

Art and the Artist in *The Rosy Crucifixion*

“I am the storyteller and the story”
- Beth Brant, Native American Indian

Henry Miller’s achievements as an artist were considerable. His body of work includes his ‘auto-novels’, essays, one play, and some twelve hundred watercolours. His work existed symbiotically with his life. Art, he thought, was a manifestation of the human soul. In fact, under the prevailing conditions, art must be viewed in religious terms, not least because the processes and themes of art are synonymous with human liberty and spiritual/psychological salvation. Literature must be a road to the truth, for the artist and the readers. The world, Miller believed, was essentially false, cancerous and in a state of decay. Literature had a dual role in that it had to reflect this state of affairs - reveal the madness and hypocrisy - and at the same time establish an alternate reality, with different standards and values. This world of creation would not represent the ultimate truth. A ‘real’ artist makes his or her very existence a work of art. It is a view that has some parallels with Platonic philosophy, which posits that art is a third rate form of the truth, a shadow of the material/political world which itself is an abstraction of the ultimate truth - the realm of pure forms. Miller differed from Plato in his belief that the artist had a far more vital role to play

than ‘political man’, whose ultimate manifestation is, perhaps, the Philosopher King of *The Republic*.

To Miller the political process had entirely invalidated itself. Even the American government was a rogue’s gallery. There was no hope of advancing the human race through politics because the form was intrinsically corrupt and promoted stupidity and violence. It is difficult to determine whether Miller had contempt for all forms of social control/discipline or whether this issue simply held no interest for him. He said that he never voted in his life, and it seemed that he never actively supported any political cause. In truth I believe that Miller found it nearly impossible to think on a social scale, he could only think in terms of the human spirit. It may be that he had so completely embraced the role of the artist that he could not visualise the whole mass of humanity, but only think in terms of his immediate audience. Writing was a personal process for Miller. He confessed that he wanted to be read by fewer and fewer people. The difference between anonymity and fame was meaningless. He believed in the communication of a truth as a universal right and a divine duty of the artist. The conceptual substratum of *The Rosy Crucifixion* is the story of a man who accepted sacrifice in order to reflect his basic humanity. The ‘I of his I’¹. Miller felt that he could reinvent himself. He could ‘want what he wants’ or determine his own inner being at the total exclusion of the prevailing culture.

Miller was an escapist. He wanted to talk nonsense. He wanted flights of fantasy. This is why he was drawn to esoteric psychology, religion and surrealism. Freedom of expression was vital to liberate humanity, specifically ‘civilised’ humanity, from the mechanistic kitsch and emptiness that was, for him, the prison in which it lives. The only true death was the death we experience in life. The animated

death of civilised drudgery in the sterile urban landscape that was so apparent in the work of early modernists like Eliot and Joyce. It was a place of neurosis. A place where...

...all about us we are aware of nameless millions performing barren office routines, wearing down their souls in interminable labours of which the products never bring them any profit - people whose pleasures are so sordid and feeble that they seem almost sadder than their pains. And this wasteland has another aspect: it is a place not merely of desolation, but of anarchy and doubt...life no longer seems serious or coherent - we have no belief in the things we do and consequently we have no heart for them²

The root of the problem was inside the individual. Humanity had manoeuvred itself into a blind alley of despair. The race was dying inside, Miller thought, and somebody had to make a stand, make a statement, and become a force for change.

Miller had already successfully written books he defined as 'auto-novels': *Tropic of Cancer*, *Black Spring*, *Tropic of Capricorn*, *The Air Conditioned Nightmare*, and *Quiet Days in Clichy* were all fine examples of his stylistic ability. His earlier attempts at third person narration, *Clipped Wings*, *Moloch*, and *Crazy Cock* are largely regarded as failures. Miller himself thought *Clipped Wings* to be one of the worst books ever written. Early failures and the success of the 'auto-novel' form he mastered in Paris may have influenced his writing strategy for the rest of his life.

¹ Novalis, quoted in Sexus from p190 onwards

² Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle* (Fontana, 1971) p90

The Rosy Crucifixion was the great undertaking of Miller's career, written in America at a time when censorship had largely adumbrated the circulation of his work. It seems likely, in fact, that Miller himself genuinely thought that the trilogy would never be published outside France. Lawrence Durrell railed against the publication of *Sexus*, mainly, but not exclusively, on the grounds of its "moral vulgarity."³ He telegraphed Miller from Corfu: SEXUS DISGRACEFULLY BAD WILL COMPLETELY RUIN REPUTATION UNLESS WITHDRAWN REVISED LARRY⁴

But Miller had no reservations about *Sexus*. He wrote a long letter to Durrell that affirmed his motives: "I am writing exactly the what I want to write and the way I want to do it. [...] Larry I can never go back on what I've written. If it was not good, it was true; if it was not artistic, it was sincere; if it was in bad taste, it was on the side of life."⁵ He wanted to make a statement about his identity and he was ready, if necessary, to pit himself against the prevailing culture, push back the boundaries of 'good taste' and play again with the novel form. In the process he created a manual of autodidactics and a blueprint of artistic evolution. It is a measure of how much respect he had for his vocation.

SEXUS

Stylistically the trilogy begins in an informal and relaxed way - *in medias res* - as though we have caught the author just at the beginning of a moment of realisation. Openings were important to Miller, and he establishes here, with this conversational first line, the existence of an invisible question that precedes the whole work. This

³ Quoted by Mary V. Dearborn, *The Happiest Man Alive*, (HarperCollins, 1991) p247

⁴ p247 Ibid

technique immediately places the reader in the role of inquisitor/interlocutor; perhaps even, disbeliever.

Sexus quickly becomes something of a confessional or at the very least an admission of defeat. Miller admits he "was at the bottom rung of the ladder, a failure in every sense of the word"⁶. He feels that life is empty, unfulfilling, and he lacks "something vital."⁷ He wants to surrender his love, even his impulses, to the new woman in his life, Mara. We get the sense that it is an act born out of desperation. He needs a catalyst to point him in the right direction - or perhaps a Beatrice to guide to Paradise. Miller is a man who is lost and he is ready to take the last chance. "A wholly new life lay before me, had I the courage to risk all."⁸ He meets Mara for dinner.

In a scene reminiscent of burlesque he shakes hands with "the manager, the assistant manager, the bouncer, the hat check girl, the doorman and with a beggar who had his mitt out."⁹ He paints himself as the archetypal fool; ebullient, idiotic, quixotic, careless, and insecure. In the cab, after they make love, Miller has a premonition of doom. He is caught up in her paranoia that they are being followed and, in a moment of realisation, reflects...

I'm in a web of lies...I'm in love with a monster, the most gorgeous monster imaginable...I should quit her now, immediately, without a word of explanation...otherwise I'm doomed...she's fathomless, impenetrable...I might

⁵ p247 Ibid

⁶ *Sexus*, p7

⁷ p10, *ibid.*

⁸ p7, *ibid.*

⁹ p14, *ibid.*

have known that the one woman in the world whom I cant live without is marked with mystery...get out at once...jump...save yourself!¹⁰

Mara embodies nemesis, and terrifies him. Like the archetypal fool he feels the ground slipping from under him. Hinting at an occult sub-text Miller relates a charged image of the lovers: "...she turned on me the full incandescent radiance of her love [...] We were facing one another, hands clasped, knees touching. A fire ran through our veins. We remained thus for several minutes, as in some ancient ceremony..."¹¹

Mara encourages him to write. Although her support launches Miller into a reverie he is still not convinced about his motives, his desires. Writing should be "...an act devoid of will"¹² (an act of love in other words) whereas all a writer does (in trying to recapture innocence) is "to inoculate the world with the virus of his disillusionment."¹³

Although the writer "has a greater grasp of reality than other men...he makes no effort to impose that higher reality on the world by force of example." ¹⁴

Miller continues..."The truly great writer does not want to write: he wants the world to be a place in which he can live the life of the imagination."¹⁵

Miller merely wants to be himself. At the same time be at one with the world, to participate: "I definitely did not want to become the artist, in the sense of becoming something strange, something apart and out of the current of life." ¹⁶

¹⁰ p15, ibid.

¹¹ p15, ibid.

¹² p18, ibid.

¹³ p18, ibid.

¹⁴ p18 ibid.

He talks of a world inside him unlike any other world. It is not a singular world, he posits, "...it is only my angle of vision which is exclusive, in that it is unique."¹⁷ But, Miller asks, what if no one understands his vision? One imagines that if this were the case then he would be truly isolated, vilified. He knows that few people share his values.

Coming out of his reverie, 'devoid of will', he begins to write about two childhood friends. Although underplayed, it is a seminal moment in his evolution. Re-reading the piece he weeps. He has written without self-consciousness, he has found an inner voice. It is a revelation: "It was revealed to me that I could say what I wanted to say - if I thought of nothing else, if I concentrated upon that exclusively - and if I were willing to bear the consequences which a pure act always involves."¹⁸

To understand this episode it is helpful to know something of the nature of love. That Mara ignites in him the passion to write is perhaps of the least significance to Miller's life and the overall form and meaning of this work. In *The Rosy Crucifixion* Miller is aiming to illustrate the transforming nature of love. When love is released people are released - or redeemed, as it were.

When Miller launches into his first appraisal of the mystery of writing he is a man intoxicated with the love of his life. We should understand that at the root of his doctrine (and indeed a catalyst for the trilogy) is the simple notion of love as the unseen transcendental force in nature that binds meaning together. Without love, art and life are meaningless; there is no evolution, no growth. But...

¹⁵ p19, *ibid.*

¹⁶ p19, *ibid.*

¹⁷ p21, *ibid.*

Where love is, there is transformation. Without love, revolution has no meaning, for then revolution is merely destruction, decay, a greater and greater ever-mounting misery. Where there is love, there is revolution, because love is transformation from moment to moment.¹⁹

This first 'natural' piece is received by Mara and "baptised in light."²⁰ Miller experiences, apparently for the first time, the effect of having a captive audience. The "expression of unreserved love and admiration"²¹ on Mara's face is transposed onto the imaginary faces of his future readers. He realises what is the force behind any ambition he may have: "...unrestrained passion, fire for fire."²² This is the only valid reward for the writer. For the first time he identifies himself with the role of "Creator."²³ He is beginning to see the role of the artist in religious terms. The writer "...must cut all ties"²⁴ "...take himself off to the wilderness..."²⁵ and on returning, "choose a disciple"²⁶

There is some irony in this, for the next person Miller sees is Ulric and neither of them are really prepared for the change that is happening to Miller. Our protagonist has found his "real self"²⁷ (the creator) has "taken over the reins"²⁸. This self...

¹⁸ p26, *ibid.*

¹⁹ J. Krishnamurti. *The First and Last Freedom* (Victor Gollancz, 1954) p288.

²⁰ p27, *ibid.*

²¹ p28, *ibid.*

²² p28, *ibid.*

²³ p27, *ibid.*

²⁴ p28, *ibid.*

²⁵ p28, *ibid.*

²⁶ p28, *ibid.*

²⁷ p29, *ibid.*

²⁸ p29, *ibid.*

...is almost a stranger. He is the one who is filled with ideas; he is the one who is writing on air; he is the one who, if you become too fascinated with his exploits, will finally expropriate the old, worn-out self, taking over your name, your address, your wife, your past, your future.²⁹

Ulric is not receptive to this new enthusiasm. Miller - talking in terms his friend can barely understand - asks Ulric if he knows "what it is to be in love?"³⁰ The response is non-committal. Miller is persistent, perhaps because he needs further recognition. "Do you think you might meet a woman some day who would change your whole life?"³¹

Miller behaves as if his self-imposed limitations have been removed. He allows his new self free rein at a soirée at Ulric's apartment: "To my amazement they seemed not to understand what I was talking about."³²

His next encounter is the first of many surreal, perhaps apocryphal, quasi-mythical events that occur throughout the trilogy.

In a saloon Miller meets a man who is "a sensitive, cultured gentleman of the old school."³³ There is talk of Europe, art and writing. Miller now finds himself playing the role of a successful artist. Fate appears to deal him some vindication when he meets Sylvia.

Sylvia seems to be what we might call a 'crypto-character', much like the Osmanli who appears at the end of *Sexus*. She is a sibylline analogue who seems to know Miller better than Miller himself. She subscribes to a different view of the

²⁹ p29, *ibid.*

³⁰ p30, *ibid.*

³¹ p30, *ibid.*

³² p31, *ibid.*

³³ p34, *ibid.*

process of artistic creation. It is not, as Miller believes, a second rate form of creation. In fact: "Art can transform the hideous into the beautiful. Better a monstrous book than a monstrous life. Art is painful, tedious, softening. If you don't die in the attempt, your work may transform you into sociable, charitable human being."³⁴

That art is "painful, tedious, softening" is an innocuous idea given the overall themes of the trilogy, not to say Miller's beliefs. It may be a caveat not to take Sylvia too seriously, at the same time hinting on a quality of corrupt urbanity.

The process Miller now undergoes is one of increasing alienation from the people around him. He becomes an observer/critic - cynical of his own culture. Looking at the tenements of New York he reflects..."One out of a hundred thousand might escape the general doom; as for the rest it would be an act of mercy if someone came in the night and slit their throats while they slept."³⁵

A key point in Miller's evolution occurs when Ulric and Miller join MacGregor in a trip to the countryside. What follows is a long, variegated discussion on the nature of literature and the merits of various authors. But Miller is bitter. He wonders what he is doing in "...this Godforsaken place..."³⁶ When the group dine he finds himself in "...a state of indifference born of despair..."³⁷ when a "...young man rose to his feet with a glass in his hand and addressed the house..."³⁸ This young man admits that he is "just a nobody, that he worked for a living and didn't make much money (no one did any more), but he knew one thing and that was that he was happy."³⁹

³⁴ p40, *ibid.*

³⁵ p74, *ibid.*

³⁶ p116, *ibid.*

³⁷ p116, *ibid.*

³⁸ p116, *ibid.*

³⁹ p116, *ibid.*

This young man, real or otherwise, has the attributes of another 'crypto-character' in that, like Sylvia, he is subordinated to the overall themes and ideas of the book. It is tempting to view him as a cipher for Miller himself.

The response the young man inspires with his speech is prodigious. He is an individual inspiring a body of people. They listen, and indeed he talks, out of a desire to express happiness, true feelings. Miller is reminded of "...that curious phenomenon of American life..."⁴⁰, the evangelist. He ruminates on the young man's speech: "A little more happiness...and he'd become what is called a dangerous man. Dangerous, because to be permanently happy would be to set the world on fire."⁴¹

The episode seems a metaphor for Miller's life. In the context of the plot it is a marker for his evolution as a writer. The young man, feeling liberated, liberates.

It seems only MacGregor is not taken in, not "intoxicated", like everyone else, (120) by the speech. He launches into a tirade on the way back to the city. The conversation moves over Hergesheimer, Dreiser, Anatole France, Joseph Conrad, Melville, Giotto, Maxfield Parrish, Jack London, O'Henry, Lewis Carroll, Shakespeare, Cézanne, Dickens, Henry James, Picasso, and Joyce in short order. MacGregor thinks that a writer usually lives like a dog, and that "Art makes you restless, dissatisfied."⁴² (An echo, perhaps, of Sylvia's short analysis.)

Ulric's reply is extensive. An artist cannot evade his task. He is an instrument "...that registers something already existent [that] he is compelled to give back to the world."⁴³

⁴⁰ p117, *ibid.*

⁴¹ p118, *ibid.*

⁴² p126, *ibid.*

⁴³ p128, *ibid.*

An artist must not suppress his desires, however tempting it may be. The artist is "infinitely richer than any other kind of human being. He's richer because he spends himself, because he gives *himself* all the time."⁴⁴

Ulric confirms what Miller suspects, we must accept our inner lives, our inner drives, and give ourselves over to something which is greater than the ego - as a result, we actually rediscover our 'true' identities. Miller submits: "The deepest meaning of the word 'human' [is that] we are a link, a bridge, a promise."⁴⁵ ...We know that if we do not move forward, if we do not realise our potential being, we shall relapse, sputter out, and drag the world down with us."⁴⁶

Miller wants to revolutionise the world from the individual upwards. Not a political imposition, but a personal liberation (through art). He tells a friend (Rebecca) that he wants to develop "a permanent supersight, as it were...something like third eye."⁴⁷ It is a concept entirely in tune with much eastern philosophy.

Miller thinks that we have lost "a sort of clairvoyance which was natural and common to all men."⁴⁸ He believes in a Golden Age, or at least he *wants* to believe in it.

Talking to Rebecca he expresses an idea that is synonymous with Krishnamurti's philosophy: "Haven't you ever noticed that when you stop looking, when you don't try to see, you suddenly see?"⁴⁹

The problem is that we cannot stop looking. The individual's loss is society's loss as well. One self-created illusion feeds on another, in a spiral of spiritual decay. America is a society of consumers who are, in fact, consuming themselves.

⁴⁴ p129, *ibid.*

⁴⁵ p311, *ibid.*

⁴⁶ p311, *ibid.*

⁴⁷ p363, *ibid.*

⁴⁸ p364, *ibid.*

Sexus ends with a surreal reverie, a stylistic flourish, containing some of the best writing of the volume.

Osmanli is another crypto-character. Ostensibly fictional, he bears many similarities to Miller. The episode works as cipher, emblematically summarising the plot like the Dumb Show in *Hamlet*.

Osmanli works for an "ecclesiastical organisation"⁵⁰ and "his sole mission in life is to spread poison, malice, slander."⁵¹ He "blossoms like a rose."⁵² He is "a man without a country, without principle, without faith, without scruples. A servant of Beelzebub, a stooge, a stool pigeon, a traitor, a turncoat. A master of confusing men's minds, an adept of the Black lodge."⁵³ Furthermore: "He is a man who loves the flavor and savor of words."⁵⁴ He is Miller's public image, a composite of all the diatribe that was levelled at him by the censors, the government, the church, perhaps even Miller himself. Certainly the analysis is biting. Osmanli even has Miller's European touch; he is a "boulevardier"⁵⁵ and a "flâneur"⁵⁶. Significantly Osmanli can only reach "his own identity in death."⁵⁷

The last chapter consists of a flash forward that echoes the death of Osmanli. Miller, sure that he has lost the love of his wife (now calling herself Mona) undergoes a transformation..."Then a curious physiological comedy took place. I began to menstruate. I menstruated from every hole in my body."⁵⁸ He ends the first volume barking like a dog. He is looking forward to his own destruction.

⁴⁹ p365, *ibid.*

⁵⁰ p442, *ibid.*

⁵¹ p442, *ibid.*

⁵² p442, *ibid.*

⁵³ p442, *ibid.*

⁵⁴ p443, *ibid.*

⁵⁵ p443, *ibid.*

⁵⁶ p443, *ibid.*

⁵⁷ p447, *ibid.*

⁵⁸ p445, *ibid.*

PLEXUS

In *Plexus* we find Miller leading a charmed but untenable life with Mona in an expensive apartment. He has cut himself off from his most undesirable friends. He reads whatever pleases him and “with a double awareness.”⁵⁹ Now there are even starker differences between the secular world and the world of art. In the first chapter this is illustrated by the contrast between the eccentric Nahoum Yood and the superficial insurance salesman Olinski. They are polarities of sensibility that seem to illustrate the journey that Miller has made from the world of commerce to the world of art. Yood and Olinski inspire in each other mutual disgust.

Later Miller considers how strange it is that he is considered a writer by nearly everyone he knows “though I had done little to prove it.”⁶⁰ He concludes that he always had a “passion for language”⁶¹ He was always reading, he claims, if not books then everything around him. The suggestion is that he was born with a natural affinity for literature.

Leaving his job, Miller feels rejuvenated, reborn. He makes a final decision: “I had a talent and I would cultivate it. I would become a writer or starve to death.”⁶² But with so much spare time on his hands, and perhaps overcome with a sense of destiny, Miller find that he cannot contain himself: “My creative energy suddenly released, I spilled over in all directions at once”⁶³ He has an obsession with his self

⁵⁹ *Plexus*, p10

⁶⁰ p31, *ibid.*

⁶¹ p32, *ibid.*

⁶² p36, *ibid.*

⁶³ p39, *ibid.*

image as a writer. He admits: “I was so in love with the idea of being a writer that I could scarcely write.”⁶⁴ In assuming a new identity Miller may be trying to get a measure of his inner self. Obsessed with preliminaries, Miller finds himself wearing himself out with preparation. The trappings of the writer fascinate him. He has no idea about how to regulate himself; he is unable to develop a routine.

Miller is in festive mood. With a touch of enigmatic irony, perhaps, he describes his situation...

It was morning now, a long, lazy morning of a holiday that was to last forever. I had elected to occupy a choice seat in Paradise. It was definite and certain. I could therefore afford to take my time, could afford to dawdle away the glorious hours ahead of me during I would still be part of the world and it's senseless routine. Once I ascended to the heavenly seat I would join the chorus of the angels, the seraphic choir which never ceases to give forth hymns of joy.⁶⁵

Miller seems to reach a new level of awareness. He turns himself into a “enormous eye.”⁶⁶ He claims: “Nothing was too petty to escape my attention”⁶⁷ The explanation he gives for this somewhat obsessive behaviour is that “The moment one gives close attention to anything, even a blade of grass, it becomes a mysterious, awesome, indescribably magnified world in itself.”⁶⁸

⁶⁴ p39, *ibid.*

⁶⁵ p40, *ibid.*

⁶⁶ p40, *ibid.*

⁶⁷ p40, *ibid.*

⁶⁸ p40, *ibid.*

Miller is being initiated into what he calls an “unrecognizable”⁶⁹ world. ‘Intoxicated’ with his own grace and freedom he is at once penetrating the mystery of the world and transcending his old self/ego. He seems to believe it is a universal process. The writer, Miller claims, “pounces on his little grain of nothingness like a beast of prey. It is the moment of full awakening, of union and absorption, and it can never be forced.”⁷⁰

This awareness, Miller believes, “was an end in itself”⁷¹ This pure awareness is a state of bliss, and it is satori, “the be all and end all.”⁷²

Miller realises that he must write, at least to sustain the illusion of being a writer. Choosing what amounts to an impenetrable subject he finds that he unable to put a word on paper. That night he reads Thomas Mann and is “overwhelmed by the flawless quality of the narration”⁷³ At this stage his critical faculties are still far ahead of his actual ability. Miller decides quite his efforts and goes to bed “rather chastened and humbled”⁷⁴ The next day he wakes up to find himself “full of piss and vinegar”⁷⁵ and begins to write fluidly. He explains...

Why? Because instead of forcing it out I had gone to sleep - after due surrender to the ego, *certes*. It was a lesson in the futility of struggle. Do your utmost and let Providence do the rest! A petty victory, perhaps, but most illuminating.⁷⁶

⁶⁹ p40, *ibid*.

⁷⁰ p40, *ibid*.

⁷¹ p40, *ibid*.

⁷² p40, *ibid*.

⁷³ p43, *ibid*.

⁷⁴ p43, *ibid*.

⁷⁵ p43, *ibid*.

⁷⁶ p43, *ibid*.

Miller still cannot master this new medium however, not least because he cannot develop a productive routine. Another problem is that he is “always confusing the mastery of technique with creation”⁷⁷ Friends encourage him to write like he talks. But to Miller this is an insult. He still believes that the written word is far superior to the spoken one. His efforts will be wasted, it seems, if writing is a simple question of ‘talking’ to a typewriter. So Miller follows his instinct for autodidactics. It drives him in all directions at once. He suggests that of ultimate importance, for “a writer at least, is to read whatever comes to hand, to follow his nose as it were.”⁷⁸ The ‘classics’ are held in slight regard.

Miller is still submitting himself to outside influences. He is playing a passive role, dependent on Mona, soaking up other people’s styles and ideas. It’s as if he believes that this new life requires no active thought. His thoughts are exploded, chaotic. He is living in a world of feeling, a world of the ‘natural processes’ which he first discovered in writing the piece on Tony and Joey at the beginning of *Sexus*. So preoccupied is Miller with this inner chaos that he cannot face up to reality. In fact he is losing touch with himself. He has become a writer who, by and large, does not write. Indeed, why be so aggressive? If it one’s destiny to write then why not let the unseen forces write through you. Submit yourself totally to the process, even though they may be no ‘you’ at the end of the journey. Destiny for the writer, as Satrè put it, is the blank page. But Miller is suggesting that the writer should approach unknowingly, without reservation, hesitancy, and completely innocent. In a sense, Miller was waiting for the medium to fall in love with him.

⁷⁷ p44, *ibid.*

⁷⁸ p47, *ibid.*

Unable to reconcile himself with the world Miller exists in a semi-neurotic state. He admits...

...there was a streak in me, a perverse one, which prevented me from giving the essential self. This 'perversity' always voiced itself thus: 'Reveal your true self and they will mutilate you.' 'They' mean not my friends alone but the world.⁷⁹

Later in *Plexus* Miller and Mona go to live with the anal-retentive Karen Lundgren. Karen, Miller notes, was a hard worker "and like all hard workers, at bottom he was as lazy as sin."⁸⁰ Miller outlines his position in a conversation with Karen: "I don't intend to be a thinker, you know. I want to write. I want to write about life, in the raw. Human beings, any kind of human beings, are food and drink to me."⁸¹ Then he reveals: "What I have to contribute must be done in a roundabout way"⁸² And later: "I like the idea of getting nowhere. I like the idea of the game for the game's sake."⁸³

We still have a sense that Miller is waiting for something to happen. He is drifting, he enjoys being taken in, being manipulated, and he is willing to sacrifice his identity in order to evolve.

Later in *Plexus* (Chapter Ten) there is a quite singular narrative by another of Miller's crypto-characters. Caccicacci delivers a long monologue that telescopes the major themes of the trilogy into its anatomy. Stylistically it is of some interest.

⁷⁹ p110, *ibid.*

⁸⁰ p231, *ibid.*

⁸¹ p251, *ibid.*

⁸² p251, *ibid.*

Cacciacci's anecdote or 'invention' is about a remarkable robot of the twelfth century. There is a certain formality in the passage that suggests that Miller is writing tongue in cheek. This formality also serves to promote the impression of Cacciacci as someone struggling to come to terms with his ideas. His idelect is off centre. There are too many comment clauses, too many digressions, and too much rhetorical pomposity for us to take Cacciacci seriously. The whole passage has the ambience of a translation. The influence of Knut Hamsun is unmistakable.

In respect of the idelect, consider the position of the verb phrase "it is admitted" in "From one of them it is admitted that we draw our sustenance."⁸⁴

Cacciacci's language has a cachinating quality, just like many of Hamsun's eccentric characters. The phonetics are used to a comic effect, and we view Cacciacci in the light of the absurdity of his method.

Cacciacci, like Miller, deviates and rambles. What we see is not a systematic argument but a monologue whose technique is synonymous with its own inner themes. Cacciacci's thoughts are in a state of fluidity. It is as if it is language, or expression, that concerns him the most. It is as if, through language, Cacciacci is resolving his opinions. It is this struggle with language that provides an echo of the trilogy's themes and provides an insight into Miller's own struggle, and deprecating sense of humour.

It may be that Miller is taking a dig at the absurdity of systematic argument. The more convincing and logical the argument the more suspicious Miller would

⁸³ p251, *ibid.*

⁸⁴ p297, *ibid.*

become. As Miller suggests from the outset: “I was strait gibberish. One should go cuckoo!”⁸⁵

Like the Osmanli creation, Caccicacci can be viewed as an analogue for Miller himself, if only because he is subordinated to the overall themes of the trilogy. And we should remember that that the themes of *The Rosy Crucifixion* and Miller himself are, in a very real sense, inseparable.

Additionally, the subject of Caccicacci’s anecdote - the scholar and his robot (‘the idiot’) can be viewed as analogues to Miller. In fact there are four personalities at work here. Miller, Caccicacci, the scholar, and his creation, Picodiribibi. All of them share common ground, and, in a sense, exist symbiotically. All of them are endowed with a certain flair or genius. Three of them (with the exception of the scholar) could be described as loquacious. It is this quality of talking aimlessly, of babbling, that Miller is making fun of.

The story Caccicacci relates is homologous to Miller’s own evolution. Miller found an inner voice that would dictate to him. His ego subordinated, Miller was a slave to this inner voice - the driving force behind much of his writing. He said that sometimes he had to beg the powers that be to turn off the dictation. The ‘voice’ drove Miller to distraction; much like Picodiribibi would destroy his master’s peace of mind.

What begins in a comic vein ends on a quite serious note, with a discussion about faith and love. The grouping of themes is significant. It is likely that Miller thought the two inseparable.

⁸⁵ *Sexus* p35

Underscoring the suspicion we may have that Cacciacchi is a mouthpiece for Miller is his provision of an answer to the problem of humanity's impending destruction:

Love. That little word, that mighty thought, that perpetual act, positive, unambiguous, eternally effective - if that should sink in, take possession of all mankind, would it not transform the world instantly? Who could not resist, if love became the order of the day? Who would want power or knowledge - if he were bathed in the perpetual glory of love?⁸⁶

Cacciacchi finishes with a statement that can be considered as a refrain for the whole work: "*Let us become more fully alive.*"⁸⁷

In chapter fifteen there appears another crypto-character. Claude is even more improbable than Sylvia and Osmanli. He is a Christ-like character, a human paradigm, possessing god-like powers and insight. Claude is only sixteen years old.

He seems to confirm Miller's early suspicions on the nature of writing and life...

It's the quickness of spirit. *The quick and the dead...* You, of all people should know what I mean. There are two classes in this world - *and in every world* - the quick and the dead. For those who cultivate the spirit nothing is impossible. For the others, everything is impossible, or incredible, or futile.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ *Plexus*, p299

⁸⁷ p300, *ibid.*

He underscores Miller's own thoughts: "To open your eyes you must relax, not strain."⁸⁹ And ends on an adamant note, somewhat defiant: "*There is and you are* - that's it in a nutshell. Don't break your skull over it, because to the mind it makes no sense. Accept it and forget it - or it will drive you mad..."⁹⁰

Towards the end of *Plexus* Miller claims that he has found his "true role."⁹¹ But he ends the book by looking forward to the discovery of his own true self. He believes...

Eventually a day is to dawn when, glancing over my own life as though it were a story or history, I can detect in it a form, a pattern, a meaning. From then on the world becomes meaningless. It will be impossible ever to relapse

For on that day I become and remain one with my creation.⁹²

The book ends with an upbeat message, a culmination of the religious overtones that have manifested themselves in this volume: "The tree of life is kept alive not by tears but the knowledge that freedom is real and everlasting.

Nexus

⁸⁸ p409, *ibid.*

⁸⁹ p410, *ibid.*

⁹⁰ p411, *ibid.*

⁹¹ p431, *ibid.*

⁹² p459, *ibid.*

Nexus opens with Miller in a state of mental turmoil, symbolically reduced to the status of a dog as at the end of *Sexus*. Stasia, who appeared at the end of *Plexus* (and in the flash forward in *Sexus*) is now established as a rival for Mona's love. Miller has never found it easy to come to terms with Mona's methods of raising cash - milking rich (and not so rich) patrons. It seems that she was unable to abandon the methods of a 'taxi-dancer' (a girl who dances with men in a dance hall for a small amount of money, perhaps offering sexual favours for further amounts of cash). The stage is set for Miller's betrayal.

In Chapter Two Miller meets John Stymer. Stymer, like MacGregor, is a cynical lawyer - fatalistic and unhappy. Stymer is fascinated by Miller and has some keen observations to make, tempered by his bleak view of the world...

...it's not so terrible to spend your life in prison...*if you have an active mind*. What *is* terrible is to make a prisoner of yourself. And that's what most of us are - self made prisoners⁹³

Stymer, like Miller, wants to break free from the world, perhaps because "...there is no longer anything left in the world that might be called soul."⁹⁴

It is a statement that echoes Miller's thought towards the end of *Plexus*: "For many years I had been aware that I was participating in a general decline. We all knew it, all felt it, only some succeeded in forgetting about it more quickly than others."⁹⁵

⁹³ Nexus, p27

⁹⁴ p30, *ibid*.

⁹⁵ p446, *Plexus*

Stymer goes on to posit a theory that has bearing on the trilogy as a whole. He attempts to put mankind's development into a scheme of historical evolution - centred on culture and the inner life of the individual...

The modern age - a misnomer by the way - was just a transition period, a breathing spell, in which man could adjust himself to the death of the soul. Already we're leading a sort of grotesque lunar life. The beliefs, hopes, principals, convictions that sustained our civilization are gone. And they won't be resuscitated. Take that on faith for the time being. No, henceforth and for a long time to come we're going to live in the mind. That means destruction...self destruction.⁹⁶

Stymer continues: "It's in the mind that the life force has taken refuge. Everything has been analysed to the point of nullity. Perhaps now the very emptiness of life will take on meaning."⁹⁷

With this last statement Stymer/Miller seems to be anticipating the post-modern movement, which was certainly manifesting itself at the time *Nexus* was being written and which many believe that Miller himself helped to propagate.

In *Nexus* Miller reverts back to the familiar theme of the loss of love...

In the literature of utter desolation there is always and only one symbol (which may be expressed mathematically as well as spiritually) about which everything turns: *minus love*. For life *can* be lived, and usually *is* lived, on the

⁹⁶ p31, *ibid.*

⁹⁷ p33, *ibid.*

minus side rather than the plus. Men may strive forever, and hopelessly, once they have elected to rule love out.⁹⁸

Miller then submits that the aching for God is nothing more than a “description of the soul’s loveless state”⁹⁹

It is into “something bordering this condition”¹⁰⁰ that he now enters. He remarks that:

There was something insane about the momentum with which I now slid downward and backward. What had taken ages to build up was demolished in the twinkling of an eye. Everything crumbled to the touch.¹⁰¹

Near the end of Chapter Three he enigmatically states that “when all is lost the steps forth...”¹⁰² He is suggesting that to grow humans must suffer.

Life with Mona and Stasia is Machiavellian, to say the least. All of them seem to be plotting constantly. Miller keeps a notebook of their conversations. In turn they treat him like a fool and a child. Accordingly he begins to play the part of the buffoon; a role that he suggests is the only option, under the circumstances, apart from murder or suicide. Nothing surprises him any more, and he begins to behave like a man under a death sentence. There is little talk of productivity. Miller is now living ‘on the minus side.’

⁹⁸ p41, *ibid.*

⁹⁹ p41, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ p41, *ibid.*

¹⁰¹ p41, *ibid.*

Throughout *Nexus* we see a starker style and content than was evidenced in the previous two volumes. The emphasis has shifted onto the ideas of defeat and squalor. He suffers a demoralising blow at the hands of his friend Stanley, who remarks: “You’ll never write a play or anything else worth talking about. You’ll write and write and never get anywhere.”¹⁰³ And then: “ If I were in your boots I’d never give up, not if *everything* was against me. I don’t say you’re a writer but...[..].But fortune’s in your favour. [...] And you’ve done nothing to invite it.”¹⁰⁴

Miller is crushed. Left alone he becomes catatonic - his lowest state. When Mona and Stasia return he speaks to them “in the manner of an automaton”¹⁰⁵ He is divorced from his own voice, speaking and listening at the same time, in a state he describes as “Pleasantly hallucinated...”¹⁰⁶

To Miller this is a revelation: “I had come face to face with the source, with authorship itself...[..]...how utterly different this was, this quiet flow from the source, than the strident act of creation which is writing.”¹⁰⁷

He feels as though he has penetrated reality itself. He sees beyond time and beyond the walls of the room. Suddenly snapping out of this chthonic state he is immediately back in the realm of trivia “with this absolutely irrelevant thought uppermost in my mind - that Christmas was upon us.”¹⁰⁸

Christmas with the family sees Miller on the defensive again. But the discussion on culture seems to inspire a new approach and back at their apartment Mona broaches the idea of going to Europe. Interestingly Miller is reticent. He wants

¹⁰² p46, *ibid.*

¹⁰³ p74, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ p74, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ p75, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ p75, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ p76, *ibid.*

to know how they will survive. He is, however, entranced. Europe is the home of the artist, “A land of true kinsfolk.”¹⁰⁹ Although the very thought of going exhausts him, as the evening wears on he becomes more determined. In retrospect we may regard it as another step away from himself - his culture, that is. Going to Europe seems like a natural process. “Even the birds make it.”¹¹⁰

Europe is seen as the land of purity - noble, ancient. It has become a panacea for Miller. There, unlike America, one finds: “Talk for the love of talk; work for the love of work; honour for the love of honour...”¹¹¹

Once again the ground is shifting under him. Miller realises that his relationship with Mona has changed: “It was obvious that I didn’t exist, except as a thorn in her side. Distraught when Mona and Stasia leave for Europe without him, and motivated with a sense of finality, Miller begins to write about their relationship, beginning with the evening he first met her. In writing he admits: “I relived the whole tragedy over again step by step, day by day. He comes to the conclusion that their love had ended, in the process creating the groundwork for *The Rosy Crucifixion*. In a letter to Mona he declares that the book “was for her, that it *was* her.”¹¹²

Their relationship is, however, restored (minus Stasia) and their thoughts turn to his writing. Miller now has a clearer idea of where he is going...

I’ll never write a book to suit the publishers.[...] Every word I put down now must be an arrow that goes strait to the mark. A poisoned arrow. I want to kill off books, writers, publishers, readers. To write for the public

¹⁰⁸ p76, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ p101, *ibid.*

¹¹⁰ p101, *ibid.*

¹¹¹ p102, *ibid.*

doesn't mean a thing to me. What I'd like to do is write for madmen - or for the angels.¹¹³

Miller now turns to what he calls "the book of life"¹¹⁴ and with Europe in mind he again is revived, reconciled. There is one last, extensive, exegesis in Chapter Sixteen. His striking conclusion is that...

To be born an eagle one must get accustomed to high places; to be born a writer one must learn to like privation, suffering, humiliation. Above all, one must learn to live apart. Like the sloth, the writer clings to his limb while beneath him life surges by steady, persistent, tumultuous. When ready plop! He falls into the stream and battles for life. Is it not something like that?¹¹⁵

CONCLUSION

¹¹² p167, *ibid.*

¹¹³ p192, *ibid.*

¹¹⁴ p217, *ibid.*

¹¹⁵ p244, *ibid.*

It has been said that: “The kind of critical assessment which concentrates mainly on literary skill won’t be very useful dealing with Miller.”¹¹⁶

Much of the prose of *The Rosy Crucifixion* seems to sit on the page, impenetrable to what we might call casual appreciation. The style has the utilitarian quality of automatic writing. It does not seem to possess the refined intensity that we have come to expect from Miller (as in *Tropic of Cancer* for example). Commentators, including admirers like Erica Yong, have criticised *The Rosy Crucifixion* for containing, variously; bombast, a lack of morals, inchoate structure and plain bad writing. Miller’s defence, mentioned in the introduction, places the trilogy ‘on the side of life.’ And if we are to take life as a journey that modulates between a matter-of-fact reality and a realm of mystery and wonder then *The Rosy Crucifixion* is a true reflection of life and its processes.

It is difficult to gauge Miller’s intentions for writing the trilogy. Miller said that he was “not interested in literature”¹¹⁷ This is a remarkable statement considering much of the content of the trilogy. Something in the manner of a concordance, looking for the names of artists or works, is likely, I believe, to come to a four-figure sum. In Chapter One of *Nexus* alone there are some ninety references artists or works of art. Miller himself was a life-long reader.

To understand this apparent disregard for literature we should understand the depth of Miller’s desire for a widespread revolution. He wanted a...

¹¹⁶ Hugo Manning, *The It and the Odyssey of Henry Miller* (Village Press, 1973) p10

¹¹⁷ *Henry Miller on Writing*, Edited by T.H. Moore (New Directions, 1964) p102

...revolution far more sweeping than the Russian revolution. [...] Governments can't bring it about. Only individuals, each one working in his own quiet way. It must be a revolution of the heart. Our attitude towards life has to be fundamentally altered.¹¹⁸

Still on the subject of his literary intentions, it should be noted that Alfred Perles, writing to Lawrence Durrell, said of Miller...

To get at his essence, a different approach seems necessary. Just interpreting the *intentions* of his work, does not strike me as efficacious for the purpose, either. For what exactly *are* his intentions? Has he any in the first place? I'm inclined to doubt it. Intention diminishes the artist. Genius is unintentional. The sun does not intend to radiate heat, it radiates it.¹¹⁹

But in that case why did Miller choose the novel form in the first place? I believe that is because novels are, beside other things, reflections or paradigms of human identity. Usually the identity revealed is at once both cultural and individual. Novels fill a need for recognition, for an identity, and a need for the *expression* of identity. In writing the trilogy Miller fills the need to place 'Mona' (June Smith) into some kind of context that he could understand, express his own identity and challenge the prevailing culture. The Rosy Crucifixion also becomes a book of empowerment. Few works can be so highly recommended to an aspiring author. It is a book about

¹¹⁸ Henry Miller, *The Wisdom of the Heart* (New Directions, 5th edition) p129

¹¹⁹ Alfred Perles, *Art and Outrage* (Village Press, 1973) p18

writing, for writers – an inescapable fact, despite Miller’s desire to make life itself a work of art.

The primary strength of the novel is that it facilitates psychological escape from the prevailing conditions of the mind, becoming, in the process, part of the mystery of life. It is difficult not to think of the novel as a counter-cultural agent, subverting, as it does, reality itself. Miller wants to carry this subversion, intrinsic in the novel form, to its ultimate conclusion and make artists of us all.

Humans, he would argue, are at their best when they are being creative and that life itself is a fiction that we create. In fact there is no such thing as veracity and people who claim to know the truth really do not understand the situation. All is flux, chaos and invention. Creativity itself is the ultimate truth and enlightenment and it may be that the novel is its purest expression to date, paradoxically an anchor from which we drift.

The *Rosy Crucifixion*, as with the rest of Miller’s work, has achieved very little recognition with the Academy. It may be that Miller and the Academy will always be incompatible. It was in Miller’s nature to avoid rigid definition and break away from the constraining conservatism of the academic environment. The Academy, of course, finds it essential to methodise its approach to literature because to accept the idea that literature is completely indefinable and subjective (particularly with Miller’s religious overtones) is to accept defeat and acknowledge that literature is academically unapproachable. As a corollary we should note that Miller was largely interested in the creative process, whereas the Academy, I believe, has a tendency to divorce the author from the process and concentrate on the finished article; its style, form, homogeneity and so on. Miller’s informal, personal style is incongruous to these aims.

In a very real sense *The Rosy Crucifixion* anticipates the publication of *Tropic of Cancer*. All the struggling and suffering in the trilogy lead up to that moment, which is in fact the unseen, implied conclusion of the work. Some idea of the impact the publication on Miller can be discerned from a letter he wrote to Michael Fraenkel...

The first floor left, here I am! Today I am mailing you a copy of *Tropic of Cancer* – the first copy! What is begun is ended and all's well. Dear old Fraenkel, you don't know with what pleasure, what gayety, with what affection, with what hope I send you this copy. [...] I feel as though fortune is with me – at last!

All morning I have been singing...[...]...I am singing, do you hear? The voice vibrates, it reverberates, it carries way out into the back yard and beyond where the woodsheds rise. [...] I am singing and I want the neighbors to hear. Moving into the Villa Seurat. I am the last man alive. They say these are bad times. Perhaps they be. But they are good times for me. I move with the changing climate. I move with the sun and the light. With the birds. With the wild flowers...

Dear Fraenkel, I don't know what to say to you, I am so happy...¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Henry Miller, Quoted in *The Genesis Of The Tropic Of Cancer* by Michael Fraenkel, In *The Happy Rock*, Ed. Bern Porter (The Walton Press, 1945) pp56-56