

ALWAYS MERRY AND BRIGHT

Written for, and delivered at, the Henry Miller centenary celebration, December 19th 1991 (one week prior to Henry's actual 100th birthday), at the Literair Eetcafé Miller, Binnen Bantammerstraat 77, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

Would you believe I got specially dressed up for this? No, sillies, not to come here. You should see me when I get dressed up. Though most of you won't. And some of you definitely won't. Henry Miller's motto was: "Always merry and bright." Eddie Woods's motto, till further notice (and don't hold your breath), is: "Yes, we have no bananas." Tut-tut, the ideas people get.

And bananas is what Henry would be going, were he alive and listening to this. Indeed, he started turning over in his grave last night, the moment I reached for the black net stockings. As for the rest—the flimsy negligee top, the silk panties, the fringed skirt, la-di-dah; once I had those on and was sashaying down to the office in my little Chinese slippers with a bunch of Henry's books tucked under my armpits...well, by that time half the cemetery was awake! And don't go spoiling my metaphors by telling me Henry was cremated. If so, his ashes were exploding. One orgasm Henry never dreamed of having.

Precisely! I dressed up to write this piece. Two nights running, in fact. First night it didn't come. I did, and then went to sleep. See: not everything changes with black net stockings. Btw, there's nothing unusual about me dressing up. Cross-dressing, it's called. More comfortable, is what I call it. Especially at home, the breeze that runs up between the legs is warm. Unless, God forbid, the utilities company cuts me off. Particularly not unusual now that I'm slim again and can fit into most of Karin's clothing. At least the things she left behind while she's away at school. Can you imagine? Fighting with your girlfriend over *her* wardrobe!

But dressing up to write something... A first even for me. 'What next?,' I wonder. And I did it all for Henry! Bless his heterosexual soul. I had to do some-thing drastic. I knew that when I read—on the announcement for this shindig—what I *would* be doing. What I was *meant* to be doing. Which, not surprisingly, is all Hans Plomp's fault. Gotta watch what you say to Hans. Same for most of those Balloon Company characters. Got a secret? Want it to fly, travel, see the world? Go whisper it out in Ruigoord/Rough Place. And be sure to add, 'Don't tell anyone.' Whoosh, it's gone. They're better than the *News of the World*!

A casual comment or two...I made to Hans one day...when we were out shopping together. For pantyhose, I think. Or was it lipstick? And now look what's happened: EDDIE WOODS WILL DISCOURSE, lecture, say something intelligent...for starters about Henry Miller's lovers. As though Henry himself never had anything to say on the subject. Which, in truth, he very nearly didn't. With one notable exception, where he surely tried (and tried and tried), Henry Miller didn't write about his loves; he wrote about his fucks. Both the real ones and (more often) those he fictionally

envisioned. And he wrote about them well. From the cock & balls fucks, all the way to the empyrean fucks. The world of fuck, the constant cosmic orgasm. The notable exception—the one woman-type love he does write about, time and again, in an ultimately futile but nonetheless courageous attempt to fathom, to understand—is of course June, aka Mona. An obsession that lasted well into his sixties.

But for those things Henry didn't write about, wouldn't write about...alas, *couldn't* write about, in great part on account of everything else he was; for all that we have Anaïs Nin to turn to. *Henry and June*, and (although for this we had to wait awhile) the unexpurgated *Diary*. Ah, but we knew right along that he was shtupping her, didn't we? Think on it: Henry Valentine Miller, the Greatest Patagonian, he of gargantuan tastes and lusts, plowing into the ever-so-refined Anaïs Nin. And we know it, not from anything he ever wrote or intimated. We know it from her, from who and what she so obviously was: a lady who knew what it meant, and what it felt like, to wear enticing black net stockings. A creature erotic, sexual, sensual...in just those ways that Henry Miller was not. And, all things considered, didn't need to be.

As Norman Mailer opined: "It is as if Henry Miller contains the unadvertised mystery of how much of a monster a great writer must be."

Oh, that comment I made to Hans, one of the comments that got me into this mess, concerned the American feminist author Kate Millett. I seem to recall having read somewhere that Kate eventually apologized to Henry for all the rude things she'd written about him. But since I can't put fingers on a verifiable reference, it may be wishful thinking on my part. Yet even whilst castigating Miller (along with Norman Mailer and D. H. Lawrence) in her book *Sexual Politics*, she did also call him a "major figure" of American literature. Saying further: "Miller is a compendium of American sexual neuroses, and his value lies not in freeing us from such afflictions, but in having the honesty to express and dramatize them." Going on to 'salute' him, albeit obliquely, for his contributions to society in articulating "the disgust, the contempt, the hostility, the violence, and the sense of filth" associated with sexuality which "had never so explicitly been given literary expression before."

The truth is at once more complicated and a lot simpler. For what Millett saw as 'male-chauvinist writing' was not only Miller's way of being totally honest: honest about himself, honest about being a male; it was also an equally honest attempt to write himself through it, and beyond its limitations. How successfully not being the point, at all.

One person Kate for sure never said sorry to was Norman Mailer. Characterizing females as life-support systems for cunts is bad enough. Stabbing one of your (six) wives is something else again. Even if she did deserve it, which I don't know to have been the case. Still, Mailer is one of the greats. And his book *Genius and Lust* is among the best anthologies of Miller's writings, containing some exceptionally intelligent and informative commentary.

Next. Miller's ideas concerning Beat writers & poets. About which I know practically nothing. I know that he'd read Kerouac and liked what he read. I know that he expressed an interest in meeting Kerouac. And that Jack went to Big Sur. And before going up to Henry's place, stopped in a bar. Had a few beers to steady his nerves. Then rang Henry to say he'd be along shortly. Had a few more beers. Rang Henry again. More beers. More ringing. Jack Kerouac never made it and the two never met.

And—last, but the proverbial 'not least'—Henry's philosophy "over het Oosten/about the East." Just open most any of his books, at random. It's all there. Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Krishnamurti. And at a time when not all that many people had yet heard of Krishnamurti. The story I like best about Henry and the East is this notion he had of making his exit by walking off into Tibet.

"When Henry Miller left for Tibet...! I can see my future biographer writing that a hundred years from now. What ever happened to Henry Miller? He said he was going to Tibet. Did he get there? Nobody knows...That's how it will be. Vanished mysteriously. Exit with two valises and a trunkful of ideas. But I will come back again one day, in another suit of flesh. I may make it snappy, too, and surprise everybody. One remains away just long enough to learn the lesson. Some learn faster than others. I learn very quickly. My home work is all finished. I know that the earth is round, but I also know that that is the least important fact you can mention about it..."
From *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*.

One final tidbit about Henry Miller and het Oosten. His Japanese widow runs a bar in Ropongi, Tokyo. Very imaginative name it has: Tropic of Cancer. Ever been to Ropongi? It's the place to go...if what you want to see...around 1 a.m.... is the most insipid assortment of utterly sloshed Japanese businessmen...slipping, sliding, staggering from one side of every street to the other.

When we meet here again, on Henry's 101st birthday, I'll tell you about the time I went to see him. And maybe, on some other occasion, I'll describe—in vivid detail—how great it feels *to me*...to be wearing long tight black net stockings...with your legs crossed and your skirt hiked up and a vibrator, going at high speed, clutched in your crotch and pressed hard against your frenum. For those of you (guys) who still have a frenum.* Either that, or ask Hans Plomp!

Love you all. And thank you.

* *frenum prepu'tii*: Fold of mucus membrane that unites the foreskin (prepuce) to the glans penis.

Afterword: It was August 1976 when I tried visiting Henry. A friend and I were driving from San Francisco to Tucson. Whence, after a weeklong stay, I wended my way by thumb to New Orleans, to other parts of the Deep South, and then up the eastern seaboard to Philadelphia and New York before flying to London. As we turned the last corner in Pacific

Palisades and approached Henry's modest suburban house, I suddenly realized that my mind was an utter blank.

'What,' I finally asked myself, 'could I possibly have to say to him? Other than: Hi, I'm me and you're you.' And I thought of Somerset Maugham, who'd matter-of-factly written that he would not so much as cross the street to meet a president or a king and was "content to know a writer through his books."

Indeed, ever since I first discovered him in the late 1950s, via a dog-eared and pirated copy of *Sexus*, I had come to know Henry very well. Now, though, he was in his mid-eighties and by all accounts not in good health. "Going west," is how the British poet Hugo Manning had described him in a letter to me a few years earlier.

We pulled up to the house. 444 Ocampo Drive. My friend David and I alighted from his van. Suddenly I felt myself hoping that the angry old man, 'Lao-tse with a penis,' wouldn't be at home.

"I'm sorry," said the defensive young lady who answered the door, opening it only enough so that we could see her face, "but Mr. Miller isn't seeing anyone. He's blind in one eye, deaf in one ear, and very old. Anyway, he just had his lunch and he's sleeping now."

"I see. Well, I did write to him. I sent him a poem and a note saying I was coming."

"If he wants to see you, he'll get in touch. Excuse me. Goodbye." With which her face was gone and the door closed.

He actually did get in touch. When I arrived in New York, a month later, there was an envelope waiting which had been forwarded from San Francisco. It contained a handwritten message penned on letterhead notepaper.

"Dear Edw. Woods," it read, "Please do not come knocking at my door. I don't receive visitors any more. Am too feeble, too worn out and can't handle it any more. Sorry." [signed] Henry Miller

Printed at the bottom was a quote from Colin Wilson: Every eel in the world is born in the Sargasso Sea.

The note is now in my archive at Stanford University.

My 'association' with Henry Miller didn't end there, however. Seeing as how I had his address, I made sure he received copies of the first three issues of the literary magazine I later edited, *Ins & Outs*. (That was in 1978. By the time the fourth issue appeared, in the summer of 1980, Henry had already left us.) I know he read and liked them, too. Not because he wrote and told me so. His New York friend Irving Stettner did that. Henry had sent Irving the first issue, with a note suggesting that he reprint Ira Cohen's "Kathmandu Dream Piece" in his magazine, *Stroker*.

Irving wrote asking permission, permission was granted, and Ira's piece got republished. Irving's letter to Ira is likewise in my archive.

Now here's that poem I sent to Henry before leaving San Francisco:

henry o henry

henry miller knows me
not at all
and though we have
a lot in common
it's the differences
in which i'm most interested:
my having sold encyclopedias
for nearly four years
whereas he quit
after the first few nights;
my finding the english
quite all right
and then some;
my loving Nature
almost as much
as the godawful city.

what a pity
if we don't meet,
two street-corner gabbers
(as that toad karl shapiro
would have us labeled),
loving america
enough to leave her,
hating her ass
enough to come back
(but in my case
only to have a look-see),
poets of the people
who know the people
ain't worth a shit,
yet loving them all
in spite of their ugly selves;
me the bisexual
scribbler of verse,
henry the indefatigable hetero:
is he worse off, i wonder,
for failing to see
the beauty of cock?

don't get your ire up,
henry me boy!
hugo manning said
you were going west
but i sure hope

you are far enough east
to meet a heavy-duty
longtime fan
who won't mind
if the flash in his pan
dies

after being humbled
by a grizzly streak
of millerian light.

if this little note
don't get you uptight
i'll see you next week:
"always merry and bright."

What's that you say? No wonder he wouldn't see me! Tee-hee.

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