Henry Miller

EXPATRIATE

Annette Baxter

HENRY MILLER
EXPATRIATE

Series

Critical Essays in English and American Literature is a series for both the scholarly and the general reader. Books in the series are published occasionally by the University of Pittsburgh Press.

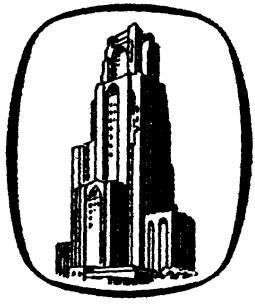
1. *William Faulkner, An Estimate of his Contribution to the Modern American Novel,* by Mary Cooper Robb $1.80
2. *The Fiction and Criticism of Katherine Anne Porter,* by Harry J. Mooney, Jr. $1.50
3. *Robinson Jeffers, A Study in Inhumanism,* by Mercedes Cunningham Monjian $1.25
4. *The Fiction of J. D. Salinger,* by Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner $1.50
5. *Henry Miller: Expatriate,* by Annette Baxter $2.50
6. *Stratford to Dogberry: Studies in Shakespeare's Earlier Plays,* by John W. Draper $3.00
7. *The Fiction of John O'Hara,* by Edward Carson $1.25

HENRY MILLER EXPATRIATE

ANNETTE KAR BAXTER

Associate in American Studies

Barnard College, Columbia University



UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH PRESS

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
CARD CATALOG NUMBER: 61-9400

Printed in the United States of America

Well, we are on our way to Mykonos, resigned now that we have heard the cocks of Attica from the Acropolis. I wish you'd write it—it is part of the mosaic. . . .

LAWRENCE DURRELL TO HENRY MILLER

August 10th, 1940.

Acknowledgments

To Henry Miller and Dr. Lawrence Clark Powell I am indebted for permission to use the Henry Miller Collection at the Library of the University of California at Los Angeles, and special thanks are due Mrs. Liselotte F. Glozer of the Special Collections staff for her assistance.

I should like to express my appreciation to Mr. Huntington Cairns for permission to identify him as the recipient of the Henry Miller letter quoted in the text, and to Mr. Merle Armitage for permission to quote from his letter to Henry Miller. Also, Mr. James T. Farrell, whose letter of Henry Miller appeared in the Henry Miller Collection and is in part reprinted in Miller's *The Plight of the Creative Artist in America,* kindly granted his permission for quotation.

I am grateful to New Directions, Henry Miller's American publisher, for permission to quote from Henry Miller's works under their imprint:

From *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* by Henry Miller, copyright 1945 by New Directions. Reprinted by permission of New Directions.

From *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch* by Henry Miller, copyright 1957 by New Directions. Reprinted by permission of New Directions.

From *The Books in My Life* by Henry Miller, copy-

right 1952 by New Directions. Reprinted by permission of New Directions.

From *The Cosmological Eye* by Henry Miller, copyright 1939 by New Directions. Reprinted by permission of New Directions.

From *Remember to Remember* by Henry Miller, copyright 1947 by New Directions. Reprinted by permission of New Directions.

From *Sunday After the War* by Henry Miller, copyright 1944 by New Directions. Reprinted by permission of New Directions.

From *The Time of the Assassins: A Study of Rimbaud* by Henry Miller, copyright 1956 by New Directions. Reprinted by permission of New Directions.

From *Why Abstract?* by Henry Miller, with Hilaire Hiler and William Saroyan, copyright 1945 by New Directions. Reprinted by permission of New Directions.

From *The Wisdom of the Heart* by Henry Miller, copyright 1941 by New Directions. Reprinted by permission of New Directions.

My investigation has utilized many publications, foreign and American, and the comments of critics and acquaintances of Henry Miller. I have attempted to cite them scrupulously in footnotes and bibliography, and I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness and gratitude to them all.

Finally, this study owes much to the assistance in various ways of the following persons: Mrs. Agnes L. Starrett, Director of the University of Pittsburgh Press, Mrs. June Miller Corbett, Professor Donald H. Fleming of Harvard University, and my husband, Dr. James E. Baxter.

Contents

I

The Expatriate Stance

THE AMERICAN EXPATRIATE

In 1934 the city of Paris saw the birth of a book, published in English, that achieved instantaneous notoriety. Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* unfolded the adventures of a loquacious, free-wheeling, appallingly uninhibited American expatriate. But the rollicking eloquence, determined gusto, and explosive imagery of this modern Rabelais barely concealed the figure of a lonely American writer, thoroughly immersed in a legendary American situation.

The expatriate has been a type, persistent and familiar, throughout our cultural history. His recognizable emergence in the first half of the nineteenth century was partly an extension of the colonial dependence on British literary models, but it was partly, too, an assertion of cultural independence. The appropriation of British and European literary culture could now be explicit, for it was to be joined to a base that with increasing warrant could be regarded as indigenous. So in the early period the easy cosmopolitanism of Washington Irving best represents the reciprocity of foreign and native strains in our culture. Still confident of our ability in time to develop a tradition fully as sustaining and enriching as that of

the Old World, we looked upon the prolonged grand tour as a desirable episode in the lives not only of youthful aspirants to a literary or artistic career, but of all who hoped to prepare themselves, whether or not they sought professional training too, for what in some agreeably large and American sense could be called life.

In these years the term of residence abroad varied. Not until the sculptor William Wetmore Story left for Rome in mid-century was there the beginning of a serious tradition of exile. Even thereafter, with the major exceptions of those who, like James, Whistler, and Hearn, possessed a canny sense of their own best milieu and determined to take permanent leave of their country, the American's experience in Europe has been typified by wandering spirits like Stephen Crane, Henry Adams, and Bret Harte, whose sojourns were dictated less by formal choice than by curiosity, temporary frustration, or chance. The most noted exile of recent times, T. S. Eliot, is hardly representative in his permanent physical removal and confessed traditionalism, however archetypical his role of *revenant,* the exile in search of ancestral heritage.[1]

Because of the inadequacy of time-span as a psychological yardstick, the term exile came to signify an attitude of alienation rather than simply the fact of geographic removal. From this emphasis arose an associated term, spiritual exile, applied to those, like Poe and Emily Dickinson, whose home remained in America, but who chose to stand apart in some important way from the life around them. The sense of alienation, then, became the test of true exile, and the European

experience, when it occurred, a useful measure of the quality and degree of that sense.

The greatest correspondence between the sense of alienation and the European experience was reached immediately following the First World War. But most of the exiles of the twenties stayed abroad only for brief periods, returning home and setting out again with a limberness that has not since been equalled. Their distress with America could always be mitigated by devalued francs and an inexpensive tourist cabin.

That a considerable company of their compatriots shared their disgust with what Samuel Putnam described as "the overwhelming material values enforced by a standardized and machine-made civilization, the lack of any spiritual depth, the falsity, the sentimentality, the hypocrisy, the repression that go with such a civilization,"[2] was attested by the manifestoes that reached an early peak in Harold Stearns' 1922 compilation, *Civilization in the United States.* The contributors to that volume did not uniformly blame the machine: a futuristic bias was shared by many writers and artists of this period, and one of them, Hart Crane, was later to attempt the formidable task of celebrating the values of a pre-mechanized America through an arch symbol of the machine. If not prepared to agree on the diagnosis of the disease, disgruntled observers of the American scene well knew its manifestations. Some, like E. E. Cummings and T. S. Eliot, did not regard them as confined to America. *The Enormous Room* and *The Wasteland,* both published in 1922, were clearly indictments with universal application. But the despair they pronounced had the special authority

of pronouncement by Americans. In short, it was becoming evident that Americans, if they were sensitive and talented enough, could claim to be suffering the ravages of the world disease more acutely than the rest of the world.

Sharing the post-war atmosphere of international disillusion with America's failure to assume moral leadership, and in some cases, fresh from service in the war itself, the young expatriates of the twenties could ascribe their decision to motives larger than mere escape from American cultural constraints. To declare for Europe was to declare for life lived on a profounder level of experience; but the declaration implicit in the act of exile meant more than the specific quality of the life lived abroad. For that life was different from what the exiles had known in America chiefly in the sense it gave of a new psychological freedom. Valuable as that sense was in the long-range development of talents as diverse as those of Hemingway, Matthew Josephson, Fitzgerald, and Robert Coates, it did not in the short run offer much more than a timely leaven for youthful intellectual passions.

The despair of the twenties was fundamentally a literary despair, and it had as its standing alternative mature reconciliation with the mother country. For representative exiles of the post-war era such a reconciliation invariably took place, if only, with some, by an effort of the artistic imagination. Even the undespairing author of *The Great Gatsby* may be said to have achieved such a reconciliation by idealizing the American dream of wealth.

While reconciliation with America was not a

new chapter in the history of the American expatriate—what more forceful precedent for it than James' *American Scene,* his autobiography, and the late novels—it acquired after the twenties a comforting inevitability. Older exiles like Gertrude Stein felt an intensified attachment that soon became as necessary a part of their personal legends as alienation itself. By the end of World War II expatriation in the old sense of a thoroughgoing rejection of American values was no longer possible. The dictum of Lionel Trilling, who in the thirties had proclaimed the importance of the contradictory relation of an artist to his culture—the creative tension between his need both to accept and to reject it—had acquired new authority.[3] Paradoxically, this happened at the very moment when the differences between America and the rest of the world seemed to be diminishing. Europe was undergoing rapid Americanization, while America found herself committed to a new cultural internationalism. For these and other reasons the confrontation of cultures through the experience of expatriation came to be regarded with growing approval.

It was in the thirties, however, that reconciliation with America first became intellectually respectable.[4] To whatever vestige of old-fashioned loyalty remained, there was added the transformation of America by economic upheaval into a nation sharply aware of its potential for social change. Whereas the disillusionment of the twenties encouraged escape from native inadequacies and iniquities, the disillusionment of the thirties provided a strong incentive for home-based reform.

The expatriate of the thirties must then have been little affected by contemporary social and political movements. In abandoning his country at that time, he was expressing not only his dissatisfaction with America, but also with collectivist ideals. While the expatriate of the twenties seemed to be transferring his loyalty from one country and its institutions to another, his successor a decade later felt that loyalty was a tenable concept only when it sprang from a deep personal involvement with one's environment, whatever it might be. Thus the expatriates of the thirties appear more as isolated figures, each searching for fulfillment on his own terms, rather than as adherents to a self-conscious cult of disenchantment. Edmund Wilson called it "The Twilight of the Expatriates."

HENRY MILLER

The generation for whom *The Sun Also Rises* served as scripture had given way to the one memorialized by another American expatriate, Henry Miller, in his *Tropic of Cancer*. Henry Miller was born in 1891 in the Yorkville section of New York City, and spent his childhood years in Brooklyn's Williamsburg. Reared in near-poverty in a rigidly conventional German-American household, he ricocheted through the public schools, vigorously responding to the stimulus of a city then undergoing successive transfusions of immigrant blood. His affectionate reminiscences of the early life in Brooklyn do not betray a sense of alienation any deeper than that experienced by many intelligent and sensitive youngsters. But with the arrival of adolescence there was a change

in his appraisal of his position among boyhood friends. He found himself in the envied role of natural leader, while caring little about the prerogatives of leadership. "Yes, it is true, I did enjoy a happy childhood. I was happy until I became conscious of the sort of world I was living in. By the age of sixteen I was wretchedly morbid. I turned inward, seeking an escape from the ugliness and villainy which hemmed me in."[5]

Knowing that what he sought could not be found in the environs of his father's tailor shop—as the only son he was slated to inherit the business—he traveled up and down the country working at dozens of different jobs, savoring the monotonies and frustrations of each. In San Diego he listened spellbound while Emma Goldman described the life and culture of Europe; Miller later called this the decisive encounter of his life. After returning to New York he fell temporarily into the pattern of married man with family and climaxed his salaried career with five years as Employment Manager of what he later sportingly termed the Cosmodemonic Telegraph Company.

His first major break with convention came in 1924 when, in his early thirties, abandoning job, wife, and child, he married a woman who encouraged his desire to write, and who was even willing to provide the livelihood that would allow him to spend all his time writing. Though seemingly free of responsibilities, his life was simultaneously blessed and tormented by the union with this second wife, alternately the "Mona" and the "Mara" of *Tropic of Capricorn* and *The Rosy Crucifixion* trilogy. Their bizarre existence in Greenwich Village and in Brooklyn Heights

would ultimately offer Miller his richest inspiration for the development of a new technique of surrealist autobiography. What this existence failed to offer became increasingly clear: the fructifying atmosphere, the mental and spiritual stimulus, the inner strength that keep the artist poised for creativity.

Miller's uneasiness with the life in which he was caught up, and with the country which seemed to touch him only with ugliness, monotony, and despair, was aggravated by visits from his boyhood acquaintance, Emil Schnellock, the "Ulric" of *Capricorn* and *Rosy Crucifixion.* Schnellock, an artist who had been abroad not many years previously, filled Miller's mind with the magic of Europe. Years later, writing from France, Miller said: "Those nights in Prospect Park with my old friend Ulric are responsible, more than anything else, for my being here today."[6] The two continued to meet throughout the agitated period of Miller's second marriage.

During this time he also took up with a much-traveled librarian at the Montague Street Library in Brooklyn: "Each time he came I made him talk about Europe; it was his 'admission fee.' "[7] Miller began poring over Metro maps of Paris. He envisioned the Italian cathedrals he was to see years later: "people sail in through the various portals and walk about with the utmost freedom. They give the impression of being on a holiday."[8]

Joe, the proprietor of a French-Italian restaurant Miller frequented in New York, "talked about Europe most of the time, how different it was there, how civilized, how enjoyable the life was."[9] So enthusiastic did Miller become that he could

launch into elaborate paeans to Europe that impressed even the transplanted foreigner with their authenticity. "Fat Louis," the Italian cook, listened to him rapturously: "When you go to Europe, Mr. Miller? You no stay here long, I see it. Ah, *Fiesole!* By God, one day I go back too!" Miller would find himself musing on this. "As I closed my eyes I had a vision of Fat Louis standing at the blazing stove, his eyes wet with tears, his heart pouring out into that omelette. Capri, Sorrento, Amalfi, Fiesole, Paestum, Taormina. . . . Funiculi, funicula . . . And Ghirlandajo . . . And the Campo Santo . . . What a country! What a people! You bet I'd go there one day."[10] The mere sound of the names of European towns and cities, of European artists, produced delirium in him.

Such was his initial response to a distant Europe, when it was still in his mind as but an odd collection of half-recognized places and names. Close friends of Miller's, like the Dr. Kronski of *Rosy Crucifixion*, realized during the hectic, drifting years of his marriage to Mona that only in Europe could Miller find himself. "Once I set up practice I'll stake you two to a trip to Europe. I'm serious about it. I've had the thought many a time. You're getting stale here. You don't belong in this country, neither of you. It's too small, too petty. . . ."[11] Escape to Europe appeared an ever-more-present alternative to the spectacle of American life that Miller found increasingly depressing.

In 1928 Miller briefly visited Europe with Mona, and, enchanted, resolved to return as soon as it could be managed. He was back two years later, without his wife. At the age of thirty-nine he had settled in Paris and was devoting himself

exclusively to writing. The fabulous Mona, who was long to occupy Miller's thoughts and a central place in his writing, had, except for a fitful visit to him in 1934, stepped out of his life.

Miller has often stated that with his arrival in France his real life began. Until then he had to resort to "the opium of dream in order to face the hideousness of a life in which I had no part. As quietly and naturally as a twig falling into the Mississippi I dropped out of the stream of American life."[12] Once in Europe his emotional allegiance did not in the least swerve: "I have such a sense of being at home that it seems incredible that I was born in America."[13] Soon his identification with Europe became so strong that he could say of America: "It was even further lost than a lost continent, because with the lost continents I felt some mysterious attachment, whereas with America I felt nothing, nothing at all."[14]

The protective silence of Paris, the congenial tolerance of eccentrics and experimentalists that harbored the creativity of Picasso, Joyce, and Gertrude Stein gave its benediction to Miller as well. With no puritanical curb on the excesses of his language, he learned to make of excess itself a style. The formlessness that had characterized his abortive literary efforts in America became suffused in his Paris writing with an inner unity. Miller was moving in a milieu both bohemian and proletarian, constantly seeking his own measure in the welter of personal relationships into which he indiscriminately thrust himself. And in one autobiographical volume after another, beginning with *Cancer*, he recorded his findings with relentless candor. Publishers almost without exception

demanded excisions or flatly declined the gamble; as a consequence Miller's *modus vivendi* regularly came to turn on the gentle exploitation of his friends. When his writing began to be issued in Paris in the mid-thirties by the offbeat Obelisk Press, he was charged with iconoclasm, which he cheerfully admitted to, and pornography, which he rejected in favor of obscenity.

Except for two brief visits to New York in 1935 and in 1936, Miller stayed on in Paris through the thirties. During his 1935 visit Miller had felt the sting of reproach reserved for men who like himself had fled an America that was undergoing social and economic upheaval. He complained of the retitling of his "Glittering Pie" in a "revolutionary" dance program. They had called it: "I came, I saw, I *fled.*" Miller commented: "The expatriates are anathema to the Americans, particularly the Communists."[15] But back a year later he remarked that "the very fact that I no longer have any need of America means that I am a disturbing factor in their midst,"[16] and he celebrated his joy at realizing that he was "free of this country, that I have no need of it, that I can not be dominated or tyrannized or enslaved by it. That is the real reason why her problems leave me unaffected. It is not hatred of it (for if it were I should have cause to feel uneasy), but indifference. I lived out my American problem; it is for the other 120,000,000 Americans to live out theirs."[17] In his correspondence with Count Keyserling, whose *Travel Diary* he had eagerly read, Miller confided his impressions of what it felt like to return as an exile to his native land.