

Caroline Blinder

# **A Self-Made Surrealist**

**Ideology and Aesthetics  
in the Work of  
Henry Miller**



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## *A Self-Made Surrealist*

Beginning with the publication of *Tropic of Cancer* in 1934, Henry Miller's reputation as a writer has been sullied by critics from all sides, and the trend has not abated in recent decades. The emphasis on Miller's use of obscenity has ignored the fact that he wrote numerous essays on his contemporaries and the role of art. In these essays, desire in a wider and more culturally specific sense, rather than hostile obscenity, lays the foundation for Miller's literary project. *A Self-Made Surrealist* sets out to provide a view of Miller different from both earlier vindications of him as sexual liberator and prophet and more contemporary feminist critiques of him as pornographer and male chauvinist. In this re-evaluation of Miller's role as a radical writer, Blinder considers not only notions of obscenity and sexuality, but also the emergence of psychoanalysis, surrealism, automatic writing, and the aesthetics of fascism as they illuminate Miller's more general twentieth-century concerns with politics and mass psychology in relation to art. Blinder also considers the effect on Miller of the theoretical works of Georges Bataille and André Breton, among others, in order to define and explore the social, philosophical, and political contexts of the period.

Caroline Blinder received her Ph.D. in American literature from King's College, London, and is a lecturer in American and English literature, creative writing, critical theory, and film at Southampton University.

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(*Constance*)

Caroline Blinder

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CAMDEN HOUSE

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## Introduction

Art teaches nothing, except the significance of life. The great work must inevitably be obscure, except to the very few, to those who like the author himself are initiated into the mysteries. Communication then is secondary: it is perpetuation which is important. For this only one good reader is necessary.

— Henry Miller, "Reflections on Writing"

EVER SINCE THE UNITED STATES PUBLICATION of *Tropic of Cancer* in 1961, Henry Miller has remained, both in the public and academic eye, the bad boy American writer. Polemical chiefly in terms of sexual politics, the stress upon the sensationalist nature of his obscenity has made it impossible to pigeonhole him into traditional literary classifications, and instead, critics have continuously fought over whether Miller should be read as a prophet of sexual liberation or an advocate of male chauvinism.<sup>1</sup>

This book seeks to address this unbalance by taking as its starting point a range of essays written by Miller, on and influenced by surrealism, during his expatriate years in Paris. Written for small presses and journals, Miller's essays run the gamut from reviews of contemporary art and homages to friends (Brassaï in "The Eye of Paris," 1938), to more philosophical pieces on obscenity and psychoanalysis. While most of these essays were published in Miller's lifetime, critical writing on Miller has nevertheless focused on the *Tropics*, *Tropic of Cancer* (1934) and *Tropic of Capricorn* (1939), as the prime examples of his literary voice.<sup>2</sup>

From Kate Millet's attack in *Sexual Politics* (1969), Mailer's defense in *The Prisoner of Sex* (1971) to Erica Jong's more recent *The Devil at Large* (1993), the *Tropics* have been used chiefly to delineate a particular notion of male sexuality. Rather than insert Miller into a more complex historical, political, and aesthetic framework, the effect has been to neglect the period in which he actually wrote most of his best material, namely the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>3</sup> Miller circles around a number of key themes in the immediate pre-war and post-war period. Firstly, the fas-

cination with surrealism; an art movement which he felt at liberty to both critique as an outsider in a political sense, and use as an overt inspiration stylistically and thematically in a literary sense. Secondly — linked to the issue of surrealism — that of the unconscious as a metaphor for creativity, and the idea that certain forms of writing can convey the unconscious in fruitful and radical ways. In Miller's fiction, the desire to search for a transcendental mode of writing often took on a surreal format, while in his essays, he engaged in an ongoing quest for an absolute, a fundamental truth from which to examine creative engagement.

In this sense, surrealism becomes a way to examine the stylistics and thematics which emerge both in Miller's fiction and essays. In the 1930s trilogy: *Tropic of Cancer* (1934), *Black Spring* (1938), *Tropic of Capricorn* (1939), a mental topography is mapped out by the first person narrator in which sexuality and desire is the source of libidinous as well as literary creativity. This mental topography, which Miller returns to repeatedly, is also an urban one — an external projection of the imaginary, with the city as the setting for an internal as well as external social drama. These topographies often mix the fictional with the critical and thus raise crucial questions related to literature's position as a politicized art form in the interim and post-war period. How does literature convey a radical voice without resorting to an ultimately romantic and mythical notion of the writer as prophet? And if so; what are the mechanisms suitable for this quest? Miller's reliance on a confessional and mystical voice, as we will see, links his writing to the surrealist notion of modernity as a development downwards towards a form of primitivism rather than onwards towards rationalism. A paradox thus occurs, as Miller's fiction seems to rely on these mechanisms, while the critical essays represent Miller's American sense of individualism as he struggles to negotiate his way around contemporary artistic groupings and their political and aesthetic definitions of radicalism.

The positioning of sexuality and obscenity as a way to radicalize art is something which Miller shares with the surrealists in crucial ways. The issue is, then, not to validate Miller by placing him in "good European company" but to illuminate his use of sexuality and, on a wider level, his concepts of individualism vis-à-vis the increasing politicization of art movements at the time. In order to structure and define this reading of Miller, this study will be guided largely by a historical juncture: the outpouring of critical thought that distinguished European intellectual life in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. In addition, this perspective will gauge both the limits of and transgressions against two important moments in history: that of the author as a historical subject

of the period between the world wars and that of the survival of the author in a post war environment. The encounter with surrealism encapsulates both Miller's desire to immerse himself in a distinctly European cultural heritage, as well as some of the complex links between a collective notion of avant-garde aesthetics and his own individualistic, literary project. I have largely argued for surrealism's inclusive role within Miller's work in terms of common themes and concerns, but I have also tried not to neglect the complex links between Miller the American individualist and the collective identity of surrealism:

Surrealism starts out innocently enough as a revolt against the insanity of everyday life. It is expressed marvellously in one of Breton's early pronouncements: "I am resolved to render powerless that hatred of the marvellous which is so rampant among certain people." Naturally he is not referring to concierges alone. He means everybody (who is not living as a poet), from the President of France on down to the chimney-sweep. It is a big order. It is a defy to the whole world practically. But there is no confusion behind the idea. It is clear as a bell.

(Henry Miller, "An Open Letter to Surrealists Everywhere," 1938)

In the opening chapter of his essay: "An Open Letter to Surrealists Everywhere" (1938), Miller looks at the influence of surrealism, automatism, and the political implications of theories based on the "unconscious" through a comparative view of himself and André Breton. Surrealism's recent academic return, in terms of publications and exhibitions, is still missing in many Anglo-American accounts of modernism. Partly due to the focus on iconography and pictorial style, the surrealists' concern with the unconscious as a motivation in narrative terms has so far been neglected in relation to American writers of the same period. In order to rethink Miller's critical work on surrealism, the ways in which concepts of the unconscious were introduced into art in a programmatic way, particularly through automatic writing, will be examined. As an example, one of Miller's unpublished pieces "Last Will and Testament," a nonsensical attempt to write surrealistically inspired in part by André Breton and Paul Eluard's *The Immaculate Conception* (1930), is compared to some of Breton's writing from the same period.<sup>4</sup> Such a comparison becomes an important guide to Miller's use of sexuality, as it allows for an analysis which goes beyond gender as the sole determinant of subjectivity. As the nodal point of three fundamental ideologies within modernism: psychoanalysis, cultural Marxism, and ethnology, surrealism represents a touchstone from which to examine Miller's aesthetics as well as politics.



Chapter 3 examines how these three fields in particular merge within surrealism as the backdrop for a writing in which sexuality is linked to an increasing eroticization of the urban landscape. Miller's attitudes to the feminine are compared to those of Breton, as both align desire with creativity through the image of the woman on the streets. As sexuality moves into the public domain, the urban landscape is both mythologized and eroticized. In particular, Breton's *Nadja* (1928) and *Mad Love* (1938), represent highly Freudian readings of the feminine in terms of an enigmatic hysteria both glorified and feared. Miller's writings show an awareness of the problems inherent in mythologizing, as well as politicizing the unconscious, and are, in many ways, representative of a working through of the paradoxes set up by Walter Benjamin in "The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia" (1929). As both Benjamin and Miller attempt to pry open the cyclical argument of surrealism, the question emerges of how language can represent the universal in terms of the irrational, which in turn is aligned with ideas of femininity and hysteria. In Breton's novels the figure of the sphinx embodies the unconscious as a feminine and creative muse. Just as the unconscious becomes indicative of a welcome illuminatory and universal force, it also opens itself up to misuse; absolving the male artist from the rationale of reason, largely through the positioning of the unconscious in terms of a feminine "other." These issues are crucial for an understanding of the terminology with which these writers create an absolute; whether it is in the form of desire, the unconscious, or the surreal marvellous.

In "The Eye of Paris," Miller's homage to his friend and later biographer the photographer Brassai, photography is seen as an art form uniquely suited to represent the hidden facets of the urban landscape. Not only is photography representative of a particular form of modernity, but its individualism ensures that "the photograph seems to carry with it the same degree of personality as any other form or expression of art."<sup>5</sup> For Miller, the prostitutes, the workers, and back-alleys in Brassai's gritty vision of a particular kind of public humanity, are uniquely suited to accompany his own fictional vagabond persona. "A man of the city, he limits himself to that spectacular feast which only such a city as Paris can offer. No phase of cosmopolitan life has escaped his eye. His albums of black and white comprise a vast encyclopedia of the city's architecture, its growth, its history, its origins" (*Wisdom of the Heart*, 180). For Miller, Brassai's photographs of working people and objects in Paris are the most apt and contemporary representations of modernism, never compromising the integrity of either the photographer or the people photographed.

"The Eye of Paris" links the focus on surrealist aesthetics set out in Chapters 1 and 2 with an examination into the political ramifications of those aesthetics in Chapters 3 and 4. Brassai's view of the people of Paris is more politicized than similar surreal images from the same period; a representation which shares Benjamin's ideas on objects as both illuminatory and suggestive of proletarian experience. Miller's essay on Brassai thus stands out as one of the clearest representations of his ability to link his own individualist philosophy with art's ability to represent a width of experience of a social, economic, and historical nature. Miller speaks of Brassai in terms of the surrealist ability to sign-post the marvellous through the urban landscape, but he also stresses a Benjaminian approach to art in his belief that objects encompass a complex network of relations which must be read within a historical continuum. Few critics have attempted to read Miller's own use of obscenity and sexuality in these politicized, social terms, apart from the French critic and philosopher Georges Bataille.

Bataille may seem an unlikely partner to Miller, both in terms of fictional and critical methodologies, but his essay: "La Morale de Miller" (1946) is one of the first critiques of Miller which reads the issue of obscenity in political and aesthetic terms. "La Morale de Miller" was the first in a series of essays on literature for *Critique*, a journal set up partly as an alternative venue to the French existentialist journal *Les Temps Modernes*. Apart from providing one of the only complex perspectives on Miller's use of obscenity, it also synthesizes a crucial issue introduced through the comparison of Miller and the surrealists; namely the impossibility of actually writing outside rational and dialectical definitions of morality. In ways similar to the surrealists, Bataille wanted to dislodge traditional boundaries between the critic and his subject, aiming to represent a totality of radical experience in writing from an aesthetic as well as political point of view. Bataille was particularly interested in the question of what really constitutes evaluative discourse, and his ethnological and sociological work (linked to sexuality in terms of eroticism and heterogeneity) offers a more politicized version of the surrealist quest for the marvellous; crucial for an understanding of the critical and aesthetic connection between sexuality and fascism: the body-politic as a dangerous as well as creative force in 1930s literature.

Chapters 3 and 4 will therefore look closely at how the mixing of political ideology, whether from a leftist perspective in the form of critical Marxist theory or a move towards a fascist aesthetic with its fascination for authoritarianism, incorporates many of the same structural devices. This intrinsic paradox must be taken into account in an exami-

nation of the use of desire and its relationship to the body politic in a wider sense. Whether one views the radicalization of sexuality from a leftist or rightist perspective, the overriding concerns are still a deliberate politicization of the individual as artist. What Bataille realized was that Miller's use of sexuality could be read as a concerted effort to align the structures of desire with language itself (not dissimilar to the surrealist project). Bataille reads the unconscious as a sphere from which sexuality emerges in radically new ways, ready to manifest itself not merely as an artistic aesthetic, but also as an image of the disintegration of the modern world. As far as language is concerned, observations on sexuality and eroticism become a way to portray the writer as he struggles to speak, as well as a way to allegorize sexuality in terms of the creative process itself.

The premise that political ideology cannot be divorced from the creative process is crucial for an understanding of Miller. For both Miller and Bataille, the radical and deliberately uncomfortable sensibility in much of their work coexists with their value as important critics in their own right; something which current work seems hesitant to address. Bataille, in particular, is a writer whose current appropriation into poststructuralism has equaled a diffusion of the disconcerting and uneasy political elements in his writing.

The notion that one can attain a truly radical subversive discourse in literature is the key to understanding writing which plays on and uses marginalization as a force. Bataille locates this marginalization within a larger sphere of heterogeneous activity which in ethnological and political terms is deemed sexual, dangerous and death-driven. Similarly, in these terms, many of Miller's more complex elements stem from the connections mentioned above, rather than any straightforward form of male chauvinism. Chapter 3: "The Politics of Violence," deals with these themes in terms of the relationship between the Japanese writer Yukio Mishima, Bataille, and Miller. Miller's "Reflections on the Death of Mishima" (1971), together with Mishima's "Georges Bataille and Divinus Deus" (1968) show a shared interest in the use of sexuality as a radical and often violent manifestation of the individual, in spite of differing cultural backgrounds. Mishima's fictional debut, *Confessions of a Mask* (1949), returns in equal measure to Miller's over-sexed and frustrated literary persona and Bataille's linking of death with pleasure. In terms of fictional representation, Mishima, Miller, and Bataille used the narrative consciousness as expressed by the writer/heroes of their books to demonstrate, in turn, their own absolute commitment to the writer's life as intrinsically rebellious and dangerous.

The fact that these writers share an interest in sexuality as a radical discourse, does not mean that they do not differ in important degrees as to the nature and extent of this "radicalism." For instance, Miller's use of sexuality often emblemizes the uncomfortable sensations of sexuality as a commodity whereas Breton's does not. In this context, Benjamin and Miller converge to some extent in their critique of commodification within the urban landscape and its potentially de-sensitizing force. As far as the urban sensibility of the artist is concerned, the prostitute for Miller — unlike Breton — is, among other things, an embodiment of the overall exploitation which takes place in the urban environment on a constant basis. Miller, in this respect, uses his own version of American individualism as a way to critique what he considers a falsely romanticized version of love within surrealism. For Miller, the surrealists failed to see that desire in itself could not provide a harmonious view of the writer at ease with his unconscious. Alienation in the modern world is always individual rather than collective, and it is this which emerges strongly in the essay on Mishima, and which explains his reluctance to speak of politics in anything but individualized terms.

The premise that it is impossible to speak of the politicization of aesthetics without simultaneously dealing with political aesthetics is a crucial one for the overall project of this book. Fascist aesthetics not only underlie much fiction of the 1920s and 1930s, but must be seen as an important part of the literary avant-garde in general. If surrealism can be read in part as an anxious response to the fascist glorification of mythology (racist and historicist), then those authors on the fringe of surrealism, whose responses to fascism manifested themselves in aesthetic and not simply overtly political terms, must be examined as well. By looking at fascist aesthetics from this broader perspective, fascism becomes another way to signal an anarchical strain, a perspective on writing as dangerous to established notions of what constitutes viable political rhetoric, rather than another more vehement and fanatical strain of nationalism. While the project of surrealist automatic writing assumed the possibility of a language unhindered by bourgeois and capitalist structures, writers like Bataille and Mishima saw no escape from these structures other than via action of a more direct and violent nature than traditional poetics could afford.

Miller's preoccupation with individualism and non-affiliation in a political sense is made all the more complex by these issues. On one hand, Miller's individualism can be seen in opposition to fascism, a remnant of a democratic American ethic, but his rhetoric is often highly authoritarian, his narcissism extreme. On the other hand, Miller strove

to get away from what he considered a restrictive commodified world view at home, and his starting point — the truthful representation of the self — is continuously signposted as American and Whitmanesque in its idealization of self-expression. There is no doubt that Miller's admiration for both D. H. Lawrence and Walt Whitman came out of an interest in the poet-writer's quest for a viable ethic of self-creation and an acknowledgment in turn of this ethic's Anglo-Saxon roots. Nevertheless, Miller's expression of self-hood, particularly in terms of sexuality, turns out to be similar to that of Bataille, Mishima, and the surrealists. The sense of divine inspiration as the artist's prerogative, together with the bodily quest turned into a metaphysical one, were things that in Miller's mind belonged to a tradition of marginalized writing regardless of its national roots.

Forced to return to the United States with the advent of the Second World War, Miller's essays became increasingly influenced by his evolving pacifism. By way of conclusion, Chapter 5 examines the issue of pacifism in Miller's 1946 book on Arthur Rimbaud: *Time of the Assassins*, which also illustrates the end of Miller's obsession with European writers and culture. In a series of letters to the academic and literary critic Wallace Fowle on the writing of *Time of the Assassins*, Miller fuses the aspects of revolt, exile and the relation towards creativity into an analysis of himself through Rimbaud. This practice of writing on the "self" through others — while in a long tradition of introspective literary analysis — foregrounds some of Miller's shortcomings as a critic. In writing from his homeland on a French writer, Miller seems to have lost the peculiar psychic advantage he had had as an expatriate. As Miller stated in 1932 "no longer being an American" still meant being "a foreigner in Paris," and it is this ambiguous position in literary and political terms which Miller needed to be able to write, both as an American writing on Europeans, and as an American written on by Europeans.

As certain themes emerge in more clarity — fascism as a form of transgression aesthetically as well as politically, sexuality and violence as allegories for communication — the overall emphasis will be on the critical force of these ideas irrespective of the nationalities of the writers concerned. The ideas and themes which emerge in these writers' works are therefore partly estimated through the resistance against them and appropriation by others, regardless of national literary traditions. This approach does not claim allegiance to, nor immunity from, any one critical method, but it deliberately incorporates a series of inter-textual dialogues in order to avoid using preferred writers as oracles. Bataille

and Benjamin are obvious examples of writers who are currently being used in this way. In fact, Miller's own multifaceted fictional as well as critical persona is partly due to the realization that nothing in literature emanates from one source only.

Miller tried to retain an anti-political, individualistic stance throughout his career, yet at the same time he was fascinated with his contemporaries' attempts to break existing notions of literary merit and groupings. This created an underlying ambiguity in Miller's work. On the one hand, he wanted to be part of an intelligentsia committed to the creation of a new form of literature, and on the other, he wanted to be seen as a provocative outsider: a form of literary anarchist. As this book will show, Miller cannot be read as representative of one particular male chauvinist sensibility, but must be seen as part of an artistic landscape, of surrealism, of Paris, of post-war Europe as well as of an American tradition of individualism. As far as literary aesthetics and politics were concerned, the representation of external reality through a voyage inward was ultimately Miller's chief project, a project which places him firmly within a tradition where people such as Georges Bataille, Yukio Mishima, and André Breton become fellow travelers rather than mere contemporaries.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "In some mysterious way, Miller has preserved an innocence of the practice of Literature-with-a-capital-L which is almost unique in history. Likewise he has preserved an innocence of heart . . . he writes a muscular, active prose in which something is always going on and which is always under control. True he often likes to ramble and hear his head roar." Kenneth Rexroth, "The Reality of Henry Miller" in *World Outside the Window* (New York: New Directions, 1947), 154–67.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer* (Paris: Obelisk Press, 1934). *Tropic of Capricorn* (Paris: Obelisk Press, 1939).

<sup>3</sup> Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1979). All subsequent quotes taken from this edition.

Erica Jong, *The Devil at Large* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993). All subsequent quotes taken from this edition.

<sup>4</sup> Hal Foster's *Compulsive Beauty* (London: MIT Press, 1993) is one notable exception.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Miller, "The Eye of Paris" in *Wisdom of the Heart* (New York: New Directions, 1960), 173–87.

## 1: Henry Miller and Surrealism

IN 1934, ONLY A YEAR AFTER THE PUBLICATION of André Breton's surrealist manifesto on automatic writing, "The Automatic Message," Henry Miller established himself in Paris with *Tropic of Cancer*, the first in a trilogy of "auto-romances." The auto-romance, a mixture of fiction and autobiography in which a version of "Miller" figures as the main protagonist, charts the narrator's day-to-day existence in Paris, his sexual adventures, the people he encounters, where he eats, sleeps, etc. While *Tropic of Cancer* is primarily known for its rendition of the perverse and obscene, for the unashamed fascination Miller expresses for street-life in all its forms, it also provides a romantic vision of the city as a potentially illuminatory force, as the hunting ground for the modern artist's inspiration.

It is no coincidence, then, that Miller's style in the *Tropics* and his chief concern in the essays written during the same period, fall under the spell of surrealism. For Miller, surrealism provided new ways to describe the juxtaposition of fantasy and reality, the use of dreams and visions, and as such became a convenient source for his own concept of radical writing. Representing above all a welcome attempt at writing which sought to use the unconscious as a literary source, surrealism became a springboard for Miller's own descent into the psychology of the writer; a vision of the possibilities for an aesthetic of the self, conceived in radical terms. As Brassai writes in his portrait of Miller, *Henry Miller: Grandeur Nature* (1975):

Like the Surrealists and Dadaists, Henry believed that dreams provided fertile soil for writing, and that writing did involve the struggle to bring to the surface that which was unknown, hidden, and unrealized. But he only employed Surrealist techniques when it felt natural and spontaneous to do so, and not because he wanted to be counted as one of their adherents. He thought that "Automatic Writing" was both too deliberate and too aimless. No writer can renounce meaning and significance; even when he is being obscure, the writer must try to remain intelligible.<sup>1</sup>

What Brassai grasps is largely the main paradox behind Miller's use of surrealism: namely Miller's interest in "the hidden, the unrealized" and how to convey this without losing the search for "meaning and significance." While Brassai signals the interest in surrealism's use of dreams,

he also points out how certain practices — such as automatic writing — significantly complicate what the definition of “meaning and significance” might actually be.<sup>2</sup>

In Miller's case, this particular aspect of his 1930s aesthetic has so far been neglected, and one reason why, is that the re-evaluation of the relation between American twentieth century writers and surrealism has yet to take place. Even now, with the increasing interest in surrealism, most critical studies isolate it as a specifically continental phenomenon, and when extended to American artists from the twenties and thirties it is usually to painters and photographers such as Man Ray. While this neglect in itself merits an analysis of some complexity, it might be linked to an unspoken divorce which still exists between the notion of what constitutes a European politicized aesthetic, compared to an American one. As with many other American writers, Miller's interest in surrealism is seen as antithetical to the overriding view of him as an anti-intellectual, a sort of primitivist enfant terrible within American letters. Even Georges Bataille, who later revised his opinion, considered Miller “a writer removed from reflective thought”; a far cry from his later analysis of Miller's use of obscenity in which the “instinctual” or anti-intellectual removal from “reflective thought” is aligned to romantic and prophetic strands within surrealism.<sup>3</sup> Both critical and admiring of surrealism, Miller formulates a quest for a discursive voice of an individualistic nature which nevertheless aims to incorporate universal issues, and he does this, by stressing how his own position vis-à-vis the movement was that of an interested outsider rather than a devoted follower:

I was living in Paris . . . we used to say, “let's take the lead.” That meant going off the deep end, diving into the unconscious, just obeying your instincts, following your impulses, of the heart, or the guts, or whatever you want to call it. But that's my way of putting it, that isn't really surrealist doctrine; that wouldn't hold water, I'm afraid, with an André Breton. However the French stand-point, the doctrinaire stand-point, didn't mean too much to me. All I cared about was that I found in it another means of expression, an added one, a heightened one, but one to be used very judiciously.<sup>4</sup>

The key phrase here, in terms of Miller's agenda, is the acknowledged quest for a heightened sense of expression. The cautionary tone is partly born out of the belief that in order for his writing to succeed it would have to engage in an intimate appeal to the reader. The confessional tone of voice might not abolish conventional distance between author and reader, but it would hopefully strengthen the portrayal of the main protagonist and narrator. Of *Tropic of Cancer*, Miller said: “I

didn't write a piece of fiction: I wrote an autobiographical document, a *human book*,” emphasizing what he described as: “the projection of the universal picture of individuation . . . the author's temporal position in time and space.”<sup>5</sup> This “universal picture of individuation” is both antithetical to and dependent on the notion of a collective art-form as proposed by the surrealists. It is antithetical in the way that Miller's self-conscious positioning of himself rejects being part of any movement *per se*, but also similar to the surrealists' desire to project a universal language of the unconscious through a democratization of the creative process.

In order to delineate the idea of a universal language, automatic writing in particular as mentioned by Brassai, this chapter will focus on two Miller pieces which bear a direct relationship to surrealism. “An Open Letter to Surrealists Everywhere” (1938), and “Last Will and Testament,” a short piece of unpublished fiction taken from Miller's Paris Notebooks now housed in the Special Collection division of U.C.L.A. Both pieces deal in different ways with the position of the artist in aesthetic as well as more politicized terms, but they also share an interest in the schism between a collective notion of the artist and his responsibilities, and a more individualistic one. While not a clear cut binary opposition, this problem points to Miller's attempts at relinquishing the political in an attempt to turn inward, a quest for a system of individualist engagement in art which can be seen in his interest in two major writers of the period, the surrealist André Breton and the French philosopher Henri Bergson.

### The Automatic Principle

From early on in his writing career, Miller invoked the influence of the philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941) as a crucial factor in his writing. Bergson's ideas of the individual as creatively evolving because he is sentient and consciously accumulating experience, rather than born with an innate unconscious language, are particularly evident in Miller's work. It is possible that Miller stumbled on the hugely popular *L'Évolution Créatrice* (1907) in the New York Public Library while in his twenties. It was translated into English in 1911. In *Tropic of Capricorn* (1938) — Miller's account of his early life in New York — he writes: “What was there then in this book which could mean so much to me? I come back to the word creative. I am sure that the whole mystery lies in the realization of the meaning of this word. When I think of the book now and the way in which I approached it, I think of a man going through the rites of



initiation."<sup>6</sup> This fascination with creativity as a progressive force ties in to the surrealist effort to capture the forces of the imaginary, but it is the Bergsonian stress on individualism and what Miller calls "metamorphosis without and within" which illustrates some of the major differences between himself and the surrealists.

In "The Automatic Message" (1933), Breton defines automatism as based on the premise that an unhindered flow of words without any conscious elaboration can signal deeper metaphysical and universal truths; in other words, an accurate transcription of the unconscious. According to Breton, our unconscious contains a language unique to itself, a "murmure"; or a murmur, which coexists in the human mind and which, in ordinary circumstances, is drowned out by our rational faculties.

Although formulated by the surrealists as a novel ideal, automatism was clearly influenced by Romantic ideas of the poetic subject's ability to communicate messages from "beyond." Together with the belief in the poet as transcriber and medium of truths, Breton, who had a medical background, used research he had done during the First World War on patients at lunatic asylums where insanity was seen to produce particular forms of hysterical outbursts of an irrational nature. Such medical research, in conjunction with a nineteenth-century fascination with spiritualism — with voices from "the other world" being channeled through mediums — became, in effect, a way to prioritize the poet's ability to echo what the surrealists would call the *marvellous*.

Because of automatism's obvious pre-history, and as way to avoid the accusation that the surrealists were simply aestheticizing Freudian notions of the unconscious, Breton had to find a viable definition of automatism that did not from the onset place itself in a no-man's land which was neither mysticism nor science. The difficulty lay primarily in how to define a fixed poetic framework, in which the writing produced, was not predetermined and yet of creative value. In other words, automatic writing would somehow have to prove that it could survive in spite of the fact that it was nearly impossible to "grasp involuntary verbal representation and fix it on the page without imposing on it any kind of qualitative judgment."<sup>7</sup>

From the onset, Breton knew that automatism would be accused of being simply a ploy designed to endow the mind with unexamined capabilities. "I will not hesitate to say that the history of automatic writing in surrealism has been one of continuing misfortune. But the sly protests of the critics, particularly attentive and aggressive on this point, will not prevent me from acknowledging that for many years I have counted on the torrent of automatic writing to purge, definitively, the literary stables." In

order to counter accusations, automatism had to be set up against existing rules of creativity, in order to gather both a meaning and a goal:

It remains for us to suppress . . . both that which oppresses us in the moral order and that which "physically," as they say, deprives us of a clear view. If only, for instance, we could have these celebrated trees cleared out of the way! The secret of surrealism lies in the fact that we are convinced something is hidden behind them. Now one needs but examine the various methods of doing away with trees to perceive that only one of them remains to us, depending in the final analysis, on our power of voluntary hallucination.<sup>8</sup>

In this passage from 1929, Breton juxtaposes expressions such as "voluntary hallucination" coupled with a methodical "assault on life" in order to prove automatism's place within surrealism as a method for investigating the psyche of the writer, and as eventual proof that a connection does exist between the individual and the cosmos. By using the word method, Breton implies that automatic writing is not simply an activity which stimulates surrealist writing, but a method based on the individual's capability to immerse himself in a state of hallucinatory empowerment. In freeing the body from external sensations, typically via hypnosis, the emergence of the automatic message is not only enabled, but actually moves us out of "the moral order" to disrupt the conventions and norms of society.

The implication of automatism is that "voluntary hallucination" can dislodge the writer from the traditionally assigned vantage point as word manipulator, as well as avoid the unanswerable question of how the transfiguration from pre-speech unconscious thoughts to actual recognizable words occurs. Underlying such a practice, the possibility of the unexpected is not only presumed, but effectively relied on as a way to break out of rationality. The leap necessitated by this theory is evident in the way it is theoretically espoused as well. Breton can only avoid an actual explanation of the process of automatism — that is to say how language moves from thought to actual writing without interference — by positing that "there are powerful and complex clusters of conceptions that are formulated outside articulated language and reasoned thought" (*What is Surrealism?*, 109). Without this premise, Breton would have to prove the authenticity of automatic writing once it had been written down, an analysis which in turn circumvents what automatism was meant to do, namely to give "free access to the *unmeasurable* region between the conscious and the unconscious" (italics

mine). By defining the potential misuse of automatism, Breton apparently proves its existence:

... an inevitable delectation (after the fact) in the very terms of the texts obtained, and in particular in the images and symbolic figurations abounding in them, has had a secondary effect of diverting most of their authors from the inattention and indifference which, at least during the production of such texts, must be maintained. This attitude, instinctive in those who are used to appreciating poetic value, has had the vexing consequence of giving the participant an immediate awareness of each part of the message received. (*What is Surrealism?*, 107)

Breton admits that "an inevitable" process of ordering occurs the minute the text has been written, if not before. However, he also insists on "inattention and indifference" as the guiding principle for pure automatism. In effect, this reverses more "romantic" notions of the poet as an exceptional being, since everyone should be able to access the unconscious. According to this premise, automatism questions — as Miller will be seen to do — whether the poet within surrealist praxis still has a distinctive role to play. In other words, can automatism really be a fruitful practice for all? In Miller's case, any theory which places the products of the artist at the forefront, especially if it is at the expense of the poet-writer's role, is necessarily suspect:

Art is only one of the manifestations of the creative spirit. What every great artist is manifesting in his work is a desire to lead a richer life; his work itself is only a description, an intimation, as it were, of these possibilities. The worst sin that can be committed against the artist is to take him at his word, to see in his work a fulfillment instead of a horizon. (*The Cosmological Eye*, 164)

For Miller the artist is still a visionary, and the desire to search for something above and beyond reality is the crucial denominator in the creative process. As such, one cannot disavow the importance of personality within the creative equation. In direct contrast, automatic writing, rather than authenticated by the artist's conscious desires and personality: "is made dubious, moreover, by the profound modifications of memory and personality involved" (*What is Surrealism?*, 106).

If memory and personality disrupt the automatic message, it is because the writer no longer functions effectively as a pure transmitter. When Breton uses the phrase "motor message" as a description of the automatic process, he turns the writer into a machine. On one hand this is a logical outcome of automatism as a "science" of the unconscious, but it also discredits the writer's moral obligations:

The question it seems to me, which each one must pose for himself is this: which reality is more vital, more life-giving, more valid, more durable — the reality of science or the reality of art? Assuming a divergence between the scientific and the poetic attitudes towards life, is it not clear enough that today the schism has grown impassable?

(*The Cosmological Eye*, 164)

The crux of Miller's argument rests on his absolute belief in a divorce between art and science. In this sense, his critique of surrealism operates from a premise diametrically opposed to that of Breton. After all, the authentication of the unconscious in itself, in terms of surrealism, rests on proving the empirical presence of "those hidden forces" accessible to all who follow the proper procedures. The schism demarcated by Miller in his critique of surrealist practice is thus a crucial element in his quest for an individual art. There can, in other words, be no human art without memory and personality, and in fact, Miller's reliance on memory as a creative force not only refers back to Bergson's definition of memory as a continuous process of becoming, but constitutes the framework for his inability to accept a synthesis of art and science. Thus while Breton sees the awareness of individuality as a contamination of the automatic message, for Miller, "Fear, love, hate, all the varying, contradictory expressions or reactions of the personality, are what compose the very warp and woof of life. You can't pull one of them out without the whole edifice crumbling" (*The Cosmological Eye*, 162).

Miller's stress on "the warp and woof of life" illuminates the problems inherent in Breton's focus on writing to validate more abstract premises about the accessibility of the unconscious. If conscious lived life is removed from the realm of art, in favor of an uncompromising return to the unconscious, rationalism must likewise be negated in the process. And, indeed, this is precisely what Breton does in "The First Manifesto": "I resolved to obtain from myself . . . a monologue spoken as rapidly as possible without any intervention on the part of the critical faculties, a monologue consequently unencumbered by the slightest inhibition." On the one hand, Breton stresses the fact that a personal resolution must necessarily motivate the automatic process but, on the other, it must present itself without any rationalizing intervention. By using the word "consequently," Breton indicates that once this occurs, our consciousness will fail to exercise its force as an ordering factor. The word inhibition is also crucial as Breton appropriates and subverts the Freudian notion of our consciousness as intrinsically linked to a restricting super-ego, a super-ego which Breton, like Freud, situates outside the unconscious. However, while Freud's compromise between the

ego and the super-ego is necessary for social compromise, Breton uses the manifestations of the ego to question the rationality of the super-ego. In some respects, Miller both accepts and questions the "use-value" of the unconscious within this context. While he acknowledges "the release of instinctive life" as fruitful for art in general "the stress on the unconscious forces of man does not necessarily imply the elimination of consciousness. On the contrary it implies the expansion of consciousness" (*What is Surrealism?*, 185). The question then remains of where, in literary terms, this expansion will occur. If it is within the realm of sexuality that the expansive forces of the unconscious attain free reign then it is through a language of the erotic that the marvellous is attained.

The issue of sexuality is deliberately down-played by Breton in his attempts to define automatism as a universal and undifferentiated manifestation of the unconscious. For Miller, however, the issue cannot be circumvented as it ties in to his search for individual freedom and, more importantly, the means with which he attains this as a male writer. What differentiates the two is the fact that for Breton individual freedom is not the highest priority of automatic writing. Automatic writing in this sense represents a break from traditional repressive literary practices, but primarily in aesthetic rather than political terms. Miller's observations on surrealism can point to its problematic status vis-à-vis Freudianism, and its failure in positing the unconscious as a given in a creative sense, but Miller still misreads surrealism's agenda in political terms. What Miller is incapable of realizing is that surrealism is largely driven by concerns deliberately divorced from that of gender, precisely what automatism exemplifies by being deliberately non-gendered.

Breton's manifestoes on automatism deal primarily with a desired radical renewal of the practice of writing and his reluctance to link a discourse of sexual desire with that of communal change is, in this respect, one of the major points of difference between Miller's actual use of surrealist tropes and Breton's ruminations on the subject. It is interesting, that while Miller and the surrealists share a genuine concern with how to present imagination as the central power in the human mind, Miller avoids the one issue where they differ the most, namely the use of obscenity as a way to reactivate the unconscious. While Miller's representation of the locations in which his urban protagonist roams is often described in surrealist terms, the constant stress on the individualism of the artist marks a significant change from the universalist voice of the automatic poet. The use of obscenity as a discourse of the masculine self becomes problematic, precisely because of its narcissism, its constant centering on the self rather than on the collective.<sup>9</sup>

Ironically, Breton's eagerness for automatism to be distinct from traditional Freudian psychoanalytical theory actually aligns itself to Miller's claims that his sexual "confessions" are valid as artistic enterprises rather than therapeutic sessions. Likewise, Miller is against the use of psychoanalysis in any curative sense: "Analysis is not going to bring about a cure of neurosis. Analysis is merely a technique, a metaphysic, . . . to illustrate and explain to us the nature of a malady" (*The Cosmological Eye*, 186). While Freudian psychoanalysis believes in the possibility of finding the key to hidden desires and frustrations, in a curative sense, automatism, as Miller points out, does not want to touch or alter the psychological make-up of the unconscious.

Automatism is a central issue, then, partly because it was seen by Breton to embody a poetic sensibility which had been marginalized within traditional poetic practice, and partly because it relates to the issue of designing a master-plan for a radically new departure into literature. By refusing ready-made meanings and creating the conditions wherein new meaning may manifest itself, automatism slots itself comfortably into the avant-garde's belief in its own radical potential, a perspective which Miller acknowledges even as he is critical of its methods.

Contrary to the automatic premise, Miller does not believe that any one methodology can transcend individual achievements. If "metamorphosis" occurs both from "without and within," then the surrealist stress on an internal, innate language of the unconscious — the necessary premise for all automatism — must be taken up for revision.<sup>10</sup> It is this acute sense of an individualistic voice that causes the schism between Miller and the surrealists, a schism which allies Miller more closely to the Bergsonian ideal that the "creation of self by self is the more complete, the more one reasons on what one does," as opposed to Breton's attempt to circumvent reason by directly tapping into "Psychic automatism in its pure state."<sup>11</sup> While the notion of automatism will cause insurmountable obstacles for the surrealist ethos, Breton insists on linking the definition of surrealism with that of automatism: "Surrealism, n. Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express — verbally, by means of the written word, — the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from aesthetic or moral concern."<sup>12</sup>

### “An Open Letter to Surrealists Everywhere” (1938)

In “An Open Letter to Surrealists Everywhere” (1938), Miller not only critiques the absence of reason within surrealism, but insists that it is an international and long-held aesthetic rather than a uniquely French one. “It is a mistake to speak about Surrealism. There is no such thing: there are only Surrealists. They have existed in the past and they will exist in the future.” What Miller is against is “to posit an ism,” for to do so, is to deny the fact that surrealism may function as an individual trait, a personal style, rather than a group endeavor. Miller’s antagonism towards group endeavors ties in to the politicization which he sees the French surrealists engaged in, deluding themselves into thinking that art-movements carry the potential for revolution, when in reality, individual self-progression is the only viable change. “There is no feasible scheme for universal liberation” as the search for freedom “is fundamentally personal and religious. It has nothing to do with liberty and justice, which are idle words signifying nobody knows precisely what. It has to do with making poetry, or, if you will, with making life a poem. It has to do with the adoption of a creative attitude towards life” (*The Cosmological Eye*, 152–87).

To provide an example, Miller uses the surrealist poet Paul Eluard’s ideal of a “fraternity of poets” as an example on this fixation on collectivity. The question for Miller lies not in whether Eluard can create great poetry, but in his adamant pursuit of “liberty and justice,” two chimeras which for Miller represent a weak premise for a truly “creative attitude towards life”:

Unlike Paul Eluard I cannot say that the word “fraternization” exalts me. Nor does it seem to me that this idea of brotherhood arises from a poetic conception of life. It is not at all what Lautréamont meant when he said that poetry must be made by all. The brotherhood of man is a permanent delusion common to idealists everywhere in all epochs: it is the reduction of the principle of individuation to the least common denominator of intelligibility. It is what leads the masses to identify themselves with movie stars and megalomaniacs like Hitler and Mussolini. It is what prevents them from reading and appreciating and being influenced by and creating in turn such poetry as Paul Eluard gives us. That Paul Eluard is desperately lonely, that he strives with might and main to establish communication with his fellow-man, I understand and subscribe to with all my heart. But when Paul Eluard goes down into the street . . . he is not making himself understood

and liked for the poet he is. . . . On the contrary, he is establishing communication with his fellow-men by capitulation, by renunciation of his individuality, his high role.

(Query: And why should poetry be made by all? Why?)

(*The Cosmological Eye*, 152)

Written in 1938, the evocation of Hitler and Mussolini strongly indicates that even the best of political intentions must take the “masses” desire for identification into consideration. Miller even likens the process to the intrinsically commercialized sphere of cinema. While Miller’s interest lies partly in a defense of the poet/writer’s “high role,” it is also a warning of what occurs when art loses its position as a guiding force on a higher intellectual, as well as moral level. Miller does not equate fascist authoritarian leader-figures with the politics of the surrealists, but he sees the institutionalization of politics as driven by “the least common denominator of intelligibility.” Miller may in fact have chosen this phrase in response to a line by Breton in “Introduction to a Discourse on the Paucity of Reality,” in which Breton affectionately calls his own thought process “this least common denominator of mortals.”<sup>13</sup> For Breton this is a complementary term, whereas for Miller, it implies a leveling out of intellectual responsibility, regardless of its political aims.

Miller’s rhetoric concerning the a-politicized stance of the surrealists, signals the problems inherent in an individualized ethos vis-à-vis the collective endeavors of the surrealists. In Miller’s critique of Eluard, the line that most clearly signals his own convictions is the belief in a street creed of communality: a more localized and less abstract version of the politics of fraternization. Miller’s reluctance towards being designated either left-wing or right-wing is partly born out of this desire: to be simply another man on the street; a perspective which was immediately suspect in the eyes of fellow writers of the period. George Orwell’s review of *The Cosmological Eye* (1938) including “An Open Letter to Surrealists Everywhere,” attests to this attitude:

Miller refuses to bother about the difference between fascism and communism because “society is made up of individuals.” This has come to be a familiar attitude nowadays and it would be a respectable one if it were carried to its logical conclusion which would mean remaining passive in the face of war, revolution fascism or anything else. . . . At bottom Miller’s outlook is that of a simple individualist who recognizes no obligations to anyone else — at any rate no obligation to society as a whole. Either one must genuinely keep out of politics, or one must recognize that politics is the science of the possible.<sup>14</sup>