Penetrating Henry Miller

by

Vicki Bott

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Literature)

Major Professor: Nina Miller

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
1998
This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Vicki Bott

has met the requirements of Iowa State University

______________________________
Major Professor

______________________________
For the Major Program

______________________________
For the Graduate College
for

Old Number Eight
Tropic of Cancer has become a carefully managed fetish of literary critics, a text demanding responses that in and of themselves chronicle the many shifts in literary criticism. Critical readings of Tropic of Cancer inevitably include and/or prioritize its obscenity. In adhering to their contemporaneous critical perspectives, critics have failed to articulate the complexity of Miller's obscenity. Such readings have seemed paralyzed, lacking both the necessary theoretical and historical tools to offer more than pedestrian insights into the presence, function, and ramifications of the text's obscenity.

The deferred legal publication and distribution of Tropic of Cancer in the United States in 1961 was met with varied critical responses. Many of those responses directly targeted Miller's use of obscenity to either argue for the value of the text or argue that the text was useless vulgarity. Praise of Tropic of Cancer became a tool in a tumultuous political battlefield that covered the United States at the time of its release. Tropic of Cancer could easily be thrown in the face of bourgeois culture as a violation of its repressive values, yet the critics' tendency was to transpose Cancer into the mainstream. In "Henry Miller: The Success of Failure," which appeared in the Virginia Quarterly Review in 1968, John Williams compares Miller's fight against cultural oppression with that of the Puritan struggle for religious freedom, a repositioning that allows Cancer to be pulled back into the mainstream. Williams places Miller on the literary and socioeconomic margins, describing him as a bright man and brilliant writer who uses obscenity because that is the language of the marginalized lower classes. His essay becomes pedantic in its attempt to normalize Miller's work and to assure the middle class that this text does not threaten the stability of their position. Williams contends that while Tropic of Cancer seems amoral, the
anxiety it produces is illusory:

If we are shocked by Miller's language, we are shocked not because our morality has been threatened but because our social standing has been; we are forced to confront and to admit the vital existence of one whose social standing appears lower than our own—one who would use such language, and so affront polite society. Thus snobbery subsumes morality, taboo overrides reason, and we are revealed to ourselves in all our cultural primitivism. (232)

Through this argument, Williams reproduces the anxiety he claims to dismiss. While he alerts us to the jarring presence of obscenity, he contains it both within the text and within the lower class. Its effect is limited to a mere acknowledgment of the distant existence of people who use obscenity in their everyday speech.

In the 1976-1977 edition of The Lost Generation Journal, a soft literary journal, a drawing of Henry Miller fills the cover and is the subject of each essay. The criticism looks much like that of the 1960's. Again, critics are primarily concerned with the effects of obscenity on the readers. Perhaps the most rigorous reading of Miller's obscenity can be found in Michael Hoffman's "Miller and the Apocalypse." Hoffman pursues a number of connections in the text, and traces various associations Miller uses in his representations of sex. Yet Hoffman offers little more than this scavenger hunt activity. His work does not move beyond recognizing that "apocalypse and violence are intimately connected with the sexual, the obscene, and the aesthetic" (20). This criticism maintains a superficial, almost legalistic reading of obscenity that is unable to make the theoretical or historical connections necessary for an adequate reading of obscenity in the text.
The majority of criticism concerning Miller in the 1980's compares his use of obscenity to other writers—Rabelais, Rimbaud, Sade, D.H. Lawrence, Anais Nin, and Norman Mailer. Several essays appear in *Anais: An International Journal* which is devoted to the work of Anais Nin and writers close to her. The criticism does not drastically change. Miller's texts are examined with the probing eyes of psychoanalytic, feminist, and Marxist critics. Andre Bay's 1988 essay, "Sex: The Promised Land: Some Thoughts of the Incurable Romantic Henry Miller," constructs Miller's obscenity as a commitment to the truth of his personal experience. In a psychoanalytic reading, Bay unfolds Miller's obscenity in an attempt to find Miller's psyche: "Actually a writer's independence of mind might be deduced, for example, by the words he uses to describe an act of sex" (109). Bay's work investigates obscenity to reveal what Miller really thinks about sex and women, which results in awkward, if not bizarre claims that Miller is a "sentimentalist and incurable romantic" (110). Bay does provide a seminal recognition of Miller's importance, particularly of his obscenity, and claims that "today, in the field of literature, we can distinguish a period before and after Miller" (109). Yet again, Bay does not offer fresh insight into how obscenity functions inside and outside of *Tropic of Cancer*.

This progression of criticism of Henry Miller's work parallels the gradual shifts in the aims of literary criticism. Williams' concern in the late 1960's is to contrast *Cancer* with bourgeois culture, to expose the differences of class and the cultures that exist across the economic spectrum. Hoffman's work of the late 1970's shows signs of poststructuralism in its attempt to identify the author's fluctuating and unstable representations of experience and to follow the varied associations that surround any attempt at discussing sexuality. Bay of the late
1980's is concerned with moving outside of the text to find meaning, yet he falls short in his focus on Miller's psyche.

In continuing a search for some way to discuss obscenity in Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, it is necessary to destabilize even the very notion of obscenity, to move outside of its ordinary conception in order to understand its presence and function in the text as well as its consequences in literature and culture. In "Critical Warfare and Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*" by Linda Williams from the 1991 anthology, *Feminist Criticism: Theory and Practice*, new methods of working with Miller's obscenity are implied by her rejection of previous approaches to *Cancer*. Williams moves the criticism away from the discussion of obscenity as a moral issue for the reader. She contends that, "any approach to Miller which cannot cope with his insistence on irrational sex and dehumanized bodies, or which would sanitize his erotics, as conventional Miller criticism has done, into a transcendence of bodies and disease in a wholesome and integrative experience of self-liberation, is obviously a non-starter" (35). Heeding Williams's warning, it is imperative to make a move away from obscenity in order to somehow find it within the text; likewise, it is necessary to contextualize such obscene material to articulate its position within its particular historical moment.

In looking for a more effective way to examine the persistence of obscenity in Miller's fictions, it seems that Miller's own nonfiction might be a good place to begin. In Miller's essays, he consistently addresses his use of obscenity, oftentimes as a direct response to decades of censorship. It is here that he repeatedly describes his use of obscenity as transgression:

> When obscenity crops out in art, in literature more particularly, it usually functions as a technical device; the element of the
deliberate which is there has nothing to do with sexual excitation, as in pornography. If there is an ulterior motive at work it is one which goes far beyond sex. Its purpose is to awaken, to usher in a sense of reality. ("Obscenity and the Law of Reflection" 186)

Miller's comments on obscenity suggest an intriguing starting point for a study of obscenity. Here, it is clear that obscenity is meant to be a violation. His description of obscenity as an awakening indicates that Miller perceives the norms obscenity violates as deadening, a conception that pervades all of his literature. Considering obscenity as transgressive offers a fresh starting point for an examination of obscenity in Tropic of Cancer.

The work of surrealist Georges Bataille proves to be helpful in articulating Miller's process of transgression. Although Bataille was excommunicated from Breton's brood of surrealists, he continued to be a prolific writer and force within and outside of the surrealist movement. Erotism: Death and Sensuality, arguably his most important work, outlines the place of taboo in culture. Bataille's construction of transgression relies upon the recognition of taboo as a means of containing the violence of nature and of the flesh.

Bataille offers a surrealist rendition of transgression, relying heavily upon the opposition of the sacred and the profane. Bataille contends that taboo and transgression are interdependent by insisting that "the taboo is there to be violated" (64). It is the threat or the actual violation of a taboo that secures its status in the profane world as a construction that gestures toward the sacred by creating a boundary. He opens his section on transgression with this claim: "The transgression does not deny the taboo but transcends it and completes it" (63). Bataille's most valuable contribution to the discourse of transgression is his recognition that a violation, a transgression, cannot eradicate the taboo; instead,
it is transgression that activates the taboo by illuminating its position as the mark of the limit of resistance. This does not mean that transgression serves a conservative function. Rather, Bataille celebrates the necessity of transgression for new connections to the sacred, which has been cast away by modern capitalism's occupation of the profane. Here, Bataille's links to Surrealism are clear.

For Bataille, transgression offers access to an erotic convulsion, or a state of vertigo that is filled with both fear and fascination. Bataille's interest in transgression focuses on this moment of convulsion. Regarding this moment of horror and ecstasy, Bataille writes: "More than any other state of mind consciousness of the void about us throws us into exultation. This does not mean that we feel an emptiness in ourselves, far from it; but we pass beyond that into an awareness of the act of transgression" (69). This presents the possibility for a glimpse of what lies beyond the limit, beyond the taboo. Bataille's gesture toward this limitless space intersects with surrealist doctrine that seeks to release the marvelous inherent in all human experience.

In *Eroticism in Georges Bataille and Henry Miller*, Gilles Mayne argues that Miller fails to write within the conception of eroticism developed in Bataille's *Erotism*. It is important to clarify that for Bataille, transgression is a necessarily erotic act. Eroticism is "the inability to opt for any one of the oppositional conflicting sides of the personality (animal/human; nature/culture; reason/passion; life/death; the communicable/the incommunicable, etc.) [that] builds up tension before reaching a traumatic climax" (*Eroticism in Georges Bataille and Henry Miller* 80). Terms are arrayed to magnify their oppositional tension, thus providing the energy necessary to reach erotic convulsion. Mayne
argues that Miller's work does not invoke the oppositional tension necessary in this construction of eroticism. This paper will argue differently within its examination of Miller's forms of transgressive obscenity.

The discourse of transgression does not end with the work of Georges Bataille. In "A Preface to Transgression," Michel Foucault argues that Bataille is one of the first thinkers of a new philosophical language, and that this language finds itself in transgression. This new transgressive philosophy surpasses the traditional language of philosophy, the dialectic. At the heart of the "sexuality" of transgression, Foucault sees the condition of subjectivity following the death of God. He writes, "the speech given to sexuality is contemporaneous, both in time and in structure, with that through which we announced to ourselves that God is dead" (25). The significance of transgression for Foucault is that the death of God destroys any hope for a natural subjectivity, which leaves us with only the experience of limits and the transgressions which make and unmake them.

In Foucault's construction, transgression becomes the means by which we map subjectivity, and a way for "recomposing its empty form, its absence, through which it becomes all the more scintillating" (30). Following the death of God, subjectivity is always at the margins of understanding, "in which the absence of a sovereign subject outlines its essential emptiness and incessantly fractures the unity of its discourse" (37). In other words, subjectivity must always find itself at the edges, at the limit or taboo, because in the center there is only the absence left by the death of God, by the death of an essential subjectivity.

Building on the work of his predecessors, Foucault does away with a more oppositional approach. For Foucault, transgression "does not seek to oppose one thing to another, nor does it achieve its purpose through mockery or by
upsetting the solidity of foundations; it does not transform the other side of the mirror, beyond an invisible and uncrossable line, into a glittering expanse" (35). Instead, transgression forms the limits that construct subjectivity.

Foucault compares transgression to the flash of lightning in the dead of night. It is only with the temporality of the flash that the depth of night can be read as dark; likewise, the violence of the flash relies upon the darkness for its brief existence. Similarly, the limit and transgression are not oppositional, but simultaneous, or as Foucault describes them, in "the form of the spiral" (35).

Foucault's presentation of transgression has great significance for readings of obscenity in Tropic of Cancer. For one, it immediately makes clear that legalistic interpretations of obscenity are inadequate. If transgression constructs the limits of culture and of subjectivity, it follows that obscenity cannot be understood narrowly as a violation of norms that are always only implied. Rather, an understanding of the whole range of limits and conventions Miller's obscenity both constructs and violates becomes absolutely crucial. Furthermore, obscenity must be understood as an erotic act; erotic in a transgressive sense, erotic as a limit and constructor of identity.

In acts of transgression the limits of culture are simultaneously surpassed and illuminated. The ways in which Miller's use of obscenity acts as a transgression within complex discourses is the primary subject of this thesis. It is the argument of this thesis that Henry Miller's Tropic of Cancer is best studied as a transgressive text that employs obscenity within the theoretical constructs of transgression.

Any discussion of the ways in which Miller's obscenity functions as transgressive must recognize that obscenity is not a violation of a fixed cultural
convention. Instead, obscenity necessarily affirms and constructs the limits it transgresses. Obscenity in Miller's work continually offers the awareness, or as Miller describes it, the "awakening," that convention and subjectivity are without foundation. Transgression is the key to this realization, which Miller positions at the center of his work. Miller's transgression always occupies the ambiguous space of subjectivity that is without foundation, a space that is created by transgression itself.

Several of Miller's critics and biographers comment on his passive acceptance of the sordid condition of life, of the status quo. While both Miller's fiction and nonfiction contain a strong quality of persistent nihilism, he is also an optimist of sorts. Jay Martin, one of his biographers, titled his 1980 book on Miller Always Merry and Bright and Mary V. Dearborn's 1991 biography was entitled The Happiest Man Alive. These titles are drawn from Miller's own descriptions of his position as a writer and a man:

I am as much a part of the present order as any man alive. I have been molded and formed by it; I have revolted against it; and finally I have been forced to accept it or die of a broken heart. But to accept the condition of life in which I happen to find myself does not mean that I believe in or approve it. I have always endeavored, and I still endeavor, to live my own life in my own way. ("Obscenity in Literature" 190)

Miller recognizes both the futility and necessity of transgression. He does not fantasize that he is overturning or eradicating the conventions he abhors. At the same time, his acceptance does not amount to a positive acknowledgment of convention. Miller recognizes that both convention and transgression are always undermined. His acceptance is not catatonic; he is committed to violations of
convention and a recognition of the limitations of those violations.

Miller explicitly positions his use of obscenity within a certain historical moment, and invokes the importance of the obscene. He says:

It is my belief that we are now passing through a period of what might be called 'cosmic insensitivity,' a period when God seems more than ever absent from the world and man doomed to come face to face with the fate which he has created for himself. At such a moment the question of whether a man can be guilty of using obscene language in printed books seems to me thoroughly inconsequential. ("Obscenity in Literature" 203)

Miller describes the age much as Foucault does—God is no longer the determinant of subjectivity and culture. In such a context, obscenity does not violate the Law, but only the laws of a culture thrown back on itself in the search for meaning. As a consequence, the significance of obscenity is its construction of the limits of subjectivity, not the task of measuring the danger of its violations.

Miller's optimistic nihilism—his celebration of the absence of God—does not make him "happy" and "always merry" as his biographers suggest. These definitions and labels fail to explicate the tension between the death of God, which is accompanied by signs of decay and disease, and Miller's moments of exultation. Critics such as Mary Dearborn rarely offer examinations more insightful than, "If the world of Tropic of Cancer is decaying and dying and the mood bleak, that is not to say that it is a book of despair. On the contrary, the narrator brings a vitality and exuberance to life lived at the bottom. From this perspective he can exult in the world and even find peace in it" (154). What is missing from such an analysis is an understanding of the significance of transgression. Miller's obscenity is not a technical device for heightening the
effect of a naïve optimism. Such a reading cannot hope to adequately account for the complexity of Miller's work. In turning to a reading that proceeds from transgression, this analysis will attempt to provide a more nuanced account.

To further place Miller's obscenity within a cultural context, it will be necessary to play within his transgressions. In *Tropic of Cancer*, Miller's obscenity often reveals and implies a convention of sexual purity embraced by and manifested in multiple American cultural forces. Throughout Cancer, Miller walks the streets. It is there that he can repress hunger, find money, meet with friends, linger among whores, feel his erection while staring at Parisian statues. On the streets, Miller finds moments of exuberance—fleeting pleasures. Miller seeks to associate himself with and participate in subcultures, street life, and brothels. He finds a certain satisfaction in the company of the lewd, the vulgar, and the drunken. In a particularly vivid scene, Miller describes a couple of his companions by presenting what he sees as admirable characteristics:

> The preliminaries over, having made peepee and blown his nose vigorously, he walks nonchalantly over to his wench and gives her a big, smacking kiss together with an affectionate pat on the rump. Her, the wench, I've never seen look anything but immaculate—even at three a.m., after an evening's work. She looks exactly as if she had just stepped out of a Turkish bath. It's a pleasure to look at such healthy brutes, to see such repose, such affection, such appetite as they display. (*Cancer* 155)

Miller reverses the social markers displayed by the couple, and celebrates their physicality. They are brutes, but brutes with health and appetite. Miller upholds these qualities in contrast to conventions the passage implies. The woman in this passage is a prostitute, but Miller respects and celebrates her seedy work. In his celebratory description of the couple as sexually deviant brutes, Miller
relied upon conventional understandings of decency as chastity even as he reverses them. For Miller, the prostitute's display of health and cleanliness is a triumph over the values that would assign her a deviant role. Already, such a description reveals that transgression must work within convention, illuminating that which it would surpass.

The construction of decency seen here runs throughout Miller's work and intersects with what many of his contemporary writers and artists cited as standard American Puritanism. Numerous literary texts published around the time Miller moves to Paris sustain affirmative constructions of what could generally be labeled the American Puritanical limit on sexuality. The editors of the Saturday Review of Literature placed "Clean Books," an article responding to readers' concern to uphold decency in literature and literary reviews, on the front page of their November 21, 1931 edition of the paper. While the editors admonish the readers for intolerance of sexual material in literature, they clarify the standards of decency as applied to writing about sex. "The problems and incidents of sex must be fitted delicately into words. Unless nicely balanced by a civilized imagination they slide into priggishness or mawkishness on one side, or into vulgarity, lasciviousness, or the merely disgusting on the other" (1). While the editors express their commitment to the inclusion of sexual material in literature, they shift their commitment away from possibilities for transgression. In this article, "clean" language will contain sexual content, and will prevent it from pushing the boundaries of "civilized imagination."

Two years before this article appeared in Saturday Review of Literature, a letter to the editor titled "Sex Literature" by Anne L.W. Soule was printed. Soule claims she is against "censorship," but she calls on society to uphold standards
of decency for sexual content in literature. She constructs causal links between sexual material and dehumanization, writing, "A Prophet of Evil Days to Come might say that if we do not before many years realize that we need to look beyond our need for nourishment and our need for sex expression, we shall run into the danger of losing our high estate as human beings and may become merely fairly intellectual, highly mechanized, animals" (1132). Soule's concern in this letter is to enforce the limits of decency. In doing so, she deploys a common construction of decency as civilized in opposition to sexuality as uncivilized and animal-like. Clearly, within this construction, Henry Miller is indeed a "Prophet of Evil Days to Come." Miller's literature plays with this connection between sexual decency and civilization, and delivers precisely what Soule fears—literature that transgresses sexual decency and the standards of "civilization" in one and the same gesture. Soule claims that readers of literature "have a sufficient supply on hand of printed material on all phases of sex from the sublime to the sordid" (1132). Miller will not allow sexual material to be merely a "supply" of contraband information tolerated by a civilized sensibility. Instead, he insists on sexuality beyond tolerance, beyond the capacity for tasteful reabsorption into a literature that must finally uphold the limits of decency.

These examinations provide important historical context for Miller's use of obscenity. However, if transgression constructs the limit, it is not enough to simply re-present conservative efforts to reinforce the limits of "decent" culture. An reading of Miller's relationship with Emma Goldman's work illustrates the necessity of understanding convention through transgression, and will further articulate the significance of Miller's use of obscenity. Both Jay Martin and Mary Dearborn cite Miller's meeting with Emma Goldman in 1913 as a pivotal moment
in his life. Her fiery attack on the work ethic, sexual propriety, and adherence to
the values of American Puritanism found an enthusiastic audience in Miller. After
the encounter, he read several of her books and throughout his work there is a
similar sense of the convention of decency. For Goldman, "Puritanism ... rests
on a fixed and immovable conception of life; it is based on the Calvinistic idea
that life is a curse, imposed upon man by the wrath of God. In order to redeem
himself man must do constant penance, must repudiate every natural and
healthy impulse, and turn his back on joy and beauty" ("Hypocrisy" 173). In a
broad sense, Goldman's conception of American Puritanism helps to articulate
the convention that operates in Miller's description of the brutes. Miller
celebrates their bodily functions—nose blowing and urinating—as the joy and
beauty suppressed by the Puritan ethic of decency. Miller's work does not allow
these activities to remain at the margins of decent behavior, and instead
positions them at the highest levels of character.

However, Goldman presents a useful means for reading Miller because
while the two writers seem to share a common construction of American
Puritanical convention, the directions of their transgressions reveal differences in
their construction of the limit. Goldman is also engaged in a foregrounding of the
physicality and sexuality of character. However, in "The Hypocrisy of
Puritanism," Goldman praises the art and literature of Europe for "delv[ing]
deeply into the social and sexual problems of our time" (176). Goldman's desire
for America to examine its sexual "problems" places sex in a space of rational
compromise and discourse on the problems and needs of American culture. This
approach ultimately subsumes sexuality under rationality, because transgression
of American Puritanical limits is a move toward the solution of "problems" and the
production of a more functional society. For Miller, physicality and sexuality are important, at least in part, precisely because they work against rational compromise and discourse. So, although Goldman and Miller both construct American Puritanism as a limit for transgression, the different transgressions they pursue illuminate differences in their construction of Puritanism as limit.

At the same time, it is imperative to avoid creating a version of Miller's transgressions as ideal or unique. Although Miller is not a member of a particular movement while writing *Tropic of Cancer* or any of his other works, he is a subject within a cultural context, and his transgressions operate within complex discourses. Miller's abhorrence of aesthetic and ideological movements makes it difficult to pinpoint those discourses and the limits of his transgressions. An examination of the transgressive intertextuality of literary and artistic works of 1930's Paris will help illuminate Miller's transgressions in *Tropic of Cancer*.

Throughout his ten year stay in Paris, Miller was surrounded by artists, both European and expatriate. Particularly visible in Paris during this period were artists and writers involved in the movements of Surrealism and modernism. Artists within these movements announced the decay of Western culture and sought to violate and reorient conventions within that culture. The surrealists and the modernists are significant for what they share in the construction of convention and for their gestures toward alternative constitutions of value. Both movements made use of transgressive strategies that help illuminate parallel strategies used by Miller. These strategies were primitivism in modernism and what could loosely be called "the marvelous" in mainstream Surrealism.

Reviewing the transgressive texts of modernists reveals that Miller
engaged in similar transgressive strategies in his work with convention. Particularly, recent postcolonial literary theory has pointed to the ways in which modernists reduced non-Western cultures to essentialized, fantasized foils for the West.

Michael North’s 1994 *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* offers an extensive historical sketch of efforts within American academia to solidify the boundaries of literary convention. During the culture wars of the 1920’s, the American Academy of Arts and Letters built a well-funded crusade dedicated to "the preservation of our English speech in its purity" (132). Through the work of Stuart Sherman in his 1922 *Americans*, the Academy attempted to establish and police a set of literary conventions and to admonish those writers who showed "little trace of the once dominant Puritan stock and nothing of the Puritan temper" (132). Through these and other examples, North describes a climate of frenzy to reinforce and validate decaying conventions of literary purity, a climate that was stifling for artists attempting to redefine genre and narrative form. Efforts to standardize the conventions of English in literature provided the modernists with abundant opportunities for linguistic transgression. North presents a critical examination of the various responses among several modernist writers and artists, including Stein, Picasso, Pound, and Eliot.

According to North, the goals of the modernists were two-pronged. They sought to reject stifling European conventions, and they worked to manifest the authentic through art. This dedication to the authentic marks an important limit for modernist transgressive efforts and encourages gestures towards primitivism in an attempt to resurrect what has been lost in Western civilization and rationality. The transgressions of modernists often involved a sort of "racial
ventriloquism" directed against ideals of Western racial and linguistic purity. For example, Gertrude Stein's "Melanctha" makes use of racial ventriloquism in its narrative of the experiences of a young black woman. Stein, like many other modernist writers, is interested in representing the process of consciousness as a means for undermining the convention of linear plot, yet she chooses a black character to act out this transgression. This appropriation of black culture produces a primitivistic fantasy of the natural and the authentic. Stein, an author famous for repetition, often describes various black characters as portraying "the wide abandoned laughter that gives the broad glow to Negro sunshine" (Three Lives 79). North contends that this type of reduction of African Americans to a natural happiness and authenticity manifests "a longing for a certain kind of sensual freedom, found in Africa or Arabia or India, because such freedom is always found 'elsewhere,' just as the natural is always found 'elsewhere'" (71).

Primitivism as transgression operates through a colonial politics, because it essentializes colonial subjects, merely reversing the binary valuations on which conceptions of Western superiority are built. It is almost as if this version of primitivism accepts the story of Western superiority right up to the last moment, when it protests that the colonized subject's proximity to "nature" gives the author access to truth Western culture has covered over with "civilization."

Although Miller never engages in racial ventriloquism, he does make use of primitivism, particularly in his fascination with Asia. For instance, while Miller is recovering from a nearly fatal illness, his friend Collins tells him of his experiences in China. Miller's recollection of this story in Cancer intersects with a childhood memory of buying fireworks for the Fourth of July. This burst of nostalgia for childhood infiltrates his visions of China.
One never thinks of China, but it is there all the time on the tips of your fingers and it makes your nose itchy; and long afterward, when you have forgotten almost what a firecracker smells like, you wake up one day with gold leaf choking you and the broken pieces of punk waft back their pungent odor and the bright red wrappers give you a nostalgia for a people and a soil you have never known, but which is in your blood, mysteriously there in your blood, like the sense of time or space, a fugitive, constant value to which you turn more and more as you get old, which you try to seize with your mind, but ineffectually, because in everything Chinese there is wisdom and mystery and you can never grasp it with two hands or with your mind but you must let it rub off, let it stick to your fingers, let it slowly infiltrate your veins. (199)

China is conjured as a mystical fantasy directed against an omnipresent and hollow Western rationality. Like other modernist writers, Miller’s transgressions work, at least in part, by mapping the limits of Western culture along geographical and political borders that act as barriers and fantastic gateways to the East. Miller fully indulges his sensuous fantasy, reducing China to a timeless, unchanging “wisdom” the West has left behind. His vision absorbs China into the unconscious, leaving it there as a quiet but constant reminder that the West has been cast out of an Eden populated by an unchanging, one dimensional people. Through this gesture, China disappears from the world into the unconscious, and takes its place as foil for the West, beyond the limits of Western rationality.

However, Miller’s use of the primitive is not as simple as this example might suggest. In his attempt to associate with people and places that diverge from mainstream Western culture, he finds himself befriending several Indian men. Miller finds photographs of his friend Kepi’s Indian family and ancestors and offers this description:
Looking at the seething hive of figures which swarm the facades of the temples one is overwhelmed by the potency of these dark, handsome peoples who mingled their mysterious streams in a sexual embrace that has lasted thirty centuries or more. These frail men and women with piercing eyes who stare out of the photographs seem like the emaciated shadows of those virile, massive figures who incarnated themselves in stone and fresco from one end of India to the other in order that the heroic myths of the races who here intermingled should remain forever entwined in the hearts of their countrymen. When I look at only a fragment of these spacious dreams of stone, these toppling, sluggish edifices studded with gems, coagulated with human sperm, I am overwhelmed by the dazzling splendor of those imaginative flights which enabled half a billion people of diverse origins to thus incarnate the most fugitive expressions of their longing. (89)

This description of Kepi’s relatives relies upon a vision of early Indian civilization, a vision that undermines the binary split of civilization and sexuality that operates in conservative attempts to police the boundaries of Western culture, as was illustrated above. At first glance, Miller seems to praise the duration of Indian civilization and to have cited its collective sexuality as the foundation and cause of that endurance. This kind of gesture is not unusual within primitivism, which often links the primitive to a kind of sexual freedom that has been lost in the West.

Yet, a closer reading of this passage reveals a double imaging of primitivism. It is not Kepi’s contemporary relatives who are sexually free and vital. In fact, Miller describes them as “emaciated shadows.” Rather, the sexual vitality of India is in the images of the temples, from “thirty centuries” ago. Miller sees the constructors of an Indian civilization permeated with sexuality as the “virile” and “massive” people who inscribed heroic and mythical images on their descendants.
This description could be read as just another dismissal of a non-Western culture that has already had its golden age and has now passed into decay. However, the function of that dismissal would be to justify the West's own golden age and continued dominance. This reading will not work with Miller, precisely because he constructs Western culture as already fallen. In reading Miller's description of India, it is necessary to keep in mind his similar treatment of Western culture. For Miller, the Indian progenitors have colonized their descendants through the power of their art, through the power of a certain intersection of civilization and sexuality. To the extent that the stone temples stand in for Indian cultural identity, they represent allegiance to a fallen civilization. Here, art serves as myth making, as a tool for fantasizing and perpetuating decaying conventions of civilization and order. In this passage, Miller's primitivism does not produce fantasies of a free sexuality beyond the limits of the Western world. Instead, it produces visions of a fallen culture living in the shadows of a certain construction of civilization and sexuality. Miller constructs Western culture in much the same way, as a civilization adhering to decaying conventions, values, and projections of itself. Of Paris, Miller says, "The world around me is dissolving, leaving here and there spots of time. The world is a cancer eating itself away" (2), and of New York, "There is a sort of atomic frenzy to the activity going on; the more furious the pace, the more diminished the spirit. A constant ferment, but it might just as well be going on in a test tube. Nobody knows what it's all about. Nobody directs the energy" (68).

This venture into primitive fantasy offers an insight into Miller's construction of the limit. In "An Open Letter to Surrealists Everywhere," Miller says,
There can be no return to an instinctive life, and in fact, even among primitive men I see no evidence of a purely instinctive life. The strict taboos, which belong to the order of consciousness, permit a greater release of the instinctive life. Civilized man has his taboos also, but the penalty, instead of being quick death, is a slow and poisonous one. By contrast with primitive people, civilized people seem dead, quite dead. They are not really more dead, to be sure, but they give the semblance of death because the tension, the polarity, is breaking down. (189)

Miller’s response to the primitive proceeds from a transgressive understanding. The appeal of the primitive is not that it offers access to instincts the West has left behind. Instead, it is that primitive people are invigorated by strict taboos. The plight of the West is that its taboos have lost their force. So, while it is important to register Miller’s maintenance of the binary between the civilized and the primitive, it is equally important to recognize the specificity of Miller’s constructions. What is important in his reaction to India is that, unlike his reaction to China, he does not construct India as primitive and thus different from the West. Instead, his description of India matches his description of the West.

Throughout Cancer, Miller struggles with the traditions of Western thought that exclude the experiences and desires of the body. Miller’s transgressions differ from those constructed by the modernists, because his interest here is not simply that Western traditions have built themselves on repressive constructions of sexuality. Rather, it is that these limits have lost the power of taboo.

Miller writes convention as always already decayed. Miller is writing within a fallen civilization: “There will be more calamities, more death, more despair. Not the slightest indication of a change anywhere. The cancer of time is eating us away” (1). It is this fall of the limits that once served to support civilization that
sets the tone for all of *Tropic of Cancer*. For Miller, "the monstrous thing is not that men have created roses out of this dung heap, but that, for some reason or other, they should *want* roses" (96). Miller is not interested in constructing a façade of roses; he wants to explore the terrain of the remains. His visions of devastation employ an apocalyptic aesthetics that begins in the first paragraph when he writes, "We are all alone here and we are dead" (1). Thus, unlike much contemporaneous transgressive art, the concern of Miller’s work is not one of setting life free from stifling or irrational limits, for there is no life but only its absence and remains.

In one memorable episode in *Cancer*, Miller takes a long hard look into the "cunt" of a "whore." He is almost instantly thrown into a horrific abyss and provides a surreal list of the images he sees there ranging from Molly Bloom to an Arabian zero. From viewing the "crack" of her genitals, Miller moves to the contemplation of the decaying structure of Western civilization.

The world is pooped out: there isn't a dry fart left. Who that has a desperate, hungry eye can have the slightest regard for these existent governments, laws, codes, principles, ideals, ideas, totems, and taboos? If anyone knew what it meant to read the riddle of that thing which today is called a 'crack' or a 'hole,' if any one had the least feeling of mystery about the phenomena which are labeled 'obscene,' this world would crack asunder. It is the obscene horror, the dry, fucked-out aspect of things which makes this crazy civilization look like a crater. It is this great yawning gulf of nothingness which the creative spirits and mothers of the race carry between their legs. (249)

As Bataille writes, "Unless the taboo is observed with fear it lacks the counterpoise of desire which gives it its deepest significance" (37). In other words, the power of transgression derives from the power of the taboo. But for
Miller, the taboos of Western culture are "fucked-out." His work does not attempt to correct art or use it to unleash the hidden realities of life. Instead, art is a gesture of announcing the apocalypse. He writes of Cancer, "This is not a book, in the ordinary sense of the word. No, this a prolonged insult, a gob of spit in the face of Art, a kick in the pants to God, Man, Destiny, Time, Love, Beauty" (2). For Miller, art's purpose is explicitly transgressive.

This distinction will prove to be important in examining Miller's relationship with Surrealism. The surrealists relied upon the revolutionary possibilities of the unconscious to evoke the vibrancy and irrationality of the "marvelous" and to disrupt the stifling saturation of bourgeois rationality in Western civilization. This conception of the marvelous maintains itself on a theoretical level, and surrealist artists practice such transgressions in literature and art. Surrealist artists interject the marvelous in materials marked by convention. Juxtaposition or surrealist metaphor are generally interchangeable terms used to describe the positioning of conventions of cultural norms with the marvelous. Juxtaposition differs from the metaphor that was of great importance to modernist writers and artists. Modernist metaphor does not necessarily pair the mundane with the bizarre. Metaphors seek to illuminate meaning through limited shifts in meaning. Surrealist metaphor or juxtaposition uses both materiality and the marvelous to startle and bewilder the reader from within the unconscious.

In 1996, Gay Louise Balliet published an extensive examination of Miller's intersections with Surrealism in Henry Miller and Surrealist Metaphor: 'Riding the Ovarian Trolley'. In her study of surrealist writers and artists, Balliet notes that a primary objective of Surrealism is "the revolution against convention and chastity" (preface). This conviction to violate and eradicate convention can be seen
throughout *Manifestoes of Surrealism* by Andre Breton, the recognized leader of the surrealist movement. In the "Second Manifesto of Surrealism," written in 1930, Breton presents the movement as an active force that is "not afraid to make for itself a tenet of total revolt, complete insubordination, of sabotage according to rule" and that "still expects nothing save from violence" (125). In contrast to the work of a surrealist like Georges Bataille, Breton's Surrealism relies upon a neo-Platonic vision of the marvelous. In *The Surrealist Revolution in France*, Herbert Gershman writes that for the surrealists, "an objective reality lies just beyond revelation" (117). Breton's goal is to reorient and reverse conventions that prohibit the intersection of materiality and the unconscious. He must take a position that maintains free access to the marvelous and that agitates for the inversion of the conventional with that which lies beyond the limit.

Again, Balliet identifies juxtaposition and surrealist metaphor as the primary instruments used by surrealists to invoke the marvelous and enliven the revolutionary prospects of the unconscious. Both of these transgressive aesthetic techniques work by disrupting familiar relationships through the pairing of known terms or symbols with irrational or unfamiliar associations. By this mechanism, the authority of convention is simultaneously activated and undermined, because that authority is redirected into the absurd or the subversive.

An example of juxtaposition in action is Marcel Duchamp's famous painting of the mustached *Mona Lisa* entitled *L.H.O.O.Q.* The *Mona Lisa* is one of the most familiar images in Western culture. Presenting *Mona Lisa* with a mustache undermines the authority of traditional art by robbing the painting of its aura of authenticity. Through this mechanism, the *Mona Lisa*, as a limit on what
constitutes good art, is invoked and violated. *L.H.O.O.Q.* effectively assassinates the *Mona Lisa* by using its authority against itself and announces that the value of art is the transgressive search for the unconscious.

Miller’s Paris produced many works of painting, photography, and film that made use of similar techniques of juxtaposition to attack convention. Painters as varied as Gauguin, Duchamp, Matisse, Dali, and Magritte filled Parisian art galleries in the 1930’s. Miller was quite literally surrounded by these works in Paris, where they filled the galleries as paintings and photographs and lined the streets as statues and films. In fact, Miller’s first published writing in Paris was a review in the *New Review* of the famous director of surrealist film, Luis Bunuel, entitled “Bunuel or Thus Cometh to an End Everywhere the Golden Age” (Wickes 252).

Like the surrealists, Miller creates images meant to startle and alter the consciousness of the reader. His language makes constant use of the juxtaposition that was common to surrealist art in the 1930’s. Balliet provides dozens of various types of mismatches in *Cancer* that produce a startling effect. These include: subject/verb mismatches such as “sun bleeds” (165), noun/adjective mismatches such as “leprous streets” (42), incongruent possession such as “dregs of human sympathy” (283), and surreal “is” clauses such as “I am the void” (28). A persistent metaphor that Miller pushes to surrealism is the metaphor of flow.

I love everything that flows, everything that has time in it and becoming, that brings us back to the beginning where there is never end: the violence of the prophets, the obscenity that is ecstasy, the wisdom of the fanatic, the priest with his rubber litany, the foul words of the whore, the spittle that floats away in the gutter, the milk of the breast and the bitter honey that pours from the
womb, all that is fluid, melting, dissolute and dissolvent, all the pus and dirt that in flowing is purified, that loses its sense of origin, that makes the great circuit toward death and dissolution. (258)

As the examples above suggest, for Miller, the rupture with the everyday is a rupture into horror. Balliet has compiled a meticulous list of Miller's surrealist metaphors which reveals that three-quarters of them evoke negativity (79). Balliet contends that most surrealist metaphors serve to expand the signification of the primary image, while Miller's engage in expansion but result in contraction. This contraction typically forces the noun into a negative and often times horrific connotation. Balliet's list of noun/adjective juxtapositions exemplifies this practice: “thyroid eyes” (8), “poisonous spring” (42), “gangrened ducts” (165), “liver ideas” (242), “fucked-out crater” (250), “spiked mouth” (251), “hallucinated sky” (252), and “bloated pages” (253). Miller continually evokes the horror of life in a civilization of fallen limits.

Cancer includes a lengthy description of Miller's visit to a Matisse exhibit at the Rue de Seze where he offers his own reaction to powerful, transgressive art. While Matisse is not considered a surrealist artist by critics, his aesthetic innovations employ similar destabilizing strategies of transgression. Miller's reaction to the work of Matisse is powerful. He says that it draws him "back again to the proper precincts of the human world" (162). He reproduces juxtapositions in Matisse's work, writing that "in every poem by Matisse there is the history of a particle of human flesh which refused the consummation of death" (163). Here, life is celebrated as "flesh," as that which has refused fulfillment and completion by the terms of death. Miller is invigorated by Matisse's art because it calls up and surpasses "the ugly scaffold to which the body of man is chained by the incontrovertible facts of life" (164). By placing the
human in the context of its cultural and subjective architecture, Matisse has exposed the decay that supports and reflects Western civilization.

But however much Miller might be inspired by the work of Matisse and other artists of the period, the terms of his transgression are situated differently. Art critic Suzanne Jones notes that while Matisse and artists associated with the surrealist movement often chose to provoke the marvelous through a nearly religious expression juxtaposed to the materiality of convention, Miller uses this technique to express the horror and beauty of what is excluded from the limit.

It is clear that Miller has much in common with the surrealists in his disdain for convention and commitment to transgression. Because of these similarities, Miller is often assumed to be a revolutionary activist for a new order. Balliet sees Miller as an essentially surrealist artist and offers this comment: "Henry Miller the narrator will wait calmly for apocalypse, in the meantime providing the world with a model, an artist/hero, who is capable of surviving the misery, rejecting social ideology, and becoming a man of instinct and purity" (76). Balliet claims that Miller has successfully used "instinct" and "purity" to transgress. Andre Bay makes similar claims when he argues, "He wants to cleanse America's culture, the 'air-conditioned nightmare,' this death in life which can only lead to an apocalypse. He fights to regain a true sense of life, to respond to the real needs of human beings, to a thirst of the soul: under all this mess, he is convinced, there is something marvelous, he feels it, and that is what he wants to express" (109).

Such celebrations of Miller's transgressions read his work as a desire to purify Western civilization, to go beyond decay and usher in new cultural architecture. However, Miller does not locate the marvelous beyond the limits of
convention and in the realm of the ineffable. He does not attack convention with visions of the suppressed reality of the marvelous. Henry Miller has no interest in heaven, whether Christian or surrealist. In an important sense, Miller is not waiting for the apocalypse but already living through it, because he constructs the world as decayed but does not offer a revolution to replace it with a world that is real or authentic. For Miller, the stakes of transgression are not the truth, but the immediate possibilities for life celebrated through transgression itself.

His reaction to Surrealism reveals an interest in its techniques and an abhorrence for its dogma. In "An Open Letter to Surrealists Everywhere," he responds to the surrealist publication Minotaure. He acknowledges that he and the surrealists have common interest in their desire to transgress the limits of Western culture, and he admires the surrealists' efforts to "deflate the abstract, materialistic universe of the scientific-minded man" (174). He also praises surrealist painters who create "incongruous and anomalous parts, the absurd which is devastating, together with the sense of space which is absent and yet devours you, all of it, sex, nonsense, poison, nostalgia" (173).

But Miller responds negatively to Surrealism's claims to revolution and special access to truth. In fact, he denies the possibility of truth, and warns that a successful revolution could do nothing more than create a new status quo. Miller contends, "I am against revolutions because they always involve a return to status quo. I am against the status quo both before and after revolutions" ("An Open Letter" 160). This response is striking, because it exposes the distance between the metaphysics of the surrealists and Miller. The stakes of transgression are not the creation of a utopian world beyond the limit. Such an approach to transgression can only reproduce the limit. Instead, for Miller the
limit is a world of fallen conventions. These conventions have not simply faded into irrelevance, as the efforts of the American Academy of Arts and Letters make clear. Yet, their boundaries are unclear. Violating them in the name of authenticity or the marvelous produces one kind of transgression. Miller’s violations produce another. In finally turning to Tropic of Cancer itself, it will become clear that the stakes of transgression for Miller are a matter of illuminating and transforming the limits of his own subjectivity. It is necessary, then, to perform a close reading of Miller’s construction of the limits of his subjectivity and how obscenity shapes his transgressive efforts.

Miller’s reflections on Mona offer a starting point for examining his transgression as a means of constructing subjectivity. Miller’s arrival in Paris is not clean. His relocation to Paris is a deliberate break with the life he led in America, and, more specifically, it is a break with his wife Mona. It is rare that Miller directly discusses Mona in Cancer, yet she is of paramount importance to the text and takes center stage in Tropic of Capricorn and The Rosy Crucifixion. Of their relationship he says, “We came together in a dance of death and so quickly was I sucked down into the vortex that when I came to the surface again I could not recognize the world. When I found myself loose the music had ceased; the carnival was over and I had been picked clean...” (181).

Miller’s relationship with Mona was one of intense passion and intimacy. His description of their involvement simultaneously evokes joyous frenzy and terrible pain. The relationship was a transformative experience for Miller, but its transformation worked through a kind of destruction. In the intensity of his relationship with Mona, Miller discovered vulnerabilities in
himself that unraveled his identity and perception of the world. This process of unraveling is the focus of Miller's transgression, an intimate violation that continually transforms boundaries. Miller enters Paris in a state of promising devastation, as an emergence from this experience of intense and intimate transgression.

In his recollections of Mona, Miller imagines her indifference to his devotion:

She wouldn't remember that at a certain corner I had stopped to pick up her hairpin, or that, when I bent down to tie her laces, I remarked the spot on which her foot had rested and that it would remain there forever, even after the cathedrals had been demolished and the whole Latin civilization wiped out forever and ever. (179)

Through his devotion, Mona takes on an almost mythical significance. He writes that his devotion to her has the power to endure through the decay of Western civilization. He also places himself in a position of vulnerability, of recognizing her power while she carries on oblivious to his surrender. Indeed, Mona has been a seminal devastation in his experience. In writing of their relationship, he states, "What a delight that must be to the sadist when she discovers her own proper masochist" (181).

It is precisely because Mona has had such a devastating impact on his life that Miller falls into worship of her. Mona acts as a marker for Miller's masochism. She is the origin of Miller's quest for transgression. It is Mona's transgression that has eroticized Miller's subjectivity. In his destruction, Miller finds new possibilities for the construction of subjectivity. He emerges from their relationship "picked clean," at the end of conventional subjectivity. In the rupture
of his relationship with her, Miller also finds a rapture, the erotic rapture of
discovering the bounds of subjectivity. His experiences with Mona constitute an
erotic convulsion, a dangerous growth that works through an intimate destruction.
Mona destroys Miller, and leaves in his place an absence searching for the limits
of subjectivity. Once begun, the "dance of death," the dance of the transgressive
mapping of subjectivity, cannot revert to stable and secure boundaries of
knowing oneself.

The importance of this experience for Miller is its illumination of the
process of transgression. For the surrealists, transgression was a matter of
revolution, of the revelation of the reality suppressed by convention. For
Miller, transgression is always first a question of subjectivity. As Foucault
writes, the death of God leaves subjectivity at the margins of understanding,
transforming the task of knowing oneself into the task of creating oneself.
Miller's transgression works through a kind of erotic ambivalence, through an
anguished search for the limits of subjectivity. Those limits are approached
with a mixture of horror and ecstasy—horror because transgression of the
limit causes the kind of devastation Miller experienced with Mona, and
ecstasy because that very devastation releases energy invested in the
tensions of a subjectivity with only absence at its center. For Miller,
transgression is a kind of masochism, or desire for the anguish and release
that comes with surpassing the limits of his subjectivity.

In continuing with a close reading of the text, the significance of Miller's
masochism will illuminate the obscene. At the center of Cancer is a lengthy
fifty page discussion of sex and women. It begins with pages of direct
quotation of Van Norden's lamentations over his hobby of fucking whores.
The scene shifts in speaker but not subject when Miller's friend Carl describes an astounding affair he is having with a wealthy woman who Carl says "just wants to be fucked that's all" (115). After Carl, Miller revisits the conversation with Van Norden, who again provides a long monologue.

Here, sex and failure are played out in the voices of others. Miller's vicarious presentation of obscenity gives him distance to play with the implications of its significance as transgression. These passages could be read as attempts to shirk responsibility for the obscenity Miller speaks through his friends. For instance, in describing Van Norden's talk, Miller says, "Mostly it is about the past he dreams. About his 'cunts'" (100). Cunts in quotation marks could be read as an attempt to establish distance from the word, but such a reading is clearly undermined by Miller's repeated use of the word outside of quotes. In fact, if this is Miller's intention, he repeatedly sabotages the effort with pages and pages of his own obscenity. Readings that would suggest a hesitancy in Miller to violate Puritanical limits suffer from similar shortcomings.

Yet, the question is undoubtedly one of sex. Miller repeatedly comments on his friends' twisted perception of reality and sexuality, calling Van Norden "mad" (130) and Carl an "imbecile" (112). Following Van Norden and Carl's sexual monologues, Miller and Van Norden hire a prostitute. Not long after they are in the hotel room, Van Norden and the prostitute begin to fuck. Miller's description of the scene provides insights into the function of his presentation of Van Norden and Carl:

The sight of them coupled like a pair of goats without the least spark of passion, grinding and grinding away for no reason except
the fifteen francs, washes away every bit of feeling I have except the inhuman one of satisfying my curiosity. The girl is lying on the edge of the bed and Van Norden is bent over her like a satyr with his two feet solidly planted on the floor. I am sitting on a chair behind him, watching their movements with a cool, scientific detachment; it doesn't matter to me if it should last forever. It's like watching one of those crazy machines which throw the newspaper out, millions and billions and trillions of them with their meaningless headlines. The machine seems more sensible, crazy as it is, and more fascinating to watch, than the human beings and the events which produced it. My interest in Van Norden and the girl is nil; if I could sit like this and watch every single performance going on at this minute all over the world my interest would be even less than nil. I wouldn't be able to differentiate between this phenomenon and the rain falling or a volcano erupting. As long as that spark of passion is missing there is no human significance in the performance. The machine is better to watch. And these two are like a machine which has slipped its cogs. It needs the touch of a human hand to set it right. It needs a mechanic. (144)

Miller, the writer of transgressive sexuality, is horrified at Van Norden's efforts with the whore. The scene is a depiction of a certain kind of failure.

Readings such as the one offered by Kate Millet that point to the dehumanization of the whore in this scene overlook the degree to which Van Norden is also dehumanized (Sexual Politics). Both Van Norden and the whore are reduced to cogs in a machine that is without significance or purpose. The horror of Miller's reaction is not the erotic convulsion associated with a limit surpassed. It is the horror of the meaningless, of the failure of transgression.

If somebody doesn't turn the switch off he'll never know what it means to die; you can't die if your own proper body has been stolen. You can get over a cunt and work away like a billy goat until eternity; you can go to the trenches and be blown to bits; nothing will create that spark of passion if there isn't the intervention of a human hand. Somebody has to put his hand into the machine and
let it be wrenched off if the cogs are to mesh again. Somebody has to do this without hope of reward, without concern over the fifteen francs; somebody whose chest is so thin that a medal would make him hunchbacked. And somebody has to throw a feed into a starving cunt without fear of pushing it out again. Otherwise this show'll go on forever. There's no way out of the mess... (145).

Here, sex is presented as meaning nothing in itself. Deviant sex fails here because it only violates the fallen limits of sexual decency. The limits of subjectivity have not been put in play at all, and so an ostensibly erotic act is only the motion of a meaningless machine. The machinery of Van Norden fucking the whore reflects the meaningless machinery of Western culture.

Miller volunteers to be the mechanic who is willing to be destroyed in order to restore meaning to sexuality and subjectivity. A kind of violent sacrifice is necessary to restore meaning to the world, and Miller offers himself in a gesture of masochism. Here, Miller's aversion to revolution takes an interesting turn. While Miller is vehemently opposed to organized revolution that seeks to establish a new order, he is creating himself as a one man revolutionary without dogmatic prospects for the future. Miller's masochistic revolution distinctly calls for the transformation of subjectivity.

The sexual adventures of Van Norden and Carl are meaningless because sex itself is meaningless. It can only take on significance if it acts as a transgression on the limits of subjectivity. Miller's obscenity does not work only through a violation of Puritanical limits, for, as previously argued, those limits are fallen. This is not to say that these limits have lost significance as taboo, but it is to say they are not enough. If they were, Van Norden's encounter with the whore would count as transgression, and would produce the force of a hotter, more frantic sexuality that has the power to eroticize the
boundaries of subjectivity. Yet, the Puritanical limit has lost the erotic force of
 taboo. Thus, the limits of subjectivity are not aligned along such a binary
 axis.

 In contrast to Van Norden and Carl, Miller expresses little interest in
 sex itself. For Miller, sex as transgression is always linked to larger upheaval.
 He writes, "Let us have more oceans, more upheavals, more wars, more
 holocausts. Let us have a world of men and women with dynamos between
 their legs, a world of natural fury, of passion, action, drama, dreams,
 madness, a world that produces ecstasy and not dry farts" (257). Miller's
 rejection of sex itself as a transgressive force allows him to articulate the
 demands of a transgressive transformation of subjectivity. His observation
 and consumption of the futility of his friends' attempts at transgression allows
 him to distance himself from their approach. Van Norden says, "I want to
 surrender myself to a woman . . . I want her to take me out of myself" (131).
 But this attempt can only fail, because Van Norden and Carl do not risk the
 limits of subjectivity. Their attempts at surrender only reproduce the
 boundaries of their subjectivities. Van Norden blames the women for this,
saying, "If she could only make me believe that there was something more
 important on earth than myself" (131). Yet, it is not a matter of "believing,"
 and Van Norden's plaintive appeals only mask his unwillingness to risk more
 than just a fuck. As a consequence, each fuck solidifies his boundaries.
 Without a more dangerous approach to transgression, without a masochistic
 approach, he remains locked in a mechanistic and isolated subjectivity. His
 attempts to be taken out of himself are futile because they only replicate the
 subjectivity he hopes to surpass.
Yet, Miller sees promise in the whores necessary for Van Norden's attempts at transgressive sex. In fact, it is largely through experiences with whores that Miller articulates the erotic ambivalence that constructs the boundaries of his subjectivity. Without whores, Miller may not have much to write. They take center stage in *Tropic of Cancer* and provide Miller with possibilities for transgression of the limits of his subjectivity. Also, these women have the potential for a transgressive rewriting of their own subjectivity. They risk their bodies and autonomy in sexual transgression. They are committed to a deviant defiance of the Puritanical limit, and, more importantly, their commitment opens up possibilities for discovering further limits of the kind that elude Van Norden and Carl. Whores reveal that sex is never enough; their failures to transgress can be as horrifying as the failures of Van Norden and Carl. But a certain kind of whore holds out the promise of new subjectivities that draw strength from their transgressions.

The very presence of whores transgresses Puritanical limits. They are constant reminders of deviant sexuality and of the ease with which Puritanical limits can be violated. Whores immediately suggest a transgression of taboo for the men who watch them and consider fucking them. But again, the transgression of fallen limits is insufficient to bring about transformations of subjectivity. In Miller's work, whores who only engage in deviant sex do not have the potential to transform subjectivity. Thus, whores are a construction that Miller problematizes, and his descriptions explore the complexity of their transgressive roles.

Walking down the Boulevard Beaumarchais in evening, Miller is lifted by the powerfully decadent surroundings:
There was a touch of spring in the air, a poisonous, malefic spring that seemed to burst from the manholes. Night after night I had been coming back to this quarter, attracted by certain leprous streets which only revealed their sinister splendor when the light of day had oozed away and the whores commenced to take up their posts. (42)

Seemingly incongruous imagery fills the streets and culminates in a "burst" of diseased spring that calls forth the whores. The "sinister splendor," another good example of Miller's use of surrealist metaphor, expresses Miller's attraction to flamboyant displays of deviance and disease. In this scene, the vibrancy of a kind of deviant spring is marked by the emergence of the whores. The whores "take up their posts," in a game of desire, of limits.

The street scene is not filled with "passion," or frenetic transgressive desire, but it attracts Miller because the whores occupy predatory positions that promise to destroy him. In taking up their posts, they become predators. They are like a "cluster of vultures who croaked and flapped their dirty wings, who reached out with sharp talons and plucked you into a doorway" (42). He admires whores, in part, because they live through the ruin of the world, by feeding off the failure of individuals like Van Norden and Carl. They lead their victims "into a little room off the street, a room without a window usually, and, sitting on the edge of the bed with skirts tucked up gave you a quick inspection, spat on your cock, and placed it for you. While you washed yourself another one stood at the door and, holding her victim by the hand, watched nonchalantly as you gave the finishing touches to your toilet" (42). Whores hold out the promise of death, not merely the "little death" of an orgasm, but the larger death of subjectivity and its anguished transformation.
An episode that describes the kind of transformation Miller seeks is his visit to a whorehouse with an Indian friend. Here, Miller again affirms the need for the transgression of the limits of subjectivity:

In a few minutes he's dancing with a naked wench, a huge blonde with creases in her jowls. I can see her ass reflected a dozen times in the mirrors that line the room—and those dark, bony fingers of his clutching her tenaciously... The girls who are unoccupied are sitting placidly on the leather benches, scratching themselves peacefully just like a family of chimpanzees... My whole being was responding to the dictates of an ambiance which it had never before experienced; that which I could call myself seemed to be contracting, condensing, shrinking from the stale, customary boundaries of the flesh whose perimeter knew only the modulations of the nerve ends... The state of tension was so finely drawn now that the introduction of a single foreign particle, even a microscopic particle, as I say, would have shattered everything... In this sort of hair-trigger eternity I felt that everything was justified, supremely justified; I felt the wars inside me that had left behind this pulp and wrack... (95)

The whorehouse is an architecture supported by fallen taboos and decay. It feeds itself with failure. Yet, it is charged with possibilities for sexual devastation that have the power to transform subjectivity. In the whorehouse, Miller is reminded of the "pulp and wrack" left behind by the devastation of his subjectivity. But his reaction is one of celebration; he recognizes that this devastation is the promise of new subjectivities, of new possibilities for living. And so Miller celebrates whores as figures of promise, as predators on the fallen, as sadists for the masochist, and as hope for transformed subjectivity.

However, an examination of individual whores in Cancer reveals that their trade is not enough. For instance, Miller has an affair with a whore
named Claude, a whore with a "soul and a conscience" (44). For Miller, this is a shortcoming, because it prevents her from engaging in the kind of cruelty necessary for the satisfaction of his masochistic transgression. Her self-consciousness and discomfort prevent her from engaging in the transgressive sadism on his subjectivity that Miller desires. Claude is just a “good French girl of average breed and intelligence” (45) who does not have the skills to succeed in the middle class. Although she transgresses the Puritanical limits, she does not engage in further transgressions. Miller has disdain for Claude because she adheres to conventions of delicacy and literature. She is not capable of bringing about a transformation in either Miller or herself, and, like Miller, requires another agent of transgression to lay her open to dissolution and convulsion. Without that transgressive agency, she remains isolated within the limits of conventional subjectivity. Yet, unlike Miller, Claude expresses no desire for the kind of devastation that could surpass the limits of her subjectivity. And so Miller’s relationship with Claude is unsatisfying.

Claude should be contrasted with another whore named Germaine. Miller celebrates Germaine as the ultimate sexual predator. Their interaction is transgressive, because Miller allows Germaine to utilize her power. Germaine was the subject of his first published story in Paris, "Mlle Claude." To Miller, Germaine was the perfect whore, "a whore all the way through, even down to her good heart, her whore’s heart which is not really a good heart but a lazy one, an indifferent, flaccid heart that can be touched for a moment, a heart without reference to any fixed point within, a big, flaccid whore's heart that can detach itself for a moment from its true center" (45-46). Germaine reflects some of the same characteristics that Miller adored in
Mona. She is a predator, a "hustler," detached but capable of fleeting intimacy with a man. He affectionately refers to Germaine's genitals as her "rosebush," a creature of "bloom and magic" (44).

Miller's interest in Germaine is not merely that she preys on figures like Van Norden and Carl. After all, Claude does as much, even if she is more hesitant in her indifference. Both Germaine and Miller recognize that deviant sex is not transgressive in and of itself, that sex alone is meaninglessness. In Germaine, Miller finds a virtuous indifference that protects her from the futility of figures like Carl and Van Norden. But, more importantly, this vital distance allows her to bring about transgressions of his subjectivity. Germaine is able to leave the "center," to surrender and be surrendered to, in moments of intimacy. This ability to truly expose herself allows Germaine to penetrate Miller's composed subjectivity. Yet, her indifference gives her the ability to leave Miller devastated. With Germaine, he is charged with the eroticism of masochism, and he is free to live out the transformations of a devastated subjectivity.

Finally, it is necessary to examine Miller's relationship with Tania. Tania is not a "whore," but as an adulteress freely casting about for sex with desire and explosive energy, she has similar potential. At the same time, Tania is different from a figure like Germaine. Tania is a woman who has recently broken away from the conventional limits. Miller's first description of Tania is a surrealist list that describes her as "a fever": "aural amplifiers, anecdotal seances, burnt sienna breasts, heavy garters, what time is it, golden pheasants stuffed with chestnuts, taffeta fingers, vaporish twilights turning to ilex, acromegaly, cancer and delirium, warm veils, poker chips,
carpets of blood and soft thighs" (5). Tania is described as an erotic frenzy, a complex series of identities and movements—inhuman, irrational, obscene.

Miller’s description of Tania is immediately followed by lines that reveal the importance of fucking for her transformation. "You can stuff toads, bats, lizards up your rectum. You can shit arpeggios if you like, or string a zither across your navel. I am fucking you, Tania, so that you'll stay fucked" (6). Miller wants Tania to "stay fucked" so that she will continue to burst with the erotic convulsion of a transformed subjectivity.

For Miller, the conventions that solidify her social boundaries are dead and serve the putrescence of her husband Sylvester. Tania’s previous existence was to the benefit of her husband, but her transformation has made her dangerous. Miller says, "But putting up a fence around her, that won’t work. You can't put a fence around a human being" (60). Miller sees his own relationship with Tania as a kind of dangerous sex that has quite literally penetrated those fences, a sex that has transgressed the limits of isolation and monogamy and opened up new possibilities for Tania’s subjectivity. It is now impossible for her to live within former boundaries. Miller fantasizes that he will speak of this transformation to Sylvester, saying, "Don't you see that you have a woman in your house now? Can't you see she's bursting?" (58). Sylvester does not recognize the new Tania and cannot acknowledge the transformation that has taken place in her without risking himself and the established boundaries of their marriage.

Clearly, Miller sees himself as an active agent in the transformation of Tania. However, what makes Miller’s relationship with Tania interesting is that she has this same erotic power over him as well. Tania has pushed
Miller into the experience of destruction, once again. He says to her, “You, Tania, are my chaos” (2). His exuberance celebrates the dangerous transgression of limits. He says, “It is not even I, it is the world dying, shedding the skin of time. I am still alive, kicking in your womb, a reality to write upon” (2). In Tania, Miller again encounters the possibility for transforming his reality. This time Tania is the artist writing his subjectivity.

Tania and Miller engage in an erotic transgression that transforms subjectivity, but it is unique because of their frantic switching of agency. Whereas Miller’s description of Mona positions him as only the masochist and her as only the sadist, it is clear that he and Tania shift roles. Tania is an essential agent in the early context of Cancer in which Miller finds “the world around me is dissolving, leaving here and there spots of time” (2). This is, of course, what Miller desires—sex that destroys. But unique to this sex is the eroticism of a mutual transgression that marks them both as destroyed and destroyers.

Toward the end of Cancer, Miller leaves Dijon after a fruitless stay there as an instructor. In a moment of reflection, he writes:

Going back in a flash over the women I’ve known. It’s like a chain which I’ve forged out of my own misery. Each one bound to the other. A fear of living separate, of staying born. The door of the womb always on the latch. Dread and longing. Deep in the blood the pull of paradise. The beyond. Always the beyond. It must have all started with the navel. They cut the umbilical cord, give you a slap on the ass, and presto! You’re out in the world, adrift, a ship without a rudder. You look at the stars and then you look at your navel. You grow eyes everywhere—in the armpits, between the lips, in the roots of your hair, on the soles of your feet. What is distant becomes near, what is near becomes distant. Inner-outer, a constant flux, a shedding of skins, a turning inside out. You drift around like that for years and years, until you find yourself in the
dead center, and there you slowly rot, slowly crumble to pieces, get dispersed again. Only your name remains. (287)

Women, whores, and fucking are how Miller relates his history and the transformation of his subjectivity. Without these reckless moves, Miller is locked in the center, his subjectivity cast for him. In order to live beyond the stagnation and isolation of a subjectivity shaped by fallen limits, Miller has created a “chain” of identity, a chain that is constructed through women and fucking. It is only through the intimate violence of Miller’s transgressive masochism that he can construct himself. In that construction, he finds the desire to keep moving, keep shifting, keep living. In dedicating himself to the flux of a subjectivity committed to the transgression of its own limits, Miller dedicates himself to life.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Kipnis, Laura. "(Male) Desire and (Female) Disgust: Reading Hustler." Cultural Studies. Eds. Grossberg, Lawrence, Cary Nelson, and Paula


Price, Sally. "Provenances and Pedigrees: The Western Appropriation of Non-Western Art." *Imagery and Creativity: Ethnoaesthetics and Art Worlds in*


