

Quiet Days in Clichy



“American literature today begins and ends with
the meaning of what Miller has done.”

Lawrence Durrell

“I like Henry Miller. I think he’s the greatest
American writer.”

Bob Dylan

“There is nothing like Henry Miller when he gets rolling...
One has to take the English language back to Marlowe and
Shakespeare before encountering a wealth of imagery equal in
intensity... a wildwater of prose, a cataract, a volcano, a torrent,
an earthquake... a writer finally like a great athlete, a
phenomenon of an avatar of literary energy.”

Norman Mailer

“The only imaginative prose writer of the slightest value
who has appeared among the English-speaking races
for some years past.”

George Orwell

ONEWORLD CLASSICS

Quiet Days in Clichy

Henry Miller



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Contents

Quiet Days in Clichy	1
Mara-Marignan	69
<i>Note on the Text and Illustrations</i>	111
<i>Notes</i>	111
Extra Material	113
<i>Henry Miller's Life</i>	115
<i>Henry Miller's Works</i>	124
<i>Adaptations</i>	134
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	135

Quiet Days in Clichy

AS I WRITE, NIGHT IS FALLING and people are going to dinner. It's been a grey day, such as one often sees in Paris. Walking around the block to air my thoughts, I couldn't help but think of the tremendous contrast between the two cities (New York and Paris). It is the same hour, the same sort of day, and yet even the word grey, which brought about the association, has little in common with that *gris* which, to the ears of a Frenchman, is capable of evoking a world of thought and feeling. Long ago, walking the streets of Paris, studying the watercolours on exhibit in the shop windows, I was aware of the singular absence of what is known as Payne's grey. I mention it because Paris, as everyone knows, is pre-eminently a grey city. I mention it because, in the realm of watercolour, American painters use this made-to-order grey excessively and obsessively. In France the range of greys is seemingly infinite; here the very effect of grey is lost.

I was thinking of this immense world of grey which I knew in Paris because at this hour, when ordinarily I would be strolling towards the boulevards, I find myself eager to return home and write: a complete reversal of my normal habits. There my day would be over, and I would instinctively set out to mingle with the crowd. Here the crowd, empty of all colour, all nuance, all

distinction, drives me in on myself, drives me back to my room, to seek in my imagination those elements of a now missing life which, when blended and assimilated, may again produce the soft natural greys so necessary to the creation of a sustained, harmonious existence. Looking towards the Sacré-Cœur from any point along the Rue Laffitte on a day like this, an hour like this, would be sufficient to put me in ecstasy. It has had that effect upon me even when I was hungry and had no place to sleep. Here, even if I had a thousand dollars in my pocket, I know of no sight which could arouse in me the feeling of ecstasy.

On a grey day in Paris I often found myself walking towards the Place Clichy in Montmartre. From Clichy to Aubervilliers there is a long string of cafés, restaurants, theatres, cinemas, haberdashers, hotels and *bordels*. It is the Broadway of Paris corresponding to that little stretch between 42nd and 53rd Streets. Broadway is fast, dizzying, dazzling and no place to sit down. Montmartre is sluggish, lazy, indifferent, somewhat shabby and seedy-looking, not glamorous so much as seductive, not scintillating but glowing with a smouldering flame. Broadway looks exciting, even magical at times, but there is no fire, no heat – it is a brilliantly illuminated asbestos display, the paradise of advertising agents. Montmartre is worn, faded, derelict, nakedly vicious, mercenary, vulgar. It is, if anything, repellent rather than attractive, but insidiously repellent, like vice itself. There are little bars filled almost exclusively with whores, pimps, thugs and

gamblers, which, no matter if you pass them up a thousand times, finally suck you in and claim you as a victim. There are hotels in the side streets leading off the boulevard whose ugliness is so sinister that you shudder at the thought of entering them, and yet it is inevitable that you will one day pass a night, perhaps a week or a month, in one of them. You may even become so attached to the place as to find one day that your whole life has been transformed and that what you once regarded as sordid, squalid, miserable, has now become charming, tender, beautiful. This insidious charm of Montmartre is due, in large part, I suspect, to the unconcealed traffic in sex. Sex is not romantic, particularly when it is commercialized, but it does create an aroma, pungent and nostalgic, which is far more glamorous and seductive than the most brilliantly illuminated Gay White Way. In fact it is obvious enough that the sexual life flourishes better in a dim, murky light: it is at home in the chiaroscuro and not in the glare of the neon light.

At one corner of the Place Clichy is the Café Wepler, which was for a long period my favourite haunt. I have sat there inside and out at all times of the day in all kinds of weather. I knew it like a book. The faces of the waiters, the managers, the cashiers, the whores, the clientele, even the attendants in the lavatory, are engraved in my memory as if they were illustrations in a book which I read every day. I remember the first day I entered the Café Wepler, in the year 1928, with my wife in tow; I remember the

shock I experienced when I saw a whore fall dead drunk across one of the little tables on the terrace and nobody ran to her assistance. I was amazed and horrified by the stoical indifference of the French; I still am, despite all the good qualities in them which I have since come to know. "*It's nothing, it was just a whore... she was drunk.*" I can still hear those words. Even today they make me shudder. But it is very French, this attitude, and, if you don't learn to accept it, your stay in France won't be very pleasant.

On the grey days, when it was chilly everywhere except in the big cafés, I looked forward with pleasure to spending an hour or two at the Café Wepler before going to dinner. The rosy glow which suffused the place emanated from the cluster of whores who usually congregated near the entrance. As they gradually distributed themselves among the clientele, the place became not only warm and rosy but fragrant. They fluttered about in the dimming light like perfumed fireflies. Those who had not been fortunate enough to find a customer would saunter slowly out to the street, usually to return in a little while and resume their old places. Others swaggered in, looking fresh and ready for the evening's work. In the corner where they usually congregated it was like an exchange, the sex market, which has its ups and downs like other exchanges. A rainy day was usually a good day, it seemed to me. There are only two things you can do on a rainy day, as the saying goes, and the whores never wasted time playing cards.

It was in the late afternoon of a rainy day that I espied a newcomer at the Café Wepler. I had been out shopping, and my arms were loaded with books and phonograph records. I must have received an unexpected remittance from America that day because, despite the purchases I had made, I still had a few hundred francs in my pocket. I sat down near the place of exchange, surrounded by a bevy of hungry, itching whores whom I had no difficulty whatever in eluding, because my eyes were fastened on this ravishing beauty who was sitting apart in a far corner of the café. I took her to be an attractive young woman who had made a rendezvous with her lover and who had come ahead of time perhaps. The apéritif which she had ordered had hardly been touched. At the men who passed her table she gave a full, steady glance, but that indicated nothing – a Frenchwoman doesn't avert her glance as does the English or the American woman. She looked around quietly, appraisingly, but without obvious effort to attract attention. She was discreet and dignified, thoroughly poised and self-contained. She was waiting. I too was waiting. I was curious to see whom she was waiting for. After a half-hour, during which time I caught her eye a number of times and held it, I made up my mind that she was waiting for anyone who would make the proper overture. Ordinarily one has only to give a sign with the head or the hand and the girl will leave her table and join you – if she's that kind of girl. I was not absolutely sure even yet. She looked too good to me, too sleek, too well nurtured, I might say.

When the waiter came round again I pointed her out and asked him if he knew her. When he said no I suggested that he invite her to come over and join me. I watched her face as he delivered the message. It gave me quite a thrill to see her smile and look my way with a nod of recognition. I expected her to get up immediately and come over, but instead she remained seated and smiled again, more discreetly this time, whereupon she turned her head away and appeared to gaze out the window dreamily. I allowed a few moments to intervene and then, seeing that she had no intention of making a move, I rose and walked over to her table. She greeted me cordially enough, quite as if I were a friend indeed, but I noticed that she was a little flustered, almost embarrassed. I wasn't sure whether she wanted me to sit down or not, but I sat down nevertheless and, after ordering drinks, quickly engaged her in conversation. Her voice was even more thrilling than her smile; it was well pitched, rather low and throaty. It was the voice of a woman who is glad to be alive, who indulges herself, who is careless and indigent, and who will do anything to preserve the modicum of freedom which she possesses. It was the voice of a giver, of a spender; its appeal went to the diaphragm rather than the heart.

I was surprised, I must confess, when she hastened to explain to me that I had made a faux pas in coming over to her table. "I thought you had understood," she said, "that I would join you outside. That's what I was trying to tell you telegraphically." She

intimated that she did not want to be known here as a professional. I apologized for the blunder and offered to withdraw, which she accepted as a delicate gesture to be ignored by a squeeze of the hand and a gracious smile.

“What are all these things?” she said, quickly changing the subject by pretending to be interested in the packages which I had placed on the table.

“Just books and records,” I said, implying that they would hardly interest her.

“Are they French authors?” she asked, suddenly injecting a note of genuine enthusiasm, it seemed to me.

“Yes,” I replied, “but they are rather dull, I fear. Proust, Céline, Élie Faure... You’d prefer Maurice Dekobra, no?”*

“Let me see them, please. I want to see what kind of French books an American reads.”

I opened the package and handed her the Élie Faure. It was *The Dance over Fire and Water*. She riffled the pages, smiling, making little exclamations as she read here and there. Then she deliberately put the book down, closed it, and put her hand over it as if to keep it closed. “Enough, let us talk about something more interesting.” After a moment’s silence, she added: “*Celui-là, est-il vraiment français?*”

“*Un vrai de vrai,*” I replied, with a broad grin.

She seemed puzzled. “It’s excellent French,” she went on, as if to herself, “and yet it’s not French either... *Comment dirais-je?*”*

I was about to say that I understood perfectly when she threw herself back against the cushion, took hold of my hand and, with a roguish smile which was meant to reinforce her candour, said: "Look, I am a thoroughly lazy creature. I haven't the patience to read books. It's too much for my feeble brain."

"There are lots of other things to do in life," I answered, returning her smile. So saying, I placed my hand on her leg and squeezed it warmly. In an instant her hand covered mine, removed it to the soft, fleshy part. Then, almost as quickly, she drew my hand away with an "*Assez, nous ne sommes pas seuls ici*".*

We sipped our drinks and relaxed. I was in no hurry to rush her off. For one thing, I was too enchanted by her speech, which was distinctive and which told me that she was not a Parisian. It was a pure French she spoke, and for a foreigner like myself a joy to listen to. She pronounced every word distinctly, using almost no slang, no colloquialisms. The words came out of her mouth fully formed and with a retarded tempo, as if she had rolled them on her palate before surrendering them to the void wherein the sound and the meaning are so swiftly transformed. Her laziness, which was voluptuous, feathered the words with a soft down; they came floating to my ears like balls of fluff. Her body was heavy, earth-laden, but the sounds which issued from her throat were like the clear notes of a bell.

She was made for it, as the saying goes, but she did not impress me as an out-and-out whore. That she would go with me, and