

1980

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Jeffrey Bartlett

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Recommended Citation

Bartlett, Jeffrey. "Review of "Aaron's Rod" by Jeffry Bartlett." *The Iowa Review* 11.2 (1980): 279-283. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.2635>

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Review · Jeffrey Bartlett

Notes on "Aaron's Rod". By Henry Miller. Edited with an introduction by Seamus Cooney. Santa Barbara, Ca.: Black Sparrow Press, 1980. Pp. 59. \$14.00.

The World of Lawrence: A Passionate Appreciation. By Henry Miller. Edited with an introduction by Evelyn J. Hinz and John J. Teunissen. Santa Barbara, Ca.: Capra Press, 1980. Pp. 272. \$15.00.

When Henry Miller died last June 7, his obituary was given front-page coverage in newspapers nationwide. Generally, they emphasized his bohemian lifestyle in Paris and Big Sur, and particularly the censorship troubles and eventual vindication of his early books. In short, they addressed those things which most made Miller famous (or, given the tone of some, notorious). Only a few noted that he was the last survivor among the generation of Modernists, whose works have embodied the break with the past and the creation of new forms so necessary to contemporary literature and so characteristic of this century of change.

I believe that, along with Lawrence, Joyce, Pound, and Williams, Miller ranks foremost among the Modernists who have given direction to this spirit of innovation, which intends, above all else, to bring writing as close as possible to human experience and perception, directly as they occur. All these men have broadened our sense of the nature and potential usefulness of the written art. Miller has received only a small fragment of the critical attention which has accumulated increasingly around each of the other four. Often he is regarded as a rather brilliant and untutored anomaly, a wild-growing weed that unexpectedly flowered in the fertile ground of the time. Yet these manuscripts, unpublished for more than forty years, demonstrate that Miller always has been a knowledgeable and literate writer, well aware of the advances achieved by his predecessors and contemporaries.

Criticism by creative writers often is thought to be of another kind than scholarly articles or reviews. Exception is made for such essays because they may shed light upon the writer's primary work and concerns. Lawrence's own *Studies in Classic American Literature* stands as a prototype for this sort of composition: personal, direct, and unconventional, the book is of a piece with the rest of his *oeuvre*. However, equally important are the most piercing of its observations on our great nineteenth century authors and the culture which produced them.

The same may be said of Henry Miller's critical output, which includes book-length studies of Rimbaud and Lawrence. Miller is an intensely personal writer and pretends to be nothing else. For example, in summarizing his various efforts to articulate "his" D. H. Lawrence, he says,

I have not scrapped what I have done in order to make a harmonious or symmetrical piece of art. I do not renounce what I said earlier any more than I would renounce my own past. . . . I had always desired this book to be an *uncritical* study of Lawrence, to be an impassioned and prejudiced thing. . . . Such a method does not make for clarity and precision. Many people are going to be baffled and bewildered. But they would be baffled and bewildered anyway. So I say—to hell with them! (pp. 260-61)

The relationship between the best readers and the best writers is reciprocal. And so Miller understands Lawrence as not many others can—immediately, at the source. Literature itself ventures into the street in Miller's work. The man sitting in his room, reading and writing, is the same guy chasing around the cafes and bumming meals from friends. Miller *declassifies* literature and brings the rest of life—including sex, food, dreams, lies and a "fuck you" attitude—to equal status with it. He is a major voice because he makes writing tangible and sensory, connected to the enormous part of our lives which occurs when we are not reading or writing. Art is something you *do*.

Miller's criticism benefits from context, his words spread into thoughts and images not spoken, showing the pathways of association the mind continually discovers. For example, in *Tropic of Cancer* (pp. 216-18), he muses on Walt Whitman and America then moves off across the ocean to the cold of Paris and its poor who sleep outside the Metro station. These "night thoughts produced by walking in the rain after two thousand years of Christianity" evoke a world where Whitman still lives, in the imagination of the man who reads him.

Many such penetrating thoughts exist in Miller's books—things which are deliberately considered, researched, and clearly expressed. That they are found in the flow of language which leaps subjects frequently and mixes tones of voice has allowed Miller's serious thought to be overlooked or scoffed at, even to the point of denying its presence.

Despite the denigration of "respectable" critics, Miller never has been without champions, just as he says he always was able to make friends wherever he went. Most significant among these supporters have been other writers, including Pound and Williams, George Orwell, Anais Nin, Lawrence Durrell, and Norman Mailer; and publishers, from Jack Kahane of the Obelisk Press in Paris to Miller's good friend Bern Porter to James Laughlin (New Directions)

and Barney Rossett (Grove Press) in New York and, finally, to Noel Young (Capra Press) in California. All these people have contributed to the cause of keeping Miller's work in circulation, which has required defending him against the ignorances of law and polite opinion and redirecting attention toward the true emphasis of what he has done.

Coincidental with his death (though perhaps aware of its approach) his last publishers have brought out two overlapping volumes on D. H. Lawrence which Miller worked at in the early Thirties while impatiently awaiting the publication of his first book, *Tropic of Cancer*. One, *Notes on "Aaron's Rod"*, appeared last April in a limited collector's edition, while the second, issued in June shortly after Miller's passing, bears its author's original title, *The World of Lawrence*, to which the editors have added the subtitle, *A Passionate Appreciation*.

Initially, that work was commissioned by Jack Kahane as a short brochure, with the idea of its smoothing the way for *Tropic of Cancer* by giving its author some credibility as a "serious" and literary writer. The best indicator of Miller's response to the plan and his quick recognition that, given his new, explosive style of writing, he could not turn out a brief, dry assessment of Lawrence's worth is found in his *Letters to Anais Nin*. The letters show how little enthusiasm Miller has for a project in traditional criticism, yet how earnest is his devotion to Lawrence:

It began by thinking of the *man*, Lawrence. How he *embraced* everything. And the only way to do justice to a man like that, who gave so much, is to give *another* creation. Not *explain* him—but prove by writing about him that one has caught the flame he tried to pass on. It's nothing less than heroic, what I'm doing—and it will put Lawrence high and dry above the sniveling corpse-diggers who are writing about him. If I have buried him, I at least have buried him *alive*.

He ends this letter with a revealing postscript: "It's not Lawrence—it's myself I'm making a place for!"

Students of Miller's work would expect publication of *The World of Lawrence*, last of the major documents from his great creative burst of the Thirties, to be a significant event. So it is, for the manuscript now is easily accessible. It has been a somewhat fabled "lost" work (though the papers have resided for some years in the UCLA Library Special Collections) and descriptions of it, in Miller's letters of the period and, more recently, Jay Martin's biography, *Always Merry and Bright*, have suggested it is a huge, undisciplined mass proliferating in multiple directions so rapidly that its author cannot control it. This legend lets an admirer of Miller imagine it as a lode of brilliant gems swirling in the stream of its wild composition.

Almost seventy pages of the new volume have been published previously, in Miller's first three New Directions collections, as four separate articles. (One, "The Universe of Death," a longwinded attack on Joyce and Proust, is reprinted almost exactly as in *The Cosmological Eye*, 1939.) Given these, especially the composite notes titled "Shadowy Monomania" (*Sunday After the War*, 1944), and the *Letters to Anais Nin*, one can postulate readily and, it turns out, accurately the kind of book Miller attempted.

As published, *The World of Lawrence* becomes a clean, organized book—perhaps too much so for a reader who would prefer to dig in the raw materials. One wonders whether it has been *forced* to be a book, instead of a collection of notes and briefer essays. Conversely, *Notes on "Aaron's Rod"* attempts to reproduce faithfully the rather fragmentary nature of Miller's thoughts and close readings of Lawrence's text. In fact, the two may be compared, for the content of *Notes on "Aaron's Rod"* appears in more polished form in Chapter II of *The World of Lawrence*. (As an instance, see *Notes*, pp. 18-22, then look at pp. 62-65 of *World*.)

It is understandable that Capra Press would wish to present Miller in the best light, by way of a coherent manuscript. Yet, as all the evidence shows, Miller did not write so smooth a book, nor did he wish to; seen in this way, the new book has risked violating the spirit of the work for the sake of order. In addition, the introduction by Professors Hinz and Teunissen makes no mention of the editing task they faced, which must have been considerable. What is the actual relation of the Miller notebooks to the published edition? Since the originals are no more available than before, this seems a serious omission for those of us who desire to know clearly what is Miller's work and what comprises the editor's job of cleaning up. Finally, if Jay Martin's work in the archives is correct, the original manuscript amounts to "hundreds of pages of notes and writing." What then has been left out? Why? (A significant outline of "Notes on Lawrence" has been appended to *Notes on "Aaron's Rod"* but does not appear in the Capra edition.)

The editors of both these volumes agree with Martin that the primary reason Miller was unable to complete *The World of Lawrence* is that he identified himself too closely with Lawrence, and therefore believed that everything which Lawrence provoked in him, however tangentially, would have to be included. Certainly the intention of his criticism is to document his personal encounter with Lawrence and the ideas he represents. Miller determined almost at once to use Kahane's proposal for his own purposes; it had taken too long for him to become the writer he dreamed of being and he was not about to retreat from that creative stance. But this affinity goes deeper than mere obstinacy or confusion.

It is easy to lose patience with Lawrence's unrelenting seriousness, or, conversely, with Miller's incautious playfulness. Despite these and other important

differences of style and personality, the two share a vision which will let literature settle for nothing less than a vital role in the life of the human spirit. Their valorization of the individual, their commitments to new form and direct language, and their radical lifestyles forced the role of outlaw on both of them in their relations to British and American society. Both have been violently attacked by law, in the form of censorship; by capitalism, with the result of poverty; and by culture, being slurred, condescended to and ignored by critics and scholars.

Lawrence and Miller provide cases as good as any of what the pioneering artist can expect from society if he pursues his truth faithfully, blasting dead values and creating new ones—and trying to live as well, to embrace more than the herd-life allows. In Chapter VI, perhaps the finest in his Lawrence book, Miller inverts the conventional valuation of “obscenity” to show the substance of his own affirmation:

Obscenity is pure and springs from effervescence, excess vitality, joy of life, concord, unanimity, alliance with nature, indifference to God of the healthy sort that takes God down a peg or two in order to reexamine him. Obscenity is a divine prerogative of man, and is always used carelessly, heedlessly, without scruple or qualms, without religious or aesthetic defense. When the body becomes sacred, obscenity comes into his own. Purity of speech is as much bosh as purity of action—there is no such thing. Obscenity is stomped down when the body is degraded, when the soul is made to usurp the body’s proper function. (pp. 175-76)

The place of D. H. Lawrence as a major innovator in twentieth century literature has been assured for some time. The publication of Miller’s tribute honors both men and should aid in raising Miller to a stature similar to Lawrence’s. For the full involvement of man in his own experience constitutes the legacy of Henry Miller.