



Big Sur, Self-Knowledge, and Poiesis in Miller and Kerouac

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the role of Big Sur in the works of Miller and Kerouac, both of whom went there as a way of rediscovering the wealth of the world when the spiritual poverty of daily life in the rest of the U.S. became debilitating for them. In this paper, I aim to show how their respective experiences of Big Sur bear on their differing self-understanding as writers, and how that difference might inform our own approach to what it means to live up to a place. I am interested in the epistemic and ethical dimensions of their works on Big Sur—and hence their philosophical character—insofar as they are motivated by site-specific experience.

KEYWORDS

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ethics, general
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“My horse! My land! My kingdom!” The babble of idiots.—Henry Miller¹

In a five-year span between 1957 and 1962, Henry Miller and Jack Kerouac each published works ostensibly on Big Sur. Eighteen miles south of Monterey on Highway 1 and 140 miles from San Francisco, the stretch of coast promised solitude, quiet, and time to reencounter that dimension of existence where the body-mind makes contact with the world. A place of rugged, austere, and awesome beauty, impenetrable mountains and turbulent ocean, luminous vistas and opaque fog, Big Sur figured in the imagination of these writers as a place of rejuvenation and literary inspiration. “This is the California that men dreamed of years ago, this is the Pacific that Balboa looked out on from the Peak of Darien, this is the face of the earth as the Creator intended it to look,” says Miller.² “Here I will find peace. Here I shall find the strength to do the work I was meant to do.”³ So, beginning in 1942, Henry Miller stayed at Big Sur for roughly twenty years following his return from Europe and Greece to what he otherwise called “the air-conditioned nightmare” of America. Kerouac, by contrast, stayed less than three weeks, arriving at Big Sur on the recommendation of Beat poet and City Lights publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who owned a rustic cabin at Bixby Creek apparently inspired by the example of Henry Miller. Kerouac was running from the delirium tremens and he made the trip west—his first travel in four years—to break the monotony of suburban Long Island where he lived with his mother. Arriving in San Francisco as the first stop along the way, Kerouac proceeded to get drunk and oversleep his departure time, only to awaken with the realization: “‘One fast move or I’m gone,’ ... gone the way of the last three years of drunken hopelessness you can’t learn in school no matter how many books on existentialism or pessimism you read, or how many jugs of vision-producing Ayahuasca you drink, or Mescaline take, or Peyote goop up with.”⁴ Big Sur, then, figured as a place for the authors to work in peace, a place to convalesce along the coast by the sea.

In the woods at Big Sur there is a feeling of immersion, a synesthetic continuity where you see in the giant redwoods the spongy humus you feel when you walk the forest floor. You can taste the cycle of decay and incessant growth of plant and animal life. In a clearing on a warm day, the sun burns your skin, but the evaporation of the forest’s respiration is just as palpable, and what is musky gives way to dust. When you reach the coast, the sea is archaic and powerful, and if your vantage and the light are right, it is as blue as any sky anywhere. On a bluff or on along the beach there is the sting of wind-whipped salt air. You see it in the sand and the flight of the gulls. You breathe the iodine spray of the surf, hear the Earth’s lunar rotation, which you also feel beneath your feet and which vibrates through your body, an echo chamber of planetary movement. Time is experienced there as both suspension and abrupt transition—and these are simultaneous and sequential with one another, suspended and overlapping—in the movement of the tide, the drift of the clouds, the arc of the sun, the sounds of the birds, the erosion of the cliffs, the temperatures. The clock and the guidebook are incapable of touching the primordial experience of these things, where you sense your lived existence as both supported by all of this and as outcast, as belonging to what is utterly indifferent to your aspirations, your

¹ Henry Miller, *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch* (New York: New Directions Books, 1957), 8.

² *Ibid.*, 6.

³ *Ibid.*, 402.

⁴ Jack Kerouac, *Big Sur* (New York: Penguin Books, 1962), 7.

personhood, your neediness. Big Sur facilitates intimacy with what is alien both within and outside ourselves.

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Hegel said that work is desire staved off. That is, work defers satisfaction, harnesses the present for the sake of the future. In very inability to consume the products of his labor, the bondsman possesses the foundations of self-consciousness, the possibility of existing for himself. The initial one-sidedness of this situation—viz., that the bondsman can recognize himself in his work, while the work cannot recognize itself in the bondsman—is overcome in Hegel’s account by the presence of the other person and the achievement of mutual recognition. Only through the restriction of desire by work is space carved out for the birth of sociality, the higher realm of spirit, and only that higher realm can redeem the promise of work, which otherwise remains servile.⁵

In the social order of early twentieth century capitalism, work not only conditioned social recognition by keeping desire in check, but provided self-understanding with the criterion of self-identity: to be someone was to have a good job. Working for a “good company” not only paid monetary wages, but bestowed status. To be someone was to be successful, to be employed, to be part of the productive social order. So for many the indignity of poverty was compounded by the humiliation of unemployment. When the stock market crashed in 1929, the year Miller first went to Paris, stories abounded of suicides by previously successfully employed people. While the numbers reported were inflated,⁶ neither the fact that over the next few years more people were driven to kill themselves than before the crash nor the public’s prurient interest in that news can be accounted for simply because people lost their income. Only the sudden change of status, the fall from social grace, explains such desperate measures, given that basic necessities remained available albeit it rationed. The counterpart of the breadline was the unemployment line, hunger salted by shame.

Henry Miller did not go to the City of Light in 1928 and again 1930, as he did to Big Sur in 1942, primarily in order to work. He went because in Paris one could live in poverty and without a job while still maintaining some degree of self-respect.⁷ After two years in the city he famously declared: “I have no money, no resources, no hopes. I am the happiest man alive.”⁸ In this way, Miller’s literary life established itself from the start in opposition to the values of the productive social order, and the title of his first work—*Tropic of Cancer*—is meant to indicate that.⁹ Not production and accumulation, but expenditure. No more belittling work at the expense of desire, but writing as the record, the creation, the effect of unbridled passion. Energies must be spent, not saved. Determined to present what proper books excluded, therefore, Miller predicated

⁵ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 111–119.

⁶ Christopher Klein, “1929 Stock Market Crash: Did Panicked Investors Really Jump from Windows?” History.com, accessed February 28, 2020, <https://www.history.com/news/stock-market-crash-suicides-wall-street-1929-great-depression>.

⁷ Gilberte Brassäi, *Henry Miller: The Paris Years*, trans. Timothy Bent (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1975), 7.

⁸ Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 1.

⁹ “For me, Cancer means the crab—the creature which could move in any direction. It is the sign in the zodiac for the poet—the halfway station of realization. . . . Cancer also means for me the disease of civilization, the extreme point of realization along the wrong path—hence the necessity to change course and begin all over again. Cancer then is the apogee of death in life.” Anaïs Nin and Henry Miller, *A Literate Passion: Letters of Anaïs Nin & Henry Miller, 1932–1953* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1987), 147.

his work on the freedom of desire, which left its mark on both the form and the content of his writing at that time. At the level of form we find a prose that eschews conventional organization and development, transforming the obsessions and failures of daily events into literary flow, and transforming literature into a kind of first-hand reporting and revelry of life on the streets. At the level of content the work is comprised of episodes and observations too base, too personal, too perverted, too insignificant to shape epic, tragic, allegorical, didactic, or moral narrative. Not surprisingly, then, again at the level of both form and content, the entire novel could be taken to exemplify Hegel's articulation of the failure of desire, that is, the discovery that what is first taken as an expression of independence is in truth a form of servitude.¹⁰ For what Miller lauds as freedom is at the same time an obsessive devotion to Tania, which consumes him and which he returns to and disastrously repeats throughout the novel. At the outset of the book, there is lascivious exaltation and unchecked self-assertion: "You, Tania, are my chaos. It is why I sing. It is not even I, it is the world dying, shedding the skin of time. I am still alive, kicking in your womb, a reality to write upon."¹¹ "O Tania, where now is that warm cunt of yours, those fat heavy garters, those soft bulging thighs? I will.... I will"¹² And at the close of the novel, Miller tells us: "For seven years I went about, day and night, with only one thing on my mind—*her*. Were there a Christian so faithful to his God as I was to her we would all be Jesus Christ today. Day and night I thought of her, even when I was deceiving her."¹³ Who could fail to see here that the sovereignty of desire is nothing, as Georges Bataille might put it,¹⁴ that is, nothing but the affirmation of its own movement, which is destined to burn out? Indeed, Miller's entire literary work is predicated on that unsustainable affirmation. For him, then, it is worth it even if and indeed because it cannot be salvaged. No wonder, then, that Miller's writing was declared obscene at the time. What cannot be put to work will not be afforded the status of belonging to the productive social order, will not be allowed to enter the market, will not be allowed to make money. So *Tropic of Cancer* was banned in the United States for twenty-seven years. Such reaction, though, only confirms that unrestrained desire can also be illuminating even as it is destructive, possessing the power to reorient and reorder.

The Beats shared Miller's affirmation of the freedom of desire, his disdain for status within the productive social order, and in many cases the burden of censorship. Ginsberg and Burroughs both wrote works tried on obscenity charges. But it was Kerouac in particular who transformed his life into a series of novels that he envisioned as constituting one great single work, his life's work. And it is worth emphasizing the role of desire in these books, again at the level of both form and content. For they are forever on the road, moving from one situation to the next, living both for and from the trips, the episodes, and the people that pass in and out of his life. Kerouac is devoted to that movement, which at its best reconfigures the order of things and transforms expectations. You know, he writes, "the way people always feel whenever they essay some trip long or short especially in the night—The eyes of hope looking over the glare of the hood into the maw with its white line feeding in straight as an arrow, the lighting of fresh cigarettes, the buckling to lean forward to the next adventure."¹⁵ The eyes of hope, then, leaning

¹⁰ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 109.

¹¹ Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*, 2.

¹² *Ibid.*, 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 177–78.

¹⁴ Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, Vols. 2&3, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1993), 430.

¹⁵ Kerouac, *Big Sur*, 176.

forward to the next adventure—such is the anticipation of life of on the road, desire for the next adventure.

Yet the often happy restlessness and sense of discovery that characterize his earlier works faded as his fame grew, and by the time he arrived at Big Sur in 1960 we witness an unhappy agitation, crippling paranoia, nightmares, and an overwhelming fear of death. Not the “face of the earth as the Creator intended it,” not Miller’s Big Sur, but the “wild gloom sea coast,”¹⁶ where “the blue sea behind the crashing high waves is full of huge black rocks rising like old ogresome castles dripping wet slime, a billion years of woe right there.”¹⁷ Not wonder, but fear and boredom, an inability to be in his surroundings. Kerouac receives the first sign of his impending madness in the novel after less than three weeks in Ferlighetti’s cabin. “The sea seems to yell to me to GO TO YOUR DESIRE DON’T HANG AROUND HERE.”¹⁸ So he hitchhikes to Monterey: scorching sun, miles without a ride, feet bloody. In all, Kerouac leaves and returns to Big Sur twice in the story, always on the move. Though the novel covers an approximately six week period, of which four take place at Big Sur, more than two thirds of the narration focuses on San Francisco, where the author meets up with Cody (based on Neal Cassady), races cars through the city streets just before dawn, and lies around drunk in Billie’s apartment. When he returns to Big Sur, it is with groups of people, a party. But it is Monsanto (based on Lawrence Ferlinghetti) and not Kerouac who remarks on the sadness of the situation, which desecrates the solitude of the place.¹⁹ It is as though Miller is thinking of Kerouac, and no doubt himself too, when he says: “‘If you don’t know where you are going, any road will take you there.’ There are days when it all seems as simple and clear as that to me. What do I mean? I mean with regard to the problem of living on this earth without becoming a slave, a drudge, a hack, a misfit, an alcoholic, a drug addict, a neurotic, a schizophrenic, a glutton for punishment or an artist *manqué*.”²⁰

I take this to mean that it is not enough to be on the road, not enough to affirm the free fall of desire, even if that affirmation might facilitate the illumination of an order beyond the world of work and social recognition. For the real task is to cultivate what Miller calls a new way of seeing, vision as a creative faculty. Rather than set out again on the move, we might also stay put and watch the world go around.²¹ How different, then, for us to pass through a place and to let a place pass through us!

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Hieronymus Bosch’s famous triptych, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, depicts the innocence, fall and condemnation of humankind. Its scope sets it apart from most of the other sixteen surviving works by the great, idiosyncratic Dutch painter, whose ability to imagine the worst of human suffering ranks with Dante and Goya. Even here, though, one need not look to the far right panel depicting Hell to see the fruits of human folly. Instead, the centerpiece, the garden of delights itself, is filled with unsettling images, such as that section of the work where we see a sexless body submerged upside down in water, a speared and broken egg between its

¹⁶ Ibid., 23.

¹⁷ Ibid., 15.

¹⁸ Ibid., 41.

¹⁹ Ibid., 94.

²⁰ Miller, *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*, 250.

²¹ Ibid., 25.

legs, while another human ensconced within a giant semi-organic pod faces a rat that approaches at eye-level via a transparent connecting tube.²² Given the predominance of such scenes in the work, it is important that Henry Miller remarks on what he calls the preternatural character of the “hallucinatively real oranges that diaper the trees.”²³ Doing so, he emphasizes that this reality eludes us when we treat the orange as something to be consumed. Use value is not the most concrete way in which things appear to us, but the most abstract, as though the essence of oranges could be found in the vitamins they contain or their Sunkist brand. Instead, things exist with their own ambiance, as Miller puts it, by which he means they present themselves in such a way as to organize the world around them.²⁴ Miller is thinking here of the experience we have of things existing in their own right but not just of their own accord, their power to color and shape and open our field of experience, as though the world is born from and nourished by them, where this situation is “the very substance of life.”²⁵ That things exist with an ambiance of their own means, then, that they pervade the system of relations that also supports them and that this exchange constitutes the vitality of the world. The world is thus given through such things, because of them, and in light of them. And this, in turn, returns us to the things themselves as just what they are: sovereign and full of themselves. Such are the oranges of Hieronymus Bosch that Miller draws upon for the subtitle of his work on *Big Sur*. “Bosch...acquired a magic vision,” says Miller. “He saw through the phenomenal world, rendered it transparent, and thus revealed its pristine aspect. Seeing the world through his eyes it appears to us once again as a world of indestructible order, beauty, harmony, which it is our privilege to accept as a paradise.”²⁶ Bosch’s vision—and Miller’s attunement to it—thus sees the world as complete, abundant, and generative. Such a world transforms desire, since in the absence of lack desire would no longer need to aim at transforming the world.

Miller says that he remarks on Bosch precisely because *Big Sur* is a paradise, that is, because its extraordinary reality elicits response from those who witness it, because *Big Sur* engenders creativity. Miller is struck not only by the place, then, but by the people he comes to know there, people who according to him strive to live up to the grandeur and nobility of their surroundings.²⁷ They show him that solitude is not a matter of isolation, but the condition required to recognize our interconnectedness with one another and the Earth. Reflecting on his neighbors, Miller notes that “their goal is . . . Not back to the safety of the womb, but—out of the wilderness [that is the omnipresent demand for a bigger and better America]!...what they are after is to become as undependent as possible. Interdependent would be more like it.”²⁸ Thus, they would seek to become like the place, to belong to its ambiance, to participate in the exchange of life by which things flourish in their own right and in accord with others. The creativity of *Big Sur*’s inhabitants on this account does not function through the determinate negation of their environment, fashioning the world in their image, but rather through the affirmation of their accord with the place whereby they fashion themselves in its image. *Big Sur*’s inhabitants, at least according to Miller, know themselves as part of something larger, and their daily lives and artistic endeavors attest to this.

²² Stefan Fischer, *Hieronymus Bosch: The Complete Works* (Cologne: Taschen Books, 2019), 124–25, 128–29.

²³ Miller, *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*, 23.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 256. And: “In practicing their own way of life they point up the unessentials which make our way of life so absurd and futile.”

Speaking for himself, of his own experience, educated and shaped by Big Sur and its inhabitants, Miller reflects on the relation of solitude and community in a way that further develops the ontology implied in the above-traced account of things exemplified in the appeal to Bosch's oranges. Miller writes: "No, we are never alone. But one has to live apart to know it for the truth.... To be alone, if only for a few minutes, and to realize it with all one's being, is a blessing." Because then

the most insignificant blade of grass assumes its proper place in the universe.... One thing becomes just as important as another, one person as good as another. Lowest and highest become interchangeable.... It is then that the bird no longer seems hideous, nor merely to be tolerated because of his scavenger propensities. Nor do the stones in the field then seem inanimate, or to be regarded with an eye toward future walls and buttresses. Even if it lasts for only a few moments, the privilege of looking at the world as a spectacle of unending life and not as a repository of persons, creatures and objects to be impressed into our service, is something never to be forgotten.²⁹

The preternatural character of things not only makes them stand out as if absolute, then, but also renders each thing equivalent with the next. This is not due to an inability to discriminate on our part, but the power of a thing to demand full attention while at the same time being unable to contain itself. Such things are radiant. They acquire their substance not by virtue of their independence, but in the connection they express with all that surrounds them, the effectuation of coexistence. Solitude is not so much a matter of seclusion, then, but a condition of exposure to the palpable excess of life itself beyond our individuality, an intensification of alertness to all that surrounds and supports us.

Daily activity within the productive social order makes it difficult to see this way, both over-stimulating and deadening the senses. But so too does always being on the move. When a place possesses the power to still the need that drives us from one thing to another, as if they are disconnected and the new search requires us to leave the old behind like garbage, we discover a time beyond both the order of work and desire. "Stay put and watch the world go round!" says Miller. Indeed, that is why he can say of his own life: It is only "From here on (Big Sur) that things began to happen in earnest."³⁰

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By way of conclusion, I want to emphasize not only that Big Sur taught Miller the beauty of things existing in their own right, radiant in their singular equivalence with each other, nor that we humans are all interconnected. It also taught him that we humans are in some sense equivalent to the things we encounter. He writes,

We have all experienced moments of utter forgetfulness when we knew ourselves as plant, animal, creature of the deep or denizen of the air. ... Most everyone has known one moment in his life when he felt so good, so thoroughly attuned, that he has been on the point of explaining: 'Ah, now is the time to die!' What is it that lurks here in the very heart of euphoria? The thought that it will not, cannot last? The sense of an ultimate?

²⁹ Ibid., 34.

³⁰ Ibid., 206.

Perhaps. But I think there is another, deeper aspect to it. I think that in such moments we are trying to tell ourselves what we have long known but ever refuse to accept—that living and dying are one, that all is one, and that it makes no difference whether we live a day or a thousand years.³¹

This is not some kind of nihilism that says it does not matter if we live or die, of course, but a repudiation of the attempt to live longer without living better, a refusal to live as a slave to work or desire. To identify with the plant, the animal, a creature of the sea or the air is to place oneself on the plane of life itself, to align oneself with the interconnectedness of all that is mortal. It is to recognize in oneself and in excess of personhood the continuity of general life. If living and dying are one, it is only because individuation cannot endure, even though life itself lives through that individuation, and hence lives on death. This is what Bataille means when he says that death is a luxury.³² But Miller goes further and adds: “Had we the power to resurrect the dead, what could we offer that life itself has not already offered, and continues to offer, in full measure?”³³ “The point I wish to stress is that in accepting our fate we are not to think that things were destined thus or that we were singled out for special attention, but that by responding to the best in ourselves we may put ourselves in rhythm with higher laws, the inscrutable laws of the universe, which have nothing to do with good or bad, you or me.”³⁴

Nothing to do with good or bad, you or me, and yet there is also here what I would like to call a hypoethics, that is, an impersonal ethics that lies below the overly lauded dignity of persons and below the threshold of utility, a way of inhabiting the world that is constituted in fidelity to general life.³⁵ I do not want to say that fidelity translates into moral action, but that the individual lives served by the limited character of moral action are likely enriched by this. For they no longer have as their sole measure individual forms of existence but the world itself taken as a whole, no longer need but abundance. In the experience of its equivalence with other creatures, human being not only loses its status as the center of creation, but frees itself from the restricted economy that status implies. We could say that it is no longer a matter of determinate negation, but rather indeterminate affirmation, a yes-saying to life that eschews self-assertion. This not only frees one from the fear of death, which is predicated upon the unquestioned primacy of individual existence struggling to preserve itself. It also frees us from the guilt

³¹ Ibid., 29.

³² Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, Vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 33ff.

³³ Miller, *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*, 168.

³⁴ Ibid., 227.

³⁵ Thus, the significance of Miller’s interest in the following, which gestures towards community of general life, community constituted in the transgression of individual life beyond its desire to preserve itself, transgression in fidelity to the uniformity of life, anonymous life, general life. The passage Miller cites comes from Wilhelm Fränger’s *The Millennium of Hieronymus Bosch*, p. 127:

“These fair-headed people of both sexes are so alike they could hardly be told apart, and their attitudes are anonymous and selfless. They are a single family reminding us of a plant family.... Theirs is a stillness as of vegetation, so that the fine-drawn groping hands appear like tendrils seeking neighboring flowers for support.

“And they seem to grow up out of the ground as much at random as wild flowers in a meadow. For the vague uniformity of this naked life is not subject to any formal discipline. Yet however arbitrarily the pattern of the moving bodies may be concentrated and condensing one place and may loosen and scatter in another, there is nowhere any overcrowding and nowhere any random emptiness. However free each may be to follow his own inclination, there remains an invisible bond holding them all together. This is the tenderness with which all these inhabitants of the heavenly meadows cling together in brotherly and sisterly intimacy” (Cited in Miller, *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*, 236–37).

imbedded in our Western morality, which shares that same investment in the primacy of individual existence and the logic of lack, since all guilt is a matter of personal inadequacy, an internalization of the difference between oneself and others as individuals. This means further, though, that what really sets hypothetical sensibility apart from our long-standing traditions of morality is that it can in no way be obligatory. For the world does not set out to settle accounts. It makes no demands but gives without the expectation of return. What would it mean to take one's measure from that? Simply "[t]o breathe out more than one breathes in,"³⁶ as Miller puts it. That is how one lives up to a place like Big Sur, or Earth.

³⁶ Miller, *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*, 193.