
UNIT 5 MILLER'S WORKS: BLACK SPRING

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Bibliography of Miller
- 5.3 Critical Analysis of Millers works
- 5.4 *Black Spring*: Plot and Narrative Technique
- 5.5 Style in *Black Spring*
- 5.6 Let us sum up
- 5.7 Questions
- 5.8 Notes and Suggested Readings

5.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this course is to critically analyse some of the major works of Henry Miller in general and *Black Spring* in particular.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Henry Miller was a prolific writer He wrote autobiographical novels (auto-novels), essays, treatises, reminiscences, letters, and travelogues. We will analyse in the following sections some of the major works of Miller.

5.2 BIBLIOGRAPHY OF MILLER

A. Works of Henry Miller¹

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5.3 CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF MILLER'S WORKS

Henry Miller writes in two main genres. His work is almost evenly divided between narrative and expository modes. He is best known for his narrative works such as *Tropic of Cancer*, *Black Spring*, *Tropic of Capricorn*, *Sexus*, *Plexus*, *Nexus*, etc. Critics have usually treated these books as novels, because Miller's method is that of fiction, but Miller has always insisted that he is writing autobiography or

autobiographical novels or auto-novels. Miller appears in them primarily in the familiar role of the artist-hero who dominates modern fiction. They might be described as confessions and the method is picaresque. They are confessions in Rousseau's sense of the word-introspective, autobiographical monologues like those of Rousseau. Miller usually tries to argue a thesis from his personal experience.²

The expository writings are harder to classify. They would usually be defined as essays, but they assume a variety of forms: letters, criticism, travel, portraiture, anecdotes, reminiscences, opinions. The personal essay admits plenty of latitude, which Miller has used, incorporating a good deal of narrative technique. The essays represent Miller in his shorter flights of imagination, and most commonly serve as a vehicle for his ideas, or rather, opinions. Most of them were originally written for periodicals and later collected for publication in book form. Miller himself has no use for literary genres - or literary criticism for that matter. To him all of his work expresses a man.

The richest period of Miller's writing career is also the most varied. This is the period he spent in Paris and its immediate aftermath. In a volcanic creative outburst, he produced stories, articles, books, at the rate of a volume a year. During this decade, he wrote the three picaresque narratives generally regarded as his best and most characteristic works namely, *Tropic of Cancer*, *Black Spring*, and *Tropic of Capricorn*. He also wrote two books in epistolary form: *Aller Retour New York* and *Hamlet* (the latter in collaboration with Michael Frankel); he wrote several stray pamphlets and articles, and stories to fill two miscellanies: *Max* and *The White Phagocytes*, and *The Wisdom of the Heart*. Upon his return to New York in 1940, he wrote a manifesto entitled *The World of Sex*; and the narratives that constitute *Quiet Days in Clitchey* and an account of his visit to Greece in 1930: *The Colossus of Maroussi*. We will give a critical analysis of some of the major works ut infra.

- A) *Tropic of Cancer* (1934) is an account of the adventures and encounters of an American in Paris-Written in the first person and the present tense, it conveys a strong sense of the speaking voices and the continuing moment. The narrator is named Henry Miller and the technique is basically interior monologue, reporting successive states of mind as they occur, with all the fragmentary nature of the true stream consciousness, a hodge podge of incidents, memories, hallucinations, rights, ruminations, conversations, nightmares. There are frequent interruptions and shifts, back and forth in time, or altogether out of time into dream and fantasy. The disorder is intentional. Miller wanted "to get off the gold standard of literature", to write as he spoke, and to revise nothing that he had written. Behind his bewildering technique, there is some organization, however. The structure is roughly chronological, with distinct episodes succeeding each other following the calendar from autumn to summer. The book is also divided into chapters, unnumbered and untitled, but each with a name. Then there is the overriding theme of "cancer and delirium". These organising principles are not readily apparent, the first impression created by this book is one of chaos, with the first chapter being the most chaotic. In fact, the uninitiated reader is likely to win the underlying themes altogether, for what is far more striking at first is Miller's intention to write "all that which is omitted in books." The reaction of many readers is shock; others are unimpressed by Miller's attempt to shock: still others are bored. But those who can accept obscenity calmly can find meaning behind it.³
- B) *Tropic of Capricorn* (1939), the third of Miller's personal narratives - you may note here that *Black Spring*, the prescribed novel, is the second of Miller's narratives - is more strictly autobiographical whereas *Tropic of Cancer* portrayed the author-narrator living in the eternal present, *Tropic of*

Capricorn goes back to the years he had discovered himself as a writer. In trying to explain how and why he became a writer, he reviews more than thirty by years of his past experience. He succeeds mainly in conveying his sense of alienation from American life. Capricorn, the sign of the zodiac symbolizes his destiny and complements the rich symbolism of cancer. For, cancer is not only the symbol of disease and corruption, it is also the zodiacal sign of the poet and the versatile: maneuverable crab "opposite cancer in the zodiac extremes (of the Equinox – turning points) is capricorn." Miller wrote in a letter to Anais Nin at the time he was finishing his second Tropic: — "the house in which I am born, which is religious and represents renaissance in death. Cancer also means for me the disease of civilization, the extreme point of realization along the wrong paths— hence the necessity to change one's course and begin all over again."⁴ Also, it is the dominant theme of resurrection which runs all through the work in man: images of suffering, death, and revival as well as more explicit allusions. In *Tropic of Capricorn*, the character he presents is that of the solitary, self-reliant-rogue, at odds with society, improving his life from day to day, accepting wind falls or hard knocks as they come. The narrative alternates between good luck and bad; the windfalls are usually sexual, the misfortunes his sufferings as an alienated individual. Since his luck is often good, it is hard to take his sufferings too seriously.⁵

- C) Five miscellanies present Miller in a new guise as a critic. In *The Cosmological Eye*, he admires the mystic perception akin to madness that produces visionary paintings. Miller makes an excellent critic of the visual arts. He has the years of appreciation, the understanding of the media, the taste, and the ability to express his vision that make a successful critic. The two major literary essays in *Max and the White Phagocytes*, both provocative, nevertheless reveal certain limitation. *The Wisdom of the Heart* (1941) is the best source for his reflection on philosophy and its expression in art-philosophy in a broad sense, embracing psychology and mysticism, the book includes two essays on Balzac, whose illuminism appealed profoundly to Miller. *Sunday after the War* (1944) is noteworthy for its three selections from *Sexus*, then unpublished. *Stand still like the Humming Bird* (1962) sweeps together as a very uneven collection of essays, mostly on literary subjects.⁶
- D) *The Colossus of Maroussi* is one of Miller's finest books. The visit to Greece had been a high moment in his life, deeply affecting him in a number of ways. His account is much like a travel book, though it dramatically conveys the spirit of place through the observer's personal intuitions. To Miller Greece was a holy land that aroused all his religious awe. Miller's experience of the sacred places of Greece is deliberately unhistorical; what he wanted was not archeology or history but a feeling of kinship with the men of the past. Disheartened by his own time, Miller preferred to take a millennial view of the human race. In Miller, Greece not only stirred antediluvian memories, it opened up several new worlds. It was both ancient and modern, with its pastoral landscape and the cities like Athens being a blaze of electric lights. Also, the book is a record of great friendship and casual encounters with ordinary folk, with whom he communicated effectively by pantomime.⁷ He is most intolerant of the American Greeks he meets every where he goes, who appreciate the worst of American materialism and nothing of their own culture. Underlying many of his attitudes is the war – the final proof that the modern world is dehumanized and death-driven.
- E) The same attitudes pervade another travel book, *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (1945). When Miller returned after a stay of ten years in Europe, he decided to tour the United States and record his impressions as he went. He spent a year zigzagging across the country and back. His account of the

journey is as erratic as his route. It would hardly serve as a guide to the United States, but it provides a good index to Miller's opinions. He is mainly appalled by his native land. The country is magnificent but the people are dead – all but the Negroes, Red Indians, and an occasional non conformist. The American way of life has created a spiritual and cultural waste land, with its obsession for objects and money, its modern conveniences, advertising, radio programs, movies, comic stories, battle ships, bombs, and canned foods. For all its anathemas, *The Airconditioned Nightmare* is a thoroughly American book. Miller rages because he is truly American, because he believes in the national ideal with a fundamentalist fervor. The book is very American in flavor. The very notion of a transcontinental odyssey is in the best native tradition, with unexpected adventures and excursions off the beaten track a part of the pattern.⁸

- F) Miller planned originally to write two volumes of *The Air Conditioned Nightmare*, but like many of his projects, the one had a way of changing as it went along. The second volume, *Remember to Remember* (1947) is a sequel only in the sense that it preserves the same man airing similar opinions. Both volumes are miscellaneous collections of sketches. The second is built around persons rather than places, for Miller's travel had ended in 1944, when he settled in Big Sur. Here again, as in the earlier volume, he makes a point of discovering unsung genius and prefers to believe that the genuine artist is always unrecognized.
- G) *Quiet Days in Clichy* (1940), as the title suggests, narrates personal experiences of the early forties when Miller was living in Clichy with his friend, Perles. The material is similar to that of *Tropic of Cancer*. It is good story telling and realistic reporting; but it has none of the vehemence that made the *Tropic of Cancer* "a cry of passionate protest", and none of the 'ecstasy and none of the heightened subjective vision that informed the earlier writing.
- H) *The World of Sex* (1957) is the *biographia literaria* of Henry Miller – a key statement that defines the role of sex in his writings and in his life written at midpoint in his career as a kind of postscript to *Tropic of Capricorn*, it serves to explain his purpose in that book and to introduce the other autobiographical volumes that are to follow.⁹
- I) *Sexus, Plexus, and Nexus*, taken together (called *The Rosy Crucifixion*) are simply an enormously expanded *Tropic of Capricorn*. The three volumes of the trilogy differ considerably. *Sexus* is the most obscene of all Miller's works, and the *Sexus* episodes which alternate regularly with neutral passages, often seem gratuitous. The other two volumes contain hardly any obscenity. *Sexus* is also the most disorganized with constant digressions, reminiscences, and other excursions, interrupting the main thread. In *Plexus* and *Nexus*, the narrative becomes more factual and straightforward, and as a result offer a clearer explanation of Miller's emergence from the past. "The *Rosy Crucifixion* is, says George Wickes," is four times as long as *Tropic of Capricorn*, with little of the humor, ferocity, or pyrotechnics."¹⁰
- J) *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch* (1957) presents Miller's meditations from his own *Walden*. The idyllic setting of Big Sur, quite naturally brought to mind Thoreau, the American frontier, and utopian communities.

About Miller's position as a writer, George Wickes avers: "Gradually a calmer view of his work is emerging not only in the public mind but among literary historians. His final place has yet to be determined, but he is being generally

recognized as one of the important writers of his time, one of the most expressive of the thirties, and certainly the best surrealist writer America has produced."¹¹

5.4 **BLACK SPRING: PLOT AND NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE**

Black Spring, published in 1936 – two years after the publication of *Tropic of Cancer* – deals with many of the same themes, but in a different mood. “I am Chancre, the crab which moves sideways and backwards and forwards at will. I move in strange tropics,” Miller announces, explaining the connection between *Black Spring* and *Tropic of Cancer*. **And the black spring of the title is a metaphor for the world’s blight. It may also be interpreted as “the season of ecstatic despair.” Instead of taking place only in the immediate present, the narrative moves in time and place, from Paris to memories of Brooklyn and New York and on to other planes to reverie and fantasia.** He is less fierce now, less hungry, more euphoric; There is less sex and obscenity, less action and violence. There is more delirium than cancer now, more dream, hallucination, and Schizophrenia, as Miller explores different modes and *levels of perception*. *Black Spring* was written partly before and partly after the delayed publication of *Cancer*. Miller repeatedly refers to post-cancer period as “euphoric”, “ultra-happy”. Miller presents a series of monologues, meditations, reminiscences, dreams, and visions, shifting back and forth from his Paris surroundings to his early years in Brooklyn and New York. Underlying its chaotic variety in style and technique is a coherence of theme and symbol.

The theme of the book is universal death and dark regeneration, humanity caught in the season of “black spring”. “Schizophrenia!”, Miller cries, pointing to the characteristic malady of our age; the whole world is diseased.¹² And yet: “a brand new world is coming out of the egg and no matter how fast I write the old world doesn’t die fast enough. I hear the new machine guns and the millions of bones splintered at once; I see dogs running mad and pigeons dropping with letters tied to their ankles”. “Smash it, smash it,” he seems to be constantly shouting, adding for ironic effect, “Always merry and bright.” Miller can hardly wait for Doomsday. He is an alien in his homeland—though a citizen of the universe and his favorite fantasy is to know the crowds of our wasteland down: “Men and women promenading on the sidewalks: curious beasts, half-human, half-crazy, their teeth polished, their eyes glazed, the women clothed in beautiful garbs, each one equipped with a cold storage smile, The men smiled too now and then, as if they were walking in their coffins to meet the Heavenly Redeemer.....I had a gat with me and when we got to Forty-Second street I opened fire, Nobody paid any attention.” (189)¹³

The Surrealists – some of you who have studied Surrealism know this – advocated firing at random on a crowd, a gesture of ultimate defiance; unlike them, Miller forecasts the millenium, his fantasy betokens not absurdity but faith. “I am thinking of that age to come when god is born again,” he writes, “when men will fight and kill for god as now and for a long time to come men are going to fight for food. I am thinking of that age when work will be forgotten and books assume their true place in life, when perhaps there will be no more books, just one great book – a Bible.” (23)¹⁴

The personality behind these statements; contradictory, shrill, humble, provides the deeper sense of unity in *Black Spring*. Apocalypse is the gloomy theme of the book, but a cynic may say that apocalypse is also Miller’s personal vindication. Without false modesty, Miller claims that his history will have a scar on the face of the earth, that it will burn up other meaningless histories. Yet Miller is too genuinely incongruous a man to inspire the sneer we reserve for charlatans.

The book contains ten sections. These are:

1. **The 14th word**
2. **Third or Fourth day of Spring**

3. A Saturday afternoon
4. The Angel is My Watermark
5. The Tailor Shop
6. Jabberwhorl Cronstadit
7. Into the Nightlife
8. Walking up and down in China
9. Burlesk
10. Megalopolitan Mania

Each of its ten self-contained sections is an exercise in a different medium of art or the imagination, or in several media. "The Angel is My watermark" for instance investigates literary inspiration, the vision of the mad, and water color technique. Further, Miller is both the angel and the horse's ass in the metamorphosis picture of "The Angel is my WaterMark;" his happy task is to relate the sublime to its animal origins. He is many selves, squabbling among themselves, warring on the world, lost to memory, "There are huge blocks of my life which are gone forever. Huge blocks gone, scattered, wasted in talk, action, reminiscences, dream. There was never any time when I was living one life....." (23).¹⁵

Moreover, he absolves himself from all conventional unities. His home is the present, grimy and sodden with glory; but his home, too, is in his beloved China—the symbol of a reconciled being. "I am here in the midst of great change, he writes in "Walking up and down in China," "I have forgotten my own language and yet I do not speak the new language, I am in China and I am talking Chinese." (164).¹⁶

Yet, he remembers repeatedly to yell: Primary colors! Primary passions! Even in China, the world must always be covered in snow or perpetually aflame. This is finally an extremist's vision of life, an artist's dream. It is the flawed artist in Miller, even more than the crippled seer, who puts his stamp on each page. The task is sometimes solitary. Like Robinson Crusoe, Miller carries his desert island with him, building his fort in his wilderness. In this view of himself as an artist, Miller may strike as an excessively romantic, yet the same man states: "THE GREAT ARTIST IS HE WHO CONQUERS THE ROMANTIC IN HIMSELF." (194).¹⁷ Like Whitman, Miller loudly proclaims his contradictions, unlike Whitman, he ends by saying to his reader: "...tonight I would like to think of one man, a lone individual, a man without name or country, a man whom I respect because he has nothing in common with you— Myself." (206) It begins with Miller possessed by "the dictation" that goes on in his head, beyond his control. He can only water down what is being dictated to him until finally it causes, leaving him exhausted. He then turns to a fascinating book on art and which prompts him to do a water color.. the rest of the piece explains how a water color happens, through a process as fortuitous as his writing: "when you're an instinctive water colorist everything happens according to God's will."¹⁸

Another section "Into the Night life...." is the scenario of a surrealist nightmare or rather, a dozen nightmares lumped together. Vividly pictorial, it is like a surrealist film, full of irrational sequences, screaming terrors, Freudian guilt and logic. Like any good nightmare it is experienced; one is there, being personal, unable to run, locked in, frantically trying to find a way out. The world tilts and the scene shifts in this "Coney island of the mind," "where memories are jumbled together with Gothic visions in a world of crazy symbols that make sense. Miller has written a great deal about the creative process elsewhere, but never so effectively, *Black Spring* demonstrates the creative imagination at work on all levels. "In ordinary waking life", Miller explains in his surrealistic vocabulary: "... The author suffers from normal vision but in the frontispiece he renders himself myopic in order to grasp the immediacy of the dream plasm. By means of the dream technique he peels off the outer layers of his geo-logic mortality and comes to grips with his true mantic self, a non stratified area of semi-liquid character. Only the amorphous side of his nature now possesses validity. By submerging the visible I, he dives below the threshold of

his schizophrenic habit patterns. He swims joyously, ad lib. in the Amniotic fluid, one with his amoebic self.¹⁹ Miller believes that writing should be as spontaneous and unconscious as possible, His own writing is full of free associations and improvisations. There are passages of automatic writing—cadenzas, as Miller sometimes calls them when the dictation possesses him, Miller at the type writer is like a centaur; he becomes one with the machine, and in furious bursts. The result is a succession of discontinuous virtuoso passages that show where he sat down to write and where he left off.

This work shows the to-be-expected frenzied journeys, horrendous transformations, snakes coming out of female organs, disintegrating bodies, mechanized desert landscapes, and threatening menageries of night life. Perhaps, the material would be of some interest in providing psychogenetic patterns for a biographer of Miller: The "poor, desperate father (holding a rust razor) with whom the son can't communicate, (177)²⁰; the injured girl-child (his sister or his daughter?) whom he can't save, the recurring images of surgery and dismemberment; the agonized stumbling into childhood scenes next to cemeteries and the recurrent nostalgia for the "street of early sorrows," the images of sexuality always turning into grotesque mechanisms (including wives); and the italicization of personal guilt – his customs declaration: "I want to declare that I am a traitor to the human race." (168).²¹

In the section entitled "Third or Fourth Day of Spring"—which can be characterized as an apocalyptic essay—Miller simply states his two gestures of escape: "You have the dream for night time and the horse laugh for day time." (30) But they are not really separate for Miller, and the laugh is emphatically nightmarish and diseased. Each great period, he suggestively notes, is followed by its characterizing malaise: ?The crusades – Black Death; Columbus–syphilis; nineteenth century–Schizophrenia. The twentieth century laugh thus tends hysteria, toward cackling at catastrophe.²²

However, Miller also claims a different stance of "gay, hard wisdom" (33). He would like to possess the sardonic delight of Petronius (whose Trimachio's "piss warm and drink cold" provides the epigraph here; of Rabelais and his pan-human hyperbole, and of Whitman's embracing song. But, Miller more often sees "only catastrophes, and his longings are messianic. He claims to be on the way, with his escape from the 'black curse' of America and with his awareness of millennial circumstances. ("I am dazzled by the glorious collapse of the world." (32).²³ More crudely, he accepts himself deified; his wife is of great 'importance' and 'significance'; his words become 'divine stuttering', his megalomania raises up an image greater than Christ or God Almighty, 'Myself' (Here you ponder—as an Indian student – whether it is megalomania or the Indian concept of Aham Brahmasmi – I am Brahman.)²⁴ He is the "new reality" in the "Universe of Death" Miller shrewdly qualifies Schizophrenic pretensions by comic hyperbole, as in his burlesque horoscope:

"I am Chance, the crab, which moves sideways and backwards and forwards at will. I move in strange tropics and deal in high explosives, embalming fluid, jasper, myrrh, smaragd, fluted snot and porcupine's toes. Because of Uranus which crosses my longitudinal I am inordinately fond of cunt, hot chitterlings and water bottles. Neptune dominates my ascendant. That means I am composed of watery fluid, that I am volatile, quixotic, unreliable, independent, and evanescent. Also quarrelsome. With a hot pad under my ass I can play the braggart or the buffoon as good as any man, to matter what sign he be born under. This is a self-portrait which yields only the missing parts—an anchor, a dinner bell, the remains of a beard, the hind part of a cow. In short, I am an idle fellow who pisses his time away. I have absolutely nothing to show for my labours except my genius. (29).²⁵

Burlesque or not, then, Miller does have a destiny, his role as artist; his gestures are confined to sitting before the typewriter; and the wild images ("missing parts") may cover the longing to be more than the Comedian in him. He ends his apocalyptic

essay by using the strategy of extremes, insisting that the choice is between song and listerine, 'Fourth Eclogue or 13th Arrondissement.' (41)²⁶

The rhapsodical memories of his Brooklyn-Newyork life start with the much worked first piece, entitled "The 14th ward". With a "patriotic" love of its streets, though not of the neighbourhood's Luthran morality. Miller joys over his boy-herds and the lost richness of the time when "foam was on the lager and people stopped to chat." (13)²⁷ No doubt that the pre-world War-I, German-American neighbourhood did have a sense of community no longer to be found; but this is not really Miller's interest since most of his nice concrete details and rhetorical flourishes point to the sense of mystery in the good old days of beer, burlesque, and boys. The single Mexican male ethos, which underlies so much of Miller's work and response, holds him in the "clutching brilliance" of memory. The insistence on returning to the world of memory reveals a longing for the time when his life, hounded by a simple masculine code, seemed "whole"; and therefore the ways of the 14th ward become holistic. One of the curious forces driving all through Miller's work is a sense of Edenic loss which he can never quite pin down. Maturity he sees, accurately for himself, as a "grant fragmentation" (18).²⁸ The awesomeness of youthful vision with its awareness of mystery in common things", and, probably later, of literary discoveries not as ideas but as rituals, had a brightness which now belongs only to dream and longing. He ends with an apostrophe to a lost world which seems to have doomed all other worlds since they cannot awaken the innocent eye of a poignant memory.

The longest piece in *Black Spring* is "The Tailor Shop," with Miller's own pathetic clown epigraph: "I have got a motter: always merry and bright" (71)²⁹. This genre piece about the days when he worked in his father's tailor shop (i.e. in his early twenties, before and during World War I) reveals nostalgia going bitter. The first part consists of a series of character sketches—with broad sentiment but shrewdly sardonic detail — of cursing Irish bartenders, earnest Jewish cutters, irascible well-to-do customers, loquacious and drunken drummers, and several pathetic imposters. As he later notes, "The men who passed through my father's shop reeked with love," (133):³⁰ more exactly, they were endearing failures, and Miller's recognition of that bed-rock type provides a solid American motif of the pathetic role of sensitivity in our society.

In the first part of the narrative, Miller subordinates the elaborate verbal play of his other sketches to an only slightly exaggerated account. Only when he is dallying with sex—the too easy seduction of the too-beautiful widow of one of his father's customers—does really get lost, and we have a presentation suitable to one of the "old cronies", in the shop. But as the peace programmes, cutomers die off, the narrator fights with his wife and outrage graves. While Miller—again claiming the example of Rabelais (115) insists on boisterous gaiety, the misery twists humor. He turns from the tailor shop—never able to maintain dramatically intense narrative—to the reunions of the "freaks who made up the family tree" (116), and he catalogues the heavy food and heavy troubles of his jolly germanic tribe. Tante Melia, who went "completely off her nut" (121)³¹ and had to be taken to the asylum by Miller, focuses the horror; the "too good" — the half-witted angel" type — are, he says always destroyed. He thus laments the lost innocence of Henry Miller. As a narrative, "The Tailor Shop" now disintegrates. Hyper-awareness becomes verbal hyperbole, with fragments of events (apparently drawn from various years) obscurely linked in an enlarging and often surreal rhetoric. His claimed artiotic gropings (dream-writing in his head a vast ancestral book, of which only the title—The Island of Incest—exists) attempt to counter the decline of his actual world. The disordered prose insists on an anguish whose cause remains unspecific and dispropionate to the obvious problems of reaching manhood which the situation suggests. The pyrotechnical fragments world seem to mark, in Miller's consciousness, the simultaneous decline of his father's tailor shop, the pre-war world, and a whole way of life, Decay, death, madness, and suffering—Miller does want to accept them, and so shores fragments of memory against the loss which threatens to become his one reality.³²

Miller writes, as D.H. Lawrence once said of himself, not for art's sake but for his own sake. Midway in one of his burlesque pieces, entitled "BURLESK," Miller sloganizes: "The Greatest Artist is he who conquers the romantic in himself" (209)³³ But his own means of conquests turns out to be violent surrender. TO overcome his past and his obsessions, he makes them his one subject; to cure himself of overstatement, he exaggerates and shouts. A weird and rather forced tone of associations leads from the Paris of the present to New York of his past. The mania for title becomes the heavy repetition of capitalized signs and "Don't spit on the Floor" and "Amen! Glory! Glory! Hallelujah" (197)³⁴. These incongruities come from a store-front gospel tabernacle in New York. Then, by natural antilogic, we move to Cleo, the of a burlesque show. The style sometimes turns from shouts and violent yokings into just bad verse: "The night is cold and men are walking in lockstep. The night is cold but the queen is naked save for a jock-strap (205)³⁵. The nuclear experience UNDERNEATH these vernal gestures – "The grotesque and the void, with the heart breaking love times. (206)³⁶ – intermittently comes through the mannerisms, sometimes with vivid detail. The cathartic process, rather than any narrative sequence or logical coherence, apparently provides the rationale for a group of brief anecdotes. These include a sadistic-obscene one of a friend punishing his frigid and unfaithful wife, which is told with a moral relish (one of the few obscene bits in *Black Spring*). Of the sketchy sordid-fantastic anecdotes from his youth, Miller says: "I am speaking of things that brought me relief in the beginning" (204)³⁷. But better therapy for his longings appears in the super-romantic conceit of writing a "beautiful book" which "will contain the absolute truth" of his life. (204) and will be of religious significance. To obscure the crude naivete of this confession. Miller switches to parody of academic explication, supposedly of the frontispiece of his projected holy writ. The burlesque concludes with an apocalyptic longing for "a new heaven and a new earth" (202), a plea for the assolution of his own disorder and disappointments.³⁸ There are some lively bits here, but the gusto is really hysteria. Miller is struggling to accept himself and his world, which he is of but not in. he can only glue the fragments with the "opiums of dream". (166) and the gestures, but not the full substance, of art.

The brief conclusion to *Black Spring* has the cute title of "Megalopolitan Maniac." The self made epigraph does equally well: "Imagine having nothing in your hands but your destiny. You sit on the doorstep of your mother's womb and you kill time- or time kills you. You sit there chanting the doxology of things beyond your grasp outside. Forever outside." (198)³⁹. Outsiderness is the quality of the city with its glittering desert streets and sardine people, for whom he writes a sardonic parody to the Vulcanized loneliness for God. mixing sharp mechanical tropes with swelling romantic rhetoric, he hyperbolically, insists on the intensity of living the apocalyptic last moments until all is "blotted in final annihilation (201). God and the song of love, of course have become a stinking fraud, but they print by their absence to a new and greater dynamo of love ten thousand years hence. Waiting on a Nietzschean mountain top for the new revelation, he meanwhile wishes to contemplate "a lone individual, a man without name or country, a man whom I repeat because he has absolutely nothing in common with you – Myself." (206).⁴⁰

5.5 STYLE IN *BLACK SPRING*

Stylistically *Black Spring* is a dazzling book, the work of a rampant imagination intoxicated with words. Miller is a poet of reckless abandon, his language exuberant and prodigal often used for sound rather than meaning. Fond of jargon and parody, he readily spins off into nonsense and jabberwocky. 'Jabberwhorl cronstadt is a verbal caricature of a friend, parodies his multisyllabic pontification and turns it into nonsense. During the course of his conversation, Jabberwhorl grows progressively drunk and in language reels: Miller drags in his usual catalogue of exotic names and

miscellaneous titbits of information, and his joking delight in scientific jargons:
 "... the great vertiginous vertebration... the zoospores and the leucocytes
 Wamroths and hollenlindens... everyone's poem, the jellyfish is a poem too—the
 finest kind of poem. You poke him here, you poke him there, he slithers and slathers,
 he's dithy and claborous, he has a colon and intestines, he's vermiform and
 ubisquishous....."⁴¹

As that final pun indicates, Jabberwhorl jellyfish is described from James Joyce as well as Lewis Carroll. It is not only the section entitled "Jabberwhorl Cronsbtadt," but the whole of *Black Spring*, is full of Joycean passages. Like the great parodist, Miller writes not in one style, but in many. Not only is each section of *Black Spring* written in a different style, but individual sections are written in Chameleon style that borrows its constantly changing colors from a dozen sources. Besides Joyce the authors he most frequently resembles are Proust and Whitman. Like the Tropics, *Black Spring* is Proustian in its view of coexistent time and place stimulated by memory and the senses; Miller's writing is evocative and nostalgic. His affinity to Whitman is more fundamental, for Whitman contributes to his stance as well as his style. "For me the book is the man," Miller declares, "and my book is the man I am, the confused man, the negligent man, the reckless man, the lusty, obscene, boisterous, thoughtful, scrupulous, lying, a diabolically truthful man that I am." Miller's rhetoric is like Whitman's, with long rhythmic lines pushing along through present participles. His descriptions of the Seine could be scanned as Whitmanesque verse:

... this still yet rushing on from out of a million billion roots,
 this still mirror bearing the clouds along and stifling the past,
 rushing on and on and on while between the mirror
 and the clouds moving transversally
 I, a complete corporate entity,
 A universe bringing countless centuries to a conclusion.
 I and this that passes beneath me
 And this that floats above me
 And all that surges through me....⁴²

The method of *Black Spring* is clear: burlesque and poetic description, vignette, and reminiscence, caricature, and revelation, all pointing to the same theme, reflecting always the same urgent sensibility. The style even more than the subject matter carries the burden of variety. Looking down from Brooklyn bridge, Miller can suddenly spin a net of images that hauls back large, symbolic meanings. A whimsical description of two spigots in a kitchen sink ends with a fugue of cosmic acceptance. A bland sentence takes a quick turn, leaping over the metaphysical contrasts of space and times. Here is an instance:

"Such a day it may be when first you encounter Dostoevski. Remember the smell of a table cloth on which the book rests; you look at the clock and it is only five minutes from eternity. Now every door of the cage is open and whichever way you walk is a straight line toward infinity; a straight, mad line over which the breakers roar and great rocks of marble, and indigo swoop to lower their fevered eggs. Out of the waves beating phosphorescent step proud and prancing the enameled horses that marched with Alexander, their light proud bellies glowing with calcium, their nostrils dipped in laudanum. Now it is all snow and ice, with the great band of Orion slung around the ocean's crotch." (14).⁴³

The passage, in Miller's own fashion, moves from the prosaic to the poetic, and on to the fantastic, and suggests the kind of vocabulary— anatomical, pharmaceutical, astrological, a vocabulary in fact derived from all the sciences and pseudo-sciences—in which he sometimes revels.

The distinctive quality of *Black Spring*, probably written before and after the publication of *Tropic of Cancer*, is not really created by new techniques. It is created, rather, by a curious aura of vindictiveness and nostalgia, an attitude toward

time even more unresolved than Cancer's. For though one of its motifs is that man must act as if the past were dead and the future unrealizable, its pervasive sense is one of loss. "Whenever I have made my bed, I have thought like a mamiac to drive out the past," he writes, "But at the last moment it is the past which rises up triumphantly, the past in which one drowns. With the last gasp one realizes that the future is a sham..." (194)⁴⁴. In *Black Spring*, Miller is indeed like a drowning man, clutching at his old selves as one might clutch at straws, mouthing imprecations and prophecies in the same breath. Yet if Miller's vision is more turbulent in *Black Spring*, his style is frequently bolder.

Kenneth Rexroth says: "what will preserve Miller and make him a minor classic is his style... He has been compared to the French 18th century naive writer Bestif de la Bretonne and the resemblances are marked. He is almost as garrulous, almost as sex-obsessed, Miller is unassignable and his style is a careful cultivation of all these elements of communication—the speech of interpersonal relations which violates the mechanisms of the dominant society. It is not just that the sexual capers of his characters expose the social lie. His prose disrupts acceptable speech. It does this so easily by simply being the common talk of his declassed caste. The lumpen intelligentsia talked this way in the days of Villon. His writing is spontaneous and uncontrolled on principle, but the control is in the principle, in the intention. If Miller just tells you the time of day he could never be mistaken for Edith Wharton. *The Tropics* established a method of which Saroyan early and Kerouac later were outstanding practitioners, a method which would become dominant in the fiction of the latter half of the century—the roman fleuve in a different sense—the pages go by like a river in flood. The overwhelming flow of Proust or Joyce or Gertrude stein is highly contrived and recognizably so. In Miller and his descendants, the author begins by overwhelming himself. This is a method where nothing succeeds but success. Miller can sweep you away.... Miller can be hilariously funny, but his humor is the humor of old time burlesque."⁴⁵

In following passages Miller's surrealistic style is reflected. Also in some of the passages you find long catalogues which are Whitmanesque:

I

However, always merry and bright! If it was before the war and the thermometer down to zero or below, if it happened to Thanksgiving Day, or New Year's or a birth-day, or just any old excuse to get together, then off we'd trot, the whole family, to join the other freaks who made up the living family tree. It always seemed astounding to me how jolly they were in our family despite the calamities that were always threatening, Jolly in spite of everything. There was cancer, dropsy, cirrhosis of the liver, insanity, thievery, mendacity, buggery, incest, paralysis, tapeworms, abortions, triplets, idiots, drunkards, ne'er-do-wells, fanatics, sailors, tailors, watch-makers, scarlet fever, whooping cough, meningitis, running ears, chorea, stutters, jail-birds, dreamers, story-tellers, bartenders – and many there was Uncle George and Tante Melia. The morgue and the insane asylum. A merry crew and the table loaded with good things—with red cabbage and green spinach, with roast pork and turkey and sauerkraut, with kartoffel-klosse and sour black gravy, with radishes and celery, with stuffed goose and peas and carrots, with beautiful which cauliflower, with apple sauce and figs from smyrba, with bananas as big as black-jack, with cinnamom cake and Streussel Kuchen, with chocolate layer cake and nuts, all kinds of nuts, walnuts, butternuts, almonds, pecans, hickory nuts, with lager beer and bottled beer, with white wines and red, with champagne, kummel, malaga, port, with schnapps, with fiery cheeses, with dull, innocent store cheese, with flat Holland cheeses, with limburger and schmierkase, with home made wines, elderberry wine, with cider: hard and sweet, with rice pudding and tapioca, with roast chestnuts, mandarines, olives, pickles, with red caviar and black, with smoked sturgeon, with lemon meringue pie, with lady fingers and chocolate eclairs, with macaroons and cream puffs, with black cigars and long thin stogies, with Bull Durham and Long Tom and meerschaums with corn-cobs and tooth-picks, wooden tooth-picks which gave you gum-boils the day after, and napkins a yard wide with your initials stitched in the corner, and a blazing coal fire and the windows steaming, everything in the world before your eyes except a finger bowl. (92)⁴⁶

II

Once in a while they worked in unison, Froid and Chaud, but that was seldom. Saturday nights, when I washed my feet at the sink, I'd get to thinking how perfect was the world over which these twain ruled. NNeveranything more than this iron sink with its two ruled. Never anything more than this iron sink with its two faucets. No beginnings and no ends. Chaud the alpha and Froid the omega. Perpetuity. The Gemini, ruling over life and death. Alpha-Chaud running out through all degrees of Fahrenheit and Reaumur, through magnetic filings and comets' tailed, through the boiling cauldron of Mauna Loa into the dry light of the Tertiary moon; Omega-Froid running out through out through the Gulf Stream into the marsupials and the foraminifera, through the nammal whales and the Polar fissures, running down through island universes, through the follicles and tentacles of worlds unformed, worlds untouched, worlds unseen, worlds unborn and forever lost. Alpha-Chaud dripping, dripping; Omega-Froid working, working. Hand, feet, hair, face, dishes, vegetables, fish washed clean and away: despair, ennui, hatred, love, jealousy, crime....dripping, dripping. I, Jabberwhorl, and my wife Jill, and after us legions upon legions... all standing at the iron sink. Seeds falling through the drain: young cantaloups, squash, caviar, macaroni, bile, spittle, phelgm, lettuce leaves, sardine bones, Worcestershire sauce, stale beer, urine, blood-clots, Kruschen salts, oatmeal, chew tobacco, pollen, dust, grease, wool, cotton threads, match sticks, live worms, shredded wheat, scalded milk, castor oil. Seeds of waste falling away forever and forever coming back in pure draughts of a miraculous chemical substance which refuses to be names, classified, labelled, analysed or drawn and quartered. Coming back as Froid and Chaud perpetually, like a truth that can't be downed. You can take it hot or cold, or you can take it tepid. You can wash your feet or gargle your throat; you can rinse the soap out of your eyes or drive the grit out of the lettuce leaves; you can bathe the new-born babe or swab the rigid limbs of the dead; you can soak bread for fricadellas or dilute your wine. First and last things. Elixir. I, Jabberwhorl, tasting the elixir of life and death. I, Jabberwhorl, of waste and H₂O composed, of hot and cold and all the intermediate realms, of scum and rind, of finest, tiniest substance never lost, of great sutures and compact bone, of ice fissures and test tubes, of semen and ova fused, dissolved, dispersed, of rubber schnausel and brass spigot, of dead cathodes and squirming infusoria, of lettuce leaves and bottled sunlight....I, Jabberwhorl, sitting at the iron sink and perplexed and exalted, never less and never more than a poem, an iron stanza, a bioiling follicle, a lost leucocyte. The iron sink where I spat out my heart, where I bathed my tender feet, where I sang like a diamond-backed terrapin and I am singing now and will sing forever though the drains clog and the faucets rust, though time runs out and I be all there is of the present, past and future. *Sing*, Froid, sing transitive! *Sing* Chaud, sing intransitive! Sing Alpha and Oemga! Sing Hallelujah! Sing out, O sink! Sing while the world sinks... '(127)⁴⁷

III

Over the foot of the bed is the shadow of the cross. There are chains binding me to the bed. The chains are clanking loudly, the anchor is being lowered,. Suddenly I feel a hand on my shoulder. Someone is shaking me vigorously. I took up and it is an old hag in a dirty wrapper. She goes to the dresser and opening a drawer she puts a revolver away.

There are three rooms, one after the other, like a railroad flat. I am lying in the middle room in which there is a walnut bookcase and a dressing-table. The old hag removes her wrapper and stands before the mirror in her chemise. She has a little powder puff in her hand and with this little puff she swabs her armpits, her bosom, her thighs. All the while she weeps like an idiot. Finally she comes over to me with an atomizer and she squirts a fine spray over me. I notice that her hair is full of rats.

I watch the old hag moving about. She seems to be in a trance. Standing at the dresser she opens and closes the drawers, one after the other, mechanically. She seems to have forgotten what she remembered to go there for. Again she picks up the powder puff and with the powder puff she daubs a little powder under her armpits. On the dressing table is a little silver watch attached to a long piece of black tape. Pulling off her chemise she slings the watch around her neck' it reaches just to the pubic triangle. There comes a faint tick and then the silver turns black.(131)⁴⁸

IV

I am here in the midst of a great change. I have forgotten my own language and yet I do not speak the new language. I am in China and I am talking Chinese. I am in the dead centre of a changing reality for which no language has been invented. According to the map I am in Paris; according to the calendar I am living in the third decade of the twentieth century. But I am neither in Paris nor in the twentieth century. I am in China and there are no clocks or

calendars here. I am sailing up the Yangstaze in a dhow and what food I gather is collected from the garbage dumped overboard by the American gunboats. It takes me all day to prepare a humble meal, but it is a delectable meal and I have a cast-iron stomach.(164)⁴⁹

5.9 NOTES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

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