

## Henry Miller – The Books in My life (1952)

Oddly enough, the man who put me on the track of Du Maurier also put into my hands Flaubert's **Bouvard et Pécuchet**, which I did not open until thirty years later. He had given this volume and the **Sentimental Education** to my father in payment of a small debt he owed. My father, of course, was disgusted. With the **Sentimental Education** goes a queer association. Somewhere Bernard Shaw says that certain books cannot be appreciated, and should therefore not be read, until one is past fifty. One of those he cited was this famous work of Flaubert. It is another of those books, like **Tom Jones** and **Moll Flanders**, which I intend one day to read, particularly since I have "come of age."<sup>1</sup>

## Henry Miller – J'suis pas plus con qu'un autre (1976)

J'espère que mes lecteurs n'attendent rien de brillant de ma part, surtout en français. Mon but sera, si j'en ai un, de vous faire sourire de temps en temps. Aujourd'hui, je me sens un peu l'âge de Bouvard ou de Pécuchet. (En vérité je suis plus âgé. Mais je l'ignore.) Je ne suis pas encore **ausgespielt**. [p. 18]

Mozart ! Voila quelqu'un qui m'embête ! Mozart c'est de la perfection ! Je ne veux rien avoir avec l'un ou l'autre ! Moi, j'aime la manque de perfection. A bas Leonardo ! A bas Flaubert et toute sa tribu ! A bas le dixhuitième siècle — Voltaire, d'Alembert, Diderot et tout ces gens ! Moi, j'aime les monstruosité de Rabelais, de Rimbaud, de

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<sup>1</sup> **L'Éducation sentimentale** figures in the appendix of books he still intended to read. Despite his repeated denials in 1976 **Bouvard et Pécuchet** & four other works by Flaubert figure in the appendix (to the French edition only) of some three thousand books Miller had already read. Yet this is a consummate man of letters, author of a work entitled **Remember to Remember**.

In his preface to the 1969 American edition Miller expresses himself in what is not his best style: "It was first printed in a type which many readers find hard on the eyes; the important list of 5,000 titles (of books read) was not included because it would have increased the cost of the book; lastly it received bad reviews by the British critics" (p. 6). Unless the French editors cut it, the list of books read contains little more than half of five thousand titles.

Miller goes on: "Impossible as it is to recall *all* of the books one has read, I am nevertheless reasonably sure that I shall be able to give at least half. I repeat, I do not regard myself as a great reader. The few men I know who have read widely, and whom I have sounded out on the extent of their reading, startle me by their replies. Twenty to thirty thousand books, I perceive, is a fair average for a cultured individual of our time. As for myself, I doubt if I have read more than five thousand, though I may well be in error" (p. 122). It should be noted that twenty-five thousand books represents almost ten books a week, more than one a day, for fifty years. This is a Wilt Chamberlain number:

<http://static.espn.go.com/nba/news/1999/1012/110836.html>

On a personal note, I have bought this book twice in English (and lost it both times) and three times in French (losing it once & giving it away twice). As Miller says in far better form: "A book lying idle on a shelf is wasted ammunition. Like money, books must be kept in constant circulation. Lend and borrow to the maximum—of both books and money ! But especially books, for books represent infinitely more than money. A book is not only a friend, it makes friends for you. When you have possessed a book with mind and spirit, you are enriched. But when you pass it on you are enriched threefold" (p. 23).

Cendrars. Un Hemingway ne me dit rien. Même Bach m'ennuie parfois. En général j'aime ceux qui sont un peu ou largement, fous. L'imbécile non ! L'idiot, oui ! Il y a une grande distinction entre les deux. Etre fou c'est d'être poète. Ce sont des imbéciles qui gouvernent le monde. Vaut mieux avoir des simples à la legislature que les gens d'aujourd'hui, des rats, des punaises ! Imaginez un monde gouverné par un trio comme Chaplin, Satchmo et Picasso. Même dans l'autre monde ils peuvent faire mieux pour nous que les hommes en contrôle à présent ! [pp. 20-1]

Quel plaisir de s'asseoir et boire un coup quelque part. Souvent, en traversant la ville en autobus, je sortais tout d'un coup parce que l'endroit n'était pas familier. J'avais une telle soif de connaître tout les quartiers. En déambulant j'étais comme un homme ivre. Tout me donnait de l'enthousiasme, un appétit insatiable. Je regrette que je n'ai jamais lu certains auteurs — Corneille, par exemple, de ne pas avoir cherché le sens de certains mots, de ne pas avoir essayé d'améliorer mon accent américain si atroce. Un livre que je regrette de ne pas avoir lu est « **Bouvard et Pécuchet** » de Flaubert. Et pourquoi n'avais-je jamais donné un coup d'œil au **Spleen de Paris** de Baudelaire ?

Je regrette tant de choses ! Je me rappelle que comme garçon j'aimais toujours les livres humoristiques. Le premier, par exemple, était un très gros livre qui s'appelait « **Peck's Bad Boy** ». Pas **Huckleberry Finn** ou **Tom Sawyer**. Mais ce livre « **Peck's Bad Boy** » était un très mauvais livre, un livre pour imbéciles ou crétins n'importe. Je n'avais qu'à ouvrir le livre et c'était le fou rire. Tous les livres de Mark Twain me paraissaient très drôles. C'est que j'avais lu ses livres posthumes et je les trouvais « arides ». Bien plus tard, à Paris quand j'ai fait la connaissance du grand psychanalyste, Otto Rank, il m'a dit qu'il aimait Mark Twain, qu'il le considérait un très grand écrivain. Moi, je préférais Gogol !

D'apropos, je crois qu'il y a peut-être une affinité entre Mark Twain et Courteline, et entre **Pickwick Papers** de Dickens et **Bouvard et Pécuchet**. Il y a une petite histoire là-dessus du temps de la boutique de tailleur de mon père. Il paraît qu'un jour mon père, déjà un peu ivre, avait rencontré un jeune homme au bar du Wolcott Hôtel en face de sa boutique. Il avait persuadé le jeune homme d'acheter un gilet avec des boutons en perle, ce qui était assez drôle ou fou. Deux ans plus tard, ne pouvant ramasser la somme due pour le gilet, il a demandé au jeune homme de faire un grand effort et de lui donner quelque chose, n'importe quoi. Alors, pendant l'absence de mon père, le jeune homme est venu un jour avec un livre sous son bras. C'était (en traduction) **Bouvard et Pécuchet**. Il m'a offert ce livre qu'il a tiré de sa bibliothèque et lequel avait maintenant une valeur appréciable. Je n'ai jamais montré le livre à mon père (Mon père ne lisait pas de livres, seulement les journaux). Quant à moi, je me suis promis de le lire mais ne l'ai jamais fait.

Une pensée m'est venue à la tête en ce qui concerne **Bouvard et Pécuchet**. Pourquoi ne pas faire un film de ce livre, avec Alec Guinness comme Bouvard et Peter Falk comme Pécuchet ?

Pour en finir avec ce sujet laissez-moi recommander le grand livre de Maurice Nadeau — « **Flaubert** ». C'est vraiment un livre qui valait le Prix de Paris ! Lisez-le, mes gars !! [pp. 42-5]

From: SAGReiss

Date: 22 November 1996

Subject: Will that be medium or large this morning, Ms Columbine?

I was going to make a show of my vast, polyglot culture and trot out the passages where Miller talks about Bouvard et Pecuchet, but my cherished English and French copies (which are different in very important ways, or at least so it seems to someone who desperately wrote fifty pages of a doctoral dissertation on cocktail napkins) of *The Books in My Life* are in France, probably lost forever. Not that any of you give a fuck. The other reference, for those of you who might, is *J'suis pas plus con qu'un autre*, which Miller wrote in bad French at the age of seventy-six. My point is not whether he did or did not read Bouvard et Pecuchet. It doesn't matter and he probably couldn't tell you if he were still alive. The more we tell the tale the less the tale matters and the more the telling. And yes, I don't really care whether we call it fiction or non-fiction. Anais Nin may have made up her huge Diary. Gertrude Stein may, or may not, have told the truth in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, which in fact says very little about poor Alice. My point is that a man called Henry Miller at the age of seventy-six struggled through his bad French to rewrite the story of something quite mundane that happened in about 1910. A customer gave either Miller or his father a gift of a book (two really) which Miller may or may not have read. Yet in telling this insignificant story, Miller remembers or makes up more telling details in 1976 than the first time (How many times did he tell the tale at supper?) in 1950. And somehow, this story becomes a vast metaphor for Miller's ambivalent relationship with books and with his father, who never read, except for the newspaper and one book by John Ruskin. Then, all of a sudden, something (a line, a sentence, a paragraph, a page) is missing from both editions I've got of *J'suis pas plus con qu'un autre*. The reader is plunged into the middle of a sentence/paragraph which is a vicious diatribe on Ruskin. Miller is seldom so mean. My point is that make it up or not you still have to get it on the page. This is what's hard. This is what matters. Given that the problem is how to represent sights/sounds/smells in written language, I see no reason to waste my time making up sights/sounds/smells. The mind somehow latches on to events, significant or not, and makes them significant by telling and retelling them. I have publicly stated that Capricorn is better than Cancer because the events are further away in Miller's memory and so he is freed up of the entire problem of what really happened. I don't like Joyce and neither did Miller. Miller calls him dead. I like Faulkner despite the silly, white trash stories. I don't understand the difference you draw, Columbine, between literature and poetry. All arguments (including Robbe-Grillet's [I don't like the son of a bitch either, but that's not the point.]) I have read on the question use Faulkner and Joyce to prove the same point, not as counter examples. My argument would be different. What is so great about *The Sound and the Fury* is that no erudition, no intellectual mind games are necessary to understand why the tale is told as it is. Benjy can't write normally. This, to me, is Faulkner's greatness and his superiority to Joyce. I hope I don't sound negative. I like your web page and keep telling myself to print up the poems so I can read them, but I haven't gotten around to it. No matter how good or bad they are, of course, at least you're trying to do something. This is what's wrong with the internet, this vast new medium that people use to post pictures of their dogs, gfs, porn which all begin to look alike on the first day you get on the web. What I liked about Shakes fumbling with his quills (which is

all made up of course) is that it is so much like the large portions of BABEL where I'm fighting with typers/pine/paper or where Buk fucks with his ribbons. The only thing I know about Huey Long is what I read in that book by Robert Penn Warren, which is usually called a novel, but then again so is BABEL, so is vr. Buk calls himself Chinaski. I use the name(s) on my birth certificate. Maybe I've just got a lazy imagination. (Why do I feel this sudden urge for a glass of whisky? Never mind.) "[Oral] sex," says Buk, "is like money. It seems far more important when you haven't got any." Columbine says: "I had my usual large cup of coffee for breakfast, most of which I drank on the subway standing up on the way to work." This is where your text comes alive for me. I was startled at half past two in the morning waking up while Nichelle was getting ready for bed. I think I even said something when I read that. Ah, finally, this is what I want to read. For some reason, events large or small, Miller's Bouvard et Pecuchet, Nichelle's rape stories, suddenly seize the mind, the syntax glows, the pace seems right. I don't care if the sentences are long or short. On a good day Hemingway can write as well as Faulkner. (Hemingway could also write worse than my mother, but that's another story.) Something tells me: "Here is the hand of a master." Not that I can't analyse it to death (the use of "and" in that endless sentence where Nichelle writes about not saying no, the way the rhythm slows to a crawl in the last line of "To his Coy Mistress") but who cares? Columbine says: "[I won't bother with the second example which is a good example of what I call Bulwer-Lytton/Marquis de Sade descriptions on Lambda or Playboy/Calvin Klein avatars on the Palace and which I find utterly insipid and boring.] [I think of Boston and wonder why she/you didn't write the T. Maybe she/you thought no one would understand or maybe there's a better reason. The text feeds my mind. I'm thinking, awake, alive.] On the way to the subway I buy a medium coffee. Small is never enough; large will give me stomach angst by the time I get around to having lunch." That seems fascinating to me. Of course I don't care whether it's medium or usual large. I wonder why you wrote both. Everything in that "Ritual of the Mundane" letter thrills me. Except perhaps the paragraph beginning: "I am the sole person..." where I think you let your mind wander a little bit. The dualing alarm clocks, Suffolk, the university, the special Boston holidays, the five company holidays. I can't quite figure out exactly where the clocks are (Are they both yours or is one outside on a church or something?) but the text makes up in detail what it lacks in clarity. The self-conscious dandruff... If this is what's in your novel, please send me a copy. Flaubert and Dostoievsky took their fucking stories right out of the newspapers. Gregor wakes up a bug. Who cares what kind of bug? The story is about a man. What are dance club outfits? Do geeks go to discotheques? So far as I know, the only place negatron goes to is the pizza parlor and the drug store to buy cigarettes. I think that's about enough for today, Mr Antichrist. I think I've about perfected the French bread making. If I had a bigger oven or if it weren't so fucking cold as to kill/chill fresh yeast cells, that baguette might be perfect. A new career for Gaby?