

**James M. Decker and Indrek Männiste, eds. *Henry Miller: New Perspectives*. Bloomsbury: New York, 2015. 233pp.**

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Twenty-three years have passed since the publication of the last critical collection of essays on Henry Miller. This fresh effort, *Henry Miller: New Perspectives*, edited by two of the foremost Miller scholars, James M. Decker and Indrek Männiste, is comprised of previously unpublished articles based on critical readings of Miller's works. In this sense, it surprisingly stands as the first collection of its kind, as prior collections have mostly contained previously published articles. *New Perspectives* provides in-depth analysis on themes in Miller's writing (including, but not limited to: transcendentalism, obscenity, surrealism, religion, and of course sexism), bringing a fresh approach with recent scholarship trends. It seems apparent that Decker and Männiste have culled articles to avoid overlapping those found in *NEXUS: The International Henry Miller Journal*—specifically, there is very little biographical exploration on Miller's life in *New Perspectives*. Instead, the collection reassesses, expands and introduces new topics demonstrating how Miller is an important writer figure, as well as an often contested outlying author.

Reading the essays sequentially, it becomes clear that Miller's magnum opus, *Tropic of Cancer* (1934), remains the centerpiece for diverse interdisciplinary critical commentary, giving testament to its literary significance. Indeed, *Cancer* is cited over 125 times throughout the collection, providing what might lightly be conceived as new perspectives on *Tropic of Cancer*. While space prevents an assessment of all 15 chapters, three particular articles that examine *Cancer* are worth noting. Anna Lillios claims that "Miller's reputation has not recovered from the assaults made on it by the second-wave feminists" of the 1970s, led specifically by Kate Millet (90). Taking part of her title from Ezra Pound's quip, "A dirty book worth reading," Lillios suggests two viewpoints to overcome the "feminist backlash" toward Miller's work. The first is to realize that "Miller as frequently depersonalizes male characters in his

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novels as he does the female”, and second, that sex in Miller’s work “can often be the means of spiritual transcendence” (89). Lillios suggests that fourth-wave feminism may help establish a view of Miller that sees beyond his “violations” to a position that embraces “the humanity that males and females share” (90, 91). In this same vein, Jeff Bursey argues that in our twenty-first century, what is deemed to be “obscene” has shifted from that of Miller’s day. Bursey establishes the lingering tendency by certain critics to demarcate Miller as offensive. He attempts to outline what Miller himself considered obscene, looking to Miller’s “Obscenity and the Law of Reflection”, and highlighting that Miller emphasized the fear of the unknown to be the greatest offense of our time. Bursey does not draw any definite conclusions as to what may now be considered obscene, but he ends with the hope that future studies on this subject will help place Miller (and specifically *Tropic of Cancer*) in a new light (170). Ondřej Skovajsa directly tackles *Tropic of Cancer* in order to expose that “Miller writes voice” through his “usage of *parallelism*” (75, 76). Through a close reading of *Cancer*, Skovajsa follows the “I” of the narrative, emphasizing the Biblical implications in Miller’s text, or a “Christ-as-Artist role” of the narrator’s voice. Miller, Skovajsa surmises, “evokes [the] traditional role of the artist/shaman in oral societies to heal the sick society”, thereby using his text to rejuvenate life in the modern society (79, 82).

Two articles with varied focus utilize Miller’s less often studied works. Of particular value is Sarah Garland’s examination of *Into the Night Life* (1947), an aesthetic collaboration between Israeli artist Bazalel Schatz and Miller. Garland explores the relationship between painting and writing, arguing that *Into the Night Life* is an “investigation in to the limits of verbalization and of conscious control” (137). Utilizing the large illustrated edition of the text (considered one of the more collectable of Miller’s publications), Garland posits that when the artwork and the text (originally written in 1936) are combined, “the duet allows image and text to act as points for resistance and interpretation” (141). The overall outcome of the combined artwork and text demonstrate Miller’s preoccupation with the “symbols for death and rebirth of the self” (138). Eric D. Lehman’s contribution to *New Perspectives* draws upon an already established association between Miller and the Transcendentalist tradition by presenting a well-argued correlation between *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch* (1957) and Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854). Lehman’s close reading of both texts reveals structural overlap, but makes clear that Miller’s work is no sequel, as “Miller has passed that point of life where he needs solitude to stimulate his creative individualism” (129). Comparing and contrasting *Big Sur* with Thoreau’s work brings to light the essence of community in the mind-set of Miller’s later years, perhaps something that has been overlooked by critics with a less favourable view on Miller’s sense of self.

*New Perspectives* is a timely publication and will boost what appears to be a newly revitalized interest in Miller over the past few years. This collection of 15

articles is not meant to be exhaustive, as a few of the authors express the hope that their work will be a starting point for future Miller analysis. Indeed, *Cancer* is the predominant cited text, with *Tropic of Capricorn* (1938) and *Black Spring* (1936) being distant followers, yet there is no reference to *Aller Retour New York* (1935) and only a handful of citations for *Remember to Remember* (1947), *Sunday After the War* (1944), and *Stand Still Like the Hummingbird* (1962). These absences are not a detriment to the articles in *New Perspectives*, and this new Miller publication enforces a solid foundation on which to continue building the increasing scholarship on Miller, which in turn will hopefully drive Miller's work into the academic classroom, revealing him to future generations of readers.