

The World of Sex

Henry Miller



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Preface

The original version of this book was privately published by a man now dead. How many copies were made and sold I was never able to learn. The book was circulated under the counter and no records were kept of its sale. At least, I never received any.

With the death of the publisher the book has gone out of print. As it was never widely known, and since no publisher in England or America was likely to reprint it, I decided to have a new edition made in France, where all the banned books bearing my signature have been published, and still are.

However, before entrusting it to the mail, I thought it wise to reread what I had written so long ago. As I read, I began (quite involuntarily) making changes and corrections, never dreaming what I was letting myself in for. If the reader will turn to the reproductions in this volume, he will see for himself with what almost diabolical enthusiasm I plunged into this work of revision.*

Halfway along, it occurred to me that it might be of interest to readers, particularly those who are curious about an author's lucubrations, to put the two versions side by side.

I should add, since there is an apparent discrepancy between the new and the corrected pages, that I made another complete revision which is not shown here but from which this new printed version derives. The effort involved in making the second revision was greater but even more exciting than that connected with the first attempt.

I should also add that the primary purpose in altering the original text was not to change the thought but to clarify it. I hope that I have not failed.

— Henry Miller

The World of Sex

THE BULK OF MY READERS, I have often observed, fall into two distinct groups: in the one group those who claim to be repelled or disgusted by the liberal dosage of sex, and in the other those who are delighted to find that this element forms such a large ingredient. The first group numbers many who find the studies and essays not only commendable but superbly to their taste, and therefore are hard put to it to explain how one and the same individual could produce such vastly dissimilar works. In the second group there are those who profess to be annoyed with what they call my serious side and who consequently derive pleasure in denouncing all evidence of it as rot, piffle and mysticism. Only a few discerning souls seem capable of reconciling the supposedly contradictory aspects of a being who has endeavoured to withhold no part of himself in his written work.

On the other hand I find that, no matter how violently disagreeable a reader's reaction may be to the written work, when we meet face to face he usually ends by accepting me wholeheartedly. From the many encounters I have had with my readers it would seem that antipathies are quickly dispelled in the living presence of an author. Repeated experiences of this sort have finally led me to believe that when I am able to make the written word convey the full essence of truth and sincerity, there will cease to exist any discrepancy between the man and the writer, between what I am and what I do or say. This, in my humble opinion, is the highest goal an author can set himself. The same aim – unification – is implicit in all religious striving. Perhaps, without knowing it, I have always been a religious person.

As to whether the sexual and the religious are conflicting and opposed, I would answer thus: every element or aspect of life, however necessitated, however questionable (to us), is

susceptible to conversion, and indeed must be converted to other levels, in accordance with our growth and understanding. The effort to eliminate the “repulsive” aspects of existence, which is the obsession of moralists, is not only absurd, but futile. One may succeed in repressing ugly, “sinful” thoughts and desires, impulses and urges, but the results are patently disastrous. (Between being a saint and being a criminal there is little to choose.) To live out one’s desires and, in so doing, subtly alter their nature is the aim of every individual who aspires to evolve. But desire is paramount and ineradicable, even when, as Buddhists express it, it passes over into its opposite. To free oneself from desire one has to *desire* to do so.

The subject is one which has always interested me profoundly. In youth, and long after, I was the victim of impulsive urges that were wholly beyond control. Of late, following upon a prolonged period of intense creative activity, I have become more than ever mystified by the morass

of thoughts in which the perennial treatment of the subject is mired.

It was in 1935 that the book *Seraphita* was thrust into my hands by a friend who was an occultist. *Seraphita* remains today one of the high peaks of my explorations in the realm of thought. It is more than a book; it is an experience which the author perpetuated in words. From this work I passed to a study of that other memorable work of Balzac, *Louis Lambert*, then to an examination of Balzac's life. The results of these studies crystallized in the form of a treatise called 'Balzac and his Double'.* In writing it the conflict which had tormented me was resolved.

Few realize how ardently Balzac wrestled with the problem of the angel in man. I say this in order to confess that, in slightly different guise, this same problem has been an obsession with me my whole life long. In a sense I believe it has always been the chief preoccupation of every creative individual, almost exclusively his.

Admittedly or not, the artist is obsessed with the thought of recreating the world in order to restore man's innocence. He knows, moreover, that man can only recover his innocence by regaining his freedom; freedom here meaning the death of the automaton.

In one of his essays, D.H. Lawrence pointed out that there were two great modes of life, the religious and the sexual. The former, he declared, took precedence over the latter. The sexual was the lesser way, he said. I have always thought that there is only one way, the way of truth, leading not to salvation but to enlightenment. However one civilization may differ from another, however the laws, customs, beliefs and worships of man may vary from one period to another, from one type or race of man to another, I perceive in the behaviour of the great spiritual leaders a singular concordance, an exemplification of truth and wholeness which even a child can grasp.

Does it seem out of character for the author of *Tropic of Cancer* to voice such views? Not if one probes beneath the surface! Liberally larded with the sexual as was that work, the concern of its author was not with sex, nor with religion, but with the problem of self-liberation. In *Tropic of Capricorn* the use of the obscene is more studied and deliberate, perhaps because of a heightened awareness of the exacting demands of the medium. The interlude called “The Land of Fuck” is for me a high water mark in the fusion of symbol, myth and metaphor. Employed as a breakwater, it serves a double purpose. (Just as the clown acts in the circus not only relieve the tension but prepare one for still greater tension.) Though in the act of writing* there was only a dim realization of its meaning, with respect to its purpose there was absolute certitude. It was an achievement tantamount to jumping out of one’s skin. In years to come this “extravaganza” may offer an unsuspected clue to the nature of the author’s inmost struggle. There is no need

to disguise the fact that the crux of the conflict pertains to the rarely understood phenomenon of polarity. Between word and response there exists today only the feeblest flicker of a current. To attribute the dilemma, as do most thinkers, to social, political and economic disturbance is to confound the issue.

The real reason lies deeper. A new world is in the making, a new type of man is in the bud. The masses, destined now to suffer more cruelly than ever before, are paralyzed with dread and apprehension. They have withdrawn, like the shell-shocked, into their self-created tombs; they have lost all contact with reality except where their bodily needs are concerned. The body, of course, has long ceased to be the temple of the spirit. It is thus that man dies to the world – and to the Creator. In the course of disintegration, a process which may go on for centuries, life loses all significance. An unearthly activity, manifested with equal ferocity in the pursuits of scholars, thinkers, men of science as in the

doings of militarists, politicians and plunderers, screens the ever waning presence of the living flame. This abnormal activity is itself the sign of approaching death.

Of all this I knew or understood very little when first I took up the pen. Before I could make a proper start I had to go through my "little death". The false start, which lasted ten years, enabled me to die to the world. In Paris, as everyone now knows, I found myself.

In that first year or two, in Paris, I was literally annihilated. There was nothing left of the writer I had hoped to be, only the writer I had to be. (In finding my way I found my voice.) The *Tropic of Cancer* is a blood-soaked testament revealing the ravages of my struggle in the womb of death. The strong odour of sex which it purveys is really the aroma of birth; it is disagreeable or repulsive only to those who fail to recognize its significance.

The *Tropic of Capricorn* represents the transition to a more knowing phase: from consciousness of

self to consciousness of purpose. Henceforward, what metamorphoses occur manifest even more through conduct than through the written word. The beginning of a conflict between the writer who is resolved to finish his task and the man who knows deep down that the desire to express oneself must never be limited to a single medium – to art, let us say – but to every phase of life. A battle, more or less conscious, between duty and desire. That part of a man which belongs to the world seeking to do its duty; the part which belongs to God striving to fulfil the demands of destiny, which are unstateable. The difficulty: to adapt to that desolate plane where only one's own powers will sustain one. From this point on, the problem is to write retrospectively and act forwardly. To slip is to sink into an abyss from which there is no rescue possible. The struggle is on all fronts, and it is ceaseless and remorseless.

Like every man, I am my own worst enemy. Unlike most men, however, I also know that I am my own saviour. I know that freedom means

responsibility. I know too how easily desire may be converted to deed. Even when I close my eyes I must be careful how I dream and of what, for now only the thinnest veil separates dream from reality.

How large or small a part sex plays in one's life seems relatively unimportant. Some of the greatest achievements we know of have been accomplished by individuals who had little or no sex life. On the other hand, we know from the lives of certain artists – men of the first rank – that their imposing works would never have been produced had they not been immersed in sex. In the case of a certain few these periods of exceptional creativity coincided with extravagant sexual indulgence. Neither abstinence nor indulgence explains anything. In the realm of sex, as in other realms, we speak of a norm – but the normal accounts for nothing more than what is true, statistically, for the great mass of men and women. What may be normal, sane, healthful for the vast majority affords us no criterion of