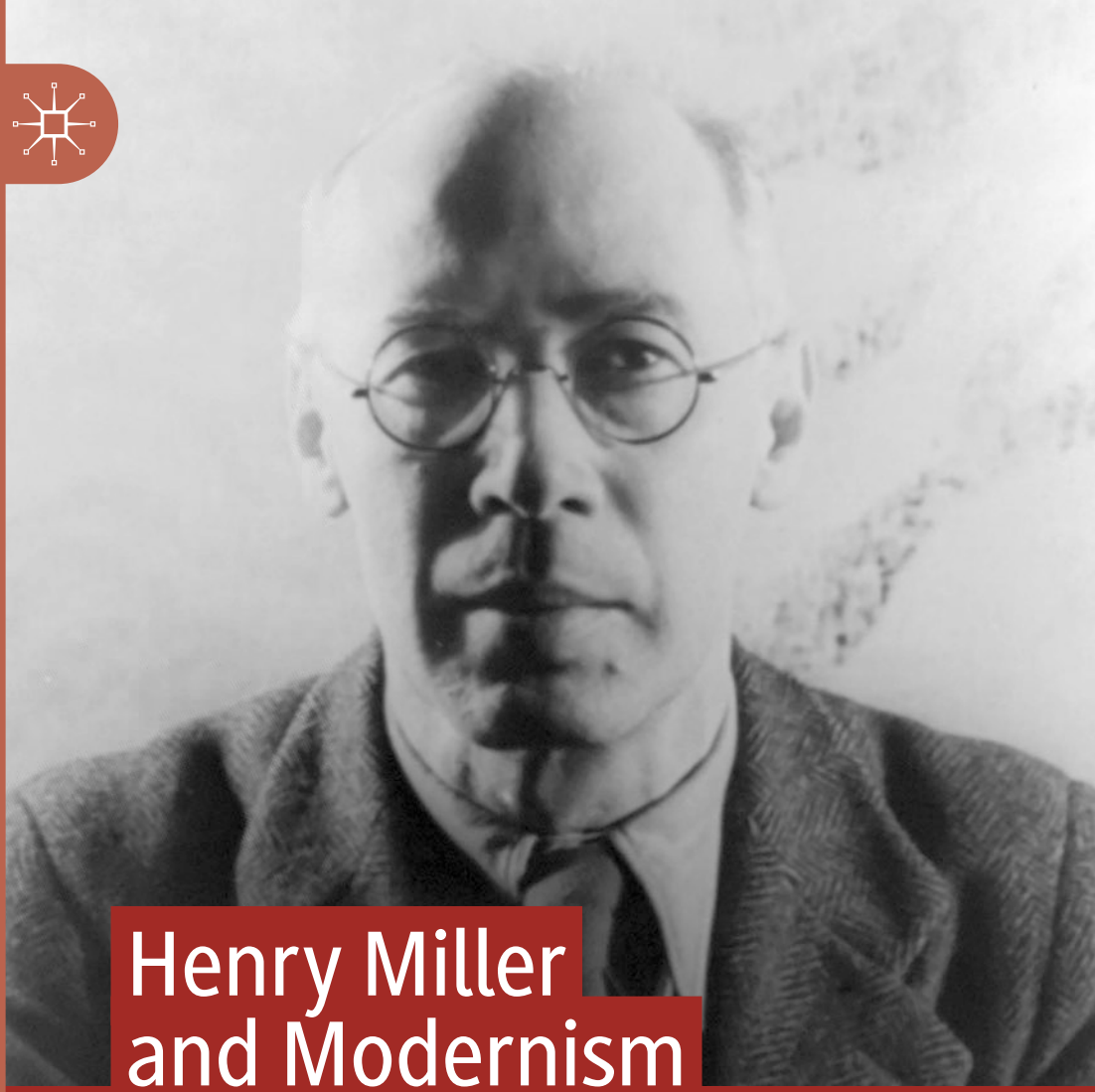

Henry Miller and Modernism

The Years in Paris, 1930–1939

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Preface

In March 1930, Henry Miller arrived in Paris. It was not his first time in the city; he had been there a few years before with his wife, June. This trip, however, was crucial. He had given himself one final chance to succeed as a writer. He was thirty-eight years old, frail, and balding, and he had been a failure in almost all aspects of life: in his family life, in his jobs, and in his attempts to write the novels that he felt he could write. He had a few unfinished manuscripts in his luggage together with ten dollars in cash, he was alone, and he knew no one. He had taken that leap out into the unknown.

Miller would spend nine years in Paris, with some side trips to southern Europe. By the time he returned to New York, he would become famous. What happened? What did Miller do in Paris, and what did Paris do to Miller?

This book describes Miller's accomplishments during this nine-year voyage of self-discovery in Paris and other parts of Europe.[1] I will concentrate on the cultural and artistic climate and movements in which Miller found himself, movements that apparently led him to form an entirely new view of himself as a writer. In Paris, Miller established as a European modernist. He should be read and analyzed in this context. But to do this, we need to establish precisely what is meant by literary Modernism and to analyze those influences that shaped Miller and which apparently made him into a major writer.

[1] All the specific biographical details can be found in the many biographies (see Chap. 9).

The first and most important development for Miller in his new situation was that he suddenly realized how to develop what I will call his *voice*.

Henry Miller was unique in the way he combined an American tradition of Romanticism and Anarchism and direct personal expression with European modernistic experiments. As Norman Mailer observed: "Few writers in the history of literature speak with such powerful a presence."[2] This is one of the reasons for reading Miller today: his joyful experiments with a vernacular language, a language completely unrestrained by any moral or social consideration. Another reason to read Miller is his deeply felt criticism of modern Western society, of capitalism, materialism, and the constant aggressiveness of our contemporary life. Yet with all this critique, Miller still believes in life, in life itself. Beyond the destruction of the modern, there remained the true vitalistic values. In these aspects, he is now, in the age of ecological consciousness, climate change, and international tensions, more relevant than ever before.

Copenhagen, Denmark — Finn Jensen

[2] Norman Mailer: *Genius and Lust. A Journey through the Major Writings of Henry Miller*, 1976, p. xiv.

Contents

CHAPTER 1

The Voice

What was amazing for Miller in Paris in 1930 was that in a short space of time he managed to establish the "voice", which later runs through the entire writings both the "fictional" and the essayistic as a characteristic stream, a voice that is unmistakable but difficult to define accurately. It's a personal voice, a voice that addresses us directly, and it feels authentic, genuine, untapped. With this voice he could start over again, allowing him to realize all his plans on a scale he hardly imagined.

The voice is anarchistic and is borne by a deep inspiration. Apparently it does not follow any established rules, and in any case it is not under the influence of established norms or moral concepts. Miller describes in several places how he simply needed to get to the machine, and then the text flowed down and down on the paper for hours, exactly as it was possible for him with a speech stream and just as seemingly unstructured and association-controlled. At the same time the voice is most supple and flexible—it can one moment move around in a seemingly banal everyday life, and then take off and fly around like a circus artist high in the metaphysical altitudes carried by the most amazing metaphors, associations, and fantasies. It can move from the most delicate poetry and spirituality and down to the most grotesque perversions, and from light religious speculations to ugly conception of decay and doom. It is a violent and expressive voice, which in its original imagery largely shows us an author who is an active part of the avant-garde, and is influenced not least by Dada and Surrealism.

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It is precisely the anarchistic and unstructured by Miller's voice, which shows him as liberated from the whole logical and linear form of production and instead cultivating the form he himself called "spiral":

> In telling this story I am not following a strict chronological sequence but have chosen to adopt a circular or spiral form of time development which enables me to expand freely in any given moment. […] I am trying to get at the inner pattern of events, trying to follow the potential being who was deflected from his course here and there, who circled around himself, so to speak, who was becalmed for long stretches or who sank to the bottom of the sea or suddenly flew to the loftiest peaks.
>
> (*The World of Sex* (1941), p. 53)

A particular aspect of the writing process is Miller's special application of the concept of time, which is largely based on the structures he develops especially in the two "Tropic" novels, but which he theoretically developed, among other things, in the "Hamlet Letters" (see Chap. 11). He distinguishes here in principle between what he calls "traditional present" (*Hamlet Letters*, p. 74) and what he calls "full present": "In the full present which is the living moment, we join forces with past and future" (p. 112). The difference between the two perceptions of time corresponds with the great difference in Miller's universe between respectively the rational linear worldview, where history makes sense as one long line of development, and an alinear situational reality that unfolds on another level. As he describes it, this reality is "the very plasma of life" (p. 50), and he summons a number of idols as witnesses: Rimbaud, Dostoevsky, Proust, Lawrence, and van Gogh. He could have added Nietzsche and Spengler, for as demonstrated among other things by Indrek Männiste in "Henry Miller's Inhuman Philosophy" (*Nexus* 9 [2012]), this sense of time was very much a central part of the general showdown with the culture of development and its value concepts. In Miller's universe, this view is an essential part of the sense of life that he denotes as "China", but in the specific narrative context, the "full present" concept is primarily expressed through the "spiral" narrative form where the text dissolves in rows of "nows", a number of expressions of the present, while any idea of "development" lies far beyond the narrator. How this is practiced and how it, in my opinion, is directly related to the chaotic life of the modern metropolis will be evidenced by the individual textual analyzes.

The evolved voice was not one he had always been aware of, or rather: He had not known that it was the one he needed, for in reality, as he often emphasizes in, for example, *Tropic of Capricorn*, he had possessed it since childhood, it was part of the street language in the popular Brooklyn, where he grew up, and it was largely characterized by creativity and imagination and attached to the oral presentation, which school later sought to destroy, but it was also the voice he cultivated on his many lonely walks in the youth, where he himself, as mentioned before, "wrote" one masterpiece after another but never could gather the strength to get them down on paper.[1] When he finally sought to realize his dreams of becoming an author, he committed the error of rejecting the voice in favor of an artificial "literary" voice, which he thought was more appropriate, but instead made him a stranger to himself and the writing oddly stiff and lifeless. It was only now when he was nearly 40 years old and lived as a kind of vagabond in Paris that he found out that the direct language was his voice, that was his style.

Frederick Turner points out in *Renegade: Henry Miller and the Making of Tropic of Cancer* (2012) that Miller's voice was also largely rooted in a peculiar American tradition of a direct and very personal expression of an oral character which may be experienced by "alternative" authors such as Mark Twain and Walt Whitman. And not least in the latter one can meet the features that would be crucial to the whole of Miller's writing: The first person narrator with his own person in the center.

By Miller the situation is complicated by, that from *Tropic of Cancer* and on he breaks with the fictive narration and makes direct use of his own name, but gives all other persons new names. This means that on what we still have to call the "fictive plane" appears a person named "Henry Miller", who in no way can be unambiguously identified with the empirical author of the same name. The name, on the other hand, relates to the narrator as the source from which the voice flows. The name and the voice are both aspects of the same design. By James Decker, it is formulated as follows:

> Miller creates a type of suprarealism that rejects factual continuity for emotional essence. An individual occurrence may thus provide Miller's narrator, or supraself—an amalgam of the numerous redactions of "Henry Miller" that stands collectively for the biographical Miller at various points in his

[1] "The Tailor Shop" in *Black Spring*, p. 111.

> life—with myriad associations or interpretations. Although the interpretations may contradict or undercut one another, they work together to form a hermeneutics of the self.
>
> (*Henry Miller and Narrative Form* (2005), p. 1)

Throughout the dissertation Decker uses the term "supraself" about the narrator. The split in the narrative role lies on the fiction plane, that is, that it is a construction that is "disturbed" by the fact that the fiction limit is constantly pervaded by the use of the real name of the empirical writer. The result is that we in an unsafe but very deliberate way oscillate across the fiction limit throughout the text, or in a different way: We have no way of actually distinguishing between facts and fiction, and that is exactly the purpose, for that does not interest the author at all. He has completely different perspectives in mind, as will be demonstrated in the actual text analysis. Originally, Miller had plans to go even further and also use the real names of the other persons in all sorts of fictional and factual situations, but his counselors drew attention to the completely unimaginable legal consequences of such a technique and it was wisely abandoned.

There is no doubt that Miller plays with the forms and would laugh of our efforts to master the concepts. Nevertheless I will argue that it is more fruitful to consider a text like *Tropic of Cancer* as a work of fiction based on biographical details, but using the author's real name attached to the narrator. Thus, the term "auto fiction" can be applied with some justification, as the only completely sure nonfictional element is the name "Henry Miller" acting on both levels and which in the text is the central collective element both as narrator and as "person".

If, unlike me, one should feel the urge to establish a larger argument to see *Tropic of Cancer* as mainly fictional, one can begin by studying Miller's letters to Emil Schnellock and Anaïs Nin from the same period. Of them, it will be evident that his focus in this period in Paris was of a completely different character than it appears from the novel. In the center was the dramatic break with his wife June and the new intense relationship with Anaïs Nin. It says something about Henry Miller as "autobiographical" author that the relationship in his life that meant most of all—the love of Anaïs Nin—is never mentioned with a word.

The auto fiction concept, as it was originally defined by Serge Doubrovsky in *Autobiographie/vérité/psychoanalysis* (1980), is a text where the author, narrator, and protagonist bear the same name, while the text still has an active fictional level. It is interesting because it marks a

"floating" state of the text, a kind of "tremble", where the reader cannot accurately count on the integrity of the narrator or with the truthfulness of the situations reported. Doubrovsky emphasizes that the text fluctuates between different levels. This relationship is utilized, in my opinion, clearly by Miller, exploiting the ambivalent and ambiguous as part of the erosion of the traditional novel's authoritarian narrative form. It is a relationship that is parallel to the complete fragmentation of chronology and causation, characteristic of many of the experiments of the avant-garde in the Paris era.

But precisely in this dissolution of the classic narrator model, there is an ambivalence by Miller. On the one hand, he dissolves the familiar forms and obscures the true identity of the narrator; on the other hand, it is imperative for him that this dissolution does not prevent the narrator from passing on the very central message that he never loses sight of: **the eschatologically vitalistic vision**. This vision of living in the end time of a culture and on the brink of a new beginning is the great constant in the period, and it is never lost sight of even though the voice can be varied. Therefore, the modern concept of "Performative Biography" is highly applicable to Miller, who, through the long range of texts, managed to stage himself in a variety of dramatic roles. In the Paris texts, you can distinguish a variety of roles played by Miller: From the Chinese wise man or mystical zen master to the free vagabond bohemian, the unfaithful lover, the social wreck, or the classical European intellectual, and so on. None of them completely covers him, but they all serve the purpose as cover-ups of the author himself; you cannot get a grip on him.

The subject "floats" in the linguistic stream, which often has the distinctive character of a speech stream. This dissolved "I" appears in several cases, but is probably most evident in the Surrealistic texts in *Black Spring*. Thus, in "Walking Up and Down in China" this notion occurs:

> If it is possible to leave the body in dream, or in death, perhaps it is possible to leave the body forever, to wander endlessly unbodied, unhooked, a nameless identity, or an unidentified name, a soul unattached, indifferent to everything, a soul immortal, perhaps incorruptible, like God—who can say? (p. 201)

But as it is underlined by James Gifford in "Dispossessed Sexual Politics: Henry Miller's Anarchism *Qua* Kate Millett and Ursula K. Le Guin" in *Henry Miller—New Perspectives* (2015), there is no question that the ego

dissolution is a constant phenomenon in the oeuvre; it seems more like a notion he plays with, a nonbinding notion that the dissolution he can observe everywhere can also include his own consciousness as attached to a firm established subject. The stream of words is primarily an aspect of the life stream that everywhere is a key idea in Miller, but as it also is formulated in the well-known image of the I seated in a lighthouse (*Tropic of Capricorn*, p. 69), also to be found in Hamsun, he is intact in the midst of a changing world. As it is formulated earlier in this work:

> If the self were not imperishable, the "I" I write about would have been destroyed long ago.
>
> (p. 12)

For Miller, the idea of the survival of the I was the strongest in the midst of the eschatological nightmare. Here, the legacy of the transcendentalists, and especially Whitman, and the eternal background figure Nietzsche, clearly breaks through.

On both sides of the three major Paris books—the two Tropic novels and the mixed collection *Black Spring*—stand two blocks of text, which in their own way illustrate the process that Miller lived through in the period as a person and a writer. The earliest, and as a prelude to and eventually an integral part of the creative process, are the letters Miller sent back to New York to his friend and confident Emil Schnellock, who during the period both served as a knowing witness and as a coworker responsible for filing all the texts and other material that Miller could send back to safety from his chaotic life in Paris. As we will see, it is precisely in these letters that Miller's "voice" first manifests itself. There is a straight line from the letters to *Tropic of Cancer*, and in some cases passages from the letters go directly into the novel.

The second text group consists of the essays Miller wrote partly in Paris, partly just after returning to the United States at the turn of the year 1939–1940. Here he is now able to step back and with great clarity and precision characterize his method while describing it in relation to the established literary tradition. It is thus herein, among other things, "Reflections on Writing" (1940), he for the first time explicitly explains the alinear, spiral process as an immediate response to a chaotic world. It is also here that he clearly acknowledges the eschatological vitality and sees the connection between this world perception and his own literary technique.

The letters to Schnellock, published in 1980 as *Letters to Emil*, are fascinating reading because they provide a direct insight into the learning process that Miller more or less consciously underwent in the years immediately after his arrival in Paris. And more than anything else, they demonstrate where Miller writes most freely and personally that the voice he seeks is in fact just his own completely natural form of narrating—as also the friend Michael Fraenkel made him aware of. Miller learned in these first years in Paris to drop all the literary pretensions and instead unfold his huge narrative talent, which the friends knew partly from the letters, partly from his verbal reports. From now on, the fabulistic, rattling, all-round associative, and above all verbatim style becomes his trademark.

Everything becomes literature around him. While the "voice" pressures impatiently, he feels an increasing creative pressure which he is afraid of is impossible to realize. As in New York, he "writes" while he walks—the voice runs continuously in the chaotic, swarming city with the constantly changing impressions. Miller's voice exactly corresponds with him as what I call the *man-of-the-city* (see Chap. 7); it is the modern edition of the inspired Romantic voice, who now finds its revelations in the big city. Here he sits at a restaurant and writes on the paper cloth:

> I get so damned chock-full of ideas that I am afraid they will dribble away before I get back to the machine […] the ideas are streaming out of me, exhaustless as a supply of radium […] And while I write the lights are suddenly switched on and the glare of the unshaded bulbs strikes the water carafe and spreads over the back of my hand, over the stained paper, gorgeous geometric designs. The refraction made by the curvature of the bottle splinters the prism of light and throws dancing jewels of color into the penumbra made by the carafe. I have one of those mad Strindberg variations.
>
> (*Letters to Emil*, p. 42)

Miller is always conscious of his literary role models.

His writing exercises also include a phenomenon that would become one of his trademarks, a special feature of his voice: the so-called catalogues, that is, almost raging phrases of sensations and phenomena—often linked to a particular locality and often tied together by associations, although they can be difficult to figure out. They are beyond the logical and chronological narrative field, giving insight into the creative mechanism itself, and historically they are in debt to both Rabelais, Whitman, psychoanalysis, Dada, and Surrealism. They represent an attempt to

achieve a form of truth beyond objective and logical analysis, and it seems like a tool that he has cultivated first in oral form, perhaps in company with Schnellock. It is therefore natural that it is in these letters that he gradually realizes that his earlier literary attempts in a more traditional and realistic direction have been a dead end for him (cf. the letter 10/5 1930, p. 48ff.). He becomes more and more aware of the importance of his true voice. In February of the year after his arrival, he still works on the old manuscripts he brought with him from the United States, and which it was his original plan to finish in Paris, but the situation is becoming more and more unsustainable because the new inspirational basis is pushing more and more on:

> This book, for example, has been so carefully and painstakingly plotted out, the notes are so copious and exhaustive, that I feel cramped, walled in, suffocated. When I get thru I want to explode. I will explode in the Paris book. The hell with form, style, expression and all those pseudo-paramount things which beguile the critics. I want to get myself across this time—and direct as a knife thrust.
>
> (p. 72)

On August 24 he is ready:

> I start tomorrow on the Paris book: first person, uncensored, formless—fuck everything!
>
> (p. 80)

The technique cannot be described more precisely; here it is the new voice that speaks. Later, in April 1932 (p. 93), he compares the technique with that you, without planning, throws all ideas and notions into a suitcase where they themselves have to find their place.

During his work, Miller becomes more and more aware of his role as a stranger, not just as an American in Paris, but fundamentally an expatriate in Western culture, without homeland and permanent attachment, and it is largely the work on the Paris book that has triggered the feeling, which in the following years became even stronger. He often compares himself with van Gogh, who fled to Arles, and with Gauguin and his travels to Tahiti, but he sees the situation as a form of strength. He is a man without a fixed position but with a new direction in his life and with something on his heart. In Paris he finds himself while he went to pieces in New York. This becomes the division of labor between the two cities of his universe

(note the two Tropic titles discussed later). He is also increasingly aware of the inspiring impulses he receives from the new circle of friends on Montparnasse. This is especially true concerning Michael Fraenkel, and in October 1932 Miller formulates it this way:

> His extremism is something that we need today. He pushes ideas to their limit till they drop exhausted. He sounds crazy sometimes, and no doubt is, but it's magnificent, lucid insanity—the kind that builds up new worlds. […] What I am doing, if I can explain it, is to free myself for expression on a different, a higher (?) level. I am working out my own salvation, as a writer, thinker, human being.
>
> (*Letters to Emil*, p. 104f.)

He is now on the right track, and with the new consciousness of his voice, the whole project falls into place and he is fully aware that it will lead him completely out of the general literary circuit. From April 1933, he is the master of the material and clearly established in his own consciousness, and from now on the perspective is unequivocally eschatologically vitalistic:

> For once I feel a united being and that ecstasy which you speak of burns steadily. The only fear I have is that I may be cut off before I say all that I wish to say. I feel that what I have to say now is important—more for the future than for the present.
>
> I am living outside the age. I expect nothing of any tomorrow. I have it all here inside me and it suffices. No more losses for me—it is only the world which stands to lose by my death.
>
> Death! That major theme running through everything I am engaged on. I owe it to Fraenkel. But here is the irony of things: in accepting it I have found a new life! I am truly resurrected. To me death is the greatest thing of all—it inspires me constantly. It is my one true joy.
>
> (p. 117f.)

The artist who rises above society and the social level to formulate a sovereign interpretation accurately corresponds to the performances Miller had observed in practice with authors such as Hamsun and Strindberg. Here he had met the man-of-the-city problem unfolded by an interpretative subject at the center as the only instance that could withstand the destruction. In this way, the very existence of the text becomes the strongest manifestation of the life force, of the will of the never-resting subject to formulate itself.

In 1939, on his journey to Greece, which in many ways can be seen as the actual culmination of the development that Miller had experienced during the years in Paris, the author George Seferis convinces him to write down his reflections on the actual writing process. Miller made a strong impression on the Greek writers he met, and Seferis' wish reflects a need to see an overall expression of the thoughts he had only formulated verbally to them. It became the essay "Reflections on Writing" later printed in *The Wisdom of the Heart* (1941), which Miller finished after returning to the United States in early 1940. The text is interesting because Miller now can look back on an exciting and fruitful creative time in Paris, where he actually succeeded in realizing his plans, first and foremost in the three central Paris works. He repeats what was central, and as evidenced by the letters to Schnellock:

> I jumped with two feet into the realm of aesthetics, the non-moral, non-ethical, non-utilitarian realm of art. My life itself became a work of art. I had found a voice, I was whole again.
>
> (*The Wisdom of the Heart* (1960 ed.), p. 21)

He compares the process with the zen initiator, that is, that you only find something when you stop searching, and it turns out that the sought-after has always been immediately in front of one. Thus also with his voice—it should not be constructed; it should simply be found. It is a voice that lives in an endless series of nuances and situations in structures that he knows never can become a whole. At the same time, the boundary between life and art is abolished, the text is primarily an aspect of life, not an attempt at accurate reflection, a realistic reproduction or a complete interpretation. As in Dada, the text is an act. He's never done, always on his way, moving around in the dimensions. Words such as spiritual, cosmos, soul are now used without problems as designations of dimensions that are always present, and this is where he for the first time uses the term which James Decker has elevated to the central expression not only for Miller's technique, but for his cosmology:

> One can only go forward by going backward and then sideways and then up and then down. There is no progress: there is perpetual movement, displacement, which is circular, spiral, endless.
>
> (p. 22)

The only hope he formulates about his works is that they are able to capture glimpses of the mystery, the very, in principle, indescribable force of vitality:

> I would like my words to flow along in the same way that the world flows along, a serpentine movement through incalculable dimensions, axes, latitudes, climates, conditions. I accept *a priori* my inability to realize such an ideal.
>
> (p. 23)

He rejects any dream of the perfect, the flawless is an empty illusion, a deception to a world that is filled with what we must see as unexplained opposites. The role of the artist is not to explain everything, but to maintain the ability to flow. This is, if you want, the very essence of the literary "program" which the time in Paris has taught him.

A special feature of Miller's voice is indeed that he completely from his debut in Paris with *Tropic of Cancer* immediately has positioned himself as a writer with a totally free relationship with the obscene, and therefore it would at this point be natural to discuss this relationship as well as briefly touch upon a series of characteristic responses to the subject which more than anything else was to determine Miller's literary destiny. In his essay "Obscenity and the Law of Reflection", written in 1941 as a defense of the Paris books, he mentions the hopelessness in defining the very concept of obscenity, and in defense of his own imagery he mentions predecessors, such as Havelock Ellis and D.H. Lawrence. As mentioned by Miller elsewhere, he does not feel alone, he feels that he is in the midst of a widespread but repressed tradition. The involvement of Ellis is interesting because he sees him as a companion when it comes to the analysis of society's sexual anxiety. But the key to his defense is that the obscene is absolutely necessary to involve in characterizing the crisis of modern civilization:

> If there is something mysterious about the manifestation of deep and unsuspected forces, which find expression in disturbing movements and ideas from one period to another, there is nevertheless nothing accidental or bizarre about it. The laws governing the spirit are just as readable as those governing nature. But the readings must come from those who are steeped in the mysteries. The very depth of these interpretations naturally make them unpalatable and unacceptable to the vast body which constitutes the unthinking public.
>
> (*Remember to Remember* (1952 ed.), p. 280)

Then the opponents could place themselves in that pattern. For the true artist, it is impossible to let himself be limited by the general morality. He emphasizes that it is necessary to break the vicious circle of modern life, where art is becoming more and more incomprehensible, while life itself becomes more and more boring. For Miller, the real contemptible obscenities are the war and materialism. An art that denies sexuality is just too appropriate for a dying world. For Miller, the sexually obscene becomes part of the anarchic border crossing, it is part of the "technical" equipment, and he adds:

> 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. In a sense, its use by the artist may be compared to the use of the miraculous by the Masters.
>
> (p. 287)

What Miller does not mention in this connection, where the essay instead evolves into a purely Buddhist manifestation, is that the sexuality so explicitly depicted throughout the texts of Paris is of a very neurotic nature. It is another consequence of the eschatological perspective: All aspects of existence are subject to the crushing judgment he casts over Western civilization, where all values including the ability to love are invaded by destructive forces. What is left is a sexuality that emerges as neurotic and emotionally cold manifestations of desire that cast a glow of misery and decay over the participants. And to clarify this perspective, a graphically uncensored representation is necessary. Here, one could imagine that Miller, as in the case of his source of inspiration D.H. Lawrence, could have marked a positive and life-giving sexuality as a counter image, and traces of this can be found in less ambitious works such as *Quiet Days in Clichy* (1956), but this feature is absent in the Paris texts. It can also be noted that sexuality is totally absent in the period's most positive work, that which completes this part of the oeuvre: *The Colossus of Maroussi*, where the spiritual positivity is finally realized. But Miller could apparently not unite this perspective with sexuality.

In parts of the Miller literature, at least by the ones who take him seriously, the obscene is often seen in relation to the anarchistic and vitalistic, this applies very much to Gordon in *The Mind and Art of Henry Miller* (1967), where he demonstrates parallels to both Emma Goldman (p. 41ff.) and the sex researchers Phyllis and Eberhard Kronhausen (p. 154ff.) in order to emphasize that Miller wants to restore the lost connections to the

power sources. But the perspectives of the Paris texts are vastly more comprehensive. The same can be said about the consequences: The obscene blocked for any placement within the general literary circuit as well as in academic research, from which he has been almost completely ruled out until recent years.

Caroline Blinder provides a beautiful wording in the aforementioned work, which in many ways is typical of the modern interpretation of Miller:

> Ultimately, Miller's use of sexuality must be seen as a discourse of a philosophical as well as physiological nature. The experimentation with language and obscenity, above all else, contains the means of liberation for the writer who strives to retain a humanity released from materialism and notions of what constitutes "proper" writing. In this sense, Miller, far from being a retrogressive writer, is a writer instrumental in defining a modern sensibility rooted in sexuality and self-exploration.
>
> (p. 161)

Another modern researcher who has attempted to capture Miller's ambivalent relationship with the obscene of the texts is Katy Masuga, who divides the relationship into three aspects: "the playful", "the disgusting and mechanical", and finally "through abstraction".[2] And she emphasizes that the three aspects reflect Miller's lack of "seriousness in relation to sexuality", but in my opinion she lacks the key aspect: the grotesque-neurotic and dehumanizing which is everywhere present and not least in the parts she calls "playful". On the other side Masuga has an open mind for a peculiar double effect in the obscene: that Miller, on the one hand, goes entirely to the language limits where communication is impossible and, on the other hand, through sexuality, formulates a desperate desire to abolish the individual's isolation through a complete association with "the other".

Masuga underlines "The Land of Fuck" section in *Tropic of Capricorn* as an example of a completely abstract form of obscenity, where it is stressed that the pure sexuality could cause the world to collapse. The section is treated in the chapter about *Tropic of Capricorn*, but here I already want to stress that Miller also here is approaching the limits of language in an abstract notion of the true life force that can break down all established structures.

[2] In "Henry Miller's Titillating Words" in *Henry Miller—New Perspectives* (2015).

Henry Miller was, in an eminent sense, a "literary" author. He was a thorough and reflective narrator who, putting himself at stake, unfolded a literary universe which was saturated by quotes, hidden or direct, as commentary or in an independent role. In this way, he creates a text in which other texts are present in layers, upside down or next to each other, like a palimpsest, where the narrator himself acts in a series of roles or attitudes, although this I is the only point of reference for the reader in a universe undergoing constant change. Miller says that he writes on the edge of a civilization, describing what he sees as a tradition in full dissolution. There are no more fixed points in the text universe, just series of voices. The entire traditional literary representative or realistic function is either broken down completely or occurs only in separate, isolated sections.

Miller was consistently modernist, or rather avant-garde, in the sense that all authority or values are removed, there are no more working vertical axes left, as in the classic "tree structures". Instead, the text universe, personal structures, and all developmental conditions float across the surface, what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari[3] have described as a "rhizome", a root net where all solid vertical structures are loosened in a universe that slowly slides beyond the edge. The texts appear as infinite streams of words, concepts, situations, associations seemingly completely chaotic. In the rhizome, all elements are connected to each other, a spectacle reminiscent of a technique that Miller frequently used and which can be called *holographic*, in the sense that each conflict contains within itself the overall conflict. It is therefore not decisive in which order the individual sections are read. From the eschatological perspective, a tangible historical structure finally emerges, but in the specific texts it is only as a description of the progressive destruction, as an opaque and unpredictable future perspective. This future takes the form of a description of post-apocalyptic new life after destruction.

American criticism has often failed to make clear this perspective on Miller's narrative. Instead, Miller was simply rejected as an unstructured "talking head", preoccupied by himself in his endless stream of words. These words from Kingsley Widmer are typical: "His most ambitious work of art and quest for identity reveals pathetic buffoonery", and he goes on to state that his work contained only a few bits of literature "and a weirdly murky confession of art as an escape from life".[4] The French reception was

[3] In *A Thousand Plateaus* (2013).
[4] *Henry Miller*, 1990, p. 81.

quite different. Very early on, French critics were receptive to Miller's technique, and in 1949 Maurice Blanchot in the essay collection *La Part du feu* compares Miller with Lautréamont.[5] Blanchot was one of the first to provide a striking description of the writing technique in, for example, *Tropic of Cancer*, where he underscores the fact that Miller, in his texts, has evaded all the normal textual control mechanisms. He thus focuses on the many descriptions of urban walks in a deserted and dying world, where the language has freed itself from the normal chronology.

In the moment, the story stops, everything is present, and everything is flowing. It is this analysis that can be viewed through the prism of Deleuze's concepts, as will be demonstrated later, though I will in no way say that my method of analysis itself is "deleuzian" if one can talk about it that way. And it is important to emphasize that Miller's texts are never totally implemented in a rhizomatic way. They never end the subject-object relationship, for in the center of the flow of words, as the only remaining focal point, stands the self, always formulated as Miller himself, and at this point his texts are a significant material for exploring the subject's status in modernity or rather, the strengthening of the fracture formations of Modernism that appear after 1900, and which represent the actual *avant-garde*. It is here, in connection with this European avant-garde, that Miller belongs (see Chap. 5).

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CHAPTER 2

Miller and the Modern City

Henry Miller was very much a man of the city. He was foremost a product of New York—the center of American capitalism, where he walked the streets and lived through all his failures the first thirty-eight years of his life. In Paris the crises continued, but the fact that he was able to develop a voice and discover his visions enabled him to finally escape the modern city life after meeting the vital light of Greece. It is this process, Miller's confrontation with modernity and discovery of European Modernism in the years in Paris from 1930 to 1939, that led him to a deeply felt belief in the vital forces of life, and this is in the center of my investigations in this book.

The modern metropolis was created in the nineteenth century by the emergence of industrial capitalism which affected among other things traffic, communication, manufacturing, and the urban economy. It created upheavals throughout the whole society, but it was in the modern big city that the full impact of these changes could be felt. One could say that the modern life of the metropolis, driven primarily by the requirements of capital, came to accommodate so many variables that it seemed to the individual to be fundamentally chaotic, that is, unamenable to any sort of systematic description or understanding. The urban dweller was thrown into modernity.

In this new world, which for most people appeared chaotic, the individual could now escape from his roots and realize his dreams and expectations. In the vibrant, chaotic city, one could be stimulated intellectually,

F. Jensen, *Henry Miller and Modernism*,
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materially, sensually, and aesthetically but one could also feel completely lost and afraid. In particular, it is one of these new relationships with the outside world that would come to stand in the center, an experience that one's ancestors didn't have: the experience of total *anonymity*.

The anonymous individual, the isolated I, is not in itself a whole new type. In certain contexts, the individual can act as a continuation of the Romantic I, with which the urban I has the total subjective mirroring and projection in common. The difference, however, is that now this individual can move about in total loneliness in close proximity with thousands of people whom he does not know and who do not give him a thought. The experience becomes both the source of the greatest despair and the most dizzying feeling of emancipation. In this mode, everything is possible.

Modern capitalism was the most profound revolutionary force the Western civilization had ever experienced. As Marx put it: "All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned."[1] In this context, the new and shocking experience of anonymity and the corresponding frightening (but also liberating) breakdown of traditional values is a driving force. Miller himself experienced this dramatic urbanization of American society in the decades up to and after the turn of the century, and he saw urbanization as a disaster. What others saw as the American dream, the new society with a growing middle class living in relative prosperity in the new metropolitan areas, in a life based on technological progress driven by industrial capitalism, Miller saw as a nightmare that would lead America into a dramatic downward spiral of dissolution. For Miller, America's coming of age was the eschatological nightmare. It was in the modern city that Miller founded his eschatology.

As described among other places in Douglas Robinson's *American Apocalypses* (1985), the notion of the apocalypse runs deep in the American tradition, both religiously and literarily, but it is my opinion that it is not possible in Henry Miller's case to establish any direct and specific American source of inspiration. Robinson mentions briefly in a note that there might be "interesting things to be said in this context about Henry Miller in relation to Emerson" (p. 260f.). I fully agree, but apart from a few quotes, like the motto in *Tropic of Cancer* about the new kind of literature, where novels will be replaced by autobiographies, it is difficult to point to specific references in this regard by Miller to Emerson or to any other American writer with apocalyptic visions. In my view Emerson was first and foremost

[1] See Chap. 5.

a vitalistic inspiration.[2] It is my opinion that Miller's eschatological views, though they may have their roots in his American nightmares, are only directly formulated in Paris under the influence of the circle around Michael Fraenkel and Walter Lowenstein (see Chap. 10), where the background is clearly European.

This is also the reason why I prefer to use the expression "eschatology" instead of "apocalypse", since the European visions are predominantly secular and nonreligious in contrast with the American tradition. Like Robinson (p. xiif) I see eschatology as the broad category and the apocalypse as specifically connected to the biblical visions which constitute the foundations of the American apocalypses.

As early as the mid-nineteenth century, a number of new conflicts in the Western culture became increasingly visible. One of them was the conflict between an unmitigated faith in progress, with its positivist belief in the ability of science and capitalism to overcome all problems and the visible despair and pessimism that these same developments caused, with their huge accumulation of slum dwellers, poverty, and pollution. Criticism of industrialism came to assume a variety of forms, from Marx's analysis of capital and class struggle to Nietzsche's cultural criticism. At the same time, the pessimism about the industrial revolution often triggered an idea of a coming collapse that would be followed by a new order of completely new possibilities for man, where we could regain contact with the central forces of our life. It is this movement that I call *eschatological vitalism* where the eschatological perspective is supported by a heartfelt and vigorously argued critique of the materialism of the entire Western world and especially of the capitalist structures, while the vitalistic aspect points toward the new culture that would emerge from the forces of life lying just beneath the crisis-driven culture. In this context, I focus largely on the development of the city and urban life as a stage in art and literature. Here I emphasize the emergence of a new type of text, a specific kind of novel that I call the "*man-of-the-city novel*". This type of novel is constructed around a lonely and often crisis-ridden protagonist, who formulates himself in the first person, and with the boundless modern city as his primary location. The structure of this kind of novel comprises three central themes: *the modern city, the emancipated ego*, and *the*

[2] In *Henry Miller, Emerson, and the Divided Self*, in *Critical Essays on Henry Miller*, 1992, Paul R. Jackson gives a detailed account on Emerson as a general source of inspiration for Miller. For further on Emerson as inspiration for Miller, see Chap. 4.

discourse (or promotion) of authentic values (that have been threatened or lost with urbanization).

The Early Registrants of the Fractures in Modernity

Many of the conceptual preconditions for this study are based on the works of prominent scholars from the beginning of the twentieth century. While very different in approach, they all observed that the major European project of establishing values had come to a decisive turning point. World War I was the single complex of events which, although not necessarily in itself triggering, in any case revealed to large groups that time had run out for the optimism of the grand development project that had otherwise celebrated so great triumphs. One of the first observers of the symptoms of this societal crisis was Baudelaire, and in this context, Walter Benjamin's exploration of the authorship and his studies in the Second Empire became a crucial source of inspiration for this work. The next phase is marked by such different personalities as Rimbaud and Nietzsche, but the signals are perceived in parallel by novelists such as Hamsun and Strindberg, who articulate the crisis into the form of the novel.

Given the enormous changes in the living conditions that the emergence of modern metropolises has meant in the Western world since the nineteenth century, it is remarkable how little research on the subject that has taken place. In particular, the decisive transition to big city anonymity is far from sufficiently explored. I will not undertake such a project here, where the focus is literary and historic, but there are two significant researchers who have been crucial for the arguments presented here: the German sociologist Georg Simmel and the aforementioned Walter Benjamin.

In his groundbreaking essay *The Metropolis and Mental Life* from 1903, Simmel emphasizes the individual's new status in the modern metropolis: the ability to establish and maintain an identity and uniqueness toward an over-mighty "social-technical machine". The task of the individual becomes that of establishing a balance or at least a practical way of life between the individual wishes and needs and the overarching forces affecting the individual's life. In this article, Simmel is one of the first scholars to seriously consider the significance of the actual metropolitan phenomenon, as it appears especially during the late nineteenth century in Europe.

He emphasizes the importance of what he calls "the intensification of the nerve life", that is, the very amount of changing sensory impressions that become the norm in the new way of life:

> These are the psychological conditions which the metropolis creates. With every crossing of the street, with the tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational and social life, the city sets up a deep contrast with small town and rural life with reference to the sensory foundations of psychic life. The metropolis exacts from man as a discriminating creature a different amount of consciousness than does rural life.[3]

Simmel also emphasizes the intellectual nature of urban life, in contrast to the concrete-physical context of rural life. The people in the metropolis must be more conscious and calculative in order not to be overcome by the vast amount of impulses. The defenses must be in place. Without being directly mentioned by Simmel, one can with some justification regard the subsequently discussed *flâneur-* and *dandy types* in this light, as types who in different ways have performed their presence, and for whom an emotional succumbing to the city would be extremely embarrassing. The flâneur and the dandy, each in their own way, represent the *blasé attitude* which Simmel stresses as a defense against the impulse pressure:

> There is perhaps no psychic phenomenon which is so unconditionally reserved to the city as the blasé outlook. It is at first the consequence of those rapidly shifting stimulations of the nerves which are thrown together in all their contrasts and from which it seems to us the intensification of metropolitan intellectuality seems to be derived.
>
> (ibid., p. 178)

Obviously, this kind of blasé is one possible attitude among many, but it is necessary to emphasize that it is often counteracted by intense alertness and extreme sensitivity to the outside world's signals. Both the flâneur who receives signals and the dandy emitting them are examples of this, and both can only superficially be characterized as blasé. Later in the essay, conducted in Simmel's special impulsive and spiral-like form, he also notes the "special city-specific extravagances" of particular types of people, what he calls caprices and the pretentious, the meaning of which is to

[3] *Simmel on Culture. Selected Writings.* Ed. by David Frisby and Mike Featherstone. London, 2000, p. 175.

distinguish oneself from the masses. Hence, Simmel is aware of the mechanism, but he misses a more specific account of the anonymity phenomenon itself which was essential to Walter Benjamin.

Simmel identifies two types of individualism: (1) the classic with roots in the ideas of freedom from the eighteenth century, which has the enlightened, liberated and useful citizen as an ideal; and (2) the other who has the roots partly in Romanticism, and partly in the economic division of labor, and which is the fully liberated individuality, which primarily has its own individualization process as its aim. Where the first individualism is social and society-based, the other is asocial and primarily closed around its own personal project. It is precisely in his exploration of the latter type that Walter Benjamin has rendered invaluable contributions, not least in his writings on Charles Baudelaire, a distinct example of type no. 2.

It was one of Walter Benjamin's inspiring discoveries in the Paris of the 1930s that he pointed out the decisive qualitative leap that occurs in the transition from a manageable life in small towns or in the countryside to life in the big city—*the metropolis*. Two factors were crucial here: the aforementioned anonymity—a radical phenomenon, something completely new to the social control of traditional society; and the new and vital importance of the market and the establishment of the notion of the product in all aspects of life, while still increasing the specialization of the workforce and the division into different professions and skills.

It is through the studies of Poe and Baudelaire and the connections between them that Benjamin is on the track of the qualitative leap these writers have registered and in this context he points out both the masses and the labyrinthine:

> The masses in Baudelaire. They stretch before the flâneur as a veil: they are the newest drug for the solitary.—Second, they efface all traces of the individual: they are the newest asylum for the reprobate and the prescript.—Finally, within the labyrinth of the city, the masses are the newest and most inscrutable labyrinth. Through them, previously unknown chthonic traits are imprinted on the image of the city.[4]

Yet Benjamin, in my view, underrated that aspect of anonymity that can best be described as *chaotic*. This chaotic anonymity led not just to new forms of experience, but actually transformed the background for the

[4] Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project* (1999 edition), p. 446.