear no radio, listen to no gossip, be thoroughly and completely lazy", then slowly one's "book-learning… dribbles away":

> "…problems melt and dissolve; ties are gently severed; thinking, when you deign to indulge in it, becomes very primitive; the body becomes a new and wonderful instrument; you look at plants or stones or fish with different eyes; you wonder what people are struggling to accomplish by their frenzied activities…"[121]

It is in this bright-eyed wonder, Miller believes, that art begins, and it is towards this wonder that art points.

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In the 1930s, Miller wrote a book of letters with the infinitely pretentious Michael Fraenkel[122]. Here Miller presents Dante as symbolic of "the whole spirit of the Middle Ages, its cosmogonic unity"[123] and Hamlet as symbolic of "the schizophrenic character"[124] of modernity.

Miller describes *Hamlet* as "the drama of the northern soul" and the Prince himself as "the arch symbol of death-in-life"[125]. Hamlet diagnoses his own

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[119] Durrell and Miller, *A Private Correspondence*, 372-3. In the 30s, Miller had read Chesterton's *St. Francis of Assisi*, which he claimed as an influence in *The Books in My Life*.
[120] Miller, *Colossus*, 133.
[121] Miller, *Colossus*, 42.
[122] Their correspondence was published under the title *Hamlet*, first in 1939. The letters are increasingly not so much about Hamlet as his avatar Fraenkel, who constantly tries to intellectually spin his death into life.
[123] Fraenkel and Miller, *Hamlet*, 42.
[124] Fraenkel and Miller, *Hamlet*, 144.
[125] Fraenkel and Miller, *Hamlet*, 11.

melancholy and knows only too well that he is lifeless, yet remains essentially impotent. He epitomises, for Miller, "modern man's inner bankruptcy"[126]. Hamlet struggles desperately to think his way out of the knot that thought has tied, and the noose tightens. He yearns that "this too too solid flesh would melt," yet he cannot help being proud of all this "looking before and after", and condemns the very "bestial oblivion" that he covets.

On Miller's reading, "polarity… has broken down"[127] in Hamlet's soul. Here we are in the far north, where the Idea rules, and where the body atrophies: "Hamlet is pure mind, a dynamo of thought whirring in the void"[128]. This is why Hamlet is beyond salvation: the only thing he can come up with are *ideas* about life. Hamlet knows he needs to come up for air, yet he keeps on soliloquising, spilling forth endless ideas, words critical of "words, words, words", and thoughts about the pale cast of thought and the lost name of action.

Hamlet is an exemplary "addict of thought"[129] who cannot help wanting more of what he doesn't need. Knowing all about the paralysis of the will hardly helps generate action. In fact, Miller claims that the very concept of *the will* represents a loss of "organic unity":

> "The French have never used the word Will as the Nordic peoples have; but they are coming around to it now, for at last the death throes are on them… The body is crumbling and organs and limbs are being fast replaced by mechanical devices which will obey the blind switchboard of the will."[130]

Miller again quotes Gutkind in these letters: "the human world is the world that is fully alive". To enter that world, Miller comments, "is as simple as to open a door and step out"[131]. To regard life as a philosophical problem requiring a solution is to attempt to pick an unlocked door. Miller says of this search for answers:

> "This is a mania—*explaining* things. It goes with a certain type of mind which I abhor. And always leaves me with the feeling that nothing is explained, that we are

[126] Fraenkel and Miller, *Hamlet*, 13.
[127] Fraenkel and Miller, *Hamlet*, 225.
[128] Fraenkel and Miller, *Hamlet*, 399.
[129] Fraenkel and Miller, *Hamlet*, 399.
[130] Fraenkel and Miller, *Hamlet*, 386.
[131] Fraenkel and Miller, *Hamlet*, 407.

simply eating into a hole."[132]

The alternative, Miller suggests, is to regard the world as "fluid and unseizable, having the highest significance... but absolutely impervious to 'explanation'"[133]. It is this sense of an intangible yet "intimate order" that he believes motivates both the artistic and the religious sensibility. When Fraenkel asks him "are music and poetry anti-thought processes? Is the counter-drive to thought the more powerful drive? Is perhaps life itself a counter-drive to thought?", Miller responds "*Yes, Yes, Yes*", but with the qualification that his answer is

> "…based on a temporary agreement as to the supposition created by your very questions. For here you make thought the dead thing which it is not *per se*; here you make thought and poetry antithetical, which they are not *per se*; here you put thought and life in opposition, which is not so *per se*"[134].

In these letters, Miller again claims that "art is nothing more than a means to greater life"[135]. Art doesn't kill thought, but rather gives it life. It restores that lost polarity between north and south, thought and action, mind and body. Art liberates us from mechanism.

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My focus here has been on the Miller of the 1930s. It bears noting that he lived until 1980. After returning to America and undertaking his tour of its Air-Conditioned Nightmare, Miller lived two decades in Big Sur and then almost as long in the Pacific Palisades. His logorrhoea never found its cure.

Miller is a central figure in a distinctively *American* spirituality in the mid-twentieth century. The extent of his influence on subsequent so-called "counter-cultural" movements in America is well-attested. In the 1850s, Whitman sang his "song of the open road". Many heard its call between then and Miller in the 1920s and 30s. Yet few heeded it so completely as Miller, who then had generations of American civilisation's discontents on his heels. No Miller, no Beatniks and no Hippies. No dharma bums, no drop-outs glorifying cold water flats, no amateurs

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[132] Fraenkel and Miller, *Hamlet*, 214.
[133] Fraenkel and Miller, *Hamlet*, 215.
[134] Fraenkel and Miller, *Hamlet*, 48.
[135] Fraenkel and Miller, *Hamlet*, 408.

in the art of letting it all hang out, venting spleen at "Craft Gleam"[136]. Perhaps this all sounds as though I'm diagnosing patient zero in a major outbreak of the clap.

Some have wondered what we today can make of this Whitman with a dose. I wonder instead at the toll of our immunity.

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[136] Jack Kerouac, *Mexico City Blues* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), 28.