

*Waste Management*  
*Hitler's Bathtub*

Laurie Monahan  
University of California, Santa Barbara

“Believe it.” With these words, *Vogue's* photographer and war correspondent in Europe, Lee Miller, flatly presented her most disturbing contribution to the magazine in June of 1945.<sup>1</sup> Marking the celebration of Germany's surrender to Allied forces, both the U.S. and the U.K. editions of *Vogue* included Miller's photographs of the Buchenwald concentration camp in Weimar: a hanged man, beaten, identified as a prisoner; emaciated corpses piled on hard ground, one with eyes open, gazing vacantly at the viewer.<sup>2</sup> The simple directive, generally unnecessary in the context of documentary reportage, indicates that Miller may have worried that the evidential certainty usually evoked by photographs could be doubted. Sensing the potential resistance to accept what they saw, Miller urged readers to comprehend and understand the truth of these photos. “Believe it.” Two words succinctly point to the conceptual reversals required to make sense of the fantasy of fashion and the reality of the concentration camp. The editors were curiously compelled to describe what was clearly visible: “The photograph on the left shows a pile of starved bodies, the one above, a prisoner hanged on an iron hook, his face clubbed.”<sup>3</sup> Yet these descriptive efforts are decidedly unhelpful. They offer nothing to make sense of the images. Why starved, why stacked up? Why beaten, why hanged? Four lines from the cable Miller had sent were included:

This is Buchenwald Concentration Camp at Weimar. No question that German civilians knew what went on. Railway siding into Dachau camp runs past villas, with trains of dead and semi-dead deportees. I don't usually take pictures of horrors. But don't think

Laurie Monahan: [monahan@arthistory.ucsb.edu](mailto:monahan@arthistory.ucsb.edu)

Copyright © 2011 (Laurie Monahan). Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 Unported License. Available at <http://jsa.asu.edu/>

that every town and every area isn't rich with them. I hope *Vogue* will feel that it can publish these pictures ...

Again the editors follow with the obvious: "Here they are." There are no records of responses to these images, since *Vogue*, with no space for readers' commentary, invited viewing rather than participation. And while the brutality of the images is unquestionably present, the circumstances for it remain unexplained.

Despite the fact that the camps had been reported in the *New York Times*, among other publications, in 1941, their existence appears to have been largely ignored by the Allies.<sup>4</sup> Presented with photographic evidence in 1945, viewers were in a position not only to try to make sense of the photographs, but to reconsider their relationship to what had been ignored and avoided. *What* is to be believed from these horrors? Or put another way, how does a reader or viewer make sense of these images? The enormity of what is to be believed registers, certainly, in comprehending these representations of Nazi atrocities. Miller's statement straightforwardly demands this much. But it also addresses disbelief and uncertainty—not by inviting them, but by acknowledging the impulse to deny what *can't* be absorbed from the photographs, what cannot clarify belief, what cannot be classified. For all of their clarity, Miller's photographs and texts, as well as their particular placement in *Vogue*, record the confusion and bewilderment that such horrors induce before historical verdicts and certainty are secured. In this sense my inquiry differs from other accounts of Miller's work, many of which are devoted to her ostensible victory over fascism, her proto-feminism and politically critical positions, as if these were always and already clear to the photographer at the time. Likewise, my discussion departs from accounts that address the ethics, moral culpability and responsibility implied by Miller's wartime photography. I am interested in her work as it pertains to the confusion *preceding* these moments of moral or ethical clarity.<sup>5</sup> As such, these images offer the opportunity to rethink and resituate our roles and histories, "precisely permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not."<sup>6</sup>

Readers were at least accustomed to features about the war in the general press, and Miller had been reporting in this capacity in *Vogue* from about 1941. Nevertheless, including such graphic images of the atrocities committed during the war was unprecedented, especially in an issue designed to celebrate the German surrender. Both the U.S. and English editions were devoted to celebrate V-E Day, although their approaches to the subject differed.<sup>7</sup> Audrey Withers, the editor of British *Vogue* and Miller's friend and confidante, noted that the London issue reduced the size of Miller's photographs so as not to dampen the tremendous relief that the war had ended. The U.S. version, on the other hand, prominently produced Miller's

photos, and the accompanying editorial made it quite clear that these revelations should strengthen the sense of purpose to continue fighting in the Pacific. The joy invoked by the end of the battles in Europe was short-lived in the pages of the American edition. The passage of victory occurred quickly: four full pages of photos depicting victory celebrations in New York and Europe, followed by a double-page spread documenting the encounter between Soviet and American forces happily congratulating each other (their meeting at Torgau featured Miller's photographs). The U.S. edition of *Vogue* understates the celebrating crowds when compared to *Life* and its U.K. counterpart, *The Picture Post*.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, even the most intrepid celebrant viewing the photo essay would find her euphoria quickly eliminated as another aspect of the surrender was placed on view. This too was a feature by Miller, soberly entitled "Germans are like this." No need to insist on believing in this instance—Miller makes it very clear that there is little room for argument in both her text and her photographs. A photograph of "well fed" and healthy German children is paired with "burned bones of starved prisoners," according to the captions provided. The latter image features several figures, bodies visible but faces cropped, standing in striped pants with their hands behind their backs seemingly standing to attention before the large pile of broken bones, little more than fragments. Below these photos, a photograph of a small "orderly" village, "patterned, quiet," is placed beside "orderly furnaces to burn bodies"—three ovens together, surrounded by brick and meticulously clean tile floors.

Miller's first paragraph notes that the Germans are "all just like real people. But they aren't. They are the enemy."<sup>9</sup> The prose is very clear, although in saying so, Miller suggests that the photographs portraying the normality of German life are unreliable: appearances can be misleading and deceptive. Or rather, these pictures actually obscure and obfuscate the reality that is documented by the photographs from the camps. The latter, while perfectly legible, rely heavily on the captions, which, like the descriptions of the photographs appearing in the "Believe It" layout, identify but do not explain. Unless the horrors of the camps are already understood, these images—whether of burned bones or crematoria—are difficult to grasp. This is, I would argue, *not* because what is seen is unbelievable, but rather because what is seen is incomplete and incomprehensible. That too is a dimension of the horror. We really don't want to believe that these events can be true, a point to which I will return. The systematic annihilation of the Jews and others is not yet fully understood, although the horror of the photographic record is clear.

This is why Miller's injunction to "Believe it" appears on the next page. It also punctuates Miller's explanation of German people. She explains in the essay opposite the four photographs that her encounters with the inhabitants of Cologne

were “disgusting and horrifying” primarily because the citizenry appeared to be thrilled by the Americans’ arrival. While the original essay was heavily edited, deleting more descriptive and disparaging passages (for example, her likening of the Germans to “pale worms” emerging from their underground bunkers), Miller’s outrage was nevertheless sharply visible:

[The Germans] were repugnant in their servility, amiability, hypocrisy. I was constantly insulted by slimy German invitations to dine, in German underground houses, and amazed by the audacity of Germans who begged rides in military vehicles and tried to cadge cigarettes, chewing gum, soap. How dared they? Whom did they think we’d been braving flesh and eyesight against all these years? Who did they think were my friends and compatriots but the blitzed citizens of London and the ill-treated French prisoners of war? Who did they think were my flesh and blood but the American pilots and infantrymen? What kind of idiocy and stupidity blinds them to my feelings? From what kind of escape zones in the unventilated alleys of their brains are they able to conjure up the idea that they are a liberated, not a conquered people?<sup>10</sup>

The trivial requests of the citizenry provide a perfect foil for Miller’s accounts of aggression. She fires off the rapid succession of questions like rounds from a machine gun. Her rage is not reserved simply for horrors committed by the enemy, but for their subsequent inability and refusal to *see*. The language is telling: a more conventional turn of phrase—flesh and blood—is replaced here with the awkward and almost incomprehensible “flesh and eyesight.” Germans are blind to her feelings. Their imaginations reside in claustrophobic spaces that cannot, *must* not, be given easy exit. That the enemy might imagine itself on the side of those who fought for freedom is simply out of the question.

At this point the reader turns the page and encounters the layout entitled “Believe it.” Readers may not believe their eyes, but they cannot be blinded by deceptive appearances of normality if they follow Miller’s narrative. The images of the suicided guard and the ignominious pile of dead bodies are real and must be believed. What passes as “normal” is fiction, what is ghastly is not. Undoubtedly Miller’s sentiment betrays an anxiety around *Vogue’s* readership, who may be implicated in the contradictions the reporter-photographer highlights.<sup>11</sup> Regularly enjoined to suspend belief in order to imagine themselves in Lanvin gowns or hats inspired by artwork, readers might easily ignore the realities of the world.

The structure of the magazine inadvertently suggests an uncomfortable similarity between the satisfied Germans who refuse to see and the wealthy matrons whose trips to Bonwit Teller offset any interference from the realities of ration cards and shortages.<sup>12</sup> In spite of the fact that *Vogue's* founder, Condé Nast, claimed in 1941 that “We must not allow people to think of *Vogue* as a really frivolous periodical unaware of the serious challenges that have been going in the life, interests and psychology of women.”<sup>13</sup> *Vogue* grouped the V-E Day reports together immediately after the editorial page, effectively cordoned off from the glamorous world of *haute-couture*. Remarkable as it is to find this reportage in *Vogue*, readers could shift from Buchenwald to beach cover-ups in the space of only two pages, leaving the actual business of *Vogue* to the next one hundred pages.

The subsequent two-page spread entitled “Nazi Harvest” featured Miller’s photographs and the editors’ clumsy captions adapted from Miller’s more nuanced text:

**Homeless:** Like the women of German-invaded countries, German women now cook in ruins. **Suicide:** Leipzig Burgomaster’s [sic] pretty daughter, victim of Nazi philosophy, kills self. **Punishment:** SS guards, who tortured prisoners beg mercy on their knees, are beaten by ex-prisoners. **Humiliation:** While Allied soldiers use bridge, German officers, boots pulled off, wade river.<sup>14</sup>

Here the comparison, while clear enough, also suggests a connection to the experience of “real people”—through the Germans’ defeat, they are, contrary to Miller’s claim only pages before, now suffering the fates of their victims, and Miller’s unedited text makes this clear. The parallel is not meant to suggest pity or mercy for the enemy, although Miller’s tone shifts occasionally, almost in spite of herself. Describing a crushed air raid shelter in Cologne, she notes that the Nazis refused to clear the wreckage so that the trapped civilians could be released. Cries for help were heard for three days until, finally, silence announced their deaths. Initially indicating sympathy for the citizens forsaken by the authorities, she immediately countered that the casualties in the shelter, for which “nobody had cared,” did not concern her either, because she remembered the “Kraut bombs on London and the buzz bombs and the V2s and the tenderness and courage of wardens and rescue teams ...” And yet she ends the article by stating, “They say that the Nazi authorities ignored the plight of civilian casualties with the same persistence with which they persecuted their foreign torture victims.”<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, Miller explained the photograph depicting a handful of German

women cooking in the ruins in her original essay, noting that a woman seated “wearing a long kind of homespun dress and dirty ankles is young and intellectual.” Her gift for languages resulted in a position with the Luftwaffe, which, Miller explained, “corresponds to a WAAF,” who monitored the conversations of enemy pilots. Nuremberg was bombed by the Allied forces, compelling the young woman to listen to the BBC for information. The Nazis caught her and her commander demanded she be hanged. Instead, she was jailed and subsequently sent to work in a factory. It is clear that Miller’s condemnation comes less readily when she relates these misfortunes. While her bitterness and anger are readily apparent, the clarity they provide seems mitigated by specific stories of suffering.<sup>16</sup> Miller’s cross-referencing between German experiences and those of the Allies does not underscore their differences, but rather attests to their similarities. In Miller’s original text, the juxtaposition of well-fed, clean and pampered Germans and the dirty ankles of an intelligent young woman dressed in anything but finery easily highlights lingering contradictions.

Insisting that all the Germans are Nazis while recognizing the way the country’s government used and abused its civilians is a difficult, if not impossible, position to negotiate. It becomes even more difficult as the most undesirable characteristics identified with the enemy become confused with one’s own. In various ways, this registered when Miller arrived at Dachau, particularly when she photographed the camp prisoners in their bunks. “In the few minutes it took me to take my pictures,” Miller writes,

two men were found dead, and were unceremoniously dragged out and thrown on the heap outside the block. Nobody seemed to mind except me. The doctor said it was too late for more than half the others in the building anyway. The bodies are just chucked out so that the wagon that makes the rounds every day can pick them up at the street corner, like garbage disposal.<sup>17</sup>

It is one thing for the doctor to concede that prisoners will die because of their weakened state, but punctuating this announcement with a matter-of-fact “anyway” conveys that there is no reason to get upset.<sup>18</sup> While the doctor is not actively exterminating prisoners, and undoubtedly worked to save those who could survive, his passive disinterest in the situation strikes too close to the behavior of guards and officers who systematically destroyed prisoners at Dachau. Miller too must have considered the very uncomfortable fact that people died as she was photographing them.

Conscious of these contradictions and the difficulty in finding a clear position by which to resolve them, Miller produced photographs which articulate the quandary. Some of her images include photographers doing what she is doing, as in one image where a man leans over the edge of a truck bed to frame a shot of the bodies scattered within. Miller, in doing the same thing to get the photo, alludes to the numbers of photographers and cameramen that were dispatched across the camp, a fact that undoubtedly created an aura of spectacle to the business of documenting the horrors before them.<sup>19</sup> In their respective discussions of Miller's photographs from the camps, Jean Gallagher and Annalisa Zox-Weaver emphasize that Miller's images constantly blur clear distinctions between "us" and "them." The tightly-framed photographs of beaten guards masquerading as prisoners and civilians bring the viewer face-to-face with fear and terror, affording no relief or space to take distance from the scene.<sup>20</sup> At Dachau, Miller enters a boxcar with a corpse in order to provide for viewers the uncanny experience of watching two American medics looking at the corpse with stunned disbelief, effectively mirroring the shock and disbelief that the viewer undoubtedly experiences as well.<sup>21</sup>

Miller's trip to see the liberation of Dachau, which she documented with extensive photographs, ended in Munich, where she and fellow photographer David Scherman spent three days in Hitler's apartment. The photo-essay that emerged was entitled "Hitleriana," and it appeared exclusively in the British edition of *Vogue* in July 1945. Opening with Miller's shot of the Berchtesgaden, Hitler's mountain retreat, in flames, the feature also included photographs of his personal apartment, which the U.S. forces occupied after the city was taken. The article also included a shot of Hitler's desk and images more posed than spontaneous—a G.I. casually reading Hitler's *Mein Kampf* while reclining on a chintz covered sofa and ostensibly using Hitler's mobile "hotline," and a photograph of Miller bathing in Hitler's bathtub (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2).<sup>22</sup>

The G.I., identified as Sergeant Arthur Peters, appears stretched out and relaxed as though he was reading the Sunday paper at home. Feet crossed, still wearing his combat boots, Peters has a wry smile on his face and holds the phone to his head. Miller and Scherman both photographed the scene. Scherman's version, slightly off-center compared to Miller's and thereby more evocative of a candid rather than staged shot, appeared in *Life* as well as the *Picture Post* (U.K.). A female bust, vaguely idealized, appears with a wreath of flowers on her head, and a plaster cast—identified by Miller in her report as Hitler's hand—form the background as Peters phones from the dead "hotline" while simultaneously reading the dead dictator's plan for world domination. Hitler himself appears in a cheap reproduction propped up against the wall, hardly present. The studied casualness secures the



Fig. 1. Lee Miller, *Sgt. Arthur Peters on Hitler's Bed, Munich, Germany, 1945* © Lee Miller Archives, Chiddingly, England



Fig. 2. Lee Miller with David E. Scherman, *Lee Miller in Hitler's bathtub, Munich, Germany 1945* © Lee Miller Archives, Chiddingly, England



irony of the photo, as if a phone call or two would deliver the Allied forces straight to Hitler's apartment where they would make themselves right at home. The exaggerated ease with which Peters occupies the space leaves no doubt about who owns the place.

The image of Miller bathing in Hitler's bathtub has none of the knowing humor or casual carelessness that animates Peters' image. Whereas the photograph of Peters is coded to maximize the irony of the situation, Miller's choreographed image prevents any conclusions, ironic or otherwise. The camera's presence violates the bathroom, perhaps the most private area in any household, and also signals the viewer's intrusiveness. Miller places her boots prominently, facing the bath, as if she had jumped directly out of them into the tub. Where *Mein Kampf* sufficed to establish and debunk Hitler's presence in the photograph of Peters, Hitler's portrait has been moved from the reading room to take up a very visible position on the left edge of the bath. His presence underscores Miller's naked vulnerability, exacerbating the already disturbing and bizarre nature of the scene. With a washcloth held to her neck, only Miller's head and shoulders are visible against a background of soap dishes and a metal hose that loops rather ominously behind her head, suggestive of a noose. A sculpted nude in the putatively wholesome classical style so favored by Hitler stands on the table next to a pushbutton callbox used to signal the staff and service personnel. In contrast to the photograph of Peters, the props play a much more active role in the composition of the image. Hitler's gaze seems directed to the statue, as if he is aware of the objects in the room. Miller brackets herself between the objects but her relationship to them, as well as the viewer's, remains unclear. Who is occupying Hitler's space and what does it mean to do so? What should or can be believed?

The contact print (Fig. 3) reveals that Miller had Scherman take six shots in all. The sequence of shots suggests that Miller had something very specific in mind, as her head and her gaze are only slightly adjusted for each pose. Each image appears carefully calibrated, and the ostensible pleasure of bathing is nowhere in evidence. The photos reveal nothing of what Scherman retrospectively described as her "leisurely, overdue bath."<sup>23</sup> The washcloth appears to serve more as a prop than a functional accessory for the task at hand. Scherman's photographs are much more animated. He mugs for the camera as he vigorously washes his hair, completely altering the tone of the scene. While Hitler's image remains present, it has been moved so that it is partially behind a soap dish—a minor detail, to be sure, but it does seem to compromise the presence that is so striking in Miller's photographs. Scherman's boots, in contrast to Miller's, are pointed away from the tub, clearly a better position for exiting the tub rather than entering.



Fig. 3. Contact sheet, "Lee Miller in Hitler's Bathtub, Munich, Germany 1945" © Lee Miller Archives, Chiddingly, England

The simplest interpretations argue that Miller enters the bath and washes away the dirt, still visible on her boots, from Dachau. In the two lines that Hawthorth-Booth devotes to the image in his otherwise thorough account of Miller's work, he states "Lee signaled the end of the Reich in a more subtle way, both symbolic and playful, by being photographed by Scherman washing off the war—in Hitler's own bath. The boots on the bath mat had walked through the horror of the Dachau death camp earlier in the same day."<sup>24</sup> The residual dirt from Dachau was of course invisible to readers, who were not privy to the fact that the photograph followed Miller's presence at the newly liberated camp earlier that day. Even so, it is doubtful that Miller imagined she could wash off even part of the war in the wake of what she had witnessed, leaving aside the question of whether she wanted to do so. After all, forgetting would betray her whole purpose.

For the purposes of cleaning, Hitler's bathtub seems an unlikely site, particularly after seeing the horrors wrought in his name.<sup>25</sup> It is hard to imagine getting clean in *his* bathtub no matter how many times the tiles had been scrubbed. The photo signals something much more ambiguous about the war and Miller's—if not the viewer's—relationship to it. This point is made repeatedly in more thorough readings of Miller's wartime imagery, although there is a strong tendency to claim that Miller's appearance in the bathtub signals her dominance over the otherwise polluted waters. Zox-Weaver, who treats the image as a kind of self-portrait, argues that it "deliberately reframes Hitler's portrait, mocking his fall from power and recent suicide by marginalizing him in the visual field and usurping—and 'profaning'—his domestic space."<sup>26</sup> Jean Gallagher's analysis of the photo states that "Miller is reversing the fascist invasion and control of vision, sexuality, and identity, the destroyed bodies and spaces of the war, by invading with her own body at its most defenseless ... these private spaces of the Third Reich."<sup>27</sup> In these instances, there is an understandable desire to credit Miller with prevailing over the forces she invites to and with the bath. That these victories would be linked to her own vulnerabilities is particularly gratifying, although I admit I am less confident about the outcomes described. For her part, Gallagher steps back somewhat from her definitive statement by adding that the image remains disturbing because Miller exposes her body "to the visible domestic traces and metonymic interiors of fascism, interiors that finally lead by visual association back to the gas chambers of the concentration camps."<sup>28</sup> This is not a domestic vision of the cleansing effects enjoyed by the ancients as they passed through the triumphal arch after battle. While one can imagine a certain amount of satisfaction in occupying Hitler's personal quarters, the glory of victory and subsequent occupation of enemy territory remain absent in the image and in the report Miller filed when she cabled her photos to *Vogue*. If Hitler is meant to bear

witness to the conquest of his most personal space, Miller's naked and vulnerable body hardly suggests a triumphant victor. That said, she is not a victim either. If this image is meant to represent Miller's attempt to manage the wastes of war, it does so by pointing to the impossibility of locating and containing the narratives conjured up in the bath.

The uneasiness of this encounter—vulnerability and strength are very much in the balance—is not Miller's alone. The image is stubbornly irresolute, compelling the viewer to shoulder its discomfort and unseemliness without offering pathways for resolution. Already having warned readers of the danger in accepting appearances of normality, Miller makes the normal completely artificial, signaling its potential for disaster. In a letter to Audrey Withers, her editor and confidante at British *Vogue*, Miller indirectly reflects on this experience. She discusses Hitler's death, which was announced on May 1<sup>st</sup>, the day she arrived in Munich from Dachau:

Well, alright, he was dead. He'd never really been alive for me until today. He'd been an evil machine-monster all these years, until I visited the places he made famous, talked to people who knew him, dug into backstairs gossip and ate and slept in his house. He became a little less fabulous and therefore more terrible, along with a little evidence of his having some almost human habits; like an ape who embarrasses and humbles you with his gestures, mirroring yourself in caricature. "There, but for the grace of God walk I."<sup>29</sup>

This passage is often cited in the secondary literature but in almost every instance omits the last line of the paragraph. While Miller signals Hitler's diminished power as an evil figurehead, the more disturbing—"terrible"—view of him is realized when she sees him as something closer to human. Significantly, Miller's last line acknowledges the real horror of the man, which is our horror: that any of us could be like him. And it is this quality that makes him come to life in Miller's narrative.

Miller's comments articulate a very real anxiety that was unavoidable with the revelation of the atrocities of the camps. The numbers of bodies and the levels of degradation were overwhelmingly horrific, on a scale that defied comprehension. Yet as Georges Didi-Huberman notes in his very compelling discussion of photos taken by prisoners at Auschwitz, this does not mean that what happened there was "unimaginable."<sup>30</sup> The horror is that it *was* imagined and actually enacted. What we had believed humanly impossible was possible. To understand this point Didi-Huberman turns to Georges Bataille speaking of Auschwitz:

In being a man, there is generally an oppressive, sickly element, which must be overcome. But this weight and this repugnance were never as heavy as they have become since Auschwitz. Like you and me, those responsible for Auschwitz had nostrils, a voice, human reason, they could unite, could have children. Like the Pyramids or the Acropolis, Auschwitz is the fact, the sign of man. The image of man is inseparable, henceforth, from a gas chamber.<sup>31</sup>

This is not to argue that victims and perpetrators are indistinguishable, but to point out that these horrific acts were *human* acts. As Didi-Huberman puts it, what happened at the camps is “evidence [that] must be considered with the anthropological fact—the fact about the *human race*.”<sup>32</sup> When Miller insists that the enemy is not like us, in spite of appearances to the contrary, it is to challenge that anthropology. She does not want to believe her eyes—nor should her readers—when they see Germans who appear normal. She insists: this is what Germans are—“schizophrenic [sic],” “like worms,” even if they may look like “us.”<sup>33</sup> They must be dehumanized in order to set them apart from the species. Yet at its most extreme, this separation leads to Buchenwald and Dachau. By proclaiming difference in the most conventional sense of the term, one runs the risk of becoming the same. One can only imagine how horrifying it must have been to see Hitler as a human—a grotesque caricature, perhaps, but perfectly ordinary in every way, from the chintz furniture to the cluttered desk. To imagine him doing as she did and then to actually *do* what he did—where are the distinctions and differences to be located?

Yet Miller seems to have invited this interchangeability. It recurred when she visited Eva Braun’s house, not far from Hitler’s apartment. In addition to providing a relatively exhaustive inventory of Braun’s medicine cabinet and cosmetics (“tweezers, Elizabeth Arden lipstick refills ... little funnels and spatulas for transferring beauty products”)—after all, she *was* writing for *Vogue*—Miller casually reported that she “took a nap on Eva’s bed.” In this instance, there was no picture recording the event. The similarities were not lost on her, nor were the contradictions the action evoked: “It was comfortable, but it was macabre ... to doze on the pillow of a girl and man who were now dead, and to be glad they were dead, if it was true.”<sup>34</sup> Miller chose the most intimate spaces to acknowledge the impossible quandaries posed by demarcating likeness and difference. The power of the images she produces lies not in the victory or defeat but in the absolutely disturbing contradictions that appear in the encounter—a new anthropology displaced the old. The normal activities of washing and sleeping were now something entirely different. Hitler’s presence

assured that no evidence would be falsified, because the normal was nothing more than fiction.

It is curious that in all the accounts of Miller's wartime photography, Georges Bataille is never mentioned when Miller's surrealist influences are discussed. Her work with Man Ray, with whom she lived in Paris from 1929 to 1930, is regularly acknowledged. Miller distinguished herself as a photographer who pushed against the conventions of the everyday by combining intimacy with distance, interiors and exteriors—all features of surrealist photography.<sup>35</sup> Admittedly no evidence exists of Miller's involvement with Bataille or his circle when she was living in Paris with Man Ray. This is not surprising, since the rifts among the Surrealists—manifestly between André Breton and Bataille—were never as intense as they were at the end of 1929 and 1930, and Man Ray's allegiance to Breton was unquestionable. Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine that Miller and Ray were unaware of *Documents*, the journal Bataille co-founded with German art historian Carl Einstein in 1929.<sup>36</sup> A publication characterized as a “war machine against received ideas,” *Documents* avoided editorial statements of intention, manifestoes and organized polemics. In spite of its name, or because of it, *Documents* deliberately cut against the grain of clarity and definition. As its press announcement proclaimed, the focus was on “the most disturbing facts, those for which the consequences are still not defined.”<sup>37</sup> As such, the “Critical Dictionary,” a regular feature throughout the journal's two years in print, critiqued the certainty that the conventional dictionary offered by adopting its form to insist on the disorder of things.

The photographs featured in *Documents* operated in a similar way, often playing off of each other to disrupt the apparent ease with which they were normally consumed. In his entry entitled “Slaughterhouse,” Bataille used the opportunity to discuss civil society's propensity for repression of that which is unseemly and unwelcome. Noting that the slaughterhouse is “cursed and quarantined like a plague-ridden ship,” Bataille argues that society purges from its ranks all that is fearful, substituting instead “their own unseemliness, an unseemliness commensurate with an unhealthy need of cleanliness, with irascible meanness, and boredom.”<sup>38</sup> The piece featured photographs by Eli Lotar of the slaughterhouse at La Villette: sweeping semi-circular patterns created by workers mopping up blood from the floor as carcasses and cattle are pushed away; an unidentifiable roll resembling a *serpilliette* (a ragpile used to mop the floor or divert water on Paris streets) sits untended in an open but deserted space, which within moments the viewer realizes is the rolled up skin of a slaughtered animal. The horror of these images turns on the fact that they are at once perceived as normal, routine practices *and* grotesque acts that result in the complete debasement of bodily integrity. The living creature is transformed

into something that is scarcely recognizable as a dead animal. Miller's images from Dachau chillingly reprise this effect where slaughter renders unrecognizable not only the gassed bodies and charred corpses of the dead but the *living* humans who remain.

Miller's photographs depict ordered piles of bone, confiscated shoes spilling out of closets, vestiges of the rationalized organization and classification so scrupulously managed by the Nazis. They are but the extreme end points of an ostensibly civilizing impulse to quantify and distinguish that which defies comprehension. Lotar's most striking image in the sequence must surely have pressed the point home: a number of hooves propped up against a spare concrete wall, absurdly paired by the knacker as if to make them anatomically consistent with the creatures from which they were brutally severed (Fig. 4).

Certainly surrealist in its capacity to derail and fragment, the photograph of neatly arranged hooves is particularly disturbing. Its formal structure, a play of



Fig. 4. Eli Lotar, *Slaughterhouse*, *Documents* 6 (November 1929): 328

diagonals and curves against sharp contrasts of light and dark, is at once enhanced and disrupted by the ordered remains of the slaughtered animals. What is absent in the picture is nevertheless present: the coherency of the animals' bodies, literally disassembled and no longer recognizable, is evoked through the careful arrangement of pairs in the aftermath of slaughter. The attempt to impose unity in the wake of total dismemberment is grotesque, a visible trace of the violence perpetrated and suppressed. The utter futility of that effort is in evidence as much as the hooves stacked up against the wall.

The contrast between the disorder of the slaughterhouse and the knacker's odd attempt to impose order, quite literally after all is lost, testifies to society's compulsion to exert order. Classification serves containment and control—"for academics to be happy," Bataille wryly notes, "the universe would have to take on form."<sup>39</sup> What is of interest to him, and central to the project of *Documents*, is to understand not "the meanings of words, but their tasks." One can understand through forms, but by necessity all knowledge is framed by not-knowing, or what is formless. By its nature, the formless can never be known, classified or located. It generates great anxiety because the unknown is unexpected, unpredictable, and uncontrollable. It is also ambiguous, difficult, and impossible. Civil society does all that it can to eliminate it or remove it from view, but to do so removes the possibility of knowing. And so the paradox: what is formless and thus impossible is central to its survival. The difficulty is not in *avoiding* the discomfort and anxiety that it produces; that is one of society's most successful and ongoing projects. The trouble starts when the consequences of this repression are felt, when not knowing suddenly overcomes what we thought we knew. The real difficulty, then, is to quit avoiding it.

In his remarkable analysis of the American psyche in the wake of 9-11, Walter A. Davis calls for the repeal of the guarantees or assurances that we regularly use to insulate ourselves from the "reality of historical trauma."<sup>40</sup> Central to those assurances is the need to convince ourselves of the superiority of our values, our actions, and our ethics in the face of events that reveal death, fear, and the most sinister elements of human behavior—in short, to classify what constitutes the good and the bad. Success in this regard assures that the event can be contained and interpreted within the reassuring framework of the fundamental goodness of human nature. Davis argues that

the concept of human nature—in all the variants constituting the philosophic and psychological history of that idea from Plato and Aristotle through American self psychology—is the primary way in which we endeavor to deny history. An event is traumatic precisely



because it suggests that history occurs beyond the limits we want to impose on it . . . Events put us as subjects—and as thinkers—into a traumatic relationship to both ourselves and our world . . . Ideologists rush in to fill that void and restore the guarantees. Our effort must be to do the opposite and thereby sustain the vital possibility implicit in an event. That possibility is to . . . find for history a radically different way of thinking. To put it concretely, a trauma cannot be resolved until it's been constituted.<sup>41</sup>

Whether trauma actually can be resolved, Davis' recognition of its radical possibilities for thought is crucial. These are not easily sustained, particularly if one does so in isolation—Miller's efforts to self-medicate during and after the war attest to the difficulties. Harder still is the effort to contain trauma, since it eludes knowledge and familiarity. To use Bataille's terminology, trauma is formless. Recognizing the circumstances of its appearance—the "event" that precipitates it—does not resolve or contain it. Efforts to repudiate or leave aside trauma generally produce unsuccessful if not disastrous results. There are serious social consequences for doing so—the certainty of total goodness produces a form that assures that any aggression, any act, can only be framed in these terms. In this sense, Davis's argument against the "ideologists" is a call to preserve the not-knowing inherent in traumatic experience.

In her very powerful analysis of trauma as "unclaimed experience," Cathy Caruth describes how Freud theorized that the traumatic event creates a breach in the mind, what she describes as

the lack of preparedness to take in a stimulus that comes too quickly. It is not simply, that is, the literal threatening of bodily life, but the fact that the threat is recognized as such by the mind *one moment too late*. The shock of the mind's relation to the threat of death is thus not the direct experience of the threat, but precisely the missing of this experience, the fact that, not being experienced *in time*, it has not yet been fully known.<sup>42</sup>

In this sense, to survive is the experience of not knowing, and the repetition that follows springs from the hope of (finally) knowing. But as Caruth points out, "For consciousness then, the act of survival, as the experience of trauma, is the repeated confrontation with the necessity and impossibility of grasping the threat to one's own life. It is because the mind cannot confront the possibility of its

death directly that survival becomes for the human being, paradoxically, an endless testimony to the impossibility of living.”<sup>43</sup>

Miller personal traumas were many and they came early in life. Raped at seven by a family friend, she contracted gonorrhea and was subjected to painful monthly treatments well into adulthood. Her mother attempted suicide, and a close friend drowned before her eyes when she was a young teenager. She was no stranger to loss and suffering. Scholars identify the personal dimension of Miller’s traumas in relation to her own life choices, identifying it as a key aspect of her ability to keep what Paula Salvio termed “an uneasy union of opposites” at play in both her writing and her photography.<sup>44</sup> As Salvio puts it:

through her documentation she challenged what it meant to ‘see war’ and to keep the radical damage done by war in view, and within the reach of cultural memory . . . [Miller’s] painful psychic and physical experiences appeared to press up against her at unsuspecting moments, as she traveled from Saint-Malo to Nuremberg to Auschwitz [sic]. War photography offered Miller abundant opportunities to move in close to trauma. She took thousands of pictures, consistently put herself in danger, and lived happily, as we learn from her collaborator, David E. Scherman, on adrenalin, with large supplements of alcohol, cigarettes, sleeping pills and Benzedrine.<sup>45</sup>

It has been said that journalists become addicted to war. Proximity to the action was crucial. As photographer Robert Capa remarked, “If your pictures are no good, you aren’t close enough.”<sup>46</sup> In terms of those who are traumatized—are there any that aren’t?—staying close to death is familiar if uncomfortable. There is a bizarre security in living in that tenuous place in which life really does hang in the balance. At the end of the war, in a letter to her husband Roland Penrose, Miller admitted that at its outset she felt “all my energy and all my pre-fabricated opinions were unleashed together.”<sup>47</sup> With the war over she was “suffering from a sort of verbal impotence—when there was a necessity for stopping being afraid . . . I could and did. This is a new disillusioning world. Peace with a world of crooks who have no honor, no integrity and no shame is not what anyone fought for.”<sup>48</sup> Disillusionment and depression replaced the sense of purpose Miller experienced during the war. The end of the hostilities also signaled the end of an emotional and physical terrain that was radically shifting from one moment to the next. The unknown was gone, yet the relief delivered nothing. That loss too was suspended in

the haze of drugs and alcohol—a different kind of death.

It is one of the truisms of society that war is terrible and should be avoided at all costs. Given the ease and speed with which we embrace its inevitability it is clear that, avowals to the contrary, war has been reclassified. Those moments when the opportunity to consider an alternative route arises—as for example in the immediate wake of 9-11, or the revelations of Abu-Ghraib, or the indefinite incarcerations of prisoners of war—are disappeared when the culture begins, once again, to identify, classify and position players and events. This does not make the ambiguities go away. Today, as I write this article, the *New York Times* front page features a coffin containing the body of a soldier who put a bullet in his own head in Afghanistan.<sup>49</sup> Left alone to shoulder the unbearable collapse of the divisions between the good and the bad, few survive. Even the conservative *Life* recognized that the danger was not over. Its editorial in the wake of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki recognized this:

It is bootless to argue at what stage of modern warfare, or by whom, the old Hague rules of war were violated. The point is that Americans, no less than Germans, have emerged from the tunnel with radically different practices and standards of permissible behavior toward others ... We are in a strange new land.<sup>50</sup>

More than forty years later, the territory grows stranger while the efforts to set up the borders grow stronger. The picture remains ambiguous—the battlefield is everywhere and nowhere, appearances are not to be trusted. The enemy is well and truly among us. Lee Miller felt this viscerally. She knew what it was to bathe in Hitler's bathtub. Her photograph shared that experience in all of its horror, strangeness, tragedy, and pain. To experience this is to avoid managing it—for managing it would be a terrible waste.

1 Lee Miller, "Believe It" *Vogue* (U.S.) June 1945, 105. The layout of this article and the others Miller contributed to the June 1945 issue, U.S. edition, can be found in David Haworth-Booth, *The Art of Lee Miller*, (New Haven/London: Yale University Press and the Trustees of the Victoria Albert Museum, 2007), 190-94. Unless otherwise noted, all citations from Miller's articles refer to the original editions of the magazine from June 1945.

2 The term "prisoner" led to subsequent confusion about the photograph, since the dead man was actually a guard at Dachau who ostensibly committed suicide after being beaten by the newly liberated

prisoners. Technically the guard *was* a “prisoner” after the camp was liberated, but the term was also being used to identify those who had been imprisoned in the camps while they were operational. This confusion was present in the camps as well, since many of the guards put on prisoners’ clothing in order to escape detection, without much success it seemed. Lee Miller makes mention of it in her account of the camps. See Antony Penrose, *Lee Miller’s War*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005), 165.

3 Annalisa Zox-Weaver has suggested that the captions below the photographs of the piece were designed to omit much of Miller’s graphic narrative, but they were also a common feature in *Vogue’s* fashion layouts. I would add that the straightforward descriptions of what is depicted were also standard fare in the magazine, although the subject matter would seem to mitigate against using the conventions generally reserved for fashion features. See Annalisa Zox-Weaver, “When the War Was in *Vogue*: Lee Miller’s War Reports,” *Women’s Studies*, Vol. 32 (2003): 152-3.

4 “Allies Describe Outrages on the Jews,” *The New York Times*, (20 December 1942): 23. When this story broke, the United States government actively opposed an effort by the United Nations to issue a statement condemning the camps and treatment of the Jews. See Walter Laquer, *The Terrible Secret: Suppression of the Truth about Hitler’s Final Solution*, (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1980; reprinted 1998), 223-228. As early as August of 1942 the *Los Angeles Times* reported on the atrocities committed by the Nazis against the Jews.

5 See for example Francine Prose’s hagiography, *The Lives of the Muses: Nine Women and the Artists They Inspired*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2002); Becky E. Conegan, “Lee Miller, Model, Photographer and War Correspondent in Vogue, 1927-1953,” *Fashion Theory* Vol. 10 (2006): 97-126. See also Zox-Weaver, and Jean Gallagher, *The World Wars through the Female Gaze*, (Carbondale/Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998). For an excellent discussion of the ethical implications of Miller’s works, see Lorraine Sims, “A different war landscape: Lee Miller’s war photography and the ethics of seeing,” *Modernist Cultures* Vol. 4 (2009): 46-66.

6 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience, Narrative, and History*, (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1996), 11. Caruth’s study argues for a history that can emerge through trauma, the experience she describes as a state of not-knowing and surviving, a point to which I will return.

7 For Miller’s images from the camps, see Haworth-Booth, 190-3. The British edition is remarkably different—only one photograph from the camps is featured, and it is reproduced in a row of images reproduced in such a reduced size as to be almost unreadable (1½ x 1½ inches). See the June 1945 *Vogue* (U.K.), 43.

8 See for example <http://www.life.com/image/3295451/in-gallery/26162#index/0>: the photographs include people dancing in the streets, a massive crowd waving to the cameras by the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, a woman her children raising the Union Jack, even London bobbies doing a mock can-can as they linked arms to control the surging crowds. In the U.S. a newsstand owner brandishes the headline, crowds gather, men appear in drag. The American edition of *Vogue*, by contrast, includes a photograph of the papers falling from skyscrapers in New York as a spontaneous parade begins, and men appear to march down the street—some in uniform—while carrying the flag. While the U.K. is represented with a photo of “the King and Queen” looking at a huge crowd, British and French canteens in New York stand in for the huge celebratory crowds. Prayer in a New York church, and a church in Chinatown are shown. But the exuberant crowds are much less frequent. As noted, American *Vogue*, ever aware of the war in the Pacific, sought to balance the celebrations with the seriousness of purpose still necessary for what remained now that “half the war was over.” See the June editorial “Half-Way to Victory: May 8, 1945,” *Vogue*, (U.S.), June 1945, 102c. Oddly, there

are almost *no* images of celebration in the British edition. Its coverage included a feature offering a retrospective look at George VI and his wife's wartime efforts, along with a full page photographic portrait of Winston Churchill making the "victory" sign, with nothing from the massive gathering at Trafalgar Square or anywhere else, for that matter.

9 *Vogue* (U.S.), 102.

10 *Vogue* (U.S.), 102.

11 Several scholars have made this point in different and very compelling ways. See especially Sim, 60; Zox-Weaver, 152 and Jean Gallagher, *The World Wars through the Female Gaze*, (Carbondale/Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998), 91.

12 This is especially true in Miller's inventory of Eva Braun's house as Jean Gallagher has argued, 89-91.

13 Caroline Seebohm, *The Man Who Was Vogue: The Life and Times of Condé Nast* (New York: Viking Press, 1982), 354.

14 *Vogue* (U.S.), 106.

15 *Vogue* (U.K.), 88 and 89.

16 Penrose, 169-70 and 181.

17 Penrose, 182-83.

18 Rose notes that the "distinctions between fantasy and reality cannot withstand, or is revealed in its most difficult relation under, the impact of war." Jacqueline Rose, *Why War?*, Bucknell Lectures in Literary Theory, (Oxford: Blackwell Publisher, 1993), 28.

19 While Scherman and Miller were among the first press photographers on the scene at Dachau, the army had its own photographers and filmmakers who produced images of what Miller was photographing as well. See for example, the Army Signal Corps film at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PH98iTYLrv4>.

20 Zox-Weaver, 149-50.

21 Gallagher, 88.

22 The photographs from the July 1945 issue can be found in Haworth-Booth, 197-99.

23 David E. Scherman, "Foreword," *Lee Miller's War*, 12.

24 Haworth-Booth, 197.

25 Zox-Weaver carries this point so far as to argue that "Rather than repudiating bodily residue that will cling to her hands, elbows and bottom, Miller enacts a willed deregulation of her bodily boundaries and solicits an osmotic intersection of surfaces between Hitler's genitals and her own," 157.

26 Zox-Weaver, 157.

27 Gallagher, 92.

28 Gallagher, 92.

29 Penrose, 188.

30 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, trans. Shane B. Lillis, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008; original French publication 2003), 27-8, quoting Bataille, "Sartre," (1947) in his *Oeuvres Complètes*, XI (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 226-28.

31 Didi-Huberman, 27-28.

32 Didi-Huberman, 27-28.

33 *Vogue* (U.K.), 41 and 42.

34 Penrose, 199.

35 See Gallagher and Sim. For a thorough discussion of Miller's surrealist work, see Amy Lyford,

*Surrealist Masculinities: Gender Anxiety and the Aesthetics of Post-World War I Reconstruction in France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) and Whitney Chadwick, "Lee Miller's Two Bodies," in Whitney Chadwick and Tirza True Latimer, eds. *The Modern Woman Revisited: Paris Between the Wars*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey, London: Rutgers University Press, 2003), passim.

36 A number of sado-masochistic photographs taken by Man Ray of Miller, W.B. Seabrook and at least two unidentified women strongly suggest that both Miller and Ray must have been aware of *Documents'* inclusion of Seabrook's article "Le *caput mortuum* ou la femme de l'alchimiste," with photographs that appear to be quite close to Man Ray's. See *Documents*, 1930, No. 8, 464. For the photographs taken by Man Ray, see Lyford, 157-163.

37 The publicity circular is quoted by Michel Leiris, a regular contributor to the journal, in his "De Bataille l'impossible à l'impossible *Documents*," *Critique*, 195-6 (August/September, 1963), 689.

38 Georges Bataille, "Slaughterhouse" (1929), reprinted and translated in *October*, Vol. 39 (Spring 1986), 11.

39 Bataille, "Slaughterhouse," 11.

40 Walter A. Davis, *Death's Dream Kingdom: The American Psyche Since 9-11* (London: Pluto Press, 2006), 38.

41 Davis, 38.

42 Caruth, 62.

43 Caruth, 62.

44 Paula M. Salvio, "Uncanny Exposures: A Study of the Wartime Photojournalism of Lee Miller," *Curriculum Inquiry* Vol. 39 No. 4, (2009): 224.

45 Savio, "Uncanny Exposures," 224.

46 Quoted in Susan D. Moeller, *Shooting War*, (New York: Basic Book Publishers, 1989), 209.

47 Antony Penrose, *The Lives of Lee Miller*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 147.

48 Penrose, *The Lives of Lee Miller*, 147.

49 2 January 2011. It is one among many reports devoted to the alarming number of suicides and traumatic stress disorders occurring among servicemen and women fighting current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

50 Moeller, 237.