

MYSTICAL EROTICISM IN BATAILLE, MILLER, AND IKKYŪ

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MYSTICAL EROTICISM IN BATAILLE, MILLER, AND IKKYŪ

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## ABSTRACT

### MYSTICAL EROTICISM IN BATAILLE, MILLER, AND IKKYŪ

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This thesis uses Zen concepts to explore the similarities between erotic and mystical experience as represented by Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye* and *The Impossible*, Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, and Ikkyū's poetry. It argues that the moments of absolute erotic dissolution described literally or metaphorically within these texts signal authentic mystical awakenings. Mystical and erotic experiences push the individual beyond rational considerations, toward an absolute consciousness: a realization of impermanence, a sense of death, a feeling of oneness, and attention to the now. This work challenges the notion that mystical experience demands spiritual or moral purity.

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## MYSTICAL EROTICISM IN BATAILLE, MILLER, AND IKKYŪ

*A monk asked Yūn-Men, "What is Buddha?"  
Yūn-Men said, "Dried shitstick."  
(Wu-Men 137)*

This essay uses Zen concepts to challenge the notion that mystical experience demands spiritual or moral purity. After working through the intriguing and controversial erotic systems of Bataille's *Story of the Eye* and *The Impossible*, Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, and a collection of Zen Master Ikkyū's 15<sup>th</sup> century poetry entitled *Wild Ways*, this exploration addresses the question of whether intense erotic realization can be distinguished from mystical awakening. A central question is whether mystical revelation is received solely through virtuous behavior, or if such awakening is possible even when the individual is engaged in transgressive sexual activity. Can an evil person be enlightened?

Each section of this essay focuses on the psychological possibilities of erotic experience. I highlight the violent dissolution of the discriminating consciousness described by Bataille, Miller, and Ikkyū. Discriminating consciousness is the term I use to designate the state of mind that possesses most people most of the time. This common state is the operation of language and rational thought, the perception that constructs and affirms the dualism that distinguishes between self and other. Discriminating

consciousness is the desire to acquire or rid, the ego's survival impulse, the anxiety that motivates us to look both ways before crossing a street. The discriminating consciousness is necessary and wonderful, but it can also tyrannize the mind and narrow the individual's understanding of what it means to be alive. In Zen practice and other religious and spiritual traditions, mystical experience is a state of conscious awareness that depends first on the radical absence of such dualistic thinking. Bodhidharma is revered as one of the most important figures in the Zen tradition; he describes mystical experience as “A special transmission outside the scripture, / not dependent on words or letters” (Park 73). Subversion of the normal, limited perspective of discriminating consciousness can precipitate a powerful, flashing intuition of the Absolute, a term which could also be called God, or the Tao, or emptiness, or continuity, among other names. Absolute consciousness is a transformative experience often recollected as a sense of vast emptiness or oneness. Zen Master Robert Aitken says, “inside and outside become one” (146).

I am using a language to introduce an image of what it means to encounter the Absolute, but I wish to acknowledge the fundamental contrast and fundamental lack of contrast between the absolute and discriminating perspectives, because a careful discussion of the Absolute points to such unresolvable paradoxes. Respected Zen teachers have argued that truth is beyond language and that truth is language without being bothered by the “simultaneous . . . affirmation and negation” (Park 73-74). Bodhidharma argues that the importance of Zen lies beyond words and scriptures, and it is common for those who have experienced a piercing awakening to believe that words pollute or betray

the significance of their realization. Words divide and contain, while the experience of the Absolute breaks all boundaries. The equally valid similarity between the Absolute and Levinas' Other is paradoxical: "The relation with the Other does not nullify separation. It does not arise within a totality nor does it establish a totality, integrating me and the other" (Levinas 251). The Absolute is not simply the conclusion of difference. My point is that even designations such as separate or together, one or many, or relative and absolute fail to encapsulate the elusive spirit of the mystic's experience. Consider Dogen's directions for Zen meditation (*zazen*): "Now sit steadfastly and think non-thinking. How do you think non-thinking? Beyond thinking. This is the essential art of *zazen*" (Dogen 5). This beyond-ness of mystical practice and experience is also exemplified by the title of Zen Master Shunryu Suzuki's book *Not Always So: Practicing the True Spirit of Zen*. Zen practice is not static or dynamic. How can just descriptions of mystical experience be developed?

Although mystics are careful to point out the limitations of language, many agree that generalities of the absolute perspective can be outlined. In addition to subversion of the discriminating consciousness and a sense of connectedness or emptiness, mystical experiences are often associated with an appreciation for the transient nature of perception. Zen Master Wu-Men articulates the delicacy of the experience, "A flash of lightning; / sparks from flint; / if you blink your eyes, / it's already gone" (137). It is easier to let go of the abstractions that deny mystical experience when the impermanent nature of the discriminating mind is clearly observed. The normal perspective is often possessed by the development and haphazard consideration of fleeting thoughts, while



mystical experience is the violent subversion of that possession. Without such disruptive experiences, one may believe that life is defined by financial, relationship, or health problems. The Absolute always says there is more. Because the discriminating consciousness is the mind's perpetual work to distinguish self and other, the Absolute is often described as a violent experience of death or dying: "When you meet the Buddha, you kill the Buddha" (Wu-Men 9). Killing the Buddha means doing away with the conditioning that conceives of life as an abstraction removed from moment-to-moment experience. Zen does violence to the overreliance on rationality, leading to experience of the Absolute which confirms that life is here and now.

Like mystical experience, eroticism is violent when it functions to disrupt or terminate the usual functioning of discriminating consciousness. Mystical and erotic experiences are opposed to what Georges Bataille describes as the "world of utility . . . [where] only the useful, the real, have a serious character" (*The Impossible* 10). These experiences are perceived as violent because they shake the individual's valuation of the world of work and practicality. The functioning of society's conditioning is threatened.

Mystical and erotic experiences are perceived as violent when they deliver a sense of death. As with the fleeting sensation of orgasm, *la petit mort*, this upheaval is not necessarily a negative event or goal. Georges Bataille explains the empowering possibilities of erotic experience:

The first turbulent surge of erotic feeling overwhelms all else, so that our gloomy considerations of the fate in store for our discontinuous selves are forgotten. And then, beyond the intoxication of youth, we achieve the power to look death in the

face and to perceive in death the pathway into unknowable and incomprehensible continuity. (*Erotism* 24)

For Bataille, the experience of continuity in eroticism is a sublime state comparable to religious or mystical experience, an analogy he develops at length in *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*. This essay is concerned with the consequences of this formulation of eroticism, an attitude I will trace through Bataille's erotic novels, Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, and Zen Master Ikkyū's fifteenth-century poetry. Each example exhibits the spiritual tension between a narrator's possession of erotic desires or experiences and the radical dissolution of the self, ego, or I. I argue that the moments of absolute erotic dissolution described literally or metaphorically within these works signal authentic mystical awakenings.

### ***Story of the Eye and The Impossible***

*Story of the Eye* (1928) and *The Impossible* (1962) are bizarre, disturbing, and provocative novels that dramatize many of the philosophical interests that Bataille formally articulates in *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (1957). The central characters of *Story of the Eye* are teenage children: the male narrator and Simone, lovers who engage in a steady progression of increasingly depraved sexual activities. What begins as relatively innocent fetishism devolves into real perversity and gruesome crimes, including rape, murder, and necrophilia. Despite these unsettling aspects of the novel, *Story of the Eye* exhibits metaphorical structure that elevates it above mere pornography.

Simone's peculiar fascination with eggs initiates a metaphorical chain of signification that includes the sun, testicles, and eyes (Barthes 240-241). A second important chain consisting of liquids arises from the first and includes: milk, tears, blood, urine, and semen (241). Roland Barthes argues that it is these “appeal[s] to metaphorical or metonymical language” that differentiates Bataille from Sade and contributes to the book's literary significance (246). Sade presents a relentless, perverted rationality, while Bataille uses symbols to challenge rationality. Barthes says,

Although, Georges Bataille's *Histoire de l'oeil* includes several named characters and the narrative of their erotic adventures, he certainly does not give us the story of Simone, Marcelle, or the narrator (as Sade could write the story of Justine or Juliette). *Histoire de l'oeil* is actually the story of an object. (240)

This object is the eye, the nodal point of the story's metaphorical chains of signification.

The eye is a traditional symbol for discriminating consciousness and as such is routinely violated in Bataille's tale. The narrative portrays the escalating struggle between rationality and the absurd erotic quest of the novel's protagonists. Gilles Mayne alludes to this building surreality of Bataille's work. He describes early and milder scenes of *Story of the Eye*: “One is inclined to laugh at such passages. But if such a 'childhood lewdness' . . . as the narrator himself puts it, distancing himself for a moment from such events, does not make us laugh, it propels us into a region of the mind that irritates, then directly threatens reason . . . . Clearly madness is in the air” (Mayne 117-118). Mayne highlights a representative passage: “Simone would ask me to bed her down by the toilet, and she would rest her arms on the rim of the bowl so that she could bend her head and fix her

*wide eyes on the white eggs*” (*Story of the Eye* 44). The italics here emphasize the building connections among a series of globular objects, contributing to what Barthes labels a “perfectly spherical metaphor” (242). Eggs, eyes, testicles, and the sun form a chain of signs that are increasingly “diverted from their usual functions” (Mayne 130). The egg ceases to signify an innocuous breakfast staple when it is fetishized and coordinated with eyes. The absurd associations constructed within *Story of the Eye* challenge discriminating consciousness by demonstrating the malleability of sign systems. Bataille will not let our eyes perceive in any normal sense. His presentation of erotic experience disrupts rational considerations.

The works of Bataille, Miller, and Ikkyū refer to this violence of eroticism as a kind of voiding where thoughts slow down or stop. Words, rational processes, and the individual's sense of an individuated consciousness are evacuated through the erotic experience. The male narrator of *Story of the Eye* reflects on an erotic moment:

The wind had died down somewhat and part of the starry sky was visible. And it struck me that death was the sole outcome of my erection, and if Simone and I were killed, then the universe of our unbearable vision was certain to be replaced by the pure stars, fully unrelated to any external gazes and realizing in a cold state, without human delays or detours, something that strikes me as the goal of my sexual licentiousness: a geometric incandescence (among other things, the coinciding point of life and death, being and nothingness, perfectly fulgurating. (33)

Fulguration is impermanence. The narrator sees the transience of his existence as all mystics must. The eyes are the most important sense organs; with our discriminating mind, they illuminate the universe of our individual experience. In Bataille's novel, rationality is avoided, movement symbolized by this vision of cold, isolated, and pure space. The narrator imagines his own death. His sense of loss or nothingness is not simply emptiness; however, but is also a feeling of profound association or oneness. Bataille's erotic state presents series of objects like eggs, eyes, testicles, or the sun radiating coordinately with "geometric incandescence," a singular illuminating emission of absolute consciousness that defies language and rationality (*Story of the Eye* 33). This experience is the orgasmic intuition of death amid existence, the feeling of a profound continuity beyond the usual plane of discriminating rationality.

Bataille's sustained assault on the typical signification of words reaches a distinct erotic climax in *Story of the Eye*. In this most disturbing scene of the novel (a scene that some have called the most shocking in all of Bataille's writing), the male narrator, Simone, and their libertine accomplice, Sir Edmond, rape, strangle, and enucleate a priest (Mayne 123). At Simone's ardent request, the priest's bloody eye/egg/sphere is then used as a fetishized object of sexual play and is inserted into her vagina. The narrator says,

I drew her thighs apart, and found myself facing something I imagine I had been waiting for in the same way that a guillotine waits for a neck to slice. I even felt as if my eyes were bulging from my head, erectile with horror; in *Simone's* hairy vagina, I saw the wan blue eye . . . . gazing at me through tears of urine. Streaks

of come in the streaming hair helped give that dreamy vision a disastrous sadness.

(*Story of the Eye* 84)

This is the novel's final and ultimate assault on the eye, on reasonable discourse, the location where the novel's metaphorical chains of signification coalesce and implode—I am interested in the sublime confusion experienced by readers of this scene. Gilles

Mayne explains:

In the (erotic) climax of the *corrida* [mass] scene of *Histoire de l'oeil*, scatology “works,” so to speak, at its best when, in the space of a moment, nothing is able to interrupt the movement of absorption-expulsion-reabsorption of foreign bodies (organs) out of/into bodies that are foreign to them, “putting one's . . . mind entirely in a (here, most) violent state of expulsion.” The narration reaches a level of ambiguity so great as to make any simple satisfactory reading null and void . . .

(122)

It is this intimation of the null or void that is the major achievement of *Story of the Eye*. The self/eye/discriminating consciousness and the other/foreign body/vagina become one. The act of reading is a manifestation of the discriminating consciousness, and this disturbing, erotic moment of Bataille's novel has an unreadable nature for its offensive surreality. The reader can experience a glimmer of mystical realization, because the sublime, climactic horror of this scene momentarily offers a space of mind frustrated from rational considerations. The mental space I refer to is an encounter with absolute consciousness; however brief, it is a consciousness void of distinctions such as right or

wrong. Mayne concludes, “the genuine movement of eroticism . . . has no rules” (163).

Eroticism pushes us beyond dualities.

My desire is not to defend the perversity of Bataille's fictional writing, but to acknowledge the violent, disruptive reality of erotic and mystical experience, the state of consciousness that Bataille's novels represent and sometimes affect through extremity of metonymy or metaphor. The disgusting crimes of *Story of the Eye* function as an emotional appeal to amplify the gravity of the voiding experience of eroticism. In a psychological or spiritual sense, this voiding is already its own kind of death and violence. Progressing through *Story of the Eye*, the reader must die to his or her expectations concerning the treatment of violence and sexuality in a narrative. Bataille admits of his erotic novels,

To be honest, these evocations have a painful heaviness about them. This heaviness may be tied to the fact that at times horror had a real presence in my life. It may be too that, even when reached in fiction, horror alone still enabled me to escape the empty feeling of untruth . . . Realism gives me the impression of a mistake. Violence alone escapes the feeling of poverty of those realistic experiences. Only death and desire have the force that oppresses, that takes one's breath away. Only the extremism of desire and of death enables one to attain the truth. (*The Impossible* 9)

The discriminating consciousness becomes too possessive and leads to blindness.

Descriptions of violence enable narrative clarity. The truth Bataille refers to is not derived through abstraction but is encountered as a force that propels the individual beyond the

discriminating consciousness. Mystical and erotic experiences are so radically violating that they cannot even be said to exist in any normal sense, “cannot be fixed in any static reality, whether of the high or of the low, of the beautiful or of the obscene, of the good or of the evil” (Mayne 164). Erotic and mystical experiences do not depend upon an idealized context.

Bataille's novel *The Impossible* explores the paradoxical non-existence of erotic experience. Although the narrator participates in an erotic quest, it is only through his lack or failure that he succeeds and encounters what he understands as the truth, or the real, or the absolute: “when I cannot attain my object I at least sink into real poverty” (*The Impossible* 17). He arrives at a state of mind that ceases to desire processes of acquisition or relinquishment. The narrator explains, “I want to write this first of all. We don't have the means of reaching at our disposal: to tell the truth, we do reach; we suddenly reach the necessary point and we spend the rest of our lives seeking a lost moment; but often we miss it, for the precise reason that seeking it leads us away from it” (25). The erotic experience is spoken of as the desired object of a quest; yet, it manifests as an absolute force that takes spontaneous possession of the individual. The paradoxical nature of this experience is not foreign to religious mystics, and Bataille begins his novel with two epigraphs, excerpts from the accounts of female saints. Saint Teresa of Avila says of her mystical awakening, “During this agony, the soul is inundated with inexpressible delights” (*The Impossible* 7). Notice that she speaks of herself as the object of an external movement that overtakes her. Although they may seem to contrast, the



deluge and the void are metaphors that describe the mystic or erotic experience in the same way. In either case, the individual consciousness disappears into a grand continuity.

As in *Story of the Eye*, the spontaneous erotic realization described by *The Impossible* is the force of a void, a word oft repeated in the novel. The narrator describes the impossibility of reaching this voiding experience through normal cognition, yet, like the mystics in any spiritual tradition, he is aware of locations and behaviors conducive to the appearance of this force. As will be seen in Miller and Ikkyū, the narrator understands the vagina as an auspicious site. I do not expect that to surprise anyone. The particular ways in which these men refer to the vagina reinforces the similarity between mystical and erotic experience. In *The Impossible*, the narrator says: “my hands were disappearing between her legs . . . blindly those hands searched for the crack, burned themselves in that fire that opens the void” (*The Impossible* 21). The violence of this eroticism is not violence done to the Other, but the immolation of the self and other as functional designations. The ashen remains of self and other are indistinguishable. Mayne says,

Eroticism does not belong to either one of these opposite realities; in fact it cannot belong at all: it can only be the constant interplay between such opposites, the constant slippage from one into the other without any possible end, or without any possible end other than the ecstatic point which they undo themselves and come to “coincide” or to “marry” each other—the point at which each comes to be the other. (163)

The vaginal space is this space of interplay, of constant slippage, the point at which each comes to be the other. There are several ways to interpret this claim and I am interested in

each of them. Offspring, for instance, represent a physical conclusion of this coming to be the other. Coming to be the other is also radical transformation, seeing from the other perspective, experiencing oneness in erotic dissolution.

Vaginal space is a metaphorical space in Bataille, Miller, and Ikkyū. The vagina is associated with life and death, the fullness of erotic actualization and the void. This space symbolizes the ambiguity between inside and outside, self and other. Vaginal space destroys boundaries between the sacred and profane.

The vaginal nodal point in *The Impossible* signifies the violent, voiding movement, a location of ecstasy and horror comparable to mystical experience. Consider the account of Saint Catherine of Siena quoted in *The Impossible*: “When he was buried, my soul reposed in peace and quiet and in such a fragrance of blood that I could not bear the idea of washing away that blood which had flowed from him onto me” (7). The blood is like a perfume. Mystical experience is found in the face of transience, horror, and loss. Compare the ambiguity of Saint Catherine's account of spiritual or mystical awakening to the narrator's relation of erotic experience:

My anguish does not come solely from knowing I am free. It requires a possible that *entices* me and frightens me at the same time. . . . The same is true of the excitation of the senses. If one strips naked the part of a pretty young woman going from halfway up the leg to the waist, desire vivifies an image of the possible that nakedness points to. . . . It would not be an abyss if it were endlessly available, remaining true to itself, forever pretty, forever stripped naked by desire, and if, for my part, I had inexhaustible strength. But if it does not have the

immediately dark character of a ravine, it is no less empty for that and leads to horror nonetheless . . . the void between the legs. (*The Impossible* 36)

Erotic and mystical experiences reveal the transient nature of existence; they are an intuition of the continuity of death that defines discontinuous life, a violent, voiding displacement from the normal discriminating mode of consciousness. These experiences point us beyond dualities.

### ***Tropic of Cancer***

Henry Miller's novel *Tropic of Cancer* presents an unashamed chronicle of erotic experience. The narrator discloses difficulties related to his sexual escapades that include lice, bedbugs, fear of disease and pregnancy, and the negotiation of challenging emotional situations. These difficulties are nightmares for many people, but the narrator is not possessed by such conflicts. He does not lament his bad luck when he rouses from “deep slumber” to discover that his lover's “hair is alive” with bedbugs (Miller 20). The narrator reports, “We pack hurriedly and sneak out of the hotel” (21). The protagonist is not stoic but present to the fullness of life; he escapes neuroticism through his attention to the now. He proclaims, “I have no money, no resources, no hopes. I am the happiest man alive” (1). In her article “Henry Miller and the Celebration of Loss,” Natalija Bonic discusses the novel's unexpected turns: “the obscenity [within *Tropic of Cancer*] is not so unusual compared with Miller's explicit delight in what most of us would find distressing” (51). The bravado of Miller's writing is seductive.

Most moments of difficulty figure as comedy in *Tropic of Cancer*. The narrator relates, “Last night Boris discovered he was lousy. I had to shave his armpits and even then the itching did not stop. How can one get lousy in a beautiful place like this? But no matter. We might never have known each other so intimately, Boris and I, had it not been for the lice” (Miller 1). Intimacy is the best word to describe the protagonist's relationship to his environment. The narrator is baffled by the “discrepancy there is between ideas and living” (242). He declares, “Ideas have to be wedded to action; if there is no sex in them, there is no action” (242). He is not bothered by temporary inconveniences such as lice or bed bugs. Miller's eroticism venerates proactive lightheartedness while opposing loftiness and abstraction. Bonic says, “There is a constant attempt in Miller writings to highlight all that has been trivialized or rejected by our standard of rationality. Whatever has been deemed worthless or deficient, or has simply been overlooked, is taken up by Miller and awarded significance” (63). The narrator is not possessed by the discriminating consciousness; he is intimate with the moment-to-moment experiences of his existence. No aspect of his life is unworthy. Anais Nin wrote of *Tropic of Cancer*, “Here is a book which, if such a thing were possible, might restore our appetite for the fundamental realities” (xxxix). Erotic experience is one of these realities.

The protagonist's stress on erotic life is precipitated by his concern for the spiritually and physically impotent individual. His claims of health are supported by a gusto that persists from the bedroom to the street, an energy that recognizes beauty in the whole spectrum of emotional states. Sadness is radiant in Miller: “The tears were streaming down his face. He made no effort to brush them away. He just let everything

gush forth. Jesus, I thought to myself, that's fine to have a release like that. . . . to let go that way. Great! Great!" (Miller 309). Streaming, gush forth, release, and let go all function as descriptions for orgasm. The narrator's orgasmic life is not simply about positive emotional states. He believes that true unhappiness is not reflected by negative emotions but by the mind's unhealthy attachment to abstract ideals, a perspective analogous to the Zen Buddhist attitude: "My idea briefly has been to present a resurrection of the emotions, to depict the conduct of a human being in the stratosphere of ideas, that is, in the grip of delirium. . . . In short, to *erect* [emphasis mine] a world on the basis of the *omphalos*, not on an abstract idea" (243). The *omphalos* is the sacred ground of moment-to-moment experience, awareness of the body and the mind. The Om-phallus is a mystical point unbound by the strictures of the discriminating consciousness. To release/orgasm is to give up resistance, to accept the here and now. The protagonist of *Tropic of Cancer* and the Zen monk accept their bodies, emotions, and desires as intimate companions. Acceptance of the here and now encourages the discriminating mind to relax its dualistic work to seek and repel. Erotic experiences in Miller often connect to this quiet space of mind, devoid of discriminating consciousness, pointing back to the moment.

*Tropic of Cancer* challenges the societal conditioning that validates abstract and idealistic operations of the discriminating consciousness, operations that lead to dissatisfaction. A tyrannical discriminating consciousness distances the individual from the now. Even religious ideals are not enough for Miller. The narrator says, "I have found God, but he is insufficient" (Miller 98). He stresses that desires such as food, sleep, and

sex are basic priorities and that their satisfaction has real religious significance. The narrator insists, "Everything is packed into a second which is either consummated or not consummated" (250). Consummation is both the state of perfection and the consecration of a union through sexual intercourse. Miller's novel emphasizes the connection between spiritual and sexual matters.

The union of sexual intercourse often symbolizes unity between the individual and his or her environment in Miller's work, a presence to the here and now that is characteristic of the mystic's awareness. The narrator criticizes the forces that have isolated the individual from this presence. He says, "Had one single element of man's nature been altered, vitally, fundamentally altered, by the incessant march of history? By what he calls the better part of his nature, man has been betrayed" (Miller 98). The protagonist is criticizing the idealistic abstractions that repress the individual and persuade her or him to believe that fundamental desires such as food and sex are profane. The narrator emphasizes that indulgence in abstraction creates and reinforces this sense of disconnection: "we get to talking about the condition of things with that enthusiasm which only those who bear no active part in life can muster" (153). *Tropic of Cancer* contains many references to literature and philosophy and is not opposed to ideas in general—many commentaries on Miller note the breadth of his reading and his association with important intellectuals—but the novel warns that the discriminating consciousness has become valued for its own sake and possessive of the individual who has been robbed of vitality: "And what is more strange is that the absence of any relationship between ideas and living causes us no anguish, no discomfort. We have

become so adjusted that, if tomorrow we were ordered to walk on our hands, we would do so without the slightest protest” (153). Erotic experience represents a salubrious exit from this stagnant mode, a gateway back to the here and now, toward an awareness of the Absolute.

The protagonist supports his arguments with a presentation of his vitality. His vibrant persona contrasts with the neurosis of his many friends, a central tension in *Tropic of Cancer*. The narrator declares in response to a friend's philosophical equivocation over an interested woman, “Fuck your two ways of looking at things! . . . *You* go sit by the fountain, and let *me* smell the lilacs!” (Miller 59). The novel argues that the dualistic, anxious logic of the discriminating mind isolates the individual from the fullness of experience by its ceaseless and needless division of the universe into subcategories of desire and burden. The protagonist’s friend is possessed by his discriminating faculties and stuck in neurosis, unable to flow with the romantic opportunity in front of him. Miller’s novel emphasizes the importance of oneness with the environment, a state of mind that the narrator discovers in erotic activity.

*Tropic of Cancer* outlines the many ways in which people lose a sense of intimacy with the moment. Miller considers a person’s daily employment one of the better representations of the isolating, ambivalent neurosis caused by strict adherence to discriminating rationality. The narrator laughs at his coworkers whose greatest fear in life is losing their jobs: “A man can get to love shit if his livelihood depends on it, if his happiness is involved” (Miller 148). The narrator's coworkers at the newspaper are always miserable, and happiness is only an abstract ideal to which they are attached. He

says, “None of my companions seem to understand why I appear so contented. They grumble all the time, they have ambitions, they want to show their pride and spleen. A good proofreader has no ambitions, no pride, no spleen” (147). *Tropic of Cancer* argues that many practical goals, ambitions, and ideals constitute an unhealthy and unnecessary denial of human nature. Miller’s novel argues that a spiritually significant existence is not disconnected from basic human desires: “Ideas are related to living: liver ideas, kidney ideas, interstitial ideas, etc.” (242). He argues, “all that can be coolly and intellectually handled belongs to the carapace and a man who is intent on creation always dives beneath, to the open wound, to the festering obscene horror. He hitches his dynamo to the tenderest parts” (249). *Tropic of Cancer* tells the story of a creative, spiritual individual who perceives sacred meaning in erotic activity, polite society be damned.

Miller celebrates the violent destruction of a sexually-repressed, unenlightened culture that has allowed itself to be possessed of mental habits devoted to getting and spending, a byproduct of the tyranny of dualistic perception. Conspicuous consumption is one example of that tyranny. The narrator asks, “What good are the fancy ties and the fine suits if you can’t get a hard on any more?” (Miller 117). Miller advocates the importance of erotic experience because it is capable of returning the individual’s attention to matters of the body and spirit, which society has conditioned its members to deny.

The protagonist in *Tropic of Cancer* juxtaposes his erotic and spiritual highlife with the sickness of society. The narrator says, “The world around me is dissolving, leaving here and there spots of time. The world is a cancer eating itself away” (Miller 2). Cancer contrasts with the narrator's condition: “I’m healthy. Incurably healthy. No



sorrows, no regrets. No past, no future. The present is enough for me. Day by day. Today!” (50). This vision of life as decay is not an existential conflict; the narrator is not afraid of death. He continues, “I am thinking that when the great silence descends upon all and everywhere music will at last triumph” (2). Great silence, orgasm, is like death. Music and silence are both terms that represent the experience of deep meditation. Music is a celebration of the fullness of life that such voiding experiences manifest but depends upon rest notes. Dying to a set of anxieties, quieting of the discriminating consciousness, equals a rebirth to the present experience of one’s life. This is the function of Zen meditation. Miller's life-long interest in Zen has been acknowledged by many scholars and it is simple to compare the narrator's behavior to a quasi-Zen attitude. *Tropic of Cancer* emphasizes oneness and presence to the now.

Miller advocates the importance of the absolute consciousness experienced and described by mystics in countless spiritual and religious traditions. The protagonist of *Tropic of Cancer* relates his realization:

My whole being was responding to the dictates of an ambience which it had never before experienced; that which I could call myself seemed to be contracting, condensing, shrinking from the stale, customary boundaries of flesh whose perimeter knew only the modulations of the nerve ends. . . . For the fraction of a second perhaps, I experienced that utter clarity which the epileptic, it is said, is given to know. In that moment I lost completely the illusion of space and time: the world unfurled its drama simultaneously across a meridian which had no axis.

(96)

The narrator does not encounter this mystical experience of the Absolute in meditation. His moment of clarity is the product of erotic experience and occurs in a wild Parisian brothel. Significant moments of Miller's eroticism are realized as intimate with the ground of human experience and are, therefore, analogous to mystical awakening. Mystical experience is not only encountered by robed monks and nuns in meditation or prayer.

Vaginal space is auspicious for Miller as it is for Bataille. The narrator speaks of the vagina in a way that is highly reminiscent of the descriptions provided in *Story of the Eye* and *The Impossible*:

Suddenly I see a dark, hairy crack in front of me . . . . A glance at that dark, unstitched wound and a deep fissure in my brain opens up: all the images and memories that had been laboriously or absent-mindedly assorted, labeled, documented, filed, sealed and stamped break forth . . . the world ceases to revolve, time stops, the very nexus of my dreams is broken and dissolved and my guts spill out in a grand schizophrenic rush, an evacuation that leaves me face to face with the Absolute. (Miller 250)

Miller experiences vaginal space as voiding. Rationality is assaulted, creating a possibility for mystical experience. He says in another instance, "When I look down into this fucked-out cunt of a whore I feel the whole world beneath me, a world tottering and crumbling, a world used up and polished like a leper's skull" (Miller 248). The narrator's meditation on the vagina offers a violent movement of perception. He explains his experience, "If anyone knew what it meant to read the riddle of that thing which today is

called a 'crack' or a 'hole,' if anyone had the least feeling of mystery about the phenomena which are labeled 'obscene,' this world would crack asunder” (249). Mystery is another term for the absolute state of consciousness; the narrator laments that everything is objectified and distanced by the normal discriminating mode which seeks to demystify the world. The tyranny of the discriminating consciousness destroys the individual’s capacity for awe, sensitivity, and engagement with one’s environment.

### *Wild Ways*

Ikkyū’s writing supports the possibility of a mystical eroticism. Zen Master Ikkyū aroused controversy in 15<sup>th</sup> century Japan for his irreverence regarding social conventions and his criticism of corrupt imperial government and hypocritical Buddhist organizations (Stevens 9-17). He is now regarded as one of the most genuine Zen masters to have lived (14). John Stevens says, “For Ikkyū, part of being authentic was to be totally up front about sex” (14). The Zen sect is like other religious traditions in that it often avoids open discussion of sexual topics, so Ikkyū’s poetry is unique for its nonchalant honesty regarding sexuality. Ikkyū discusses his penis in “A Man’s Root”: “Eight inches strong, it is my favorite thing; / If I’m alone at night, I embrace it fully-- / A beautiful woman hasn’t touched it for ages. / Within my *fundoshi* there is an entire universe!” (73). The universe of sexual desire is not antithetical to this Master’s Zen life. Ikkyū’s poetry shares a spiritual wisdom and attitude that is compatible with and often connected to his erotic experience.

Ikkyū's description of the vagina is not wholly unlike those provided by Miller and Bataille. He writes in "A Woman's Sex," "It has the original mouth but remains wordless; / It is surrounded by a magnificent mound of hair. / Sentient beings can get completely lost in it / But it is also the birthplace of all the Buddhas of the ten thousand worlds" (Ikkyū 74). Ambiguity is an aspect of vaginal space for Ikkyū, as it is for Bataille and Miller. The original mouth speaks a fundamental message that is, nevertheless, beyond language/discriminating consciousness. The original mouth is a description of the Absolute. Getting completely lost can either mean becoming obsessed/hedonistic or losing one's sense of self and other. The latter interpretation recalls the voiding sensation that Miller and Bataille associate with the vagina. Calling the vagina the birthplace of the Buddhas of the ten thousand worlds can be understood literally as the universal site of birth and figuratively as a gate to mystical experience. The vaginal space is auspicious for Ikkyū as it is for Miller and Bataille.

Auspicious space in Zen is not limited to the *zendo* (meditation hall). *Zen koans* (stories/records) acknowledge manifold spaces of realization. The historical Buddha experienced awakening as he watched Venus rise over the dawn horizon. Zen Master Gutei enlightened a disciple by raising one finger (Wu-Men 28). The Buddha enlightened Mahakasyapa by twirling a flower (46). Zen Master Joshu enlightened a monk by telling him to wash his rice bowl (54). A Zen monk was awakened by the sound of a pebble he swept into the wall (39). What about sex?

I will relate one modern Zen story which identifies erotic experience as the point of enlightenment. Bobo-roshi was a Zen monk who practiced for years in an arduous

Japanese Zen monastery but struggled to awaken and absconded when he reached the point of complete despair (van de Wetering 100). The monk wandered into town with his few belongings and encountered a geisha (101). The naive monk asked the woman what she needed and allowed her to lead him into her home (101). Bobo-roshi did not shy away when he discovered the nature of the situation (101). The monk's sexual experience with the geisha gave way to a uniquely powerful enlightenment, a tremendous *satori*, the kind of experience the monk had been striving for years to achieve in the Zen monastery (101). This story does not represent an exceptional case in Zen history. Ikkyū advocates in “A Woman's Sex,” “Enter a brothel once and Great Wisdom will explode upon you” (77). From the Zen perspective, erotic experience can be mystical experience.

Reservations regarding the authenticity of erotic experiences as mystical experiences often stem from insistence upon a distinction between the sacred and the profane. Ikkyū's erotic poetry contradicted with the general understanding of sexuality as impure activity in fifteenth-century Japanese society. He says in “A Woman's Sex,” “Follow the rule of celibacy blindly and you are no more than an ass; / Break it and you are only human. / The spirit of Zen is manifest in ways countless as the sands of the Ganges. / Every newborn is a fruit of the conjugal bond. / How many aeons have secret blossoms been budding and fading?” (Ikkyū 81). Mystical experience is not about strict adherence to doctrine or principles for their own sake. Ikkyū argues that awakening is independent of context when he says that Zen is manifest in ways countless as the sands of the Ganges. Realization is always available here in the budding blossoms of this

moment, even in a grain of sand. Ikkyū says that human life is the product of erotic experience. The erotic is not simply profane.

Ikkyū does more than defend the mystical possibilities of erotic experience; he often argues that erotic activity is at the forefront of his Zen life. Ikkyū concludes in “A Woman's Sex,” “The autumn breeze of a single night of love is / better than a hundred thousand years of / sterile sitting meditation . . .” (75). He argues that mystical life is not just the immaculate labor of quiet, cloistered men and women. Ikkyū, Miller, and Bataille are similar in their rejection of purity and ideality. Mystical experience does not depend upon context.

Ikkyū accepts the authenticity of erotic awakening but does not advocate hedonism. He celebrates the importance of his erotic life, yet it is only one aspect of his Zen. He writes in “A Hermit Monk in the Mountains,” “I like it best when no one comes, / Preferring fallen leaves and swirling flowers for company. / Just an old Zen monk living like he should, / A withered plum tree suddenly sprouting a hundred blossoms” (Ikkyū 43). Blossoms can figure as an erotic object or the beauty of hermitage in Ikkyū's poetry. Like erotic experience, quiet and solitude cannot encapsulate the mystical experience—nothing can—but Ikkyū appreciates these aspects of his Zen life as well. The mystic's experience is certainly not all about sex, and the great variety of Ikkyū's poetry reflects the complexity of the human character. Both eroticism and solitude may be sites of realization.

Zen life is about moderation. The modern Zen Master Robert Aitken advises, “No boorish sex. That's a good precept for all of us” (37). Aitken outlines the complexity of

defining boorish but believes that trust and safety are essential in sexual situations (Aitken 43). These values are, of course, absent from Bataille's erotic tales and occasionally Miller's. Ikkyū's poetry is not solely focused upon flashy experiences of awakening to the Absolute. That is not to say that such experiences lack significance, but Miller and Bataille fail to emphasize that such experiences are only an entrance to spiritual life and not its conclusion. Zen practice is concerned with taking care of oneself and the community: compassion, moment-to-moment awareness, generosity, personal responsibility, non-violence, social activism, and confidence. Many of Ikkyū's poems discuss these values without sexual association.

Erotic realization can be mystical awakening because the Absolute can be encountered through presence to any experience. Aitken says, "Buddha-nature [the realization of the Absolute] is, in fact, the essence and quality of energy, including the human energy of sex" (42). Energy is not necessarily good or bad and neither is Buddha-nature. Everything has Buddha-nature, according to Zen, so it is possible for an evil person to be enlightened. Although ethics are a critical consideration to formal Zen practice, mystical experience does not depend upon context.

## **Conclusion**

The moments of absolute erotic dissolution described by Georges Bataille's novels *Story of the Eye* and *The Impossible*, Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, and Ikkyū's poetry signify authentic mystical awakenings. Eroticism and mysticism are complex but

connected topics. Mystic and erotic quests lead toward dissolution of the discriminating consciousness and precipitate an encounter with the Absolute. Mystical and erotic experiences are associated with a realization of impermanence, a sense of death, a feeling of oneness, and attention to the now.

I have challenged the assertion that mystical experiences require spiritual or moral purity. This challenge does not advocate erotic quests. Such quests are inevitable. I do emphasize that eroticism is central to human experience; therefore, central to mystical experience. The works I have analyzed recognize the sacred as intimate with basic terrestrial concerns. They show that desire for transformative/transgressive experience is outlined by mundane aspects of daily life: the eggs in *Story of the Eye*, hunger and monotonous employment in *Tropic of Cancer*, and the isolation of hermetic life in Ikkyū.

The works of these men challenge dualistic thinking by blurring the boundaries between dualistic distinctions such as sacred and profane. This blurring represents a dynamic perspective produced by an awakening to the Absolute. Each writer represents this perspective in a unique way: Bataille's erotic novels are surreal, Miller often contradicts himself, and Ikkyū privileges both sexuality and hermitage. Despite differences in style, Bataille, Miller, and Ikkyū each communicate similar appreciation for absolute consciousness.

This revelation of the profound interconnectedness that underlies all existence is only possible when the attachment to self becomes less tenacious. Spiritual disconnection is promoted by a tyrannical ego. Constant dependence upon a sense of self and other means that we are easily seduced by idealism, desiring an abstract good beyond the



perception of a separate, limited individuality. Mystical and erotic experiences do violence to this construction of the discriminating consciousness by delivering a piercing vision of the Absolute, an experience that upheaves dualistic rationality.

Dualistic thinking is important because it distinguishes self and other; discriminating rationality is the ground of what is labeled human consciousness. This consciousness is wonderful in many ways: aiding survival, making sense of language, and promoting the power of the species. The discriminating consciousness is problematic when it becomes too possessive, constricts perception, and stifles the possibility of intimacy. Believing that the sacred exists outside of oneself, beyond the here and now, prevents recognition of the relationship among all things. Zen practitioners are challenged with *koans* such as “Who were you before you were born? or What was your original face?” to poke holes in the narrow perception of a fixed, separate self. The works of Bataille, Miller, and Ikkyū are *koans*.

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