

[Dear Henry Miller](#) [1]

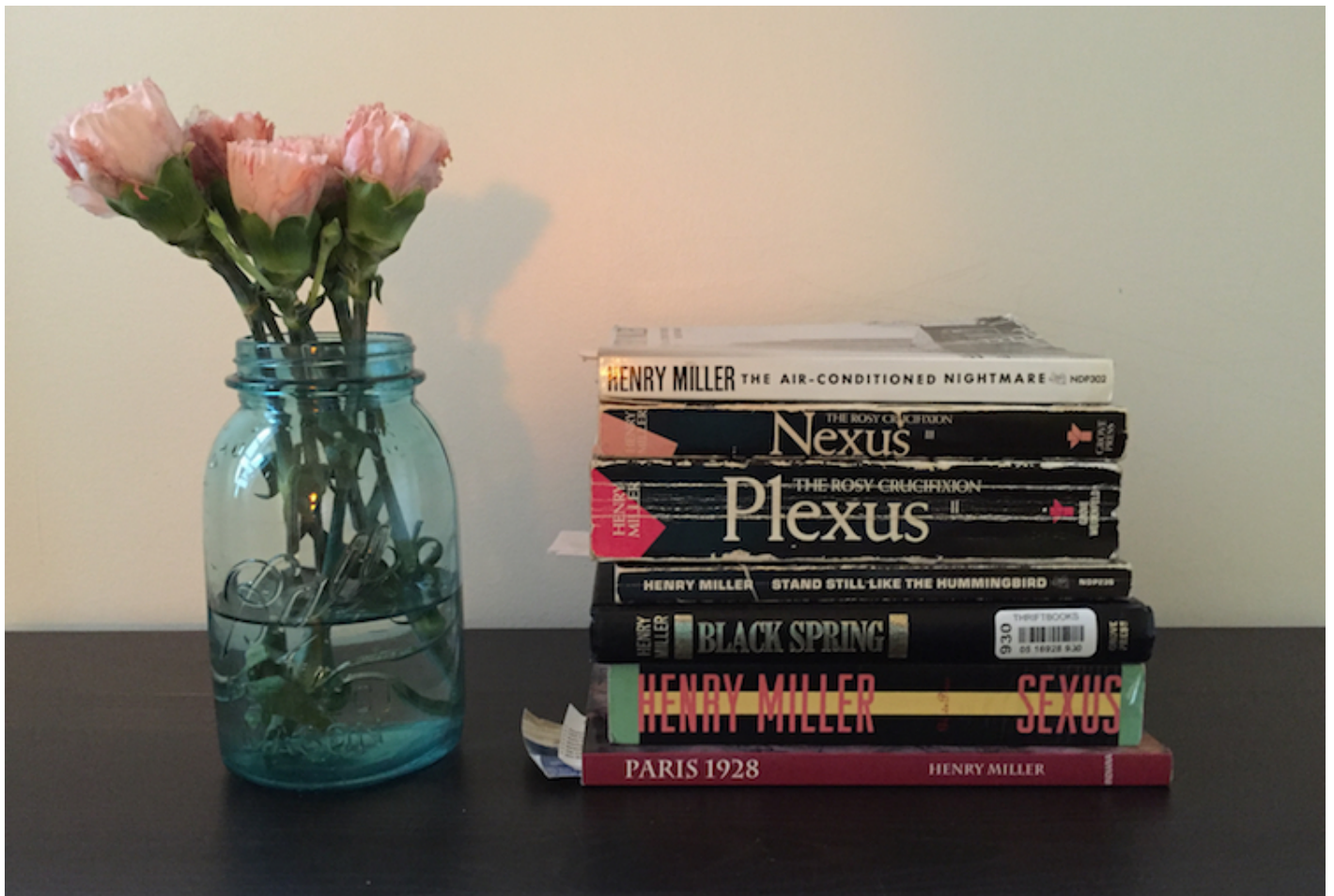
September 12, 2016 [Writing and Faith](#) [2]

[Authors](#) [3]

[Open Letters](#) [4]

Open Letter by John Vogel

What If I'm Your Next Suit of Flesh?



Dear Henry:

I think I might be you. And I'm only half joking.

Recently, going back through your work, I kept coming across passages that echo my own feelings. I don't need to explain it, because you described the same sensation when reading authors who kindled you. In your 1952 autobiographical novel *Plexus*, you wrote of nineteenth-century philosopher Oswald Spengler:

I am the lad who hated to study. I am the charming fellow who consistently rejected all systems of thought. Like a cork tossed about on an angry sea I follow in the wake of this morphological monster....His thought is music to my ears; I recognize all the hidden melodies.

This isn't anything new to me, either. I've been working on a project about "the ecstasy of perfect recognition," in Stephen King's words. But with your writing, it hits closer to home and more frequently than with others. When I read you, the music to my ears plays straight to my soul.

I certainly identify with your insecurity about writing. These lines are from your 1959 book *Nexus*, the last part of *The Rosy Crucifixion* trilogy (*Plexus* is the second):

Only if I lived to be ninety or a hundred would I have something to show for my labors.

Another almost equally disturbing thought entered my head. Would I ever write anything acceptable?

The answer which came at once to my lips was: 'Fuck a duck!'

The Air Conditioned Nightmare, your 1945 memoir about traveling through the United States after coming home from World-War-II France, often speaks to your disdain for American consumerism. Here's one golden nugget:

There are two things in life which it seems to me all men want and very few ever get (because both of them belong to the domain of the spiritual) and they are health and freedom. The druggist, the doctor, the surgeon are all powerless to give health; money, power, security, authority do not give freedom. Education can never provide wisdom, nor churches religion, nor wealth happiness, nor security peace.

We agree about so many things, including the fact that the capitalist system doesn't provide the real necessities of life. Like you, I've avidly followed a personal track of study rather than formal schooling. But the resonance I feel with you goes deeper than intellectual ideas. In the chapter "My Dream of Mobile" from *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, you muse about a hypothetical future biography:

Whatever happened to Henry Miller? He disappeared. He said he was going to Tibet. Did he get there? Nobody knows.... That's how it will be. Vanished mysteriously. Exit with two valises and a trunkful of ideas. But I will come back again one day, in another suit of flesh. I may make it snappy, too, and surprise everybody. One remains away just long enough to learn the lesson. Some learn faster than others. I learn very quickly. My homework is all finished.

Grandiose as this may sound, could I be your other suit of flesh? After all, you died not long before I was born. It's unlikely, of course, considering I don't actually believe in reincarnation, but I have to admit I've argued it out in my head:

For someone else's soul to enter your body, do they have to die right when you're born or when you're conceived? The most likely scenario is they'd die at the same time as your consciousness is developing. When does that happen? What part of the anatomy is responsible for the soul? Highly debatable, it turns out. People say consciousness is in the frontal lobe, but I'm talking more about the primordial subconscious that houses our innate knowledge. It seems like the brainstem is closer, and I've heard the pineal gland mentioned (even though this originated with Descartes, and it's probably bullshit). So, when do the pineal gland and brainstem develop in a fetus? The pineal gland is hard to pin down, but some researchers and spiritual types talk about it getting "visualized" at 49 days. Popular stats for the brainstem have it forming between days 42 and 84.

Let's do the math. I was born on January 20, 1981. Henry Miller died on June 7, 1980. My parents aren't sure when I was conceived, so we're looking at a rough date of April 25, 1980. That would mean Henry Miller died on day 43 of my prenatal life—and that's pretty close.

For the record, I must note our differences. I'm less promiscuous than you were, more willing to deal with work, less attracted to dramatic types. You grew up wanting to become a musician and ended up as a writer, while I grew up wanting to be a writer and became a musician.

But here are a few other things that happened the day I was born, some of which would have been in the making as you were winding down at 444 Ocampo Drive in the Pacific Palisades, where you spent the last seventeen years of your life: Ronald Reagan was inaugurated for his first term as President. After being held hostage for 444 days, 52 Americans were released by Iran into US custody. A total penumbral lunar eclipse occurred. It was Tuesday.

A fun fact about 444: In 2007ish, for a few weeks, I felt inundated by 444. I saw it in license plates, phone numbers, addresses (such as the address of the library in *Beverly Hills, 90210*), and it started to feel significant for reasons I couldn't figure out. This led me to discover Jung's ideas about synchronicity or significant coincidences. Years later, when I realized 444 was the number of days of the Iranian hostage crisis—which ended on my birth date—and also your last address, it was the first time that feeling of synchronicity made sense.

If there's a thread that binds us, I believe it's hope, reasonable or not, for a kind of saving grace. It's belief in an unexpected event that will open the door to a person's success, however they choose to define it. As you wrote in *Nexus*:

What I really hoped for, no doubt, was to come upon one of those lives which begin nowhere, which lead us through marshes and salt flats, trickling away, seemingly, without plan, purpose or goal, and then suddenly emerge, gushing like geysers, and never cease gushing, even in death. What I wanted to lay hold of—as if one could ever come to grips with such impalpables!—was that crucial point in the evolution of a genius when the hard dry rock suddenly yields water. As the heavenly vapors are eventually collected in vast watersheds and there converted into streams and rivers, so in the mind and soul, I felt, there must ever exist this reservoir waiting to be transformed into words, sentences, books, to be drowned again in the ocean of thought.

That's what I'm talking about.

Sincerely,

John

Publishing Information

- *Plexus* by Henry Miller, originally published in 1952 by Corr  a (Grove Press, 1963).
- *Nexus* by Henry Miller, originally published in 1959 by Hans Reitzel (Grove Press, 1965).
- *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* by Henry Miller (New Directions Publishing, 1945).
- "[Fetal Development: Baby's Nervous System and Brain](#) [5]," *What to Expect*, July 20, 2016.
- [DMT: The Spirit Molecule](#) [6] by Rick Strassman (Park Street Press, 2001).
- "[Reactions to the Hostage Crisis](#) [7]," Public Broadcasting Service, November 4, 1979, to January 20, 1981.
- "[Total Penumbral Lunar Eclipses](#) [8]" by J. Meeus, *Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada*, Volume 74, 1980.

Art Information

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