**HENRY MILLER (1891-1980)**

An iconoclastic writer of autobiographical fiction, travel narratives, and personal essays, Henry Miller drew from several strands of European Modernism, including Surrealism, Dada, and Expressionism. The autodidactic Miller also absorbed the ideas of many philosophers who helped shape his Modernist understanding of temporality, urban alienation, and eschatology, among other concepts. Additionally, Miller culled modern psychological theories for their thoughts on sexuality, dreams, and self-actualization. While strictly characterizing Miller as a Modernist author seems highly problematic, the impact of Modernist elements on his writing and thinking is indisputable.

In his earliest American work, such as early drafts of *Moloch* (1992) and *Crazy Cock* (1991), Miller wrote in a type of Dreiserian realism infused with impressionistic flights reminiscent of Surrealism. After moving to Paris, Miller reexamined both his voice and ideas because of a variety of factors, including his discussions with Michael Fraenkel and Walter Lowenfels. Always attracted to subversive thinkers such as Emma Goldman and Friedrich Nietzsche, Miller began to transform his thoughts on realism and “literature” in general and turned his energies toward a more chaotic narrative style that reflected his interests in Bergson, Céline, Faure, and others. Ultimately resulting in *Tropic of Cancer* (1934), this new alinear style grew organically from Miller’s denunciation of prescriptive ideologies that stifled individual growth.

Like so many Modernists, Miller placed fragmented identity at the center of his thematic interests. Tracing his alienation back to his boyhood days (in *Black Spring* [1936], for example), Miller sought to reclaim his wholeness and faith via his artistic endeavors. Skeptical of Progressive Era notions of human perfectibility (and attracted to apocalyptic philosophers such as Oswald Spengler), Miller rejected systemic, linear thinking in favor of an admixture of metaphysics (particularly from the East) and pseudoscience (astrology, for instance). This counter-Enlightenment bent allowed Miller to hold ostensibly contradictory positions and pursue an idiosyncratic narrative that rejected plot and reveled in personal symbolism.

Influenced by a host of the “new” psychologists, including Otto Rank and Carl Jung, Miller inevitably found himself attracted to movements that reflected an interest in the Unconscious, such as Surrealism, Dada, and Expressionism. Dreams and fantasies pervade Miller’s works, such as the *Rosy Crucifixion* trilogy, and Miller experimented with the techniques he discovered in the thriving Parisian avant garde culture, including the worlds of art, cinema, and literature. As with his philosophical and spiritual concerns, the world of the unconscious permitted Miller to deviate from both strict plots (although he retained traces of plot in the form of anecdotes) and photographic realism.

The new psychologies proved instrumental in Miller’s representations of sexuality as well. As he explained in *The World of Sex* (1940), Miller did not include explicit sexuality in his works merely for titillation. Rather, he employed them in works such as *Tropic of Capricorn* (1939) and *Sexus* (1949) as a symbolic barometer of his characters’ level of self-actualization. The apocalyptic violence present in other areas of his narratives takes expression in his sexual scenes as well, and Miller claimed in several of his essays that sexuality serves as a manifestation of the struggle required to awaken fully.

Miller, of course, notoriously avoided movements and trends, and his use of Modernist tenets and techniques is no exception. Influenced by astrology, Transcendentalism, Hinduism, Theosophy, and anarchism, among many other ideas, Miller resists easy labels. Alternating between scenes of frank realism and impressionistic fancy, between extreme violence and tender sentiment, Miller, like his idol Walt Whitman, exulted in contradictions and embraced his difference. Exploring this difference in radically experimental narratives that place a premium on interior interrogation and external violence, Miller, like James Joyce, John Dos Passos, and Dorothy Richardson—among many other Modernist writers—epitomizes the alienated modern individual on a quest for spiritual rebirth and unity.

Further Reading:

Blinder, Caroline. *A Self-Made Surrealist: Ideology and Aesthetics in the Work of Henry*

*Miller*. Suffolk: Camden House, 2000.

Decker, James M. *Henry Miller and Narrative Form: Constructing the Self, Rejecting*

*Modernity*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

Männiste, Indrek. *Henry Miller: The Inhuman Artist*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013.

Masuga, Katy. *The Secret Violence of Henry Miller*. Rochester: Camden House, 2011.

Bibliography

*The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*. New York: New Directions, 1945.

*Aller Retour New York*. Paris: Obelisk, 1935.

*Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymous Bosch*. New York: New Directions, 1957.

*Black Spring*. Paris: Obelisk, 1936.

*Book of Friends*. Santa Barbara, CA: Capra, 1976.

*The Books in My Life*. New York: New Directions, 1952.

*The Colossus of Maroussi*. San Francisco: Colt, 1941.

*The Cosmological Eye*. Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1939.

*Crazy Cock*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991.

*Joey*. Santa Barbara, CA: Capra, 1979.

*Max and the White Phagocytes*. Paris: Obelisk, 1938.

*Moloch; or, This Gentile World*. New York: Grove, 1992.

*My Bike and other Friends*. Santa Barbara, CA: Capra, 1978.

*Nexus*. Copenhagen: Hans Reitzel, 1959.

“The New Instinctivism (A Duet in Creative Violence)” [1931; unpublished MS] *Nexus:*

*The International Henry Miller Journal* 4 (2007): 3-56. [With Alfred Perlès]

*Plexus*. Paris: Corrêa, 1952.

*Quiet Days in Clichy*. Paris: Olympia, 1956.

*Remember to Remember*. New York: New Directions, 1947.

*Sexus*. Paris: Obelisk, 1949.

*Stand Still like the Hummingbird*. Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1962.

*Sunday after the War*. Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1944.

*The Time of the Assassins: A Study of Rimbaud*. Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1956.

*Tropic of Cancer*. Paris: Obelisk, 1934.

*Tropic of Capricorn*. Paris: Obelisk, 1939.

*The Wisdom of the Heart*. Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1941.

*The World of Lawrence: A Passionate Appreciation*. Santa Barbara, CA: Capra 1980.

*The World of Sex*. New York: J. H. N. [Ben Abramson], 1941.