

City University of New York (CUNY)

## CUNY Academic Works

---

Dissertations and Theses

City College of New York

---

2021

### **'A contradiction in essence': Eroticism and the Creation of the Self in Henry Miller**

Cian Doyle  
*CUNY City College*

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cc\\_etds\\_theses/975](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cc_etds_theses/975)

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

---

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).  
Contact: [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu)

Cian Doyle

MA Thesis

Advisor: Václav Paris

12/6/2021

### **‘A contradiction in essence’: Eroticism and the Creation of the Self in Henry Miller**

We use the word eroticism every time a human being behaves in a way strongly contrasted with everyday standards and behaviour. Eroticism shows the other side of a façade of unimpeachable propriety. Behind the façade are revealed the feelings, parts of the body and habits we are normally ashamed of.

(Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, 118)

When we think of erotic writing in Western literature, one of the first names likely to come to mind is Henry Miller. His breakthrough novel, *Tropic of Cancer*, was banned from release in the United States and Great Britain for what was at the time considered to be obscene content. Only after thirty years and a lengthy trial was the ban lifted in those countries. Even in France, where his novels found much of their initial success, a case was brought against him in 1946: “To everyone’s astonishment,” as Jay Martin writes in *The King of Smut: Henry Miller’s Tragical History*, “it found against Miller, determined that he *was* a pornographer, and proposed to bring sanctions against his work” (Martin, *King of Smut*, 353). While critics and censors were quick to

denounce Miller, other writers were largely laudatory of his work: a committee created to defend Miller's work in the 1946 trial included writers such as André Breton, Albert Camus, Paul Eluard, André Gide, and Jean-Paul Sartre; his work also received praise from George Bernard Shaw and T.S Eliot, who wrote that "*Tropic of Cancer* seems to me a very remarkable book...a rather magnificent piece of work" (Martin, *King of Smut*, 348).

Beyond the contention regarding obscenity and the drama surrounding publication, there is also a dismissal of Miller's work on the basis of its sexual content – as there tends to be with regards to any literature containing a strong erotic element. This has echoes of Virginia Woolf's response to James Joyce's *Ulysses*: "An illiterate, underbred book it seems to me"; and 'Never did I read such tosh. As for the first 2 chapters we will let them pass, but the 3rd 4th 5th 6th—merely the scratching of pimples on the body of the bootboy at Claridges" (Woolf, *Letters of Virginia Woolf*, 551). The dismissive attitude to erotic literature is curious – perhaps because it belongs to low culture insofar as it discusses sexuality without pretense. As Georges Bataille discusses in *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, there are different strata to the erotic, as well as manners in which it is expressed. Nevertheless, whether praised or condemned, the sexually explicit content of Miller's novels and the pariahdom surrounding it largely serve to obscure their actual merit and his contribution to literature at large – however, this labelling of 'erotic' also provides an avenue inside the text.

The intention of this paper is as follows: in the first, to demonstrate that Miller's work has been labeled 'erotic', and that this label obscures the true contribution of his work – but that as much as it obscures his work, this label of 'erotic' also provides us an avenue to access it. In the second, it is to explore what actually constitutes the 'erotic' (through the lens of Sigmund Freud and Georges Bataille), how this is featured in Miller's work, and how it functions as an

analytic tool to reveal what is significant in that work. Lastly, with specific regard to the works *Tropic of Cancer* and *Tropic of Capricorn*, the intention is to examine the journey undertaken by the narrator, wherein a transition is made from the object-based eroticism of love and sexuality to the objectless eroticism of writing – and this done with the intention of revealing the actual significance of Miller’s work, which is in its use as a blueprint for self-realization through an artistic practice.

To begin, it is beneficial to explore the etymology of the word erotic, from the Ancient Greek root word *eros* (love, desire). My chief interest in *eros* is in its Freudian usage: as life energy; the will to live; the desire to create and produce; creative energy. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud first introduces the term *eros* in the following statement: “Thus the Libido of our sexual instincts would coincide with the Eros of poets and philosophers, which holds together all things living” (Freud, *Pleasure*, 41). In the essay, he contrasts the drive of *eros* with a corresponding drive towards death and asserts that the dance of these two forces occurs on a molecular level. The relationship between *eros* and the death-drive is comparable to an electrical circuit, containing a ‘hot’ wire which provides a path outward for an electrical current and a ‘neutral’ wire which provides a path for it to return. The drive to death provides the function of relieving the tension created as a result of a surplus of *eros*. In this light, the term ‘death’ should not be taken with grim connotations – but simply as a state of equilibrium to which life seeks to return. In Freud’s words: “This final goal of all organic striving can be stated too. It would be counter to the conservative nature of instinct if the goal of life were a state never hitherto reached. It must rather be an ancient starting point, which the living being left long ago, and to which it harks back again by all the circuitous paths of development [...] The goal of all life is death” (Freud, *Pleasure*, 30).

Keeping both the etymology and the Freudian conception in mind, the concept of the erotic expands far beyond a base sexuality. In his essay “Eroticism and Love,” Paul Gregory defines eroticism as “[...] the quality of human sexuality in virtue of which it acquires a meaning that goes beyond and is separate from the pleasure or the procreative function of the sexual act” (Gregory, “Eroticism and Love,” 339). One gets the sense that this expanded concept of the erotic informs the core of Miller’s writing, such as in this passage from *Tropic of Cancer*:

“I love everything that flows” [...] Yes, I said to myself, I too love everything that flows [...] I love everything that flows, everything that has time in it and becoming, that bring us back to the beginning where there is never end [...] all that is fluid, melting, dissolute and dissolvent, all the pus and dirt that in flowing is purified, that loses its sense of origin, that makes the great circuit toward death and dissolution. The great incestuous wish is to flow on, one with time, to merge this great image of the beyond with the here and now. A fatuous, suicidal wish that is constipated by words and paralyzed by thought. (Miller, *Cancer*, 257)

Or, as Anais Nin concluded in her preface to the 1961 edition of *Tropic of Cancer*:

And is it blood and flesh which are here given us. Drink, food, laughter, desire, passion, curiosity, the simple realities which nourish the roots of our highest and vaguest creations. The superstructure is lopped away. This book brings with it a wind that blows down the dead and hollow trees whose roots are withered and lost in the barren soil of our times. This book goes to the roots and digs under, digs for subterranean springs. (Nin, *Cancer*, xxxiii)

*Cancer* is certainly an erotic book in the sense that is alive, fleshy – it is a ‘becoming’ versus a ‘being,’ in the sense that Heraclitus wrote of: “All things move and nothing remains still [...] you cannot step twice into the same rivers; for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you” (*Fragments* 12). Miller himself reflects on this Heraclitean becoming in his own terms: “Joy is like a river, it flows ceaselessly [...] that we should participate through ceaseless flow and

movement, that we should not stop to reflect, compare, analyze, possess, but flow on and through, endlessly, like music. This is the gift of surrender” (Miller, *Cancer*, xxix).

But this more meaningful sense of erotic is taken by critics at a superficial level – literally ‘erotica’. As language develops, naturally words acquire certain connotations depending on what concepts they are associated with – such is the case with the general contemporary treatment of ‘erotic’. To appreciate what is actually significant in *Cancer* and its companion, *Tropic of Capricorn*, it is necessary to understand them as erotic books from the root sense of the word.

To this point – though the scope of this paper does not cover Miller’s influences – it is important to briefly make note of the spiritual echoes of Sade in Miller’s work. In his paper “Sade and erotic discourse” (2000), Gaëtan Brulotte provides a description of the challenge around Sade which could have just as easily been written about Miller: “Critics have often been content to bury his work under the label of ‘pornography’, a label that kept him so far away from everyday life, and prevented a proper evaluation, for example, of his contribution to erotic discourse itself” (Brulotte, “Sade”, 51). In the same way as Sade, that which obscures the text in Miller is also what provides the reader a way in: naturally, there is far more to Sade than sexual cruelty – but those are the terms that the writer dictates the text must be read. As Brulotte points out: “For two centuries, readers have taken this new erotic body literally and have seen only unbearable cruelty here. In reality, with it, Sade pointed out significant aspects of desire and thus of erotic discourse. Even in its excesses, desire is the desire for fusion with the other” (Brulotte, “Sade”, 55).

Sade is not the only writer to whom Miller can be connected by way of the obfuscation created by this erotic label. In his 1940 essay “Inside the Whale”, George Orwell explores in detail the ways in which Miller’s work has been obscured by its own explicit content – the eros

eclipsed by the erotica. Early on, he draws a connection between *Cancer* and Joyce's *Ulysses* (with the caveat that they are very different undertakings). There is the obvious connection in that both novels dealt with their own dramas surrounding the obscenity of the content – but Orwell makes this connection to demonstrate that there is an extant pattern of critics being blinded by sexuality, as well as the fact that much of the merit of these novels comes from what in some senses is simply the ‘other side of the coin’ of that very sexuality:

Now and again there appears a novel which opens up a new world not by revealing what is strange, but by revealing what is familiar. The truly remarkable thing about *Ulysses*, for instance, is the commonplaceness of its material. Of course there is much more in *Ulysses* than this [...] but his real achievement has been to get the familiar on to paper. He dared — for it is a matter of daring just as much as of technique — to expose the imbecilities of the inner mind, and in doing so he discovered an America which was under everybody's nose. (Orwell, “Inside the Whale”)

What is obscene, then, is partly the very familiarity of these coarse and bestial descriptions of sexual activity. It is offensive not so much because it is sexual – but because it is the sexuality of the street; without, as I mentioned before, any pretense or packaging. It is the same in Céline or Genet, for example – and there is a violence implicit in this kind of writing which taboo is put in place to restrain. To draw from Georges Bataille's *Erotism*: “Man goes constantly in fear of himself. His erotic urges terrify him” (Bataille, *Erotism*, 8). In other words, it is that which is familiar to us which terrifies us; it is not others that repulse us, but what of ourselves we see reflected in them.

Orwell continues with the connection between *Cancer* and *Ulysses*:

Here is a whole world of stuff which you supposed to be of its nature incommunicable, and somebody has managed to communicate it. The effect is to break down, at any rate momentarily, the solitude in which the human being lives. When you read certain passages in *Ulysses* you feel that Joyce's mind and your mind

are one, that he knows all about you though he has never heard your name, that there exists some world outside time and space in which you and he are together. And though he does not resemble Joyce in other ways, there is a touch of this quality in Henry Miller [...] But read him for five pages, ten pages, and you feel the peculiar relief that comes not so much from understanding as from being understood. 'He knows all about me,' you feel; 'he wrote this specially for me. (Orwell, "Inside the Whale")

This sense of familiarity, then, while on the one hand causing a sense of terror, is also what brings us into the fold – it is, for better or worse, true to our lives; and, again, what is the role of the artist if it is not to honestly reflect our lives? "In Miller's case," Orwell writes, "it is not so much a question of exploring the mechanisms of the mind as of owning up to everyday facts and everyday emotions" (Orwell, "Inside the Whale"); and as Martin writes in *King of Smut*, "It was the truth of life that [Miller] was trying to get into his art – even if it became necessary to seem to sacrifice art in order to do so" (Martin, *King of Smut*, 356).

Moving away from the Joyce connection, Orwell goes into the nature of obscene books:

When a book like *Tropic of Cancer* appears, it is only natural that the first thing people notice should be its obscenity. Given our current notions of literary decency, it is not at all easy to approach an unprintable book with detachment. Either one is shocked and disgusted, or one is morbidly thrilled, or one is determined above all else not to be impressed. The last is probably the commonest reaction, with the result that unprintable books often get less attention than they deserve. (Orwell, "Inside the Whale")

The obscenity, in other words, is a spectacle – but only on the merit that it reveals us to ourselves. The reader then exhibits either fascination or rejection – which, ultimately, are the same. The reader is either seduced or horrified by the reflection of their own nature. "But in general", says Orwell, "the attitude is 'Let's swallow it whole'. And hence the seeming preoccupation with indecency and with the dirty-handkerchief side of life. It is only seeming, for the truth is that ordinary everyday life consists far more largely of horrors than writers of fiction

usually care to admit” (Orwell, “Inside the Whale”). This dualism of fascination and rejection, then, only really exists in the response to *Cancer*, as opposed to the text itself. To elaborate on this dualistic response to a text, we can turn to Bataille and his concept of continuity/discontinuity:

Reproduction implies the existence of discontinuous beings. Beings which reproduce themselves are distinct from one another, and those reproduced are likewise distinct from each other, just as they are distinct from their parents. Each being is distinct from all others. His birth, his death, the events of his life may have an interest for others, but he alone is directly concerned in them. He is born alone. He dies alone. Between one being and another, there is a gulf, a discontinuity. This gulf exists, for instance, between you, listening to me, and me, speaking to you. We are attempting to communicate, but no communication between us can abolish our fundamental difference. If you die, it is not my death. You and I are discontinuous beings. (Bataille, *Erotism*, 12)

This idea of continuity and discontinuity in the human physical and spiritual experience is a fundamental part of Bataille’s theory of erotics. In her essay “‘Recognition’ by a Woman!: A Reading of Bataille’s *L’Erotisme*”, Suzzane Guerlac describes this theory as “[...] a schematic opposition between continuity, or fusion, on the one hand, and discontinuity, or separation, on the other. Eroticism is characterized as a movement from the latter (back) to the former” (Guerlac, ‘Recognition’, 91). For Bataille, erotics composes the practices by which we attempt to unify ourselves, whether with another human (such would be the purpose of a physical sexual union), or with God (such would be the purpose of religion): “The final aim of eroticism is fusion, all barriers gone” (Bataille, *Erotism*, 138). However, the erotic practice, whatever form that may take, while perhaps giving us a taste of that union with other life, also reminds us of our disunion (or using Bataille’s terminology, our discontinuity). Therein lies the reason the reader

experiences either fascination or rejection when reading an obscene text – simply that it reminds them of their nature.

The obscenity of *Cancer* goes beyond providing this terrible glance at one's own nature, though; the obscenity can also be found in the way the book contrasts what was valued in literature at the time – what ideas, beliefs, preoccupations were commonly held. In Orwell's words, Miller's work could be described as something "[...] non-political, non-educational, non-progressive, non-cooperative, non-ethical, non-literary, non-consistent, non-contemporary" – a kind of philosophy that was markedly different than both his predecessors and his contemporaries, as "[...] if the keynote of the writers of the 'twenties is 'tragic sense of life', the keynote of the new writers is 'serious purpose'" (Orwell, "Inside the Whale"). Miller embodies neither of these; instead, "[his] outlook is deeply akin to that of Whitman [...] in which, after the lecheries, the swindles, the fights, the drinking bouts, and the imbecilities, he simply sits down and watches the Seine flowing past, in a sort of mystical acceptance of the thing-as-it-is" (Orwell, "Inside the Whale").

In contrasting *Cancer* with Céline's *Voyage au Bout de la Nuit*, Orwell describes the book as "[...] something so unusual as to seem almost anomalous, but it is the book of a man who is happy [...] Exactly the aspects of life that fill Céline with horror are the ones that appeal to him. So far from protesting, he is accepting" (Orwell, "Inside the Whale"). Miller is a madman, like Céline, but not spiteful – he is the gay and laughing madman of Heraclitean becoming. *Cancer* is decidedly suggestive of something new and completely unaffiliated to anything extant – extant beliefs, ideologies, places, selves, ways of life – but instead catalogues the process of becoming, with naturally cannot be situated in anything extant. This conflict with and departure from what is extant, along with the ways in which it reflects our own nature to us,

composes the real obscenity of Miller's writing – far more than simply being a naughty book. As Maurice Couturier puts it in his essay "Sex vs. Text: From Miller to Nabokov", "The most erotic details in this text are in the metaphors rather than the helpless explosions of bestiality" (Couturier, "Sex vs. Text", 248).

In her essay "Henry Miller and the Book of Life", Katy Masuga offers an extensive study on the obfuscation of what is significant in Miller's work by its own erotic dimension, writing: "A controversial writer at the outset, Miller's negative literary reputation has often kept his work excluded from much serious academic discourse. This exclusion is partly due to, as Mary Kellie Munsil notes, 'the seemingly misogynist and sexually violent inclinations of the protagonist / author'" (Masuga, "Book of Life", 182). Continuing, Masuga asserts that "This negative issue of pornography, among others that deride Miller's literary merit, ultimately comes as a result of an array of misreadings of Miller's work, in the sense that he is often read literally rather than within a context that his work requires" (Masuga, "Book of Life", 182). This context, Masuga argues, evolves from the following basis:

Indeed, relative to this indictment of Miller as pornographic, a poor writer, and unworthy of academic attention is the very quality in Miller's writing that precisely blurs these lines between acceptable writing, not just in terms of cultural norms (on topics of sexuality, among others) but in terms of a sense of the quality of writing that the reader observes in both the form and content in Miller. That is to say, if Miller is creating a "new" form of autobiography, for example, it is precisely in this new form that Miller's ingenuity can truly shine and should be permitted to do so by the critics [...] Miller's writing style needs to be considered not within the confines of traditional literary evaluation but precisely as something exceptional and external to those conventions; as something that asks its reader to rethink not only certain literary guidelines and expectations, but the very ontological basis on which such guidelines and conventions situate themselves. (Masuga, "Book of Life", 182)

In essence, Masuga argues that Miller's work must be examined in the context of the work itself, as opposed to conducting an external evaluation – precisely because the project his work undertakes is to deconstruct external methodologies of evaluation. I made a similar proposition above in positing that Miller's work is a manifestation of Heraclitean becoming; in that it is a wheel which is constantly reinventing itself, it is always decidedly parting with what already exists – which renders any extant methodology of evaluation medieval. The challenge to this line of thought, however, is that it is Miller himself who gives us the cross with which to crucify him – it is not simply due to a misunderstanding of his work as pornographic by the reader, as Masuga states, but rather a reality that is present in the work. Then again, this challenge is part of what is endearing about Miller, and fits with his philosophy of 'total surrender': in giving us the tools with which we can shear off what is external and not of the self, he necessarily implicates himself as a target against which we ought to level our blade.

In closing out his essay, Orwell touches on what he believes to be an important part of the philosophy expressed in *Cancer*:

Where Miller's work is symptomatically important is in its avoidance of any of these attitudes. He is neither pushing the world-process forward nor trying to drag it back, but on the other hand he is by no means ignoring it. I should say that he believes in the impending ruin of Western Civilization much more firmly than the majority of 'revolutionary' writers; only he does not feel called upon to do anything about it. He is fiddling while Rome is burning, and, unlike the enormous majority of people who do this, fiddling with his face towards the flames. (Orwell, "Inside the Whale")

This attitude of unconditional acceptance on the part of Miller, or at least his narrators, is reflected in the form of the writing just as much as the content. This naturally brings to mind Proust, where the form of each paragraph is a microcosm of the content of the novel. If in Proust the arc of a paragraph adheres the following formula: begins with the creation of an idea,

structure, possibility; and ends with the disillusion, the tearing down of that – then in Miller it is the opposite. Though the arc is longer because the sentences themselves are not as extensive as in Proust, the arc begins with disillusionment of a thing, a situation, and ends with a gay acceptance and drunkenness (in the Baudelairean sense). From a “a story about a spavined horse” (Miller, *Cancer*, 14) flows wine and sunshine: “With that bottle between my legs and the sun splashing through the window I experience once again the splendor of those miserable days when I first arrived in Paris, a poverty-stricken individual who haunted the streets like a ghost at a banquet” (Miller, *Cancer*, 15). Or on page 17, where he begins with disillusion:

And it was down the Rue Bonaparte that only a year before Mona and I used to walk every night, after we had taken leave of Borowski. St. Sulpice not meaning much to me then, nor anything in Paris. Washed out with talk. Sick of faces. Fed up with cathedrals and squares and menageries and what not. Picking up a book in the red bedroom and the cane chair uncomfortable; tired of sitting on my ass all day long, tired of red wallpaper, tired of seeing so many people jabbering away about nothing. The red bedroom and the trunk always open; her gowns lying about in a delirium of disorder. The red bedroom with my galoshes and canes, the notebooks I never touched, the manuscripts lying cold and dead. Paris! (Miller, *Cancer*, 17)

Only to transition, in the same long paragraph, to a scene of orgiastic joy and drunkenness:

In that Paris of '28 only one night stands out in my memory – the night before sailing for America [...] *leaving in the morning!* That's what I'm telling the blonde with agate-colored eyes. And while I'm telling her she takes my hand and squeezes it between her legs. In the lavatory I stand before the bowl with a tremendous erection; it seems light and heavy at the same time, like a piece of lead with wings on it [...] I greet them cordially, prick in hand. They give me a wink and pass on. In the vestibule, as I'm buttoning my fly, I notice one of them is waiting for her friend to come out of the can. The music is still playing and maybe Mona'll be coming to fetch me, or Borowski with his gold-knobbed cane, but I'm in her arms now and she has hold of me and I don't care who comes or what happens (Miller, *Cancer*, 17)

The architecture of the paragraphs, as detailed above, is the same in the content and the philosophy: “[...] the splendor of those miserable days” (Miller, *Cancer*, 15) – this, along with “I have no money, no resources, no hopes. I am the happiest man alive” (Miller, *Cancer*, 1) seems an apt summation of the paradox in Miller, the inversion. Amongst the poverty of everything else, a spiritual contentment; amongst things dead and dying, an affirmation of the will to live. Masuga addresses Miller’s philosophy of radical acceptance, which is also his narrator existing in a constant state of becoming, in the context of the metaphysics of writing: “The actual act of writing in Miller is perhaps a state of mind, a constant mental movement and less a process of adding up words on paper. It is a way of seeing, a way of being-in-the-world or simply a matter of perception. The issue is one not just of literature then, but of language itself” (Masuga, “Book of Life”, 187). In this sense, writing in Miller is not confined to an act of simply producing something – in fact, the product couldn’t be less relevant – rather, it has only to do with the process itself, which is a way of, as Masuga says, “being-in-the-world”. “Certainly a most noteworthy characteristic of Miller's writing”, Masuga continues, “is his interest not necessarily in writing a great work of literature but in the act of writing itself and in writing in order to live to explore the nature of writing for the sake of writing, or, perhaps, for the task that is writing itself – with or without a ‘sake’ or any kind of definable purpose” (Masuga, “Book of Life,” 187).

This oscillation between dejection and affirmation reflects the paradox inherent in an erotic practice: an expression which, though originating from a surplus of life and a need to do something with it, serves to bring us as close to death as possible. This phenomenon shows up in the practice of writing, for example, in that one desperately feels the need to write to relieve the tension of that overabundance of eros, but to finish writing necessarily entails a certain kind of

death or forfeiture. As Bataille expresses, “Eroticism, it may be said, is assenting to life up to the point of death [...] Indeed, although erotic activity is in the first place an exuberance of life, the object of this psychological quest [...] is not alien to death” (Bataille, *Erotism*, 12). The language, too, is bodily; erotic in the sense that it is bursting with life, threatening to brim over like a cup that is always too full. In Miller, for example: “More comfortable down in that thick stew pouring into the Gare St. Lazare, the whores in the doorways, seltzer bottles on every table; a thick tide of semen flooding the gutters. Nothing better between five and seven than to be pushed around in that throng” (Miller, *Cancer*, 15).

This particular idea comes up in *Tropic of Capricorn* as well, when the narrator is walking down Broadway – this sense of being immersed and lost in a crowd. Indeed, this idea seems to be at the center of his whole experience – the loss of oneself into something larger; into the amorphous mass of humanity. This idea reflects that longing Bataille speaks of – longing of the human being for continuity, to be united with a partner or, in a larger sense, humanity, life:

On the most fundamental level there are transitions from continuous to discontinuous or from discontinuous to continuous. We are discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity. We find the state of affairs that binds us to our random and ephemeral individuality hard to bear. Along with our tormenting desire that this evanescent thing should last, there stands our obsession with a primal continuity linking us with everything that is [...] A man can suffer at the thought of not existing in the world like a wave lost among many other waves. [In eroticism] the concern is to substitute for the individual isolated discontinuity a feeling of profound continuity. (Bataille, *Erotism*, 16)

Yet love is always the challenge in Miller when aspiring to that continuity of being. Bataille, further on, addresses love, saying:

We suffer from our isolation in our individual separateness. Love reiterates: 'If only you possessed the beloved one, your soul sick with loneliness would be one with the soul of the beloved' [...] Through the beloved appears [...] full and limitless being unconfined within the trammels of separate personalities, continuity of being, glimpsed as a deliverance through the person of the beloved. There is something absurd and horribly commixed about this conception, yet beyond the absurdity, the confusion and the suffering there lies a miraculous truth. There is nothing really illusory in the truth of love; the beloved being is indeed equated for the lover [...] with the truth of existence. Chance may will it that through that being, the world's complexities laid aside, the lover may perceive the true depths of existence and their simplicity. (Bataille, *Erotism*, 21)

Just as much as love is an experience that promises, and even briefly provides, a sense of continuity, it reveals by way of contrast the extreme discontinuity of one's individual existence. In *Cancer* and *Capricorn*, the narrator has a deep love for Mona, whom he initially meets at the end of *Capricorn*, and by the events of *Cancer*, has left him (though the narrator often reflects on her within the novel). Love for a particular individual is an experience that draws one out of the crowd; an experience that isolates and separates the two lovers, as well as the two individuals. This is the nature of an erotic practice, among which the experience of love is included. This is demonstrated on page 19 of *Cancer* when the narrator is waiting and searching for Mona in a crowd: "Mona has been away for a long time and it's just today I'm meeting her at the Gare St. Lazare. Toward evening I'm standing there with my face squeezed between the bars, but there's no Mona, and I read the cable over again but it doesn't help any [...] Strolling past the Dôme a little later suddenly I see a pale, heavy face and burning eyes [...] She rises up out of a sea of faces and embraces me, embraces me passionately – a thousand eyes, noses, fingers, legs, bottles, windows, purses, saucers all glaring at us and we in each other's arms oblivious" (Miller, *Cancer*, 19).

The narrator later reflects on the experience of losing this love after Mona has left him:

Now and then, it's true, I did think of Mona, not as of a person in a definite aura of time and space, but separately, detached, as though she had blown up into a great cloudlike form that blotted out the past. I couldn't allow myself to think about her very long; if I had I would have jumped off the bridge. It's strange. I had become so reconciled to this life without her, and yet if I thought about her only for a minute it was enough to pierce the bone and marrow of my contentment and shove me back again into the agonizing gutter of my wretched past [...] And now sometimes, in the very midst of things, sometimes when I feel that I am absolutely free of it all, suddenly, in rounding a corner perhaps, there will bob up a little square, a few trees and a bench, a deserted spot where we stood and had it out, where we drove each other crazy with bitter, jealous scenes [...] When I realize that she is gone, perhaps gone forever, a great void opens up and I feel that I am falling, falling, falling into deep black space. And this is worse than tears, deeper than regret or pain or sorrow; it is the abyss into which Satan was plunged. There is no climbing back, no ray of light, no sound of human voice or human touch of hand... (Miller, *Cancer*, 177)

Reflecting further on her departure, he continues: "How many thousand times, in walking through the streets at night, have I wondered if the day would ever come again when she would be at my side: all those yearning looks I bestowed on the buildings and statues, I had looked at them so hungrily, so desperately, that by now my thoughts must have become part of the very buildings and statues, they must be saturated with my anguish" (Miller, *Cancer*, 178).

And finally:

Walking down the Rue Lhomond one night in a fit of unusual anguish and desolation, certain things were revealed to me in poignant clarity. Whether it was that I had so often walked this street in bitterness and despair or whether it was the remembrance of a phrase which she had dropped one night as we stood at the Place Lucien-Herr I do not know. "Why don't you show me that Paris," she said, "that you have written about?" One thing I know, that at the recollection of these words I suddenly realized the impossibility of ever revealing to her that Paris which I had gotten to know, the Paris whose *arrondissements* are undefined,

a Paris that has never existed except by virtue of my loneliness, my hunger for her [...] This Paris, to which I alone had the key, hardly lends itself to a tour [...] it is a Paris that has to be lived, that has to be experienced each day in a thousand different forms of torture, a Paris that grows inside you like a cancer, and grows and grows until you are eaten away by it. (Miller, *Cancer*, 179)

The narrator's progression through and processing of the loss of Mona leads him to this crucial point of understanding: he cannot show Mona the Paris which he has written about precisely because it only exists in the writing; and the writing only exists "[...] by virtue of my loneliness, my hunger for her" (Miller, *Cancer*, 179). The loss of Mona, of that one avenue of eroticism (love), was necessary for this new erotic practice of writing to come into being – this book which he is writing is the manifestation of the new life, for which the departure of the old life provided the genesis. This same idea is addressed in *Tropic of Capricorn*: "I was alone and there were millions of people around me. It came over me, as I stood there, that I wasn't thinking of her any more; I was thinking of this book which I am writing, and the book had become more important to me than her" (Miller, *Capricorn*, 303). As was related in *Cancer*, the writing of 'the book' eventually takes the place of the love-interest for the narrator. He experiences love, loses the object of his love, and from the resultant emptiness grows 'the book' – a monument to his love that takes on a life of its own. In this sense, the object of desire is the same thing as the erotic practice – there is no difference between product and process. As far as the novels and the narrators are concerned, Mona *is* his loving Mona; the book *is* his writing it. As Masuga states:

Miller has an understanding of the process of writing as something that simultaneously brings him closer and further away from living. Writing is necessary for seizing the world, for getting a grasp on it in the sense of the way things function, how they are considered, understood, used and valued. It is not a privilege, nor a pleasure to write: it is a necessity. It is an attempt to get closer to an essence, a sense of

being, that itself is always moving away due to its being written and that therefore, as Miller realizes, does not exist - but this knowledge does not halt the writer's process of seeking it. (Masuga 186)

Keeping this in consideration, it is easy to see why the novels might be thought of as 'erotica' – it was necessary to detail the narrator's obsession with sexuality and love in order to ultimately transcend it. It's in this way one can 'miss the forest for the trees': if one reads Miller's novels as a collection of individual organs and processes instead of the ultimate motion being enacted, it is easy to miss the fact that despite the apparent preoccupation with sexuality, the true agenda is to go beyond it and develop a new erotic practice – writing. To replace one god with another, as it were, but with the hope that this particular act of worship will bring one closer to one's god than the previous managed to do; to do away with an "[...] eroticism which is a fusion, which shifts interest away from and beyond the person and his limits, [which is] expressed by an object. We are faced with the paradox of an object which implies the abolition of the limits of all objects, of an erotic object" (Bataille, *Erotism*, 139). Relinquishing Mona as his god, he instead makes a god of the self, of life – a godless god; one with no object.

The narrator articulates this idea further in *Capricorn*: "But when I realized that she could do without me, even for a limited time, the truth which I had tried to shut out began to grow with alarming rapidity. It was more painful than anything I had ever experienced before, but it was also healing. When I was completely emptied, when the loneliness had reached such a point that it could not be sharpened any further, I suddenly felt that, to go on living, this intolerable truth had to be incorporated into something greater than the frame of personal misfortune. I felt that I had made an imperceptible switch into another realm, a realm of tougher, more elastic fibre, which the most horrible truth was powerless to destroy" (Miller, *Capricorn*, 304).

In short, the loss of love, and subsequently the loss of the erotic practice of loving, engendered the possibility of this “[...] imperceptible switch into another realm” (Miller, *Capricorn*, 304) in which writing, and its manifestation as ‘the book’, become the new erotic practice. As Bataille puts it, “The object of desire is different from eroticism itself; it is not eroticism in its completeness, but eroticism working through it” (Bataille, *Erotism*, 139). In losing Mona and turning to the practice of writing, the narrator effectively gives up the object of desire and transcends to an objectless eroticism. This is, in its essence, the journey of the narrator in the *Tropics* and the challenge the books concern themselves with: the shift towards an eroticism without object; one that is self-generated, a closed circuit: “Eroticism is one aspect of the inner life of man. We fail to realise this because man is everlastingly in search of an object outside himself but this object answers the innerness of the desire” (Bataille, *Erotism*, 30).

The symbol of a closed circuit is pertinent here: the image of such an idea resembles the loop of a ‘zero’ – and the symbol of a ‘zero’ and what that suggests is often returned to by the narrator throughout the *Tropics*. But I will return to this later; first it is necessary to tie up the issues of love and sex:

There is, quite obviously in both books, a hatred and a love of women in most of the central male characters. This relates directly back to this idea of the object of desire: always in the novels, the object is a woman – women are the avenues through which desire passes and is manifested. The city of Paris, too, fulfills the same role: it engenders the same hatred and love in the male characters, and acts just as much as a channel through which desire flows. In this sense the women of the novel, and the city – they are truly objectified, as they only seem to function as vehicles for the male characters to express themselves. Further, any hatred and love that is engendered by women cannot be attributed to them – they only reflect the male characters to

themselves. What interests me principally about this objectification is the totality of it: neither novel contains an actual female character – only as symbols or archetypes – and where there is totality, there is likely some symbolic quality to the situation. As Guerlac explains, “The object of desire, Bataille writes in *L'Histoire de l'erotisme* is ‘the mirror in which we ourselves are reflected’ (OC, 100). The woman performs this reflection to the extent that she operates as a sign [...] In the possession of the erotic object man comes into consciousness-of loss, of death, and of himself as erotic subject. The erotic object must be not only a woman, but a woman as object” (Guerlac, “Recognition”, 92). The alternating hatred and love of women, both inflamed, only betrays the apparent overarching obsession of the novels: the obsession with the idea that one could be completed by something external to the self – be it a person, a city, a meal. In line with Bataille, the male characters are simultaneously enamored with the women they encounter because they represent a counterpart, a chance at continuity, and enraged because they reveal to them the discontinuity of individual existence. It is on account of this that the erotic becomes a preoccupation: it is the depth of their obsession that engenders both hatred and love – these which are not ultimately for women, or for Paris, or for anything but what they reflect back to the men of themselves.

Elaine Blair touches on this topic in a back-and-forth exchange between herself and writer Erica Jong (who had a literary relationship with Miller and wrote a novel about him). Jong, in a critical response to Blair’s *On Henry Miller: Or, How to Be an Anarchist*, charges Blair with misreading Miller as a misogynist. In her own response, Blair asserts that Miller

[...] gives no sign of perceiving a crucial aspect of sexuality. To put it simply: one person’s expressions of sexual desire can impinge on another person’s freedom. This impingement may be accidental or it may be intentional; it may be the very source of pleasure. This was something that Miller couldn’t see, or,

more accurately, he didn't recognize a potential moral problem in it [...] He is a searching philosopher in other respects, but his philosophy of sex is shallow. (Blair, "Response to Erica Jong", New York Review)

In this, Blair effectively sums up the challenge of Miller: how to locate the "searching philosopher" amongst the erotic baggage, which, as Masuga suggests when she claims we must examine the writing on its own terms and in its own context, means searching through the baggage itself. To put it another way, it is necessary to unpack this baggage and create a map using the items within – a map being simply a collection of symbols. As I mentioned above, where there is totality there must be symbolism – totality must be a farce. As Masuga points out, "Miller is constantly humoring the reader, but bringing him 'into the know' by reminding him that he is essentially reading a farcical text. What is interesting about this particular point is that, of course, Miller's text may be the least farcical of all, in its desire and ability to assert itself as a very fragmented construction and without any claims or illusions otherwise" (Masuga, "Book of Life", 189).

The narrator, while still very much ensconced in this manner of relating to women, which is to say a non-relation, appears to be slightly more complex in that he exhibits a sense of self-consciousness, at least as regards his observations of his friends, such as the character Van Norden. The principal terror of this character is that the women he sleeps with will take his "soul", a term and usage which displeases the narrator, who thinks that "somehow it seemed like a false coin" (Miller, *Cancer*, 129): "It was the soul of him that women were trying to possess – that he made clear to me. He has explained it over and over again, but he comes back to it afresh each time like a paranoic to his obsession [...] His one fear is to be left alone, and this fear is so deep and persistent that even when he is on top of a woman, even when he has welded himself to her, he cannot escape the prison which he has created for himself" (Miller, *Cancer*, 130).

And then: “‘I try all sorts of things’, he explains to me. ‘I even count sometimes, or I begin to think of a problem in philosophy, but it doesn’t work. It’s like I’m two people, and one of them is watching me all the time. I get so goddamned mad at myself that I could kill myself...and in a way, that’s what I do every time I have an orgasm. For one second like I obliterate myself. There’s not even one me then...there’s nothing’” (Miller, *Cancer*, 130). To reference Bataille: “Each being contributes to the self-negation of the other, yet the negation is not by any means a recognition of the other as a partner. This attraction seems to be a matter less of similarity between the two than of the plethora of the other. The violence of the one goes out to meet the violence of the other; on each side there is an inner compulsion to get out of the limits of individual discontinuity [...] At the moment of conjunction the animal couple is not made up of two discontinuous beings drawing close together uniting in a current of momentary continuity: there is no real union; two individuals in the grip of violence brought together by the preordained reflexes of sexual intercourse share in a state of crisis in which both are beside themselves” (Bataille, *Eroticism*, 112).

In Van Norden, a shadow of the narrator in many ways, there is a character who is enraged at this brief union with another; enraged at both the union itself and the other person involved because the sum of it all only serves to remind him that he will soon, once again, resume his state of discontinuity – his individual existence. In a way, Van Norden demonstrates the true obscenity of Miller’s writing: not because he is a foul and miserable character, but because he reflects back to the reader some of the many foul and miserable ways humanity attempts to come to terms with its discontinuous existence. Van Norden elaborates further on his sexual experience: “‘For a few seconds afterward I have a fine spiritual glow...and maybe it would continue that way indefinitely – how can you tell? – if it weren’t for the fact that there’s a

woman beside you and then the douche bag and the water running...all those little details that make you desperately self-conscious, desperately lonely” (Miller, *Cancer*, 130). And then, as if in direct opposition to his fear of a sex partner taking his soul:

‘But what is it you want of a woman, then?’ I demand. He begins to mold his hands; his lower lip droops. He looks completely frustrated. When eventually he succeeds in stammering out a few broken phrases it’s with the conviction that behind his words lies an overwhelming futility. ‘I want to be able to surrender myself to a woman,’ he blurts out. ‘I want her to take me out of myself [...] She’s got to make me believe that I need her, that I can’t live without her [...] If she could only make me believe that there was something more important on earth than myself. Jesus, I hate myself!’ (Miller, *Cancer*, 131)

What does this mad soliloquy of Van Norden’s signify if not that very seizure of the soul which he claims to be his greatest fear? – and what is the loss of the soul if not the loss of the individual self-concept to the throng of life at large? One can see the paradox, and yet the parallelism, of this character’s hopes and fears – they are one and the same. He wishes to lose himself entirely, and yet the very thought of it terrifies him and inspires an insipid hatred of those whom he deems (the women he sleeps with, in this case) to be culpable. Unlike the narrator, however, Van Norden has not discovered writing – or rather, he doesn’t care enough to begin to write, and instead of embarking on the journey of that erotic practice, remains mired in a dimension of cyclical sexual suffering and hatred.

The narrator, on the other hand, has discovered writing – an alternate erotic practice to sex and love. “Poetry leads to the same place as all forms of eroticism: to the blending and fusion of separate objects. It leads us to eternity, it leads us to death, and through death to continuity. Poetry is eternity; the sun matched with the sea” (Bataille, *Erotism*, 26). This is, again, the real eroticism of Miller’s writing: behind the façade of sex is always the writing practice; sex is merely a charade, a shadow. The seeking of a sexual or love union with another (in other words,

an erotic practice which is dependent on having an external object) is what is sought to be transcended by way of developing a self-sufficient practice – for the narrator, writing. Summing this idea up, the narrator says of another character, Tania: “[...] something is germinating inside me which will destroy her...” (Miller, *Cancer*, 28). What he speaks of is the ‘book’ – with its existence, what anything external has to offer him is rendered moot.

This leads us back to the concept of a ‘zero’: to be a zero, a ‘cipher’ as the narrator calls it, is to have nothing, to be nothing – unable to be negated from or added to. “I’m lying there on the iron bed thinking what a zero I have become, what a cipher, what a nullity [...] a non-entity” (Miller, *Cancer*, 78). This state at which the narrator arrives represents a closed-circuit eroticism – one in which the practice requires no object (writing, in this case). As I have said, it was only possible for the narrator to arrive at this point through the loss of Mona – that disillusionment doubled as the disillusionment with object-based eroticism: “Somehow the realization that nothing was to be hoped for had a salutary effect upon me. For weeks and months, for years, in fact, all my life I had been looking forward to something happening, some extrinsic event that would alter my life, and now suddenly, inspired by the absolute hopelessness of everything, I felt relieved, felt as though a great burden had been lifted from my shoulders” (Miller, *Cancer*, 97).

The narrator continues this thought:

Walking toward Montparnasse I decided to let myself drift with the tide, to make not the least resistance to fate, no matter in what form it presented itself. Nothing that had happened to me thus far has been sufficient enough to destroy me; nothing had been destroyed except my illusions. I myself was intact. The world was intact. [...] It seemed to me that the great calamity had already manifested itself, that I could be no more truly alone than at this very moment. I made up my mind that I would hold on to nothing, that I would expect nothing, that henceforth I would live as an animal, a beast of prey, a rover, a plunderer [...] At the limits of his spiritual being mad finds himself again naked as a savage. [...] When he finds God, as it were,

he has been picked clean: he is a skeleton. One must burrow into life again in order to put on flesh. The word must become flesh; the soul thirsts. On whatever crumb my eye fastens, I will pounce and devour. If to live is the paramount thing, then I will live, even if I must become a cannibal. Heretofore I have been trying to save my precious hide, trying to preserve the few pieces of meat that hid my bones. I am done with that. I have reached the limits of endurance. My back is to the wall; I can retreat no further. [...] I have found God, but he is insufficient. (Miller, *Cancer*, 97)

In becoming a ‘zero’, a ‘non-entity’, one relinquishes the individual, single self – for whatever duration. It is to enter Bataille’s state of continuity: “In essence, the domain of eroticism is the domain of violence, of violation [...] The whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives” (Bataille, *Erotism*, 16). In the artistic practice, the object that is necessary in the sexual union is replaced by a divided self – the self as separated entities. In this dance of creation, the divided portions seek to converge on each other (coming into ‘self-knowledge’). Through this practice of writing, the narrator seeks to express himself as honestly as possible – which necessitates knowing himself as honestly as possible. This touches on what is significant in Miller’s writing: it demonstrates what an erotic practice is and how it is necessary for the development of an individual. This is the essential investigation in his writing, clothed as it may be in the sexual-eroticism it seeks to transcend.

As a foreword to *Tropic of Capricorn*, Miller quotes the foreword to Peter Abelard’s *Historia Calamitatum*:

‘Often the hearts of men and women are stirred, as likewise they are soothed in their sorrows, more by example than by words. And therefore, because I too have known some consolation from speech had with one who was a witness thereof, am I now minded to write of the sufferings which have sprung out of my misfortunes, for the eyes of one who, though absent, is of himself ever a consoler. This I do so that, in

comparing your sorrows with mine, you may discover that yours are in truth nought, or at the most but of small account, and so you shall come to bear them more easily.’ (Miller, *Capricorn*, 8)

In this the idea of a union is evident: one between the author and the reader; the artist and the consumer of the art. That the author might be able to touch the reader in some way through the medium of their writing. Art, again, constitutes an erotic practice – which is a means of bringing two entities together. This foreword points to the principal struggle of Miller: that is, the search for a method by which he can break the chain of Bataille’s discontinuity. By conducting an artistic practice, he hopes to connect with somebody, anybody; and therefore to humanity beyond himself; and therefore to himself – the individual self that is a microcosm of life, and vice versa (in the sense of a snowflake or a mandala).

The struggle of an artistic (erotic) practice is the struggle to communicate – that is, to bridge a gap between multiple points. As soon as there is differentiation, multiplicity, there arises the need for a method of communication. If one desires to merge with a lover, there must be a sexual union; if one desires to merge with God, there must be prayer; and so on. This is a principle aspect of Bataille’s theories: that the erotic practice acts as a method by which we bridge a given gap. He touches on this in terms of nakedness:

Nakedness offers a contrast to self-possession, to discontinuous existence, in other words. It is a state of communication revealing a quest for a possible continuance of being beyond the confines of the self.

Bodies open out to a state of continuity through secret channels that give us a feeling of obscenity.

Obscenity is our name for the uneasiness which upsets the physical state associated with self-possession, with the possession of a recognized and stable individuality. (Bataille, *Erotism*, 17)

This idea of nakedness goes beyond being physically naked – there is a nakedness, for example, in any honest attempt at communication; a vulnerability, as it were. And to be naked, to be

vulnerable, as Bataille explains, is obscene; to bare oneself openly on the page is obscene; to embrace the loss of the self is obscene; to be a ‘zero’ is obscene: “Eroticism always entails a breaking down of established patterns, the patterns, I repeat, of the regulated social order basic to our discontinuous mode of existence as defined and separate individuals” (Bataille, *Eroticism*, 19).

But what is the significance of this journey which the narrator of the *Tropics* undertakes towards developing a self-sufficient erotic practice in writing? It is that this practice allows him to tell his story; to say what he means, truthfully – in other words, simply to express himself, and to do so as accurately as possible. And to express oneself, to articulate the spirit – which I would posit is the goal of any artistic practice – is to thereby become oneself (this brings to mind the haunting refrain in Proust: that if a thing could just be written, totally truthfully, then perhaps it could be understood, laid to rest): “For there is only one great adventure and that is inward towards the self, and for that, time nor space nor even deeds matter” (Miller, *Capricorn*, 11). In short, the significance of his journey is in how it details the path of the artist to self-realization. Miller addresses this in the following passage from *Capricorn*:

Everything that happens, when it has significance, is in the nature of a contradiction. Until the one for whom this is written came along I imagined that somewhere outside, in life, as they say, lay the solutions to all things. I thought, when I came upon her, that I was seizing hold of life, seizing hold of something which I could bite into. Instead I lost hold of life completely. I reached out for something to attach myself to – and I found nothing. But in reaching out, in the effort to grasp, to attach myself, left high and dry as I was, I nevertheless found something I had not looked for – *myself*. I found that what I had desired all my life was not to live – if what others are doing is called living – but to express myself. I realized that I never had the least interest in living, but only in this which I am doing now, something which is parallel to life, of it at the same time, and beyond it. (Miller, *Capricorn*, 13)

Through the erotic practice, the being that “[...] was enclosed in its individual separateness and its existence was discontinuous [is] brought back by death into continuity with all being, to the absence of separate individualities. The act of violence that deprives the creature of its limited particularity and bestows on it the limitless, infinite nature of sacred things” (Bataille, *Erotism*, 91). The erotic practice is a kind of theatre, *la petite mort*, which allows one to experience the death of the self on one level or another while still being able to return to one’s individualized existence thereafter. This is the kind of paradoxical theatre present in Miller’s writing:

everything must be acted out in order to be transcended; death and loss must occur for life to; the self must be disintegrated in order to be understood. This theatre is what Masuga refers to when she points to the endless farce in Miller’s writing. On page 91 of *Erotism*, Bataille compares the sexual union to ritual sacrifice in that a being, through an act of violence (an erotic practice), is stripped of its individuation and given up to the collective. In this sense the act of writing fulfills the same function: it is an act of violence to bring pen to paper, to create a new world, and one that requires the sacrifice of the individualized self.

The act of writing for Miller is continuous destruction and creation. Masuga asserts that “Miller uses the function of writing itself to create a character who is writing about writing” (Masuga, “Book of Life”, 183). The book that the reader sits and reads is about a person trying to write a book; and that book which he is trying to write is itself about writing a book. Further: “For Miller writing is the process itself, not the completed product. Writing is creation and not a means to an end” (Masuga 187). Writing for Miller is not a product, but a process; a book is not a product, but a process – something which is constantly becoming itself. In Masuga’s words, “[...] the presence of the text is actually a movement and a constant becoming; not a stagnant state in a fixed, imaginary universe” (Masuga 197). One would be hard pressed to even call it the

documentation of a process, for that would suggest the writing, the book, is in any way separate from the process itself. Necessarily, writing – this act of creation – is a process one undertakes vis-à-vis the tool of language, which is also the context. Writing is language in process – language made active. Miller’s preoccupation with writing is not inconsequential or random – it is the practice by which he can create the self. Again, where Brulotte writes of Sade, one gets the impression it could just as well be said of Miller: “This is, perhaps, where Sade’s greatest merit lies, and in his wake, though with varying degrees of success, that of all erotic literature: in his constant effort to exceed the limits of language, to remove the most problematic human experience from the silence in which it is hidden, to articulate the unintelligible, to circumscribe the most refractory elements of affectivity within the structures of language” (Brulotte, “Sade”, 61). If language is the tool with which one creates the self, then to “exceed the limits of language” is consequently to exceed the limits of the self – to enlarge the spirit.

As a constant state of becoming, Miller’s writing is also a constant transgression – the most superficial layer being, of course, the sexual-moral one. But when we look beyond this, we can see that the real undertaking of Miller is to annihilate language in the eternal fire of becoming; to be so constantly processing that the very moment a product is produced it is re-consumed for fuel for this ever-burning oven. Turning to Masuga again:

The narrator's own interest in becoming a writer is embedded in every facet of the text, and the act of writing about writing often enters the text in unexpected ways. This kind of writing always brings with it the two following discoveries: one, that there is no arriving at the destination of being a writer and two, that the task of writing itself is incapable of ever being completed. As his writing commences, Miller sets up a sense of a particular horizon of achievement through writing, the very nature of which is to remain a horizon. Highly significant is that Miller employs his paradoxical technique with a great deal of humor and self-awareness. It is perhaps this combination between his desperate interest in writing and his firm

understanding of its futility that characterizes Miller's style and underscores its literary value. (Masuga, "Book of Life", 183)

As she says, the horizon in Miller's writing is to remain just that – something unattainable, unproduceable; something constantly in process. "Again," Masuga continues, "Miller is deliberately in pursuit of 'the end of writing' by writing about writing and the necessary ontological failure of that writing ever to achieve what it seeks to achieve: completion, closure, stable meaning" (Masuga, "Book of Life", 184).

Further on, Masuga discusses the symbol of the mirror:

Can the writer hold up a mirror to himself in the act of writing? Crucially, Miller indicates that one's sense of self is always bound to an external identity of oneself. Hence, the mirror always reflects a separate, unique subject who is not the same self that is present on the front-side of the mirror. With the eyes closed, there is a presence of the self to the self; yet, with the eyes open the self is only perceiving itself and not directly knowing it. And yet knowing is always bound up with these two selves, or two modes of perception (subject perceived and object perceived). The perceiver encounters himself as the perceived in this case. (Masuga, "Book of Life", 195)

Specifically, she asserts that the act of writing is comparable to looking in a mirror with one's eyes closed – and that this mode where there is "a presence of the self to the self" is the only mode wherein one can truly witness the self. In contrast, to look in the mirror with one's eyes open, one perceives the figure therein and begins to form an idea of self, as opposed to an experience of self. The figure perceived in the mirror is an image, an object, and this is precisely the failure encountered by the narrator in the erotic practices of love or sexual union: to see oneself as reflected in another can never be an accurate rendition. Conversely, the erotic practice of writing, which is a relationship strictly between self and self without any interlocutor, is a method by which one can clearly see the self. Illustrating this notion on page 46 of *Capricorn*,

Miller describes a curious and abstract experience – the genesis of the practice of writing as it occurred in his life:

What I had begun, in the middle of the Brooklyn Bridge, was what I had begun time and time again in the past, usually when walking to my father's shop, a performance which was repeated day in and day out as if in a trance. What I had begun, in brief, was a book of the hours, of the tedium and monotony of my life in the midst of a ferocious activity. Not for years had I thought of this book which I used to write every day on my way from Delancey Street to Murray Hill. But going over the bridge the sun setting, the skyscrapers gleaming like phosphorescent cadavers, the remembrance of the past set in...remembrance of going back and forth over the bridge, going to a job which was death, returning to a home which was a morgue, memorizing *Faust* and looking down into the cemetery, spitting into the cemetery from the elevated train [...] why am I going to work, what will I do to-night [...] run away and become a cowboy, try Alaska, the gold mines, get off and turn around, don't die yet, wait another day, a stroke of luck [...] to-morrow a new life, where, anywhere, why begin again, the same thing everywhere [...] anyway each time I passed on high I was truly alone, and whenever that happened the book commenced to write itself, screaming the things which I never breathed, the thoughts I never uttered, the conversations I never held, the hopes, the dreams, the delusions I never admitted. If this was the true self then it was marvelous, and what's more it never seemed to change but always to pick up from the last stop. (Miller, *Capricorn*, 46)

This experience points to the fact that the erotic practice of writing is really a dialogue with the self – such as described by Masuga in her analogy of the mirror. This phenomenon is comparable to what Bataille terms 'inner experience', and in his essay 'Ecstasy, Sacrifice, Communication: Bataille on Religion and Inner Experience', Alexander C. Irwin provides a compelling investigation of this concept. Irwin first describes inner experience as "[...] the territory of an intensely private, inward-turning, and essentially ahistorical venture into the hidden regions of the psyche" (Irwin, "Ecstasy, Sacrifice, Communication", 106). Referencing Bataille, Irwin then goes on to point out that while this inner experience finds many a comparison in religious

practices (such as prayer or meditation), that ultimately “The experience can have no concern and no goal other than itself. Inner experience is its own sole authority, sole value” (Irwin, “Ecstasy, Sacrifice, Communication”, 109). Further,

For Bataille, inner experience, totally focused upon itself, abolishing deferred futures in the intensity of the instant, represents the negation of the project and the mode of being the project requires [...] Thus, the "principle of inner experience" must finally be formulated in paradoxical terms: to escape, by means of a project, from the domain of the project. (Irwin 110)

In other words, this inner experience is engineered on the basis of that ever-burning fire of becoming, “the intensity of the instant” as Irwin says. In this complete submission to process (or “project”), the process constantly negates itself. This is the state at which Miller’s narrator arrives in cultivating the erotic practice of writing: in undertaking this “project” of writing, it’s implicit that this project seeks the end of itself (“the end of writing”, as Masuga put it). But the very paradox and deliverance of it all is this seemingly impossible situation: from that fire of becoming emerges the essence of the self, with everything that is not-self burned away.

This is the ultimate goal of eroticism – the continuity of Bataille. But, when the erotic practice is relieved of an external object and one commences an inner relationship, there arises the opportunity to transcend those oscillations between continuity and discontinuity – an opportunity which is a perpetual balancing on impossibility. In tandem with Bataille, Irwin posits that “In such moments, ‘the experience attains the fusion of subject and object, being as subject unknowing, as object the unknown’ (OC 21). Yet immediately, as we attain communication with ‘the hidden world, transformed into an abyss by unknowing,’ unknowing crystallizes and fixes itself into a form of (mystical) knowledge: an image of the divine which we label ‘God.’ This knowledge then instantly demands its own transcendence, its own dissolution” (Irwin, “Ecstasy,

Sacrifice, Communication”, 111). In Miller’s words, “Truth lies in this knowledge of the end which is ruthless and remorseless. We can know the truth and accept it, or we can refuse the knowledge of it and neither die nor be born again” (Miller, *Capricorn*, 304).

This, then, is the allure of Miller’s work: he creates a narrative that demonstrates the use of an artistic practice, and, somewhat ironically, how taking up such a practice actually moves a person away from the objectification of human beings. His writing has been labeled as ‘erotica’, and in a sense rightfully so, but on a closer reading it becomes clear that the work seeks to transcend itself and move towards a more spiritual dimension of eroticism. Ultimately, I believe that it is this philosophical growth demonstrated in Miller’s writing that constitutes his contribution to literature, as well as to our understanding of the role of an artist and the function of artistic practices in our lives.

## Works Cited:

Bataille, Georges. *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*. Trans. Mary Dalwood. San Francisco: City Lights, 1986. [monoskop.org/images/a/a8/Bataille\\_Georges\\_Erotism\\_Death\\_and\\_Sensuality.pdf](http://monoskop.org/images/a/a8/Bataille_Georges_Erotism_Death_and_Sensuality.pdf)

Blair, Elaine. In response to Erica Jong. *New York Review*, March 2019.

[www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/03/21/henry-miller-mind-body-problem/](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/03/21/henry-miller-mind-body-problem/)

Brulotte, Gaëtan. "Sade and erotic discourse". *Paragraph*, March 2000, Vol. 23, No. 1, SADE AND HIS LEGACY, pp. 51-62. Pub. Edinburgh University Press. Stable URL:

[www.jstor.org/stable/43263585](http://www.jstor.org/stable/43263585)

Couturier, Maurice. "Sex vs. Text: From Miller to Nabokov". *Revue française d'études américaines*, May 1984, No. 20, 'ÉROTISME ET SEXUALITÉ DANS LA LITTÉRATURE AMÉRICAINNE / EROTICISM AND SEX IN AMERICAN LITERATURE' (May 1984), pp.

243-260. Pub. Editions Belin. [www.jstor.org/stable/20873164](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20873164)

Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Trans. C.J.M Hubback. The International Psycho-Analytical Press, 1922.

[www.libraryofsocialscience.com/assets/pdf/freud\\_beyond\\_the\\_pleasure\\_principle.pdf](http://www.libraryofsocialscience.com/assets/pdf/freud_beyond_the_pleasure_principle.pdf)

Gregory, Paul. "Eroticism and Love". *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Oct., 1988, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Oct., 1988), pp. 339-34. University of Illinois Press. [www.jstor.org/stable/20014257](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20014257)

Guerlac, Suzanne. "'Recognition' by a Woman!: A Reading of Bataille's *L'Erotisme*". *Yale French Studies*, 1990, No. 78, On Bataille (1990), pp. 90-105. Pub. Yale University Press.

[www.jstor.org/stable/2930117](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2930117)

Heraclitus. "Fragments" (published in container site "Antilogicalism"). Trans. John Burnet, Arthur Fairbanks, and Kathleen Freeman.

[https://antilogicalism.files.wordpress.com/2016/12/heraclitus\\_fragments\\_final.pdf](https://antilogicalism.files.wordpress.com/2016/12/heraclitus_fragments_final.pdf)

Irwin, Alexander C. "Ecstasy, Sacrifice, Communication: Bataille on Religion and Inner Experience". *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Spring 1993, Vol. 76, No. 1., pp. 105-128. Pub. Penn State University Press. [www.jstor.org/stable/41178621](http://www.jstor.org/stable/41178621)

Martin, Jay. "The King of Smut: Henry Miller's Tragical History". *The Antioch Review*, Autumn, 1977, Vol. 35, No. 4., pp. 342-367 Pub. Antioch Review. [www.jstor.org/stable/4637955](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4637955)

Masuga, Katy. "Henry Miller and the Book of Life". *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, Summer 2010, Vol. 52, No. 2., pp. 181-202. Pub. University of Texas Press. [www.jstor.org/stable/40755571](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40755571)

Miller, Henry. *Tropic of Cancer*. New York: Grove Press, 1961.

Miller, Henry. *Tropic of Capricorn*. New York: Granada, 1966.

Orwell, George. "Inside the Whale". *The Orwell Foundation*. Orig. published 1932. [www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/inside-the-whale/](http://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/inside-the-whale/)

Woolf, Virginia. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautman. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975-1980.