

## Henry Miller: The Life and Literature of Obscenity

By Dr. Greg Bahnsen

Movie critics are delighting in recent change in the movie industry's self-imposed rating system. In the place of the old "X" category of movies we now have the NC-17 designation, indicating that no children under seventeen are permitted. The X-rating has now been dropped, recognizing that what it communicates is that a movie is pornographic, rather than it is "adult" in its theme or treatment. The movie moguls and critics are pleased because they argue that some films are too explicit to be assigned the R-rating, and yet - according to them - are not pornographic in character or intent. This is hopeless, if not hypocritical, moral vacillation.

The movie which finally pushed the rating agency to change its code is a recent release entitled *Henry & June*, based upon the book of the same title by Anaïs Nin, who was the friend, literary colleague and sexual partner of Henry Miller, the controversial author of *Tropic of Cancer* and other obscene works. (June was Henry's wife and another sex-interest of Nin's, even before her involvement with him.)

Henry Miller was born in 1891 and grew up in Brooklyn. During a self-imposed "exile" to France and Greece (1930-40), his first book, *Tropic of Cancer*, was published in Paris in 1934 - due to the encouragement and financial backing of Anaïs Nin. It was immediately banned from publication in all English-speaking countries, and Miller himself was even denied entrance to England by port authorities. In 1953, the ACLU lost in its attempt to have the ban against the book lifted. However, after Grove Press published it in 1961, suits against it were lost in Chicago (1962) and before the U.S. Supreme Court (1964).

Anaïs Nin is known for her own volumes of erotica (the polite word for pornography), books of "sophisticated naughtiness" according to *Cosmopolitan* and highly praised in *Newsweek* and the *New York Times Book Review*. The multi-volume *Diary of Anaïs Nin*, in which she describes her relationship with Henry Miller, began to be published in 1966. It was a work that had been praised to the sky (or zodiac anyway) by Miller himself. Nevertheless, not until the 1985 death of Nin's husband, Hugh Guiler, did she disclose the drawn-out love affair which she shared with Henry Miller, which she does in intimate detail in *Henry & June* - now showing at the movies (NC-17). Nin died in 1987. Miller eventually married five times, back in the U.S. experience both poverty (needing to appeal for old clothes in *The New Republic*) and luxury (living in the fashionable Pacific Palisades - thanks to the notoriety bestowed by the censorship controversy), suffered a stroke and eight years later died in 1980.

The controversy which has recently stirred over the rating of the movie *Henry & June* proved to be an ironic case of "life imitating art" - or, at least, of reaction to a man's life (the movie) imitating

reaction to man's art (his books). In Henry Miller we find the life and literature of obscenity. This correlation is no surprise. Miller boasted that his novels were exercises in autobiography and self-analysis. Proverbs tells us, "as a man thinks in his heart so is he" (23:7). Jesus pointedly taught that "out of the heart of men proceed evil thoughts, fornications... adulteries... lasciviousness... pride, foolishness; all these evil things proceed from within and defile the man" (Mark 7:21-23).

Miller resisted this truth. In his strained apologetic essays for obscenity ("Obscenity and the Law of Reflection" and "Obscenity and Literature"). Miller repeatedly argued that obscenity is actually found in the world ("every department of life is...corroded with what is so unthinkingly labeled 'obscene'"), and he was simply persecuted for telling the truth. "My concern has never been with morals but with life, my own life particularly." In the distorted reasoning of unbelieving thought this meant that "Nothing would be regarded as obscene, I feel, if men were living out their inmost desires." Everything is obscene so that nothing is obscene. Indeed, in his essay on immorality and morality, Miller ends with a quotation from Hindu scripture, declaring evil does not exist!

Here is the self-refutation of every apologist for obscenity. If evil does not exist, then it cannot be evil for the author's works to be banned! Henry Miller was a walking self-contradiction. He complained that "Instead of respect, toleration, kindness and consideration, to say nothing of love, we view one another with fear, suspicion, hatred, envy, rivalry and malevolence. Our world is grounded in falsity." But given Miller's worldview, it was meaningless to condemn a lack of love and toleration. One literary critic has written that Henry Miller struggled "to give expression to the romantic notion - underlying all his work - that there should exist something better than the loveless world in which he found himself enmeshed." But Miller's moral anarchy cannot logically sustain that "romantic notion" at all. His obscenity in life and literature, we should see, was the degrading and destruction of *romance* in more ways than one.