

Excerpts from *Tropic of Capricorn* by Henry Miller

compiled by Phillip W. Weiss

I was a philosopher when still in swaddling clothes. (10)

Everything that happens, when it has significance, is in the nature of a contradiction. (13)

My people were entirely Nordic, which is to say idiots. (11)

Nobody can estimate the results of a good deed, of a kind word. (27)

Men are poor everywhere – they always have been and they always will be. (27)

To fight was easy, but to fight for food and rent was like fighting an army of ghosts. (45)

To be accepted and appreciated you must nullify yourself, make yourself indistinguishable from the herd. (56)

Everything American will disappear one day, more completely than that which was Greek, or Roman, or Egyptian. (56-7)

I was born a fanatic. (62)

Whatever is created above the normal limits of human suffering, acts as a boomerang and brings about destruction. (68)

I could study a cornice or a coping with the greatest curiosity while pretending to listen to a tale of human woe. (68)

Just as the city itself had become a huge tomb in which men struggled to earn a decent death so my own life came to resemble a tomb which I was constructing out of my own death. (68)

From the top of the Empire State Building I looked down one night upon the city which I knew from below: there they were, in true perspective, the human ants with whom I had crawled, the human lice with whom I had struggled. (69)

Everyday of my life, my tiny, microcosmic life, was a reflection of the outer chaos. (70)

Forty-five in New York is the deadline (71)

I wanted to feel the blood running back into my veins, even at the cost of annihilation. (76)

It was difficult to know how to put her to sleep again without losing a good fuck. (82)

It was one of the most wonderful fucks I ever had in my life. (83)

You're a Jew bastard yourself, only you don't know it. (86)

He was trying to tell me in his twisted Jewish way that he liked me. (86)

If you weren't such a romantic bastard I'd almost swear that you were a Jew. (87)

Listen, when I hear you talk sometimes I think to myself – if only that guy would put it down on paper! (87)

It was the look of a hopeless Jew in whom, as with all his race, the life instinct was so strong that, even though was absolutely nothing to hope for, he was powerless to kill himself. (88)

There were limits to sorrow as there were limits to joy, that was the impression they gave me. (89)

The death of his wife was only an item, a trifle, in the history of his calamities. (90)

The stink they were trying to take out of the world was the stink they themselves had brought into the world. (90)

To go beyond the ordained limits of joy or grief was wicked. (90)

And why the hell should one want to go on breathing forever? (91)

They were friends from the convent school in Canada where they had both studied music and the art of masturbation. (93)

Listen, did you ever fuck a crazy woman? (94)

Of course, whatever I recommended went in one ear and out the other. (95)

From Times Square to Fiftieth Street all that St. Thomas Aquinas forgot to include in his magnum opus is here included, which to is say, among other things, hamburger sandwiches, collar buttons, poodle dogs, slot machines, gray bowlers, typewriter ribbons, orange sticks, free toilets, sanitary

napkins, mint jujubes, billiard balls, chopped onions, crinkled doilies, manholes, chewing gum, sidecars and sourballs, cellophane, cord tires, magnetos, horse liniment, cough drops, feenamint, and the feline opacity of the hysterically endowed eunuch who marches to the soda fountain with a sawed-off shotgun between his legs. (98-9)

Cold energy trapped by sunning brutes and then set free like explosive rockets, wheels intricately interwheeled to give the illusion of force and speed, some for light, some for power, some for motion, words wired by maniacs and mounted like false teeth, perfect, and repulsive as lepers, ingratiating, soft, slippery, nonsensical movement. vertical, horizontal, circular, between walls and through walls, for pleasure, for barter, for crime, for sex (99)

The spiritual part of the being passes off like a scum, leaves absolutely no evidence or trace of its passage, vanishes, vanishes even more completely than a point in space after a mathematical discourse. (101)

The proof is the fact and the fact has no meaning except what is given to it by those who establish the facts. (101)

Everything I look at is rotten, lousy, rancid. (102)

The thought of running away and beginning all over again is equally terrifying: it means working like a nigger to keep body and soul together. (102)

Even if I could begin again it would be no use because fundamentally I have no desire to work and no desire to become a useful member of society. (102)

The city itself strikes me as a piece of the highest insanity, everything about it, sewers, elevated lines, slot machines, newspapers, telephones, cops, doorknobs, flophouses, screens, toilet paper, everything. (103)

You have to realize, Henry me boy, that you are dealing with cutthroats, with cannibals, only they're dressed up, shaved, perfumed, but that's all they are – cutthroats, cannibals. (103)

The world is divided into three parts of which two parts are meat balls and spaghetti and the other part a huge syphilitic chancre. (106)

The music is a diarrhea, a lake of gasoline, stagnant with cockroaches and stale horse piss. (107)

The sly intelligence of a fox and – the utter heartlessness of a jackal. (112)

There is something about rye bread which I am trying to fathom – something vaguely delicious, terrifying and liberating, something associated with first discoveries. (128)

Facts had little importance for us; what we demanded of a subject was that it allow us opportunity to expand. (128)

From the moment when one is put in school one is lost; one has the feeling of having a halter put around his neck. (129)

I could weep when I think of what life has made them. (129-30)

With the refinements that come with maturity the smells faded out, to be replaced by only one other distinctly memorable, distinctly pleasurable smell – the odor of the cunt. (132)

One can remember many things about the woman one has loved but it is hard to remember the smell of her cunt – with anything like certitude. (133)

Nobody knew yet what a fairy was, but whatever it was we were against it. (135)

Who had ever heard of a Jew beating up a Gentile? (138)

He was typical of the shanty Irish who made up the neighborhood. (139)

He had no right to be living in our neighborhood, no right to be as capable and manly as he was. (140)

Even if I must become a wild and natural park inhabited only by the idle dreamers I must not stop to rest here in the ordered fatuity of responsible, adult life. (145)

Everything which the fathers and the mothers created I disown. (145)

That people could make promises without ever having the least intention of fulfilling them was something unimaginable to me. (155)

Filth rolled off his lips like honey. (177)

With us he got a change of meat – Gentile cunt, as he put it. (178)

One ought to have a lot of respect for a woman, provided she's not a whore. (179)

It was like taking a flat in the Land of Fuck. (181)

It was here in the void of hernia that I did all of my quiet thinking via the penis. (184)

But *fuck*, the real thing, *cunt*, the real thing, seems to contain some unidentifiable element which is far more dangerous than nitroglycerin. (192)

Nothing is determined in advance, the future is absolutely uncertain, the past is non-existent. For every million born 999,999 are doomed to die and never again be born. (203)

God is the summation of all the spermatozoa come to full consciousness. (204)

All department stores are symbols of sickness and emptiness, but Bloomingdale's is my special sickness, my incurable obscure malady. (205)

Ordinary human suffering, ordinary human jealousy, ordinary human ambition – it was just so much shit to me. (209)

She's a voluptuous Jewess with enormous liquid eyes and the frankness which comes from sensuality. (223)

I am the intruder, the goy who has come down into the neighborhood to pick off a nice ripe cunt. (223)

What's a fuck when what I want is love? (224)

I thought of her like a maniac night and day, year in and year out, and then, without even noticing it, she drops out of my mind, like that, like a penny falling through a hole in your pocket. (224)

Now it dawns on me with full clarity: *you are alone in the world!* (225)

Fuck it! Blow it to hell! Kill, kill, kill: Kill them all, Jews and Gentiles, young and old, good and bad (226)

Nobody could tell him who he was, where he came from or what had happened to him. (227)

What fascinates me is that anything so dead and buried as I was could be resuscitated, and not only once, but innumerable times. (230)

Playing the piano was just one long vicarious fuck for me. (255)

She was living with a nigger, as I later found out. (255)

She was beautiful and lascivious, with strong Scotch teats and a row of white even teeth that were dazzling. (257)

She was rather shocked to find us in the raw, but soon we tumbled her out of the canoe and stripped her. (257)

She certainly wasn't a Catholic and if she had any morals they were of the reptilian order. (261)

I wouldn't want to be in love: it must be terrible to have to fuck the same man all the time, don't you think? (262)

She had an enormous cunt and it had been well reamed out, I could feel. (266)

Once I had a drunken Irish bitch and this one had some queer ideas. (269)

The other guy, Nietzsche, he was a real case, a case for the bughouse. (272)

He said they were full of shit, to make it brief, and by God, wasn't he right though? (272)

Not that he had any special grievance against him – he just didn't like his mug. (273)

Listen, you never know what a man might do for you some day. (274)

I learned it, by bitter experience, to hold my tongue; I learned to sit in silence, and even smile, when actually I was foaming at the mouth. (288)

The moment a child is born it becomes part of a world in which there is not only the life rhythm but the death rhythm. The frantic desire to live, to live at any cost, is not a result of the life rhythm in us, but of the death rhythm. (288)

This keeping oneself alive, out of a blind urge to defeat death, is in itself a means of sowing death. (288)

Death is the automaton which rules the world of activity. (290)

The war was on and men were being slaughtered, one million, two million, five million, ten million, twenty million, finally a hundred million, then a billion, everybody, man, woman and child, down to the last one. (290)

No beginning, no end. (346)

Source: Henry Miller, *Tropic of Capricorn*, 1938. Grove Press, New York, 1961.