

THE ART OF FICTION NO. 28

HENRY MILLER

In 1934, Henry Miller, then aged forty-two and living in Paris, published his first book. In 1961 the book was finally published in his native land, where it promptly became a best-seller and a cause célèbre. By now the waters have been so muddied by controversy about censorship, pornography, and obscenity that one is likely to talk about anything but the book itself.

But this is nothing new. Like D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller has long been a byword and a legend. Championed by critics and artists, venerated by pilgrims, emulated by beatniks, he is above everything else a culture hero—or villain, to those who see him as a menace to law and order. He might even be described as a folk hero: hobo, prophet, and exile, the Brooklyn boy who went to Paris when everyone else was going home, the starving bohemian enduring the plight of the creative artist in America, and in latter years the sage of Big Sur.

His life is all written out in a series of picaresque narratives in the first-person historical present: his early Brooklyn years in *Black Spring*, his struggles to find himself during the twenties in *Tropic of Capricorn* and the three volumes of the *Rosy Crucifixion*, his adventures in Paris during the thirties in *Tropic of Cancer*.

In 1939 he went to Greece to visit Lawrence Durrell; his sojourn there provides the narrative basis of *The Colossus of Maroussi*. Cut off by the war and forced to return to America, he made the yearlong odyssey recorded in *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*. Then in 1944 he settled on a magnificent empty stretch of California coast, leading the life described in *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*. Now that his name has made Big Sur a center for pilgrimage, he has been driven out and is once again on the move.

At seventy Henry Miller looks rather like a Buddhist monk who has swallowed a canary. He immediately impresses one as a warm and humorous human being. Despite his bald head with its halo of white hair, there is nothing old about him. His figure, surprisingly slight, is that of a young man; all his gestures and movements are young.

His voice is quite magically captivating, a mellow, resonant but quiet bass with great range and variety of modulation; he cannot be as unconscious as he seems of its musical spell. He speaks a modified Brooklynese frequently punctuated by such rhetorical pauses as “Don’t you see?” and “You know?” and trailing off with a series of diminishing reflective noises, “Yas, yas . . . hmm . . . hmm . . . yas . . . hm . . . hm.” To get the full flavor and honesty of the man, one must hear the recordings of that voice.

The interview was conducted in September 1961, in London.

— George Wickes, 1962

INTERVIEWER

First of all, would you explain how you go about the actual business of writing? Do you sharpen pencils like Hemingway, or anything like that to get the motor started?

HENRY MILLER

No, not generally, no, nothing of that sort. I generally go to work right after breakfast. I sit right down to the machine. If I find I'm not able to write, I quit. But no, there are no preparatory stages as a rule.

INTERVIEWER

Are there certain times of day, certain days when you work better than others?

MILLER

I prefer the morning now, and just for two or three hours. In the beginning I used to work after midnight until dawn, but that was in the very beginning. Even after I got to Paris I found it was much better working in the morning. But then I used to work long hours. I'd work in the morning, take a nap after lunch, get up and write again, sometimes write until midnight. In the last ten or fifteen years, I've found that it isn't necessary to work that much. It's bad, in fact. You drain the reservoir.

INTERVIEWER

Would you say you write rapidly? Perlès said in *My Friend Henry Miller* that you were one of the fastest typists he knew.

MILLER

Yes, many people say that. I must make a great clatter when I write. I suppose I do write rapidly. But then that varies. I can write rapidly for a while, then there come stages where I'm stuck, and I might spend an hour on a page. But that's rather rare, because when I find I'm being bogged down, I will skip a difficult part and go on, you see, and come back to it fresh another day.

INTERVIEWER

How long would you say it took you to write one of your earlier books once you got going?

MILLER

I couldn't answer that. I could never predict how long a book would take: even now when I set out to do something I couldn't say. And it's somewhat false to take the dates the author says he began and ended a book. It doesn't mean that he was writing the book constantly during that time. Take *Sexus*, or take the whole *Rosy Crucifixion*. I think I began that in 1940, and here I'm still on it. Well, it would be absurd to say that I've been working on it all this time. I haven't even thought about it for years at a time. So how can you talk about it?

INTERVIEWER

Well, I know that you rewrote *Tropic of Cancer* several times, and that work probably gave you more trouble than any other, but of course it was the beginning. Then too, I'm wondering if writing doesn't come easier for you now?

MILLER

I think these questions are meaningless. What does it matter how long it takes to write a book? If you were to ask that of Simenon, he'd tell you very definitely. I think it takes him from four to seven weeks. He knows that he can count on it. His books have a certain length usually. Then too, he's one of those rare exceptions, a man who when he says, "Now I'm going to start and write this book," gives himself to it completely. He barricades himself, he has nothing else to think about or do. Well, my life has never been that way. I've got everything else under the sun to do while writing.

INTERVIEWER

Do you edit or change much?

MILLER

That too varies a great deal. I never do any correcting or revising while in the process of writing. Let's say I write a thing out any old

way, and then, after it's cooled off—I let it rest for a while, a month or two maybe—I see it with a fresh eye. Then I have a wonderful time of it. I just go to work on it with the ax. But not always. Sometimes it comes out almost like I wanted it.

INTERVIEWER

How do you go about revising?

MILLER

When I'm revising, I use a pen and ink to make changes, cross out, insert. The manuscript looks wonderful afterwards, like a Balzac. Then I retype, and in the process of retyping I make more changes. I prefer to retype everything myself, because even when I think I've made all the changes I want, the mere mechanical business of touching the keys sharpens my thoughts, and I find myself revising while doing the finished thing.

INTERVIEWER

You mean there is something going on between you and the machine?

MILLER

Yes, in a way the machine acts as a stimulus; it's a cooperative thing.

INTERVIEWER

In *The Books in My Life*, you say that most writers and painters work in an uncomfortable position. Do you think this helps?

MILLER

I do. Somehow I've come to believe that the last thing a writer or any artist thinks about is to make himself comfortable while he's working. Perhaps the *discomfort* is a bit of an aid or stimulus. Men who can afford to work under better conditions often choose to work under miserable conditions.

INTERVIEWER

Aren't these discomforts sometimes psychological? You take the case of Dostoyevsky . . .

MILLER

Well, I don't know. I know Dostoyevsky was always in a miserable state, but you can't say he deliberately chose psychological discomforts. No, I doubt that strongly. I don't think anyone chooses these things, unless unconsciously. I do think many writers have what you might call a demonic nature. They are always in trouble, you know, and not only while they're writing or because they're writing, but in every aspect of their lives, with marriage, love, business, money, everything. It's all tied together, all part and parcel of the same thing. It's an aspect of the creative personality. Not all creative personalities are this way, but some are.

INTERVIEWER

You speak in one of your books of "the dictation," of being almost possessed, of having this stuff spilling out of you. How does this process work?

MILLER

Well, it happens only at rare intervals, this dictation. Someone takes over and you just copy out what is being said. It occurred most strongly with the work on D.H. Lawrence, a work I never finished—and that was because I had to do too much thinking. You see, I think it's bad to think. A writer shouldn't think much. But this was a work which required thought. I'm not very good at thinking. I work from some deep down place; and when I write, well, I don't know just exactly what's going to happen. I know what I want to write about, but I'm not concerned too much with how to say it. But in that book I was grappling with ideas; it had to have some form and meaning, and whatnot. I'd been on it, I suppose, a good two years. I was saturated with it, and I got obsessed and couldn't drop it. I couldn't even sleep. Well, as I say,

the dictation took over most strongly with that book. It occurred with *Capricorn* too, and with parts of other books. I think the passages stand out. I don't know whether others notice or not.

INTERVIEWER

Are these the passages you call cadenzas?

MILLER

Yes, I have used that expression. The passages I refer to are tumultuous, the words fall over one another. I could go on indefinitely. Of course I think that is the way one should write all the time. You see here the whole difference, the great difference, between Western and Eastern thinking and behavior and discipline. If, say, a Zen artist is going to do something, he's had a long preparation of discipline and meditation, deep quiet thought about it, and then no thought, silence, emptiness, and so on—it might be for months, it might be for years. Then, when he begins, it's like lightning, just what he wants—it's perfect. Well, this is the way I think all art should be done. But who does it? We lead lives that are contrary to our profession.

INTERVIEWER

Is there a particular conditioning that the writer can go through, like the Zen swordsman?

MILLER

Why, of course, but who does it? Whether he means to do it or not, however, every artist does discipline himself and condition himself in one way or another. Each man has his own way. After all, most writing is done away from the typewriter, away from the desk. I'd say it occurs in the quiet, silent moments, while you're walking or shaving or playing a game or whatever, or even talking to someone you're not vitally interested in. You're working, your mind is working, on this problem in the back of your head. So, when you get to the machine it's a mere matter of transfer.

INTERVIEWER

You said earlier there's something inside you that takes over.

MILLER

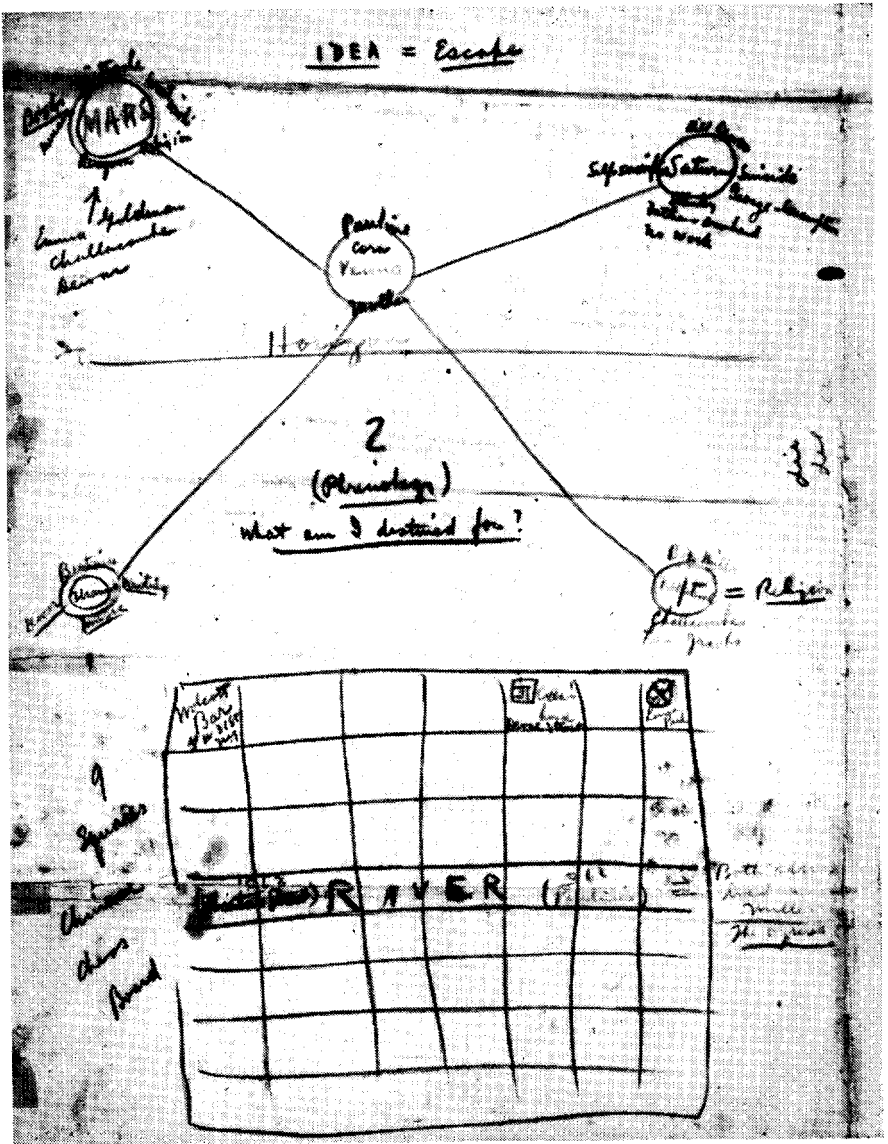
Yes, of course. Listen. Who writes the great books? It isn't we who sign our names. What is an artist? He's a man who has antennae, who knows how to hook up to the currents which are in the atmosphere, in the cosmos; he merely has the facility for hooking on, as it were. Who is original? Everything that we are doing, everything that we think, exists already, and we are only intermediaries, that's all, who make use of what is in the air. Why do ideas, why do great scientific discoveries often occur in different parts of the world at the same time? The same is true of the elements that go to make up a poem or a great novel or any work of art. They are already in the air, they have not been given voice, that's all. They need *the* man, *the* interpreter, to bring them forth. Well, and it's true too, of course, that some men are ahead of their time. But today, I don't think it's the artist who is so much ahead of his time as the man of science. The artist is lagging behind, his imagination is not keeping pace with the men of science.

INTERVIEWER

How do you account for the fact that certain men are creative? Angus Wilson says that the artist writes because of a kind of trauma, that he uses his art as a kind of therapy to overcome his neurosis. Aldous Huxley, on the other hand, takes quite the opposite view, and says that the writer is preeminently sane, that if he has a neurosis this only adds to his handicap as a writer. Do you have any views on this subject?

MILLER

I think this varies with the individual writer. I don't think you can make such statements about writers as a whole. A writer after all is a *man*, a man like other men; he may be neurotic or he may not. I mean his neurosis, or whatever it is that they say makes his



Manuscript plan of Henry Miller's *Tropic of Capricorn*, "embracing planetary conjunction; topographical map of region and monuments and streets and cemeteries; fatal, or otherwise, influence of fields—according to type; Major Events; Dominant Idea; Psychological Pattern."

personality, doesn't account for his writing. I think it's a much more mysterious thing than that and I wouldn't even try to put my finger on it. I said that a writer was a man who had antennae; if he really knew what he was, he would be very humble. He would recognize himself as a man who was possessed of a certain faculty which he was destined to use for the service of others. He has nothing to be proud of, his name means nothing, his ego is nil, he's only an instrument in a long procession.

INTERVIEWER

When did you find that you had this faculty? When did you first start writing?

MILLER

I must have begun while I was working for the Western Union. That's certainly when I wrote the first book, at any rate. I wrote other little things at that time too, but the real thing happened after I quit the Western Union—in 1924—when I decided I would be a writer and give myself to it completely.

INTERVIEWER

So that means that you went on writing for a period of ten years before *Tropic of Cancer* appeared in print.

MILLER

Just about, yes. Among other things I wrote two or three novels during that time. Certainly I wrote two before I wrote the *Tropic of Cancer*.

INTERVIEWER

Could you tell me a little about that period?

MILLER

Well, I've told a good deal about it in *The Rosy Crucifixion*: *Sexus*, *Plexus*, and *Nexus* all deal with that period. There will be

still more in the last half of *Nexus*. I've told all about my tribulations during this period—my physical life, my difficulties. I worked like a dog and at the same time—what shall I say?—I was in a fog. I didn't know what I was doing. I couldn't see what I was getting at. I was supposed to be working on a novel, writing this great novel, but actually I wasn't getting anywhere. Sometimes I'd not write more than three or four lines a day. My wife would come home late at night and ask, "Well, how is it going?" (I never let her see what was in the machine.) I'd say, "Oh, it's going along marvelously." "Well, where are you right now?" Now, mind you, maybe of all the pages I was supposed to have written maybe I had written only three or four, but I would talk as though I'd written a hundred or a hundred and fifty pages. I would go on talking about what I had done, composing the novel as I talked to her. And she would listen and encourage me, knowing damned well that I was lying. Next day she'd come back and say, "What about that part you spoke of the other day, how is that going?" And it was all a lie, you see, a fabrication between the two of us. Wonderful, wonderful . . .

INTERVIEWER

When did you begin to conceive of all these autobiographical volumes as a whole?

MILLER

In the year 1927 when my wife went to Europe and I was left alone. I had a job for a while in the Park Department in Queens. One day, at the end of the day, instead of going home I was seized with this idea of planning the book of my life, and I stayed up all night doing it. I planned everything that I've written to date in about forty or fifty typewritten pages. I wrote it in notes, in telegraphic style. But the whole thing is there. My whole work from *Capricorn* on through *The Rosy Crucifixion*—except *Cancer*, which was a thing of the immediate present—is about the seven years that I had lived with this woman, from the time I met her

until I left for Europe. I didn't know then when I was leaving, but I knew I was going sooner or later. That was the crucial period of my life as a writer, the period just before leaving America.

INTERVIEWER

Durrell speaks of the writer's need to make the breakthrough in his writing, to hear the sound of his own voice. Isn't that your own expression, as a matter of fact?

MILLER

Yes, I think so. Anyway, it happened for me with *Tropic of Cancer*. Up until that point you might say I was a wholly derivative writer, influenced by everyone, taking on all the tones and shades of every other writer that I had ever loved. I was a *literary* man, you might say. And I became a *non-literary* man: I cut the cord. I said, I will do only what I can do, express what I am—that's why I used the first person, why I wrote about myself. I decided to write from the standpoint of my own experience, what I knew and felt. And that was my salvation.

INTERVIEWER

What were those earlier novels like?

MILLER

I imagine you would find, naturally you *must* find, some traces of myself in them. But I felt very keenly then that one should have some sort of story, a plot to unroll; I was more concerned then with the form and the manner of doing it than with the vital thing.

INTERVIEWER

That is what you mean by the "literary" approach?

MILLER

Yes, something that's outworn and useless, that you have to slough off. The literary man had to be killed off. Naturally you

don't kill that man, he's a very vital element of yourself as a writer, and certainly every artist is fascinated with technique. But the other thing in writing is *you*. The point I discovered is that the best technique is none at all. I never feel that I must adhere to any particular manner of approach. I try to remain open and flexible, ready to turn with the wind or with the current of thought. That's my stance, my technique, if you will, to be flexible and alert, to use whatever I think good at the moment.

INTERVIEWER

In "An Open Letter to Surrealists Everywhere" you say, "I was writing surrealistically in America before I ever heard the word." Now, what do you mean by surrealism?

MILLER

When I was living in Paris, we had an expression, a very American one, which in a way explains it better than anything else. We used to say, "Let's take the lead." That meant going off the deep end, diving into the unconscious, just obeying your instincts, following your impulses, of the heart, or the guts, or whatever you want to call it. But that's my way of putting it, that isn't really surrealist doctrine; that wouldn't hold water, I'm afraid, with an André Breton. However, the French standpoint, the doctrinaire standpoint, didn't mean too much to me. All I cared about was that I found in it another means of expression, an added one, a heightened one, but one to be used very judiciously. When the well-known surrealists employed this technique, they did it too deliberately, it seemed to me. It became unintelligible, it served no purpose. Once one loses all intelligibility, one is lost, I think.

INTERVIEWER

Is surrealism what you mean by the phrase "into the night life"?

MILLER

Yes, there it was primarily the dream. The surrealists make use of the dream, and of course that's always a marvelous fecund aspect of experience. Consciously or unconsciously, all writers employ the dream, even when they're not surrealists. The waking mind, you see, is the least serviceable in the arts. In the process of writing one is struggling to bring out what is unknown to himself. To put down merely what one is conscious of means nothing, really, gets one nowhere. Anybody can do that with a little practice, anybody can become that kind of writer.

INTERVIEWER

You have called Lewis Carroll a surrealist, and his name suggests the kind of jabberwocky which you use occasionally . . .

MILLER

Yes, yes, of course Lewis Carroll is a writer I love. I would give my right arm to have written his books, or to be able to come anywhere near doing what he did. When I finish my project, if I continue writing, I would love to write sheer nonsense.

INTERVIEWER

What about Dadaism? Did you ever get into that?

MILLER

Yes, Dadaism was even more important to me than surrealism. The Dadaist movement was something truly revolutionary. It was a deliberate conscious effort to turn the tables upside down, to show the absolute insanity of our present-day life, the worthlessness of all our values. There were wonderful men in the Dadaist movement, and they all had a sense of humor. It was something to make you laugh, but also to make you think.

INTERVIEWER

It seems to me that in *Black Spring* you came pretty close to Dadaism.

MILLER

No doubt. I was most impressionable then. I was open to everything that was going on when I reached Europe. Some things I already knew about in America, it's true. *Transition* came to us in America; Jolas was marvelous in selecting those strange bizarre writers and artists we had never heard of. Then I remember, for example, going to the Armory Show to see Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase," and many other marvelous things. I was infatuated, intoxicated. All this was what I was looking for, it seemed so familiar to me.

INTERVIEWER

You've always been better understood and appreciated in Europe than in America or England. How do you account for this?

MILLER

Well, in the first place I didn't have much chance to be understood in America because my books weren't in print there. But aside from that, though I am one hundred percent American (and I know it more and more every day), still I had better contact with Europeans. I was able to talk to them, express my thoughts more easily, be more quickly understood. I had a greater rapport with them than with Americans.

INTERVIEWER

In your book on Patchen you say that in America the artist will never be accepted unless he compromises himself. Do you still feel that way?

MILLER

Yes, more strongly than ever. I feel that America is essentially against the artist, that the enemy of America is the artist, because he stands for individuality and creativeness, and that's *un-American* somehow. I think that of all countries—we have to overlook the communist countries of course—America is the most mechanized, robotized, of all.

INTERVIEWER

What did you find in Paris in the thirties that you couldn't find in America?

MILLER

For one thing, I suppose I found a freedom such as I never knew in America. I found contact with people so much easier—that is, the people that I enjoyed talking to. I met more of my own kind there. Above all I felt that I was tolerated. I didn't ask to be understood or accepted. To be tolerated was enough. In America I never felt that. But then, Europe was a new world to me. I suppose it might have been good almost anywhere—just to be in some other, different world, an alien. Because all my life, really, and this is part of my psychological—what shall I say?—strangeness, I've liked only what is alien.

INTERVIEWER

In other words, if you'd gone to Greece in 1930 instead of 1939 you might have found the same thing?

MILLER

I might not have found the same thing, but I would have found the means of self-expression, of self-liberation there. I may not have become the kind of writer that I am now, but I feel I would have found myself. In America I was in danger of going mad, or committing suicide. I felt completely isolated.

INTERVIEWER

How about Big Sur? Did you find a congenial environment there?

MILLER

Oh, no, there was nothing there, except nature. I was alone, which was what I wanted. I stayed there because it was an isolated spot. I had already learned to write no matter where I lived. It was a wonderful change, Big Sur. I then definitely put the cities behind me. I'd had my fill of city life. Of course I never chose Big Sur, you understand. I was dumped on the road there one day by a friend. As he left me he said, "You go and see such and such a person, and she'll put you up for the night or a week. It's a wonderful country, I think you'll like it." And that's how I fell into it. I never had heard of Big Sur before. I knew of Point Sur because I'd read Robinson Jeffers. I read his *Women at Point Sur* in the Café Rotonde in Paris—I'll never forget it.

INTERVIEWER

Isn't it surprising that you should have gone out to nature that way, since you'd always been a city man?

MILLER

Well, you see, I have a Chinese nature. You know, in ancient China, when the artist or the philosopher began to get old, he retired to the country. To live and meditate in peace.

INTERVIEWER

But in your case it was something of a coincidence?

MILLER

Entirely. But, you see, everything of significance in my life has happened that way—by pure hazard. Of course I don't believe that either. I believe there always was a purpose, that it was destined to be that way. The explanation lies in my horoscope—that would be my frank answer. To me it's all quite clear.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you never go back to Paris to live?

MILLER

For several reasons. In the first place, I got married soon after I reached Big Sur; and then I had children; and then I had no money; and then too I fell in love with Big Sur. I had no desire to resume my Paris life, it was finished. Most of my friends were gone, the war had broken up everything.

INTERVIEWER

Gertrude Stein says that living in France purified her English because she didn't use the language in daily life, and this made her the stylist that she is. Did living in Paris have the same effect on you?

MILLER

Not exactly, but I understand what she meant. Of course I spoke much more English while there than Gertrude Stein did. Less French, in other words. Still, I was saturated with French all the time. Hearing another language daily sharpens your own language for you, makes you aware of shades and nuances you never suspected. Also, there comes a slight forgetting which makes you hunger to be able to recapture certain phrases and expressions. You become more conscious of your own language.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever have anything to do with Gertrude Stein or her set?

MILLER

No, nothing whatever. Never met her, no, knew nobody belonging to her set. But then I didn't know much of any set, you might say. I was always a lone wolf, always against groups and sets and sects and cults and isms and so on. I knew a number of surrealists, but I never was a member of the surrealist group or any group.

INTERVIEWER

Didn't you know any American writers in Paris?

MILLER

I knew Walter Lowenfels, Samuel Putnam, Michael Fraenkel. Sherwood Anderson, Dos Passos, Steinbeck, and Saroyan I met later, in America. I met them only a few times, no more. I never had any real connection with them. Of all the American writers that I have met, Sherwood Anderson stands out as the one I liked most. Dos Passos was a warm, wonderful chap, but Sherwood Anderson—well, I had been in love with his work, his style, his language, from the beginning. And I liked him as a man—although we were completely at loggerheads about most things, especially America. He loved America, he knew it intimately, he loved the people and everything about America. I was the contrary. But I loved to hear what he had to say about America.

INTERVIEWER

Have you known many English writers? You've had a long-standing friendship, haven't you, with Durrell and Powys?

MILLER

Durrell, sure, but then I hardly think of him as an English writer. I think of him as *un*-British, completely. John Cowper Powys, of course, had the most tremendous influence on me; but then, I never knew him, never cultivated him. I didn't dare! I was a midget and he was a giant, you see. He was my god, my mentor, my idol. I had run across him when I was in my early twenties. He used to lecture then in Labor temples in New York, Cooper Union and such places. It cost only ten cents to hear him speak. Some thirty years later I went to see him in Wales, and found to my surprise that he knew my work. He seemed to have great respect for my work—which surprised me even more.

INTERVIEWER

You knew Orwell in those days too?

MILLER

Orwell I met maybe two or three times, on his visits to Paris. I wouldn't call him a friend, just a passing acquaintance. But I was crazy about his book *Down and Out in Paris and London*; I think it's a classic. For me it's still his best book. Though he was a wonderful chap in his way, Orwell, in the end I thought him stupid. He was like so many English people, an idealist, and, it seemed to me, a foolish idealist. A man of principle, as we say. Men of principle bore me.

INTERVIEWER

You don't have much use for politics?

MILLER

None whatever. I regard politics as a thoroughly foul, rotten world. We get nowhere through politics. It debases everything.

INTERVIEWER

Even political idealism of Orwell's sort?

MILLER

Especially that! The idealists in politics lack a sense of reality. And a politician must be a realist above all. These people with ideals and principles, they're all at sea, in my opinion. One has to be a lowbrow, a bit of a murderer, to be a politician, ready and willing to see people sacrificed, slaughtered, for the sake of an idea, whether a good one or a bad one. I mean, those are the ones who flourish.

INTERVIEWER

What about some of the great writers of the past that have particularly attracted you? You've done studies of Balzac and

Rimbaud and Lawrence. Would you say there's a particular type of writer that draws you?

MILLER

That's hard to say, the writers I love are so diverse. They are the writers who are more than writers. They have this mysterious X quality which is metaphysical, occult, or whatnot—I don't know what term to use—this little extra something beyond the confines of literature. You see, people read to be amused, to pass the time, or to be instructed. Now I never read to pass the time, I never read to be instructed; I read to be taken out of myself, to become ecstatic. I'm always looking for the author who can lift me out of myself.

INTERVIEWER

Can you say why you never finished your book on D.H. Lawrence?

MILLER

Yes, it's very simple. The further I got into the book, the less I understood what I was doing. I found myself in a mass of contradictions. I found that I didn't really know who Lawrence was, I couldn't place him, I couldn't put my finger on him, I just couldn't cope with him after a while. I got completely bewildered. I'd got myself into a jungle, and I couldn't get out. So I abandoned the work.

INTERVIEWER

You didn't have this trouble with Rimbaud, though?

MILLER

No, oddly enough. He's more of an enigma as a personality, true. But then, I didn't do so much grappling with ideas in the Rimbaud book. Lawrence was entirely a man of ideas, and he hung his literature on the rack of these ideas.

INTERVIEWER

You don't necessarily subscribe to Lawrence's ideas, do you?

MILLER

No, not altogether, but I do admire his quest, his search, his struggle. And there are many things in Lawrence I agree with. On the other hand, there are many things I laugh about in Lawrence, things which seem absurd and stupid, foolish. I have a better perspective of him today, but I no longer find it important to say anything about him. Then he meant something to me, I was completely in his grip.

INTERVIEWER

Well, now, I suppose we have to go into this question of pornography and obscenity. I hope you don't mind. After all, you're considered an authority on the subject. Didn't you say somewhere, "I am for obscenity and against pornography"?

MILLER

Well, it's very simple. The obscene would be the forthright, and pornography would be the roundabout. I believe in saying the truth, coming out with it cold, shocking if necessary, not disguising it. In other words, obscenity is a cleansing process, whereas pornography only adds to the murk.

INTERVIEWER

Cleansing in what sense?

MILLER

Whenever a taboo is broken, something good happens, something vitalizing.

INTERVIEWER

All taboos are bad?

MILLER

Not among primitive peoples. There is reason for the taboo in primitive life, but not in our life, not in civilized communities. The taboo then is dangerous and unhealthy. You see, civilized peoples don't live according to moral codes or principles of any kind. We speak about them, we pay lip service to them, but nobody believes in them. Nobody practices these rules, they have no place in our lives. Taboos after all are only hangovers, the product of diseased minds, you might say, of fearsome people who hadn't the courage to live and who under the guise of morality and religion have imposed these things upon us. I see the world, the civilized world, as largely irreligious. The religion in force among civilized people is always false and hypocritical, the very opposite of what the initiators of any religion really meant.

INTERVIEWER

Still, you yourself have been called a very religious man.

MILLER

Yes, but without espousing any religion. What does that mean? That means simply having a reverence for life, being on the side of life instead of death. Again, the word "civilization" to my mind is coupled with death. When I use the word, I see civilization as a crippling, thwarting thing, a stultifying thing. For me it was always so. I don't believe in the golden ages, you see. What I mean is that it was a golden age for a very few people, for a select few, but the masses were always in misery, they were superstitious, they were ignorant, they were downtrodden, they were strangled by Church and State. I'm still a great believer in Spengler, and there you have it all. He makes the antithesis between culture and civilization. Civilization is the arteriosclerosis of culture.

INTERVIEWER

Now, Durrell in that article he wrote about you for *Horizon* about ten years ago speaks of obscenity as technique. Do you regard obscenity as a technique?

MILLER

I think I know what he meant. I think he meant a shock technique. Well, I may have used it thus unconsciously, but I never deliberately used it that way. I employed obscenity as naturally as I would any other way of speaking. It was like breathing, it was part of my whole rhythm. There were moments when you were obscene, and then there were other moments. I don't think obscenity is the most important element by any means. But it's a very important one, and it must not be denied, overlooked, or suppressed.

INTERVIEWER

It might also be exaggerated . . .

MILLER

It could be, but what harm if it were? What are we so worried about, what is there to fear? Words, words—what is there to fear in them? Or in ideas? Supposing they are revolting, are we cowards? Haven't we faced all manner of things, haven't we been on the edge of destruction time and again through war, disease, pestilence, famine? What are we threatened with by the exaggerated use of obscenity? Where's the danger?

INTERVIEWER

You have commented that obscenity is mild by comparison to the sort of violence that is very common in American paperbacks.

MILLER

Yes, all this perverse sadistic writing is abhorrent to me. I've always said mine is healthy because it's joyous and natural. I never express anything that people are not saying and doing all the time.

Where did I get it from? I didn't pick it out of a hat. It's all around us, we breathe it every day. People simply refuse to acknowledge it. Between the printed word and the spoken word—what difference? You know, we didn't always have this taboo. There was a time in English literature when most anything was permitted. It's only in the last two or three hundred years that we've had this queasy attitude.

INTERVIEWER

Well, even in Chaucer you won't find all the words you find in Henry Miller.

MILLER

But you do find plenty of joyous, healthy naturalism, plenty of freedom of speech.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think of the comment Durrell made in the interview he did for the *Paris Review*? He said that in retrospect he found parts of the *Black Book* too obscene now.

MILLER

Did he? Well, let me say that those are the parts I relish most. I thought they were marvelous when I first read them, and I still think so today. Maybe he was only spoofing, Durrell.

INTERVIEWER

Why have you written so much about sex? What does sex mean for you? Does it mean something special?

MILLER

That's hard to answer. You know, I think I have written as much of what my hostile critics call "flapdoodle"—that is, metaphysical nonsense—as I have about sex. Only they choose to look at the sex. No, I can't answer that question, except to say that

it's played a great part in my life. I've led a good rich sexual life, and I don't see why it should be left out.

INTERVIEWER

Did it have anything to do with your break with the life you were leading in New York?

MILLER

No, I don't think so. But one becomes aware in France, after having lived in America, that sex pervades the air. It's there all around you, like a fluid. Now I don't doubt that Americans enter into sexual relations as strongly, deeply, and multifariously as any other people, but it's not in the atmosphere around you, somehow. Then too, in France woman plays a bigger role in man's life. She has a better standing there, she's taken into consideration, she's talked to like a person, not just as a wife or a mistress or whatnot. Besides the Frenchman prefers to be in the company of women. In England and America, men seem to enjoy being among themselves.

INTERVIEWER

Still, your life in the Villa Seurat was a very masculine kind of life.

MILLER

To be sure, but there were always women about. I had many friends, it's true, but I've had great friendships all through my life. That's another thing in my horoscope: I'm a man who is destined to make friends. That is probably the biggest factor in my life, and perhaps I ought to say something about it. When I started writing I began to realize how much I was indebted to others. I have been helped all my life, by friends and strangers too. What did I need money for, when I had friends? What does anyone want, if he has friends? I've had many friends, great friends, lifelong friends. I'm only now losing them through death.

INTERVIEWER

Let's leave sex and talk a little about painting. Now, you sensed this urge to write, about the middle of the twenties; did you start painting about the same time?

MILLER

Very shortly after. I think it was 1927 or-'8 that I began. But not with the same seriousness, naturally. The desire to write was a big thing in my life, a very big thing. If I didn't begin writing till quite late—I was thirty-three when I definitely began—it wasn't that I had never thought about it. I had put it too far above me, I didn't think I had the ability, I didn't believe in myself as a writer, as an artist. I didn't dare to think I could be such a person, you see. Well, I didn't take to painting in that way. I discovered that there was another side of me that I could use. It gave me pleasure to paint, it was recreation, it was a rest from other things.

INTERVIEWER

Is it still a kind of game with you?

MILLER

Oh yes, nothing more.

INTERVIEWER

Don't you find some kind of fundamental connection, though, between the arts?

MILLER

Absolutely. If you're creative in one way, you're creative in another. Originally, you know, music was the biggest thing with me. I played the piano, I hoped to be a good pianist, but I didn't have the talent for it. Still, I was saturated with music. I might even say that music means more to me than writing or painting. It's there in the back of my head all the time.

INTERVIEWER

You were very keen on jazz at one time.

MILLER

So I was. I'm not so keen today. I think jazz quite empty now. It's too limited. Just as I deplore what happened to the movies, so I deplore the fate of jazz. It becomes more and more automatic, it doesn't evolve enough, it's not enriching. It's like having a cocktail. I need wine and beer, champagne and brandy too.

INTERVIEWER

You wrote several essays in the thirties on the art of the film. Did you ever get a chance to practice that art?

MILLER

No, but I still hope to meet the man who will give me a chance. What I deplore most is that the medium of the film has never been properly exploited. It's a poetic medium with all sorts of possibilities. Just think of the element of dream and fantasy. But how often do we get it? Now and then a little touch of it, and we're agape. And think of all the technical devices at our command. But my God, we haven't even begun to use them. We could have incredible marvels, wonders, limitless joy and beauty. And what do we get? Sheer crap. The film is the freest of all media, you can do marvels with it. In fact I would welcome the day when the film would displace literature, when there'd be no more need to read. You remember faces in films, and gestures, as you never do when you read a book. If the film can hold you at all, you give yourself to it completely. Even when you listen to music, it's not like that. You go to the concert hall and the atmosphere is bad, the people are yawning, or falling asleep, the program is too long, it hasn't got the things you like, and so on. You know what I mean. But in the cinema, sitting there in the dark, the images coming and going, it's like a rain of meteorites hitting you.

INTERVIEWER

What's this about a film version of *Tropic of Cancer*?

MILLER

Well, there are rumors of it. There have been offers made, but I can't see how anyone could possibly make a film of that book.

INTERVIEWER

Would you like to do it yourself?

MILLER

No, I wouldn't because I think it's almost impossible to make a film of that book. I don't see the story there, for one thing. And then, so much depends on the language. Maybe one could get away with this tropical language in Japanese or Turkish. I can't see it being rendered in English, can you? The film is so definitely a dramatic, plastic medium, anyhow, a thing of images.

INTERVIEWER

You were a judge at the Cannes Film Festival, weren't you, last year?

MILLER

Yes, though I was rather a dubious choice. The French probably did it to show their appreciation of my work. Of course they knew I was a cineast, but when a reporter asked me if I still liked films, I had to say I hardly ever see them anymore. For fifteen years now I've seen very few good movies. But sure, I'm still a cineast at heart.

INTERVIEWER

Well, now you've written a play. How do you feel about the medium?

MILLER

It's a medium I always wished to tackle, but I never had the courage. In *Nexus*, when I'm living that underground life and struggling to write, there's a description, a very vivid one, of how I tried to write a play about the life we were then living. I never finished it. I think I got as far as the first act. I had tacked an elaborate plan of it on the wall, and I could talk about it marvelously, but I couldn't bring it off. The play I've just written fell out of the hat, so to speak. I was in a peculiar state of mind: I had nothing to do, nowhere to go, nothing much to eat, everybody was away, and so I said why not sit down and try it? I had no idea what I was doing when I began, the words just came to me, I didn't struggle with it. There was hardly any effort involved.

INTERVIEWER

What's it all about?

MILLER

About everything and nothing. I don't think it matters much what it's about, really. It's a kind of farce or burlesque, with surrealistic elements. And there's music, incidental music, which comes from the jukebox and over the air. I don't think it has much importance. The most I can say about it is that you won't go to sleep if you see it.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think you'll go on and write more plays?

MILLER

I hope so, yes. The next one will be a tragedy, or a comedy to make one weep.

INTERVIEWER

What else are you writing now?

MILLER

I'm not writing anything else.

INTERVIEWER

Aren't you going on with volume two of *Nexus*?

MILLER

Yes, sure, that's what I *have* to do. But I haven't begun it yet. I made several attempts but gave up.

INTERVIEWER

You *have* to do it, you say?

MILLER

Well, yes, in a sense I must finish my project, the project I laid out in 1927. This is the end of it, you see. I think part of my delay in finishing it is that I don't want to bring the work to an end. It means that I will have to turn over, take a new tack, discover a new field, as it were. Because I no longer want to write about my personal experiences. I wrote all these autobiographical books not because I think myself such an important person but—this will make you laugh—because I thought when I began that I was telling the story of the most tragic suffering any man had endured. As I got on with it I realized that I was only an amateur at suffering. Certainly I had my full share of it, but I no longer think it was so terrible. That's why I called the trilogy *The Rosy Crucifixion*. I discovered that this suffering was good for me, that it opened the way to a joyous life, through acceptance of the suffering. When a man is crucified, when he dies to himself, the heart opens up like a flower. Of course you don't die, nobody dies, death doesn't exist, you only reach a new level of vision, a new realm of consciousness, a new unknown world. Just as you don't know where you came from, so you don't know where you're going. But that there is something there, before and after, I firmly believe.

INTERVIEWER

How does it feel to be a best-seller after enduring the plight of the creative artist all these years?

MILLER

I really have no feelings about it. It's unreal to me, the whole thing. I don't find myself involved. In fact I rather dislike it. It gives me no pleasure. All I see is more disruption in my life, more intrusions, more nonsense. People are concerned about something which no longer concerns me. That book doesn't mean anything to me anymore. People think because they're all worked up about it that I am too. They think it's a great thing for me that I'm accepted at last. Well, I feel that I'd been accepted long before, at least by those I cared to be accepted by. To be accepted by the mob doesn't mean a thing to me. In fact it's rather painful. Because I'm being accepted for the wrong reasons. It's a sensational affair, it doesn't mean that I am appreciated for my true worth.

INTERVIEWER

But this is part of the recognition that you've always known would come to you.

MILLER

Yes, of course. But then, don't you see, the only real recognition comes from those who are on the same level with you, from your peers. That's the only kind that matters, and I've had that. I've had it for years now.

INTERVIEWER

Which of your books do you think came off best?

MILLER

I always say *The Colossus of Maroussi*.

INTERVIEWER

The critics, most of them, say *Cancer* is your great book.

MILLER

Well, on rereading *Cancer* I found that it was a much better book than I had thought. I liked it. I was amazed, in fact. I hadn't looked at it for many years, you know. I think it's a very good book, that it has lasting qualities. But the *Colossus* was written from some other level of my being. What I like about it is that it's a joyous book, it expresses joy, it gives joy.

INTERVIEWER

What ever happened to *Draco and the Ecliptic*, which you announced many years ago?

MILLER

Nothing. That's been forgotten, though it is always possible that I may one day write that book. My thought was to write a very slim work, explaining what I had been trying to do in writing all these books about my life. In other words, to forget what I had written and try once again to explain what I had hoped to do. In that way perhaps to give the significance of the work from the author's standpoint. You see, the author's standpoint is only one of many, and his idea of the significance of his own work is lost in the welter of other voices. Does he know his own work as well as he imagines? I rather think not. I rather think he's like a medium who, when he comes out of his trance, is amazed at what he's said and done.

