

# HENRY MILLER

## *Greetings to the Monster*

by Michael Ventura

December 27, 1991

*I want to become the monster I am.*

--Henry Miller,  
in a letter, 1936

*Fuck America! She's a maniac without balls.*

--Henry Miller,  
in a letter, 1934

On December 26 it will be 100 years since the birth of Henry Miller, and America still doesn't know what to do with him. Feminists tend to dismiss him as a sexist, gays as a repressed homosexual. Nobody in the men's movement dares talk about him at all. The critical establishment seems to think of Miller as some sort of literary freak, an amateur who hit it big with one book, *Tropic of Cancer*, then fizzled. (Miller worked 20 years forging one of the most distinctive prose styles of the century, and did it in circumstances that would have crushed most people; whatever he was, he was no amateur.) Academia simply ignores Miller; the professors don't teach him, and they don't write about him – a tacit admission that Henry Miller's very presence in literature defies.

None of this would have surprised Miller, though some of it might have wounded him. As he wrote to the still un-published Lawrence Durrell in 1936, "They will shit on you anyway, so have your say first."

While he lived, America treated Miller even more harshly – at least until he was about 70. He completed *Tropic of Cancer* in 1932, at the age of 41; *Tropic of Capricorn* and *Black Spring* were written over the next four years. Considered his greatest books, they were banned in America until 1961. But even though Miller was virtually unknown

to the American public, his writing so alarmed the U.S. government that in September 1935 the editors of the *Harvard Advocate* were arrested for printing an *anonymous* piece by Miller, one that was legally “clean.” An American publisher who tried to put out *Tropic of Cancer* by using a Mexican publisher did two years in jail, and even as late as 1962 – the year following the removal of the ban from *Tropic of Cancer* – a Brooklyn court issued a warrant for Miller’s arrest.

It should be remembered that -- with the exception of D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, William Burroughs and Henry Miller – every other major English-language writer of fiction before 1961 caved in to the authorities, and to society in general, when it came to expressing sexuality. The list is impressive and, on this count, shameful: Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Gertrude Stein, Willa Cather, Virginia Wolfe, Thomas Wolfe, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Raymond Chandler, Norman Mailer, James Jones, Nelson Algren, Richard Wright, George Orwell, John Cheever, Anais Nin, James Baldwin, Doris Lessing – none of them crossed the line that might have led to their work being banned. They took care to write *around* sexuality in general, and their own sexuality in particular.

Henry Miller, then, was the only major American writer who didn’t compromise in the decades-long struggle over “obscenity” that finally resulted in the extraordinary liberties of the last 30 years – liberties without which both today’s literary and academic worlds, as well as our famous gender and sexual movements, would be unthinkable. But, in the present atmosphere of “correctness” on the one hand and repression on the other, nobody’s thanking him for it.

Of course, Miller got what he pretty much expected and what he certainly asked for. The very first page of *Tropic of Cancer* challenges the lightning to strike, in what’s become one of the most famous passages of 20<sup>th</sup> Century prose:

I have no money, no resources, no hopes. I am the happiest man alive. A year ago, six months ago, I thought I was an artist. I no longer think about it, I *am*. Everything that was literature has fallen from me. There are no more books to be written, thank God.

This then? This is not a book. This is libel, slander, defamation of character. This is not a book, in the ordinary sense of the word. No, this is a

prolonged insult, a gob of spit in the face of Art, a kick in the pants to God, Man, Destiny, Time, Love, Beauty... what you will. I am going to sing for you, a little off key perhaps, but I will sing. I will sing while you croak, I will dance over your corpse...

Since then, so many writers of both genders and all sexes have imitated that tone (often without knowing it, imitators imitating earlier imitators) that it's hard to remember how, in 1931, there was nothing else like it in our language. *Tropic of Cancer's* only precedents were two slim 19<sup>th</sup> Century volumes written by the men whom Henry Miller would acknowledge as his masters: Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864, Russia) and Knut Hamsun's *Hunger* (1890, Norway).

You have to consider Hamsun's influence to understand Miller's achievement. It's virtually forgotten now that that Norwegian novelist single-handedly created the way 20<sup>th</sup> Century writers use the first-person voice. Never in fiction had the word "I" been used so informally yet precisely, with such immediacy and fluidity, as in Hamsun's novel. In the first quarter of this century every writer read *Hunger* to learn first-person, and, in turn, we who followed learned it from them. To this day, only James Joyce and Henry Miller have taken the first person further than Hamsun, and in many ways Miller took it further than Joyce.

In *Cancer*, *Capricorn* and *Black Spring* Miller's "I" has such force, is such a definite yet spacious word, that at the same time it grounds these books, it allows them to go off in any direction, about any subject, at any time. There is no sense of interruption when this happens, because Miller conveys a palpable sense that, as he wrote in *Capricorn*, "Confusion is a word we have invented for an order which is not understood." His sense of the underlying pattern is so sure that he can traverse the whole psyche in a page – he can fuck, smell food, spout philosophy, remember his childhood, pray to God, tell a joke, wonder whether he's ill, bemoan the state of his finances, swoon with shame, seethe with hatred and sing with love in a single passage that makes it all jibe. Again, from *Capricorn*, "I have no fear or illusions about disorder any more than I have of death. The labyrinth is my happy hunting ground, and the deeper I burrow into the maze the more oriented I become."

Miller makes his intent crystal clear in *Tropic of Cancer* when he quotes Emerson: “Life consists in what a man is thinking.” Miller constructs his fiction around that perception, but he goes beyond “thinking” into psyche. His grasp of the *simultaneity* of the psyche is unexcelled, even by Joyce. On Miller’s pages the unconscious churns, and changes the speaker’s awareness at every moment. Every second is an experience of shift. This is a phenomenon that everyone lives with: you’re on a walk or a drive, you’re making love or having a conversation, and your mind is a virtual kaleidoscope, moving from image to idea to concern to memory to whatever, all the while defying your conscious intent. Miller gave himself the task of expressing his experience *through* this fact of the mind, as through a lens. That’s why he had to include his meanness, his bigotry, his silliness and every quirk of his lust – because his task was to express the psyche not as he would wish it, but as it is. As George Orwell wrote in the first serious essay on Miller (“Inside the Whale,” 1940), “He dared – and it is a matter of *daring* as much as technique -- ... to drop the Geneva language of the ordinary novel and drag the *real-politik* of the inner mind out into the open.” Or as Miller wrote in *Tropic of Cancer*, “Chaos is the score upon which reality is written.” (Joyce’s attempts to chart order in that chaos seemed, to Miller, quaint. For the same reasons, Miller thought D.H. Lawrence’s treatment of sexuality genteel.)

Western culture has driven itself on the belief that the mind can ultimately be understood. Henry Miller, especially in the *Tropic* novels, was saying something very different. He wasn’t looking for understanding or truth – he didn’t believe they were possible in any ultimate sense. He wrote in *Tropic of Capricorn*, “The truth can also be a lie. The truth is not enough. Truth is only the core of a totality which is inexhaustible.” And during the same period he wrote a passage in *Black Spring* that could serve as a rejoinder to anyone worried about the demise of Western civilization: “Nobody thinks anymore of how marvelous it is that the whole world is diseased. No point of reference, no frame of health. God might just as well be typhoid fever. No absolutes.” This doesn’t depress or discourage Miller; on the contrary, it’s not only he but the whole world that has “no prospects, no hope,” and this makes him *happy* – “the happiest man alive,” as he had earlier claimed. Therefore, in *Black Spring*, he could extend the following invitation: “Let’s feel each other belly to belly, *without hope*.” Living in this frame of mind for so

much as a weekend would have driven Joyce or Lawrence (not to mention John Updike or Ann Beattie) insane.

Most “great” writers are trying simultaneously to decipher, guide and even cure civilization. But, said Miller in *The Colossus of Maroussi* (1941), “There ain’t no such thing as civilization. There’s one big barbarious [sic] world and the name of the rat-catcher is Boogie Woogie.” In *Capricorn* he defined civilization as “a perpetual state of war.” By Miller’s definition, it can’t be saved – it can only be experienced. “The world,” he writes in *Capricorn*, “in its visible, tangible substance, is a map of our love.” But don’t mistake that for optimism. According to Miller, “the world in its visible tangible substance,” or at least the world we *make* of the world, is grotesque. (And if it’s “a map of our love,” what does that say about our love?) “We who are awake are boiling in horror,” he cries elsewhere in *Capricorn*, and in *Colossus* he reaches the conclusion (decades before R.D. Laing, Robert Lindner, James Hillman and other psychologists), “There is no salvation in becoming adapted to a world which is crazy.”

This is at the heart of Henry Miller, and it is why sex is so important to his writing. In *Remember to Remember* (1947), there is an essay titled “Obscenity and the Law of Reflection.” If civilization is, in practice, “a perpetual state of war,” writes Miller, and if morality is justified as the bulwark of civilization, then, “I believe that in a way what we call morality is really a form of madness.” Its elements are “always fear and wish, fear and wish. Never the pure fountain of desire. And so we have and have not, we are and are not.”

He then lays out psychology’s argument about “obscenity” clearly and briefly: “Nothing would be regarded as obscene, I feel, if men were living out their inmost desires. What man dreads most is to be faced with the manifestation, in word or deed, of that which he has refused to live out, that which he has throttled or stifled, buried, as we say now, in his subconscious.” Most theories on the subject stop there, but Miller moves further: “When obscenity crops out in art... its purpose is to awaken, to usher in a sense of reality. In a sense, its use by the artist may be compared to the use of the miraculous by the Masters.”

What Miller means by “reality” is not what most people mean by “realistic.” He means *his* reality, the reality he’d expressed in his novels, the reality of the psyche – that cauldron of mystery and simultaneity which we both carry and are propelled by. He writes graphically of sexuality both to evoke such reality and because, if you’re trying to explore that the psyche is, *not* to write of sexuality is to lie. Once, Miller says, it was enough to evoke the miraculous in order to draw people out of their illusions about reality. The old poems and tales are full of this. But now, Miller writes in *The Colossus of Maroussi*, we have “cut ourselves off, amputate[d] the mysterious antennae which serve to connect us with forces beyond our power of understanding.” So, in his fiction, he uses sexuality in place of the miraculous, expresses sex in the most disturbing and graphic ways, in order to stir the reader’s psyche – even unto madness.

“The task of the genius, and man is nothing if not genius, is to keep the miracle alive,” he wrote in *Colossus*. He uses what others call obscenity in the belief that if the psyche is sufficiently stirred and disturbed, then the miraculous – the visionary, the revelatory, the transcendent – will stay alive in human consciousness. The social consequences of this sort of thing aren’t important to him because, to Miller, protecting society is just a way of institutionalizing a collective insanity. In *Capricorn* he wrote,

I can think of no street in America... capable of leading one on toward the discovery of the self... I think of all the streets in America combined as forming a huge cesspool, a cesspool of the spirit in which everything is sucked down and drained away to everlasting shit.

And yet there is this crazy alchemy in Miller: he writes with fury and bitterness, but *happily* – as though he really is the happiest man alive. (His motto, he used to say, was “Always merry and bright!”) Read any 10 pages of Miller and, no matter what cesspool he happens to be describing, he manages somehow to cheer you up – yet without making any attempts to comfort you. He doesn’t believe in hope, and wouldn’t stoop to inspire any, but he does transmit a tremendous vitality. If the floodgates of the psyche should open and destroy our society, he asks, what harm could there be in that? Again from *Colossus*: “It matters little how much is destroyed, if only the germ of the miraculous be preserved and nurtured.”

It is as though, as Miller himself claimed, as a writer he really had become an angel – the sort of angel Peter Falk plays in *Wings of Desire*. The following passage appears near the end of *Tropic of Capricorn*:

The truth is my desire was so great it became a reality. At such a moment what a man *does* is of no great importance, it's what he *is* that counts. It's at such a moment that a man becomes an angel. That is precisely what happened to me: *I became an angel*. It is not the purity of an angel which is so valuable, as the fact that it can fly. An angel can break the pattern anywhere at any moment and find its heaven; it has the power to descend into the lowest matter and to extricate itself at will. The night in question I understood it perfectly. I was pure and inhuman. I was detached. I had wings. I was dispossessed of the past and I had no concern about the future. I was beyond ecstasy. When I left the office I folded my wings and hid them beneath my coat.

You can't help but ask, "Who *was* Henry Miller? How did that Brooklyn boy from 1063 Decatur Street become Henry Miller? How much did it have to do with what we would now call his "dysfunctional" family?

Miller's father, Heinrich, was a gentle tailor with no ambition and little personal force, who drank heavily throughout Miller's childhood, and always acceded to Henry's mother, Louise. Louise – well, *her* mother went insane when Louise was 13, and died in an asylum. So did her sister. Louise's daughter, Henry's sister Laretta, was mentally retarded, and Louise beat her viciously and often – beatings Henry had to watch, experiencing the now familiar "abuse syndrome" of his consciousness leaving his body and watching from elsewhere. Louise both doted on Henry and kept him in terror. His first love affair would be with a woman Louise's age. When he announced to Louise, as a young man, that he intended to marry the woman, Louise went after him with a kitchen knife. (Miller didn't marry that woman.)

In *My Life and Times* (1972), Miller wrote, "I never felt any warmth from [my mother]. She never kissed me, never hugged me. I don't ever remember going to her and

putting my arms around her. I didn't know mothers did that until one day I visited a friend at his home." But as James Hillman wrote, "Thousands had childhoods very like Leonardo's, but there's only one Leonardo." And there's only one Henry Miller.

What about Miller's cultural milieu, his working-class German-Christian (and rabidly anti-Semitic) neighborhood in a turn-of-the-century America that was sexually out of its mind? For, as Robert Ferguson notes in *Henry Miller: A Life* (W.W. Norton, 1991), the national idea of women was more distorted during Henry's youth than at any other time in our history: "The medical stereotype of the average decent woman became progressively purer and less realistic between 1870 and 1912, and in 1911 at least one practicing physician believed the wholly passionless woman to be the norm." "Decent" women weren't allowed in bars, and in 1908 New York City made it illegal for women to smoke!

Men were marginally better off (if you think drinking, smoking and voting are important), but society was in many ways was equally strict with them. The function of a man was to work. Period. It was mostly manual labor, six days a week, 12 to 16 hours a day, with no vacations, no benefits and no recourse but to take whatever your employer dished out. As Mary V. Dearborn notes in her Henry Miller biography, *The Happiest Man Alive* (Simon and Schuster, 1991), Henry Ford stated the ethic of the era when he said, "Nothing is more abhorrent than a life of ease. None of us has the right to ease."

Sex for both genders was considered not only evil, but destructive. Until about 1912 (when Miller was 1919), it was the professional opinion of most American physicians that fucking more than was absolutely necessary would seriously damage one's health.

Miller's life and work were definitely a reaction and a rebellion against the nonsense commonly accepted in his youth, and that gives him a context – but is that enough to explain him? Many young writers in America and in Europe grew up with the same strictures, and many of them resemble each other – F. Scott Fitzgerald and Willa Cather are more alike than different, as are Virginia Wolfe and William Faulkner, but none of them is anything like Miller.

As for the thinking and culture of the time, the young Miller had no education past high school, but he watched Jack Johnson train, saw Nijinsky dance, and avidly

attended lectures by the anarchists Emma Goldman, “Big Bill” Haywood, and Carlo Tresca. (He said later that Goldman influenced him tremendously.) He went to all the movies (a brand-new art form), read lots of books, was exposed to all the cultural trends. But so did many other writers. Again, it gives him a context, and in any critical study of his work this stuff would make for plenty of footnotes. Still, these facts fill in precious few gaps in Miller’s portrait; much less do they explain the writer.

As Robert Ferguson points out, the one institution of the time that does help explain, if not the man, then at least his work, is burlesque. There were burlesque theaters in almost every neighborhood in New York, and Miller went to most of them. “The literary debt of the author of the *Tropics* to comedians like Eddie Foy, Bert Savoy and Willie Howard is considerable. They taught him much about the difficult art of entering the taboo areas of human experience, and the equally difficult art of getting back out of them again.” No other writer of the age (except the Russian Mikhail Bulgakov, the first “magical realist”), managed to be serious *and* comic, metaphysical and farcical, realistic and fantastic, often on a single page. Miller writes like a gifted clown. (“A clown is a poet in action,” he said in *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* (1948). “He is the story which he enacts.” A pretty good description of himself.)

But no matter how you sift through his early life, Henry Miller doesn’t *become* Henry Miller until, at age 32, in the year 1923, he meets June. As he said in *Sexus*, the first volume of his trilogy of novels *The Rosy Crucifixion*: “A wholly new life lay before me, had I the courage to risk all.”

June Mansfield (real name Smerth – she chose the name “Mansfield”) was a Jewish immigrant born in Bukovina in the Carpathian Mountains of Eastern Europe. (That’s the town where, in Bram Stoker’s book, Jonathin Harkin waits for the coach to take him to Count Dracula’s castle.) She arrived with her family on Ellis Island at the age of 5. At 15 she quit school and started working in taxi-dance joints, where men purchased tickets for a nickel or a dime to dance with the female employees, or taxi-dancers. As Mary Dearborn says with considerable understatement: “A beautiful taxi-dancer might indeed have a series of intense, bizarre experiences in a few years.”

June's beauty, especially at this period, was by all accounts extraordinary. One writer who knew her, Lionel Abel, seriously called the quality of her beauty "almost frightening." And everyone, even people who met June in her old age (none of Miller's biographers says when June died, but she was still alive in 1977), testifies that her voice was as thrilling as her looks, and that it was this combination of voice and looks that literally swept people off their feet. Henry Miller, Anais Nin, and many other men and women fell in love with June at first sight. "Her beauty drowned me," Nin wrote in her diary of the 29-year-old June, the first day she met her. "I'm in love with a monster," Miller wrote in *Sexus*, "the most gorgeous monster imaginable."

Anyone who had any experience of her testifies that June *breathed* sensuality. Even when doing chores she dressed as though she was starring in some surreal pornographic film. She followed no fashions but her own, often changing her look suddenly and drastically. In 1926 (when she and Miller had been married two years), as Mary Dearborn describes it, "she plucked her full eyebrows into theatrically thin arches and affected heavy dramatic make-up, smearing Vaseline on her eyelids and dusting her face with a greenish powder. She changed her hair style and began to dress strangely, cutting the points out of her brassiere so her nipples would show through and going without stockings in all seasons. She wore black and sometimes purple; instead of underwear she wore a strip of black velvet saturated with perfume.... she seemed to go about all day with a cigarette hanging from her upper lip." (This was 50 years before punk and 60 years before Madonna, in case you're wondering what's "new" and what's not.)

That first night at the taxi-dance joint, June was dancing with someone else when she overheard Miller mention the playwright Luigi Pirandello to his partner. This interested her (like Miller, she read books with a kind of desperate hunger), and she introduced herself. From the very beginning she was convinced (with not much to go on) that Miller would be a "great writer," and she consciously drove him (and he let himself be driven) to that fate. She persuaded him to leave his wife and quit the one good job he ever held, then insisted on supporting him while he stayed home and wrote – though she herself had no visible means of support. Miller submitted to her will entirely the first few

years. June hustled, certainly, although to this day no one knows whether she actually slept with the men and women she managed to get money from.

Late in life, after Miller had become famous, June said, “I did not create him to abandon me, but to offer him to the world for posterity.” An extraordinary statement, to say the least, but they *both* give evidence of being conscious that June was molding Henry, and that Henry was allowing himself to undergo the mad and painful process (the “rosy crucifixion”) of being molded. Miller summarizes the process early in *Tropic of Capricorn* (which is dedicated “To Her”):

Until the one for whom this is written came along I imagined that somewhere outside in life, as they say, lay the solution 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*.

It was through June that Henry learned the two elements without which there is no writer named Henry Miller: sexuality and a unique form of language. His sexuality falls into two categories: other women and June. (Joining June’s category, in time, would be Anais Nin and Miller’s third and fourth wives, Lepaska and Eve, but he never wrote about any of them.) With other women, from his first wife, Beatrice, to the whores of Paris, any charges the feminists may wish to make are justified and then some, by Miller’s own admission; with June, we enter the realm in which sex and the miraculous are one.

That, at any rate, seemed to be their experience. It took June to pry Miller from the Victorian sexual attitudes he’d grown up with and teach him that, as he wrote in *Cancer*, “As long as the spark of passion is missing there is no human significance in the performance.” In *Capricorn* Miller would call it “love without gender,” saying, “It was dubious at times whether I was in her or she was in me.” He dominated other women sexually, before and after June, but June he served. She led him into what he came to call “the Land of Fuck.” From *Capricorn*:

I know that we were conjugating the verb love like two maniacs trying to fuck through an iron gate. I said that in the frantic grappling in the dark I sometimes forgot her name, what she looked like, who she was. It's true. I over-reached myself in the dark, I slid off the flesh rails into the endless space of sex...

It terrified him. "*Fuck*, the real thing, *cunt*, the real thing, seems to contain some undefined element which is far more dangerous than nitroglycerin." And he couldn't bear it. After three years of marriage, and over June's deep objections, Henry got twin beds so that he could retreat from her sexually sometimes. Fucking her was quite simply the defining experience of his life, and he knew it. In the same year that he got the twin beds, during one 24-hour period Miller typed a single-spaced 32-page outline of what would be his life's work: an expression of his experience of June. For the next 32 years, virtually all his major writings would flow from that outline.

June's sexuality was connected with her unique use of language, as all who knew her agreed. "[Her] talk goes on," Miller wrote in *Capricorn*, "in that low, throaty voice. No beginning, no end... She's got a little womb in the throat hooked up to the big womb in the pelvic." Elsewhere in that book he describes it like this:

No knowing how or where she began. Suddenly she is in the midst of a long narrative, a fresh one, but it is always the same. Her talk is as formless as dream: there are no grooves, no walls, no exits, no stops. I have the feeling of being drowned in a deep mesh of words.

This is a fair summary of Miller's own writing. (And notice he used the same word about June's language, "drowned," that Anais Nin used about June's beauty.) As far as all the observers and biographers can ascertain, Henry Miller achieved the *form* of his writing by attempting, consciously or unconsciously, to write as June Smerth Mansfield Miller talked.

Only Neal Cassady (whose behavior and fate uncannily resemble June's) and Nora Joyce can vie with June as non-writers who've had a major influence on 20<sup>th</sup> Century literature. Miller and Nin each wrote several books about her, Alfred Perles

wrote one, and she appeared in the writings of many lesser practitioners who knew her in New York and Paris. When you consider the influence Miller has had, and then consider that his major *literary* influence (along with Hamsun, Dostoyevsky and burlesque) appears to have been not only June's behavior and sexuality but her almost surreal form of conversation – then you have a taxi-dancer whose force of spirit was such that, although she lived her whole life in obscurity and spent her last 30 years in and out of mental hospitals, she can lay claim to being an important – and original – influence on the culture of her century. As she said to Anais Nin (in a line Henry later stole for the “angel” passage of *Tropic of Capricorn*): “What does it matter what I do, it is what I *am* that matters.” And, as Nin admitted, “What are we? Only creators. She *is*. What a dull world without June.”

All writers do what Henry Miller did: take their essence from everything around them, and put it into words. That's what writing is. June could not have done Henry's writing – as musicians say, she didn't have the chops. But Miller could not have learned his craft, nor had his visions, without June. June teaches Henry; Henry instructs us; and between them they are, in Roky Erickson's phrase, a two-headed dog, a fearsome and incredibly graceful monster, without equal in modern annals.

Henry Miller died in his sleep on June 7, 1980, at the age of 88, in Pacific Palisades. His last significant writing was a Capra Chapbook titled *On Turning Eighty*, in which he wrote:

As for the world in general, it not only does not look any better than when I was a boy of eight, it looks a thousand times worse... As for the past whether good or bad, I have made the most of it. What future remains for me was made by my past. The future of the world is something for philosophers and visionaries to ponder on. All we really have is the present, but very few of us ever live it. I am neither a pessimist nor an optimist. To me the world is neither this nor that, but all things at once, and to each according to his vision.

In that same little book there is this passage: “What I should like to recommend for the few remaining years, months or weeks that are left us is to piss the time away enjoyably.”

This had become, when all is said and done, his philosophy – a philosophy at which Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Spengler, Plato and all the rest would throw up their hands, not because Miller is wrong but because, if he's right, there's really no such thing as "philosophy," the same way, as Miller insisted, there's no such thing as civilization. You feel, from Miller, that if you could peel the universe like an onion, at the center there would be nothing but... June, laughing as she did on their wedding night, laughing and unable to stop laughing, a laughter that was so frightening to Miller that he begged a friend of theirs to get her to stop. He'd promise her anything, he'd do anything, if only she would never laugh like that again.

On Halloween, 1959, at the age of 68, Henry Miller summed up his life in a letter to his protégé and best friend, Laurence Durrell. None of Miller's biographers quotes this letter, which is strange, because it's the only instance in his thousands of pages of writing in which Miller judges his own life. He was on the verge of finishing *The Rosy Crucifixion*, the task he had set himself 30-odd years before. He wrote Durrell as follows:

What I feel like saying sometimes – when the whole bloody *Crucifixion* comes to an end – is, 'Ladies and Gentlemen, don't believe a word of it, it was all a hoax. Let me tell you in a few words the story of my tragedy; I can do it in 20 pages.'

And what would be that story? That, wanting desperately to become a writer, I became a writer. In the process I sinned. I became so involved with the Holy Ghost that I betrayed my wife, my child, my friends, my country, I fell in love with the medium. I thought – if one makes a stroke on the blackboard that is the thing in itself, the reality. I almost fell in love with myself, horrible thought. I recorded what I saw and felt, not what was. To explain... it's a bit like what happened to the Jews. In the beginning there were men who talked with God. As the power or faculty dried up men began talking *about* God. A world of difference. I would like to talk to men or with men in a different way now. Like Parsifal, not Pagliacci. My heart was never broken. I'm intact, comme dit

Rimbaud. I held on by a thread, no doubt.

The critics, the academics, the government and even the public who still read avidly of Henry and June think of them, with benevolence or hostility, as a couple of psychopaths trapped in a *folie a deux*. But as Robert Ferguson writes, in a brilliant flash: “As a label, ‘psychopath’ is not so much an explanation of character as an admission of moral bewilderment.” They were “morally bewildered” by each other, and their tale leaves us in a state of moral bewilderment, a state in which none of the rules or truths apply – and that, finally, is their gift to us: naked moments in which we’re entirely on our own, without civilization, without morality, starting from scratch.

*Copyright by Michael Ventura, all rights reserved.*