

MILLER'S TALE: HENRY HITS 100

This year marks the centenary of Henry Miller's birth. Throughout the year, various events and publications will celebrate the life and work of this most American of authors who left the land of his birth in order to discover himself. Like Huck Finn lighting out for the Territory, Miller rejected a civilized ambience he found utterly depressing for an earthier, more simple one. In an age where practical champions of science appeared to be crowding out spiritual expression, he chose literally to beg for bread rather than be just one more three-piece suit competing for material success.

Miller located his muse in post-expatriate Europe during the Depression, turning up there penniless and disillusioned just as Hemingway and company were picking up their coats; for them the party seemed over. For Miller it was a beginning; the first day of the rest of his life. Remember, he was already 43 years old when "Tropic of Cancer," his first and most important book, was published in Paris in 1934. At an age when American men are in mid-career, Miller was just beginning to reconstitute himself from social misfit to literary innovator.

"Cancer's" very first page sets a euphoric tone as its confident narrator announces: "I have no money, no resources, no hopes. I am the happiest man alive." This first-person voice employed by Miller to serve as his fictional alter ego speaks to us with immediacy and verisimilitude. It is an irrepressibly optimistic voice, one that remains cheery in the face of absolute poverty. Nothing can defeat this man – not hunger pains nor marauding bed lice nor indifference to his writing. The writer Alfred Perles, an intimate of Miller's during this period, remembers him thus: "In those days his friends walked in his shadow and even his shadow was warm."

What accounted for the radical change in Miller, the emergent charisma? Back in cold New York he had been a round peg stuck in the square hole of a stifling existence that imprisoned his soul. Stultifying jobs sapped his energy and inhibited his writing. The first of his five wives divorced him. A perfectionist mother, whom he could never please, sniped at him constantly, castigating his nonconforming life style. The desultory writing he was producing satisfied nobody, least of all himself.

Most crucially, in the immediate period before he abandoned America, Miller was being alternately elevated and brought low by his second wife, June Mansfield, who of the many women in his life, was most dominant. June, in support of Henry's ambitions to write, encouraged him to stay home while she worked

long hours in dance halls and speak-easies, teasing wealthy old men out of their dollars. Some of Miller's earliest literary efforts were ghost-written pieces that June signed and then hawked to her sugar daddies, staying out all night in the process and making Henry furiously jealous. By the time he arrived in Paris, he was an emotional mess.

Once there, he was reborn on the spot, it seems. To paraphrase Peter Weiss' *Marat*, Miller pulled himself up by his own hair, turned himself inside out, and saw the world with fresh eyes. Miller's revolution, though, was not a political one. It was the wedding of his life and his art. Actual and imagined experiences became indistinguishable from each other. "I am the hero and the book is myself," he says in "Tropic of Cancer." In the hands of a less-gifted writer, such blurring of narrative voice invites disaster. Miller pulls it off seamlessly. Exactly how is not so easy to describe.

His fictional persona is many things – graphically erotic, elliptically surrealistic, unevenly anarchistic, combatively philosophical, abidingly romantic, downright funny – and always deeply felt. He resoundingly deplores patriotism, modern medicine, financial responsibility and organized religion, presaging emulation by such latter-day iconoclasts as Norman Mailer and Lenny Bruce.

"Tropic of Cancer" and its companion volumes, "Black Spring" (1936) and "Tropic of Capricorn" (1939), are the bedrock on which Henry Miller's worldwide reputation rests, though he would continue to publish books for almost another half-century. It would be more than two decades, however, before that reputation took root in the United States. When Grove Press finally published "Tropic of Cancer" in 1961, it ran into a buzz saw of lawsuits that charged irredeemable obscenity. Two years later, a Supreme Court decision lifted from Miller's shoulders the onus of being censored in his back yard. At 70, he was hailed by the '60s counterculture as a hero.

Miller had been elsewhere beleaguered since returning to the United States after World War II broke out in Europe. Though never a political activist, he openly opposed America's entry into the war, an unpopular view that cost him prestige at a time when he seemed to be catching on in the literary world.

James Laughlin's pioneering modern press, New Directions, had begun to publish some of Miller's less-controversial texts, though his independence of mind would keep the kettle bubbling no matter how tame he tried to be. He wrote an ambivalent account of a year-long cross-country automobile trip, imaginatively titled, "The Air-Conditioned Nightmare." The trip ended in Los Angeles. It was 1942 and Miller was still broke and

struggling. He was not yet a household name worthy of publication by Playboy or People.

When living in Los Angeles palled, Miller moved up the coast into what he considered his first real home – an unheated cabin with no plumbing in rugged Big Sur. From this primitive outpost at Land's End, where he could look toward the Orient he had always venerated, Miller, now married to Janine Lepska, and with two young children by her, bartered the watercolors he was producing by the dozens for food and clothing.

Lawrence Clark Powell, then university librarian at UCLA, made regular pilgrimages up Big Sur's precipitous Partington Ridge for the collection of the author's manuscripts and other literary artifacts that eventually would comprise the Henry Miller Archive. Prescient book collectors were vying for Miller's first editions. (Today a pristine copy of "Tropic of Cancer" easily commands five figures.)

The aging outsider finally came in from the cold, relocating for the last time in 1963 on the strength of royalties from American publication to sunny, upscale Pacific Palisades. Ensnared there in the kind of middle-class dwelling he would have deplored in more contentious times, Henry Miller settled into the role of literary lion. He corresponded with a legion of admirers and greeted a steady flow of visitors, including several doting young women who sought the warmth of the old romantic's banked but not quite extinguished fires. There also was a short-lived marriage with a Japanese entertainer half his age.

Now in the winter of his life, Miller revisited his youth, writing a series of bittersweet memoirs and a critical study of D. H. Lawrence for an old friend, Noel Young, of Capra Press. This last of his published works had been abandoned almost 50 years earlier because its fledgling author felt he had not gotten Lawrence right. Miller was instinctively correct, because his true subject, always, was himself.

Like Walt Whitman and Henry Thoreau, two authors whose work he revered, Henry Miller sang his own song, marched to his own gait. Like those noble literary dissenters, he remains an American original.

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