Critical Essays on
HENRY MILLER

edited by

RONALD GOTTESMAN

G. K. Hall & Co. / New York
Maxwell Macmillan Canada / Toronto
Maxwell Macmillan International / New York Oxford Singapore Sydney

Twayne Publishers
Macmillan Publishing Company
866 Third Avenue
New York, New York 10022

Maxwell Macmillan Canada, Inc.
1200 Eglinton Avenue East
Suite 200
Don Mills, Ontario M3C 3N1

Macmillan Publishing Company is part of the Maxwell Communication Group of Companies.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Critical essays on Henry Miller / edited by Ronald Gottesman.
p. cm.—(Critical essays on American literature)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-8161-7319-2
1. Miller, Henry, 1891– —Criticism and interpretation.
I. Gottesman, Ronald. II. Series.
PS3525.I5454Z6593 1992
818'.5209—dc20 92-16873
CIP

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials. ANSI Z3948-1984.♾™

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America

Critical Essays on
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CRITICAL ESSAYS ON AMERICAN LITERATURE

James Nagel, General Editor
University of Georgia, Athens

To Beth Shube in love and friendship

General Editor's Note

This series seeks to anthologize the most important criticism on a wide variety of topics and writers in American literature. Our readers will find in various volumes not only a generous selection of reprinted articles and reviews but original essays, bibliographies, manuscript sections, and other materials brought to public attention for the first time. This volume, *Critical Essays on Henry Miller* is the most comprehensive collection of essays ever published on one of the most important modern writers in the United States. It contains both a sizable gathering of early reviews and a broad selection of more modern scholarship as well. Among the authors of reprinted articles and reviews are Jay Martin, Kate Millet, Lawrence Durrell, Ezra Pound, Edmund Wilson, Erica Jong, Warner Berthoff, and Alan Trachtenberg. In addition to a substantial introduction by Ronald Gottesman there are also four original essays commissioned specifically for publication in this volume, new studies by Mary Kellie Munsil, Jeffrey Bartlett, Welch D. Everman, and Richard Kostelanetz. There is also a section of new tributes to Miller with statements from Isaac Bashevis Singer, Jerzy Kosinski, Robert Creeley, Robert Snyder, and Diane Miller. We are confident that this book will make a permanent and significant contribution to the study of American literature.

James Nagel
University of Georgia

Publisher's Note

Producing a volume that contains both newly commissioned and reprinted material presents the publisher with the challenge of balancing the desire to achieve stylistic consistency with the need to preserve the integrity of works first published elsewhere. In the Critical Essays series, essays commissioned especially for a particular volume are edited to be consistent with G. K. Hall's house style; reprinted essays appear in the style in which they were first published, with only typographical errors corrected. Consequently, shifts in style from one essay to another are the result of our efforts to be faithful to each text as it was originally published.

Acknowledgments

My debt to Jay Martin is primary and double. His deeply imagined biography of Henry Miller stimulated my serious interest in the man and his literary achievement, and ever since Jay has been a steady and generous source of encouragement of that interest (and many others). Fine teacher that he is, Jay knows how to help without getting in the way. I am glad to acknowledge his friendship over the years.

Another biographer of Miller—Bob Snyder—has also inspired me by his creative example and comforted me with his friendship—often over breakfast, always with a wondrous mixture of utter seriousness and unrestrained laughter. His film *The Henry Miller Odyssey* made a gift to me many years ago of the living presence of Miller. More recently, Bob instigated what has become this large book. Our frequent companions in eating, talking, and laughing were Noel Riley Fitch and Michael Hargraves, who between them knew everyone who had written or were writing on Miller and Anaïs Nin (and scores of related topics). They were full of good advice, practical information, and sound judgment.

Many other people have also contributed to the completion of this collection. Annelore Stern in the Reference Department and Mary Hollerich, Assistant Head of Access Services, of the University of Southern California's Doheny Library were very helpful, as were their colleagues in the Inter-Library Loan Service. Jerry Kamstra, Director of the Henry Miller Memorial Library in Big Sur, supplied information promptly and in a cordial fashion. Patricia Middleton of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University expedited my inquiries, and Octavio Olvera in Special Collections made my use of Special Collections at UCLA efficient and pleasant.

I want to say a special word of thanks to two groups of people. Among those who have written on Miller, Bert Mathieu was especially generous both with his own scholarship and in supplying the letter written by Isaac B. Singer for a publication planned by Mathieu many years ago. He was, moreover, gracious about supplying translations to French passages in the

selections from his fine book on Miller. Warner Berthoff, Louis Budd, Erica Jong, Norman Mailer, Jay Martin, Patricia Middleton, Barbara, Tony, and Valentine Miller, Ann Barret Perlès, Bern Porter, Alan Trachtenberg, and George Wickes were instrumental in making materials available either free of charge or for a very token fee. Many publishers were similarly cooperative and should have the gratitude of the scholarly community: Straight Arrow Press, New Directions, Farrar Straus and Giroux, Duke University Press, Da Capo Press, the Scott Meredith Literary Agency, the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Omni Publications International. They certainly have mine.

Jeffrey Bartlett, Welch Everman, James Goodwin, and Mary Kellie Munsil, prepared original essays for this volume at the rate of something like ten cents an hour. And they paid their own postage. All who use this volume are, like me, in their debt.

Several students of mine in recent years have written papers on Miller for seminars in modernism, and all of them have stimulated my thinking about Miller and his works. It is a pleasure to acknowledge the contributions of Paul Hansom, Andrea Ivanov, and John Whalen-Bridge. Two research assistants did invaluable leg and finger work and I am grateful to (Karen) Hyon Hui Oh and Tracey M. Harris for efficient help cheerfully rendered.

Finally, I am pleased to thank two family members for their assistance. Allison McCabe took time from her school break to type footnotes and to prepare, meticulously, the index. Beth Shube, to whom this book is dedicated, did large parts of the intellectual and clerical work that went into the preparation of this book. But I am even more grateful for her emotional support, which made it possible for me to carry on with my part of the work.

I alone, of course, am responsible for any errors of fact and judgment that remain.

Contents

Introduction

RONALD GOTTESMAN

> But the quality of the imagination is to flow, and not to freeze.
>
> —Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet"

> By the time I was handed my birth certificate my criminal instincts were already fully developed. It was only natural that I should become a rebel, an outlaw, a desperado. I blame my parents, I blame society, I blame God. I accuse. I go through life with finger lifted accusingly. I have the prophetic itch. I curse and blaspheme. I tell the bitter truth.
>
> —Henry Miller, "Uterine Hunger"

Henry Miller wrote too much and too much has been written about him and his work to make it possible to cover all his writings or the vast range of responses to them in this one volume. Selections had to be made and the choices and their arrangement will not please everybody. More space might have been given to Miller's post-Paris writings, to Miller's lifelong role as a literary commentator, to theoretically sophisticated gender-conscious criticism, to other current theoretical interests (for example, a Bakhtinian analysis of Miller's carnivalesque), to the vast body of criticism in languages other than English, and to Miller as one of the most extraordinary letter writers of the past century. Many of the dozens of Henry Millers (to say nothing of the hundreds of commentators) are inevitably absent from this volume.[1] Still, the reprinted material and the essays commissioned specifically for this volume do provide a richly varied set of perspectives on Miller the man and his writings, and surely this collection will not be the final or "definitive" one for a writer of such power and originality.[2]

If it is usually difficult to separate a writer from his work, in the case of Henry Miller it is virtually impossible to do so. As Miller himself observed: "I don't care who the artist is, if you study him deeply, sincerely, detachedly, you will find that he and his work are one."[3] Another guiding assumption

behind the selection of materials and the interpretations offered in this introduction is that there is not one Henry Miller but many. (Norman Mailer suggested twenty, fifteen of whom are very good.)[4] It is also true that although an immense amount of ink has been expended on both the life of the man and his work, we are still discovering a great deal about the person called Henry Miller, about his several literary personae, and about the two score of volumes of letters, fiction, autobiographies, essays, travel writings, plays, literary, art, and film commentary, and miscellaneous writings he left as his literary legacy.[5] *Crazy Cock*, a previously unpublished early novel by Miller, appeared in 1991, two new biographies were published in the centennial year of his birth by Mary Dearborn and Robert Ferguson, and Erica Jong is at work on a memoir focussing on Miller.[6] This volume is part of the upsurge of interest in the legacies of Henry Miller, and it has a double purpose—to acknowledge and characterize the earlier critical responses to Miller and his works, and to indicate some of the ways in which a new generation of readers is responding to the man and his writings.[7]

Early Miller

The collection opens with a vivid and sensitive appreciation by Emil Schnellock, one of Miller's earliest and most intimate friends—the one who Miller credited with crystallizing his ambition to become a writer.[8] Schnellock's portrait calls attention to a number of character traits not usually associated in the public mind with Miller—his generosity, his capacity for sympathetic attentiveness, and the undercurrent of tenderness that runs beneath the nihilistic and despairing surface of *Tropic of Cancer*. We are hardly surprised to be told about Miller's animal energy, the "tremendous gusto" of a young man who "could caper like a goat," a man who had the disconcerting habit of laughing in your face when he sensed falseness of utterance, a man whose capacity for talk was marked by a manic intensity "in which he spoke all languages at once." After all, one of Miller's mottoes was "Always merry and bright," a motto adopted in the face of experience that was often painful and dark. We may be surprised, however, to hear of Miller's early sense of being a misfit (of being, as his friend Lawrence Durrell put it, "stillborn") and of his attempted suicide (with its comic and symbolically predictable outcome). Of even greater interest, I think, are three of Schnellock's observations: his intriguing reference to Miller's tendency to fall into trances "at the most unusual, unexpected moments," his description of Miller's "joyful frenzy" in the act of painting, and, in particular, Schnellock's astonishment at the "cascade" of letters Miller wrote to him (as he did to many others) over the years of their long friendship. Schnellock's account of Miller is surely one of the best brief impressions we have of Miller as a young man. Written

with the eye of an artist and the heart of a devoted friend, it is a biographical gem.

Miller's first published and still best-known book is *Tropic of Cancer* (1934), and it has seemed worthwhile to devote a good deal of attention to this work's genesis, its compositional and publication histories, and the responses it has evoked over the past half century. Virtually everything written about Miller addresses *Tropic of Cancer*, but the next few items in this collection do so in a concentrated way.

Michael Fraenkel, a businessman turned poet and philosopher, was introduced to Miller in the spring of 1931 by the expatriate American poet Walter Lowenfels.[9] Fraenkel, obsessed with the notion of the spiritual death of the Western world, immediately took Miller in hand (and into his apartment, the Villa Borghese of *Tropic of Cancer*), where the two of them engaged in nonstop oral autopsies of Western civilization. Fraenkel's essay enjoys the benefit of a decade of hindsight, but its reconstruction of both the mood of the times in which *Cancer* was composed and the biographical circumstances of its composition has the ring of truth (and none of its facts or interpretations were gainsaid by any of the principals).

Fraenkel clearly had a fine instinct for Miller's imaginative power and for what Miller needed to do to realize that power as a writer. Responding to what he took to be Miller's "absolute simplicity," his natural, open artlessness (which he also recognized were connected with Miller's anarchic impulses), Fraenkel offered his new friend advice he was ready to heed, partly because Miller had already begun to act on it (as one can plainly see in the extraordinary letters Miller had been writing for some time to Emil Schnellock). Still, Fraenkel deserves credit for encouraging Miller to put his imitative literariness behind him and to begin to close the gap between the rhythms of his mind and emotions and the movement of his prose. Fraenkel's observations about the way the moment-to-moment nature of the lives depicted in *Cancer* are made manifest in the narrative's "desperate swing and beat" reveal that Fraenkel had a literary as well as a philosophic sensibility. Fraenkel, moreover, perceptively insists that the book *is* the author, "the living man going on," and that central to the power of both was "*talk*"—this "wild, mad, fantastic talk that swelled and grew and gathered momentum—a stream, a torrent, a flood." The power of Miller's speech, Fraenkel observes, is "something pathological," but as Miller brought it under control in the act of writing and revising, it became one of the salient features of his style, giving a distinctive immediacy to his writing that lives as much in the mind's ear as in the mind's eye.[10]

Throughout his life Miller had an extraordinary capacity to make and sustain friendships, and he made many lifelong friends during his Paris years. Of these none was deeper or more complex than his relationship with Anaïs Nin, which, as Gunther Stuhlmann has noted, was "firmly founded on [their]

shared need to create themselves through writing."[11] Anyone familiar with the various documentations and interpretations of this relationship is already aware of its romantic, literary, and practical aspects, and especially of the emotional and material support Nin provided Miller, who was, when they first met, better known as a "desperado" or bohemian "gangster" than as a writer. What is of special importance is her unparalleled understanding of Miller as a man and a writer from the moment of their first meeting as recorded in Nin's astonishing diaries—that vast and artful repository of one of the most finely tuned sensibilities of her generation.

Nin immediately picked up on Miller's complexity of character, sensing the intensity of his curiosity, his capacity to install himself without reserve in the present moment, the tension between his acquiescent passivity and his rebellious anger, and, perhaps most presciently, Miller's deep need for revenge against life's insults, especially those by women; "his work," she noted, "is a struggle to triumph over woman, over the mother, over the woman in himself" (p. 165).[12] Once she had read some of his (then unpublished) work, she remarked, as many critics since have, on its "ugly, destructive, fearless, cathartic strength." "He uses," she went on, "the first person, real names; he repudiates order and form and fiction itself. He writes in the uncoordinated way we feel, on various levels at once" (pp. 10–11). The diaries are studded with such perceptive observations, and if Nin could venture the shrewd opinion that Miller's distinctive contribution to letters is his "dementalization" of fiction, it is because she, like Miller, had a "small, round, hard photographic lens" in her eyes (p. 258). And while this is not the proper place to explore the subject in detail, the importance to Miller's life and writing of his engagement with his dream life beginning in 1933 would be hard to exaggerate, and this too was in large part a gift from Nin. Her suggestion to Miller that he hold on to his dreams, that "they will make a new kind of work, of book" proved invaluable (p. 225).[13]

Many of the canny observations about Miller and his writings recorded as her diary entries find their way into what is still one of the best pieces of criticism devoted to *Cancer*—Nin's famous preface to the book (she pointedly refrained from calling it a novel). Indeed, much later critical commentary owes a debt to her aphoristic notation of the unresolved tensions embedded in the book, its "obedience to flow," its descent to a " 'pre-artistic level,' " the pioneering character of its form, the book's ability "to startle the lifeless ones from their profound slumber"—all deriving from its origins in, and paradoxically controlled allegiance to, the unconscious, the world of personal and cultural dream and nightmare.[14]

Jay Martin's chapter "The Last Book" (Miller's first title for *Tropic of Cancer*) is a model of biographical writing, combining as it does the spirit of the time, the facts of the place, the interplay between the inner life of the subject and the often exuberant dailiness of his life. But it is as *literary* biography that this chapter of *Always Merry and Bright* is most impressive.

Martin deftly traces the way Miller stitches significant episodes and small details of his life into the design of the book, identifies Miller's growing sense of his destiny as a writer, fills in the circumstances surrounding the titling and publication of the book, and convincingly argues that at "the end of the book the man who can write the book is born." Martin, of course, has other fresh and critically acute things to say about Miller and his diverse writings, but the chapter reprinted here has the form, finish, and heft that distinguishes the best literary biographies of our time.

The next contributions deal in various ways with *Tropic of Cancer* as a published book, and they are chosen from among many noteworthy candidates.[15] While *Cancer* was, in several senses, notorious from the moment of its birth on 1 September 1934, it was a critical success as well. Blaise Cendrars, the Swiss-French writer, published the first review in *Orbes* (Summer 1935), 9–10, characterizing Miller as a "good down-to-earth realist," who wrote of Paris with a European sensibility.[16] As Jay Martin tells us, in response to Miller's request for his opinion, T. S. Eliot had written at about the same time: "*Tropic of Cancer* seems to me a very remarkable book . . . a rather magnificent piece of work. . . . a great deal better both in depth of insight and of course in the actual writing than *Lady Chatterley's Lover*."[17] Miller had sent copies of his first published book to other influential writers, critics, and editors, and many of them admired the book for one reason or another.[18]

Some of the most interesting early reactions to *Cancer* were not published for many years. Perhaps the best-known of these early responses, however, came from the least-known writer among them—young Lawrence Durrell. Durrell, then in his early twenties, wrote Miller a fan letter in August 1935 (included in this volume) in which he celebrated the book as "the only man-size piece of work which this century can really boast of." Durrell particularly gloried in the antiliterary qualities of the book, the way "it really gets down on paper the blood and the bowels of our time," the way it violates conventions that insist on the well-mannered, the sentimental, the superficially pretty. It already is, he concluded, "the copy-book for my generation."

Ezra Pound wrote privately on 28 March 1935 to T. S. Eliot, asking him to reserve four pages of each issue of the *Criterion* so that Pound could tell readers what was fit for them to read. He immediately went on to note that Henry Miller had recently published "presumably the only book a man cd. read for pleasure," a book which "if not out Ulysseeing Joyce" was at least "more part of permanent literature than such ½ master slime the weakminded, Woolf female" had written. Less than two years later (11 December 1937), Pound wrote to Montgomery Butchart: "Miller has considerable talent. Ultimately bores me, as did D. H. Lawrence." Pound qualifies this judgment by pointing out that he is not "the general reader; and Miller is too good for them."[19]

Pound's review of *Cancer* was apparently written for the *Criterion*, in