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Erogenous and Spiritual Consciousness: A Study of Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*

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Abstract:

This paper explores the similarities between erogenous and spiritual experience as represented by Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*. It argues that the moments of absolute erotic dissolution described literary or metaphysically within this text, signal authentic spiritual awakening towards an absolute consciousness: a realization of impermanence, a sense of death, a feeling of oneness, a condition of frustration, and attention to the present. This work challenges the notion that mystical experience demands spiritual or moral purity.

Keywords: sex, eroticism, power, masculinity.

Let each one turn his gaze inward and regard himself with awe and wonder, with mystery and reverence; let each one promulgate his own laws, his own theories; let each one work his own influence, his own havoc, his own miracles. Let each one as an individual, assume the roles of artist, healer, prophet, priest, king warrior, saint.

Henry Miller (CE, 174-175)

Introduction:

Henry Valentine Miller was an American writer. He was a distinguished personality in the world of semi-autobiographical writing and erotic representation. His writing blended with the social criticism, philosophical reflection, sex and mysticism. His most characteristic works of this kind are *Tropic of Cancer* (1934), *Black Spring* (1936), *Tropic of Capricorn* (1939) and *The Rosy Crucifixion* trilogy (1949–59), all of which are based on his experiences in New York and Paris. *Tropic of Cancer* is a novel by Henry Miller that has been described as “notorious for its candid sexuality” and as responsible for the “free speech that we now take for granted in literature”. Miller wrote the book between 1930 and 1934 during his “nomadic life” in Paris. As Miller discloses in the text of the book, he first intended to title it “Crazy Cock”. Miller gave the following explanation of why the book's title was *Tropic of Cancer*: “It was because to me

cancer symbolizes the disease of civilization, the endpoint of the wrong path, the necessity to change course radically, to start completely over from scratch". In his *Tropic of Cancer* Miller gave a vivid description of erotic consciousness and the sexual desire of life.

Tropic of Cancer (1934), Miller's most famous and acclaimed work, is a lyrical, profane, and surreal portrait of the author's experiences in the bohemian underworld of 1930s Paris. The novel was a personal and artistic break-through for Miller, who was an obscure and impoverished writer when it was first published. The theme of sexual and artistic liberation, which pervades *Tropic of Cancer*, manifests itself in its Whitmanesque poetic embrace of sexuality, its open disdain for the constraints of bourgeois society, and its declarations of antagonism toward the conventions of the modern novel. At one point Miller writes: "This is not a book ... this is a prolonged insult, a gob of spit in the face of Art...." While some critics have dismissed *Tropic of Cancer* as a merely autobiographical rant which is reckless and nihilistic in its abandonment of literary conventions, others have recognized Miller's notoriously liberal use of profanity and sexual description as an attempt to broaden the expressive means of the novel. The unusually polemical and partisan tenor of much early criticism on Miller's novel should be considered against the background of its publication history. Before Grove Press won its censorship struggle in the early 1960s, *Tropic of Cancer* was ruled obscene and its sale was banned in the United States and England.

Henry Miller explores the similarities between the erogenous and mystical experiences in his novel *Tropic of Cancer*. It argues that the moments of absolute erotic dissolution describe literally or metaphysically with in this text signal authentic mystical awakening. Mystical and erotic experiences push the individual beyond the rational considerations, toward an absolute consciousness: a realization of impermanence, a sense of death, a feeling of oneness, and attention to the present.

Henry Miller's novel *Tropic of Cancer* presents an unashamed chronicle of erogenous experience. The narrator discloses difficulties related to his sexual escapades that include lice, bedbugs, fear of disease and pregnancy, and the negotiation of challenging emotional situations. These difficulties are nightmares for many people, but the narrator is not possessed by such conflicts. He does not lament his bad luck when he rouses from "deep slumber" to discover that his lover's "hair is alive" with bedbugs (Miller 20). The narrator reports, "We pack hurriedly and sneak out of the hotel" (21). The protagonist is not stoic but present in the fullness of life; he escapes neuroticism through his attention to the now. He proclaims, "I have no money, no resources, no hopes. I am the happiest man alive" (1). In her article, *Henry Miller and the Celebration of Loss*, Natalija Bonic discusses the novel's unexpected turns: "the obscenity within *Tropic of Cancer* is not so unusual compared with Miller's explicit delight in what most of us would find distressing" (51). The bravado of Miller's writing is seductive.

Most moments of difficulty figure as comedy in *Tropic of Cancer*. The narrator relates, “Last night Boris discovered he was lousy. I had to shave his armpits and even then the itching did not stop. How can one get lousy in a beautiful place like this? But no matter. We might never have known each other so intimately, Boris and I, had it not been for the lice” (Miller 1). Intimacy is the best word to describe the protagonist’s relationship to his environment. The narrator is baffled by the “discrepancy there is between ideas and living” (242). He declares, “Ideas have to be wedded to action; if there is no sex in them, there is no action” (242). He is not bothered by temporary inconveniences such as lice or bed bugs. Miller’s eroticism venerates proactive lightheartedness while opposing loftiness and abstraction. Bonic says,

“There is a constant attempt in Miller writings to highlight all that has been trivialized or rejected by our standard of rationality. Whatever has been deemed worthless or deficient, or has simply been overlooked, is taken up by Miller and awarded significance” (63).

The narrator is not possessed by the discriminating consciousness; he is intimate with the moment-to-moment experiences of his existence. No aspect of his life is unworthy. Anais Nin wrote of *Tropic of Cancer*, “Here is a book which, if such a thing were possible, might restore our appetite for the fundamental realities” (xxx). Erotic experience is one of these realities.

The protagonist’s stress of erotic life is precipitated by his concern for the spiritually and physically impotent individual. His claims of health are supported by a gusto that persists from the bedroom to the street, an energy that recognizes beauty in the whole spectrum of emotional states. Sadness is radiant in Miller:

“The tears were streaming down his face. He made no effort to brush them away. He just let everything gush forth. Jesus, I thought to myself, that’s fine to have a release like that ... to let go that way. Great! Great!” (Miller 309).

Streaming, gush forth, release, and let go all functions as described for orgasm. The narrator’s orgasmic life is not simply about positive emotional states. He believes that true unhappiness is not reflected by negative emotions but by the mind’s unhealthy attachment to abstract ideals, a perspective analogous to the Zen Buddhist attitude: “My idea briefly has been to present a resurrection of the emotions, to depict the conduct of a human being in the stratosphere of ideas, that is, in the grip of delirium... In short, to erect [emphasis mine] a world on the basis of the *omphalos*, not on an abstract idea” (243). The *Omphalos* is the sacred ground of moment-to-moment experience, awareness of the body and the mind. The Om-phallus is a mystical point unbound by the strictures of the discriminating consciousness. To release/orgasm is to give up resistance, to accept the here and now. The protagonist of *Tropic of Cancer* and the Zen monk accepts their bodies, emotions, and desires as intimate companions. Acceptance of the here and now encourages the discriminating mind to relax its dualistic work to seek and repel. Erotic

experiences in Miller often connect to this quiet space of mind, devoid of discriminating consciousness, pointing back to the moment.

Tropic of Cancer challenges the societal conditioning that validates abstract and idealistic operations of the discriminating consciousness, operations that lead to dissatisfaction. A tyrannical discriminating consciousness distances the individual from the now. Even religious ideals are not enough for Miller. The narrator says, “I have found God, but he is insufficient” (Miller 98). He stresses that desires such as food, sleep, and sex are basic priorities and that their satisfaction has real religious significance. The narrator insists, “Everything is packed into a second which is either consummated or not consummated” (250). Consummation is both the state of perfection and the consecration of a union through sexual intercourse. Miller’s novel emphasizes the connection between spiritual and sexual matters.

The union of sexual intercourse often symbolizes unity between the individual and his or her environment in Miller’s work, a presence to the here and now that is characteristic of the mystic’s awareness. The narrator criticizes the forces that have isolated the individual from this presence. He says, “Had one single element of man’s nature been altered, vitally, fundamentally altered, by the incessant march of history? By what he calls the better part of his nature, man has been betrayed” (Miller 98). The protagonist is criticizing the idealistic abstractions that repress the individual and persuade her or him to believe that fundamental desires such as food and sex are profane. The narrator emphasizes that indulgence in abstraction creates and reinforces this sense of disconnection: “we get to talking about the condition of things with that enthusiasm which only those who bear no active part in life can muster” (153). *Tropic of Cancer* contains many references to literature and philosophy and is not opposed to ideas in general—many commentaries on Miller note the breadth of his reading and his association with important intellectuals—but the novel warns that the discriminating consciousness has become valued for its own sake and possessive of the individual who has been robbed of vitality:

“And what is more strange is that the absence of any relationship between ideas and living causes us no anguish, no discomfort. We have become so adjusted that, if tomorrow we were ordered to walk on our hands, we would do so without the slightest protest” (153).

Erotic experience represents a salubrious exit from this stagnant mode, a gateway back to the here and now, toward an awareness of the Absolute.

The protagonist supports his arguments with a presentation of his vitality. His vibrant persona contrasts with the neurosis of his many friends, a central tension in *Tropic of Cancer*. The narrator declares in response to a friend’s philosophical equivocation over an interested woman, “Fuck your two ways of looking at things! ... *You go* sit by the fountain, and let *me* smell the lilacs!” (Miller 59). The novel argues that the dualistic, anxious logic of the discriminating

mind isolates the individual from the fullness of experience by its ceaseless and needless division of the universe into subcategories of desire and burden. The protagonist's friend is possessed by his discriminating faculties and stuck in neurosis, unable to flow with the romantic opportunity in front of him. Miller's novel emphasizes the importance of oneness with the environment, a state of mind that the narrator discovers in erotic activity.

Tropic of Cancer outlines the many ways in which people lose a sense of intimacy with the moment. Miller considers a person's daily employment one of the better representations of the isolating, ambivalent neurosis caused by strict adherence to discriminating rationality. The narrator laughs at his coworkers whose greatest fear in life is losing their jobs: "A man can get to love shit if his livelihood depends on it, if his happiness is involved" (Miller 148). The narrator's coworkers at the newspaper are always miserable, and happiness is only an abstract ideal to which they are attached. He says, "None of my companions seem to understand why I appear so contented. They grumble all the time, they have ambitions, and they want to show their pride and spleen. A good proofreader has no ambitions, no pride, no spleen" (147). *Tropic of Cancer* argues that many practical goals, ambitions, and ideals constitute an unhealthy and unnecessary denial of human nature. Miller's novel argues that a spiritually significant existence is not disconnected from basic human desires: "Ideas are related to living: liver ideas, kidney ideas, interstitial ideas, etc." (242). He argues, "all that can be coolly and intellectually handled belongs to the carapace and a man who is intent on creation always dives beneath, to the open wound, to the festering obscene horror. He hitches his dynamo to the tenderest parts" (249). *Tropic of Cancer* tells the story of a creative, spiritual individual who perceives sacred meaning in erotic activity, polite society be damned.

Miller celebrates the violent destruction of a sexually-repressed, unenlightened culture that has allowed it to be possessed of mental habits devoted to getting and spending, a byproduct of the tyranny of dualistic perception. Conspicuous consumption is one example of that tyranny. The narrator asks, "What good are the fancy ties and the fine suits if you can't get a hard on any more?" (Miller 117). Miller advocates the importance of erotic experience because it is capable of returning the individual's attention to matters of the body and spirit, which society has conditioned its members to deny.

The protagonist in *Tropic of Cancer* juxtaposes his erotic and spiritual highlife with the sickness of society. The narrator says, "The world around me is dissolving, leaving here and there spots of time. The world is a cancer eating itself away" (Miller 2). Cancer contrasts with the narrator's condition: "I'm healthy. Incurably healthy. No sorrows, no regrets. No past, no future. The present is enough for me. Day by day. Today!" (50). This vision of life as decay is not an existential conflict; the narrator is not afraid of death. He continues, "I am thinking that when the great silence descends upon all and everywhere music will at last triumph" (2). Great silence, orgasm, is like death. Music and silence are both terms that represent the experience of deep meditation. Music is a celebration of the fullness of life that such voiding experiences

manifest, but depends upon rest notes. Dying for a set of anxieties, quieting of the discriminating consciousness, equals a rebirth to the present experience of one's life. This is the function of Zen meditation. Miller's lifelong interest in Zen has been acknowledged by many scholars and it is simple to compare the narrator's behavior to a quasi-Zen attitude. *Tropic of Cancer* emphasizes oneness and the presence of the now.

Miller advocates the importance of the absolute consciousness experienced and described by mystics in countless spiritual and religious traditions. The protagonist of *Tropic of Cancer* relates his realization: My whole being was responding to the dictates of an ambience which it had never before experienced; that which I could call myself seemed to be contracting, condensing, shrinking from the stale, customary boundaries of flesh whose perimeter knew only the modulations of the nerve ends. . . For the fraction of a second, perhaps, I experienced that utter clarity which the epileptic, it is said, is given to know. In that moment I lost completely the illusion of space and time: the world unfurled its drama simultaneously across a meridian which had no axis. (96) The narrator does not encounter this mystical experience of the Absolute in meditation. His moment of clarity is the product of erotic experience and occurs in a wild Parisian brothel. Significant moments of Miller's eroticism are realized as intimate with the ground of human experience and are, therefore, analogous to mystical awakening. Mystical experience is not only encountered by robed monks and nuns in meditation or prayer.

Vaginal space is more auspicious for Miller as the narrator speaks of the vagina in a way that is highly reminiscent of the descriptions provided in *Story of the Eye* and *The Impossible*:

Suddenly I see a dark, hairy crack in front of me . . . A glance at that dark, unstitched wound and a deep fissure in my brain opens up: all the images and memories that had been laboriously or absent-mindedly assorted, labeled, documented, filed, sealed and stamped break forth . . . the world ceases to revolve, time stops, the very nexus of my dreams is broken and dissolved and my guts spill out in a grand schizophrenic rush, an evacuation that leaves me face to face with the Absolute. (Miller 250)

Miller experiences vaginal space as voiding. Rationality is assaulted, creating a possibility for mystical experience. He says in another instance, "When I look down into this fucked-out cunt of a whore I feel the whole world beneath me, a world tottering and crumbling, a world used up and polished like a leper's skull" (Miller 248). The narrator's meditation on the vagina offers a violent movement of perception. He explains his experience:

"If anyone knew what it meant to read the riddle of that thing which today is called a 'crack' or a 'hole,' if anyone had the least feeling of mystery about the phenomena which are labeled 'obscene,' this world would crack asunder" (249).

Mystery is another term for the absolute state of consciousness; the narrator laments that everything is objectified and distanced by the normal discriminating mode which seeks to demystify the world. The tyranny of the discriminating consciousness destroys the individual's capacity for awe, sensitivity, and engagement with one's environment.

Conclusion:

The moments of absolute erotic dissolution described by Henry Miller's novel *Tropic of Cancer* authentic mystical awakenings. Eroticism and mysticism are complex, but connected topics. Mystics and erotic quests lead toward dissolution of the discriminating consciousness and precipitate an encounter to the Absolute.

It is in the ending of Miller's novels, where the philosophical reflections are most common and meaningful. The ending of *Tropic of Cancer* is a good example of Miller's thinking on a high plane, far from the exigencies of sexual encounters. Frederic Turner in his book, *Renegade: Henry Miller and the making of Tropic of Cancer*, also recognizes that there is a spiritual element in Miller's work. Calling *Tropic of Cancer* "an outlaw book," he says that "it might seem oxymoronic to speak of *Tropic of Cancer* as having a 'moral.' But when stripped of its rhetorical excess, its comic boasts, its wild contradictions and coprolalia, it does have this spiritual arc.

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