

The Inward Journey to the Self: The Importance of *Tropic of Capricorn*

*Tropic of Capricorn*, by Henry Miller. New York: Grove Press, 1987. 348 pp.

\$13.00 trade paperback.

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Miller's two tropics – *Cancer* and *Capricorn* – are manuals for the creative life: they serve as testimony to Miller's transformation from a lost-in-thought lay-schmuck of the 1930's American economy – working in the belly of the beast in such jobs as his position with the Western Union Telegraph company, which he refers to as the “Cosmococcic / Cosmodemonic Telegraph Company” - to his evolution as an expatriate writer living in Paris. The books are really designed to be read together by the serious student of writing to magnify the metamorphosis, the rite of passage. While *Cancer* chronicles the latter portion of Miller's experience abroad, the prequel, *Capricorn*, written five years later in 1939, is the more developed and more seminal of the two and elucidates with much greater detail the affects of his epiphany.

Most artists will immediately recognize the struggle Miller endures. Married and with a young child – a relationship which he finds stifling to his creative development – Miller faces tenable employment situations to support this life. Those jobs he does find do little for his prosperity; rather he finds himself as a cog on a wheel of Hell. His transformation from the morass of society is painful. To pursue

such a life is frightening enough: to do it behind the rancorous veil of the American dream is horrifying. Miller recognizes the banal existence of modern America with its machines, its backward corporate policies, its worship of the unthinking and mechanical and he also knows he must break from its fetters.

Part of Miller's disenchantment with America is organic to his being just as much as it is experiential. Miller feels a unique disassociation with his peers and even his family. This self-possessed knowledge of his unique intelligence leaves Miller with a feeling of disorientation. As an adolescent, he sees his drunken father convert to piety when wooed by the charisma of a local minister. Miller, Sr. then falls from grace when the minister is called to another location and as a result of this perceived abandonment, cycles back to his earlier state of crapulousness. The event seems to have intimated to Miller the importance of being self-reliant upon a constant wellspring of inspiration so that disappointment in other people does not interrupt the flow of creativity.

Miller describes his artistic evolution as riding "on the ovarian trolley." In fact, those very words are what preface *Capricorn*. For Miller there are really two births the artist experiences before his final descent into a world riddled with isolation, hunger and anticipation. Of course, there is the physical birth but this is more a symbolic representation than Miller's actual recognition of his square-peg, round-hole emotional relationship with the world: this is the first stage. The second stage comes years later out of the "Land of F\_ck" as Miller coins it, the place where the "spermatozoon reigns supreme" (198). These phrases, as they would first seem

(and were seen for many years the book was banned from U.S. publication), are not some gratuitous account of Miller's perceptions of his conquests. Rather, he uses the extended metaphors to give the reader an understanding to the visceral almost primordial conditions from whence the artist arises. For Miller, spiritual ascension is a process biologic as well as intellectual.

Once this fact is grasped there can be no more despair. At the very bottom of the ladder, *chez* the spermatozoa, there is the same condition of bliss at the top, *chez* God. God is the summation of all the spermatozoa come to full consciousness. Between the bottom and the top there is no stop, no halfway station (199).

There is an almost funereal quality about Miller's cognizance here: this idea of exploring one's complete "ANNIHILATION" before metaphysical resurrection. Miller understands the need for an eradication of the former self before the rebirth of the artist as he moves from the *terra firma* to the *terra vague*. Along with this laying waste of the individual comes the erasure of connections to the self: friends, family, lovers - all abandoned to pursue the freedom to express unhindered utterance\*. To this point, Miller's use of "Tropic of" in the titles of *Cancer* and *Capricorn* now begins to make more sense as he asserts himself to be on the boundary between this land of the physical and the spiritual; the place where men

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\* A phrase I have incorporated from listening to many extemporaneous speeches of creative rebellion from Squawk Coffeehouse co-founder, Lee Kidd.

aspire to be “God the embryo” for a period of time just before the flash-point of creative impulse.

He brings the idea of the “ovarian trolley” full circle when he talks about the importance of discovering Dostoevsky – this being his first glimpse into a man’s soul – and then later in a book called *Creative Evolution* by Henri Bergson. He carries the latter book with him everywhere and extols its virtue upon any man or woman who would hear the new standard version on the gospel of solitude.

*Tropic of Capricorn* should be standard reading for anyone in the arts: for any who have ever felt the pang of isolation wrought by such proclivity. Miller operates as an overman and as a result, he does pose a certain condition of tremulousness in his readership. He has forged his own society, his own being into something closer to what history had intended for him since the first phone call he placed into the horn of the fallopian. This is discomfiting for most and is intended to show how the application of artistic introspection can lead to becoming an acolyte of unconventional philosophy: how a writer emerges as the great *e pluribus unum*. Henry Miller’s doctrine is reserved for the initiate, the mad few who choose separation from the masses as a means for creative growth.

The Grove trade paperback version of *Tropic of Capricorn* remains true to the 1961 edition. However, Grove could better serve Miller’s back-catalog by reconsidering cover-art which more accurately represents Miller’s complexion of themes.

Four Key Words for Identification:

Fiction, surrealism, metaphysics, modernity

- Edward J. Carvalho, Goddard College