

Voice of the Moment: Henry Miller's Paris Notebooks and the Problem of Autobiographical Fiction

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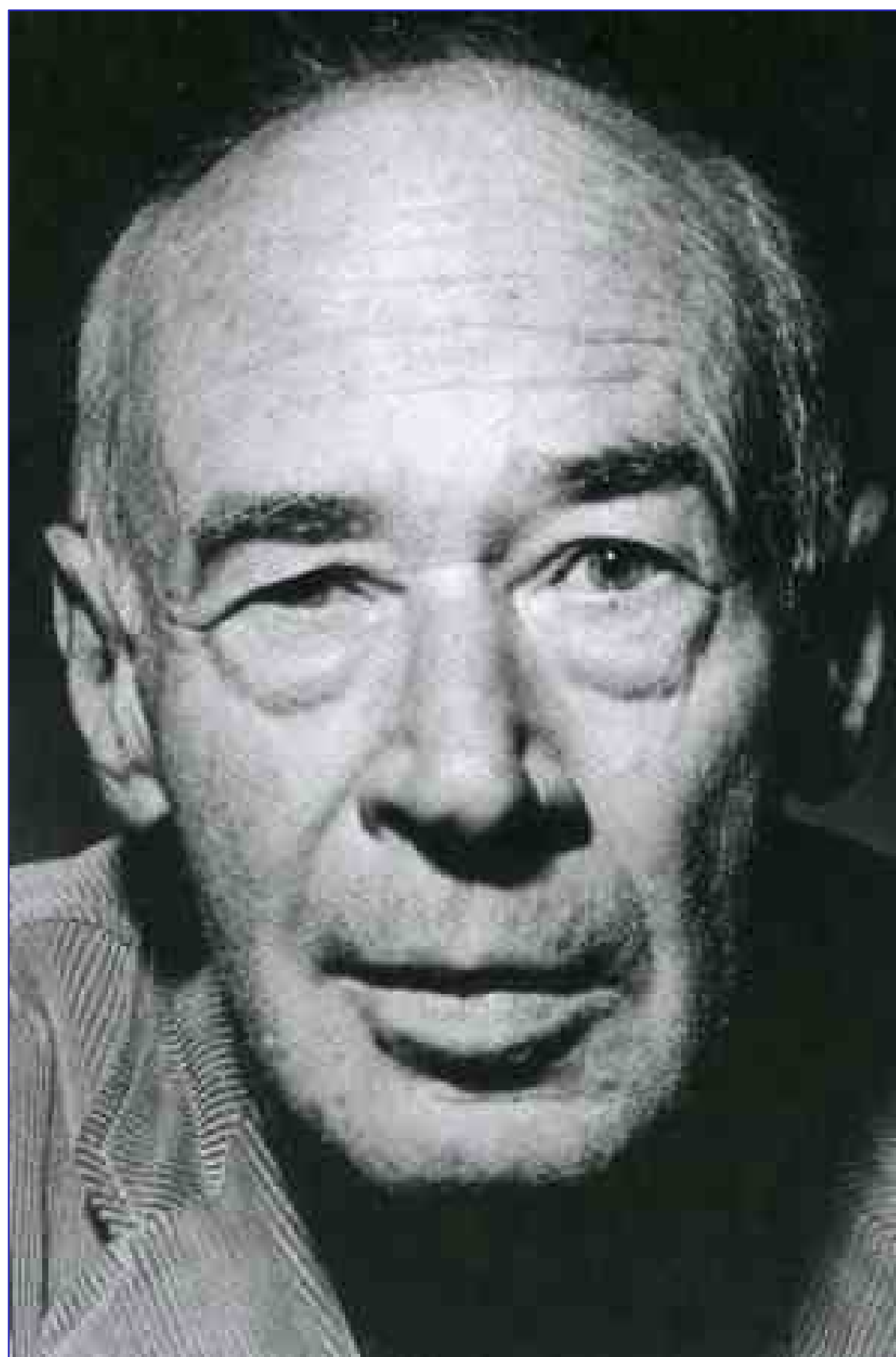
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Abstract

In 2010 Yale's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library acquired Henry Miller's three "Paris Notebooks," which have been in private hands and read by only a few scholars over the past ninety years. They are a working writer's hodge-podge of undated diary entries, descriptions of places and people, lists, letters, rough drafts, and unpublished pieces. After close examination of the manuscripts, I assessed that these pages offer important insights, and I am writing a critical biography to expose their impact. The notebooks shed particular light on Miller's process, which seems far less "inspired" or "prophetic" and much more "workmanlike" than previously imagined.

The first published result of this process, *Tropic of Cancer*, inspired generations of authors to write loosely autobiographical fiction, but also created a new problem when discussing these works. Many critics and even biographers conflate Henry Miller the person with the narrator or character of "Henry" in *Tropic of Cancer* and his other books.

This is not a problem confined to scholarship on one author. Our literary culture continues to misunderstand poets and novelists who write in voices we imagine to be their own, whose "characters" speaking in *On the Road* or "Lady Lazarus" seem to be the same person as Jack Kerouac or Sylvia Plath, when in fact each is a persona, a voice of the moment.

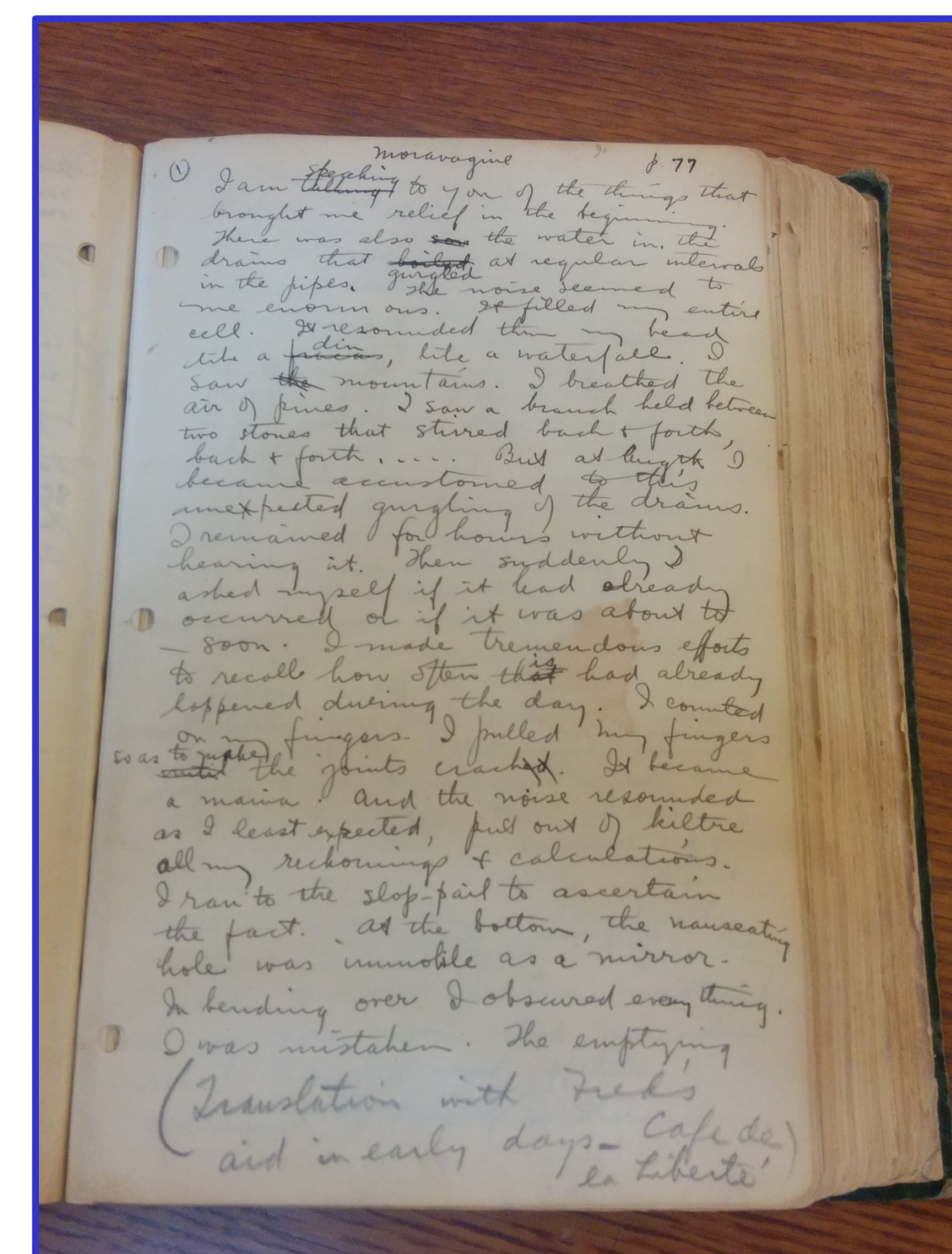


Though Henry Miller's books did push the boundaries of sexual content, this was a side-effect of his struggle for a new type of honesty in literature, a new kind of voice.

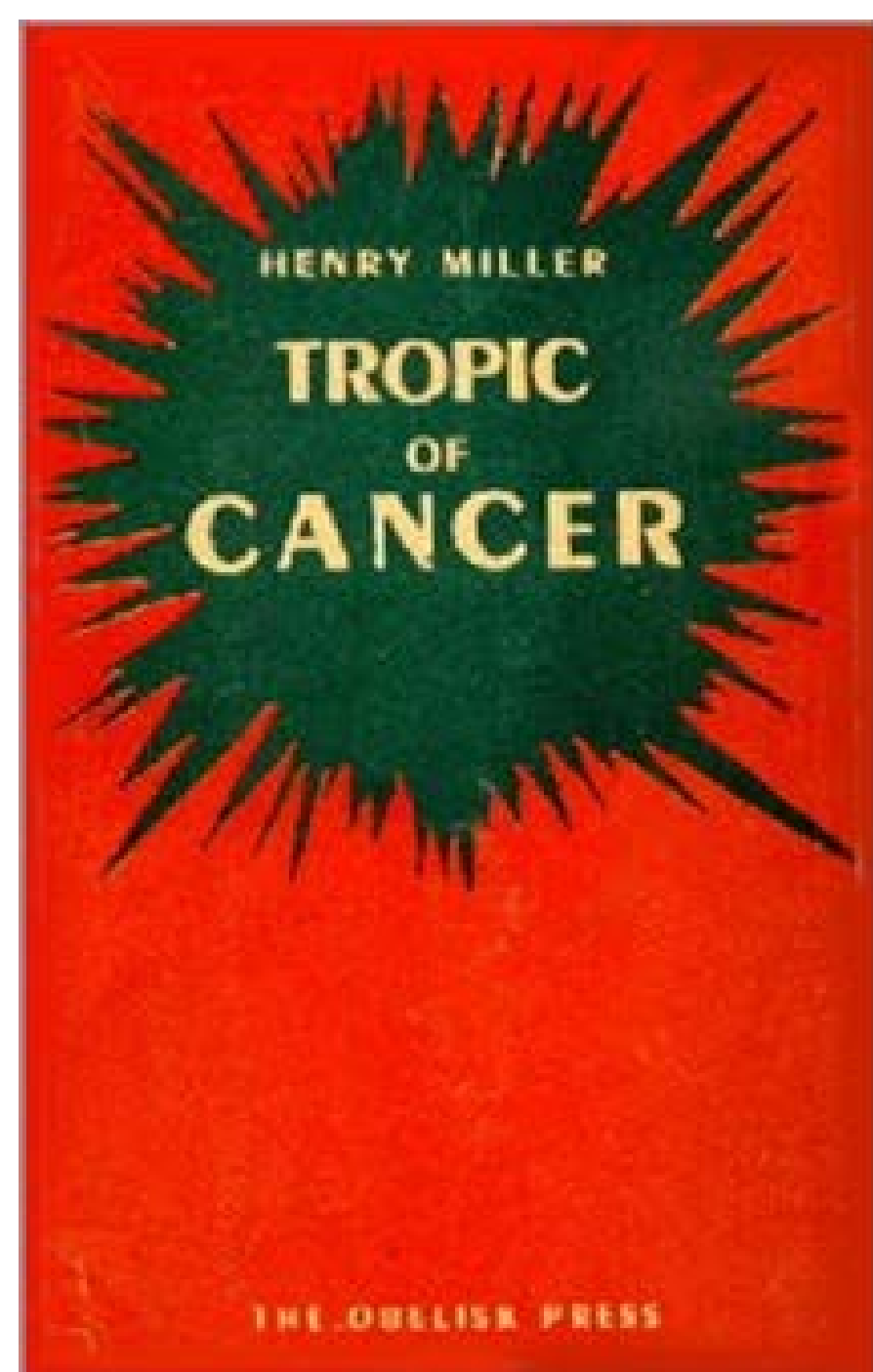
Research Goals

My work at Yale's Beinecke library has already involved a careful reading of the documents, which along with many handwritten rough drafts, include diary entries, pasted in typed drafts, and even watercolor pictures. The handwritten sections of the journals present various problems of transcription and interpretation, but even the typed sections require serious comparative analysis. In addition to the newly available journals, I will go back to other primary sources, the letters and ephemera, to put together a truer picture of his life and work during this crucial literary transformation.

My preparations and qualifications for this project include numerous and qualified essays in *Nexus: The International Henry Miller Journal* and a chapter in *Henry Miller: New Perspectives* (Bloomsbury, 2015). I have also already completed historical scholarship on Miller, with a piece of successful research on his mysterious Bridgeport friend Richard Osborn and the transcription and annotation of unpublished letters from Miller's second wife June, which are also held by the Beinecke.



Miller's journals remained in various private hands from the 1930s to 2010, when Yale University bought them and made them public. Few scholars have seen them, and none have yet made use of them in a peer-reviewed book.



After *Tropic of Cancer* was released in 1932, Miller was called a "prophet of the future." However, he had already been working on his style and ideas for over twenty years.

Challenges and Solutions

Two of the most damaging criticisms of Henry Miller were intended as compliments – that he was "prophetic" and that he was "sexually groundbreaking." As we get farther from the time Miller lived these become more and more an occasion for shurfs rather than serious attention. Nevertheless, Karl Shapiro's well-meaning introduction is still published with *Tropic of Cancer*, declaring things like, "Morally I regard Miller as a holy man, as most of his adherents do." But to readers who have never met him and who cannot see that he is an "emancipated being" this is an exaggeration at best. Furthermore, this sort of pseudo-spiritual attention can only be harmful to his reputation as a writer.

The second compliment to Henry Miller involves his literary destruction of traditional sexual mores. As scholar Roger Jackson puts it, Miller and his books will never disappear completely because of his place in the history of pornography and censorship. However, his books now seem tame compared to what has come afterwards, and as some critics point out, are shot through with strains of both masculine violence and masochism. Does *Tropic of Cancer* herald the sexual revolution that followed thirty years later? Perhaps. But that is nearly useless to its value as a novel, and is the most damaging part of this compliment. It allows writers and readers to damn it with faint praise, as Ezra Pound did with his comment "a dirty book worth reading," or worse to dismiss it as a symbol rather than a book.

While to his contemporaries Miller seemed a light in dark places, to the 21st century reader he may only seem a man slightly ahead of his time. These journals help to show that he was first and foremost a working writer. If he is not going to be merely a footnote in the history of censorship, we must judge him on his literary achievements, on his style, on his expression of the human and the inhuman qualities of life. He will rise or fall on that alone.

His notebooks also help show how seriously he took that part of the writing life. His journey led him to experiment what scholar James Decker calls "spiral form," which includes twelve literary techniques, including caricature, diatribe, interior monologue, and micro-essay. Each of these techniques had to be modeled, mastered, and combined, a process that took incredible skills of synthesis and a complete dedication to the science of prose.

The weight of this new information and the challenges put forward by a half-century of Miller scholarship require a full new critical biography. My research will focus on Miller's hard work and dedication to the craft in the years leading up to and during his Paris sojourn, which are often ignored in favor of the more lurid parts of his life.

Conclusions

While exploring the gray area between fiction and nonfiction, wavering between a fictional character and narrator, the author settled on a changing persona – the voice of the moment, one of many Henry Millers, a mode in which he continued to write (with occasional exceptions) for the rest of his life.

This project shines light on an important 20th century writer, but also all "confessional" or "autobiographical" novelists. It is my hope to encourage other critics and particularly biographers to focus on their work as works of the imagination, and to treat the narrative voice as a created one. This does not mean that the voice is not "honest" or "true," but rather that it is one of many truths created by an everchanging set of choices made by the author.