

Sextet

Henry Miller.

NY: New Directions, 2010.

\$14.95; paperback

Reviewed by Tom Pynn – Kennesaw State University

*We are living in a period which constantly threatens to annihilate
not only our personality but our very identity.*

—Henry Miller, “First Impressions of Greece”

Originally published as separate chapbooks and then collected in one volume in 1977 by Capra Press, *SEXTET* after going out of print has been reissued by New Directions. In a “Publisher’s Note” addressed to you, the reader, you are encouraged to “[t]hink of yourself as holding six lively personalities living peacefully together under the family name, *SEXTET*.” One may also read this volume as a representative sampling of Henry Miller’s later thoughts as they are all from the 1972-1977 period of his life. Miller died in 1980 at the age of 89. Thus, the collection has scholarly value inasmuch as it gives us a glance at the themes and ideas salient to his life as a thinker and writer.

If one is coming to this important avant-garde author for the first time, *SEXTET*’s contents are a handy introduction to some of Miller’s recurring themes. The importance of Miller as one of several artists who alerted readers to the reversible ideologies of modernism and postmodernism cannot be understated. Like Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, John Berryman, Robert Lowell, and William Faulkner, Miller also demonstrated how the concerns of both modernism and postmodernism are held together in tension as is a bow or lyre. As Ludwig Wittgenstein and other philosophers have argued, concepts are not separate and distinct, but share family resemblances. For the creative artist cum thinker, exploring and expressing this interplay is an important dimension of his/her work. Indeed, Miller himself in his study of Arthur Rimbaud, *Time of the Assassins* (1946), reads such a tension in the poet’s relationship to society and to himself, much more importantly, to himself.

The theme of the artist in tension with his/her time is a mainstay of Miller’s work and is a concern he shares with many artists including the Beats. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have stated the importance of certain European and American post war artists, these “[s]trange” figures of

Anglo-American literature: from Thomas Hardy, from D.H. Lawrence to Malcolm Lowry, from Henry Miller to Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, men who knew how to leave, to scramble the codes, to cause flows to circulate, to traverse the desert of the body without organs. They overcome a limit, they shatter a wall, the capitalist barrier. (132-3)

Scrambling codes describes a significant part of postmodern work. Miller, Ginsberg, and Kerouac not only scramble the various sexual, aesthetic, militaristic, and economic codes, but they also rewrite them for a new generation. As Miller wrote in the “*Preface to The Subterraneans*,” “Born virtuoso that he is, he takes pleasure in defying the laws and conventions of literary expression which cripple genuine, untrammelled communication between reader and

writer” (407-8). Not only Kerouac, though. In his appreciation of Kenneth Patchen, “Patchen: Man of Anger and Light,” he describes the poet as “a living symbol of protest” a poet who “uses the language of revolt” (27 and 31, respectively). For Miller, Patchen, like any writer of his age, is one who shouts from all sides and heights: “THE WAY MEN LIVE IS A LIE!” (1962 31). Indeed, Miller’s own work attests to the same kind of revolt, of overcoming limits and of shattering walls. In his retrospective essay that begins the volume, “On Turning Eighty,” “[m]y ideal is to be free of ideals, free of principles, free of isms and ideologies. I want to take to the ocean of life like a fish takes to the sea” (6-7). To live in the swarm as he wrote in *The Rosy Crucifixion*. Only in this way can one “leave, . . . scramble the codes, . . . cause flows to circulate, . . . traverse the body without organs.”

Miller’s own passionate engagement of his time(s) led him to acknowledge in his “Reflections on the Death of Mishima” that [l]ife is not a deadly serious affair, it is a tragic-comic drama” (33). Like his Beat counterparts, Miller understood that it is the serious man who poses the greatest threat to life in general and the artist in particular. Yet, he also believes, in one of his many moments of tragic-comic hope, that [t]he world is less and less interested in men who undertake death missions” (32). In the avant-garde Japanese writer, he finds a brother soul, one who, like himself, blends the aesthetic and the emotional, “trying to make the world a better place to live in” (44). Yet he is not without disagreement with Yukio Mishima. Mishima’s quasi-militarism—an illusory affection for Japan’s samurai past? His homoerotic sadism? His trust in ideas over life lived?—disturbs Miller such that the author posthumously offers the great Japanese writer “[a] journey through reality, not principles and ideas” (40). Miller addresses Mishima directly towards the end of the essay when broaching the subject of war and peace, a topic close to Miller’s heart:

[j]udging from what I have read of you, my dear Mishima, this subject of peace does not seem to occupy a great place in your work. I thought about this when reading of your little band of well-tailored soldiers. (Forgive the tinge of mockery.) Every time I see a well-trained army marching off to war I think of how those spic-and-span outfits, those polished boots and polished buttons will look after the first encounter with the enemy. I think of how those millions of bright uniforms are destined to become nothing more than ragged, filthy shrouds covering dead and mutilated bodies. (45)

“Today,” Miller continues in his albeit too late dressing down of the hapless “samurai” writer, “the whole ‘civilized’ world is nothing more than an armed camp in which the victims are silently screaming ‘Peace, Peace, give us Peace!’ And you, my dear Mishima, seem to have been strangely unconcerned” (46). “[S]trangely unconcerned” because for Miller, an artist is engaged in tension with his/her time in order to resist the blind urge to rush ahead costs be damned: “*Avanti! Avanti!* It [the world] yells, *Forwards!* even though it mean universal destruction” (47).

It is this critique of the modern world given over to speed, machinery, and a death drive that devours and destroys everything that is creative, beautiful and just—the artist!—that rankles Miller the most (In this he most resembles the Beat writers.). In “First Impressions of Greece,” he declares that “[t]he belief, the morality, the ethic are nothing—it’s the *form* of the life which gives peace and character and wisdom” (55). This essay, composed in 1973 while in Greece, is an abbreviated version of or, more likely, a close companion to his insights and musings that

makes *The Colossus of Maroussi* (1941) such a magnificent work. “Here,” Miller writes of Greece, “is where the buttons go back to the button molder, where everything is ‘refunded,’ in the mystic sense” (53). The reference to *Peer Gynt* is instructive. Greece is for Miller “[t]he birthplace of the immaculate conception. An island built by a race of artists. Everything miraculously produced out of nothingness” (51). Thus, everything that does not actively contribute, does not join in the ever-flowing incomprehensibility that is Greece, is destroyed. Only the *living* survive. “What is good about Greece,” he opines, “is that it is illogical, paradoxical, a contradiction from one end to the other” (65). Miller has always been less concerned with the rational processes of human cogitation than with the subconscious creative, mystical, erotic energies of the Dionysian spirit.

As an aesthetic philosopher, Miller has important things to say about writing and the writing process. He devotes nearly the entire third volume of *The Rosy Crucifixion* (“Plexus”) to such commentary and the whole of *Time of the Assassins*, one of the finest poetics in the 20th century. In “The Waters Reglitterized” (1973), we have a rare glimpse of Miller the visual artist, the water colorist. Sometimes the essay reads like a manual of expressionism, and at other times a tribute to Artaud and Utrillo. In regards to the former, he reveals that he works by the “Principle of Least Action”—itself a play on the Action Painting theory of the abstract expressionists?—in which one attempts to break through the “studied effect” of the image, “breaking new ground until I reach the level of exact expression” (92). In what Miller calls “the ritual of life which is practiced by the man who evolves,” the painter “doesn’t go back, figuratively, to correct his errors and defects, he transposes and converts them into virtues. He makes wings of his larval cerements” (92). Neither art imitating life nor life imitating art; art and life, *the art of life*. Miller’s aesthetics of expressionism ultimately rests upon uncovering the truth from within, “a soul quality and ultimately unanalyzable” (101). Once revealed, the truth within becomes “the great freedom and spontaneity” (95). Almost echoing a Zen text on calligraphy, Miller writes that “[t]he most careless gesture is a right, as true, as valid, as the most carefully planned strokes. *This I know*, and nobody could convince me to the contrary” (95).

With “Mother, China, and the World beyond” (1977), *SEXTET* ends in a similar meditational manner as it began: Musings on a dream about his mother, in which she utters the romantic credo that [o]nly the imagination is real,” that eases into ruminations on time and peace. “The one thing I prayed I would never witness again,” he writes, “was violence. A world without crime, without war or revolution, without sickness and poverty, without bitterness and prejudice seemed to my way of thinking like the only real Heaven” (163). Yet, as he has observed throughout his prolific career, this is not the case. America, especially, he castigates for fomenting worldwide violence. Even at home, we do not escape the violent effects of both direct and structural violence. In the essay’s closing section entitled “*China*,” Miller makes an important distinction between the worlds that have been in his imagination since childhood—Tibet, China, Timbuktu, Mecca—and the world he knows: America, which

. . . tries to give to the world an image of a unified nation, “one and indivisible.” Nothing could be further from the truth. We are a people torn with strife, divided in many ways, not only regionally. Our population contains some of the poorest and most neglected people in the world. It probably also contains the most rich people of any country in the world. (167)

Well, he's right on all counts. Even though he is writing at the end of the seventies after nearly 15 years of divisions (generational, sexual, racial, and political) that at times seemed like the second coming of not Christ but civil war, little has changed. What would Miller write today if he were still with us? What biting irony would fill his pages regarding the face of democracy and freedom we present to the world? In the spirit of tragic-comic hope that is also indicative of Miller's work, he would also write from the secret depths of his own heart seeking to embody the peace he so yearned for. As two characters from *The Maurizius Case* discuss:

“And what about punishment?” Maurizius replies. “Isn't punishment necessary? It has been since the world began.”

Klakusch leans over Maurizius and whispers: “*Then we must destroy the world and create people who think differently.*” (116)

Works Cited

Charters, Ann, Ed. *Beat Down to Your Soul: What was the Beat Generation?* N.Y.: Penguin Books, 2001.

Delueze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *anti-oedipus: capitalism and schizophrenia*. Trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.

Miller, Henry. *SEXTET*. New York: New Directions, 2010.

_____. *Stand Still Like a Hummingbird*. New York: New Directions, 1962.