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GENIUS

BY DANIEL DIXON

Some call Henry Miller obscene. Others say he's a literary giant. Should he be censored?

HENRY MILLER, who unblushingly admits to having used—in his own words—"obscene language more freely and abundantly than any other living writer," was scrounging for handouts on the Left Bank of Paris when his first book was published back in 1934. Now, 25 years later, he has exploded into an international legend. Acclaimed by some authorities as an undiluted genius, the most unique and forceful literary talent of his era, he is damned by others as a lunatic, a revolutionary, and a sex-happy pornographer. His books have been denounced, defended, banned and bootlegged across four continents and in at least a dozen different languages, including Japanese. If not the most famous writer in the world today, he is almost certainly the most controversial—and going away the most notorious.

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It's not hard to understand why. This lean, sinewy man is totally without reverence for the polite conventions. He says what he likes, how he likes—and to hell with the consequences. "I was born with a cussed streak in me," he once announced, "and nothing can eliminate it."

Here, for example, is a little treasury of typical Miller opinion:

On the nobility of toil: "Work, it seemed to me even at the threshold of life, was an activity reserved for dullards."

On the American middle class: "Could there be any emptier souls than these? All living like stuffed cadavers in a wax museum."

On the United Nations: "You know that two lascivious monkeys in the zoo, two monkeys picking fleas off one another's backsides, are doing just as good a job."

On call girls: "Even a Supreme Court judge would find it pleasant, profitable and instructive to spend an hour or two with one of their calling. The pity is that they are unavailable to the rank and file!"

On his own personal philosophy: "Do anything, but let it produce joy. Do anything, but let it yield ecstasy!"

MILLER'S MOST spectacular heresies, however, have had to do with the subject of sex. He is indisputably the number one literary infidel ever to spell out the facts of life with four-letter words, and some of his 20-odd books make *God's Little Acre* read like a watered-down version of *The Bobbsey Twins.* One of them, in fact, is splashed with no less than 127 sexual encounters, ranging in character from brief seductions to prolonged orgies, and all described without recourse to dots, dashes, asterisks, suggestive dim-outs, or any other such puritanical devices.

Nevertheless, Miller declines to accept full responsibility for these incendiary passages. Many, he insists, have been written while under the influence of what he calls "The Voice," a supernatural broadcaster

who's been beaming him orders from outer space for over 20 years.

It's a fantastic business, this dictation. When it commences, Miller is reduced to a sort of stenographer. No thought or effort of his own is required; he simply sits down at the typewriter, tunes in on the right wave-length, and whole blocks of frequently sulphurous prose come spilling out—"Bang! Like a sack of coal."

During the composition of a book called *Tropic of Capricorn*, for instance, the Voice became so unruly that Miller could hardly credit his ears. *"What's that?"* he'd yell, all the time pounding away at the keys in a frantic attempt to keep pace. "Don't ask me to put *that* down, please. You're only creating more trouble for me." But the Voice kept sending, Miller receiving. "Sentence by sentence I wrote it down," he says, "having not the slightest idea what was to come next."

Actually, of course, Miller's "Voice" is no more nor less than a comic term for inspiration. In writing, he says, "I obey only my own instincts and intuitions. Often I put down things that I do not understand myself, secure in the knowledge that later they will become clear and meaningful to me." This has prodded some critics to complain that his books are without plot or character—that they're shapeless and sometimes incoherent eruptions of feeling. Such charges bother Miller not at all. "Plot and character don't make life," he snorts. "Life isn't in the upper story; life is here, now, any time you let her rip."

As might be expected, Miller's epic candor has landed him in hot water with the censors. The courts have repeatedly declared his most celebrated books, notably *Tropic of Cancer* and *Tropic of Capricorn*, unfit for publication in England and the United States, and they have likewise upheld the confiscation of smuggled copies by ferret-eyed customs inspectors. Sputtered one

judge in a representative ruling: "If this be importable literature, then the dignity of the human person and the stability of the family unit, which are the cornerstones of our system of society, are lost to us."

Maybe so—but not according to many of the world's most distinguished and influential literary experts. These fastidious gentlemen have pronounced Miller a writer of historic natural gifts. British critic Sir Henry Read, for example, has hailed *Tropic of Cancer* as "a work of art in the first thin rank of contemporary achievements." Echoes T. S. Eliot, generally conceded to be the foremost poet now laboring in the English language and a man noted for his austerity of deportment: "A very remarkable book, with passages of writing in it as good as any I have read for a long time." Similar praise has come from so many other sources—H. L. Mencken, George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, and Nobel Prize winners Albert Camus and André Gide—that Miller has been elected to the exclusive National Institute of Arts and Letters. In fact, he has recently come into such favor with the intelligentsia that his correspondence is being preserved for posterity by the Special Collections Division at the University of Southern California.

Since many of Miller's most lurid books are frankly based on personal experience—"my quaint autobiographical romances," he calls them—it goes without saying that his life has been long on color and short on inhibitions.

Now 67, he was born and raised in Brooklyn, where his father operated a tailor shop. During his twenties and on into his thirties he did a little bit of everything—panhandled, peddled encyclopedias and vacuum cleaners, opened a speakeasy, picked fruit, and drudged as a white-collar worker for various corporations and government agencies. This was a routine that made him feel "like a jellyfish nailed to a plank," and finally, in 1930, he made the decisive break. Beset by the itch to write, he

suddenly busted loose and hopped a boat for Europe, arriving in Paris at the age of 40, a penniless unknown, snorting like a stallion and primed for anything.

Now began the boozing, wenching, and other raucous adventures that caused one awed observer to call him "the loosest member of the Lost Generation." There were times when he was backed up to the brink of outright starvation, and at one point, he says bluntly, "I didn't have a button on my fly." Nevertheless, he somehow managed to produce a phenomenal amount of writing. During his nine years in France he published six books, three of which—*Tropic of Cancer*, *Black Spring*, and *Tropic of Capricorn*—were promptly outlawed both in England and the United States. By 1939, he was not only being saluted as "the largest force lately arisen on the horizon of American letters" but was actually beginning, for the first time, to make some money from his work. *Tropic of Cancer* alone had romped through five editions, had been translated into French, German, Danish, Italian and Japanese, and—though pirated by literary hijackers in Amsterdam, Budapest, Vienna and Shanghai—was still selling like hotcakes, especially to English and American tourists.

THIS BRIEF burst of prosperity, though, was doomed by the outbreak of World War II. Forced out of Europe by Hitler's goosestepping armies, his foreign royalties completely choked off, Miller returned home in 1940 to take off on a philosophical binge. He had been fascinated for a long time by the supernatural and the occult, and now, in books like *The Cosmological Eye* and *The Wisdom of the Heart*, he began to pour out "vast symphonic musings" on everything from reincarnation to Zen Buddhism and "the mystical dynamic of the fourth-dimensional view." Sometimes his meditations sounded as though they had been conceived at the business end of an opium pipe:

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"I felt the blood which the earth has given to man restored to earth to run in tumultuous subterranean rivers, to flow sluggishly among the constellations, to burst the trunks of fat tropical trees, to dry and bake in the peaked Andes . . ."

Fortunately or unfortunately, there was almost no market for this sort of thing. None of the books and pamphlets that Miller produced over the next few years earned him as much as he might have made running an elevator.

In 1941, commissioned by an American publisher to write a book about the United States, Miller set out on a long cross-country trip. Finally, after several months on the road, he fetched up amid the palm trees and smudge pots of Southern California, where a big-time movie producer named Arthur Freed offered him $1,000 a week to concoct screen plays for one of the Hollywood dream factories. Miller was flat broke at the time—marooned in a leaky shack, he had been reduced to a gaunt diet of "spaghetti and an occasional Sunkist orange"—but he flatly refused to be distracted from his own work. Rejecting Freed's proposition, he left Los Angeles and headed for his present headquarters at Big Sur, California, a spectacular chunk of real estate about 150 miles down the wave-hammered Pacific Coast from San Francisco.

Miller's first couple of years at Big Sur were anything but opulent. "Though we were paying only five dollars a month for the hovel we occupied," he says, "we were always in debt to the mailman who kept us supplied with food and other necessities. Sometimes we owed him as much as two or three hundred dollars." The end of World War II, however, changed all that. Overseas, hordes of American GIs proved so eager to get their hands on *Tropic of Cancer* and *Tropic of Capricorn* that Miller was able to buy a house, to remarry for the fourth time, and even to establish a modest bank account. Today he

is more comfortably fixed than ever before in his life.

Miller has been promoting Big Sur as an earthly paradise ever since he first landed there about 15 years ago, and with such success that he now presides as the leading prophet and chief tourist attraction of what is probably the most singular colony of non-conformists anywhere in the United States. All told, Big Sur's population numbers about 300 writers, artists, musicians, philosophers, school teachers and plumbers, most of them pinched by poverty, and all of them fugitives from the outer world of time clocks, insurance policies, sales gimmicks, and excess baggage of any sort. "Stone deaf," Miller sums up, "when asked to toe the line."

FOR MILLER, Big Sur is flawed by only one defect—a ceaseless procession of visitors. All the same, he has turned out more work during his years at Big Sur than most authors produce in a lifetime. The majority of those last eight books have been sedate enough to escape censorship, but one—a still uncompleted trilogy called *The Rosy Crucifixion*—is without question the most fiery gumbo of sex and sacrilege he's ever cooked up. Portions of it have been suppressed even in France. And here in the United States it has inevitably been added to the list of books—Miller has written seven of them in all—that the powers have declared too inflammatory for public consumption.

This draws a bead on the crucial question. Should or should not Miller's work be banned?

If designed to excite lust simply for lust's sake, yes. That's the definition of pornography, and it's been on just such grounds that the courts have thus far supported the censors. "The many long, filthy descriptions of sexual experiences, practices and organs," thundered one judge, "are of themselves admitted to be lewd. They are sought to be justified by the claim that the books as a whole have an artistic pattern . . . But I must conclude that this is sophistry

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. . . Salacious or filthy literature cannot become clean or wholesome upon the mere statement of some alleged or so-called critic."

The hole in this argument, of course, is that the "alleged or so-called" critics so disdainfully brushed off by the judge are among the most honored in the world. In effect, he's ruling that customs dicks, local police, Federal postmasters, and frequently bigoted watchdog societies are better equipped to reckon the merits of Miller's work than Nobel Prize winners or the many college professors who recommend *Tropic of Cancer* and *Tropic of Capricorn* to their students as examples of masterly English prose. "It's ridiculous!" exploded one University of California professor not long ago. "I'm not a Miller devotee, mind you, but I *do* believe that the fate of his books ought to be decided by experts, not by a bunch of half-baked amateurs."

Well, what about expurgation? Can't Miller's work be laundered in such a way as to make it suitable for general circulation?

No, say the connoisseurs—not without crippling its vitality. Insists one: "Miller's books are admirable not in spite of the obscenity but at least partly *because* of it. He gets right down to bedrock—reveals the secret thoughts and desires that most of us share but usually refuse to discuss outside the privacy of a psychiatrist's office. That's what makes his work so powerful. Take away the crudity, and you'd also lose a lot of the literary value."

Obviously, not everybody agrees. Where one man can scan Miller's most humid books without the slightest affront, another will find objectionable passages in the Bible or the Mechanic's Lien Act. At bottom, it's strictly a matter of taste, and this is to many people the most convincing reason why Miller's work should be published in the United States as it is published elsewhere in the world.

ODDLY ENOUGH, Miller himself is no longer very much disturbed by

the censorship of his books. "I would go on writing what I have to write and wish to write," he says, "even if there were no outlet for my work. I've arrived at the point where the important thing is to write, not to get published." Still, there are times when his mind idles with the alluring thought of what might happen were his most notorious books to become available in the United States. "If tomorrow," he once said, "by a decision of the Supreme Court, a half-dozen terrifying words were restored to currency, if I, like other great English writers of the past, were permitted to use them, I would undoubtedly be sitting in clover. I might be the most widely read writer in civilization."

He could be right, at that.

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WHAT MILLER WRITES

The following excerpts are taken from Tropic of Cancer, *Miller's first book. Published in 1934 by the Obelisk Press of Paris, this work, which deals with Miller's high adventures in Paris, has been described by the author himself as "libel, slander, defamation of character . . . a gob of spit in the face of Art, a kick in the pants to God, Man, Time, Destiny, Love, Beauty . . ."*

The first excerpt, which reveals Miller as a thoughtful, perceptive writer—without the aid of pornographic references—clashes sharply with the tone of the second excerpt, which has been edited by PAGEANT'S *staff much as it would be by blue-nosed censors.*

The river is swollen, muddy, streaked with lights. I don't know what it is rushes up in me at the sight of this dark, swift-moving current, but a great exultation lifts me up, affirms the deep wish that is in me never to leave this land. I remember passing this way the other morning on my way to the American Express, knowing in advance that there would be no mail for me, no check, no cable, nothing. A wagon from the Galeries Lafayette was

rumbling over the bridge. The rain had stopped and the sun breaking through the soapy clouds touched the glistening rubble with a cold fire. I recall how the driver leaned out and looked up the river toward Passy way. Such a healthy, simple, approving glance, as if he were saying to himself: "Ah, spring is coming." And God knows, when spring comes to Paris the humblest mortal alive must feel that he dwells in paradise. But it was not only this—it was the intimacy with which his eye rested upon the scene. It was *his* Paris. A man does not need to be rich, nor even a citizen, to feel this way about Paris. Paris is filled with poor people—the proudest and filthiest lot of beggars that ever walked the earth, it seems to me. And yet they give the illusion of being at home. It is that which distinguishes the Parisian from all other metropolitan souls.

When I think of New York I have a very different feeling. New York makes even a rich man feel his unimportance. New York is cold, glittering, malign. The buildings dominate. There is a sort of atomic frenzy going on; the more furious the pace, the more diminished the spirits. A tremendous creative urge, but absolutely uncoordinated.

When I think of this city where I was born and raised, this Manhattan that Whitman sang of, a blind white rage licks my guts. New York! . . . Meaningless. You can walk along with your hand out and they'll put cinders in your cap. Rich or poor, they walk along with head thrown back and they almost break their necks looking up at the beautiful white prisons. They walk along like blind geese and the searchlights spray their empty faces with flecks of ecstasy.

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"Listen," he says, "do you happen to know a [redacted] by the name of Norma? She hangs around the *Dôme* all day. I think she's [redacted] I had her up here yesterday. [redacted] She wouldn't let me do a thing. I [redacted] I even [redacted]

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[redacted] . . . and then I got disgusted. [redacted] I can't bother struggling that way any more. It isn't worth it. Either they do or they don't—it's foolish to waste time wrestling with them. While you're struggling with a little [redacted] like that there may be a dozen [redacted] on the *terrasse* just dying to be [redacted]. It's a fact. They come over here to [redacted] . They think it's sinful here . . . *the poor boobs!* Some of those school teachers from out west, they're actually virgins . . . I mean it! They sit around on their [redacted] all day thinking about it. You don't have to work them over very much. They're dying for it. I had a married woman the other day who told me she hadn't [redacted] for six months. Can you imagine that? [redacted], she was hot! I thought she'd [redacted] me. And groaning all the time. "*Do you? Do you?*" She kept saying that all the time, like she was nuts. And you know what that [redacted] wanted to do? She wanted to move in here, imagine that! Asking me if I loved her. I didn't even know her name. I never know their names . . . I don't want to. The married ones! [redacted] if you saw all the married [redacted] I brought up here you'd never have any more illusions. They're worse than the virgins, the married ones. They don't wait for you to start things—they [redacted] . And then they talk about love afterwards. It's disgusting. I tell you, I'm beginning to hate [redacted] ."