

A State of Otonomy: Henry Miller's Obscene Autobiographical Form

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As for what you're actually
hearing this morning: think twice
before you tell anyone what was said in this field
and by whom.

-Louise Gluck, from "Daisies," *Wild Iris*

Despite early and very late recognition of the distinct form in Henry Miller's writing—George Orwell (1940) saw in the writing of *Tropic of Cancer* and *Black Spring* an "English . . . treated as a spoken language, but spoken *without fear* . . . a flowing, swelling prose, a prose with rhythms in it" (100-1), while Katy Masuga (2010) argues that Miller's writing demands the "exploration of the difficulty of drawing a line between what is real and what is fiction, indeed, what is the nature of writing in general" (182)—both Miller's advocates and adversaries in the main have regarded his "form" as derivative, transgressive, or even nonexistent. Frank Kermode (1966) complains that Miller is "in thrall to the conventions of modern Romantic primitivism" and neglects "form and *mesure* [sic]" (70). Nigh indefatigably, Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* (1970) calls out Miller's "neurotic hostility" towards women in *Tropic of Cancer*, the book wherein "Miller simply converts woman to 'cunt'—thing, commodity, matter" (313; 279). More recently, Daniel Fuchs in *The Limits of Ferocity* (2011) identifies Miller with the Marquis de Sade because "Miller is talking about fornication, not salvation, and there is no such thing as a born-again fornicator" (270)ⁱ.

My interest here is in the notion that if Miller writes in a distinct form, that form both invites and resists an easy conflation between Miller-the-writer and Miller-the-narrator. Whatever the merits of his work, Miller was concerned to disrupt the conventional hierarchy and division between author, speaker, and reader, and the hermeneutic authority that this structure generates. Moreover, a defining quality of his form is the onus it puts on the reader to maintain not only this tension between the two Millers but also to maintain a kind of perceptual contractⁱⁱ in which the reader must "re-authorize" the testimony of the text by being willing to hear it and render it *each time it is read*. As Priscilla Wald keenly notes, however, Miller's plotless and obscene moments—whatever else they provoke—"force readers to confront their own longing for the narrative conventions that make a work comprehensible" (239). By bemoaning what Miller writes, rather than what his writing *does* to its reader and to writing itself, readers fail to imagine Miller orchestrating a form that would disrupt form as such, especially in its spiritually or creatively enervating varieties. By routinely blaspheming

modernity's twin gods of reason and socio-economic growth, Miller forges a style out of his repudiation of what Jean-François Lyotard calls the "narratives of legitimation[...]the emancipation of humanity, the realization of the Idea" (65). Critics are right, then, to evaluate Miller's modernism through his surreal, obscene, and seemingly pointless digressions, but they stop well short of considering these digressions as formally and even ethically vitalizing in themselves.ⁱⁱⁱ

In this article, my aim is twofold: first, by focusing on *Tropic of Cancer* and some passages within *The Rosy Crucifixion Trilogy* (*Sexus*, *Plexus*, and *Nexus*), I hope to show how Miller's form works in his writing and how he often exercises it as a critique of modernity and its inherited but constrictive aesthetic criteria. According to Miller scholars James M. Decker and Indrek Mäaniste, Miller's philosophy often pervaded his fiction where his energies if not always his stories were "directed against the most dominant features of the progress-oriented modern age: linear conception of history, time, technology, and the aesthetic notion of art" (Decker and Mäaniste 3). While Miller shares the exploratory bravura of artists like Kandinsky, Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Woolf, Orwell, Picasso, Proust, D.H. Lawrence, Djuna Barnes, Dos Passos, and Kafka, he, like they, had to anxiously carve out his own freedom; creativity did not necessarily come down from on high, nor was it seamlessly in line with the times. These artists' interior and untethered sense of freedom did not equate with and was often antithetical to the liberalism derived from Enlightenment values such as rationality and productivity and converted into a capitalist political economy. A *modern* freedom, then, when valued in terms of goals and measurable yields, became mechanical and hierarchical instead of spiritual and holistic. As Decker explains, modernity's new triumphalist (and perhaps enduring) conception of freedom "tended to reduce humanity to a conformist mass in mindless pursuit of material comforts and spiritual platitudes. Instilled and enforced by stultifying institutions, such as schools and churches, the concept of external obligation (and the concomitant deferral of self-fulfillment) created a psychic fissure within most individuals, which resulted in profound alienation" (21).

As Sarah Garland, Masuga, and others have contended, Miller preserves and demonstrates his defiant and quasi-mystical sense of freedom by writing in "an extraordinarily intertextual fashion, with overt and covert allusions running in a constant stream throughout the narratives" (23). Miller calls this mode his "spiral form": it's a form that *deforms*, we might say, narrative closure and even structural sequence. His approach to representational writing, even when autobiographical, stems from Miller's conviction that no one plot structure or discursive formula can grasp, let alone liberate, consciousness. Thus, although Miller has his own place among the modernist *avant-garde*, even if many critics and publics lionize him for the censorship trials and debates rather than for his literary labor, his alinear, polysemous spiral form "shares affinities with many premodern spiritual traditions as well as with those esoteric

and avant-garde movements intent on exploding the scientific rationalism of the Enlightenment” (22). Like Whitman, Miller has a way of electrifying the present with a cosmological sweep so primordial it is unfamiliar and even offensive.^{iv}

I, too, argue that Miller takes the old and incorrigibly makes something new; he is a rude hieroglyphic. Of course, creating a “form” that disrupts form and sequence as such was not necessarily a new thing in Miller’s time. This dissident impulse had its roots at least since the rise of the Western novel and through the Romantic Movement in Europe, from the seventeenth century to the early nineteenth. While the earliest and most successful novels mirrored the emotional and actual topographies of the rising bourgeoisie—think Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740), Henry Mackenzie’s *The Man of Feeling* (1771), and Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverley* (1814)—a parallel line of authors began to deepen the self-consciousness of the novel and question its sentimentality and moral opportunism through witty inversion and readerly engagement, even collusion. Such experimental, involuted fiction^v owes much, for example, to Laurence Sterne’s creation of a self-conscious and subversive narrator in his *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67).

Likewise, the German writer and philologist Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829) introduced the term “romantic irony” to describe “a mode of dramatic or narrative writing in which the author builds up the illusion of representing reality, only to shatter the illusion by revealing that the author, as artist, is the creator and arbitrary manipulator of the characters and their actions (Abrams and Harpham 168). Insofar as Miller-the-writer metaphorizes the raw perceptions of his actual life, he decenters the facticity of that life by inventing *life-like* thoughts and actions for Miller-the-character (“the illusion of representing reality”). Of course, crafting verisimilitude is many a writer’s job—nothing new here. But what makes the form of Miller’s semiautobiographical writing enigmatic is how his writing wants to include or encircle both his literal perceptions and nonliteral ones—perceptions that *seem* like they are consistent with what Miller might have actually gone through earlier in the novel or in other essays, letters, and travelogues, but which can also belong to the given text’s persona; we can’t always be sure.

On the one hand, then, Miller crafts an autobiographical novel^{vi} in *Tropic of Cancer* that *appears* autonomous and *author-itative*: like most autobiographies, his seems to be a first-person *telling* to a third-person reader. On the other hand, I contend, Miller puts the top-down autonomy and access of the autobiography in doubt. Both structurally and thematically, then, Miller’s decentering “spiral form,” while not the first of its kind, is unique enough “in its ability to generate discomfort in [an] audience” (Decker and Männiste 2), in its modern insistence on keeping human incongruities in the same orbit and with the same vitality. Miller’s more nuanced critics argue that he developed a literary approach that could encircle and entwine the

incompatible and unsettling poles of life. This “form” suited Miller’s delirious desire to amalgamate contradictions: “anti-Semitism and philo-Semitism; misogyny and philogyny; wisdom and ignorance; materialism and asceticism; arrogance and doubt; beauty and ugliness; good and evil” (2).

Part of my argument is that because the act of reading Miller pits us with the relentless capaciousness of his language, we can only categorize his autobiographical novels as chronicles of *fact* so far, for they are not just that; perhaps more enduringly, they are disasters of *meaning*—lettered tornadoes, so to speak, rejecting authoritative, stable meaning but continually pulling in some kind of meaning (especially uncomfortable meaning) as well. Miller’s message, such as there is, is in the medium. But the medium isn’t just himself; it is everything else that *isn’t* he: it is we as well. The form that characterizes most of Miller’s novels “is a message designed to coimplicate the reader in language’s failure to communicate shared experience and external ‘fact,’ much less the essence of identity or spiritual energy” (3). Such a committed rupture of conventional literary form and representational realism warrants interrogation. In what compelling ways, if any, does Miller demonstrate that “[b]etween subjective and objective there is no vital difference” (Miller 1941b:25)?

Second, I will complicate Miller’s “spiral form” by considering it a proto-deconstructive and ethical orientation to reading itself. Paradoxically, when the reader momentarily allies herself with Miller’s lyricized self-discovery, she endorses or “countersigns” it in her name (as one authenticates a contract) and thus joins the authorial^{vii} Miller in granting those autobiographical moments in the novel their capacity to *shape* a novel, to slip from the authorial self to any readerly self who is present. Miller’s prose is transgressive enough that any claim to securely “know” or “critique” his text is problematic because it is not just *his* text anymore: the perceiver-critic’s knowing the value of a *book*, positioning it as “an other” to be “officially” made sense of, paradoxically implicates the perceiver-critic as a mediating source of knowing. If Miller’s texts are obscene in the usual sense, then they are also obscene in the far more significant sense that critics often miss: in the sense that the text, as sign and saying, is fulfilled—is read, is made readable—by the reader who is in the crucial position to calibrate not only the writer and the narrator’s voiced ideas, but her *own* as well. Crucially, this two-way resonance, this capacity to re-sound thoughts to one another, has no time limit. This postponed listening perpetually attunes to and in a receptive body “off stage”—an originary meaning of *obscene*.^{viii}

Accordingly, I argue that Miller’s spiral form anticipates Jacques Derrida’s *The Ear of the Other* (1985) by exposing the apparent “autonomous” and self-contained act of reading as also an ethical act of translation in which the *autos*, the self as the subject of biography, constantly

offers itself to an other's *otos* (the Greek root for *ear*), a phenomenon that suggests that reading, especially the reading of a text with a one-sided authority (the autobiography, for example), is simultaneously a re-writing, a re-authoring. Because of its circumferential dynamics, then, spiral form—whatever its versions—constantly if unsettlingly presents a kind of void or emptiness in the circle/circuit between writer and reader. But it is precisely the unpredictable turns, inclusions, exclusions, revolutions and thus evolutions in meaning exchanged between writer and reader (or text and translation) that (temporarily) fill this void.

In this sense, I regard the lexical site of an other's ear as the organ that transgresses and reshapes a writer's authority, an authority which we assume is both materially and critically well-defined. We owe such influence to reasonable sources, such as the author's signature or inscribed name on his book, the mass-reproduction of his works, New Historical or formalist analyses that may argue for the *author's* intended and thus "correct" meaning, and the author's sustained legacy by his default inclusion in curricula. But I argue that the effects of reading Miller's spiral form interrupts any privileged domain of authorship and evaluation because this form opens onto and, indeed, preserves the co-perception and the co-autonomy of what we might reasonably call the *otobiographical* novel. If a more nuanced view of reading reveals that this slippage of the singular *autos* into the polyphonic *otos* (and back) is a valid, experiential phenomenon, then the moment of reading invites a strange form of ethics or, perhaps, the only form of ethics: one that performs and keeps open its oscillations (spiralings), ambivalences, and differences between writer and reader, between incompatible and sometimes irreconcilable registers of being, thereby interrupting the notion of authority from the start.^{ix} Thus, a certain transgressiveness becomes the condition of possibility for ethics. Finally, I conclude with identifying an intrinsic problem with reading "otobiographically," and consider a phenomenological if tenuous response to it.

I. The N/earness of You: Miller's Spiral Form and Derrida's *Ear of the Other*

In his "Reflections on Writing," Miller concedes that he could never convincingly capture "Reality" in his narratives, but this seeming limitation illuminates something quite honest about the nature of writing "Reality" in which "one can only go forward by going backward and then sideways and then up and then down. There is no [linear, authoritative] progress: there is perpetual movement, which is circular, spiral, endless" (Miller 1941: 22). Several years later in a letter dated 3 September 1966, Miller would write to William Gordon, "all the backward and forward jumps have pertinence, from the standpoint of 'true' autobiographical narrative" (1968: 65). Miller specifies his concept of spiral form in his essay, *The World of Sex*. Justifying his meandering, metonymic, and promiscuous narratives, he clarifies that

[i]n telling this story [of my life] I am not following a strict chronological sequence but have chosen to adopt a circular or spiral form of time development which enables me to expand freely in any direction at any given moment. The ordinary chronological development seems to me wooden and artificial.... The facts and events of life are for me only the starting points on the way towards the discovery of truth. I am trying to get at the inner pattern of events, trying to follow the potential being who was deflected from his course here and there. . . . Thus, for no apparent reason, I may often lapse back into a period anterior to the one I am talking about. . . . A sudden switch, a long parenthetical detour, a monologue, a remembrance which suddenly crops up, all these, without conscious effort on my part, serve to bind the loose threads together and augment the whole emotional trend. (1941c: 53-4)^x

There is a visionary lucidity here and, as we will see, Miller's compositional epiphany includes a re-formulation of time that is not abstract but experiential.

Aware of conventional temporality's restrictions, Miller reconfigures the relationship between art, observation, and evaluation. Channeling a syncretism of stream-of-consciousness, surrealist and impressionist expressiveness, diatribal (m)orality, and his own willingness to unify the "whole emotional trend," Miller doesn't so much repudiate the reader as rely on her to participate in recurring tropes and universal experiences. As the long quotation above from *The World of Sex* intimates, Miller's narratological volatility is more discipline than derangement. As a late-bloomer of modernist literature, Miller seems to insist that his spiral form partake of modernism's struggle to cope with the deracination irrupted by World War I and its panicked accumulations of control via urbanization, Taylorized production, Wilsonian progress, positivistic education, and encroaching surveillance. Residually, perhaps, Miller finds urgency in loosening the control of author over reader (and over meaning).

In order to establish the link between Miller's spiral formation of his autobiography and the reader's paradoxical co-authoring of that autobiography, we can briefly outline Derrida's major claims in *The Ear of the Other*. The most relevant essay in this work is "Otobiographies: The Teaching of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name," which is actually a transcript of two roundtable discussions between Derrida and a host of distinguished scholars (Gasché, McDonald, Donato, Mahony, Lévesque, Vance, Péraldi). In this speech-text, the topic Derrida broaches is a distressing one, not just because it involves interpreting Nietzsche and "listening" beyond or under the bilious rhetoric, but because it also involves interrogating those elements of Nietzsche's thinking that allegedly were "naturally" assimilable to the Nazi worldview. Derrida is not interested in siding with Nietzsche's defenders who claim that his texts were

grossly misread and taken out of context; nor is Derrida interested in siding with Nietzsche's detractors who claim that his texts were uniquely formulated for such misreadings.

Instead, Derrida looks at Nietzsche's autobiographical meditations, namely in his late work *Ecce Homo*, and recuperates the *speculative* Nietzsche, the Nietzsche who, for all of his pronouncements, is, deep down, not sure of things and thus open to a view of life beyond nihilism. This Nietzsche speaks of the "untimely," spiritually adrift character of his writing, the "absence of fit readers in his own time and the need to project his meaning forward into an always uncertain and provisional future" (Norris 61). It is this *rhetorical*, poetic Nietzsche to which Derrida devotes his linguistic and meta-ethical cause. In this Nietzsche, Derrida sees the hermeneutic rebel who subverts the long-standing "metaphysics of presence," the ontological surety of truth-claims, from Socrates to Hegel, and argues that—pre-deconstructively, we should note—all concepts that purport to describe the noumenal real or the "things-in-themselves" are at best metaphors, figurations of the ungraspable cosmos made by and for the self or mind that is grasping. In short, they are so many autobiographies.

In examining Nietzsche's proper name as a multivalent speech-act, as both a surface phoneme (and grapheme) and a metonymical doorway to a provocative biography, Derrida reflects on a new speculative sub-genre he calls the *otobiography*. This type of text is the autobiography that veers from autobiography proper because it doubles or at least troubles an autobiography's normal source: as Derrida suggests in his account of Nietzsche, the name "Nietzsche" is both a life and a ghost, both a concrete series of events in history (the *bios* that the word *Nietzsche* encapsulates) and a transient homonym (the variant and often radical versions of "Nietzsche" we conjure when the name appears), whose utterance or sight at any moment subjects the "original" Nietzsche to exhumation: to verification, to appropriation, to a questioning of an author's self-same authority, to no rest at all. Thus, while it may seem a strained effort to show the parallels between Miller's and Derrida's textual orientations, Derrida's re-reading of Nietzsche in *The Ear of the Other* may help us see that Miller's "spiral form" operates through what Derrida would call "iterability," that emptiness-cum-readiness in which meaning (and any "unauthorized" reading) only actually emerges through successive encounters between reader/hearer and text. It is this mimetic perversion that paradoxically keeps any relation between writer and reader (between text and encounter) *genuinely* open, not just theoretically open.

For instance, normally, we regard the proper name or signature on an autobiography as the stamp that signifies the author as both the text's creator and its subject. But Derrida argues that

in some way the signature will take place on the addressee's side, that is, on the side of him or her whose ear will be keen enough to hear my name, for example, or to understand my signature, that with which I sign . . . the ear of the other says me to me and constitutes the *autos* of my autobiography. (50)

An autobiography will only speak its intended "voice" and realize the purchase of its "signature" when other readers/listeners engage with it. For Derrida, the reader's "co-signing" of a text is a "testamentary structuring" that doesn't "befall a text as if by accident, but constructs it. This is how a text always comes about" (51). In Derrida's reading, Nietzsche forcefully enjoins us to not deaden our spirits by accepting like sheep the words from our cultured, authoritative individuals and resigning ourselves to "accidental," passive hearing/thinking. If in the beginning was the word, Nietzsche might concur, but add unflinchingly that that word was autobiographical in the strictest sense. It not only came from us (as opposed to a deity); it was us:

What is a word? It is the copy in sound of a nerve stimulus. But the further inference from the nerve stimulus to a cause outside of us is already the result of a false and unjustifiable application of the principle of sufficient reason. If truth alone had been the deciding factor in the genesis of language, and if the standpoint of certainty had been decisive for designations, then how could we still dare to say "the stone is hard," as if "hard" were something otherwise familiar to us, and not merely a totally subjective stimulation! (Nietzsche 111)

Here, half a century before the poet Laura Riding observed that the task of truth is divided among us, to the number of us, Nietzsche suggests that language itself can become an organ that conceals rather than reveals truth. The literally creative dimension of language is too close to us, even as it sustains us, and we forget to hear it like our own heartbeat.

The increasingly enfolded, embodied nature of reading another's autobiography, then, produces an ear-catching and mobile agency in a reader, a fluctuating *otonomy*, we might say. After some *otobiographical* readings of Miller's passages, I will bring to bear the fuller phenomenological import of this heuristic term, *otonomy*. For now, suffice it to say that the printed or cursive signature on the surface of an autobiography literally and metonymically spirals out and into the spiraled ear of the reader, the cochlear alterity that must parse out the enunciations of an author pursuant to the textual "singing" (and simultaneous *signing*) for which the author has auditioned.^{xi} The dialogic meeting between writer and reader indicates that the gesture of this precarious "generosity," this newly alighted hospitality

consists in hearing, while we speak and as acutely as possible, Nietzsche's voice [the author and authority in Derrida's example]. But this does not mean that one simply receives it. To hear and understand it, one must also produce it, because, like his voice, Nietzsche's signature awaits its own form, its own event. This event is entrusted to us. Politically *and* historically . . . it is we who have been entrusted with responsibility of the signature of the other's text which we have inherited. (51)

In what follows, I aim to show that Miller's autobiographical discourse includes an ever-present and often transgressive address to collective bodies appearing both in the authorial Miller's memory and in the form of futural, "entrusted" readers. It is with these bodies that Miller feels his own body—including the body of his work, the body of any redemptive knowledge to come—inextricably linked.

II. The Weather Will Not Change: Spiral Form, Time, & Truth

Miller's literal sojourning in Paris which he details in *Tropic of Cancer* spirals out into a mental topography in which, despite the abundance of signifiers, the reader cannot readily locate their signifieds. This deterritorialization compels the reader to search her own inner world of reference (to "listen" to her own dueling "voices" of reason and un-reason). What further augments the move from autobiography to "otobiography" is that from our uncertainty in classifying and normativizing Miller's self (real and fictive), we bring our own self to the fore of evaluation.

As Derrida suggests above, any perception of a work—a perception that may already be prejudiced—is precarious business on both sides of the perceiving. While it is a truism now that Miller is widely critiqued as a writer with a problematic fascination with violence^{xii} (and this view is not entirely unjustified), there is an even more fundamental "violence" *about* Miller's writing: the historical and critical consensus on Miller's writing points to how a reader's authoritative and preconceived evaluation of Miller's work (as opposed to a raw, unbiased, and phenomenological reading of it) is the first and last violence. Unwittingly if understandably, when reading a novel or autobiography, we regularly engage in taking stock of our *own* autobiographical and epistemic make-up, with the often unconscious desire to make *someone else's* (namely, the author whom we are reading) utterances accord with ours in taste and timbre. Strictly speaking, these can be violent if invisible situations. It may even be a deathly situation: is not each critical appraisal of a work (mine of Miller's included), let alone a published and, therefore, *public* appraisal, a kind of temporary death-sentence for that work? At least for a significantly-sized audience—and for a greater one depending on how authoritative the official critic is—the literary text under review now *is* (is good, is rotten, is absurd); in some way, there are restrictions on what it *can be*.

On a subterranean level, then, an appraisal discloses a desire for a moral (and an *oral*, depending on how influential the criticism is and its production of adherents who circulate it) presence that is at once an erasure. Vexingly, though, even the reader faces a degree of oblivion, for there is always a chance that in wandering through an author's personal (and yet partially invented) cosmography, one's hitherto stable sense of self can be derailed if not abdicated. On the one hand, Miller announces as much when, in his "fuck everything" book, he sounds the death gurgle with his "gob of spit in the face of Art" (*Cancer* 2). On the other hand, he threatens any given reader's own need for therapeutic emplotment. And not only does Miller threaten it, he *addresses* it in a sustained manner, as suggested by the epistolary, conversational mode between narrator and reader. The effect is Whitmanian, as a distinct speaker in Miller's texts emerges to address, or at least be in the presence of, an equally distinct *you*. Anaïs Nin was keen to pick up on his epistolary candor when she beheld his Parisian novels as a "loose mad kind of letter writing" that "is full of surprises, no tapestry weaving, no arduous mountain climbing, just diving" (Nin and Miller 1987: 89).

If Miller's writing is full of violence (and it is), I propose that a certain modality of that violence contains a hospitality in its invitation to our very real ability to be re-born, re-invented. Finn Jensen posits that Miller anticipates a Deleuzian aesthetic of fluid reinvention, since "the chaotic order of the novel [*Tropic of Cancer*] is very much like a rhizome, a set of relations without a center...in constant movement" (69). But as Miller states in his explanation of spiral form above, his anecdotes, diatribes, and reveries—disconnected and uncentered though they seem—all revolve around an "inner pattern," suggesting Miller's basic faith in the self-actualizing and even coherent undertones of literature.

But following Paul Jashan, it is valid to read Miller's content and form as bursting with proto-postmodern bricolage. Miller's rants are autochthonous signifiers that are made to embody the gap of readerly interpretation without filling that gap with normative grammars like plot and purpose, which were never the signifiers' own to begin with. Miller actually indexes his disavowal of plot in the beginning of *Cancer* where he subtly but resolutely disrupts the very engine of plot: time. If Miller's subject is the self (and, by extension, any self), then adequately realizing this self requires a reformulation of the boundaries between past, present, and future and, likewise, between the self and the other: "the cancer of time is eating us away.... The hero then is not time but timelessness" (*Cancer*, 1). But the term, "timelessness," can be misleading here. Miller's next passage suggests that timelessness entails not so much the elision between this event and that, between self and other, but rather their equality or "evenness" insofar as a self cannot exist without its other. For Miller, the "inequalities" of binary and antagonistic thinking (consider the prevailing dichotomies ushered by Western philosophy and science, such as subject/object, time/space, birth/death, rational/emotional,

civility/tribalism, high art/kitsch) are impositions of artificial order and peace, whereas his primordial sense of equality recuperates a chaos that is necessary for genuine creativity:

It is the twenty-somethingth of October. I no longer keep track of the date. Would you say—my dream of the 14th November last? There are intervals, but they are between dreams, and *there is no consciousness left of them*. The world around me is dissolving leaving here and there spots of time When into the womb of time everything is again withdrawn chaos will be restored and chaos is the score upon which reality is written. You, Tania, are my chaos. (2, emphasis mine)

The italicized phrase implies that our judgments of another, a work, or a world are not fixed; they are “between” consciousnesses, neither original nor terminal but performative. It is not that there is not an other, work, or world elsewhere; it is that, for Miller, this other, work, or world refuses to remain safely and authoritatively *over there*, outside the one reading/perceiving.

This illocutionary^{xiii} re-tuning of abstract, linear time into interpersonal, embodied time (“It is to you, Tania, that I am singing” [2]) inaugurates the spatial layout of the novel. For instance, the sporadic and polysemous “spots of time” that Miller compares to the intervals between dreams has a graphemic analogue in the way he structures *Tropic of Cancer*: fifteen unmarked “chapters,” preceding and ending with large space on the pages, and several gaps between paragraphs within the chapters. Textual fissures bookend *Cancer* as well, with the last paragraphs on both the first and last page of the book being set off from the previous one. Two reasons may be given, one formal and the other, strangely, meteorological. Of the former, Miller writes:

No single part of [my book] is finished off: I could resume the narrative at any point, carry on, lay tunnels, bridges, houses, factories, stud it with other inhabitants, other fauna and flora...I have no beginning and no ending. (1941a: 27)

Of the latter reason, Miller starts and ends his novel with musings on the weather:

The weather will continue bad, he [Boris] says. There will be more calamities, more death, more despair. Not the slightest indication of change anywhere. The cancer of time is eating us away.... There is no escape. The weather will not change. (1)

The sun is setting. I feel this river flowing through me—its past, its ancient soil, the changing climate. These hills gently girdle it about: its course is fixed. (318)

Prima facie, these lines seem fatalistic and downright wrong: whatever they mean, weather does change day to day, if only a little, and Miller in the second passage writes of a “flowing,” “changing climate.”

But taking an interpretive cue from Masuga is helpful here, as she notes that most readers “read Miller literally rather than within a context that his work requires” (2010: 182). Macrocosmically, “the weather” is just a localized phenomenon of change itself: it is precisely *because* it changes unceasingly and often infinitesimally that it can be said to have a constancy, a paradoxical reliability in which we experientially feel that there is something about the weather that does *not* change. The “river” of the second passage is an inherent body of change and, paradoxically, “its course is fixed” if we take the river as a signifier of the animating principle of life itself from which Miller finds his voice and to which he accepts losing it. Again, as his writing symptomatizes, what is fixed is the *incompletion* of being fixed, of being certain and authoritative towards life. Whatever the authorities define as “literature,” perhaps it is first and last the irrepressible need for bare expression, irrespective of a certain end, influence, or “worth.”

In *Tropic of Capricorn*, Miller parts more clearly with the notion of a complete and infinite (and human) truth: “But the truth can also be a lie. The truth is not enough. Truth is only the core of a totality which is inexhaustible” (*Capricorn*, 303). Masuga (2010) trenchantly adds that not only is each value-laden proposition necessarily contextual and contingent, but the beginning of any speaking or writing is already an incomplete task of trying to disseminate into language that which was once (and always is, as in “fixed”) a nonclassifiable experience from the plenitude of life itself. Alluding to the resurrective excess of a river, Miller affirms in *Sexus*:

No man ever puts down what he intended to say: the original creation, which is taking place all the time, whether one writes or doesn't write, [...] has no dimensions, no form, no time element. In this preliminary state, which is creation and not birth, what disappears suffers no destruction; something which was already there, something imperishable, like memory, or matter, or God, is summoned and in it one flings himself like a twig into a torrent. (20)

Thus, Miller's meteorological ouroboros may not be so strange a way to frame a book. A sympathetic if daring reader, then, might submit an eco-critical corrective to the oft-maligned passage about Miller's self-acclaimed “inhumanity”:

Once I thought that to be human was the highest aim a man could have, but I see now that it was meant to destroy me. Today I am proud to say that I am *inhuman*, that I belong not to men and governments, that I have nothing to do with creeds and principles. I have nothing to do with the creaking machinery of humanity—I belong to the earth! (*Cancer* 254)

The being from which “truth” and “falsehood” are derived—Miller’s “primal flux” (20)—is not itself true or false; it simply is, undulating through and as everything in its homeostatic thrum like the magmic heartbeat undersea. The revelation that he doesn’t have to be anything other than what he is, just as the sun and the hills don’t have to be other than what they are, allows Miller to say: “I have no money, no resources, no hopes. I am the happiest man alive. A year ago, six months ago, I thought that I was an artist. I no longer think about it, I *am*” (1).

Hearing the connotations in how Miller speaks of “men and governments,” “the creaking machinery of humanity,” “money,” “resources,” and even “hopes,” we realize that he is denigrating not the neutral, biological notion of *human*, but the invented and industrialized notion increasingly propagated by Western civilization. This dominant notion of what it means to be human is also bound up with a positivistic, absolutist notion of time. For Miller, both of these notions were failures. Historically, notes Männiste,

modern times have failed to produce the better man and world that “our heroes” of the Enlightenment era dreamed about. Miller is fighting against a notion of time that is embedded in the very metaphysics of the age, a metaphysics that is commonly taken to support the linear concept of history. Time’s role, commonly construed as rigid, it seemed to Miller, served to a great extent merely for the purpose of justifying historical developments as necessary and inevitable. (Decker and Männiste 11).

Although as a whole, we have become human (as in a hyper-rationalizing, means-justifying, and time-constricting species), remaining so, for Miller, is not “necessary and inevitable.” To jar us out of this existential stupor, Miller urges us to become *inhuman*, to rise above the “lifeless mass of humanity” and do what only an “inhuman” person can do, which is turn that lifeless mass “into bread and the bread into wine and the wine into song” (*Cancer* 256).

Moreover, by invoking the peculiar term “inhuman,” Miller puts us in the mind to more readily identify with or at least hear “the other,” that non-self whose difference or alterity is often *de*-humanized, otherized, effaced in the name of the “human,” the “correct,” the authoritative. In the next section, I expand upon how the notion of the “other,” particularly in Emmanuel Levinas’ worldview, can inform an ethical reading of Miller’s seemingly immoral (or

at least *amoral*) writing. In Miller's idiosyncratic if tortuous eco-metaphysics, to become *inhuman* is to fall into and revivify our organic, creative beingness which is itself enveloped by and spiraling within the beingness of the earth, of "the weather," of the literal constellations of light, air, and water. It is *that* course which is fixed. It is these elements that author us all.

III. Ethical Writes: Otonomy and the Politics of Reading

Paramount to Miller's otobiography, the structural gaps in *Cancer* serve as audio-visual lacunae of a dyadic silence/emptiness and are essential for not only unfurling the written text, but for encompassing the reader of the text as well. This encompassing, oddly enough, positions any given reader into not just a physiology of reading but also a politics of reading—or, more precisely, the politics that is reading. For example, let's take the role of a professional scholar entrusted to critically read a novel (or essay). This role, arguably, has certain political privileges to it. For one, the formal critic has the training to articulate a certain degree of bibliographic and analytical power. He or she is usually praised for the ability to make hidden meaning transparent, to iron out any equivocations between words, between subject and object, and so forth. Second, this power is curiously bicameral: dispensed with individually and yet often expected to be public and publicly approved; this singular power's worth is realized among many people. Third, given the intellectual and cultural impact this power can have, the perceived merit of the work and author in question can be swiftly, even permanently, determined.

But for Miller, this political gatekeeping within literary criticism makes a tyranny of art and a puppeteering of thinking: "Up to the present, my idea in collaborating with myself has been to get off the gold standard of literature. [...] Are these [artists and critics] men and women, I ask myself, or are these shadows, shadows of puppets dangled by invisible strings? They move in freedom apparently, but they have nowhere to go" (243; 245). Although he was generally apolitical for most of his life, Miller is implicitly concerned with the fundamental politics of expressive freedom—one's autonomy in the basic sense. With such a central concern, *Cancer* seems less like a book about vulgar sex without "real" form and content and more about a poignant, if loutish, politics. Miller's typographical and aural "pauses," then—apart from his entropic diction and surreal parataxes—provide otobiographical resistance to some final say.

As an investigator of excitable speech, Judith Butler (1997) also expresses concern over what constitutes authoritative or critical interpellating and who does the authorizing:

But are we, whoever "we" are, the kind of community in which such meanings could be established once and for all? Is there not a permanent diversity within the semantic field

that constitutes an irreversible situation for political theorizing? Who stands above the interpretive fray in a position to “assign” the same utterances the same meanings? And why is it that the threat posed by such an authority is deemed less serious than the one posed by equivocal interpretation left unconstrained? (87)

Like Miller, Butler raises the inherent asymmetries and heuristic gaps that exist in the dynamics between the speaker and her speech. If the open-ended and hence, *otobiographical*, nature of language is seriously honored, then an authentic politics remains alive. Butler importantly asks:

Does the assertion of a potential incommensurability between intention and utterance (not saying what one means), utterance and action (not doing what one says), and intention and action (not doing what one meant), threaten the very linguistic condition for political participation, or do such disjunctures produce the possibility for a politically consequential *renegotiation* of language that exploits the undetermined [or, put differently, *otobiographical*] character of these relations? (92)

In other words, Butler suggests that the ambiguity or discrepancy between what we intend and what we actually do is paradoxically a necessary condition for social diversity and equality: the perpetual slippage away from authoritative (that is, unilateral, top-down) communication is necessary for what kind of speech and conduct *can become* “authoritative” (that is, accepted and affirmed by a representative plurality among a diverse society) in a more ethical way. But even *this* new “authority” must risk being “undetermined” and constantly revisited.

The “gap” between our intentions and our actions—not unlike the gaps that cradle and infuse Miller’s book—is what allows us to re-define and recite what gets inscribed into the words and ingrained assumptions of so-called political and ethical standards. In Miller, both the unensconced signifiers (the spatio-temporal gaps in *Cancer*) and the inscribed ones (the “spiraling,” fantasmatic diction and syntax) make the lack of prescribed, authoritative signification self-evident: Miller’s signifiers arguably belong to a “pure experience” which functions through and because of that lack. In other words, Miller’s refusal to follow a narrative calculus disempowers a reader’s totalizing wishes. His errant cataloguing does not fill up the gap of signification so much as expose that it is there, as he constitutes the political borders of that gap, the rim of that gap, in the way a potter, for example, honors the originary space of emptiness by cussing the pot-to-be in spiraled deference.

While it is not my aim in this article to account for Miller’s representations of misogyny, it is his autobiographically-tinged sexual tirades through which the effect of “otobiography” is

severely tested. The rapacious apostrophe to Tania (biographically, Bertha Schrank^{xiv}) that commences *Cancer* has become almost synonymous with Miller himself:

O Tania where now is that warm cunt of yours, those fat, heavy garters, those soft, bulging thighs? There is a bone in my prick six inches long. . . . I know how to inflame a cunt. I shoot hot bolts into you, Tania, I make your ovaries incandescent. . . . I have set the shores a little wider. . . . I am fucking you, Tania, so that you'll stay fucked. And if you are afraid of being fucked publicly I will fuck you privately. I will tear off a few hairs from your cunt and paste them on Boris' chin. I will bite into your clitoris and spit out two franc pieces. (6)

By isolating this invective from the rest of the protagonist's evolution, and without hermeneutically "spiraling out" to Miller's *non-fictional* attitudes towards gender relations (whatever they may be), the assessments of Kate Millett, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar, among others, would stand: for them, Miller abides in a "theology of the cunt" (Gilbert and Gubar 116).^{xv} But as Charles Glicksberg rightly points out, Miller often juxtaposes his most enraged monologues with his most tranquil ones (138).

Hence, the above passage is immediately followed by a reveried walk through Paris (itself a spiraling infrastructure of districts). Significantly, Miller is modulating his thoughts in a way that helps him "listen" with the mind's ear:

Indigo sky swept clear of fleecy clouds, gaunt trees infinitely extended, their black boughs gesticulating like a sleepwalker. Somber, spectral trees, their trunks pale as cigar ash. A silence supreme and altogether European. Shutters drawn, shops barred. . . . I think of Spengler and of his terrible pronunciamientos, and I wonder if style, style in the grand manner, is done for. I say that my mind is occupied with these thoughts, but it is not true; it is only later, after I have crossed the Seine, after I have put behind me the carnival of lights, that I allow my mind to play with these ideas. For the moment I can think of nothing—except that I am a sentient being stabbed by the miracle of these waters that reflect a forgotten world. . . . No one to whom I can communicate even a fraction of my feelings. (*Cancer* 6)

James Decker's central work on Miller's writing style suggests that in these textual dyads of eruption-equanimity, Miller is usually—offensively, transgressively, even transcendently—trying to get the reader to move towards the messy unity of life, not away from it.^{xvi} If we are to harbor how an *otobiographical* reading implicates and shapes not just a given reader but

reading itself, we would do well to consider any ethical undertones that might fluctuate between the two incommensurate “pronunciamentos” quoted above.

For all the rage and absurdity of the Tania address, we can read the foundational thought it shares with the walking daydream passage: the inability to reach another, to say all one needs to say and to have heard all that one needs to have heard (suggested further by the second passages’ pun on “Seine,” as in “crossing the [textual or verbal] Sign” and reaching one’s listener or reader). In the paean to Tania’s cunt, it’s easy to dismiss the writing as so much smut. An obscene and thinly-veiled autobiographical confession in the middle of a novel can be ruinous for a plot. However, Miller is not interested in plot but rather in presenting a fractured life as it is being fractured—in *real* time, as it were, where real means not linear and predetermined. There is no room for formal plot in *Cancer* because the spiritual upheaval of the novel’s *I* is, for Miller at least, riveting enough. By staying true to what his friend, early reader, and former landlord Michael Fraenkel told Miller in 1931 in Paris—“Write the way you talk!” (Skovajsa 77)—Miller creates a “plot” that is at one and the same time the evolving genesis of the book, wherein “his living situation penetrates into the very structure of the composition!” (77, exclamation in the original). But if this book is not just autobiography but *otobiography*, then in the moment a reader finds himself condemning and “otherizing” Miller’s most lewd but honest thoughts, he also in the same moment opens the possibility of recognizing that he is confronting an *other*, even a wholly radical other.

While such a reaction is certainly not guaranteed, the otobiographical nature of Miller’s writing makes this reaction more tangible, permissible, as though Miller were saying to the reader, “Not only do you *have* private, profane thoughts like I do, but you can *share* them too.” In a more sacrilegious idiom, to be sure, Miller nonetheless takes inspiration from Whitman’s apostrophic lines,

Camerado, this is no book,
Who touches this, touches a man,
(Is it night? are we here together alone?)
Is it I you hold and who holds you,
I spring from the pages into your arms—decease calls me forth. (Whitman 407)

Whitman holds his addressee and Miller fucks his, but in both cases, do not both authors “spring from the pages” and into our arms, however temporarily? And even if we loathe Miller’s words, is it not his unease—not *decease* but literally *dis-ease*—that calls us forth?

Miller stills his mind enough to grasp his own sentience, but as soon as he does, he realizes his inability to possess not only woman but also language itself, even though he has literally been created by, authored by, both (hinted now by an *ur*-literary pun: “I am a *sentence* being. . .”). The dynamic, river-like quality of language is also suggested by Miller’s diction, which, in the above long passage, is quite remarkable for how unpredictable and polarized his qualifiers and nouns are. For example, the spectral, ashy trees present a haunting image, and yet Miller immediately offers us a comforting one: not just a silence, but a *supreme* one, one we might welcome when we are in a deep enough sleep to “sleepwalk,” or when in the waking state we are strolling besides “miraculous” still water, at peace enough for our “mind to play.” To feel this alive, this “sentient,” is also akin to feeling “stabbed.” Our narrator is alone, one with the earth and clear-eyed, but he longs for others. He has so much to communicate, but simultaneously, his writing may not even get a fraction of his feelings across.

An otobiographical reading of this passage suggests that as soon as writing is undertaken, both writer and reader must functionally “abandon” the plenitude of pure sentience in order to create the distance and difference that make writing *to* an other and the reading *of* an other possible. The book is at stake here (and objects are “others” too): the dialectical genesis of writer and reader means that the “gaunt trees” (so many leaves around a book’s spine/trunk) will remain “infinitely extended” (readable, iterable, *otobiographical*), and their “black boughs” (the inscribed marks and lines on the page) proleptically “gesticulating” for a reader (our eyes imperceptibly and rapidly tracing the falls, rises, and curves of letters, letters ever open to being fingered, scribbled upon, back-tracked—and most modernly, weaving in and out before a blinking cursor).

It is fair criticism to suppose that I am over- or misreading the two passages, “gesticulating” and reaching myself for ethical translations where there are none. But such a criticism, I contend, misses the point—at least the point I am making in this essay and that I think Miller creatively makes in many of his texts. To conclude that the close-reading I have just proffered misses the analytical mark presupposes that there *is* a mark, a hidden but *true* meaning waiting to be accurately unveiled as though it were *a priori* always there. While this assumption, *in general*, is sensible to make—after all, such a stance is a nod to certain authoritative protocols of hermeneutics—New Criticism or inductive reasoning, for example—it is not always productive. When encountering many texts—and certainly, literary texts—we somatically and psychologically remain vulnerable to sounds that register only at a certain unpredictable remove: the words that “call us forth,” as Whitman would say, occur in resonant bodies that are shaped not just by the labyrinthine channels of the ear’s tympanum, but also by the emotional inflections and sensorial accents that modulate our identities. Another reader will and should weave her own lexical fabric when reading the above passages. Both the

ideational and soundful depths that a reader uncovers will be her own, for they are immanent in and animated by that space of alterity between her and the text. The otobiographical readings I have submitted—indeed, in which I have actively participated—are situated in the event of writing, of writing as enunciation, as performative rather than constative. To inflect Butler’s phrase on gender, we don’t find a reading; we do a reading.

Therefore, Miller’s hyperbolic, inconsistent, mythopoetic novel, before it is an object of analysis (let alone an *authoritative* analysis), it is an invocation, a topos of self-consciousness, alternately brutal and halcyon though it may be. As invocation, the work literally contains “voices” in it, and “voices” are performatively generated from it (in the form of thoughts, reactions, or audible utterances). In this view, the novel exercises onto—even gives—its own “subjectivity” to the reader, who *then* realizes the makeup and positionality of *her* subjectivity or identity. The deferrals and distances implied by Miller’s *I* attempting to corral three tenses in the Tania address—“*I have set* the shores. . .”, “*I am* fucking you. . .”, and “*I will* fuck you. . .”—connote that the speaker is beholden to an animating “other” (another person, a circumstance, a time, a contingent set of intentions) who makes an ego’s aims possible. Despite the speaker’s intransigence, his need to cover all time-frames in his apostrophe suggests that something in every object/other recesses from our presence: the other can’t always be “fucked [read: *read*] publicly” and at our whim.

But not only does this deferred opacity of a readerly or beholding other ignite the very genesis of human communication, it halts that communication too, thereby offering an unexpected gap or space—sometimes a “silence supreme” (*Cancer* 6)—for the writer in which she may realize, ever more authentically, that she is not the only one in the room; she never was. The *equivocation* (the equi-vocality) that is the book already bridges, from the start, the estrangement between writer and reader in a primordial if subtle way; the “listening” and “speaking back” (the translating, the close-reading, the analysis) are the belated but nonetheless co-creative, gestural crossings of that bridge. The text or utterance, as other, temporarily relinquishes its otherness by unfolding, laying bare, and “infinitely extending” (like Miller’s “gaunt trees” in the second passage above) the author’s sayability, her voice, and those who are open to listening in a circumspect (spiraling?) way permit an other’s voice to be re-iterable (re-readable, re-thinkable, rebuttable, even irrepressible). Otobiographical reading, then, is a mode of perception that may have its origins in the lyrical, biographical narrative. But I propose that, ultimately, it is a mode of perception that potentiates an ethics, that enacts a quality of relationship that remains sensitive to the ways in which the text, sign, or vibration is a most intimate and life-sustaining Other, one that still has the power to “reflect a forgotten world” (*Cancer* 6).

Alas, the “ethics” of Miller’s mode of writing (and the mode of reading/listening in which he places us) may emerge more clearly. Miller impales Tania and walks Paris, but it is significant that these acts remain farcical and dreamlike, respectively. Their illusory and ironic qualities suggest our perpetual disjunction from objective reality (such as there may be); as Nietzsche suggests in his musings on what a “word” really is (quoted in section one above), we can’t ever tell with certainty the difference between the so-called real world out there and our perceptual language about it. The fact that Miller narrates his momentary angst but ultimate acceptance towards the failure or indeterminacy within communication anticipates Roland Barthes’ *texte de jouissance*, “the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language” (Barthes 14).

If spiral form foments ambivalence, then it also provokes what we might now more assuredly call a reader’s *state of otonomy*: a state in which the reader’s agency is realized not in the “forgotten” act of cursory reading, but in the wandering and liminal act of re-reading, of reading *as much as possible* from the sensuous, evocative dimension of both human and earthly “sentience” out of which the very “miracle” of expressing as much or as little as possible emerges^{xvii}. In this way, reading is *always* transgressive: as the Latin roots *trans* and *gressus* suggest, reading, at least for Miller, is the most intimate opportunity to both step across and beyond the page.

Recall that Miller is centrally concerned with the failure or inadequacy of communication. But this intersubjective ill is also the cure. Communication, as a bodily, intersubjective phenomenon, accrues to *all* expressive bodies, not just to the human. As the ecologist and philosopher of language David Abram explains, “Our own speaking, then, does not set us outside of the animate landscape but—whether or not we are aware of it—inscribes us more fully in its chattering, whispering, soundful depths” (Abram 80). That is why Miller *can* reach some kind of peace or clarity when he is alone with nature’s elements (and also why he can’t stay alone indefinitely). Upon reflection, the founding source of our autonomy is none other than the enveloping, permeating, and manifold world into which we withdraw and out of which we continually emerge. True autonomy, then, is *otonomy*. Real freedom will always be an interdependent and intertwined dispensation, composed of an agent’s responsibility to and deference for a repertoire of so many “others,” seen and unseen, that make a human life possible. Miller’s imperfect, evolving sense of freedom enlivens many things—from hemorrhoids to supernovas—but it can never enliven complete *independence*, even when it thinks it is doing so. For to even be speaking and apostrophizing is to already have “uttered” a

spiritual and pre-rational greeting and thank you to the world, to the sensual, hospitable, and irreducible earth which literally bestows upon us the ability to breathe and speak and feel.

In short, we are never off the hook when reading. And neither is Miller, which is why another reading of the above quixotic passages is open to being feminist: Miller is not only comical, but also self-deprecatingly so, as these two passages undercut male (hetero)sexual dominance exactly by obsessing over it so histrionically. As Mary Kellie Munsil suggests, “By accentuating his persona’s sexual need, Miller, consciously or not, makes the persona seem laughable, even pitiable” (289-90). I would add that despite the carnivalesque disparity between the passages above, Miller’s own “somber” if belated undertone calls out from both an existential and textual lacuna (there is a gap between the two paragraphs in his text) in which we can hear a modern male insecurity^{xviii}, not just towards women, but towards the possibility of persons listening to each other without muting each other.

In any event, our close reading of these passages in *Cancer* has reverberated an otobiographical sensing and syntax that are necessarily incomplete, but whose circumlocutions (the alternating processes of coming back to the words and then back to who’s reading the words) make our “listening” sharper, more experiential and less abstract, and perhaps “happier” as Miller’s elements of nature are happy. Such happiness need not be naïve or facile, but one that labors in perceptual crossings, that perturbs the self out of complacency, that granulates a living art out of being “sovereign without sovereignty” (Derrida *Philosophy*, 191).

In his heretical way, Miller strove for this elusive state of being “sovereign without sovereignty,” a state to which Derrida would devote his late writing as he learned from his friend and mentor Emmanuel Levinas the irreducible importance of ethics and encountering the “Other.” In his seminal work, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Levinas historicizes and then critiques the modern, Cartesian notion of the autonomous self and its totalizing tendencies. Indeed, René Descartes’ hard-won pronouncement in his *Discourse on the Method* (1637), “Cogito ergo sum” (“I think, therefore I am”) is intuitively incontrovertible and thus has an authoritative, world-ordering effect. Since we are dealing in the current essay with the relationship between a conventionally sovereign, self-reflective language (that of an authoritative, autobiographical source) and a kind of transcendence in the form of a transgressive, ever-encroaching bearer of that language (the exterior, unfamiliar “other”), one of Levinas’ passages under the section called “Separation and Discourse” proves instructive, for it questions the hegemony of the self. Levinas writes:

To recognize the Other is therefore to come to him across the world of possessed things, but at the same time to establish, by gift, community and universality. Language

is universal because it is the very passage from the individual to the general, because it offers things which are mine to the Other. To speak is to make the world common, to create commonplaces. Language does not refer to the generality of concepts, but lays the foundations for a possession in common. It abolishes the inalienable property of enjoyment. The world in discourse is no longer what it is in separation, in the being at home with oneself, where everything is given to me; it is what I give: the communicable, the thought, the universal. (Levinas 76)

For Levinas, discourse is our most intimate and embodied relational activity; as such, it literally and not just theoretically constitutes our being. In turn, discourse—that is to say, the recognition of our existence from and through our communications with others—compels a bare respect towards the other, whether we like it or not. The ontology of any encounter (and reading and listening certainly count here) reveals the “transcendence of the Other...his height, his lordship, [and] in its concrete meaning [made sensible through language or discourse,] includes his destitution, his exile, and his rights as a stranger” (76-77).

Averse as we might often be towards the transgressive liberalities Derrida takes when reading others’ works, Derrida nonetheless takes seriously Levinas’ ethical vision. For instance, in one line from Levinas’ passage above—“Language is universal because it is the very passage from the individual to the general, because it offers things which are mine to the Other”—Derrida particularizes and even deepens the word “passage” by understanding it in terms of “travel” or, more specifically, “traveling *with*.” The preposition necessarily entails otherness, be it another object or person. If language is the “passage from the individual to the general,” we realize the inherent and perhaps unrelenting *movement* or *responsiveness* when we “travel with” others: even in the solitary reading of or listening to another’s words, for example, we are still traveling *with* those words and their givers. Think of the traffic of thoughts and feelings in which we are stuck at any moment of reading or listening to another’s expressions. In this enfolded, co-visitation of discourses, then, secrets are possible, even inevitable: with enough sensitivity, we might hear an author’s secrets and fears. Likewise, an author might tap into our own secrets and vulnerabilities, and *obscenely* at that (that is, *ob-scene* or “off-stage” and its relevant senses—the author is absent from our moment of reading, draws out our literary or analytical anxiety in the Bloomian sense, is emotionally or cognitively inaccessible, or is deceased).

Consequently, Derrida would in effect *perform* or enact these concepts of “traveling with” and being “sovereign without sovereignty” by co-authoring a book called *Counterpath* with his friend and fellow literary and philosophy scholar Catherine Malabou. True to his intentions, Derrida generates the book in “real time” by inviting Malabou (and by extension, the

reader) to physically and persistently travel with him between May 1997 and May 1998. Introspective by temperament, Derrida took a personal risk by trying to experience a very specific and Levinasian gesture of hospitality and open-ended vulnerability. As Tram Nguyen claims in his essay “Traveling Sovereignty” in which he compares the undecidable moments of reading in Roberto Bolaño and Derrida’s texts, Derrida in *Counterpath* “affords us intimate access to a terrain of negotiations where self, subject, ethics, autobiography, readerly scrutiny, friendship, violence, hospitality and deconstruction explicitly jostle for space. But precisely because *Counterpath* trespasses into autobiography, it enables Derrida to enact the very ethical crossings which he sought with great conviction toward the end of his life” (Nguyen 25). By letting someone inhabit his space, his writing, his confessions, even if she is his friend, Derrida demonstrates that a guest simultaneously has the capacity to be a hostile host to the self.^{xix}

Similarly, Joseph Kronick argues for a Levinasian reading of Derrida’s *Counterpath* and late work because the writing here is responsive to (and is responsible for, as Levinas would say) a call from an Other (and perpetually many others). To genuinely, if sometimes dreadfully, hear the call of the Other who—not always literally or obviously—announces a need, a neglect, an outrage, a point of view, or simply her presence, is to sustain a fracture in the self, a transgressive wound to the self-contained, immune (and even *auto*-immune, given the habit of thinking one is separate from and not bound to the other) cogito. This fracture *is* ethics. Kronick argues that the older Derrida sought to not reduce the other but to answer him ethically, as an ethics, an openness, an emptiness prior to any *logos*, structure, or controlling language because the Other “provokes in him something singular, a text of his own whose otherness surprises him” (Kronick 1000-01).

Miller’s language is, of course, very much his own and doesn’t abide in modern philosophy’s or deconstruction’s terminology. But he still generates this language as a risk and a hospitality, knowing that a “traveling-with” any and all readers—a meaningful movement in discourse or prose—is not just the passport to ethics: this hospitable if precarious opening (of the door, the book, the wound) is the very birth-certificate of being itself. We assume, even vigorously narrate, this emptying-out, this lack of being so that there might be being in the first place. This double labor (Miller’s and ours) literally provides the caloric intake of the words, the movement created between sense organs and sense-making. Because much if not most of Miller’s narrative content in the work examined herein is relatively plotless, we realize that the true content is the movement of the words and our travelings with and from them. We won’t always know what these movements and meditations mean; we’ll know that they just *are*, that they are sovereign. As Miller reflects in *Sexus*, “A great work of art, if it accomplishes anything, serves to remind us, or let us say to set us dreaming, of all that is fluid and intangible. Which is to say, the *universe*. It cannot be understood; it can only be accepted or rejected” (20). With a

form that implicates (indeed, instances) the reader's constitutive listening and talking back, Miller's gramphonic work suggests that there is no separation and autonomy as such, only otonomy—an ineliminable freedom-as-entanglement that allows him to declare that his "life itself became a work of art" (Miller 1941a: 243).

Conclusion: Is Anyone There? In Search of Otobiography in Search of Miller

Classical Greek dramatists believed that it was degrading to show extreme emotion on stage. Some action had to be implied off stage (*ob skene*) because it was deemed too raw and transgressive to display explicitly. This classical idea of obscenity included sexual conduct, but would also include expressions of anguish and aporia. At stake in this article has been the notion that Miller's writing in his early major works spirals around and as a vital obscenity, not because it depicts offensive sexual and gender relations (though it does this too), but because our reading of it enacts a co-listening and co-authoring of a life that is on the surface not our own. Our textual presence constitutes an often unconscious risk that begins and ends outside the book, "off stage" in our authenticating if implacable listening (receiving, interpreting) of a reader upon whom an author's voice relies. The question as to whether a reader of an autobiography is reading/listening *consciously* rather than unconsciously and even indifferently, perpetually threatens an authorial subject with an "obscene" fate, an anguish of identity off stage. For good or ill, the transgressive and appropriative nature of awareness itself keeps reading precarious, on the edge of being profane. It also keeps reading alive.

But the nature of otobiography as understood through Miller's work leaves us with another inherent problem: if the otobiography consists of the authorial subject recognizing himself in the recognition by the reader whom, in anticipation, he has already created, might we not view every text, every representation in letters, as "otobiographical" to varying degrees? Would this not effectively eliminate what is *sui generis* about autobiography apart from every other genre? More disturbingly, if the otobiographical approach reveals how frequently *unconscious* and passively sentient (as Miller often laments) our reading is, does this mean that all reading is actually quite solipsistic, rendering the significance of any text as ultimately dependent on *my* reading of it, thereby making a genuine ethical reading impossible? When reading, are we listening to anyone besides ourselves?

I don't propose to have a clear answer. I can only suggest that a viable though contingent recourse may lie in following through on the phenomenology of the problem itself. For instance, by definition, we are unaware of what is unconscious, and without awareness of something, we cannot identify it. Without identification, we cannot clearly name or talk about it. We only know of unconscious contents or forces either by inference, as when they manifest as emotions, memories, or behavior that we *feel* we are aware of; or when they take

intentional, external shape from our conscious awareness—for instance, as in any praxis, labor, or work of art. Although by then, of course, these unconscious contents are no longer unconscious. Likewise, in speaking of the largely unconscious process of reading that otobiography entails, the best we can do, it seems, is to take a sort of leap of faith: to practice reading *as if* it can be more conscious, ethical, and sentient at any moment.

By this conditional, I don't mean anything melancholic or ironically abstract in an overly postmodern sense; I mean something very lived, embodied, and dare I say, good. The fact that so much of reading takes place by forgetting itself, by proceeding unconsciously, by being startled by itself, as when a text must be re-read or is misread—all this requires a “letting go” of the very *unconsciousness* of reading, requires the asking for its “resignation” (re-signing, re-imagining the event of language, the *as if*). That is, we need to get over the idea that language is unsayable; we need to let go of the paralyzing notion that “real” and “authoritative” reading is a curse, enigma, or illusion. What is “real” or “authoritative” reading anyway? What would it even look like? For by “entrusting” (Derrida's term) that language—our sayings and hearings—*can* be conscious, sayable, and “real” in each instantiation, we are reminded that the very event of language *is* and *has been* conscious all along: there can be no reading without the simultaneous reading of and listening to the countless “others” (sentient and non-sentient) that make up and inform one's life. Thus, the paradox of literacy must be embraced, not explained away: we make an ethical, other-oriented and non-solipsistic reading possible (*otobiography*) by reading solipsistically (*autobiography*). For all of his bombast, Miller invests his writerly authority to show that literature possesses its own “otonomy,” that aspect of itself that forgets itself so that there might be a remembering at all, a genuine, effortful, participatory listening which opens up the perpetually transgressive human needs of reading, writing, and expression. By the same token, Maurice Blanchot avers in *The Work of Fire*:

Art is an *as if*. Everything happens as if we were in the presence of truth, but this presence is not one [i.e., fixed or authoritative], that is why it does not forbid us to go forward. Art claims knowledge when knowledge is a step leading to eternal life, and it claims non-knowledge when knowledge is an obstacle drawn up in front of this life. It changes its meaning and its sign. It destroys itself while it survives. (19, emphasis in the original)^{xx}

The communicative event that I have interrogated (a non- and multi-authoritative reading/speaking/art) and that our language attempts to re-name (attempts to *as if*, if I may use that phrase transitively) is already there (“it survives,” writes Blanchot) at the moment of any encounter, textual, bodily, or otherwise. We are demonstrating this intimate, transgressive ethics in our conditionality, in our apostrophic search for a present voice (or the voice of

presence), stuttered though it may be. The question, then, is not can we listen consciously, but *how* consciously? How autonomously? The power of listening must be turned back upon listening itself. The ear must hear its own deafness. Only then can we begin to truly listen.

In Miller's case and to close, we have seen some of the ways he listens to himself and, consequently, how we listen back. He believes that he is creating a life worth living, a body of joyous and spiritual work. But as Miller's spiral form seems to both demonstrate and flout, language consists of trying to speak at the moment when speaking becomes instantly negated, as its autonomous and autochthonous life is eclipsed at the very instant of being heard, of being reiterated. Thus, it remains troublingly possible that Miller's voice, like any voice, can never truly be heard. But is it not astounding that *being heard* could be thought possible at all? Is it not an undying miracle that we can continue to "know" each other (if only briefly), to make contact, to transgress each other's boundaries? In *Sexus*, Miller is haunted by both the possibility of being understood and not. His confession may help us address the concern that otobiographical reading collapses distinct voices and flattens differences among types of work:

There is then a world in me which is utterly unlike any world I know of. I do not think it is my exclusive property—it is only the angle of my vision which is exclusive, in that it is unique. If I talk the language of my unique vision nobody understands; the most colossal edifice may be reared and yet remain invisible. The thought of that haunts me. What good will it do to make an invisible temple? (21)

As Miller suggests along with Blanchot and Derrida, otobiographical reading ultimately renders texts as interdependent, bound to each other, to language, and to ever-imminent encounters while remaining singular ("the angle of my vision"). It does not necessarily render them as homogenous, vacuously interchangeable, or fully subservient to only the next reader. A lexical hegemony or exclusivizing *can* happen, however, and this is what "haunts" Miller. However, the otobiography's capacity to move past its own lettered presence, along with Miller's own kinetic, spiral form, suggest the difficulty of any reader ever obtaining the *full* import and imprimatur of Miller's texts. The same, I venture, could be said of any text. In the end, we do read; we do find someone there on stage. The auditorium is never quite empty.

To wit, just when we thought an otobiographical reading helped us hear a more harmonious, a more "knowable" Henry Miller, his voice spirals us out of our unconscious meaning-making:

Away with lamentation! Away with elegies and dirges! Away with biographies and histories, and libraries and museums! Let the dead eat the dead. Let us living ones dance about the rim of the crater, a last expiring dance. But a dance! (*Cancer*, 257).

So we are again surprised by Miller's literary language which casts us off like so much detritus. But he seems surprised too, suddenly ready to "dance" with whatever comes to life next. Somehow, we knew that. After all, as would-be readers of Miller, we signed off on his self-discovery by being here to rehearse with him, to put our ears closer, to dance before he asked by picking up his book. We have surprised the surprise.

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ⁱ Responding at length to each of these critics' powerful and well-researched readings of Miller demands another essay, and I can only partially engage their arguments in mine. That said, my overarching aim in the present work is to proffer a phenomenological, if somewhat still unsettling, hermeneutics with which to re-read Miller in a way that would contribute to a minoritized critical ballast to Miller's compelling detractors.

ⁱⁱ Philippe Lejeune, in his lucid *On Autobiography*, provides an extensive study on the qualities and problems of autobiography and its related genres. He writes, "In order for there to be autobiography (and personal literature in general), the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist* must be identical" (5). In the present work, I contend that Miller deliberately troubles this definition by virtue of his novelistic features and epistemological sensibilities.

ⁱⁱⁱ Recent scholarship is encouraging, however. With an intensive post-structuralist framework, Paul Jashan (2001) traces the "deviation" in Miller's texts back to his controlling of the "Apollonian-Dionysian" dialectic, a tension between semiotic reason and semiotic disorder, respectively. James Decker (2005) has provided the most sustained research on Miller's "spiral form" while also arguing that Miller's rejection of aesthetic constraints results in a liberated "supraself" that transcends artificial structure and value. Katy Masuga (2010) offers the only book to date that theoretically and aesthetically situates Miller within Deleuze and Guattari's concept of a minor literature, Bataille's theory of puerile language, Proust's mental topology, and Dostoevsky and Nietzsche's deep questioning of conventional morality. The last two figures Miller admires most, writes Masuga, for they "reflect what he [Miller] perceives to be his own disposition: a struggling writer in a mad, malfunctioning and ignorant world" (194). These authors also recognize the affinities between Miller and Derrida, though they do not take up a sustained analysis of Miller's work as an anticipation and application of Derrida's concept of "otobiography."

^{iv} Indeed, Miller alludes much to Whitman in *Cancer*, both directly and through his "fecund" prose, exceeding Whitman in perhaps only invective and fatalism: "Love and hate, despair, pity, rage, disgust—what are these amidst the fornications of the planets? What is war, disease, cruelty, terror, when night presents the ecstasy of myriad blazing suns? What is this chaff we chew in our sleep if it is not the remembrance of fang-whorl and star cluster" (*Cancer* 251).

^v The "involute novel" is a variant of and response to the traditional novel form and finds sustained expression in the second half of the twentieth century, becoming symptomatic of the broader view of *postmodernism*. For example, and in the vein of Sterne, Vladimir Nabokov was an audacious technician of the "involute." As M.H. Abrams notes, Nabokov's work—*Pale Fire*, for example—"contains subjects who incorporate an account of their own genesis and development, employs multi-lingual puns and jokes, incorporates mundane or esoteric data [in Nabokov's case,

butterflies, of which he was an actual scientist], adopts strategies from chess, crossword puzzles, and other games, parodies other novels (and his own as well), and sets elaborate traps for the unwary reader” (Abrams and Harpham 231). But as I suggest above, the involuted novel, or at least its negational impulses, shadowed the rise of the earliest romantic novels which centered on sentiment, incident, and character. In any case, we might regard the “spiral form” with which Miller says he writes his autobiographical novels as part of the “involuted” aesthetic lineage. Broadly speaking, this lineage takes as its main point of departure the authoritative element of *plot*, which Aristotle termed *mythos* and whose nature he explores in his *Poetics* (c. 335 BCE), perhaps the first sustained treatise on literary theory in the West. This work has standardized our notions of plot and narrative that run through many genres—dramatic, poetic, rhetorical, historical, fictional. Aristotle lays the foundations of plot in his famous and logical assertion that a “whole [account of human action] is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end” (7.1450b26). Upon scrutiny, we might find such a conception of human experience and its narration as naïve and restrictive; it’s difficult to give a start and end to human actions, as we tend to find ourselves *in the middle of* (*in media res*) or *thrown in* (to use Heidegger’s term) any given human condition. But it is precisely because of this entropy that Aristotle wanted to establish the features that make a literary work different from life; plot can give order, magnitude, and unity to human thoughts and actions that they don’t always have in real life. So important, then, was plot for Aristotle in forming the essence of a story that he called it the “first principle,” the “soul,” as it were, of narrative art (6.1450a13-39). As we will see, Miller takes pains to defy Aristotle’s aesthetic criteria for “great” art; for Miller, plot is not the soul of human drama—the *human soul* is the soul of human drama (even this syntax “spirals” or circles unto itself). As I hope to argue in the current essay, Miller’s central texts represent an exasperated but sure-souled going-against the literary and even rational grain. Abiding in Miller’s “spiral form” as readers, what we lose in Aristotelian orderliness and narrative unity we stand to (re)gain in phenomenological honesty on its own account. Where many if not most writers, emulating Aristotle, affirm the intelligibility and purpose of human existence, Miller hails its messiness, its unboundedness: “Through endless night the earth whirls toward a creation unknown” (*Cancer* 253). I thank the *Modern Horizons* editors of this essay for pointing out some of the writers who experimented with and established “transgressive” modes of narrative such as involuted fiction, metafiction, and fabulation.

^{vi} William Gordon (1967) has called Miller’s genre the “auto-novel,” wherein the main speaker is clearly based on the real Miller (the non-fictional aspect), but whose moments of irony, sarcasm, and conscientiousness effectively establish a Miller *persona* (the fictional aspect) and thus a distancing from the real Miller, whose *actual* attitudes toward what his narrator is experiencing we may or may not be so sure of.

^{vii} As I hope will be clear in this essay, I argue that Miller’s style and language compel us to reevaluate the conventional structure or dynamics of reading, one in which the reader is passively beholden to the *author’s* thoughts and words. In one sense, then, I am arguing that Miller troubles the traditional notion of “authority” as that in which or in whom a power or commanding knowledge is vested. An author’s authority—her ability to communicate her power or knowledge—is unfulfilled without the reader/listener. In a related but distinct sense, I am also arguing that Miller’s style and language thrust upon us a deeper and more general *ethical* problem by putting us in a position to dissolve the separate sense of authority intrinsic to our sense of *self*, of which the very word *authority* is etymologically made: the “author” in “authority” comes from the Latin *auctor*, meaning “author, father, progenitor,” and *auctor* is ultimately derived from the Greek *auto-*, meaning “self, same, one’s own.” What is potentially ethical about Miller’s writing, then, is that it invites us to question—and even dissolve—the apparent separateness and authority of the author whom we are reading. That activity, in turn, means that the so-called author is breaking down our apparently separate and disinterested role as reader. The ethical import, I propose, of reading Miller in the disruptive and reflexive mode into which his “spiral form” can send us lies in the recognition that a self’s “authority” is only legitimate when the self realizes that it isn’t a self at all—that it isn’t an isolated, independent entity. If we entertain such a paradoxical Millerian awareness, we might notice that a discrete, fixed self is nowhere to be found. And yet it is all we find in any perception.

^{viii} Robert Hendrickson, in his *Encyclopedia of Word and Phrase Origins*, informs us that “*obscene* meant ‘off the stage’ in ancient Greek drama, deriving from the Greek *ob*, ‘against,’ and *scaena*, ‘stage.’ What was kept off the stage in Greek drama was violence..., not sex, of which there was plenty in comedies and satyr plays” (490). Hendrickson also notes that Shakespeare was the first to use *obscene* in the now dominant sense that links moral and sensory disgust. But even in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the original Greek sense of the word remained reputable if minor. For example, while the sexologist Havelock Ellis had his 1897 work *Sexual Inversion* tried for obscenity, he himself employed the word *obscene* “in a colourless [*sic*] and technical sense to indicate the usually unseen or obverse side of life, the side behind the scenes, [...] and not implying anything necessarily objectionable” (134). As a reader and admirer of D.H. Lawrence, it is possible that Miller may have come across Lawrence’s 1929 essay, “Pornography and Obscenity” in which Lawrence traces the theatrical and multi-active sense of “*obscena*, that which might not be represented on the stage” (170). For an interdisciplinary study on the role of literary modes and concepts in modern performances,

especially in relation to women, see Penny Farfan, *Women, Modernism, and Performance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 65-89.

^{ix} As I will elaborate below, the ontological and purportedly universal nature of ethics to which I am alluding and that transcends simply legalistic and social contractual notions of ethics stems from Emmanuel Levinas' conception of ethics. Levinas' worldview on ethics cannot be adequately summarized in a few sentences, but it is rooted in putting into question the self's apparent authority, independence, and ability to individually comprehend the world (the word "comprehend" entails an urge towards control or mastery, even violence, as it means to "grasp," as in the linguistic chain *greifen, Griff, begreifen, Begriff*, or more fully, to "seize completely" [from the Latin *com + prehendere*]). The self-authorizing, self-referential ego that Levinas calls, following Plato's term, "the Same" (*le meme; to auton*) unavoidably maintains a relation with otherness or, to use Levinas' word, with "alterity" (*altérité*). But the predominant notion of the self that Western civilization has inherited from Plato (whether we call it the *Same*, the Cartesian *cogito*, Schopenhauerian *Will*, the Freudian ego, the Husserlian *noesis*, or the Heideggerian *Dasein*), Levinas argues, is a self that does not really maintain an *ethical* relation to the Other because the "I" or the Same constantly attempts to reduce or "comprehend" the Other in terms of the Same's knowledge and values. In contrast, for Levinas, ethics begins when we affirm that the Other or alterity cannot be reduced to the Same; the Other must "transgress," and remain at a distance from, the cognitive, comprehensive powers of the knowing subject. The first time Levinas gives an operative definition of "ethics" in his magnum opus, *Totality and Infinity*, he defines it as "the putting into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other" (Levinas 43).

^x On the heels of completing what would become the "Obelisk Trilogy" (consisting of the two *Tropics* and *Black Spring* in between them), Miller publishes in 1941 a limited edition of *The World of Sex* (Chicago: J.H.N. [Ben Abramson]). Toward the end of completing *The Rosy Crucifixion Trilogy* (1949-1959), Miller publishes a revised but still limited version of the book in 1957 (Paris: Olympia). This revised version virtually remains the same when it becomes a mass American edition in 1965 (New York: Grove Press). Significantly, the revised version remains largely identical save for a tightening of prose and the notable emendation of italicizing the word "apparent" in the sentence, "Thus, for no *apparent* reason, I revert now and then..." Unitalicized (as in the original statement on spiral form), this sentence suggests that the author's control over the narrative structure is accidental or mostly spontaneous. When italicized, the sentence reveals Miller's formal and more conscious shaping of his narratives.

^{xi} We recall Miller's narrator at the beginning of *Tropic of Cancer*: "To sing you must first open your mouth" (2).

^{xii} In a number that still staggers, *Tropic of Cancer* went through more than sixty obscenity trials in the U.S. alone. The enduring critical scholarship that tends to readily collapse the authorial Miller with the narrative Miller is linked to the *ad hominem* nature of many of the trials. Contemporaneous articles during the book's official U.S. trials and early victories report that prosecutors, literary purists, and hostile witnesses in general jumped on *Tropic of Cancer's* plotlessness, violence, and depravity as "evidence" of the book's status as pornography. Likewise, these readers interpreted Miller's disregard for the "Beauty" and "Time" of plot and form (core tenets upon which Miller "spits" in the opening of *Cancer*) as precisely the *modus operandi* of the pornographer, who is not concerned with self-understanding but simply with rifling through sex scene after sex scene. For example, a Chicago lawyer badgered James Joyce biographer Richard Ellmann (who also considered writing Miller's biography) for qualifying the autobiographical novel's apparent plotlessness (Norris 1962: 52). Meanwhile, a string of "reliable" witnesses in California bemoaned that "there is no continuity" in *Cancer* (Bess 1962: 22). For more on *Tropic of Cancer's* censorship history, see Edward de Grazia, E.R. Hutchison, and Eleanor Widmer, among others.

^{xiii} This crux of this notion is systematically (and playfully) treated by J.L. Austin in his seminal work on speech act theory, *How to Do Things with Words 2nd ed.* (Eds.) J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962. Austin distinguishes between constative statements, which are statements whose value is based on whether what is stated is true or false, and performative utterances, which enable an action just by their being said (or written). An illocutionary act is a performative utterance that yields immediate consequences in its speaking: saying, "Forgive me" is not only an entreaty, but (presumably) the exercising of contrition. More subtly, "Workers of the world, unite!" is a statement that calls for future unity while simultaneously demonstrating the speaker's present unitedness with others.

^{xiv} By substituting an "S" for the "T" and rearranging the rest of the letters, Tania could also represent Anaïs Nin, with whom Miller had a tumultuous affair and with whom he collaborated on his early writings in the 1930s.

^{xv} A close reading of the other textually dominant character in *Cancer*, Van Norden (based on a columnist Wambly Bald who Miller detested for many reasons, not least of which was Bald's rebuke at Miller's "total disregard for accuracy" [Wood 8]), suggests that Miller is actually appalled by Van Norden's deliberately callous and exploitative attitude toward sex. The typewriter of Miller-the-narrator is counterposed by the machine-like licentiousness of Van Norden who declares matter-of-factly, "all I ask is a bunch of books, a bunch of dreams, and a bunch of cunt" (*Cancer*, 108). A few

hours later, the narrator witnesses the fruition of Van Norden's coercive obsession: "As I watch Van Norden tackle her, it seems to me I'm looking at a machine whose cogs have slipped. [...] As long as that spark of passion is missing there is no human significance in the performance" (143-44).

^{xvi} See James M. Decker. *Henry Miller and Narrative Form: Constructing the Self, Rejecting Modernity*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

^{xvii} Cf. Miller in *Cancer*, and right after a distinct space (omission? silence?) between paragraphs: "There is only one thing which interests me vitally now, and that is the recording of all that which is omitted in books" (11).

^{xviii} I use the term, "modern," provisionally here, for one could argue, both generally and empirically, that heterosexual male insecurity in relationships predates and will probably post-date Miller's at-the-time "modern" experiences. In any case, it is warranted to say that the experience of insecurity, frustration, and unhappiness within romantic relationships remains commonplace. In fact, research indicates that problems with mutual desire and reciprocal affection are normal rather than abnormal. For instance, clinical psychologist and sex therapist Dr. David Schnarch developed an online survey for NBC TV's *Dateline* in 2006. He reports: "About 27,500 people participated over four days: 22 percent said they were in the 'sex is alive and well' category, and another 10 percent said their sex is 'robust, erotic, and passionate.' However, 68 percent had sexual desire problems. That's two out of every three people! Thirteen percent said their 'sex life is dead,' and 22 percent said it is 'comatose and in danger of dying.' Thirty-three percent said their sex is 'asleep and needing a wake-up call.' This came on the heels of *Dateline* running a one-hour program showing two sexless couples going through therapy with me. After the show aired, I received over two thousand requests for help" (Schnarch xvii). More recently, social psychologist Sandra Hoy published a study in the *International Journal of Men's Health* which adds quantitative research that shows men's general hesitancy in seeking help for psychological and relational distress. She conducted a meta-ethnography of 51 qualitative studies on men's perspectives on psychological distress and help-seeking. Her findings indicate that most participants' conceptualizations of psychological distress are socially-based and many have difficulty with the concepts of "insecurity," "depression," and "sharing emotions" (Hoy 202).

^{xix} The word "guest" has the same original root as the word "host," which in turn is derived from the Latin word *hospis*, meaning enemy. Thus, a guest is—etymologically and often in real life—both a welcome and unwelcome presence. To show that many words have a self-negating, antithetical meaning built into them is, of course, one of deconstruction's critical tasks. For example, in his essay "Plato's Pharmacy," Derrida shows the contradictions Plato makes in his work *Phaedrus* (c. 370 BCE) about the epistemic superiority of speech over writing. The topic shapes much of the dialogue between Phaedrus and Socrates, who decide to journey out of Athens to the countryside in order to discuss a written speech by the sophist Lysias. Phaedrus is so impressed by Lysias' speech that the former has written it down for convenient remembrance and for its rhetorical power, but Socrates questions the virtues of the written word over speech. Socrates compares the written text to a "pharmakon" (φάρμακον [*phármakon*]), which has a composite meaning of remedy, poison, and scapegoat. We are familiar with the first two senses, which form our current understanding of "pharmacology" and "pharmacy." But the third sense has been lost, for it referred to the ancient Greek social ritual of sacrificing or exiling a person (usually a slave, a crippled person, or a criminal) from the community in times of disaster or misfortune. The murder or exile of the person would occur in the countryside or uninhabited land. Derrida argues in "Plato's Pharmacy" that Plato, knowingly or not, implies all three meanings of "pharmakon," but in doing so, Plato can't affirm one of the meanings without it being contradicted by the others. For instance, Socrates says to Phaedrus: "Yet you seem to have discovered a drug for getting me out [of the city] (*dokei moi tes emes exodon to pharmakon heurekenai*). A hungry animal can be driven by dangling a carrot or a bit of greenstuff in front of it; similarly if you proffer me speeches bound in books (*en bibliois*), I don't doubt you can cart me all around Attica, and anywhere else you please" (*Phaedrus* 230d-231). Just prior to this exchange, Socrates states his bias for the city over the country: "landscapes and trees have nothing to teach me, only people in the town [i.e., the polis or city] do" (230d). Shortly after these statements, Socrates lays out his argument that, contrary to what Phaedrus thinks, writing is not the remedy ("pharmakon") for remembering and thus for securing wisdom, but only gives the appearance of wisdom. The written word, argues Socrates, is silent: it cannot question its interlocutors or come to its own defense. In contrast, the only lasting source of wisdom is found in the living, breathing discourse of one who truly knows and can exegize spontaneously. Furthermore, whatever intuitive or experiential knowledge such a person has, it is akin to a kind of divine madness (thus referring to the "drug" or "poison" sense of "pharmakon") because, so argues Plato (via Socrates), such knowledge is inspired and largely comes from without us, as does love, creativity, and spiritual revelation. The contradiction in Socrates' argument, Derrida claims, is that this attribution of wisdom to "the gods" is an admission of *nature* ("landscapes and trees") as the cause of true knowledge, not *man* ("only people," the city). Moreover, in trying to "purge" the notion out of Phaedrus' mind (and ours) that writing leads to more reliable knowledge, Socrates ends up purging himself to the countryside (the ritualistic sense of "pharmakon") in order to receive the necessary inspiration for making his case. Indeed, it is precisely the *transcribed* speech of Lysias that Phaedrus has admired and created that, strictly speaking, inspires Socrates' exegesis on

knowledge and larger vision about what makes humans “divine.” As Derrida writes: “Only the *logoi en bibliois*, only words that are deferred, reserved, enveloped, rolled up, words that force one to wait for them in the form of and under cover of a solid object, letting themselves to be desired for the space of a walk, only hidden letters can thus get Socrates moving” (Derrida 71). Lastly, Derrida argues that although Socrates claims that writing is silent and ineffective, the only authoritative voice we have of Socrates—Plato himself—relied on his writing to proleptically *speak for* and defend the position that speaking is closer to truth than writing.

^{xx} Cf. also Miller in *Capricorn*: “Any word contained all words—for him who had become detached through love or sorrow or whatever the cause. In every word the current ran back to the beginning which was lost and which would never be found again since there was neither beginning nor end but only that which expressed itself in beginning and end”(49-50).