

HENRY MILLER'S SWING OF DELIGHT

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The arrival of the 20th century is characterized, in literature as in many other fields of knowledge, by the relevance acquired by discourses which had, until then, remained outside the canon. To put it in urbanistic terms, the 20th century has brought the suburbia into the cultural scene. The origin of this relevance acquired by eccentric discourses may be traced back to the Renaissance, but our purpose in this paper is not to trace the origins of eccentric discourses back, but to analyse one particular «marginal» discourse: Henry Miller's «A Saturday Afternoon.»

Once the purpose of this paper has been more or less defined, let us start our argument by quoting St. Augustine.

. . . There are some who have allegorized the entire Garden of Eden where, according to Holy Scripture, the first parents of the Human race actually lived. The trees and fruit-bearing shrubs are turned into symbols of virtues and ways of living, as though they had no visible and material reality and as if Scripture had no purpose but to express meanings for our minds. The assumption here is that the possibility of a spiritual meaning rules out the reality of a physical Paradise. That is like saying that Agar and Sara, the mothers of the two sons of Abraham, «the one by a slave-girl and the other by a free woman,» had no historical existence simply because the Apostle has said that «by way of allegory. . . these are the two covenants,» or that Moses struck no rock nor did water actually flow simply because the story can also be read as an allegory of Christ, as the same Apostle does read it: «but the rock was Christ» (21).

St. Augustine goes straight to the point, we did not expect less from him, by distinguishing two different cities: the City of God and the City of Man. Both cities are independent one from the other. The important point for St. Augustine is to stress that the material reality of the City of God is not minor than that of the City of Man. We find in St. Augustine a duality that has exhaustively been criticised since it was stated.

But we do not wish to enter this old discussion since the subject of our presentation is, as we have said before, Mr. Henry Miller.

Intending to illustrate the ideas exposed in this presentation, I looked for a map of this City of God which everybody but me seemed to know quite well. But, all I could find were these maps of my own hometown.

SLIDE I.

Castellón was built upon the already existing muslim farmhouse by the name of Benirabe. There is an old debate about whether it was built in accordance to a previous plan or not. The truth is that when king Jaume I ordered to transfer the village from the hill of La Magdalena to the plain, the real city was some ten kilometres away, Burriana. Castellón was baptized as Castellón de Burriana, in English: the little castle of Burriana. Nowadays Burriana is but a small village, and Castellón has become the capital of the province...or to put it in derridean terms Castellón was born a decentered city...

One can hardly refrain, though, from wondering where should Miller's narrative voice be placed, in the City of God or in the City of Man. This question could be stated in similar but different terms: from where did Miller himself want to speak in his novels, from the City of God or from the City of Man? But let us allow Miller to speak for himself:

It is a Saturday afternoon and this Saturday afternoon is distinct from all other Saturday afternoons, but in no wise like a Monday afternoon or a Thursday afternoon. On this morning, as I ride toward the Neuilly Bridge past the island of Robinson with its temple at the far end and in the temple the little statue like a cotyledon in the mouth of a bell, I have such a sense of being at home that it seems incredible that I was born in America. (37)

Miller's American nationality does not prevent him from enjoying the «transnational» and «transcultural» beauty of the Neuilly Bridge. His capability to perceive the beauty of the scenery, his strong feeling of empathy for the landscape reveal that Miller may well belong to a city wider than that of man. There is a strong sense throughout the passage of harmony of man and nature, of perfect order...But let us be cautious before we draw any hasty conclusions from what is no more than an opening passage.

As a matter of fact, the passage quoted before is just referring to a particular moment within Miller's long trip around France. However, it is precisely this momentary nature of experience that interests Miller.

This is the moment when I know that a sign reading «To Versailles,» or a sign reading «To Suresnes,» any and all signs pointing to this or that place, should be ignored, that one should always go toward the place for which there is no sign. This is the moment when the deserted street on which I have chosen to sit is throbbing with people and all the crowded streets are empty. (40)

The moment, experiencing the moment in all its intensity, opens an unexpected path for the wanderer. A path into which all roads, be they Roman, French or American, flow. The temptation to interpret Miller's moment of ecstasy as a momentary walk along the streets of the City of God is considerable...but we should try hard to overcome it.

Let us have a second glance at the history of Castellón as a way of keeping our minds away from any temptation. Castellón became a conventual city during the 16th century. This fact led to the expansion of the city beyond the old walls, since convents used to be built in the outskirts of the town at that time. Thus, the building of the convents can be considered as one of the main factors that originated the metamorphosis of the medieval city into the modern one.

SLIDE II.

The 18th century was witness to a major event in the history of the city. A new wall was built in order to defend the city from the Carlist soldiers. This wall which was intended to draw the boundaries of the city and to keep them well defended will, later, condition the growth and development of the city... This urban irony reminds us, once more, of this constant swing between the City of Man, and the City of God.

But, in any case, for those who are familiar with the works of Henry Miller, just the thought of him sitting among tender, white cherubs must sound at least ridiculous, if not completely misled. Miller himself will not put off fulfilling our expectancies. Some lines after the idyllic passage we have quoted before, we find, once more, the narrative voice we were all longing for, the «genius in a bad temper» as the *Observer* once described him.

I put my bicycle in the rack under the tree and go to the urinal to take a leak. It is all gray, even the urinal. As I stand there looking up at the house fronts a demure young woman leans out of a window to watch me. How many times have I stood thus smiling, gracious world, the sun splashing over me and the birds twittering crazily, and found a woman looking down at me from an open window, her smile crumbling into soft little bits which the birds gather in their beaks and deposit sometimes at the base of a urinal where the water gurgles melodiously and a man comes along with his fly open and pours the steaming contents of his bladder over the dissolving crumbs. (42)

Here it is, again, the provocative, obscene, narrative voice which we all recognise in Miller. We can see the man sinking his arms in filth up to the elbows. And listening to this provocative, obscene, narrative voice the reader smiles remembering how some minutes ago the same voice had talked to us about an idyllic «locus amoenus.» Miller has cunningly placed us where he wanted us to be: among the beauty. And while we hang around he opens wide his fly/mouth and shoots out his filth on us. And you can see the reader inevitably falling all the way down from the City of God into the City of Man. The urinal becomes in Miller's discourse an evidence of to what extent urban

culture is intimately related to filth and rubbish. The urinal is, if we are to follow Miller's punch-line, a monument to human filth and debris among all the other monuments produced by human activity. Urban culture can be summarised with the image of the urinal, as a matter of fact, Miller establishes an allegory with his own cultural trip around France in these terms.

There are certain urinals I go out of my way to make - such as the battered rattle-trap outside the deaf and dumb asylum of the Rue St. Jacques and the Rue de l'Abbe-de-L'Eppée, or the Pneu Hutchinson one by the Luxembourg Gardens, corner Rue d'Assas and Rue Guynemer. (43)

But Miller's enthusiasm to demonstrate that cities are monuments to human filth is not completely original. It could not be original since cities were born to channel the flow of human filth, and to prevent this very filth from suffocating humankind.

When the Roman countryside was ruined by the Roman sewer, Rome exhausted Italy, and when she had poured Italy through her drains she disposed of Sicily, then Sardinia, then Africa. The Roman sewer engulfed the world, sapping town and country alike. Urbi et Orbi or the Eternal City, the bottomless drain. (44)

SLIDE III.

Just a brief comment on my beloved hometown. At the same time that two public urinals were being built in front of the Town's theatre (one for the ladies, one for the gentlemen), a railway station was built outside the town. The railway station built with the intention of promoting the development of the city is nowadays the main problem in the town-planning of Castellón since it has become an unwanted limit for the expansion of the city westwards.

City of God, City of Man? Where does the frontier stand? Or let us formulate the question in different terms: does the border between the City of God and that of Man exist at all? Trying to answer to our question would be as useless as trying to discover which the angel's gender is. We are not interested, as we said at the commencement of this paper, in investigating at what moment in time certain literary discourses abandoned the City of God. But our reflection on the topography of Miller's narrative voice has led us to experience, as Miller experiences in our second quotation, the overwhelming feeling that the French know as «*déjà vu*». We, as literary critics, have the right and the duty to question those emotions that the text provokes. And Miller formulates this question masterly.

'The roquefort, was it good?' asks the waitress. Divine! The stalest, the wormiest, the lousiest roquefort that was ever fabricated, saturated with the worms of Dante, of Vergil, Homer, Boccaccio, Rabelais, Goethe, all the worms that ever

were and have passed on into cheese. To eat this cheese one must have genius. This is the cheese wherein I bury myself, I Miguel Feodor François Wolfgang Valentine Miller. (40)

Miller standing with his fly wide open, relieving his bladder on our cultural cheese is, if no more a disturbing image, at least a provocative one. Why? Because Miller's voice breaks the unwritten rule on which all culture is established: that what is clean should remain clean,¹ and be separated from what is filthy..because we must «Render therefore unto Caesar the things which be Caesar's, and unto God the things which be God's.»

This impulse to separate ourselves from the debris that threatens to drown us constitutes us as individuals. We constantly need to channel this abject filth that, should we let it flow freely, would surround ourselves threatening all borders. Hence, Miller's relief on emptying his bladder on our cultural cheese is obviously a provocation, we dare say the provocation, to our main only law.

SLIDES IV, V, VI, VII, VIII, IX.

Back to Castellón again. The end of the 19th century brought to the city a general concern about how to sort out the problem that the city walls represented for the growth of the city. The 20th century will see many and varied projects to improve the habitability of the town. Some of these plans will never be put in practice due to the Spanish Civil war and other historical reasons.

But the city is not only filthy debris. Let us follow Miller in his trip, this time around the United States of America. Miller is this time in Chicago, in the very heart of the city. And today is Sunday instead of Saturday:

A Sunday atmosphere here. Everything serene and peaceful like modern Eleusis smothered by a wet sock. Then suddenly I saw it chalked up on the side of a house in letters ten feet high:

GOOD NEWS! GOD IS LOVE!

When I see these words I got down on my knees in the open sewer which had been conveniently placed there for the purpose and I offered up a short prayer, a silent one, which must have registered as far as Mound City, Illinois, where the coloured musk-rats have built their igloos. It was time for a good stiff drink of cod-liver oil but as the varnish factories were all closed we had to repair to the abattoir and quaff a bucket of blood. Never has blood tasted so wonderful!

¹ My analysis of Miller's discourse draws on Freud's concept of totem & taboo, and on Kristeva's notion of abjection.

Miller tells us once more what we already knew, but may have forgotten: that Love and Death are indistinguishable, that God and excremental debris stand on opposite sides of a continuum.

I guess you must be wondering about the end of the story about my hometown. Right, some years ago, the townhall architects designed a new, and ambitious plan for the city. Part of this plan was put into practice, but to remain faithful to our lifelong tradition, most of it never became true. The slogan of the publicity campaign that preceded the materialization of the plan was:

Imagina't Castelló. / Imagine Castellón.

In other words:

SLIDES X, XI.

let us pray for thy kingdom to come, while we dwell upon this ugly and filthy City of Man.

SLIDE XII.

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