

The New Mystic: Mysticism as an Embodied Experience in Henry Miller's Semiautobiographical Fiction

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ABSTRACT

When Henry Miller, the American author, decides to take a year-long road trip across the United States in 1939, after returning from Paris, he lodges a scathing attack on the gradual transformation of America into what Miller calls an “air conditioned nightmare” in the eponymous book which is a *sui generis*. In critiquing American tendencies of consumerism, Miller takes recourse to Indian philosophy and refers extensively to the teachings of Indian mystic Ramakrishna, his disciple Swami Vivekananda and also Jeddu Krishnamurthi. By alluding to these spiritual masters Miller attempts to provide an escape route for America to regain a kind of (in)humanity where all life converges into a disparate whole, channelised by one's *elan vital* or life rhythm. It is interesting to study how Miller's works like *Air Conditioned Nightmare* and his semiautobiographical novels like *Tropic of Cancer* and *Sexus* can be seen through a postcolonial lens to show how Miller departs from ‘colonial’ notions of transcendence as a religious function and synthesizes diverse mystical traditions of thought into an immanent category of experience to first critique and then provide solutions to what Miller interprets as problems of modernity, which reduces man to his machinic function. This paper shall argue how in Miller's somewhat desacralised notion of mysticism, all facets of life including sex, animalistic behaviour, aggression, femininity, find place and converge as a decentred whole. In forging the world of his fancy he excludes nothing which is the immanent approach in

Indian philosophy, towards a kind of embodiment of a very urban mystical experience where transformations of various kinds are always underway, which might answer some vital questions of modernity. Miller's careful choosing of a unique line of poets and artists like Whitman and Rimbaud who've emphasized on the body as the site of all transcendental experience, along with the mystical immanence found in Indian philosophical approaches, is unique in American literature. This also makes Miller a champion of early postcolonialism. By employing mysticism as a method of embodying all experience Miller rescues transcendentalist philosophy from the trappings and hierarchies of various colonial interpretations, making him an early champion of decolonisation.

Keywords: Henry Miller, Mysticism, Embodiment, Becoming, Postcolonial

INTRODUCTION

When Henry Miller, the much derided American author of semiautobiographical fiction, returned to America in 1939, after spending ten years as an expatriate in Paris, he decided to embark on a road trip which later took the shape of *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (1945), a book of non-fiction, commonly interpreted as Miller's scathing attack on America's aggressive march towards consumerism. What was to be a quest to know his land in a deeper way, quickly escalated to what Miller calls "the beginning of an endless nightmare" (*The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* 15). Confounded with the "crushing incomprehension" (Miller, *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* 47) brought to America by the dark side of modernity, he observes how his birth place, New York, turned alien to him. In the first chapter of *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, Miller goes on to make a statement, which has now become very popular: "the country is magnificent – and terrifying. Why terrifying? Because nowhere else in the world is the divorce between man and nature so complete" (20).

In trying to find some kind of a refuge from this condition of modernity, Miller looked towards the east, just as the early

masters of American transcendentalism did in their early inspired attempts to develop a distinctly American aesthetics. Seemingly, in keeping with the transcendentalist tradition, in *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, Miller juxtaposes the figures of Indian mystic Ramakrishna and his disciple Swami Vivekananda against the 'industrial state of mind' confounding Miller after his return to America. However, there is a difference in the brand of mysticism in Miller's conception. He chooses Indian masters as his source of inspiration not because of the "association of India with the cultural symbolic of the 'mystic East'" (King 161), but precisely because he wanted to be the first writer of fiction to wittingly or unwittingly attempt to bypass the colonial, and orientalist notions of the mystical as it has passed through decades, towards an understanding of mysticism as 'embodiment', which is the focus of this paper. Further, this theoretically-focussed paper will attempt to provide a new interpretation of mysticism in Henry Miller's fiction, not as a vague half-spiritual quest, but as an intuitive method of spiritual enquiry which is grounded empirically, without having anything to do with the transcendental outside, and show how Henry Miller is an early champion of the postcolonial tendency in representation.

At the very beginning, it is important to look at the word mysticism in ways other than is traditionally accepted. As opposed to the popular notion that definitions of mysticism were arrived at from the east, the idea of Mysticism, it can be argued, is a very western, Christian construct. Richard King, in the chapter "The Power of Definitions: A Genealogy of the Idea of 'the mystical'" from his book *Orientalism and Religion* (1999) argues how the term "was initially coined by Western intellectuals to refer to that phenomenon or aspect of the Christian tradition that was understood to emphasize religious knowledge gained by means of an extraordinary experience or revelation of the divine" (7). In fact, King in the chapter attempts to provide what he calls a "genealogy of 'the mystical' – that is, a

history of the idea that pays specific attention to the power dynamic involved in the way in which it has been defined in various historical circumstances" (8). King also quotes from Grace Jantzen's argument in her book *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (1995), where she points to the fact that "the idea of 'mysticism' is a social construction and that it has been constructed in different ways at different times." (Jantzen 12). In light of this argument, it would be interesting to re-read Henry Miller's brand of mysticism through the postcolonial lens, as an unique enterprise in American ideas of transcendentalism.

Miller is an important figure in the continuum of the treatment and understanding of transcendence in the American conception; in that he is an urban mystic. He departs from all ideas of transcendence of 'serenity' and 'poise' in the Emersonian conception, towards a new philosophy of a chaotic, percept-driven practical mysticism experienced in praxis in the heart of a bustling metropolis (New York or Paris) with Baudelaire as his real precursor. Baudelaire was the first to locate the mystical in the urban, in his seminal essay "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863), where he reveals a sense of "immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement" (12) and observes how "the lover of universal life enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy" (13).

In Miller's writings, the mystical is a shifting experience – one that unfolds in movements through the body, which is the site of experience. However his brand of mysticism, despite its departure from conventional notions of transcendence, ought to be placed in the continuum of American transcendentalist thought, indebted to a late eighteenth and early nineteenth century European philosophical strand. Blake's mystical ruminations in "Auguries of Innocence" sum up the very essence of that strand: "To see a World in a Grain of Sand/ And a Heaven in a Wild Flower/ Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand/ And

Eternity in an hour" (67). This was vociferously championed by later American transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau in works such as "Nature" (1836) and *Walden* (1854) respectively. This was a strand of thought that celebrated the communion of the 'soul' with the 'world-soul' through experientially and phenomenologically engaging with objects culled from deep within nature's crevices, represented in poetry through images ranging from the "sounding Cataracts" (172) of Wordsworth's Grasmere, the roses and children of Blake's pastures, or the rhodoras of Emerson. For Henry Miller however, that communion of the soul with the world soul can be facilitated even in the concrete caverns of an object-driven metropolitan life: "In every object there was a minute particle which particularly claimed my attention...a microscopic eye for the blemish, for the grain of ugliness which to me constituted the sole beauty of the object". (Miller, *Tropic of Capricorn* 41). An out-and-out city bred author, Henry Miller, fascinated and obsessed with New York and Paris, wandering through hotels, pubs, apartments and brothels to locate the 'infinite,' is an exception in world literature. With the observer, participant and phenomenologically involved novelist/semiautobiographer, sometimes in the background and often in the foreground, Miller's cityscapes strangely metamorphose into transcendental spaces offering 'spots of times' or epiphanies to delve deep into what he calls 'life rhythm' in his early novel *Tropic of Cancer* (1934) and *Tropic of Capricorn* (1939), which is opposed to "a life with deducted form and rhythm, with beginning and end" (*Capricorn* 55). The focalizer/narrator depicts a crucial stage in his life when he, working in the contingent and inhospitable spaces of the Cosmodemonic Telegraph Company (and America at large) begins to suffer from spiritual vertigo. Finding himself undergoing "a great change" (*Capricorn*, Miller 50) in the middle of an ever-alienating spatial and spiritual circumstance, the protagonist, propelled by a series of events and epiphanies, decides to surrender to the flux, and employs mysticism as a

method to enquire into what he perceives as truth, involving a frantic attempt to regress to a simpler form of existence in which one's sense of being effortlessly reconciles with one's surroundings. Miller's characters exhibit a frantic desire to live and participate in this 'life rhythm' (*Capricorn* 246); in the process, they transcend their finite attachments to their respective spatialities to become alienated bodies engaged in a cosmic conflict with an ever-alienating universe. The novel is set in the "null and void" of stasis; in "zero whiteness" where the only marker of passage of time in the streets is the "smell of hunger which has nothing to do with love." (Miller, *Capricorn* 53). This kind of treatment of the mystical in everyday life can be read as a reinterpretation of American transcendental philosophy.

The early American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson saw transcendence as infused in nature as opposed to something outside of the natural world order. Henry Miller, after Emerson, attempts at redefining transcendence and mystical experience, as this study shall explore; he aims at creating affects and precepts, instead of striving towards transcendentalism in relations of exteriority to lived realities. Miller employs mysticism as a method to liberate the experiencing subject. His aim is less to transcend than to accept and transform, as Katy Masuga puts it in "Transgressing the Law of Literature" (2009): "Writing is not a discourse that unveils objects through their descriptions' Instead it creates' as Miller's extravagant writing makes his reader aware' a texture of effects" (209). Miller's goal, as an individual in the middle of a stasis, is to infuse the alienating concrete caverns of the city with organic life, which in turn may inspire a mystical sense of oneness to the city-bred 'seeker', so to speak, of the 'life rhythm' (246), amidst the chaos, cacophony and carnal orgies of lives within cities. Miller, both the observer and participant, intoxicated with the drug of the flâneur, moves from lane to lane, neighbourhood to neighbourhood, to make contact with the same 'life rhythm', and

celebrates the act of rambling aimlessly through pavements and streets, the act of *flanerie*, as a potent method to interact with and understand lived spaces within the city by way of “reflecting on the silence that surrounded [him]” (*Capricorn*, Miller 51)). *Tropic of Capricorn* is phenomenologically rich in such urban enclaves, much to the delight of the *flâneur* in Miller, in search of the primal and instinctual, which eventually opens up wormholes into the infinite, culminating in a resurrection where one “feel(s) exactly like Jesus Christ” (53) becoming “one with nature and against nature at the same time”(49). The search for meaning through movement and detached observation in an ever-alienating universe is as old as the first unofficial manifestoes of modernism. Before Walter Benjamin mastered the philosophy of movement in modern life, Baudelaire summed up what finds reiteration in Miller. Baudelaire, in “The Painter of Modern Life” (1863) ruminates:

For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world ... the lover of universal life enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy. (12-13)

It is interesting to trace the evolution of city-based experience of an ‘ecstatic process’ which turns mystical in the hands of Miller later on in the 20th century. Henry Miller gives mysticism the shape of a method though a very individualised approach where orientalist and colonial definitions of the mystical are carefully and intentionally bypassed.

THEORISING MYSTICISM

Postcolonial thinker Andreas Christmann in the essay “Reclaiming Mysticism: Anti-Orientalism and the Construction of ‘Islamic Sufism’ in Postcolonial Egypt” observes:

With the 'psychological turn' in Western studies (W. James, E. Underhill, R. Jones, N. Söderblom, C.G. Jung, et al.), by the end of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries mysticism was predominantly reduced to a universal and timeless religious experience, a solitary subjectivity without any distinct practices that could possess cultural particularities. In addition, as turned into 'a psychology', mysticism covered a wide range of experiences that were by and large not strictly religious: from the narcotic, neurotic, and hysterical to the sublimely artistic, creative, and inspirational. (59)

This aspect of mysticism, as Christmann has it, opens up new 'postcolonial' possibilities of looking at mysticism as an other-than-transcendental category of experience. She further argues how mysticism in the post-enlightenment era, "had moved away from the centre of the religious community to the heart of the individual believer, whereby the term mysticism more and more defined only the individual quest for the Divine" (59)

It is important to trace the notion of transcendence as it has developed through the centuries in the hands of certain philosophers and authors, and how mysticism has travelled a long distance from being an elusive, metaphysical abstraction in the hands of the colonial interpreters to a fully developed immanent category of experience. One may attempt to read Miller in the light of the same philosophers who have attempted to understand mysticism as an embodied and immanent category of experience. Michel de Certeau, in his important essay "Mysticism," (1992) notes how "mysticism remains the rendezvous of an enigma. It can be situated but not classified" (24) and argues that "[w]hatever one thinks of mysticism, even if one recognises in it the emergence of a universal or absolute reality, it can only be treated in terms of a specific cultural and historical situation." (13). Certeau is one of the earliest thinkers to locate the tradition of mystical experience as what Michael Goddard calls an "ecstatic process" (56) in the essay "The Scattering of Time Crystals: Deleuze, Mysticism and Cinema"

(2001) – a pioneering essay in understanding mysticism as Deleuze has theorised upon it. Goddard, understands mysticism in terms of the body and temporality, “[where] the mystics are themselves the embodiment of a spiritual ‘language’, a writing of gestures, movements and sensations”, and that the “mystical experience is primarily an experience not of consciousness but of the depths of the body and its unknown potentialities” (54-55). Tracing the understanding of mysticism in continental thought, Goddard in the same essay talks about Bergson’s idea of spirituality – a “frequently affirming mystical experience as a privileged expression of the *élan vital*.” (60).

In fact, concerning any discussion on mysticism as a method of enquiry, it is important to explore relevant theoretical engagements with the mystical by philosophers like Bergson and Deleuze, and their commentators like Goddard, and Certeau who have engaged with Deleuze’s theory of ‘practical mysticism,’ as explained in detail by Terry Lovat. Lovat in his essay “Practical Mysticism and Deleuze’s Ontology of the Virtual” argues how “for Deleuze percepts, affects and concepts constitute an irreducible triad, [and] knowledge becomes necessarily grounded in a religious dimension of experience” and how “[i]n contrast to solely faith-based religion, practical mysticism enriches it with action as the level of practical experience.” (236-37). In the essay Lovat notes how Deleuze “equates mystical experience with an event of a sudden actualisation of potentialities, that is, awakening of perceptions, such as seeing and hearing, by raising them to a new power of enhanced perception.”(240). In this context, Katy Masuga’s research on Henry Miller becomes indispensable.

In her interdisciplinary research, *The Secret Violence of Henry Miller* (2011), Masuga delves into Miller’s urban geographies, interrogating into spatial transformations, indispensable in any estimation of Henry Miller as a mystical flaneur. Masuga argues how geographical and territorial movements sometimes expand

to incorporate the mystical. With so much movement in Miller's narratives – either real or imagined, it is understandable why some scholars have tried to see Henry Miller as an urban geographer of modern life. Taking of space, the body happens to be an entry point to poststructuralism, and also postcolonial approaches to mysticism. In this regard, one must engage with theorists such as Michael Hardt who have attempted to use corporeality as an integral aspect of mystical experiences.

Mysticism in Miller is really a story of “the fullness of the flesh” (Hardt 78). In his autobiographical narratives, Miller compares himself to Christ time and again. In fact, he begins *Sexus* with a reference to Christ: “I was approaching my thirty-third year, the age to Christ crucified.” (Miller1). *Tropic of Capricorn* initially planned as *Clipped Wings*, a study of twelve Western Union messengers, parallel the story of Christ and his twelve apostles. Miller says in *Tropic of Capricorn* that he “was born with a crucifixion complex”. His parents saw him as a free thinker and a passionate believer. Miller's calvaries can be read as crucifixion gone wrong, or continuous crucifixions. He says:

If one isn't crucified, like Christ, if one manages to survive, to go on living above and beyond the sense of desperation and futility, then another curious thing happens. It's as though one had actually died and actually been resurrected again; one lives a supernormal life, like the Chinese. That is to say, one is unnaturally gay, unnaturally healthy, unnaturally indifferent. The tragic sense is gone: one lives on like a flower, a rock, a tree, one with Nature and against Nature at the same time. (49)

Miller observes how the pain and struggle reduces (transforms in Miller) the individual to a Meursault: “If your best friend dies you don't even bother to go to the funeral; if a man is rundown by a streetcar right before your eyes you keep on walking just as though nothing had happened” (50), and after the resurrection, so to speak “you belong to the earth and whatever is of the earth is yours inalienably” (50). The real incarnation takes place on Calvary. Only through his hanging on

the cross does Christ realise the flesh. Miller denounces suffering and says at the end of the novel: "All my Calvaries were rosy crucifixions, pseudo-tragedies to keep the fires of hell burning brightly for the real sinners who are in danger of being forgotten" (*Capricorn* 279). Hardt observes "that in becoming flesh Christ abandoned the form of God" and that "[t]he self-emptying or kenosis of Christ, the evacuation of the transcendental, is the affirmation of the plenitude of the material, the fullness of the flesh ... None of being or God or nature remains outside existence, but rather all is fully realised, fully expressed, without remainder, in the flesh." (78). Hardt further observes how at the time of his crucifixion "Christ is all body, an open piece of flesh, abandoned, exposed... [and that] is when Christ's emptied divinity, its radiant surfaces shine forth most brightly". (80) In fact, flesh becomes a talking point – a motif of sorts – in *Sexus*, and we find Miller deliberating over the mysterious nature of flesh time and again in the episodes narrated in it. Miller is more interested in what becomes of flesh than representing.

Miller's narration of euphorias or mystical encounters in his novels sometimes makes his narratives static and reflexive. The narrator's introspective passages occasionally relapse into stylistic abstractions, as shall be explored in one of the chapters in this study, with close reference to select passages from his novels. For methodological support, an essay composed by Sartre in December 1943 – "A New Mystic" – may offer substantial theoretical tool for an analysis of select passages in Miller's novels where the narrator struggles to articulate the inarticulate. Sartre in the same essay uses George Bataille's ruminations in *Inner Experience* (1943) to engage upon a discursive strategy, if at all possible, to articulate mystical experiences. Sartre points out to the reluctance of Bataille when it came to the use of the discursive mode in the artist's attempt to articulate an awakening of sorts – an euphoria or an epiphany – within the domain of the material. Bataille even had refused to

situate such an art form within the generic boundary of poetry, as it may generally be assumed, given the possibilities of poetic license. Sartre notes: "It is partly for this reason that he situates his (Bataille's) work 'beyond poetry'" (226). Bataille however had a solution to articulate such moments in his writings, as observed by Sartre; through attempting "a mimesis of the moment" (226). He explains: "Silence and the moment being one and the same thing, it is the configuration of the moment he has to impart to his thought" (226). This is what Bataille calls "the expression of inner experience" (226-227). To further extend this technique, Bataille explains:

to express oneself through rapid flashes, to free as much as is possible the expression of one's thought from a project, to include everything in a few sentences: anguish, decision and the right to the poetic perversion of words without which it would seem that one was subject to a domination. (qt. in Sartre 227)

A sample of Miller's narration in a passage from *Sexus* in the light of Bataille's "rapid flashes" and "perversion of words" to accommodate inner experience may be quoted for further enquiry in this proposed dissertation. As the narrator is engaged in a casual conversation with his friend Carruthers in the presence of Florrie and Mara, in Chapter Two of the novel, the narrator relapses into deep thought. As Carruthers becomes jealous of the narrator's physical proximity with Florrie, the narrator, while closely examining Carruther's reactions, suddenly relapses into a state of complete detachment: "Even from this low height the crowd took on that dehumanised appearance which comes with weight and number. If there were not this thing called language there would be little to differentiate this maelstrom of flesh from other forms of animal life..." (*Sexus* 45). In another passage from the next chapter, the narrator in one of his epiphanies focalises on his friend Dr Kronski and his depression. Dr Kronski had been a man with an immense capacity to suffer, having lost his first wife to a medical blunder, and having to settle with a neurotic second wife. He

lived in an unkempt home where everything was in a state of disorder. As he lay on the sofa, dead drunk, the narrator begins to reflect upon his state: “Dr Kronski ceased to exist: only the pain and torment remained, functioning as positive and negative electrons in the vast atomic vacuum of a lost personality” (*Sexus* 71). In a heavily loaded phenomenological style, Miller carries on in his reverie:

The skin itself was just a bag in which was loosely collected a rather messy outfit of bones, muscles, sinews, blood, fat, lymph, bile, urine, dung and so on. Germs were stewing around in this stinking bag of guts; the germs would win out no matter how brilliantly that cage of dull gray matter called brain functioned. The body was in hostage to Death, and Dr Kronschi, so vital in the X-ray world of statistics, was just a louse to be cracked under a dirty nail when it came to surrender his shell. (*Sexus* 72)

Such are the reveries of Miller.

RE-READING MYSTICISM IN HENRY MILLER'S FICTION

Miller in his novels is severely critical of the ravages of modern consumerist tendencies of America of the 1920s and 30s. He sees the whole continent as “a nightmare producing the greatest misery of the greatest number” (Miller, *Tropic of Capricorn*, 4). His fascination with Paris in *Tropic of Cancer* may be understood as a quest that first begins as an infatuation, which slowly escalates into spiritually significant as Miller moves farther and farther in his world of “euphorias” (*Capricorn* 36), finding himself more and more into an ontologically barren but phenomenology rich urban scape. In one of the reflective passages of *Tropic of Capricorn* – his savage attack on America(n consumerism – Miller deliberates, in a Bergsonian vein on board the trolley at Brooklyn Bridge to go to a flat at Green point where “a couple of trollops were waiting to receive us” (37), on the nature of rhythm and the energy it emanates. He starts by reflecting on the nature and function of his “euphorias” (36):

My friend Kronski used to twit me about my 'euphorias'. It was a sly way he had of reminding me, when I was extraordinarily gay, that the morrow would find me depressed. It was true. I had nothing but ups and downs. Long stretches of gloom and melancholy followed by extravagant bursts of gaiety, of trance like inspiration. (*Tropic of Capricorn* 36)

Then, the passage navigates through his sexual escapades, as he narrates his friend Hymie's ignorant obsession with his wife's ovaries on board the Brooklyn trolley. As Miller reflects in retrospect, in his drunken stupor while listening to Hymie's ovary talk, he recollects how the effect of the drink and the conversation on ovaries, suddenly leads him to a burst of euphoria. As he began to explain to his friend Hymie "what ovaries meant" (37) in "crude and simple fashion" (37), the moment appeared to him as "profoundly tragic and ridiculous" (37) at the same time. Miller the narrator observes:

From the idea of diseased ovaries there germinated in one lightning-like flash a sort of tropical growth made up of the most heterogeneous assortment of odds and ends in the midst of which, securely lodged, tenaciously lodged, I might say, were Dante and Shakespeare. (*Tropic of Capricorn* 37)

Much later, in the same novel, Miller returns to the ovary trope in a section near the end of the novel titled "Interlude":

[t]he ovarian world is the product of a life rhythm. The moment a child is born it becomes part of a world in which there is not only the life rhythm but the death rhythm. The frantic desire to live, to live at any cost, is not a result of the life rhythm in us, but of the death rhythm. (*Tropic of Capricorn* 246)

The ovarian trolley – a potent way of (dis)placing-oneself-in-space – becomes a subcultural and subversive mode of life which is liberating. Miller's quest in the concrete muddle of the city may be understood in the light of Georg Simmel, one of the first theorists on urban sociology. Simmel observes in "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1903), that the modern city-dweller is occasionally engaged in a quest which is characteristic of city

life, a quest which lodges “an inquiry into the inner meaning of specifically modern life and its products, into the soul of the cultural body, so to speak ... seek[ing] to solve the equation which structures like the metropolis set up between the individual and the super-individual contents of life” (Simmel 409).

In Miller’s narratives, the urban experience – saturated with sexual epiphanies – approach psychedelia. Pinchbeck in the “Introduction” to *The Psychedelic Experience* (1964) observes how “the rediscovery of psychedelics in the late twentieth century caused shockwaves, because the modern psyche had been cut off from the direct access to revelation formerly possessed by shamans and seer”(x). Pinchbeck further notes how, “[p]ossessed by the hierarchical framework and transcendent ideology of Christianity, the Europeans crusaded against any and all representatives of the archaic worldview that knew second sight, visions, and prophecy to be crucial aspects of reality.” (xi). Henry Miller, the narrator of his autobiographical novels, is an urban prophet, so to speak, seeking to establish a mystical connection between one’s body in motion and his urban eikios.

Miller’s urban mysticism in the light of Sara Ahmed’s theory of object-driven affects, to be elucidated upon in detail in the section dedicated to ‘methodology’. In her essay “Happy Objects” Sara Ahmed discusses how “happiness also turns us toward objects” (29) and how the same object-driven happiness ultimately generates in us an aversion for the same objects, driving us towards replacing them with new. Thus Ahmed engages” with the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds, and the drama of contingency, [and with] how we are touched by what we are near.” (30). Ahmed calls for a evaluative approach to affect by arguing how “(b)odily transformations might also transform what is experienced as delightful. If our bodies change over time, then the world

around us will create different impressions.” (30). Similarly, Miller the narrator, once infatuated with the images of Paris, the capital of modernity, as a potent space of salvation and starting a new life with Mara, seeks, in the course of his semiautobiographical *The Rosy Crucifixion*, respite from objects. In *Sexus*, he fantasizes: “I could see Mara coming to meet me at the station. We’d start a new life together [...] We’d saunter out arm in arm and stroll about in the moonlight” (89). However, in the course of the novel, Miller abandons the fantasy approach for a more creative body-oriented pursuit of euphoria – a mystical awakening of sorts which results in a “frightful discordance between this inner state of being and the physical atmosphere of the neighbourhood through which [he] had to plunge each night” (155). The very image of liberation transforms for him and he observes: “Heroic little souls whose very obsession to liberate themselves from the thralldom of work served only to magnify the squalor and the misery of their lives” (155). Further, Ahmed goes on to show how the complex relationship between objects and feelings shape us. She notes how “pleasures are not only directed toward objects that can be tasted, that come into a sensuous proximity with the flesh of the body, as a meeting of flesh.”, and how “Pleasure creates an object, even when the object of pleasure appears before us” (32-33).

In this manner, Miller seems to argue, the body of the artist becomes a phenomenological field. His representation of the sexual, far from being erotic in the traditional sense, seems explorations of the body. Sex in Miller – far from serving only to compensate for some lack – produces desire. Sex in Miller generates and bequeaths “new vitality” (*Sexus* 236). The idea of reconciling the body with the soul in the experience of the mystical goes back to Whitman in the American tradition of transcendental literature. Whitman asks in his poem “I Sing the Body Electric”: “... if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?” (109). Whitman’s bodies acquire a non-gendered quality as they become aesthetic objects detached from their wholeness,

suspended in a non-hierarchical plane – engaged with other bodies – becoming animals. In Whitman there is a dehumanising of the human body in an aesthetic pure plane where man and elements of nature paradigmatically change positions becoming affective objects allowing Whitman (and the reader) to “pass freely ... at the / mother’s breast with the little child”, “swim with the swimmers” and “pause, listen, count”. (111). Whitman says: “O I saw these are not the parts and poems of the body only, / O I say now these are the soul!” (119).

Mysticism in Henry Miller’s semiautobiographical fiction has always been looked at either parochially, or reduced to ecstatic visions rooted in Miller’s religious beliefs. Even recent scholarship on Miller has attempted to look at all expressions of religiosity and mysticism from an autobiographical perspective succumbing to discourses of standardised definitions patronised and disseminated by colonialism. By emphasizing on embodiment as a fully developed category of mysticism, an attempt can be made to rescue Henry Miller’s works from the fallacies of employing old methods and definitions of understanding mystical experience, and provide new postcolonial perspectives from which to look at the experience of mysticism in the light of the world-vision of late modernist philosophers and commentators, redefining and extending traditionalist ideas of transcendence.

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