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On Henry Miller: Or, How to Be an Anarchist

By John Burnside

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As anyone who has tried to write about him knows, Henry Miller is a difficult subject. Besides his reputation for pornography and sexism – both partially justified and always requiring explanation – there’s also always the nagging sense of this defiantly anti-academic writer hovering, disapprovingly, over the critic’s shoulder. In his preface to *On Henry Miller*, a book intended ‘not about Miller, but after’ him, the poet and novelist John Burnside does a good job of summing up these pitfalls. Scanning an early draft, he says, he realised with horror first that he had unwittingly fudged the issue of female objectification, and second that he had produced a work ‘as unlike anything Henry Miller might have written as it was possible to be. There was no fever, no itch, no *drunkenness*.’

Like Miller – who wrote his own study after rather than about an idol, D H Lawrence – Burnside has tried to give lit crit a wide berth, aiming instead for a personal account of the impact reading Miller has had on his thinking, feeling and writing. That impact, it turns out, has mainly to do with a form of ‘spiritual’ or ‘pagan’ ‘anarchism’ he discovered as a teenager in Miller’s later, less celebrated work and which has stayed with him ever since. What we get, then, is a passionate and welcome defence of Miller as a thinker and writer, of anarchism, and of both as serious rather than adolescent preoccupations. As you’d expect from a personal literary homage, it also contains a healthy dose of rhapsodising and imitation.

The obvious advantage to focusing on ‘Henry Miller’s *other* books’, the ones he wrote after his famous, saucy decade in Paris, is that Burnside is able to shine a light on Miller’s less known, serious philosophical side. Miller the writer of dirty books was always an avid reader of Taoist theology, Henri Bergson, St Thomas Aquinas and Emma Goldman. Indeed, one unfortunate effect of his early work being banned was that it distracted critics from his intellectual grounding. It was only after he returned to America in the 1940s and settled in the West Coast mountain hamlet of Big Sur that these influences became express talking points in his work. Through loose, ‘drunken’ riffs on Miller’s little-read essay on Arthur Rimbaud, *The Time of the Assassins*, and on his travelogues on Greece and America, *The Colossus of Maroussi* and *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, Burnside makes the unfashionable case for Miller as a visionary artist whose life and works lead by example.

What Burnside has taken from Miller – and what he hopes to pass on – is not the usual licence to break taboos, but the urge to live and write as an ‘adept’ (a term Burnside lifts from ‘magic and alchemy’ and which means ‘one who owns nothing, but has use of everything’). Drawing from traditions as varied as the 17th-century Border ballad and late 19th-century

German Romanticism, and pairing Miller with such unlikely philosophical allies as Henri Laborit and the *Tao Te Ching*, Burnside explains Miller's life after Paris as one in which self-liberation became his sole aim, with art being subordinated to the status of by-product and proof that this aim had been achieved. Rather than the controversial literature, Burnside says, this is Miller's chief legacy, and it elevates him above the writers and movements he is ordinarily associated with. Unlike the Beat Generation, which Miller helped to inspire, and the Surrealists, who inspired him, he 'understood the need to add anarchist *discipline* ... to the visionary imagination.' What Burnside means by this isn't always clear, but it has loosely to do with the alignment of order in oneself with the order of the natural world.

All this is valuable evidence that the aggression of Miller's early prose was offset by a softer spiritual vision that emerged later in his career. The starving artist who raved deliriously through Parisian streets in *Tropic of Cancer*, and whose main preoccupations were sex and food, had become by the 1940s 'a true *voyant*'. And yet by focusing so much on that late period, *On Henry Miller* overlooks the fact that the literature he wrote then simply wasn't as groundbreaking or influential as the early work. As Burnside rightly claims, *The Colossus of Maroussi* and *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* contain beautiful and insightful passages by a man who, after years of struggle, finally 'knew what he was about.' But they did little that was new stylistically, and – as Burnside's citations show – are compromised throughout by political and philosophical platitudes. It is interesting to be reminded of this other Henry Miller, but emphasising his spiritual transformation in older age runs the risk of diverting attention from the truly original Paris works, which George Orwell, Ezra Pound, T S Eliot and Samuel Beckett all understood to be game-changing.

Thankfully Burnside's gift as a poet and his easy, knowing imitation of Miller's disordered and digressional style save this homage from descending into cliché or starry-eyed apology. Despite the occasional tired swipe at the 'ensorious Right' or invective about his and Miller's common war on 'the-powers-that-be', *On Henry Miller* is a considered, moving account of how this flawed but much-misread writer thought, and of what he still offers, philosophically and politically. Like the best recent critics, Burnside emphasises both the real-life gentleness and the hopeless, damaged romanticism that belay Miller's publicly macho persona. It was 'fear of unmanliness', Burnside says, that drove Miller 'to write some of the works for which he has been most criticized', a fear that came from witnessing his father's browbeating by his mother and growing up in Teddy Roosevelt's America, where impossible standards of masculinity prevailed. Remembering his own father – browbeaten in the Scottish industrial workplace rather than the American home – and the pressures he himself endured as a working-class teenager drawn to literature, Burnside performs rare, sensitive but exacting psychoanalysis on Miller's sometimes 'monstrous' literary alter ego. Although *On Henry Miller* is the work of a fully paid-up fan, it succeeds where many others have failed in arguing persuasively for Miller's relevance today.