

Imagining the Interstate: Henry Miller, Post-Tourism, and the Disappearance of American *Place*

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Automobiles, and the infrastructural developments necessary to produce and operate them, contributed greatly to regional standardization in the United States. However, automobile travel books, or road books, typically lament the disappearance of regional difference. This paradox is typical of the genre, and until the 1930s it could be more or less resolved by recuperating regional difference at a national as opposed to local level. Thus interstate travel became a symbol of national difference, and the patriotic domestic tourist was distinguished from the expatriate. This strategy was typical, for instance, of the American Guide Series of the 1930s and 1940s. Henry Miller's *Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, written upon his return to the United States in 1939 after a decade abroad, breaks decisively with this tradition by refusing to recuperate standardization in terms of national difference. His road book maps the disappearance of location as a site of tradition, identity, and experience; and in doing so it prefigures two of the major concerns of late modernism: existential alienation and the postmodern imaginary. Understanding the road book and its particular relation to the landscape as antecedent to both of these trends allows for a spatial definition of recent and contemporary cultural formations. If high modernism is the culture of literary exile, postmodernism is the culture of the interstate. In order to sketch the contours of this cultural and geographical transformation, my essay situates Miller's travelogue in a wider tradition of travel narratives, beginning with those of early automobile tourists, continuing with the returning expatriates, and concluding with the road novels of the 1950s and 1960s, when driving becomes the major trope of post-war protest and conformism.

Edmund Wilson and Henry Miller engaged in a telling exchange shortly before the latter returned to the United States in 1939. In one of the first American reviews of *The Tropic of Cancer*, a book then still unavailable in the United States, Wilson claims that Miller has written "the epitaph for the whole generation of American writers and artists that migrated to Paris after the war" (*The Shores of Light*, 706). The article, significantly entitled "Twilight of the Expatriates," mainly refers to the end of the bankrupt lifestyle pursued by the "expatriate bums," as Wilson calls them elsewhere (Review of "The Air

Conditioned Nightmare,” 63). Miller replied in a letter to the *New Republic* that if Wilson meant to imply the narrator is a bum, “then it is me, because I have painstakingly indicated throughout the book that the hero is myself” (*The Shores of Light*, 709). The three salient themes in this exchange—the end of literary exile, the transient or mobile lifestyle of the bum, and the significance of personal experience—are central to the book Miller wrote after returning to the United States, *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (1945).

The travelogue, documenting Miller’s return to the United States after a decade abroad, marks the moment when the previously fashionable term “expatriate” begins to lose its cultural significance. The geopolitical situation was extremely significant at this juncture, as the shifting alliances of World War II and then the Cold War produced a bipolar or global power structure that in many ways militated against more traditional definitions of national identity. My essay will focus on the “economic” changes affecting national identity, namely the tourism and consumer capitalism that Miller and others feared was standardizing the landscape, and hence leveling-out regional differences with homogenized products and architecture. Miller’s travelogue charts the changing contours of a landscape being redefined as an *interstate* network. The technologies of transportation and communication responsible for this transformation simultaneously seemed to render *place* obsolete. Miller is the last expatriate because after him—not because of him—it becomes difficult to understand exile as a limited condition in relation to a particular place. His road book maps the disappearance of *location* as a site of tradition, identity, and experience; and in doing so it prefigures two of the major concerns of late modernism: existential alienation and the postmodern imaginary. Understanding the *road book* and its particular relation to the landscape as antecedent to both of these trends allows for a spatial definition of recent and contemporary cultural formations. If high modernism is the culture of literary exile, postmodernism is the culture of the interstate. In order to sketch the contours of this cultural and geographical transformation, my essay will situate Miller’s text in a wider tradition of travel narratives, beginning with those of early automobile tourists, continuing with the returning expatriates, and concluding with the road novels of the 1950s and 1960s, when driving,

as Morris Dickstein points out, becomes the major trope of post-war protest and conformism (175).

I. Interstate Travel and the Exile's Return

Road books have an ambivalent connection to consumer culture that manifests itself in their conflicted relation to place. On the one hand, they promote the use of one of the twentieth century's most important and obvious commodities, the automobile. On the other hand, they typically protest the impact of automobility on the landscape, and particularly the standardized roadside architecture which, as John Jakle and Keith Skulle have demonstrated, emerged concomitantly with standardized assembly lines.¹ Many of the earliest road narratives were advertisements for particular cars and automotive products, either published by automobile companies directly or printed alongside ads for tires and oil in magazines like *Sunset* and *Scribner's* (Gross, "Cars, Postcards, and Patriotism," 81). However, writers such as Emily Post, whose *By Motor to the Golden Gate* was serialized in *Collier's Weekly* in 1915, typically complained that the nationwide trends made possible by interstate travel were destroying regional difference (88). The paradox evident in Post is constitutive of road books as a genre; in their quest for authentic locations they are compelled to criticize the leveling effects of mobility.

Standardization finds its narrative equivalent in formal problem of parataxis: drivers with nothing new to report tend to slip into repetitive observations or litanies of complaint. This is a general problem of travel writing: the tourist must discover something unique or "authentic" to structure the itinerary and transform it into a narrative. The formal problem is often solved through a scenic view of the landscape which, as W.J.T. Mitchell has pointed out, produces correlative forms of subjectivity (1-2). Mitchell's analysis of the interdependence of sight and site in the construction of the scenic draws attention to how specific views of the American landscape have

1 Jakle points out in *The Tourist*, "with improved highways and the rise of roadside commerce, regional differences were obscured beneath a veneer of roadside homogeneity" (199). See also: the trilogy of books Jakle has written with Skulle, *The Gas Station in America*, *Fast Food*, and *The Motel in America*.

always been central to constituting American identities and imagining the national whole. For Post, as for many of her contemporaries, the “authentic” American experience was pioneering and its location the American West. That her experience of authenticity is “staged,” to borrow Dean MacCannell’s term, is suggested by the fact that Post finally “discovers” the West when she imagines herself as a star in her own film (MacCannell, 98-100):

We might have been taking an unconscious part in some vast moving picture production, or, more easily still, if we overlooked the fact of our own motor car, we could have supposed ourselves crossing the plains in the days of the caravans and stage coaches, when roads were trails, and bridges were not! (135)

The cinematic view is central to Post’s project because it simultaneously constitutes the landscape as a scene for her enjoyment and erases the disturbing presence of modern technology (“the days of caravans and stage coaches”). Jeffrey Schnapp has pointed out that a landscape moving across a film screen mimics the way it slides past the windshield (22). In Post this metonymic link is key to reproducing and mastering automobility as a locus of authentic regional difference. Her use of the cinematic trope is related to what Leo Marx terms the “the rhetoric of the technological sublime,” but with one important difference (Marx, 195). Marx is interested in authors for whom the machine is a visible symbol of progress (206); for Post machines are most interesting when they reproduce the conditions of their absence, presenting a technology-free vision of the world that is itself the height of artifice. Post deploys one technology of motion (film) to contain or naturalize the impacts of another (automobility), authorizing herself as a mobile subject vis-à-vis a nostalgically imagined region, which stands in the relation of synecdoche to the national whole.² This is the central mechanism of road narratives up until Henry Miller: *place*, threatened by the homogenizing effects of modern transportation, is recuperated as the sublime locus of the nation.

2 The heady combination of modern technology and nostalgia for the West quickly established itself as one of the dominant tropes of early automotive advertising (Gross, “Cars, Postcards, and Patriotism,” 80).

One threat to the recuperative value of national place vis-à-vis interstate travel was the popularity of *international* travel in the early twentieth century. Marguerite Shaffer has documented the advertising and cultural war waged to convince tourists to “see America first” (26-39). The advertising campaign can be understood as a rearguard action against the master trope of American high modernism: expatriation. However, it also reveals the predominant orientation of literary exile, which was nostalgic and domestic. By 1934 Malcolm Cowley had firmly established the circular trajectory of homecoming (related to nostalgia through the Greek *nostos*, “return home”) in *Exile's Return*, still one of the prevailing accounts of “the lost generation.”³ According to Cowley, the expatriates who fled to Paris to pursue “the religion of art” reintegrated themselves in the American scene when the Great Depression made resources scarce: “Things had changed everywhere. The lost generation ceased to deserve its name; the members of it had either gone under [. . .] or else had found their places in the world” (284, 285-288). Finding one’s place in the world, it should be noted, is not the same as finding one’s *place* in strictly geographical terms. Cowley’s exiles do not go back to the small towns where they were born; rather, they settle in New York to undertake projects that are national in scope, “selling out,” for instance, to advertising firms or devoting their energies to social causes and/or proletarian literature. Homecoming, accord to Cowley, does not mean coming home; it is the continuation of an *international* journey in a *national* space by professional, political, or artistic means. Just as Post deploys one technology of motion (film) to recuperate the effects of another (automobility), Cowley deploys the circular structure of the return to reinscribe international travel in national space.

These early representations of twentieth-century travel, both interstate and international, provide complementary and interdependent images of a mobile nation in which trajectories are constitutive of *spaces* but not reducible to *places*. The emphasis on mobility is evident in the writing of Nathan Asch, an expatriate only briefly mentioned by Cowley, who after returning from Paris decided “to try to see America”

3 See Georges Van Den Abbeele for an account of how the circular structure of the journey plays a role in the history of travel literature and political and philosophical thought.

by crossing the continent by car and bus (Cowley, 7). The book emerging from his travels, *The Road: In Search of America* (1937), finds America not in any particular location but in political solidarity with the underprivileged. Asch's relatively unknown domestic travel book is in many ways typical of what Michael Denning calls "the masculine romance of the road" in its preoccupation with hitchhikers, tramps, vagabonds, and the migratory poor (Denning, 187). There is, however, an important difference. Denning argues that the romance of the road tries but fails to represent the *place* of production, i.e. the factory assembly line (ibid.). The road book, however, is able to transform its internal resistance to place (which is to say its structural commitment to mobility) into a prescription for political *movement*. In his final chapter Asch reveals that his aim has been to "reach inside the miners and the field workers and the unskilled laborers and the poor farmers and the machinists and the construction men and the loggers, and their wives and girls and sisters and their children" to show them that their hardships unite them in a common cause (269). While this might seem a lot to expect of a short road trip, Asch's narrative is typical of the domestic recuperation of the international journey: the momentum acquired abroad "returns" by converting transportation into a political movement with national implications. Already evident in the trope of the "exile's return," and the progressive travel narratives emerging from it, is a depiction of modernization as what Anthony Giddens calls "disembedding": the decreasing significance of *place* in relation to symbolic systems spanning wide areas of time and space. Such systems include money, media such as radio and newspapers, and, I would argue, the interstate.⁴ In the early part of the twentieth century, disembedding is still understood in primarily national rather than international terms.

Disembedding becomes a political and artistic factor in the project Asch was to join after finishing his own travelogue: the American Guide Series, published under the auspices of the WPA in

4 Giddens, 2, 18. See also: David Nye's description of the effects of electricity and electronic media on the relation of subject to place: "what was once called the settlement of the United States begins to appear as a continual unsettling and uprooting. The journey into American space leads not to Wright Morris's *Home Place* but to more restless movement. The electrification of the countryside does not stabilize its population, but unsettles it" (187).

the late 1930s and early 1940s. Asch served as national editor on the series, as did many returning expatriates, including the series general editor, Henry Alsberg, who traveled extensively as a journalist in Europe and the Ukraine in the 1920s and 1930s. The enormous project, which produced a guide for every state and some regions and cities, set out to describe and preserve local traditions and communities already seen as endangered by modern developments in transportation and communication. The Guide Series also *was* one of these developments, organizing the country in a series of “tours,” or road trips, which literally mapped national space from north to south, east to west, symbolically aligning small communities according to their relation to the starting point, Washington, D.C. (Bold, 36). This was the literary version of a process that began as early as 1919, when the Zero Mile Marker was placed on the Ellipse south of the White House as the starting-point for mile markers radiating out across the United States (Weingroff, “Zero Milestone, Washington, D.C.”), and expanded in 1925 through the national standardization of road signs (Boorstin, 112). Like mile markers and road signs, the Guide Series organizes the American landscape from the perspective of the nation’s capital; and like other travel books, it does so by emphasizing scenic aspects of the landscape. The editorial staff understood this scenic mapping as an innovation on par with the invention of a new genre. As Alsberg put it, “The tour form is a difficult form; it is like a sonnet; but, if you can learn it, you can be more interesting in the description of a tour than in any novel” (McDonald, 694). The tours are “interesting” due to their particular relation of text to geography: they inscribe progressive political narratives on the landscape by directing drivers to sites of social relevance, from historical battlegrounds to new bridges and dams. By converting the political into the scenic the American Guides make Asch’s experience available to everyone: automobile tourism becomes an act of national solidarity. As in the other travel narratives of the era, the modernizing forces potentially disruptive to local tradition are reinscribed in a national whole.

W.H. Auden’s long poem “New Year Letter (January 1, 1940)” offers a more cosmopolitan view of American mobility and thus represents one of the first steps away from the recuperative gesture of the sublime national space. Auden immigrated to the United States in 1939 shortly before the outbreak of World War II. His British

contemporaries saw his expatriation, and this poem in particular, as marking a decline in his “poetic powers” (Smith, 7). However, Auden understands mobility as being as central to his project and to the American landscape. The United States is congenial not only because it offers refuge from the war, but because it is “This raw untidy continent / Where the commuter can’t forget / The pioneer” (237). In spite of the reference to pioneering, which we have already seen plays a mystifying role in *Post*, Auden is careful not to transform American mobility into a national myth. Thus he pairs his description of African Americans migrating north for better wages with an account of “Resourceful manufacturers” moving production facilities south to cut down on the cost of labor (*ibid.*). Auden’s reflections on the economics of mobility lead him to very different conclusions on the scenic value of place. He is particularly concerned with the impact of Hollywood on the West:

and kids,
 When their imagination bids,
 Hitch-hike a thousand miles to find
 The Hesperides that’s on their mind,
 Some Texas where real cowboys seem
 Lost in a movie-cowboy’s dream.
 More even than in Europe, here
 The choice of patterns is made clear
 Which the machine imposes, what
 Is possible and what is not,
 To what conditions we must bow
 In building the Just City now.

However we decide to act,
 Decision must accept the fact
 That the machine has now destroyed
 The local customs we enjoyed,
 Replaced the bonds of blood and nation
 By personal confederation.

(238)

Auden takes the United States as his example because, he argues, the impacts of modernization are visible there “more even than in Europe.” He carries his analysis a step farther than *Post*, and in a different direction from *Asch* and the WPA, attributing both patterns of production (“the machine”) and consumption (“movie-cowboy”) with

the weakening of “local customs.” One result is alienation — “Compelling all to the admission, / Aloneness is man’s real condition”—but a potentially positive effect is the erosion of blood and soil nationalism (*ibid.*). The standardization Asch and Alsberg hope to transform into progressive politics, Auden sees as clearing a space for cosmopolitanism.⁵ Thus he represents American salesmen and commuters as a worldly roster of latter-day Gawaines, Quixotes, Ishmaels, and Henry Jameses. This sort of cultural travel, an aesthetic version of the daily commute, is supposed to replace disappearing local and community feelings (200). Art becomes the new place, the non-geographical locus of an imaginary community, and the preferred medium of social intercourse or “personal confederation.”

This brief genealogy of road books and representations of travel—from Post through Cowley, Asch, and the WPA to Auden—is intended to demonstrate what might be polemically called “the disappearance of place.” Places do not disappear, of course, but the systems binding them together—symbolic and geographical—become increasingly prominent in the age of interstate and international travel. Disembedding has a visible geographical form—the interstate—which finds its narrative and poetic forms in the twentieth-century travelogue. Of course, the term “interstate” predates automobile travel. Frederick Jackson Turner uses the term in his famous essay “The Significance of the Frontier in Western History,” for instance, to describe a “Mobility of population [that] is death to localism” (53). However, automobility and its visible impacts on the landscape lend a more general credibility to the concept of networked space always central to Turner’s theories.⁶ In the twentieth century it becomes increasingly clear to even the most casual tourists that regional customs and architecture are taking a back seat to wider national and ultimately international trends, whether these

5 Auden also sees the mobile American society as more conducive to religion, but this point lies beyond the scope of my analysis.

6 Turner consistently described the lines of commerce and communication binding the nation together as a network, although his metaphors reflect the organicist orientation typical of nineteenth-century nationalism: “It is like the steady growth of a complex nervous system for the originally simple, inert continent. If one would understand why we are to-day one nation, rather than a collection of isolated states, he must study this economic and social consolidation of the country” (41).

be understood in terms of the technological (Post), political (Cowley, Asch, WPA), or artistic (Auden) sublime.

Henry Miller rejects the circular itinerary of the return, progressive politics, and even the possibility of locating a particular American culture, whether grounded in mobility or other social factors. We might sum up his perspective as a total negation of the scenic—the homology of site and sight—and with it the subject position of the tourist and consumer. Miller is in short an unhappy tourist. His perspective is surprisingly similar to that of the writer Auden mentions near the end of his long list of traveling literati: Henry James, who “learn[s] to draw the careful line,” but perhaps not in the way Auden meant (239). In *The American Scene*, a book recounting his travels through the United States in 1904-05, James opposes those internationalizing trends that are connected to modernization—especially industry and immigration—while remaining committed to his own literary cosmopolitanism. When praising a new enclosure around Harvard Yard, James is clear about the defects of the alternative: “The open door—as it figures here [in America! in respect to everything but trade—may make a magnificent place, but it makes poor places” (62). James’s travelogue is a half-hearted attempt to “draw the line” or close the American door through observations that are undeniably anti-Semitic, xenophobic, and elitist in tone. James shows more sympathy for personified old buildings, through which he ventriloquizes his concerns, than for the immigrants who are typically denied voices. However, his elegy for disappearing “places,” and especially old buildings, must also be understood as a (conservative) protest against standardization and all attempts to recuperate it in terms of a national whole. Bill Brown argues that James “fashion[s] a scene that, despite or because of its assumed agency, is anything but scenic, anything but scopio,” placing this anti-touristic style in a long tradition of modern and post-modern critics of the standardized capitalist landscape, from Simmel to Baudrillard (Brown, 178).

Miller also belongs on this list. His landscape is anti-scenic and anti-patriotic, although he achieves this effect without recourse to talking buildings. Rather, he provides what is perhaps the first sustained account of the two themes that would preoccupy post-war literature: alienation and the reign of the image. Miller is an early example of what Don Slater calls the “post-tourist”:

unlike the romantic traveller in search of authenticity, or the mass package holiday maker who captures a 'real' experience in snapshots, the 'post-tourist' knows that she or he is a tourist and 'that tourism is a series of games with multiple texts and no single, authentic tourist experience.' (198)

He travels because he does not belong anywhere, and he resists scenic moments of transcendence that would establish him as a "loyal" American subject in relation to a meaningful place. When his experiences are momentarily transcendental or sublime, the overall tone of his travelogue evacuates them of their significance. Miller's domestic travels document the disappearance of place, and with it the belief that interstate and international travel can be recuperated by a national whole.

II. The Unhappy Tourist

The outbreak of World War II forced Miller, like Auden, to return to the United States in 1939. He was reluctant to leave Europe and desperately short of funds. His best-known works like *The Tropic of Cancer* were at that time unavailable in his country of birth, but censorship gave him a reputation he hoped to capitalize on with a book that deliberately steered clear of prurient themes (Ferguson, 273-274). With this in mind, Miller accepted a commission from Doubleday to write a domestic travelogue from the perspective of the returning expatriate (Dearborn, 220). The book emerging from these travels, *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, was subsequently rejected by that press and has never received sustained critical attention. The painful contradictions everywhere evident in the narrative suggest that the project—not to mention the cash advance from a major American publisher—placed Miller in an uncomfortable role. Buying a car, for instance, meant giving into the mass opinion and mass technology Miller so famously resents: "The only way to see America is by automobile—that's what everybody says" (14). Miller suspects that driving makes him more American than he wants to be—part of the "new world" that had become a world of things (17). The car is a "lethal comfort" and "the very symbol of falsity and illusion" (33). Newer cars are the air-conditioned nightmares of the title (242).

Miller's project was to compose an anti-automobile road narrative. This is also of course the book's central paradox. He is certainly not the first motorist to harbor a secret resentment against automobility. However he no longer believes that the authentic can be distinguished from the standard or that local traditions exist, at least not in the United States. His pessimistic account inverts the sublime encounter typical of much American landscape writing, moving him to terror rather than ecstasy, or to a terror that is itself ecstatic. Summarizing his impression of St. Louis he says, "my disgust grew so great that I passed over into the opposite—into a state of ecstasy" (69). Describing the country in general: "Topographically the country is magnificent—and terrifying. Why terrifying? Because nowhere else in the world is the divorce between man and nature so complete" (19). The geographical homogenization that "divorces" man from nature also estranges Miller from his muse: "I had to travel about ten thousand miles before receiving the inspiration to write a single line" (19-20).

The regional homogenization Miller understands as a symptom of consumer culture is relentlessly practical and therefore anti-aesthetic:

Nothing comes to fruition here except utilitarian projects. You can ride for thousands of miles and be utterly unaware of the existence of the world of art. You will learn all about beer, condensed milk, rubber goods, canned food, inflated mattresses, etc., but you will never see or hear anything concerning the masterpieces of art. (157)

American commercial culture appropriates even avant-garde art, transforming surrealist provocations, for instance, into advertising gimmicks for Nylon stockings (257). It is this ability to capitalize on art for the purposes of advertising that renders the United States, in Miller's opinion, one of the least inviting lands for true artists (24, 49). In his diagnosis of the problem he significantly pairs Henry Ford with Walt Disney, the automobile industry with the image industry: "He's [Disney] the master of the nightmare. He's the Gustave Doré of the world of Henry Ford & Co., Inc." (40). Disney's unreal creatures reveal certain uncomfortable truths about modern life:

Of course they're not real men and women: they're dream creatures. They tell us what we look like beneath the covering of flesh. A fascinating world, what? Really, when you think about it, even more fascinating than Dali's cream puffs. (41)

The implication is that we are all "dream creatures," constructed in the same standardized way that Ford constructs automobiles and Disney films:

The typical American everywhere [...] looks as though he were turned out by a university with the aid of a chain store cloak and suit house. One looks like the other, just as the automobiles, the radios and the telephones do. (45)

The form of the road book opens up certain predictable avenues of escape from the world of standardized production methods (Ford) and cultural products (Disney). Miller, like Post, turns to nostalgia for relief; France, in its absence, still manages to inspire his poetic fancy. Describing the small town of Auxerre, Miller says,

It was more French [than was Paris], more authentic. It created another kind of nostalgia, the nostalgia which later I was to discover in certain French books or through conversation with a whore in bed while quietly smoking a cigarette. (67)

Miller's nostalgia is not scenic. Unlike Post he does not see himself as the master or consumer of a site presented in visual terms. His brand of nostalgia leads him to the conclusion that the German invaders cannot succeed in conquering France, and then through the associative logic that is characteristic of his narrative, to the reflection that he and his former wife, in their role as American tourists, were also "invaders":

With our dirty American dollars we were buying the things we wanted. But with every purchase we were given something gratuitous, something we had not bargained for, and it ate into us and transformed us, until finally we were completely subjugated. (68)

The gratuitous feeling that cannot be bought or sold is what makes France—and its "invaders"—French.⁷ Authenticity is a shadow

7 Here Miller is adapting an economic formula from the standard text of exilic literature, Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, which establishes Spain as a place of

economy operating outside and through economic exchange; in fact, it seems at first glance to be the opposite of a consumer economy since it “eats” or consumes its invaders rather than the reverse. However, a closer look reveals this shadow economy to be merely the inverted or mirror image of American consumer capitalism. The world of Ford, Disney, and interchangeable citizens is, after all, not only a landscape of consumption but also a *consuming* landscape: one that regurgitates art and, ultimately, personality in its own standardized image.

The limitations of the shadow economy of authenticity become clear when Miller attempts to apply his model of escape to the American scene. Like many other tourists, he locates authenticity in pockets of “otherness” or ethnic difference, both living and monumental. Miller seeks to escape the commercialism of American life, for instance, by strongly identifying with Native Americans, even wishing at one point for an Indian sidekick. He also claims that the only place nature still exists in its undefiled form in the United States is on the reservations (“The little Cherokee reservation is a virtual Paradise,” [36-37]). Any ethnicity, so long as it diverges from what Miller considers the American standard, can serve as a marker of authenticity. This becomes clear when Miller compares Native American cliff dwellings to a ninth-century Chinese Buddha he encounters in Louisiana. The following paragraph is taken from the penultimate page of his travelogue:

It is doubtful if this continent will ever bequeath the world the deathless splendor of the holy cities of India. Only in the cliff dwellings of the Southwest, perhaps, does the work of man here in America arouse emotions remotely analogous to those which the ruins of other great peoples inspire in the traveler. On Avery Island, in Louisiana, I ran across a massive statue of the Buddha, brought over from China, which was protected by a glass cage. It was startling to look upon in its bizarre setting. It dominated the landscape which was in itself a work of art in a way that is difficult to describe. (287)

ritual violence and spirituality irreducible to the “clear financial basis” of France (Hemingway, 233). For Miller it is not France but the United States that is guilty of crass commercialism. That the accusation varies, even amongst expatriates, suggests the imprecision of commercialism as an invective.

The significance of this monument marking the end of Miller's journey is doubly inscribed; not only does the statue stand out from the landscape as something unique and worth visiting, it also, by virtue of its distinctiveness, helps transform nature into what Miller terms "a work of art," and transform his narrative—placed as it is at the end—into a discovery of something worthwhile. This is the transcendental and aesthetic moment usually denied to him by the "terrifying" and "disgusting" American landscape responsible for divorcing him from his muse. The surplus cultural value he attributes to the French shadow economy is embodied here in "the shadow of the Buddha [...] as if defining with unerring exactitude the utmost limits of hope, desire, courage and belief" (288). This sublime moment is established through a string of ethnic associations—American Indian, Eastern Indian, Chinese—whose common denominator is their presumed externality to the American commercial system. What might, for lack of a better term, be called the "ethnic sublime" corresponds to the technological, political, and poetic varieties we have explored in other travel narratives. Because the Buddha transforms nature into art "in a way that is difficult to describe," the artfulness of the scene begins to seem natural rather than artificial, somehow apart from the "staged authenticity" of consumer culture. Miller finally discovers a locus of authenticity in America, and it is Chinese, or Native American, or French, etc.

However, there is more to the Buddha than meets the eye. What Miller does not tell us is that Avery Island is the site of the Tabasco pepper sauce factory, that the Buddha was acquired by the company's owner E.A. McIlhenny in 1936, only shortly before Miller's visit, and that he was the one who had it placed in the artfully natural setting of the bird sanctuary, which was built on the grounds of the factory. Today the statue and sanctuary are major regional tourist attractions that can be combined with a Tabasco factory visit.⁸ Even in Miller's day the Buddha betrayed a connection (however mystified) to the consumer capitalism from which he hoped it offered an escape.⁹

8 "Tabasco Pepperfest Info Booth." Tabasco, http://www.tabasco.com/info_booth/faq/avery_visit.cfm.

9 The Tabasco Buddha could productively be analyzed as a variation on the kind of roadside colossus explored at length by Marling: "Colossi are advertisements that point to commodities for sale" (67).

Here Miller's narrative, presumably against his will, demonstrates the risks of grounding a critique of consumerism in the touristic search for authenticity. The flight from standardized landscape and culture, represented by Ford and Disney, leads to the epiphany of pepper sauce.

The Air-Conditioned Nightmare falls into an obvious contradiction: critical of consumer culture, and of the standard travel narratives seeming to buy into it, Miller's book ultimately commits the same literary and touristic sins. What makes Miller's narrative different, and also indicative of emergent literary trends, is the way it figures its unresolvable contradiction in imaginary monuments and endless journeys. His chapter on "Arkansas and the Great Pyramid" describes a kind of counter-monument to the Buddha (although the effect was probably unintentional). The pyramid is the pipe dream of one William Hope Harvey, who, in the words of his own promotional pamphlet, wanted to erect a great pyramid "to attract the attention of the people of the world to the fact that civilizations have come and gone attended with untold suffering to hundreds of millions of people, and that this one is now in danger—on the verge of going" (Miller, 137). The pyramid exists in Miller's narrative but not his itinerary; it is a ruin never built. Its particular form of unreality, existing in a symbolic field but not in space, is opened as a possibility by the unique spatial-textual nexus of the travelogue, which assumes homology between narrative and itinerary on the one hand, and depends on the "trope of use" on the other (Bold, 17-18). The difference between travel narratives and their fictional counterparts is not merely their "origin" in reality—an ontological relation notoriously difficult to define—but their utility as guides for subsequent journeys. The pyramid, however, cannot be visited, although other sites in Miller's travelogue could be. It is an *image* because it does not exist, but an image of a different order from the Buddha, which can be visited but appears to be outside consumer culture, other than what it actually is. Here one sort of image, made possible by the structure of the travelogue, offers a critical alternative to the kind of image or illusion internal to the structure of tourism. On the one hand this uncanny moment is symptomatic of the contradictions Miller's travelogue cannot escape, on the other it points to an emergent cultural paradigm: the postmodern preoccupation with images.

Miller's narrative keeps returning to non-places which, due to their position in the travelogue, must be distinguished from fictional settings. Analogous to the absent monument is a destination endlessly deferred. In the chapter "My Dream of Mobile," which rehearses, as litany, many of the canonical introductory clauses to travel narratives—"When Marco Polo went to the East [...]" "When the Spaniards sailed West" etc. (181 ff.)—Miller never actually reaches his destination because Mobile, as the name suggests, is always moving: "It is mobile, fluid, fixed, but not glued" (192). Miller provides the key to this narrative strategy of deferral when he argues that the imagination and imaginary communities are more important than geographical locations:

I know that there are maps of the earth which designate a country called America. That's also relatively unimportant. *Do you dream?* Do you leave your little *locus perdidibus* [sic] and mingle with other inhabitants of the earth? (189)

In these rhetorical questions Miller comes extremely close to Auden's literary cosmopolitanism, except that his narrative denies the possibility of realizing art in the United States. The destination never reached is an alternate version of the imaginary monument: an ideal that can exist only in its absence. However, it also figures the tourist as an eternal exile, someone who travels because he does not fit in. This is also symptomatic of Miller's critical stance vis-à-vis the consumer culture he cannot escape, and indicative of another post-war cultural paradigm: existential alienation.

III. Let's Get Lost

Post-war critics such as Sidney Finkelstein saw Miller as "a direct link between the two generations of 'disillusion,' that which followed the First World War and that which followed the Second" (121). One chapter in *Air-Conditioned Nightmare* describes how Miller, whom Wilson described as composing the elegy to the expatriates, comes into contact with other travelers who can only be described as "Beat." Miller attributes his decision to purchase a car to two acquaintances who could have served as character models for *On the Road* (151). The protagonists are dressed in proto-Beat fashions ("a blue denim suit, big

boots, horn-rimmed specs, long hair and a goatee,” [156]); they are self-conscious drop-outs (158); they experiment with the spontaneous autobiographical writing that would later serve as the paradigm of Beat prose (159); and they are even engaged in the search for a lost father as are Kerouac’s heroes Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty (*Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, 162; Kerouac, 307). The main difference between Miller’s acquaintances and Kerouac’s characters is that the latter only purchase cars as a means of last resort, preferring instead to hitchhike, ride the bus, ride-share, or, like Dean, simply steal.

Finkelstein argued that Miller’s and the Beat’s rebellion was meaningless because anti-social and ultimately criminal. Less conservative critics tended to focus not on their distance but their proximity to mass or consumer culture. Isaac Rosenfeld’s negative review in *Partisan Review* in 1946 accuses Miller of “falling so readily into the American stride, the tricky, self-advertising gait, that he becomes merely a conscious citizen, disgusted by his society, but by no means dissociated from it” (382). This line of critique was perhaps most forcefully articulated by Irving Howe in “Mass Society and Post-Modern Fiction” (1959), an essay dealing not with Miller but the Beats and the “Angry Young Men” in Great Britain. Howe, more dismissive of the Beats, decries rebellion against society as the flip-side of conformity:

These writers, I would contend, illustrate the painful, though not inevitable, predicament of rebellion in a mass society: they are the other side of the American hollow. In their contempt for mind, they are at one with the middle class suburbia they think they scorn. (435)

His polemic culminates in a description of the alienated rebels as “veritable mimics of the American tourist” (*ibid.*). Howe’s argument about “the predicament of rebellion in a mass society” brings us face to face with one of the core elements of consumer culture, although perhaps in a way opposite to what he intended. Howe thought the Beats were imitating the middle class, but current criticism focuses on how consumer culture cashes-in on the kind of rebellion evident in Beat literature by appropriating protest as stylistic innovation. As Don Slater has pointed out, “youth culture” can be understood as a form of rebellion that directly feeds into the planned obsolescence central to

any consumer-driven economy; consumer goods “became the vehicle for expressing a seemingly total dissatisfaction or provocation to the society that produced them” (165). We need look no further than the discomfort of somebody like Kerouac who becomes trendy in his rebellion against prevailing trends, or at the popularity of “bop,” “Beat,” and later “hippy” looks, which might have begun as forms of protest but were proliferated as fashions.

To escape consumer culture the Beats follow the same path as Miller and other tourists: romancing the “other” as somehow immune from market forces. Kerouac’s narrator Sal Paradise, for instance, achieves his hard-won moments of transcendence mainly when the road brings him into contact with African American jazz musicians, Latino migrant workers, or the Mexican Indians he characterizes as “the source of mankind and the fathers of it” (280). Transcendence is virtually assured for Kerouac when “otherness” is doubly embodied as race and gender; encounters with dark-skinned women are either oversexualized (“remembering I was in Mexico after all and not in a pornographic hasheesh daydream in heaven” [289]) or deliberately asexualized (“They were like the eyes of the Virgin Mother when she was a child” [297]), both representational strategies firmly locating the locus of authentic difference in the body.

This explicit eroticism is another link to Miller, who repressed sex in his travelogue in order to capitalize on the infamy of his more controversial books (Finkelstein, 121). Rosenfeld criticized Miller for deviating from his trusted provocation:

It may be the onset of age, or in some way the effect of America, but Miller back-at-home is not the same old Henry. The image he created for himself, among the despairing ecstasies of *Tropic of Cancer*, of a man, flashlight in hand, peering down a vagina, is hard to connect with the motorist peering through a windshield. (382)

However, subsequent road books by other authors were not so demure. Kerouac’s moments of transcendence are often defined erotically. The sexual element of the journey is evoked, for instance, when Dean, Marylou, and Sal remove their clothes and nakedly “drive west into the sun” (161). Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955), to take the most famous example, depends on an extended analogy between the girl’s body and the

American landscape: “The *tour* of your thigh, you know, should not exceed seventeen and a half inches [...] We are now setting out on a long happy *journey*” (Nabokov, 209, italics added). In John Updike’s *Rabbit, Run* (1960), the protagonist Rabbit Angstrom is in permanent flight from the uniformity in his landscape and life: “The land refuses to change. The more he drives the more the region resembles the country around Mt. Judge [his hometown]” (37). The novel deliberately plays up the parallels between his quest for difference and his sexual encounters. As a minister says to Rabbit in the first book of the series, “of course, all vagrants think they’re on a quest. At least at first”; he later adds, “it’s the strange thing about you mystics, how often your little ecstasies wear a skirt” (120, 121). Sexuality, of course, is not necessarily or even usually a place of protest. David Lewis has convincingly shown that it has been involved in the marketing of cars “from the dawn of the auto age” (123). Nevertheless, it was intimately bound up with youth protest movements, which by the late 1950s were already drawing an analogy between sexual and political repression on the authority of Herbert Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization* (1955).¹⁰ The body becomes the non-place of post-war travel narratives, a locus of experience rather than a destination or location.

Morris Dickstein’s essay on post-war fiction in the *Cambridge History of American Literature* argues that most novels of the 1950s can be understood as road books, couching their social protest explicitly in the lyrical or picaresque modes, or operating as counter-road books by presenting their critique through the irony of *not* setting out (175). *Catcher in the Rye*, *On the Road*, and *Lolita*, and *Rabbit, Run* are complemented—not contradicted—by suburban novels like *Revolutionary Road* (1961) and *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*

10 Marcuse’s own summary of his project in his “Political Preface” to the 1966 edition of the book gives a concise formulation of the relation between political and sexual repression: “It was the thesis of *Eros and Civilization*, more fully developed in my *One-Dimensional Man*, that man could avoid the fate of a Welfare-Through-Warfare State only by achieving a new starting point where he could reconstruct the productive apparatus without that “innerworldly asceticism” which provided the mental basis for domination and exploitation [...] ‘Polymorphous sexuality’ was the term which I used to indicate that the new direction of progress would depend completely on the opportunity to activate repressed or arrested *organic*, biological needs: to make the human body an instrument of pleasure rather than labor” (xiv-xv).

(1955). In the 1950s the road becomes the universal expression of American culture, and also the primary “vehicle” of its critique.

The ambiguous symbolism of the road in the 1950s is not only the result of the constitutive contradictions of consumer culture; it also stems from contradictions within the automotive industry itself. James Flink argues that “in the late 1950s [...] many Americans began to have critical second thoughts about the automobile industry and its product” (“Three Stages of Automobile Consciousness,” 468). Flink’s primary piece of evidence is the increasing number of industry-critical books to come out in the late-1950s, beginning with John Keats’ *The Insolent Chariots* (1958), Jane Jacobs’ *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), and culminating in Ralph Nader’s *Unsafe at Any Speed* (1965). He also points out, however, that this critical period follows fast on the heels of the record-breaking auto sales after World War II (467). The car, in other words, is both symptom and solution, the source of major social problems but also the only evident means of escape, not only for the economy but for the individuals who would hold themselves aloof from it: “automobility is one of the last bastions of individualism in our increasingly bureaucratized, collectivized and conformist society” (“Three Stages,” 468). In his 1988 monograph *The Automobile Age*, Flink points to other factors contributing to the ambiguous status of the automobile in the 1950s. The nearly universal ownership of cars even among urban poor (359) coupled with technological stagnation (278) made planned obsolescence and stylistic change the determinate factors in motivating new sales (234-235). Hence the elaborate tail fins, chrome detailing, fancy accessories, etc. typical of post-war automotive production. Innovation becomes a matter of stylistic change, or image, at the moment that driving becomes nearly universal, both in fact and fiction.

IV. Postmodernism: Imagining the Interstate

The image and alienation are two of the most salient features of road literature. Howe’s analysis of “post-modern” fiction provides a useful starting point for theorizing the relation between them. It is important to recognize that what Howe calls “post-modern” differs from dominant accounts of postmodern literary form, as well as from current descriptions of postmodernity as a stage of economic and cultural

development. To take one example, Fredric Jameson defines postmodernism as a proliferation of subjectivities and styles symptomatic of a fast-paced consumer society that depends on the rapid recycling of fashions. Thus the dominant postmodern narrative forms are characterized by pastiche and schizophrenia: the proliferation of styles corresponding to the multiplicity of subjectivities necessary to consume them (Jameson, 111). Howe, on the other hand, is concerned with an earlier moment in consumer culture when individualism is still a trend. These are two distinct moments in the development of consumer subjectivity: the heroic-rebellious and the performative-ironic, the era of alienation and the era of image. However, the two moments should be understood along a continuum. Slater, summarizing postmodern critiques of “the society of spectacle,” states the relation between alienation and image in the following terms:

Because everything can be commodified and objectified—including all forms of opposition (the very idea of “revolution” can be packaged as a subcultural style, an advertising slogan, an urban guerrilla clothing fashion)—everything can be absorbed into the spectacle. Alienation, then, has spread from the work-place to absorb all of life, above all the free spaces of leisure, consumption and culture in everyday life. (127)

Spectacle or image, in this analysis, means both style and illusion. Consumers become increasingly dependent on images to define their identities (style) at the moment it becomes clear that images do not refer to a reality outside of consumer capitalism (illusion) (Slater, 30). The impossibility of “locating” alienation, say in the workplace, is the flip side of the impossibility of locating authenticity in the landscape. Miller’s post-tourism, seeking a destination he knows to be false or nonexistent, forges the link not only between exilic and Beat literature, but between existential alienation and the postmodern preoccupation with the image.

Daniel Boorstin offered one of the first analyses of the link between alienation and the image in his 1962 book *The Image*, which laments “the thicket of unreality which stands between us and the facts of life” (3). Unreality is connected in several ways to consumer culture, but Boorstin clearly identifies the automobile as “one of the chief insulating agencies” (111), along with the “super highways,” which he

sees as “the climax in homogenizing the motorist’s landscape” (112). As I have already pointed out, this complaint about standardization dates back as early as 1915. However, Boorstin is concerned with a stage at which standardization not only replaces but begins to *reproduce* local difference: “One thing motels everywhere have in common is the effort of their managers to fabricate an inoffensive bit of ‘local atmosphere’” (113). Boorstin’s image takes the place of the real. In the age of interstate highways and organized tourism even nature seems fake:

The pre-eminence of Yellowstone National Park as a tourist attraction is doubtless due to the fact that its natural phenomena—its geysers and ‘paintpots’ which erupt and boil on schedule—come closest to the artificiality of regular tourist performances. (III)

Boorstin’s fake Yellowstone is closer to Miller’s Tabasco-brand Buddha than Post’s “authentic” West. It emerges in an interstate landscape deprived of the recuperative energy of the national sublime, and hence without any distinct sense of the nation as place or space. Thus Boorstin sees his contemporary Americans, denied contact with reality and the nation, as tourists in their own land (109), permanent itinerants whose destination is “no place in particular—in limbo, en route” (114).

Boorstin’s preoccupation with alienation and the image was anticipated by a book that proved extremely important in city planning and urban development circles, *The Image of the City* (1960) by M.I.T. professor Kevin Lynch. The difference in tone between the two analyses could hardly be overstated. For Lynch the image is not a symptom of general detachment but an urban design objective, one that is supposed to restore a sense of security, depth, and intensity to inhabitants who might otherwise be “lost” in the chaotic urban landscape (4-5). Nevertheless, the fact that Lynch characterizes city inhabitants as potentially “lost” reveals the deeper congruities between his argument and Boorstin’s. Like his contemporary, Lynch sees modem building practices, and particularly freeways, as potentially alienating structures; he points out that pathways for motorists constitute “edges” or barriers for pedestrians (64), and that highways quickly become complete and self-enclosed structures in cities like L.A. (60), often seeming to exist without relation to the city at all (65).

Lynch hopes to correct this confusion by “forming our new city world into an imageable landscape: visible, coherent, and clear” (91). The use of the term “image” is deliberate; Lynch advocates redesigning cities with aesthetic criteria in mind, and particularly with concepts taken from music, narrative, and drama. It is these kinesthetic arts, rather than static ones like sculpture, that provide the vocabulary for Lynch’s argument; they articulate the sequencing he sees as central to the modern experience of the city, which is primarily an experience of motion (Lynch, 113). Lynch is not one of those critics, just beginning to raise objections at that time, seeking to banish freeways from the urban setting.¹¹ On the contrary, he argues that the technology rendering “The underlying topography, the pre-existing natural setting [. . .] perhaps not quite as important a factor in imageability as it once used to be” actually brings about new possibilities for ordering the landscape (110). Lynch and Boorstin represent two sides of the same debate: Lynch’s dream of an image adequate to modern mobility is the optimistic version of Boorstin’s nightmare that the image is replacing reality. What the latter disparages as permanent tourism, the former praises as “the potential drama and identification” of modern life.¹²

In Boorstin and Lynch, as in Miller, the image is no longer *expressive* of place or space. The collapse of this symbolic relation entails the end of the *scenic* understood as a correlation between subject, site, and nation. Site is no longer related to sight through synecdoche but through distortion or illusion, or at best through artful

11 One noteworthy anti-freeway exponent at the time was Lewis Mumford: “By allowing mass transportation to deteriorate and by building expressways out of the city and parking garages within, in order to encourage the maximum use of the private car, our highway engineers and city planners have helped to destroy the living tissue of the city and to limit the possibilities of creating a larger urban organism on a regional scale” (510).

12 Lynch, 49. It would be possible to trace the development of the linked concepts of alienation and the image from Boorstin’s and Lynch’s seminal analyses to more recent theories of spectacle and postmodern architecture and city planning. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour’s famous argument—“If you take the signs away, there is no place. The desert town is intensified communication along the highway” (18)—stands as paradigmatic for the semiotic turn typical of more contemporary accounts of postmodernism. What early theorists represent as total alienation from an illusory landscape on the one hand, or the deployment of artistic forms to reimagine landscape on the other, contemporary critics and architects understand as the transformation of space into text.

city planning; the part no longer “naturally” represents the national whole. The sublime vision of the nation gives way to suspicion of the fake. The subjectivity corresponding to this landscape of illusion is alienated, displaced, no longer “at home” in any particular location, and reduced to the mobile body as a site of “authentic” experience. The interstate provides a spatial figure for this situation, and also a convenient time frame in which to date its emergence. On June 29, 1956 President Eisenhower signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act allowing for the creation of the interstate highway system. The first stretch went under construction in Missouri that year, and the final segment was completed in Los Angeles in 1993 (Weingroff, “Three States Claim First Interstate Highway”). While the idea of a limited-access, high-speed network of roads goes back to at least the 1920s, and while the American freeway system continues to grow today, the opening and closing dates of the Federal-Aid Highway Act provide useful markers for locating postmodernity. The interstate, in other words, is postmodern space.

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