Henry Miller and the Embrace of Defilement

The Artistic Transposition of Humiliation

Stephen Crane and Zora Neale Hurston represent two different artistic accommodations or transformations of humiliation that translate into two of the three genres at issue here. Crane, who kept no journal or diary and wrote no autobiography or memoir and few revealing letters (his most recent biographer thus calls his life “enigmatic”\(^1\)), seems to have projected his shame directly onto the characters in his class trauma stories and to have said very little about his own anguish, except in the obscurity of his famously cryptic poetry. He also created a few heroic figures in his writing (such as Dr. Trescott) that possess the stoicism, resolve, and stubbornness to resist the humiliators and stigmatizers. Hurston, who manufactured heroic alter egos for herself in her liberating fictions of slumming drama and also wrote about herself heroically in her autobiography, reconfigured her shame in almost mystical terms as a special inner vitality that involved spiritual and telepathic proclivities (à la voodoo). What little humiliation is evident in her work (say in Tea Cake’s bizarre death) peeps through in richly reconfigured form. Crane and Hurston shared this: both disliked personal weakness and chose not to admit it, at least not in any direct way, and both liked to construe themselves as unusually possessed of moral integrity. Henry Miller makes a nice comparison to the two of them for the shame theorist because his literary strategy of dealing with his humiliation was so different and produced the third genre under discussion: he crafted openly autobiographical and therapeutic
slumming trauma, in which he baldly proclaimed himself wounded and, rather than attempting to present himself (or his fictional Henry Miller) as possessing integrity, exaggerated his happy monstrosity. It is not that Miller was more honest than Hurston (though it is easy to say that both of them were more forthcoming than Crane); it is rather that Miller’s fantasy of himself involved an ecstatic embrace of defilement.

Miller has much in common with Crane and Hurston, not only in the fact of the formation of his identity in conditions of humiliation, but also in his nonliterary strategies of coping with his personal difficulties. The sources of his shame were no doubt somewhat different from that of Crane and Hurston: on the one hand, he had a distant mother and a weak father like Crane; on the other, he experienced a class humiliation that was more akin to Hurston’s experience of poverty after the breakup of her family. Miller’s father had a drinking problem, and if Miller came to rationalize his father’s drinking as an escape from an aggressive wife, he was also pretty clearly humiliated as a child by his father’s kowtowing to wealthy customers in his tailor shop (HM, 29, 32). As for coping as an adult, like Crane and Hurston, Miller found himself on the lam in voluntary exile, abandoning a (hard-won and fortuitous) middle-class and white-collar status in favor of a bohemian existence, and escaping from a romantic relationship he experienced as toxic and crippling. Miller manifested an anxiety about rejection that is similar to those experienced by Crane and Hurston: like George in Crane’s George’s Mother, Miller’s first love, which lasted over a year, was of a neighborhood girl whom he never had the courage to approach.

When Miller finally found the mate he thought he truly desired and entered what he recognized as the relationship of his life, he too felt, like Crane, miserable and trapped, and, like Hurston, jealously mistrustful and afraid. “It is Sunday, the first Sunday of my new life, and I am wearing the dog collar you fastened around my neck,” he later wrote of June (Cap, 347). Like Crane and Hurston, he found his mate overbearing and possessive. He became submissive: “I learned what to do just as though I were part of her organism; I was better than a ventriloquist’s dummy because I could act without being violently jerked by the strings” (Cap, 235). And, like Cora to Crane, June felt inaccessible to Miller: “I sought relentlessly for her whose name was not written anywhere, I penetrated to the very altar and found—nothing. I wrapped myself around this hollow shell of nothingness…” (Cap, 232). “Thou art a skull with ruby eyes,” Crane wrote of Cora; Miller wrote of June: “I could not read her face. I could see only the eyes shining.