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American Travelogue Revisited: Henry Miller's *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*

In 1939 Henry Miller left Paris, where he had been living for ten years and set out on a long journey to Greece. First, he stayed with Lawrence Durrell at Corfu, next he visited the Peloponnesus, Athens, ancient Eleusis, Epidaurus, Mycenae, and Knossos. The trip described in *The Colossus of Maroussi* (1941) is a record of Miller's spiritual transformation and rebirth experienced in these mythic sites. Summing up his Greek epiphany, Miller confesses:

> I never knew that the earth contains so much; I had walked blindfolded, with faltering, hesitant steps; I was proud and arrogant, content to live the false, restricted life of the city man. The light of Greece opened my eyes, penetrated my pores, expanded my whole being. I came home to the world, having found the true center and the real meaning of revolution. (241)

Unfortunately, "having found the true center" Miller could not stay there and, to escape the imminent war, he was forced to return to the United States. In 1941, the year when *The Colossus* was published, the author was on a transcontinental car trip across his homeland. However, the experiences of the American journey turned out to be radically different from the Greek pilgrimage. While *The Colossus* can be read as a loving homage to the Greek civilization and the Greek people, their unique spirit, wisdom and philosophy of life, *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* contains mostly bitter and unsparing criticism of the American way of life, popular culture, technology and all-pervasive materialism.

Among the twentieth-century classics of American travel writing, *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* is an exceptional book in both form and content. On the one hand, its author has broken most generic conventions of road narratives but, on the other, his explorations have remained true to the central idea of American travel, which is a personal quest for the national identity. Moreover, with his travelogue Miller initiated a new subgenre of "protest road narratives," which questioned American complacency and expressed rebellion against dominant values of progress, success and utility, anticipating the spirit of the Beats (Primeau 36).

Thematically, *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* belongs to the broad category of homecoming travel narratives, yet unlike typical exiles, the expatriate Miller does not dream of returning home. In fact, his motivation for making the journey is paradoxical as he seeks reconciliation with home in order to leave it.

> I felt the need to effect a reconciliation with my native land. It was an urgent need because, unlike most prodigal sons, I was returning not with the intention of remaining in the bosom of the family but of wandering forth again, perhaps never to return. I wanted to have a last look at my country and leave it with a good taste in my mouth. (10)

Moreover, he is not willing to explore how the flow of time affected the familiar landscapes, people and places and to ponder the meaning of change, a pattern frequently employed by the authors of homecoming travel books.[1] Typically, in such texts, the joy of revisiting familiar places is often dimmed with nostalgia and the authors tend to idealize the past but neither of these feelings is present in Miller's critical account.

Even though Miller eventually settled down in Big Sur, California, his initial prediction that the return is only temporary points to a complicated relation between the writer and his native land. For most travelers, the opposition between home and abroad, between the internalized cultural values and the alien world of the "other" constitutes a crucial point of reference. Terry Caesar claims, however, that the contrary is true for some American modernist writers, in whose case "alienation with a stable relation with home comes to serve a normative function" (109), and this statement certainly pertains to Miller who seems to be "gloriously alienated – most simply from American society, but more profoundly from any society" (108). Even in Paris, his home for ten years, Miller claimed "I'm not an American anymore, nor a New Yorker, and even less a European, or a Parisian… I'm a neutral" (*Tropic* 35, 157).

However, Miller finds it hard to remain neutral when, whether he wants it or not, the curious and enthusiastic Greeks treat him as a representative American. Upset by the esteem the natives feel for his country and by their dreams of immigration, Miller in vain emphasizes the negative aspects of American reality: poverty, unemployment, restlessness and lost ideals. Predictably, his interlocutors react with disbelief, judging him to be "the strangest American they had ever met" (6-7). In fact, the American writer and the poor Greek peasants on his way find it extremely hard to communicate as their respective visions of Greece stem from radically different experiences; "a holy land" of ancient

[1] Travel books which follow this pattern are, for example: J.A. Williams, *This Is My Country Too* (1965), W. Saroyan, *Short Drive, Sweet Chariot* (1966), B. Bryson, *The Lost Continent* (1986), M. Rosenblum, *Back Home* (1989).

civilization and mythic heroes for the traveler is but a poor and backward country for the natives.

If Greece is Miller's dreamscape, a landscape upon which the vision of a harmonious coexistence of people and land is projected, America becomes "the air-conditioned nightmare," a place where "the divorce between man and nature [is]… complete" (18). According to Gaston Bachelard, there exists a link between a house and dreaming, since "the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" (6). Characteristically, with the notable exception of an old Southern mansion belonging to his friend, Miller does not feel protected in American houses or hotels. In spotless, comfortable, air-conditioned rooms he suffers from depression or is haunted by fears and nightmares (24).

It is interesting to note that the very impression of the first American house, which he sees from the deck of the ship, foreshadows Miller's sense of alienation. "I didn't like the look of the American house; there is something cold, austere, something barren and chill, about the architecture of American home. It was *home*, with all the ugly, evil, sinister connotations which the word contains for a restless soul" (10). As this passage implies, there is neither joyous anticipation nor recognition of the familiar in Miller's first view of the American shore. As a rejected, misunderstood artist he feels unwelcome home, comparing himself to "a runaway slave" brought back to New York he once escaped, and trapped again in the place he hates (11). In a conversation with a friend, a Hungarian immigrant, he confesses that he instantly felt at home in Budapest and that he loved Paris but feels alien at his birth-place. "In fact, I feel at home everywhere, except in my native land" (21). It is no wonder that home perceived in such negative terms is not a place to stay but to escape again, thus Miller begins to plan a journey so as "to experience something genuinely American… to get out in the open" (11).

Reflected in Miller's narrative, the conviction that the authentic American experience is to be found outside the big cities is one of the cornerstones of contemporary travel writing. Countless twentieth-century travelogues have been devoted to exploring the back roads and blue highways of provincial America.[2] Miller chooses the quintessentially American means of transport and buys his first car ever; then, after six driving lessons, he sets out South with his friend, the painter Abe Rattner. However, unlike most narratives of American travel, *The Air Conditioned Nightmare* neither specifies the traversed route nor preserves the chronology of events. The loosely connected chapters foreground a collage of topics, ranging from painting, music, Hindu philosophy, cultural

[2] Classic examples include John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley* (1962) and William Least Heat Moon's *Blue Highways* (1984).

and intellectual differences between Europe and America, to car problems.[3] Even the title is untypical of the genre as it does not name the destination or contain any hint that the book is a record of actual travel.

Unlike in his account of the Greek journey, Miller fails to keep in balance two essential components of a travel book: namely, the actual journey in time and space should parallel the spiritual or "temperamental journey" that enables the reader an insight into the author's mind (Kowalewski 9). The author's "internal voyage" clearly predominates in the text: an interesting book, a peculiar name, an accidental meeting become pretexts for recollections, musings or visions that have little in common with the actualities of travel. This is why, in the book about the USA, there are, for example, two chapters devoted entirely to the author's French experiences ("Vive la France!", "A Night with Jupiter").

Miller seems to follow the tradition of the British inter-war travelogues whose authors combined travel accounts with essays on all possible topics of interest (Fussell 204-206). The subject that Miller evidently finds inspiring is the interconnectedness of dream and travel. He starts the chapter "My dream of Mobile" by recalling great explorers and discoverers – "men who dreamed, and then realized their dreams. Men filled with wonder, with longing, with ecstasy. Sailing straight for the unknown, finding it, realizing it, and then returning to the straight jacket. Or dying of fever in the midst of a mirage" (158). This is a romantic view of travel as a heroic quest, a test of manly stamina and courage. Such epic journeys inspired by dreams and fantasies are hardly possible in the contemporary world unless one chooses to travel in the imagination and this is precisely what Miller does. With the line "Admiral Farragut steamed into Mobile Bay" in mind, the writer envisages a city he never actually visited – a white city with "mandolinish" name, where streets are littered with confetti and people sit on the verandahs drinking Absinthe and "breaking paw-paws." The city is filled with music and gaiety, but above all it is eternal: "as it was in the time of Saul, as were the days for the Colossians and the nights for the Egyptian, so it is now" (163-168). In other words, a trip may begin and end in the imagination and, unsurprisingly, imaginary journeys are much more satisfying than real ones as they prevent the traveler from the confrontation with the disappointing reality. "What a different book it would have been!" – Miller confesses on the first page of his travelogue, regretting he had not written an account of imaginary American travels back in Paris (9).

Thus, the Preface to *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* anticipates the recurring motif of dreams clashing with reality. Symptomatically, Miller summarizes of the whole experience in the Preface and the first chapter. As a result, even before reading more about

[3] Prior to the book publication in 1945, many of these essays were separately published in magazines and anthologies in the USA and abroad.

the actual trip, the reader learns that it did not help the writer to become reconciled with his homeland and only strengthened his alienation. A page-long catalogue of the most notable experiences of the trip soon gives way to a more general discussion of the American way of life. Miller creates a bleak image of American society, listing its cardinal sins, failures, and mistakes. First of all, he reproaches his countryman for betraying the noble ideals of democracy: "We have degenerated; we have degenerated the life which we sought to establish on this continent" (27). He perceives America as a spiritual and cultural wasteland, and Americans as restless, unhappy people, obsessed with the idea of "false progress," endlessly craving for money (22). He sees the betrayal of the founding republican principles in social injustices and racial prejudices.

The tone of the Preface is angry, bitter, and disillusioned; it is evident that by articulating his charges Miller tries to understand why "a great human experiment" (18) failed to establish the foundation for a brave new world. As Primeau rightly observes, "[b]y assaulting readers with fire-and-brimstone homiletics and drawing them into his discontinuous patterns, Miller opens up a dialogue on the American culture ha had left" (34). The writer presents America's downfall as a gradual process. The decimation of the native peoples, the cruelty of the civil war, the wasteful use of natural resources – these are all signs of the slow but inevitable erosion of values. Miller blames his ancestors for betraying "the dreams and visions of great Americans" (2). He declares that contemporary America, where "the poet is anathema, the thinker a fool, the artists an escapist, the man of vision a criminal," is "not the world I want to live in" (22).

For Miller, Americans are people of captive minds: a vulgar mob that yields to manipulation and feeds on false ideologies. They have limited aspirations due to poverty, they lack human dignity due to stupefying factory work – Henry Ford's empire is a negative example here – and finally, they find nourishment in popular culture, epitomized by Walt Disney's products. America has created a civilization of things: "It is a word cluttered with useless objects which men and women, in order to be exploited and degraded, are taught to regard as useful" (22).

Though expressed in a different language, Miller's diagnosis of the illness that troubles America resembles H. D. Thoreau's claim about "improved means to an unimproved end" (49). Similarly to Thoreau a hundred years earlier, Miller is not against progress as such. However, he warns his readers against the faith in "false progress," against using technology only for improvement of material existence while the artistic or spiritual needs are neglected (30-31). He also hopes that the war may provide a stimulus for a change of the heart, an occasion for "a conversion" of his compatriots (22). Again, this belief echoes Thoreau's call to simplify our lives and return to the deliberate life, in which one faces only its "essential facts."

Apart from the jeremiad-like rhetoric of his book, Miller seems to be a precursor of the typically American approach to travel so popular with contemporary authors. His journey is first and foremost an opportunity to meet and talk to people. As the writer feels contempt for the typical American, who looks "as though he were turned out by the university with the aid of a chain store cloak and suit house," a mass product of dominant ideology of success (40), he is fascinated by those who stand out from the crowd. In the book he gives voice to artists, visionaries, lunatics and even criminals. What these individuals have in common is an internal drive, a passion for life according to their own principles even if it entails hostility from or rejection by the society. Miller, an outsider himself, clearly sympathizes with those Americans who remain marginal, neglected and unappreciated by the majority.

To create his vision of America, Miller often resorts to the technique of comparison and contrast; for example, he evokes an image of the virgin land prior to the arrival of the Pilgrim Fathers and juxtaposes it with the contemporary industrial wasteland. The very first description of the American urban landscape, filled with bridges, railroad tracks, warehouses and factories reveals Miller's strong anti-industrial bias: "[T]here was nothing of the animal, vegetable or human kingdom in sight. It was a vast jumbled waste created by pre-human or sub-human monsters in a delirium of greed. It was something negative, some not-ness of some kind or other" (11). The urban and industrial North is, in turn, set against the "backward," but less devastated, rural South. Finally, the sublime and majestic wilderness is contrasted with man-made structures and the latter pale into insignificance in the face of American nature.

Miller's dislike and contempt of American cities parallels his admiration for American nature. In the cities he never visits famous sights or landmarks, instead focusing his attention on the slums, flea markets or industrial districts. "None of them is the worst" – he concludes, thinking about the towns he saw. "The worst is in the process of becoming. It's inside us now, only we haven't brought it forth" (38). Miller decries the big cities for ugliness and sterility but he finds the striking landscapes of the West invigorating. He is fascinated with "the land of enchantment" in the Southwest, greatly impressed with the Grand Canyon and moved by the lush greenery of California. According to Kris Lackey, Miller's "divided judgment" of the USA, marked by a celebration of American nature and a concomitant rejection American culture, is reminiscent of Charles Dickens and Henry James who were similarly ambiguous in their responses to America (44).

Faced with the scenic beauty of natural wonders in the West, Miller conventionally casts himself in the role of a humble pilgrim who pays homage to magnificent nature and its Creator. When the traveler follows the route of nineteenth-century pioneers he describes, for example, his first view of "the wildest, greenest green imaginable" – Califor-

nia – with true exaltation. He adds: "I wanted to go back through that pass – Cajon Pass – on foot, holding my hat reverently in my hand and saluting the Creator" (214). At the same time, his sense that "seated in an automobile, hemmed in by a horde of Sunday afternoon maniacs, one can't possibly experience the emotion which such a scene should produce in the human breast" (214) and his wish for a repetition of this experience make him exceptional among the fellow travel authors. As Kris Lackey notes, American travelers who invariably get to the wonders of nature in a car and frequently express a concern about the threats posed to the wilderness by civilization, seem to forget that their own car is also a product of the same civilization. Thus, Miller's awareness of this connection is indeed unique (41).

Even though he treats the car as a symbol of the American way of life, he questions its positive connotations with freedom, independence or escape. For him, the car is "the very symbol of falsity and illusion" (29), as thousands of automobiles parked in front of American factories create an image of false prosperity. No one seems too poor to own one. The working masses across the world envy Americans their "shining tin chariots," often considered to be a veritable confirmation of the American dream. However, according to Miller, to win this prize the American worker must devote himself totally to the most stupefying, dehumanizing work (30). In this light, the car is no longer a means to make its owner a free man, on the contrary, it appears as a truly devilish invention, an object of desire that makes people sacrifice their bodies and souls to get it. Yet, in a comic chapter "Automotive Passacaglia," Miller recounts his car adventures and conversations with mechanics to finally arrive at the following conclusion: "We American people have always been kind to animals and other creatures on the earth. It's in our blood. Be kind to your Buick or Studebaker. God gave us these blessings in order to enrich the automobile manufacturers. He did not mean for us to lose our tempers easily" (189). In this passage the car acquires a status similar to that of domestic animals that serve people. It is a "blessing," God's gift to help humans strive for perfection. In the course of time, as he acquires greater driving experience, Miller realizes that the car is indeed something more than just a machine and begins to feel that his Buick, the only traveling companion he has, needs to be treated well and occasionally coaxed into cooperation.

"If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer," writes H.D. Thoreau in *Walden* (285). Henry Miller was certainly an artist who "stepp[ed] to the music he hear[d]" and thus waited longer for recognition at home than abroad. His most famous novel, the scandalizing *Tropic of Cancer,* published in France in 1934, appeared in the USA only in 1961. His other books: *Black Spring* (1936) and *Tropic of Capricorn* (1939) had also been prohibited by censorship.

The Colossus of Maroussi (1941) and *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (1945) were therefore the first books published by Miller in the USA.[4] It is worth considering them jointly as the context provided by *The Colossus of Maroussi* makes it easier to understand why American travels were so disappointing for the author.

Miller himself considered *The Colossus of Maroussi* his best book (Kersnowski and Hughes xiii). The Greek journey follows closely the pattern of a spiritual pilgrimage, which leads to epiphany and transformation of the self. Greece becomes for the traveler an epitome of culture that has managed to preserve the greatness of human spirit and guard it against the encroaching modernity.[5] Miller's loving admiration for Greece accounts, at least partially, for his rejection of America in the next book. After his metamorphosis in Greece, it would be strange to expect a similar experience to happen again so shortly. Apart from that, it would sound unconvincing if a declared critic of American civilization suddenly saw its charms upon returning home. His American travelogue lacks the kind of unity of tone which, in the book about the Greek journey, results from the positive experiences constituting the narrative core.

As a travel book*, The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* is indebted to both American and European traditions of the genre. The former is manifested, for example, in Miller's rationale for making the trip, the direction (South and West), and the preoccupation with the national ideals. Wandering across his country, Miller, absent for decades, tries to reestablish a bond with his land. Rather conventionally, he rejects the East and the urban landscapes of big cities but delights in American nature. Intuitively, he chooses the quintessentially American way of traveling. A solitary car journey (his friend Abe Rattner had to return home after a few weeks) allows him to meet and talk to the people whose stories he recounts. At the same time, Miller is clearly indebted to the European tradition of intellectual travel and creates in the text a narrative persona of an erudite, a connoisseur of modern painting, philosophy, and music. Travel is for him often just a pretext for intellectual musings and for the presentation of the ideas which fascinate him. Such a perspective on travel is more frequently found in the accounts written by the European authors about America.[6]

[4] Though the journey was made in 1941, Miller decided to postpone the publication of *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* as he was afraid that his critique of America would not be well received in the atmosphere of patriotism preceding WWII.

[5] It is worth noting that Miller's travelogue belongs, in a way, to the rich and predominantly British collection of travel books inspired by Greece in the first half of the twentieth century. As Mark Cocker asserts, "no country… has given rise to a richer collection of works, or played a more important part in the genre in the last fifty years" (206).

[6] Two most famous examples of such narratives would be Umberto Eco's *Travels in Hyperreality* (1975) and Jean Baudrillard's *America* (1986).

The Air-Conditioned Nightmare stands out among American road classics because of its scathing criticism of the writer's homeland, redeemed only by irony and humor.[7] The vision of America, with its materialism, cult of technology and progress, and superficial morality, resembles the image of Ginsberg's Moloch, devouring the human hearts and minds. Miller's narrative of "rebellion and protest" clearly shows the roots underlying the Beats' contestation a decade later.

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[7] While it would be hard to find direct followers of Miller's approach among American travel authors, his book has directly inspired a Canadian, Norman Levine. In *Canada Made Me* (1958), the author acknowledges his debt to Miller in the epigraph and presents a similarly bleak picture of his native country.