

Black Spring



“American literature today begins and ends with
the meaning of what Miller has done.”

Lawrence Durrell

“I like Henry Miller. I think he’s the
greatest American writer.”

Bob Dylan

“There is nothing like Henry Miller when he gets
rolling... One has to take the English language back to
Marlowe and Shakespeare before encountering a wealth
of imagery equal in intensity... a wildwater of prose, a
cataract, a volcano, a torrent, an earthquake... a writer
finally like a great athlete, a phenomenon
of an avatar of literary energy.”

Norman Mailer

“The only imaginative prose writer of the slightest
value who has appeared among the English-speaking
races for some years past.”

George Orwell

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Black Spring

Henry Miller



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Black Spring

To Anais Nin

Can I be as I believe myself or as others believe me to be? Here is where these lines become a confession in the presence of my unknown and unknowable me, unknown and unknowable for myself. Here is where I create the legend wherein I must bury myself.

Miguel de Unamuno

The 14th Ward

What is not in the open street is false, derived, that is to say, literature.

I AM A PATRIOT – of the 14th Ward Brooklyn, where I was raised. The rest of the United States doesn't exist for me, except as idea, or history, or literature. At ten years of age I was uprooted from my native soil and removed to a cemetery, a *Lutheran* cemetery, where the tombstones were always in order and the wreaths never faded.

But I was born in the street and raised in the street. “The post-mechanical open street, where the most beautiful and hallucinating iron vegetation”, etc... Born under the sign of Aries, which gives a fiery, active, energetic and somewhat restless body. *With Mars in the ninth house!*

To be born in the street means to wander all your life, to be free. It means accident and incident, drama, movement. It means above all dream. A harmony of irrelevant facts which gives to your wandering a metaphysical certitude. In the street you learn what human beings really are; otherwise, or afterwards, you invent them. What is not in the open street is false, derived, that is to say, *literature*. Nothing of what is called “adventure” ever approaches the flavour of the street. It doesn't matter whether you fly to the Pole, whether you sit on the floor of the ocean with a pad in your hand, whether you pull up nine cities one after the other or whether, like Kurtz, you sail up the river and go mad. No matter how exciting, how intolerable the situation, there are always exits, always ameliorations, comforts, compensations, newspapers, religions. But once there was none of this. Once you were free, wild, murderous...

The boys you worshipped when you first came down into the street remain with you all your life. They are the only real heroes. Napoleon, Lenin, Capone – all fiction. Napoleon is nothing to me in comparison with Eddie Carney, who gave me my first black eye. No man I have ever met seems as princely, as regal, as noble, as Lester Reardon, who by

the mere act of walking down the street inspired fear and admiration. Jules Verne never led me to the places that Stanley Borowski had up his sleeve when it came dark. Robinson Crusoe lacked imagination in comparison with Johnny Paul. All these boys of the 14th Ward have a flavour about them still. They were not invented or imagined: they were real. Their names ring out like gold coins – Tom Fowler, Jim Buckley, Matt Owen, Rob Ramsay, Harry Martin, Johnny Dunne, to say nothing of Eddie Carney or the great Lester Reardon. Why, even now when I say Johnny Paul, the names of the saints leave a bad taste in my mouth. Johnny Paul was the living Odyssey of the 14th Ward; that he later became a truck-driver is an irrelevant fact.

Before the great change no one seemed to notice that the streets were ugly or dirty. If the sewer mains were opened, you held your nose. If you blew your nose, you found snot in your handkerchief and not your nose. There was more of inward peace and contentment. There was the saloon, the race track, bicycles, fast women and trot horses. Life was still moving along leisurely. In the 14th Ward, at least. Sunday mornings no one was dressed. If Mrs Gorman came down in her wrapper with dirt in her eyes to bow to the priest – “Good morning, Father!” “Good morning, Mrs Gorman!” – the street was purged of all sin. Pat McCarren carried his handkerchief in the tail flap of his frock coat; it was nice and handy there, like the shamrock in his buttonhole. The foam was on the lager and people stopped to chat with one another.

In my dreams I come back to the 14th Ward as a paranoiac returns to his obsessions. When I think of those steel-grey battleships in the Navy Yard I see them lying there in some astrologic dimension in which I am the gunnersmith, the chemist, the dealer in high explosives, the undertaker, the coroner, the cuckold, the sadist, the lawyer and contender, the scholar, the restless one, the jolt-head and the brazen-faced.

Where others remember of their youth a beautiful garden, a fond mother, a sojourn at the seashore, I remember, with a vividness as if it were etched in acid, the grim, soot-covered walls and chimneys of the tin factory opposite us and the bright circular pieces of tin that were strewn in the street, some bright and gleaming, others rusted, dull, copperish, leaving a stain on the fingers; I remember the ironworks where the red furnace glowed and men walked towards the glowing pit with huge shovels in their hands, while outside were the shallow wooden forms like coffins with rods through them, on which you

scraped your shins or broke your neck. I remember the black hands of the iron-moulders, the grit that had sunk so deep into the skin that nothing could remove it, not soap, nor elbow grease, nor money, nor love, nor death. Like a black mark on them! Walking into the furnace like devils with black hands – and later, with flowers over them, cool and rigid in their Sunday suits, not even the rain can wash away the grit. All these beautiful gorillas going up to God with swollen muscles and lumbago and black hands...

For me the whole world was embraced in the confines of the 14th Ward. If anything happened outside, it either didn't happen or it was unimportant. If my father went outside that world to fish, it was of no interest to me. I remember only his boozy breath when he came home in the evening and, opening the big green basket, spilled the squirming, goggle-eyed monsters on the floor. If a man went off to the War, I remember only that he came back of a Sunday afternoon and, standing in front of the minister's house, puked up his guts and then wiped it up with his vest. Such was Rob Ramsay, the minister's son. I remember that everybody liked Rob Ramsay – he was the black sheep of the family. They liked him because he was a good-for-nothing and he made no bones about it. Sundays or Wednesdays made no difference to him: you could see him coming down the street under the drooping awnings with his coat over his arm and the sweat rolling down his face; his legs wobbly, with that long, steady roll of a sailor coming ashore after a long cruise; the tobacco juice dribbling from his lips, together with warm, silent curses and some loud and foul ones too. The utter indolence, the insouciance of the man, the obscenities, the sacrilege. Not a man of God, like his father. No, a man who inspired love! His frailties were human frailties, and he wore them jauntily, tauntingly, flauntingly, like banderillas. He would come down the warm open street with the gas mains bursting and the air full of sun and shit and oaths, and maybe his fly would be open and his suspenders undone, or maybe his vest bright with vomit. Sometimes he came charging down the street, like a bull skidding on all fours, and then the street cleared magically, as if the manholes had opened up and swallowed their offal. Crazy Willy Maine would be standing on the shed over the paint shop with his pants down, jerking away for dear life. There they stood in the dry electrical crackle of the open street with the gas mains bursting. A tandem that broke the minister's heart.

That was how he was then, Rob Ramsay. A man on a perpetual spree. He came back from the War with medals, and with fire in his guts. He puked up in front of his own door and he wiped up his puke with his own vest. He could clear the street quicker than a machine gun. *Faugh a balla!** That was his way. And a little later, in his warm-heartedness, in that fine, careless way he had, he walked off the end of a pier and drowned himself.

I remember him so well and the house he lived in. Because it was on the doorstep of Rob Ramsay's house that we used to congregate in the warm summer evenings and watch the goings-on over the saloon across the street. A coming and going all night long and nobody bothered to pull down the shades. Just a stone's throw away from the little burlesque house called "The Bum". All around "The Bum" were the saloons, and Saturday nights there was a long line outside, milling and pushing and squirming to get at the ticket window. Saturday nights, when the Girl in Blue was in her glory, some wild tar from the Navy Yard would be sure to jump out of his seat and grab off one of Millie de Leon's garters. And a little later that night they'd be sure to come strolling down the street and turn in at the family entrance. And soon they'd be standing in the bedroom over the saloon, pulling off their tight pants and the women yanking off their corsets and scratching themselves like monkeys, while down below they were scuttling the suds and biting each other's ears off, and such a wild, shrill laughter all bottled up inside there, like dynamite evaporating. All this from Rob Ramsay's doorstep, the old man upstairs saying his prayers over a kerosene lamp, praying like an obscene nanny goat for an end to come, or, when he got tired of praying, coming down in his nightshirt, like an old leprechaun, and belaying us with a broomstick.

From Saturday afternoon on until Monday morning it was a period without end, one thing melting into another. Saturday morning already – how it happened God only knows – you could *feel* the war vessels lying at anchor in the big basin. Saturday mornings my heart was in my mouth. I could see the decks being scrubbed down and the guns polished, and the weight of those big sea monsters resting on the dirty glass lake of the basin was a luxurious weight on me. I was already dreaming of running away, of going to far places. But I got only as far as the other side of the river, about as far north as Second Avenue and 28th Street, via the Belt Line. There I played the Orange Blossom

Waltz and in the entr'actes I washed my eyes at the iron sink. The piano stood in the rear of the saloon. The keys were very yellow and my feet wouldn't reach to the pedals. I wore a velvet suit, because velvet was the order of the day.

Everything that passed on the other side of the river was sheer lunacy: the sanded floor, the Argand lamps, the mica pictures in which the snow never melted, the crazy Dutchmen with stains in their hands, the iron sink that had grown such a mossy coat of slime, the woman from Hamburg whose ass always hung over the back of the chair, the courtyard choked with sauerkraut... Everything in three-quarter time that goes on for ever. I walk between my parents, with one hand in my mother's muff and the other in my father's sleeve. My eyes are tight shut, tight as clams which draw back their lids only to weep.

All the changing tides and weather that passed over the river are in my blood. I can still feel the slipperiness of the big handrail which I leant against in fog and rain, which sent through my cool forehead the shrill blasts of the ferry boat as she slid out of the slip. I can still see the mossy planks of the ferry slip buckling as the big round prow grazed her sides and the green, juicy water sloshed through the heaving, groaning planks of the slip. And overhead the seagulls wheeling and diving making a dirty noise with their dirty beaks, a hoarse, preying sound of inhuman feasting, of mouths fastened down on refuse, of scabby legs skimming the green-churned water.

One passes imperceptibly from one scene, one age, one life, to another. Suddenly, walking down a street, be it real or be it a dream, one realizes for the first time that the years have flown, that all this has passed for ever and will live on only in memory, and then the memory turns inwards with a strange, clutching brilliance and one goes over these scenes and incidents perpetually, in dream and reverie, while walking a street, while lying with a woman, while reading a book, while talking to a stranger... Suddenly, but always with terrific insistence and always with terrific accuracy, these memories intrude, rise up like ghosts and permeate every fibre of one's being. Henceforward everything moves on shifting levels – our thoughts, our dreams, our actions, our whole life. A parallelogram in which we drop from one platform of our scaffold to another. Henceforward we walk split into myriad fragments, like an insect with a hundred feet, a centipede with soft-stirring feet that drinks in the atmosphere; we walk with sensitive filaments that drink

avidly of past and future, and all things melt into music and sorrow; we walk against a united world, asserting our dividedness. All things, as we walk, splitting with us into a myriad iridescent fragments. The fragmentation of maturity. The great change. In youth we were whole and the terror and pain of the world penetrated us through and through. There was no sharp separation between joy and sorrow: they fused into one, as our waking life fuses with dream and sleep. We rose one being in the morning, and at night we went down into an ocean, drowned out completely, clutching the stars and the fever of the day.

And then comes a time when suddenly all seems to be reversed. We live in the mind, in ideas, in fragments. We no longer drink in the wild outer music of the streets – we *remember* only. Like a monomaniac that picks up the thread over and over and spews it out according to some obsessive, logarithmic pattern. If we are stirred by a fat bust, it is the fat bust of a whore who bent over on a rainy night and showed us for the first time the wonder of the great milky globes; if we are stirred by the reflections on a wet pavement, it is because at the age of seven we were suddenly speared by a premonition of the life to come as we stared unthinkingly into that bright, liquid mirror of the street. If the sight of a swinging door intrigues, it is the memory of a summer's evening when all the doors were swinging softly and, where the light bent down to caress the shadow, there were golden calves and lace and glittering parasols, and through the chinks in the swinging door, like fine sand sifting through a bed of rubies, there drifted the music and the incense of gorgeous unknown bodies. Perhaps when that door parted to give us a choking glimpse of the world, perhaps then we had the first intimation of the great impact of sin, the first intimation that here, over little round tables spinning in the light, our feet idly scraping the sawdust, our hands touching the cold stem of a glass, that here, over these little round tables, which later we are to look at with such yearning and reverence, that here, I say, we are to feel in the years to come the first iron of love, the first stains of rust, the first black, clawing hands of the pit, the bright circular pieces of tin in the streets, the gaunt soot-coloured chimneys, the bare elm tree that lashes out in the summer's lightning and screams and shrieks as the rain beats down, while out of the hot earth the snails scoot away miraculously and all the air turns blue and sulphurous. Here, over these tables, at the first call, the first touch of a hand, there is to come the bitter, gnawing pain

that gripes at the bowels; the wine turns sour in our bellies and a pain rises from the soles of the feet, and the round table tops whirl with the anguish and the fever in our bones at the soft, burning touch of a hand. Here there is buried legend after legend of youth and melancholy, of savage nights and mysterious bosoms dancing on the wet mirror of the pavement, of women chuckling softly as they scratch themselves, of wild sailors' shouts, of long queues standing in front of the lobby, of boats brushing each other in the fog, and tugs snorting furiously against the rush of tide, while up on the Brooklyn Bridge a man is standing in agony, waiting to jump, or waiting to write a poem, or waiting for the blood to leave his vessels, because if he advances another foot the pain of his love will kill him.

The plasm of the dream is the pain of separation. The dream lives on after the body is buried. We walk the streets with a thousand legs and eyes, with furry antennae picking up the slightest clue and memory of the past. In the aimless to and fro we pause now and then, like long, sticky plants, and we swallow whole the live morsel of the past. We open up soft and yielding to drink in the night and the oceans of blood which drowned the sleep of our youth. We drink and drink with insatiable thirst. We are never whole again, but living in fragments, and all our parts separated by thinnest membrane. Thus when the fleet manoeuvres in the Pacific, it is the whole saga of youth flashing before your eyes, the dream of the open street and the sound of gulls wheeling and diving with garbage in their beaks; or it's the sound of the trumpet and flags flying and all the unknown parts of the earth sailing before your eyes without dates or meaning, wheeling like the table top in an iridescent sheen of power and glory. Day comes when you stand on the Brooklyn Bridge looking down into black funnels belching smoke and the gun barrels gleam and the buttons gleam and the water divides miraculously under the sharp, cutting prow, and like ice and lace, like a breaking and a smoking, the water churns green and blue with a cold incandescence, with the chill of champagne and burnt gills. And the prow cleaves the waters in an unending metaphor: the heavy body of the vessel moves on, with the prow ever dividing, and the weight of her is the unweighable weight of the world, the sinking down into unknown barometric pressures, into unknown geologic fissures and caverns where the waters roll melodiously and the stars turn over and die and hands reach up and grasp and clutch and never seize nor close

but clutch and grasp while the stars die out one by one, myriads of them, myriads and myriads of worlds sinking down into cold incandescence, into fuliginous night of green and blue with broken ice and the burn of champagne and the hoarse cry of gulls, their beaks swollen with barnacles, their foul garbaged mouths stuffed for ever under the silent keel of the ship.

One looks down (from the Brooklyn Bridge) on a spot of foam or a little lake of gasoline or a broken splinter or an empty scow; the world goes by upside down with pain and light devouring the innards, the sides of flesh bursting, the spears pressing in against the cartilage, the very armature of the body floating off into nothingness. Passes through you crazy words from the ancient world, signs and portents, the writing on the wall, the chinks of the saloon door, the card-players with their clay pipes, the gaunt tree against the tin factory, the black hands stained even in death. One walks the street at night with the bridge against the sky like a harp and the festered eyes of sleep burn into the shanties, deflower the walls; the stairs collapse in a smudge and the rats scamper across the ceiling; a voice is nailed against the door and long creepy things with furry antennae and a thousand legs drop from the pipes like beads of sweat. Glad, murderous ghosts with the shriek of night wind and the curses of warm-legged men; low, shallow coffins with rods through the body; grief-spit drooling down into the cold, waxen flesh, searing the dead eyes, the hard, chipped lids of dead clams. One walks around in a circular cage on shifting levels, stars and clouds under the escalator, and the walls of the cage revolve and there are no men and women without tails or claws, while over all things are written the letters of the alphabet in iron and permanganate. One walks round and round in a circular cage to the roll of drum-fire; the theatre burns and the actors go on mouthing their lines; the bladder bursts, the teeth fall out, but the wailing of the clown is like the noise of dandruff falling. One walks around on moonless nights in the valley of craters, valley of dead fires and whitened skulls, of birds without wings. Round and round one walks, seeking the hub and nodality, but the fires are burned to ash and the sex of things is hidden in the finger of a glove.

And then one day, as if suddenly the flesh came undone and the blood beneath the flesh had coalesced with the air, suddenly the whole world roars again and the very skeleton of the body melts like wax. Such

a day it may be when first you encounter Dostoevsky. You remember the smell of the tablecloth on which the book rests; you look at the clock and it is only five minutes from eternity; you count the objects on the mantelpiece because the sound of numbers is a totally new sound in your mouth, because everything new and old, or touched and forgotten, is a fire and a mesmerism. Now every door of the cage is open and whichever way you walk is a straight line over which the breakers roar and great rocks of marble and indigo swoop to lower their fevered eggs. Out of the waves beating phosphorescent step proud and prancing the enamelled horses that marched with Alexander, their tight-proud bellies glowing with calcium, their nostrils dipped in laudanum. Now it is all snow and ice, with great band of Orion slung around the ocean's crotch.

It was exactly five minutes past seven, at the corner of Broadway and Kosciusko Street, when Dostoevsky first flashed across my horizon. Two men and a woman were dressing a shop window. From the middle of the upper legs down the mannequins were all wire. Empty shoe boxes lay banked against the window like last year's snow...

That is how Dostoevsky's name came in. Unostentatiously. Like an old shoe box. The Jew who pronounced his name for me had thick lips; he could not say Vladivostok, for instance, nor Carpathians – but he could say Dostoevsky divinely. Even now, when I say Dostoevsky, I see again his big, blubbery lips and the thin thread of spittle stretching like a rubber band as he pronounced the word. Between his two front teeth there was a more than usual space; it was exactly in the middle of this cavity that the word Dostoevsky quivered and stretched, a thin iridescent film of sputum in which all the gold of twilight had collected – for the sun was just going down over Kosciusko Street and the traffic overhead was breaking into a spring thaw, a chewing and grinding noise, as if the mannequins in their wire legs were chewing each other alive. A little later, when I came to the land of the Houyhnhnms, I heard the same chewing and grinding overhead, and again the spittle in a man's mouth quivered and stretched and shone iridescent in a dying sun. This time it is at the Dragon's Gorge: a man standing over me with a rattan stick and banging away with a wild Arabian smile. Again, as if my brain were a uterus, the walls of the world gave way. The name Swift was like a clear, hard pissing against the tin-plate lid of the world. Overhead the green fire-eater, his delicate intestines wrapped

in tarpaulin; two enormous milk-white teeth champing down over a belt of black-greased cogs connecting with the shooting gallery and the Turkish Baths; the belt of cogs slipping over a frame of bleached bones. The green dragon of Swift moves over the cogs with an endless pissing sound, grinding down fine and foreshortened the human-sized midgets that are sucked in like macaroni. In and out of the oesophagus, up and down and around the scapular bones and the mastoid delta, falling through the bottomless pit of the viscera, gurgitating and exgurgitating, the crotch spreading and slipping, the cogs moving on relentlessly, chewing alive all the fine, foreshortened macaroni hanging by the whiskers from the dragon's red gulch. I look into the milk-white smile of the barker, that fanatical Arabian smile which came out of the Dreamland fire, and then I step quietly into the open belly of the dragon. Between the crazy slats of the skeleton that holds the revolving cogs the land of the Houyhnhnms spreads out before me; that hissing, pissing noise in my ears, as if the language of men were made of Seltzer water. Up and down over the greasy black belt, over the Turkish Baths, through the house of the winds, over the sky-blue waters, between the clay pipes and the silver balls dancing on liquid jets: the infra-human world of fedoras and banjos, of bandannas and black cigars; butterscotch stretching from peg to Winnipeg, beer bottles bursting, spun-glass molasses and hot tamales, surf-roar and griddle sizzle, foam and eucalyptus, dirt, chalk, confetti, a woman's white thigh, a broken oar; the razzle-dazzle of wooden slats, the Meccano puzzle, the smile that never comes off, the wild Arabian smile with spits of fire, the red gulch and the green intestines...

O world, strangled and collapsed, where are the strong white teeth?
 O world, sinking with the silver balls and the corks and the life-preservers, where are the rosy scalps? O glab and glairy, O glabrous world now chewed to a frazzle, under what dead moon do you lie cold and gleaming?

Third or Fourth Day of Spring

To piss warm and drink cold, as Trimalchio says, because our mother the earth is in the middle, made round like an egg, and has all good things in herself, like a honeycomb.

THE HOUSE wherein I passed the most important years of my life had only three rooms. One was the room in which my grandfather died. At the funeral my mother's grief was so violent that she almost yanked my grandfather out of the coffin. He looked ridiculous, my dead grandfather, weeping with his daughter's tears. As if he were weeping over his own funeral.

In another room my aunt gave birth to twins. When I heard *twins*, she being so thin and barren, I said to myself: why twins? why not triplets? why not quadruplets? why stop? So thin and scraggy she was, and the room so small – with green walls and a dirty iron sink in the corner. Yet it was the only room in the house which could produce twins – or triplets, or jackasses.

The third room was an alcove where I contracted the measles, chickenpox, scarlet fever, diphtheria, et cetera: all the lovely diseases of childhood which make time stretch out in everlasting bliss and agony, especially when Providence has provided a window over the bed with bars and ogres to claw at them and sweat as thick as carbuncles, rapid as a river and sprouting, sprouting as if it were always spring and tropics, with thick tenderloin steaks for hands, and feet heavier than lead or light as snow, feet and hands separated by oceans of time or incurable latitudes of light, the little knob of the brain hidden away like a grain of sand and the toenails rotting blissfully under the ruins of Athens. In this room I heard nothing but insanities. With each fresh, lovely disease my parents became more addle-pated. (“Just think, when you were a little baby I took you to the sink and I said baby you don't want to drink from the bottle any more do you and you said no and I smashed the bottle in the sink.”) Into this room softly treading (“treading softly,” said General Smerdyakov) came Miss Sonowska,

spinster of dubious age with a green-black dress. And with her came the smell of old cheese – her sex had turned rancid under her dress. But Miss Sonowska also brought with her the sack of Jerusalem and the nails that so pierced the hands of Jesus that the holes have never disappeared. After the crusades the Black Death; after Columbus syphilis; after Miss Sonowska schizophrenia.

Schizophrenia! Nobody thinks any more how marvellous it is that the whole world is diseased. No point of reference, no frame of health. God might just as well be typhoid fever. No absolutes. Only light years of deferred progress. When I think of those centuries in which all Europe grappled with the Black Death, I realize how radiant life can be if only we are bitten in the right place! The dance and fever in the midst of that corruption! Europe may never again dance so ecstatically. And syphilis! The advent of syphilis! There it was, like a morning star hanging over the rim of the world.

In 1927 I sat in the Bronx listening to a man reading from the diary of a drug addict. The man could scarcely read, he was laughing so hard. Two phenomena utterly disparate: a man lying in luminol, so taut that his feet stretch beyond the window, leaving the upper half of his body in ecstasy; the other man, who is the same man, sitting in the Bronx and laughing his guts out because he doesn't understand.

Aye, the great sun of syphilis is setting. *Low visibility*: forecast for the Bronx, for America, for the whole modern world. Low visibility accompanied by gales of laughter. No new stars on the horizon. *Catastrophes...* only catastrophes!

I am thinking of that age to come when God is born again, when men will fight and kill for God, as now and for a long time to come men are going to fight for food. I am thinking of that age when work will be forgotten and books assume their true place in life, when perhaps there will be no more books, just one great big book – a Bible. For me the book is the man and my book is the man I am, the confused man, the negligent man, the reckless man, the lusty, obscene, boisterous, thoughtful, scrupulous, lying, diabolically truthful man that I am. I am thinking that in that age to come I shall not be overlooked. Then my history will become important and the scar which I leave upon the face of the world will have significance. I cannot forget that I am making history, a history on the side, which, like a chancre, will eat away the other meaningless history. I regard myself not as a book,

a record, a document, but as a history of our time – a history of *all* time.

If I was unhappy in America, if I craved more room, more adventure, more freedom of expression, it was because I needed these things. I am grateful to America for having made me realize my needs. I served my sentence there. At present I have no needs. I am a man without a past and without a future. *I am* – that is all. I am not concerned with your likes and dislikes; it doesn't matter to me whether you are convinced that what I say is so or not. It is all the same to me if you drop me here and now. I am not an atomizer from which you can squeeze a thin spray of hope. I see America spreading disaster. I see America as a black curse upon the world. I see a long night settling in and that mushroom which has poisoned the world withering at the roots.

And so it is with a premonition of the end – be it tomorrow or three hundred years hence – that I feverishly write this book. So it is too that my thoughts sputter out now and then, that I am obliged to rekindle the flame again and again, not with courage alone, but with desperation – for there is no one I can trust to say these things for me. My faltering and groping, my search for any and every means of expression, is a sort of divine stuttering. *I am dazzled by the glorious collapse of the world!*

Every evening, after dinner, I take the garbage down to the courtyard. Coming up, I stand with empty pail at the staircase window gazing at the Sacré Coeur high up on the hill of Montmartre. Every evening, when I take the garbage down, I think of myself standing out on a high hill in resplendent whiteness. It is no sacred heart that inspires me, no Christ I am thinking of. Something better than a Christ, something bigger than a heart, something beyond God Almighty I think of – MYSELF. *I am a man.* That seems to me sufficient.

I am a man of God and a man of the Devil. To each his due. Nothing eternal, nothing absolute. Before me always the image of the body, our triune god of penis and testicles. On the right God the Father; on the left and hanging a little lower, God the Son; and between and above them the Holy Ghost. I can never forget that this holy trinity is man-made, that it will undergo infinite changes – but as long as we come out of wombs with arms and legs, as long as there are stars above us to drive us mad and grass under our feet to cushion the wonder in us, just so long will this body serve for all the tunes that we may whistle.

Today is the third or fourth day of spring and I am sitting at the Place Clichy in full sunshine. Today, sitting here in the sun, I tell you it doesn't matter a damn whether the world is going to the dogs or not; it doesn't matter whether the world is right or wrong, good or bad. *It is* – and that suffices. The world is what it is and I am what I am. I say it not like a squatting Buddha with legs crossed, but out of a gay, hard wisdom, out of an inner security. This out there and this in me, all this, *everything*, the resultant of inexplicable forces. A chaos whose order is beyond comprehension.

As a human being walking around at twilight, at dawn, at strange hours, unearthly hours, the sense of being alone and unique fortifies me to such a degree that when I walk with the multitude and seem no longer to be a human being but a mere speck, a gob of spit, I begin to think of myself alone in space, a single being surrounded by the most magnificent empty streets, a human biped walking between the skyscrapers when all the inhabitants have fled and I am alone walking, singing, commanding the earth. I do not have to look in my vest pocket to find my soul; it is there all the time, bumping against my ribs, swelling, inflated with song. If I just left a gathering where it was agreed that all is dead now as I walk the streets, alone and identical with God, I know that this is a lie. The evidence of death is before my eyes constantly, but this death of the world, a death constantly going on, does not move from the periphery in, to engulf me, this death is at my very feet, moving from me outwards, my own death a step in advance of me always. The world is the mirror of myself dying, the world not dying any more than I die. I more alive a thousand years from now than this moment and this world in which I am now dying also more alive than now though dead a thousand years. When each thing is lived through to the end there is no death and no regrets, neither is there a false springtime; each moment lived pushes open a greater, wider horizon from which there is no escape save living.

The dreamers dream from the neck up, their bodies securely strapped to the electric chair. To imagine a new world is to live it daily, each thought, each glance, each step, each gesture killing and recreating, death always a step in advance. To spit on the past is not enough. To proclaim the future is not enough. One must act *as if* the past were dead and the future unrealizable. One must act *as if* the next step were the last, which it is. Each step forwards is the last, and with it a world

dies, one's self included. We are here of the earth never to end, the past never ceasing, the future never beginning, the present never ending. The never-never world which we hold in our hands and see yet is not ourselves. We are that which is never concluded, never shaped to be recognized, all there is and yet not the whole, the parts so much greater than the whole that only God the mathematician can figure it out.

Laughter! counselled Rabelais. For all your ills *laughter!* Jesus but it's hard to take his sane, gay wisdom after all the quack medicines we've poured down our throats. How can one laugh when the lining is worn off his stomach? How can one laugh after all the misery they've poisoned us with, the whey-faced, lantern-jawed, sad, suffering, solemn, serious, seraphic spirits? I understand the treachery that inspired them. I forgive them their genius. But it's hard to free oneself from all the sorrow they've created.

When I think of all the fanatics who were crucified, and those who were not fanatics, but simple idiots, all slaughtered for the sake of ideas, I begin to draw a smile. Bottle up every avenue of escape, I say. Bring the lid down hard on the New Jerusalem! Let's feel each other belly to belly, *without hope!* Washed and unwashed, murderer and evangelist, the whey-faced guys and the bullet-heads – let them only get closer together, let them stew for a few centuries in this cul-de-sac!

Either the world is too slack or I am not taut enough. If I became unintelligible I would be understood immediately. The difference between understanding and non-understanding is as fine as a hair, *finer*, the difference of a millimetre, a thread of space between China and Neptune. No matter how far out of whack I get, the ratio remains the same; it has nothing to do with clarity, precision, et cetera. (The et cetera is important!) The mind blunders because it is too precise an instrument; the threads break against the mahogany knots, against the cedar and ebony of alien matter. We talk about reality as if it were something commensurable, a piano exercise, or a lesson in physics. The Black Death came with the return of the crusaders. Syphilis came with the return of Columbus. *Reality will come too! Reality prime*, says my friend Cronstadt. From a poem written on the ocean floor...

To prognosticate this reality is to be off either by a millimetre or by a million light years. The difference is a quantum formed by the intersection of streets. A quantum is a functional disorder created by trying to squeeze oneself into a frame of reference. A reference is a

discharge from an old employer, that is to say, a muco-pus from an old disease.

These are thoughts born of the street, *genus epileptoid*. You walk out with the guitar and the strings snap – because the idea is not embedded morphologically. To recall the dream one must keep the eyes closed and not budge. The slightest stir and the whole fabric falls apart. In the street I expose myself to the destructive, disintegrating elements that surround me. I let everything wreak its own havoc with me. I bend over to spy on the secret processes, *to obey* rather than to command.

There are huge blocks of my life which are gone for ever. Huge blocks gone, scattered, wasted in talk, action, reminiscence, dream. There was never any time when I was living *one* life, the life of a husband, a lover, a friend. Wherever I was, whatever I was engaged in, I was leading multiple lives. Thus, whatever it is that I choose to regard as *my* story is lost, drowned, indissolubly fused with the lives, the drama, the stories of others.

I am a man of the old world, a seed that was transplanted by the wind, a seed which failed to blossom in the mushroom oasis of America. I belong on the heavy tree of the past. My allegiance, physical and spiritual, is with the men of Europe, those who were once Franks, Gauls, Vikings, Huns, Tartars, what not. The climate for my body and soul is here where there is quickness and corruption. I am proud *not* to belong to this century.

For those star-gazers who are unable to follow the act of revelation I append herewith a few horoscopic brush strokes in the margin of my *Universe of Death...*

I am Chancre, the crab, which moves sideways and backwards and forwards at will. I move in strange tropics and deal in high explosives, embalming fluid, jasper, myrrh, smaragd, fluted snot and porcupine's toes. Because of Uranus which crosses my longitudinal I am inordinately fond of cunt, hot chitterlings and water bottles. Neptune dominates my ascendant. That means I am composed of watery fluid, that I am volatile, quixotic, unreliable, independent and evanescent. Also quarrelsome. With a hot pad under my ass I can play the braggart or the buffoon as good as any man, no matter what sign he be born under. This is a self-portrait which yields only the missing parts – an anchor, a dinner bell, the remains of a beard, the hind part of a cow. In short, I am an idle fellow who pisses his time away. I have absolutely

nothing to show for my labours except my genius. But there comes a time, even in the life of an idle genius, when he has to go to the window and vomit up the excess baggage. If you are a genius you have to do that – if for no other reason than to build a little comprehensible world of your own which will not run down like an eight-day clock! And the more ballast you throw overboard the easier you rise above the esteem of your neighbours. Until you find yourself all alone in the stratosphere. Then you tie a stone around your neck and you jump feet first. That brings about the complete destruction of anagogic dream interpretation, together with mercurial stomatitis brought about by inunctions. You have the dream for the night time and the horse laugh for the day time.

And so, when I stand at the bar of Little Tom Thumb and see these men with three-quarter faces coming up through the trapdoors of hell with pulleys and braces, dragging locomotives and pianos and cuspidors, I say to myself: “Grand! Grand! All this bric-a-brac, all this machinery coming to me on a silver platter! It’s grand! It’s marvellous! It’s a poem created while I was asleep.”

What little I have learnt about writing amounts to this: *it is not what people think it is*. It is an absolutely new thing each time with each individual. Valparaiso, for example. Valparaiso, when I say it, means something totally different from anything it ever meant before. It may mean an English cunt with all her front teeth gone and the bartender standing in the middle of the street searching for customers. It may mean an angel in a silk shirt running his lacy fingers over a black harp. It may mean an odalisque with a mosquito netting around her ass. It may mean any of these things, or none, but whatever it may mean you can be sure it will be something different, something new. Valparaiso is always five minutes before the end, a little this side of Peru, or maybe three inches nearer. It’s the accidental square inch that you do with fever because you’ve got a hot pad under your ass and the Holy Ghost in your bowels – orthopaedic mistakes included. It means “to piss warm and drink cold”, as Trimalchio says, “because our mother the earth is in the middle, made round like an egg, and has all good things in herself, like a honeycomb”.

And now, ladies and gentlemen, with this little universal can-opener which I hold in my hands I am about to open a can of sardines. With this little can-opener which I hold in my hands it’s all the same