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The Writing of Betty Miller: 1933-49

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Abstract

This thesis is the first comprehensive study of the writing of the author, journalist, reviewer and scholar Betty Miller (1910-65). As such it seeks to develop a language with which readers might think about her work.

Analysing the ways in which commentators have redrawn the critical maps of the 1930s and 40s provides a crucial context for an understanding of Miller's work as a product of its cultural inception. Exploring the dynamics of the various socio-historic and institutional forces that have come to bear on the availability and readability of women's writing from this period, *The Writing of Betty Miller* looks at the recuperative practices of feminist publishing houses as well as the near annihilation of Miller's work in the Second World War.

Betty Miller's bestselling biography of Robert Browning and her non-fiction writing for journals such as *Twentieth Century* and *Horizon* in the 1950s, begin to suggest a literary context that draws out the allusions in and influences on her fiction. The seven novels that she wrote between 1933-49, read chronologically, situate her amongst contemporaneous debates on the gendered dynamics of marriage, the politics of the Anglo-Jewish experience and the familial impact of war. They also confront literary experiments of writing timeliness, boredom and violence. Close reading interrogates her texts' most prevalent imagery and aesthetics, asking what makes her writing particularly Millerian, whilst positioning a readership that pays attention to the thoughtful examination of the morality of everyday decision-making that underlies Miller's work.

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Introduction

On the dust jacket of Betty Miller's fourth novel *Farewell Leicester Square* (1941) is a long list of quotes praising her previous work. There is, for example, a recommendation by Dorothy Richardson: 'Rarely', she writes, 'has a young writer set out with such a formidable array of gifts'. An anonymous reviewer from *New York Herald and Tribune* agrees: 'Given this amazing reach of imagination, a style, which, at its best, reaches a distinctive beauty and a sound sense of narrative, one cannot doubt that this author has started on a brilliant career.'¹ The emphasis on Miller's precocious talent and output is not misplaced. By the time she was twenty-four, Victor Gollancz had published three of her novels and considered himself something of a mentor. In 1936 he rejected *Farewell Leicester Square*, a novel that dealt with the Anglo-Jewish experience in 1930s London, for being too controversial. It took a realignment of the perspective of British society, brought about by the outbreak of war, before Robert Hale printed it in 1941. Three other novels followed, as well as a career as a biographer and editor of Victorian poetry and letters. I first encountered Betty Miller's work when I read *Robert Browning: A Portrait* and was taken with her account of his domestic life. In the biographical note on the back pages of my Penguin Classic, I learnt that the author had published seven novels between 1933 and 1949. So, over the course of a few months, read them all. Doing so was more of an administrative problem than I had anticipated. None of my local libraries had them in their collections and there was, it transpired, just one copy of each in the British Library so I had to remember to order them days in advance. I soon learnt that it is

¹ Betty Miller, *Farewell Leicester Square* (London: Robert Hale, 1941)

difficult to read Betty Miller's work, let alone to read it spontaneously. Nonetheless, I persevered because I found her fiction strangely compelling. It seemed so recognisably one thing and then it was another; I could see the relatedness between the novels but also felt how singular each one was from its predecessor. How should I articulate what Betty Miller's writing is doing on the page? And what of the 'brilliant career' that was promised of this peculiar writer? *The Writing of Betty Miller* is the first comprehensive study of the author, journalist, reviewer and scholar Betty Miller (1910-65). As such, it seeks to develop a language for the ways that we might read her work.

Politically interested, often explicitly so, Miller's work is a product of the cultural moments of the 1930s and 1940s. Thankfully, the perceived failure of this period of writing is no longer the starting point for an assessment of its critical reception. Rather we turn to the overlapping, but often adjacent, literary scholarship of readers and writers who are still continuing to find new ways to think about its fiction. It is significant to note that Betty Miller's work does not appear in what is generally accepted to be the first 'comprehensive' study of the writing of this period, Valentine Cunningham's enormous, epoch-shifting survey *British Writers of the Thirties*.² Often using Cunningham as a starting point for revisionist readings of the 1930s, critics have looked beyond the limits of its boundaries. Keith Williams and Steven Matthews' collected edition is focused on writing that highlighted the 'broad and contested cultural context' of literature that often goes against the outdated map of the period.³ Others have continued the critical work of troubling the notion of the

² Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988)

³ *Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism and After*, ed., Keith Williams and Steven Matthews (London: Longman, 1997)

1930s as a ‘discrete historical decade with unique identifying features manifested in its literature.’⁴ Tyrus Miller’s analysis of what he terms *Late Modernism*, places the paradox of literary innovation in relation to its necessary historical catalysts and therefore amongst its anticipated aftermath.⁵ Meanwhile Kristin Bluemel’s *Intermodernism* draws together the connections between the literature of the Second World War and 1930s life. She makes it clear that her term is a postmodern invention; the latest attempt to reclaim 1930s writing that is often Middlebrow, Jewish, Feminist and Leftist. Betty Miller’s work has so far never experienced a serious attempt of reclamation. Largely unread, it has silently refused to be classified. The unusual position in which it rests is therefore somewhat of a hindrance to a reader beginning to try to express its significance. But it also means that it remains un-tethered by the normal cultural constructs that can be used as formal categorisations of problematic work.

Andy Croft’s study of working-class writers was an important part of the inclusive revisionist work on the 1930s.⁶ But the most fundamental development in the criticism of this period is the recognition of its many professional women writers. Nicola Beauman’s *A Very Great Profession* contextualised the historical conditions that she saw as bringing about the plenitude of fiction by women between the wars. Moreover, she named them: drawing more academic attention to the work of, amongst many others, Enid Bagnold, E.M. Delafield, Margaret Kennedy and G.B.

⁴ *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History* ed., Maroula Joannou (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p.2

⁵ Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction and the Arts between the World Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999)

⁶ Andy Croft, *Red Letter Days: British Literature in the 1930s* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990)

Stern.⁷ Alison Light drew on this study, marking out the political implications of the domestic fiction of the 1930s and claiming a shift in the national self-image that took place between the wars. The dominant mood of the period, she wrote, ‘could be conservative in effect and yet was often modern in form.’⁸ In Light’s understanding, the First World War rhetorically belonged to the heroes of the trenches, but ordinary people on the Home Front fought the Second World War. Whilst ‘potentially democratising’, this mythology, she argues, has resulted in the sense of the period as being both politically, and socially, inward-looking. Other critics, such as Rita Felski, Janet Montefiore, and Lisa Rado, have explored the political imperatives of women writers who did engage with broader, international debates.⁹ Sourcing radio programmes and newspaper articles as well as fiction, Diana Wallace has shown how women writers responded to the discussions about marriage that were taking place in the 1930s.¹⁰ Ranging from female adultery to the difficulty of obtaining a divorce before the 1937 Matrimonial Causes Act, writers such as E.H. Young and F. Tennyson Jesse saw the institution of marriage as the key site for exploring the intersections of sexual politics.¹¹ Catherine Clay’s study of women writers in this period draws out some of the literary networks that they forged, emphasising the

⁷ Nicola Beauman, *A Very Great Profession* (London: Virago, 1983)

⁸ Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), p.11

⁹ Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); Janet Montefiore, *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The Dangerous Flood of History* (London: Routledge, 1996); Lisa Rado, ed., *Rereading Modernism: New Directions in Feminist Criticism* (New York: Garland, 1994)

¹⁰ Diana Wallace, ‘Revising the Marriage Plot in Women’s Fiction of the 1930s’, *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History*, ed., Maroula Joannou (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999)

¹¹ E.H. Young, *The Curate’s Wife* (London: Virago, 1985), F. Tennyson Jesse, *A Pin to See the Peepshow* (London: William Heinemann, 1973)

professional coteries of Stella Benson, Vera Brittain, Winifred Holtby, Storm Jameson, Naomi Mitchison and their patron at *Time and Tide*, Lady Rhondda.¹²

Three of Betty Miller's novels were published in the 1930s, the other four in the 1940s. But all of them underscore the very real presence of latent violence. For British women writers, as Phyllis Lassner has observed, the struggle to resolve fascism abroad could only be achieved if the fascism at home was addressed. Karen Schneider has shown the ways in which romantic love was used as a trope for war both 'at home' as well as 'in the home'.¹³ Continuing to expose the privilege of the masculine in war stories, she emphasises that war is a human condition, not just a male one.¹⁴ As such, women's stories of the war should be recognised as war stories: re-positioning women in broader socio-historic narratives. Jenny Hartley reads a broad range of canonical and popular texts to explore typical themes in women's writing of the war and position those texts in their cultural context.¹⁵ Similarly refusing to essentialise the difference between men and women's writing of the period, Phyllis Lassner creates a division between writers who, noting its fundamental moral difference from the previous one, were broadly supportive of the Second World War; and others whose pacifism was informed by the perception of continuation from its predecessor.¹⁶ Marina Mackay's *Modernism and World War II* is a study in what she terms 'public modernism'. She finds that the literature of the Second World War doesn't always have to insist that war is despicable because, writing after the First,

¹² Catherine Clay, *British Women Writers 1914-1945: Professional Work and Friendship* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006)

¹³ Karen Schneider, *Loving Arms: British Women Writing the Second World War* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1997)

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Jenny Hartley, *Millions Like Us: British Women's Fiction of the Second World War* (London: Virago, 1997)

¹⁶ Phyllis Lassner, *British Women writers of World War II: Battlegrounds of Their Own* (London: Macmillan, 1997)

this position was taken as given. She argues that focusing on late modernism ‘is a way of reading modernism through its longer outcomes rather than its notional origins.’¹⁷ Like Jed Esty, she sees ‘diminution (rather than ‘decline’)

as the crucial dimension of post-war culture.’¹⁸

Negotiating the discourses on ‘how the period was experienced and imaginatively organised’ is a crucial component of situating Miller’s work in a historical and literary framework.¹⁹ Lawrence Rainey’s insistence on the significance of institutions in the cultural narratives of literary production and reception is also key. His warning against conflating avant-garde form with radical progressive politics works conversely in the case of Betty Miller and her fiction. A woman writer focussing on the often-gendered ideologies of the domestic, it would be easy to categorise her as middlebrow. Critics such as Nicola Humble, alongside groups such as the Middlebrow Network, have sought to interrogate this culturally loaded term in order, primarily, to release domestic fiction from the derided margins of literature.²⁰ Judy Suh has shown how middlebrow culture, using the example of Phyllis Bottome, ‘demonstrates the capacity for cosmopolitan political perception and class mobility important for twentieth century feminists.’²¹

From 1933 to 1940, eight of Betty Miller’s short stories were published in the newspaper that often found itself amongst the battle of the ‘brows’, *John O’London’s*

¹⁷ Marina Mackay, *Modernism and World War II* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008), p.15

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.17; Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003)

¹⁹ Marina Mackay, *Modernism and World War II* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008), p.14

²⁰ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel 1920s-1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)

²¹ Judy Suh, *Fascism and Anti-Fascism in Twentieth-Century British Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.70

Weekly. Between 80,000 and 100,000 copies of *John O'London's Weekly* were sold each week in the 1930s. Q.D. Leavis famously dismissed it in *Fiction and the Reading Public* as an résumé of publisher's advertisements and full of literary gossip. But it was also, for example, the British publisher of the newly discovered Katherine Mansfield short stories that appeared in tandem with *The New Yorker* in the autumn of 1939. Established in 1919 by the *Daily Mail* writer Wilfred Whitten who edited it until 1936, the paper found its niche producing popular literary journalism. Jonathan Wild has shown the vast cultural spectrum of the weekly paper's interests: from tutorials for budding short story writers to reviews of all the 'brows' where the avant-garde sits column to column with popular bestsellers.²² Erica Brown and Mary Grover insist on the significance of the middlebrow in spite of its perception as a literary no-man's land and a pejorative catch-all for narratives that are both somehow not difficult enough to be literature and yet themselves, tricky to define.²³ Outlining the significance of the term in the early twentieth century, from Q.D. Leavis's derisive '*faux-bon*' to Virginia Woolf's oppositional definition of it as *not* avant-garde, they highlight the cultural and historical contingency of the middlebrow in its position as both 'betwixt and between'.²⁴ *The Writing of Betty Miller* works alongside this project but resists finitely naming Miller and her work as such. Crucially, for example, her work doesn't coyly insist on its own artlessness, on its own ordinariness, as Humble defines middlebrow fiction doing; it *explicitly* asks intellectual questions about what it means to be artful or ordinary.

²² Jonathan Wild, 'A Strongly Felt Need': Wilfred Whitten/John O'London and the Rise of the New Reading Public', *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows, 1920-60* ed. Erica Brown and Mary Grover (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)

²³ *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows, 1920-60* ed. Erica Brown and Mary Grover (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)

²⁴ Q.D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Pimlico, 2000), p.39

Lawrence Rainey's emphasis on print culture is another fundamental component of this study, but it is in the moment of *re-production* that this is so. Many 'forgotten' women writers have been made available to critics looking for a richer, more inclusive way to read the literature of the twentieth century, primarily through the recuperative ventures of feminist publishing houses. In turn, the academic interest in the dynamics of literary culture 'legitimises' their activity. Rainey argues that critical conceptions of the stratification of literary cultures that took place in the early twentieth century ignore the economic and institutional factors on which they were all dependent. He laments 'cultural activity that has been distilled of its material complexity [...] that bears no relation to the realities of cultural production within complex, modern societies'.²⁵ Feminist reassessment, he claims, often falls in to this trap. But feminist literary recovery is now a prevalent part of *our* modern cultural moment.²⁶ And 'stories' continue to be 'complex and contradictory artifacts' long after their initial inception.²⁷

I began this chapter with an account of how I first came to read Betty Miller's work in order to accent how her novels are difficult to find and impossible to stumble across. There are editions in the national libraries but second-hand copies are rare and expensive. The print-runs of her biography, *Robert Browning: A Portrait*, were much larger than any of her novels' runs. In the 1950s it was also re-issued several times with different publishers and translated into French. As a result, used copies are much more common. Also in the 1950s, after the success of *Robert Browning*, Miller tried, half-heartedly, to get some of her fiction from the 1930s back in to print. But

²⁵ Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p.8

²⁶ Urmilla Seshagiri, 'Persephone Books and the Modernist Project', *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (Summer 2013) pp. 241-287

²⁷ Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism*, p.9

publishers were reluctant to do so. They were only interested in new writing. Just one of her novels, *On the Side of the Angels* (1945), was reprinted (by Virago) in the twentieth century. Persephone Books reprinted *Farewell Leicester Square*, the novel that Gollancz rejected in 1936, in 2000. The Persephone Books imprint of *Farewell Leicester Square* is only in its second edition; since 2000 it has only sold enough copies to be reprinted once. But the unique position of small independent publishers that exclusively re-issue forgotten works, means that it continues to stay in print; the recuperative principle to which they adhere outweighs the economic value of a particular book. Avoiding a political or ideological recuperation, avoiding falling back on what Deleuze and Guattari call a 'hard segment', is at odds with the economic and ideological institutions that facilitate our ability to read forgotten women writers like Betty Miller.²⁸

Taking a cue from Potter's study of the less canonical works by women writers that responded to the Great War, *The Writing of Betty Miller* is not strictly a comparative study in that it's motivation isn't to place Miller's writing apart from her more celebrated male contemporaries. Rather it seeks to isolate the specifics of her work amongst it's often female context but never in isolation from the dominant masculine cultures. Hence, the female narratives of this thesis are complemented, if only briefly, by men's novels and memoirs.²⁹ Betty Miller's obituary in the *Times* compared her 'sensitive novels' to the work of Elizabeth Bowen and Elizabeth Taylor, two writers who have found a modern, albeit limited, readership.³⁰ Her work shares with Jean Rhys' the occasionally ruthless dismissal of certain kinds of enforced

²⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), x

²⁹ Jane Potter, *Boys in Khaki, Girls in Print: Women's Literary Responses to the Great War 1914-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.5

³⁰ Anon., 'Obituary', *The Times* (27th November 1965), p.32

femininity but not Rhys' vulnerable heroines. It has some of the lush prose of Rosamond Lehmann's fiction, but couldn't be further away in its reinforcement of the rational over the emotional. Her early novels are interested in re-working Virginia Woolf's experiments with daily time and structure. Her later ones continue to look to the morality of the everyday but place them within larger ambivalent social forces such as marriage, war and race. These women writers, as well as other lesser-known ones, form vital networks of meaning for Miller and her work. Some were literal: she was, for example, friends with Olivia Manning and Stevie Smith. But others are purely allusive: they are suggested, either explicitly or implicitly, by Miller's texts.

The Writing of Betty Miller begins with her best-selling and most widely available book, her biography *Robert Browning: A Portrait*. Stepping outside of the main parameters of this study of the fiction produced by Betty Miller in the years 1933 to 1949, it reads her biography of Robert Browning alongside her non-fiction prose from the late 1940s until her death in 1965. Otherwise, I have structured what we might call a retrospective of Miller's work chronologically. This is not to say that my interest is to position her work in terms of the context of her life, rather in the context of its moment of production. I have set out some of the pertinent points of biographical detail in chapter one partly to introduce some episodes in the life of an interesting writer who is almost exclusively unknown. More importantly, I have done so in order to illuminate some of the geographical, cultural and political markers that resonate in the work.

Chapters Two and Three offer close readings of Miller's first two novels *The Mere Living* (1933) and *Sunday* (1934). *The Mere Living* narrates the story of a family

of four on an ordinary day in 1930s London. Thinking about the circadian novel as a device for her linguistic explorations of modern consciousness acts as a starting point for an appreciation of Miller's literary style. *Sunday* follows a rich factory-owner on his trip to France where he is able to confront his disillusionment. Escaping from the emotional ties of his family, as well as the responsibilities of his profession, offers Mark Lane time to reflect. Radical revision of what it meant to be middle-class was well underway by the time Miller started to depict it. To be middle-class in a Millerian sense is the ability to afford leisure time. Structured as an 'Interlude' from the regular week, *Sunday* figures as a dangerous day of leisure in that it offers too much time away from productive occupation. *The Mere Living* and *Sunday* contain very little dialogue. They are personal novels; the ones that follow are public.

Chapter Four looks at Miller's third novel *Portrait of the Bride* (1935) within the concept of 'the woman's novel'. Through its depiction of various reading practices and habits, *Portrait of the Bride* exposes the dynamics of marriage. Rhoda Ingram's sexual boredom is, Miller shows us, a result of 'bad reading'. The novel is also a satire of the seduction games so tantalisingly depicted in the novels and films aimed at a female audience. Chapter Five reads the bildungsroman of the economically privileged but racially marginalised Alec Berman in *Farewell Leicester Square* (1941) within the historically determined definitions of 'tolerance' and 'liberalism'. Chapter Six is dedicated to drawing out Miller's use of specific imagery in *A Room in Regent's Park* (1942). It identifies the real and imagined cages that Valentine Cunningham identifies as being a key motif of fiction writing in the 1930s. The novel's present is the late 1930s; it ends in the first few weeks of the 'Phoney War'. This chapter therefore also analyses the peculiar position of *A Room in*

Regent's Park as a novel that is of the war whilst simultaneously anticipating war's arrival. Chapter Seven reads Miller's themes of violence and (im)posturing in the paper things and cloth uniforms in *On the Side of the Angels*. Turning to the ways in which a writer such as Betty Miller can come to be out of print, it also focuses on the bibliographic annihilation of the Second World War. Always concerned with intimate manifestations of conflict, Miller's last novel, *The Death of the Nightingale* (1949), aligns the family politics between a father and his daughter with the legacies of war, old and new. Nostalgia in this period, as Gabriel Josipovici claims, is too associated with proto-fascism, with a 'longing for an ordered world of community in contrast with the fragmented, liberal and individualistic world in which we live.'³¹ *The Death of the Nightingale*, as Miller's other novels did before it in different ways, deconstructs this contrast and wonders which will survive.

³¹ Gabriel Josipovici, *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2010), p.18

Chapter One

Robert Browning and the 'Peeping Tom of Prosperity.'

Or How to read Betty Miller?

29th January 1957

I have let this lady off ~~late~~ lightly but it is almost impossible to convey to her where this play goes wrong. It is all far too literary and the appearance of spirit manifestations from cabinets at a séance runs a grave risk of getting laughs unless the context in which it happened were of tremendous strength.

A friend of hers has asked Ken Tynan to read it.

MV

This letter is from one of the few archives that hold any mention of Betty Miller or her work.¹

Margery Vosper, Miller's agent at the time, was writing to a colleague about *Shadow on the Window*, a radio screenplay that she wrote with Sam Rosenberg. The play, which no longer exists and was never performed, was based on the Brownings' meeting with Daniel Home, known as 'Sludge the Medium', in London in the summer of 1855. Rosenberg recalls:

She was extremely modest, almost pathologically so, and blushed brightly when praised for her superb essays, reviews, novels. Nobody ever wrote more brilliant and original essays than Betty. I use them as a model, in part, for my own imaginative essays. No-one could dramatise ideas as brilliantly...It was for me a great experience to have that prolonged contact with such a formidable intellect.²

Shadow on the Window was Miller's last completed work. Her publishers picked up her joint biography of Tennyson and Kipling in 1956 but being 'superstitious' she refused an advance.

It was three-quarters finished in 1960 when she was diagnosed with the Alzheimer's disease

¹ Margery Vosper, Letter to David Higham, 29th January 1957, David Higham Papers, Box 379, Harry Ransom Centre

² Quoted in Sarah Miller, 'Introduction', *On the Side of the Angels* (London: Capuchin Classics, 2012), p.22

that meant she could no longer write. She was incarcerated in Friern Mental Hospital, formerly known as Colney Hatch Lunatic Asylum, where she died on 24th November 1965, soon after her fifty-fifth birthday. Her agents sold the papers to another Kipling scholar who used her research in his own book. No copies remain and her efforts were unacknowledged by the publisher.³

Vosper's letter is notable in that it articulates many of the problems involved when handling the work of a non-canonical writer. Women writers of this period, such as Elizabeth Bowen, Elizabeth Taylor, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Storm Jameson have experienced a commercial and academic resurgence but the problems of categorisation continue to inform much of the reading of their work. But Miller's work remains unexamined even when she has been reprinted by three of the most important publishers specialising in this resurgence.⁴ It is perhaps particularly strange that an educated, privileged writer living amongst her contemporaries with the weight of publishing giants and a literary coterie of her own is still an outsider figure.

How does this particular failure towards the end of Miller's career speak to the ways in which we read her novels from the previous decades? And what does it mean to be 'far too literary'? That comment seems at odds with the more frequent dismissal of women's writing of this period as being middlebrow or somehow not literary enough. Vosper's assessment that Miller's work is somehow limp, lacking 'tremendous strength' is more in line with the disregard for women's writing. Coupled with Vosper's reference to her as a 'lady' can we infer a gendered marginalisation of the work, even though it was written with Rosenberg?

³ Her discovery in 1955 that Flo Garrad was the inspiration for Masie in Kipling's *The Light that Failed* is now common knowledge amongst Kipling scholars. As told in an interview with Jonathan Miller.

⁴ Namely Virago Press, Persephone Books and Capuchin Classics. See list of Betty Miller publications in bibliography.

Miller's body of work rests somewhere on this spectrum between marginalisation and failure. She did not deliberately appropriate literary margins. Moreover, the margins her work occupies now, largely out of print and unread, are not the margins that the texts are interested in. In fact, Miller's work isn't interested in margins at all. It seeks out the commonplace centre, focuses in on those banal things and then magnifies them to the point where her novels are often saturated with enlarged specificity.

The 'wrong-ness' of *Shadow on the Window* recalls a moment earlier on in Miller's career. Her fourth novel was submitted to her publisher Victor Gollancz in 1935 as *Next Year in Jerusalem*. It was a study of 'the social and psychological conflicts of a Jew in the modern world' and she was immensely proud of what she had produced.⁵ It came as a great shock to her when Gollancz rejected it, so much so that she didn't write again until it was picked up by Robert Hale six years later. But Miller had got the politics wrong. Or, rather, she had got them right; they were just too controversial at the time. No record of the rejection letter exists but it seems highly plausible, as concluded by others such as Phyllis Lassner and Kristin Bluemel, that it was the novel's exploration of the Anglo-Jewish condition to which Gollancz objected. Whether it was because he felt it to have missed its mark or because it was too accurate, what was 'wrong' in 1935 was 'right' in 1941 when Britain was in its second year of the war against Fascism. It was Robert Hale who decided to publish the refused novel and he became a friend and a supporter of Miller's fiction, publishing all four of her final novels. When the firm changed hands, his son John Hale, the new director, wrote a kind note to Miller stating how nothing would please him more than a new novel from her.⁶

⁵ Quoted in Sarah Miller, 'Introduction', *On the Side of the Angels* (London: Capuchin Classics, 2012), p.16

⁶ John Hale, letter to Betty Miller, 6th August 1958, Robert Hale Papers, Harry Ransom Centre

Vosper's letter is also intriguing in that it was actually written at a time in Miller's career when she was most highly regarded.⁷ Published in the now iconic orange papers of Penguin Books, a Daily Mail Book of the Month, a Book Society recommendation and a Sunday Times bestseller of the early 1950s, *Robert Browning: A Portrait* (1952) was by far Betty Miller's most successful book. As a direct result of its success she was asked to edit the letters from Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mary Russell Mitford that appeared in a single volume edition in 1954. She was subsequently made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature where several times she was invited to speak as a guest lecturer. But, as she did with the invitations from PEN, she always refused, citing domestic obligations as well as confessing her terror of public speaking. Similarly, she never wrote about her own fiction or produced essays on popular literary issues. She very rarely gave interviews, although the few that she did give show her to be firm in her opinions. How do we negotiate these wilful silences? As a deliberate self-censorship? Or are they perhaps part of Miller's fascination with ideas of discretion and tolerance that play themselves out in much of her fiction? And how can writing which is interested in discretion be at the same time so explicit? It this paradox part of its 'wrong-ness'?

To try to better articulate some of the inevitable problems of reading Miller's work we start with a re-reading of her most available book: *Robert Browning: A Portrait*. Interestingly, her American publishers were keen to put out the biography under the name Elizabeth Miller. They felt that 'Betty' was suitably frivolous for fiction but not learned-sounding enough for a biography of an important poet. She refused, subsequently ensuring that her corpus of work remains more whole than it might have otherwise been.

⁷ There is something tantalising in that typo where 'lately' and 'lightly' are confused.

Miller quotes from Browning's introduction to his *Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley* as her introductory epigram to her most famous book. It includes an assertion that is apposite in the reading of the 'wrong-ness' of her own work: 'The performance we seek to estimate aright, has been obstructed and cut short of completion by circumstances'.⁸ The anonymous *Times* reviewer, however, focuses on what it gets right:

She has done her work with quite exemplary skill and with a rare sharpness of intuition. And in her sympathetic manipulations the Brownings for the first time become real, if very improbable, people. One of the most distinguished books that have appeared since the war.⁹

What is significant is the reviewer's insistence on Miller's *skill*. Writerly skilfulness implies the impression of an idea worked through to its fullest potential on the page. It is not an adjective usually ascribed to a forgotten author such as Miller and points towards why a reading of her portrait of the Brownings might illuminate some of the features of her writing's style and interest.

In it she did something quite radical with the story of the Brownings, writing Elizabeth Barrett as the rescuer of Robert. Between 1838 and 1846 Elizabeth Barrett lived at 50 Wimpole Street, famously self-cloistered away in a dark drawing room for the good of her health and, so the story went, for the convenience of her easily disgruntled father. It was to this house that Browning first wrote love letters and then made long visits. It was ultimately the cage from which he saved Barrett, taking her off to Italy where she found the freedom and inspiration to produce her most lasting work *Aurora Leigh* (1856). But in Miller's 'psycho-biography' Robert Browning is a weak, vulnerable person, overly dependent on his mother then transferring this emotional dependency to Barrett¹⁰. William C. Devane, reviewing

⁸ Robert Browning, Introductory Essay to 25 [spurious], *Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley* quoted in Betty Miller, *Robert Browning: A Portrait* (London: Penguin, 1958), p.6

⁹ Anon., 'Review of Betty Miller's *Robert Browning: A Portrait*', *The Times*, 6 October, 1952, p.22

¹⁰ Stefan Hanlin, *Robert Browning* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.41

Miller's book in 1953 argues that the 'terrible muse' of Twentieth Century poetry was psychology. And that Browning, along with his chief contemporary rival Alfred Tennyson, was partly responsible for that being the case. With Miller's biography, 'the wheel has come full circle: he is here the victim of the method he applied with telling effect.'¹¹ The personal history that informs his work is 'penetrating[ly]' laid out by Miller, particularly with reference to his relationships with the women whom he necessarily worshipped; only being able to love them, Miller asserts, 'from below'.¹² Time and time again, she insists on Browning's helplessness: his Perseus relies on Elizabeth Barrett's Andromeda to rescue both of them on his behalf. For Miller, Browning's early poem *Paracelsus* was only the first in a long line that displayed 'the poet's life-long obsession with the psychology of the charlatan, the quack, the second-rater, and the 'apparent failure'.¹³ Psychobiography centres on the why of human behaviour, attempting to make psychological meaning from biographical data. It is therefore a framework at odds with literary criticism that privileges the art itself.¹⁴ Her book is not a posthumous diagnosis of either of the Brownings but it does offer an interpretation of the motives both of the life and the work of Browning.

One of Miller's close friends, the writer Naomi Lewis, called Browning a 'genius of sensations' but dismissed the notion that he was an academic or philosophical poet.¹⁵ She followed Miller, however, in the view that he was a man most affected by the places of his childhood, by 'the four walls that contained and dominated [...] The stones of Casa Guidi were still, for all the sunlit setting, the bricks of Camberwell.'¹⁶ Lewis also wrote an essay based on her reading of letters between Elizabeth Barrett and Miss Mitford, collected and

¹¹ William C. Devane, 'Pundit for Grandfather', *Saturday Review*, (March 7, 1953), p. 22

¹² *Ibid.*, p.22

¹³ Betty Miller, *Robert Browning: A Portrait* (London: Penguin, 1958), p.22

¹⁴ *The Handbook of Psychobiography*, ed. William Todd Schultz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.15

¹⁵ Naomi Lewis, 'Browning' in *A Visit to Mrs Wilcox* (London: The Cresset Press, 1957), p.74

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.73-4

edited by Miller. The volume covers the significant ten years before Barrett meets Browning and therefore continues some of the work started by Miller in her portrait to take what Naomi Lewis called ‘the Wimpole Street legend’ and make it new.¹⁷ Often gossipy and sentimental, but rarely languorous or timid, the letters also reveal a dedicated reader of new literature, a powerful narrative poet of increasing reputation and a shrewd woman aware of the frustrating limitations of her feminine existence. By this point in her career Miller was very much part of the literary establishment, but the personal interest, as well as the professional one, that Miller had for these letters is, with hindsight, all too apparent.

Her portrait opens: ‘Throughout his life, Robert Browning was as turbulent in sickness as in health’.¹⁸ This is no hagiography of the poet that she undoubtedly admired. It is Barrett whose talent is consistently emphasised and Barrett whose calm, practical logic Miller presents most admiringly. She ‘unhesitatingly ascribes [Barrett’s] illness to her jealousy of her eldest brother, Edward.’¹⁹ He was male, and therefore was provided with the rigorous education that she was not privy to. She was encouraged to sew and practise the domestic niceties that would prepare her for marital duty. ‘She countered by becoming a *sufferer*, a position from which she could exert power through incapacity, and which enabled her to evade the ‘normal’ responsibilities of her sex and class.’²⁰ As Karlin implies, Barrett exploited her health failures in order to achieve her literary success. Browning, on the other hand, is drawn as a figure that *unknowingly* evades his agency. He can’t help but subsume himself in his adoration of older women; Eliza Flower and Fanny Haworth occupied all his

¹⁷ Ibid., p.67

¹⁸ Miller, *Robert Browning*, p.13. Miller claims in her preface that ‘the biographer, however humble his vocation, is justly required to support the claims of his intuition with such material evidence as he has been able to collect.’ It is this emphasis on the inevitability of intuition which helps define, she implies, her study of Browning as particularly ‘A Portrait’.

¹⁹ Ibid., back cover.

²⁰ Daniel Karlin, *The Courtship of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp.24-5

time in between his mother's and then Barrett's dominion. She doesn't write a simple swapping of roles; once married, Barrett is only referred to as Mrs Browning. But Miller does certainly create a new realignment of these roles.

Her account is structured by the names of the places that the Brownings lived. Far pacier, far less pondering than her fiction could be, it follows the Brownings *and* their biographer as they move from house to house. The chapter headings that let us know where we are in the story reveal the significance of domestic spaces. There is great pleasure in imagining Browning, living back in London after his wife's death, taking the newly built Underground railway from his house in Paddington up to Regent's Park where he visited with the Wedgewood family on Cumberland Place.

Browning attempted to conceal records of his life from social inquiry, burning many letters, a fact acknowledged by Miller but then thrown off. Her device of a 'portrait' is her negotiation of the request in his poem *House*: 'A peep through my window, if folk prefer;/ But, please you, no foot over threshold of mine!'²¹ His dislike of the form, of the 'Peeping Tom of prosperity', is so strong that he rebukes the biographical artifice of 'certainty and precision' in the method of depicting the human Soul.²² Miller also notes her subject's abilities as a biographer. She is scathing of Browning's own attempt at an introductory biographical essay to a collection of Shelley's letters. It isn't until halfway through, she bemoans, that he remembers to even mention the name of his subject.

Miller is particularly aware of her position as a female biographer, even if she would not have considered herself a feminist one. She comments on how male editors of Barrett's

²¹ Robert Browning, 'House', *Poems of Robert Browning* (London: Henry Frowde, 1912), p.201

²² Robert Browning quoted in Miller, *Robert Browning*, p.116

letters have ‘had to cut by the pageful’ long, often repetitive, accounts of Pen as a child from their collected editions.²³ Miller then glosses the content for her reader, quoting skittishly so that we have a definite sense of the giddy tone of Barrett’s maternal gushing. Those male editors, Miller is hinting, were quite right to be quick with the red pencil. And simultaneously, they were too quick; her specific mention of their sex implies that it would be just this that influenced their decision. Miller, however, is not immune to reducing Barrett’s eccentricities to mere femininities. She recounts in great detail the séance on 23rd July held at Mr and Mrs Rymer’s house in Ealing, conducted by the infamous 22 year-old, Daniel Douglas Home. It was this episode that inspired the ‘failure’ of the radio-play that she wrote with Rosenberg. Miller explains how furious Browning was with the charade, how Home was preying on Barrett’s afflictions. From her account in *Robert Browning* there can be no doubt that what Margery Vosper found ‘laughable’ in the piece was intentional satire of how wholly Barrett was taken in by Home’s display of noises from the netherworld and magically floating wreaths.

Her children grown-up and away at university, Miller did much of the research for *Robert Browning* in her local public library in St John’s Wood. She had a lot to work from. Frances M. Sim’s two-volume inquiry, published separately in the 1920s, divides Browning’s life in half in order to rigorously and dispassionately detail the exact movements of the man.²⁴ One of the more creative potential models for Miller’s biography was by David Loth.²⁵ Also written in the 1920s it is far less academic, far more anecdotal than Sim’s work. For example, it opens with Robert Browning attending the premiere of Thomas Noon Talfourd’s adaptation of Euripides’ *Ion*, where a toast is taking place to the poets of England. Loth imagines cigars resting on the edge of plates as the audience clink their glasses and happily mutter their praise

²³ Miller, *Robert Browning*, p.162

²⁴ Frances M. Sim, *Robert Browning: Poet and Philosopher, 1850 – 1889* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1923)

²⁵ David Loth, *The Brownings: A Victorian Idyll* (New York: Tudor Publishing, 1936)

around Serjeant Talfourd's table. Flimsy and nostalgic it describes the romantic courtship of two poets fated for each other, very much in the genre of a prose Idyll. In a similar vein, Frances Winar's *The Immortal Lovers*, is structured by the story of the two eternally youthful poets in their 'parallel lives'.²⁶ It relies on the story of their childhood homes as being places from which they escape into their lives with each other. Once more, Hope End is the fairytale castle over which Mr Barrett rules as the despot; Mrs Barrett is dutiful and meek and her children, all twelve of them, follow suitably. Tellingly, Miller is uninterested in Winar's exploration of the possible mixed-racial heritage of the Brownings. Nor does she indulge in lyrical imaginings of childhood walks amongst Camberwell's hedgerows. Published in the same year as Miller's *Portrait* were two other works on the subject of Robert Browning: J.M. Cohen's *Robert Browning* and Dallas Kenmare's *Ever a Fighter: A Modern Approach to the Works of Robert Browning*.²⁷ Cohen would go on to be the first translator of Borges and Pasternak and of the definitive *Don Quixote* and by this time was already very much an established literary figure. His study is a confident attempt to prove the 'relevance [of Browning's work] to contemporary readers.'²⁸ But it didn't sell well and therefore didn't reach the popular readership at which it was aimed. Kenmare was a prolific poet and critic from the 1930s onwards who had previously published popular scholarly work on Browning. His 'modern approach' to a reading of Browning's poetry, however, was felt to be exactly the opposite, to be 'the same *old* approach', by its readers.²⁹

Knickerbocker and Litzinger, attempting to work against the adulation of the various Browning Societies of the mid-twentieth century, felt that the poet was 'ripe for reappraisal'.

²⁶ Frances Winar, *The Immortal Lovers: Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1950)

²⁷ J.M. Cohen, *Robert Browning* (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1952), Dallas Kenmare, *Ever a Fighter: A Modern Approach to the Works of Robert Browning* (London: James Barries, 1952)

²⁸ J.M. Cohen, *Robert Browning* (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1952), p.4

²⁹ K.L. Knickerbocker and Boyd Litzinger, *The Robert Browning Critics* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), p.266

The ‘brilliantly intuitive Betty Miller’, they claim, is an example of the ‘new approach’ to Browning studies.³⁰ Reviewing Dorothy Hewlett’s *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (1953) Margaret Willy notes the recent proliferation of publications on the Brownings, none of which are as readable nor as necessary as Betty Miller’s ‘brilliant, but somewhat disconcerting, re-assessment’ of the poets.³¹ Hewlett’s, in contrast, relies on the caricature of Mr Barrett as the tyrannical Victorian paterfamilias and hence ‘offers nothing so startling.’³² It was not just the popularity of the Brownings themselves that made the book successful. It was also that Miller was considered a ‘startling’ and ‘disconcerting’ writer in addition to a ‘skilful’ one. It is this that explains why her biography of Browning was so well regarded.

Robert Browning was a rigorous research task with which Nina Meninsky, the daughter of her friend, the painter Bernard Meninsky, assisted her. Meninsky’s portrait of Miller now hangs outside the bedroom of her son Jonathan who lives a short walk away from the pocket of North London in which Miller set (almost) all of her fiction. For this research, Miller went out to the parts of North and East London where her husband’s family had lived during their early years in London. Stamford Grove West, where Robert Browning went as an aspiring poet to visit the house of his first love Eliza and his mentor/editor William James Fox, is two minutes walk from the house on Bethune Road that Emanuel lived in as a teenage science scholar.³³ Neither house is still standing, nor would they have been in the late-1940s when Miller was collecting material for her book, this being one of the corners of London that lost most to the Blitz. But it is significant that, in mapping these parts of Browning’s London, Miller also maps her own. Elizabeth Barrett and Betty Miller shared an exclusive corner of London, one that by Miller’s time had been taken over by medical professionals. In

³⁰ Ibid., p266

³¹ Margaret Willy, ‘Was Barrett a Tyrant?’, *John O’London’s Weekly*, Vol. LXII, No. 1,490 (Friday January 30th 1953), p.14

³² Ibid., p14

³³ The 1911 census is careful to list him, surely at his instruction, specifically as a science scholar.

fact, both writers lived domestic lives surrounded by male professionals. Elizabeth Barrett's house in Wimpole Street (again, no longer standing) was in the block just to the south of the one where the Millers lived almost exactly a hundred years later. Indeed, Wimpole Street was where her husband, Emanuel Miller, was living, at number 28, when he first met Betty Bergson Spiro. She wrote *Robert Browning* at 13 Harley Street, a five-minute walk from Wimpole Street. In the late 1950s the Millers moved back briefly, to number 23, when Betty Miller, now a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, was an established writer.

Retrieving biographical information about Miller has been a difficult task. Kate Bassett's recent biography of her son Jonathan Miller is one of the only published records to mention details of her life, and even then it is a few paragraphs. The impression she creates is of someone charming and witty but shy: more interested in her writing than anything, or anyone, else. Bassett's position, as the biographer of one of Miller's children, inevitably means that the characteristics of Miller in which she is most interested are the ones that define her role as a mother. Therefore she presents an intellectual who was often insular and only occasionally affectionate towards her children. This Betty was never maternal, wafting around with a faintly ironic air.³⁴ Bassett associates Miller's writing that 'rarely conveys open affection' with her daughter's recollection: 'Ma had a great deal of charm, but not a great deal of warmth.'³⁵ One of Betty's cousins remembers her being proud of her first child yet remaining self-absorbed, 'living only for writing, in a world of her own'.³⁶ However Bassett does appear to appreciate Miller's writing, noting that it was both 'sensitive' and 'alert', displaying her 'humorous eloquence' and her 'early feminist' instincts as well as her

³⁴ Kate Bassett, *In Two Minds: A Biography of Jonathan Miller* (London: Oberon, 2012), p.3

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.3

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.8

‘ambivalence about motherhood’.³⁷ These are astute, if somewhat vague, readings of Miller’s fiction to which the following chapters will return.

Betty Miller was born Betty Bergson Spiro in Cork in 1910.³⁸ Her mother, Sara (née Bergson), was originally from Sweden and proud of her close relationship with her great-uncle Henri Bergson. The Bergsons were successful garment manufacturers who lived in their apartments near the factory in Karlstad and in hunting lodges on Lake Vanern. One of her nieces was the actress and beauty Marit Gruson who was part of Ingmar Bergman’s circle. His 1982 lavish family saga set in 1910, *Fanny and Alexander*, was partly based on the opulent and bohemian Bergson family. Simon Spiro, Betty’s father, had emigrated with his family from Lithuania in the late nineteenth century, fleeing famine and the legislated oppression of the country’s Jewish population. He set up a successful tobacco shop in an elegant redbrick building on Bridge Street and became a Justice of the Peace during what became known as the Irish Troubles. Both her parents were prominent members of the close Jewish community in Cork, helping raise funds for the small synagogue that still stands, though now dilapidated, on the river front. She had an older sister Dorothy and two brothers: the rakish Julian played the piano and went on to work in the London film industry making documentaries for the Crown Film Unit. Henry Spiro became a parliamentary civil servant and died when the submarine he helped man, the HMS *Firedrake*, was torpedoed in the North Atlantic in January 1943. Miller dedicated her novel *On the Side of the Angels* to Henry, calling him a dear brother and an incomparable friend.

Cork was the site of increasing violence from 1916 onwards. The fighting between the Irish Republican Army and the Royal Irish Constabulary resulted in widespread fires across

³⁷ Ibid., p.7

³⁸ All biographical information, unless otherwise stated, was found in census records.

the city and the assassinations of several notable political figures. A magistrate for the British government, Simon Spiro imprisoned many Republican dissidents. As a result of threats on her husband's life, in 1920 Sara took her children to her family in Sweden and then to London where Simon joined them in 1922. Betty was educated initially at St Paul's school for Girls where, due to her lack of musicality, the aging master, Gustav Holst, banned her from the choir. Aged thirteen, she contracted tuberculosis of the neck and was sent to a Catholic sanatorium near Calais for a year. Her essay 'At the Villa Éole' recalls her time there, spending the first few weeks in a full body cast, lying immobile in bed.³⁹

When Miller returned, she had decided to become a writer. She joined Dorothy at Notting Hill High School and in her spare time read Victorian poetry. Amongst her childhood friends was the philosopher Isaiah Berlin. Intellectual and awkward, they were made to attend teenage dances against their will, so would rebel by sitting together in a corner of the party, deep in literary conversation. Berlin recalls her love of Browning even then. She was a 'pensive, slightly melancholy girl' who possessed something he called 'moral charm'.⁴⁰ She went on to take a two-year diploma in journalism at University College, London. The course had been designed as a way of training soldiers returning from the Great War but a surprising number of women writers started their careers with it. Christina Hole, Stella Gibbons and Elizabeth Bowen were all enrolled in the 1920s and later students included Leila Berg and Penelope Mortimer.⁴¹ There was a dedicated Journalism Workroom at 88 Gower Street that the students decorated with their rejection slips. Miller's graduation report from the summer of 1930 noted her intelligence and desire to write professionally. She was not athletic: under the 'Physical Activities' section of her end of term statement she could only joke 'running to lectures when late'. Her first novel, *The Mere Living*, was published in the prestigious yellow

³⁹ Betty Miller, 'At the Villa Éole: A Fragment of Autobiography', *The Cornhill*, No.995, Spring 1953, p.406

⁴⁰ Quoted in Sarah Miller, 'Introduction', *On the Side of the Angels* (London: Capuchin Classics, 2012), p.23

⁴¹ Reggie Oliver, *Out of the Woodshed: Portrait of Stella Gibbons* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), p.33

dust jacket of Victor Gollancz in February 1933. A few months later she became engaged to Emanuel Miller, a practising Harley Street psychiatrist, who was eighteen years her senior. Emanuel had been born in Fournier Street, Whitechapel to Abraham and Rebecca Miller (née Fingelstein) in 1892, the youngest of nine siblings. The 1901 census lists Abraham Miller as a furrier, along with the majority of the residents of Fournier Street. Unusually though, he is also an 'employer' as opposed to a 'worker', marking out his status. Emanuel won a scholarship to a local foundation school and excelled academically. His aptitude for science and his serious ambition found him another scholarship at St John's College, Cambridge where he studied under W. H. R. Rivers. He moved back to London after First World War and worked at University College Hospital before setting up his own practice.

They married in August 1933 at New West End synagogue in St Petersburg Place, Bayswater. As a wedding present Emanuel gave Betty a leather bound edition of one of her favourite works, Marcel Proust's *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. She wrote *Sunday*, set in bucolic rural France, whilst pregnant with her first child: Jonathan was born in the summer of 1934 and her second novel was published in the October of the same year. *Portrait of the Bride*, a witty take on the newly married middle-classes, came out to warm reviews in 1935. But 1936 was a devastating year for Miller: her mother, Sara, fell ill with cancer and died in May. Gollancz's rejection of what was then called *Next Year in Jerusalem* and which became *Farewell Leicester Square* happened a few months later. She stopped writing fiction and turned her attention to domestic matters, moving the family to a large house on Queen's Grove in St John's Wood where her daughter Sarah, named after her grandmother, was born in March 1937.

With the outbreak of war in September 1939, Emanuel enlisted in the Royal Army Medical Corps. He was stationed at various military hospitals meaning that the Millers packed up their belongings and moved around England, never at one institution for more than a few months. Jonathan Miller remembers his mother disappearing for mysterious weekends away that he subsequently learnt were taken up with frantic house hunting, his parents terrified by the prospect of a Nazi invasion.⁴² In 1941 Robert Hale published *Farewell Leicester Square* and she began writing again, finishing *A Room in Regent's Park* in 1942. A coming of age novel, it is Miller at her most romantic. Two young lovers struggle to leave their disapproving parents to set up a new life together only for war to break out: it is also Miller's love-letter to the corner of London she clearly missed. At Bishop's Lydeard in Somerset she contracted near-fatal pneumonia but recovered to move her family once again to Abbots Langley, just north of Watford, where they spent the rest of the war. The village is the named setting of *On the Side of the Angels* that came out in 1945, just as the Millers were heading back to Queen's Grove. The house had been requisitioned for Polish Army officers and, though still standing, had lost all of its windows to the Blitz. Her letters describe the cold, damp building to which they returned and her immediate efforts to restore it to a habitable home again. Her 'covert feminism' rendered her deliberately terrible at anything that entailed and her husband's private practice was growing so decorators were quickly set to work and two part-time cooks were hired. Emanuel employed a chauffeur who was moved, along with his family, in to the adjoining basement flat.⁴³

Miller's final novel *The Death of the Nightingale* was written here. It was a return to the Ireland of her childhood and an attempt to understand the violence of the Troubles and of the human impact of war more generally. It was at this point that another return took place.

⁴² Jonathan Miller, *The Evacuees*, ed. by B.S. Johnson (London: Gollancz, 1968), p.200

⁴³ Kate Bassett, *In Two Minds: A Biography of Jonathan Miller* (London: Oberon, 2012), p.25

Miller shifted the focus of her writing to the Victorian poetry that she had read all her life. In doing so her literary network shifted too. She became a regular contributor to the most prestigious journals of the day; reviewing for *Twentieth Century* magazine and publishing essays on her ongoing research in, for example, *Cornhill* and *Horizon*. She occasionally found time to travel in Europe during these years. There were whole family vacations to Karlstad and holidays to Italy where she made research trips that doubled as pilgrimages to the literary landmarks, such as to the Brownings' Casa Guidi in Florence. Her publishers also arranged for her to stay with Freya Stark in Asolo, Italy where Browning had spent the last months of his life. She occasionally made solo trips to Paris, staying with her friends Charlotte and Simone Richard whom Bassett describes as 'artistically well-connected seamstresses with socialist principles'.⁴⁴ At the Richards' salons, Miller, who had perfect French, socialised with artists and poets, escaping some of the restrictions of family life. It was here, for example, that she met the poet Francis Ponge and reconnected with old family friends.

In 1950, her father died. He had continued living at 10 Stanley Crescent after the death of Sara, joined occasionally by Betty's youngest brother Albert Emanuel (known as Julian). Julian, born in Cork in 1915, had been a sub-lieutenant in the Navy during the Second World War. Always fashionably dressed, he was more gregarious and sociable than his older brother Henry had been. After his father's death, he moved in to a flat in Kensington where he threw parties for his musician friends. In 1985 he married an American widow Marcia Panama. He outlived his immediate family by several decades; enjoying a semi-artistic dilettantism until his death, at home, in 2006.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.213

In 1952, when *Robert Browning: A Portrait* was being heralded as a major contribution to Victorian scholarship, as well as being a ‘good read’, Betty Miller had already been photographed by Cecil Beaton for *Vogue*. It was this glamorous photograph that loomed large on the front covers of the publications listing their ‘Books of the Year’. But in characteristic humility Miller dismissed herself as resembling a ‘long-faced horse gazing over a stable door.’⁴⁵ Her photograph also appears in *Tatler*, deep in conversation at a book launch with Reginald Moore and Elizabeth Berridge. Moore wrote to her, alerting her to her increasing fame, whilst regretfully admitting that he was unable to publish an essay of hers:

2nd March 1948

Dear Betty Miller

I hate parting with ‘Face to Face’ but you are quite right – at the moment the odds are against my being able to use it. We have hit a book slump of book slumps: nothing like it since ’38. I note that you do not ask for your fee, which is considerate of you. If things pick up, and I can get *Modern Reading* out of dry dock, I shall be asking for this story back – or another. It’s hard on you, but I have to tell you that you appear with Lisa and me once again in *The Writer*, March no. Did you see the photo in *The Tatler*? Lisa seemed to be imitating Lady Squint. Still, you came out very well. I look like a pensioned off leprechaun.

All the best,

Reginald Moore⁴⁶

Even though her fiction was already long out of print, the 1950s were a steadily productive period for Miller who continued to write for all the important journals of the day. But letters to her agents and publishers in both London and New York show her handwriting deteriorating in clarity as the decade progressed. She went to see a specialist at University College Hospital and was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease in 1960. Although it had been recognised as a condition since 1906 there were no treatments available and Miller was committed to Friern Hospital for the last four years of her life.

⁴⁵ Sarah Miller, ‘Introduction’ to *On the Side of the Angels* (London: Capuchin Classics, 2012), p.19

⁴⁶ Reginald Moore, Letter to Betty Miller, British Library: MSS:ADD: 79468

Most famously, she had several fallings-out with the poet Stevie Smith whose short story 'Beside the Seaside' was a satirical account of a joint holiday to Poole in 1948. Margaret and Henry Levison (Betty and Emanuel Miller) and their children, brattish Hughie and docile Anna, are lounging on the beach with Margaret's poet friend Helen (Stevie Smith) on a hot August day. When Hughie catches a jellyfish with a 'wicked face', Helen instructs him to leave it on the beach for the sun to dry it out. The 'darling, darling' Margaret rather dreamily finds the creature beautiful. Three times Helen, the narrator of the story, insists on Margaret as 'gentle'. Henry, the scientist, fully-dressed in his deck-chair set apart from the group, gruffly mumbles statistics about the jelly-fish's reproductive system.

Margaret liked to live in a vegetable reverie; in this world of her vegetable reverie the delicate life of the plants, and the stones, too, for that matter, and the great trees and the blades of sharp grass and the leaves that were white when they turned upon the breeze, had a delicate obstinate life of their own. Margaret thought that people were the devils of creation. She thought that they were for ever at war for ever trying to oppress the delicate life of the plants and to destroy them; but this of course they fortunately could not do.⁴⁷

The cruel representation of Emanuel and of her son Jonathan insulted Miller, but this description of her own reverie seems not to have done so. It is a dangerously acute summation of Miller's ecological sensibility and her fiction is replete with exactly that concern for humanity's violent potential.

The real cause for offence though, was the attack on Henry Levison's Jewishness. Or more pointedly, his attitude towards his Jewishness. Henry is 'more locked up in being a Jew than it seems possible'.⁴⁸ Margaret tries to explain this psychological cage to Helen:

You cannot know quite what it is like; it is a feeling of profound uncertainty, especially if you have children. There is a strong growing anti-Jewish feeling in England, and when they get a little older, will they also be in a concentration camp here in England?⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Stevie Smith, 'Beside the Seaside', *Me Again: Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith* (London: Virago, 1981), p.20

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.19

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.19

Miller explores this specific uncertainty in her novel *Farewell Leicester Square* and finds a similar fear in many of her other characters. To explore a personal anxiety in one's own work is one thing, to have it exposed by your friend in a barely-disguised fictionalisation of not only you but of your young family is another. Smith sent the story to Miller who wrote back tellingly: she was able to praise it as a story, but expressed her shock at the divulgence of their confidential conversation. A few months later Olivia Manning telephoned Miller to inform her that Smith had read at a party, after they had left for the evening, a poem written at the same time called 'A Mother's Hearse'. It shares with the story the theme of a child spoiled by the disinterested affection of his mother. Francis Wyndham who was at the party to hear the reading recalls that Miller was upset and broke off contact with Smith. In 1952 Smith wrote to Miller admiring her moving yet comical book on Browning but it took several more years for the women to reconcile their former friendship.⁵⁰

Jack Barbera and William McBrien describe this 'Hampstead set' of female writers to which she belonged. Both before and after the war, Miller would write in the mornings and then go for walks in Regent's Park with Smith, Inez Holden, Naomi Lewis and Cecily Mackworth. Kay Dick and Marghanita Laski also joined them, although less frequently. Although they were neighbours in the 1950s, Miller only appears briefly in the Braybrooke's study of the life of Olivia Manning; citing the influence of *Robert Browning* on Manning's thinking about her own 'mother-dominated' husband.⁵¹ Jock Murray, the publisher of *Robert Browning*, also became a close friend. Of the book he said 'It was a remarkable achievement and it was for her a marvellous subject. It seemed to stimulate her strength as a writer and her extraordinary ability to select and order details from a mass of researched material.'⁵²

⁵⁰ Frances Spalding, *Stevie Smith: A Biography* (London: W. W. Norton, 1988), p.250

⁵¹ Neville and June Braybrooke, *Olivia Manning: A Life* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2004), p.157. She makes no appearance in Deirdre David's *Olivia Manning: A Woman at War* (Oxford: OUP, 2012)

⁵² Quoted in Sarah Miller, 'Introduction' to *On the Side of the Angels* (London: Virago, 1985), p.21

Miller's impressive control of the Browning archive, her professional handling of the marks, traces and vestiges of their lives and work serves to highlight the lack of her own.

When writing about modern lives we generally have too much information from which to edit down. But the inverse is true in cases such as Betty Miller. Virginia Woolf's essay *Lives of the Obscure* goes some way to illuminating some of the factors at play when writing about an unknown writer. Woolf is writing specifically about reading the unread memoirs of unknown people, of the 'obscure' who 'sleep on the walls, slouching against each other [...] Their backs are flaking off; their titles often vanished. Why disturb their sleep?' There is something, Woolf claims, romantic in the urge to rescue these obscure volumes written by 'stranded ghosts'. Anecdotally we know that Miller very rarely talked about her writing, even with her writer friends such as Inez Holden or Marghanita Laski. She would hide the manuscript on which she was working in the linen cupboard as soon as anyone came into the room. Mr Carter, of the London branch of her American publishers Scribner's, stated when asked:

There is nothing very striking about her. She doesn't smoke cigars or chew gum. She's a damned good writer, awfully nice, quiet, about thirty-one or -two. It's a dangerous thing to hazard a woman's age. She doesn't carry on at all like a lit'ry dame. Some authors, you know, are hell.⁵³

Even to those who knew her Betty Miller was difficult to recall. Carter, not incidentally, was wrong by almost exactly a decade when guessing her age and only seems to be able to define her by what she doesn't do, by the impression that she doesn't make. Most of her literary friends and colleagues forgot her too. Kay Dick, for example, was a notoriously difficult and yet respected editor and writer. They had first met when she had

⁵³ William C. Devane, 'Pundit for Grandfather', *Saturday Review*, (March 7, 1953), p.22

edited some of Miller's short stories for publication. Following her successful edition of interviews with Ivy Compton-Burnett and Stevie Smith, Dick put together a volume that she called *Friends and Friendship: Conversations and Reflections*. Miller had died nearly ten years previously and does not appear on its pages, although several of her friends did (namely Olivia Manning and Isobel English). However, a sentence in Dick's afterword almost certainly makes reference to Miller:

Nothing [Dick writes] irritates me more than the false humbleness of certain writers [...] who felt they must constantly proclaim their "ordinariness".⁵⁴ Whilst a focus on the ordinary, as well as being so, irritated Dick it was exactly those qualities that other people found so attractive in Miller. Her daughter's friend, the writer Jane Miller remembers conversations with her fondly:

When she talked to me it was about ageless things like the sort of day she'd had, the absurd cavortings of a writer friend who lived down the road and few of the pompous and irritating things her husband had said or done during the last week or so. [...] I remember her as [...] similarly awkward, perverse – beady, perhaps. She was often very funny as well as rather despairing.⁵⁵

Miller did, however, start writing a kind of memoir in the late 1940s. Just a few thousand words long, she called these fragments 'Notes for an Unwritten Autobiography'. In them she describes her childhood home in Cork, on the hill between Western Road and Cork Gaol. In her nursery she could hear the protest songs of political prisoners. She recounts a walk taken with her nurse Biddy that passed by a local asylum which affected her deeply but notes what really strengthened her moral fibre was her mother's insistence that she must undo her shoe-laces before taking off her shoes. A version of these fragments appears as 'Meditations of a Fifth Columnist' in which she articulates her instinct to side with 'the

⁵⁴ Kay Dick, *Friends and Friendship: Conversations and Reflections* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1974), p.175

⁵⁵ Jane Miller, *Seductions: Studies in Reading and Culture* (London: Virago, 1990), pp.12-3

enemy'.⁵⁶ She implies that her impulses are at odds with her actions; that her impulses are hidden and private. Yet she confesses the pleasure she gets from what she calls her 'ambivalence'.⁵⁷ Her conclusion is that 'heresy begins at home'. That her fiction focussed on the politics of the domestic sphere is no surprise; it is in the nurseries that 'future victims or members of the Gestapo are busy perfecting their weapons, maturing, with regard to authority, an attitude either of compliance or rebellion.'⁵⁸ That the experience of boredom is so vital to her work is no surprise either; in the fragment she calls 'Train of Thought', Miller reveals the significance of habit to her as a writer: 'The more of our minds that we can relinquish to automatism the more free we are to explore higher intellectual plains.'⁵⁹

Glimpses of Miller's understanding about her own writing also appear in the short biographical pieces about, for example, Henry James and Samuel Butler and their fathers. Once again finding intrigue in the heresy of domestic lives she explains that 'human nature is always ready to resist the established regime; to go underground in order to emerge at a new and wholly unpredictable level of self-expression.'⁶⁰ In her reviews of other biographies she exposes her priorities for life writing. She called Mary Moorman's biography of William Wordsworth 'commendably unemphatic'.⁶¹ In these essays of the late 1950s we can also learn some of her literary tastes and inclinations. In a review from August 1957 she reveals herself to be a Henry James 'addict'. Her long, complex sentences are no doubt influenced by him even though, it has been noted, in Miller's hands they can collapse into the 'over-

⁵⁶ Betty Miller, 'Notes for an Unwritten Autobiography', *Modern Reading No. 13* (London: Wells Gardner, Darton and Company, 1945), pp.39-45

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p41

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p41

⁵⁹ Betty Miller, 'Train of Thought', *The Windmill*, ed. Reginald Moore and Edward Lane, Vol.2, No.5, (1946), pp.138-42

⁶⁰ Betty Miller, 'Two Fathers and Their Sons', *Nineteenth Century and After*, Vol. CXLVI, (October 1948), pp.251-60

⁶¹ Betty Miller, 'Book Review', *Twentieth Century*, Vol. 161, (May 1957), p.501

written'. Also in 1957 she reviews Graham Hough's biography of D.H. Lawrence and presents an image of herself as a young reader of literature:

In particular, those readers who, in adolescence, were electrified by the impact of Lawrence and, through the very intensity of their own reaction, experienced long periods of recuperative indifference to his genius, will welcome a book which not only awakens the old interest, but powerfully fortifies, guides and amplifies it.⁶²

The famous Lawrentian intensity of experience is certainly present in her fiction although it is never a physical one; her characters are either too intellectually cold or too awkwardly aware to ever be overcome.

More often than not, however, she wrote about famous literary men. She was noticeably intrigued by the debating group founded in 1820, the Cambridge Apostles, perhaps after the exposure of the former Apostle in the Cambridge spy ring in 1951. Miller convincingly argues that in *Idylls of the Kings*, Camelot represents Cambridge and the Apostles are the Knights of the Round Table. Often solitary, she was also clearly intrigued by the intense closeness of the group, noting that the Apostles lived 'in constant intercourse of the utmost intimacy' with one another'.⁶³ Seen in this light, she argues, *In Memoriam* appears not just as an elegy for Tennyson's respected friend Arthur Hallam but as an elegy for a whole group of the poet's friends and contemporaries.

In July 1864 an anonymous writer in *Fraser's Magazine* on the subject of The Apostles writes:

It may lay claim to a man of genius or two and several men of talent, as having belonged to the fraternity; but as regards national thought or progress, its annals might be cut out of the intellectual history of England without being missed.⁶⁴

But this letter-writer would be proved wrong. The turn of the twentieth century saw another group of brilliant men in The Apostles who would change the culture of the country,

⁶² Betty Miller, 'Book Review', *Twentieth Century*, Vol. 161, (January 1957), p.82

⁶³ Betty Miller, 'Camelot at Cambridge', *Twentieth Century*, Vol. 163, No. 972 (February 1958), pp. 133-47

⁶⁴ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p137

becoming better known as the Bloomsbury Group. Leonard Woolf, John Maynard Keynes, Lytton Strachey, Rupert Brooke, E.M. Forster and G.E. Moore all met there. Miller's network to some extent set themselves against the Bloomsbury Group. Shifting and extending the 'Hampstead set' in which Miller is central, a very specific site comes into focus. In 1951 Olivia and Reggie Manning move to 51 Queen's Grove in St John's Wood, a few doors along from the Millers at number 35. During the Second World War Inez Holden lived in a mews flat over the garage at the end of H. G. Well's garden in Marylebone. Stevie Smith was not far away in Hampstead with her infamous Lion Aunt. Montagu Slater, one of the earliest readers of Miller's work was in Haverstock Hill and Isaiah Berlin, a friend since childhood, lived on the road parallel to the Millers on Upper Addison Gardens. Plotted on a map, these places encircle, cushion and extend Regent's Park. Miller had fictionalised these streets in her fifth novel *A Room in Regent's Park*. Her first three novels had all been set in and around houses in Kensington and St John's Wood. Her fourth, *Farewell Leicester Square*, is set mainly in Lewisham and by Regent's Canal in Little Venice.⁶⁵

Forgotten and out of print, somehow 'wrong': for a reader of Miller's novels her monument is the park that acts as a metonym for Miller's London. These real sites that still exist today only highlight the fact that her books do not. 'Obstructed and cut short of completion by circumstances' Miller's work is 'far too literary' to be reclaimed as middlebrow and too interested in men to be considered domestic women's fiction. If we return to Margery Vosper's letter we can read something in her confusion of 'lately' and 'lightly' that has become part of the problem of both time and weight in Miller's unread body of work. She has a fascinating biography: located amongst and yet deliberately apart from the intellectual and literary networks of which she was a product. Betty Miller the author is

⁶⁵ Her last two novels are unusual in their location: *On the Side of the Angels* takes place on a military base in the Home Counties and *Death of the Nightingale* is set in Miller's birthplace of Cork, Ireland.

inextricable from the cultural movements that have attempted, and failed, to claim her, to make her readable. Therefore she can be read freely. Her reader is unburdened by labels of ‘Jewish writer’ or ‘middlebrow writer’ or Late Modernist. Yet, she was, her work is, all of these things. Reclamation studies explore the ways in which a neglected writer conforms to or rejects our established modes of thinking about literature. Deliberately paying attention to almost forgotten works also knowingly asks questions of what it means to attempt a *modern* reading of that writing. At their most distilled, Miller’s novels are literary experiments that rely on the structures of previous authors. Her work is therefore an enactment of appraisal and re-appraisal that necessitates reading backwards, or re-reading. We have started to read her with her last work. Now we return to her first.

Chapter Two

Re-writing the Circadian Novel

The Mere Living (1933)

The house remained inanimate, without consciousness, unaware. It faced the street, blind and dark. The street was deserted: only the lamp-post stood at the corner, and all night long a lonely radiance watched the silence.¹

These are the last words of Betty Miller's first novel *The Mere Living*. The novel ends as it began; with a single lamp-post lighting a silent night-time London street. There is nothing, this return suggests, outside the time of the novel. It ends with the 'lonely radiance' of that lamp-post and then begins again as the unnoticed light of the corner street-lamp dies, signalling the approach of dawn. London is silent; the Thames is still asleep and the city's houses are blind. And then all shivers into life as a bus stumbles along the road in Westbourne Grove and an unnamed traveller enters the city on a train to Paddington. The train emits a drowsy whistle prompting the traveller to yawn. We begin reading as the day starts, but also as the night fails. *The Mere Living* is, therefore, a circadian novel. Resisting a teleological structure of origin and end, this circadian form was taken up by a surprising number of young writers in the 1930s, no doubt influenced by the two most recognisable and celebrated circadian novels: James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. Miller's circadian novel tells of

¹ Betty Miller, *The Mere Living* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1933), p. 366.

an ordinary early spring day in 1932 in which the Sullivan family Henry, Mary and their teenage children Paul and Nancy wake-up, have breakfast, go to work or university whilst Mary cleans the house and does the daily shop. Finally they all gather for their evening meal and then go to sleep. Nothing extraordinary happens even though Henry is told that his business partner has swindled them out of all their money, Mary is told that she has a pre-cancerous tumour, Nancy loses her virginity and Paul realises simultaneously that he might be gay and wants to be a writer. Miller quietly presents the everyday as not as a means to an end, but an end in itself.

Betty Miller was 23 years old when this, her first novel, was published. Beginning with a close reading of Miller's early style, as exemplified by *The Mere Living*, we will simultaneously encounter many of the images and ideas with which her fiction would continue to be pre-occupied. Most significant here, however, is the importance of what her son would later identify as the value of monotony. Upon Miller's death, just a few decades later, Emanuel Miller donated a Women's Literary Prize to the Women's Union of the Anglo-Jewish Association. Elaine Feinstein, for example, won the Betty Miller prize in 1971 for her novel *The Circle* in which she shows a woman struggling to remember a sense of identity after marriage and children. The intensity of its style is much like Miller's early novels:

Watching Alan: loyal serious absorbed. As he carefully washed the white painted wood and the side of the stairs.²

Feinstein's curious combination of humdrum domesticity and an arresting intelligent watchfulness are both recognizable Millerian characteristics. Her son's biographer, Kate Bassett, articulated this as such:

² Elaine Feinstein, *The Circle* (London: Penguin, 1970), p.41. The award is still presented to a Jewish woman writer each year.

Betty's philosophy of life advocated a kind of societal close reading: one should scrutinize one's immediate surroundings, the undiscovered country of the nearby. She may have overlooked her own small children but, artistically, she had grasped that the essence of life resides in its normally ignored trivia [...] Her son now recognizes the value of that. 'My mother taught me something of which I was very impatient at the time: the value of monotony... With hindsight I see that the imposition of her routine was in effect a spiritual exercise which has lasted the rest of my life, she saw epiphanies in the mundane.'³

Bassett's conflation of Miller's life and work is difficult to unpack. But certainly Miller's work can be said to rest on normally ignored trivia as well as her characters' occasional experiences of epiphanies in the mundane. *The Mere Living*, as we shall see, was her first scrutiny of these ideas.

Written in between her journalism lectures at UCL, its circadian form is telling. The fact that Miller decided to write within it, suggests that she anticipated a reader who would be familiar with Joyce and Woolf. Reading *The Mere Living* almost exactly eighty years later now encountering her (mostly) out of print novels for the first time, our reading experience to some degrees mirrors that of her original audience. We recognize the circadian form of *The Mere Living* and that the subject is intended to be familiar in its ordinariness. Yet it is Miller's writing that remains unfamiliar (all over again). This is Henry Sullivan falling into sleep on the last page of the novel:

Gradually, sleep-warmth lapped, vague and mollifying and blind. It deprived him increasingly of knowledge of his own body. Dying away into an easeful warmth of non-being... He no longer felt his hands. Soft drunken pillow.

Body was darkening and darkening, all knowledge of himself was going, he was escaping at last...

A clock began striking the hour into the oblivious silence. He heard nothing. The waves reached the soft blind shell of his ear. He heard nothing. He had escaped. He was asleep.⁴

³ Kate Bassett, *In Two Minds: A Biography of Jonathan Miller* (London: Oberon, 2012), p.28-9

⁴ Miller, *The Mere Living*, p.365

How can a pillow be drunk? How can an ear be blind? The most prominent aspects of Miller's style are her discomfiting use of synaesthesia, her repetition of words and images and her proclivity for ellipses (and very occasionally, parentheses). In this extract, as both Mr Sullivan's day and the novel itself wind down, all three are at play. The sentences fall down the page as Henry Sullivan falls asleep but there are other types of movement occurring too. The first is repetitive: waves of 'sleep-warmth' lap around him, ebbing towards and then away from Sullivan as seen in the wave-like rhythm of the first sentence: 'vague and mollifying and blind'. Then we are presented with the continuous present descent: 'dying', 'darkening' and 'going' he is deprived 'increasingly' of his wakefulness. Miller, as throughout her work, also uses ellipses to signify movement: here they act as a textual representation of Sullivan's movement out of consciousness and into unconsciousness. They also encourage the reader's eye along in a single motion, mirroring Sullivan's closing eyes. There is a gap on the page as he enters sleep and then a clock 'began striking the hour'. This is not a clock which just chimes once each hour, it tells the specific hour via the number of chimes. And yet the reader is not given the exact time. We, like the household, 'hear nothing', thus falling into a sort of textual sleep allowing the novel to end.

The circadian novel not only relies on various ambiguities of conceptions of time but remains simultaneously defiant of them. Its narrative uniquely evokes expectation as well as reluctant retrospectives because an attempt to record the everyday is to transform the present into the past by anticipating its memory. Narratological time, chronological time, linear and cyclical time, integral and external time all coalesce, often radically, in the circadian novel. Fundamentally the form asks its reader to question what is at stake in the ambiguous temporality of a day-span.

Days, the circadian novel tells us, exist in an illusion of unity by their separate naming so that 'Tuesday' or 'Wednesday' operate alternatively within their difference and sameness.

One response to a circadian novel is to read it as a signification of a larger temporality than the one it specifically covers; a circadian novel is one which represents a whole life in a single day, effacing the specificity of the particular fictional day. Conversely, the circadian novel can be read as a 'day in the life', as a brief snapshot of a life. Both constructions of the form ultimately have the same effect of an erasure of distinction between a life-span and a 24 hour cycle. At stake in the circadian novel, therefore, is the question of whether it is a metaphor or metonym for 'life'. In fact, by giving a singular day some prominence over any other fictional day circadian novels cement the ambiguous nature of 'daily-ness' and in doing so write the day as *both* metaphor and metonym. A day is both the exemplary day and the repetition of the day which is always exemplary.

If, therefore, a day must be defined by its repetitious nature, then an exploration of the 'everyday' is necessary to the understanding of the concept of the 'daily-ness' of the circadian novel. The everyday has come to be synonymous with all the mundanities of day-to-day activity: they are not necessarily laborious or difficult; not even necessarily boring or tedious, but they are certainly repetitive and automatic. The Millerian everyday is the seemingly non-productive activities that have to be carried out again, in almost exactly the same way, the following day. Brushing hair and teeth and making the bed are morning-time examples of the 'everyday', even reading the morning newspaper feels 'everyday' to Mr Sullivan when the breaking

news headline appears familiar. *The Mere Living* is an attempt to override the notion that what is familiar goes unrecognised. It therefore contends with the concepts of familiarity and habit, divisions of work and leisure as well as the play between boredom and day-dreaming. Defined so inclusively, the everyday is an exhaustibly broad concept that is in danger of being an empty one. But for Betty Miller, to ignore the everyday is to ignore the person to whom things happen. As such, it is easy to conclude that circadian novels resist hierarchies, that nothing and no one is intrinsically more everyday than another. And an inquiry into the everyday is ‘an activity of finding meaning in an impossible diversity’.⁵ These are all concepts to which this chapter will return.

Miller constructs her novel in the four most familiar parts of the everyday: Breakfast Time, Lunch Time, Tea Time and Dinner Time. Each section involves the specific moment of its title so that Breakfast Time and Dinner Time are ‘shared time’ for the family. In the two middle sections the family is separate thus lunch time and tea time for each of them does not occur simultaneously; they are broader temporal concepts. Miller’s structure engages directly with philosophical categorisations of time that were being re-evaluated at the beginning of the twentieth century. Henri Bergson is famous for the now self-evident insistence that the same moment does not occur twice. Moreover his concept of ‘duration’ is understood pervasively as noting the temporality of consciousness.⁶ Structuring time is the grand fallacy of the novel and Miller, alongside many other twentieth century writers implodes this by writing the tension between psychological duration and chronological time, most obviously in these section titles of her circadian novel.

⁵ Bryony Randall, *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.189

⁶ Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will* (London: George Allen, 1913)

Clocks tick noisily all the way through *The Mere Living*, but importantly, they are different clocks: there is Big Ben (inevitably), the maid Ellen's plastic clock radio, the ornate clock in the cloisters at UCL, the dusty one in the office of Mr Sullivan's work as well as the one he keeps in his jacket pocket. Nancy's salon has one marking work-time and there is one at her lover's flat and also in the doctor's waiting room where Mrs Sullivan sits anxiously before her appointment. The ugly grandfather clock in the dining room is the one which wakes the family up and lets them know when it is time to go to bed: Mr Sullivan bought it cheaply at a sale and it refuses to stay true. Unlike *Mrs Dalloway* in which the patriarchal Ben urges his servants on hurriedly towards late appointments, *The Mere Living* has no controlling omnipotent time, other than the one in those section headings; created and then undermined by Miller herself. There is no way of knowing whether or not all those disparate clocks tick in unison, nor whether the pocket-watch to which time Mr Sullivan adjusts the grandfather clock is actually accurate. In the presence of each separate time-zone, the individual creates a new-time which is self-sufficient. And yet the rigid temporal nature of the circadian novel means that the reader knows that just as the day began, it will end. And the same is true for Miller's novel, there will be no apocalypse because she has written into a form that tends to 'see the world as one that runs on a rhythm defined by banal continuity rather than accentuated series of revolutionary shocks.'⁷

If meal times are the exemplars of familiar day-time divisions, then to wake up is the catalyst for day-time: day-time cannot exist without wakefulness and wakefulness allows for the condition of attentiveness which is integral to Miller's

⁷ Michael Sayeau, *Against the Event: The Everyday and the Evolution of Modernist Narrative* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), p. 5.

evocation of 'pleasurable' daily-ness. Simply put: daily routine begins with the routine of waking. There are four waking scenes in the first section of the novel, one for each family member. Mr Sullivan is the first:

Now I am awake. I am awake, he thought uneasily. His eyes were still sealed and his body lay darkened in persisting somnolence, but it was as though he had, in the silence which followed the seven remote warnings of the clock, opened a pair of non-physical eyes. And found himself robbed of all self-knowledge.⁸

The diurnal pattern – day following night and night following day – is maintained by the cycle of human wakefulness. But all four characters in this novel experience the moment of awaking differently. Miller is deliberately questioning the individual human subject: how can something so familiar as waking be so deeply mysterious? In Henry Sullivan's case, not only is it a mysterious experience, it is an uneasy one in which the logic of wakefulness being synonymous with a knowing consciousness is subverted so that in the moment he knows himself to be awake he in fact loses all sense of '*integral*' consciousness.

As Mr Sullivan puts on his dressing gown and brushes his teeth, Paul, his son, wakes up to an entirely different construction of 'self', one which is without consciousness and is purely physical; lying 'netted' in his unused limbs. Paul's waking is evoked as a sort of trickle of milky ooze around and into his body with his flesh as the 'soft web' which encases it all. He is entirely without earthly function; specifically, 'There was no desire. All was complete.'⁹ Paul remains motionless and unthinking, his limbs extended until Mr Sullivan opens the door to his son's room and they exchange a 'gaze'. Without saying a word Mr Sullivan's stare animates his son in to 'remarkable activity', who rushes around his room dressing, seemingly

⁸ Miller, *The Mere Living*, p.5

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.12

possessed by his father's presence.¹⁰ Later, when at work in the hairdressing salon, Nancy will also become an automaton under the gaze of her boss: sped-up or slowed-down, the productivity of used time is a part of *The Mere Living's* everyday project.

Paul's activity is followed by a half-page blank. Miller was keenly aware of the experience of reading and of how her words appeared on the page. Although she didn't experiment with textual effects often, when she did she made sure that her editors were careful to maintain them. After submitting an article for *Modern Reading*, for example, she followed up with a letter reminding the board of this fact:

35 Queens Grove NW8

April 28th 1946

Dear Reginald Moore

Here is the chapter I promised you. I hope it makes sense apart from its context. If you do decide to use it – would you be good enough to see that the printer respects the spacing – which is vital to the meaning!

Cordial greetings

Betty Miller¹¹

Her chosen spacing is a crucial tool in *The Mere Living* too. As we skim down to the next text we read a romantic vision of a trip to the French Riviera in which a deliciously voiced Raoul carries in a silver breakfast tray adorned with mimosa. What could be a memory we soon realise is a cheap fantasy, a day-dream, belonging to Mr Sullivan's daughter Nancy.¹² This is a different waking scene again: Nancy, like the page, is empty and then she day-dreams into wakefulness.

¹⁰ Ibid., p12

¹¹ Betty Miller, Letter to Reginald Moore, Reginald Moore Papers, British Library: MSS:ADD: 79452-79472

¹² Miller, *The Mere Living*, p.19 The exotic romantic figure of Raoul is borrowed from James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

The mother is the last to wake. She is not roused by the clock that woke her husband but by her heart-beat; a 'pendulum inside her'.¹³ The rest of the family have been pulled out of sleep by something which shocks them awake but Mary Sullivan's waking comes out of a maintained internal state. She is attuned to what we think of as a body-clock, with which habit tells us it is time to start the day. Though her waking is habitual, it is not easy. And though it is written in the language of a birth scene, it is not natural but painful and dramatic:

Unwilling birth. We cry that we are born. Dark-curved in the womb we would remain. Back, back. A moving and a whimpering, an unsealing of tender eyes. White splinters of light sharply strike. Born again. Expelled from the womb of sleep.

Her eyes opened momentarily to the raw day-light. Born again. After the sweet prolonged dissolution of sleep, each morning was a painful and unnecessary birth.¹⁴

She is a mother and so Miller reduces her to that primary function within the family; her body is exclusively a 'gate-way for strangers', including her conscious self. But for Mary Sullivan the unity of self which is achieved through the waking moment is not only the same as the one which she repeats each day; it is also the exact opposite of the instance to which it is compared. Being born is the only thing that Mary has done just once, her only unrepeatable act. She has given birth exactly twice, but everything else in her life is a repetition, written in the language of her one unique act.

Miller was not alone in her interest in this form. Lewis Gibbs' *A Day's Tale* (1932) gives the reader a day in the London life of the Crompton family.¹⁵ It opens with the sun moving up and over the North Sea, across the Essex flats and in to London where it attempts to see off the night fog:

¹³ Ibid., p.27

¹⁴ Ibid., p.29

¹⁵ Lewis Gibbs, *A Day's Tale* (London: J M Dent, 1932), p.2

And now people began to struggle up from sleep, wrestling unconsciously with the inertia of the bed; being born again with pain and unwillingness. To most of them an inward mentor whispered – it had been whispering for some time – that it was late and the darkness a mere deception.¹⁶

The similarities with Miller's waking scenes are striking. Both writers invoke the language of pain, labour and of a fractured consciousness that simultaneously resists and insists on the time to wake. Susan Prior's novel *Awake* (1932), perhaps not surprisingly given the title, begins with her central character waking after a night's sleep:

She awoke suddenly and completely, only her eyes still focussed in sleep. Wandered sightlessly towards the window. As she lay cold, uncomfortable beneath disordered sheets gradually her eyes awoke too and recognized the familiar objects in the room: the washstand, the face-towel crumpled into the rail for she never folded towels, it would be as bad as calling a napkin a serviette – the basin brimming with grey soapy water – could she really have been so dirty last night?¹⁷

Prior's anonymous heroine, like Miller's, awakes in a state of disintegration where her different components are dependent upon each other and yet respond arrhythmically. The influence of Proust's famous waking scene is undeniable. Man, asleep, Proust shows us, is 'a bundle of potential'. But he also insists that 'our existence is radically contingent'.¹⁸ Only when these characters are able to recognize their surroundings do they know themselves to be awake.

With these four waking scenes Miller sets out her project for the circadian novel. Each repeated moment is the same as the one before, pointing towards the same one that will inevitably happen again tomorrow. But it is also entirely different from itself and from the others around it: how can something familiar be painful (as for Mrs Sullivan) or fantastic (as for Mary Sullivan) or uneasy (as for Mr Sullivan)?

¹⁶ Ibid., p.2

¹⁷ Susan Prior, *Awake* (London: Pharos Editions, 1932), p.9

¹⁸ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Volume One: Swann's Way*, translated by C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (London: Vintage, 1996), p.91

For these questions to be productive, Miller emphasises ‘participation’ in the everyday which she clarifies in the novel as a form of ‘attention’. Franco Moretti calls this necessary critique the ‘*treatment of the everyday*’ whereas Bryony Randall insists on recognising the importance of ‘reshaping the world of perceiving and evaluating it according to *human proportions*.’¹⁹ Her defence of the everyday comes from its ability to humanise that which, ‘through systems of patriarchy and capitalism, has become dehumanised.’²⁰ Ultimately what is being affirmed is that everyday life is a system of interpretation, that there must be a hermeneutic dimension to the definition of the everyday. When Paul leaves for university in the morning he recognises the repetition of that action:

I have done this every morning for more than a year and yet every morning the adventure is new. It is incomprehensible to me that any living creature can manage to be bored.²¹

Paul, here, is articulating the tension between the repetitious act and the potential for stimulation in that repetition. Furthermore, *The Mere Living* shows the most accomplished ways a novelist can achieve the hermeneutic attention to the everyday is with, in its self-conscious repetitious-ness, the form of the circadian novel.

John Mullan honours George Augustus Sala’s *Twice Round The Clock or Hours of the Day and Night in London* (1858) as the first of its kind.²² Divided into twenty-four hour-long chapters, it now reads as a fascinating documentary of multitudinous lives in Victorian London. He presents scenes of, amongst many others, the printing of the morning newspaper, clerks arriving at a bank, a third-class carriage on a commuter train, a morning wedding in Victoria, workers at the docks, a debate in

¹⁹ Franco Moretti, *The Modern Epic*, translated by Quintin Hoare (London: Verso, 1996), p.144

²⁰ Bryony Randall, *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.20

²¹ Miller, *The Mere Living*, p.57

²² <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/oct/25/circadian-novels>

the House of Commons, the traders at various markets, ‘a scientific conversation’, a walk through a park and one over a bridge. Miller presents the London of 1932 as just as busy:

Feet neatly gripped the flat pavement, arms swung, eyes darted, with easy insolence, lungs drew air. All around, were man-built things. Taller than trees, the faces of the buildings stood up, flat and taut, the river ran submissively between concrete and Time itself was harnessed in civic rein to the tremendous circling wheels of Big Ben.

Mr Sullivan had reached the Embankment.²³

Mr Sullivan’s London is populated by automatons whose bodily parts gesture in isolation from each other. Nature has been subsumed by civilisation to the extent that the mechanised clock controls, but is not controlled by, Time. He stands on the bridge and looks down at the water below, wondering if it might offer some escape from the ‘easy insolence’ of his life in London. Instead he goes to the pub for a glass of whisky and soda served to him by a barmaid with ‘a brooch on her dress saying DORIS in curly silver letters’.²⁴ He finishes his drink and walks on past children with ‘shaven heads and slimy noses’, past the smell of cooking cabbage and into the Picture Palace where he finds a ‘new time’ which is ‘self-sufficient, unrelated’.²⁵ In the cosy cinema he finds ‘the march of actual time artificially broken, and synthetically replaced, dream-potent.’²⁶ Faced with all the broken automatons on the street, Mr Sullivan felt too alive, too aware, too awake. Here, as in the pub where he watches Doris’s ornate name-tag, time breaks from civic reality and so he can break from his everyday London life.

²³ Miller, *The Mere Living*, p.257

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.264

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.267

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.268

In *The Mere Living* we move about London physically but also consciously. The second section of *The Mere Living*, ‘lunch time’ starts as Nancy Sullivan travels by Tube (on what is now known as the circle line) to her work in a hairdresser’s. At the Tube station the lift fills up, goes down to the platform, empties, goes up again to collect more passengers and then repeats. It has only two stops to make, filling and emptying endlessly. The train, on its looped route around London, has the same fate. Nancy, on the platform, feels a fellow passenger watch her and so she slows down: ‘deliberately, delicately’ she lazily paces to and fro in front of him. She wants to be seen, but needs to keep moving so that when she briefly disappears she can make him regret her absence. But unlike Proust’s *passantes*, or the young woman Peter Walsh follows in *Mrs Dalloway*, she paces back into view. Around her lift doors open and urgently spill more and more commuters on to the platform; they ‘Hurry, hurry’, trying to crowd on to an already full train carriage. Miller creates the image of an overflowing platform but Nancy still has pacing room. And we can hear the sound of commuters’ feet:

Along the passage. Hurry, hurry. Quick plattering of many feet. But the train had already gone. Low vacant tunnel. Too late. Aimlessly, they walk up and down, their steps sounding in the shallow silence. In the self-conscious silence. Up and down. Or stare at the advertisements on the in-curling walls.²⁷

This urgent scene of mindless action happens in the present continuous tense so that ‘their steps sounding’ march out a chaotic but continuous rhythm. There is a similar music to Miller’s syntax with certain words gaining a refrain. Here it is ‘silence’. Passengers walk ‘up and down’ in a state of unchanging flux. There is a separateness in those short sentences that are placed next to each other so that they lie on the page mimicking all the passengers on the platform. The Tube, in *The Mere*

²⁷ Ibid., p.70

Living is a ‘necessary part of modernity and it is simply a question of negotiating everyday life in this machine built environment.’²⁸ It regulates London, shuttling its inhabitants from east to west, north to south and back again, on a time-table which is only displayed to the passengers in instalments.

By 1930 the Standard Stock trains, with sets of automatic sliding-doors in each carriage for disembarkation, were in general use on the underground so that the tube trains in *The Mere Living* would have looked very similar to the ones with which we are familiar today. It is not possible to observe the exterior world from the tube, unlike the bus or the over-ground train because a tube journey is literally ‘inside’ London. Bound up with notions of interiority Miller, along with other writers of the period, did not focus on descriptions of the trains, but on the experience of ‘*being* in the Tube car’.²⁹ In Woolf’s *The Waves* (1931) for example, all six characters experience the tube separately and differently: for Louis the ‘descent into the Tube was like death’ and Jinny comes to the realisation that she is ‘no longer young’.³⁰ In Jean Rhys’ short story ‘The Insect World’ the colloquial ‘Jiggers’ (after the tropical insect that lays eggs under the skin) is slang for people who use the Tube.³¹ The image of commuters as insects under the skin of London is gruesome. But Miller allows us to come back up from the underground, once again repeating her understanding of the cyclical motion of modern life. As Nancy walks from the tube station to her work-place she watches cleaners go about their duties as a ‘busy, ordinary traffic of people going’. Nancy therefore notices the connectedness of the

²⁸ David Welsh, *Underground Writing: the London Tube from George Gissing to Virginia Woolf* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), p.181

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.174

³⁰ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), p.153, p.165

³¹ Jean Rhys ‘The Insect World’, *Sleep it Off Lady* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980)

experiences she is amongst but quickly removes herself from it. Lost in reverie again, she imagines a glimpse of what the city will become at night-time ‘the sky irreal and theatrically spangled’. She wishes it was night-time already and is thankful that it is only her ‘half-day’ at work.³²

The literature of the modern work-place is the literature of boredom. Miller describes a place in which all the noisy dynamism of activity and productivity is brushed aside impatiently: this is not the grand ‘ennui’ or ‘melancholia’ of previous generations, Miller’s banal boredom is a specifically secular, post-industrialist condition. For Nancy boredom is both ‘opposite and inextricable’ from desire because boredom cannot exist without a yearning for something which is other.³³ And because boredom is essentially a temporal state it follows that to be bored we must be divorced from both past and present. Yet boredom is fundamentally a sensation of extended present-ness in which we cannot remember what came before, or anticipate anything which might follow. This play between boredom (and its other signifiers such as ‘tedium’, ‘monotony’, ‘dullness’) and its temporal location is mirrored in the definition of the circadian novel. In this respect the circadian novel can be read as the formal articulation of boredom *par excellence*.

One of the most common ways of understanding the tedium of the work-place is with the analogy of the assembly line. Laurie Langbauer writes: ‘The boredom of everyday city life is the boredom of the assembly line, of one thing after another, of pieces locked in an infinite series that never really progresses: the more it changes, the

³² Miller, *The Mere Living*, p.88

³³ Sara Crangle, *Prosaic Desires: Modernist Knowledge, Boredom, Laughter and Anticipation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p.74

more it remains the same.³⁴ Famously first introduced by Henry Ford in 1913, the revolutionary mode of production was intended to bring about a speed and efficiency to meet the demands of a modern industrial output. In alignment with Frederick Winslow Taylor's writing, workers had to be 'managed' for minimum waste and for maximum efficiency. Effectively the work-force was regulated to the point of dehumanization as the machines that were being built were internalised by those that were building them. The hairdressing scene in *The Mere Living* enacts a feminized version of this assembly line: each girl has her specific cubicle where she can be monitored by the overseer. There is no 'creative content'; they carry out automatic actions on the women seated with their backs to them. Nancy's customer is even described as a machine-like manikin and so time is emptied of 'any significant markers that would differentiate one moment from the next.'³⁵ In their separate cells, time plods on so that their boredom is the most heightened awareness of time passing.

Work-time is also felt uncomfortably by Nancy for another reason. This is her lecherous boss, overseeing his 'girls':

All fat and white, suavely smelling of brilliantine, Mr Meadows paced the corridor between the facing row of cubicles [...] Now the Sullivan girl gave distinction to a place. He glanced into the cubicle where she was working, and saw her, sleeves rolled above soft bare elbows. He looked and the hollow of his palm hungered for the taste of that delicate flesh. He frowned. At it again. [...] Mr Meadows sighed. At home, in Swiss Cottage, he had a thin brittle wife who was absorbed in some quack religion and continually knitted clothes for the missionaries in Algeria. Mr Meadows sighed again, and passed a big pale hand over his carefully dyed hair.³⁶

Here Miller shifts from exact omniscient description fluidly into first person interiority. Mr Meadows is given a distinct voice: 'Now the Sullivan girl', and then

³⁴ Laurie Langbauer, *Novels of Everyday Life: The Series in English Fiction, 1850 - 1930* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), p.81

³⁵ Ben Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.7

³⁶ Miller, *The Mere Living*, pp.95-6

Miller interjects, finishing with the stunning rhythm of that double-hypotaxis in the last sentence: he ‘passed a big pale hand over his carefully dyed hair.’ But this boss is not straight-forwardly lecherous, it is ‘the hollow of his palm’ that hungers for the taste of Nancy.

Miller tends to write in blocks of description separated by bars of blank space on the page, creating a kind of extended metalepsis between the two distinct passages. The effect is such that what appears unconnected between one section and the next is actually writing infected by what has preceded it. This is what follows Mr Meadows’ fantasising:

The humming of the drying machine filled the air. Long nickeled serpent, hissing electric air. It hummed, hummed, hummed. New towels were stiff and smelled of laundry. Slowly the white flush of steam arose, disguising the naked mirror, and more water streamed into the china basin: a fine fairy rain from the slender hose watered the flowering hair, drenched all the fine entangled grasses that, during the human summer, numerously pursue their coiling growth along the fertile slopes of the skull. In another compartment, the quick clipping of scissors.³⁷

A customer is having her hair washed, charged with the virile ponderings of Mr Meadows. The nickeled serpent and the slender hose, the naked mirror and the stiff towels; these objects do not possess an eroticism for any of the customers nor for the women working in the salon. The metaphor of the human skull as a ‘fertile slope’ is catachrestic too: hair is not grass, it grows but it is dead. Hair pays no attention to season; it does not rely on summer sunshine nor a romantic ‘fairy rain’ to grow, it does so all year round. These broken fantasies fail to cohere, leaving the reader thankful for the interruption of the menacing sound of the scissors clipping away in the compartment next door. These two paragraphs are both descriptions of the

³⁷ Ibid., p.97

hairdressers as experienced by Mr Meadows, so that as we watch them with him we are made uncomfortable by his gaze. The effect is to more powerfully produce an image of a man one does not want to work for: no wonder Nancy glances at the clock. Importantly, these long passages of seemingly misshapen description also work to frustrate the reader's experience of time. Plot is slowed down again as we read of all the inanimate action in the hairdressing salon.

Miller shifts focus on to the part of the day that she would become most interested in for the rest of her writing career. We are shown the housewife at home after everyone else has left for the day. She would indeed recount her own experience of this alone time in her fragmentary life-notes that she published in the 1940s. In 'Interlude' she describes, in first person, the hour of her day when she sits quietly in the house on her own and reads the newspaper. The news is always of mutinies, revolts, riots: of 'disturbances' breaking out all over the globe; of the atom bomb exploding at Hiroshima. Next she quietly and unthinkingly carries out her daily rituals:

I take my tray and go across the passage into the bright tidy little kitchen; and soon, an apron about my waist, reconstituting dried egg, reconstituting household milk, performing all those tricks of domestic reconstruction which the politicians have trained me to imitate and accept.³⁸

Once her house has emptied for the day, Mary Sullivan begins her private daily routine which starts with a walk around the now almost-silent rooms.

Slowly she walked along in the sunlight. An utter peacefulness held her. No longer need she strive to build up her life, altering the architectural plans of heredity and bringing the painfully gathered material of her own initiative. Her life had been built. It was now a house to dwell in.³⁹

³⁸ Betty Miller, 'Train of Thought', *The Windmill*, edited by Reginald Moore and Edward Lane, Vol.2, No.5, (1946), p.141

³⁹ Miller, *The Mere Living*, p.167

The only sound is the grandfather clock, which for Mary, ticks 'lazy-busy'.⁴⁰ Her working day is full of contemplation on the gentle boredom of her spent time, but in contrast to Nancy's urgent frustration, Mary's boredom is peaceful. Her time is simultaneously lazy and busy and she seems ponderously resigned to that definition of her day. She tidies up the clutter that her children have scattered about and carefully dusts around the ornaments on Nancy's dressing-table. Downstairs, we are given a glimpse of the almost-still kitchen 'in the oasis of an idle moment' as 'clean, empty: only the tap dripped continuously, and the cheap alarm clock ticked loudly from the dresser...'⁴¹ Miller uses these moments of 'almost' to convey the dreariness of Mary's day, whilst refusing to collapse them into utter emptiness. There is a pulse that is maintained by the separate clocks, carrying her tasks forward so that she is constantly forced to ask herself 'What next? For life seemed to have reduced itself to a sequence of small duties that had to be fulfilled.'⁴²

Week after week, the same things to be done. Day after day. Beds to be made, meals to be cooked, dishes to be washed. Day after day...Meaningless, thought Mrs Sullivan. Insane repetition, endless stereotyping. To-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow.⁴³

Here Miller emphasises the 'endless' 'repetition' of the day, but goes further. It is now a day which belongs to *Mrs Sullivan* and, constantly aware of the onset of tomorrow it thus becomes 'insane'. With this little passage of resistance, Miller writes herself in to a tradition of feminist thinking and does so using that which is often invoked by misogyny: the equation of female experience defined by pseudo-insanity and hysteria.⁴⁴ To live her life in anticipation of the tedium of to-morrow, Mrs Sullivan believes, is insane.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p154

⁴¹ Ibid., p.224

⁴² Ibid., p.223

⁴³ Ibid., p.224

When Mrs Dalloway goes for her morning lie-down she becomes encased in the white sheets of her coffin-like bed.⁴⁵ Mrs Sullivan, conversely, energetically, goes fish-shopping at roughly the same point in her day. Walking up the Portobello Road, finding comfort in the familiarity, she shops ‘skilfully, discreetly, with pleasure. She had been down here every day for years’.⁴⁶ She feels part of history: she remembers the captured eighteenth century Spanish port which gave its name to the market and finds something port-like in the cacophony of street sounds and exotic goods through which she now picks a route to her usual fishmonger.

As Mr Palmer handled the fish for her benefit [...] Mrs Sullivan began to speculate on the subject of Time. For obviously, she thought, time does not extend horizontally, but vertically, being composed of different *planes*: and time can hardly be common to creatures of entirely dissimilar spheres. A half an hour to a man, and a half an hour to a fish, must mean something totally different.⁴⁷

Bergson’s concept of duration has lost its radicality to the point that a middle-class housewife can ponder on the clarity of its conclusions in a west London fish-shop. ‘Obviously’ time is experienced differently; it can ‘hardly’ be shared by various creatures. What *is* radical is that here Mrs Sullivan aligns herself with her freshly bought fish. By separating its experience from that of Mr Palmer’s and of man’s in general, she sees more in common with the fish than with the man who sells it to her.

Like Mrs Dalloway, Mrs Sullivan is menopausal. Their daughters Elizabeth and Nancy are flower-like, their bodies fertile and blossoming but Mrs Dalloway acknowledges that there will be ‘no more marrying, no more having of children’ for

⁴⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), p.33

⁴⁶ Miller, *The Mere Living*, p.162

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.160

her.⁴⁸ Both women are at the half-point of their life and so, removed from male-time and perhaps playing on the caricature of a 'fish-wife' Mrs Sullivan experiences a kind of fish-time. She goes on however, to normalise this feeling:

It was terrible to become old, she thought: but without conviction. (Shopping bag over her arm, she pulled the front door to, and emerged from the house into the spacious domain of a light spring morning.) Without conviction: for the present age retains progressively the feeling of being the subject's *normal* age, and all other, past or future, merely a derivation from that. A succession of personalities ("when I was fifteen," "when I was twenty-seven") of which the present personality alone appears to be the normal and the permanent one.⁴⁹

This is a curious passage in which narratorial and character voices coalesce so that we cannot be sure whether Mary realises her thought was without conviction or whether it is Miller who does so. The first parenthetical description, which is narratorial, implies that what is outside of it is Mrs Sullivan's logical response to an instinctive cliché. But the second parenthesis contains her thoughts, perhaps quoted by Miller in order to make a kind of authorial conclusion. Problematically, Miller wants it to be unclear exactly who is unconvinced by Mary's assertion on the terrors of aging: Mrs Sullivan or the reader? Further along the chapter it becomes clear:

Every day, she did the same things, and yet each day was a cycle in itself: in its birth, maturity and decline, in its needs and functions and activities, a complete microcosm. She had reached the stage in which she could accept each day separately, and not, as in youth, hang always on the anticipation of the morrow for fuller pleasure and development. It was as though, in this respect, she had entered into her own future. And it was thus, in this phase of life alone, she found, that one could be free.⁵⁰

This realisation, told in the omniscient third person, is Mrs Sullivan's. And this could not have come without her lack of conviction of her earlier statement. By 'accepting each day separately' she writes 'her own future'. This is therefore also a realisation

⁴⁸ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), p.11

⁴⁹ Miller, *The Mere Living*, p.158

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p167

which works textually, driving the form of the novel as a whole and anticipating the future of the circadian novel as a justifiable, and necessary, literary project.⁵¹

The centrality of a middle-aged female consciousness in a circadian novel is also explored in Storm Jameson's 1933 novel *A Day Off*. It is an unremittingly bleak description of an unnamed, unemployed woman's lonely Thursday. It is summer in London so she goes to Richmond Park and sits on a warm bench, remembering all the men who have left her to her poverty and her loneliness. She remembers working in a mill as a young woman, her German cafe-owner husband who ran-off before the First World War and the funeral of her Aunt Ada. She accidentally steals a woman's handbag on a number 33 bus and spends the evening in a pub with its contents. She returns home: 'The house was as quiet as that other. Climbing the stairs, the worn canvas catching her heels, it was like every other night'.⁵² This is a different kind of circadian novel. Focalized through a single protagonist, time is singularly personal, not multivalent. There is no glance forward to tomorrow, even though the title suggests it. The day which the reader is given is full of memories which infect the present thus rendering it with the atmosphere of the *last* day. It ends: 'Poor woman, let her sleep'. It is a novel about *wasted* time, with mournful glances back to times which were less, but none-the-less, boring. In contrast, *The Mere Living*, though contending with all the boredom and repetition of everyday London life is full of pleasure. This is the question at the heart of the novel, how can the everyday be pleasurable? Extrapolating from this, the reader must ask: How can reading a circadian novel be pleasurable?

⁵¹ A project taken up by contemporary writers including Ian McEwan, Graham Swift and Rachel Cusk.

⁵² Storm Jameson, 'A Day Off', *Women Against Men* (London: Virago, 1985), p.213

Frank Kendon's review in *John O'London's Weekly* points out the obviously 'powerful influence' of Virginia Woolf over the literary ambitions that Miller lays out with *The Mere Living*. He notes the 'youthful exultation' in the novel's perception but argues that first-time writers rarely have enough 'word-sense' to find expression for it:

What measure of success the book has depends upon the extraordinary keenness of its author's sense-perceptions and her impulsive (but often effective) tyranny over words.⁵³

He notes the 'direct physical effect of the description. The very words touch and see and smell and hear [...] But this method of writing, being all emphasis, becomes monotonous and distracting.' For Kendon, Miller's repetitious exploration of everyday boredom loses its pleasure with the build-up of all the moments that aren't boring enough. Whilst he enjoys the attention Miller's prose pays to the texture of words themselves they are cumulatively too much. But in *The Mere Living*, pleasure comes from experiencing the oscillating aesthetics of everyday things. For the four protagonists, life only becomes boring when they do not pay attention; careful attentiveness will mean that they must be changed by what is changing around them. For Paul, this day will be one of recognition. He first recognises the egg that his mother gives him for breakfast, 'he stared at it, and suddenly normal sight was eclipsed, and he saw it as for the first time'.⁵⁴ In doing so Paul is prompted into seeing his father 'after an absence of years'. The difference, Paul realises, is that 'although he had seen his father every day, he had never looked at him'; he had accepted the 'habit-image' of his father.⁵⁵ With his rejection of the habit-image Paul escapes the boredom of the everyday. Habit, he recognises, 'was like the shrouds people put over

⁵³ Frank Kendon, 'Review', *John O'London's Weekly*, July 15, 1933, Vol. XXIX, No. 744, p.512

⁵⁴ Miller, *The Mere Living*, p.48

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.48

the furniture when they were away from the house'.⁵⁶ Mary Sullivan's ability to see each day as separate and new, works in the same way. They are informed by Nietzsche's understanding of boredom as 'one of the dangers of the present' and as such are those who, aware of 'historical repetition, can transcend boredom'.⁵⁷

After the relative success of her first novel, *John O'London's Weekly* printed Miller's first short story in the summer of 1933. *Margit* is set in a Swedish boarding house called Agnesvik in rural Varmland. Margit is a young woman who Frau Oden, proprietress of Agnesvik, rescues from an orphanage as a teenager. She waits on the guests who are generally aged with a silent efficiency that could be disquieting: 'There was a curious lack of *presence* in [her] prolonged gaze. No personal awareness; no defence.'⁵⁸ She is seduced by a travelling salesman who promises to meet her again the following night but is gone by breakfast time. Nonetheless Margit returns to wait for him at the level crossing where they met the previous night. Of course, he does not come. She returns to work with the same stoic dedication and then goes back to the level crossing that night too. Indeed, she returns every night for the next week, then weeks, then months until she becomes infamous in the surrounding villages. She is silent, passive and obedient, utterly without interiority. We imagine her to be melancholy through the impressions and responses of the people around her but never through her own admission. She is somehow secure in her remoteness and finds a contained loyalty remote from reality.

The following summer he returns, grinning from too much gin, to the boarding house, full of the same slick promises as the previous year. But instead of falling

⁵⁶ Ibid., p.49

⁵⁷ Crangle, *Prosaic Desires*, p.79

⁵⁸ Betty Miller, 'Margit' in *John O'London's Weekly*, July 15 1933, Vol. XXIX No. 744, pp.529-30

joyfully in to his arms she brushes passed him, knowing that it is the time of evening when she must go to wait at the crossing. He drunkenly and confusedly attempts to get her to stay but she continues in a trance off to her meeting spot which she reaches and where settles herself. The story ends with her there: 'It was evident from this state of remote inner happiness that it would be impossible to awake her.'⁵⁹ With this inverted fairytale Miller is again exploring the phenomena of repetition and habit, albeit in a very different form. But here it isn't boredom that is at stake but the danger, and the safety, of reverie. Margit has become so subsumed by the habit of waiting at the crossing that she cannot recognize what she was waiting for when it appears elsewhere. This is unnerving to read but because we can see what Miller shows us, that this salesman is a fool, it also a relief for us to read.

As we have seen, Nancy and Henry Sullivan, unable to see over or through the habit-image, focus on fantasy, on reverie, on inattention to escape their everyday lives. Towards the end of the novel, the family are all in bed but Nancy imagines herself on a white-sailed ship 'Nancy Sullivan: Passenger to To-morrow'. The dining-room clock strikes 11.30 as Paul is falling asleep, reminding Mr Sullivan to wind up his pocket-watch:

The day had left a residue on him [...] But sleep would efface. Nightly it offered him its way of treacherous escape; release from responsibilities, and from the day-time world which created them for him.

Henry relies on the night-time as 'the compensation for each day to be endured'.⁶⁰ In our experience of everyday life Miller offers us two models: we can choose to follow the Paul/Mary model of attentive pleasure or the Henry/Nancy model of fantastical compensation. But by framing these ideas in her re-writing of the circadian novel

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.530

⁶⁰ Miller, *The Mere Living*, p.363

Miller not only prescribes an exemplary way of experiencing the everyday, but also puts forward a paradigm for reading. Both the rhythm of the everyday and the prose of the prosaic can lull us into a forgetfulness of ourselves. But we must pay attention: Miller's repetition and ellipses rhythmically carry us along the page in a Henry/Nancy reverie and then she forces our attention with those catechisms and synaesthetic images. Reading Miller's work, we are forced to realise the ways a text must be, and is, historically determined. *The Mere Living* could not have been written without, in particular *Mrs Dalloway* nor without Henri Bergson's work. It is possible to argue that the everyday cannot be textualised; that the textuality of the everyday removes the practical function and the direct experience of the everyday. Bergson, however, like Miller, 'returns again and again to art as a privileged realm where the actuality of duration can be perceived'.⁶¹ Art, for Bergson, enables us to experience what we cannot understand. Unread and therefore not understood, *The Mere Living* is the first way of paying necessary attention to Miller's work as a whole.

⁶¹ Randall, *Modernism*, p.55

Chapter Three

In Search of an Interlude

Sunday (1934)

On the front jacket of Betty Miller's second novel, *Sunday*, published in 1934 by Victor Gollancz, there is a printed message from the publisher. In bold font it reads:

We anticipate no sensational success for this very sensitive novel, so far as sales are concerned, but we believe that our happiness in publishing it will be shared with those who may be attracted to read it by the reputation which, we venture to prophesy, will be given to it by the reviewers. The impression it leaves is one of great beauty: mood and atmosphere are conveyed by very delicate and exact description: there are whole passages of sustained loveliness and scenes of great dramatic intensity.¹

What appears to be a naive but laudable disregard for profit margins, is in fact a Machiavellian publicity technique quite typical of Gollancz: he is attempting to sell Miller's novel by appealing to the potential reader's pomposity. You shouldn't read *Sunday* because everyone else is reading it, he is almost saying; you should read it because no one else is. It doesn't matter that you haven't read the prophesied reviews because they will only tell you what we are telling you now. By invoking the notion that *Sunday* is a marginalised novel on the moment that it hits the shop floor, he solidifies the reputation and readership (or lack of), which remains true for Miller's novels today. This is not to say my argument follows Gollancz's: that we should read Miller because she is unread; she should be read for her storytelling capabilities, for

¹ On the dust-jacket of Betty Miller, *Sunday* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1934)

her bizarre, discomfoting stylistics and for her engagement with the political and cultural discourses of the 1930s.

Mark Lane is a man nearing middle age, in charge of the family business that he inherited from his dead father. Lane's biscuits are made at a factory in Walthamstow that he commutes to every day from the family's large house in Cleveland Square near Hyde Park. Named after a now disused tube station near the Tower of London, Mark Lane is defined by his status as a Londoner. He shares the house with his aging mother who lies in bed all day, incapacitated by a leg injury. His two gregarious younger sisters are rarely at home and he detests their 'emotional avidity', so Lane occupies his time almost exclusively with work.² The novel describes an unusual week for Mark Lane. He makes the spontaneous decision to visit an old friend at their house in France. Once there, removed from the routine of his working life, Lane has an affair with one of the family's servants. The novel ends as he returns to London and the mundanity of work.

As Sarah Sceats notes, Lane's trip to France is 'an escape: from the mechanization in the factory and from the emotional entanglements of his mother and sisters.'³ Miller chooses to tell Mark Lane's story of escape within a rigid time frame. The week that he spends in France is as far as possible from his working week in that

² Betty Miller, *Sunday* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1934), p.24

Jenny Hartley notes that 'avidity' is a word that recurs in Miller's writing, usually in relation to a repressed character's repelled fascination with open emotional expression, especially of yearning or passion. Jenny Hartley 'Warriors and Healers, Imposters and Mothers: Betty Miller's *On the Side of the Angels*' in *Dressing up for War: Transformations of Gender and Genre in the Discourse and Literature of War* eds. Aranzazu Usandizaga and Andrew Monickman (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), p.95

³ Sarah Sceats, 'Betty Miller's Narratives of Ambivalence', *In the Open: Jewish Women Writers and British Culture* ed. Clare M. Tylee (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2006), pp.88-9

it offers freedom from the things that he feels too weighed down by. And yet whilst in France Miller dedicates a long chapter to the day of Sunday where she gives the reader glimpses of life back in London. No matter where one is, Miller is saying, Sunday is removed from the rest of the week. Still concerned with the compactness of daily time, she structures her second novel around the concept of a single day as an interlude.

Miller's impression of Sunday as being somehow different from the rest of the week relies on society's structuring of labour and leisure. The responsibilities from which Lane desires escape are, first and foremost, the ones at work. Because he runs a family business, however, his work is immersed in emotional commitments that are only compounded by living in the family house. Virginia Woolf wrote in *The Waves*: 'Something always has to be done next. Tuesday follows Monday: Wednesday, Tuesday. Each spreads the same ripple of wellbeing, repeats the same curve of rhythm; covers fresh sand with a chill or ebbs a little slackly without. So the being grows rings; identity becomes robust.'⁴

Mark Lane's identity has become so robust that he fears it is brittle. Sunday, for him, is the day to reflect. Contemplation, however, is just a different form of labour. He believes that the division of the week in to weekday and Sunday creates the false division between occupation and existence. Sunday is the day 'outside time, outside the calendar. It was a realm of being: the one in which he could stand back, survey; detachedly observe; take a faithful and comprehensive view of life. Sunday was for him the mountain top. The spirit of solitude, which, looking down, can see

⁴ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), p.150

with new proportion the busy streets of men as small and crawling ant-ways....⁵ This chapter will explore the ways that Miller's second novel writes about the compunction to escape. It will look at the things that the novel presents as being necessary to escape from, as well as what is being escaped to and the means by which individuals might get there. It will read the novel's exposition on the significance of reflection that plays out, for example, in Miller's slow-paced plot and elaborate sentences. But we start with Miller's consideration of Sunday as both an abstract idea, and a specific day functioning within the historic and regulated model that we know as a week.

Miller was not alone in being struck by the crucial mystique of Sundays: the peculiar quality of them can be found in other works from the period. Patrick Hamilton noted the day's potential for bringing together a variety of atmospheres:

To the infinite piquancies and horrors of Sunday she was alive: she was part of its drear dreaminess: she partook avidly of its hideous drugs – cocoa, tea, coffee – these at the junctions or termini, or at her rooms immediately, when she arrived late...⁶

Anna, in Jean Rhys' *Voyage in the Dark* feels only the oppressive weight of its emptiness. She believes that 'the feeling of Sunday is the same everywhere, heavy, melancholy, standing still. Like when they say, 'As it was in the beginning, is now, and shall ever be, world without end.''⁷ But her instinctive ability to quote the Gloria Patri transports her back to the West Indies when as a child she would go to church on Sundays with the 'heavy-sweet' scent in the exotic air.⁸ In Katherine Mansfield's short story, the eponymous Miss Brill spends every Sunday not attending church but

⁵ Miller, *Sunday*, p.42

⁶ Patrick Hamilton, *Twopence Coloured* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), p.285

⁷ Jean Rhys, *A Voyage in the Dark* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), p.36

⁸ *Ibid.*, p77

going to watch the band in the park. Incorporating formality in to her routine she dresses up for the occasion in her precious fur coat.⁹

The day was considered so particular, and yet so revealing, that Mass Observation dedicated a whole study to what its respondents did with it. Food was recorded as being an important part of Sunday. Indeed ‘Mass-Observation of Sunday habits makes it clear that most people do, in fact, spend not only Sunday morning but the entire day either in or around the home.’¹⁰ When people do leave the house they would prefer to be in the countryside than the city. A respondent listed only as a twenty-five year-old clerk, would ideally spend his Sunday ‘out in the country, sitting down and relaxing and thinking about other things.’¹¹ A middle-aged plumber, who clearly was able to occupy himself outside of the house on Sundays, dismissed the existence of ‘Monday Blues’. The malaise of the working day, he thinks, is more likely to hit ‘round about Wednesday or Thursday, not Monday, because people have been out in the open on Sundays and feel all the better for it.’¹²

For those who live in the city and cannot escape to the country it is the day that they look forward to least. A nineteen year old female shop assistant states that ‘Sunday is a dreary day. Everywhere is dead.’¹³ And a young unemployed building worker agrees: ‘There’s nowhere to go and nothing to do. I just dread the day.’¹⁴ The study quotes from Charles Lamb’s *The Essays of Elia* (1823) to articulate why this might be:

⁹ Katherine Mansfield, ‘Miss Brill’ in *The Collected Short Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982)

¹⁰ Mass Observation, *Meet Yourself on Sunday* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p.5

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p66

¹² *Ibid.*, p56

¹³ *Ibid.*, p57

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p66

There is a gloom for me attendant upon a city Sunday, a weight in the air. I miss the cheerful cries of London – the music and the ballad-singer – the buzz and stirring murmur of the streets. Those eternal bells depress me. The closed shops repel me.¹⁵

Lamb, like Rhys' Anna, finds the Sunday silence of an ordinarily busy city aggressive in its capacity to depress and repel. A clerk in London, Sunday was the only day that Lamb wasn't in the office. But on the one day that he was free to wander out, everything was closed up. It wasn't until 1932, Mass Observation records, that Sunday cinemas became legal, as did Sunday openings of exhibitions, galleries and zoos. Sunday trading did not become legal in England and Wales until 1994. Even with these stimulating places on offer, people recorded that the reasons for liking Sundays are 'usually more or less negative; they enjoy Sunday chiefly because they do not have to work, but also because it provides a release from the week-day routine.'¹⁶

It is crucial to start with the recognition that Miller's first two novels contain almost no spoken dialogue. The exchanges that do take place are almost always personal rather than public. Whereas her later novels are domestic, her first two are subjective. *The Mere Living* was focalized by four separate characters who, even though they all lived together, vary rarely interacted with each other. *Sunday* heightens this, presenting only the thoughts and actions of one character, Mark Lane. The relevance of Sunday doesn't make itself clear immediately. Miller introduces the reader to Lane but for a few pages he is unnamed. It is telling that we learn his grandfather's name before his own. Like the biscuits that his factory produces he is plain, dull even, with no 'new-fangled additions of egg-white cream, chocolate or

¹⁵ Charles Lamb, *The Essays of Elia* (Philadelphia: Willis P. Hazard, 1854), p.248

¹⁶ Mass Observation, *Meet Yourself on Sunday* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p.55

jam'.¹⁷ With his revealing use of the expression 'new-fangled' we know that Lane is both traditional and uncomfortably aware that he is somehow out of step with society. We also learn that he is neat, almost compulsively so, and very serious. Dull but impressive, he has no sense of frivolity. He lives on the top floor of the house, by himself, to which he alone has the key. Both geographically and metaphorically, he is head of the house.

Still alone, Lane sits down to a bleak breakfast. He gloomily ignores the letters waiting to be read on the breakfast table; Miller does not tell us how they got there. His solitude, we learn, is a deliberate refusal to engage with society's pressures. He looks again at the correspondence and 'there rose up within him a wave of aversion, exasperation; of stubborn unwillingness, of hatred. It was like a physical nausea swelling. His mouth puckered.'¹⁸ Forcibly enmeshed by the social fabric of his life 'a sort of negativism grew up in him'.¹⁹ So he sits motionless at the breakfast table in an attempt to disengage physically from the outer world. For a while he is empty, 'completely vacant....'²⁰ The ellipses, opening up a narrative vacancy, allow Miller to reflect on the catalyst for Lane's negativism:

After the release of Sunday, the old, insistent, nagging grey demands on Monday: of getting back to work, back into routine, back into daily life. He came to a stop before the window, and stared out at the faded summer trees of Cleveland Square. But that reaction was not personal to him: the reluctance to return – Monday-morning-feeling – lay very deep indeed at the root of human nature. It made some men artists in the desire to construct their own world rather than accept the Monday of ordinary living; others it made philosophers, deserters from the front rank of commonplace realities. It was there in all of us, in some form or other – the deepest disease of the human spirit....²¹

¹⁷ Miller, *Sunday*, p.11

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.11

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.12

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.12

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.14

It is the 'Monday of ordinary living' that defines Sunday as a day of release and vice versa. The sensation of the inevitable return after Sunday's release is rendered in the vocabulary of disease so nauseous that Lane nearly vomits.

Miller describes in great detail the routine that Lane performs each Monday morning, and therefore every weekday morning. After breakfast in his private rooms on the top floor of the house he descends down to say goodbye to his mother, puts on his coat and hat, gets in to the car and is driven across London to his factory. That descent first to his mother's floor of the house and eventually to the front door draws out another significance of Miller's understanding of Monday morning reluctance. When Lane is climbing down the stairs his mind is empty and Miller shows us the exact physical actions that he performs. Whenever Lane pauses on a landing, he is reminded of something from his past. Indeed the knowledge that 'the past was cradled within these walls' is one of the forces from which he most wants to escape.²² Immediately after breakfast, for example, he gathers himself together in front of a gilded mirror and walks out in to the hallway. He pauses at the top of the staircase. In this moment of stasis he remembers the old nursery that he shared with his two sisters and he remembers how his nurse Nony would decorate the mantelpiece at Christmas. These 'constant memories' stop as he begins to walk slowly down the stairs: 'The physically incapable moment of the Present held his body in its thrall, imprisoned him in its dimension.'²³ Landings of houses are often sites of trouble for women in the fiction of the 1930s. For Jean Rhys' characters, for example, they are 'menacingly indeterminate places, that are between rooms [...] men lurk there in the darkness' of

²² Ibid., p.20

²³ Ibid., p.17

dingy hotels.²⁴ Whether they are the public landings where the rootless rest, or the over-familiar ones at home, one is somehow suspended on a landing. They are a meeting place in the present.

Another memory that appears to Lane on the landing is the time he spent in France. As a child Mark Lane was sent to Berck Plage to have his spinal curvature corrected. For two years he lived, separated from his family at the Sanatorium de la Paix.²⁵ He remembers having to spend long days and then weeks, lying flat on his back encased in a brace and without moving, 'seeing the external world only through the mirror which, screwed on to a frame, was placed above his head, so that he could tilt it at the angle he pleased.'²⁶ It is this mirror, acting as a tool for all his perceptions, which created his 'protracted reflected observation of the external world'. He developed a new detachment, and with it:

the realization (in the midst of alien surroundings, alien language) that this detachment might be the most precious talisman an individual could possess against life. Which would give a security greater than any human being could even offer....²⁷

In spite of this new security that meant he could maintain a societal detachment, Lane made one friend from his two-year stay at the sanatorium in Berck. Joseph Regnier is described as a small boy with glasses who carried around books by Jean-Henri Fabre. Either we are to believe that Joseph was an incredibly precocious child or this is

²⁴ Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.365

²⁵ Berck, a French resort on the English Channel, is considered the birthplace of thalassotherapy. It is where Miller was sent as a ten year-old for the realignment of her back. She has Mark Lane suffer the same affliction and the same remedy.

²⁶ Miller, *Sunday*, p.19

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.19

Miller's attempt to cement the idea that children who were sent to Berck inevitably developed an unusually acute perspective on their world.²⁸

Sylvia Plath visited Berck in the summer of 1961 and wrote her desolate poem *Berck-Plage* the following year. The state of dormancy, of latency, that Lane remembers at Berck, is shared by Plath who writes: 'this is the sea, then, this great abeyance.'²⁹ Berck was famous, not just for its sanatorium, but as a location for thalassotherapy. Whilst Plath sees the sea as infected by the suspension, the temporary disuse, of the patients that she watches on the beach, Lane finds the recuperative potential in its abeyance. One of Miller's friends, Cicely Mackworth, would go on to write about the necessity of physically crossing the Channel in order to experience a new perspective. Miller first met Cecily Mackworth when she was a student at University College in 1929. Mackworth was studying at LSE: her education was supported by her aunt Margaret Rhondda, the editor of the feminist magazine *Time and Tide* and governor of LSE. Married at 22 but widowed at 25, Mackworth left London for central Europe and settled in Paris in 1936 where she made her living as a travel writer and journalist. She returned to London for the Second World War, staying with Inez Holden whilst she worked with the Free French and contributed articles to *Horizon*. She socialized in the Chelsea pubs with Dylan Thomas and met Stevie Smith in the Mass-Observation offices. She returned to France after the war and published her first novel *Spring's Green Shadow* in 1952. The heroine, Laura, escapes her provincial life in the Welsh Valleys (and her husband, Idris) by moving to Paris. For Laura, 'Paris was an anchor' where her 'head cleared'.³⁰ Laura's clarity comes from independence from her old routine, something that she can only have on

²⁸ Jean-Henri Fabre (1823-1915), entomologist.

²⁹ Sylvia Plath, 'Berck-Plage', *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p.196

³⁰ Cecily Mackworth, *Spring's Green Shadow* (London: Macgibbon and Kee, 1952), p.181

the other side of the Channel. In opposition to the stasis that he wishes for himself, Lane resorts to crossing the sea again to return to France. He informs his mother that he will not be chaperoning his sisters on their trip, but will instead be accepting Regnier's offer to holiday with him at Laroche. He had always politely refused Regnier's invitations: partly out of fear of changing his holiday habits and partly out of a desire to deny the intimacy that accepting might involve or imply. But he was weary of his life, his work and his family and intrigued by the isolation from them that a stay at Chateau Laroche could provide.

Like the gentle breeze that Wordsworth welcomes in the opening lines of his Romantic epic *The Prelude*, the poet/protagonist is 'free, enfranchised and at large.' Mark Lane's decision to travel to France is informed by this enticing idea: to leave 'a house of bondage,/from yon city's walls set free'. Liberated:

It is shaken off –
As by miraculous gift 'tis shaken off –
That burden of my own unnatural self,
That heavy weight of many a weary day
Not mine, and such as were not made for me.³¹

The similarity in lexicon that Wordsworth and Miller use to describe the need for escape is striking: the 'burden', the 'weight' of Wordsworth's 'weary day' is named by Miller as Monday. Leaving his 'house of bondage', his private and enclosed life, Lane is first forced to confront 'the streets of the world.'³²

It was for this reason that Monday always weighed on him so painfully: the being forced to resume a meaningless routine: being wrenched away from his desire to stand outside and watch; compelled, instead to accept these everyday appearances of things as though they were indeed the ultimate realities – stable, fair, and absolute....³³

³¹William Wordsworth, 'The Prelude' (1805), *The Prelude: The Four Texts* (London: Penguin, 1995)

³²Miller, *Sunday*, p.34

³³Ibid., p.36

Unable as he did at Berck to set himself apart and see everything through a mirror angled to his own prescription, Lane must participate in the roles demanded of him. As the manager and owner of his own factory he has no time to think beyond accepted realities: he has his own industrial city to run, one so big that it even has its own smell.

The workers at the Lane factory have their own lending library, airy resting rooms, sports-grounds and access to dentists and doctors. But as we watch Lane watching the rows of workers, ‘each at a minute continuously recurring task’, he is struck by the paradox of their situation. The specialization of his workers’ function has become increasingly narrow so that it, ‘at the same time, perversely, Tantalus-fashion, accorded him all facilities for greater education, for wider knowledge and desire and outlook....’³⁴ But the packaging jobs that, until a few years ago, were done by his factory girls were now fulfilled by a roaring, throbbing machine. ‘The real menace of this became clear to him: a menace more alarming, insidious, than the objective economic one. Leisure. The worst danger of all.’³⁵ Tantalised by the ability to imagine a life outside of the factory, Lane’s workers may well lose their jobs to the increasing mechanization of the factory. A man who has never been poor, Lane naively envisages that the real hardship in unemployment will be the free time that will open up.

Aldous Huxley, in defence of the civilising influence of productive empirical work, shows how communities have always believed in the benefit of the practical over the thoughtful. He notes how under Benedictine Rule, monks were expected to

³⁴ Ibid., p.41

³⁵ Ibid., p.41

spend ‘about three hours at their devotions and about seven at work.’³⁶ Not incidentally, this is roughly the division of time ascribed to Mark Lane’s week. But in an increasingly atheist society (Lane, for example, never attends church), that period of time spent in devotion is free to be wasted however we choose. Richard Church’s review of *Sunday* draws out the method by which Miller writes this insidious problem into the way that we are forced to read the novel:

Epithet and image are always pleasurable, and the reader never resents the slow, stately pace which the story must take in order to carry them, like a ceremonial dress. For the tale *is* a ceremony, a ritual of exorcism to drive out the Spirit of Time, that relentless wearer-down of our human faith and purpose. And the fact that the effort is futile is part of this elaborate ceremony.³⁷

Miller, Church is arguing, understands her novel to be a way for us, her reader, to spend our leisure time. Just as Lane worries about his workers, Miller produces a ‘purpose’ for her readers so that we might not be bored.

Both a construct and a myth, boredom has had a central role in the philosophy of human existence for centuries. Medieval societies had the conception of *acedia*, ‘a combination of what we call boredom and what we call sloth’.³⁸ The word boredom, as has been well documented by Patricia Meyer Spacks, was a late-eighteenth century invention. Its genesis therefore springs from two Western cultural moments: the rise of capitalism and the decline of orthodox Christianity. The Industrial Revolution introduced a differentiation of time for the majority of the population; work time and leisure time, a division that Miller explores in both *The Mere Living* and *Sunday* and

³⁶ Aldous Huxley, *Ends and Means: An Enquiry into the Nature of Ideals* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1946), p.135

³⁷ Richard Church, ‘Review of *Sunday*’, *John O’London’s Weekly*, Vol. XXXII, No. 794 (October 6, 1934), p.49

³⁸ Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), p.11

informs *Portrait of the Bride*.³⁹ This division constructed ways of spending or passing time and in so doing, newly problematised the experience of it. Simultaneously, an increasingly secular society was readjusting traditional discourses of ‘faith’ and finding boredom to lie at the other end of the spectrum. We are still led to believe that there is something immoral in boredom and certainly for Miller it has the potential to be an infectious vice capable of bringing down a largely productive society.

This understanding of the boredom of leisure time within the bourgeois concepts of labour and productivity defines it as a response to the immediate. When Lane pauses on the landing of his house he has time to remember that he must keep going down the stairs in order to get to work. When he is actually stepping down, placing one foot in front of the other, he does not. It is at odds with the Baudelairean concept of ennui described in his *Spleen* poems which ‘implies a judgment of the universe’ and which carries a ‘metaphysical dignity’.⁴⁰ Philosophical debates about boredom have traditionally been dominated by this privileged ennui. Fictions in which boredom are felt, acknowledged and then remedied are particularly attractive to readers in that they proffer inspirational dramatic upheavals. *Sunday* is not one of these texts. Trains and boats are the ‘visible machinery of escape’ that are ultimately ‘meaningless, since, however fast or however far we run, we must revolve, squirrel-wise, within the cage of time.’⁴¹ Lane decides that he must go to France to escape both Mondays and Sundays. Even though he will still be amidst the daily occurrences on family life he will be an observant stranger without obligations. He imagines that

³⁹ Ibid., p.21

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.12

⁴¹ Miller, *Sunday*, p.49

he will be ‘completely released, because of his particular position, of any necessity for participation, what better way of observing life? What better solitude?’⁴²

Seeking escape from his dark house and the spiritual gloom of his job, Miller emphasizes Lane’s exposure to light. He arrives in France on a still and warm night. The drive from the port is quiet and the countryside is in twilight so the surrounding landscape can only be observed in the beams of the car’s headlamps. The two lights, red and green, of a plane overhead seem to Lane to indicate his two realities; the one he would be having at home and the one he is having in France. He notices the orange lamp light in the windows of the village cottages. Regnier’s house, Laroche, is up ahead but hidden in the darkness. The car pulls up at the tall white gates and Lane goes inside. The first thing that he sees on the dining table is a bowl filled with water on which was floating ‘the great yellow dials of sunflowers’.

In a moment of almost hallucinatory clarity, these flowers seemed to detach themselves from their background, from everything else, and to present themselves with an astonishing intensity: they were of far more significance and importance than anything or anybody else in the room.⁴³

Lane has achieved his ‘hallucinatory clarity’ of Sunday perception. Furthermore, hanging above the bowl of sunflower petals is a lamp with out-raying beams of light. The image of these separate objects as two clock-faces pointing towards each other reinforces the idea of the different kinds of time that Miller has established. Lane is welcomed to Laroche with a family meal at this dinner table. Comparing the large, sumptuous French spread to the simple breakfast that Mark Lane has at the beginning of the novel we understand that the isolated individual is now at a communal table. Both versions of Lane eating are informed by competing rituals or, as Diane McGee

⁴² Ibid., p.46

⁴³ Ibid., p.56

asserts: 'dining and attitudes to food in general are linked to the modern predicaments [...] of homelessness, rootlessness, alienation and isolation.'⁴⁴ Curiously these are exactly the predicaments that Lane is attempting to escape *to*. After the meal he finds pleasure in the strangeness of the sheets, in the smells and the formation of the bedroom where he is staying.

Now in France and an observant stranger, Lane can pay attention to the minutest of physical details. But he does not see in colour. The quality of his detachment from the Regnier family, his Sunday perception, and his desire for 'strangeness' places everyone and everything at Laroche in extreme chiaroscuro. Madame Regnier, for example, only ever wears black. Her 'masses of faded blonde hair had merged so imperceptibly into grey that it was impossible to distinguish between the two colours.'⁴⁵ Similarly, Monsieur Regnier has bushy silver eyebrows and dark eyes. Lane sits on white wooden furniture in the sunshine of the morning and hangs his grey flannel suits in the wardrobe. When Janine Regnier and her mother check the linen cupboard, everything is pure white. The pillowcases, sheets, bedspreads, tablecloths, towels and the generations of female trousseaux in the attic are all white too. All the way downstairs in the kitchen the cook is with Paula the gamekeeper's daughter drinking black coffee and eating dark chocolate. They sit in front of the white light gleaming out from behind the black bars of the range. The hot sun has even bleached the pebbles in the garden. When Lane firsts meet Janine she is wearing a simple white sleeveless tennis dress that revealed the 'dark flowering of

⁴⁴ Diane McGee, *Writing the Meal: Dinner in the Fiction of Early Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (London: University of Toronto Press, 2001), p.81

⁴⁵ Miller, *Sunday*, p.57

hair' in the pit of her arm.⁴⁶ The hair on her head is dark too, almost black, and parted straight down the middle in a broad straight line.

Seeing only in shades of light and dark, Lane nevertheless quickly becomes bored at Laroche. Even here he experiences the recurrence of 'the same cycle of activities [...] the exhausting, terrifying lack of finality.'⁴⁷ Each morning he wakes up, recognises that which he must repeat and craves the 'peace, the *finality* of utter annihilation.'⁴⁸ Every day the sky was tremendous and in the garden the water-pump 'unavailingly implored'. There is a clock over the stable door that every hour 'struck its deep note', marking the passing of time.⁴⁹ But then, forced indoors by the rain and so unable to take his daily walk through the woods 'the whole of his great aimless body weighed upon him; he did not know what to do with it; without the harness of some task, some *definite* occupation, it simply hung about him, a meaningless oppression.'⁵⁰ Without his new routine and so on a metaphorical landing, Lane remembers his old one; specifically his mistress Helen Summers back in London.

Suddenly, because she was absent (both in time and space – but it is the former absence that is the most compelling), because she now partook of an aspect of his past, she had become dear to him....⁵¹

Remembering Summers, Lane can see colour again. Along her office window she has a row of coloured hyacinths.⁵² In her two-roomed flat she had hung 'curtains of curious fabric; light Indian materials, pastel shades.'⁵³ Her light, colourful rooms pull Lane out of the clarity of his greyscale Sunday perception and he is irritated. He

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.82

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.92

⁴⁸ Ibid., p.92

⁴⁹ Ibid., p.121

⁵⁰ Ibid., p.98

⁵¹ Ibid., p.122

⁵² Ibid., p.125. See chapter six for a reading of the significance of hyacinths in Miller's novels.

⁵³ Ibid., p.126

develops a new affair with Janine Regnier, Joseph's sister, but has sex with Paula in the woods near Laroche. Lane has managed to escape the demands of labour but not of boredom. His biggest failure is that he has replaced the emotional responsibilities asked of him by his mistress, mother and sisters with the women at Laroche. Monsieur l'Abbé Gravier, the priest at the local church, has escaped these pressures. He is free from ties or desires or bonds because his focus is on eternal divine love. Mark admits that he is envious, but only to an extent, wondering whether that kind of freedom is *easier* 'above earthly reach: above risk, and above realization [...] Sunday – or Monday? Which? Before I leave this place, I feel I must come to a decision on that question....'⁵⁴ Janine is heartbroken when she finds out about Lane's infidelity and he is asked to leave Laroche. On his last day there, a Sunday, Janine is knocked over by a motorcar. Lane returns to London, realizing that he will marry Helen Summers; it will be an obligation that will force him out of his selfish isolation. The novel concludes 'Sunday was over it would be Monday morning when he reached England.'⁵⁵

So far we have explored some of the ways that Miller sets up her protagonist's experiences of labour and leisure time, as well as the attempts that Lane makes to escape from that imposed structure of the week. We have seen how Miller stylistically conveys the different sensation once Lane is removed from his life in London and the inability for him to ever completely be able to do so. What follows is a close reading of the most linguistically complex and memorable of all of Miller's writing; writing

⁵⁴ Ibid., p.166

⁵⁵ Ibid., p.244

that led her reviewer to exclaim: 'what a quality of emotion, what nervous sophistication, what richness of fancy the artist pours into this conventional mould.'⁵⁶

Chapter Twelve of *Sunday* interrupts the narrative of the novel. Miller calls it 'Interlude: The Seventh Day'. An interlude can be both an episode within a larger framework or a short piece that stands on its own. This is true of the chapter too. It is strikingly different to the rest of the novel and yet adds to its meaning. It is primarily made up of imagined fragments of London life in which Lane's previous philosophizing is demonstrated in the images used by Miller. She shows us, for example, how an insect creeps inside a wild flower and becomes imprisoned in a silent cathedral; how a rabbit in a beetroot field sits content and attentive in the sunlight, ears cocked. The first seven sections of the chapter are long paragraphs that describe Laroche. The next seven sections make up what we shall mark as Part II of the chapter. We move from impressions of London on, we imagine, the same Sunday, back to short paragraphs of narratorial or scriptural instruction and the scene of the church in Laroche. It opens with an (unascribed) extract from the Ten Commandments, Exodus 20:8-11, which begins 'Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.'⁵⁷ Miller understood the difference between the Sabbath day as prescribed by the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament and the Sunday worship explained in the New Testament. According to Catholic teaching, ceremonial worship takes place on Sunday, the day after Sabbath. From this juxtaposition we might infer that if scriptural conceptions of Sunday are fluid then the spiritual function of the day is unfixed.

⁵⁶ Richard Church 'Review of *Sunday*', *John O'London's Weekly*, Vol. XXXII, No. 794 (October 6 1934), p.249

⁵⁷ Miller, *Sunday*, p.135

Miller introduces the interlude with the French countryside, hot and still, in the very early morning. The landscape is dusty and deserted. An empty road is lined with telephone wires that hum faintly overhead, in anticipation of the villagers that will soon noisily awake. The sun 'was a monstrosity, its holy golden rays outpouring. Matutinal and high-lifted. Come, all ye faithful. The earth lay in adoration.'⁵⁸ The holiness of this day, Sunday, is underscored repeatedly with biblical phrasing and references. The specialness of the day is rendered in the peculiar imagery Miller uses to describe it:

Hitherto mute-hanging, tongue silently pendulous, the great iron bell slowly capsized. Dong! The first and premonitory peal smote the stillness. The glassy air shivered. [...] Dong, dong, dong. The church bell was ringing.⁵⁹

Her wrought syntax forces us to read slowly through the sibilance that is as close as the French morning air. From our omniscient position we are shown the young priest walking to the church alone, his heart swelling in peaceful reverie. The church itself is calm and expectant as the bell continues to ring, summoning its faceless congregation:

Down in the village the cottage doors were opening. They came forth in their Sunday best. The men wore old-fashioned black suits, and clumsy boots, newly polished. With stiff straw hats engarlanded with artificial buttercups, wearing clean white cotton gloves, the little girls came, walking together, holding their black leather prayer-books.⁶⁰

Miller presents the villages as a mass 'other', almost exoticising their Catholicism; they appear as an unthinking collective obeying the persistent bell. It continues with an ellipsis that suggests 'meanwhile':

... In London, awaking on Sunday was the awareness of a peculiar kind of blank....All the streets seemed to have been laid down with felt. Rarely came the rattle of a loaded bus. No postman's knock resounding from door to door. It was a different day at once: unlinked to the imperious routine of trains, disconnected from the machinery of postal services, unyoked to the shafts of innumerable systems of transport, unharnessed to the wheels of factories and

⁵⁸ Ibid., p.132

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.134

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.135

clocks and systems. Released. Disconnected. Turned loose into the meadows of leisure. Sunday.⁶¹

This Sunday in London is first characterised by its unusual *absence* of sounds much like Charles Lamb's observations noted earlier. Sunday here is defined by a loss of that which defines the other days of the week. Miller goes on to understand it as a day 'turned loose' and therefore free from definition. The text returns to the extract from Exodus and relocates its significance from a Christian God to the individual:

Six days given to create. Each individual, his own world. But on the seventh day the individual must stand back and survey; stand outside and consider if it is good. The opportunity allowed men otherwise inextricably harnessed to the dinning machine of everyday civilisation to stand back, to survey, to see beyond, to see through – and, if necessary, to repudiate. The day in which the automatic business of living, the small absorbing sequence of daily events – trains, buses, post offices, commercial offices, typewriters, banking accounts, shops, theatres – suddenly lose hold of the individual, revealing the fact that they do not complete the whole of existence – revealing themselves like stage scenery, unexpectedly and horribly empty on the other side.⁶²

This argument for each of us to utilize our latent ability for omnipotent omniscience is potentially blasphemous in the parallel that Miller is drawing between divine creation and personal existence. At the very least the humanism of the simile is unorthodox. Miller describes as a 'sequence' the layered list of things and places that at first appear disparate but are in fact all aligned in their urbanity. This sequential list, therefore, figures London-time is a catalogue of one thing and then the next. Throughout the chapter there is a vociferous repetition of the word 'silence'. For example:

Sunday. And this peculiar tangible silence. All over London. All over Europe. Silence. Silence. Silence.⁶³

⁶¹ Ibid., p.135

⁶² Ibid., p.136

⁶³ Ibid., p.137

Capitalised, the word loudly echoes across London and then out across Europe. It continues to echo down the page too, so that the next section begins: ‘Silence. It was Sunday.’ Mimicking scriptural rhetoric, instruction booms out at the reader: ‘Now stand back. Observe. In the silence is the ultimate knowledge, is your answer.’⁶⁴ The next section moves us back to Laroche with another elliptical ‘meanwhile’. The villagers in the church are singing, ‘chanting’ with one voice in unison. ‘Secure, close-packed; radiantly, noisily singing, singing to keep out the menace, to keep out the silence of Sunday.’⁶⁵ This religious collective is intent on denying the individual reflection that Miller is advocating as a necessary part of our week.

Part III moves us back to London again with short staccato sentences: ‘Sunday. In Streatham, Edward rolled over with voluptuous realisation. No office. Sunday. Nothing to do.’⁶⁶ Miller presents these named strangers going about their day off. She shows us an extended impression of various characters of different classes in Hyde Park: gentlemen in top hats on a leisurely stroll; dog-walkers; a father out with his son, his ‘cockney little boy’, in ‘complete personal leisure’.⁶⁷ For these men of all ages in the park, Sunday is a day of light and air and freedom and vision. But, Miller warns, it is almost too much for one day. In a few hours they will be wearied with themselves and looking forward to the relief of safe office-work drudgery.

On Rotten Row impressive black oiled horses are paraded by their riders in front of admiring ladies who politely ignore the rich odour of manure that hangs in the air. Close by, grey-uniformed nurses wheel their unconscious wards in perambulators

⁶⁴ Ibid., p.137

⁶⁵ Ibid., p.137

⁶⁶ Ibid., p.137

⁶⁷ Ibid., p.139

and gossip about fashion. Occasionally Miller gives one of the riders or the nurses a name and darts in to their thoughts and conversations, bringing them momentarily in to life. Then she reminds us that these impressions are happening simultaneously. Closed in parentheses, women wheel their infants in Hyde Park, in the Bois de Boulogne, in Central Park, in the Botanical Gardens: in London, Paris, New York or any, of many, major cities. In the same section we see funeral processions moving along the roads to Willesden Cemetery and Pere Lachaise. Prams, Miller morbidly reminds us, perform a very similar function to coffins.

It is now afternoon in London and the shops are closed with their blinds down as if in mourning. The air of relief felt during the morning walk has disappeared.

They had had enough of freedom. Now to find some dope to fill the blankness, the void, to muffle the silence, to shut away its import, to keep us warm and enclosed, to weave a web about us, to blinker us, to give us protection from the supreme danger – the danger of realising our own awaiting death....⁶⁸

Miller moves from describing the unnamed ‘They’ to an inclusive ‘us’, that with each use becomes more frightening. The silence of Sunday, she means, allows us time to realise the silence of our inevitable death. The next few sections show some of the doping that London has on offer: one class of Londoner listens to Beethoven at the Albert Hall whilst another plays football in a suburban park. Young people, the ‘gilded pleasure-heads’, loll indifferently at the smoky underground Palais de Danse.

The reader is tempted down too:

Down, come down here, into an atmosphere artificially scented, warm, warm as the breast, transformed by unreal lights, luminously bemused. Dancing partners for sale. [...] Take your choice.... Her black net dress rests lightly on the ineffable mild fullness of her breast, whose scent my imagination, trembling, knows – a big blown rose, drooping, full of its sweet and imminent sensual decay. Take your tickets at the desk.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Ibid., p.144

⁶⁹ Ibid., p.145

Down here there is a pervading sense of false fecundity: the drooping rose, the detached bodies that liquefy to the broadcast (not live) sounds of the famous Geraldo's Tango Orchestra. Once again Miller employs heavy sibilance as the waiters 'stalely serve their sandwich-bits'. And lights shudder low over 'tinny dollops of synthetic fruit'. The smell of jasmine is too strong in the club. And there are too many consonants in Miller's image of 'thick lids rapt', changing the rhythm of the piece to a slow staccato tango. Her repetition of 'wh', 'r', 't', 's' sounds in the final line of the section, an alexandrine, slows the pace down even further: 'The whole room whirled slowly to the strains of a waltz...' ⁷⁰ Section nine of this third part speeds up again:

Along the Great West Road sped car after car. To road-house and swimming-pool, Americanised, flood-lit [...] Car after car [...] Speeding. Speeding. They were escaping from the ordinary daily dimension which holds man in its slow thrall; they were bursting the bonds of space; they were fleeing, escaping, pursuing the unattained, faster, faster, faster (70 – 80 – 85 – the needle indicated the car's frenziedly rising blood pressure). ⁷¹

The reckless London youth, retreat from the tedium of a London in Sunday with such urgency that the cars in which they are riding become humanised. Or, more accurately, the people riding in them disappear and the vehicles turn in to metonyms for their owners.

Miller ends her interlude by returning us to an almost silent London street. The only sound is the muffin man's tinkling bell, echoing the church bell at Laroche that began the chapter. This section, all seventeen pages of it, is a narrative isthmus. But Miller includes a final sentence that forces to re-think everything that came before

⁷⁰ Ibid., p.146

⁷¹ Ibid., p.147

it. The chapter ends: ‘The dead lay quiet in their graves.’⁷² Setting the line on its own on the page and therefore allowing the simple meaning to resonate, we realize that this unexpected twist is surprising in form only. The novel has told us that a thoughtless life is one that is un-lived. Those drunk dancers, those speeding drivers seeking annihilation are, in Miller’s conclusion, already dead.

Mark Lane struggles to incorporate the freedoms he has inherited with the freedoms he discovers. And yet these new ones are limited too. He returns home to live amongst the old ones with the memory of the new. *Sunday* is the only one of Miller’s novels not to include an introductory epigram. We might offer this extract from Forster as an honorary one:

‘Only Connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its highest. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to each, will die.’⁷³

⁷² Ibid., p.148

⁷³ E.M. Forster *Howard’s End* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), p.151

Chapter Four

Reading Practices and the Dynamics of Marriage

Portrait of the Bride (1935)

With *John O'London's Weekly* he fell a victim, in some measure, to popularized great literature. He even began to read tabulated outlines of it and to acquire what might be called the Great-Short-Story-Of-The-World mentality. Like an idle playgoer with the drama, he became, with literature, even more interested in the names and picturesque personalities than in the actual achievements thereof. He familiarized himself with the Love Stories (rather than the greatness) of the Great.¹

In Patrick Hamilton's *Twenty Thousand Streets under the Sky*, Bob the bartender is reading the latest copy of John O'London in between bursts of Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Ella, in love and in awe, sees the eleven or twelve copies of the paper in his room and flirtatiously teases him for his 'littery tastes'.² But Hamilton's narrator tells us something of the 'literary' regard for the paper. Its readers, like Bob, become more interested with the gossip of the book world than the 'Great' works that it produces. Between 1933 and 1949 Betty Miller published six of her short stories in *John O'London's Weekly*. Should this perception of the paper affect our appreciation of the stories? It was a problem of which Miller was keenly aware: so much so that she incorporated it in to some of the plots of the stories themselves.³ Furthermore, it became the undercurrent of her third novel

¹ Patrick Hamilton, *Twenty Thousand Streets under the Sky* (London: Vintage, 2004), p.40

² *Ibid.*, p.7

³ See, for example, 'Stranger than Fiction', *John O'London's Weekly*, Vol. XLI, No. 1,062 (August 18, 1939), pp.673-4 and 'Puss, Puss', *John O'London's Weekly*, Vol. XLIII, No. 1,106 (June 21, 1940), pp.333-5

Portrait of the Bride in which the struggles of a newly-married couple are articulated in their different reading habits and tastes.

One of Miller's *John O'London* stories, 'Evie' (1935), introduces us to a newly-hired , charwoman. Her employer is Mrs Shirley Wilson who has started to feel the tedium of life in her 'too-small, too-modern suburban garden-city home' and so decides to set up a dress-shop in Kensington called Chez Francine.⁴ Shirley is thrilled with the 'modernist glass lilies' and long satin evening gowns that are displayed in the shop-front. She feels she will 'become a person once more' after the novelty of married life has worn off. Partly, she thinks, for her own sense of self-fulfilment but also so that Hubert can have back the woman he married; to 'rehabilitate her self-respect' and 're-establish herself as the individual' he had fallen in love with.⁵

Narrated from Shirley's point of view, Evie, with one Machiavellian turn after another, first manages to have Nurse dismissed, then May, the cook. She becomes a 'substitute-mother' for the Wilson's baby daughter Jill, so that she is doing the work of a charwoman, a nurse and a cook-general. Even though she is caught up in her plans for her new business, Shirley is not totally unaware of the astute machinations Evie is taking to replace her position in her home. She is conscious of the ways that women are taught first to 'catch' then 'keep' a man but in choosing to seek an occupation outside of the home, she knows that she is risking losing her role there. Shirley gets home early from work one day to surprise Hubert. Secretly watching her husband accept a drink from Evie she realizes that she had become forever excluded

⁴ Betty Miller, 'Evie', *John O'London's Weekly*, Vol. XXXIV, No. 860 (October 5, 1935), pp.7,8,10

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.8

from 'the two of them enclosed in a circle of familiarity'.⁶ This short story is typical of Miller's work in its exploration of the complexities of domestic female experience. There is no sense of blame ascribed to either Evie or Shirley, nor to Hubert. All three have made decisions over the course of the story that lead to an ending that rests on an intellectual realization rather than a dramatic one. Shirley, for example, didn't come home to find her husband and her maid in bed; rather the culmination of the story happens mentally when Shirley notices that there has been an almost imperceptible shift in her marriage.

Portrait of the Bride was written in London in 1934 and published by Victor Gollancz in 1935. The novel's concerns are very much aligned with 'Evie' in that it looks at the suburban life of a housewife balancing the experience of marriage and work. In order to do so, Miller sets up two female friends with opposing notions of womanhood. There is the simple, vain, conciliatory, romantic Rhoda and the sharp, lonely, jocular, independent Edith. But the novel's style and tone are very different from those of the story. It is narrated with an archness that isn't present in 'Evie', other than perhaps in the pretentious French name of Shirley's new shop. The characters in *Portrait of the Bride* are younger and mask their uncomfortable idealism with feigned sophistication. So when, for example, Rhoda wants to cry to get her husband's attention, she decides not to because she remembers that she is wearing mascara that would run and streak her face. The novel is also more specifically concerned with the conventions of seduction and how those conventions linger once the seduction is over. The gendered experience of marriage is therefore explored

⁶ Ibid., p.10

through Rhoda's sexual boredom and her dissatisfied expectations of what it means to be someone's wife.

That Miller published some of her stories in *John o'London's Weekly* is intriguing given that *Portrait of the Bride* is also a critique of what we might call the popular women's novel. It incorporates many of the clichés of the genre that George Eliot called 'silly novels by lady novelists' and yet it lampoons them.⁷ The films that Rhoda goes to see in the cinema are American 'mind-and-millinery' tales following the adventures of perfected heroines possessing a flawless face, background and morals. Many of Faith Baldwin's bestselling novels about the competition between wives and their husband's secretaries were turned in to films and these are the type by which Rhoda seems particularly enticed. *The Office Wife* (1930) and *Beauty for Sale* (1933), for example, portray the lives of modern, urban, fashionable women in workplace romances with their married male employers. Rhoda watches these films and becomes convinced that her husband Bernard is having an affair. Bernard, with his unflappable male logic, scoffs at her suspicions. Whilst Miller is not accusatory in her depiction of Rhoda's flights of imagination, and however grating Bernard's pomposity might be, it is certainly his side of the argument with which the reader is being encouraged to follow. Such stories are trivial and a mis-use of Rhoda's attention. These wasted products of semi-educated ladies, George Eliot argued, are dangerous in that they discourage the solid education of all other classes of women. Miller instead chooses to write within the form in order to expose its, often hilarious, hypocrisy.

⁷ George Eliot, *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists* (London: Penguin, 2010), p.1

Portrait of the Bride was far less obviously experimental than her first two novels. *The Mere Living* took a recognisable form, the circadian novel, and re-wrote it, deferring to it as a serious structural tool for thinking about time and daily life. *Sunday*, as we have seen, is similarly considerate of ideas of timeliness, particularly in relation to conceptions of habit and escape. *Portrait of the Bride* marks a turning point for Miller. Always concerned with a kind of psychological realism that is inevitably various and shifting, with this novel she begins to move away from some of the technically curious, often jarring, stylistic tools that we saw her using in the first two novels. Thematically too, it is a conventional domestic novel. Rhoda and Bernard Ingram are newlyweds struggling to adjust to their new domestic situation. Over the course of the novel they drift apart, reconcile and then have a daughter together. The novel ends with their future happiness potentially grounded in this contented trio. Miller's American publisher put on the cover a simple painting of a young woman wearing a red dress with exposed décolletage and her dark hair neatly pinned up in an elaborate fashion. She is standing in front of a draped green curtain with a vase of calla lilies in the foreground; her made-up face is turned away from the viewer and the artist has not painted her eyes. The image has an unsettling effect: she poses pouting, as though she is aware of being gazed at but with her blank eyes she cannot return the attention.⁸

This unnerving portrait of a woman whose face is a mask points, once again, to Miller's fascination with attentiveness. In *Portrait of the Bride* these concerns are focussed through the characterisation of a woman who, with her 'gray eyes, uncertain

⁸ Betty Miller, *Portrait of the Bride* (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1936). All quotations are from the American edition of the novel due to the scarcity of copies of the British edition. *Portrait of the Bride* was the best selling of Miller's novels in America.

as lake-water' looks at the wrong things.⁹ In a novel where the dynamics of marriage are played out through the practices of reading, Rhoda reminds her mother that her governess had decided that she was 'morally blind'.¹⁰ Not only is Miller's work interested in what is seen and what is looked over but also in what is read and what is unread. Furthermore, it confronts how those reading habits can be revealing of *moral* character. A good way to begin looking at what Miller is doing with *Portrait of the Bride*, therefore, is to turn to the treatment of the physical objects that have been produced to be read.

Miller's fictional bride is Rhoda Ingram, an unknowingly bored young wife living in St John's Wood with her publisher husband Bernard. Spoilt and naïve, Rhoda can't understand why Bernard isn't more interested in her and so, at a raucous party hosted by her friend Lewis Hambro, she allows herself to be flirted with by the scandalously suave Edward Hudson. Rhoda is encouraged by her wealthy friend Edith whose modern chic leaves no space for what she dismisses as outmoded concepts of marital fidelity or guilt. Rhoda's mother however is shocked; tutting at the notion of an affair as much as she does at the shop-bought cakes that Rhoda serves in her fashionably decorated house. The solution is for Rhoda to have a baby, which she dutifully does. When Sally is born Rhoda finally has something to do; the novel ends with a contented young family having their portrait painted.

The dust jacket from the 1936 American edition of *Portrait of the Bride* asks its contemporaneous reader:

⁹ Ibid., p.2

¹⁰ Ibid., p.133

Was there ever a bride who did not face these questions during the first year of her married life? Must I have no men friends? Is Romance gone? Can my mother understand me? Should I still discuss my thoughts with my best girl friend? Do I want to have a baby? In this delightful story of love and romance during the exciting and dangerous first year of modern marriage Betty Miller has held the mirror up to a lovely bewildered bride as human as you or I.¹¹

Miller's publishers clearly positioned it as a realist novel to be read by women. As Rosalind Coward and others have pointed out, the 'woman's novel' is not necessarily a feminist novel although this fact in no way negates its interest for a feminist reader. Clare Hanson points towards the *reading process* that is central both within and of these kinds of novels in which 'popular fiction and formula romance represent extreme forms of Barthes' readerly text, offering themselves for consumption as a product, by brand name.'¹² What does this mean if the book in question, such as *Portrait of the Bride*, is out of print? If the author is not a brand name but the furthest thing from it? And how do these texts put forward an ideal reader of their pages within them?

Bernard Ingram, we learn, is a Covent Garden publisher with a 'sacred' inclination for tidiness. He is also growing increasingly frustrated with writers who possess the 'appalling ability for expression coupled with nothing at all to express [...] it's this cleverness that's the disease, the curse of modern writers.'¹³ Edward Hudson conversely, is an editor at *Modern Outlook*, a Russell Square based poetry journal that publishes exactly the kind of writing Ingram detests. Ingram is a man who always reads at his desk, upright and uncomfortable, perfectly embodying Nicola Humble's

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Clare Hanson, *Hysterical Fictions: The 'Woman's Novel' in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), p.5

¹³ Miller, *Portrait*, p.30

definition of the highbrow reader sitting forward with scholarly attention.¹⁴ The only exception, and it is a revealing one, is halfway through the novel when the Ingrams go for a picnic at Kew gardens. Bernard reads a manuscript by ‘a young lady’ lying in the grass on his front. Even in this relatively leisurely pose Rhoda saw ‘the hostility with which he always began on a new thing gradually drop from him: saw his indifference go. He forgot to grimace disapproval, boredom: he lay very still, turning over page after page with sudden absorption’.¹⁵ Even on his day off, out with his wife, Bernard is an attentive, professional reader of the thing in front of him. And yet Rhoda views it as an act of infidelity: ‘as though he were carrying out a flirtation under her very nose.’¹⁶ It is telling that Rhoda decides Bernard is somehow being unfaithful with both the position of his body and his total immersion in the thing that he is reading.

Rhoda, Miller shows us, is a very different kind of reader. She gets two books out of the library each week: one to read ‘in company’ when Bernard is home from work and one to read ‘for solitude and enjoyment’.¹⁷ The scene at Kew is the only time that we see Rhoda with one of her library books. What we do get is a series of situations in which Rhoda passes time with women’s magazines and papers: on her brocade sofa waiting for Edith to arrive, in the beautician’s waiting room, at the breakfast table when she finishes eating before Bernard and in her garden before Sally is born. Whereas Bernard is a professional reader, Rhoda with all her time as designated leisure time, reads for pleasure and at a leisurely pace. He reads mainly at

¹⁴ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel 1920s-1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)

¹⁵ Miller, *Portrait*, p.90

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.90

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.93

his desk whereas Rhoda reads on sofas, deckchairs, curled up in armchairs with her legs tucked underneath her.

Bernard notices Rhoda's leisurely reading and notes to himself the feminine frivolity of it. 'Why', he thinks, 'look at the way Rhoda read a newspaper, for instance: divorce-court news, fashion page, film criticism – never glancing at the leaders.'¹⁸ Admiring the mulberry binding and superior paper of the book Rhoda has taken to read at Kew, even her 'company' book is treated as a superficial prop by Bernard. Books then have no 'meaningful' role in Rhoda's life as they are never opened nor given concentration. Instead, they are an accessory; as important to finishing off an outfit in Bernard's presence as a well-placed brooch is in her mother's. To Rhoda books are objects, fashionable 'things'. At Bernard's office she dresses as she imagines 'the Wife of a Well-Known Publisher' would and at Lewis Hambro's apartment party she wears black stockings and new shoes that were 'preposterously curved, expensively buckled for that *'Vie Parisienne* effect'.¹⁹ Clothes perform a function of signification as many critics have shown and for Rhoda Ingram that signification is one that is lifted directly from the pages of fashion magazines.²⁰ By wearing her back-seamed stockings at Hambro's party she is conscious of the impression they will create and hopeful of the romantic attention it will invite. She is successful: she meets Edward Hudson who asks her to his flat alone for afternoon tea. She prepares all week for the trip to Edward's, deciding to wear an outfit taken from another of her magazines: a clingy black dress and a dainty hat perched 'just so'. As they confidently play out their respective roles of dashing seducer and femme fatale, the voice shifts confusingly throughout the scene so that by

¹⁸ Ibid., p.62

¹⁹ Ibid., p.64

²⁰ See, for example, Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1983)

turns we, Rhoda and Bernard are the various readers of textual signs at play. For example:

Edward Hudson searched in his waistcoat pocket. "Do you smoke?" She took one [...] "And now, tell me about yourself," he said. The words had a ring that was familiar [...] Some sense of propriety, an uneasy social conscience, twinged. The most fundamental aim of a woman's being, after all, is to attract, to market herself.²¹

Are Edward's words 'familiar' to him? Or familiar to Rhoda? And is it our social conscience that is prodded or is it either of theirs? Is that last sentence an authorial statement or an attempt by Rhoda or perhaps Bernard to justify the niggling uncomfortable feeling being experienced by one or both of them? Rhoda resists his advances and Edward is furious. Miller allows him a five-page long speech in which he attempts to reveal Rhoda to herself, calling her soulless and an Undine. Throughout his speech Rhoda is bored, wondering humourously to herself 'My goodness, how long's this Running Commentary going on?'²² It is a game for her, but one that she isn't enjoying and is refusing to play according to the rules. She dresses the part, taking her cue from *Vogue* or *Peg's Paper*, but she hasn't read them properly.

Miller shares Bernard's frustration with this kind of frivolous reading. The outrage he feels for Rhoda's indifference to broader world politics, to the fact that 'capitalism was crumbling, that nations were preparing an armaments race' is the most vehement writing in the whole novel and a theme to which Miller returns in several of her other fictions. Similarly, Rhoda's fashionable-ness is mocked by Miller. Indeed the plot of the novel hinges on these characteristics which Rhoda must overcome. Miller's heroines are never really that: they tend to be dull, plain, often

²¹ Miller, *Portrait*, p.73

²² *Ibid.*, p.182

deluded women. Even when they are beautiful and glamorous as in the case of Rhoda Ingram, they are slow-witted and selfish. They are all ‘unlikeable’. What then for Miller’s ‘woman’s novel’? And how can we place a work in which the conventions of a ‘woman’s novel’ are invoked and then bathetically undercut by such textual shifts?

Let us go back to Rhoda’s shop-bought cakes. Rhoda’s mother bakes her own: she cuts out recipes from newspapers and *Good Housekeeping* magazine and then uses them to make delicious biscuits or puddings for which she receives much praise. In doing so she must pay them close attention, something that the other characters in the novel are either incapable or unwilling to do. Bernard has never actually read any of the film papers or fashion magazines of which he so derisive. And crucially, it seems that Rhoda hasn’t either. In the kitchen, warming some milk to help her sleep she discovers ‘at last’ a pile of papers under the cook’s cushion. She pulls one out ‘at random’ and sits down. It is called ‘True Romance Stories’. She turns the pages ‘idly’.²³ Here Rhoda’s energy very quickly turns from her enthusiastic searching for something to read to the relaxed, almost inactivity of that idle page-turning. We don’t even know if she is looking at the pages in front of her. On another occasion Rhoda is seeing the pages of a magazine but certainly doesn’t seem to be reading them: ‘She sat down on the couch and looked through the pages of *Tatler*; listlessly.’²⁴ Here Rhoda’s indifference to the page is mirrored by Miller’s languid semantic addition of ‘listlessly’. These descriptions of Rhoda’s reading habits are at odds with generic expectations of the naïve female reader. Typically, novels in which young women are tempted by romantic fictions or by salacious gossip become utterly engrossed by the

²³ Ibid., p.279

²⁴ Ibid., p.188

corrupting narrative.²⁵ Rhoda however remains curiously indifferent to the stimuli that conventionally *should* be gripping her. Paradoxically, it is this disregard for reading, for a fashionable kind of nonchalance that, as we have seen, ‘saves’ Rhoda from Edward.

Miller refuses to create anything as simplistic as an ideal reader of her novels but she does use moments of reading, mis-reading and not-reading to structure and illuminate her writing. More precisely, the acts of posing or posturing with magazines are simultaneously something to be mocked and encouraged. Better, Miller posits, to pose with them than to read them too carefully. Towards the end of *Portrait of the Bride* she suggests this again. Pregnant, in a deck-chair in the sunny garden, Rhoda has a pile of film magazines and a plate of fruit sitting beside her. We are not told the titles but they would have probably been popular editions such as *Picture Play* or *Film Daily*. The fruit functions somewhat clumsily as symbols of Rhoda’s fecundity but that pile of film magazines is interesting. The *pile* of magazines, like the *plate* of fruit, remains intact as a unit that defies the specific purpose of the component parts: the pile is unread and the plate is uneaten. In her work Miller warns her reader not to read too fashionably or with indifference but she also reminds her reader that sometimes written things can function most meaningfully as unread things.

The two epigrams that open the novel align two very different textual sources for its inspiration. The first is from Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*:

As his hero and heroine pass the matrimonial barrier, the novelist generally drops the curtain, as if the drama were over then: the doubts and struggles of life ended: as if, once landed in the marriage country, all were green and

²⁵ The most lasting examples of such narratives are nineteenth century novels such as Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*.

pleasant there: and wife and husband had nothing to do but link each other's arms together, and wander gently downwards towards old age in happy perfect fruition.²⁶

The second, Miller tells us, is an 'Extract from London Evening Newspaper':

A husband complained at West London Police Court yesterday that his wife's romantic disposition has wrecked their marriage.²⁷

In placing these two extracts on the page together Miller interestingly aligns the scandalous divorce court newspaper reports of the 1930s with Thackeray's popular satire of early nineteenth century Britain. This is important for a novel that is constantly referencing gossip columns and fashion magazines as disturbing 'modern' influences on its characters. Tantalisingly, Miller refrains from naming the specific source of her newspaper quote hinting at the pervasiveness of such an extract. Furthermore, its lack of historiography also fictionalises it, creating a curious play between the real and the realist tradition in which Miller is writing.

Famously based on a reference to the everlasting fete in the county town of Vanity from Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Vanity Fair* frequently disrupts the marriage-as-happy-ending conventions of the English novel with almost all of its characters marrying more than once and almost exclusively unhappily. Thackeray uses two metaphors to depict the romantic journey from coupledness to marriage: the first being the image of the novel-as-stage in which the reader is only presented with the pre-marital build-up; the second is a sailing one in which he suggests the couple arrive at a new 'green and pleasant' land. The quote continues: 'But our little Amelia was just on the bank of her new country, and was already looking anxiously back towards the sad friendly figures waving farewell to her across the stream, from the

²⁶ W.M. Thackeray, *Vanity Fair (A Novel Without a Hero)* quoted in Miller, *Portrait*, p.1

²⁷ Quoted in Miller, *Portrait*, p.1

other distant shore.²⁸ This fluvial language is mirrored in the newspaper extract in which the ‘loveboat’ has been ‘wrecked’. Miller continues this watery trope in her novel as she describes the wet streets of cosmopolitan London and the self-reflective pools of Narcissism into which her characters threaten to fall. Water-language also points the reader to one of the most significant literary allusions in the novel: the myth of the water-spirit Undine who in order to gain a soul must fall in love and marry.

The vagrancies and varieties of the marriage-plot are clearly at work here which is why it is particularly interesting for Miller to use a quote from a novel which has such a tantalisingly bleak, indeed potentially murderous ending of a marriage. *Portrait of the Bride* is, like *Vanity Fair*, a satire in which the vapidness of the moneyed and idle are lampooned; it too has a kind of instructive instinct from which the reader feels the judgemental narratorial bite and it is also ‘a novel without a hero’. Its quotidian tone, for the most part, is however very different to Thackeray’s moralising bombast. Rhoda Ingram is certainly the novel’s protagonist but she is spoilt and vain and silly. Crucially though, she has none of Becky Sharp’s celebrated ‘wit’, nor Amelia’s integral ‘honesty’. Her actions are guided by the unknowing boredom so typical of Miller’s female characters. Becky Sharp throws a copy of Dr Johnson’s dictionary out of the window of the carriage that is taking her away from Miss Pinkerton’s academy but Rhoda does nothing so intentionally symbolic. One of the Crawley brothers gives Becky instructive sermons to read whilst the other seduces her with flowers and romantic gestures. Edward, Rhoda’s ‘romantic interest’ sends her a copy of the Undine book to read but her husband opens the package whilst she is out and so she has no opportunity to decide whether to read it or not. Becky knowingly

²⁸ W.M. Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (London: Wordsworth, 2001), p.240

gambles with loaded silver dice but Rhoda seems unaware of such a thing as chance or her ability to manipulate it. There is, however, a gap between what happens to Rhoda in the novel and the language that Miller uses to describe her. Take, for example, the start of the novel:

Rhoda Ingram sat on the brocaded couch, hands negligently folded, in the attitude in which Frank Craig had lately chosen to paint her. It was in any case a favourite, and therefore significant, attitude of hers. Even when she was alone, there was something about her movements which seemed to hint that, for her, solitude was often peopled with some invisible audience; so that it was obviously for the benefit of this latter that she reclined with such grace, or lingered so pensive by a window, or gave these starts of exaggerated alarm when an unexpected noise occurred – off-stage, as it were. This tendency of hers became particularly evident wherever a telephone was concerned; and it occasionally surprised her husband to notice that she dialled the number of her greengrocer with an aspect of urgency, even of drama, about her: subtle, it is true, but quite perceptible; and puzzling him, since he had not yet learned to recognize it as a sort of hang-over from last night's visit to the local picture theatre.²⁹

Her hands are 'negligently' folded in a deliberate way that has been chosen by the painter Frank Craig. It is also her 'favourite' way that, Miller makes a point of stating parenthetically, makes it significant. In these first two sentences the forcefulness of individual agency has been undercut with the more powerful one of portraiture. Craig does not actually appear with brush in hand until the very end of the novel so that Rhoda, by enacting the pose in which she will be painted in the future, anticipates her own projected image of herself. I use this cinematic language deliberately to trace the rhetoric of this passage through to its last line in which Miller explains several fundamentals of the novel. Firstly, that Bernard does not 'recognize' (a word that Miller frequently uses instead of 'understand') his wife's behaviour. Also, we note that strange oxymoron, as stated by the authorial narrator, of truth being both subtle and 'quite perceptible' in Miller's fiction. The authorial voice then goes on to explicitly explain that Rhoda's actions are informed by her sense of having an

²⁹ Miller, *Portrait*, p.1

imagined ever-present audience, the cause of which is the result of a ‘hang-over’ from her repeated trips to the cinema. This is a strange image. We are being asked to imagine Rhoda filling her evenings at the ‘local picture house’ and then re-acting or re-enacting scenes from the films that she saw the following day. But the ‘hang-over’ is loaded with something else more specific: a slow, blurred consciousness that has been infected by the cinematic. Rhoda, we are told, visits the cinema when she is bored. Which is often. As in *Sunday*, Miller is problematising the idea of leisure time: she is primarily interested in the cinema as a space in which we pass the time and as such, writes about the potential of the whole experience of *going to the cinema*.

The importance of the cinema on the cultural, social and psychological landscape of the twentieth century is well known, as is its impact on women and therefore the realist novels engaged with the female experience in the 1930s.³⁰ Storm Jameson, for example, lamented a fiction ‘infected with film technique’ and feeding ‘herd prejudice’, in which:

Deep calls to deep, and the writer’s thought is sucked into the immense vacuum created in women’s minds by a civilization in which they have either nothing much to do or too much (too much machine-mending).³¹

Shelley Stamp points out that the lush interiors of cinemas were adopted from the traditionally female-centric department stores with their gilded mirrors and sweeping staircases.³² The physical stimulation of the space can be seen in Rose Macaulay’s description of the experience of entering the cinema: ‘From a bright foyer we descend in darkness down a slope lit by the flashing torches of fantastic elves, dancing ahead

³⁰ For a recent survey of women and the cinema in the twentieth century see, for example, *British Women’s Cinema*, edited by Melanie Bell and Melanie Williams (London: Routledge, 2010)

³¹ Storm Jameson, *Civil Journey* (London: Cassell, 1939), pp.18;82;84

³² Shelley Stamp, *Movie Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000)

like wills-o'-the-wisp.'³³ And Elizabeth Bowen admits 'I have – like, I suppose every other filmgoer – a physical affection for certain cinemas.'³⁴ As Lant and Periz rightly assert, the cinema was a place in which women were confronted with their bodies, offering like the lobby mirrors 'templates for female emulation and aids to examination of appearance.'³⁵ Early on commentators saw the parallels between this cinematic experience and women's desire to remove themselves from themselves. Iris Barry, for example, noted that 'here, for three hours, is a new time, self-sufficient, unrelated: the march of actual time artificially broken, and synthetically replaced, dream-potent'.³⁶

Bernard Ingram recognises his wife's eagerness to escape from boredom and towards the stimulation to be found in the cinema, as well as in many other guises:

I've got ranged against me the formidable hosts of all the world's romantic literature, from Heloise and Abelard down to the protagonists of *Peg's Paper* – not to mention, of course, romantic music, plays, films, etc. All peddling the same exalted fiction of glamorous love [...] That's what any ordinary sober husband is up against. Far more formidable than petty little local Don Juans like Edward Hudson.³⁷

But the unknowing boredom of a character such as Rhoda Ingram does not, cannot, demonstrate the possibility of remedy capable from a character who understands himself to be bored. Fundamentally perhaps, women's boredom has been viewed as too trivial or crushingly *boring* to be scrutinized. Feminist critics however have begun to address this balance with an inquiry into quotidian boredom as a particularly female experience. Much of this feminist criticism takes as its starting point Kuhn's

³³ Rose Macaulay, *Personal Pleasures* (London: Macmillan, 1936), p.135

³⁴ Elizabeth Bowen 'Why I go to the Cinema', *Footnotes to the Film* edited by Charles Davy (London: Lovat Dickson, 1937), p.205

³⁵ *Red Velvet Seat: Women's Writings on the First Fifty Years of Cinema* edited by Antonia Lant and Ingrid Periz (London: Verso, 2006), p.54

³⁶ Iris Barry, *Let's Go to the Pictures* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1926)

³⁷ Miller, *Portrait*, p.246

study of ennui from the 1970s in which he pointedly dismisses a specific suburban housewifely boredom from the focus of his study.

A somewhat different case is illustrated by the typical portrait of the suburbanite. She is tired of the magazine that she is reading or the television show that she is watching and mixes another cocktail for herself. Or perhaps she telephones an equally bored friend and they talk for hours about nothing, or perhaps she drifts into an affair that means as little to her as does the television show or the magazine article. Despite its banality such a case presents infinitely serious problems [...because] this is a condition that has no foreseeable or inevitable end but death. It could be called a case of extended or timeless 'desoeuvrement.' It is a problem for the psychologist, and the victim of this malaise is a prospective patient for the psychiatrist.³⁸

There is an inherent contradiction in Kuhn's argument: it is impossible to 'talk for hours about nothing'; the thing of their discussion only becomes no-thing when it is perceived as such.³⁹ But for Kuhn, the suburbanite's boredom is of no interest to the philosopher, its significance lies in the realm of psychiatry. His a-historical exploration of ennui has no place for this modern, gendered boredom. Conversely Wolf Lepenies, amongst others, reads boredom as a historically determined symptom of civilized human experience.⁴⁰ Alison Pease defines Kuhn's portrait of the suburbanite as a specific social construction in which middle-class women, better educated than ever before but on the edge of 'professional or civic life were left vulnerable to the conscious experience of meaninglessness or emptiness that induces boredom.'⁴¹ She highlights how feminist writers from the early twentieth century, such as May Sinclair, used this boredom as a complaint that 'women, as individuals, were being held back from achieving their full potential by oppressive patriarchal ideologies.'⁴² Kuhn's example lists television, magazines and the telephone as the

³⁸ Reinhard Kuhn, *The Demon of Noontide: Ennui in Western Literature* (New Jersey: Princeton, 1976), p.7

³⁹ Elizabeth Goodsetin, *Experience Without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity* (Stanford: SUP, 2005), p.5

⁴⁰ Wolf Lepenies, *Melancholy and Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992)

⁴¹ Alison Pease, *Modernism, Feminism and the Culture of Boredom* (Cambridge: CUP, 2012), p.171

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.171

props of the suburbanite. This is especially fascinating to a sociological critical impulse in that he perfectly exposes the fundamental aspect of passivity which defines the bored modern housewife: ‘as consumer rather than producer of the culture in which she finds herself, she is witness to a signifying economy’.⁴³ Similarly Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd figure the modern housewife as a response to social conditions in which she is ‘a subject rather than an object of boredom.’⁴⁴

Olive Schreiner, in her 1911 tract *Women and Labour*, railed against the disenfranchised middle and upper-class woman leading a life of ‘morbid inactivity’.⁴⁵ By the 1930s these women, still without occupation were arguably even more inactive with their technological props part of the dis-occupation produced by labour-saving devices.⁴⁶ Bernard Ingram in conversation with his mother-in-law comments on this very subject in *Portrait of the Bride*:

“You’ve said yourself, for instance, that marriages were happier then.”
“They were securer.... And we didn’t have so much time to think about whether we were happy or not.”
“Ah,” said Bernard triumphantly. “I thought so. No Labour-Saving Devices. No Hoovers and contraceptives. Think of it, Anna: all the terrifying short-cuts they’re inventing – television, speed. They’ll be nothing left for us to do soon. Work was the safe wall between us and eternity: now they’re picking that to bits. We’ll have no shelter soon: nothing at all to save us; nothing to do with our fearful hideous leisure but keep ourselves continuously doped in film-palaces – or more courageously, contemplate the view of infinity and go mad at once.”⁴⁷

In an age of increasing speed and dynamism propagated by technological advance, Bernard fears the danger of too much leisure time. The novel’s anger at these modern creators of leisure time is specifically through Bernard’s voice, although Rhoda’s

⁴³ Ibid., p.172

⁴⁴ Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd, *Sentenced to Everyday Life: Feminism and the Housewife* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), pp.121-2

⁴⁵ Olive Schreiner, *Women and Labour* (London: Virago, 1988), p.11

⁴⁶ Goodstein, *Experience Without Qualities*, p.5

⁴⁷ Miller, *Portrait*, p.248

mother does agree with him. He blindly misses the point that women, perhaps, might find some useful or valuable profession outside of the home or the cinema. Rhoda, however, is struck early on in the novel by a recurring phrase:

She did not earn her keep... Morally she was in a far inferior position to the woman who scrubbed her own floors and did the cooking while her man was out earning – that woman was really the mistress; whereas she herself, with a servant about the house to command, was without status.⁴⁸

And yet at no point in the novel is the suggestion of Rhoda going out to work even hinted at, not even the idea of study or some other civic activity mentioned. Miller, a product of her class and time, doesn't posit economic employment as a solution to Rhoda's crisis of occupation. Her resolution will be the new status brought about by motherhood.

The feminine predicament of boredom in the marriage-plot novel is longstanding and various. Jane Austen's Emma Woodhouse is a famous meddler in other character's 'marriage-plots' but she does not understand herself as bored except in specific situations (such as conversations with Miss Bates). Gwendolen in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* and Rosamund in *Middlemarch* are constantly disappointed with other people's failures and so experience indulgent and indulged boredom tied to narcissism. Male characters in the marriage-plot novel tend to experience boredom as moral superiority (D.H.Lawrence's Birkin) or moral inadequacy (Grandcourt in *Daniel Deronda* or Gilbert Osmond in *The Portrait of a Lady*). In these novels the opposite of boredom is engagement; one must have something to engage with. I use this word deliberately to set up the distinction between the pre- and post-wedding lives of the women in them. When Bernard finds out that Rhoda has been to see Edward she explains:

⁴⁸ Ibid., p.48

I wanted to get back that romantic stage with *you*: that's what I really wanted. With you, nobody else. Why, when I look back on the time we were first meeting, do you know, I'm jealous of myself, or my own past. I'd do anything to bring those times back.⁴⁹

Rhoda's fragmented married self from which she is nostalgic for her lost 'engaged' life is a description of a particularly modern bored wife. Modernism, as argued by Patricia Meyer Spacks, 'posits an isolated subject existing in a secularized, fragmented world marked by lost or precarious traditions: a paradigmatic situation for boredom'.⁵⁰ Miller does not write a Modernist boredom but a modern one. Rhoda's modern boredom is tied to historic specificity, as well as being informed by the tradition of its definition in opposition to propriety. There is something sexually dangerous about a bored woman because she is left to indulge in erotic, or at the very least romantic, fantasies.

If we return to the water imagery in Miller's two epigrams we can explore some of the techniques that she uses to convey Rhoda's married tedium as well as the responses of the men that Rhoda uses in her romantic encounters. Sara Crangle has noted the ways in which Virginia Woolf differentiates between bourgeois melancholy and 'the boredom of the urban, anonymous, over-stimulated, and distinctly average human being'.⁵¹ But she also argues that 'if there is an image which best denotes the fundamental role of boredom in Woolf's writing, it may be the sea.'⁵² The sea, for Woolf, can be a form of ecstasy full of vast potential for escape and adventure. But more often it symbolises monotony as in *The Voyage Out* where waves are perpetual or in *Jacob's Room* where they are dull. In *The Waves*, from which Miller may have named her two central characters, the sea both enacts the style of Woolf's language

⁴⁹ Ibid., p198

⁵⁰ Meyer Spacks, *Boredom*, p.219

⁵¹ Crangle, *Prosaic Desires*, p.217

⁵² Ibid., p.228

and is a representation of, amongst other things, Bernard's artistic ennui. The specifically wifely boredom in Woolf is figured differently. For Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, nothing is less interesting than herself. As Woolf's model of a nineteenth century wife, she is a matchmaker never consciously concerned about her own boredom but is frequently anxious about other people's. She despondently imagines the lighthouse keepers who, surrounded by tidal regularity but constantly on watch for anything out of the ordinary, are shut up for months at a time with nothing to do than 'polish the lamp and trim the wick'.⁵³

Rhoda is most bored when she is alone. If the sea is the image of boredom then the symbol of isolation for these writers is the edge-of-the-sea space occupied by the pier, the peninsula and the further-outness of the lighthouse. Anna Kavan's 1935 novel *A Stranger Still* was described on publication as narrating the 'essential solitude of the individual'.⁵⁴ Here the boredom felt by all the characters can only be staved off by isolation. In France, for example, Anna goes for a walk along the coast-line heading for a place to think, 'for a certain point, for a small peninsula that jutted out, always just ahead of her.'⁵⁵ Standing there Anna 'felt as though she were carrying about with her an invisible umbrella which isolated her in a small circle of shade.'⁵⁶ Anna, unlike Rhoda who actively seeks men out, chooses to supplant boredom with isolation.

William Lewison is a wealthy London department-store owner. *A Stranger Still* tells the affairs had by his two sons, Cedric and Martin and his daughter Gwenda

⁵³ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: Penguin, 2000), p.9

⁵⁴ Anna Kavan, *A Stranger Still*, (London: Peter Owen, 1995)

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.128

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.129

who all move in bohemian London circles. A fictional Anna Kavan, separated from the husband who works abroad and with whom she has grown tired, meets and falls in uncertain love with the painter Martin in France. Meanwhile Martin's wife Germaine is in Paris having an affair with his friend Gerard Gill. At the novel's end, all the couples married or otherwise have separated and William has been swindled out his money by a cheating business partner. Kavan depicts a cosmopolitan boredom with suitably named characters such as Anna's aunt Lauretta Bland who is staying by the sea at the Mont Boron Palace Hotel in Nice:

A charming, beautifully gowned little lady with cleverly tinted hair, and looking, in a favourable light, not much over forty, pushed back her chair from the green-topped card-table. For once in a way she was quite glad to take her turn as dummy and to leave her partner to play the hand. She was growing tired – not, of course, of bridge itself as a game – but of the particular society and environment in which she had been playing all the evening, and for a great many previous evenings as well.⁵⁷

Anna, before she has fled London to Nice where she will meet Martin, is restless but numbed to the fact. She is in the Carolina Club, dancing with her tedious older lover, the judge Sir Edward when she first questions, and then explains, her boredom. 'Why was she dancing with him, with him of all people? She would rather have been with almost anyone else. She felt utterly bored with Sir Edward. Her boredom was so acute that she yawned over his shoulder into the brilliant room.' The physical act of yawning coupled with the interior question creates a moment of clarity for Anna: 'Clear as a vision she saw the rest of the evening before her'.⁵⁸ Sir Edward asks her if she will consent to be 'kept' by him in a flat on Grafton Street. She pauses.

Anna said nothing more but sat passive, holding the stem of her glass and staring across the room. The "no" had been jerked out of her involuntarily; she did not know where she had found the necessary determination to utter it. The strange sense of unreality persisted in her, making her feel irresponsible. She did not want to be forced to answer questions or to think about extraneous

⁵⁷ Ibid., p.104

⁵⁸ Ibid., p.50

subjects. She needed to be alone, to hold and analyse the obscure change of thought that was working up in her.⁵⁹

This image echoes the opening of *Portrait of the Bride* where Rhoda sits perfectly still on her brocade sofa. But Rhoda is intently waiting for company whereas this is the moment when Anna decides to be alone. Kavan's treatment of wifely boredom is obviously marked by the fact that Anna is geographically independent of her husband. This distance, and the threat of being placed in a new house in which she will act the wife, is the catalyst for her need to 'be alone, to hold and analyse'. Whilst they share key motifs, these two novels are markedly different in tone. Miller holds up the games of seduction for laughs whereas Kavan's women are never far away from the bleak knowledge that what is willed can never be achieved and so what is desired must be ascetically negated:

And it was dreary, dreary; like the melancholy phantasm of some Schopenhauer-created world. The ghastly midnight dreariness of the great train travelling northward in the dark; pounding along in a blind, relentless, insensate rush, like an evil great monster in the heart of the night.⁶⁰

Miller explores her version of this housewifely boredom again in her 1935 short story 'The Exile'.⁶¹ A bored 'semi-suburban, semi-countrified' housewife grows desperate to know the secrets of her new émigré servant Irina. Obsessed with what she doesn't know about her life in Russia before the revolution, Lois completely misses the fact that her brother-in-law has fallen in love with Irina. Lois's husband, Edmund, does notice the attraction and is able to act quickly, sending Irina away. Whereas Woolf's bored wives are visionaries and creators, Miller's are bad storytellers. Like Lois, they focus on the wrong thing and they gossip, re-telling part-truths cheaply. In *Portrait of the Bride* Bernard has a discussion with his partner at

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.52

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.232

⁶¹ Betty Miller, 'The Exile', *John O'London's Weekly*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 842 (June 1, 1935), pp.285-7

the publishing house in which he vociferously debunks the worth of ‘Art for Art’s sake’.⁶² His ideal literature is ‘political and social on one hand, metaphysical on the other. A literature of facts and ideas; reality and the nature of reality.’⁶³ Bernard is in a position of engagement with his world, in which he can critique one social agenda and pursue another. Meanwhile, Rhoda is having beauty treatments and going to the cinema, bored. Her unknowing boredom springs from dullness. Nothing in her world holds enough lustre for her. So she takes the stories that she sees onscreen or on the pages of fashion magazines and performs a hackneyed version of them. Every woman, claims Edith, is ‘her own creation’.⁶⁴ But bored and unknowing, Rhoda is in a position where she is unable to create a new self.

The novel is not as opprobrious as this would all imply. As we have seen, Rhoda’s dice are not weighted and so she cannot cheat her circumstance. Hers is a historically produced housewife moment. In his flat, Edward assess her:

Her fingers with their ornate nails, struck him suddenly as curiously useless. That perverse carmine was like a branding upon her, the symbol of useless elaboration: advertising a caste more doubtful than that of the harem women:- the wife who, caught in a moment of transition, of social hiatus, between two generations, had neither achieved the independence of the male nor broken with the traditions of domesticity. So that she was, like other wives in her position, without any real status in the community. She existed in a kind of social limbo.⁶⁵

Identifying Lois in ‘The Exile’ as ‘semi-suburban’ breaks down the definitive hybridity of suburbanism (or ‘sub-urbanism’) beyond recognition. Coupled with her being ‘semi-countrified’, the description enforces the structure of ‘limbo’ that is true for Rhoda too.

⁶² Miller, *Portrait*, p.30

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.31

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.20

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.183

This structure of limbo, or what we might call social boredom, is performed by Miller's allusions to myths and fairy-tales. Without ignoring the weighty detail of all the material things and specifically imagined spaces that the characters occupy, the novel frequently invokes, for example, Ariadne's thread holding the destiny of all Londoners.⁶⁶ The Ingrams' house on Acacia Hill Road springs back in to life with Bernard's imminent return from work 'like the palace of the sleeping beauty'.⁶⁷ Elizabeth Taylor's novel *The Sleeping Beauty* (1953) similarly uses this fairy-tale to describe the romantic seclusion of a woman waiting to be rescued from the coastal town that is her 'limbo'. The most pervasive myth in the novel, however, is Baron de la Motte Fouqué's *Undine*. If Becky Sharp is Clytemnestra, then Rhoda Ingram is Undine.⁶⁸ Water-spirits who live in forest pools or mountain springs and like the sirens of nautical renown, they are unnaturally beautiful with alluring singing voices. They are also immortal. But if they marry and give-birth, Undines will gain a soul, thereby living a mortal life. In the German folk-tale Ondine falls in love with the knight Lawrence whom she marries and has a son with. Once a mother, Ondine's beauty fades and Lawrence loses interest in her. She finds him with another woman and she curses him to a life without sleep.

Looking for some evidence of a sensational secret to amuse her, Rhoda rifles through the usually locked drawer of Bernard's desk and finds exactly the thing: an old postcard sent by Bernard's first girlfriend. Addressed to 'Berry', the card reveals an intimacy between this unknown part of her husband and the waif-like Iris who died tragically in an airplane crash and is the catalyst Rhoda needs to visit Edward,

⁶⁶ Ibid., p.37

⁶⁷ Ibid., p.57

⁶⁸ W.M. Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (London: Wordsworth, 2001), p.485

unaccompanied, at his flat. When she refuses to sleep with him he attempts to bamboozle her into submissive guilt:

You're calm, contented, and appropriative: innocent and unscrupulous. In fact, you're a soulless being, Rhoda. You're an Undine – hence those lake-grey eyes of yours. You've got the strange soulless eyes of an Undine.⁶⁹

Edward turns the pages to the marriage scene in the fisherman's hut. He tells her 'The knight there, fell in love with her, and she married him to win an immortal soul. It was the only way she could get one – through the love of a human being.... How is it that you haven't achieved the same thing Rhoda?'⁷⁰ Although nothing physically sexual happens, the deliberate indiscretion of the very act of going to Edward's flat alone is scandalous enough to stimulate Rhoda's simultaneous excitement and regret. She tells Bernard over breakfast who is stunned to discover that he 'wasn't satisfying' her, that he 'wasn't sufficient' for her.⁷¹ Rhoda is horrified to think that Bernard imagines her able to sleep with another man and attempts to explain '*you* were the really romantic figure in my life – much more than the others – and that that's why it's so painful to be coming down to humdrum reality with you, of all people'.⁷² The Undine myth is just one example of how Miller's characters articulate the dynamics of sexual relationships through the language of a written tale. It was one that seems to have had a particular currency for early twentieth century women writers, perhaps sparked by W.L. Courtney's translation, illustrated by Arthur Rackham, which had been published in 1909. In Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes*, for example, the Undine myth is reversed so that the protagonist sells her soul to the devil to secure independence from marriage.

⁶⁹ Miller, *Portrait*, pp.181-2

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.184

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.197

⁷² *Ibid.*, p.198

Olive Schreiner also used this German myth as the framework for her first, partly autobiographical novel *Undine*, which she wrote in the late 1920s but was only published posthumously. The melodrama of its subject often works against the narratorial critique of sexual oppression, but the novel's re-imagining of the water-spirit myth gestures towards the significance, for Schreiner and as well as other women writers, of a tale that describes the struggle of female identity within the marriage plot.⁷³ In *Portrait of the Bride*, Bernard calls Rhoda both Scheherazade and Salome. Similarly, the fragmented female identity is enunciated by nominalism in H.D.'s *Her* (1927). The protagonist, Hermione Gart, is called various names by other people and asserts that 'Names are in people, people are in names.'⁷⁴ Just as Edith calls Rhoda Narcissus, George also calls Her, Narcissa. At a party Her, like Rhoda, is also accused of being Undine:

"Yes you are Undine, or better, the mermaid from Hans Christian Andersen." Undine long ago was a mermaid, she wanted a voice or she wanted feet. "Oh I remember. You mean I have no feet to stand on?" That is what Lillian means, Lillian is the first to find me out. There is something about Lillian. She knows perfectly well that I don't belong, that there is no use. Lillian has found out that my name is Undine.⁷⁵

Initially Her accepts this naming of herself, choosing to identify as being simultaneously both human and other and therefore somehow lacking. But she goes on to reject it:

"Your mother called me Undine."
But she knew seated upright by the tree bole, remembering the seven-branched larch boughs and the boy screaming on the woodpath, that Undine was not her name, would never be her name, for Undine (or was it the Little Mermaid?) sold her sea-inheritance and Her would never, never sell this inheritance, this sea-inheritance of amoeba little jellyfish sort of living creature separating from another creature. "I am not Undine," she said, "for

⁷³ For a detailed synopsis and discussion of Olive Schreiner's *Undine* see, for example, the biography by Ruth First and Ann Scott, *Olive Schreiner* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1980).

⁷⁴ H.D., *Her* (London: Virago, 1984), p.5

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.113

Undine or the Little Mermaid sold her glory for feet. Undine (or the Little Mermaid) couldn't speak after she sold her glory. I will not sell my glory.⁷⁶

When new names are given it unsettles our ontological status and so Her accidentally conflates the Undine myth with its Danish adaptation, *The Little Mermaid*. In Hans Christian Anderson's version, the water nymph becomes a mermaid who exchanges her tongue for legs. If the prince marries her, she will gain part of his soul. But when he marries someone else, she turns in to sea-foam. Transposing the tongue and legs renders the mermaid mute and therefore unable to declare herself to the prince; she cannot tell him who she is. Instead, Her chooses to embrace the separating-ness of her identity that comes from having a voice. In doing so she retains the potential to name herself: 'I am Tree exactly'.⁷⁷

For Susan Stanford Friedman, the evocation of Undine works as one of the many 'muse figures' in the novel in that a rejection of that name brings about the figure of the tree, which is the 'motif of Hermione's autonomous self'.⁷⁸ Once a mother, Rhoda is no longer an Undine but is still defined by her relationship to the tale:

For she was not Undine any longer... the too transparent, ambiguous look had gone from her eyes. There was now beneath the surface of her gaze, along with the hidden tenderness, a preoccupation with reality. Undine, as in the tale, had gained a human soul; but not as the tale said, through love of a man, but through love of her own child... And he remembered quite suddenly a line he had once read, as a boy, in a book of quotations belonging to his mother: *Womanliness means only motherhood. All love begins and ends there.*⁷⁹

Significantly, Rhoda herself never identifies as Undine. Here it is Bernard, strangely echoing Edward's appraisal who names her (not) so.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p.120

⁷⁷ Ibid., p.197

⁷⁸ Susan Stanford Friedman, *Penelope's Web: Gender, Modernity, H.D.'s Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.118

⁷⁹ Miller, *Portrait*, p.320. A quotation from Robert Browning's *The Inn Album* (1875) in *Poetical Works of Robert Browning Vol. XII* (London: Smith, Elder & Co, 1889)

Her and *Undine* have had the inverse textual ‘existence’ to *Portrait of the Bride*. H.D.’s and Olive Schreiner’s novels were only made available to read posthumously whereas *Portrait* only for a few years until it went out of print. Betty Bergson Spiro married Emmanuel Miller in the New West End synagogue in late 1933, before she started work on *Portrait of the Bride*. Their first home together was at 35 Queen’s Grove in St John’s Wood, a few minutes walk from the fictional Acacia Hill Road where the novel is set. Just as the large white-stuccoed houses are recognisable inspirations for the neighbourhood that Miller describes it would be easy to read *Portrait* as a the project of a young author attempting to work out her own position as a new wife on the page. At the same time she includes a dedication: ‘For him who is nowhere reflected within the pages of fiction; but is, in life, beloved collaborator’.⁸⁰ This dedication that makes pains to assure a specific reader that the novel is not autobiographical and in doing so acknowledges that it could well be confused as such, recognising its particular social and historical realism. Twenty-five years later, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and a mother of two children, Miller was commissioned to write a piece on the young ‘thinking woman’ for the *Twentieth Century* magazine.⁸¹ Her response was the essay ‘Amazons and Afterwards’, in which she explores the perceived political reticence of her children’s generation and ultimately laments the lack of political anxiety in the young middle-class woman of the day. She uses as her case study for this indifferent modern woman a newly married friend of her daughter, the writer Jane Miller, aged twenty-five. After the revolution of Edwardian suffragism, she argues, contemporary women have returned to living in the ways that were expected of Victorian women. They have the

⁸⁰ The dedication in Miller, *Portrait*

⁸¹ Betty Miller, ‘Amazons and Afterwards’ in *The Twentieth Century*, August 1958, Vol. 164, No. 978, pp.126-135

vote and so their civic position has shifted. But their social position has swung back to the home where they potter complacent and, she suggests, content. Miller's essay is a reflection of the particular moment in which she is writing. She is solely interested in the generation of middle-class women who, having left university with their first-class degree have avoided what she calls the Scylla of Shorthand and the Charybdis of Typewriting.⁸² But these same women, after a few years working in a low or middle-ranking position, cannot seem to progress further to a position of power or influence. She writes:

The result has been, and this in more than one case, that, disillusioned by a species of competition unfamiliar and uncongenial to her, the graduate has resigned both her job and her salary; and, dismantling all the apparatus of independence, has happily accepted in its place the less spectacular but in every way more rewarding role of marriage and motherhood.⁸³

At home, within her own sphere, she is 'supreme arbiter' in which 'the tempo of that life, its duties and pleasures, are largely dependent on no other will than her own. Moreover – an added bonus, this – free of the office and its imposed routine, she is able to find more time now than ever before to read, and so to cultivate, unhindered, her own intellectual life.'⁸⁴ The realm for women in the 1950s, Miller notes, is the home. It is in the home that she has the control that she cannot find in the workplace and so seems content with quiet domesticity. Like Jane Miller, Rhoda Ingram is unemployed. But she is not a graduate, does not read to cultivate an intellectual life and has never had a job or salary from which she can resign. It is precisely an occupation that she seeks.

⁸² Ibid., p.127

⁸³ Ibid., pp.127-8

⁸⁴ Ibid., p.128

Having worked out an understanding of the female experience in the late 1950s, Miller goes on to lament it. This is the political turn of the piece. Referring to the suffragette exhibits at the London Museum she despondently notes that ‘it does not seem that the young woman of today has felt impelled to make a pilgrimage to Kensington to piously make herself acquainted with these relics of a more barbarous age’.⁸⁵ Miller’s language identifies the moral, even spiritual, imperative that she urges for. Before, she writes, women ‘tend to complacency, it is as well that they themselves test, if only superficially, something of the weight and pressure of the force loaded against them.’⁸⁶ Miller then lays out the long history of this force, quoting the older misogyny of, for example, Aristotle and Schopenhauer, and moving forward to the discussions in the House of Commons wherein members tried to decide whether suffragettes could legally be birched or deported.

And the young woman of today is openly indifferent to her own ‘Rights’? Is not this, perhaps, because no one, so far, has seriously attempted to wrest them from her? Let the attempt – the hint, the mere hint of an attempt be made – and just see what happens!⁸⁷

The rights, Miller states, of young women are less stable than they may think. This language is a deliberate evocation of suffragette oratory. She is almost daring that wrestle to take place, calling for a resurgence of the revolutionary fervour that is lying dormant but waiting to be prodded into action. Furthermore, capitalised and in quotes, Miller implies that women’s ‘Rights’ are inherently lacking in substance.

The politics of *Portrait of the Bride* are far less strident than those found in ‘Amazons and Afterwards’ although the evolution of Miller’s ideas are easy to trace. ‘Amazons and Afterwards’ was written when Miller was a more developed as a writer

⁸⁵ Ibid., p.126

⁸⁶ Ibid., p.132

⁸⁷ Ibid., p.134

and the essay-form allows for Miller to assert her thinking more acutely. She would never have identified as a feminist and her son has stated that he can't ever remember her discussing politics, either social or institutional. But the attention that her writing pays to the position of women acts as evidence to the contrary. Whereas Rhoda begins *Portrait of the Bride* as an unthinking woman, she ends it as a thinking one: for the first time she is occupied (by feeding her child) and is unconscious of her husband's gaze as he tries to read her.

Chapter Five

The Careless Tolerance of English Liberalism

Farewell Leicester Square (1941)

The 1930s saw a proliferation of attempts to define Englishness. In the face of European fascism and the decline of the British Empire, cultural commentators took what Esty has defined as an ‘inward turn’.¹ Novelists and poets including George Orwell, W.H. Auden, Virginia Woolf and T.S. Eliot wrote contrasting essays on the subject, focussing variously on political, social and cultural constructions of the nation-state and its intrinsic ‘character’. Betty Miller’s *Farewell Leicester Square* engaged in this discourse, interrogating the potential failures of English liberalism through what she called ‘the social and psychological conflicts of a Jew in the modern world’.² Miller’s protagonist is Alec Berman, who leaves his traditional Jewish family in Brighton to pursue a career as a film-maker. He becomes hugely successful, marries Catherine Nicholls, the daughter of his genteel mentor Richard Nicholls, but remains estranged from his family at the demands of his rigid father. As Alec gets older, his questioning of what it means to be a Jew in English society grows more pronounced, frustrating Catherine who cannot comprehend his insecurities. When their son is attacked at school for his Jewish heritage,

¹ Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003)

² Quoted by Jane Miller, ‘Preface’, *Farewell Leicester Square* (London: Persephone Books, 2000), xi

Catherine, unable to compromise her son's wellbeing and careful of his future, decides to divorce Alec. The novel ends romantically, with Alec returning to his family home for the first time in nearly twenty years, to the bedside of his dying mother. It oscillates between first-, second-, and third-person address, between interior monologue, free indirect speech and objective narrative and yet *Farewell Leicester Square* is more formally realist than Miller's previous novels, mirroring her characters' concern with tradition and heritage. It is also a novel that is, inescapably for Miller, a reaction to the zeitgeist of the mid-1930s which deals with ambivalent Jewish identity in the prevailing semitic and anti-semitic discourses of the day. An understanding, therefore, of contemporaneous liberal thought and its manifestation of 'tolerance', complexities of racial categorization and monetary systems of power is necessary in a reading of this novel. As are the redemptive potentials of the production of an inclusive art form which, for Miller, embodied all of these factors in the 1930s: the cinema.

Queen Victoria's reign (1837-1901) roughly oversaw the post-enlightenment era of ideological liberalism. Politically too, the Liberal Party were in power for much of the second half of the nineteenth century with William Gladstone leading his party, and the country, towards a more definite appreciation of social liberty and democratic freedom. English liberalism and its founding ideals were transported around the globe, and forcibly translated onto the various colonial machinations that it had over-written. The great defence of the good of Empire was the export of this civilising Western liberalism. By the turn of the century, the power of the British Empire was deflating and its founding ideology was too, but Edwardian New Liberalism was still hugely successful as the

prevailing dogma in England itself. The famous Liberal Summer Schools led by Ramsay Muir helped to develop the Liberal policy of the 1920s but the First World War and its aftermath necessitated a level of state-interventionism which fundamentally weakened the Liberal Party's faith in liberalism as an ideology, 'even when wartime compulsion was justified on the grounds of temporary emergency and regarded as not necessarily anti-Liberal or anti-democratic'.³ The state had lost some of its aura as the embodiment of the common good; the belief that had propped up the huge success of pre-war New Liberalism. The war revealed another problem, what Alan Sykes describes as 'the existence of competing groups within society, rather than, as they supposed and hoped, competing individuals'.⁴ The growth of, for example, trade-unionism enhanced the fractious nature of English society and challenged the core liberal assumption that sensible individual conduct and decent governmental legislation could be a force for social good. 'As always, Liberals over-looked material factors and over-intellectualised'.⁵ The later years of the 1920s were the last in which progressive liberalism was best represented by the Liberals; after the Second World War it would be at the heart of the Labour party's social reform and so disassociated with the Liberal Party itself that Rebecca West would write, either fearfully, apologetically or both, in a 1955 letter to J. B. Priestly: "I am afraid that I am the last liberal left".⁶

Tolerance, the creation of a rigid hierarchy between those who tolerate and those who have to be tolerated, is one of the foundations of English liberalism but it is a value

³ Alan Sykes, *The Rise and Fall of British Liberalism 1776-1988* (Harlow: Longman, 1997), p.239

⁴ *Ibid.*, p239

⁵ *Ibid.*, p240

⁶ Rebecca West, Letter to J.B.Priestly, 22 June, 1955, in *Selected Letters*, ed. Bonnie Kime Scott (Yale: Yale University Press, 2000), p.295

which is also a ‘nagging vulnerability and an embarrassment’ to liberals.⁷ Wendy Brown argues, for example, that ‘tolerance as a political practice is always conferred by the dominant’ and is a way of ‘containing and regulating those it marginalizes’.⁸ Liberalism’s emphasis on individualism in fact necessitates ‘us’ and ‘them’ distinctions and so is part of this hierarchy in that it privileges Western cultures of tolerance over the cultures of other nation-states. Betty Miller’s *Farewell Leicester Square* was written in 1935 as a response to liberal ‘tolerance’ and the culturalization of European politics, but it is a very local book, concentrating on real streets in Brighton and London; real cinemas, real shops and houses. In this sense, it is an English *künstlerroman* following both the professional success and marital failure of a Jewish film-maker, Alec Berman, in the London of the 1930s and his remembered late-childhood in the Sussex of the 1920s. It is also a novel which engages with ideas of how liberal individualism was at odds with the time and of the dangers of an oppressive tolerance in a society with so little comprehension of how unfixed the safe ‘us’ and ‘them’ distinctions were becoming.

It is important to recognize that *Farewell Leicester Square* is one of the two of Miller’s novels that are now back in print. It can easily be bought from booksellers, borrowed from public libraries and is also read by students of literature in both the UK and the US. This accessibility has brought the novel some, if not a lot, of critical attention and it is therefore less defined by its status as a forgotten text. Reviewing the 2000 reprint of *Farewell Leicester Square* for ‘The New York Review of Books’ for example, Neal Ascherson concluded that Betty Miller ‘wrote in a profuse, Art Deco sort of prose which

⁷ Paul Armstrong, ‘Two Cheers for Tolerance: E M Forster’s Ironic Liberalism and the Indirections of Style’, *Modernism/modernity*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (April 2009), p.281

⁸ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p.282

does not spare the reader a character's thought or a soda siphon's hiss.'⁹ Ascherson also decides that *Farewell Leicester Square* is about the impossibility of assimilation. Sarah Sceats however is more interested in what she understands as Miller's fascination with ambivalence. With this novel in particular, she states 'Miller is bringing the dilemma of societal ambivalence into the home.'¹⁰ Alec's first recognition of difference comes when, as a young man, he sees Catherine and her brother walking through their garden:

Alec, looking after them as they went, felt down to the roots of his being the contrast which emerged between himself and them: and it was at that precise moment, for the first time, that something new, the sense of racial distinctness, awoke in him.... A sudden knowledge of the difference between these two, who could tread with careless assurance a land which in every sense was theirs; and himself, who was destined to live always on the fringe: to exist only in the toleration of others, with no birthright but that toleration.¹¹

What is striking here is that initially Alec's understanding of his difference is contingent upon their difference from him; he doesn't recognise his oddness as negative, but he becomes aware that it exists. What structures their distinctness as being superior to his own is Alec's articulation of that distinctness in the language of ownership: he sees the Nicholls as nonchalantly secure in their tenure which had in no way been learnt or acquired, it is something into which they have been born. This is what Sceats reads as his ambivalent status. Passive and fatalistic, Alec sees himself as existing in the margins of their world where he is forced to rely on their acceptance of him. From their security they possess assured carelessness which can only be defined as such in the moment that Alec realises that he must be *care-ful*.

⁹ Neal Ascherson 'The Remains of der Tag', *New York Review of Books*, Vol XLVIII, No. 5, (March 29, 2001), p.47

¹⁰ Sarah Sceats 'Betty Miller's Narratives of Ambivalence', *In the Open: Jewish Women Writers and British Culture*, ed. Clare M. Tylee (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2006), p.85

¹¹ Betty Miller, *Farewell Leicester Square* (London: Persephone Books, 2000), pp.33-4

Later on in the novel, it is not the difference which he laments, but the liberal society's response to that difference: 'Oh, Lord. Their tolerance. Their damned shallow self-satisfied *tolerance!*'¹² In his 1941 essay, E. M. Forster offers 'Love' as the only alternative to tolerance but argues how constructions of governmental 'Love' can result in totalitarianism. In the ideal world imagined by Alec, one free from persecution, tolerance would be indefensible. But for twentieth-century Britain, Forster argues, there is no more successful alternative to hand: 'If you don't like people, put up with them as well as you can. Don't try to love them: you can't, you'll only strain yourself. But try to tolerate them. On the basis of that tolerance a civilized future may be built.'¹³ For Forster, a 'liability of individualism is its potential for apolitical, asocial isolation' but tolerance, requiring imagination and empathy, counter-acts this. In Forster's comprehension, *active* tolerance replaces the indifference that Orwell argues writers in the 1930s must avoid. *Farewell Leicester Square* rejects Forster's claim. It recognises, as elsewhere Tony Kushner asserts, that liberalist tolerance can only ever be conditional in that it necessitates of the outsider, conformity to the dominant social codes. Redemptive imagination and empathy, in this novel, are to be found outside of liberal tolerance, putting forward the case for exchanges of tolerations that release subjects from a hierarchy.

The difference Alec realised in the garden is a racial one: he is Jewish and the Nicholls siblings are not, in they are in fact 'English'. What happens in the garden scene

¹² Ibid., p.108

¹³ George Orwell, 'Tolerance', *Two Cheers for Democracy*, (London: Penguin, 1970), p.55

is that, for Alec, these two identities become mutually exclusive; conferring on Catherine the exoticism which he comes to resent others finding in him. What then follows in the novel is a narrative of how Alec negotiates these two classifications in an attempt to understand whether he can define himself as both English and Jewish. The most pregnant moments of Alec's identification are induced by an anti-semitic discourse which, importantly, is produced by friends, family members, strangers and Alec himself.

In his 1945 essay 'Anti-Semitism in Britain' Orwell writes:

There has never been much feeling against intermarriage, or against Jews taking a prominent part in public life. Nevertheless, thirty years ago it was accepted more or less as a law of Nature that a Jew was a figure of fun and – though superior in intelligence – slightly deficient in 'character'.¹⁴

There are moments in *Farewell Leicester Square* which illustrate that whilst 'intermarriage' was accepted, it was not necessarily acceptable: when Catherine is visiting the gynaecologist, her name is called in the waiting room and she is once again amused by the other women's confusion at 'the apparent discrepancy between the name and her own appearance...not knowing, as she put it...which prejudice to stand on.'¹⁵ Historians have since come to show that anti-semitic feeling in Britain was perhaps more prevalent than Orwell would have his readers believe. Nonetheless, he acknowledges the sense of difference that Jews had in the English imagination: marrying an English spouse would be classed as 'intermarriage' and Jews were constructed as more intelligent but less moral than the average Englishman. This characterisation reveals itself in literary representations of Jews as canny businessmen lacking the scruples of the English gentleman. Conversely, Orwell claims that:

¹⁴ George Orwell, *Collected Essays*, (London: Secker and Warburg, 1961), p.293

¹⁵ Miller, *Farewell*, p.185

Tolerance of mass violence against Jews, or, what is more important, anti-Semitic legislation, is not possible in England. It is not at present possible, indeed, that anti-Semitism should *become respectable*.¹⁶

Anti-semitism in England in the 1930s was, therefore, often low-grade but widespread and part of the pejorative vernacular of most English speakers. Alec is respected for his talent and is made famous for it, but he too claims a 'little share' of anti-semitic prejudice:

It's a more rarefied perhaps – but all the more invidious for that. One's got a sort of sixth sense by now – always on the look out for attack. Not physical attack: but other things – things that cut away one's self-respect – a smile – a silence.¹⁷

He is fragile and vulnerable, constantly expecting an unspoken but nonetheless odious assertion of that fragility. In fact, his fear is perfectly articulated by the narrator of Stevie Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936), the bored secretary Pompey Casmilus:

Hurrah to be a goy! A clever goy is cleverer than a clever Jew. And I am a clever goy that knows everything on earth and in heaven...Do all goys among Jews get that way? Yes, perhaps. And the feeling that you must pipe down and apologize for being so superior and clever: I can't help it really my dear chap, you see I'm a goy.¹⁸

What is most shocking in Pompey's declaration is her unapologetic, straight-forward glee in her non-Jewishness.¹⁹ Miller's writing is not shocking but it is frank: she is interested in revealing to the reader that which is hidden just below the surface of polite conversation. Directly articulating the attitudes of their characters that society would find most controversial, neither Miller nor Smith 'pipe down'. They both use anti-semitic

¹⁶ George Orwell, *Collected Essays*, (London: Secker and Warburg, 1961), p.292

¹⁷ Miller, *Farewell*, p.182

¹⁸ Stevie Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper* (London: Virago, 1985), p.11

¹⁹ So much so that the reader senses this may even be a joke of Smith's at Miller's expense: her short story *Beside the Seaside* 'outs' the Miller family's sensitivities to their semitic identity and ruined the two women's friendship.

discourses in order to convey the ways in which knowing and not-knowing, what is concealed and what can be revealed, are present in everyday conversation.

The distinctness from Catherine which Alec recognizes is verbalised a few years later when Catherine's brother Richard invites Alec to his country house. In the living-room, discussing their childhood home, Catherine mentions that it has been bought by 'some awful dago'.²⁰ Alec's response mirrors his earlier revelatory moment in the garden except that on this occasion it has been verbalised for him. The shock he feels is familiar but it is still shocking, as is 'the careless contempt' with which the words were spoken. The carelessness here reveals another form of tolerance at work which comes from Catherine's blindness to Alec's Jewishness; from her inability, or liberal refusal, to recognize the Jewishness of the Jew. 'He could anticipate the scene. Her sudden violent flush. Oh, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean – And then the usual smoothing over.'²¹ Importantly, Catherine does not respond in this way, she does not realise the impact of her words and so she cannot apologise for them. This *imagined* embarrassment is therefore working in two ways: first Miller is showing to the reader the banal power of 'insidious' anti-semitic language, whilst also demonstrating that Alec's artistic inclinations will prove to dominate his relationship with Catherine. Focalized through Alec, the imagined apology scene therefore displays the ways in which anti-semitic discourse, both actual and anticipated, is informed by its subjects.

²⁰ Miller, *Farewell*, p.108

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.108

Brian Cheyette has written extensively about this discourse of ‘Jewish difference within an apparently benevolent liberalism’.²² Critical treatments of Jews in literature have tended to offer fixed stereotypes of Jewish characters without engaging in the political or historical context of their production. Cheyette offers a different critical approach: one which demonstrates the fluid and ambivalent ‘semitic discourse’ of particular cultures and eras. George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*, for example, has long been held up as the archetypal Victorian liberal English novel in many ways, not least in its negotiations of Jewishness and anti-semitism. As Cheyette explains, the historiography of Anglo-Jewry splits along two main fault lines when ‘discussing liberal forms of oppression’. Todd M. Endelman and David Felman reinforce a British exceptionalism whereby although British liberalism is compatible with native anti-semitism, it nonetheless offered ‘Jews opportunities which they could not have found elsewhere (apart from the United States).’²³ David Cesarini, Tony Kushner and Bill Willimas meanwhile, follow a different historiographical argument which maintains that liberalism is fundamentally ambivalent towards all ethnic minorities, not just Jews. Its immigration policies, for example, highlight this, as does its emphasis on a form of tolerance which insists on conformity and ultimately homogeneity. What is more useful, argues Cheyette, is an approach which rejects the absolutism of terms such as ‘anti-semitism’ and ‘philo-semitism’. Miller’s novel enacts this Cheyette-ian project by showing the ways in which those supposedly distinct phenomena are inextricably linked. A pertinent moment for Alec is when he, repulsed by the slicked hair and gaudy shoes of his friend Lew Solomon, realises that he must come to terms with his own version of anti-semitism:

²² Bryan Cheyette and Nadia Valman, *The Image of the Jew in European Liberal Culture* (Edgware: Vallentine Mitchell, 2004), p.7

²³ *Ibid.*, p.2

The realization, then, of his own former intolerance startled him. Why should he find Lew more offensive than, say, some tow-haired youth, low-browed and spotty-faced, with a dangerous animal vacuity in his light-blue eyes? Did Englishmen feel as much resentment at the sight of an displeasing Englishman as he did, confronted with the minutest failing of his own race?²⁴

Alec's anti-semitism and his intolerance is defined by shame. What makes Lew repulsive to Alec is the fear that others will equate them in a racial simulacrum. He is only too aware of the perceived signs of Jewishness and how they might be interpreted.

Farewell Leicester Square has been read variously in terms of its negotiations of the categories of anti-semitism, philo-semitism and assimilation. Kristin Bluemel rightly demonstrates the ways in which it 'sympathetically affirms Jewish religious, ethnic and cultural solidarity as a strength for young middle-class Jews who are intent on leaving their parents' old-world ways and Jewish communities.'²⁵ In returning to his family home at the end of the novel, Miller is avowing the importance of Berman's Jewishness for him. But through a Cheyette-ian lens, Miller's characters are therefore neither anti-semitic nor philo-semitic: Catherine does not divorce Alec because he is Jewish, nor does she marry him because he is Jewish as some critics have suggested. She is attracted to his exoticism but also to his desire for her, and for, as a successful man, what he can offer her materially and artistically. Similarly, Alec does not marry Catherine in order to assimilate; his objectives are not that transparent. He is certainly attracted to her own exoticness and to the idea of marrying Nicholls' daughter and living with her in a large

24 Miller, *Farewell*, p.58

25 Kristin Bluemel, 'The Urban Geography of English Antisemitism and Assimilation: A Case Study', *Antisemitism and Philosemitism in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries: Representing Jews, Jewishness and Modern Culture*, ed. Phyllis Lassner and Lara Trubowitz (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009), p.175

suburban house, but what he actually desires is her carelessness. As Catherine grows more care-ful, she becomes less 'natural' and Alec's desire for her decreases. Nonetheless, their marriage places the two in an ambivalent dialogue of race and class.

In parallel with the concept of tolerance is the concept of assimilation. What the dominant culture refuses to tolerate as other, must be assimilated into that dominant culture or be expelled. Both phenomena involve its subjects within a system of power in which more often than not, one subject is active and the other passive. When Nicholls first meets Alec he hears in his voice 'a trace of racial sibilance' but anticipates the time when he would succeed in 'the extraordinary feat of ousting all trace of their origin, not only from their accent and behaviour, but actually from their physique'.²⁶ Naomi Jacobs' *Barren Metal* was published in 1936 and so is exactly contemporaneous with *Farewell Leicester Square*; it is also, in very different ways, concerned with exploring the position of Anglo-Jewry in the first half of the twentieth century. It is a bildungsroman: Meyer Pardo comes to London in the late 1880s with his Jewish parents to work as tailors in the East End of London. He marries, becomes hugely successful making and selling British flags and bunting for Victoria's jubilee and moves his family west-wards across London acquiring wealth and respect from his colleagues. The fact that he makes his first fortune out of selling symbols of Britishness back to the British, implies Pardo's predilection to pass about national identity for professional profit. But his attempt to assimilate is borne out of an economic shame, not exclusively a racial one: he buys old English furniture for his large house and fashionable gowns for his wife Rachel whose affinity for the old Whitechapel community he cannot understand: "You let everyone know you're a Jewess,

²⁶ Miller, *Farewell*, p.39

you can't forget it, you won't let other people forget it."²⁷ Like Alec Berman, Rachel Pardo has a pronounced lisp of which Meyer is also ashamed; both Miller and Jacobs use this stereotype to display the fear of how, in spite of a sophisticated use of an adopted language and its learnt idioms, the very act of enunciation can signify meaning for the listener which is utterly out of the speaker's control, indeed that which the speaker has endeavoured to conceal. In this case, how Rachel and Alec's lisps potentially signify their Jewishness. Miller's writing is similarly preoccupied with what it can conceal or reveal. The following is one of the few descriptions Miller offers of Catherine watching Alec, wondering what his physicality is revealing about his interior state:

It did not suit him to be so pale, she thought: it altered him, gave his face a pinched look, as though some spiritual distemper were appearing through the flesh.... She wondered what had happened to cause this change. Whether in any chance remark of hers, she had been tactless: touching on that complex of sensibilities that lay so near the surface. It was difficult to know how to deal with him.²⁸

Initially Catherine's thoughts are recorded through Miller's narratorial voice so that the weight of the sentence lands with Catherine's direct voice: 'It was difficult to know how to deal with him' is revealed to the reader only after it has been mediated by the narrator. What is revealed by this direct access to Catherine is that her inability to read Alec is re-writing the distinctness between them, losing its exotic charm. Now both of Miller's characters are nervous and the reader is too.

²⁷ Naomi Jacob, *Barren Metal* (New York: Macmillan, 1937), p.152

²⁸ Miller, *Farewell*, p.136

Contrasted with integration, ‘the paradox of assimilation is that it can never be achieved.’²⁹ The tragedy in *Farewell Leicester Square*, does not, therefore, come from a failed attempt to assimilate as Nicholls anticipated, but from the failure of ‘an ideal’: ‘the personal failure of himself and Catherine to live up to an ideal in no way invalidated that ideal.’³⁰ Miller, using the tropes of the nineteenth-century realist novel, implies that somehow this failed ideal is inevitable: she employs romantic fantasies of a marriage based on opposition in order to create the romantic tension which we know to be doomed in that the union is based on difference, the kind that cannot succeed in a plot of domestic realism. But we are told that the ideal remains intact. Moreover the novel’s heroine, Catherine, is only exotic to Alec; to most she is plain and often demonstrably dull; also surprisingly, the novel’s protagonist is male. The ramifications of this failed ideal will be felt most strongly for their son David and so it is actually David’s, not Alec’s identity which is at the crux of the novel: it is only when he is attacked in the playground that the Berman’s marriage (‘the ideal’) fails. Alec himself realises that ‘David mattered more than he did’.³¹ *Farewell Leicester Square* manages to extend this realist tradition into a text more akin to the Condition of England novel exemplified by *Howards End*, in which Helen Schlegel’s baby with Leonard Bast, it is suggested, will be the inadvertent heir to the Wilcox family home. On the final page of both of these novels, the reader is left feeling the weight of the future that will be carried on the shoulders of a child. Helen’s unnamed baby and David Berman (his very name imbuing him with symbolic potential),

²⁹ Claire Pajaczkowska and Barry Curtis, ‘Assimilation, Entertainment and the Hollywood Solution’, *The Jew in the Text: Modernity and the Construction of Identity* ed. Tamar Garb and Linda Nochlin (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), p.239

³⁰ Miller, *Farewell*, p.305

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.306

serve a very important symbolic function: to mark out to the reader that the legacy of the narrative is as key as the 'history' the novel narrates.

Another novel which centres on the fate of a child born to an English mother and a Jewish father is Elizabeth Bowen's *The House in Paris* which was published by Victor Gollancz in 1935, the year that he refused to publish *Farewell Leicester Square*. Bowen opens the novel on a cool day in a dark house in Paris with the bulk of the narrative told in flash-back sequences through free indirect discourse. At first glance it might seem that Bowen's concern is not necessarily with the *racial* politics at stake and we can potentially therefore understand why Gollancz was more inclined to publish it than Miller's novel.³² But Bowen is a writer dedicated to the oblique in a way that Miller's writing is not. The location of her novel in 'the house in Paris' is the most immediate suggestion of how the two writers diverge in style: Bowen's novel is situated apart from the English values which she seeks to interrogate whilst Miller's is located firmly amongst them. When Leopold first meets Ray, the elder thinks that he watches the boy identify him:

Oh yes, an Englishman! (It should be clear that Ray looked like any of these tall Englishmen who stand back in train corridors unobtrusively to let foreigners pass to meals or the lavatory... He was the Englishman's age: about thirty-six.³³

Leopold's categorisation of Ray is clearly written as childish and so the idea that one can be identified as English or French or Jewish is ridiculed by Bowen in this way.³⁴ But what complicates this position, and what aligns Bowen and Miller's work in aim if not in

³² Bowen was a far more famous and successful writer than Miller even in their lifetimes: the Gollancz production books show that Miller's novels were printed in runs of 2,000, Bowen's were often in multiple runs of 8,000.

³³ Elizabeth Bowen, *The House in Paris* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971)

³⁴ Henrietta sees Leopold for the first time as 'a very slight little boy who looked either French or Jewish'. *Ibid.*, p.21

form, is the fact that this is Ray *imagining* Leopold's classification of him which is then both affirmed and simultaneously undercut by Bowen's narratorial interjection: 'it should be clear...'. Leopold's father is Max, a French Jew who dies soon after Leopold is born. Hermione Lee sees Max's Jewishness as intentionally 'suspect' (within the parameters of the novel) but Neil Corcoran argues that he is Jewish in order to 'define the anti-semitism of the Michaelises and, through them, of upper-class educated English liberal culture'.³⁵ Clare Tylee has persuasively suggested that what separates these two novels most decisively is the fact that Bowen's situation of the novel in Paris defines it as a *liberal novel*: distanced from, tolerating even, the values which it seeks to expose. Miller's, on the other hand, offers no hierarchy of tolerance within its pages: it is *amongst* the semitic and anti-semitic discourses themselves with her characters openly discussing the ideas to which Bowen's characters allude.

The House in Paris has three sections: The Present, The Past and The Present. *Farewell Leicester Square* also has a three part structure, but a very different one: each section is of equal length but the scope of the action narrows dramatically as the novel goes on. Whilst part one covers the first twenty years of Alec's life, the next two focus on just three or four years between them. Rhythmically, therefore, the reader experiences an inevitable sense of the denouement, the 'failed ideal', to come. Though employed differently, both Bowen and Miller use structure to show the ways in which the past dominates. In the novel's present, however, Alec feels 'impartially sacked from his dedicated, his life's job as British citizen.'³⁶ Framing his citizenship as 'his life's job'

³⁵ Neil Corcoran, *The Enforced Return* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), p.96

³⁶ Miller, *Farewell*, p.269

Miller parallels Alec's self-hood with his work as a film-maker in the production and reproduction of modern England for a paying audience. If Alec is inescapably Jewish, he is also inescapably a capitalist. Critics have long commented on the stereotype of the economic Jew in English literature from Shakespeare's Shylock to George du Maurier's Svengali. That is not to imply that such readings are not complex. Gary Martin Levine for example, reads George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* as a division between 'the assimilating Jew as the embodiment of capitalism' and Zionism as a 'lost anti-capitalist, separatist Hebraic spiritualism'.³⁷ But the construction of the Jew as a 'symbol of modernity, with its associated cultural decay and vulgarism, and a metonym for a market economy that promotes bad taste and bad art' is not appropriate here.³⁸ Miller's characters are not racial metonyms, they are products of the mid-1930s semitic discourse and bound-up with the period's shifting economic debates. Catherine, for example, despite her teasing postures towards dinner party socialism, is just as much of a modern capitalist as Alec.

As New Liberalism disappeared from 1930s cultural circles, the question of what could replace a now redundant laissez-faire capitalist economy was also being asked. John Maynard Keynes, the foremost economic thinker of this period wrote that 'one cannot live today secure in the undisturbed individualism which was the extraordinary achievement of the early Edwardian days'.³⁹ His answer to this problem came in his 1936 work *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, which argued that

³⁷ Gary Martin Levine, *The Merchant of Modernism: The Economic Jew in Anglo-American Literature, 1864-1939* (London: Routledge, 2003), p.49

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p51

³⁹ *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes*, Vol. 10, ed. Donald Moggridge (London: Macmillan, 1982), p.444

the classical postulations put forward by Victorian economists such as Adam Smith were no longer applicable in the new conditions of 1930s world economies. Ideally, he argued, old economies such as Britain should follow his middle way between ‘raw capitalist individualism and the new authoritarian collectivism.’⁴⁰ Berman’s place in English society is undoubtedly informed by his economic situation: he recognises that ‘competition was healthy: the natural condition of life’. He enjoys the silk pyjamas and ivory-backed brushes that, as a wealthy man, he can buy; he revels in watching his wife’s friends drink his expensive liquor; and reminds his son of how meagre his own childhood was in comparison to the lavish one he can now afford. Alec is not avaricious nor is his consumerism ‘vulgar’ but his capitalist inclinations are part of his attempts to accumulate the materiality of the English ideals which Catherine in some ways represents. Catherine, in turn, notes his ‘purposefulness’ and his ambition but does not allow herself to acknowledge that part of his attraction is founded on his ability to provide for her in much the same way as her father had done, even when she repeatedly realises ‘It is as though I were at home again’.⁴¹ As we have seen, Miller articulates the ways in which 1930s society was struggling with a flawed liberal tolerance by invoking and then modernising its cultural mediators, namely the *künstlerroman* and the Condition of England novel. But she is also playing with the capitalist factors at work within all of those fictions in order to convey concordant economies of race.

C. P. Snow’s *The Conscience of the Rich*, published in 1958 but set amongst rich Anglo-Jewish families in the inter-war years, is an interesting comparison for *Farewell*

⁴⁰ Jed Esty, ‘National Objects: Keynesian Economics and Modernist Culture in England’, *Modernism/Modernity* 7.1, (2000), p.6

⁴¹ Miller, *Farewell*, p.168

Leicester Square because its protagonists are incredibly wealthy and so they do not experience Alec's uncertainty of position. It centres on the March family, whose ancestors assimilated almost completely into English life in the eighteenth century: they acknowledge both their Jewish heritage and their English values without any sense that their Jewishness might make them in any way inferior or less entitled; they do not have to rely on any one. The March family's careless assurance mirrors the Nicholls' in some ways, but theirs is achieved through vast amounts of money, whereas the Nicholls' is derived from an unconscious rootedness that has a value of its own.

Miller explicitly links economic and racial dependencies in a scene set outside a Chinese restaurant in the window of which a sign politely refuses the admittance of Japanese customers. At Piccadilly Circus, whilst out with Lew Solomon, Alec sees a man selling fascist newspapers, probably *The Blackshirt*, the 'official organ of the British Union of Fascists' which was in circulation in 1934. Rather than remonstrate, Alec decides to buy a paper so that he could 'look at an enemy and experience the relief of hatred' but as he does so:

There was a moment in which they looked at each other: in which Alec searched the glance of a man of his own age, with fair, thinning hair and a weather-beaten face: a moment of curious, still intensity in which something passed between them which was almost a recognition.⁴²

In fact there are two forms of exchange at work here: one is humanistic and the other economic. As Alec tenders his coin he demystifies his antagonist and rewrites his semiotics of capitalist commerce to those expressed by Georg Simmel in his *Metropolis and Mental Life* whereby 'money liquidates pre-existing forms of cultural affiliation and

⁴² Ibid., p.175

cultural distinction, suspending free individuals in a democratizing social medium'.⁴³ In a novel which uses metaphors of boundaries and borders in order to convey how misleading surfaces can be; which displays how speech can unexpectedly reveal what is outwardly concealed, this scene is crucial in that Alec's expectations are *almost* confounded by a shared experience. Tantalisingly, the momentous recognition of what Miller implies could be an ontological human essence, just fails to occur and so the constructions of racial difference remain intact.

The attempts by writers to define Englishness mentioned earlier also overtly deal with constructions of race. In his 1939 essay 'Racial Exercise' E. M. Forster questioned established ideas of classification and refuted the ontological self-confident notion of 'purity'. Hitler and his propagandists used the economic and political weaknesses of Weimar Germany as an ethnographic excuse for their racial policies. Jewish orthodoxy states that a child inherits its ethnic Jewishness through the mother whereas Nazi racial ideology cited that having at least one Jewish grandparent classified a person as Jewish. One of the projects of *Farewell Leicester Square* is an interrogation of this terminology; as Forster knew, the ethnographic impulse can be a dangerous one as classification breeds separateness and separateness breeds hierarchies and hierarchies result in oppression.

In Betty Miller's *Farewell Leicester Square*, Alec Berman struggles to define himself as Anglo-Jewish in a society which tended to view 'English' and 'Jewish' as mutually exclusive categories. Miller informs the reader very early on in the novel that the Berman family is Jewish: Isaac Berman manages 'to combine with outstanding

⁴³ Jed Esty, 'National Objects: Keynesian Economics and Modernist Culture in England', *Modernism/Modernity* 7.1, (2000), p.4

success the characteristics of the English Victorian father with the Lithuanian-born Jewish patriarch'.⁴⁴ But Isaac's children are British-born: are they then racially Jewish but culturally English? Is such a division of race and culture arbitrary? And how are those classifiers at work in the novel?

Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* (1869) established the influential liberal definition of 'culture' as an erasure of the differences between 'Hebraism' and 'Hellenism'. In a sense, the assimilated Jews of post-Enlightenment Britain are therefore the exemplar of Arnoldian 'culture' in that they assume the embodiment of that erasure in 'a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world'.⁴⁵ Tylee notes that Miller 'concludes her text with the words that celebrate the return from exile' as the Berman family gather round to sing a blessing. But the blessing on the page is not in the original Hebrew but in the language of the Authorised Version.⁴⁶ Is this Miller's gesture towards assimilation? Towards an Arnoldian definition of culture that maintains the signification of Hebraic culture but renders it in the language of the host nation?

Tylee writes that 'in losing Catherine [Alec] does lose his stake in bourgeois England. Yet he returns to his family strong in the recognition that although he and Catherine had tried and failed, the mixed marriage had been an attempt worth making.

⁴⁴ Miller, *Farewell*, p.9

⁴⁵ Matthew Arnold, 'Culture and Anarchy', *Selected Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991)

⁴⁶ Claire M. Tylee, 'Hyphenated Identity in the 'Woman's Novel': Racisms and Betty Miller's *Farewell Leicester Square*', *At Home and Abroad in the Empire: British Women Write the 1930s* ed. Robin Hackett (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009), p.132

We might say that he returns to Zion *in* Babylon.⁴⁷ If, as Tylee seems to suggest, Alec's attempt at assimilation has failed and he is consequentially fixed racially as a Jew, then he cannot represent anything other than Hebraic culture. His is a plural and partial selfhood, existing as he does as a kind of internal colonial. But as we have seen, there is no suggestion at the end of the novel that Alec will not return to his work and his life in London. He has lost Catherine, but he has not lost his culture or his art. It is Alec's art to which we now turn to explore the ways in which Miller offers a qualified solution to some of the problems of identity she raises.

In her 1938 essay *Three Guineas* Virginia Woolf famously aligns fascism abroad with sexism at home, arguing that a woman's literary freedom can only exist if it is careless of sex. As George Orwell conceded, it is a 'psychological *fact* that without this 'bourgeois' liberty the creative powers wither away'.⁴⁸ Berman's 'creative powers' are derived from his ability to observe and then reproduce what he sees. He describes the immediacy of that experience in the language of the Sublime:

Alec was able to experience the glory of being a spectator; of seeing all this unrolled for him as entertainment to his senses, his understanding. And there was something in that experience, the supreme thrill of the artist, which rendered by comparison such pleasures as Sydney might know, poor, confused and meaningless: a clarity, an intensity of awareness in which the eye saw every detail in high relief and the emotions gave the scene an artistic unity: a pleasure so intense and complete as to be in itself, like the religious experience of which he had no knowledge, a justification of existence...⁴⁹

Alec's 'creative powers', alongside his marriage and his own sense of self, are what is at stake in *Farewell Leicester Square*. If the concept of Western tolerance was founded in

⁴⁷ Ibid., p131

⁴⁸ George Orwell, *Inside the Whale and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 1964), p.39

⁴⁹ Miller, *Farewell*, p.17

the aftermath of the Reformation then the most fundamental form of tolerance is a religious tolerance but there is never any question that Alec's Jewishness is anything other than racial: at Shabbat he sings the Hebrew songs taught to him by his father but he does not understand the words. His religion is instead based on an epistemology of materiality and the mundane details of everyday English life, his genius for putting the commonplace on to the screen and somehow illuminating it with his own passionate observation.⁵⁰

Clare Tylee has argued that Berman's artistic sensibilities mimic Miller's own, comparing *Farewell Leicester Square* to the lending library successes which Basil Nicholls grudgingly publishes and which Berman ingeniously adapts for screen. Both men are trading off 'the woman's novel' which was so popular in the inter-war period. Tylee asserts that Miller uses the form to 'masquerade' her politics in an impersonation of the woman's novel, using as she does the conventions of romantic fiction in which to reproduce the biting social questions of her time.⁵¹ However, 'English notions of good taste' are in this way not affronted by the idea of her cultural interrogations and are therefore, Tylee argues, very much at odds with 'the cosy nationalism of the early British film industry constructed by such Jewish filmmakers as Michael Balcon' (one of the possible inspirations for the character of Alec Berman).⁵² In this reading of the novel Berman's art is cosy and potentially trivial but Miller's is certainly not. I would argue that actually Miller lampoons the woman's novel in *Farewell Leicester Square*: she makes it clear that it is only Berman's sensitivity that rescues those lending library

⁵⁰ Ibid., p.173

⁵¹ Tylee, 'Hyphenated Identity', p.121

⁵² Ibid., p.125

paperbacks from mediocrity. Perhaps it is the woman's novel which Miller herself works at to tolerate.

Another reading of *Farewell Leicester Square* understands Berman's art as a product of these cultural interrogations: his demonstrative delight in the objects of mass consumer culture undermine any potential 'cosiness' that might have dominated his 'Kilburn High Road' films. Indeed, we read of several tentative apotheosis moments when Alec, confronted with the materiality of the domestic scenes which had formerly (and formally) inspired him, is left intellectually unsatisfied and confusingly so:

The table was laid in the corner of the room. Informally, with a check linen cloth and, in the centre, an earthenware pot of mimosa, downy, canary-bright, that breathed forth a tender and penetrating fragrance of vanilla. Alec, sitting before the open dial of the grapefruit, uneasily nested in its green Woolworths glass, surveyed the picture, the still-life, these things made, with momentary inner satisfaction. (Only a few years ago he could have lived in that satisfaction alone: the texture, the appearance of the material world. And now...? He was uneasy that the former intensity should be slipping from him: and suspicious of that which was coming to replace it: an interest in ideas and values. Were these, perhaps, only a second-best?)⁵³

Once again, Berman is feeling the weight of the politics of the 1930s this time not because of his racial identity, but because of his aesthetic functions as a film-maker. The 'ideas and values' that are nudging into his vision, unsettle him as they nudge out the pleasure he derives from the simple, turning the cosy into the complex. He visits the ballet with Catherine and sits uncomfortably in the audience feeling 'a definite repulsion for the mechanics of the whole thing: the grotesquely painted faces, the quivering muscles, the gleam of sweat'. In this scene, Berman is suspicious 'of the fantastic...of all this intensity about something so alien to every day reality.' He goes so far as to

⁵³ Miller, *Farewell*, p.87

recognise that ‘there were moments, this evening, in particular, watching a group of male dancers seriously posturing, when he felt almost ashamed for humanity...’⁵⁴ In both of these scenes, Berman is struggling with his categorization of art: in one he is disappointed in its potential banality and in the other repulsed by its mechanics. Faced with this dilemma he admits: ‘I find it increasingly hard to take the arts at all seriously.’⁵⁵

Catherine too, is an artist. When she and Alec marry she insists on having a studio in which to paint but which is never used because she takes up knitting instead – the age-old recourse of the bored housewife. She is depicted along the lines of Mrs Ramsay in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, seated in her armchair, very still. But Miller does not give the reader access to Catherine’s interior in the way that Woolf does with Mrs Ramsay; our image of Catherine is entirely focalized through Alec. There is a suggestion, therefore, that Catherine merely postures, like those sweaty dancers, towards her art but the reader is never given her own thoughts on the subject. Alec is certainly disdainful of her output: ‘the effect aimed at, he realized, was a child-like simplicity of perception. He distrusted both the intention and the effect. The cult of infantilism had no appeal for him.’⁵⁶ We can infer that the reason for Alec’s sneering is its lack of seriousness, its lack of reason. Catherine paints abstracts whilst Alec produces films about contemporary every-day life. Even if those films are nostalgic in tone, as is implied, nostalgia is *the* modern condition. The only praise Alec has for Catherine’s art is when, in the early stages of their marriage, he returns home early from work to find her sketching in the garden. The subject of her sketch is their marital home. This is the kind of art of which

⁵⁴ Ibid., p.126

⁵⁵ Ibid., p.128

⁵⁶ Ibid., p.134

Alec approves: domestic; realist; humble; not the 'Pure Art' which she had formerly attempted.⁵⁷

Alec envisages a movement away from art for art's sake, putting it to use and providing a practical social function wherein the finest work will be taken out of the 'stuffy galleries' and instead curated into a 'democratic open-air exhibition extending from one end of the country to the other!' He prompts:

Imagine what the walls of the Tube are going to look like when Salvador Dali advocates beer. Or Stanley Spencer portrays a dish of military pickles. Think what a fine impression the foreigner will get as he passes our railway hoardings! Why, it gives Art a justification.⁵⁸

A new kind of democratic art, one that represents the ordinary objects of the modern world, informed by diverging styles and artistic movements, but separate from the nineteenth century tradition is its practical, consumerist function is the only form of modern art which Alec can justify. Surely it is no coincidence that Miller, a nineteenth-century scholar, named the Nicholls' lame man-servant Hazlitt. A Dissenter, a proponent of the virtues of English disinterestedness, William Hazlitt is rendered in the 1930s as a wizened kindly Cockney, limping from his WWI injuries. The early twentieth century had 'literally', for Miller, crippled English liberalism. In this modern world, one anticipating a new war whilst everywhere reminded (with that 'dish of military pickles') of the old one, the England Alec imagines will be an inclusive one, full of European art which is both beautiful and impressively ordinary. We cannot say whether Alec's idealism was shared by Miller. What is notable though, is the device by which Miller communicates Alec's idealism. She often has her characters leisurely discussing art, or

⁵⁷ Ibid., p.163

⁵⁸ Ibid., p.94

history, or love, or politics. Realist novels use this device to create dramatic tension: the reader imagines that the characters are somehow up for grabs; that the beliefs by which they are defined might be changed in a heated debate around a coffee table or during a stroll in the garden. In *Farewell Leicester Square*, however, these discussions are self-defining in that they extend moments for the characters to reveal, perhaps with a lisp, or conceal with a Noel Coward-esque joke, their identities.⁵⁹

Amy Feinstein and Lara Trubowitz have both shown how interrupted Jewish identities have been transformed into ‘conceptual foundations’ or analogies for the art of storytelling in the early twentieth century, namely in Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood* (1937) and Mina Loy’s unfinished novel *Goy Israels* written in the 1930s. In *Nightwood* this art of storytelling is ‘tantamount to self-erasure’.⁶⁰ *Farewell Leicester Square* similarly duplicates and resists semitic and anti-semitic rhetoric of the 1930s but the art it produces is the exact opposite: it is self-defining. The cinematic industry in both England and Hollywood was a new site for myth-making in this era. F Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Last Tycoon* is a novel set on this site; its protagonist Monroe Stahr is thought to be based on Irving Thalberg the influential production chief of MGM studios born to German Jewish immigrant parents.⁶¹ For Monroe Stahr, as for Alec Berman, success as a film-maker comes from the ability to transform an inescapable distinctness into ‘a capacity to

⁵⁹ On their first date, Catherine attempts to hide her awkwardness by cribbing Coward-esque lines: she calls Alec’s intentions ‘how too, too suburb’. *Ibid.*, p.136

⁶⁰ Lara Trubowitz, ‘In search of ‘The Jew’ in Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*: Jewishness, Antisemitism, Structure and Style’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (Summer 2005), p.312

⁶¹ Anecdotally, Thalberg produced the film ‘The Barretts of Wimpole Street’ which Miller, ardent cinema go-er and future biographer of Robert Browning, would have undoubtedly been to see on its UK release in 1934.

generate and elaborate myths for their adopted culture'.⁶² In the Modern England Miller depicts, individual 'eccentricities' are tolerated but what Alec identifies as 'distinctness' and what Michael Ragussis calls 'the particular', create a 'profound crisis' of national identity.⁶³ Betty Miller's *Farewell Leicester Square* attempts to highlight this crisis and then provide some kind of consolation of artistic integration by writing Alec Berman as a prototype of Hannah Arendt's 'conscious pariah', defined as one who refuses to assimilate but is not separatist.⁶⁴ In fact Berman could be said to go even further than this: not only is he not separate from his host culture, in dialogic relation to his cultural history, he aids its production in his films of every-day English existence.⁶⁵

In *Twopence Coloured* (1928), Patrick Hamilton had written the story of Jackie Mortimer who leaves Hove to move up to London to make a career for herself as an actress. Coupling a Jane Eyre-esque, secret-wife plot-twist with George Gissing's grubby Londoners, it is Hamilton's over-long depiction of life in the theatre. Of the numbing solitude amidst thronging London.⁶⁶ In 1928 Mortimer's journey was to London's theatre; just a few years later these dreamers would move to London not for the theatre but for its cinema industry.

⁶² Claire Pajaczkowska and Barry Curtis, 'Assimilation, Entertainment and the Hollywood Solution', *The Jew in the Text: Modernity and the Construction of Identity*, ed. Tamar Garb and Linda Nochlin (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), p.252

⁶³ Michael Ragussis, *Figures of Conversion: The Jewish Question and English National Identity* (Durham: Duke UP, 1995), p.8

⁶⁴ Hannah Arendt, 'Zionism Reconsidered', *The Jew as Pariah* (New York: Grove, 1978)

⁶⁵ Claire Pajaczkowska calls this site the Hollywood Solution, deliberately invokes the language of the 'Jewish Problem', the most articulate commentator of which is Hannah Arendt. In this sense, Berman is a version of Arendt's 'conscious pariah'.

⁶⁶ Patrick Hamilton, *Twopence Coloured*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), p.285

Joan Morgan's *Camera!* is a novel about the British film industry that she knew well.⁶⁷ Born to silent film actors, Morgan (1910-2004) was a child star in the 1920s. She turned to screenwriting as an adult and wrote this, her only novel, drawing heavily on her experiences in the studios. It follows three female characters. Fay Howie, a child star whose father died as a pilot in the Great War, is full of cherubic charm. Rosemary Shaw is the nation's favourite actress, 'she belonged to the Public, the great Public'.⁶⁸ Dubbed by the press 'English Rose', she loses her looks and succumbs to suicide when her aging coincides with the advent of the 'talkie'. The Latvian exile Marija Ringold appears with glacial beauty to replace Rosemary in the turning tide of film fashion. Her exoticism is an asset; she recognizes that more than ever 'It does make a difference, your blood.'⁶⁹

Towards the very end of the novel, Alec goes for a walk along Brighton sea-front where the neon sign above the pier radiates '*Brighton Greets You*', just as it should in one's home town. Alec walks further along the coast to visit the house in the garden of which he first experienced his 'distinctness'. Oldwood Lodge, the family home of the Nichollses, who can be read as representing the archetypal English middle-class family, is now a guest house. The sign outside which advertises this fact, reads: 'Tea Room Open to Non-Residents'. The implication is that this fictional house, a metaphor for England, is now merely 'housing guests'. The various attempts to define Englishness have only succeeding in further unsettling it and so it can now even occasionally include spaces for paying 'non-residents'. Miller optimistically suggests that England has become a nation

⁶⁷ Joan Morgan, *Camera!* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1940)

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.55

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.80

whose borders are more open, implying that the next generation of Bermans might not feel so distinct from their 'host' culture, if only because there will be myriad distinctions, and therefore tolerations to be made.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ There is much to be said on how these ideas of tolerance have manifested in a twenty-first century Europe in which multi-culturalism is being declared a failure.

Chapter Six

Plotting and Planting: Millerian Imagery

A Room in Regent's Park (1942)

With the publication of *Farewell Leicester Square* Betty Miller had found a new home for her work. Robert Hale would go on to publish her next three novels. She had new agents too, at Curtis Brown. By 1943 the Millers would settle in Abbots Langley in Hertfordshire, at 8 Gallows Hill Lane, a small house at the other end of the street from the writer and radio personality Marghanita Laski. Miller and Laski both created fiction that confronted the fracturing of domestic life whilst at Abbots Langley during these war years. Laski's *To Bed With Grand Music* (1946), published under the pseudonym Sarah Russell, portrayed 'the other side' of the young married women left at home whilst their partners were soldiering in Europe, debunking some of the already-ever-present myths of the Home Front. Instead of keeping the home fires burning, Deborah Robertson has a series of affairs with men with increasingly dubious past-times. The novel frankly confronts a frivolous young woman's desire for fashionable hats and restaurants during the war-years. The easiest way to gain access to these excitements is, she discovers, in exchange for sex. At a time when national identity, and indeed international success, was resting heavily on the dichotomy between good and evil, Laski exposes the moral fragility of everyday decision-making.

Her 1949 novel *Little Boy Lost* is the story of a man who returns to France after the war to search for the son he was forced to leave behind in Paris in 1939. He too is consumed by his inability to contend with difficult decisions. On the one hand, he must choose whether he can cope with the guilt of eating the black-market steaks and drinking the black-market coffee that he is offered 'under the counter' in restaurants. On the other he must make more significant decisions about the future of the child he discovers in a Norman orphanage. Is the child actually his son? And does he actually want to parent him? Metaphorically, the novel also tackles the collective responsibility for the care of all the displaced people left scattered after the Second World War. Laski's war-time 'trilogy' concludes with *The Village* in 1952. Perhaps more interesting as a document of social history than as a work of fiction, it plays out some of the social gradations of the Home Counties in post-war Britain using the narrative of a love affair across the class-divide.

Whilst Laski and Miller weren't close friends, they did meet occasionally in Abbots Langley to discuss their latest novels. Miller was, by all accounts, rather intimidated by Laski who was more forthright in talking about her own writing. After leaving their house in London and before settling in Abbots Langley, the Millers moved often. Jonathan Miller later wrote about his family's itinerant early war-years in a 1968 collection of reminiscences edited by B.S. Johnson. They were, he felt, almost constantly on a train, moving between the military hospitals his father was stationed in and around the Wye Valley. 'The names had been taken off the railway stations so that all our travel

took place in limbo.’¹ His mother, he remembers, ‘sparkled’ as an officer’s wife in her chic military suit. She too sported some of the badges of war-time pomp that she would come to expose in her fiction. Her RAMC brooch was ‘tricked up into a piece of costume jewellery with diamonds, seed pearls and a flash of deep crimson enamel.’² And yet, all the while they were living in the countryside, Miller had a strong sense that ‘London was where we really lived and must finally return to.’³ These three sensations, of limbo, of pomp and of home, feature crucially in Miller’s fiction after *Farewell Leicester Square*. It is not my intention to create an arbitrary gulf between Miller’s writing of the 1930s and the 1940s. There is perhaps a tendency to divide the history of Europe into two halves with the War as the six-year buffer between them. Similarly the literature of the period is habitually defined chronologically, alluding to a kind of cataclysmic shift in style or concern that is not always the case. As we shall see, Miller’s ‘war fiction’ includes the last three novels that she wrote, one published in 1942, one in 1945 and one in 1949. Just as in 1952 Laski was back in London still writing about the war, arguably Miller continued to write about the ways in which the war lingered for the rest of her career.

As Gill Plain notes, women’s fiction of the Second World War was less preoccupied with ‘the outward destruction of war, than with a more introspective contemplation of the human condition under war.’⁴ Products of their historical moment, Miller’s final three novels are undeniably framed by the cohesive chronology of the Second World War. Although they were in no way conceived as being so, they performed

¹ Jonathan Miller, *The Evacuees*, ed., B.S. Johnson (London: Victor Gollancz, 1968), p.202

² *Ibid.*, p.200

³ *Ibid.*, p.204

⁴ Gill Plain, *Women’s Fiction of the Second World War* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p.3

the function of a trilogy of domestic middle-class war-time experience. *A Room in Regent's Park* ends in the September of 1939 just a few days after its declaration, *On the Side of The Angels* narrates the war-time experience of two sisters living during the war and her final novel, *Death of the Nightingale*, seeks to understand some of the immediate legacies of the period. All three are interested in how individuals are affected by a threat to their identity. They are all concerned with performance and masquerade, with secrets and lies. And they all contend with the problem of place, particularly, as suggested in its very title, *A Room in Regent's Park*.

The title of Miller's *A Room in Regent's Park* most obviously echoes Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. Not just in the language but in the rhythm of it, from which we can infer that some of the truth of the novel is developed from that of Woolf's essay. Considering the implications of the historical relationship between 'women' and 'fiction', Woolf famously argues for the necessity of the possession of a room and an income in order for women to be able to write. Her argument rests on the persistence of exclusion. The room is therefore both a literal and a figurative one that Woolf envisages for women. She also looks hopefully towards a future in which representations of relationships between women are no longer presented as purely rivalrous. Miller, writing in the shadow of Woolf, takes up some of her images and ideas as part of the skeleton of the novel. She too plays with the names from Woolf's essay: Miller's three female characters in *A Room in Regent's Park* are Virginia, Judith and Mary. Naming, as Woolf attends to in her essay, is slippery and contentious, particularly for women. 'Call me Mary Beton,

Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please' Woolf states.⁵ And Miller takes up the joke, naming Penrose's first wife Mary Gardiner, and her daughter Judith after Woolf's imaginary 'Judith Shakespeare'.

The plot is, however, relatively un-playful; deliberately straight-forward. It is a linear telling of a young woman's coming-of-age. Judith is the teenage daughter of a Harley Street doctor whose mother, Mary Gardiner, has been dead for ten or so years. Her father, Penrose Gardiner, has re-married by the time the novel begins: Judith's stepmother Virginia is an 'aging' beauty. Well brought-up with pale skin and dark-hair she spends her days planning outfits for the evening's entertainments. Penrose is a distracted but gentle father whose medical practice takes up all of his time. Judith, unknown to either Pen or Virginia, meets up each morning before breakfast with Robert Harrison, a medical student at University College. Robert has also grown up motherless, in a large, cold, empty gothic house in Westbourne Grove. Robert's father is a doctor who intends to leave his practice to his son. Robert and Judith stumble together through the awkward steps of falling in love and leaving home. With Judith's encouragement, Robert gives up medicine to become a journalist. It is he who affords the room in Regent's Park that Judith furnishes with items taken from her childhood room in Harley Street. It is only when Pen notices that Judith isn't at home one night and finds her in her dressing gown at Robert's flat that he relents and allows them to marry. At the end of the novel Robert and Judith are newly-weds, hosting a celebratory party at their two-room flat in Regent's Park.

⁵ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas* (London: Vintage, 2001), p.5

Miller's thesis is therefore markedly adjacent to Woolf's. It is her young male character Robert, who is the writer. It is he who sets out on his own to make a living from his writing and in doing so can afford a space outside of the familial home. Judith is stuck in the role of a female intercessor: mediating and negotiating between the male characters who have the professional careers and therefore the determining control over her condition. Judith's agency rests in her patience. She has to bide her time before she can persuade Pen that her decision to marry Robert is, if not ideal, then inevitable. Miller includes a poem by Robert Herrick as her introductory epigram:

Virgins, weep not; 'twill come, when
As she, so you'll be ripe for men.
Then grieve her not, with saying
She must no more a Maying:
Or by Rose-buds devine
Who'll be her Valentine.
Nor name those wanton reaks
Y've had at Barly-breaks.
But now kisse her, and thus say,
Take time, Lady, while ye may.⁶

Interestingly, or tediously, Virginia too spends her time waiting. Her role is bound up, not unlike Laski's Deborah Robertson, with the economy of female beauty. She is an archetypal Millerian female: vain, bored, she flicks aimlessly through fashion magazines waiting for her husband to return home from work. Thus, reading Miller's work gives the impression that it creates a vast, complex whole. Characters, themes and images appear, disappear and then re-emerge and merge. One such example is in the character of Virginia with whom Miller presents the married middle-class female experience. Chapter VI of *A Room in Regent's Park* is dedicated to 'Morning and Afternoon of a Married

⁶ Robert Herrick, 'An Epithalamie to Sir Thomas Southwell and his Ladie', *The Complete Poetry of Robert Herrick*, Vol. I, ed., Tom Cain and Ruth Connolly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp.51-4

Woman'. The indefinite article points to Miller's assumption of Virginia as a recognizable 'type' visible on the real High Street. This is also true of Miller's fictional ones. Once again, as in *The Mere Living* and in *Portrait of the Bride* the married woman asks herself 'Now what had she to do? Change her book at Boots, order the fish.'⁷ Virginia, thinking about Pen's previous wife hears a barrel-organ playing on the street-corner. She watches the other women 'marshal' their shopping baskets: 'shift aside the Custard Powder to receive Aldous Huxley: pack Virginia Woolf next to the Rinso.'⁸ This scene is as familiar to Virginia as it is to Miller's readers. The repetitive nature of this kind of day reaches outside the pages of just one of her novels and across them all. Indeed the image of the highbrows Woolf and Huxley, metonyms for their texts, lodged uncomfortably alongside the domestic necessities is a good joke and a visual image of exactly the kind of juxtapositions that Miller's work is interested in.

One of Miller's short stories 'Puss, Puss' invokes Huxley again as a kind of branded cultural item. It is a Sunday afternoon on Adelaide Road an hour after lunch and the entire neighbourhood 'appears to pass into a coma [...] A silence, as soft and opaque as blotting-paper, steals all the sound from the air.'⁹ Herbert and Val, in their over-stuffy living room are reading but wanting some excitement. He is a novelist. Val tells him: 'For some reason, you long to be simple and warm and emotional, a book of the month choice, instead of a bleak chip off one of the minor Huxley blocks.'¹⁰ Val delivers her insult to her husband gently, but it nonetheless hurts Herbert's feelings. She is punished

⁷ Betty Miller, *A Room in Regent's Park* (London: Robert Hale, 1942), p.85

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.88

⁹ Betty Miller, 'Puss, Puss', *John O'London's Weekly*, Vol. XLIII, No. 1,106 (June 21 1940), pp.333-5

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.333

for her insensitivity. A girl knocks on the door, distraught, looking for her lost cat. She thinks it might have got in to the house through the garden. Val and Herbert jump in to action, searching their rooms for the lost animal. But they have no luck. The girl is 'patently in an agony of distress' and wants to leave, as much as they would like her to stay and entertain them with her search. After the girl has left Val goes in to her bag to pull out some sweets and finds it empty; we discover with Val that the girl has taken her money. What is important here is not the fact that Val is disappointed that her husband isn't as 'good' a writer as Huxley, it's that the significance of literariness is overshadowed by a mere girl and her fake cat. For Miller the custard powder is just as full of meaning as the Huxley novel in a housewife's basket.

After a lunch with Penrose, Virginia sits on in his room, feeling the quality of his absence and of her isolation:

It happened like this every day. At the same moment a chasm seemed to open up in the midst of her day, of her existence. There was nothing to do: or else, no sense in doing it.... It was this latter that was so frightening. The realization of purposelessness. A good-looking woman, her purpose, hitherto, had been the culmination of her own looks, and the attraction of other human beings through those looks: and since there, too, lay nature's purpose, she had felt, in the minutest refinement of vanity, sustained, justified. But now – what was happening? It was no longer nature's purpose, that she should attract.¹¹

Once again, Miller returns to the problem of the 'purposeless' woman. Filtered through Miller's narration, Virginia's direct thoughts are clouded by the authorial argument. Virginia's 'frightening' realization of her waning purpose is not shown here as being felt by Virginia herself but presented to the reader as a statement of truth. Only at the end of

¹¹ Miller, *Regent's Park*, p.94

the paragraph are we given what might be access to her experience with that halting ‘But now – what was happening?’ This technique is typical of Miller’s style. Her characters’ voices are often mediated in this way, their thoughts expressed in the same tone as the narration so that we read their emptiness as they experience it.

Many of the chapters in *A Room in Regent’s Park* are named after meal times once again, marking Miller’s fascination with domestic rituals. As in *The Mere Living* Miller focuses on the moment of wakefulness, understanding it as a transition into awareness and responsibility but also as a movement across an imaginary and fluid space:

She was about to wake.... Sunk upon the big, blown pillows, lapped in bedclothes warm with the warmth she herself had transferred to them, she became aware of the fact that she was about to wake. After swaying, fluent as an uprooted weed, rolling, like an errant shell, through the self-locked ocean of her own dream, she felt the moment arrive, in which the magic element within which she had operated, devoid of weight, of consequence, drained away.¹²

Miller also recycles favourite images: Virginia compares Robert to Undine with similar language used to describe Rhoda in *Portrait*. Robert is aroused by what he reads as Judith’s Mona Lisa Smile, again a comparison that is used to describe Rhoda Ingram. As in *Farewell Leicester Square* the lights of Brighton’s sea-front stand in as the archetype of the gaudy thrill of the new and a site full of potential for dangerous impropriety. Miller’s recycling of images is therefore more revealing of her writing than of her characters’. They are very rarely distinct.

¹² Ibid., p.27

A Room in Regent's Park also points forward to the ideas in her later war novels. The dramatic denouement of *On the Side of the Angels* rests on the unmasking of the officer as a fraud. The idea that war-time is ripe for posturing is characterized by Robert who anticipates that conscription will be akin to casting the crowd scenes from the silent films of the First World War.

When I'm conscripted, I'll feel automatically that I'm playing a part: all dressed up, and waiting to go on, as an extra [...] Do you remember John Gilbert and Renée Adorée in *The Big Parade*? And Victor McLaglan and Edmund Lowe in *What Price Glory*? I saw them all, when I was a kid, in the sixpennies, at the Coronet, Notting Hill Gate.¹³

Robert is an older, more talented, more successful version of Paul Sullivan in *The Mere Living*. With his innate interest in attentiveness he is also not unlike Alec Berman, the film-maker in *Farewell Leicester Square*.

We watch Robert examining a blade of grass on one of his walks with Judith. His focus is intent and involves his 'whole being'. His 'hunger for objects in the physical world' is 'passionate and indiscriminate'.¹⁴ Alec Berman, as we have seen, translates his attentiveness into the myth-making films of Englishness. For Robert, the objects that hold his physical gaze become words on the page. He has a 'strange literary gift.' The short paragraphs he writes are, Miller takes pains to inform us, not poetry or short stories. They are 'intense', 'exact', reproductions of 'inconsequential vivid experiences.'¹⁵ He defines

¹³ Ibid., p.73

¹⁴ Ibid., p.54

¹⁵ Ibid., p.55

them as ‘mathematically exact transcriptions, into words, of sensuous experience.’¹⁶ And they hover on the threshold of the unctuous, we are uncertain of just how parodic is Miller’s intent: *A winkle-shell, with the winkle in the aperture, looks like a snotty nostril.*¹⁷ Importantly, they are not fragments. They are, in themselves whole. Robert calls them ‘Bits’ but they are finished bits: ‘Nothing I write is part of anything. It’s all self-contained. That’s the beauty of it.’¹⁸

It seems very likely that the inspiration for this impulse in Robert comes by way of the poet Francis Ponge. Jean-Paul Sartre declared Ponge’s writing to be one of the most curious and perhaps the most important of the day. Born in 1899 and living in Paris for most of his writing life, Ponge was fascinated by the relationship between the imagination and things.¹⁹ He actively resisted ascribing his work to any of the theoretical writing happening in France or elsewhere, yet it is grounded in the problematic poetical transcription of the interplay between observer and object. He wrote fragments, essays, prose-poetry and criticism but he is now most popularly known as the poet of *Le Parti pris des choses* the publication of which was delayed until 1942 due to the outbreak of war. Miller met him in Paris in the 1930s and wrote an article on his work for *Horizon* in September 1947.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.82

¹⁷ Ibid., p.117

¹⁸ Ibid., p.117

¹⁹ Ian Higgins, *Francis Ponge* (London: The Athlone Press, 1979)

Ponge, Miller asserts, is interested above all in the ‘self-sufficiency of the material object...to uphold in every respect the secret, the formula of its particular integrity.’²⁰

This is an extract from ‘The Oyster’:

The oyster, the size of an average pebble, looks rougher, its colours less uniform, brilliantly whitish. It is a world stubbornly closed. And yet, it can be opened: then you’ve got to hold it in the hollow of a dish towel, use a jagged and rather tricky knife, repeat this several times.²¹

Ponge’s oyster is like and yet unlike a pebble. It is closed and yet can be opened: it has an interior as well as an exterior that can be accessed.²² That the oyster can be changed by that outside of it, is necessary to Miller’s appreciation of Ponge’s poetic attentiveness. For them both there is no such thing as the ‘still life’. She writes: ‘the only thing that is at all static about a natural object is precisely the average man’s conception of it; and it is from the tyranny of that conception that the vision of Ponge liberates an under-privileged world.’²³ Furthermore, there is a punishment, and ‘annihilation’ promised if we do not realize the objects around us: the pebble, the sponge, a lump of earth, a spider, a shell, the jug, a tile. The individual’s responsibility for attentiveness, and the potential devastation when it is not met, rumbles underneath the surface of Miller’s entire body of work. She is at her most forthright on the subject in her essay on Ponge:

An author who writes of sticks and stones as he might of men and women is a revolutionary whose aims exceed the limit of any known revolution, in that if he postulates a reversal of hierarchies, it is not a particular class, but humanity as a whole, that finds itself thereby reduced to the ranks.²⁴

²⁰ Betty Miller, ‘Francis Ponge and the Creative Method’, *Horizon*, Vol. XVI, No 92 (September 1947), p214

²¹ Francis Ponge, ‘The Oyster’, *The Power of Language*, trans. Serge Gavronsky (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979)

²² Francis Ponge, *Selected Poems*, ed. Margaret Guiton (North Carolina: Wake Forest University Press, 1994)

²³ Miller, ‘Francis Ponge’, p.219

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p220

Objects, for Miller, can have a social impetus and therefore imagery can have a political function. As Barbara Johnson points out ‘the problem is not, as it seems, a desire to treat things as persons, but a difficulty in being sure that we treat *persons* as persons.’²⁵ In *A Room in Regent’s Park* this difficulty is encapsulated in Judith’s coming of age story. Once again, Miller is taking a clichéd narrative, in this case the teenage girl desperate to leave home and become a woman, and asking questions of it.

On one of their walks Judith and Robert duck into the morning shadow of one of the garden’s chalets to inexpertly conduct experiments in the matter of kissing. They are compared to the animals in the zoological gardens further north. Robert is clear:

We’re minors, don’t forget: and minors aren’t citizens: they’re not even human, altogether: they’re unwieldy domestic animals that have to be groomed and trained; and confined, according to our age and class, in various kinds of cage; moral, legal, or educational.²⁶

These cages are not metaphorical; they are also literal and inevitable. The children born to the medical men living in Harley Street, Wimpole Street, Devonshire Place lead, during five days of the week, a very specialized sort of existence. They are, Miller explains, smuggled in and out of the house so that patients are not disturbed by them. Voices must be kept hushed, no toys left scattered. All clues and traces carefully removed.²⁷ On Harley Street back-facing windows are opened before patients arrive to dissipate the smell of that morning’s breakfast kippers.

²⁵ Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), p.2

²⁶ Miller, *Regent’s Park*, p.16

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.18

Judith had grown up ‘under lock and key, in this pleasant cage.’²⁸ Concerned with thresholds between the public and the private and the peculiar position of the professional life in that conundrum, Judith’s mother created for her ‘a room of her own’ at the top of 155 Harley Street, converting it into a nursery flat. ‘Everything complete, everything self-contained. There was even a special lift, communicating with the kitchens, below; so that meals could be sent up, on pressing a button, without disturbing the rest of the household.’²⁹

Even Judith’s birth is described as an intrusion. She ‘gate-crashed into the lives of her parents.’³⁰ Later in the novel she arranges to meet Pen for lunch at the Royal Society of Medicine to ask him for his permission to marry Robert. At home, she tells him ‘I’m nothing but a daughter.’ Here, on neutral ground, they can see each other as ‘two human beings – respect each other’s rights.’³¹ Miller is showing the ways in which humanity is defined by the spaces that we occupy. They must be shared. Judith tells Robert that he always looks like ‘an interested visitor, moving from cage to cage.’³² In this coming-of-age novel, Robert and Judith will become mature adults once they have a room of their own. What will prevent it from becoming a ‘cage’ is their co-habitation of it. Two people, subject to each other, will be citizens in a society of their own making.

This is apparent from the first stroll we take with Judith and Robert. She leaves the house on Harley Street and walks north to Park Square Gardens where she finds

²⁸ Ibid., p.14

²⁹ Ibid., p.215

³⁰ Ibid., p.20

³¹ Ibid., p.154

³² Ibid., p.115

Robert waiting for her ‘in characteristic attitude: hands in pockets, leaning against the square railings, as if he leaned, in privacy, against the mantelpiece of his own fireside.’³³

And yet Miller is quick to inform us that this romantic hero is scarred by the ugliness of youth:

On the nape of his neck, beneath hair willfully overgrown, a square of Elastoplast concealed a boil, surrounded with the scars, since healed, of other boils: it was, he sometimes thought, as if he had become a type of crater: without warning, adolescence erupting from him in this, and other, unruly forms....³⁴

The potential for Robert’s ability to create ruptures is rendered on his very skin. Judith hands him her father’s ‘heavy iron key’ and Robert uses it to open the gates to the private gardens.

The gate clanged shut. Behind railings, behind neatly clipped hedges, the lawns lay outspread; tender and green, amid the cement; an oasis, guarded by privilege. Shadows lay upon the grass, new-minted, immaculate. In the play-ground the children’s swings hung motionless. No one, yet, had entered the gardens: the seals of night and of solitude, the long shining spider-webs, were still intact.³⁵

The sexual metaphor is not subtle: the park is a symbol/site of Judith’s virginity. Robert is handed the means by which he may enter the garden. But there is another narrative at work here too: Miller invokes the romance between Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett. ‘I wish’, Robert tells Judith, ‘I could come and rescue you, single-handed, from Harley Street.’³⁶ The story of Browning rescuing Barrett from her sequestration in her father’s rooms on Wimpole Street would be undone in the biography Miller wrote after she had given up fiction and she begins to explore the buds of her narrative here. She also

³³ Ibid., p.12

³⁴ Ibid., p.13

³⁵ Ibid., p.14

³⁶ Ibid., p.103

plays with names again, inverting the generation gap with Penrose as the father figure and Robert as the young suitor. Robert's pronouncement draws Harley Street itself as a cage from which to break free, one that echoes Wimpole Street.

On either side, were the tall impassive houses, the railings before each; the basements, like steep moats, filled, now, with shadow: there, beside the front doors, were the name-plates, the oblongs of brass or steel (staking out the various claims, the areas of influence, in this hotly contested territory): the knockers and door-knobs, even now, faintly gleaming: the blank windows: the well-groomed window-boxes. There it was; all the apparatus of dignity; of dress-shirt medicine: expensive to maintain, cumbersome to uphold; and yet impressive; withal, a certain rectitude about it....³⁷

Miller builds up these images of solid objects in sentences riddled with and yet held together by different punctuating marks. The street, a cell, but also a site of conflict, maintains its rectitude, its honesty or integrity, through the culmination of all of those disparate things: the door-knobs and the knockers, the windows and the window-boxes. Conversely, Miller doesn't give us the exact location of Robert's 'room' but we know it is 'behind Primrose Hill', number fourteen on an unnamed residential street. It therefore is a freer space, one that Robert and Judith will help to define.

In the final pages of the novel there is a shift and Robert's 'room' has become a 'flat'. Miller guides the reader along the garden path to the freshly painted porch and into the flat directly: 'In the hall, facing you, as you came in, there was a trestle table. On it, neatly folded and ticketed, lay women's coats, furs, fox capes.'³⁸ There is clearly some kind of party under way. We soon learn that it is a form of wedding reception to celebrate

³⁷ Ibid., p.171

³⁸ Ibid., p.191

the marriage of Judith and Robert. The ‘flat’ is in the same building as Robert’s ‘room’, on the floor below. Pen has paid for the re-decoration. Although Robert’s original furniture ‘still persisted’, it sat alongside standard lamps from John Lewis and a ‘deep chubby couch’.³⁹ Judith is transformed. Wearing a ‘hostess gown’ and with lipstick, her hair curled on top of her head she is barely recognizable to Virginia and her sister Sydney. ‘My first party in my own home.’⁴⁰

The final chapter begins with Judith sitting in the wintry sunshine on a bench in Regent’s Park. It is the one she played on as a child and the difference between her current and her former self feels engrained in the texture of the wooden slats. The park is deserted; the peacefulness is sinister. High above her (tethered in the Inner Circle) is the balloon barrage that guards London: the war has begun. She is startled by the appearance of Nobby the park keeper. In his smart uniform and polished black boots he invites the image of all the other men who aren’t in the park but off fighting across the channel. He points with a gloved finger at the park key, ‘Reckon you won’t be needing that much longer, miss. They say they’re going to pull down all them railings – Park Square, Park Crescent Gardens, too – scrap metal, for the Government.’⁴¹ Judith is horrified by the thought of ‘our precious railings’ being taken down. ‘These sacred gardens – open to the street – anyone who likes, able to walk in, as they choose!’⁴² And yet Nobby, ‘she

³⁹ Ibid., p.193

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.198

⁴¹ Ibid., p.205

⁴² Ibid., p.205

realized, suddenly, preferred the railings.’⁴³ She believes that he liked those barriers, even though they were directed at his own class.

Society has changed, is changing, and it is felt in the places around them. The places, as well as the people that occupy them, are subject to forces outside of their own control. The flower-seller has disappeared. The windows on Harley Street have become almost instantly dingy and the porches unwashed. There is plywood fixed over the frosted glass doors and the skylights above painted dark-blue. Judith can look out of the window now and not see anything at all. They were papered over and smeared with anti-blast solution to reinforce them against ‘the blast that never came; or did not come, cleanly and swiftly, in high-explosive form, but like this; in a slow-motion disintegration, relentless: a disease at work within the tissues of the city, that no power could arrest.’⁴⁴

Judith wonders if this is the end of Harley Street, if ‘the system could survive such a lapse? Possibly not. Things that had taken centuries to build up, systems that had seemed unassailable, crumbled, these days, before one’s very eyes.’⁴⁵ Pen, however, notes the crumbling system with more optimism. He acknowledges that he has played his part in the maintenance of the elite and yet is equivocal on the subject of its survival: “I didn’t invent Harley Street...I don’t like the system of privilege, in medicine, any more than they do.”⁴⁶ ‘In medicine’ appears in parenthesis as if to emphasise that it is not all systems that he dislikes. And we have to imagine who ‘they’ are as the silent subject of

⁴³ Ibid., p.205

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.206

⁴⁵ Ibid., p.207

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.212

Pen's argument. But his unease with the symbol of Harley Street is characteristic of some of the thoughts beginning to circulate in the medical profession to which Miller, married to an eminent doctor, was privy. A neighbour of the Miller's in the 1930s was A. J. Cronin who used his medical experience in Harley Street to write hugely successful novels, the most important of which was *The Citadel*. It won the 1937 National Book Award in America but more significantly was credited with exposing the hypocrisy of the affluent doctors on Harley Street and even with laying the groundwork for the foundation of the National Health Service ten years later. Its protagonist, Andrew Manson, gives up his work in a Welsh mining community for the private clinics of London's elite. His wife Christina, however, knows that where they should actually be is in a country practice, living in a cottage with a pink rose growing around the front door. For her, the rose is a symbol of bucolic bliss as well as social decency. For Cronin that social rose would grow in to the NHS. Both Pen and Judith know that they are in a moment of change, but neither is sure of what the outcome will be.

Miller is interested in the metaphor of the gate in the railings to explore personal shifts. Harley Street is used to explore social ones. The houses on Harley Street become symbols of the modern dichotomy between street and home. The thresholds of these cages, cells or homes are sites of potentiality, none more so than the windows on Harley Street. The ones in the dim breakfast room at the back of the house open on to small, enclosed courtyards. There were still bars on the windows of Judith's room, the old day nursery. At home, Virginia watches the rain fall outside of her window. 'She had not lost her childhood pleasure in the magic of a pane of glass, an equator, dividing two distinct

hemispheres: in the preferential treatment it conferred on those, so to speak, on the right side of it.⁴⁷ Even the windows, therefore, continue to contain Judith whilst Virginia acknowledges their ability to protect through a creation of a hierarchy.

Bay windows in mid to late Victorian terraced housing were designed to create extra space in the rooms at the front of the house. But they also symbolize the modern propensity for outward display. Tables with large vases of cut flowers would be placed in prime position, seeking the attention of the passing pedestrian. At Robert's room Miller shows how these family houses are becoming divided into flats. Beside his red-lacquered front door there is a 'small colony of bells.'⁴⁸ Judith, on her way to Robert's new 'room' stops to buy some chrysanthemum from one of the flower-sellers who position themselves on the corner for friends and families visiting in-patients in the clinics. They are 'not the fine shop-bred kind, but a mongrel sort, peculiar to flower-sellers, with tangled petals, erratically pinked leaves, and a green stinging scent.'⁴⁹ The window woodwork in Robert's flat is also bright red. And, possessing only necessities, he has no vase for Judith's flowers. Miller's language here, the 'colony' of bells and the 'mongrel' chrysanthemum, point to the social significance of thresholds and flowers in this novel.

Harley Street itself, running north from Cavendish Square to Marylebone Road, exudes tradition and self-confidence through its red brick, terracotta and stone styles, ranging from eclectic Gothic to Queen Anne, from Georgian symmetry to Beaux-Arts. The architecture of 155 Harley Street where the Gardiners live is described as Georgian.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.161

⁴⁸ Ibid., p.140

⁴⁹ Ibid., p.139

Three deep steps lead up to a tiled path two strides deep to the doorstep. These houses, therefore, are set back just a few meters from the pavement. They were built as a four-storey frontage with the kitchen in the basement and rooms for servants in the attic. Neighbours' front doors don't nestle against each other as they do in Victorian terraced streets; the houses repeat their symmetry along the road individually, not in pairs. They are three portrait windows wide. The top two floors, the sleeping quarters, have the smallest sash windows and the narrowest sill. The first floors have long, almost floor-to-ceiling windows with a jutting balcony that spans all three. The black iron railings that provide the balustrade are purely decorative: the balconies were not intended for use. Conventions of taste dictate that the vases of flowers stand on tables *between* the windows so that they are purely for interior display.

However, on the ground floor the two windows to the right of the door have just enough sill for a window-box. Window-sills are the part of the window that doesn't attract much attention. And yet, like the front doorsteps, they are a threshold. Existing on both sides of the window-pane they are a site of transition and of interaction between the home and the city. Informed readers know that wisteria growing up the exterior walls of a house is romantic. Ivy is ominous, it suggests a gothic neglect. On every well-maintained, middle-class exterior window-sill sits an oblong terracotta pot. The house on Harley Street, occupied by the Gardiners, is no exception. Other women writers of this period also use images of flowers as symbols of female experience. Jean Rhys' heroines, for example, are given cut flowers by men but there are no window-boxes in Rhys' London. In *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* Julia hides away in boarding-houses and shabby hotels where the windows are always commented on. The blinds are usually down and the

buildings decorated not with flowers but with red-lit signs. When the blind is open the window is a 'square of blackness'.⁵⁰ Whereas Miller's window-boxes are symbols of a stable, domestic space that is tended-to, Julia buys violets on the corner of Woburn Square and drooping roses for her mother's funeral, breaking her last ten shilling note.⁵¹ Like for Miss Brill in Katherine Mansfield's story who buys herself a small posie and therefore can't have cake, they are a luxury. When Anna, in Rhys' *Voyage in the Dark* is given violets and has no vase for them; she puts them in her water jug.⁵² Katherine Mansfield's short stories make much use of floral imagery. The potted daffodils in 'Feuille d'Album' entice the narrator across the road to talk to his female neighbour. The pink roses bloom perfectly on cue in 'The Garden Party'. Where they are bought is also important. Rosemary Fellon in 'A Cup of Tea' is carefree with her affluence, shopping at an elite florist on Regent Street.⁵³ Miller uses plants and flowers in this novel more frequently than in any other she wrote. She describes window-boxes, home-grown cut-flowers, bought cut-flowers and flowers growing in pots inside the house. They all resonate meaning.

Kasia Boddy traces how the red geranium came to be the Victorian staple in the terracotta flower-pot.⁵⁴ We know that in the 1930s Orwell made famous the image of the aspidistra and its ability to signify the mundanity of the middle-classes: 'there will be no revolution in England whilst there are aspidistras in the window.'⁵⁵ For Miller, the

⁵⁰ Jean Rhys, *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), p.110

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp.49; 91

⁵² Jean Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000)

⁵³ Katherine Mansfield, 'A Cup of Tea', *The Collected Short Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982)

⁵⁴ Kasia Boddy 'Potting', *Restless Cities* (London: Verso, 2010)

⁵⁵ George Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (London: Penguin, 2000), p.44

hyacinth is the symbol of affluent bohemianism and intellectual elegance in cosmopolitan life. Her work was influenced, no doubt, by the aesthetics of English Post-Impressionists who repeatedly used hyacinths in their paintings. In Greek mythology Hyacinth was the beautiful lover of the god Apollo who dies in a tragic accident. The plant that grew up from his spilt blood was described by Homer and thus the genus of plant was ascribed the name *hyacinthus* in the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century William-Morris took it up, repeated it and adorned the walls of his house with it. The anti-hero of Henry James' *The Princess of Casamassima* is the bookbinder Hyacinth Robinson. Historically a male symbol, it was used variously by modernist writers to denote youthful female loveliness. In *Mrs Dalloway*, for example, Elizabeth detests the constant patronising comparison to a hyacinth. Famously Eliot shifted the paradigm with his creation of the hyacinth girl in The Burial of the Dead section of *The Waste Land*:

You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
They called me hyacinth girl⁵⁶

In *A Room in Regent's Park* there are hyacinths placed on the window sills both inside and out. Judith has one in her room growing in an earthenware pot. Its 'multitude of flowers knotted as closely upon it as the tight-sprung curls on the bust of a Greek youth.'⁵⁷ Miller renders the hyacinth as genderless. It is objectified: Judith looks on it as another of her things in her room. The eye has prominence over the nose: we are only informed of the smell of the hyacinth when it grows outside, when the scent can be extinguished:

Harley Street was busy: full of shining cars nosing their way to the kerb: darting taxis; an occasional ambulance. On either side of the street, there were little

⁵⁶ T.S. Eliot, 'The Waste Land', *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p.54

⁵⁷ Miller, *Regent's Park*, p.84

wooden window-boxes, planted with formal little bushes, or with the flowers of the season: hyacinths like coloured minarets, standing upright, or leaning Pisa-like, under the weight of their own floescence. The fragile rings of perfume drifted, and were extinguished, among the traffic; the odour of petrol.⁵⁸

We know that the petals are colourful but we are not told what colour they are. They are exoticised masts like the minarets on Islamic mosques or the famous Italian bell-tower. But their perfume is no match for the city and they remain as objects, unlike Ponge's oyster, with no power to change or effect. There are also hyacinths inside the house. Here they stand in isolation from their surroundings. They have no scent at all. Miller describes the single plant as frozen in a moment of just the merest movement:

As much a prisoner to the room, as might have been a canary in its cage, a hyacinth stood on the table, in a bowl: long leaves were cupped about the opening buds, in the gesture of reverent hands shielding the core of flame. That alone which, visibly, appeared to live in the room, was the fire. Confined between bars, through which its hot breath was, even at a distance, perceptible, caged, like a devouring animal. It prowled and flickered; now and then, restlessly tossing up its long, fiery antlers.⁵⁹

The buds are opening and compared to a living creature, the canary. And yet the comparison is made only to highlight the confinement of the hyacinth. The central blossom is also, curiously, flame-like; curious because the only visible life in the room is the fire in the fireplace. The room is a cage and everything in it is confined in its own smaller one. Like Miller's description of Harley Street outside, all the objects in the room are separate and distinct yet connected doubly through their position in the room as well as the merging of the figurative language used to define them.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p.85

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.57

Moreover, these two passages isolate the image of the hyacinth in that there appears to be no immediate human agency. They have been planted in the window-boxes and set in a bowl on the table by some unknown hand for some unknown purpose. In Virginia's bedroom it is a different matter:

On the window-sill, behind a small rail, as in the room itself, there were bulbs in earthenware pots. In each, the green shoots were just beginning to prick through the earth: rising, like the periscope of a submarine, to negotiate conditions above the surface. Virginia herself had set them in place: conscientiously, and with a view to this moment, planting each one within the earth, like a series of time-bombs. And now the plot was hatching: the power furred within each was about to make itself manifest.... She looked from bowl to bowl, contemplating the slow-motion explosion already taking place in each; gratified by this punctual response to her action.⁶⁰

Virginia plants the hyacinths herself. She has control over their position in their pots behind their small rail. And we learn that she has set them there 'with a view to this moment' that we have caught. This scene, towards the end of the novel, as the war edges closer, is irretrievable from its militaristic language. The hyacinth shoots are like the periscopes on a submarine. Virginia sees them as 'time-bombs' or explosions like the ones that created the craters on Robert's skin, like the ones constantly being anticipated by the characters in the novel as they wait for the war to be declared. Miller uses the hyacinth here to create a meaningful alliteration between 'plotting' and 'planting'. This is significant in various ways. Firstly, it gives Virginia's seemingly eternal female waiting game a moment of fruition. Secondly, it illuminates the interestingly chronology of the novel and its production. Miller always wrote historically 'present' novels. *A Room in Regent's Park* is therefore somewhat of an anomaly in that it is a kind of return. Set over the course of 1939 but written during 1940-1 the tension that builds up during the

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.161

narrative (of when war will come) is a fictionalized example of what Knowles identified as the ‘literature of anticipation’ that what produced in the build up to 1939.⁶¹ Just as Virginia waits for her hyacinths to blossom, Miller’s reader waits for the war.

The novel is a geographical return for Miller too. Living outside of London for the first time since her childhood she chose, once again, to write about the pocket of North London that envelopes and is named after Regent’s Park. The park has long been a site for fictional romance as in David Lean’s *Brief Encounter* (1945) when Alec and Laura take a ride on the boating lake or Elizabeth Bowen’s *Death of the Heart* (1938). In 1811 John Nash began designs for the ‘great gated enclosure to be called Regent’s Park’ with the terraces of houses as palisades.⁶² Nash envisaged building twenty-six villas within the gates of the park but only eight were ever built. The Outer Circle contains the Inner Circle with a subsidiary road emerging at York Gate. There are four gateways: Hanover, Clarence, York and Gloucester named for the Houses of the English aristocracy. The neighbouring area St John’s Wood was designed in 1794 with the innovation of the semi-detached villa, breaking the London tradition of terraced housing. ‘Altogether, the concept would seem romantic privacy’.⁶³

The park forms a whole with the surrounding architecture of John Nash. Regent Street was designed to end in the north with ‘a private garden city for the aristocracy’. In

⁶¹ Sebastian D G Knowles, *A Purgatorial Flame: Seven British Writers in the Second World War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990)

⁶² Elizabeth Bowen, ‘Regent’s Park and St. John’s Wood’, *Flower of Cities: A Book of London* (London: Max Parrish, 1949), p.156

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.157

Miller's novel *Regent's Park* performs the function of the domestic garden. And yet it is ostensibly a public space, albeit one with privileged access. On one of Judith and Robert's walks the keeper at the gate of the park holds up the traffic with an outstretched hand allowing them to cross the road. Judith 'thanked him with a smile and they gained the park'.⁶⁴ As they walk through the dewy grass Robert remembers Judith telling him that servants could only enter the gardens if they were exercising their employer's dog.⁶⁵ Traditionally the gardens at the southern end of the park were paid for and therefore maintained by the local residents. Only they had access to the squares. They are therefore synonymous with the glamour and prestige of a refined form of cosmopolitan living. Enclosed by railings and surrounded by houses they are an iconic London feature. Elizabeth Bowen, Miller's *Regent's Park* neighbour attempted to define the importance that the space had for herself as well as many other writers:

Regent's Park is something more than an enclosed space; it has the character of a terrain on its own – almost, one might feel, a peculiar climate. The impression, on entering by any one of the gates for the first time, is of dreamlike improbability and a certain rawness; as though one were looking upon a masterly but abandoned sketch.⁶⁶

Instead of being characterized as a green space within or amongst the city, it is the separateness of the Park that is crucial to its significance. The first open-air play was staged in a roped-off section of the Inner Circle of Regent's Park in 1932. Phyllis Neilson-Terry played Olivia in *Twelfth Night*. By the end of the Second World War two-thirds of the Terraces built by Nash were unoccupied, given over to subsidence and dry

⁶⁴ Miller, *Regent's Park*, p.99

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.14

⁶⁶ Elizabeth Bowen, 'Regent's Park and St. John's Wood', p.149

rot and almost all had been altered by bombing. 212 of the 374 terrace houses were leased to government ministries whilst a committee decided whether or not to pull them all down for land redevelopment. The terraces were eventually deemed significant enough to preserve and a special mention was made in the ensuing report that 'we would greatly deprecate any further building within the Park itself.'⁶⁷ Its distinctness was secured.

A devotee of the *Mass Observation* movement, Miller would have been one of the many who saw Humphrey Jennings' documentary film *The First Days 1939*. It was produced by the G.P.O. Film Unit as a piece of propaganda for American audiences. Written by Robert Sinclair it presents a 'picture of the London Front.' It opens with Chamberlain's wireless address from 10 Downing Street declaring Britain at war with Germany. Images of empty streets with symmetrically planted plane trees along the pavements recall the Great War paintings of Nash and turn London's residential roads into the trenches of France or Belgium. Regent's Park features frequently. Jennings shows the balloon barrages going up in the Inner Circle and the sandbags lining Park Crescent where the Millers lived at newly-weds. As we watch the soil being shoveled up from bomb craters the narrator declares:

Twenty years of peace and of building up had been overthrown. The devastation of war had claimed even the blades of grass that had brightened the grey winters. The long-forgotten earth of London has seen the light after barren years. It is put to barren use. Sandbags. Sandbags. Millions of sandbags.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Quoted in Ann Saunders, *Regent's Park* (Newton Abbott: David and Charles, 1969), p.168

⁶⁸ *The First Days 1939*, dir. Humphrey Jennings (G.P.O Film Unit, 1939)

The Park itself, as well as the houses that bordered it, was changed by the war from the soil up. The very matter of the earth, the brick, the glass and the stone was altered.

Much like Judith noting the imminent disappearance of the park's railings Elizabeth Bowen recognizes 'the old iron outer gates, unused to shutting, stand so loose on their hinges that one can squeeze through.'⁶⁹ Hinges have rusted; glass and brick and iron will be replaced by paper, cotton and cardboard. Indeed paper in particular becomes a hugely powerful metaphor for both Bowen and Miller when writing about the war. In her preface to *The Demon Lover* Elizabeth Bowen famously maps war 'more as a territory than as a page of history'. Both notions of war rely on paper. In 'Britain in Autumn' (1940) Bowen asserts that:

Our own "things", tables and chairs and lamps, give one kind of confidence to us who choose to stay in our paper rooms.⁷⁰

She goes on to describe, in her essay 'Calico Windows', the construction of the 'cotton and cardboard 1944 summer home, inside the shell of the old home'.⁷¹ Miller uses this image too. At Judith and Robert's wedding party a guest asks:

"Have you seen today's paper?.... All our generation live in paper houses. Who wants foundations when the lid may blow off at any moment?"⁷²

⁶⁹ Elizabeth Bowen, 'Britain in Autumn', *Peoples, Places, Things: Essays by Elizabeth Bowen* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2008), p.52

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.49

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.183

⁷² Miller, *Regent's Park*, p.143

Paper carries on it the printed word and therefore the power to affect and alter. But the paper places written by Bowen and Miller are used to encapsulate the vulnerability of the era. On Harley Street Judith's attention is caught by another newspaper headline that reads: SITUATION CRITICAL. In this moment she realizes that, now happy, she is fearful of war in a way that hadn't been true previously. Instantly her perception of London is altered: the trees above her still had their leaves but their colour had changed to the brassy tone of a 'mature chorus-girl'. The sky is characterized by the quality of paper, it seems to be the 'starch-blue of the paper' in which her flowers were wrapped.⁷³

Miller was not a frequent letter-writer. Some of the (very few) that survive from this period can be found in the Reginald Moore archive at the British Library. Almost all are written on her husband's pale blue medical paper, torn into thirds and turned portrait-length in order to economize. One of the letters records the family returning to their house at 35 Queen's Grove in St John's Wood at the end of the war. All the windows have survived the blitz but the wallpaper has not. It smells, terribly. And has changed colour.

The very final scene of *A Room in Regent's Park* is dedicated to the soldier. Robert, marching with his unit laughs out loud at the sight of a man painting a tree in the nearby field. The attempt to observe and record is as laughable to him now as it was essential to him before the war. And yet Miller continues and we watch as a 'small company of men, walking, head down in the driving mist, rounded a bend in the road,

⁷³ Ibid., p.139

and disappeared from sight.’⁷⁴ The impact of war on people, as well as the landscape and objects around them, would be the focus of Miller’s last two novels.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p.215

Chapter Seven

Paper and Cloth: Unmasking the Second World War

On the Side of the Angels (1945)

In Barbara Noble's London Blitz novel *The House Opposite* (1943), two friends are walking home from work along Tottenham Court Road. Joan jokes to Elizabeth:

I've become very glass-conscious since the raids. I'd no idea there was so much of the stuff till it started to throw itself about. If we want to be rich after the war, we'd better marry glaziers.¹

Joan's jocular dismissal of the enemy agency, the idea that the windows have shattered themselves, is a great joke between them: as is the pun on 'class-conscious'. Her insistence on the notion of normality after the war; not only that they would, of course, survive the raids, but that eligible men would too, is very moving for a twenty-first century reader. Moreover, it is telling that an abstract concept such as 'class', in the linguistic slippage enacted by the situation of war, becomes materialized in London's broken glass.

In Betty Miller's *On the Side of the Angels* (1945), Honor Carmichael sits on her veranda. In the still-warm afternoon sunshine she darns khaki socks, waiting for her

¹ Barbara Noble, *The House Opposite* (London: William Heinemann, 1943), p.44

family to come home from work. At the other end of the village the train whistles by. 'Papers, parcels, passengers, would be arriving: an impulse from the outside world, a series of demands to be met and countered.'² On the train will be her sister Claudia: 'gloved, powdered, crisp still from her contact with the outside world she would bring with her its tokens: newspapers from Cirencester, a woman's journal, cigarettes, sweets perhaps for Peter.'³ Betty Miller's sixth novel, her bestselling one in Britain, is set at some mid-way point of the Second World War. At its core it 'explores the effect on both men and women of war service'⁴ Honor and Claudia are two sisters living in the same house with Honor's husband and son. The khaki socks and various paper objects that Miller describes in this opening scene point to the material language of out which Miller constructs the novel's motifs. These are not the paper rooms of wartime London.⁵ *On the Side of the Angels* is set in the Gloucestershire village of Linfield. Honor's husband Colin is a doctor with R.A.M.C., working at the military hospital that before the war was a mental asylum. Honor's sister Claudia, the schoolmistress, is staying with them. Claudia's fiancée Andrew Pierse lives close by: he is a lawyer whose weak heart and lungs have invalidated him out of the army. For Honor, the most terrifying aspect of the war is the thought that Colin might be *posted* overseas. In this semantic slippage, war turns people into paper. They are inseparable from the pieces of paper that define them.

² Betty Miller, *On the Side of the Angels* (London: Capuchin Classics, 2012), p.27

³ *Ibid.*, p.28

⁴ Elizabeth Maslen, *Political and Social Issues in British Women's Fiction: 1928-68* (London: Palgrave, 2001), p.159

⁵ As seen in Miller's previous novel, *A Room in Regent's Park*.

As Jenny Hartley writes, war is all-pervasive in *On the Side of the Angels*: ‘everything must be interpreted in its ubiquitous language and grammar’.⁶ When we glance down a side street, for example, Miller shows us the neat stone houses with their ‘lace curtains parted to reveal a neutral triangle of the room within.’⁷ When Claudia is nearly tempted into running off with the heroic new officer Captain Herriot, Honor is astounded, creating a new intimate conflict between the two sisters. Once again in Miller’s narrative it is the stranger who has the ability to effect change. In Jane Miller’s feminist reading:

The novel delicately illustrates the difficulties women experience even in recognizing one another so long as they deny what has kept them apart: the character of their individual and collective susceptibility to both the meretricious and the heroic in male culture.⁸

But Herriot is revealed as a fraud: he has actually just been performing the role of Commando. By dressing up in the uniform of one, everyone he meets assumes that he must be so. The far-reaching question of what it means to wear a military uniform is a fundamental one for the novel. As Victoria Stewart asserts, it ‘uses the figure of an impostor to look towards the long-term consequences on society of the violence of war.’⁹ These two material things, paper and cloth, are not just inert surfaces laid out *beneath* some markings.¹⁰ Herriot’s status is marked by his green beret and by the ‘flash’ on his sleeve. The identity cards that every citizen was forced to carry around with them legitimized their being.

⁶ Jenny Hartley, *Millions Like Us: British Women’s Fiction of the Second World War* (London: Virago, 1997), p.173

⁷ Miller, *Angels*, p.53

⁸ Jane Miller, *Seductions: Studies in Reading and Culture* (London: Virago, 1990), p.20

⁹ Victoria Stewart, *Narratives of Memory: British Writing of the 1940s* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p.153

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Paper Machine*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p.42

We're all prisoners of war, Claudia asserts hesitatingly to Mrs Pierse who nods her agreement. 'We don't have much liberty, these days. Filling out forms for this, filling out forms for that....Prisoners of war – that's about it.'¹¹ The history of paper is not the same thing as a history of the book, nor of writing. There was writing before there was paper.¹² But the significance of paper in Miller's books is striking. In the library, Colin chooses from the shelf a volume that 'attracted his attention by its canary yellow binding.'¹³ He makes his decision without reading the title, or the author, or the blurb on the cover but based purely on the paper's ability to set itself apart from something similar.¹⁴ Stevie Smith's narrator Pompey, in *The Novel on Yellow Paper*, makes sure to distinguish the novel she is writing from her office work by changing the colour of the paper on which she writes.

I am typing this book on yellow paper... It is very yellow paper, and it is this very yellow paper because often sometimes I am typing it in my room at my office, and the paper I use for Sir Phoebus's letters is blue paper with his name across the corner.¹⁵

The letters, newspapers, novels, blueprints, wallpaper, postcards, photographs and journals in Miller's novels are all objects that articulate 'the plastic and material language...through which the bourgeoisie expresses itself.'¹⁶ Bryher's memoir of the war years, dedicated to the Lowndes Group, describes the regular sight of people sleeping on underground platforms on layers of old newspapers. 'I was assured that the 'Times' was

¹¹ Miller, *Angels*, p.85

¹² Ian Sansom, *Paper: An Elegy* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012)

¹³ Miller, *Angels*, p.210

¹⁴ The yellow dust-jacket is recognizably from the publishing house of Victor Gollancz.

¹⁵ Stevie Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper* (London: Virago, 1980), p.15

¹⁶ Julia Prewitt Brown, *The Bourgeois Interior* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2008), p.3

the thickest and most comfortable.¹⁷ As we can infer from Bryher's anecdote, not all paper objects hold equal value. Captain Herriot, in *On the Side of the Angels* is only caught when it comes out that he doesn't have the right papers. In the film *The Third Man* (1949) based on Graham Greene's novella, Anna Schmidt's physical and emotional vulnerability is made clear to the viewer when her forged identification papers are seized by the police, along with the love letters from Harry Limes that she had kept hidden. In return, the police offer her a receipt that she dismisses as meaningless to her. Having the correct papers is crucial. *They Met in the Dark* is a 1943 film adaptation of a thriller by Anthony Gilbert. Lieutenant Commander Richard Francis Heritage and Laura Verity attempt to unmask a German spy ring. The intricacies of the plot hang on faked naval orders in various sealed envelopes. Verity's dependence on Heritage becomes necessary when her bag is stolen: she has no identification papers and no money. The film's climax takes place in a magic show. Heritage announces to a shocked audience: 'During this apparently harmless entertainment...secret orders have been stolen from a naval officer and fake ones substituted.' One of the most memorable scenes in *On the Side of the Angels* is when a German plane crashes just outside of the camp. The dead pilot becomes an instant celebrity:

Everybody seemed to know exactly what the dead soldier looked like; how old he was; where he came from; what he wore; what papers he carried: details of these – the photographs, letters, bread-tickets, identity-cards – were a subject of open discussion not only in the hospital and the village but in the entire neighbourhood.¹⁸

It is impossible that his papers would have survived the crash. But the whole neighbourhood collectively imagines what he would have been carrying with him

¹⁷ Bryher, *The Days of Mars: A Memoir 1940-6* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1972), p.77

¹⁸ Miller, *Angels*, p.174

because otherwise he would never have existed. The burnt-out wreckage of the plane is not enough evidence of a life; we need the papers to prove it.

As with most of her novels, Miller first worked out some of her ideas for *On the Side of the Angels* in a short story. 'Press Button B' was published in *John O'London's Weekly* and reprinted in a 1947 collection of short stories by Jewish writers. In it she identified the overlapping materials of war.

She had almost forgotten what it was like to look through a normal pane of glass. The edges of this one had been painted with black-out paint, evenly, like the border of a mourning-card: anti-splinter net masked the surface: a strip of black-out paper was stuck with drawing pins across the pelmet: and beneath the pre-war curtains were the black-out ones, a lurking pall behind the innocuous rosiness of chintz.¹⁹

Kay is getting fat. She lives at Crophorne Guest House with her mother, Mrs Wareing. She feels relegated to a small quiet town away from the danger and excitement of the Blitz. All the occupants of the guest house are women so Kay has almost no contact with men until an RAF officer from the nearby air-base comes to inquire after a room for his aunt. Flying Officer Llewellyn displays above one breast-pocket, 'the embroidered motif: the spread wings. Her eyes became fixed; the significance of these struck her, forcibly: a blatant symbol of freedom, of escape.'²⁰ Llewellyn's uniform also stimulates in Kay a simultaneously pleasurable and terrifying response to its representation of authorized violence. She pretends to go out after dinner to post a letter. In fact she stops at the telephone booth, determined to do some living and call the officer as he had suggested.

¹⁹ Betty Miller, 'Press Button B', *In England and in English: A Collection of Modern Stories by Jewish Authors* ed., William Goldman (London: Art and Educational Publishers, 1947), p.130

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.131

He does not answer. The operator instructs her to ‘Press Button B’ to get her money back.

She ‘mechanically’ does as she is told.

Her coins, that might have purchased so much, shot forth, rejected: they subsided into the slot with a dull rattle, and lay there, unwanted, valueless. After a moment, Kay picked them up and went away.²¹

The seductive power that the military uniform has over women is central to *On the Side of the Angels*, as is the juxtaposition of feminine domesticity alongside the violence represented by those men in uniform. ‘Dressing up for war controls the meaning and movement of the novel.’²²

On the Side of the Angels occupies similar territory to Elizabeth Taylor’s *At Mrs Lippincote’s*. Both describe domestic life in a military camp in the English countryside. Both husbands resent the responsibilities of married life in a rented house during the war and their marriages suffer for it. Having their family so close to their peers feels like an attempt to wrest them out of the militaristic ideas by which they are so absorbed.²³ These two opposing institutions encroach upon each other spatially, but also linguistically. In a night-time raid, Claudia watches searchlights spring up over Linfield. ‘A moment later, and another, then yet another sprang up: noiselessly, they fenced; noiselessly met and clashed, tip to tip, until the shining blades were arched above the earth like swords at a bridal procession.’²⁴ The fiction of the Second World War was

²¹ Ibid., p.138

²² Jenny Hartley, ‘Warriors and Healers, Imposters and Mothers: Betty Miller’s *On the Side of the Angels*’ in *Dressing up for War: Transformations of Gender and Genre in the Discourse and Literature of War*, ed., Aranzazu Usandizaga and Andrew Monnickendam (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2001), p.173

²³ Elizabeth Maslen, *Political and Social Issues in British Women’s Fiction: 1928-1968* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p.160

²⁴ Miller, *Angels*, p.79

never, as Rod Mengham writes, too far away from the house, either architecturally or socially.²⁵ But the peculiar adjacency of the domestic and the military of life at a camp opens up new sites of personal conflict. For example, the Sports Day is held at the military hospital, Linfield Park. Requisitioned by the military at the outbreak of war, it is a former lunatic asylum. Old Mrs. Carey remains on living at the lodge: she sits in her basket-chair behind the lace-curtained windows. The inpatients have their own mental hierarchy. The seriously wounded who have come back from their tours overseas stand nobly at the top but the majority of the other patients, injured in training accidents whilst still at home, pull their caps down over their eyes to avoid the undeserved 'sympathetic admiration' from the villagers.²⁶ And the narrator makes it clear that 'through no fault of their own, they had done nothing to deserve' the different uniforms that they are forced to wear and that conspicuously mark them out.

The blue coats of the patients, the white of the athletes, the khaki of the officers and the men, the flashing veils and scarlet-lined capes of the Sisters, forming a bright, incoherent pattern; like the component parts of a vast jigsaw puzzle, shuffled and re-shuffled in the effort to find a final and harmonious solution.²⁷

This vast jigsaw puzzle is the institution of the British military. But it is the German soldier who first holds the attention of the village. In her war diary Frances Partridge remarks that the likelihood of a German parachutist landing in a nearby field, dressed up as a nun or clergyman has become 'a good farcical subject on which to let off steam.'²⁸ When the pilot who dies in *On the Side of the Angels* is found (without his imaginary

²⁵ Rod Mengham, 'British Fiction of the War' in *Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II*, edited by Marina MacKay (Cambridge: CUP, 2009), p.41

²⁶ Miller, *Angels*, p.97

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.98

²⁸ Frances Partridge, 'May 13, 1940' in *A Pacifist's War* (London: Phoenix, 1999), p.39

papers) he is ‘furlled in the silken shroud of his parachute.’²⁹ Edith, the Carmichaels’ cook, stands fixed, gazing at the procession of his coffin down the high street. She is unable to stop staring at ‘the vivid red and black swastika. Here, tangible to them for the first time, was the enemy. Here were his emblems: here at last was his very body, which even in death had not lost the menace, the mysterious potency that enmity itself endowed it with.’³⁰ The German’s swastika, like Llewellyn’s ‘wings’ and, as we shall see, Captain Herriot’s commando flash has the power to captivate, even to seduce. His cloth-made paraphernalia, the nets and parachutes found with his dead body, are as much a part of him as, for example, the blue coats or khaki of the British soldiers participating in the Army sports day.

Andrew Pierse is Claudia’s fiancé. He is the only man in the novel who does not wear a uniform and is therefore not subsumed by its militaristic masculinity. He wears a pair of grey flannel trousers that do not fit with regulation crispness, but hang loosely off his hips. On his feet are matt sandals instead of shiny black boots and his white shirt strikes Claudia as unfamiliar after only seeing men in khaki for so long. She watches him walk in front of her like a small boy, ‘whistling abstractedly’ and kicking at dust.’³¹ Andrew is very aware of his lack of uniform. The song he whistles is an old nursery rhyme:

Oh, soldier, soldier, will you marry me,
With your musket, fife and drum?
Oh, no, sweet maid, I cannot marry you,
For I have no coat to put on.³²

²⁹ Miller, *Angels*, p.174

³⁰ Ibid., p.175

³¹ Ibid., p.39

³² Ibid., p.48

Claudia blushes when Andrew correctly tells her that she'll miss out on the thrill of being on the arm of a soldier in uniform. He tells her:

I want you to realize that when you agreed to marry me, you did so largely because I was in fancy dress. In uniform...You became engaged to the soldier, Claudia; not to me...It was the sight of the khaki that did it in the end – the brass buttons, the tin hat, the revolver – the paraphernalia of power.³³

Claudia denies that this is the case, but then is seduced by Captain Herriot. Adam Piette reads Andrew's truth in Evelyn Waugh's *Put Out More Flags* (1942). Basil Seal is the 'shapeshifter of the tale, the master of efficient action defined as duplicity, intrigue and power to create fictional selves.'³⁴ Seal spends the novel simultaneously looking for a uniform and also avoiding how to wear one dutifully. He quips:

There's a lot to be said for a uniform [...] it's the best possible disguise for a man of intelligence. No one ever suspects a soldier of taking a serious interest in the war.³⁵

Whilst Seal is 'capable of infusing patriotic, military desire in the women who dream him' he is unable to convince anyone in the military of the same dream.³⁶ Yet Andrew insists that War shows us our true moral fabric: 'You've got to have a war to show where people's real values lie. A war turns us inside out, shows the lining.'³⁷

Honor isn't seduced by men in uniform, she is puzzled by them. The sight of the Colonel in his formal mess kit lends him, she thinks, 'a curiously theatrical, Ouida-esque appearance, which confuses her slightly:

³³ Ibid., p47

³⁴ Adam Piette, *Imagination at War: British Fiction and Poetry 1939-45* (London: Papermac, 1995), p.89

³⁵ Evelyn Waugh, *Put Out More Flags* (London: Penguin 2000), p.150

³⁶ Piette, *Imagination at War*, p.90

³⁷ Betty Miller, *On the Side of the Angels* (London: Capuchin Classics, 2012), p.47

His strong neck bulged slightly over the upstanding collar of the jacket; the cigar stuck out of his mouth at an angle, like a thermometer; he looked powerful, dangerous, amiable. Standing there so close to him, she sensed the power in him, experienced the full force of the man's personality as Colin might do; but unlike Colin she was not overborne, she did not succumb to the undoubted magnetism he exercised; on the contrary, she was deeply antagonized; repelled, without knowing why.³⁸

The elaborate uniforms, designed to reinforce masculine ideals in a time of war, strike Honor as being for the eyes of other men rather than her own. She is more concerned by the fact that she is unable to place her husband. She remembers the other Colin, the 'black-coated, pin-striped, the rising young doctor.... What had happened since then?' In the inverse version of events to her sister, Honor meets her husband out of military uniform. She realises that it was, in fact, the uniform that changed him.

It was if the anonymity conferred on him by uniform gave him a new sense of freedom and irresponsibility: as if he were masked, and, being masked, privileged, in a sort of carnival spirit, to conduct himself in a manner wholly alien to his normal way of life.³⁹

Faced with the privilege of the male uniform Honor becomes ashamed of her femininity: 'the fullness, the slipshod contours, of all that was inchoate, ununiformed about her.'⁴⁰ Colin's uniform allows him to mask himself but Honor's lack of uniform becomes, for her, a perceived lack of uniformity. As Victoria Stewart notes, it is a costume that has a profound impact on the individual's relationship with those who remain, for reasons of gender or unfitness, outside the ranks.⁴¹ Honor knows that regularity is key component of the military ideals to which she is exposed, but not within.

³⁸ Ibid., pp.159-60

³⁹ Ibid., p.119

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.56

⁴¹ Victoria Stewart , 'Masculinity, Masquerade and the Second World War: Betty Miller's *On the Side of the Angels*', *Conflict, Nationhood and Corporeality in Modern Literature: Bodies at War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), p. 124

Hats are the item of clothing by which women in the novel confer authority. Lady Brent's majestic straw hat, hilariously perched atop her enormous beehive of hair, is given an entire page of text. Honor, dressing to go to the sports day events wants to put on an intricate dress and hat, but Colin doesn't want her to wear anything fussy; 'He hates that. He doesn't want me to be conspicuous....'⁴² Herriot, on the other hand, publically treats his beret nonchalantly in order to assert his indifference to authority. When he walks in to the Blue Trout for an evening drink he flings it across the room where it lands on the coat-rack. But after diving in to a ditch to avoid a bomb he fastidiously brushes it clean with his jacket cuff.

In one of her autobiographical 'pieces' from 1945, Miller remembers her childhood fascination with the Kaiser. She and her sister, growing up during the First World War, were so compelled by him that they formed a secret society in his honour. The enemy, she reflects 'closer to us, more pertinently a part of our own being during time of war that at any other period in our relationship with him. It is when we are officially at war, therefore, that we are, unofficially, most susceptible to each other's influence.'⁴³ She continues:

The term, 'Fifth Columnist' had not then been invented: nor, if it had, might it have occurred to those responsible to look for its members in the nursery [...] Heresy begins at home: it is precisely in the nursery that the future victims or members of the Gestapo are busy perfecting their weapons, maturing, with regard to authority, an attitude either of compliance or rebellion.⁴⁴

⁴² Ibid., p.107

⁴³ Betty Miller, 'Notes for an Unwritten Autobiography' in *Modern Reading No. 13*, (London: Wells Gardner, Darton and Company, 1945), p. 39

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 41

One afternoon, Honor finds Edith in the rose bushes. Edith sheepishly tells her that she is collecting flowers to put on the German pilot's grave. Honor lets her have as many as she can carry, but she cannot look at them in Edith's hand. The act isn't treacherous: it is pitiful, she thinks.⁴⁵ When Honor tells Colin, however, he recognizes Edith's actions as 'a form of hate, really [...] She probably hates us all and feels the enemy is really her ally.'⁴⁶ With this new pronouncement of Edith's 'Fifth Columnism' Honor just nods, unperturbed. She goes back to her darning, 'resuming that essential maintenance and repair work, emotional no less than practical, which derives from the feminine desire to preserve at all costs the *status quo*.'⁴⁷ Facing all around her the symbols of war, Honor cannot enforce change, she can only try to maintain. Her only impact is when breastfeeding: the stillness, the peacefulness that both she and her child experience, permeates the whole house.⁴⁸

In *Brideshead Revisited* Waugh wrote, 'we keep company in this world with a hoard of abstractions and reflexions and counterfeits of ourselves.'⁴⁹ Faced with a very real enemy, the figure of the imposter was a particularly commanding one in wartime fiction. They are, for example, a central theme in Elizabeth Taylor's *A Wreath of Roses* (1949). A man who claims that his name is Richard provides some romantic excitement in Camilla's repetitive existence. He starts to half-believe the stories he has spun her but he is, in fact, a criminal on the run. In her introduction to the section on the

⁴⁵ Ibid., p.179

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.181

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.181

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp.245-6

⁴⁹ Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1945), p.198

Second World War of her collection of war-writings Martha Gellhorn, an American, observes:

When [the English] are really up against it, their negative qualities turn positive, in a glorious somersault. Slowness, understatement, complacency change into endurance, a refusal to panic, and pride, the begetter of self-discipline. What is “not done” is to be a crook or a coward.⁵⁰

The military imposter was the ultimate male ‘crook’ in wartime fiction. For female characters, it was infidelity that cast them as corrupt. Jenny Hartley, citing Elizabeth Taylor’s *At Mrs Lippincote’s*, Betty Miller’s *On the Side of the Angels* and Winifred Peck’s *There is a Fortress* (all published in 1945), notes that ‘novels about women who contemplate and reject the idea of having affairs proliferated towards the end of the war.’⁵¹ Significantly, for all of the women in these novels, just the idea is, in the end, enough.

Whilst *On the Side of the Angels* chiefly sees military uniforms as a tool used by men to seduce women, it recognizes the un-gendered presence of camouflage too. Honor, one evening, is forced to wear the disguise of an energetic hostess so that none of her guests will pay attention to her. Claudia, a history teacher, has perfected her disguise so well that ‘on occasion she was not sure where the camouflage ended.’ As she undresses ‘item by item, she stripped from her the personality of her working hours: the disguise of ‘Miss Abbott,’ assistant mistress at Waverley Park Girls’ School: a disguise that must defy speculation and impose the fiction of its wholeness upon the adolescent mind.’⁵²

The painter Roland Penrose was a fundamental advocate of camouflage techniques in the

⁵⁰ Martha Gellhorn, *The Face of War* (London: Virago, 1986), p.86

⁵¹ Jenny Hartley, *Millions Like Us: British Women’s Fiction of the Second World War* (London: Virago, 1997), p.69

⁵² Miller, *Angels*, p.30

Second World War, running the Camouflage Development and Training Centre at Farnham Castle and writing the practical *Home Guard Manual of Camouflage*. His work laid out the two primary methods of camouflage: crypsis, which helps hide an object against its background and mimesis, which disguises an object as something else.⁵³ As well as these two techniques, characters in *On the Side of the Angels* employ another form of camouflage: dazzle patterns. These work not by concealment, but by confusion and are, the text suggests, the most effective kind. Regular camouflage has become so commonplace in Linfield that it is noticeable only when it is absent. The cars parked outside the Blue Trout Hotel are both: ‘civilian and military, the latter camouflaged in the now familiar McKnight Kauffer designs.’⁵⁴ Not only is the design familiar, its designer is too.

Dazzling camouflage works on the premise that one of the ways we can hide is by moving or removing shadow. Herriot is a master of it. His green beret is beguiling but it is the commando flash on his sleeve that blinds everyone at Linfield to the fact that he is actually a married bank manager and not really a war hero. He likes to control the light sources around him, often standing directly under a light, smiling to expose his gleaming white teeth.⁵⁵ During the nighttime raid when Claudia sees swords of light in the sky, Colin and Herriot are caught out, returning home late from a function. Stumbling in the dark, Colin gets out his torch: ‘the light swung upwards: they saw each other’s faces, bleached and startled, overhanging the darkness. ‘Hey – turn that down,’ Herriot said.

⁵³ Roland Penrose, *Home Guard Manual of Camouflage* (London: G. Routledge and Sons, 1941)

⁵⁴ Miller, *Angels*, p.53

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.71

‘It’s like a ruddy searchlight.’⁵⁶ Andrew, however, is unaffected by Herriot’s dazzle. He ‘at all times saw the world about him accurately and without any colouring of enchantment.’⁵⁷ He recognizes that Colin’s feelings of depression were due to the fact that the war could not last forever ‘like a curtain being rung down on a glittering and exciting show’.⁵⁸

Lloyd is the only one of the officers to see Herriot clearly: ‘You overestimate the man, I think. He strikes me as a thoroughly trivial sort of person, rather objectionable, if anything.’⁵⁹ But it is Andrew who, outside of the army, is able to see the various stories that people are telling themselves and each other. He tells Claudia that she must ‘find out who is the reality, as far you’re concerned – Herriot or me. Which is real to you – the life Herriot stands for – or the life I can offer you?’⁶⁰ He knows that Claudia’s marriage to Herriot would be ‘a sham – a charade – a pretty grim one, in the end.’⁶¹

More radically, Andrew’s position on the war is a personal one. He claims that ‘we’re not fighting something local and external, labeled Fascism – we’re wrestling with our own deepest inclinations and desires [...] There’s a Fifth Columnist inside every one of us.’⁶² Only towards the very end of the novel, when Herriot lures her in to a conversation on courage of identity, does Claudia believe this too. She advocates the necessary struggle with that latent internal fascism: ‘We’ve got to learn how *not* to be

⁵⁶ Ibid., p.78

⁵⁷ Ibid., p.139

⁵⁸ Ibid., p.142

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.105

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.173

⁶¹ Ibid., p.201

⁶² Ibid., p.94

ourselves – to have the courage, the strength to be something else. Otherwise there never *will* be any progress.’ Tellingly, Herriot misunderstands, agreeing that life should be ‘a glorified fancy-dress ball.’⁶³ Claudia now recognizes that the qualities that she found most seductive in Herriot were the mythologised conventions of a man outside the ordinary realm of her existence. Of course, she thinks, a local schoolteacher is infatuated with the idea of heroic man who has proved himself away on exotic battlefields. The fact that he will have killed in order to do so only makes him more alluring; it is something that she has never experienced. Her desire for Herriot over Andrew compounds the reassuring belief in humanity’s perverse attraction to violence as something ‘other’. But, as the exposure of Herriot’s (im)posturing illuminates, ‘that violence itself is a façade, a fake.’⁶⁴ She articulates this with the analogy of Cain and Abel: ‘We hate Abel, the guiltless man, the victim; it’s Cain we love: Cain, the killer. And we permit war in order to justify that love in our hearts.’⁶⁵ It is Andrew, now Herriot’s lawyer, who explains to Claudia that Herriot was really a small-town bank manager and a member of the Home Guard. Frustrated with his inability to be what he considered a real soldier he swapped the H.G. badge for the Commando flash.

On the Side of the Angels was, as Jenny Hartley states, an ‘extraordinary novel to write during the war, amidst the rhetoric of the just war and the people’s war that dominated contemporary attitudes in Britain, Miller presents her subtle study of

⁶³ Ibid., p.200

⁶⁴ Ibid., p248

⁶⁵ Ibid., p227

militarism and aggression.’⁶⁶ But should we be amazed? Dominant discourses of propaganda and mythology often mask the minor literature that acts as the cultural Fifth Columnist. Nonetheless, echoing Sarah Sceats, it is important to recognize how easy it is for modern day readers with the hindsight of nearly seventy years of evidence to understand the ‘disruptions of the Second World War went much further and much deeper than its manifest effects.’⁶⁷ The novel was dedicated to her brother, Henry William Spiro, who was missing, presumed killed when the HMS Firedrake was torpedoed in December 1942 during the Battle of the Atlantic. It was therefore written with a very immediate sense of the impact of war. *On the Side of the Angels* was reprinted by Virago Press in 1985 and remaindered in 1991.⁶⁸ Sarah Miller was offered the leftover copies for twenty pence each. It was, however, reprinted again in 2012 by Capuchin Classics. For a novel in which the textures of paper and cloth are so prominent, its position as the most physically available of all of Miller’s novels is almost fated. The scarcity of her earlier fiction is, however, a testament to the novel’s narrative in which the materiality of the physical world is impacted by war just as profoundly as the moral one is.

Miller delivered her manuscript to Robert Hale in 1944 but it was not published until 1945 because of the wartime paper shortage. Paul Fussell has called this period the

⁶⁶ Jenny Hartley, ‘Warriors and Healers, Imposters and Mothers: Betty Miller’s *On the Side of the Angels*’ in *Dressing up for War: Transformations of Gender and Genre in the Discourse and Literature of War*, ed., Aranzazu Usandizaga and Andrew Monnickendam (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2001), p.175

⁶⁷ Sarah Sceats, ‘Souls Astray: Belonging and the Idea of Home: Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Heat of the Day*, Betty Miller’s *On the Side of the Angels* and *Death of the Nightingale* and Muriel Spark’s *Memento Mori*’, *Women’s Writing 1945-60: After the Deluge*, ed. Jane Dowson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p.92

⁶⁸ Lynn Knight, Letter to Sarah Miller, 1st February 1991, British Library, Virago Papers, Add. MS. 88904/1/290 4061A

‘Age of Anthologies’.⁶⁹ Books were bought at an unprecedented rate, and literary magazines, such as Penguin New Writing, flourished when their mixture of short stories, articles and poetry was found to be particularly ‘war-friendly’. But I intend to discuss a specific historical moment that meant that thousands of works, specifically from the 1930s, came to be out of print: the Blitz.

The publishing industry, like most others, faced unexpected upheaval with the outbreak of the Second World War. Printers and binders were flooded with work producing propaganda and public service information for the government. Skilled men from all the major publishing houses were conscripted, resulting in a noticeably depleted workforce. By the summer of 1940, for example, the Oxford University Press notes that they had ‘already sent nearly 200 young men to the fighting services.’⁷⁰ A few publishers, however, did thrive: the war would be the making of Allen Lane’s Penguin Books whose small standard format made economic use of paper and could be easily carried about. Classics that portrayed a calmer, more stable Britain were popular war-time reading (or re-reading) so it seems that Anthony Trollope and Jane Austen novels were amongst the most borrowed items from the few remaining public libraries but D. H. Lawrence fell out of favour.⁷¹

Demand for books initially slumped during the first few months of the war but, more broadly, the appetite for new work far exceeded the amount that publishers were

⁶⁹ Paul Fussell, *Understanding and Behaviour in the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.245

⁷⁰ Quoted in Juliet Gardiner, *Wartime Britain 1939-45* (London: Headline, 2005), p.485

⁷¹ Richard Todd, *Consuming Fictions* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p.110

able to supply. In fact, over 200 small, niche presses were able to set up business, printing pure escapism in the form of sexy westerns and gangster novels. The majority of London's more established publishers had their offices huddled around the medieval streets of Paternoster Row, next to St Paul's Cathedral. Whilst the cathedral famously survived the German air raids of the Blitz, the centre of the British book trade did not remain unscathed. On 29th December 1940, nearly six million books were destroyed in the targeted bombing of the area.⁷² Amongst those effected were the old established firms such as Agatha Christie's publisher Collins and Hodder and Stoughton who had put out the first edition of *Alice in Wonderland*. Longman, who had been trading on the cobbled street for nearly two hundred years, was demolished, as was its warehouse in Bermondsey: on that night it lost three million books alone. Symbolically, the offices of *The Bookseller* magazine were hit and the largest wholesale and distribution centre, Simpkin Marshall, was also destroyed. It should also be noted that 160 civilians died that night in what has since become known as The Second Great Fire of London.

If a publisher left London they faced distribution problems due to the disrupted transport network and so most had stayed. But in 1939, anticipating the war, Gollancz moved most of his firm from Covent Garden to the shed at his country house in Berkshire. The packing continued to be done in Henrietta Street where there was a skeleton staff who stayed to send out review copies and meet with agents.⁷³ As a result the Gollancz offices, unlike many others', were spared the direct impact of the Blitz. The

⁷² Ruth Dudley Edwards, *Victor Gollancz* (London: Gollancz, 1987), p.133

⁷³ Sheila Hodges, *Gollancz: The Story of a Publishing House 1928-78* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1978), p.144

following year, however, an incendiary bomb hit Leighton Straker, Gollancz's bookbinders, where most of their stock was stored.⁷⁴

The Gollancz production books, now at the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick, detail every item printed and sold by Gollancz and show exactly what was lost in Leighton's bomb.⁷⁵ In total, roughly fifty per cent of all the as yet unsold stock that Gollancz published between 1932 and 1939 was destroyed in the Blitz. Not, of course, including any of the stock printed before or after those years, nor what was in the numerous bookshops that were hit, or the editions that were lost from the personal bookshelves of the million or so houses that were bombed in the London Blitz.

For a bibliophile, these numbers are shocking. For a businessman such as Gollancz, they were terrifying. For many of the writers whose work was lost it meant falling out of print indefinitely. Along with Miller's first three novels, plays by H.M. Harwood, Merton Hodge and John Van Druten; non-fiction by Clare Leighton, Klaus Mann and Naomi Mitchison and fiction by Elizabeth Jenkins, Louis Golding, Robert Goodyear, R.C. Sherriff and Helen Ashton were destroyed. What is important to note is that most of the titles that were lost would have been the company's slower sellers: copies of Dorothy L Sayers' books, for example, never stayed at the binder's warehouse for long because they were so hugely popular. The editions that went out of print due to the bombing were those of the type which are still the hardest to sell today: poetry pamphlets; short story collections; prose and hardback literary fiction. In other words,

⁷⁴ Ibid., p.156

⁷⁵ Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, Gollancz, MSS.318/2/1/7-14

they were the editions that were the least likely to be printed in the first place, and very unlikely to be reprinted at the end of the initial run.

The majority of these slow-sellers have never been reprinted. The first difficulty was the fact that it was so very difficult to print anything during the war. With Germany's invasion of Norway, just four months after that 'Second Great Fire of London', Britain's main source of paper was lost. Paper rationing was introduced as a result, with publishers allocated a small percentage of their pre-war consumption. This meant that they could only print approximately a third of what they had done in the year leading up to the war. In 1939, nearly fifteen thousand books were published in Britain but by 1945 it was less than half that.⁷⁶ The Ministry of Information occasionally allocated extra paper if it felt a book served 'a good purpose' which led to the feeling amongst publishers that it was censoring books that it didn't want to see published. George Orwell, for example, was convinced that this was true for *Animal Farm*, a novel that Gollancz infamously turned down for publication. In March 1942, the Ministry of Supply agreed to release an extra 250 tons of paper for books of 'national importance'. But by the following year the paper used to print books had been recycled so many times, and was so thin, that it was said to resemble toilet paper.⁷⁷

The Ministry of Supply, attempting to collect resources for the war effort, launched a salvage drive to collect pre-war books and astonishingly, 56 million were collected (roughly the population of Britain at the time). Five million of these were sent

⁷⁶ Valerie Holman, *Print for Victory: Book Publishing in England 1939-45* (London: British Library, 2008), p.30

⁷⁷ Juliet Gardiner, *Wartime Britain 1939-45* (London: Headline, 2005), p.486

to troops overseas and the rest were pulped.⁷⁸ No record of what was donated exists but it is fair to assume that included in those fifty million or so pulped books will have almost certainly been some of Betty Miller's work. It is estimated that in total, twenty million books were destroyed in the Blitz. We know from Gollancz's production books that roughly 3,000 of these were editions of Betty Miller's first three novels. We also know that the market is the primary force of the canon: unless those novels are reprinted it seems unlikely that Miller's writing will ever receive a wider readership.

Lawrence Rainey uses the case of the poet H.D. to argue that the politicization of cultural discussion has marked a move away from assessing the literary quality of work. It is, he attests, important to remember that the status of a writer is not the same thing as the status of the texts that they produced; that critics must focus primarily on what is the work doing in any evaluation of 'marginal'. He dismisses the very premise of the notion that gendered assumptions of literary value have excluded women from the institutions of the canon, how cultural concepts interact with cultural practices. Nonetheless his framework points towards how bibliographical context is a necessary part of an evaluation of Betty Miller's writing. It is irretrievable from the 'institutional pressures' that bear on the work.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p.487

Chapter Eight

A Question of Legacy

The Death of the Nightingale (1949)

In 1949 Inez Holden wrote an article for the *Nineteenth Century Magazine* called ‘Some Women Writers’. It was, she explained, a response to a discussion held on the BBC in which it was said that ‘some women writers had restless fidgety prose styles – like a woman searching desperately in an overcrowded handbag for a lipstick or a powder puff.’¹ Holden argues in her preface that the term ‘women writers’ is now in itself redundant since no one would speak of ‘men writers.’ There are now a great many successful women writers in England and it is one of the few professions in which there is equal pay for equal work.² She has, she states, chosen five books to review, from the dozen or so of ‘great quality, written by women [...] none in a fidgety style’ that were published that year.³

Ivy Compton-Burnett’s *Two Worlds and Their Ways* is set in the late nineteenth century with a school teacher and the wife of a headmaster revealing something about

¹ Inez Holden, ‘Some Women Writers’ in *Nineteenth Century*, Vol. 146, (August 1949), pp.130-6

² This assertion is characteristic of Holden’s body of writing in which pay and the workplace tend to be her central concern. *Ibid.*, p.130

³ *Ibid.*, p.130

‘feminine characteristics.’ ‘The art of Miss Compton-Burnett’, Holden writes using a deliberately feminine metaphor ‘is rather like an elaborate piece of needlework, you can see the stitches, or you can see the whole design. If you wish you can examine both at once.’⁴ Stevie Smith’s *The Holiday*, the next book on Holden’s list for examination, is written ‘like a restless driver who is not halted by the lights, she chanches the amber, and gets well ahead and, as it turns out, the journey is a great success.’⁵ Elizabeth Bowen, in *The Heat of the Day* ‘writes about individuals struggling against, or swimming with, the current of violent outside events. Other writers have recently done the same thing. But Elizabeth Bowen does it better.’⁶ Cicely Mackworth ‘uses the talents of a poet in telling the touching story of *Francois Villon*.’⁷

The other book Holden praises in this article is Betty Miller’s *The Death of the Nightingale*. It is, she tells us, the story of ‘two men politically opposed who each believed themselves in the right, two points of view which can never meet. Betty Miller tells the story rather well and she does not lose sight of her main philosophical theme; she writes with sensitivity and with wit.’⁸ This was Miller’s final novel before she became a scholar and biographer of Victorian poets. In it the problems of troubled identity, doubles, masks and imposters linger from her previous one, *On the Side of the Angels*. The other novels in Holden’s article also seem to continue from their writers’ previous works. Stevie Smith’s novel *The Holiday* was written during the Second World War

⁴ Ibid., p.131

⁵ Ibid., p.132

⁶ Ibid., p.135

⁷ Ibid., p.136

⁸ But for Holden the novel is too full of sub-plot and too slowly paced. ‘Reading Betty Miller’s book is rather like being taken for a country walk with someone who has promised to tell you all about strange murderous ‘goings-on’ in the village.’ Ibid., p.134

years but only published in 1949. Smith decided to update the novel's action and delete references to the war being ongoing. As Victoria Stewart notes, Smith's narrator Celia comments: 'It is a year or so after the war. It cannot be said that it is post-war; this will probably go on for ten years.'⁹ Indeed Bowen's novel *The World of Love* (1955) extends this idea of post-war legacy even further. Its first line reminds an attentive reader of the novel that Holden reviewed with so much praise: 'The sun rose on a landscape still pale with the heat of the day before.'¹⁰ As Gill Plain has so rightly asserted, the concept of 'Post-war' emerges at the same moment of war.¹¹

Reginald Moore wrote to Betty Miller in the June of 1946, asking for more of her writing for him to publish in *The Windmill*. On 1st September she replied that unfortunately she had 'no new work at the moment, as we have just returned to town and I am practically re-building the house single-handed.'¹² Professor Cain, the symbolic protagonist of *The Death of the Nightingale*, lives in a small village in his family home 'Bishop's House'. He is intellectual and aloof; his house is both the place to which he retreats and a figuration of Cain's insistence on stability and continuity. The novel narrates the ways in which he is daily re-building his war-damaged house.

⁹ Stevie Smith, *The Holiday* (London: Virago, 1979), p.13 quoted in Victoria Stewart, *Narratives of Memory: British Writing of the 1940s* (London: Macmillan, 2006), p.132

¹⁰ Elizabeth Bowen, *A World of Love* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1955), p.9

¹¹ Gill Plain *Literature of the 1940s: War, Post-war and Peace* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013)

¹² Betty Miller, Letter to Reginald Moore, Reginald Moore Papers, British Library: MSS:ADD: 79463

The Death of the Nightingale is immeasurably bound up with the potent legacy of the Second World War. But Miller's narrative is also consumed by the lasting effect of another conflict: the Irish Troubles. Betty Miller, born in Cork, had a slight Irish accent that she kept all of her life. Indeed, it got more pronounced towards the end of her life when she was staying in a hospice in Middlesex, coping badly with severe Alzheimer's disease. The Troubles, the Irish euphemism for political turmoil and violence, 'have their roots in Ireland's colonial relationship to England and the political and sectarian divisions in Ireland flowing out of that relationship. The term was first applied to the revolutionary events that took place between 1916 and 1923, a period that included the 1916 Easter Rising, the War of Independence of 1919-1921, and the Civil War of 1922-1923.'¹³ In one of her many book reviews for the *Twentieth Century* magazine, Miller reads two histories of these violent encounters: Richard Bennett's *The Black and Tans* and the autobiography of Rudolph Hoess.¹⁴ She is reminded of the prisoners in Cork Gaol that she heard from her window as a child and simply ends her review with a quote from Kipling's *Recessional*: 'Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet/Lest we forget – lest we forget.'¹⁵

By the end of her novel the cumulative ways in which those conflicts shaped her characters, directly and indirectly, has come to light. It also looks forward to another kind of war, one that we now think of as the Cold War. Professor Cain, the man around whose life Miller weaves her narrative spends much of his time at his desk anticipating the next

¹³ Michael L. Storey, *Representing the Troubles in Irish Short Fiction* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), p.2

¹⁴ Betty Miller, 'Book Review', *Twentieth Century*, Vol. 166, No. 989 (July 1959), pp.30-2

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p32

inevitable violence, the next war that ‘will upon us at any moment now.’¹⁶ And yet he is at the same time resistant to human complacency when faced with the inevitable. ‘If the invention of these new weapons is to be made the pretext for a sort of moral Bank holiday’ he thinks, ‘then the atom bomb will have done its work well in advance of the actual explosion.’¹⁷ But the most pervasive way that conflict makes itself known in Miller’s novel is in the fractured relationships, the vernacular of violence and the casual (yet necessary) deceit that plays itself out. As has been noted, ‘All wars are the same in theory [...] and specific wars should not be mistaken for themselves. There are, in fact, an expression or realization of collective human subjectivity’.¹⁸ This reading of Miller’s last novel addresses the question of historical, as well of literary legacies.

Miller quotes from her friend Naomi Lewis’ translation of the Hans Christian Andersen tale *The Nightingale* in order to set up the ‘philosophical theme’ which Holden references in her article:

The chief music master praised the artificial bird. He said that it was superior to the living nightingale, not only in its exterior, all sparkling with jewels, but intrinsically. “For see, my noble Lords, his Imperial Majesty especially, with the living nightingale one could never reckon on what was coming; but everything is settled in advance with the artificial bird; he will sing in this one way only and in no other.”¹⁹

The Death of the Nightingale is a novel in which the relationships between characters reveal the lies that have been told about their pasts. Leonie Cain, to her father’s menacingly quiet disapproval, is in love with and by the end of the novel married to,

¹⁶ Miller, *Nightingale*, p.17

¹⁷ Ibid., p17

¹⁸ Nick Mansfield, *Theorizing War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p.41

¹⁹ Miller, *Nightingale*, p.8

Matthew O'Farrell. The development of their relationship takes place in the novel's present: post-war England, specifically the spring and summer of 1948. Leonie lives with her father, a professor, in the village of Bishops Langley, twenty minutes' commute by train into London.²⁰ Her father is a proud logician. A rationalist who, unsettled by his daughter's love affair, unwillingly remembers the lost ones of his youth. His marriage to Leonie's mother Ginette is revealed to the reader 'accidentally' through a chapter of flash-backs. Ginette and Cain, after meeting in France some time in the late 1920s, marry and move to Glasgow where Cain has a readership at the University. It is here that Leonie is born. Ginette has an affair with Peter Sargeant, a dashing hero from the First World War who won the Military Cross at Paschendale. Betrayed, Cain persuades the housekeeper Ella to abduct Leonie, to 'save' her from her mother. Cain inherits his childhood home on the death of his father. He and Leonie move into the house in Abbots Langley where, the implication is, all is calm until the next war brings O'Farrell into their lives.

An even earlier section of Cain's past is revealed to the reader through a different narrative technique. Matthew O'Farrell proposes to Leonie and then returns to his childhood home to inform his mother of the wedding that will take place in six months time. His mother Rose O'Farrell is a beauty, widowed during the violence of the Irish Troubles when her husband Kevin O'Farrell, a lecturer at University College Cork and dissident Republican, is shot and killed. Rose recounts the time in 1920 when Kevin O'Farrell died. Murdered, she insists, by the man who betrayed his involvement in the

²⁰ Bishops Langley is based on the village Abbots Langley where Miller and her family lived during the war.

uprising: Professor John Cain. Matthew, she believes, is committing the ultimate act of betrayal in marrying the daughter of the man who killed his father. The novel is the story of how the music master from Andersen's tale, Cain, came to be. Moreover, it seeks to expose everyday divisions, whether they be geographical or generational, and the necessary attempts made to overcome them.

The philosophical theme that Holden identifies in Miller's novel is the exploration of 'two points of view which can never meet'. The contradictory categories at work here can be identified in three ways. In the abstract, the novel is interested in the chasm between the intellect and the body and the pursuit to destroy the boundaries between them. This chasm is paralleled in the politicized endeavours to re-draw national boundaries, namely the struggle to partition (or not) Ireland from the rest of Britain and create a new Republic. Primarily though, it deals with characters' relationships that move towards intimate unions of marriage and co-habitation or end up in fractured familial arrangements. Often, significantly, both 'union' and 'separation' are true for the couples that Miller establishes. Sometimes these are romantic, but they can also be generational such as in Matthew's home-coming to Cork or Leonie's departure from Bishops Langleigh. Miller pairs up her characters to move them closer to each other and then pulls them away again.

She begins the novel by establishing the character of Professor John Cain. The first thing we learn is that he prefers the simulated light of the lamp over which he has control than the daylight shining outside. He is sitting at his desk: he checks that his

drawer is still locked and straightens the articles in front of him as though they had been shuffled about in his absence. 'The conspiracy, he saw, had begun.'²¹ He looks over plans for a library and lecture hall to be built 'on a site previously leveled by high explosive bombs. Guilt, he wrote in his fine cramped handwriting, guilt is, it seems, a necessary condition of human progress....'²² There is a pervasive sense of tension and intrigue which Miller neatly conveys in this scene. Indeed Robert Hale, the publisher, marketed the book as 'almost [...] a thriller, but a thriller at a level not usually envisaged by the writer of thrillers.'²³ Cain, it is clear, is the 'music master' of Andersen's tale who advocates the artificial in which 'everything is settled in advance.' Listening to the aeroplane outside his study window he felt a 'sense of reassurance in the very inertia and predictability of the machine he watched.' Furthermore, the machine's noises are pleasurable, even erotic for him:

Head raised, he listened with pleasure to the throbbing of the engines. It gave him deep satisfaction to know that it was the power of reason, no less, which, defying and surpassing man's natural limitations, maintained in the air and with a magical effortlessness that great dead weight of metal.²⁴

For Cain there is great joy to be found in the predictable power of reason, so much so that he figures it as 'magical'. Valentine Cunningham notes that imagery of birds was particularly prominent in the 1930s. But it was, he observes, the birds of prey that excited most writers: the majestic swooping of, for example, kestrels in flight is 'reminiscent of the modern military aeroplane.'²⁵ Cunningham aligns the preoccupation with birds as symbols of masculinity with the conceptions of heroism that were lauded in the 1930s.

²¹ Miller, *Nightingale*, p.9

²² Ibid., p.10

²³ Ibid., dust-jacket

²⁴ Miller, *Nightingale*, p.11

²⁵ Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties*, p.192

Cain's reverence for the plane is the lingering effect of the militarization of the previous years of his life, as much as it is revealing of Miller's trope of him as the mechanical Nightingale.

Instead of listening to bird-song, Cain listens to the aeroplane. The continued use of the nightingale in literature stems from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in which King Tereus rapes Philomena and cuts out her tongue. Philomena, unable to tell anyone about what has happened, weaves a tapestry to her sister, Tereus's wife, Procne. As punishment Procne kills their son Itys and feeds him to Tereus. The sisters pray to the Gods for assistance. They are transformed into a Nightingale and Swallow and fly away, escaping Tereus. The symbol of the nightingale was taken up by the Romantic poets as one of their own; Keats for example, describes the bird, in *Ode to a Nightingale* (1819) as the perfect poet.

We first meet Cain's daughter Leonie as he listens to the aeroplane. Outside, she is being watched by a blackbird. She is *subject* to the natural in all the ways Cain endeavours to resist.

There was a moist smell of earth: spilled from the pouting leaves, raindrops hung winking in the threads of her fine and childlike hair. Slowly, lapsing from leaf to leaf, the quiet drops dwindled to earth.²⁶

The perspective shifts again so that Leonie gazes at the laurel bush in front of her. Suddenly the face of a man appears: 'sharply, he turned his head, and there on the cheekbone in all its novelty that was yet so familiar was the outline of a map etched by

²⁶ Miller, *Nightingale*, p.11

fire.’²⁷ This young man, we soon learn, is Matthew O’Farrell, an Irishman still living in England after having fought in the British Army during the Second World War. That he is marked by war is not incidental to the novel, nor is the configuration of that mark. ‘The outline of a map etched by fire’ invokes the changing cartography of Europe with its shifting boundaries between independent national states. But by drawing this map on Matthew’s skin Miller displays the scarring effect of war not just on a large geo-political scale but also on the most primary boundaries between human beings.

Boundaries demarcate between places, factioning off people and things from each other. But thresholds open up a new space that offers the potential for crossing those boundaries. Matthew, the Irishman in England, sees borders everywhere. Looking at one of Cain’s orderly flowerbeds he sees daffodils hanging ‘snared’, ‘between frosty blades’, bordered by hyacinth bells.²⁸ Matthew finds the militaristic in the natural so that even a flowerbed is figured as a violent space. But he names his dog ‘Robber’ evoking the act of surreptitiously crossing over borders into spaces that are closed off, only legitimately accessible only with another’s permission. Leonie, in figuring Matthew’s scar as ‘an outline of a map etched by fire’, recognizes the pressing effect of his ability to enact change on the safe boundaries that Cain had established. Miller’s short story ‘Contact’ (1937) has a protagonist who shares Cain’s preference for the man-made. He is a Swedish, Nobel Prize-winning novelist who lives with his quiet sister Karen on a secluded pine-scented island in the middle of lake Varnen. On a damp September night their peace is interrupted when a small plane lands on the island. The pilot is the famous Valerie Silver who is quickly offered a bed for the night by Lind. A fan of his books, she

²⁷ Ibid., p12

²⁸ Ibid., p15

attempts to seduce him, but the author famous for his work as a 'sensitive analyst of women's hearts', is only interested in the story he might get out of the evening.²⁹ He is in a constant state of 'ecstatic blindness' and so the 'contact' imagined by both of them does not happen. She leaves and his normalcy is happily restored.

Whilst Cain, a very different kind of writer, works on his paper 'The Function of Reason in Social and Political Man' Leonie, in a reverie, finds herself without:

During the war. How long ago it seemed.... She found herself remembering, with a surprising flash of nostalgia, the faded blue of an RAF tunic; a peaked and battered service cap. And a longing possessed her for the intensity of those by-gone days; hours shared, he in uniform, she in uniform, at a fighter station in Sussex: an idyll remote now; outmoded by peace; irrecoverable.³⁰

The war, Mrs Paull tells Leonie, 'robbed you of your youth.' But Leonie disagrees. She longs for it, or for certain aspects of it. She feels distaste for the scenes of combat that Matthew describes to her and yet feels that there was less, perhaps, to fear from such 'spontaneous aggression than from the abstention, the scrupulous control that in men like Cain achieved resolution through an act of prolonged and slow-motion violence.'³¹ Matthew also holds a fondness for the war. He unapologetically knows that it 'gave me something nothing else can give me. Complete self-fulfillment. It's something I can never forget and never regain, and it's spoilt me for anything else.'³² Only Mrs Paull, perhaps because she lived through more than one and has therefore seen its consequences, asserts 'Human beings are not animals. War is a dreadful unnatural thing, and all civilized

²⁹ Betty Miller, 'Contact', *John O'London's Weekly*, January 8, 1937, Vol. Vol. XXXVI No. 971, pp.613-5

³⁰ Miller, *Nightingale*, p.17

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.27

³² *Ibid.*, p.29

people think so.’³³ N.H. Reeve notes how in the post-war period the ‘uneasy home-coming syndrome is so ubiquitous as to have become a virtual cliché.’³⁴ So Mrs Paull refers to ‘War’ and not, as Leonie and Matthew do, to ‘the war’.

The other organized violence which is more impactful on these characters, which holds a greater legacy for them, is the one that took place in Ireland. Matthew, taking in the scene at his old home in Cork notes the garden, wild and overgrown and yet somehow still unchanged:

It was the quality of the silence here that disturbed him: it was like the indifference of a clock that has stopped; whose hands point obstinately to an hour long since outmoded. Like a piece of grit, some vent in the past had thwarted the impulse of the wheels, and brought the whole mechanism to a standstill. A piece of lead, Matthew found himself thinking: a bullet. For it was an act of violence, long since expired, that had brought about this sudden cessation; inaugurated in the lives of the survivors this strange unfaltering hiatus.³⁵

Cain makes this conflict resonate when he pontificates: ‘I sometimes think that the relationship of England to Ireland, and vice versa, represents a common dilemma of our time; the intellect perpetually trying to dominate the emotions; and the emotions as violently repelling the regime of the intellect.’³⁶ Miller knew that oppositions inevitably involve some kind of conflict. Cain remembers an evening when he found Ginette reading from Samuel Butler’s *Notebooks*; he takes the book from her and Miller quotes for us what he reads:

Matter and mind form one another, that is, they give to one another the form in which we see them. They are the help-meets to one another, that cross each other

³³ Ibid., p.39

³⁴ N. H. Reeve, *The Fiction of the 1940s: Stories of Survival* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p.162

³⁵ Miller, *Nightingale*, p.87

³⁶ Ibid., p.57

and undo each, and in the undoing, do, and in the doing, undo, and so see-saw ad infinitum.³⁷

This is a delicate equilibrium of binaries. Butler envisages a productive conflict whereby the opposed ‘cross each other’ and are not destructive. Most of Cain’s thinking is in fact taken from or influenced by Butler’s own. Butler’s *Notebooks*, very much in vogue by the 1920s, are a selection of re-worked reflections from his jotting-books.³⁸ He had a light touch in declaring to lay out knotty truths: Hilary Spurling notes that the pieces could be ‘either delightfully or dreadfully bold’.³⁹

Butler has been acknowledged as an important influence on British writers of the modern moment. Virginia Woolf wrote three essays on him and his work and various critics have noted the significance of his thinking for the Bloomsbury Group more generally. E.M. Forster described Butler as a ‘master of the oblique’.⁴⁰ Leonard Woolf, recalling his clique at Cambridge, wrote that ‘We read it when it first came out and felt at once its significance for us’.⁴¹ Ivy Compton-Burnett too regularly re-read and annotated her copy of the *Notebooks*. Peter Raby, for example, points out that ‘there are affinities between Ernest Pontifex [from *The Way of All Flesh*] and Felix Bacon in Compton-Burnett’s *More Women Than Men*’.⁴²

Presented by his admirers as the first great exploder of Victorian hypocrisy, Butler responded to Darwin’s theory of evolution and concluded that it was habit, not

³⁷ Ibid., p.62

³⁸ Samuel Butler, *The Notebooks* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1951)

³⁹ Hilary Spurling, *Ivy: The Life of I. Compton-Burnett* (London: Richard Cohen, 1995), p.245

⁴⁰ E.M Forster, ‘Books that Influenced Me’, *The New Statesman and Nation*, No. XXVIII (1944), p.43

⁴¹ Leonard Woolf, *Sowing*, (London: Hogarth Press, 1960), p.66

⁴² Peter Raby, *Samuel Butler: A Biography* (London: Hogarth Press, 1991), p.300

chance, that was the chief factor in producing variations.⁴³ He uses as his examples playing (a musical instrument), reading, writing, walking and talking. These are all human behaviours or skills that are practised over the course of time so that they become habit. The person ‘ceases to notice his acts of volition, each one of which is, nevertheless, followed by a corresponding muscular action.’⁴⁴ Taking his cue from Butler’s thinking, Cain doesn’t believe in coincidence. ‘In my life I’ve always found that the same cards recur again and again in varying combinations. This was one of the possible combinations.’ He claims that he ‘always knew that sooner or later Kevin O’Farrell’s son would rise up to accost me [...] There are no coincidences in life...Only the working out of given patterns.’⁴⁵ Cain’s given patterns can be understood as Butler’s formulation of Habit.

‘To define modernism in relation to the concept of habit flies in the face of most established theories of modernity. Modernism begins when habit fails.’⁴⁶ Habit’s philosophical moment, furthermore, is generally thought to have passed with the turn of the twentieth century. ‘Make it new!’ is the Poundian cry that echoes in the ears of the writers that come after him; ascribing habit with numbing, deadening qualities and enticing the avant-garde’s ‘blasting’ away of it. Walter Benjamin’s canonical ‘On some motifs in Baudelaire’ famously defines shock as the catalyst for modernity. And yet he acknowledges that it is the oscillation between shock and habit that is a peculiarly

⁴³ Malcolm Muggeridge, *The Earnest Atheist: A Study of Samuel Butler* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1936), vii

⁴⁴ Samuel Butler, *Life and Habit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.4

⁴⁵ Miller, *Nightingale*, p.113

⁴⁶ Lisi Schoenbach, *Pragmatic Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.19

modern problematic.⁴⁷ Whereas Walter Pater in 1873 stated that ‘failure is to form habits’ Samuel Butler in his *Life and Habit* concludes that it is habit that produces variation, habit that can ‘make it new’.⁴⁸ Habit, for Butler, is not sluggish, it does not suggest an intellectual rut. Habit is productive.

The polarisation of the intellect, represented by Cain, and the instinct, embodied by Matthew, is juxtaposed by the places they visit on a trip to London. Whilst Cain is in the silent reading room of the British Museum, Matthew and Leonie are visiting the London Zoo. Here they are confronted with the violent sexual ruttings of caged monkeys:

The mechanical screams and boomings, the sharp yells, the rattling of bars burst out afresh: sultry and rank, the stench of hairy bodies mingled with the fermentation of rotting straw. Of the female mandrill, nothing could be seen but the inflamed hump of her backside, from the puckered anus of which protruded a butt of excrement: the male, with black-snouted mask fringed in fur, crouched on a shelf above, long pink penis dangling. In the cage opposite, the chimpanzee, flat-chested, with black nipples peeping through her pelt, gathered a heap of straw in her arms and rocked herself backwards and forwards on her haunches, thudding again and again upon the bars of the cage with the erotic, the hopeless, the destructive fury of a maniac in a padded cell.⁴⁹

The pig-tailed monkey in the cage next door becomes a symbol for Matthew’s understanding of the Mind-Matter problem. ‘Now there,’ he says solemnly, ‘you have in my submission a perfect symbol of modern man. That’s what he is, for all his philosophy: a dextrous pig. The front half is cunning enough to learn how to split the atom, and the back half forces him to chuck it about in the form of atomic bombs.’⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Glossed from Henri Bergson’s *Matter and Memory* in which experience is a matter of tradition. Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (New York: Dover, 2004)

⁴⁸ Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.120

⁴⁹ Miller, *Nightingale*, pp.131-2

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.133

Planning for his future with Leonie and seeking a solution to this problem, Matthew meets his old wing commander in a London hotel. Together they intend to buy and run a small farm called 'Sweetfield', a bucolic sounding place of escape. At the same hotel Matthew is seduced by Anita, Mrs Paull's daughter. She does a 'spot of film-extra' work and plays the part of the seductress well. Back in her Marylebone flat she 'looked at the rain slanting past the closed window-pane and sighed luxuriously. "Best indoors on a day like this," she said. In a practised movement, legs curled up under her, she sank back on the cushions of the divan.'⁵¹ After they've had sex she reveals her motivations. Whilst Leonie got to live with her family and have Anita's mother as her own, Anita was sent away to live with 'an old hag in Shepherd's Bush'. She recalls running away one day, to Bishops Langley, to her mother. At the house she 'looked through a window. They were all having dinner, all of them – Her face changed. Violently she began to cork up and put away in a little case the bottles of nail varnish. "Well, it didn't take me long to tumble to it. When I saw the set-up there, I understood why I wasn't wanted. My place was already filled. There was no room for me. I turned and went straight back to old Mother Webb and her gin bottles. Better that than nothing at all.'⁵² Anita reveals that her father is Professor Cain. But that she blames Leonie for her situation. 'If she'd never existed everything would be different for me. I'd have a chance, then. But no – she took everything from me – from the very beginning she took everything I ought to have had [...] Well, now the tables are turned [...] I've had something of *hers* for a change!'⁵³ The image of Anita standing at the window of the Cains' house shows her to be unable to

⁵¹ Ibid., p.167

⁵² Ibid., p.171

⁵³ Ibid., p.172

cross borders as Matthew later does. The fact that she tells the story whilst standing at another window only reinforces this fact.

Cain works hard, professionally and in his private life, to construct and maintain borders. He is confident as the novel starts, that he has established one between his life with Leonie and ‘that conspiracy of the home life in which the stranger, temporarily accepted and even feted, is always, when that moment arrives, summarily disowned with the closing of the front door.’⁵⁴ This is the front door of the house in which he grew up and the one in which he chose to raise Leonie. ‘Here, of all places, in the childhood’s home whose shelter he had abjured, he was to re-discover something of the peace and stability that more than anything else in the world he now desired.’⁵⁵ One of the ways in which Matthew’s presence in their lives threatens Cain’s peace is the fact that he offers Leonie a safety outside of it. And he is able to do so because Cain is unable to recognise that:

Everything is like a door swinging backwards and forwards. Everything has a little of that from which it is most remote and to which it is most opposed and these antitheses serve to explain one another.⁵⁶

Miller, like Butler before her, sees openings in domestic spaces as ideal imagery for an individual’s relation to its antithesis. Both Anita’s window and Cain’s door simultaneously separate and unite the inside with the outside. However, as Georg Simmel writes, whilst the window is transparent but primarily designed to be looked out of, the

⁵⁴ Ibid., p.41

⁵⁵ Ibid., p.139

⁵⁶ Samuel Butler, *The Notebooks* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1951), pp.58-9

door cancels the separation between the inside from the outside 'because it constitutes a link between the human and everything which is outside of it.'⁵⁷

Even the engagement ring that Matthew gives Leonie, which was, symbolically, his father's, writes this out. It holds the image of Cork Harbour: two forts, one on each side, and a ship in between. It bears the motto 'Statio Bene Fida Carinis' which Cain himself translates as 'a safe harbor for ships.' Leonie is aware of her position as this 'ship' in between the forts of her father and Matthew. At a train station, listening to the different accents of the passengers:

It was if the frontiers between the two countries dissolved, and there was an overlapping in which here, in the heart of the capital she knew, she felt the tempo of an unfamiliar people invade her senses; an experience that she found oddly pleasurable, oddly disturbing.⁵⁸

Train stations hold a particular resonance as places of departure in the novel. But Miller writes them as being both full of potential for meeting, for coming together in spite of boundaries, but also of violent clashing. At the train station, for example, 'they pushed open the swing-door, rupturing frosted-glass panels which swing to behind them, mated, and were still.'⁵⁹ Trains, similarly, are endowed with menacing status: 'To the right of the platform, a shell, a great crustacean, the train stood waiting to absorb them; its open doors exposing the hollow sockets that soon would be invested with an inner tissue of human flesh and blood.'⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Georg Simmel, 'The Bridge and the Door', trans. Michael Kaern, *Qualitative Sociology*, 17/4 (1994), pp.407-13

⁵⁸ Miller, *Nightingale*, p.178

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.176

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.177

Matthew enters this ‘great crustacean’ to go home. This return is worth following closely in that, as the build-up to Miller’s narrative denouement, it synthesises the imagery of conflict that we have identified as well as the spatialisation of its various forms. Back in Cork, Matthew walks through the familiar streets to his childhood home. His journey had been structured by oscillating moments of the familiar and the alien so that ‘It was with relief that he reached the heavy gates of The Laurels.’⁶¹ ‘Mechanically, his hand found the old spot; he pushed the gate open and with a hollow thud it fell to behind him, severing at a blow all connection with the world outside.’⁶² He knocks on the door which then opens. ‘Rose O’Farrell stood on the threshold. Like a violence, the act of recognition took place between them.’⁶³

It is on this trip to The Laurels that Matthew is told by his mother the ‘full story’ of her relationship with Cain. Rose O’Farrell, in a long monologue describes how Cain became obsessed by her: turning up at the shop where she worked and cornering her at College functions. As the threat of violence increases in Cork, Kevin begins increasingly anxious to protect his wife, particularly when she becomes pregnant. She is sent in to the countryside to stay with a relative. Cain, hearing this, and thinking that that O’Farrell’s marriage must have failed, goes out to visit her. But, of course, he finds Rose pregnant. She continues:

To my amazement, he whipped himself away from me; quickly, like a vicious animal. There was an extraordinary expression in his eyes – disgust – hatred: I believe if he could he would have slapped my face. He tried to say something –

⁶¹ The Laurels is almost certainly based on the house in Cork where Miller’s family lived until 1920. Situated on the Western Road it is described in the novel as having belonged to ‘one of the local magistrates who’d sent his family away when the troubles began.’ *Ibid.*, p.190

⁶² *Ibid.*, p.181

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.89

nothing came from him but the sort of groan you hear people give in the middle of a nightmare – and then he turned and ran – yes, ran, away from me.⁶⁴

This is the only moment of physical violence in the novel. And even then, it is a remembered one that doesn't actually happen. In fact, instead of a violent coming together where skin meets skin, Cain runs away from Rose. It is also salient to note that in no direct way is any of Rose's story ever corroborated by Cain; just as Anita's revelation that she is the illegitimate daughter of Ella and Cain is never backed up. These are stories that we must believe to be true, although the only proof the reader is given is the fact that the story has been told. There is no evidence other than the story itself. Similarly Matthew, when Rose tells him that it was Cain who was responsible for his father's death reasons:

She doesn't know what was said between them: she admits that herself: then how can she be sure what really happened? His heart was beating quickly. After all --- there's no *proof* a trap was laid: that bullet *could* have been accidental, as they said. His excitement increased. Supposing, after all, that Cain were guiltless? Then why was the story told? How did the legend grow up?⁶⁵

There is a jump in the narrative: Matthew is back from Ireland and Mrs Paull takes Leonie to a hotel in London where she will stay before the wedding. The newly-weds will move the next day to their farm at Sweetfield. Everyone congregates at the house of Matthew's old Wing Commander Ashe-Robertson where Matthew is the last to arrive. He wanders around the large house, looking for his mother or for the room in which she is staying in order to return the suitcase that she had lost and that he had found. He hears a 'muffled outcry'.⁶⁶ He is 'reluctant' and 'hesitating' but enters the bedroom

⁶⁴ Ibid., p.214

⁶⁵ Ibid., p.107

⁶⁶ Ibid., p.232

from where the noise came to find Sir Richard, his friend's father, propped up in his enormous bed.

For fifteen years now, he had lived shrouded, imprisoned in his own body, which had become an obstruction between him and the rest of the world. Inaccessible to all, he had retired to the more than monastic seclusion of his own physical frontiers; reduced at one stroke (literally) from a life vested in the pre-eminence of the will, of an exceptionally brilliant and restless intellect, to a condition resembling that, not so much of an animal, but more fantastically, of a plant; motionless, forever rooted in, and limited by, the narrowed-down frontiers of flesh.⁶⁷

Sir Richard is a physical reminder of Cain's hypochondria concerning the body. And of the inability of the reasoned mind to control the body's physical frailty.

Matthew finds his mother sitting in the garden at the centre of the square on which the Ashe-Robertson house stood. Private, sheltered, accessible only to residents with keys and protected by the imposing frontages of the houses surrounding it. 'It was a stronghold, it is true, in appearance only; for beneath the imposing stucco fronts the multiplying cell of the bed-sitter, the one-room flatlet was gradually infecting house after house, undermining from within the already fly-blown structure of upper middle-class dignity.'⁶⁸ Following Armstrong and Tennenhouse we can put forward the idea of two modalities of violence: one which is 'out there' in the world and one which is exercised through words upon things in the world. Their thesis, however, is that the two cannot in fact be distinguished, at least in writing. They demonstrate that 'violent events are not simply so but are called violent because they bring together different concepts of social

⁶⁷ Ibid., p.234

⁶⁸ Ibid., p.234

order.’⁶⁹ So the novel is concerned with the legacy of violence and fear of invasion that is everywhere, both ‘out there’ and ‘here’ in its language. Figured spatially therefore, a question of violence is the question of home and where people find safety.⁷⁰

It is in this garden with its ‘winding paths’ that Rose O’Farrell reveals her ‘final’ secret to Matthew. When she hears that Cain has arrived to talk to Leonie before the wedding he will not attend, she wants to find him, to talk to him. Because, Rose admits, ‘He was the only man I ever cared tuppence about.’⁷¹ The silence that followed ‘stiffened, became positive, a barrier’ between them. So, Matthew realises, ‘It was all a sham [...] In expiation of her own guilt, she had built this monument to a man she did not love. She had immured herself, and Matthew with her, in the vacuum of a prolonged and meaningless falsehood.’⁷²

Rose’s desire to tell her story is in itself an act of attempted retrieval, of anticipated revival. We can identify this desire as ‘nostalgia’, an inclination that possesses a troubling differentiation from ‘reflection’ in that it will inevitably be thwarted because nostalgia is a desire for a return that can never take place. Even Rose’s storytelling is, therefore, a loss in that it necessitates a textual repetition of the loss it

⁶⁹ ‘Introduction’, *The Violence of Representation: Literature and the History of Violence*, ed. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, (London: Routledge, 1989), p.9

⁷⁰ This is something *Nightingale* something it shares broadly with, for example, *Farewell Leicester Square* and *A Room in Regent’s Park*.

⁷¹ Miller, *Nightingale*, p.240

⁷² *Ibid.*, p.240

laments. As Champigny identifies, ‘poetic nostalgia is both a loss and a conquest. It is both recollection and repetition.’⁷³

The idyll that Rose finally reveals is defined by its spatial context, the paths, whether they be physical or temporal, by which it is approached. Physical demarcations of space are therefore of the utmost significance. Each house in the novel presents, at the same time, an enclosure which provides security, and an ‘opening’, which invites adventure.⁷⁴ It is this play between access which is granted and denied which creates the ‘vacuum of a prolonged and meaningless falsehood’ that Matthew recognizes. In fact, Matthew appears uncannily astute to this throughout the novel, and spends much of his time hovering in doorways and around thresholds.

Physical doorways also act as metaphysical doorways to the past and therefore act as the space between the real and the paradisiacal. In other words, doorways and thresholds allow an access to physical space just as storytelling and memory allows an access to Rose’s temporal space. Windows too, are a kind of narrative threshold in the novel. In the last house we are shown, that of Sir Richard, the windows are veiled by heavy curtains. But they are disintegrating:

The dining-room of the Ashe-Robertson household had three tall windows that looked out onto the gardens at the back of the house. Each was masked with a pair of damask curtains within the massive folds of which desiccated butterflies and moths hung ready, at a touch, to dissolve into dust.⁷⁵

⁷³ Robert Champigny, *Portrait of a Symbolist Hero* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1954), p.129

⁷⁴ Elaine Cancalon, *Fairy-Tale Structures and Motifs in Le Grand Meaulnes* (Bern: Herbert and Lang, 1975), p.63

⁷⁵ Miller, *Nightingale*, p.244

This novel, Seates states, ‘opposes order and reason to the instinctive and contingent.’⁷⁶

It’s farewell to the drawing-room’s mannerly cry,
The professor’s logical whereto and why,
The frock-coated diplomat’s polished aplomb,
Now matters are settled with gas and with bomb.⁷⁷

Here Cain offers Leonie a proposal: as a wedding present he will give her Bishops House, her childhood home. But only on the condition that he will live with her and Matthew as their lodger. ‘Leonie sat stunned. The thought of living for a single day in the same house as Matthew and Cain, of prolonging, and perpetuating a conflict so intolerable, was more, even in anticipation, than her self-control could stand.’⁷⁸

Rejected, he leaves immediately, avoiding any further talk with Leonie and a conversation with Rose. Miller ends the novel with the image of Cain back at home, sitting down at his desk to work. But is distracted. Outside, a bird is singing:

Cain laid down his pen. Crossing the room, he went to the French windows; he leaned forward, and pulling the doors towards him, bolted them together in their socket. The voice of the bird was silenced. Satisfied, Cain drew out his desk chair and sat down, once again, at his desk. His note-books, his reference-books open before him, he turned to the reading-lamp and switched on the light. A steady glare, a hard unvarying radiance, fell upon his page.⁷⁹

So Cain returns to his desk and closes his windows in an attempt to retain his separateness. He has failed to keep his daughter, much as he failed to keep his wife. If Leonie is the feminized body, at one with nature and divorced from violent warfare, Cain

⁷⁶ Sarah Seates ‘Betty Miller’s Narratives of Ambivalence’, *In the Open: Jewish Women Writers and British Culture* ed. Clare M. Tylee (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2006), p.92

⁷⁷ W.H. Auden, ‘It’s farewell to the drawing room’s mannerly cry’, *Another Time* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996)

⁷⁸ Miller, *Nightingale*, p.248

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.250

is the intellect, obsessively seeking to dispel the urges of his corporeal self. Rose is 'rooted': she represents home, safety and loyalty. Her revelations are so powerful because they come from the least likely source of betrayal. Matthew is the ex-soldier negotiating the borders between all of these fronts; these sites of conflict. Kevin O'Farrell is the dead man, more significantly, the dead father, whose image is kept alive by Rose who takes photographs of him with her wherever she travels. He is also the political soldier, a 'terrorist' in Cain's words, one very different to the sanctioned man-in-uniform his son will grow up to become. Biblically speaking, Cain was the first man born. He murdered his brother who was the first man to die. Miller playfully calls upon the infamy of Cain to point towards the ancient stories of family violence. In the novel, familial relations are difficult to decipher. Mrs Paull, the housekeeper, is actually Ella, with whom John Cain had an affair and whose daughter is Anita. Anita sleeps with her soon-to-be brother-in-law as an act of revenge on her half-sister Leonie. Leonie's mother Ginette disappears with her lover from Scotland. For a moment, when he discovers his mother's love for Cain, Kevin wonders whether his real father is actually the Professor, his nearly father-in-law. Which would mean that he would be about to marry his half-sister. Rose tells Matthew (and the reader) that this is not the case and we must trust her word. Rose is also, significantly, the storyteller. It is her version of history we hear; her words enact the previous conversations that we trust her to recall accurately.

Unfortunately no manuscripts have survived for any of Miller's novels. It is therefore difficult to trace any of her drafting her work. But *The Death of the Nightingale* was previewed in 'Modern Reading' in February 1947. The extract, entitled 'Full Circle',

was from the chapter that would become 'Train of Thought' in the completed novel. In a section of the journal dedicated to Books to Come, it was published with an excerpt from the Mexican journals of Michael Fraenkel, co-founder of Editions du Carrefour and the model for Boris in Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*. A comparison of the various differences between the two versions of this chapter is revealing. There are numerous punctuation changes: most frequently colons are changed to full stops so that Miller's long sentences actually tend to be much shorter in the final novel. Cain's academic focus is named in the extract as being 'Logic and Statistical Method' and the date of the examination is noted as being August 23rd, 1920, a year earlier than in the novel: Miller was working out its complicated time-frame.

She cuts large chunks of the dialogue between Ginette and Cain so that the adulterous revelation is less melodramatic in the novel than in the extract. Noticeable too, are the descriptive sentences that were cut. In 'Full Circle' Miller gives far more attention to the interiors of the rooms and the objects in them. We are shown, for example, a heavily bees-waxed hall table where he keeps his gloves, a small bronze of the Venus de Milo on a pedestal and, in the far corner of the room, 'a fall palm deployed its dustless leaves beneath a framed reproduction of Rossetti's Beata Beatrix.'⁸⁰ The lustrous surface of the table and the newly cleaned plant leaf are markers of both Cain's particular nature and Ella's industrious dedication to his need for order. The 'art' too, is pointedly chosen. Two of the most recognizable depictions of female subjects in Western art, silent and endlessly reproduced, they pose no threat to Cain's controlled environment. Another example of the editing 'down' of the final novel can be seen in the description of the food

⁸⁰ Betty Miller, 'Full Circle', *Modern Reading 14*, ed., Reginald Moore (London: Pheonix, 1947), p.155

at Cain's tea for his students. In *Nightingale* 'they cut with the edge of the fork the yielding layers of a chocolate sponge cake.'⁸¹ In 'Full Circle' the students 'passed the cake-stand from hand to hand, selecting with celerity the slices of home-made shortbread, of cherry tart; the plaster white meringues joined to one another by a puff of sweetened cream.'⁸²

The most significant change Miller made to the novel is the book that she gives to Ginette to read. In 'Full Circle' Cain is surprised to find her with Anderson's fairytale 'The Nightingale'. Miller quotes the exact extract (from the same translation) as the epigram to her finished novel. In *The Death of the Nightingale*, Ginette is reading from Samuel Butler's *Notebooks*. Her placement of the quote from Butler signals his significance and suggests that Miller may have re-worked the final piece to incorporate more of his writing. That Miller was influenced by Butler's work is clear. But it remains unclear whether any of Miller's writing was influential. Her final novel draws out personal divisions that play out in the language of thresholds and boundaries. It also enacts the powerful legacies of those divisions, placing her characters amongst various kinds of physical and emotional borders. As Valentine Cunningham points out: 'Borders might trap you and catch you out; if you stayed there long you risked [...] isolation and disorientation.'⁸³ It seems that Miller's work, without a legacy to call its own, might have rested for too long on a literary border.

⁸¹ Miller, *Nightingale*, p.64

⁸² Betty Miller, 'Full Circle', *Modern Reading 14*, ed., Reginald Moore (London: Pheonix, 1947), p.155

⁸³ Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties*, p.373

Conclusion

Reading the Unread

Betty Miller wrote seven novels between 1933 and 1948; her biography of Robert Browning was, in 1952, described by the Times as one of the best books of the post-war period and she went on to become a well-known critic and Victorian scholar. She was educated in France, Sweden and studied journalism at University College London. In between her lectures there she wrote her first novel which was published as *The Mere Living* in 1933; she was 23 years old. Her first three novels, were all put out by Gollancz: *The Mere Living* was followed by *Sunday* (1934) and then *Portrait of the Bride* (1935). Robert Hale published her next four novels in 1940s and John Murray her non-fiction of the 1950s.

Her work is now almost entirely unread: two of her later novels have been reprinted but her work from the 1930s remains incredibly hard to find. Bookselling websites make the task of tracking down out of print writers much easier than it would have been say, twenty years ago, but the casual browser will almost certainly never come across a Betty Miller novel in a second-hand bookshop. There are innumerable reasons why a writer might come to be out of print, many of which have already been discussed this thesis.

The significant cultural and political machinations of what is printed and re-printed and how this impacts on what is included and what is omitted from the canon is vital to expanding the work done across the humanities. Gollancz made two prophecies on the jacket of *Sunday* in language that seems to mimic Miller's own:

We anticipate no sensational success for this very sensitive novel, so far as sales are concerned, but we believe that our happiness in publishing it will be shared with those who may be attracted to read it by the reputation which, we venture to prophesy, will be given to it by the reviewers. The impression it leaves is one of great beauty: mood and atmosphere are conveyed by very delicate and exact description: there are whole passages of sustained loveliness and scenes of great dramatic intensity.¹

He hoped that the second prophesy would counter-act the first; that Miller's work would gain a reputation and so build a readership. In post-war Britain Miller's peculiar writing, bombed as it was, out of print, sadly had neither. This remains largely true today.

We can compile some of the bibliographical elements of her career if we scour through old journals or are lucky enough to find a rare out-of-print copy of one of her novels, but for a writer so interested in the questions of socio-historical and familial legacies it is almost perverse that Miller's literary legacy is so murky. Inez Holden's short comparative essay that opened the previous chapter was one of the few pieces to address Miller's work when it was first printed. The recuperative re-printing of two of her novels by Virago Press in 1985 and Persephone Books in 2001 has gone some way to addressing the fate of Miller's legacy for modern readers. When the Virago edition of *On the Side of the Angels* went out of print in the 1991, having sold less than three thousand

¹ On the dust-jacket of Betty Miller, *Sunday* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1934)

copies, it took one of the newer publishing ventures Capuchin Classics until 2012 to re-issue the novel again. Capuchin's edition includes a foreword by Miller's much more famous son Jonathan and it seems very likely that this would have been a strong selling-point for them. It is a shame that Capuchin, with their tag-line 'Books to keep alive' made a huge error on their jacket blurb by describing the action taking place in the First World War, when it is a Second World War novel. This slip compounds a very material problem when reading Miller's work: when she writes about the particular intimacies of human interactions she is always decidedly saying something significant about the abstract concepts or ideologies in which those characters are functioning. It is perhaps, therefore, no surprise that the copy-editor at Capuchin confused the novel's wartime framework. As we have seen, Miller's work finds the violence of war present in the everyday.

Writing to her editor and friend Reginald Moore, Miller articulates her position as a woman writer:

8 Gallows Hill Lane
December 8th, 1945

Dear Mr Moore,
Thank you for your letter. [...] I shall send you a few more [extracts] to choose from, as you request – but you'll have to wait until the school term begins again and I can find the time to recollect that I am supposed to be a writer as well as a harassed war-time housewife. In other words, you'll have to wait three or four weeks - - I hope you don't mind?

Yours Sincerely
Betty Miller²

² Betty Miller, Letter to Reginald Moore, Reginald Moore Papers, British Library: MSS:ADD: 79460

Furthermore, the idea of ‘finding the time to recollect’ is a very Millerian turn of phrase. Her writing seeks to understand the ways in which we consider ourselves through formal constructs of time and place. These tropes position Miller’s work within its cultural contexts, but at the same time, the singularity of her prose style constantly reminds itself to her reader.

Her intensely serious, often urgent, texts write of the conflict between consciousness and unconsciousness, between the intellect and emotion, between masculinity and femininity. But they do so in surprising ways: when she writes a novel about anti-semitism, her Jewish protagonist is the most consistent anti-semitic voice her reader is given. Her World War II novels are neither set on the battlefields of Europe nor the streets of a bomb-damaged metropolis but an isolated psychiatric hospital on a rural military base. Her love stories aren’t romantic and her heroes aren’t heroic. *The Writing of Betty Miller* pays attention to the forgotten works of Betty Miller. In doing so it attempts to perform the act of *paying attention* that was so fundamental to her as a writer. The autobiographical piece ‘At the Villa Éole’ describes her time in a sanatorium in France as a young girl. Up in their dorm room, the patients are all occupied with a task given to them by their schoolteacher:

Dusk was falling, but the wind had not abated: yellow wooden shutters trembled continuously against the walls, and from time to time the glass panes were stung by the vehemence of flying sand. New to the sound, I looked uneasily, through the window, at the sea tumbling livid in the darkness beyond: the other girls did not move or turn their heads.³

³ ‘At the Villa Éole: A Fragment of Autobiography’, *The Cornhill*, Vol. 166, No. 995 (Spring 1953), p. 406

Betty Miller – List of Publications

Fiction⁴

Bergson Spiro, Betty, *The Mere Living* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1933)

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⁴ I have quoted from the most recent editions of each novel. If different to the original edition this is noted parenthetically.

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- ‘Two Fathers and Their Sons’, *Nineteenth Century*, Vol. 166 (October 1949), pp.251-60

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