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Henry Miller's Painterly Eye

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Abstract

Henry Miller's works, specifically the unofficial "Obelisk" trilogy and *The Rosy Crucifixion Trilogy*, provoke questions concerning the representation of the visual in the literary text, as the inclusion of real and fictional paintings and painters in Miller's texts are frequent occurrences. Such widespread traces of painting in Miller's work mediate both the narrator and the reader's relation to the text and to the world and raise questions of the stability of language in depicting other forms of art. Indeed, through the narrator's experiences with these arts, the reader enters, by means of ekphrastic descriptions, the world of the depicted art to the extent that written language permits. In this article, I provide a mapping of the ways in which the act of painting surfaces in Miller's work, which I separate into three categories. I call the first *notional ekphrasis*, where episodes experienced by the narrator are described as if they could be paintings themselves or as resembling paintings that do not actually exist (that, in fact, Miller is creating in the passages). The second category involves the manner in which Miller refers to paintings and to painters in order better to articulate or depict an episode in his own text. In these passages the narrator suggests that the events around him, which he is incidentally describing, remind him of actual paintings or suggest to him that they could be, or should be, part of actual paintings. I term this writing function *referential ekphrasis*. Lastly, Miller describes himself in

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detail in the act of painting and refers to various elements concerning the process and the medium of painting, a form of writing that I dub *active ekphrasis*. Thus, by engaging in several rather complex and self-conscious forms of ekphrasis, Miller develops an innovative writing style that encourages the reader to reflect on the impossibility of language as a stable, communicative tool and to reconsider the act of writing as a straight-forward mode of representation, and instead to recognize that all language use is an ongoing mode of creation, blurring the lines between artistic mediums and the expectations from those mediums.

Keywords: Henry Miller, modernism, modernity, modernist studies, literary criticism, 20th century literature, American literature, prose fiction, language, fragmentation, ekphrasis, painting, the image, visual culture

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摘　　要

亨利・米勒的作品，尤其是俗稱的「方尖石塔（自傳）」三部曲，以及「薔薇十字架三部曲」（*The Rosy Crucifixion Trilogy*），觸發文學文本中視覺再現的問題。米勒的作品中實際與虛構的畫作與畫家，屢見不鮮；繪畫的痕跡無所不在，成了敘事者和讀者與文本和世界的關係之中介，從而引發語言在描述其他形式的藝術時，穩定度的問題。讀者透過敘事者的藝術經驗，藉由視覺描述，就書寫語言所及，進入藝術刻劃的世界。本篇論文中，我嘗試勾勒出繪畫行為浮顯在米勒的作品中的幾種方式，共分成三類。第一類是「觀念視覺藝術描繪」（*notional ekphrasis*）。敘事者所經驗的情節故事之描繪，猶如繪畫本身，或類似實際不存在的繪畫，亦即米勒在字裡行間創造出的繪畫。第二類則涵蓋米勒在其文本中，為進一步闡述或描繪某一段情節，而指涉繪畫及畫家的方式。許多相關章節中，敘事者暗示他不經意間描述的周遭事件令他回憶起實際的畫作，或者畫作之局部。我稱這種書寫功能為「指示視覺藝術描繪」（*referential ekphrasis*）。最後，米勒在繪畫行為中鉅細靡遺地描繪自我，並且涉及繪畫過程和媒介相關的各種元素，我稱這種書寫形式為「主動視覺藝術描繪」（*active ekphrasis*）。在投身幾種相當複雜、自覺的視覺藝術描繪（*ekphrasis*）形式的同時，米勒發展出嶄新的書寫風格，鼓勵讀者思

索語言作為穩定的溝通工具之不可能性，重新思考書寫行為作為直接無礙的再現模式，而體察到所有語言使用皆為生生不息的創造模式，不斷模糊藝術媒介及其期待之界限。

關鍵詞：亨利．米勒、現代主義、視覺藝術描繪、文學批評、繪畫、二十世紀文學、現代性、現代主義研究、美國文學、散文小說、語言、碎片化、意象、視覺文化

Henry Miller's Painterly Eye

Das Bild des Lebens. – Die Aufgabe, *das* Bild *des* Lebens zu malen, so oft sie auch von Dichtern und Philosophen gestellt wurde, ist trotzdem unsinnig: auch unter den Händen der größten Maler-Denker sind immer nur Bilder und Bildchen *aus einem* Leben, nämlich aus ihrem Leben, entstanden – und nichts anderes ist auch nur möglich. Im Werdenden kann sich ein Werdendes nicht als fest und dauernd, nicht als ein "das" spiegeln.[1] (*The picture of life.* – The task of painting *the* picture of life, however often poets and philosophers may pose it, is nonetheless senseless: even under the hands of the greatest of painter-thinkers all that has ever eventuated is pictures and miniatures *out of one* life, namely their own – and nothing else is even possible. Something in course of becoming cannot be reflected as a firm and lasting image, as a 'the', in something else in course of becoming.[2])

—Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)

In the informally named "Obelisk" trilogy (*Tropic of Cancer*, *Black Spring*, *Tropic of Capricorn*) and *The Rosy Crucifixion* trilogy (*Sexus*, *Nexus*, *Plexus*), Henry Miller (1891-1980) regularly discourses on the arts, specifically painting and literature and, very occasionally, music. Throughout these works, Miller makes extensive direct citations and references as well as oblique allusions to texts, paintings, writers, painters and musicians. Such widespread traces of these arts in Miller's texts mediate both the narrator and the reader's relation to the text and to the world. Taking Miller's interest in painting as its focus, this article explores the manner in which Miller engages his reader via "literary images" in his writing. By means of ekphrastic writing—using one artistic medium to remark on another; in this case,

[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches—Werke*, ed. Karl Schlechta (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1954, 1978, 1993) [Berlin: Directmedia Publishing GMBH, 2004, CD-ROM], 750.

[2] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 218.

painting through writing—the reader encounters the world of the depicted art. Yet there is more at stake in Miller than simply perspectival representation or an attempt to illuminate the qualities and form of painting through writing. It is the case, rather, that the ways in which these artistic elements enter Miller's texts are not always straightforward, and in fact they are multifarious. Generally speaking, the very act of portraying an artistic medium inside another opens the text up to a new set of questions concerning the nature of writing and reading. Miller references, but also creates, paintings in his texts, and it is in the possible limitations, or periphery, of those kinds of allusions that I am interested. Such appearances of paintings in Miller's work immediately create a distancing effect for the reader, in terms of the space of the text and the reader's ability to approach it as an unambiguous, readable body. By including these works of art in his text, Miller inhibits (or *alters*, to say the least) the reader's "view" not only of the text that he is writing but also the text that is further being portrayed in the writing. However, the different modes in which this occurs in Miller establish different effects.

In many instances, the narrator defines himself in unison, and comparison, with several artists in order to relate his frustration as a self-declared writer who is painstakingly in search of his art, that is to say (in all its peculiarity), in search of his words. The act of painting specifically surfaces in Miller's work in several ways, which I separate into three categories. There is what I call *notional ekphrasis* in Miller, where episodes experienced by the narrator are described as if they could be paintings themselves or as resembling paintings that do not actually exist (that, in fact, Miller is creating in the passages). The second category involves the manner in which Miller refers to paintings and to painters in order better to articulate or depict an episode in his own text. Although Miller never describes the actual paintings in much detail, there is a series of evocative ekphrastic descriptions or even announcements, so to speak, of an event corresponding to or resembling an existent painting. Again, these descriptions are not very "complete," but the passages are significant in the way that the narrator suggests that the events

around him, which he is incidentally describing, remind him of actual paintings or suggest to him that they could be, *or should be*, part of actual paintings. These descriptions of actual paintings are often brief and tightly woven into the scenes by the narrator, such that the descriptions of the narrator's environment are the focus, and less so the ekphrastic description of the comparison. I term this writing function to be a *referential ekphrasis*, because the interest is in how actual paintings can be referred to in order to "see" the scene occurring in the text. Lastly, Miller describes himself in detail in the act of painting and refers to various elements concerning the process and the medium of painting. Despite this last approach possibly appearing to be a mundane exercise that simply provides a step-by-step process of the act of painting, it ultimately produces surprising and innovative literary effects.

The Artist

To the extent that Miller is perpetually writing about the narrator's desire to become a writer, Miller's work itself reflects the desire of the reader to enter into the text and engage with the narrator in the process of writing. In this way, it is also the presence of these external sources—these artists—that flesh out Miller's text and give the reader a sense of access to the internal workings of the act of writing and to the external presence of those artists in the text. At the time same, it becomes immediately clear that this is an illusion; one that instantly vanishes in the act of reading, since of course access to this internal process is inherently impeded by the nature of writing as a tool necessarily separated from its material. In *The Literature of Silence* (1967), one of the few challenging and crucial works of criticism on Miller, Ihab Hassen writes: "He seems fated to write continuously in order that he may be cured forever of the disease of literature. In this sense, Henry Miller may be considered the first author of anti-literature… Language has become void; therefore words can only demonstrate their emptiness. Certainty in knowledge

is no longer possible; therefore epistemology must become parody."[3] In short, it is but limited descriptions through words that play with this sense of what a text can reveal about its own inner workings and about the external sources that it can include in itself. These other artists are, indeed, hardly present and only loosely described; often with a particular (and peculiar) purpose devised by the narrator. The reader, enticed by Miller to enter this seemingly ordinary world becoming extraordinary (in the eyes of the narrator—a typical figure like the reader himself—searching for his artistry through the very process of finding it), is confronted with a fragmented world, saturated with the presence of the often bizarre descriptions of artists and artworks. Life, as the narrator sees it, is frequently described as a work of art, implicitly and explicitly, or in terms that also describe works of art. Hassen writes, "…in Miller, literature pretends, erratically, to be life."[4] And so, the reader desperately wants to contact Miller's world and allow it to inflect his (as he is deceptively encouraged to do by Miller), just as, in a manner of speaking, the world of the other artists does so for Miller's narrator. However, this endeavor is interrupted by the troubling fact that the narrator, in many ways, is also one of the artists entering Miller's text, and Miller's text is precisely that: a text—a work of art—and not actually the innocent thoughts of a man seeking to become an artist.

Nexus, written in 1960, brings the Obelisk and *The Rosy Crucifixion* trilogies full circle, in that it ends Miller's period in New York (he is finally Paris-bound), after which begins the period in Paris, where *Tropic of Cancer* commences, which, of course, was Miller's first book, written in 1934. Temporally speaking then, the period of the narrator's life that concerns the reader here begins during his thirties in New York (described in *Tropic of Capricorn*, *Black Spring* and *The Rosy Crucifixion*) and continues into his

[3] Ihab Hassan, *The Literature of Silence: Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1967), 30.

[4] Hassan, *The Literature of Silence*, 13.

forties, which occur in Paris (described in *Tropic of Cancer* and *Black Spring*). Therefore, it is significant that *Nexus* is the text in which Miller produces a lengthy passage on the inability of his downtrodden, blue-collar neighborhood to produce any kind of artist, world-renowned or otherwise. This can be read as slightly ironic for the obvious fact that, by this time, Miller the actual writer has garnered a considerable amount of recognition as a literary figure. He writes, "Nowhere in the upholstered Gentile world I hailed from had I ever run into a genius, or even a near-genius. Even a bookshop was hard to find. Calendars, yes, oodles of them, supplied by the butcher or grocer. Never a Holbein, a Carpaccio, a Hiroshige, a Giotto, nor even a Rembrandt. Whistler, possibly but only his mother, that placid-looking creature all in black with hands folded in her lap, so resigned, so eminently respectable. No, never anything among us dreary Christians that smelled of art."[5] From this passage, I want first to investigate the sampling of artists whom Miller chooses as *not* possibly coming from his neighborhood. Hans Holbein (1460-1524), Vittore Carpaccio (c. 1460-1525), Giotto (c. 1267-1337) and Rembrandt (1606-1669) can collectively fall under the category of Renaissance painters. In the greater context of the passage, Miller is painting an air of sentimentality about his neighborhood, which falls in line with this Renaissance trajectory. However, this directly contrasts with Whistler's own, post-Renaissance "art for art's sake" motto. Yet, Whistler (1834-1903)—at least his mother—is considered as a possibility, but we are not really talking about Whistler's mother, are we? Miller is clearly referring to Whistler's 1871 painting "Arrangement in Gray and Black: Portrait of the Artist's Mother" (known popularly as "Whistler's Mother"). Perhaps the monochromatic and austere quality of "Whistler's Mother" permits Miller to appropriate it as part of the bleak and depressing state of his childhood neighborhood. In other words, as close as his neighborhood comes to producing a "genius" is being the subject of a genius's *depiction*. This foregrounds my next analysis on the descriptions Miller

[5] Henry Miller, *Nexus: The Rosy Crucifixion,* Part III (London: Granada Publishing Ltd., 1980), 221.

provides in the passage immediately prior to this one, which considers an eclectic collection of browbeaten immigrants who seek work and look to Miller for help: are these men who, like Whistler's mother, become immortalized not by their own doing but through the very genius of Henry Miller the writer?

Before turning to that topic, I would first like to consider the Hiroshige addition to the list of painters who could not possibly have come from Miller's neighborhood. Seeming to have been randomly thrown in the mix, Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858) was a Japanese painter who practiced in the ukiyo-e tradition, a process involving woodblock printing (allowing the paintings to be mass-produced finally bringing art into the hands of the general public) and often depicting scenes from the city and everyday life: the theatre, actors' portraits, beautiful women, fashion trends, scenes of a sexual nature and so on.[6] It may be more difficult to conclude why Miller includes Hiroshige in this list. However, Hiroshige and other Japanese ukiyo-e artists were heavily influential for French artists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, specifically the impressionists. Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890), for example, copied several of Hiroshige's prints, such as "Rain," and Edgar Degas (1834-1917) kept prints of Hiroshige, Katsushika Hokusai (1760-18949), Kitagawa Utamaro (1753-1806) and others in his private albums.[7] Yet, we are also armed with several other clues: in this instance,

[6] For more on the ukiyo-e tradition, see Susugu Yoshida and Roni Uever's *Ukiyo-E: 250 Years of Japanese Art* (New York: Gallery Books, 1991).

[7] Colta Feller Ives expands on the depth of influence of this type of Japanese art on French artists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries; specifically referring to Edouard Manet (1832-1883), Edgar Degas, Mary Cassat (1844-1926), Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947), Jean-Edouard Vuillard (1886-1940), Toulouse-Lautrec and Paul Gauguin (1848-1903). Thus, the significance or presence of Hiroshige in Paris during Miller's time in the thirties is not only likely, but also obvious. For more on the prevalence and influence of Japanese art in France during the early 20th century, see Ives' *The Great Wave: The Influence of Japanese Woodcuts on French Prints* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1974).

Miller is describing the masses, those who live and die in the dregs of the urban shuffle; he is not describing, for example, joyful adventures in the city of the *flâneur* or the Dandy; secondly, Miller is clearly a fan of beautiful women and of depicting sexuality in art; thirdly, Miller himself is an admirer of Japanese culture (and Asian culture generally, a fact that enters many of his texts, as in the short piece "China," where he finds being mistaken as having "Mongolian blood" very complimentary).[8] Thus, for Miller, as with the Renaissance masters, nothing so complex and admirable at Hiroshige could find its roots in the dead soil of a neglected, urban, American neighborhood. To put it simply, for Miller, there is nothing urbane, sexy or Japanese about Brooklyn.

Notional Ekphrasis

One of the most repeated themes in Miller's work is that of the relationship between the narrator's world and the world of art. For Miller, ekphrasis is a means to draw attention to this complicated relationship by having characters discuss painters, by himself depicting a scene in his life in terms of a painting, or by simply pondering the significance of art in life and life in art. Although *Nexus* often does not receive a lot of positive literary criticism, it contains some of the most interesting ekphrastic descriptions, or allusions, in all of Miller's work. These manifestations of paintings evoke this ekphrastic aesthetic in Miller, which, again, is to say that they reveal his profound interest in the perceived unclear, and perhaps forged, distinction between life and art. As such, in *Nexus* Miller discusses how indiscriminate groups of commonplace objects become meaningful sources of inspiration in

[8] See Miller's *Sextet* where he writes, "When I lived in Paris (1930-1940) I was dubbed by my friend Lawrence Durrell 'a Chinese rock-bottom man.' I have never received a greater compliment. I always think it possible I have Oriental blood in my veins. And by that I mean either Mongolian or Chinese. Many people, on meeting me for the first time, ask if I do not have Asiatic blood. This always pleases me immensely." Henry Miller, *Sextet* (Santa Barbara: Capra Press, 1977), 187.

his writing. In one instance, Miller recounts how he develops his "painter's eye" while ghost-writing for his wife Mona for her to "sell" them to Pop, a suitor and financial supporter of the couple. Here Miller reports on honing his skill, as a writer, in finding new material for Mona:

> Thus, not so strangely, I developed a kind of painter's eye. Often I made it my business to return to a certain spot in order to review a "still life" which I had passed too hurriedly the day before or three days before. The still life, as I term it, might be an artless arrangement of objects which no one in his sense would have bothered to look at twice. For example – a few playing cards lying face up on the sidewalk and next to them a toy pistol or the head of a missing chicken. Or an open parasol torn to shreds sticking out of a lumberjack's boot, and beside the boot a tattered copy of *The Golden Ass* pierced with a rusty jack-knife. Wondering what so fascinated me in these chance arrangements, it would suddenly dawn on me that I had detected similar configurations in the painter's world. Then it would be an all night task to recall which painting, which painter, and where I had first stumbled upon it. Extraordinary, when one takes up the pursuit of such chimeras, to discover what amazing trivia, what sheer insanity, infests some of the great masterpieces of art.[9]

This passage might strike the reader as somewhat perplexing. Miller writes that, while randomly walking around the city, he comes across a collection of everyday items, which he dubs a "still life," that is to say, "an artless arrangement of objects." However, the arrangements he describes do not seem to be those one actually *would* encounter haphazardly. He describes two such arrangements—the first: "a few playing cards lying face up on the sidewalk and next to them a toy pistol or the head of a missing chicken," and the second: "an open parasol torn to shreds sticking out of a lumberjack's boot, and beside the boot a tattered copy of *The Golden Ass* pierced with a rusty jack-knife."

[9] Miller, *Nexus*, 242.

He is delighted by such arrangements, because they remind him of possible, actual paintings, and he encourages himself not only to incorporate them into his own art but also to uncover where their very presence previously lies in the world of "the great masterpieces of art." In other words, he spends time researching paintings in the hope of finding these arrangements already on canvas. However, the question for the reader at this time might be, how is it that he encounters such a peculiar "artless arrangement of objects" that is in fact *nothing but* artful, in the sense that the collection of objects is considered an arrangement or even that such an arrangement would exist in the everyday world without having actually *been* arranged? Of course, what gives Miller his painter's eye is partly due to his creation of such manifestations of objects as occurring randomly in his world of inspiration.

Miller wants to assert that the peculiarity of these arrangements suggests that they are already contained in paintings. Indeed, there is nothing "real world" or random about them. Although the arrangements might be present in existent paintings, their presence as described by Miller brings the text to attention as an art object that is actively describing an arrangement, whether or not it is in a painting. In other words, at this moment, Miller engages the reader in an encounter with these objects outside their habitual nature, in a Heideggerian sense. That is to say, he takes such objects that are otherwise ready-to-hand (*zuhanden*)—objects which are taken for granted, so to speak (e.g. "a few playing cards," "a toy pistol," "a rusty jack-knife," etc.)—and deliberately makes them present-to-hand (*vorhanden*), in order to make them the object of his attention, this artistic attention that is the text being written. More than just this, however, Miller humorously instills these art arrangements into the so-called everyday world around him and then proceeds to depict them in his own work of art in a notional ekphrastic sense, in the sense that they should be, or even already are, works of art as he is encountering and subsequently describing them.

There are several passages in Miller where the narrator leads the reader to believe that the scene being portrayed resembles what could be a painting, even if the passage itself is not quite a "painterly" description. Instead, the narrator makes the overt suggestion of the scene as having a painterly quality. In the following passage from *Sexus*, Miller depicts an episode involving himself and his wife (called Mara in this instance) lying on the beach, after recovering from a sexual escapade undertaken by the sea. The tone is satirical but earnestly descriptive.

> We stretched ourselves out in the hollow of a suppurating sand dune next to a bed of waving stinkweed on the lee side of a macadamized road over which the emissaries of progress and enlightenment were rolling along with that familiar and soothing clatter which accompanies the smooth locomotion of spitting and farting contraptions of tin woven together by steel knitting needles. The sun was setting in the West as usual, not in splendor and radiance however but in disgust, like a gorgeous omelet engulfed by clouds of snot and phlegm. It was the ideal setting for love, such as the drugstores sell or rent between the covers of a handy pocket edition. I took off my shoes and leisurely deposited my big toe in the first notch of Mara's crotch. Her head was pointed South, mine North; we pillowed them on folded hands, our bodies relaxed and floating effortlessly in the magnetic drift, like two enormous twigs suspended on the surface of a gasoline lake. A visitor from the Renaissance, coming upon us unexpectedly, might well have assumed that we had become dislodged from a painting depicting the violent end of the mangy retinue of a Sybaritic doge. We were lying at the edge of a world in ruins, the composition being a rather precipitate study of perspective and foreshortening in which our prostrated figures served as a picaresque detail.[10]

[10] Henry Miller, *Sexus: The Rosy Crucifixion,* Part I (London: Panther Books, 1970), 133.

An issue that is raised here is how the scene might resemble a painting beyond the description provided by Miller, or how it is that Miller's description makes the scene take on a painterly quality. Either way, the allusions are present, and the images are stark, even if a complete "picture" is difficult to actually envision. The conclusion that Miller makes from his own description is that the scene in which he and Mara find themselves resembles a possible Renaissance painting, which, however random it may seem, appears to portray the sudden death of the followers of an obscure Italian magistrate ("the violent end of the mangy retinue of a Sybaritic doge"). In such a passage, Miller alerts the reader to the distance between writing and painting by providing a description of an event in "life" that seems to clearly resemble a painting but which obviously does not, in the sense that the images are extremely obtuse and abstract. As for the images themselves, then, of this comparison, there is a pus-spewing sand dune, a busy motorway, a horribly ugly setting sun, clouds of snot, and Miller with his toe wedged in the space between Mara's legs.

How then could this be mistaken for a Renaissance painting? The disconnection of the actual "artless arrangement of objects" amongst themselves, to use Miller's own expression, forces the reader to rethink the very idea that this could possibly *confuse* a "visitor from the Renaissance." The playfulness of the words, however, indicates how Miller is capable of giving the reader an opportunity to envision a multitude of images that are represented in a single passage. In other words, the reader must see Miller's toe in Mara's crotch, but he must also see that image as a painting that *looks like* and that *depicts* "the violent end of the mangy retinue of a Sybaritic doge." Miller's interest and ability in providing such an image in his writing is both a cheeky attempt to establish an image and a slippery incomplete image whose signification regresses infinitely. A passage from Paul Jahshan's important work *Henry Miller and the Surrealist Discourse of Excess* (2001) can be best used to understand this quality of writing in Miller. He writes the following:

> The text is not a substance, but a field; not a finite object, but something that cannot stop, that is always going to the limits of enumeration, always paradoxical; it is dilatory, practicing the infinite deferment of the signified, and at ease in the signifier; it is structured but off-centered, always without closure; it is plural, not only in the sense of having several meanings but also because its plurality is irreducible; it answers not to interpretation but to dissemination; it is not caught up in filiation but in intertextuality; the approach to it is through pleasure, and it is thus bound to *jouissance*."[11]

Ultimately, the images that the reader is creating from the passage are directed by both what he "sees" and what Miller indicates he is "seeing." Furthermore, the reader also encounters a *mise-en-abîme* effect, where he must also see the Renaissance visitor "coming upon" them unexpectedly and seeing the painting himself. What precisely, then, would the visitor see: "a gorgeous omelet engulfed by clouds of snot and phlegm," or "the violent end of the mangy retinue of a Sybaritic doge"? This is visually problematic, as they are ultimately two descriptions for the same thing.

Miller announces his wonderfully complicated entanglement with painting at the beginning of *Nexus:* "Like Balzac, I live with imaginary paintings. Even the frames are imaginary."[12] There are several ways to understand this claim. Like Balzac (1799-1850), Miller attempts to write the truth into his text. Like Balzac, Miller is aware of the impossibility of this endeavor and knows very well that the world of the text is populated with images only of the imagination—that there is a gap between the text and the actual world. However, whereas Balzac's descriptions are presented as though straight-forward, Miller does not attempt to write as though the words are revealing descriptions but as creations in themselves, and he does so in a

[11] Paul Jahshan, *Henry Miller and the Surrealist Discourse of Excess: A Post-Structuralist Reading* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 15.

[12] Miller, *Sexus,* 8.

manner that is purposely aware of its distancing effect from the reader. For this reason, Jahshan makes the following claim: "With the Millerian text, however, frames are continuously broken and built and broken again through a strategically-minded technique which very effectively allocates the peaks and troughs of such a dialectic movement."[13] Jahshan calls Miller a "wrestler" for this reason, suggesting he uses and breaks such literary rules as he sees fit. He is excessive, unpredictable and seemingly "inconsistent,"[14] keeping the reader on edge in terms of the always elusive concreteness of any given literary image. As such, then, Balzac's imaginary paintings, like any images the text instills in the reader's mind, owe their identity to their "mode of presentation"[15] in the fiction. In other words, the way in which they are presented in the fiction of the text is precisely what establishes them as existent at all.

There is another way to read this involving a reference to Balzac's short story "Le chef-d'œuvre inconnu" ("Unknown Masterpiece"), where the old painter, Frenhofer, physically resembles "une toile de Rembrandt marchant silencieusement et sans cadre dans la noire atmosphère que s'est appropriée ce grand peintre."[16] ("one of Rembrandt's canvases, without a frame, walking silently through the dark atmosphere which that great painter made his own."[17]) This allusion suggests that, again in his own text, Miller is blurring the distinction between life and art. Indeed, Frenhofer goes mad once he recognizes the impossibility of completely manifesting life in painting. That is to say, "Il a profondément médité sur les couleurs, sur la vérité absolue de la ligne ; mais, à force de recherches, il est arrivé à douter de l'objet même

[13] Miller, *Sexus*, 72.

[14] Miller, *Sexus*, 17.

[15] Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 88.

[16] Honoré de Balzac, "Le chef-d'œuvre inconnu," in *Contes oubliés du XIXe siècle* (Montreal: Cercle du livre de France, 1949), 40.

[17] Honoré de Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece*, http://cybersybils.com/Balzac.html.

de ses recherches."[18] ("He has meditated deeply on coloring, on the absolute accuracy of the line; but he has investigated so much that he has at last reached the point of doubting the very object of his investigations."[19]) In learning the secret to "relief" in painting by the great Mabuse, Frenhofer finally loses his faith in painting (through madness), because it is revealed to him, he believes, that indeed painting can only ever be imitation. Subsequently, he is unable to finish any of his paintings, because he finds that if life, its very essence, cannot be portrayed on the flat canvas, then the painting will never be capable of portraying what it claims to portray. There will always be a deficit.

Before his final madness, Frenhofer criticizes a painting by his student Porbus for this very shortcoming. Looking at Porbus' rendition of *Marie the Egyptian*, he complains,

> Au premier aspect, elle semble admirable ; mais, au second coup d'oeil on s'aperçoit qu'elle est collée au fond de la toile et qu'on ne pourrait pas faire le tour de son corps. C'est une silhouette qui n'a qu'une seule face, c'est une apparence découpée, une image qui ne saurait se retourner, ni changer de position.[20] (At first glance, she seems admirable; but when you look again, you see that she is glued to the canvas, and that you cannot walk around her. She is a silhouette with a single face, a cut out figure, an image which cannot turn or change its position.[21])

Of course this very description applies not only to the figure in the painting, but to the characters living on the printed page as well. The irony here is not so much in Balzac, as it is in the allusion by Miller and in my argument. In other words, Miller knows the text, like the painting, is flat. As Maurice Blanchot (1907-2003) suggests, "Le langage fait comme si nous pouvions voir

[18] Balzac, "Le chef-d'œuvre inconnu," 62.

[19] Balzac, "The Unknown Masterpiece," hypertext.

[20] Balzac, "Le chef-d'œuvre inconnu," 43.

[21] Balzac, "The Unknown Masterpiece," hypertext.

la chose de tous les côtés."[22] ("Language acts as though we were able to see the thing from all sides."[23]) For Miller this is not a weakness of writing or of art, in general, as it is for Frenhofer, who continues: "Il y a de la vérité ici… Puis, ici… Mais, là… tout est faux,"[24] ("There is truth here…and here… But here… all is false,"[25]) pointing to various parts of the woman's body painted on Porbus's canvas. He refers to a hand as an example: "une main ne tient pas seulement au corps, elle exprime et continue une pensée qu'il faut saisir et rendre."[26] ("a hand is not simply a part of the body, it expresses and continues a thought which we must grasp and render."[27]) Frenhofer insists that the value in painting is not in the exactness of its imitation of an actual object, but in its expression of spirit and essence: namely, that which the observer does *not* see when regarding the actual object.

This passage on Balzac comes near the beginning of *Nexus*, the first line of which peculiarly begins, "WOOF! Woof woof! *Woof! Woof!*"[28] and proceeds into a surreal monologue concerning the tremendously dysfunctional relationship that Miller has with his wife and her lover, leading him to adopt this intensely submissive, canine behavior. Perhaps, like Frenhofer, the narrator is going mad in his interest to render the impossible: truth in art. Art has become solely imaginary, and Miller once again is becoming-animal. "*Woof! Woof woof!*" is interjected between each paragraph of this first page, the content of which makes reference to Dante, Strindberg, a collection of Miller's "Alma Mater" classmates and then a long list of painters. Miller reminisces on the latter: "I used to move from wall to wall greeting this one

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[22] Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 40.

[23] Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 28.

[24] Balzac, "Le chef-d'œuvre inconnu," 45.

[25] Balzac, "The Unknown Masterpiece," hypertext.

[26] Balzac, "Le chef-d'œuvre inconnu," 46.

[27] Balzac, "The Unknown Masterpiece," hypertext.

[28] Miller, *Nexus*, 7.

and that, all old friends: Leon Bakst, Whistler, Lovis Corinth, Brueghel the Elder, Botticelli, Bosch, Giotto, Cimabue, Piero della Francesca, Grunewald, Holbein, Lucas Cranach, Van Gogh, Utrillo, Gauguin, Piranesi, Utamaro, Hokusai, Hiroshige – and the Wailing Wall. Goya too, and Turner."[29] This is immediately followed by a lamentation regarding these painters: "The walls are bare now,"[30] which then leads directly into the Balzac comparison. Where, or what, are these imaginary paintings of Balzac? Frenhofer from Balzac's "Le chef-d'œuvre inconnu" ("Untitled Masterpiece") cannot complete this grand masterpiece, because he recognizes that a perfect work of art *is only the actual object itself* and is, thus, no longer a work of art. Were these painters who used to cover Miller's walls at one time like Frenhofer, "one of Rembrandt's canvases, without a frame," and therefore the walls are bare due to Miller's maddening revelation that art is not life? Or is it perhaps that the paintings themselves are lost as actual objects due to Miller's maddening revelation that literature can only create imaginary paintings? Either way, both of these explanations require the reader to take a second glance at the text: in the first instance, Miller is reminding his reader that he is not in the text himself (art is not life). In the second instance, as hard as Miller tries to depict another art (even writing itself) in his text, he falls short and can only provide imaginaries, "collée au fond de la toile" ("glued to the canvas")—or, perhaps, the page—by the words themselves. Thus, because "[t]he walls are bare now," Miller could be suggesting that he has lost his ability to write. In other words, Miller's own world has been stripped of its imaginary content, or he has lost his ability to *create*, to use his imagination to create the interior world of the fiction as a result of this revelation, which is intertwined with the breakdown of his marriage (i.e. the collapse of his sense of being-in-the-world). He can recall only "some happy time – when? how distant? what planet?"[31] when his "old friends," the painters, accompanied him.

[29] Miller, *Nexus*, 7-8.

[30] Miller, *Nexus*, 8.

[31] Miller, *Nexus*, 7.

Much of this ekphrastic quality in Miller, as well as his focus on memory, likely comes from his interest in Proust (1871-1922). The last passage considered in this section is rather long, which I do not wish to truncate, but which I divide into two parts. They appear back to back, in a certain sense, in *Tropic of Cancer*. First, Miller refers to Proust's *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* (*In a Budding Grove*), which leads him into a long discourse on Matisse. Here is the first passage:

> It is only later, in the afternoon, when I find myself in an art gallery on the Rue de Sèze, surrounded by the men and women of Matisse, that I am drawn back again to the proper precincts of the human world. On the threshold of that big hall whose walls are now ablaze, I pause a moment to recover from the shock which one experiences when the habitual gray of the world is rent asunder and the color of life splashes forth in song and poem. I find myself in a world so natural, so complete, that I am lost. I have the sensation of being immersed in the very plexus of life, focal from whatever place, position or attitude I take my stance. Lost as when once I sank into the quick of a budding grove and seated in the dining room of that enormous world of Balbec, I caught for the first time the profound meaning of those interior stills which manifest their presence through the exorcism of sight and touch. Standing on the threshold of that world which Matisse has created I re-experienced the power of that revelation which had permitted Proust to so deform the picture of life that only those who, like himself, are sensible to the alchemy of sound and sense, are capable of transforming the negative reality of life into the substantial and significant outlines of art. Only those who can admit the light into their gizzards can translate what is there in the heart. Vividly now I recall how the glint and sparkle of light caroming from the massive chandeliers splintered and ran blood, flecking the tips of the waves that beat monotonously on the dull gold outside the windows. On the beach, masts and chimneys interlaced, and like a fuliginous shadow

> the figure of Albertine gliding through the surf, fusing into the mysterious quick and prism of a protoplasmic realm, uniting her shadow to the dream and harbinger of death. With the close of day, pain rising like a mist from the earth, sorrow closing in, shuttering the endless vista of sea and sky. Two waxen hands lying listlessly on the bedspread and along the pale veins the fluted murmur of a shell repeating the legend at its birth.[32]

To set the scene: the narrator is in an art gallery viewing paintings by Matisse, which recall for him certain passages in Proust. It is interesting that he first refers to Matisse's paintings as "song and poem," as this surfaces again in the longer passage on Matisse, to come. The presence of Matisse, here in *Tropic of Cancer*, seems somewhat parallel to my example with Balzac's "imaginary paintings" in *Nexus*. For, in this reference, with the presence of Matisse, the "walls are now blaze" with "the color of life." There is something about Matisse that evokes, for Miller, a very literary impression, whereas Balzac evokes something painterly, but it is a painterly quality in terms of lack. There is the absence of painting in Balzac (or perhaps simply an *imagination* of painting), whereas there is the presence of literature in Matisse.

Indeed, before continuing to paint a picture of the effects that Matisse has on Miller in the passage to follow, he first engages in a reverie on Proust, which, as already suggested, is drawn out of him by looking at paintings by Matisse. The reflections, then, on Proust conjure up images that themselves are already notionally ekphrastic in Proust's work. That is to say, Miller is referring to instances in *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*)—likely, the second volume, more specifically—that describe the scene as if it were a Matisse painting.[33] Proust, to be sure, is not directly describing a

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[32] Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 162-163.

[33] This brings to mind Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) and her *portrait in prose* "Matisse" (first published in a special issue of *Camera Work* in August 1912), and William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) with his ekphrastic piece, influenced by Stein's, "A Matisse" from *Imaginations*

Matisse painting in his text but only what he sees before him, which, as Miller reads Proust, appears to resemble for him a Matisse painting. The descriptions, by Proust indirectly, are provided in Miller's words while using the same vocabulary and objects found in Proust's text: "the glint and sparkle of light caroming from the massive chandeliers," "the tips of the waves that beat monotonously on the dull gold outside the windows," "the figure of Albertine gliding through the surf." Curiously, however, Miller *should be* describing a Matisse painting, as he is presently in the art gallery with the images before him. Yet, cleverly, Miller, instead, describes Proust's descriptions of Matisse, which themselves are notionally ekphrastic, but without actually citing Proust. The reader of course knows Miller is "using" Proust (and not referring directly to the Matisse before him) in a referentially ekphrastic manner, if not simply based on the reference to Albertine.

The relationship of the reader to Miller's text is complicated through both the inner text of the Matisse painting in front of Miller, which he is indirectly describing *by way of* Proust, and the Proustian text that he recalls *on account of* the Matisse paintings. Again, Matisse evokes Proust for Miller, who then describes Proust in a manner that evokes Matisse. The very next paragraph beings with the following passage:

> In every poem by Matisse there is the history of a particle of human flesh which refused the consummation of death. The whole run of flesh, from hair to nails, expresses the miracle of breathing, as if the inner eye, in its thirst for a greater reality, had converted the pores of the flesh into hungry seeing mouths. By whatever vision one passes there is the odor and the sound of voyage. It is impossible to gaze at

(New York: New Directions, 1921). Both writers experimented with pictorial methods of writing, and both incidentally influenced Miller to some degree. For more on Stein, Williams and others in relation to the development of American modernism and the interplay between writing and painting, see Jay Bochner's *An American Lens: Scenes from Alfred Stieglitz's New York Secession* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005).

> even a corner of his dreams without feeling the lift of the wave and the cool of flying spray. He stands at the helm peering with steady blue eyes into the portfolio of time. Into what distant corners has he not thrown his long, slanting gaze? Looking down the vast promontory of his nose he has beheld everything—the Cordilleras falling away into the Pacific, the history of the Diaspora done in vellum, shutters fluting the froufrou of the beach, the piano curving like a conch, corollas giving out diapasons of light, chameleons squirming under the book press, seraglios expiring in oceans of dust, music issuing like fire from the hidden chromosphere of pain, and spore and madrepore fructifying the earth, navels vomiting their bright spawn of anguish….He is a bright sage, a dancing seer who, with a sweep of the brush, removes the ugly scaffold to which the body of man is chained by the incontrovertible facts of life. He it is, if any man today possesses the gift, who knows where to dissolve the human figure, who has the courage to sacrifice an harmonious line in order to detect the rhythm and murmur of the blood, who takes the light that has been refracted inside him and lets it flood the keyboard of color. Behind the minutiae, the chaos, the mockery of life, he detects the invisible pattern; he announces his discoveries in the metaphysical pigment of space. No searching for formulae, no crucifixion of ideas, no compulsion other than to create. Even as the world goes to smash there is one man who remains at the core, who becomes more solidly fixed and anchored, more centrifugal as the process of dissolution quickens.[34]

To return, then, to Miller's reference to this world of "song and poem" that is produced by Matisse's paintings, it should be noted that the passage above also makes reference to Matisse's individual paintings as *poems*. If we bear in mind the complex arrangement of words in this passage, we can see that

[34] Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*, 163-164.

Matisse does, in many ways, become the literary figure describing "the color of life" for Miller's reader. That is to say, Miller is announcing that the ultimate inspiration and foundation of these passages are attributable back to his experience of viewing Matisse, which recalls Proust, which recalls Matisse.

Perhaps the most telling phrase in this passage is the following: "I caught for the first time the profound meaning of those interior stills which manifest their presence through the exorcism of sight and touch."[35] In this moment of incredible clarity, Miller makes the observation that Proust's brilliance as a painter, conversely, is the beauty of his descriptions of painting through words ("the exorcism of sight and touch"). The painting might itself become one of Balzac's imaginaries: a product of the text, in the text. And, yet, the space between Proust and Balzac, for Miller, might be Proust's deliberate penetration of the image in the text, such that he could "so deform the picture of life" in order to transform "the negative reality of life into the substantial and significant outlines of art,"[36] whereas Balzac keeps his paintings hidden in the text. They remain imaginary.

Referential Ekphrasis

Even though several of the passages that I refer to in the previous section include certain forms of actual ekphrastic descriptions, they only do so indirectly, in the sense that the paintings that are referred to are imaginary (except, possibly, in the case of the Proust/Matisse passage, but even that becomes ekphrastically complicated and "imaginary," since the descriptions of Matisse are mediated through Proust, and the descriptions of Proust are mediated through Matisse. Furthermore, none of the actual descriptions seek to represent anything from either Proust or Matisse directly). This section investigates the passages in which Miller directly references paintings. At the same time, these ekphrastic descriptions are not for the sake of illuminating

[35] Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*, 163.

[36] Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*, 163.

qualities of the paintings, as in the last section, but to emphasize the painterly qualities present in the actual scenes of the narrator's life. In this way, then, Miller develops a challenging literary claim distinguishing between how, in notional ekphrasis, life is knowable only through artistic description and, in referential ekphrasis, art is a tool used to illuminate already-present life. Miller exposes his reader to the problematic quality of such a distinction, insofar as explications of any sort are mediated through a form of art, writing, that is used to reflect upon events in the life of the narrator, who is also the author. Furthermore, this includes events that involve other arts, namely painting, that exist in the "external" world within the text as well as beyond the text. Subsequently, how the arts that are being referenced inform and are informed by writing is always blurred and remains at the forefront of Miller's own analysis.

In the beginning of *Plexus*, Miller makes a brief reference to Rembrandt. The narrator is walking at night through the ghetto of New York's East Side, a poverty-stricken district where many of the messengers come from who work at the telegraph company where Miller is the hiring manager. Miller is moved by the neighborhood's tragic Old-Worldliness—the shabbiness, the depravity, the exhaustion—and is "stirred to the roots" by the sensation that "[i]t was like coming home."[37] His description of the neighborhood takes on a referential ekphrastic character.

> The quality that got me most of all was the pullulation. Everything was struggling towards the light in glorious profusion. Everything burgeoned and gleamed, just as in the murky canvases of Rembrandt. One was constantly being surprised, often by the homeliest trifles. It was the world of my childhood wherein common everyday objects acquired a sacred character. These poor despised aliens were living with the discarded objects of a world which had moved on. For me they were living out a past which had been abruptly stifled. Their

[37] Henry Miller, *Plexus: The Rosy Crucifixion,* Part II (London: Panther Books, 1969), 22.

> bread was still a good bread which one could eat without butter or jam. Their kerosene lamps gave their rooms a holy glow. The bed always loomed large and inviting, the furniture was old but comfortable. It was a constant source of wonder to me how clean and orderly were the interiors of these hideous edifices which seemed to be crumbling to bits. Nothing can be more elegant than a bare poverty-stricken home which is clean and fully of peace. I saw hundreds of such homes in my search for vagrant boys. Many of these unexpected scenes we came upon in the dead of night were like illustrated pages from the Old Testament.[38]

There are two sets of referential ekphrastic images evoked in this passage: Rembrandt and the illustrated Old Testament. Obviously, the reader never considers such a description to be an ekphrastic portrayal from either a Rembrandt or of the Old Testament. In a case such as this one, Miller is relying on the reader's own knowledge of a Rembrandt or of an illustrated Old Testament in order to convey the image of the East Side ghetto. Speaking about such literary descriptions of the city by Miller, as well as and the black-and-white images of Hungarian-born French photographer Brassaï, contemporary Miller critic Caroline Blinder writes in *A Self-Made Surrealist* (2000), "For Miller the key issue is not whether the writer/photographer *can* assimilate the urban landscape around him, but *how* one does this successfully. Ultimately the aim is to recognize the emotional impact of the city on the writer and photographer and not to focus only on the finished image or text."[39] Indeed, descriptions of the "holy glow" of the kerosene lamps, the "hideous edifices," the bed that "always loomed large and inviting" and how everything "burgeoned and gleamed" bring to mind "the murky canvases of Rembrandt" and "illustrated pages from the Old Testament" and not necessarily a

[38] Miller, *Plexus*, 22.

[39] Caroline Blinder, *A Self-Made Surrealist: Ideology and Aesthetics in the Work of Henry Miller* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Camden House, 2000), 72.

"realistic" portrayal of the East Side ghetto. Thus, if the reader is familiar with such paintings, he can aptly envision the images in the text or at least have a better sense of the tone that Miller is trying to create for a mental representation of the East Side ghetto. The ekphrasis here may serve as an aid in the description of the actual scene. However, as Miller would have it, it also works in the converse, demonstrating again Miller's literary painter's eye: the description he provides of the ghetto can conjure for the reader what a Rembrandt painting *might* look like or what an illustrated Old Testament *might* look like. Yet what is always implicit in these descriptions of Miller's is that nothing can be rendered completely, or at least a literary explanation of a scene according to a painterly description naturally and necessarily removes the reader double-fold from what the narrator is actually seeing. And, of course, what the narrator is "actually" seeing, is itself a fiction that only ever is, or includes, whatever elements Miller provides.

There is also something else that is interesting about this passage. Miller identifies the objects of this ghetto world with the world of his childhood, "wherein common everyday objects acquired a sacred character." This brings to mind the aforementioned phenomenological issue of an object being ready-to-hand (*zuhanden*) or present-to-hand (*vorhanden*).[40] The objects that compose the neighborhood are no longer everyday objects (present-to-hand) for Miller. They are ready-to-hand in this description, as he describes them with his awareness of their being. They are almost *not real* in the sense

[40] Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*) was published in Germany in 1927, and thus it should be noted that it is very likely Miller read this work (indeed, in *Nexus* Miller directly refers to Heidegger while describing, humorously to some extent, the elements that exist in the writer's world: "I have my own world, a *Graben* of a world, cluttered with Vespasiennes, Miros and Heideggers, bidets, a lone Yeshiva Bocher, cantors who sing like clarinets, divas who swim in their own fat, bugle busters and troikas that rush like the wind…" [Miller, *Nexus*, 246]). At any rate, the case can be made, as I here suggest, that Miller was highly influenced by Heidegger's philosophy of hermeneutics, or at least that there is some value to reading Miller with a sense of Heidegger's philosophy invested in it.

that they are being considered in light of their potential presence in a painting. Like a child who is first discovering the world and who confronts objects with an ontological curiosity (giving them "a sacred character"), Miller is able to see the neighborhood as something to be regarded in itself, in the sense of being used (even conceptually); and, specifically, *to be used in a painting*. How these objects are described for the reader illuminates Miller's "painter's eye," which demands a distancing from the object (a readiness-to-hand) [*Zuhandenheit*]). Thus, Miller regards the neighborhood with a consciousness of the objects in a manner in which their everydayness is lost, and their presence as objects invokes the Proustian concept of the *zone d'évaporation* ("zone of evaporation") that exists on the surface of, or at the meeting, between the object perceived and the subject perceiving. This subject/object relation affects not only how an object in a text is expressed by the describing subject and how that distance is established and necessarily maintained between the two, but also how the use of words to "depict" paintings parallels that awkward and insurmountable relation between the subject and object, in terms of the way in which one mode is favored over another, that is to say, prioritized. In other words, the subject (the word) dictates the presence of the object (the painting). As W. J. T. Mitchell writes, "The 'differences' between images and language are not merely formal matters: they are, in practice, linked to things like the difference between the (speaking) self and the (seen) other; between telling and showing; between 'hearsay' and 'eyewitness' testimony; between words (heard, quoted, inscribed) and objects or actions (seen, depicted, described); between sensory channels, traditions of representation, and modes of experience."[41] This understanding is significant not just for the aforementioned episode, but also within the larger context of Miller's writing. It is a repeated motif and one which can be used to better understand how Miller's writing approaches writing and approaches the objects that surface in writing as deliberately mechanical, artificial and,

[41] W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 5.

subsequently, playful in his use of them—in this instance specifically, paintings or objects that are depicted in paintings in the text.

A particularly poignant example in which Miller uses a well-known painting to describe a scene in the life of the narrator occurs in *Nexus*. This incident entails the first meeting between Miller and his wife with their neighborhood shop-owner, Reb. In the brief introduction to Reb's "corner stationary store," Miller provides a referential ekphrastic description.

> It was an old-time establishment run by a Jewish family. Immediately I entered I took a fancy to the place; it had that faded, somnolescent air of the little shops I used to patronize as a boy when looking for a chocolate cream drop or a bag of Spanish peanuts. The owner of the place was seated at a table in a dim corner of the store, playing chess with a friend. The way they were hunched over the board reminded me of celebrated paintings, Cézanne's card players particularly. They heavy man continued to study the board while the owner waited on us.[42]

The reference is short and direct. But, again, the intention is to evoke an image distinct from the description of Reb's shop—that of the painting by Paul Cézanne (1839-1906), or any number of "celebrated paintings" possibly, although no others have been named—in order to infuse the description at hand with the mental image of the painting. The weight is on the description of the shop, but it can only be supported by the already-present mental image of the Cézanne painting. Thus, to "see" Reb playing chess with his friend, the reader envisions Cézanne's painting and installs it in Miller's narrative. So, in fact, in some sense, Reb and his friend resemble the men of the painting. Even if the reader is unfamiliar with the Cézanne painting, it is still present in the description, such that the reader is forced to envision something less actual than the chess-playing taking place (as in the previous case of the ghetto

[42] Miller, *Nexus*, 187.

resembling a Rembrandt painting or an illustrated Old Testament). That is to say, there is a painterly quality to the actual scene, or, more accurately, Miller creates a passage imbued to the core with this painterly quality.

One small detail that makes this ekphrastic example take on new significance is the fact that there are actually two Cézanne paintings entitled "Les joueurs de cartes" ("The Card Players"). In the first, two men are alone playing cards, whereas in the second, there are also a man and a girl observing. In this moment of description, then, Miller and Mona have entered Cézanne's painting (or, perhaps, they have led it into creation in the text). Even though it might be Miller himself who is observing the painting in order to describe it to the reader (creating the problem as to how Miller is able to be inside and outside the painting), perhaps it is instead the reader who is observing the painting *with Miller in it*, as he is reading the description. In this way, Miller makes several things clear: *there is a reader*, the reader is outside the text and Miller is both inside, as narrator, and outside, as writer. In other words, a text is never as sharp, or as flat, as a painting.

Active Ekphrasis

The chapter in *Black Spring* called "The Angel Is My Watermark!" is entirely concerned with Miller's own activity of painting. He states his intention in the first line: "The object of these pages is to relate the genesis of a masterpiece. The masterpiece is hanging on the wall in front of me; it is dry now. I am putting this down to remember the process, because I shall probably never do another like it."[43] In this chapter, Miller does indeed go through every step of the painting process, including the café excursions he makes to get away from the frustration that the process occasionally induces in him. Yet, instead of explicating those steps, I aim to discuss how one medium is used to describe another and to consider the effects of those passages on the reader. Miller himself, in writing out the steps, hopes again to remind the reader of the

[43] Henry Miller, *Black Spring* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 57.

curious relationship between art and life and between writing and painting. Indeed, this second relation informs the former for Miller, insofar as it this kind of self-conscious ekphrasis that is used to blur the line between art and life.

In *Henry Miller and Narrative Form*, James Decker makes an important observation. Speaking specifically of "The Angel Is My Watermark!" he writes, "This anecdote is the raison d'être of spiral form: the impossibility of revealing more than a shadow of the passionate color behind the 'facts'."[44] The more Miller writes, the further he gets from describing his painting, despite the writer's (and reader's) intuitive impulse to believe the contrary. Indeed, as Decker continues, "Spiral from, often derided as no form at all, privileges the color of life over the black and white ideologies that force individuals to capitulate to reason and murder their instincts."[45] This is not to suggest that Miller is unreasonable, but simply that it is impossible and counterproductive to wedge experimentation back into the ideologies from which it is breaking free, or at least revealing as misguiding, apparitional forces. Over the course of the many descriptions of Miller I include here, there is the overwhelming academic compulsion to make divisions and decisions in terms of meaning in the text. But this is precisely what Miller urges us against by employing this nebulous technique, what Decker calls *spiral form*.[46] Miller calls a spade a spade: "All live, interesting data is labeled minus. When you find the plus equivalent you have—*nothing*. You have that imaginary, momentary something called 'a balance.' A balance never *is*. It's a fraud, like

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[44] James M. Decker, *Henry Miller and Narrative Form: Constructing the Self, Rejecting Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 81-82.

[45] Decker, *Henry Miller and Narrative Form*, 82.

[46] Decker notes that Miller's use of spiral form predates Joseph Frank's notion of spatial form of 1945, which essentially describes the same style. Frank describes the nonlinear story as of "lyric organization." Separate plots point to and away from chronologically, emotionally, logically preceding and succeeding ones. This results in a series of images with "no comprehensible relationship in time" (Decker, *Henry Miller and Narrative Form*, 9).

stopping the clock, or like calling a truce. You strike a balance in order to add a hypothetical weight, in order to create a reason for your existence."[47] As Miller begins the process of painting his "masterpiece," he goes through an explanation of how the presence of art complicates a word as it unsuccessfully seeks to place a definite meaning or definition on it. Art, the unexplainable, is the ever-present "minus" in society. That is to say, it exists in a space between reason and the senses. The endeavor then is to "strike a balance," which tends toward developing a coherent, stable method of designation in order to name and separate concepts into reduced binary forms, which will then "create a reason for [our] existence." The minus, in some ways, is desire itself: the mode for continuing, in search of meaning. But, as Miller calls the balance "a fraud," the idea of desire as a negative force diminishes. Miller encourages the idea of modern art as an expression of the multiple. It does not let itself be reduced to a single meaning, a single form. As Jahshan notes, "The value of the text does not reside in what it *means*, in the signified, but in the signifier itself."[48] For Miler, the literary text is also like a painting in that it attempts to present itself as an image that may appear as a linear manifestation, but it is in fact, a complex web of shades, forms, colors, angles, lights, materials and, most importantly, perspectives. "The Angel Is My Watermark!" is a demonstration of Miller's interest in allowing the literary text to further bend mediums, subvert expectations and manipulate conventions in order to assert that negativity as a form itself.

"The Angel Is My Watermark!" is an experiment in the possibilities of the form of the literary text or novel, where, one might say, Miller is writing about his process of painting. One also might say that as he is certainly not doing any commonly accepted or easily apprehended, straightforward descriptions of the painting process. Indeed, the painting ("the masterpiece"), about which he is writing, is woven in with diverse descriptions and circuitous

[47] Miller, *Black Spring*, 74.

[48] Jahshan, *Henry Miller and the Surrealist Discourse of Excess*, 149.

monologues that interfere with the description of the painting itself, even though, supposedly, these descriptions are part of it. This chapter of *Black Spring*, indeed, enforces Hassan's claim of Miller: "He begins by forcing art back to life; he ends by refusing to art a permanent ontological reality."[49] At the end of the chapter, Miller poses the reader a series of questions about his now-completed painting:

> My masterpiece! It's like a splinter under the nail. I ask you, now that you are looking at it, do you see in it the lakes beyond the Urals? do you see the mad Kotchei balancing himself with a paper parasol? do you see the arch of Trajan breaking through the smoke of Asia? do you see the penguins thawing in the Himalayas? do you see the Creeks and the Seminoles gliding through the cemetery gates? do you see the fresco from the Upper Nile, with its flying geese, its bats and aviaries? do you see the marvelous pommels of the Crusaders and the saliva that washed them down? do you see the wigwams belching fire? do you see the alkali sinks and the mule bones and the gleaming borax? do you see the tomb of Belshazzar, or the ghoul who is rifling it? do you see the new mouths which the Colorado will open up? do you see the starfish lying on their backs and the molecules supporting them? do you see the bursting eyes of Alexander, or the grief that inspired it? do you see the ink on which the squibs are feeding?[50]

Before answering Miller's questions, it is necessary to backtrack for a moment. It should be clear by now that Miller is not writing about painting in any conventional sense here. The act of writing for Miller is an engagement with the instability of language, of writing itself and of the nature of art. And what is art? This is precisely the question that cannot be answered regardless of the amount of words that Miller produces. He can say that it is an activity that is

[49] Hassan, *The Literature of Silence*, 56.

[50] Miller, *Black Spring*, 75.

distinct from the activity of living but one that remains indefinable, and that distinction remains blurred.

Miller was himself an avid watercolorist (if, arguably, not a very good one). Interspersed between analysis and reverie, then, he comments directly on the process of creating his self-declared masterpiece (possibly with tongue-in-cheek). He begins painting a horse, which is described quite humorously: "The tail isn't in yet, but I've left an opening just above the asshole. The tail can be put in any time. The main thing is to get him into action, to make him prance like. So I twist the front legs up. Part of him is in motion, the rest is standing stock still. With the proper kind of tail I could turn him into a fine kangaroo."[51] As the painting begins to take form (there is now a man, a bridge, houses and a gondola), Miller inadvertently adds flames to the houses, and explains the resulting fallout: "The result of my incendiarism is that I've singed the horse's back. Now he's neither a horse nor a zebra. He's become a fire-eating dragon. And where the missing tail belonged there is now a bunch of fire-crackers, and with a bunch of fire-crackers up his ass not even an Ionian horse can preserve his dignity. I could, of course, go on to make a real dragon; but this conversion and patching-up is getting on my nerves. If you start with a horse you ought to keep it a horse—or eliminate it entirely."[52] Indeed, in the next paragraph he writes, "With a solid opaque green and indigo I blot the horse out. In my mind, to be sure, he's still there."[53] It is noteworthy that Miller claims the horse is still there. Firstly, he is writing about a painting, which the reader cannot see. Secondly, were there a painting, the horse still would not be visible, as it has been replaced, ultimately, by a blot of paint. What is apparent here, with the interplay between writing and painting, is Miller's interest in, and simultaneous awareness of, the impossibility of moving beyond superficial descriptions. That is to say, the painting before us,

[51] Miller, *Black Spring*, 62.

[52] Miller, *Black Spring*, 71.

[53] Miller, *Black Spring*, 71.

which is no less a painting in words than it is in paint, is still only mere appearance, despite what it intends to render. The more Miller strives to articulate the origins of his artistic motivation, the further he moves from them, and the more he toys with the writing to produce this effect. The mode is at the very heart of Miller's writing; it is this very desire that identifies the essence or purpose of art, in its transcendence of the everyday.

Miller next seeks to explain his decision to incorporate the gondola into his painting. This passage directly pertains to possible issues of the painter's intentionality, the viewer's perception and, most importantly, the reader's understanding in terms of viewing a painting (or an imaginary painting).

> And now suddenly I know the reason for the gondola. Among the Renoirs the other day there was a Venetian scene, and the inevitable gondola of course. Now what intrigued me, weakly enough, was that the man who sat in the gondola was so distinctly a man, though he was only a speck of black, hardly separable from all the other specks which made up the sunlight, the choppy sea, the crumbling palaces, the sailboats, , etc. He was just a speck in that fiery combination of colors—and yet he was distinctly a man. You could even tell that he was a Frenchman and that he was of the 1870's or thereabouts…[54]

What is at stake in this description is the very notion of intentionality: the reader must assume that Miller is describing the painting with a genuine sense of its portrayal. In any case, his earnestness suggests that the genius of Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919) made him capable of rendering, definitively, the image of a man with just a "speck" of black paint. And, yet, can we really continue to believe Miller's description as he digresses into qualities that are clearly *never* attributable to a painting—i.e. this "speck's" French-ness and the time period from whence he (the "speck," who is clearly a man) comes?

[54] Miller, *Black Spring*, 68.

Ultimately, Miller is pulling the reader's metaphorical leg, and, in doing so, he acknowledges—he spells out—this discrepancy and complex relationship between the painterly and writerly mediums. It is not a case of one insufficiently rendering another, but a case of one indicating its own peculiarities by means of the other. Writing is no less *real*, no less imagistic, one might even say, than painting. It is not to suggest at all that Renoir's speck *really is* a Frenchman (after all, it cannot be dismissed entirely that paintings are capable of announcing nationalities in some fashion), but, indeed, he *is* a Frenchman as far as this particular text seeks to describe and identify and thus constitute "him" as such—this "speck of black."

To return, then, to Miller's questions posed to the reader who has "seen" this final painting (with the missing horse, gondola, *et al*), he goes on to provide the reader with the definitive response, "No, I'm afraid you don't!"[55] The reader does not see the Ural Mountains or any other described elements in the painting from the previous passage. Indeed, such things never existed on the canvas. There may have been certain objects that Miller described to the reader as having at some point existed (a river, a volcano, cemetery gates, etc.), but not only have they been wiped out, as Miller tells us on the previous page, by his paintbrush, they did not make it off the page. In other words, whether or not the painting *really* exists, the text is creating the painting and destroying the painting, which is still a creation in words.

Miller's use of language ruptures the belief, however, that writing can provide *pictures* of the world, pointing to Donald Davidson's claim that "A picture is not worth a thousand words, or any other number. Words are the wrong currency to exchange for pictures."[56] In short, words are not mimetic, and certainly Miller, of course, is not using words in exchange for pictures. This is precisely what he is *not* attempting. He develops and exploits these

[55] Miller, *Black Spring*, 76.

[56] Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 273.

different modes of ekphrasis in order to demonstrate how language functions as a creative tool that not only establishes its own reality in the presence of the words—the signifiers—but also paints a picture of what appears to be another reality that is used ultimately to seduce the reader into thinking that that reality is something external to the words themselves. The different types and uses of ekphrasis that are used—again what I have named as *notional, referential* and *active*—are a means to reinforce his belief that writing does not imitate or represent; it creates, and, in doing so, it establishes itself as something unfinished, unstable and yet complete in its fabrication of the worldly elements that it expresses.

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