

Excerpts from *Tropic of Cancer* by Henry Miller

compiled by Phillip W. Weiss

Over there you think of nothing but becoming President of the United States some day. Potentially every man is Presidential timber. Here it's different. Here every man is potentially a zero. (150)

This life which, if I were still a man with pride, honor, ambition and so forth, would seem like the bottom rung of degradation. (148)

A world without hope, but no despair. (151)

Everything that belongs to the past seems to have fallen into the sea; I have memories, but the images have lost their vividness, they seem dead and desultory, like time-bitten mummies stuck in a quagmire. (152-153)

We have become Orientalized. We have become coolies, white-collar coolies, silenced by a handful of rice each day. (153)

A pimp has his private grief and misery too, don't you forget. (159)

When I listen to the reproaches that are leveled against a girl like Lucienne, when I hear her being denigrated or despised because she is cold and mercenary, because she is too mechanical, or because she's in too great a hurry, or because of this or because of that, I say to myself, hold on there bozo, not so fast. (159)

Everything is slowly dribbling back to the sewer. (161)

I have never seen a place like Paris for varieties of sexual provender. (162)

A missing tooth or a nose eaten away or a fallen womb, any misfortune that aggravates the natural homeliness of the female, seems to be regarded as an added spice, a stimulant for the jaded appetites of the male. (162)

In every poem by Matisse there is the history of a particle of human flesh which refused the consummation of death. (163)

He is a bright sage, a dancing seer who, with a sweep of the brush, removes the ugly scaffold to which the body of man is chained by the incontrovertible facts of life. (164)

Behind the minutiae, the chaos, the mockery of life, he detects the invisible pattern; he announces his discoveries in the metaphysical pigment of space. (164)

More and more the world resembles an entomologist's dream. (164)

Beauty, that feline beauty which has us by the balls in America, is finished. To fathom the new reality it is first necessary to dismantle the drains, to lay open the gangrened ducts which compose the genitourinary system that supplies the excreta of art. (165)

To come upon a woman offering herself outside of a urinal, where there are advertised cigarette papers, run, acrobats, horse races, where the heavy foliage of trees breaks the heavy mass of walls and roofs, is an experience that begins where the boundaries of the known world leave off. (166)

He tried to nourish me with ideas. (169)

I sometimes ask myself how it happens that I attract nothing but crackbrained individuals, neurasthenics, neurotics, psychopaths – and Jews especially. (170)

He came round regularly for his little dose of insults – it was like a tonic to him. (170)

I tried to look earnest, but I only succeeded in looking pathetic. (171)

But the moment I left her my head cleared. (174)

Inside the toilet you could take an inventory of their idle thoughts (174)

It requires more concentration to detect a missing comma than to epitomize Nietzsche's philosophy. You can be brilliant sometimes, when you're drunk, but brilliance is out of place in the proofreading department. Dates, fractions, semicolons – these are things that count. And these are things that are most difficult to track down when your mind is all ablaze. (175)

I played the high-grade moron, which is what they wanted of us. (176)

Just the same it's hard to talk to a man when you have nothing in common with him; you betray yourself, even if you use only monosyllabic words. (176)

I had become so reconciled to this life without her, and yet if I thought about her for only a minute it was enough to pierce the bone and marrow of my contentment and shove me back again into the agonizing gutter of my wretched past. (177)

Were there a Christian so faithful to his God as I was to her we would all be Jesus Christs today. (178)

One thing I know, that at the recollection of these words I suddenly realized the impossibility of ever revealing to her that Paris which I had gotten to know, the Paris whose *arrondissements* are undefined, a Paris that has never existed except by virtue of my loneliness, my hunger for her. (179)

One can live without friends, one can live without love, or even without money, that supposed *sine qua non*. One can live in Paris – I discovered that! – on just grief and anguish. (180)

We came together in a dance of death and so quickly was I sucked down into the vortex that when I came to the surface again I could not recognize the world. (181)

I understood then why it is that Paris attracts the tortured, the hallucinated, the great maniacs of love. (181)

Here all boundaries fade away and the world reveals itself for the mad slaughterhouse that it is. (182)

An eternal city, Paris! More eternal than Rome, more splendid than Nineveh. (182)

The candles of civilization are the putrid sinks of the world, the charnel house to which the stinking wombs confide their bloody packages of flesh and bone. (182)

The streets were my refuge. And no man can understand the glamor of the streets until he is obliged to take refuge in them, until he has become a straw that is tossed here and there by every zephyr that blows. (182)

Everything is hoary, grisly, bristling with merriment, swollen with the future, like a gumboil. (182-183)

My world of human beings has perished; I was utterly alone in the world and for friends I had the streets, and the streets spoke to me in that sad, bitter language compounded of human misery, yearning, regret, failure, wasted effort. (184)

I can stand here and smile vacantly, and no matter how fervid my prayers, no matter how desperate my longing, there is an ocean between us; there she will stay and starve, and here I shall walk from one street to the next, the hot tears scalding my face. (184-185)

No matter where you go, no matter what you touch, there is cancer and syphilis. (185)

The main thing is to eat. Trust to Providence for the rest. (187)

... the world never permits a good-looking woman to starve. (187)

The first people to turn to when you're down and out are the Jews. (187)

The worst job of all was a thesis I undertook to write for a deaf and dumb psychologist. (188)

When you're not in your home town you can permit yourself little liberties, particularly for such a worthy motive as earning your daily bread. (189)

Kruger was one of those saints who have gone wrong, a masochist, an anal type whose law is scrupulousness, rectitude and conscientiousness, who on an off day, would knock a man's teeth down his throat without a qualm. (190)

The work of a madman – vicious, petty, malign, brilliant. (192)

When one spends what he has on himself, when one has a thoroughly good time with his own money, people are apt to say "he doesn't know what to do with his money." (193)

People said he was a bore, and so he was, I suppose, but when you're in need of food you can put up with worse things than being bored. (194)

That he liked Byron also, and Victor Hugo, one can forgive; he was only a few years out of college and he had plenty of time ahead of him to be cured of such tastes. (194)

People can't look at pictures and statues with enthusiasm when a man is dying before their eyes. (195)

I didn't care where I died, really, so long as it wasn't necessarily to get up. (195)

One should die in the bosom of his family, in private, as it were. (197)

I hadn't a sou in my pocket, which didn't matter, of course, since I was the guest of honor. (201)

I liked the way Collins moved against this background of literature continuously; it was like a millionaire who never stepped out of his Rolls Royce. (203)

When we entered the whorehouse on the Quai Voltaire, after he had flung himself on the divan and rung for girls and for drinks, he was still paddling up the river with Kurtz, and only when the girls had flopped on the bed beside him and stuffed his mouth with kisses did he cease his divagations. (203)

Nothing like a nice barroom brawl ... so easy to stick a knife in a man's back or club him with a bottle when he's lying under a table. (206)

We were getting sentimental, as Americans do when it comes time to part. (207)

It doesn't exist, America. It's a name you give to an abstract idea (208)

Paris is like a whore. From a distance she seems ravishing, you can't wait until you have her in your arms. And five minutes later you feel empty, disgusted with yourself. You feel tricked. (209)

When you feel all puffed up inside it isn't so easy to go to bed right away. (212)

One always lets himself in for it because of a trifle. (213)

That touched me, that crazy little gesture. (212)

The thing to do when you're trapped is to breeze – at once. (213)

I was in my underclothes and had a tremendous erection. (215)

I wanted full value for my hundred francs. (217)

The rainy season was coming on, the long, dreary stretch of grease and fog and squirts of rain that you damp and miserable. (219)

Source: Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*, 1934. Grove Press, New York, 1961.