

New Leader, 2/8/93, Vol. 76 Issue 3, p17, 3p.

## A LABOR OF LOVE

### The Devil at Large: Erica Jong on *Henry Miller*

By Erica Jong Turtle Bay Books. 337 pp. \$23.00.

A POEM IN *Loveroot*, the third of Erica Jong's seven poetry collections, refers to "the chicken soup of sex/which cures everything." Though her male patient there is too far gone to save, Jong's faith in the cure shows up strong as ever in her 16th book.

She brings to *The Devil at Large* all the ambition of a former PhD candidate at Columbia. The volume includes a carefully annotated bibliography--11 pages of Miller's full-length books, seven pages of shorter works, four pages of recommended background reading. Anyone wanting the source of one of the myriad quotations can turn to the Notes at the back and find it easily under its page number. Only an index is lacking.

Yet with all the scholarly apparatus to give her effort legitimacy, Jong still feels a need to justify defending and celebrating a writer who was awarded the title "Grand Speleologist of the Vagina" by Norman Mailer. "If Eros is life force," she says in her Introduction, "then censoring Eros is death. Henry Miller matters because he understood this; he demanded life more abundant above all. He did not use Eros promiscuously--even in his books. And he was not demanding that we do. What he was demanding was that we understand the connection between Eros and life. And we still have not understood. That is why I wrote this book."

She also was keeping a promise she had made to Miller, and paying a debt she had long recognized. Yet for a decade after his death in 1980, at age 88, she was unable to find a path through the conflicts and misgivings that affection could not sweep away.

The affection began in 1974 when he wrote praising her first novel, *Fear of Flying*; that set off a lively exchange of letters, many of them quoted here. An early missive from Miller actually touches glancingly on perhaps the most difficult problem Jong would try to solve. "Incidentally," he says, "I wonder what Germaine Greer and Anais Nin think of it! Or Kate Millett."

While Jong was resisting the undertaking she told a friend the reasons: "Because of his sexism, his narcissism, his jibes at Jews. And because he's so free. I work so hard at my writing and he's such a slob.... He's such a Blagueur. And I try so hard to be honest. Everything is cake to him. He treats women horribly and doesn't seem to care.... Even his suffering seems like fun."

Miller impressed many people that way, often purposely. Once, at a literary party in London, I found myself sitting with him. Then in his 70s, he seemed youthful and unaffected, with a likable air of candor. At one point, giving me an impish look, he said, "You know, they think I was boasting--all those scenes of sex. Well, let me tell you, that wasn't the half of it." (Can we resist a jingle? "Only a fraction of the friction/ will you find in Henry's fiction.")

Knowing this side of Miller, Jong no doubt felt thwarted by contradictions as extreme as any that ever splintered a writer's image. Along with her ambivalence, Jong's habits as a novelist influenced by film techniques prevented *The Devil at Large* from being straightforward "Life and Work." In her Introduction she warns the reader what to expect:

"I always knew it was to be an unconventional book--part memoir, part critical study, part biography, part exploration of sexual politics in our time. But I did not anticipate how difficult the task was to become or how much of my own bag as a writer I would have to unpack before I could begin to unpack Henry's bag."

That last bit will not surprise readers familiar with Jong's poetry and six novels. As intent on self-examination as Miller himself, she is doing what comes naturally. Several of her most absorbing passages, dropped here and there, describe the "tortuous road" she traveled as a young writer, her agonies of doubt before she could start *Fear of Flying*, climaxed by the "terrifying" act of writing.

A few months after Miller wrote his heartening letter about the novel, Jong was in California trying her hand at a screenplay. There she could spend hours with the frail, ill old man. On the first day their talk "ignited" and in later visits they "ranged over dozens of subjects: Paris in the '30s, literature, mysticism, food, life." (Some television viewers may have more specific memories of their encounters, since Mike Wallace created a segment of *60 Minutes* from them. A four-minute tape provided by Turtle Bay Books consists only of their congratulating each other for liberating their respective sexes.)

Miller must have found it easy to claim Jong as a disciple when he read her novel, which he called "the female counterpart of *Tropic of Cancer*." She recalls that "when I was searching for the freedom to write *Fear of Flying*, I picked up *Tropic of Cancer* and the sheer exuberance of the prose unlocked something in me." Miller surely recognized not only the spirit he had set free but even some of his own signature tricks, such as the use of lists.

Remember, while reading *Black Spring*, your groans of laughter at the page-long incantation of calamities lurking under a family slogan, "always merry and bright"? Albeit not quite with Miller's soaring bravura, Jong makes wry comedy of the detailed diseases Isadora Wing is sure will befall her. The most obvious sign of blood kinship, however, is the uninhibited delight of the two in showing off body parts hitherto thought of as private, and heralding their functions happily under the rudest possible names.

At the time Miller wrote *Tropic*, in the '30s, this was taboo. Jong tells how the book, like *Ulysses* earlier, was smuggled into the United States from France, where a loophole in the law permitted printing it in English--though even there Miller had to endure a nasty court trial. He "was more mystic than pornographer," Jong insists. In another of her many similar statements, she declares: "The voice he found expressed the abundance of the man. It was not the sex the puritans hated and feared. It was the abundance. It was not the four-letter words; it was the five-star soul."

Jong speaks often of the soul. Citing Proust's differentiation of an author's creations from his social habits and vices, she observes: "The inner self of a writer, the self destined to live beyond the flesh, is not always visible in the writer's daily life. But the writer's true voice, once discovered, is congruent with the writer's soul." (Finding that voice, we are told, is the most important goal a writing teacher can help a student reach.) Jong maintains that Miller "had no choice. He wrote what the 'voice' dictated." Moreover, she argues, it did not always dictate what Kate Millett or Andrea Dworkin, the angriest feminist critics, would attack as pornography. She urges attention to his less well-known books, particularly *The Colossus of Maroussi*. Norman Mailer, who reprinted part of it in *Genuis and Lust: A Journey Through the Major Writings of Henry Miller* thought it his ultimate best. Nevertheless, it was rejected again and again by mainstream publishers. Jong constantly blames our society's "sexomania/sexophobia" for the misunderstanding of Miller's message and his failure to find a place in the literary canon.

Even though Miller regarded his own books as more autobiography than fiction, several writers had produced biographies before Jong embarked on *The Devil at Large*. Maybe for this reason she lets much of his story come out almost incidentally here. She may note a circumstance offhandedly in the course of showing, for instance, how Miller's writing was an effort to free himself from his mother, despite his lifelong need of a female muse; or in attempting to explain his violence toward women as not advocacy but rather a shocking revelation of our patriarchal society.

With much help from Anais Nin's diaries and her *Henry and June*, Jong presents Miller's series of marriages to women he abandoned, along with their children. She tells how earlier he dropped out of City College when required to read *The Faerie Queen*, becoming briefly apprenticed to his father, who was a master tailor. But Miller's unlikely five years as a personnel manager for Western Union, resulting

from his protest at not being hired as a messenger, begs for more than is offered.

Along the way Jong mentions casually that the woman Miller first lived with was a friend of the mother of one of his piano pupils. Only much later do we discover that he earned money giving music lessons, and that he stopped piano playing for good after marrying his teacher. Never do we get a sense of his early study, of how his daily practicing and dreams of a concert career apparently preoccupied him in his youth.

Jong quotes the cheerful letter Miller published in the *New Republic* begging (as he did by postcards to his friends) for old clothes and painting materials. His easiness with money and the lack of it are famous. But how many readers would know that in California in the '40s he contentedly earned his living by showing and selling his water colors? He wrote about it, too, titling one of his essays "To Paint is to Love Again." Noel Young put together a book of reproductions, with a Preface by Lawrence Durrell.

Miller's literary supporters as well as his influences (Rabelais, Joyce, Lawrence) get credit here; so do Jong's forerunners, whose paths she says Miller cleared (Philip Roth and John Updike). And through it all Jong promotes her cure: "How may we be sexual in the age of AIDS?" she asks. "Let me count the ways." Her list includes telephone computer sex, and "liberating ourselves with one partner or no partner at all," helped by Nicholson Baker's *Vox*. "Eventually," she says, "we will have virtual reality sets which will enable us to simulate sex with any famous lover of the past."

The chief objective of *The Devil at Large* is to placate the justly skeptical feminists, and to some extent the author's fellow Jews. But this would have required of Jong painful labor almost beyond the call of duty, even in a labor of love.

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