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Henry Miller and the Uses of Insanity

I

One consequence of the extreme self-consciousness which characterized Henry Miller and his friends as artists was their need to locate themselves with reference to the boundaries recognized by their society. For Miller the process often took the form of statements about how the artist was the only sane actor in an insane world, even though society labelled the artist insane for these Very actions. "Insanity," then, has idiosyncratic meanings within Miller's fictional universe; it is a relative concept, often applied as a badge of honor to those sensitive enough to reject the norms of the dominant society. The child, the artist, the criminal and the actual madman are joined in Miller's praise, for they all, whether innocently, unconsciously, or deliberately, defy social conventions and expectations. Society's proscriptive use of the term insane may be viewed as part of a defensive exclusion of threatening values.

Miller's writings suggest a cosmos within which deviance from social norms is a virtue, a necessary stand for the artist, since society's accepted values, in Miller's higher view, are the true insanity. Liberation from restricting conventions frees the artist to contact the greater truths, even though this exposure may so alter his perceptions that his genuine artistic uniqueness will appear as psychopathological deviance. One consequence, in Miller's view, is that society's labelling of insane may be read as potential indicator of genius. Exploring Miller's notions of insanity helps us reconstruct this fictional world within which his protagonists' thoughts and actions are both coherent and justified.

II

Insanity, in one form or another, is the basic concept upon which Henry Miller has formed his attitude toward life. Although he uses the word constantly, and with many different meanings, he at no time defines what he means by it. Miller describes insanity, discusses it, finds it both a symptom and a cause of the world's sickness, uses it as a criterion to find himself both the sanest and maddest of all men, and yet never lets us know precisely what insanity is. It is necessary to distinguish between the different meanings Miller gives to the word "insanity" so that its importance in his philosophy can be clearly shown.

In general, Miller discusses insanity from two different viewpoints: his Own and that of society. Looking at the world from his own point of view, which he feels is that of a liberated man, free from the distortions and prejudices of society, Miller claims that, the world is insane. The definition Miller suggests is that insanity is the replacing of the natural instincts of man with others which produce neither happiness, wisdom, nor creativity. The "natural instincts of man"

are those which man is born with, the need for food, drink, sex, and those which enable him to enjoy life, to love; understand, communicate. and express himself. The lack of these natural instincts may be seen, Miller feels, in the wars that accompany civilization, in the slums and misery of the cities, and in the purposeless existence most working people lead.

The other definition of insanity Miller uses is that which society has arbitrarily formulated. In this case insanity is allowing one's thoughts and actions to interfere with the ability to understand and live in reality. Reality refers to the conventional patterns of behavior which are followed by almost all people in a society. For Miller, who rejects reality and refuses to live within society's laws and codes, who creates a personal world to replace society, this means no more than being different, or disagreeing with the majority. "I am insane only because 999,999,999,999 others think differently from me" 1 Miller says in *The World of Sex*. There is nothing wrong with his thoughts and actions, he feels; they are just different. If he is labeled insane by a world which he considers mad. this does not reflect on his actions. Within his own world they are justified, and this is a satisfactory justification for Miller.

This means that for Miller the world's condemnation has no validity. Or, in his own words, "don't believe you are insane because you find yourself in a nut house." 2 Society's judgment is based only on its narrow prejudices; by rejecting whatever is different it dismisses both that which is nonsense and that which is profound. Miller argues that some of what appears to be mad, because of society's all-inclusive definition of madness, is the absolute and undistorted truth, which must appear mad because it has never been revealed so clearly before. "I was so lucid that they said I was daffy," he writes in *Tropic of Capricorn*. "I was describing the New World -- unfortunately a little too soon because it had not yet been discovered and nobody could be persuaded that it existed." 3

There are types of insanity which can be called constructive or corrective insanity.' out of which come great truths and insights. Discussing the art of the Surrealists. Miller writes "madness is tonic and invigorating. It makes the sane more sane." 4 In another sense, insanity sometimes means daring to dream of what is unknown and new. "Think of Balboa, of Columbus, of Amerigo Vesputius!" Miller writes. "Men who dreamed, and then realized their dreams. Men filled with wonder, with longing, with ecstasy. Sailing straight for the unknown, finding it, realizing it, and then returning to the straight-jacket. Or diving of fever in the midst of a mirage. Cortez, Ponce de Leon, de Soto! Madmen. Dreamers Fanatics. In search of the marvelous. In quest of the miracle" 5 In time, these men were proved right, and became known as the great visionaries of their age. But they were considered insane by their contemporaries. Perhaps today, Miller warns, we are locking away the prophets and geniuses of our time in insane asylums because they are different. This may be so, and it will continue to be a possibility. Miller feels, until we change our attitudes about the insane His advice is that we should recognize the strange and unusual as signs of creative force, rather than as symptoms of derangement, to be ignored. Insanity may be derangement compared to the conservatism of society. but for Miller it is derangement in a creative sense, and in today's society he regards it as one of the few hopes for the salvation of man as an individual.

Miller admits having his own moments of insanity, but he feels that it is within these moments, when he makes the least sense in society's terms, that he makes the most sense in terms of understanding life. These moments occur when he is writing, painting, or just talking; as he becomes more and more involved with himself, more dominated by his inspiration, the hold which logic has upon him proportionately decreases. Nonsense gradually replaces sense and the distinction between order and disorder, sanity and insanity becomes increasingly vague. It is a thin line that separates what is mad from what is not. Miller realizes. More than once he describes himself as on the brink of insanity, aware that if his feelings become more intense he will pass over "that thin line which separates the sane from the insane." 6 But it is at the border line, when one has a glimpse of both worlds, that Miller feels man can achieve his fullest promise. Within that moment, in the eternity to be found when one sees both the real and the unreal, man can suddenly become aware of the great and universal truths which govern his actions. "Now is the thinnest veil between madness and sanity," he writes. "Now is everything so simple that it mocks one." 7

"It is at the edge of madness that we attain to a glimpse of the over-whelming truth and simplicity of life." 8 This, in Miller's own words, is the most important concept related to madness. What we must keep in mind, Miller reminds us, is that those who have gone over the edge into madness have attained a glimpse of the truth of life. Even if they became mad in society's terms, the insane have seen what most people can only guess at. It is for this reason, Miller states, that we must not disregard the insane - neither their writings their art work, nor their every-day lives. They once knew the great truths of the universe, he feels, and to ignore them would be to deny ourselves the opportunity of learning from the insane. They do have within themselves the wisdom, and it is important that we attempt to discover these truths. If we can not learn from them, we must go near the edge of madness ourselves

Thus, insanity becomes a positive creative source for Miller. He sees the world as such an oppressive and confining force that insanity becomes war to free himself from the restrictions of society. Once this freedom is achieved, Miller will live in the most natural way, obeying only his impulses and thoughts. Many of Miller's actions and ideas will appear insane to the world, but to Miller they are not insane. Within his own philosophy all his actions are justified, and very often he embraces the insane because it is the best means for him to realize his goals. Miller is attracted to the insane; he imitates them, he sympathizes with them, and he finds everything about them meaningful.

There are four main groups of people who live outside the conventions of society, Miller feels: children, who have not yet been corrupted by society; criminals, who actively and violently oppose it; the insane, who create their own private worlds to replace society; and the creative person, who combines all the other types of rejection in his attempt to live his own life. It is with the creative people that Miller is most concerned, since he is himself both a writer and a painter; also, his friends are described as being either men of letters or artists.

For Miller, the artist is visionary, madman, and savior, struggling alone, and misunderstood by society. The function of the artist is to stimulate our imaginations, to awaken us to a greater

reality, "to make people want another, a different picture."⁹ He must strive for the marvelous and the impossible, must overthrow existing values, must "make out of the chaos about him an order which is his own, to sow strife and ferment so that by the emotional release those who are dead may be restored to life"¹⁰ Of course in doing this the artist will inevitably clash with society. Miller claims that the artist has to "make war on society" in order to protect himself. "He has to become a pan-handler, a pimp, a prostitute, a criminal, in order to survive. Sometimes he even has to pretend that he is an idiot or a madman. Anything to get a crust of bread!"¹¹ This is what happened to him and to other artists. Miller asserts; were they to conform to the demands of society they would cease being artists, in the true sense.

In reacting against society's order and logic Miller approaches the opposite extreme. He reverts to the illogical, to that which does not seem rational or make sense. Miller names this state "nonsense; and he feels it is just a higher realm of reality, an expression of the universal confusion which can not be seen by those limited to society's view of the world. He says at one point in *Tropic of Capricorn* that "confusion is a word we have invented for an order which is not understood."¹² Miller goes so far as to say that "only those ideas which strike the prosaic rulers of the world as chimerical have validity."¹³ In the realm of the marvelous, where one accepts everything without demanding order or logic, life is simply acceptance. There can be no problems for there are no rules to break and no codes to violate. In society, however, anything alien is discouraged. "It is not at all strange that madmen are out under lock and key and saviours crucified and prophets stoned,"¹⁴ Miller writes. Those "rational" beings, holding the keys have not yet learned to live their own lives, to escape from the insanity they are in, and so can not be expected to recognize the greater reality when it appears.

For Miller, vitality, passion, and self-liberation are characteristics of healthy people; this health means optimism, love, acceptance, simplicity and the ability to be joyous. Miller shouts from the rooftops whenever he discovers something important, and he feels that all men should express their passions fully and openly. He wants to resurrect the natural state of man, for within that state only can man realize his potential greatness. "Every man, when he gets quiet, when he becomes desperately honest with himself, is capable of uttering profound truths," he writes. "We are all part of creation, all kings, all poets, all musicians: we have only to open up, only to discover what is already there,"¹⁵ The capabilities exist within all of us: given a chance man will live up to the best in him. However, in modern society he never does get that chance. To do so he must leave society.

One important aspect of Miller's attitude is that while he advocates rejecting society to join a universal brotherhood of all men, he does not believe that a man can be anything but an individual. The brotherhood of men will be a brotherhood of true individuals, he says. Each man has an individual capacity, which, when realized, will make him a unique being. Society's laws and customs do not concern men as individuals; society deals with the common life, which is less important to Miller than the life we live when alone. We are truly alone, and we must try to fulfill ourselves as individuals rather than as members of society. It is a truth, Miller thinks, "that every man is a law unto himself and that the only way to liberation is through the recognition and the realization that he is a unique being."¹⁶

Miller's stress on the development of a personal universe, outside society, limited only by the individual imagination, means that the individual is going to become more and more self-centered. It is calling for a subjective interpretation of all thoughts and actions, placing the artist in the center of the universe. For if a person has been able to penetrate to the central issues of existence, in discussing them he will be dealing with the basic issues for all men. "The writer," Miller says, "is...but reading and transcribing the great message of creation which the creator in his goodness has made manifest to him." 17 This, though, leads Miller to comment that whatever the poet says is the great message of creation - "if he is mad then madness is the *sine qua non*. If he utters nonsense, then nonsense must be the order of all our days. Thus, if we have sufficient faith in the sincerity of the individual artist, we can accept anything he creates, no matter how fantastic or insane it may seem.

III

Complete or partial insanity is continually present in Miller's consciousness. He is always aware of living in a society which he considers mad, and, at the same time, is aware that he is guilty of deeds considered mad by this society. Because most of his attitudes are opposite to those generally held, it is inevitable that his thoughts, habits, and actions are going to be considered eccentric. He is different and is proud of the difference between himself and others. Much of the eccentricity associated with Miller is justified as a logical part of his personal system of life. However, often there is no reason for the symptoms of insanity one finds in his books. Sometimes Miller admits his own insanity and his sympathies with the insane; more often it is the tendencies that unite him with the insane which he discusses. A partial look at Miller's statements on the various aspects of insanity will illustrate the extent of his commitment on this subject.

"All my life I have felt a great kinship with the madman and the criminal"; 19 with these lines Miller begins one of his subjective essays, "The Brooklyn Bridge." This is not an isolated admission of madness, for throughout Miller's stories and conversations appear many more statements of this type. His description of his introduction to Dostoevski's works states that when he sat down to read Dostoevski the whole face of his world was changed. "Maybe I had been a bit queer before that, without realizing it," he admits, "but from the moment that I dipped into Dostoevski I was definitely, irrevocably, contentedly queer. The ordinary, waking, work-a-day world was finished for me." 20 Rimbaud experienced his great crisis when he was 18, at which moment in his life he had reached the edge of madness; Miller claims he reached his at the age of thirty-six to thirty-seven. 21 These describe the great changes, when Miller decided to leave the confines of society. But otherwise, he does make admissions of his queerness. After giving one of his subjective interpretations, Miller says: "I must be crazy to think thus, but I am honest enough to admit the thought." 22 Just a few pages later he says: "shepherds are crazy folk. So am I. I am done with civilization and its spawn of cultured souls." 23

Miller develops neuroses when he is in friction with society. When he worked as a proofreader in Paris, he cultivated "a mild sort of insanity, echolalia, think it's called," 24 as a reaction against

the long, factual lectures his boss would subject him to. More often, his impulses and emotions influence him directly, instead of being censored by reason and propriety. In one letter he wrote: "I am going to become like Cato and stand up every morning in my nightshirt, yelling 'America must be destroyed!' Because I say so! Megalomania! Delightful megalomania. Better megalomania than schizophrenia, is it not?" 25 Another example of this is his description of the day he stood in the British Museum for an hour examining a single case of Oceanic masks.

To use an analogy, may I say that the sensation resembled in a manner that strange crisis of emotions that occurs in one's heart when hearing for the first time an alien music. It is not precisely the pursuit of beauty one undertakes at such moments but something far more vital, more elemental, more terrible. It is almost as if one fell into a dream, and while walking amidst familiar scenes there emerged at a turn in the street a grotesque idol rolling along on wheels and from its several heads, embedded in the sockets of its frozen eyes, rubies and emeralds gleamed. 26

He continues on in this manner, very similar to the mental state he describes in *Tropic of Capricorn*: "Often I forget which is the real me," he writes. "Sometimes between the dream and reality there is only the thinnest line. Sometimes while a person is talking to me I step out of my shoes and, like a plant drifting with the current, I begin the voyage, of my rootless self." 27

At times, Miller notes, his feelings of awareness become so acute that he loses all sense of reality. He becomes delirious because he is living and dying so fast, because he finds himself alive.

There I was! It grew dark, a wind came up, the streets became deserted, and finally it began to pour cats and dogs. Jesus, that finished me! When the rain came down, and I got it smack in the face staring at the sky, I suddenly began to bellow with joy. I laughed and laughed and laughed, exactly like an insane man. Nor did I know what I was laughing about. I wasn't thinking of a thing. I was just overwhelmed with joy, just crazy with delight in finding myself absolutely alone. 20

There have been times in his life, when Miller has entered a foreign country or a new phase of his life, when he has admitted that he has felt unstable and close to madness. In Greece, "along the Sacred Way, from Daphni to the sea, I was on the point of madness several times," he writes. "I actually did start running up the hillside only to stop midway, terror-stricken, wondering what had taken possession of men." 29 When describing his first days in Paris, before he knew the language, he admits feeling similarly. "If there had been no music I would have gone to the madhouse like Nijinsky." 30 He talks of finding the same type of salvation in reading *Creative Evolution* by Henry Bergson: "If this book had not fallen into my hands at the precise moment it did, perhaps I would have gone mad. on my hands. It came at a moment when another huge world was crumbling on my hands." 31

Miller even talks about a brief period when, "according to the astrologers, insanity menaced" him. Here we can see a flaw in Miller's belief in the self-sufficiency of the individual: as long as

Miller is reasonably secure in society, even if this means almost starving, as long as he has a few friends who will support him, he can live the life of the individualist, confident that no one will allow him to starve completely. However, in a foreign land, without friends or any social connections, Miller feels that he really is at the complete mercy of the world: this, he well realizes, means that he is absolutely alone and with no possible means of survival except what he himself creates. At these moments he feels madness threatening. It is the madness that comes from the terrible awareness of the situation he is in, by his own volition. "When we realize that we are truly alone," Miller writes, "we either go mad or we take to the open road." 33 This, he realizes, is the consequence of the choice he made when he rejected society, and, until he is able to find some security, even if it is only that of friendship, his equilibrium is in grave danger of

being unsettled. Once reasonably settled, Miller is able to pursue his idiosyncrasies. One of these seems to be collecting strange characters. Alfred Perlès tells of the visitors Henry had at two of the important periods in his life. "Henry attracted, and probably still does, the queerest lot of people: there was, at Villa Seurat," in Paris, where Miller and Perlès lived together, "a continuous va-et-vient of cranks, nuts, drunks, writers, artists, bums, Montparnasse derelicts, vagabonds, psychopaths. . . or all possible nationalities and sexes, and all of them came with their troubles." 34 Of Miller's earlier New York days, he writes:

I remembered the description June had once given me of the miserable basement flat in Greenwich Village where she and Henry lived together. A constant coming and going, as in a cafe. And what a queer collection of characters! Most of them homosexuals or otherwise tainted; would-be artists, writers and poets, drunkards, neurotics, maniacs, foreigners and bums. Something wrong with every one of them. 35

Miller himself wonders about this unusual talent. "I sometimes ask myself," he muses in *Tropic of Cancer*, "how it happens that I attract nothing but crack-brained individuals, neurasthenics, neurotics, psychopaths" 36

The authors to whom Miller is attracted usually have a touch of insanity, either in their lives or in their works. His friend Alfred Perlès, whom he calls "productive neurotic," 37 spent the closing years of the first World War in an insane asylum. "Apparently it hadn't done him any great injury," Miller comments. "He was out of harm's way, as we say." 38 He can understand, he says, why Sherwood Anderson had to pretend madness in order to escape "the prison which he found himself in when he was working in the paint factory." 39 And he becomes fascinated by a book Antonin Artaud wrote after his release from the asylum where he had spent nine years.

With his last breath...Artaud writes about that other madman, Van Gogh. Incredible language. The language which only a man of genius can summon to pay homage to another man of genius. Not merely exalted, but mad. (Mad like de Nerval, like Swift, like Nijinsky.) Corrective madness. Tinged with the vitriol of scorn, hatred, contempt and disdain for the 'sane,' for the bourgeois spirits, for the aesthetes, patrons and the patronizers of art. 40

"The only creative spirits in modern times were the demonic beings [Blake, de Nerval, Kierkegaard, Lautreamont, Strindberg, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Rimbaud]," Miller says; "in them was focused the passion which is dribbling away. They had rediscovered the source of life, that banquet of old at which Rimbaud sought to restore his appetite, but their means of communication were cut off." 41 The message of Blake and Nietzsche is still so new that we think of them in terms of insanity, he notes. 42 In 1882 Nietzsche goes mad and remains that way until his death in 1900. "Lucky man!" Miller writes. 43 Rimbaud, he says, "avoided one kind of madness only to become the victim of another." 44 Balzac, in *Louis Lambert*, is telling the story of his own narrow escape from madness, Miller feels. "The condition which Balzac is loath to call 'madness' is really the demonic state of the world, which now horrifies us, and which is really the product of idealism. No century in history can boast of so many madmen, among its superior types, as the one following upon Balzac's time." 45 Going back still further, Miller quotes Jacob Boehme, 16th century German mystic. "Said the mad cobbler: 'All things are generated out of the grand mystery, and proceed out of one degree into another Whatever goes forward in its degree, the same receives no abominate.'" 46

It is obvious that in literature, Miller is attracted to the unusual and the unknown, towards those authors who are strange and alien to most people. It is a part of the general attraction the unconventional has for him. He feels that in his exploration of himself and others around him he has learned almost all he can about the normal and the sane, and he becomes tempted, by his curiosity and his desire for greater fulfillment and breadth of understanding, to explore the irrational, the fantastic, and the insane worlds, if they are available. In the same way that he is attracted to the paintings of the insane, copying them, taking inspiration from them, analysing them, so is Miller attracted to these authors who are unconventional in some way or other, either in style, in their lives, or in their philosophy. Many of the authors he admires most were actually insane when they wrote, or later became insane. Some were not recognized at the time they wrote, and were regarded as insane in some aspect of their lives or writings. But the insanity of the authors was defined by society, and usually based on the author's unconventionality. These authors were ahead of their times, Miller feels, and so it was inevitable that they would be ostracized.

It is not because the authors were regarded as insane that Miller is attracted to them. He is attracted to their ideas, which were such that society could not accept them. Miller's tastes do border on the fringes of insanity, but he considers insanity to be sometimes just as plausible as the accepted modes of thought. The truly great authors and the real visionaries were so radical in thought that they had to be locked up, because their ideas contradicted all of those established and conservative ones upon which society was based. We can learn from the errors of the past, Miller feels, and so we should carefully examine those "insane" people who also are not in alignment with their time. Not to do so would be to assume that we have reached perfection; this, Miller says, is hardly the case in our times.

In discussing various artists and their works, Miller mentions Schwitters, Chagall, Miro, Utrillo, Van Gogh, Bosch, Grunewald, Giotto, the Surrealists, and his friend Hilaire Hiler as insane in one

way or another. One aspect of the madness of these artists is their startling objectivity, the naked truth they reveal in their works. A society which is founded on lies, and which must perpetuate them to survive as Miller thinks ours is, can not accept absolute truth, for it would directly contradict the social order. Therefore, those clairvoyants, those few who are able to see the world without society's prejudices, are going to be persecuted as if they were dangerous to the social community. Their truth will be labeled "insanity" and their wisdom taken from the world. The opinions of those groups that Miller regards as able to see clearly, those that have not been corrupted by society or who have consciously or unconsciously rejected the illogic they found in society, all fall into this category. Children's opinions are regarded as unsophisticated, the criminals are locked up as dangerous to society, the insane are regarded as completely unrealistic, and the artists are treated as either neurotics or children. His sympathy with these groups can be seen in his works. He writes about a detail he observes that stands out with "hair-raising exactitude such as one sees only in the paintings of the very great or the insane." 47 And it is the insane artists, Miller writes, who produce the most intellectual sort of compositions. 48 In "Aller Retour New York," Miller describes one of the passengers aboard the ship who was insane. "They say you're crazy," Miller addresses him. "Is that true?" "That's right," says Mannheim, the crazy one. "I am crazy. I am very crazy. I am vicious." "Would you like to get better?" "No, I want to get worse...then I will be better. If you are sane then I want to be insane." 49 Mannheim is locked in his cabin, but Miller visits him. At the end of the voyage he writes:

And now, my dear Mannheim, a parting word to you.... You can't imagine how sad I shall feel to leave you. You were the only person on board the boat for whom I felt a genuine sympathy. It's pity that the others are not going to be locked up and you set free. The world would be much gayer and much freer if people like you were abroad... So long Mannheim, and God bless you! go to the asylum. A pity we can't all go to the asylum. (I'm sure we'd be much better off. . . .) 50

He later asks Alfred Perlès that all the profits of this pamphlet be sent to Mannheim, so that he can buy his favorite brand of cigarettes.

At another time, when discussing painting, Miller mentions his sympathy with the insane and with children. "Even that far back I was violently drawn to the work of children and the insane," we writes. "Today, if I were to choose - if I could afford the choice! - I would rather be surrounded by the work of children and the insane than by such 'masters' as Picasso, Rouault, Dali or Cézanne. At various times I have endeavored to copy the work of a child or of a maniac." 51 Perlès also mentions the child-like aspect in Miller when he paints and in his actions. "Only a child can laugh as uninhibitedly as Henry Miller laughs," Perlès says, "and, of course, at heart he is a child." 52

The third group he admits sympathy with is the criminal class ("All my life I have felt a great kinship with the... criminal." 53 In *Tropic of Cancer* he says that only the killers seem to be extracting some satisfactory measure of what they are putting into life, 54 and in a long passage in *Tropic of Capricorn* he completely identifies with the outlaw class. This happens when he suddenly becomes aware of the insanity and meaninglessness of life in the society that

surrounds him.

In this condition I have always fallen in with thieves and rogues and murderers, and how kind and gentle they have been with me. As though they were my brothers. And are they not, indeed? Have I not been guilty of every crime and suffered for it? And is it not just because of my crimes that I am united so closely to my fellowmen? Always, when I see a light of recognition in the other person's eyes, I am aware of this secret bond. It is only the just whose eyes never light up. It is the just who have never known the secret of human fellowship. It is the just who demand our fingerprints, who prove to us that we have died even when we stand before them in the flesh. It is the just who impose upon us arbitrary names, false names, who put false dates in the register and bury us alive. I prefer the thieves, the rogues, the murderers, unless I can find a man of my own stature, my own quality. 55

The main distinction Miller has in common with the three groups is that each has achieved, in some way or other, a position wherein society's laws and restrictions are no longer applicable. The state of the child is the most enviable, for it is the most natural, and requires no suffering or conscious rejection of the outside world. Miller feels a sympathy with the criminal, because this class, like the artists and writers, finds life within society's bounds intolerable and chooses to live without society's protection and sanctions; both classes live off society, without producing any material wealth in return, but the criminal class reacts more violently and directly than the creative people can. It is partly because they share similar views on the impossibility of living within society's laws and partly because of his respect for the violence and directness of their protest that Miller is attracted to the criminal.

For the insane, Miller has more actual sympathy. The insane, he feels, have not chosen to reject society; they were driven to rejection because they were too sensitive to withstand the discouragement their ideas received. These people may be classified as insane because they are ahead of their time, because their ideas are too brilliant to be accepted, because they are locked away against their wills. Others may never have been influenced by society: they may have remained within their own worlds all the time. Still more may have taken refuge within themselves because of their fear of the outside world. However, all have been condemned by society in some way or other, all have broken down and lost their equilibrium because of society's pressures, and all have felt, in some way, as Miller has, the helplessness of the individual against the traditions and interests of the masses.

Within his own family, Miller had two deranged people to sympathize with. His sister was mentally deficient and was considered insane by his mother because she acted out her every impulse. She would often give money away to a beggar, Miller reports, or throw it in the river, or refuse to want to get ahead in the world, or perform some other angelic act of grace in her insanity. For this she was punished, of course, because, Miller says, "nothing was worse than to do a good deed without a reason." 56 She was irresponsible and could not answer for her acts. but she was good and kind: it is symptomatic of our society. Miller feels, that this child, who

could do no harm to anyone, is considered insane. His Aunt Mele was the other demented one in his family. When Miller was just fifteen Mele was put into the insane asylum, and she remained there for at least thirty years. Her trouble, Miller feels, was that she was too good and angelic to live in the real world. Mele knew only how to love and be loved, and became unfit for the rest of society.

If this is the case, Miller feels, if these two people, who are everything that is kind and gentle, who can do no harm to their fellow man, are considered insane, it is not they who are insane at all, but rather the society that calls such goodness mad. What the individual man must do, then, Miller asserts, is break the restricting bonds that tie him to society, obligating his acceptance of all its wrongs. Each man must decide what is important in life for himself, and if he feels intensely enough, then he must do something about his situation. Miller feels he is showing the way to all those wishing to become free, and he records his own life as an example.

The means one must use and the paths one must follow to reach this goal of freedom and individuality will be strange and unusual, Miller warns. But this is only natural, he feels, because the goal is strange and unusual to most people. To a free man anything will be acceptable, because there will be no restrictions and laws which will state what is good or bad, right or wrong. In fact, some ideas and concepts that were previously avoided will now be embraced, Miller asserts, because they will be seen to have values greater than those society recognizes.

Insanity is of this category. What is commonly called insanity is one of the keys to the free, creative life, Miller feels. Insanity is misunderstood by most people; living within society one can never understand and appreciate it. So Miller leaves society, and finds in insanity the path to understanding life and the universe. Miller recommends that other people re-evaluate their attitudes on insanity, feeling that there is too much to be gained from insanity to ignore the subject because society does not understand it.

To best understand Miller's philosophy and its relation to insanity completely, imagine a diagram representing the three separate modes of existence Miller distinguishes between: this would consist of two concentric circles, the area within the inner representing the world we live in, the area between the circles standing for that potential world that man will inhabit when he fulfills himself, and the space outside the circles indicating the universe. wherein is contained everything not in the two other worlds.

The inner circle of the world is organized in a definite manner. All the societies of our world and of all time can be given a specific place inside this circle. At the hub of the circle are the largest cities, for they represent the greatest insanity of man's evolution. Miller writes about Paris in this manner, in *Tropic of Cancer*.

I understood then why it is that Paris attracts the tortured, the hallucinated, the great maniacs of love. I understood why it is that here, at the very hub of the wheel. one can embrace the most fantastic, the most impossible theories, without finding them in the least

strange; it is here that one reads again the books of his youth and the enigmas take on new meanings, one for every white hair. One walks the streets knowing that he is mad, possessed, because it is only too obvious that these cold, indifferent faces are the visages of one's keepers. Here all boundaries fade away, and the world reveals itself for the mad slaughterhouse that it is. 57

Traveling outward toward the rim of the circle the cities get smaller and less complex, less organized and consequently less corrupt, until at the outermost areas of the circle we find the most "uncivilized" towns, the farming villages and the small hamlets that Miller so admired in Greece. In these places the people are not so completely caught up in purely financial and business worries; here the people are able to live their own lives, relatively unaffected by the neuroses and insanities of big city life. At the border, the people are more in tune with the cosmos. This whole world is mad, Miller feels, but it is most mad at the center of its sphere, and gradually becomes less insane as one travels toward the edge of the world and toward the potential world.

The potential world is that which Miller is striving towards in his efforts at self-liberation and individuality. Within this world, every man is aware of the basic truths of existence to some extent. Each man has become an individual, has realized himself to his full potential, and is independent of all others. This means that each man is basically alone and that the justification for individual acts lies with the individual only. There are no conventions or limitations to restrict the fulfillment of natural impulses; within the potential world man becomes pure and honest, interpreting the universe creatively through himself. Here genius is the norm, Miller says, and the only art practiced is the art of living. And this world represents the only salvation for man. "Between this solution [of making everybody crazy] and a perpetual state of war, which is civilization, there is only one other way out." Miller writes in *Tropic of Capricorn* "and that is the road we will all take eventually because everything else is doomed to failure." 58 Here too, as in the realm of the real world, the intensity of the self-realization varies with the distance from the real world and the universe. As one moves closer to the real world the extent to which full potentialities are realized decreases; as one approaches the borderline separating the potential world of man from the universal realm of ideas man becomes less human as we know it and begins to develop saintly qualities.

No man can ever permanently go beyond the limits of the potential world into that of the universal truths and maintain his equilibrium. However, that world can be approached, with man becoming more fully alive as he is able to absorb the greater truths of the universe, replacing those worldly axioms which he has rejected. Here Miller is influenced by his readings in Hindu philosophy, and we can see the similarities between the striving for Nirvana and Miller's repeated cry for universal acceptance as the prerequisite for fulfillment. Here also, Miller's readings in the Transcendentalists - Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman are evident. Accepting, to Miller, means opening one's self to the universal laws, rather than the laws of society. Within the universal realm, there is no order such as is found within the inner circle.

The order that is here cannot be understood in normal human terms and concepts, for it is too grand and too fundamental for our minds. The grand order of the universe must remain chaos to our eyes. However, within what must seem to us chaos there are fundamental truths, which, if we can learn them, will give us great insights into life.

As we approach the limits of the potential world, and become exposed to the universe, a danger appears. The danger is that the absolute clarity and truth of the universe, and the profound chaos man will find there, will prove too much for man to accept. If, rather than occasionally passing over the borderline, one gets drawn out of the potential world into the universal realm permanently, man will lose all contact with the aspects of living and will become concerned only with great, universal, and basic ideas. There will be no contact with reality, and man will become truly insane, in the sense that reality will have no meaning for him. Anyone who strives for complete self-realization must face this danger; complete realization means losing even one's own individual world. Again, to the extent that one penetrates into the potential world, one increases the dangers of being regarded as insane by the real world, because one's contact with the real world proportionally decreases.

The position that Miller occupies within this cosmos varies. At times he is in the heart of the real world, acutely aware of all its sicknesses and insanities. At other times he feels himself at the very edge of the universe, facing the immortal truths and at the brink of madness because of the magnitude of his discovery. However, most often Miller thinks of himself as occupying a place in the potential world, where he himself is lord of all he surveys. Actually, though, he stays only at the border line between the real and the potential world. He must live in the real world to get food and shelter, and he can justify the sacrifices he makes for these necessities by explaining his actions in terms of the potential world. It is as if his head is across the line, while his body remains behind to face reality. Miller finds all artists and writers, some criminals, children, and most insane people occupying the same position on the border line. Children are born into and live in the realm of the potential world, and it is only as the real world forces itself upon them that they are drawn across the border line, to become corrupted and to take their place as citizens of the insane civilization. The insane that we find here, including the majority of those in the asylums, are those who have been driven, by the pressures and demands of the insane real world, to seek refuge within themselves only, rejecting the world of reality as a danger to the security of their own private worlds. The artists and writers, while depending upon the real world for support, create by interpreting the universal and potential realms for those of limited vision and unrealized capacities who live in the real world. The criminals prey on the real world while living according to laws and codes that are valid in the potential world only.

All these people who inhabit the borderline regions will be regarded as strange, if not insane. This judgment exists because these people's actions and thoughts, while perfectly intelligible and rational to themselves as they are conceived in the potential world, cannot be understood when observed in the real world. Miller's private universe, wherein every one of his actions is justified, can in no way be known to an observer in the real world, who only sees him acting in a manner that defies all the normal rules and standards of society. These people live within conventional society, but act according to rules and standards that cannot be conceived by the

conventional mind. inevitably, the conservative lawmakers who govern the real world must protect themselves from whatever they cannot understand: that which is beyond them is labeled insane and is placed where it can not do any damage or upset any established systems.

The other type of insane person one meets, Miller feels, is that person who has escaped the real world and has gone to the limits of the potential world. person has exposed himself to the great, incomprehensible chaos of the universal realm of absolute truth, and has absorbed so much light and clarity that he has become insane, unable to deal with the ordinary problems of existence. This is the case with some of the great writers Miller names, who went to the brink of madness and then became insane.

Once again we can see Miller's reasons for wanting to give the revelations in the art and writings of the insane greater importance. The insane have successfully escaped the conventions which restrict most people. They have achieved the full potential as human beings that lies within all of us, but which only a few can ever know. They have seen the light, have been exposed to the great truths which control our lives and fates, and have placed themselves in the hands of the eternal forces of the universe. They all have something to give to us, teachings which, if learned and accepted, would make the entire world the great and living creation that is now found only in the potential world. In their art and writings, these messages are revealed, but not in any conventional way. Often written in cryptic or apocalyptic language, or disguised in cosmic symbolism, or else revealed with such great simplicity that it seems unbelievable, Miller's books express the truth and wisdom that have been absorbed by the insane. Those of us who do not have their depths of understanding must not ignore their statements because they are unusual or different: we must try to find the meaning that is within the statements. They cannot return to the level of the real world, but we can elevate ourselves to theirs. The insane can show the way for the conventional world, and help everyone achieve the true state of man to be found in the potential world. Our ignoring this wisdom is the great tragedy of our "civilized" world.

This explanation of the three worlds - the real, the potential, and the universal - in Miller's philosophy is never strictly defined by him, but, like his insanity, is constantly discussed and illustrated. Miller's philosophical system is never too organized or logical. He never seems able to organize his thoughts completely and write in an orderly manner. Not only does he evade defining the main issues of his discussions by talking about minor issues instead of major problems, but his style and form also indicate an inability to follow an idea to its logical conclusions. Miller never constructs a plot for his stories, and is not strict about chronological time sequence in his "novels," the *Tropics* and *The Rosy Crucifixion*. The only order in the books is that of Miller's thoughts, and often the writing becomes a free association of ideas. Miller feels that this lack of logic is justified because it is a true interpretation of life, but a close perusal of all his writings indicates that it is a rationalization for his inability to organize his thoughts.

If one looks at Miller objectively, disregarding his personal justification for his thoughts and actions, it is not at all difficult to find symptoms of insanity in his acts. Most basic is Miller's refusal to accept the world around him, a refusal to compromise his own thoughts, ideas, opinions, urges, and self-images. He avoids the problems that would occur when his personality

conflicts with the world by ignoring reality, constructing his own world, and living in his private world only. This is illustrated by Miller's inability to write about any person or action that he is not involved in, and in his almost compulsive need to understand everything with which he comes in contact. By accepting only what he understands and is personally involved in, Miller gains a security and invulnerability which makes the ordinary problems of life nonexistent for him. Miller has distorted his values as part of his rejection of reality. He ignores whatever he feels is too difficult and troublesome, leaving these issues to "fate." The minor problems, which he can solve himself, he elevates to great importance, and finds his ability to resolve these issues evidence of his wisdom and understanding of life.

Miller's greatest failing, looking only at small rather than larger problems and issues, is also his greatest achievement. By eliminating all extraneous worries, Miller is able to see clearly and often with great insight into those problems he does concentrate on. His criticisms of America, although exaggerated and generalized from his own experiences, accurately picture the unnatural aspect of a society motivated by money. Miller's solution to the problem of living a natural life in an unnatural society is not a practical one; if adopted by everyone society would become chaotic. However, his general attitude toward life is an honest one, and if accepted will help people find greater enjoyment in the common incidents of their lives. Miller accepts everything he meets, looks for the positive aspect of everything and everyone he comes into contact with, refuses to be discouraged by what he knows are only temporary worries, and lives doing only what he feels is natural and correct. Other writers of Miller's time, living in and writing about the same society, wrote only gloomy, bitter stories reflecting the hate and confusion they found in the world. It is Miller's greatest virtue that he is able to write about his experiences, which were not all cheerful and happy, with an optimism and an exuberance that makes the living and enjoyment of life the most important aspect of existence. Saying that one learns from evil as well as from good, from dirt as from beauty, from the sick and the well, and from the insane and the sane, Miller offers an example of how life is an end in itself, and encourages every one to join him in the enjoyment of living.

Notes

1 Henry Miller, *The World of Sex* (New York, 1940), p.76.

2 Henry Miller, *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch* (Norfolk, 1957), p.251.

3 Henry Miller, *Tropic of Capricorn* (Paris, 1957), p.297.

4 Henry Miller, "An Open Letter to Surrealists Everywhere," *Max and the White Phagocytes* (Paris, 1938), p.283.

5 Henry Miller, "My Dream of Mobile," *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (New York, 1945), p.181.

6 Henry Miller, *Sexus, The Rosy Crucifixion* (Paris, 1949), III, 338.

- 7 Henry Miller, "A Saturday Afternoon," *Black Spring* (Paris, 1938), p.48.
- 8 Henry Miller, "The Absolute Collective," *The Wisdom of the Heart* (New York, 1960), p.89.
- 9 Miller, "An Open Letter," *Max*, p.269.
- 10 Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer* (Paris, 1959), p.245.
- 11 Henry Miller, "Artist and Public," *Remember to Remember* (New York, 1947), p.421.
- 12 Miller, *Capricorn*, p.181.
- 13 Henry Miller, "The Gigantic Sunrise," *Sunday After the War* (Norfolk, 1946), p.61.
- 14 Miller, "An Open Letter," *Max*, p.254.
- 15 Henry Miller, "A Fragment from *The Rosy Crucifixion*," *Sunday After the War*, p.123.
- 16 Miller, *The World of Sex*, p.12.
- 17 Henry Miller, *The Books in My Life* (London, 1952), p.29.
- 18 Miller- "The Gigantic Sunrise, *Sunday After the War*, p.66.
- 19 Henry Miller, "The Brooklyn Bridge," *Nights of Love and Laughter* (New York, 1955), p.123.
- 20 Miller, *Capricorn*, p.215. 1956)
- 21 Henry Miller, *The Time of the Assassins: A Study of Rimbaud* (New York, p.5.
- 22 Henry Miller, *The Colossus of Maroussi* (New York, 1941), p.90.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p.93.
- 24 Miller, *Cancer*, p.174.
- 25 Henry Miller, *Semblance of a Devoted Past* (Berkeley, 1944), p.21.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p.4.
- 27 Miller, *Capricorn*, pp.235-236.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p.218.
- 29 Miller, *Colossus*, pp. 44-45.

30 Miller, *Capricorn*, p.311.

31 *Ibid.*, p.226.

32 Miller, "The Brooklyn Bridge," *Nights*, p.126.

33 Henry Miller, Michael Fraenkel, *Hamlet* (Bruges, 1939), p.188.

34 Alfred Perlès, "Henry Miller in Villa Seurat," *Life and Letters Today*, XLI (June 1944), p.150.

35 Alfred Perlès, *My Friend Henry Miller* (London, 1955), p.19.

36 Miller, *Cancer*, p.167.

37 Henry Miller, *What Are You Goings to Do About Alf* (Berkeley, 1944), p.21.

38 Miller, "Remember to Remember," *Remember to Remember*, p.362.

39 Henry Miller, "Good News! God is Love!," *Sunday After the War*, pp.15-16.

40 Henry Miller, "Preface," *The Waters Reglitterized* (1950).

41 Miller, *The Time of the Assassins*, p.132.

42 *Ibid.*, p.161.

43 *Ibid.*, p.135.

44 *Ibid.*

45 Henry Miller, "Balzac and His Double," *The Intimate Henry Miller* (New York, 1959), p.56.

46 Miller, *The Time of the Assassins*, p.88.

47 Miller, *Colossus*, p.115.

48 Miller, *Sexus*, IV, 63:

49 Henry Miller, *Aller Retour New York* (1945), p.69.

50 *Ibid.*, p.76.

51 Miller, *Big Sur*, p.90.

52 Per1ès, *My Friend Henry Miller*, p.201.

53 Henry Miller, "The Brooklyn Bridge," *The Cosmological Eye* (New York, 1939), p.346.

54 Miller, *Cancer*, p.20.

55 Miller, *Capricorn*, p.235.

56 *Ibid.*, p.339.

57 Miller, *Cancer*, p.178.

58 Miller, *Capricorn*, p.315.