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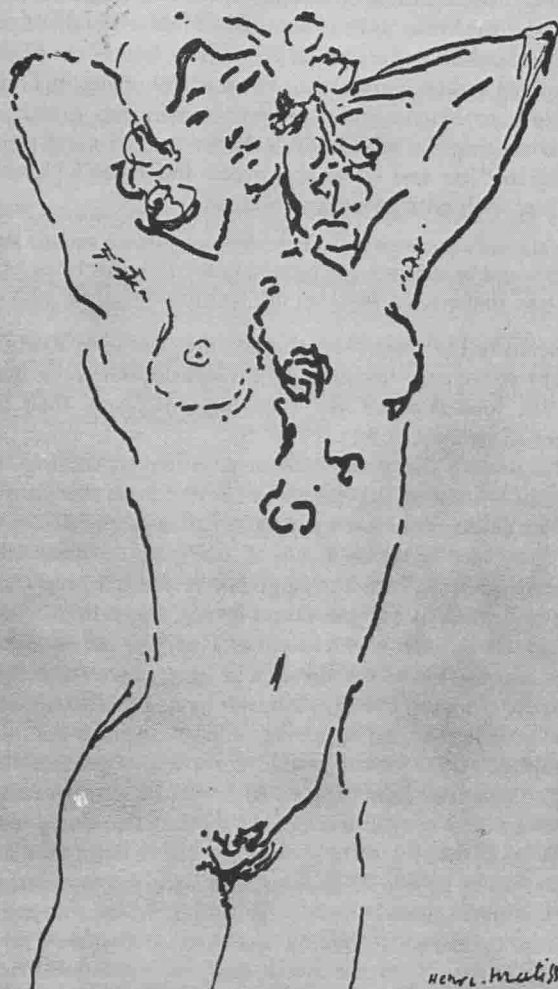
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Notes and Comment

The Miller–Matisse Connection: A Matter of Aesthetics

SUZANNE W. JONES



Henri Miller

OBRATNÍK RAKA

When *Tropic of Cancer* was published in Czechoslovakia in 1938, a working drawing from *Bonheur de vivre* by Henri Matisse appeared on the cover. While the choice of illustration certainly reflects the admiration for Matisse's work that Henry Miller expresses within the novel, Miller's interest in Matisse as an artist also reveals much about the novelist's aesthetics.

Miller's love of painting began in grade school as he watched with envy the progress of his artist friend Emil Schnellock. Together they pored over art books and reproductions of the masters. Inspired by his friend, Miller himself was dabbling in watercolors before he left New York for Paris. Thus it is not surprising that his letters home to Emil should be filled with talk of painting. Collected under the title *Semblance of a Devoted Past*, these letters are filled with Miller's Parisian discoveries and activities, many of which he relates in *Tropic of Cancer*.¹ Numerous references to Matisse indicate that his paintings greatly influenced Miller while he was writing the novel. While Miller judged many contemporary artists to be lacking in "life and color and gusto and fever" (*Semblance*, p. 59), his letters overflow with enthusiasm for Matisse:

I like Matisse's flowerpots and brocades and goldfish and his women and statues, all navels and hips and broad asses and crossed knees. I like his blobs of floweriness and wallpaper, the green shutters, the sunshine that deforms the object with its glare (*Semblance*, p. 59).

Attracted to the "hard brutal lines" Matisse used to enclose figures and objects, Miller tried to copy his oil paintings, furious when his own efforts with watercolor and line looked more like wax museum pieces than living, breathing human figures (*Semblance*, p. 57).

Not until Miller turned from painting to writing, though, was he able to implement some of the lessons he learned from studying Matisse in the art gallery on the rue de Seze. With pen rather than paints Miller brutally outlined his life in Paris. He wrote to Emil of working on two self-portraits. The one in watercolors resembles a self-portrait by Matisse, and the one in words resembles Matisse's work in its "gusto and fever," if not in its "life and color." Before this second self-portrait was released as *Tropic of Cancer*, Miller considered illustrating a de luxe edition of the novel with his own watercolors. Thoughts of the two art forms mingled in Miller's mind: he referred to his best writing as "painting" (*Semblance*, p. 64) and to Matisse's best paintings as "poems."²

Indeed, Miller looked at the world with a painterly as well as a writerly eye. In *To Paint Is to Love Again*, Miller speaks of "the transformation" which took place in him when he first began "to view the world with the eyes of a painter": "The most familiar things, objects which I had gazed at all my life, now became an unending source of wonder, and with the wonder, of course, affection."³ In his writing Miller's painterly eye is most noticeable in his memorable catalogues of colors and in his startling analogies of shapes. The otherwise gray world of

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¹ Henry Miller, *Semblance of a Devoted Past* in *To Paint Is to Love Again* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1968).

² Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 147.

³ Henry Miller, *To Paint Is to Love Again* (Alhambra, Cal.: Cambria Books, 1960), 17.

Tropic of Cancer is occasionally splashed with color, and not simply the rose or azure of a writer's palette, but shades and hues so precise that only a painter could distinguish them: "in the drawers are labels written out in white ink, brown ink, red ink, blue ink, vermilion, saffron, mauve, sienna, apricot, turquoise, onyx, Anjou, herring, Corona, verdigris, gorgonzola."⁴ In describing a sunset Miller writes, "The sun is setting fast. The colors die. They shift from purple to dried blood from nacre to bister, from cool dead grays to pigeon shit" (*Cancer*, p. 37).

Miller's interest in shapes suggests a painter's eye as well. In *Tropic of Cancer* he unites disparate images through analogies of shapes. When helping Van Norden move to his new room, Miller spots an absurd assortment of objects including a pair of handle bars which make him recall a dream:

But more remarkable still is remembrance that suddenly floats up of an actual dream which occurred only the other night, a dream in which I saw Van Norden in just such a corner as is occupied now by the handle bars, only instead of the handle bars there was a woman crouching with her legs drawn up (*Cancer*, p. 114).

Miller's ability to associate shapes causes his imagination to run wild after a visit to the *Jardin des Plantes*:

Marvelous pelicans here from Chapultepec and peacocks with studded fans that look at you with silly eyes. Suddenly it began to rain. Returning to Montparnasse in the bus I noticed a little French woman opposite me who sat stiff and erect as if she were getting ready to preen herself. She sat on the edge of the seat as if she feared to crush her gorgeous tail. Marvelous, I thought, if suddenly she shook herself and from her *derriere* sprung open a huge studded fan with long silken plumes (*Cancer*, p. 145).

Miller's interest in shapes is similar to Matisse's use of representational analogies in a painting, such as *Les Marocains* in which round flowers in the background echo melons in the foreground which in turn suggest the turban of a seated Moroccan nearby. Such analogies not only keep the eye moving across the painting but also join otherwise disjointed parts of the work.⁵ Miller's repeated shapes function similarly.

In addition to form, the content of scenes in Miller's novel resembles paintings by Matisse as well. The flowerpots, goldfish, navels, wallpaper, shutters, and foods from Matisse's world enliven the Paris of *Tropic of Cancer*. When Miller finds himself "tired of red wall paper,"⁶ one thinks immediately of Matisse's *Le studio rouge* or *La chambre rouge* in which the red wallpaper covers not only the wall but the table and the floor as well. Irene, the rich older woman who surprises Miller's friend Carl by meeting him in her dressing gown, is enough like a Matisse odalisque, at least in dim lighting, that Carl describes her so to the envious Van Norden. And the portrait that artist Mark Swift paints of Miller, seated at his typewriter in front of a window overlooking Paris, is startlingly like Matisse's self-portrait, *Le peintre et son modèle*, with Matisse at his easel in front of a window.

Like Matisse, Miller believed that "the task which the artist implicitly sets himself is to overthrow existing values, to make of the chaos about him an order which is his own" (*Cancer*, p. 228). In order to emphasize his role as creator rather

⁴ Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*, 4.

⁵ John Elderfield, *Matisse* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1978), 111.

⁶ Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*, 15.

than recorder of life, as expressionist rather than realist, Miller, like Matisse, places himself within his art. Particularly in the first four chapters of *Tropic of Cancer*, Miller discusses writing the novel in the present tense, thereby conveying the sense that the reader is looking over his shoulder as he writes:

I'm laughing to myself as I write this (*Cancer*, p. 20).

In a few minutes I'll be able to sit down again and type. Somehow I don't feel like it any more today. My spirit is dribbling away (*Cancer*, p. 29).

Miller follows white space in the text with remarks like, "The telephone interrupts this thought which I should never have been able to complete" (*Cancer*, p. 10) and "Had to knock off for an hour or so" (*Cancer*, p. 27). Similarly Matisse depicts paintings in progress in works such as *Le peintre et son modèle* and *L'artiste et son modèle*. In his drawings, Matisse sometimes appears in mirrors which reflect him sketching the very work we see. Miller too uses mirrors to call attention to the artist as creator, to his place at the center of his work. At one point in the novel Miller moves his typewriter into another room so that he can see himself while he writes.

However, Miller sought to "insult" his audience while Matisse sought to "soothe" his. While Miller sees *Tropic of Cancer* not as a book but as "a prolonged insult, a gob of spit in the face of Art, a kick in the pants to God, Man, Destiny, Time, Love, Beauty" (*Cancer*, p. 2), Matisse says that it was through painting the human figure that he best expressed the nearly religious feeling he had towards life.⁷ It is significant that Miller has artist Mark Swift do a portrait of his mistress that is a grotesque parody of a Matisse odalisque:

She sat there on the horsehair sofa. . . . The most prominent thing was her buttocks, which were lopsided and full of scabs; she seemed to have slightly raised her ass from the sofa, as if to let a loud fart.⁸

This parody captures the differences between Miller and Matisse. On the one hand, Miller seeks "to sow strife and ferment so that the emotional release [*sic*] those who are dead may be restored to life" (*Cancer*, p. 228). He fills the novel with death and disease, starvation and filth, passionless sex and strangled embryos as he tries to cleanse readers' spirits by having them experience the suffering and shock he endured that cleansed his soul and reconnected him with life. On the other hand, Matisse works for another sort of emotional release. He strives to create:

an art of balance, of purity and serenity devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art which might be for every mental worker, be he businessman or writer, like an appeasing influence, like a mental soother, something like a good armchair in which to rest from physical fatigue.⁹

Matisse's art provides Miller with just this feeling in Paris in the 1930s. In *Tropic of Cancer* he writes of being surrounded by "men and women whose last drop of juice has been squeezed out by the machine – the martyrs of modern

⁷ Henri Matisse, "Notes of a Painter," in *Matisse, His Art and His Public* by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1951), 122.

⁸ Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*, 174.

⁹ Matisse, 122.

progress."¹⁰ Then he enters an art gallery where the men and women of Matisse draw him back "into the proper precincts of the human world" (*Cancer*, p. 146). In Matisse's paintings Miller finds no machinery: "there is not a ball bearing in evidence, nor a boiler plate, nor a piston, nor a monkey wrench" (*Cancer*, p. 149). The gallery exhibiting Matisse's work is like an oasis in a parched world, for there Miller experiences a "soothing and refreshing" feeling (*Cancer*, p. 149).

Because of this opposition between their two worlds, Miller speaks of Matisse as capturing the "color of life" (*Cancer*, p. 146), its vitality and promise, as opposed to what he terms "the negative reality," the "habitual gray" (*Cancer*, p. 146) of his own mechanized and decaying world. Throughout *Tropic of Cancer* Miller seeks Matisse's life of color. In his search he decides to live in the present rather than look to the past or toward the future. His job as proofreader allows him a comfortable existence whereby "he's in the world but not of it" (*Cancer*, p. 133). He explains by saying that "nothing escapes the proofreader's eye but nothing penetrates his bulletproof vest" (*Cancer*, p. 134). His job allows him to live his "new religion" — "a world without hope, but no despair" (*Cancer*, p. 136). By living without hope, Miller steels himself against life's disappointments, but at the same time, he severs himself from commitments to the people who might cause these disappointments. Not wanting to feel despair when he receives neither love nor compassion from others, he desires only passion, the emotion of the present, not the ties of the past or the commitment of the future. Ironically Miller, who denounces abstract ideas such as love, is most "touched" (*Cancer*, p. 190), most alive in the novel, in the moments when others give selflessly to him and in the rare moments when he shows love and compassion — to his wife Mona and to the English girl who needs money. In *Tropic of Cancer* Miller immerses himself in life, but he is not connected with it because he feels neither love nor compassion for his fellow men or women. Instead he uses both men and women to satisfy his physical needs. "The great peace" (*Cancer*, p. 286) Miller feels as he flows with life, hardly seems to be that union with life that Matisse experiences as he paints or that Miller sees as his own goal.

In theory then, Miller's new vision is miles distant from the "life and color" of Matisse's paintings, which evoke the love that Matisse felt for the objects and the people he painted. In practice, Miller's art is bleak because he achieves joy and ecstasy, not in life, but only in those trips of escape to the galleries filled with Matisse's art.

¹⁰ Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*, 146.