An interior journey

*Spiritual Letters*, David Miller (Contraband)

David Miller's 'spiritual letters' – mostly prose poems with a little poetry woven in to them – have been published far and wide since the series began back in 1995. Beautiful handprinted books, artist's books, slim pamphlets, paperbacks and broadsheets have issued forth, not to mention selections of poems in a variety of journals online and in, now all gathered together in one paperback collection. Here, individual sequences are still numbered, but individual poems are not.

I mention this, because it is now difficult to use the author's notes to refer to the texts. Although Miller says they do not *explain* the work, they do provide a counterpoint of interest and *inform* the work, a bonus for any interested reader. Miller is right, however, that the work can, and must, stand alone.

The word spiritual is, of course, a difficult one to use. It is a word claimed by and associated with various mainstream religions and more esoteric mystical traditions, as well as a number of gnostics, heretics and charlatans, and any one else who wants to appropriate it, be they of the art world or new age visionaries. This vagueness and lack of definition can be both useful and annoying. Here it seems to refer to a kind of epiphanic state of mind: Miller mosaics moments of clarity, awe and philosophical and emotional thought together, many texts using indirect quotes or retellings. There is no sense of preaching to the reader, or of shared enlightenment; in fact, it may be that the moments depicted here are not at all precious or special, except in their depiction here in heightened prose.

Miller has always been an intriguing and associative writer, one concerned not so much with narrative or plot but with the visual, emotional, and pictorial. It's sometimes hard to articulate what one takes away from the gatherings of ideas and images here; I find myself fumbling to 'know' what I have read, how to process the streams of text. (Indeed, I often find it easier to write back to Miller's work than review it.) The letters have a general drift towards longer and darker material as the book progresses, although the Epilogue counteracts that with a few concise sections (prior to the aforementioned notes).

*Spiritual Letters* is in many ways an epic, an interior journey on a par with the adventures of Ulysses. It is perhaps also akin to the journals of Paul Blackburn, documenting a very individual view of life; or a very different journey through history in the manner of Robert Sheppard's *Twentieth Century Blues*; or perhaps it explores a different sense of space and place in a complex manner not entirely unrelated to Allen Fisher's work, albeit with different concerns and source material.

It certainly matches all these major contemporary works in ambition and scope (if not in page count). Miller's prose is fluid and exquisite, he is a master of minimal scene-setting and observation, conversation, at summation and excerpt, and of course juxtaposition and parataxis. Whilst *Spiritual Letters* isn't, in this form, my favourite David Miller book, it is an important and accomplished addition to place next to the *Collected Poems* which Shearsman published last year.

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