

James M. Decker, Indrek Manniste, eds. *Henry Miller: New Perspectives.*

Jennifer Cowe



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/11179>

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Jennifer Cowe, « James M. Decker, Indrek Manniste, eds. *Henry Miller: New Perspectives.* », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2016-1, document 10, Online since 17 February 2016, connection on 01 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/11179>

This text was automatically generated on 1 May 2019.

Creative Commons License

James M. Decker, Indrek Manniste, eds. **Henry Miller: New Perspectives.**

Jennifer Cowe

- 1 Henry Miller continues to be a writer who causes much consternation amongst readers and critics alike. Often characterised as everything for a pornographer, misogynist, counter-cultural hero to sexual libertine, Miller has frequently been pigeonholed by critics to fit their agenda. This, along with changing sensibilities within literary criticism has led to a relegation of Miller to the minor leagues of research and academia. Thus, this edition of essays by many of today's leading Miller scholars is not only timely, but most welcome by those of us who believe Miller has been overlooked for too long.
- 2 The breadth of analysis on display must surely lead those who see Miller as a one trick pony to reconsider. The fifteen papers include analysis of Miller's work in relation to religion, feminism, Transcendentalism, Surrealism and his relationship with modernism. For those discovering Miller for the first time or curious to see what academic research is being done on him, this book is an excellent place to start. It provides a good overview of the current perspectives within Miller studies and the various ways in which his work can be read and interpreted. For those who already have more than a passing interest in Miller, I am not sure that this collection has much to offer. Many of the essays offer a condensed version of the authors' earlier key works on Miller. Examples of this would be: Indrek Manniste's 'Henry Miller's Inhuman Philosophy' which is

essentially a shortened version of his recent book *Henry Miller: The Inhuman Artist* (2013); James M. Decker's essay "'The agonizing gutter of my past': Henry Miller, Conversion, and the Trauma of the Modern" shares key arguments with his earlier work *Henry Miller and Narrative Form: Constructing the Self, Rejecting Modernity* (2005); Katy Masuga's "Henry Miller's Titillating Words" is indebted to her book *The Secret Violence of Henry Miller* (2011). This is not necessarily a bad thing for those new to Miller studies, but it is somewhat repetitive for those with a deeper knowledge. Likewise Eric D. Leman's "Big Sur and Walden: Henry Miller's Practical Transcendentalism" simply retreads paths already well-trodden, so much has been written on the influence of Transcendentalism upon Miller that it is nigh on impossible to find anything new to say. That is not to say that old ground does not need to be looked at anew. If one of the main aims for this collection of essays is to offer a "new perspective" then it is crucial to address some of the long-standing criticism of Miller in relation to misogyny, racism and anti-Semitism. These may be questions that some Miller scholars find redundant, but the fact remains that Miller's reputation and legacy are largely still seen through the lens of his perceived bigotry. We need only look to Jeanette Winterson's brutal review in *The New York Times* in 2012 of Frederick Turner's *Renegade: The Making of Tropic of Cancer* (2012) to see that these issues still colour how Miller is seen in the wider literary community:

Indeed, Turner tells us that Miller had to endure "the most awful humiliation a man might suffer." This, presumably, is June's lesbian affair, one she brought home to their apartment, so much so that Miller wrote a novel, "Lovely Lesbians," one of his lifelong rants against women, written around the same time as "Moloch," his rant against Jews. Miller realized with these failed novels that hatred alone was not enough to sustain a work of fiction. He had plenty of hatred, toward Jews, foreigners and especially America, the newfound land that had spoiled itself and a once-in-a-species opportunity to really begin again. For Miller, Turner writes, America was "more mercenary than the meanest whore." This is an ugly image, and while it is certainly true of Miller's mind, it seems indicative of Turner's own unconscious thinking. But it usefully presents us with the fused object of Miller's hatred: the body politic of America will be worked over and revenged through the body of Woman.¹

- 3 Three papers in this collection tackle Miller's perceived prejudices head-on. In "'A dirty book worth reading: Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* and the Feminist Backlash" Anna Lillios follows on from Allison Palumbo's² recent feminist reading of Miller, charting the various generational feminist readings of Miller and giving a third-wave feminist reading of Miller that draws inspiration from *Hélène Cixous'*

concept of *écriture féminine*.³ Lillios's essay really does offer a new and alternative way to read Miller at his most controversial. She pushes the argument far beyond the dichotomies of horrified rejection, resigned acceptance or simplistic validation that Miller critics have often found themselves in accordance with. James Gifford's "Dispossessed Sexual Politics: Henry Miller's Anarchism *Qua* Kate Millett and Ursula K. Le Guin" posits that Miller is an anarchic provocateur and Millett the reactionary progressive. Gifford examines Miller's overall notions of personal anarchism through the comparison between two similar scenes in Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* (1934) and Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974). He compares the scene in *Tropic of Cancer* where the drunken protagonist tries and fails to have sex with a woman in the bathroom of a dancehall. The scene is both comic and tragic as a depiction of the failure of masculine virility, yet to Millett the scene is the focal point of her attack upon Miller in *Sexual Politics* (1970). Millett argues that rather than have consensual sex with his partner, what the protagonist really wants to humiliate her. Gifford compares this scene with one in *The Dispossessed* where Shevek, the visiting anarchist physicist to a neighbouring capitalist planet becomes so drunk at a party that he almost rapes one of the female guests. Gifford shows that where it is acceptable for the feminist Le Guin to show "the invidious nature of capitalism's reshaping of human intimacies...the drunken failure, and the enervating impact of capital and patriarchy on human relations are common to both Miller and Le Guin" (180) it is not so for Miller. Both writers are approaching the same topic with similar bluntness, yet Le Guin is applauded whilst Miller is condemned. Gifford shows brilliantly the double standard that continues to be applied to Miller in relation to his depiction of women and sex.

- 4 One other essay attempts to challenge Miller's reputation in relation to racism and anti-Semitism. In "When Henry Miller Left for Tibet," Paul Jahshan examines Miller's personal views and his representations of different races, religions and nationalities in his novels. No short essay could ever hope to do full justice to this subject; however Jahshan at the very least shows that Miller's perceptions of these contentious subjects are far more intelligent and nuanced than he has been given credit for. By examining Miller's journeys to France and Greece, Jahshan shows how Miller developed an admiration for cultures that supported

and respected the artist, what Miller saw as the antithesis of America. His growing interest in so-called primitive societies only led to a deeper sense of alienation from the prevailing cultural norms of his homeland. Miller's only real prejudice seems to have been against his own people, American, bourgeois Protestants. Jahshan's essay prompts the reader to see beyond the surface of Miller's writing to discover a writer who had a profound interest in and love for humanity, in its various manifestations.

- 5 Miller scholars can but hope that this collection leads to a renewed curiosity in Miller and the accompanying academic research his work deserves. The fifteen essays cover a wide variety of approaches to his work and show that there are still new and fruitful ways to unpack Miller.
- 6 Jennifer Cowe
- 7 University of Glasgow