Rummaging through the bone-heap: Beat Writing and Reactionary Modernist Aesthetics

INTRO

- In his 1940 essay 'Inside the Whale' George Orwell praised the expatriate American author Henry Miller as 'a Whitman among the corpses'. Miller, he said, had applied the nineteenth century American Transcendentalist ideal of 'total acceptance' not only to 'the ancient bone-heap of Europe', but in an 'epoch of fear, tyranny and regimentation'.
- Agreeing with Orwell, I'll argue today that Miller's transplantation of Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson's ideology and aesthetic from 1830s America to Paris during the two world wars foreran the stylistic revolution represented by the Beat Generation after 1945.
- Work by Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs is steeped in a tension between transcendentalist optimism and fatalistic anti-humanism that can be traced back to their obsessions with the ancient bone-heap of Europe Orwell describes.
- Treating Henry Miller as an intermediary figure, this paper will briefly outline connections between the Beats and some of their less likely early modernist predecessors – from the 1910s apocalyptic meta-historian Oswald Spengler to wartime fascist collaborators Louis-Ferdinand Celine and Ezra Pound.
- While by no means an attempt to test their progressive worth, it aims at a better understanding of the complicated reactionary overtones that abound in Beat writing by putting their transcendentalist visions in the context of an early twentieth century modernist aesthetic.

MILLER IN PARIS 'RUMMAGING THROUGH THE BONE-HEAP' FOR FOOD

- Let's start with Miller's *Tropic of Cancer.*

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- Published in 1934, it's the loosely autobiographical account of an aspiring writer who, after two decades of failure in New York, moves to Paris to try and improve on his luck. Beyond the act of writing – which Miller, like the Beats, obsessed over - his chief preoccupation is QUOTE 'food in majuscule' END QUOTES, the day-to-day struggle to subsist without a steady income.
- Paraphrasing Emerson's dictum that 'life … consists in what a man is thinking all day ', Miller says 'If that be so then my life is nothing but a big intestine. I not only think about food all day but I dream about it at night'.
- As well as Emerson, there's an important precursor to this in the Norwegian writer Knut Hamsun, whose 1890 novel *Hunger* Miller claimed as an influence and which I'll come back to later in the paper.
- In *Tropic of Cancer* though, what we're presented with is a man obsessing on almost every page about where his next meal is going to come from, blagging

dinner or dinner money from friends, and rummaging through bins for scraps.

- That's one kind of rummaging my title suggests, the literal rummaging through piles of rubbish, piles of discarded goods for a sustenance that comes free.
- It works for Miller as a metaphor to describe his aesthetic process too. As he puts it in *Tropic of Capricorn*, the prequel to *Tropic of Cancer*:
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> 'In the discarded, worthless *thing* which everyone ignored there was contained the secret of my regeneration … I had a microscopic eye for the blemish, for the grain of ugliness which to me constituted the sole beauty of the object.'[1]

- Like Hamsun, Miller takes a perverse pride from these moments that might occasion shame. He elevates his poverty by focusing on the opportunity it affords him to live on his wits, freed from what he calls the conventional 'humiliation' of having to earn his daily bread, and rendered closer to the truth of animal physical existence through the growl in his stomach.
- That hunger and that act of noble scavenging convert bitter suffering into a cause for manic joy: both a Zen-like transcendence and Nietzschean embrace of the ego.

ORWELL ON MILLER

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- Into Miller's carnal-spiritual scene enters George Orwell, who famously lived down and out in Paris seven years before, and was impressed enough by *Tropic of Cancer* to build his long essay around it.
- Predictably, but much to Miller's distaste, Orwell read him with politics in mind, saying the remarkable thing about the book is that its author manages to stay 'merry and bright' in an age of totalitarian rhetoric, 'concentration camps, rubber truncheons … bombs, aeroplanes, tinned food machine guns, putsches, purges, slogans', that he has defied all odds to produce something resembling Walt Whitman in the fallen 1930s.
- If Whitman had counselled 'acceptance' at the dawn of an emerging American democracy, Orwell says that Miller does the same on a continent *where* and a point in history *when* there is nothing worth accepting.
- Transported from the land of progress and opportunity to a continent groaning under the weight of its bloody history, and confronted with the contemporary crisis of a failing economy, weakened liberal democratic government and violent political extremism, he should by rights be expected either to rail against the system or riff on the profound futility of existence.

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[1] Henry Miller, *Tropic of Capricorn* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005 [orig. ed.: Paris: Obelisk, 1939]), p. 50.

- Instead, Orwell declares enthusiastically, Miller accepts life - ordinary, everyday life divorced from politicking, idealising, divorced from the abstraction of ideas (clear modernist connotations here). His, Orwell says, is the 'voice from the 3rd class carriage' in a milieu saturated by shrill & privileged English proselytisers, poets like W.H. Auden and Stephen Spender who are 'playing with fire [but] don't know that fire is hot'.
- These are Orwell's binaries – the 'hard-boiled' American Miller, too savvy to get mixed up in futile political bun fights, versus idealistic 'Boy Scout' poets who allow their partisan hopes to obscure reality. It's real life versus political make-believe.

- For anyone who enjoys early Miller, it's heartening to hear him described in these terms. Indeed, *Tropic of Cancer* enduring appeal, the thing that saves it from its many lapses into overwriting and out-dated identity politics, is the familiarity and apparently brutal honesty of Miller's voice.
- He does, *as Orwell suggests*, seem to be speaking directly to you, and telling you how he feels and how he sees, rather than trying to persuade you to accept a particular cause or way of thinking.
- He is, as Orwell says, heroically, infectiously optimistic under woeful personal and social conditions. It was perceptive and original of Orwell at the time to look past the sensationalism surrounding Miller's graphic subject matter and point these things out.
- His class-based reading, however, misses a couple of fundamental facts: first, far from an anti-intellectual average Joe, Miller the author/ narrator was an autodidact at pains to show off his literary credentials. The book is full of ostentatious, often obscure literary and philosophical references. It revels in its moment, sourcing and sometimes lifting whole passages from Joyce, meta-historian Oswald Spengler, the French philosopher Henri Bergson, Nietzsche.
- His work in 1935 was steeped in the experiments of the previous two decades in Anglo-American and European literature. In this sense he was not an unreconstructed everyman telling it simply as it is, but rather an obvious product of his literary environment. But then Orwell is halfway aware of this. Before figuring him as 'the voice from the 3rd class carriage', he equates what Miler is doing in 1935 to what T.S. Eliot did with 'The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock' in 1915.

- The 2nd problem with Orwell's reading is that he ignores a clearly signposted philosophical foundation to the rejection of conventional morality in *Tropic of Cancer*, as well as Miller's zealous impulse not only to live and write accordingly but to light the way for his readers.
- What Orwell takes to be QUOTE UNQUOTES 'quietism' in fact rests on serious engagement with questions about human existence raised first in the 19th century by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and pre-Anarchists like Max Stirner then updated in the 20th through the pluralist philosophies of thinkers like the Frenchman Henri Bergson.
- This is part of Miller's heritage in early modernism and particularly those writers whose challenges to humanist conventions steered them into

politically murky waters. What I want to explore is a related paradox in Miller that reverberated in the Beat period and, later, into the 1960s counterculture.

- In the 1930s, he was motivated both by optimistic Transcendentalist ideals and a European scepticism about the anthropocentric notion of progressive, perfectible humanity. As Georges Bataille noted soon after Orwell's influential essay appeared, there is in fact a perversely moral undercurrent to Miller's repudiation of social etiquette and ethics.
- To Bataille, he's virtuous by his refusal of his 'daily bread' – both in terms of entering socially productive employment and the moral exchange system that keeps conventional society running.
- We can take this further to consider his narcissistic celebration of the self, and his Nietzsche-inspired rejection of what he termed false 'brotherhood' as having a very particularly humanistic purpose.
- Looked at from another angle, by playing around with anti-humanism he also ventures into some of the same murky waters as his modernist predecessors

<u>MILLER'S TRANSCENDENTALISM</u>

- Before thinking about these paradoxes – and their offshoots in the counterculture - it's worth detailing the link between Miller and Transcendentalism, a link that's been made by various scholars since Orwell, and particularly well by Paul R. Jackson in his 1977 essay 'Henry Miller, Emerson and the Divided Self'.

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- Miller made no secret of his debt both to Whitman and Emerson, beginning with a citation from Emerson in his preface to *Tropic of Cancer* and consolidated throughout the book through repeated speculations about their works.
- Following the Emerson quote, a prediction made in 1868 that novels will eventually 'give way … to diaries or autobiographies – captivating books, if only a man knew how to choose among what he calls his experiences that which is really his experiences, and how to record truth truthfully', he writes to a confessional autobiographical formula intended to replace what Whitman called the lies of manufactured Literature.
- 'Everything that was literature has fallen from me', Miller declares on his first page. Rather than entertain or explain through storytelling, he will, like Whitman 'sing for you … a little off key perhaps', but nonetheless a song that tells his personal truth.
- This is tied into Whitman's Emerson-inspired notion that all aspects of human life are worthy of literary representation as long as they are recorded honestly by the author as he or she sees and feels them.
- Having tried and failed to craft realist fiction along the lines of Theodore Dreiser, Miller falls back on his own life for material and determines to

include every aspect, from the serious to the mundane, from goings on in the mind to the goings on of the body and from the existentially revelatory to the abjectly humiliating; the last two often together in the same moment. Of course, as his modernist forbears had figured out, the task to include everything in the service of total truth was impossible - a fact Miller was both alive and defiantly opposed to.

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- In a moral sense, his writing follows Whitman by attempting also to do away with religious hang-ups about the sinfulness of the flesh. If Whitman luxuriates in the human form (nudity, genitals), its processes (youth, age, growth of hair) and its needs and appetites (for food, drink and excretion and for sex), Miller ratchets this up to consider not only the virtue inherent in acts corruptly coded as vice but to explore those acts brutally, as a method of self-cleansing.

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- By writing unflinchingly, often cruelly about sex, he was he says ''getting the poison out of [his] system.' 'Curiously enough', he went on, 'this poison had a tonic effect for others. It was as if I had given them some kind of immunity'.[2]
- Though they veer off in their own direction, philosophically and spiritually, these methods have their root in Emerson's Unitarian-inspired theory that the individual human being is divine.
- They break, like Emerson, with the strictures of organised puritanical religion by positing the spiritual as residing within. What Miller does is seize on that impulse - using the satiation of carnal appetites and thirsts to demonstrate the fleshly divine - but bypass Emerson and Whitman's belief that such divinity would be brought to the fore through union with a larger force in nature.
- In Whitman and Emerson (also Thoreau) Miller found 'rare eternal verities' (*The Books in My Life,* p. 318), and an early source of spiritual absolution: 'One comes away from a reading', he says, 'feeling purified' (BIML p. 184).

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- Indeed, in a letter to his lover and literary ally Anais Nin, he goes on the say: 'I wanted to raise Waldo Emerson to the skies, just to prove to the world that once there had been a great American – but more than that, because I once had been greatly influenced by him, he was bound up with a whole side of me that I consider my better side' (Henry Miller: Letters to Anais Nin, ed. by Gunther Stuhlmann (New York, 1965), p. 58).

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[2] Henry Miller, 'My Aims and Intentions,' in *Henry Miller on writing / selected by Thomas H. Moore from the published and unpublished works of Henry Miller* (New York: New Directions, 1964), p. 155. Originally published in *Art and Outrage. A correspondence about Henry Miller between A. Perlès and Lawrence Durrell* (London: Putnam, 1959).

- Crucially, he wouldn't develop that 'better side' fully until he'd moved back to America in his mellower old age and started writing a gnostic style of literature, one that was ridden with the kind of proselytising Orwell found absent in *Tropic of Cancer*.
- For the time being in the 1930s, he sourced Whitman and Emerson for a confessional starting position and a celebratory view of the body, but he did so on radically unromantic terms.

MILLER FORERAN THE BEATS' STYLISTIC REVOLUTION. STRADDLING TRANSCENDENTALIST OPTIMISM AND FATALISTIC ANTI-HUMANISM

- If the Beats were more definite inheritors of the Romantic tradition (of Emerson, Whitman and most emphatically, in Ginsberg's case, Blake) their own aversion to sentimentalism, informed like Miller's by a continental European tradition, also tempered this aspect of their work.
- They set out their humanist purposes more clearly and programmatically than Miller, envisioning social progress through individual efforts to transcend collectively restrictive spiritual and psychological limitations.
- Indeed, theirs was a movement inextricably tied to Emerson's notion of the American landscape as a point of communion through which human divinity could be realized. This is the fundamental difference between Miller and the Beats as twentieth century transcendentalists – that though he was enamored with Whitman's aesthetics and Emerson on the spirit, he began his writing career a disaffected self-imposed exile and could never bring himself to eulogize about the potential of the continent.
- He believed in what Orwell calls Whitman's democratic 'vistas' of the mind but can't countenance an equivalent vision for the vast expanse from coast to coast. This, even after returning to America in the 1950s and setting up home in magnificent Big Sur.
- His exile's ode to Whitman, however, filtered through European anti-humanism, had its logical conclusion in a post-1945 American renaissance that was bursting with lyrical optimism about human potential but mired also in an understanding of life according to the bondage imposed by physical wants and needs.

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- Like Miller their attraction to poetic truth in Whitman had its European counterpoint not only in Rimbaud's visionary poetics but the bitter disenchantment of Louis Ferdinand Celine and Jean Genet.
- In their respective first-hand accounts of war and the criminal underworld, each cautioned against celebrating anything other than bodily experience, and each scorned all but the most radical, programs for collective advancement (fascist right for the one and militant left for the other).

- Their influence is everywhere in Beat literature, from Ginsberg's *Howl* and Kerouac's *Visions of Cody* to Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*. Indeed, if the key Beat

figures were hesitant to confirm an often-mooted connection to Miller, their debt to Celine was never in doubt. As Kerouac put it ''Don't say that I read Henry Miller all my life. It just isn't true, I did read Louis Ferdinand Céline, from whom Miller obtained his style. I could never find a copy of the *Tropics* anyway'.

- What Kerouac fails to acknowledge is that the combination of transcendentalism and Celine in his own work had its direct heritage in Miller. Orwell could just as easily be referring to Kerouac when he says of Miller that he counters Celine's 'protest against the horror and meaninglessness of modern life' with a perverse optimism.
- For Kerouac, as for Miller, 'exactly the aspects of life that fill Céline with horror are the ones that appeal to him'. Significantly, Orwell again oversimplifies matters – that acceptance is not something easily come by but rather struggled towards and never fully achieved, in both Miller's work and work by the Beats.
- Genet's presence is most strongly felt in Burroughs and it points to a much clearer understanding of radical human imperfection, of evil, and 'the conception of sin' than is generally acknowledged.
- In Genet who was only four years older but a forebear nonetheless, Burroughs found a way of channeling the Sadean obscene in the twentieth century, a way to posit the autobiographical author – the Whitman-like autobiographical author – as arbiter of pleasure and disgust and to present those sensations as the only true measures of morality.

- Kerouac's Catholicism is also important here.
- Even if we overlook his late-life alcoholic misanthropy – a tragic but unhelpful biographical distraction – his ritualistic approach to the act of writing, motivated by an attraction to piety, order, and self-sacrifice, gives an intriguing insight into his interest in maintaining rather than dismantling traditional borders between things.
- In this respect there's an unlikely affinity between the Beat project and the early century Anglo-American modernism that preceded Miller's arrival in Paris.
- Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and T.E. Hulme – three poets who came to prominence in London around the time of the First World War – were what we might now call the literary counterculture of their day, and their rebellion involved a struggle to square belief in intuitive revelation with the disbelief in perfectible humanity.
- For Eliot and Hulme in particular, the problem was the loss of values suffered when it was accepted that 'all meaning is human meaning', which would have a later literary expression in much of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg's agonizings, as well as the grim, dystopian satires of William Burroughs.

CONCLUSION

- The modernist attraction to fascism – which was anti-humanist in its mysticism but humanist in its assumption of the human race's perfectibility – has important implications for Miller, the Beats and the counterculture.
- Indeed, what appears progressive in post-1945 attempts at transcendence through Eastern religion and later, through psychedelic drugs, can also be read as regressive in its anti-rationality, something picked up on by older critics of the hippie movement who paralleled their rejection of empiricism with Hitler's four decades before.
- Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg's description of the Beat Generation as 'Dionysian' points to the potentially suspect Nietzschean root of their challenge to humanist conventions, and to their ready embrace of the paradox of violence and bliss Nietzsche found in 'the will'.
- Resisting humanism, for the modernists and the Beats, led inevitably to modern reconstitutions of it on counter-intuitively religious grounds. Thus if the counterculture found the modernist entanglement with fascism repellent, it's possible that repellence may arise out of an intuited affinity.
- This is an avenue that's worth exploring not, as Orwell put it, in the service of 'orthodoxy sniffing' but to better understand the complex aesthetics and ideologies of the post-war American avant-garde, and to test assumptions about progressive experimentalism in the present day.
- The Beats were on the one hand exemplary of the humanism high modernists rejected, setting their stall by what Hulme disdainfully calls 'life [as] the source and measure of all values', but, on the other, not as credulous about the possibilities therein than they first appear.
- In the popular and academic imagination, the renaissance Ginsberg, Kerouac and Burroughs orchestrated was a restoration of the aesthetic and ideological mission begun by Emerson, Whitman and Thoreau a century before. There's was, the story goes, a struggle towards a better understanding of self through literature with the purpose of liberating the individual from societal and psychological oppression; in short, an updating of Emerson's transcendence through contemplation of the self and world.
- Their work is undoubtedly permeated by a longing for progress, both for the individual and the collective.
- However, much of what these writers produced in the 1950s and 60s also carried with it a paradoxical uncertainty about whether mankind truly was perfectible, an uncertainty that can be traced back both to Henry Miller and a period in European literary history when philosophical and political humanism had continually been called into question.
