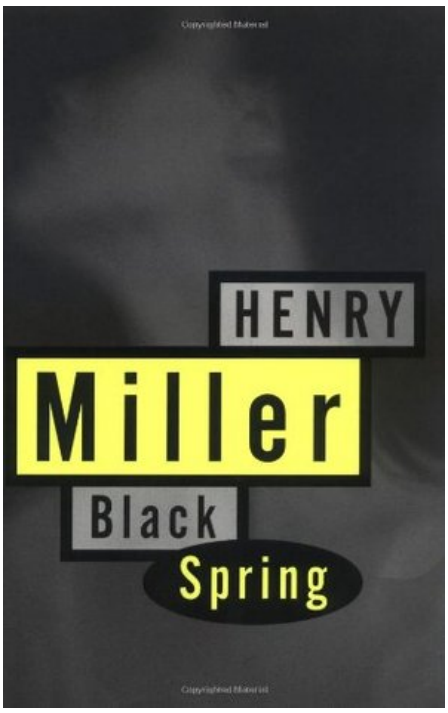

Black Spring

Henry Miller

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Black Spring

Henry Miller

Black Spring Henry Miller
Continuing the subversive self-revelation begun in Tropic of Cancer and Tropic of Capricorn, Henry Miller takes readers along a mad, free-associating journey from the damp grime of his Brooklyn youth to the sun-splashed cafes and squalid flats of Paris. With incomparable glee, Miller shifts effortlessly from Virgil to venereal disease, from Rabelais to Roquefort. In this seductive technicolor swirl of Paris and New York, he captures like no one else the blending of people and the cities they inhabit.

Black Spring Details

Date	:	Published February 11th 1994 by Grove Press (first published 1936)
ISBN	:	9780802131829
Author	:	Henry Miller
Format	:	Paperback 243 pages
Genre	:	Fiction, Literature, Classics, American

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From Reader Review Black Spring for online ebook

Shauna says

In Black Spring Miller reinvents his inward journey, again endlessly listing, rewriting his history, trying to live dozens of lateral lives while mourning his single linear life. "One life! And there are millions and millions of lives to be lived." Like he's astonished a spirit like his is condemned to exist but once, on one patch of land in one chunk of history, so he refuses that fate and writes about everything and anything with an inhuman ferocity.
It's a fever dream like Ginsberg's Howl, but it's more sustained. Unlike Tropic of Cancer and Tropic of Capricorn, Miller flies off the handle, not tethering Black Spring to anything so trite as a timeline or plot. He doesn't really need to, because he'd established himself so firmly in Cancer and Capricorn, that if you're still reading Miller after that, you know what you're in for and chances are you can't get enough.
He writes about New York and Paris, about memory, and about the disgusting beauty of a kitchen sink. It's utterly joyous and life-affirming, if half the time nonsensical.
Like so much of what Miller wrote, it's dedicated to Anais Nin from the outset. He's not afraid to mention his literary influences including her (who held both romantic and literary sway over him) and his idol Dostoyevsky, and it's his love for literature that always shines through.
Miller's what a thousand Palahniuks could never be -- unhinged subversiveness without the uninspiring pessimism. He's like an enhanced Bukowski -- relevant but elevated to something more spiritual. He's uncensored and honest, but it's never for shock value. There will never be another like him.

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Jim says

I've read that Miller is out of fashion at the moment. I can see why he might have been *in* fashion in just the same way as James Joyce and D H Lawrence were banned – and so also fashionable – because of their shock element. Now none of them are particularly shocking so why should we keep reading? Based purely on this book, which the blurb on the back calls "his most distinguished book from a stylistic point of view," I can see that there is a lot more to Miller than simple shock tactics. His biggest strength is as an observer but there's not much point being an observer if you're not also equipped to effectively communicate what you've observed, then what he does is comment on what he has observed (which he does with Joycean flair) and what he has to say is thought-provoking.

Is it dated? Yes, of course it is, but who would suggest that we stop reading Dickens because he's dated? I would suggest that he's not outdated. Good writing doesn't get old especially if its themes are broad: everyone has a childhood, everyone had a dad, everyone needs to pee and although I doubt many of us will ever have a friend quite like Jabberwhorl Cronstadt we all have friends who from time to time test the bonds of friendship. I would recommend this book to writers as a textbook first and foremost. I'm sure we've all had a crack at stream of consciousness writing and fallen flat on our faces; like abstract art, it's not as easy as it looks. These are ten ways of doing it. I say, ten, because every story is different in style and approach and yet they all have the name Miller running through the centre of them like a stick of Blackpool rock.

I would not pretend for a minute that this is an easy book because it is not. Who said reading was supposed to be easy? Going for a stroll is easy. Climbing up a mountain isn't but which is the more satisfying I ask you?

You can read my full review on my blog here.

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Stephen B says

Henry Miller is an asshole, and that is what makes him great.

Shaimaa Ali says

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Henry Martin says

Warning: This review is long, has excessive amount of quotes, and does not reach much of a conclusion. If

you have a short attention span, this may not be for you. However, if you appreciate fine writing, I encourage you to read on.

For me, Henry Miller is the finest writer America has produced over the past century. When his name comes up, most readers associate Miller with sex, scandals, pornography. This is mostly due to the press attention given to his two books, The Tropic of Cancer, and The Tropic of Capricorn. There is, however, much more to Miller than these two books. Miller's life work can be broken to three separate categories: Sex, Surrealism, and Philosophy. The works that make up these three categories did not come in a chronological order, even though his latter works are much more philosophical. The shift from sex to philosophy is very noticeable in his Rosy Crucifixion trilogy, where Nexus makes a grand departure from the world of sex and into philosophical realms. Nevertheless, when I say sex, I do not mean obscenity. Miller's writing is dotted with sex, but not sex for sex's value alone; it is sex that is a part of the story, not the other way around.

Unlike his other books, Black Spring stands alone, covering a period of Miller's life not often discussed in his other works - his early years. It is also, undoubtedly, his most surreal work. By surreal I mean that not only it touches on the principles of surrealism, but that it is a work riddled with surreal imagery. In Black Spring, this imagery is Miller's greatest asset.

The Fourteenth Ward is the opening chapter of Black Spring, an opening chapter into the intimate life of Henry Miller. This is the chapter where he talks about his childhood, his friends, the people and the streets he grew up with. It is a painful place, yet a safe haven. The following is a fine example from this chapter:

"And then one day, as if suddenly the flesh came undone and the blood beneath the flesh had coalesced with the air, suddenly the whole world roars again and the very skeleton of the body melts like wax. Such a day it may be when you first encounter Dostoevski. You remember the smell of the tablecloth on which the book rests; you look at the clock and it is only five minutes from eternity; you count the objects on the mantelpiece because the sound of numbers is a totally new sound in your mouth, because everything new and old, or touched and forgotten, is a fire and mesmerism. Now every door of the cage is open and whichever way you walk is a straight line toward infinity, a straight, mad line over which the breakers roar and the great rocs of marble and indigo swoop to lower their fevered eggs. Out of the waves beating phosphorescent step proud and prancing the enameled horses that marched with Alexander, their tight-proud bellies glowing with calcium, their nostrils dipped in laudanum. Now it is all snow and lice, with the great band of Orion slung around the ocean's crotch."

Third or Fourth Day of Spring, the second chapter in Black Spring, fluctuates between his childhood home and his current place in Clichy.

"The third room was an alcove where I contracted the measles, chicken pox, scarlet fever, diphtheria, et cetera: all the lovely diseases of childhood which make time stretch out in everlasting bliss and agony, especially when Providence has provided a window over the bed with bars and ogres to claw at them and sweat as thick as carbuncles, rapid as a river and sprouting, sprouting as if it were always spring and tropics, with thick tenderloin steaks for hands and feet heavier than led or light as snow, feet and hands separated by oceans of time or incalculable latitudes of light, the little knob of the brain hidden away like a grain of sand and the toenails rotting blissfully under the ruins of Athens."

Where this chapter opens with the description of his home, it shifts to his obsession with the way humanity destroys itself, the never-ending list of wrongs he sees.

"I am thinking of that age to come when God is born again, when men will fight and kill for God as now and for a long time to come men are going to fight for food."

One could argue that Miller was a pessimist. I disagree. Miller, for the most part, enjoyed life to its fullest. Perhaps he foresaw what was in store around the corner, perhaps he foresaw the destruction WWII brought upon Europe, which I will touch upon later in this review.

"I am dazzled by the glorious collapse of the world."

A Saturday Afternoon, the third chapter, is a wonderful praise to France. Spending the day on his bicycle, Miller joyfully explores everything French, and sings his amorous hymns to the French people, his newly-found countrymen. He finds joy in the simple pleasure of pissing in an open urinal (and he recounts quite a few of them), or visiting a toilet with a book.

"No harm, I say, can ever be done a great book by taking it with you to the toilet. Only the little books suffer thereby. Only the little books make ass wipers."

It is a chapter about French countryside, toilets, and great literature. Not an easy combination to pull off, but he did. Enough said.

The Angel is my Watermark, the fourth chapter in Black Spring. This is a stand-alone piece, which chronicles Miller's attempt at a watercolor painting. Those of you not familiar with Miller may not know this about him, but he was a prolific, and pretty good, watercolor artist. I believe it originally started as a way to make money, but later it was done purely out of joy. In later years, when Miller settled in Big Sur, he used to wrap books in his watercolors and sent the books to his fans and supporters. Since then, some of his watercolors sold for insane amounts of money, and later there was a limited run of hand-signed serigraphs. Being a sucker for Miller, I own one of them - Really, the Blues. The nice thing about the serigraphs, aside from being limited edition and hand signed, is that each one of them is unique in color composition.

Back to the story at hand. After waking up and feeling like creating something, Miller is 'attacked' by a muse. He calls it dictation, a process where words and sentences come to him so fast he has a hard time keeping up and writing it down. This lasts for many hours during which he attempts to take a break, goes out, and eats something. But the dictation continues, he writes on the tablecloth, goes home, and it still continues. By the time it is over with, he is tired and worn out. Then, seeing a pamphlet with paintings by inmates in an insane-asylum, he realizes that this whole time he really wanted to create a painting.

"I'm very eager to start in. Just the same, I'm at loss for ideas. The dictation has ceased. I have a half mind to copy one of these illustrations. But then I'm a little ashamed of myself—to copy the work of a lunatic is the worst form of plagiarism."

And so he begins, with a horse of all things. Not having any picture of a horse, he draws from memory. Here, he shows his playful nature:

"To put meat on the hoof is a delicate task, extremely delicate. And to make the legs join the body naturally, not as if they were stuck on with glue. My horse already has five legs: the easiest thing to do is to transform one of them into a phallus erectus. No sooner said than done. And how he is standing just like a terra cotta figure of the sixth century B.C. The tail isn't in yet, but I've left an opening just above the asshole."

and in the next paragraph: "During the leg experiments the stomach has become dilapidated. I patch it as best I can—until it looks like a hammock. Let it go at that. If it doesn't look like a horse when I'm through I can always turn it into a hammock."

and one paragraph later: "At this point, I admit frankly, I am completely disgusted with my prowess. I have a mind to erase and begin all over again. But I detest the eraser. I would rather convert the horse into a dynamo or a grand piano than erase my work completely."

The more he works at it, the worse it becomes. Here he says: "However, when I get into a predicament of this sort I know that I can extricate myself later when it comes time to apply the color. The drawing is simply the excuse for color. The color is the toccata: drawing belongs to the realm of idea."

He continues with the drawing, making it more and more elaborate, throwing things in there that have no place in the original idea. A bridge, a man, trees, houses, a mountain..."What's a mountain? It's a pile of dirt which never wears away, at least, not in historical time. A mountain's too easy. I want a volcano I want a reason for my horse to be snorting and prancing. Logic, logic! "Le fou montre un souci constant de logique!" (Les Frances aussi.) Well, I'm not a fou, especially a French fou I can take a few liberties, particularly with the work of an imbecile."

Thus he starts on the volcano. "When I'm all through, I have a shirt on my hands. A shirt, precisely!"..."One thing, however, stands out unmistakably, clear and clean, and that is the bridge. It's strange, but if you can draw an arch the rest of the bridge follows naturally. Only an engineer can ruin a bridge."

This last line is rather important. It is subtle, but it points to a larger issue Miller seemed to have, and that is the issue with progress, advancement, especially the modern way of things changing fast while destroying old habits, familiar places, picturesque views. This is why I think he loved France and Greece so much, but disliked America. The old world held onto the old, the familiar. The new world kept building and rebuilding. No attachment.

Here he inserts an angel above his horse. "It's a sad angel with a fallen stomach, and the wings are supported by umbrella ribs."

Inspiration for this is explained here: "Have you ever sat at a railway station and watched people killing time? Do they not sit a little like crestfallen angels—with their broken arches and their fallen stomachs? Those eternal few minutes in which they are condemned to be alone with themselves—does it not put umbrella ribs in their wings?
All angels in religious art are false. If you want to see angels you must go to the Grand Central Depot, or to the Gare St. Lazare. Especially the Gare St.Lazare—Salle des Pas Perdus."

The piece eventually evolves into something entirely different than Miller's original intention. And so does the story. It is no longer about painting, about horses, or about anything that might be on the canvas (and there were many, many things taking appearance only to be transformed or covered entirely). It is now about Miller, about humanity, about angels.

"My whole life seems to be wrapped up in that dirty handkerchief, the Bowery, which I walked through day after day, year in and year out—a dose of smallpox whose scars never disappear. If I had a name then it was Cimex Lectularius. If I had a home it was a slide trombone. If I had a passion, it was to wash myself clean."

After ruining the painting, he decides to wash it in a sink, scrub it, and lay it on his desk. Here the story takes

a completely different turn and Miller shines in his surreal monologue for three pages. In the end, this is as much about the painting as it is about Miller himself. It is a story of imbalance, of internal struggle; and as such it is beautiful.

The Tailor Shop is the fifth chapter, and here we are offered a glimpse into his early adult years.

At first, Miller sets the scene: His father's tailor shop, grumpy customers, half-wit brother, and his mother who does not have a clue. He spends a quite a bit of time on his father's customers, often using them not only for background, but also to express his disagreement with advancement.
I really liked this simple description: "Of the three brothers I liked Albert the best. He had arrived at that ripe age when the bones become as brittle as glass. His spine had the natural curvature of old age, as though he were preparing to fold up and return to the womb."

He was writing Black Spring in France, and his disdain with America was already apparent: "Yes, all the silk-lined duffers I knew well—we had the best families in America on our roster. And what a pus and filth when they opened their dirty traps!"

His sentiment about the changes in society, his surroundings, and the world in general are pretty clear here: "As the old 'uns died off they were replaced by young blood. Young blood! That was the war cry all along the Avenue, wherever there were silk-lined suits for sale. A fine bloody crew they were, the young bloods. Gamblers, racetrack touts, stockbrokers, ham actors, prize fighters, etc. Rich one day, poor the next. No honor, no loyalty, no sense of responsibility. A fine bunch of gangrened syphilics they were, most of 'em. Came back from Paris or Monte Carlo with dirty postcards and a string of big blue rocks in their groin. Some of them with balls as big as a lamb's fry."

Miller is clearly showing affection for the less fortunate, as he has done in most of his books. While he thrashes the rich and powerful, he embraces the everyday men.

"The men my father loved were weak and lovable. They went out, each and every one of them, like brilliant stars before the sun. They went out quietly and catastrophically. No shred of them remained—nothing but the memory of their blaze and glory. They flow inside me now like a vast river choked with falling stars. They form the black flowing river which keeps the axis of my world in constant revolution. Out of this black, endless, ever-expanding girdle of nigh springs the continuous morning which is wasted in creation. Each morning the river overflows its banks, leaving the sleeves and buttonholes and all the rinds of a dead universe strewn along the beach where I stand contemplating the ocean of the morning of creation."

And his surreal imagery pours forth as the story goes on, once again changing the course from its beginning to the larger issues Miller sees with the world:

"It's staggeringly beautiful at this hour when every one seems to be going his own private way. Love and murder, they're still a few hours apart. Love and murder, I feel it coming with the dusk: new babies coming out of the womb, soft, pink flesh to get tangled up in barbed wire and scream all night long and rot like dead bone a thousand miles from nowhere. Crazy virgins with ice-cold jazz in their veins egging men on to erect new buildings and men with dog collars around their necks wading through the muck up to the eyes so that the czar of electricity will rule the waves. What's in the seed scares the living piss out of me: a brand new world is coming out of the egg and no matter how fast I write the old world doesn't die fast enough. I hear the new machine guns and the millions of bones splintered at once; I see dogs running mad and pigeons dropping with letters tied to their ankles."

In France, Miller found his peace. He found understanding, and a society that he could embrace. His tormented view of self in America has finally cleared, and he truly enjoyed life. His writing here is much more calm, much more picturesque. In France he found pleasure in observing its people, their habits, their ways. Whereas here he saw himself as an individual, in America he saw himself as part of a machine, a machine he had no desire to be a part of.

"Swimming in the crowd, a digit with the rest. Tailored and re-tailored. The lights are twinkling—on and off, on and off. Sometimes it's a rubber tire, sometimes it's a piece of chewing gum. The tragedy of it is that nobody sees the look of desperation on my face. Thousands and thousands of us, and we are passing one another without a look of recognition. The lights jigging like electric needles. The atoms going crazy with light and heat. A conflagration going on behind the glass and nothing burns away. Men breaking their backs, men bursting their brains, to invent a machine which a child will manipulate. If I could only find the hypothetical child who's to run this machine I'd put a hammer in its hands and say: Smash it! Smash it!"

Jabberwhorl Cronstadt the sixth chapter is a rather eccentric, imagery-rich piece with very surreal settings. Since most of the story itself is comprised of a dialogue, it is impossible to quote a single paragraph without taking it out of context. This piece, nevertheless, is thought-provoking in its own way. Jabberwhorl is an eccentric artist, or perhaps he only serves as a metaphor for one of Miller's alter egos. In the end, he is laid to rest, which could also mean Miller's own departure from one period of his life into another.

Part Two Follows:

Ivana Books Are Magic says

Saying this probably won't make me popular, but Miller strikes me as such a mediocre writing talent. Truth be told, his prose is not without rhythm. There is some beauty in his writing, I can't disagree with that, but in this book the beauty of his writing strikes me as almost an accident. Reading Black Spring, I was left with the impression that the poetry in Miller's prose is a rather rare occurrence. The good parts were too few and too far in-between! There is some writing talent evident, but not nearly as much as I expect. I hate to say this, but it seems to me that Miller is too much of an exhibitionist to be a truly great writer.

While I can certainly see why someone would call Miller a poet of street style, I must admit that I was personally quite disappointed by Black Spring. Initially Black Spring drew me in, but soon it proved tiresome. Examining his writing in Black Spring a bit more carefully, I found it lacking in many ways. I don't have a problem with chaotic or experimental writing, as long as there is a point to it, and I failed to see any kind of point or meaning, be it aesthetic or content-wise, in Black Spring.

That's just my personal opinion based on this particular book, I'm not making any claims yet. I do plan to read more of Miller and I hope to be able to make a better (personal) assessment of his writing soon. At the moment, however, reading about Miller seems more appealing than reading his works! In other words, I found reading about Miller's life and his influence on the beat generation more interesting than actually reading his works, and that's not a good sign as I'm primary a lover of literature. Literary history is fascinating, but typically I enjoy reading literary works more than I enjoy reading about literature!

Let's get back to reviewing this book. Black Spring is a collection of stories. Published in 1936 in Paris,

Black Spring was (with time) favourably received by Miller's critics, and was referred by Miller himself as 'the best of all I wrote during that period.' I must admit that as I started reading Black Spring, I felt glued to its pages. Initially, it did impress me. Very quickly, however, I became quite bored of it and struggled to make it to the end. I can see how Black Spring could have been seen as revolutionary for its time, but the vulgarity and the chaos of this book didn't appeal to me. I failed to see it as shocking or thought provoking. I'm not being a moralist, I just found it needlessly excessive and repetitive in many ways. I might be wrong, but at times Miller actually seems to be resorting to name naming for the sake of name naming. I don't see what I should be so impressed with. The fact that Miller knows the names of a handful of writers and artists and repeats them ad nauseam?

I would say that Black Spring is interesting as an experiment. It is indeed quite full of potential, and it is not completely devoid of writing talent. However, sadly that writing potential doesn't seem to fully realized. In other words, I would call Black Spring a disappointment. On overall, the narrative strikes me as devoid of meaning and purpose. It was too random, too generic and quite frankly more than a bit immature. Miller lacks the self control to create a truly memorable prose. I'm a big fan of the stream of consciousness technique and I absolutely adore many writers that use it, but Black Spring takes it a bit too far. At times, it feels like ramblings of a mad man. Black Spring does contains a few hauntingly beautiful passages, but in my view they don't make it up for the rest of the book, that mostly strikes me as chaotic, immature and exhibitionist writing.

Geoff says

Basically?
That Miller is Nabokov, sans plot, wit, playfulness or purpose. Long streams of rarely heard nouns do not a classic make.

Jason says

In the heat of the late afternoon the city rises up like a huge polar bear shaking off its rhododendrons.

If you can't enjoy this line, you might not enjoy this book. This line is perfect summary, the imagery that needs to be connected is fierce and brilliant. The point is that you are going to be falling into the recesses of Miller's brain, dancing with his Id as a stripper dances with the pole, you'll need to make the connections, you'll need to uncover the brilliance of the geography of Miller's mind.

When i say this, "the geography of Miller's mind," that is how i propose this book. he takes you through the streets of his childhood, to the popular haunts of his time in France, to ancient cities he has explored in his mind, to mythic cities that were popularized by fictions. He takes you not only to the New York of his childhood, but to the way *he remembers* the New York of his childhood. You are reading a travelogue, and your conductor is a mad scientist.

This is why when he rediscovers something or someone he elaborates not with a description full of the

person's actions and life, but of his emotional commitment to that person. If someone from his past was soulless, they'll have tentacles. If someone was a bastion of innocence, they will sprout wings in his memory. For instance the way he remembers Mele, a slightly retarded girl that fascinated Miller with the brilliance of her innocence was the depth in which he witnessed the world punish her:

Two great round eyes, full and black as the night, staring at me uncomprehendingly. No maniac can look that way. No idiot can look that way. Only an angel or a saint.

He epitomizes her as the perfection of this world,

I don't think that Mele had any knowledge of sin or of guilt or of remorse. I think that Mele was born a half-witted angel. I think Mele was a saint...Why couldn't they make a place for her by the fire, let her sit there and dream, if that's what she wanted to do? Why must everybody work*--even the saints and the angels? Why must half-wits set a good example?*

When he is forced to institutionalize her, he realizes that he is losing a part of himself. her trust in him was self-affirmation, assured by her naivety and unlikeliness to beguile him with false flatteries:

And now she's very tranquil and she calls the cows by their first name. The moon fascinates her. She has no fear because i'm with her and she always trusted me. I was her favorite. Even though she was a half-wit she was good to me. The others were more intelligent, but their hearts were bad...During the journey I wept--I couldn't help it. When people are too good for this world they have to be put under lock and key. There's something wrong with people who are too good.

In order to get Miller, you have to understand his abstraction. He takes the elements from this world and coordinates them into symbols, each with an inherent meaning. Then he blasts those symbols for inconsistency and stereotypes, he exploits as he cleanses. Through him is run a tunnel of choppers and dicers, but also reparation and a system to create new metaphors, metaphors cleansed from the toil of history. His geography is new, without the dirt of the pioneers or the sperm of the crusaders, his map is drawn from the fanciful collection of birds and seahorses and sequins landmasses and anatomical parts that draw up a human being as much as they do a landscape. You have to hear in his metaphor the way things are pieced together, then you start to understand the meaning or instigation:

Life is just a continuous honeymoon filled with chocolate layer cake and cranberry pie. Put a penny in the slot and see a woman undressing on the grass. Put a penny in the slot and win a set of false teeth. The world is made of new parts every afternoon: the soiled parts are set to the dry cleaner, the used parts are scrapped and sold for junk

Here, he uses images from a childhood; the coveted (chocolate cake, undressing woman) versus the deranged (false teeth, a scrap yard, dry cleaner); to infiltrate that part of the psyche that lays dormant when reading details. He is trying to instigate the emotional connections to substance, he does this by recalling the geography of his mind and dancing with the images. His process is monumental:

the air beats thick, the bats are flapping, the cement softens, the iron rails flatten under the broad flanges of the trolley wheels. Life is written down in headlines twelve feet high with periods, commas, and semicolons

Surely nothing is better than to take a train at night when all inhabitants are asleep and to drain from their open mouths the rich succulent morsels of their unspoken tongue. When every one sleeps the mind is crowded with events; the mind travels in a swarm, like summer flies that are sucked along by the train

I move in a golden hum through a syrup of warm lazy bodies

You won't find a coherent story in Miller (unless you read the Rosy Crucifixion or one of his *actual* travel books), what you will find is a spiritual journey through the connections of the mind. He is a poet who writes in prose. He finds the ethereal substances and writes scores by their name, but he does not attempt to write the music. He is strange, because he writes the notes in their abstraction as one would write details, but he is using the force that drives music to write his prose. Essentially, he is a writer with a poet's mind. Hence, having to make all the connections in what was *supposed* to just be a story.

In one section of the book, titled "The Angel is my Watermark!" he details a painting that he is creating in vivid detail, calling it at one point, *a sad angel with a fallen stomach, and the wings are supported by umbrella ribs*. Is he talking about the shape of the figure within the painting? Or is this a comparison? Miller does not include illustrations, most likely because you are supposed to illustrate this image in your mind. He prods the reader for being insufficient at finding the true meaning of the painting, even though he has outlined it to excess. He prods the reader because as he paints the painting he devalues the reader's capability to understand something as oblique and strange and wonderful as angels. He mocks you in order to make you try harder, sort of the antagonistic father figure:

No, I'm afraid you don't! you see only the bleak blue angel frozen by the glaciers. You do not even see the umbrella ribs, because you are not trained to look for umbrella ribs. But you see an angel, and you see a horse's ass. And you may keep them: they are for you! *There are no pockmarks on the angel now--only a cold blue spotlight which throws into relief his fallen stomach and his broken arches. The angel is there to lead you to Heaven, where it is all plus and no minus. The angel is there like a watermark, a guarantee of your faultless vision. The angel is there to drop sprigs of parsley in your omelette, to put a shamrock in your buttonhole. I could scrub the mythology out ofthe horse's mane; i could scrub the the yellow out of the Yangtsze Kiang [Yellow River:]; i could scrub the date out of the man in the gondola; i could scrub out the clouds and the tissue paper in which were wrapped the bouquets with forked lightning...*But the angel i can't scrub out. The angel is my watermark.

In order to get his harrowing cynicism, you have to imagine that Miller lived in a world of disgusting people. As he saw it, the universe was clean in its entropy, in its structured chaos. But men, who deciphered meanings and religiosity from themes, claimed to hold the universe in their hands. That ignorance deserves to be lamented. But how much of a hypocrite should one be in lambasting the species that you are! Miller takes it with a grain of salt, realizing he can not be a crusader against the awful Crusades. So he calls himself a man, spits and beguiles other men, but upholds an image of austerity to the potential of man as well. He celebrates the well-being of man to create this absurd image of himself and emblazon his way through an entirely damaged idea of life. Someone once told me that Miller upholds Camus' idea of the Absurd man terrifically. He is living in Paris, shit poor with nothing to do but survive, but he is the happiest man on Earth. How can this be? Because he realizes the confrontation between himself and the world order is asinine. We will never own anything. So he lives his life as a flower or as a beast, as a genteel savage. He barks at people, he sniffs their crotches and he dances at night when he hears pretty music. He delivers himself as the rose of a person he was meant to be, and under starlight he accomplishes the same innocence as his friend Mele, before she was institutionalized and lost her sense of complacency and fell into madness. Miller realizes that this madness is potential, by falling into the cold dirge of civilization. So he reinterprets the world, draws up his own map, one that barks and yelps and sings, so you can see the world as a relative strait of images, suspended in its own charisma by the dance of connections on a speculative plane. He realizes himself as only a piece of this world, and he places himself as merely a buoy, a shape within the bizarre geography:

every living man is a museum that houses the horrors of the race. Each man adds a new wing to the museum. And so, each night, standing before the house in which i live, the house which is being torn down, i try to grasp the meaning of it. the more the insides are exposed the more i get to love my house. I love even the old pisspot which stands under the bed, and which nobody uses any more.

Ian "Marvin" Graye says

A Miller's Tale

If "Tropic of Cancer" was Henry Miller's debut album, an outspoken work of radical sexual and philosophical self-revelation, then "Black Spring" is a lesser, sophomore work that is a shadow of the debut.

Though it is still a worthy effort, it is a lesser work in many ways. It is shorter, it isn't one continuous work that flows inexorably from beginning to end. It is more or less 10 semi-autobiographical works, each with its own chapter title, much like a collection of essays. Indeed, some of the chapters were individually submitted for publication in magazines.

Sexuality is only one subject matter out of many. Paris is only one setting. Miller's hometown of Brooklyn is equally, if not more, important.

There is a greater concern with Henry Miller the person, the individual, rather than Henry Miller, the lover, the fucquer.

Ironically, the novel is dedicated to Anais Nin, his lover, who helped fund its publication. Perhaps both were trying to prove to the world that he was a serious writer who could write about more than sex, at least from a masculine point of view.

European What Not

Miller's tale commences in Brooklyn. He describes himself as a patriot of the Fourteenth Ward, now known as Williamsburg. His father was for a period a tailor in the vicinity of Fifth Avenue and 30th Street, Manhattan (near the former Hotel Wolcott).

His family came from Germany ("Hurrah for the German Fifth!"). He describes "the freaks who made up the living family tree". He identifies not only with his family background, but its German and European origins. In both "Tropic of Cancer" and "Black Spring", he refers to Goethe.

"I am a man of the old world, a seed that was transplanted by the wind, a seed which failed to blossom in the mushroom oasis of America. I belong on the heavy tree of the past. My allegiance, physical and spiritual, is with the men of Europe, those who were once Franks, Gauls, Vikings, Huns, Tatars, what not."

Miller derives his ambition from European roots:

"Once I thought there were marvelous things in store for me...I was part of the great tree, part of the past, with crest and lineage, with pride, pride...Always merry and bright!"

In the Street

Miller prides himself on the toughness he learned in the streets of Brooklyn. The street is where you find truth. The street is authentic and real:

"What is not in the street is false, derived, that is to say, literature."

It's the sensibility of the street that he brings to his fiction, that and the street-wise cynicism of the street-walker. He doesn't imagine himself writing from a gentleman's study, but from a poverty-stricken artist's garret.

Once in the street, you are part of the world, and you could be anywhere.

A Walk, A Dream, A Reverie

Miller claims, "I am not a traveler, not an adventurer," but he is a walker, and his walking takes him first from childhood to youth and then to adulthood, but eventually to Paris, all the time seeking out something, himself.

He sees youth as whole and undivided. "There was no sharp separation between joy and sorrow: they fused into one, as our waking life fuses with dream and sleep." Then comes "the great fragmentation of maturity. The great change":

"...All things, as we walk, splitting with us into a myriad iridescent fragments…We live in the mind, in ideas, in fragments. We no longer drink in the wild outer music of the streets – we remember only. Like a monomaniac we relive the drama of youth."

Miller explored these Proustian concerns in "Tropic of Cancer" as well. Here, he adds:

"One passes imperceptibly from one scene, one age, one life to another. Suddenly, walking down a street, be it real or be it a dream, one realises for the first time that the years have flown, that all this has passed forever and will live on only in memory; and then the memory turns inward with a strange, clutching brilliance and one goes over these scenes and incidents perpetually, in dream and reverie, while walking a street, while lying with a woman, while reading a book, while talking to a stranger..."

Miller wants to reinstate his wholeness (though not necessarily his wholesomeness), and he will wander everywhere, walk anywhere in his quest for wholeness.

In Search of His Roots

If you'll permit me to descend into the Australian vernacular, Miller didn't just return to Europe in pursuit of sexual conquests, he was seeking an alternative to the industrial and materialistic life he found in America:

"Things happened to me in my search for a way out. Up till now I had been working away in a blind tunnel, burrowing in the bowels of the earth for light and water. I could not believe, being a man of the American continent, that there was a place on earth where a man could be himself."

Europe was to be that place, well, at least Paris.

I assume that Berlin and Vienna were less appealing in the early Thirties, because of the contemporaneous ascent of Nazism, though Miller imagines Germany in the following terms in a dream:

"Everything is sordid, shoddy, thin as pasteboard. A Coney Island of the mind...Everything is sliding and crumbling, everything glitters, totters, teeters, titters."

Paris gives Miller the freedom to think and to write, notwithstanding his abject poverty, having resolved not to get a job:

"Here I am in the womb of time and nothing will jolt me out of my stillness. One more wanderer who has found the flame of his restlessness. Here I sit in the open street composing my song."

Despite his romanticisation of Europe, he realises that it, too, is changing:

"The map of Europe is changing before our eyes; nobody knows where the new continent begins or ends...I am here in the midst of a great change. I have forgotten my own language and yet I do not speak the new language."

The Great Wall of China

Miller hopes that a new world will emerge from these changes and his own explorations.

He describes this brave new world as "China", not necessarily the nation "China", but a metaphorical place, like the “East” that Hermann Hesse adverts to.

The metaphor seems to derive from his sense of a wall:

"In Paris, out of Paris, leaving Paris or coming back to Paris, it's always Paris and Paris is France and France is China. All that which is incomprehensible to me runs like a great wall over the hills and valleys through which I wander. Within this great wall I can live out my Chinese life in peace and security...

"By force of circumstance. I became a Chinaman - a Chinaman in my own country! I took 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."

The Song of Love

Miller sings his song while the world around him is collapsing:

"I see America spreading disaster. I see America as a black curse upon the world. I see a long night settling in and that mushroom which has poisoned the world withering at the roots...

"I am dazzled by the glorious collapse of the world!"

Ironically, it’s within this context of destruction that he will learn to write:

"The climate for my body and soul is here where there is quickness and corruption. I am proud not to belong to this century."

In essence, what he wishes to write about is not the world around him, not its history, not its politics, not its ideological future:

"Tomorrow you may bring about the destruction of your world…but tonight I would like to think of one man, a lone individual, a man without a name or country, a man whom I respect because he has absolutely nothing in common with you - MYSELF. Tonight I shall meditate upon that which I am."

As does Walt Whitman, "I celebrate myself, and sing myself".

Miller refers to a God, though it's arguable that it's not the God of Christianity:

"It is no sacred heart that inspires me, no Christ I am thinking of. Something better than a Christ, something bigger than a heart, something beyond God Almighty I think of - MYSELF. I am a man. That seems to me sufficient."

So above all else it is himself with whom Miller is in love, and he is both the subject and the object of his Song of Love.

This Animal, This Man is Some Body

Miller's song is his book:

"For me the book is the man and my book is the man I am…I am a man without a past and without a future. I am - that is all."

Miller is content to "be". In the language of Erich Fromm, he doesn't need to "have", to acquire and horde materialistic possessions.

At the heart of what Miller's Man is, is the body:

"In the honeycomb I am, in the warm belly of the Sphinx. The sky and the earth they tremble with the live, pleasant weight of humanity. At the very core is the body. Beyond is doubt, despair, disillusionment. The body is the fundament, the imperishable."

Of course, in the mind of a male, the body takes his own shape:

"I am a man of God and a man of the Devil. To each his due. Nothing eternal, nothing absolute. Before me always the image of the body, our triune god of penis and testicles."

Womanhood must be described in the same terms, if for no other reason than authenticity:

"I want a world where the vagina is represented by a crude, honest slit, a world that has feeling for bone and contour, for raw primary colours, a world that has fear and respect for its animal origins."

Who's This Man?

One last comment about the man before we talk about sex. This is the essence of Miller as he sees himself:

"Because of Uranus which crosses my longitudinal I am inordinately fond of qunt, hot chitterlings, and

water bottles...I am volatile, quixotic, unreliable, independent, and evanescent. Also quarrelsome...in short, I am an idle fellow who pisses his time away. I have absolutely nothing to show for my labors except my genius..."

An Inordinate Fondness

There is much more about Miller's inordinate fondness in "Tropic of Cancer" than there is in "Black Spring".

However, there are two scenes that are examples of what Kate Millett criticizes in "Sexual Politics".

In my review of "Tropic of Cancer", I mentioned his "sexual exuberance".

On page 96, Miller's protagonist goes to the home of a recent widow with whose beauty he is infatuated.

They are sitting next to each other on the couch, when, after some formalities and sobbing…

"I finally bent over and without saying a word I raised her dress and slipped it into her...she was a pushover...I thought to myself what a sap you've been to wait for so long."

On page 123, on a train during rush hour, he is "pressed up against a woman so tight I can feel the hair on her twat. So tightly glued together my knuckles are making a dent in her groin."

Millett refers to the pushover comment in terms of Miller's and men's belief that "such opportunities are missed only for the lack of enterprise or through adherence to false ideals."

Men are supposed to have absolute licence, and women are supposed to be perpetually available for sex. In other words, all women are supposed to be as available as whores, except that they should expect no payment or consideration.

Millett makes no comment on the second scene. However, it contains within it a more explicit threat of sexual violence.

The protagonist alights at the same stop as the woman, then follows her up to street level, until he decides that she is not interested in sex and he ends his pursuit.

Later that night, he considers that he "ought to go back to the subway, grab a Jane and rape her in the street".

To the extent that this scene captures what goes on in the mind of a stranger, it is a caution to all women.

While Millett is highly critical of some of Miller's sexual descriptions, she does preface her comments as follows:

"Miller is a compendium of American sexual neuroses, and his value lies not in freeing us from such afflictions, but in having had the honesty to express and dramatise them.…What Miller did articulate was the disgust, the contempt, the hostility, the violence, and the sense of filth with which our culture, or more specifically, its masculine sensibility, surrounds sexuality. And women too; for somehow it is women upon whom this onerous burden of sexuality falls."

While Millett wrote these words in 1969 and I think there is much of literary merit in Miller's writing, I

don’t think Millett’s views should be dismissed, even though it’s over forty years later.

"Tropic of Cancer"

My review of the first volume in the trilogy, "Tropic of Cancer", is here:

http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/...

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Ana says

Can we just see, by show of hands, how many people understood what this book is about? Nobody has their hands up? OK. We have no idea what this book is about. Clearing that up makes reading it easier.

Outside of his more auto-biographical works, Miller is just one lean metaphor-making machine. From page one, it can discourage even the bravest of readers, by giving you no time at all to adjust to the rhythm or the cadence of his sentences. In "Black Spring", you will find a very dark Miller, writing as if he is on the edge of insanity - though by his account, he is probably just reaching sanity now. I can see how many people, even if they are fans of Miller's writing, will back out of finishing this book, or will finish it the way I did - eating my way through it one page at a time, sometimes even skipping a few (no shame there, my friends), when things get rough. For example, why should I read two pages filled with names of people? I absolutely skipped past that.

You will find here the erotically blunt Miller that the world is used to:

> I want a world where the vagina is represented by a crude, honest slit, a world that has feeling for bone and contour, for raw, primary colors, a world that has fear and respect for its animal origins. I'm sick of looking at cunts all tickled up, disguised, deformed, idealized. Cunts with nerve ends exposed. I don't want to watch young virgins masturbating in the privacy of their boudoirs or biting their nails or tearing their hair [...].

> Pressed up against a woman so tight I can feel the hair on her twat. So tightly glued together my knuckles are making a dent in her groin.

It is the same crude Miller that I absolutely fell in love with in all of his works. His writing is still cruelly beautiful, albeit of a complexity that sometimes just wooshes past your head. I can only recommend him to very patient readers - you won't get much out of this work but the feeling that you have "conquered" it by the end.

The rest of the book seems to be a conscious attempt at making the reader lose himself in rows upon rows of words, in an endless enumeration that makes you forget you ever had a train of thought:

> Seeds falling down through the drain: young canteloupes, squash, caviar, macaroni, bile, spittle, phlegm, lettuce leaves, sardines' bones, Worcestershire sauce, stale beer, urine, bloodclots, Kruschen salts, oatmeal, chew tobacco, pollen, dust, grease, wool, cotton threads, match sticks, live worms, shredded wheat, scalded milk, castor oil.

And then you gave the absolute, unique, Milleresque gems:

> What's in the seed scares the living piss out of me: a brand new world is coming out of the egg and no matter how fast I write the old world doesn't die fast enough. I hear the new machine guns and the millions of bones splintered at once; I see dogs running mad and pigeons dropping with letters tied to their ankle.

As a reader, I am content with going through a book of metaphors if I emerge at the end with such a passage making a living inside of my head. Miller may not be for everyone, but I think everyone should try him at once. Maybe don't start with "Black Spring", if you want to end up liking him. Apart from that, I'm very glad I tackled this work.

Finbar says

This book changed my life. No hyperbole. I never looked at the world the same way after reading this. It was also present at the moment of serendipity when I finally "got" modernism. Probably the best birthday gift I've ever received. Thanks Ken.

Bart Schaneman says

I could have done with more characters and less philosophy, but this is also Miller at the height of his surreal and madman powers, which is always entertaining. He really was the successor to Whitman, and here he's channelling him with little to no filter. Not his best book, nor his worst.

Favorite passage:

"Today it is the third or fourth day of spring and I am sitting at the Place Clichy in full sunshine. Today, sitting here in the sun, I tell you it doesn’t matter a damn whether the world is going to the dogs or not; it doesn’t matter whether the world is right or wrong, good or bad. It is -- and that suffices. The world is what it

is and I am what I am. I say it not like a squatting Buddha with legs crossed, but out of a gay, hard wisdom, out of an inner security. This out there and this in me, all this, everything, the resultant of inexplicable forces. A chaos whose order is beyond comprehension. Beyond human comprehension."

Vit Babenco says

In *Black Spring* **Henry Miller** demonstrates his abilities as a teller of anecdotes and poet of the street life:

> To be born in the street means to wander all your life, to be free. It means accident and incident, drama, movement. It means above all dream. A harmony of irrelevant facts which gives to your wandering a metaphysical certitude. In the street you learn what human beings really are; otherwise, or afterwards, you invent them.

And throughout the entire book he keeps walking the streets: streets of his childhood, streets of his adulthood, streets of his voluntary exile, streets of his dreams and streets of his recollections… And he encounters so many people and sees so many things…

> And then one day, as if suddenly the flesh came undone and the blood beneath the flesh had coalesced with the air, suddenly the whole world roars again and the very skeleton of the body melts like wax. Such a day it may be when first you encounter Dostoevski. You remember the smell of the tablecloth on which the book rests; you look at the clock and it is only five minutes from eternity; you count the objects on the mantelpiece because the sound of numbers is a totally new sound in your mouth, because everything new and old, or touched and forgotten, is a fire and a mesmerism. Now every door of the cage is open and whichever way you walk is a straight line toward infinity, a straight, mad line over which the breakers roar and great rocs of marble and indigo swoop to lower their fevered eggs.

The day he meets Dostoevsky sounds like the best day of his life…
And there also is the best hour to walk the streets…

> It’s staggeringly beautiful at this hour when every one seems to be going his own private way. Love and murder, they’re still a few hours apart. Love and murder, I feel it coming with the dusk: new babies coming out of the womb, soft, pink flesh to get tangled up in barbed wire and scream all night long and rot like dead bone a thousand miles from nowhere. Crazy virgins with ice-cold jazz in their veins egging men on to erect new buildings and men with dog collars around their necks wading through the muck up to the eyes so that the czar of electricity will rule the waves.

Henry Miller makes more and more gestures in the direction of surrealism so gradually his narration turns overwrought to the degree that it becomes preposterous… And beginning with *Into the Night Life* he literally starts sleepwalking and closer to the end turns into a somnambulist completely.

Sean Wilson says

Black Spring is Henry Miller's hallucinogenic fragments between the Tropics. Each fragment or short story alternates between Paris and New York in a psychedelic swirl of stream of consciousness and technicolor modernism.

"I sit in the dead center of traffic, stilled by the hush of a new life growing out of the decay about me."

Ahmad says

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Cátia Vieira says

Henry Miller is my favorite writer. He has been since I was 15 years old and I can barely describe what I felt when I found his works. I was discovering a whole new world. I had been feeling all those things inside but I couldn’t really make sense of them. And, then, I met him. He tells me about love, life, sex, suffering, solitude. Above all, he tells me about myself. And I felt understood.

Black Spring, published in 1936, might be my least favourite book by Henry Miller so far. Written between his Tropics, this book is composed by 10 short stories (more or less). To be honest, short stories were never my thing. I end up losing focus.

He mostly writes about his life experiences in Brooklyn and Paris. Henry Miller was a 'flâneur'. Wandering the streets of these great cities meant personal growth, meant learning about life, meant getting the possibility of experiencing. I also think 'Black Spring' is one of his most surrealist works, where the stream of consciousness tends to rule.

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