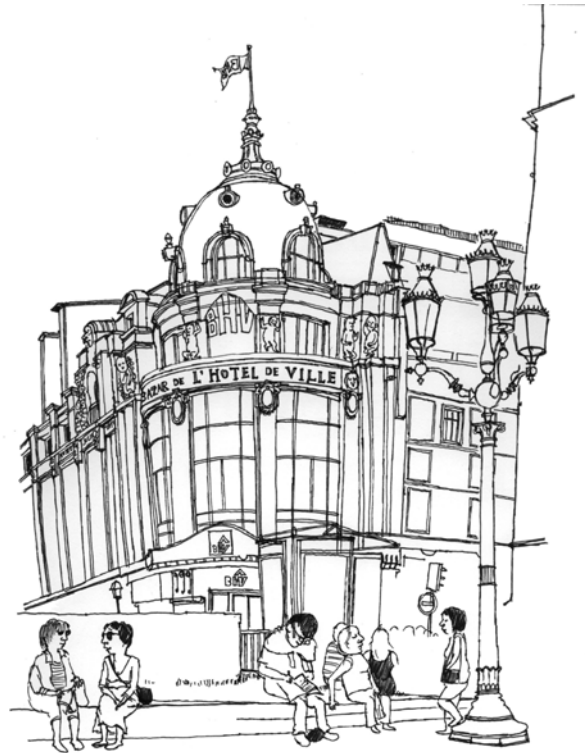


Five Dials



NUMBER 8

The Paris Issue

- ALI SMITH 3 *Paris Belongs to All of Us*
PAUL DAVIS 7 *Londoners v. Parisians*
GEOFF DYER 20 *In the Chanel Tunnel*
STEVE TOLTZ 30 *New Fiction*
LAUREN ELKIN 33 *Why French Bookshops Survive*
JOE DUNTHORNE 37 *Trial by Oulipo*
HUGO VICKERS 39 *The Best Kept Man in Paris*

... plus SONTAG, UPDIKE, CAPOTE, CAMUS and more.



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Phantoms Over Paris

By Ali Smith

In Paris you can always hope to find what you had thought lost, your own past or someone else's.

—ITALO CALVINO

IT'S A BOWL of big-finned goldfish swimming in light shot more than a hundred years ago by the Lumière box camera. A crowd of joyful people playing boules. A man where a horse would usually be, between the shafts of a heavy cart, crossing the Pont-Neuf one morning at the turn of the last century, and there above his head the statue of a man on a prancing horse, light as air compared to the heft of every real working man and horse crossing the bridge beneath it.

Apporter le monde au monde. It's a train going into a tunnel. It's the flecks on the celluloid in the dark of the mouth of it then the flecks in the light at the end. It's a little girl laughing in a high-chair, feeding her cat with her spoon. It's three little girls in big white hats by the side of the Champs-Élysées and one of them trying to get the attention of a silly little dog; it's the open smile of that lapdog, the happy indifference, the curl of its tail. It's young men and old men in bowler hats in New York and a paper-boy running across the street between them with the day's news over his left shoulder. It's people street-dancing in Mexico. It's people street-dancing in London, the street bright after rain. It's Rome, Venice, Dresden, Liverpool; a street scene in Milan where nobody notices the camera; a street scene in Moscow where, halfway through, a middle-aged man stops, wonders what's happening, watches us back.

It's the smoke rising off Henri Langlois's cigarette, filmed by chance by Rohmer. *The stone!* the American in *Le Signe du Lion* exclaims and hits his hand against an indifferent wall. The city nearly ruins him. It leaves him down-and-out and then it turns him into a clown. It's the *New York Herald Tribune*, Jean Seberg's voice in the middle of traffic. It's Romaine Bohringer and Elsa Zylberstein lolling in seventies clothes on a bench at the top of a city hill, art and hope and tragedy ahead of them. It's Jean-Pierre Leaud running away from home, staying

out all night, stealing a bottle of milk for his breakfast and splash-washing his face in a fountain. Decorous, stony Paris belongs to him, and to the gentle Stefan Zweig, who calls it the city of eternal youth, who loves it there because it treats everybody the same, who meets Rainer Maria Rilke in the Paris streets and Rilke tells him *he* loves Paris because it lets him be anybody; and to Joseph Roth, charmed by how no square of Paris grass is ever forbidden to children, who play all over it wherever it happens to be; and to five-year-old Stéphane Grappelli, not yet a street-urchin, being taught how to move to express himself by Isadora Duncan at her dance school; and to Katherine Mansfield, young, ill and dying, and off out into the warm afternoon to buy herself a new hat.

It's Mistinguett, crossing the stage as light as a leaf wearing a headdress that weighs nearly the same as four housebricks; and Josephine Baker, home at last, the city is the making of her, turns her clowning into art, and there she is, on stage in 1949 playing *Mary Queen of Scots*, decapitated, singing *Ave Maria* out of the neck of a headless robe; and it's Colette and de Beauvoir, both in the same room; it's the shrug of de Beauvoir at Niagara Falls (*I look. What else is there to do? It's water*); and the young Colette, brought to the city, locked in a room by her first husband and told to write something a bit saucy that he can sell, writing instead about *the velvety green of the woods*, turning saucy pure, making racy guiltless; and the old Colette (who's just, by the skin of their teeth, saved her last husband from the Nazis), sitting up in bed to have her photo taken, by Lee Miller, reflected upside down in a snowglobe, then showing her careful array of pens and pencils to Miller, making her try each one to feel the point of it; and the middle-aged Colette meeting Josephine Baker and asking her if, by any chance, there's an English chorus girl at the Folies who sits backstage between acts knitting for her baby. *Yes!* Josephine Baker says. Colette nods, *there's always one*, she says.

Paris *nous appartient*, all of us, me too; at seventeen, buying a Quintet of the Hot

Club of France record from a Paris record shop then bringing it home packed so badly in a rucksack that it emerges curved, good for nothing but throwing in the garden for the dog to jump and catch; and at twenty reading all the de Beauvoir I could find; and at thirty reading all the Colette; and at forty being extensively bitten by fleas in the bed of an expensive Parisienne hotel.

But Paris has never belonged to me more than it did one night when I was about fourteen, hadn't yet dared even imagine imagining that I'd ever get there for real, and went to see what chanced to be on at the pictures in Eden Court Theatre in Inverness, Scotland, where they sometimes showed foreign films, and where I forgot about time and place for the length of a film about two women in Paris in 1974, a librarian and a really bad magician, who meet by chance and find themselves breaking into a house of poisonous ghosts to rescue a little girl.

Céline and Julie Go Boating (aka *Phantom Ladies Over Paris*). 1974. Director: Jacques Rivette. Julie: Dominique Labourier. Céline: Juliet Berto (who died young, of breast cancer, and there she is, luminous, beautiful, playing the part). It was made improvisationally, in twenty days. It starts with a simple childlike song and with wildtrack of birds, the sounds of early summer and of unseen children in a city park. Then two strangers follow each other round the city, each trying inadvertently to give the other something she's lost. Reality and the imagination meet, hit it off, then laughingly burgle the past. It lasts more than three hours, it maddens, it bores, it entralls. It is literally curious, stares out of itself at its own audiences. It plays with everything it touches. It seems inconsequent, to meander like water. But everything fixed will be bent and discarded, and everything haphazard delivers.

Then it ends in the place it began, ready to do it all over again.

Where else could it happen but in the filmic city of stone and smoke, knownness and anonymity, chic and chicanery, where classical meets playful in such a wise simultaneity? How lightly it goes deep, how profoundly it lightens things, how generously and indifferently it works its transformations.

Où vas-tu, Céline, Céline?
Paris.

Arabesques

Ellen Hinsey witnesses the sweetness of September

SEPTEMBER · AVENUE PARMENTIER

AFTERNOON is unpredictable. On a dusty avenue in a lost neighbourhood of Paris, August stealthily returns and streaks the café's September windows. A rapid flash of vermillion, cooled by blue shadows. And though evening is coming, it is still the season to be outside – so the café's open door brings in all sorts of evidence of the world: the noises of passing exchanges and fights and the on-and-off insistence of a drill. Inside the dilapidated café, three men are standing at the bar. They are in work clothes, and their over-

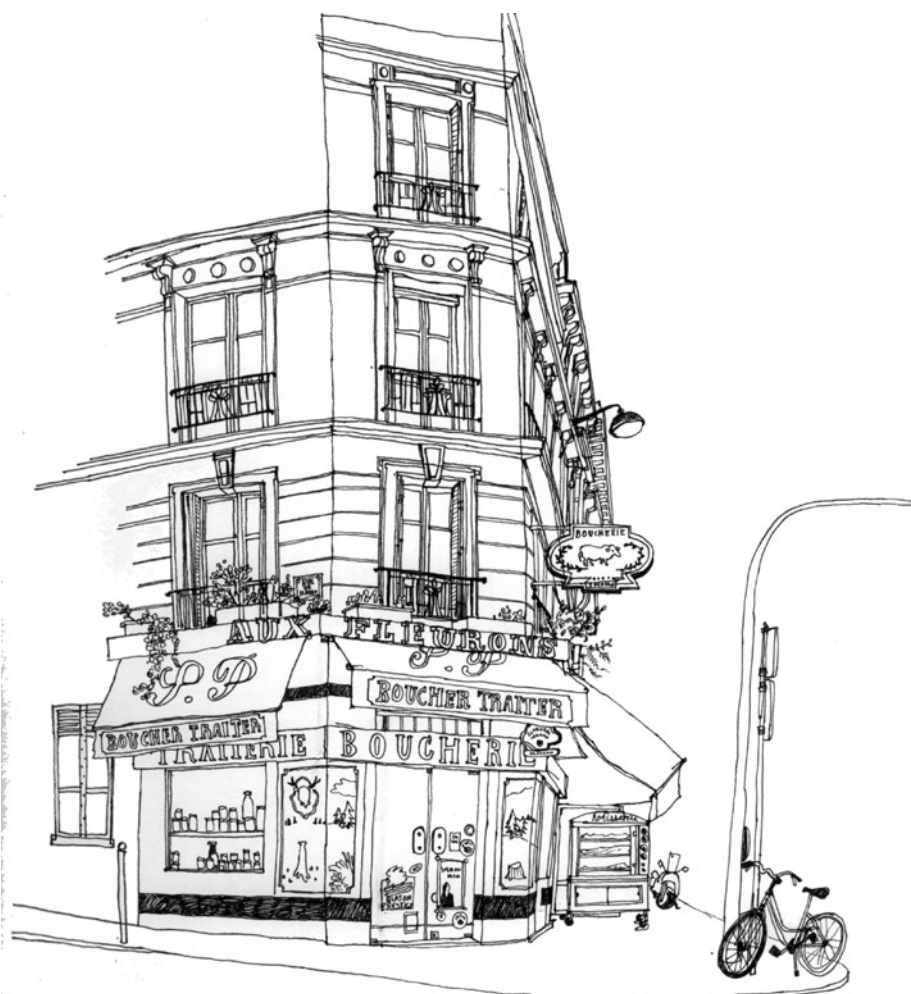
alls tug at their shoulders. Three other men with mud on their shoes linger by the door or out on the cement terrace, where the afternoon traffic passes along the avenue intermittently, with lulls and starts like a conversation held in the late hours of night.

Behind the old marble counter, upright at his post, the barman's head is reflected in a speckled mirror. In front of him, the three men are motionless, silently waiting out the last of the afternoon. One of them stands reading newspapers from the previous week. Another stares out across

the boulevard, his *bleus* covered with infinite flecks of dust, white on blue like a first glance at the universe at night. The last, a slim, dark man, doesn't quite fill his clothes. His arms grow awkwardly out of his shoulders, which are wiry, slight. He smokes as if it could add mass to his hands, his head. He leans on one leg, places the other on the metal rail beneath the bar. There is silence. After a moment, as if orchestrated, all three men shift their weight. Then one by one they put out their cigarettes. Their faces take on a reassured cast, and a sort of relief comes over the room. Life is long and mysterious: praise be to the simple and the done.

In the corner a television explains the day to itself. In this moment of respite, there is little sense of where they have come from or where they are going. In the paper, now folded to the side of the bar, there are stories of immigrants found in the wheels of planes, frozen to death upon their arrival at airport hangars. Stories of bodies loaded into refrigerator trucks as they attempt to cross under the Channel any way they can. By the boats on the French side heading towards England they get as far as the gangplank, but it is pulled up and they are left behind when they cannot produce their identity cards. At a distance, their faces merge into the single mask of *l'étranger*. The men at the café are the lucky ones. They have a white plastic card in the wallet in their pocket, a temporary pass, and maybe soon the voices they hear on the telephone will join them. But for now there is afternoon silence, and the chance company of the day's end.

Elsewhere, in the warm afternoon, the green trash trucks are blocking traffic as they slowly make their way down the street. Before their arrival, the refuse of the day, like unspoken, discarded thoughts, can still be observed. Among a tangle of plastic bags and broken bottles someone has left three framed photographs face down. Most don't concern themselves with them as they pass. But the addition of some trash suddenly turns them over. One shows three young boys with scraped knees sitting in a park, with an adolescent on crutches passing behind them making his way along a graffiti-stained wall. Another shows a man – his hands handcuffed behind his back – wedged against the incline of a



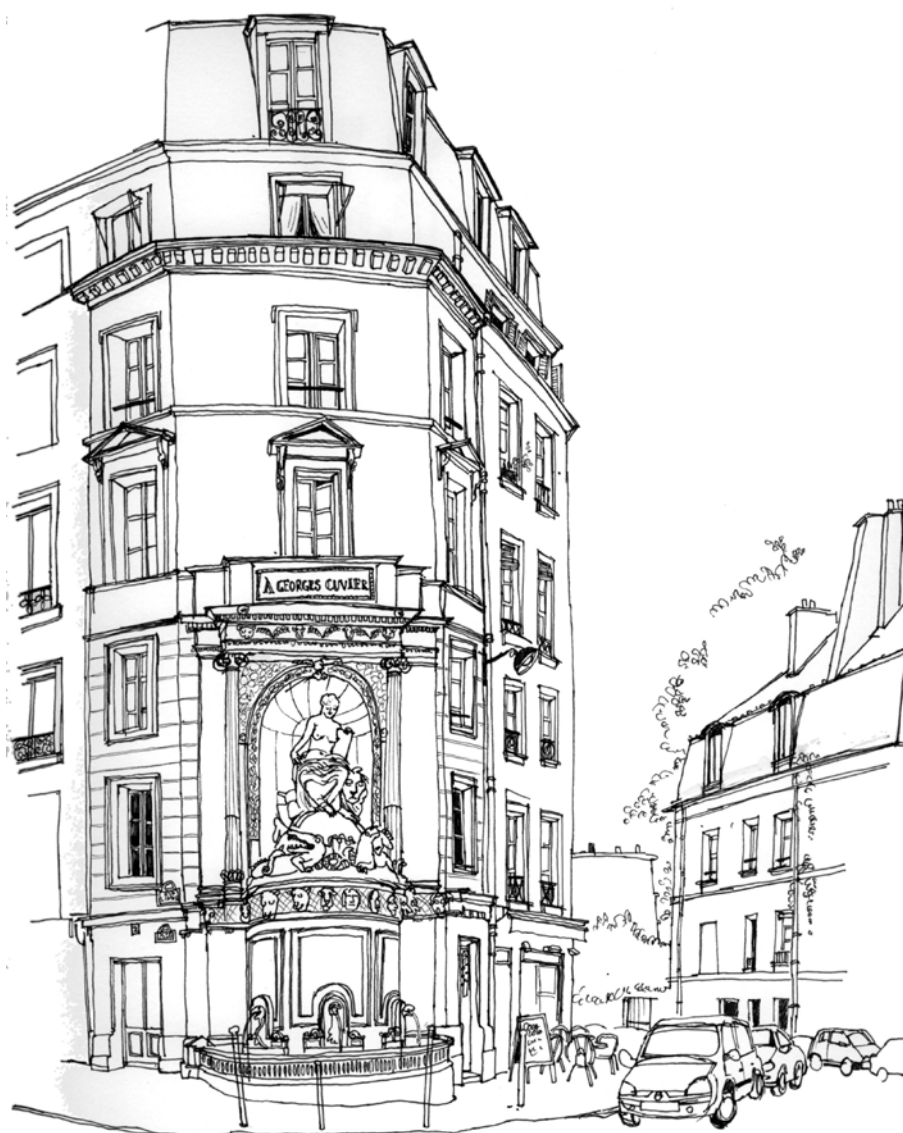
dark car seat. His face is turned away from the camera, but there are messages in his fingers. The final photograph shows a black man pinned against a police car. His mouth is open, and he is held breathless: he grimaces against an arm across his throat. A sound tries, but fails to escape from the photograph.

Instead city lights, like a far-off blurry landscape, mirror the haze of summer heat behind his head.

Next to the photographs are shoes lying at odd angles, and clothing separated from its owners. In the afternoon light, they speak of those who have squatted in church basements or in the rooms of small run-down hotels. For having arrived, one's hold on the *terre d'exile* – the land of exile – is still tentative. After hunger strikes or promises of a place to sleep, the owners of the clothing sometimes find themselves escorted at dusk back to airports where they are handcuffed or drugged for the return trip. Their belongings left unclaimed, abandoned on a street corner.

At the bar, the men speak in African dialects, in Arabic. They speak to the bartender in French. They don't know each other's names but in the street they call each other *mon cousin* and extend an open palm. They are back from loading trucks or working at early morning building sites, where they hauled gravel into courtyards and mixed cement by hand, then sat at lunchtime with the Polish and Russian workers who covered their faces with caps while they slept. These are the moving populations: their families are scattered everywhere and they live on the edges, but are somehow sustained by the seasons as long as the body holds up. Tomorrow they will wake early: the late afternoon hours are already night.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, there is commotion in the street. A police siren opens up the afternoon like the rip of a saw's blade. For a moment the patrol car and its noise take up all available space along the avenue, followed by a fleet of agitated cars. The men pursue the noise out to the terrace. But it is nothing important: just a common emergency. Nevertheless, in the wake of the event, the three uncollected photographs shift and rattle nervously. The incident past, the men stand for a moment under the



cool evening sky. They put their hands on their upper thighs, or rub a left hand into the rough crescent of the right. Then the head dips a bit and the body bends, but turning back, their café has disappeared. The new one in its place has a night interior: the burnt umber tones of afternoon are gone and the electric lights are on. Something has changed and day cannot settle back. Instead, it is the hour of return.

The sound of human encounters, by degrees, fills the evening air. The laughter of children and couples meeting after the long day. Along the tree-lined street

come the African women returning home with their bags of produce. They slowly advance under the weight, and the luminous designs on their dresses seem to rise like the first great planets of night. The solar and lunar prints are the constellations before constellations, mysterious nebulas, fiery rings, burst novae. A single woman's head fills the sidewalk like a beautiful dark planet, her eyes wide and black. Behind her, evening along the boulevard reaches up into the trees, and despite everything it has witnessed, draws the sweetness of September into its branches and begins to laugh. ◇

Ideal Husband or Ideal Lover?

Susan Sontag weighs the evidence on Albert Camus

GR^{EAT} WRITERS are either husbands or lovers. Some writers supply the solid virtues of a husband: reliability, intelligibility, generosity, decency. There are other writers in whom one prizes the gift of a lover, gifts of temperament rather than moral goodness. Notoriously, women tolerate qualities of a lover – moodiness, selfishness, unreliability, brutality – that would never be countenanced in a husband, in return for excitement, an infusion of intense feeling. In the same way, readers put up with intelligibility, obsessiveness, painful truths, lies, bad grammar – if, in compensation, the writer allows them to savour rare emotions and dangerous sensations. And, as in life, so in art, both are necessary, husbands and lovers. It's a great pity when one is forced to choose between them.

Again, as in life, so in art: the lover

usually has to take second place. In the great periods of literature, husbands have been more numerous than lovers; in all the great periods of literature, that is, except our own. Perversity is the muse of modern literature. Today the house of fiction is full of mad lovers, gleeful rapists, castrated sons – but very few husbands. The husbands have a bad conscience, they would all like to be lovers. Even so husbandly and solid a writer as Thomas Mann was tormented by an ambivalence towards virtue, and was forever carrying on about it in the guise of a conflict between the bourgeois and the artist. But most modern writers don't even acknowledge Mann's problem. Each writer, each literary movement vies with its predecessor in a great display of temperament, obsession, singularity. Modern literature is oversupplied with madmen of genius. No wonder, then,

that when an immensely gifted writer, whose talents certainly fall short of genius, arises who boldly assumes the responsibilities of sanity, he should be acclaimed beyond his purely literary merits.

I mean, of course, Albert Camus, the ideal husband of contemporary letters. Being a contemporary, he had to traffic in the madmen's themes: suicide, affectlessness, guilt, absolute terror. But he does so with such an air of reasonableness, measure, effortlessness, gracious impersonality, as to place him apart from the others. Starting from the premises of a popular nihilism, he moves the reader – solely by the power of his tranquil voice and tone – to humanist and humanitarian conclusions in no way entailed by his premises. This illogical leaping of the abyss of nihilism is the gift for which readers are grateful to Camus. This is why he evoked feelings of real affection on the part of his readers. Kafka arouses pity and terror, Joyce admiration, Proust and Gide respect, but no modern writer that I can think of, except Camus, has aroused love. His death in 1960 was felt as a personal loss by the whole literate world. ◇

TRAVEL ADVICE

Paris As Desert

Albert Camus on the virtues of solitude

W^{HAT} IS HATEFUL in Paris: tenderness, feelings, a hideous sentimentality that sees everything beautiful as pretty and everything pretty as beautiful. The tenderness and despair that accompany these murky skies, the shining roofs and this endless rain.

What is inspiring: the terrible loneliness. As a remedy to life in society, I would suggest the big city. Nowadays, it is the only desert within our means. Here the body loses its prestige. It is covered over, and hidden under shapeless skins. The only thing left is the soul, the soul with all its sloppy overflow of drunken sentimentality, its whining emotions and everything else. But the soul also with its one greatness: silent solitude. When you look at Paris from the Butte Montmartre, seeing it like a monstrous cloud of steam beneath the rain, a grey and shapeless swelling on

the surface of the earth, and then turn to look at the Calvary of Saint-Pierre de Montmartre, you can feel the kinship between a country, an art and a religion. Every line of these stones, and every one of these scourged or crucified bodies is quivering with the same wanton and defiled emotion as the town itself, and is pouring into men's hearts.

But, on the other hand, the soul is never right, and here less than elsewhere. For the most splendid expressions which it has given to this soul-obsessed religion have been hewn out of stone in imitation of bodily forms. And if this God touches you, it is because his face is that of a man. It is a strange limitation of the human condition that it should be unable to escape from humanity, and that it should have clothed in bodies those of its symbols which try to deny the body. They do deny it, but it gives them its titles to greatness.

Only the body is generous. And we feel that this Roman legionary is alive because of his extraordinary nose or hunched back, this Pilate because of the expression of ostentatious boredom that stone has preserved for him over the centuries.

From this point of view Christianity has understood. And if it has made so deep an impact on us, it is by its God who was made man. But its truth and greatness come to an end on the cross, at the moment when this man cries out that he has been forsaken. Tear out the last pages of the New Testament, and we are offered a religion of loneliness and human grandeur. Certainly its bitterness makes it unbearable. But that is its truth, and all the rest is a lie.

Hence the fact that being able to live alone in a cheap room for a year in Paris teaches a man more than a hundred literary salons and forty years' experience of 'Parisian life'. It is a hard, terrible and sometimes agonizing experience, and always on the verge of madness. But, by being close to such a fate, a man's quality must either become hardened and tempered – or perish. And if it perishes, then it is because it was not strong enough to survive.

—TRANSLATED BY PHILIP THODY

PARIS → LONDON
LONDON → PARIS

STARRING:

- ① LIZ R.
- ② BERTIE R.
JOHNNY P.S.
- ③ MARIE A.
- ④ JARVE D.
- ⑤ CHARLIE D.

THESE DRAWINGS are BASED
ON QUOTES COLLECTED and
THEN PUT THROUGH an ONLINE
TRANSLATION SERVICE a FEW
TIMES

OT: THE DRAWINGS HAVE BEEN BASED
ON THE PICKED UP APPOINTMENTS
AND LATER THEY BE PUT BY
ON-LINE INTERPRET SERVICE
FOR OCCASIONAL TIMES



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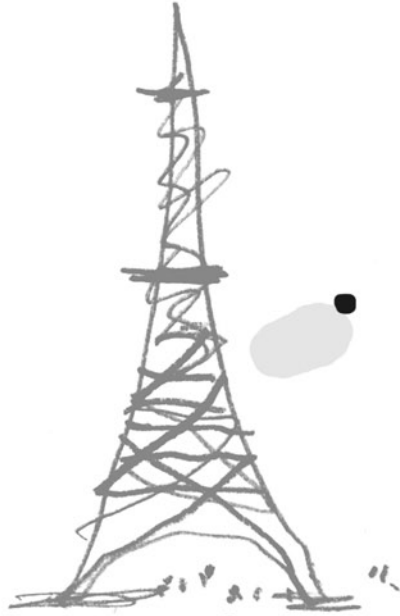


LONDON? CHEWING GUM TOWARDS THE
OUTSIDE PAVEMENTS (LEFT by ALL).
SWEARING, VIOLENCE and then LAUGHING
TOO EASY. SADLY UNINTELLIGENT PEOPLE.
THEY HAVE HATRED in their Demeanour

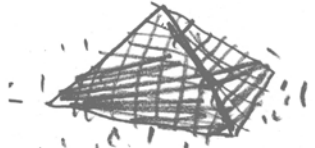


PARIS? MISERABLISTS OF
GLANCE WHICH THINKS
THEY ARE KINGS of
INTELLIGENCE of BEING
COOL "PFFF" THEY GO
WHICH MEANS NO
DECISION, ONE WORRIES
TO THINK THEY ARE NOT
INTERESTED.
RVDE SOLIPSISTS.





let them
eat the eel
pie and the
mash



OOH, I LOVE LONDON. I LOVE TO NOT
REMOVE PLACES IN THIS GROUND. WE
THANKS WITH THE GOD FOR THE TUNNEL
IN THE ENGLISH CHANNEL. AND THEIR
KITCHEN IS SURPRISINGLY SPECTACULAR.

AND I AM OF PARIS!



I, YOU, PRAY COMPLETELY on the
RICH and MAGNIFICENTLY CULTURE
of PARIS: LETTERS, MARBLE,
THE PAINTS. AND I'M A LONDONER



On Paris and Our Paris Issue

ONCE SPENT a Christmas alone in Paris and sometimes when I tell this to people they look at me quizzically. But Paris is a perfect place for a lonely holiday and, if your home is far away, the city becomes the setting for a kind of inverse Christmas, where festiveness turns itself inside out to become the kind of loneliness that bleaches away the noise and clatter of the year and leaves a person – usually some time close to 27 December – in a state of reflection, wandering somewhere near the Bastille, on an empty street, feeling not only clarity, but also the weight of Paris itself, which is different to that of London, if only because, bereft of Parisians during the winter holiday, the vistas are nearly unobscured by people, so the backdrop of boulevards slides by as if it were a continuous set built solely for the purpose of reflection. I've been back, of course, with people, to visit people, to be in crowds of people, but Paris to me is a city where one learns the sharp and useful effects of being alone.

As you might have noticed, we usually begin each issue with an editor's letter, but nothing scraped from our desks could top the beauty of Ali Smith's introduction to Paris. Instead, here is a short mid-magazine interruption, so that we at *Five Dials* can be absolutely clear what Paris means to us – a lot. One of the reasons we decided to assemble a Paris issue is because, more than any other city, we'd argue this one is partly owned by its visitors. Everyone has a Paris – a token they'll carry back to Minnesota or Adelaide or Glasgow after a visit. It may seem gauche and clichéd to the people of Paris – what doesn't? – but they only get to live there, and we get to visit, turn it into what we need, take from it what we can, and leave before that particular smell known as 'used Paris street' and that particular species called 'Paris waiter' begin to counterbalance what we've come to love.

It feels strange, in a way, to share my own personal Paris with others. I reread

the first paragraph of this intro and wondered if anyone else uses Paris for loneliness, and then remembered one of our more illustrious contributors, just in the previous article, had his own view of the purpose of the city. You might remember the line: 'Being able to live alone,' wrote Albert Camus, 'in a cheap room for a year in Paris teaches a man more than a hundred literary salons and forty years' experience of "Parisian life".'

What about others? What other Paris exist? A quick poll of the *Five Dials* editors uncovered Notre Dame, Baudelaire, Moulin Rouge, *Verlan* slang (French teenagers saying *C'est ouf, ça!* instead of *C'est fou, ça!*), *clochards*, the Chinese women who sing in the Métro, the Eiffel tower lighting up and going sparkly at night once an hour, cafés, Black Devil chocolate cigarettes ('I swear cigarettes rolled with chocolate paper only exist in Paris'), *Before Sunset* (the film), balconies, Rilke's alter ego/protagonist wandering around in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, the sound of the Metro trains, the little streams running along the gutters, catching glimpses of courtyards, noticing small and beautiful details on the buildings, Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, students, being careful not to order Coke in restaurants for fear of refusal from French waiters.

'My longterm girlfriend at university moved to Paris and we kept going out for a while,' another editor wrote. 'I took the boat train when I could afford it. (This was before Eurostar.) The relationship didn't last, and I have always found something melancholy in the way the beauty of Paris is almost impossible to live up to. If you are splitting up with someone there it somehow amplifies the heartache. Our final break-up was at a party on a *Bateau Mouche* – sadly just after it had left dock, so I spent the next two hours at one end of the boat and my girlfriend at the other with a hundred French office workers manically dancing the Ceroc in between.'

I know one *Five Dials* subscriber named

Erin, who first visited Paris in 2003, and took a grim bus ride from the airport past concrete overpasses and parking lots to begin her trip in a non-descript swatch of the city. 'I had seen nothing of the Paris of my dreams,' she told me a few weeks ago, 'and that night I bought a cheap bottle of wine, a baguette and spent too much money on a hotel after some weepy phone calls home bemoaning my disappointment.' Her mother had one line of advice: 'You never get another first time.'

Erin did find the Paris that existed in her more romantic dreams – emerging on the Champs-Élysées on a clear, cold February day will do it – and three trips (one honeymoon) and twenty-five Paris-days later she knows where to get the apricot jam crêpe that fits snugly into her own version of the city. (I can't guarantee whether the man selling crêpes at the entrance to the Jardin des Tuileries is the greatest; we'll take her word for it.)

I SAW ERIN a few weeks ago when I was visiting her hometown 3,000 miles away on the west side of North America. We sat in her car talking. When I mentioned the Paris issue she did something most subscribers to the magazine will not be able to match. She inched her shirt up to reveal a new tattoo of the Eiffel tower on her waist.

'So you did have a good time in France?' I asked. She explained the inkwork: 'I wanted the tattoo partially because it reminds me how much I love Paris but also because it reminds me to slow down and remember those first moments. I glimpse down on my right side and so many memories come flooding back. It's likely true Parisians would think it tacky or unchic but for the most part I don't care. I can't think of any occasion where I will wander the streets of Paris baring my midriff. The location is not significant. Its architecture just follows the curves of my body, its feet stretching over my hip bones.'

'What about London?' I asked her, thinking about how many times you'd have to explain, 'No, it's a *gherkin*' to tattoo enthusiasts.

'London? Never,' was Erin's reply. 'If I was going to move across the Atlantic, it would only be for Paris. I could never, ever have too much.'

—CRAIG TAYLOR

Chic Beneath the Street

The twelve details you should know about le Métro, by Mark Ovenden

THERE IS NOT MUCH Parisian life that cannot be found underground. The Paris Metro is a microcosm of the city beneath which it runs. One might miss the majesty and grandeur of the Eiffel Tower glimpsed between buildings, or perhaps the autumn leaves crunching underfoot along the quays of the Seine, but below the Haussmann boulevards lie thoroughfares resplendent with just as much diversity as those on the surface. Passengers buy and drink coffee down there; passageways are filled with the mouth-watering aroma of freshly baking croissants; passers-by are passing an eye over each other; the homeless are sheltering from the elements; chatterboxes are gossiping on their mobile phones; the stressed are thumping away at portable computers; and the restless are playing Sudoku. Parisians and tourists alike shop, drink wine, hold parties, get lost, take drugs, fall in love, get married, have babies . . . all encased by the classic white ceramic bevelled-edge tiles entombed inside the warm, brightly lit tunnels, in the cold damp earth of the Ile de France.

Since 19 July 1900, the day the first parts of this now labyrinthine system opened, people have passed beneath the unsymmetrical, organic-looking, moulded wrought-iron casts of young art nouveau architect Hector Guimard. They've hopped down (what still seem like surprisingly few) steps to those early platforms (in places a mere 3 metres below the streets), and entered a subterranean world within a world. With 16 lines, and 212km of route, it is the world's eighth longest, and almost four million journeys are made on the Paris Metro each day to the 300 stations – 380 if you count all the interchanges. Only the New York Subway has more stations than Paris.

The Metro is such an intrinsic part of the 'quotidien' in the French capital that the words of a long-forgotten poem have become an idiom of the language; 'Metro-Boulot-Dodo' (subway-work-sleep) was first coined by poet Pierre Béarn (in his 1951 *Couleurs d'usine* about the rhyth-

mic monotony of everyday life he wrote, '*Métro, boulot, bistro, mégots, dodo, zéro*').

Paris would've had the first underground railway in the world if some of the fanciful plans of the 1840s were enacted; yet London, Budapest, Glasgow and Boston got there before the French Government stopped interfering with the will of the Parisians to construct a system that suited their needs rather than those of the competing mainline railway companies. Having seen just how gloomy some of neighbouring London's Underground stations looked, the French had the benefit of hindsight and chose a bright, almost hospital-clean image of white ceramic to line the platform walls. The tiles were specially chosen to bounce round as much light as possible from those crude early electric bulbs, and they've stood the test of time.

Though more people are now transported below ground each year in Tokyo, Moscow, Seoul, New York and Mexico City . . . Paris comes next in the number of passenger journeys made, so it is no surprise the full cornucopia of life is played out right below our feet. Having moved to Paris from London expressly to write about the design of the Paris Metro for a new book, I marvelled at the sheer diversity of the spaces and the people teeming, idling, kissing, peeing and begging in them. These are some observations that travellers both new and frequent might find interesting, though they could easily have been taken from a grumpy old git's guide to foreigner folk:

1. The stations are much closer together than they are in almost any other city (the idea was that one would not have to walk any further than 500 metres in any direction to find a Metro entrance – only the older stations of Buenos Aires and Madrid are more closely spaced), so if your destination is say five stops away, this would equate to an average of only two or three stops in Washington DC or Moscow – it may be more pleasant, and possibly quicker, to walk.

2. When traversing Paris by Metro, time a journey by counting the number of stations on the map. A good rule of thumb seems to be about two minutes per station, plus two for each interchange.
3. Though smoking has been banned for passengers since 1992, both the homeless who lollop around on the platforms, and incredibly even some train drivers, seem to believe they have a constitutional right to ignore the health and safety implications of chucking lit cigarettes on to the oily track in the driest part of the city. Word of advice here: never tackle anyone breaking the rules – unless you want to risk a vociferous rebuttal and possible physical attack. The only smoker I've ever tried a polite word in poor French with was a well-dressed middle-aged female passenger. I was hysterically shouted at for several minutes in words that even the teenager stood next to me seemed quite shocked to hear.
4. The trains of lines 1, 4, 6, 11 and 14 run on rubber tyres rather than steel wheels – a technology developed by the French to cut down the vibrations beside historic buildings, and successfully exported to cities like Montreal, Santiago and Taipei. The aroma of hot rubber belching up through the grates at street level is strangely welcoming on returning to Paris.
5. Buskers, though slightly annoying to people whose ears are already stuffed with their own brand of tinny tootling, are generally the quintessential Parisian accordionists playing traditional French music. They have even been known to crack a wry smile on the dourest Parisian visage.
6. Most train doors are opened manually by a cute little handle – and so passengers can jump out even before the train has come to a complete halt. Tip: don't stand too close to the platform edge in case some mad hurried commuter sweeps you off your feet, or an overhanging strap gets caught by the handle. I witnessed a nasty incident at last year's Gay Pride when a tipsy

tranny's clutchbag was whipped from her shoulder and dragged halfway down the platform at Bastille – though she had the presence of style to scream something like 'fashion's moving so fast these days' as she ran for the battered baggage.

7. Though tickets are not needed to get out of the system, never jettison a *billet* before *sortie*-ing as gangs of stern roving inspectors can wait cunningly hidden at strategic enclaves before the exits. No valid ticket; one hefty fine. At €1.60 (cheaper with a *carnet* of ten and better value with a day pass – or using the electronic smartcard Navigo), it's so cheap to ride the Metro it really is not worth risking injury and fine by jumping the barriers. Those who have dutifully paid often take great joy in watching the myriads who squirm mightily before the burly *contrôleurs* with their pathetic fake excuses about why they haven't got a valid ticket. On

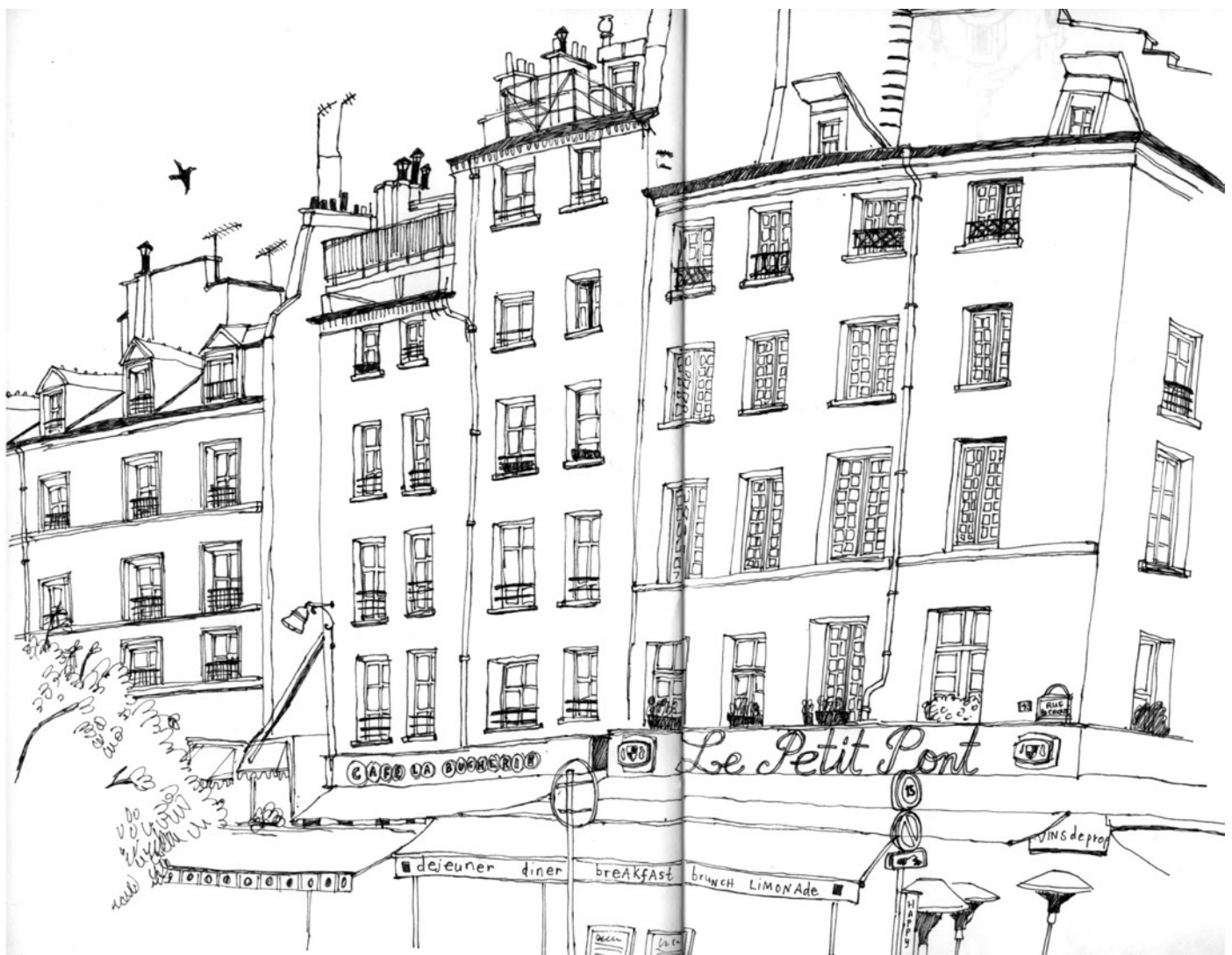
the one occasion I jumped over I was caught six minutes later leaving Gare du Nord. However, I had been in and out of stations all morning trying to find a working photo-booth to send a mugshot in for my Navigo. The ridiculous story and comedy French somehow convinced the *contrôleur* I was not worth processing and let me off.

8. The Navigo pass itself is idiosyncratically French: not only is a photo obligatory (it's burnt on to the card) but a weekly only runs from Sunday to Saturday or a monthly from the 1st of the month. It cannot be started on any other day and it cannot be topped up for a journey over the zone(s) it is covered for. A full valid ticket for the entire journey has to be bought from the starting station, even if that station is already covered by the zones you've paid for on your card. The RATP have promised to upgrade the system for several years because it's highly frustrating

for all users. However, at €56 a month for zones 1 & 2 it's considerably better value for money than many other large systems offer.

9. The trains are generally extremely frequent and reliable – it's an odd sight to see more than three minutes' wait on the electronic indicators (which coincidentally are normally very accurate in predicting when the next train will arrive). But if they are flashing something obscure like 13 minutes it usually means the unit is merely recalculating the exact ETA and it will drop down to 3 or 4 minutes as soon as it stops flashing. There's no need to run for a Paris Metro train, another one will almost certainly be along in a minute.

10. Unlike many other major subway systems (and most of the British overland train network) mobile phones and 3G work pretty seamlessly underground – both in the trains and in the vast rab-



bit warren of cross passageways. An impressive feat, which has so far led to very few overly loud and pointless conversations about being *dans le train* and precisely zero terrorist attacks (the reason the London tunnels have not been equipped with them, for example). On the down side, that does mean 'going into a tunnel' is not a valid excuse for cutting a caller off in Paris!

11. There are several 'ghost stations' (long closed but still visible from a passing train). Easiest to spot are: Saint Martin (between République and Strasbourg Saint Denis on both lines 8 and 9); Champs de Mars (between La Motte Picquet Grenelle and Ecole Militaire on line 8); Arsenal (between Quai de la Rapée and Bastille on line 5) and Croix Rouge (between Sèvres Babylone and Mabillon on line 10). Impossible to see (unless you're lucky enough to get on one of the special occasional ADEMAs society overnight

services, using beautiful refurbished old Sprague Thompson rolling stock) are Haxo (on a now closed shuttle that ran between Porte de Lilas and Pre St Gervais – the station was only built at platform level and has no stairs or access to the surface – very eerie) and Molitor (on an unused spur off the Auteuil loop of line 10 – also platforms only, with just an emergency stairwell to the surface). The old train society ADEMAs occasionally have a special event down here – they celebrated last New Year's Eve with a full sit-down meal on the dusty old platforms where no fare-paying passenger had ever trod.

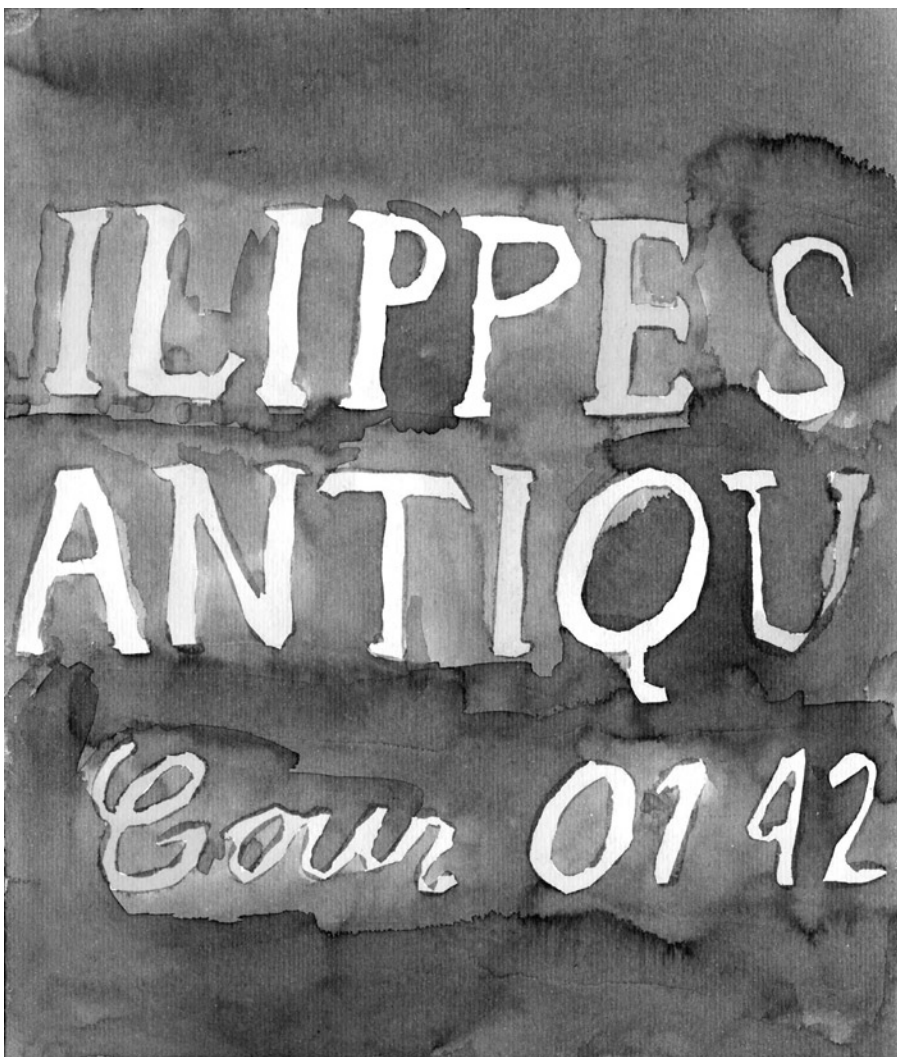
12. Must-see stations include the 1967 rebuild of Louvre–Rivoli station. Here a somewhat tired relic of the first 1900 line was badly in need of renovation. Given its proximity to the world's biggest museum (the line actually runs along one wall of the

basement), the station was lavishly refurbished with marble and (reproduction) museum exhibits. There's a piece of the retaining wall of the original Bastille jutting out on to one of the line 5 platforms; though poorly marked and barely recognized by the passers by, this is probably one of the oldest visible foundations on the Metro. The last standing full art nouveau entrance is at Porte Dauphine and is now a national historic monument.

While the Paris Metro stations might be recognizable as symbols of the city ... the Metro map has never reached the same iconic status as, say, its London or New York counterparts: The RATP insisted for many years on avoiding copying the diagrammatic style, first popularized by Harry Beck's map of the Tube in 1933. A totally geographical map of the city remains outside each station, but passengers have benefitted since 2000 from a 45-degree-based diagram on pocket maps and inside the trains.

Assignations, *liaisons dangereuses* and sheer bold-as-brass pick-ups are common in crowded trains where the rules of up-top are abandoned in favour of an intimacy that the invasion of close personal space, never tolerated on the surface, inevitably brings. My favourite story is of a friend who was beckoned into the driver's cab on the way to work. After the train was emptied at Nation the driver took it – and my by-then naked mate – round the loop, so to speak.

But the Metro holds many possibilities ... one night a distinctly scary-looking security guard got on at Arts & Metiers and sat opposite me on one of the fold-down seats. The train was virtually empty but after a few risky furtive glances the handsome fellow strode brazenly over and sat right next to me. Was he about to get angry, or something far more salacious? To my pleasant surprise a large manly hand grabbed my thigh! After an exciting few stops of leg frottage it was time for me to get off and the hunk of blokeyness decided to follow. Half an hour later, when walking the brute out of my building, and back towards the Metro, he warns me that if I see him on the train in future I'm not to let on to him, in case he's with his girlfriend. I'm sincerely hoping the good lady is not a regular reader of *Five Dials*. ♦



Chanel No. 1

By John Updike

WHO IS THE greatest Frenchwoman of the century? Marie Curie's discoveries began in the nineteenth century and, anyway, she was born Polish. Brigitte Bardot, Catherine Deneuve, Simone Signoret, Jeanne Moreau – actresses all, images, in part the creation of others, including our fantasizing selves. Simone de Beauvoir, handmaiden of existentialism, inventor of feminism? But if we must name a writer, surely it should be Colette, who wrote as naturally as she slept, danced or made love, who rendered the tangle of a modern woman's life with the casual calm of classic art. And if we think of Colette we come to Chanel, another tough, industrious child of the provinces who tapped into the realistic essence of French style. In so far as individual designers can be said to direct the vast, subconsciously swayed movements of fashion, it was she who brought sense and comfort to female clothes, shifting their control from the women. Breathtaking corsets, giant plumed hats, and floor-length skirts of cumbersome complexity and weight were the style in Gabrielle Chanel's girlhood, when women of means paraded as stiffly as manacled captives; in her long and steadily successful career as a designer, she first simplified the hat, then lightened and loosened the dress and lifted it to expose ever more of the ankle. Flapper minimalism was her meat. In the 1920s, she produced the first little black dress – in mousseline, chenille, satin, velvet; the Ford of fashion, the American *Vogue* called it – and the simple, snug suit, usually in lightweight wool jersey, that became her signature piece.

According to Janet Wallach's near-hagiographic picture-book *Chanel: Her Style and Her Life*, the birdy little gamine from Auvergne worked a miracle wherever one was needed: 'Each new problem in life propelled her to new ideas. With women no longer able to order their drivers to take them shopping on rainy days [World War I was causing the inconvenience], Chanel invented a rubberized style based on the lines of a chauffeur's coat,

with deep pockets and adjustable tabs at the cuffs.' Walking on the hot sands of the Lido gave her 'the idea to tie two straps around a sheet of cork and cut it into sandals, a style that became popular around the world.' Her affair with the Duke of Westminster, the richest man in England, saw his country-weekend sweaters transformed into 'snappy cardigans for women', the uniforms of his yacht crew adapted into sailor outfits and nautical *chapeaux* for milady, and the jewellery ('Indian bibs of rare diamonds and emeralds, matching bracelets of rubies, emeralds and sapphires, brilliant solitaires, strands of diamonds and emeralds, and ropes of pearls') that the besotted Duke bestowed upon her transmographed into gaudy costume ornaments – 'she turned the snobbish realm of jewellery into the fantasy world of the fake.' All this, and Chanel No. 5, too; the scent was named No.5 without there having been a 1, 2, 3 or 4 and was marketed, in one of Chanel's brilliant adaptations of male accoutrements, in a bottle whose square solidity was 'borrowed from the toiletry cases of her lovers'. The elixir made her rich for life, a life, as Wallach tells it, that was one long romance and name drop.

Her own name, descended from a tribe of peasants who lived on the edge of a chestnut forest in the Cévennes and who were driven by the chestnut blight to become itinerant peddlers, was all she had to start with. Her parents married fifteen months after she was born. Her mother died when she was twelve, and her faithless, peripatetic father put Gabrielle and her two sisters in an orphanage run by nuns at Aubazine; he was never to be seen by his daughters again. Though she did not elect, at seventeen, to become a nun, a chaste austerity, a quest for purity of purpose and line, remained at the heart of her flair. The nuns had taught her to sew. She took a job as a shopgirl in a lingerie-and-trousseau firm in Moulins, and worked extra hours for a tailor, mending the uniforms of a pet; she sang at a local cabaret. According to Wallach, she

knew the words to only two songs: 'Ko Ko Ri Ko' and 'Qui qu'a vu Coco?' The soldiers would call out for Coco, and thus she acquired her nickname, although, a tireless obfuscator of her past, she would afterward claim that her father had called her that, in one of his rare visits home. She was not beautiful but had for assets a wide mouth, a long neck, an indomitable temperament. The Gaul rebel chieftain Vercingetorix had come from the volcanic hills of Auvergne, and Chanel spoke of herself as 'the only crater of Auvergne that is not extinct'.

By the age of twenty she had achieved the next social step up from shopgirl and amateur entertainer and become a kept woman. Her keeper was the infantry officer Etienne Balsan. His is the first name we encounter in her pilgrimage from man to man. A devoted horseman, an indifferent soldier, the good-humoured heir of a textile fortune accumulated in Châteauroux, he encouraged Chanel to pursue her possible stage career at Vichy, where her singing coach told her, 'You've got a voice like a crow.' His parents had recently died, and with his inheritance he purchased an estate called Royallieu, near Compiègne, and invited Chanel to join him there, among the horses and overdressed demimondaines who flocked to the place on the arms of Balsan's aristocratic friends. These women admired Chanel's manlike riding style and the simplified hats she had designed; they had her make hats for them, which they sometimes wore on to the stage. Photographs of Chanel modelling her sweeping creations appeared in a 1910 issue of the theatrical periodical *Comoedia Illustrée*. Her vocation as a designer didn't take hold, however, until she met the Englishman Arthur 'Boy' Capel, in a burst of Wallach's fulsome, you-are-there prose:

She saw him first at Pau, a smart town for the racing set, and turned her charms on him at once. With coquettish technique she looked longingly into his eyes, fluttered her lashes, played her necklace to her lips and slithered her body closer to his. He was soon a regular guest at Royallieu.

For a time the two amiable playboys shared what she later called 'my hot little body'; she got to Paris in 1913 by sharing

Capel's apartment on the Avenue Gabriel and using Balsan's flat on the boulevard Malesherbes for her first shop.

Fashion history is made in odd jumps. Boy Capel, supportive lover though he was, didn't take her out much; the scrawny crow-voiced milliner couldn't hold her own among the pneumatic courtesans who, gotten up in the ornate, high-waisted styles of Worth, Poiret, and Paquin, filled the cafés with their cultivated chatter. One time when he did take her to a restaurant, Wallach relates, 'she ate too much and popped her stays . . . Chanel swore she would never wear a tight corset again.' Her lean styles, no longer confined to hats, became fashionable during the war; she opened shops in Deauville and Biarritz, and by 1919, she said, she 'had woken up famous'. She was the new woman:

Slim, narrow-hipped and nearly breastless, she had shed her corsets, shortened her skirts, cut her long hair and allowed her youthful face to tan in the sun. She lived openly with a man she loved but was not married to, and she enjoyed financial independence as an entrepreneur with a flourishing business.

Her lover, however, went back to England to find a wife and to father a daughter, while continuing to visit Chanel. It was after a visit to her, on his way to meet his wife in Cannes, that he died in a car crash. 'She would never love another man as much as she had loved Capel,' Wallach asserts; but it was not for lack of trying. She took up with the arty crowd, meeting Diaghilev and Cocteau, seducing Stravinsky, failing to seduce Picasso, and travelling to Venice with dear friends Misia and José-Marís Set (the latter's murals can still be seen at the Waldorf-Astoria). Chanel was now rich enough to support, in the style to which he was accustomed, the Grand Duke Dmitri, dashing exiled from Russia because of his part in the assassination of Rasputin. She always got something out of her lovers, though; Dmitri introduced her to Byzantine jewellery and to the Tsar's former perfumer, the chemist Ernest Beaux, who in 1920 created Chanel No. 5. And then there was, after Dmitri, the surly, stocky poet Pierre Reverdy, Picasso's close friend, who

shared with Chanel the knack of always being photographed with a cigarette.

Chanel's next lover, the Duke of Westminster, excites Wallach to her most breathless rhapsodies:

Ruggedly good-looking with a large frame and handsome face, reddish blond hair and intense blue eyes, Westminster oozed elegance . . . Loyal servants scurried to do whatever he asked, while high-society ladies scuffled to be at his beck and call.

Oozing while his lessers scurried and scuffled, the Duke nevertheless found Chanel resistant to his Chanel-crossing courtship gifts of 'out-of-season strawberries, peaches, nectarines and freshly caught Scottish salmon . . . He even sent her a basket of fresh vegetables, and when her servant reached inside, he plucked out a giant emerald.' How could the little orphan from Aubazine not succumb? He had houses everywhere, two great yachts, and in his fifty-four-bedroom main domicile, Eaton Hall, 'the acres of walls were covered with paintings by Rubens and Raphael, Rembrandt and Hals, Velázquez and Goya.' Chanel and the Duke were together for six years, sailing, hunting, consorting with the likes of Winston Churchill and the Prince of Wales. She even tried, in her mid-forties, to become pregnant with Westminster's heir, which would induce their marriage; she submitted, she later allowed, to surgery and 'humiliating acrobatics'. In vain: the Duke took to younger companions and married the deliciously named Loelia Ponsonby, half his age and 'the well-bred daughter of the protocol chief to the king'. Speaking of emeralds – late in their relationship, while cruising, Westminster tried to placate his French mistress with another giant; she tossed it over the side.

Chanel's next noteworthy lover was Paul Iribe, a chubby, complicated (Colette thought he was demonic) Basque cartoonist from Angoulême, who designed for her an array of antic, expensive jewellery. Hotheads the same age, they might have married, but in 1935 he collapsed before her eyes, on the tennis court of her Riviera villa, La Pausa, and died a few hours later. If Iribe had a touch of the demonic, Chanel's wartime affair nearly damned her with disgrace. When war was

declared in 1939, she closed the House of Chanel for the duration; when the Germans invaded, she fled as far as Pau, but at the invitation of the new masters of Paris she returned to her rooms at the Ritz. She took a German lover, Baron Hans Gunther von Dincklage, called 'Spatz'; a figure about Paris before the war, the son of an English mother, he was a Nazi intelligence office with a taste for fine things and for staying away from Berlin. The lovers spoke, in the words of Chanel's best biographer, Edmonde Charles-Roux: 'in a world in which mountains of misfortune were rising around them'. An obfuscation similar to that which hides her girlhood masks this period. After the war, Chanel joked, 'At my age, when a man wants to sleep with you, you don't ask to see his passport.'

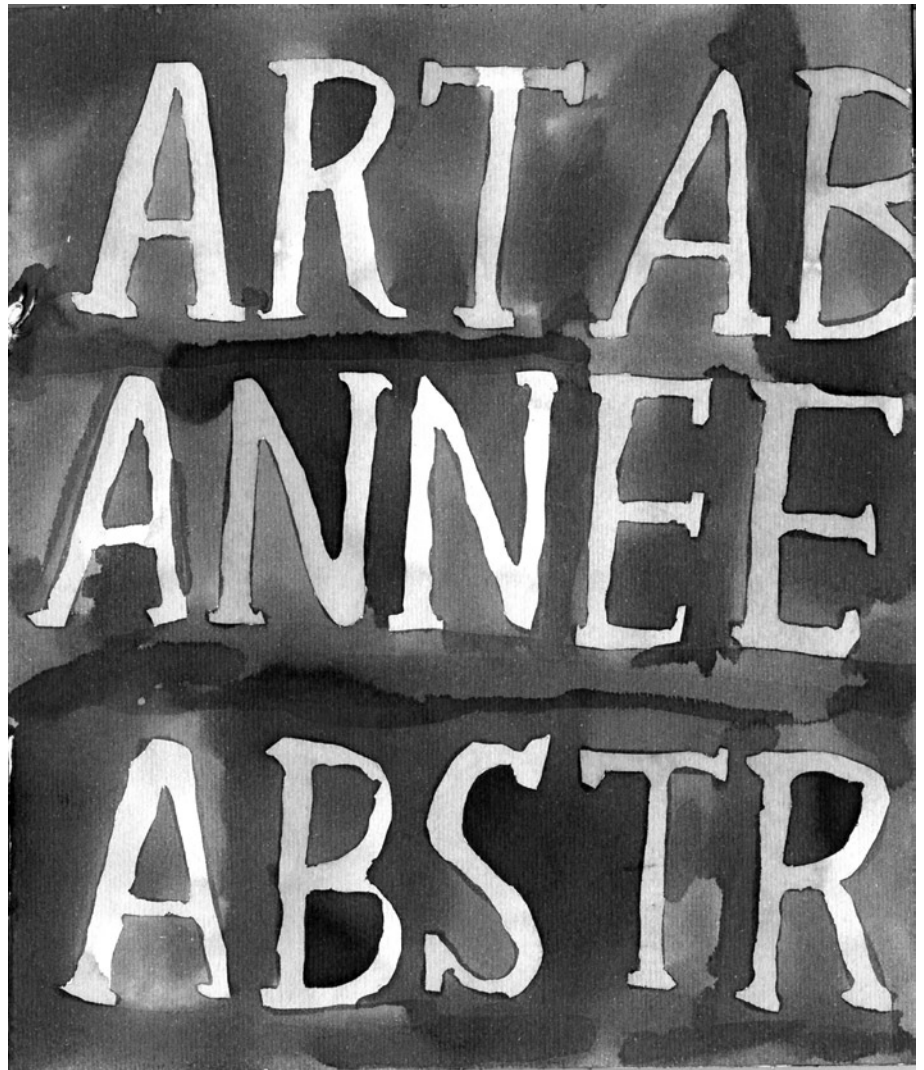
She and her German contacts concocted a scheme whereby Chanel would exploit her friendship with Churchill to arrange a conditional German surrender; she travelled to Spain with this purpose, taking with her Vera Bate, a pre-war English friend who had married an Italian colonel and was surviving the war in Rome until the Germans kidnapped her for Chanel's grandiose mission.

More damningly, Chanel attempted to use the Nazi anti-Semitic laws to wrest control of Chanel No. 5 from her old partner and backer Pierre Wertheimer, who was exiled in New York, supervising the perfume's successful American manufacture – it, too, had been kidnapped. (It was also manufactured in France, since Wertheimer had cannily put the company in the hands of Aryans, and was therefore one of the few name products available to both Allied and Axis consumers.)

Chanel's legal suit failed, and eventually she and Wertheimer settled to mutual advantage, but her attempted exploitation of the Holocaust was not becoming. According to another biographer, Pierre Galante, she enjoyed wartime favours because, 'like her friend, Pierre Laval [the Premier of the puppet Vichy government]. She was an Auvergnat.' After the Liberation, it was said she was protected by her old shooting chum Churchill; she was briefly arrested but was spared public trial and a shaved head, unlike lesser women who had slept with the enemy. She exiled herself to Switzerland, where she continued living with and supporting Spatz.

Yet she was forgiven, because she was, in a way, France herself – the ubiquitous name of French chic, its subtle, rational, penetrating glamour. She returned to Paris at the age of seventy and, though her first showing, in 1954, drew mixed and even vicious reviews, the Americans continued to love her youthful little suits and dresses, and she enjoyed prosperity and acclaim until her death at the age of eighty-seven. Other designers, like Dior and Schiaparelli, could create sensations with their fanciful, overblown revivals of Belle Epoque femininity, but in the end no one designed for women as Chanel did. When *les grandes cocottes* came into her shop in 1913 wearing their immense hats, she asked, ‘How can the brain function in those things?’ At the height of the mini-skirt craze toward the end of her life, she insisted that the skirt should be one that – in the paraphrase of a third French biographer, Marcel Haedrich – ‘makes it possible to sit down decently.’ And skirts do return, after every fashion flurry, to the knee-length grazing Chanel length.

She was forgiven because she was a genius with scissors in her hand and pins in her mouth, who even when she was the world’s richest self-made woman continued to do the fittings herself, on her knees until they ached, ripping seams, resetting shoulders, lying flat on the floor to check hems and make sure ‘the underside is as perfect as the outside’. Such perfection was felt. ‘Some women want to



be gripped inside their clothes,’ she said. ‘Never. I want women to enter my dresses and to hell with everything else.’ Wallach ends her whirl through Chanel’s fabulous

life with a no-frills assessment of her couture: ‘All is practical, all is logical, all is done to make a woman feel good about herself.’

AN APPRECIATION

Chanel No. 2

Truman Capote captions Richard Avedon’s photographs of Coco

CHANEL, a spare spruce sparrow voluble and vital as a woodpecker, once, midflight in one of her nonstop-pable monologues, said, referring to the very costly *pauvre* orphan appearance she has lo these decades modelled: ‘Cut off my head, and I’m thirteen.’ But her head has always remained attached, definitely she has it perfectly placed way back yonder when she *was* thirteen, or scarcely more, and a moneyed ‘kind gentleman’, the first of several grateful and well-wishing patrons, asked petite

‘Coco’, daughter of a Basque blacksmith who had taught her to help him shoe horses, which she preferred, black pearls or white? Neither, she answered – what she preferred, *cheri*, were the stakings to start a little shop. Thus emerged Chanel, the fashion-visionary. Whether or not the productions of a dress-maker can be called important ‘cultural’ contributions (and perhaps they can: a Mainbocher, a Balenciaga, are men of more authentic creative significance than several platoons of poets and composers who rise

to mind) is uninteresting; but a career woman impure and simply like Chanel arouses a documentary interest, the sum of which is partially totalled in these photographs of her changeling’s face, at one angle a darling dangling in a heartshaped locket, at another an arid and avid go-getter – observe the striving in the taut stem of her neck: one thinks of a plant, an old hardy perennial still pushing toward, though now a touch parched by, the sun of success that, for those talented inconsolables primed with desire and fueled with ego and whose relentless energy propels the engine that hauls along the lethargic rest of us invariably flourishes in the frigid sky of ambition. Chanel lives alone in an apartment across the street from the Ritz.

Fabulous Clothes

Geoff Dyer on a mission from Vogue

OUR EUROSTAR was still creeping through the Kent countryside when my minder from *Vogue* HQ expressed the first doubts about my mission.

‘Do you actually know what couture is?’

‘Yes I do,’ I replied. ‘Yes in the sense of ... no, not really.’ Detecting an *I-thought-as-much* look flicker across her face I reassured her that this was no cause for concern. Since the readers of *Vogue* obviously knew what couture was it made no difference that the reporter didn’t. I banged on about this for some time, rounding off my defence with a well-chosen pun: ‘I think we’re about to enter the Chanel tunnel,’ I said. It was my way of letting her know that I knew more than I let on.

The first show – Christian Dior – was at the Hippodrome on the outskirts of Paris. We drove there in an unmarked car. Security was tight but I had not lost my invitation so it was OK. I have a vague memory of entering a tent or marquee or something but the interior had been transformed so totally that, by the time I had taken my seat, all sense of the world outside – *le monde sans couture* – evaporated. The entrance to the runway was marked by a vast wall of light boxes, illuminated, for the moment, by two signs with the letters CD in blazing red. Such is the familiarity of those initials that it seemed possible that we had actually travelled back in time and were about to witness the launch of a technological breakthrough that would render the LP obsolete. Certainly there was a major sense of expectation. The lights dimmed. The wall of lights came alive in pulsing rectangles. Music roared and pumped. Show-time ...

Thin as legend claims, the models streamed into view. The Spanish element was unmistakable. A friend once told me that the thing about flamenco was that you *had* to do it with a serious expression on your face and the Dior models brought to their task a sternness of expression befitting the judges at Nuremberg. Whether ‘face’ is an adequate term

to describe the site of this seriousness is a different matter entirely. ‘Face’ is powerfully suggestive of something human but make-up and paint had here been applied to make this seem a quaint, possibly unfounded assumption. It quickly became apparent that flamenco was just one bee in the designer’s swarming bonnet. There was a bit of everything going on. The models appeared, variously, as flappers, can-can dancers, sprites, zombies – you name it. A seasoned fashion writer said to me later that this show had actually been comparatively tame: ‘There were things in it that you might even wear,’ he said. Nothing brought home to me my ignorance of couture more clearly than this crestfallen lament. To my untutored eye what was on offer here had nothing to do with clothing as traditionally understood. Looking at the coats – which seemed capable of almost anything *except* keeping you warm or dry – I was reminded of Frank Lloyd Wright’s response to clients who grumbled about the roof leaking: that’s how you can tell it’s a roof. And so it was here: it was primarily by their extravagant refusal of the function for which they had been nominally intended that they could be defined as clothes. No, this was a form of pure and vibrant display that took the job of covering the human body only as a necessary jumping-off point. An ecstatic poetry was, as Mark Doty puts it in ‘Couture’,

ravelled around the body’s
plain prose.

And how lovely it was, this celebration of our capacity to produce *excess*. What progress we have made from the cave-dwelling days when arguments would break out over whose turn it was to wear the hide.

The music surged and changed. It was like a firework display in that you wish it would never end – though even as you wish this you know that you would be bored rigid if it lasted a moment longer

than it does. At the end of it all Galliano came stomping up the runway, looking like a cross between a toreador and Conan the cross-cultural Barbarian. I say ‘Galliano’ but I only learned that it was him after I turned to my chaperone and asked if he was Christian Dior. No, it is not, she replied. The reason for this, apparently, is that Dior has been dead for about a hundred years. Well, as Philip Larkin said, ‘useful to get that learnt’. It was obvious that only a response of the utmost gravity would redeem me in the eyes of my chaperone. ‘Ah yes,’ I said. ‘But his spirit lives on in Galliano.’

This impression was confirmed – or, for all I knew, refuted – when Galliano appeared on TV later that evening. I was right about one thing: there really was a bit of everything going on. He talked about the way his collection had been inspired by Spain, his travels in India, African ceremonies, and he ended by saying that it had all been done for his father. Just as couture has floated free from any anchoring in function so no one feels under any compulsion to anchor what is said *about* it in something as humdrum as sense. No one would have batted an eyelid if Galliano had said that he’d intended the whole show as an offering to the Gods of the Incas. I shall return to this point.

After the Dior show I went to have a look round the Ungaro atelier, where this kind of high-end clobber is actually made. It was, to say the least, a far cry from the sweatshops of Bangkok. Everyone wore white medical jackets, creating the impression that they were engaged in work that was vital to the health of the human race. And who is to say that they were not? For it would be a dreary old planet if there weren’t the chance to create stuff so far in excess of what any one could ever need. ‘Nothing *needs* to be this lavish,’ Doty exclaims in rhetorical astonishment. To which the only riposte – as the poet himself was surely aware – is Lear’s: ‘Oh, reason not the need!’ I was reminded, watching *les petites mains* at work, of the painstaking labour and inventiveness that goes into the preparation of exquisite food, that same devotion to transcending the body’s base requirements.

Many of the people here had worked for Ungaro for years and years. They

seemed a contented and fulfilled workforce, proud of their skills and of the chance to deploy them to such extravagant ends. I thought of my mum who, for years, mended my clothes when they were torn and took them in if they were too large or long. Having completed one of these tasks she always said that she would love to have been a seamstress. Not a seamstress for a designer; just someone whose skills would be sufficient to earn a modest living. Maybe this is the greatest excess and waste in the world: the huge reservoir of abilities that never get a chance to be used.

My visit culminated with admission to a room where *le maître* himself was putting the final touches to one of his creations. The model wearing it was long, blonde and lovely but her face conveyed the suggestion – in Don DeLillo’s words – of lifelong bereavement over the death of a pet rabbit. She turned from Ungaro and gazed at herself in the mirror. I say gazed at ‘herself’ but this form of words fails to do justice to whatever it was she beheld in the glass. She had glimpsed what she would become during the show: the incarnation of something more than herself. Already, after just a few hours, I was starting to realize that there was more to couture than meets the eye.

Versace wasn’t doing a show: just a presentation in a tent (with chandelier) at the Ritz. It was like being a museum in the process of formation, the exhibits consisting of a bag, a shoe, a brocaded jacket . . . There was one model, though, in an airy dress and a mink coat with ostrich feathers. Her hair was not hair so much as a kind of super-deluxe candy floss. People regarded her in the same way tourists do the soldiers on Horse Guards’ Parade, *peering* at her while she was being photographed. One of these peerers was me. I wondered what it must be like to exist in this I-am-seen-therefore-I-am trance. Her eyes were no longer the instruments of vision, merely its object. Although the compulsion to stare at her was overwhelming it was difficult to detect her nationality, her race, even, frankly, her *species*. She was laboratory-bred to look amazing on magazine covers. If anything she reminded me of drag queens I’d seen a few weeks earlier at the Gay Pride March in New York. It

wasn’t that she looked like a man dressed up in women’s clothes, but there was the same obsession with expressing an idea of femininity by its accoutrements. It was *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* meets *Mad Max*, a combination that might one day result in a co-production called *Back-combed to the Future*. Surrounded by clothes displayed like museum exhibits it was as if she had been cryogenically preserved, the sole survivor of a catastrophe so devastating that the means to bring her fully back to life were no longer quite functioning and so she was unable to explicate the creation myth of *haute couture* of which she was the embodiment and apostle.

Nor could she have explained how, twenty minutes later, we were in the Gursky-space of Palais Omnisports, doing the Mexican wave, waiting for the Rolling Stones. It was a huge venue but, in the context of stadium hugeness, quite small. There was no sense of scale, none of the perspectival recession that enables one to make sense of distance. Cheers went up for no reason, just to give vent to the terrible burden of expectation. I had heard a rumour that the Stones’ wives might become clients of Ungaro but it seemed that the Stones husbands were themselves in more urgent need of vestimentary assistance. People speak of Mick Jagger’s extraordinary longevity and wealth but that is only half the story. The other, more interesting half is how, despite this wealth, he has managed to dress so badly for so long. Like the other Stones he favours tight trousers which make him look like a Cruickshank drawing of a character in a Dickens novel, one of the interminable ones that has been adapted for TV so many times you know it off by heart without ever having read it. And so it was with this truly dismal concert. The enthusiastic consensus was that the Stones could ‘still do it’ – though what this ‘it’ was, and whether ‘it’ was worth doing remained a source of mystery.

This was all the more striking given that the music at the shows is so cool: the Chanel show at the Cloître de l’Abbaye in Port Royal featured under-seat audio that turned the cloisters into a night club. Or *day* club rather for it was only ten in the morning. Photographers descended on a blonde woman in the front row who

turned out to be Kylie Minogue. Jack Nicholson had been at the Dior show but I had not caught a glimpse of him. After the Stones gig, at Chez Paul, I pointed out to my chaperone that there was a Keanu Reeves look-alike at a nearby table. He looked so like Keanu Reeves that it did not occur to us that he really was Keanu Reeves until he left, posing for photographs and signing autographs for our fellow-diners. So it felt good to start the day with a confirmed celebrity sighting.

That afternoon, a screaming comes across the sky . . . a fly-past by high-end military aircraft, slipping the surly bonds of earth or whatever. It’s not only the linguistic coincidence of the runway that links *haute couture* and *haute aviation*. The procedure is essentially the same: the full range of state-of-the-art aircraft – fighters, bombers, helicopters – cruise by in a straight line, strutting their edge-of-the-envelope stuff for all to see, unhindered by anything as tedious as budgetary restriction. It lasted ten minutes, after which I expected to see either the planes’ designers or the Air-Vice Marshal take a victory roll.

Next up was Lacroix at the Ecole Supérieure Beaux Arts. The models emerged from a seaweed tangle of glowing bulbs, luxuriant as the growth of an electrically powered forest, the entrance to a grotto of unimaginable fabulousness. The runway was curved and blue and the models came floating down this river of pure glamour. Faint applause pattered down from one of the rows behind me. My neighbour explained that when you heard applause from the back like this it almost certainly emanated from one of the women who did the sewing. I felt so happy for the woman in question: how lovely to see your skills paraded before the world like this and to applaud what they had resulted in, anonymously, from the back. By contrast, I had heard that a well-known fashion writer had got all bent out of shape because she had not been given a seat in the front row. I felt so sorry for her: how sad to invest even a fraction of your self-esteem in something so trivial, especially since the view from the second row was perfect.

There seemed to be elements of some kind of national costume in Lacroix’s collection – but which nation could it

be? One with a GNP larger than that of the whole continent of Africa and an amazing array of tropical birds. One October day the American writer John Cheever found himself thinking about the beautiful autumns they must have in those countries that make brilliantly coloured carpets. 'How else could the Persians have hit on the idea of gold and crimson underfoot?' In the same way, I was becoming more and more convinced of an essential connection – no less essential for being lost over time – between the extravagant contrivances of couture and the forces of the natural world: a magical connection, what's more.

There seemed to be a House of Usher thing going on at Givenchy. There were a lot of colours but, at the outset, they were all black, grey or charcoal. The look was that of a nineteenth-century business woman – and the business was undertaking. The show was in le Grand Hôtel, in a ball room that could, just as easily, have been a church. The moment it ended people began scrambling for the exits. Sokurov's film *Russian Ark* ends with the aristocracy trooping out of a ball at the Hermitage, stepping down the staircase, patiently descending into the maws of history. There was no semblance of grace or patience here. It was like someone had issued the order to abandon ship and word had got round that not all the lifeboats had an adequate stash of champagne. It was over – and we were *outta* there, scuttling for our driver who, in turn, jockeyed for position, battling with the other drivers who were caught up in the micro-jam of traffic-jam generated by the show.

WE WERE ONLY going to be at the Théâtre de l'Empire – for the Ungaro show – for an hour but people were so desperate for upgrades, for seats nearer the front, you'd have thought we were crammed in for a flight to Sydney. But some people *were* – in it for the long-haul, I mean – and their faces revealed the same tiredness as those ageing flight attendants who have been around the global equivalent of the block (i.e. the world) so many times that there is no longer any difference – especially when you factor in jetlag – between coming and going. Fashion writers live seasons not years, so

if you want to calculate the age of a fashion writer in normal human terms you probably have to multiply it by at least two. The vocabulary alone is enough to do for you. No one should have to use words like 'trull' or X more than three or four times in a lifetime but fashion writers routinely expose themselves to several times the recommended lifetime dose in a single year.

The models entered through geometric pearl arches suggestive of jet-age elegance. Movie-score strings evoked a Hollywood epic whose entire budget had been blown on costumes. By comparison with some of the stuff we'd seen earlier in the week this collection seemed almost understated. Minimalism can come in many guises. There was even, I realized now, a minimalism in the realm of excess. Perhaps I had a soft spot for Ungaro because I'd caught a glimpse of a fraction of the effort that went on behind the scenes. But this, surely, is not enough to account for the surge of happiness when I recognised, flaming and flickering down the runway, the model wearing the outfit I'd watched her try out the day before.

Of course it's not. There was more to it than that.

Later that day we went to shows by Valentino (climaxing with an appearance by *the* Naomi) and Gaultier (who introduced an innovation of ankle-spraining originality: shoes that were quite unwearable) but by now it was the similarities of these events rather than their quirky differences that absorbed me.

'The ceremony is about to begin ...' Jim Morrison's line was always in my head as we waited for a show to start. Whatever the setting, the form taken by this ceremony varied only in detail: the march of the individual models, climaxing, as often as not, with a wedding dress, followed by the appearance of the designer (greeted ecstatically by the audience) who would walk off either arm in arm with the bride (of Frankenstein, so to speak) or surrounded by his magnificent creations. Obviously this form had not come about by accident, even if the people who arranged a given manifestation of it were not conscious of the origins of the template to which they conformed.

The number of couture customers is falling off. There are practical reasons

for this (the rise of ready-to-wear) but this dwindling of initiates is appropriate in other ways. Saint-Laurent once said that *haute couture* consisted 'of secrets whispered down from generation to generation', emphasizing that it is not just a set of skills but a form of esoteric knowledge. Much is made of the astronomical expense of couture but perhaps some other kind of transfer – of which the garment is no more than the outward or symbolic expression – is at work here. Nietzsche pointed out that beneath the grace of Greek tragedy lay a primitive force that had earlier found uninhibited expression in singing and dancing rituals. In the same way this fabulous extravaganza had about it something instinctual, primeval. Could it be that the couture show is an immensely sophisticated and commercialized residue of an arcane rite or fertility ceremony?

In this light the models and their outfits really might be an offering to some kind of god. Not, as I had joked earlier, the old god of the Incas but the great modern god of the camera, waiting at the end of the runway like the rising or setting sun, except this sun is not just the source of life but its meaning and content too.

Still not convinced? Try looking at it another way. Imagine you came across an event like this – the costumes with their amazing surfeit of plumage and jewels, the models with their unnatural, clippy-cloppy, equine walk – in the Amazon. Wouldn't you think that you were witnessing some attempt at harnessing the characteristic powers of certain revered birds or animals and incarnating their spirit in human form? Wouldn't you assume that the designers were endowed with some alchemical or shamanic power? If the couture show is itself a residue of older rites then a residue of what this show originally appealed to is still there, in equally etiolated form, in some recess of our own psyche. How could people invest couture with so much importance were it not also the contemporary manifestation of something primal: not an extravagance, in other words, but the practice of a belief? How else to account for that weird sensation that something as transitory as a *fashion show* has about it a quality of timelessness? ◇

Sans Domicile Fixé

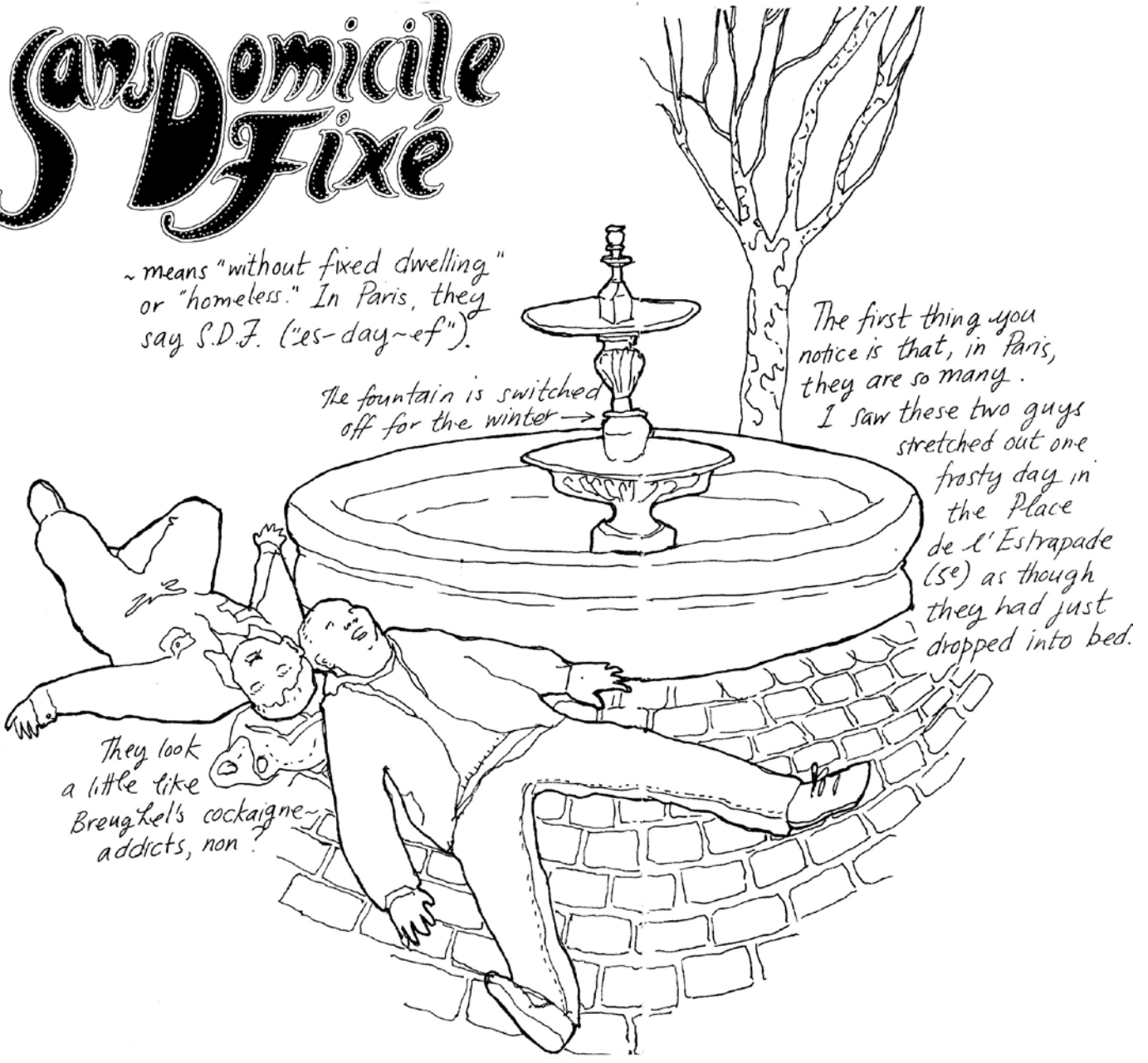
~ means "without fixed dwelling" or "homeless." In Paris, they say S.D.F. ("es-day-ef").

The fountain is switched off for the winter →

The first thing you notice is that, in Paris, they are so many.

I saw these two guys stretched out one frosty day in the Place de l'Estrapade (se) as though they had just dropped into bed.

They look a little like Breughel's cockaigne-addicts, non?



Then there are the Moselem girls in attitudes of frozen prayer outside Metro Saint Michel and spaced at regular intervals all down the Boulevard Saint Michel, like the prostitutes on Berlin's Freidrichstrasse.





Immobile?

One of the guys
who sits, drinking,
outside the station.
Where's he going?
with his crutches
and his huge pile of
luggage?

Lounge Lizard

outside the Gare du Nord



Abri ou Sans

Abri ?

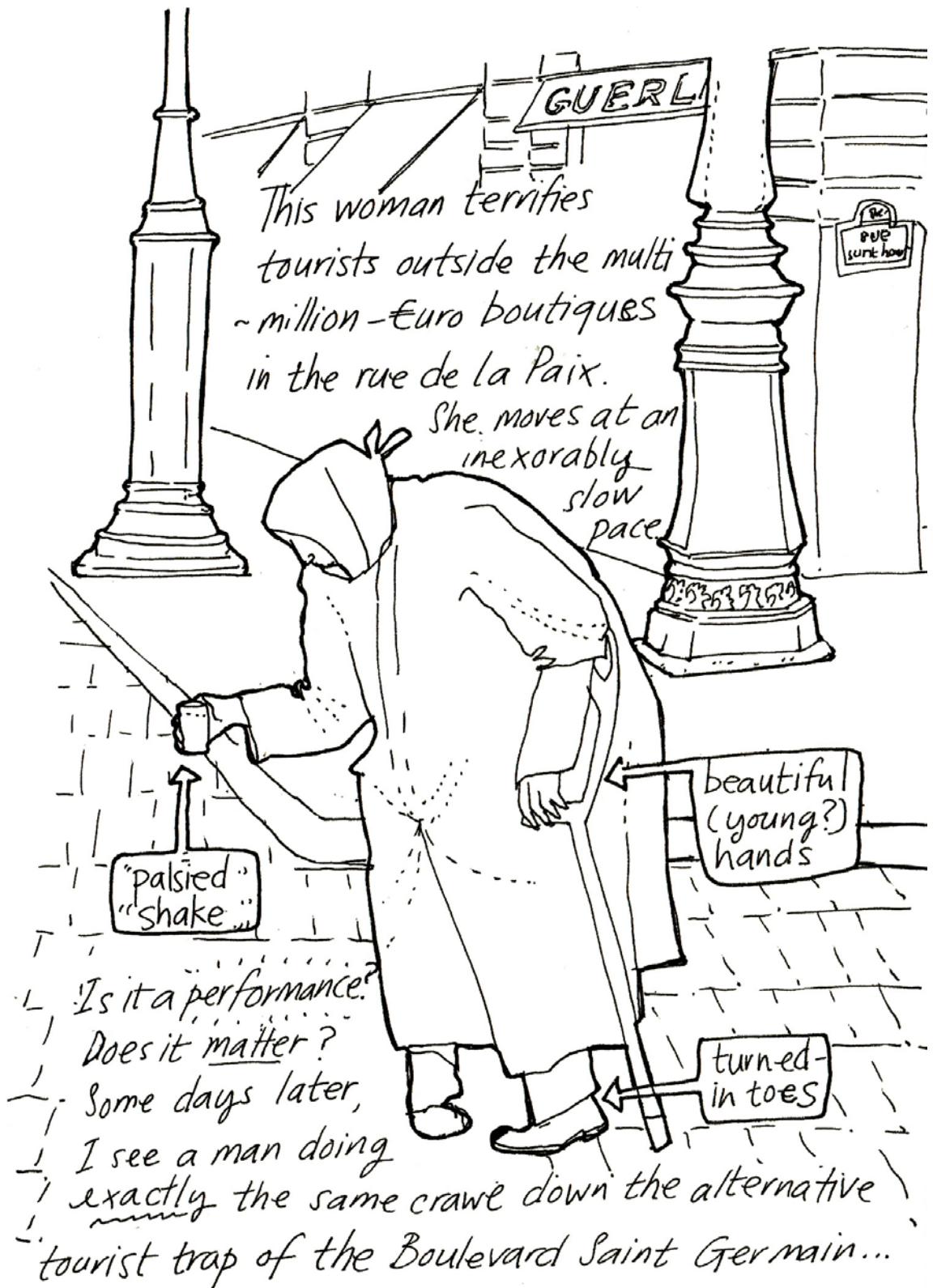
(making & selling tin ashtrays on the steps outside Sacre Coeur)

Clashion

symmetry

Outside Le Bon Marché Department Store





This woman terrifies tourists outside the multi-million-Euro boutiques in the rue de la Paix.

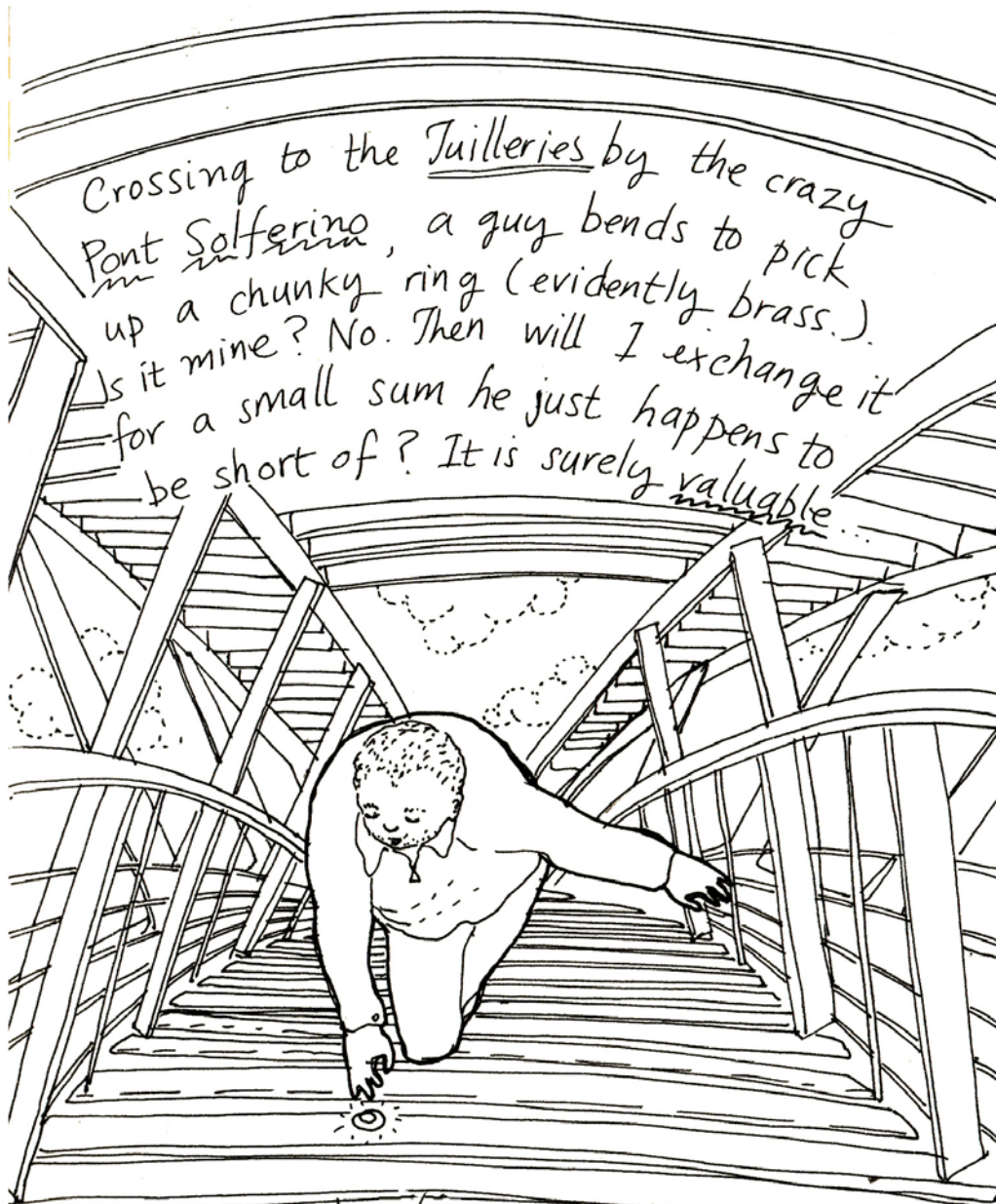
She moves at an inexorably slow pace

"palsied" "shake"

beautiful (young?) hands

turned-in toes

Is it a performance?
Does it matter?
Some days later,
I see a man doing
exactly the same crawl down the alternative
tourist trap of the Boulevard Saint Germain...



Crossing to the Tuilleries by the crazy
Pont Solferino, a guy bends to pick
up a chunky ring (evidently brass.)
Is it mine? No. Then will I exchange it
for a small sum he just happens to
be short of? It is surely valuable

We're alone: this drama is strictly for me
Monsieur, I have heard it all before but
I have to admire your style. "Monsieur

quel Cinema!*

* "what a performance!"

L'Asticot

By Steve Toltz

If I married a whore with nurses' training I could save a couple of hours a week was how my French existential novel began.

I wasn't entirely certain what I meant, but I liked how it sounded.

At first I called my narrator Z. Unsatisfied, I changed his name to Y. Then I tried every letter in the alphabet: F was too cheery; X clearly a fool; obviously T was an arrogant and aggressive bastard; R was intriguing, but who the hell *was* R? (And since character is destiny, that seemed to rule out E, G, H, and O.)

I even briefly toyed with the idea of a numerical protagonist. But who would read a book about a guy named 3?

Z it was, then.

IN MY SECOND year of university I chain-smoked Balinese cigarettes, wore a pirate shirt and stalked the hallways with intolerable arrogance to mask the choking sense of bitter outrage I felt on a daily basis. Maybe because I was five years older than the other students, or because my naval haircut hadn't grown back, or because of the botched tattoo of a hawk too expensive to remove, I was ignored by them. I felt uninteresting on a subatomic level, and decided therefore that I might as well do as I pleased. So I smoked in the cafeteria, kicked anyone who blocked my passage, and, when my final-year French literature essay was due, disregarded the question (on Flaubert) and handed in two chapters of my novel, *L'Asticot*.

I waited until everyone had left. My literature professor, who always seemed wary of students lurking behind, either to harangue or seduce him, was pretending to shuffle papers when I handed him my manuscript. He took it like a parking ticket, examining the staples along the side that made up the spine, and began reading.

Out in the hall, I could hear conversations between students: someone named Ron was being told by three separate women to 'cut it out'. I tried to breathe leisurely and avoid glaring openly at my professor. He was a tall man of around

forty who was always well dressed for an earlier decade (pink shirt, white leather tie). He smoked cigarillos and made inaudible jokes that made himself laugh; every sign indicated that he lived, ate, slept alone.

He made a hissing sound that seemed to come from somewhere other than his face. It was an intimate and stressful moment. I had the story memorized and was mentally browsing it when I noticed his eyes float across the page in a way that made me doubt he was reading at all. I wanted to snatch it back. Where did he get off? After all, hadn't he earlier that month stood in front of us, and in his raspy horror-movie voice, explained that self-publishing is no longer stigmatized like it used to be? Then, pulling out a copy of *his* novel, he had handed it to the nearest white Rastafarian (we had three that semester) who quickly passed it around the lecture hall while its author stood with his back against the wall, as if attached with screws.

His novel had a stark white cover with his name and the title (*The Jaunty and the Damned*) in simple black lettering. It looked just like a real book, until you turned to the inside back cover and saw the strange author photograph. It was one of those snaps people take of themselves: arm outstretched; chin enormous, like a pillow; and to the right of the frame, antlers, maybe from the edge of a moose head above a fireplace. When everyone in the lecture hall started to laugh, he told us that we had not the mental equipment to understand the structure of his novel that was designed, he said, as an elaborate game of gin rummy.

Whatever that meant.

Now he closed my manuscript. He had been leaning against the blackboard and when he paced the room I could see his back was covered in chalk.

'So this . . . you took this class . . .' he said, breathing hard.

'Sorry sir?'

'Do you think we all wouldn't like to be doing whatever we want, instead of

what we have to do!' he suddenly shouted.

Something about me and my manuscript had really set him off. 'You want to go to Paris to write? Let me tell you, you think this lot are bad, my god, save yourself a ticket, I've *been* there, and there's nothing better anywhere than, you know, they aren't even real people, that's all you can, before you even begin to imagine the horror of . . .' He was pointing at my tattoo now, and not making any sense. There was no longer any anger in his voice, only despair, and he looked like some sort of castaway, as if he had been stranded here in this place, and his book had been an SOS that we had ignored.

It occurred to me then that this was a meeting of a sad sub-species who existed solely to make other people feel comfortable about themselves. How had we gotten this way? Me through family and bad choices, but for him – I had the impression it was the result of a personal catastrophe, maybe something awful had happened to him, maybe in Paris. Either way it was clear that the meaning buried in his words was nothing that could be easily grasped.

He returned his anxious eyes to the manuscript, relaxed his body against the desk's edge and, unexpectedly, continued to read.

Z WORKED FOR *Le Monde*, covering all the world events that occur on the number 2 metro line between Porte Dauphine and Nation. I thought if I placed him underground, that would allow me the opportunity to describe the psychological entrails of a citizenry who are pumped daily through a city's veins, as well as the chance to introduce a homeless accordion player named Olaf (and his entourage). When I began to feel suffocated in those grimy airless tunnels, I had Z at *Le Figaro* newspaper instead, writing eulogies for still-born babies. That seemed to fit. He sat at his desk, in a small, claustrophobic office, pouring out his heart about these sad non-starters.

Z was no stranger himself to tragedy.

When he was young, Z's father, an astute businessman, committed suicide because he'd heard that limbo was a tax shelter.

His mother, a socially conservative gypsy (I was trying not to stereotype),

had run off with a butcher who was named Pierre on one page but Gerard a few pages later, to keep the story fresh and unpredictable.

Z was thereafter raised by his grandmother, a disciplinarian who believed all failings of character were due to bad skin and ignorance of Balzac's *Comédie Humaine*, and who would introduce him to her friends as her new lover. (I was uncertain whether she would refer to him as *mon chéri* when the rest of the novel was in English, but in the end I decided that a smattering of untranslated foreign phrases, and indeed large slabs of indecipherable text, always flatters the reader's intelligence.)

Though Z's journey from childhood to manhood was marred by this domineering woman and by disease – he was stricken with an undiagnosed illness that had few if any symptoms – his adolescence was not completely without its childish pleasures. During his first year at the Lycée, he had a fleeting, disastrous relationship with a married woman whose skin he would later misremember as more velvety than it was, and who used a discount shampoo that made her hair smell like urine in leather pants. They had a child but abandoned her in one of the city's many *tabacs*. Though the woman was the concierge in his building, she refused to look at Z's face again, turning to the wall whenever he passed by.

In a flash-forward that suggests the tedious circle of life, we learn that many years later Z's own wife will file for divorce, citing 'a clash of civilizations'.

This was all covered in the first chapter.

I REMEMBER the day I saw my professor at the supermarket in bare feet. I had a box of gnocchi concealed under my flannel shirt. He was peering through the aisles, moving sideways like a crab. When I said hello, he didn't seem to recognize me, not as a student or even as a verifiable shape.

He folded his arms as if this was a privilege of his class, and for a long while we stood there, listening to the muzac and the screaming children and an adolescent voice announcing that the supermarket would be closing soon, but not too soon.

He was staring at me with blurry eyes. He had a long red welt on his face that could have been from a tree branch or a

whip. The silence was killing me. I told him, though he had not asked, that the reason I had not been in class for the past two months was due to a nasty chest infection that had turned into near-fatal pneumonia. As the words were coming out of my mouth, I was aware that my voice didn't sound even remotely sick, and I wondered if it were too late and too theatrical to cough.

He asked me if I still thought I was beyond obeying the rules, and at that moment I looked down and saw an unnatural bulge in his pants.

I met his eyes. He gave me a smile that made me want to duck.

The shape in his pants, I quickly guessed, was a packet of tagliatelle. He had been shoplifting too. Maybe because of this moment of weird synchronicity, it suddenly occurred to me that he hadn't been in class either.

He motioned to the gnocchi in my shirt.

'Hey, give that to me.'

'What for?'

'Let me steal that for you.'

'No,' I said. 'I couldn't possibly.'

'Please. It would be a pleasure,' he insisted.

'No,' I said firmly.

Stalemate. He had a crazy grin on his face. It was like looking in a mirror that showed my future reflection and he – what was he looking at? I felt like a road already travelled.

The voice over the loudspeaker boomed: an announcement urging customers to speed things along.

I coughed and wheezed a little.

My professor touched his face and seemed surprised to find a beard there.

NOW HERE COMES the existential part.

Z feels that the human body is too gimmicky. Most nights, he climbs the steep, windy streets and sits at Park de Belleville and watches the sun drop behind the rooftops. Paris is not for everyone, he thinks. Much of the immense city seems off-limits: the doors hiding whole streets, the wrought iron gates forbidding entrance into private gardens, the Chinese prostitutes only giving discounts to Chinese customers. And why does every apartment building he moves into become designated for demolition? Why was he always going to graves and tombs

of his favourite writers only to arrive and be bored out of his mind? Why did he constantly flatter waiters he found repulsive? And where did all the *pissoirs* go? And the true courtesans? And why can't he visit the catacombs without hitting his head on a low-vaulted passage?

His neighbor Constantine constantly berates him for his black moods. 'What's wrong with you? I've seen hat-boxes with more *joie de vivre*,' he says. Z fears Constantine's words hint at an incestuous relationship between them, even though he knows that they are not related.

Z runs outside. It's snowing geometrically. There is a protest in the streets, the whole city has been shut down – students are setting fire to cars and gyms, to movie cinemas and bookstores. Men are fishing in the filthy canals. Z walks in a zigzag fashion because he fears he is being followed, or is in a high-risk category of being followed, by a Peruvian pipe band. Z goes down Rue de Fontaine, crossing over Rue Bichet to Rue Saint-Maur, then takes a right at Rue Morand then goes down Boulevard de la Villette, turns into Rue de Chalet, before taking a left at Rue de l'Atlas and crossing to Avenue Simon Bolivar (I read somewhere that contemporary authors achieve realism by copying the street directory). Three pages of street names later, Z finds himself at the Louvre where he is accosted by a group on a *Da Vinci Code* tour. At this point, I realize the book I have been writing perhaps wasn't a homage to French existentialist literature but to cheap, mass-market thrillers. Maybe underneath the Louvre, in addition to the studies of anatomy and the blueprint of the helicopter, Z could unearth rudimentary designs by Leonardo DaVinci for the 'treadmill', the 'stairmaster' and the 'abflex' that the Catholic Church had suppressed successfully for centuries. It's amazing what seems like genius at three in the morning. By five a.m. though, I was already having doubts. Paralyzed by indecision, and in my eagerness to finish chapter two, I had Z play a game of boules, move from terrace to bar to night club to carousel, before finally wandering off to Montparnasse cemetery, to the grave of Cioran, where he is bored out of his mind. It's there he has the idea of killing himself by stumbling seasoned into a cannibal banquet.

YEARS LATER I heard that my literature professor had been transferred to a minimum security prison only minutes from my house.

I was conscious how old I must have looked; how old, how bald, how fat. It unnerved me to see anyone from the past, let alone a man who in my mind was so many things: mentor and nemesis, anecdote and stranger.

It was a cold day when I made my way to the prison perimeter. I couldn't believe how dead the day was, so quiet you'd never know you were in any kind of ecosystem at all. The prisoners were in the

exercise yard wearing baggy tracksuits; some sat together like spiritualists frozen mid-séance, others were walking in circles. I stood there, about fifty metres from the fence, searching their faces. A cold wind blew – from their side of the fence, I imagined.

Finally I spotted him. He had already seen me and was staring with an unnerving look of recognition. He was taller and thinner than I remembered, though he had the haunted look of a man shopping at one minute to midnight on Christmas Eve. I was glad of that wire fence. One hand remained behind his back, and he

watched me idly, with an almost sentimental gaze. At least he didn't look anxious, I thought, which was something. I took a step closer, and was trying to read good news in his eyes: hoping to see that he didn't hate his life, or that at birth he had set a vague course for prison and now that he had finally arrived there was relief getting there . . .

I wrote him a note and threw it into the yard attached to a tennis ball.

'You never told me what you thought of my novel,' the note said.

Two guards turned their heads to look at me. I whispered, Oh god, Oh god.

Through the fence I saw him pick up the ball. He beckoned me over.

From somewhere in the yard a whistle blew. While both of us ran the risk of being capsicum-sprayed, I ran over to him.

'If I am not mistaken, your novel,' he said, in that familiar raspy, horror-movie voice, 'was designed as an elaborate game of scissors, paper, rock.'

I nodded. Maybe it was. The guards were running towards us now, and even though many years had passed and I had married and divorced, and declared bankruptcy twice, and doctors had found another skin cancer on my arm that I feared had something to do with experimental tattoo-removal surgery, and even though I had since been to Paris only to find it too noisy and too expensive to enjoy and I had gotten robbed on the Rue de Rivoli while paying for a crêpe, I started thinking about Z again, and the life he might have lived.

Before my professor was Tasered and wrestled to the ground, I got an opportunity to thank him for everything and for nothing. And then I walked away, returning to the motel room I now call home, to begin the third chapter. ♦



République des Lettres

Why are there 792 bookshops in Paris? Lauren Elkin reports

IT'S A SATURDAY NIGHT in Paris in May, and it's pouring rain. Outside of the Musée Carnavalet, a line stretches up the rue de Sévigné, where people are clustered together under umbrellas waiting for admission to the museum. It is the Nuit des musées, and the museums of Paris have opened their doors to welcome visitors inside to enjoy the exhibits for free. Except the Musée Carnavalet is always free, and by now the musical concerts and dance performances are over. These hardy souls have come, then, some with their children, not to get something for free that usually costs money, but to participate in a cultural celebration, to do something out of the norm: go to a museum on a Saturday night. Along with everyone else.

In addition to Nuit des musées, there's la Nuit Blanche, the all-night-long arts festival, which mayor Bertrand Delanoë initiated in Paris in 2002, FIAC, the Jazz Festival, and Fête de la Musique (this was Jack Lang in the early 80s). 'It's the transformation of Paris from a museum city into a city of living culture,' said Anne-Marie Thiesse, cultural historian and researcher at the CNRS. 'Cultural festivals like this in Paris – we didn't have this twenty years ago.'

The French culture machine has always been about spectacle, but now it is a new hybrid kind of spectacle, where the arts and public welfare are interrelated – for their mutual survival. A recent poll conducted by TNS-Sofres revealed that one out of every four French people had not read a book in the past year. However, the same poll indicated that one out of two French people had *bought* a book in the last year. It would seem, then, that the French are at least buying books, even if they are not reading them. André Schiffrin, in a 2007 interview, related a well-known story on this subject: when Sartre's *L'Être et le Néant* was first published in 1943, it was missing pages 40 to 80. Only two people complained to Gallimard.

In France one must be seen doing cul-

ture, caring about culture; being able to talk about books is as important as having read them. (Not for nothing was it a Frenchman who wrote *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read*, which was a best-seller here.)

And it is not so much the content of the culture that is produced, but the fact that it is produced, that matters. Even in the midst of the economic crisis, as *The New York Times* reported recently, the French government is pouring money into projects related to their *patrimoine*, restoring chateaux and cathedrals and opening up multi-million-dollar arts centres. Literary culture is no exception; to say the French are deeply proud of their literature would be an understatement.

They are dutiful consumers and protectors of culture, with a keen sense of what ought to be done to protect literature; they have a specific politics of the book that grows out of a dual belief in the superiority and tradition of French letters and the interest of the collective that is an odd blend of socialist and capitalist – just look at the debates over the fixed book price law. The result is that France prizes culture not only for its own merits but for what it says about France. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, France spends 1.5% of its gross interior product on cultural activities, as opposed to 0.7% in Germany, 0.5% in the UK and 0.3% in the US.

As fewer and fewer young people are reading, the French cultural establishment (a top-down system which begins at the government level and trickles downward to the publishing houses, the press and the bookstores) are trying to devise ways to make reading appealing. The old-fashioned ways of interacting with a readership are beginning to seem stale. Literature has now been harnessed to the cult of the event, in which it is paired with the other arts – dance, music, drama, film, the visual arts – in order to liven things up a bit. French writers are trying to move their work in new directions,

exploding the *idées fixes* about genre and language which have kept French literature in a kind of stasis. 'The way that the book industry will flourish, going forward, is by associating books with other things,' Thiesse told me when we met at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, where she teaches, in May. 'With nature, with travel, with art, with dance – that's the way to get people interested in reading. Like the music industry, who has had to shift from their record sales to making money from their performances, literature is now experiencing a period of transition, an attempt to adapt to the new demands of culture by resorting to a *mise en performance*.'

THIS IS NOT unique to Paris, but the Parisian literary scene has always appropriated public spaces for its own uses – the salon, the café, the restaurant, the bar, the jazz club; French literature has ever thrived in collectives. However, as anyone who's been to the Café du Flore recently looking in vain for the latter-day Beauvoirs and Sartres will tell you, this space has greatly changed over time. Pascale Casanova has written that for centuries, Paris was the world capital of literature, the *République mondiale des lettres*. It has been some time since this is no longer the case; instead of being the world capital, it is now one of several vying for attention, and not always winning. Perhaps to counter this, both to comfort themselves of Paris's great literary history and to reinforce the continued vibrancy of French literature, this literary space is now being used in new and interdisciplinary ways, largely thanks to Delanoë. The result is a kind of 'eventiness' – a fetish for the eventfulness of doing something which is not ordinarily ritualized or marked out in any particular way. Think of the Vélib initiative, or Paris Plage, when tons of sand are dumped on the banks of the Seine during the month of August to create a temporary beach. Although this new concentration on the dynamism of the event is by no means the rule, the emphasis is shifting from the silent, solitary reading to the shared, public reading as spectacle. It's a shift especially noticeable in a culture where the vast majority of *rencontres* with French authors consists of the author sitting at a table signing books for two hours while their public queues

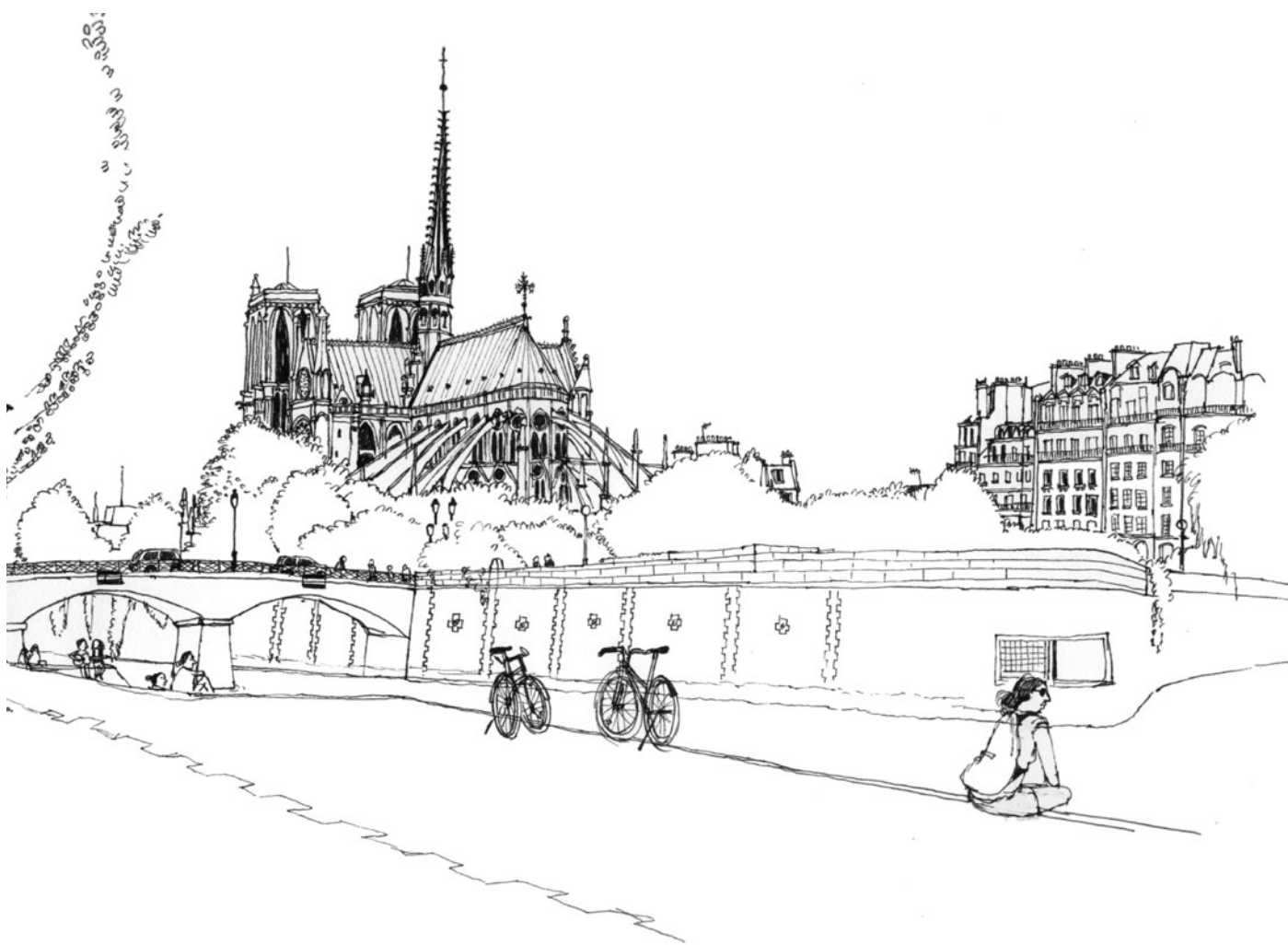
up and practises what they're going to say.

In late 2007 the cover of *Time Magazine* proclaimed the death of French culture, with an image of the recently deceased mime artist Marcel Marceau shedding a tear. The article's author, Donald Morrison, did not speak in quite such dramatic tones; rather than the death of French culture he seemed to be suggesting more of a decline. 'Once admired for the dominating excellence of its writers, artists and musicians,' Morrison wrote, 'France today is a wilting power in the global cultural marketplace.' An outcry arose around the world that left Morrison to defend his allegations in an extended essay, published in France in 2008, called *Que reste-t-il de la culture française?* [*What remains of French culture?*]. Morrison complains that France imports much more than it exports. But you could also see this as a reflection of the French obligation to be aware of and consume culture. Stop in any French bookshop, and the depth and breadth of works in translation will stop you in your tracks.

French culture may not be making much of an impression abroad (and that's debatable) but the French will to culture is alive and well. A search in the Paris yellow pages for 'bookstores' yielded 792 results: 101 in the 6th, 100 in the 5th – although these are the traditionally literary neighbourhoods; still there are 63 in the 11th, 28 in the 19th, 36 in the 16th. When you consider that there are only 10 independent bookstores in all of New York City, these figures are astounding.

There are over 3,000 independent bookstores in France, employing approximately 13,000 people. The largest French retailer of books – the Fnac – was founded by communists. (It was subsequently bought by François Pinault in 1994.) According to a report published in 2007, independent bookstores, which, according to an IPSOS study, make up about 41% of the book retail market, face certain challenges of being in the retail business – high rents, low return on investment, high social fees to be paid for their employees – but, as is oft repeated

in France, *le livre n'est pas un produit comme des autres*. A book is not a commodity like any other. Therefore, the Minister of Culture, Christine Albanel, introduced a '*plan livre*' – book plan – at the end of 2007 which aims to help out independent bookstores who fit a certain profile. The label '*LIR*' – *librairie indépendante de référence* – was launched in 2008. In order to qualify, there are a list of requirements, notably: the bookstore must not have access to a centralized warehouse from which their stock is replenished, the stock must contain a majority of books in print for more than one year, and the bookstore's owner must have total autonomy over the bookstore's holdings. Once the label has been bestowed, the bookstore becomes eligible for a variety of subsidies from the Centre National du Livre (CNL) – interest-free loans for development projects, funds with which to acquire stock (up to 500,000 euros per year of the CNL's budget have been earmarked for this purpose), reductions on social fees for employees, tax relief, and funding to sponsor read-



ings, festivals, and other activities. (The funding of the CNL increased in 2008 from 1.3 to 2.5 million euros.)

Paris is a bibliophile's paradise in a way that New York or London have stopped trying to be. Penelope Le Masson, owner of the Red Wheelbarrow, an English-language bookshop in the Marais, attributes this to the 'smaller territory', along with the 'tradition of literary salons, thought, dispute – the luxury of universities and philosophers and kings, poets and students who could come here and live cheaply.' The territory has shifted, though; whereas in the 60s it might have been affordable to hunker down in the 6th arrondissement to smoke Gauloises and write poetry, most of the bookshops and increasingly more of the publishing houses have been priced out of the neighbourhood by upscale *pret-à-porter* boutiques. But this taught the City of Paris a valuable lesson, and now, they are intervening to protect certain areas against that kind of gentrification where they feel it is harmful to Paris's literary patrimony; in some cases, they are buying buildings and renting the retail space to bookstores for a minimal rent; in others, they are stepping in to protect the character of a neighbourhood. Sylvia Whitman, owner of the Shakespeare and Company bookshop, is hoping that if her neighbours sell their property, the city will encourage a cultural business such as hers and prevent entrepreneurs from setting up a Starbucks or something similar. She is hoping to expand the bookstore and include an organic café – something sorely lacking in Paris, especially in the tourist-ridden quarters of St Michel.

At La Hune, the legendary bookstore in St Germain des Pres, the following books are laid out on the front table: Badiou, Horkheimer, and Walter Benjamin (*Rêves, biographie – une vie dans les textes*). Derrida, Foucault, Agamben. It is an impressive layout to be sure. But I wonder – do the customers of La Hune want to read these people? Is La Hune uniquely frequented by theory-heads? Or is this just the way they want to be perceived? 'Who decides what goes out on the front table?' I asked the cashier one day in May. 'Oh,' she said in a bored tone. 'The aisle experts.' 'Aisle experts?' I repeated blankly. 'They are experts in

their domain, and they each have an aisle, and they decide what goes on the tables.' 'So who sells really well?' I asked. 'Um,' she thought. 'the Millennium books ... Stefan Zweig ... Claude Lanzmann's autobiography ...' For a bookshop specialising in art books and theory, this is not bad.

Down the road at L'Ecume des Pages, another independent bookstore which has only been there about twenty years, the emphasis is more solidly on literature. Walking in, on the left there is a huge array of works in translation on a banquet-sized table. Another, further along, is piled with *carnets, inédits, édits*, by all the greats and less greats, the knowns and the unknowns. A book by the America-based French author Catherine Cusset on bicycles in New York (*Journal du cycle*) (Cusset is very popular right now so I assume she can write about whatever she pleases). A book about *les antipodes*. Another called *Promenade parmi les tons voisins*, published on beautiful stock by a publisher I'd never heard of, Isolato. I asked the manager about them, and he told me that several former employees of the bookshop have since gone off and launched their own publishing houses – Isolato being one of them. 'We try to give them a hand, display their books prominently, and they do tend to sell that way,' he said.

A BOOK IS NOT a product like any other, the French government affirmed when they adopted the Loi Lang, regarding the fixed price of books, in 1981. The law stipulates that the publisher has to print the price of the book on the back cover, and retailers are not allowed to offer more than a 5% discount on that price. It is the reason behind the quality of books published and the abundance of independent bookstores in France; it prevents large retailers like the Fnac or Amazon from putting small bookstores out of business; in theory it is also meant to prevent consumers from going to small bookstores to check out a book and then buying it in discount stores or, now, online.

The editor Sabine Wespieser, who owns her own publishing company, says that in the US, houses of her size can only function with the support of non-profit foundations, whereas in France, her books can compete on the market alongside the big publishers. 'As long as the Loi

Lang is in effect, editors will be able to publish books they really care about.'

The co-founder of the Fnac, the Trotskyist André Essel, was against the *prix unique*, because he believed the quality of life of the masses would be improved only through lower prices for goods. 'This law has [only] made the *hypermarchés* [the equivalent of Target or Tesco] rich.' Jean-Baptiste Daelman, head of the Fédération Française Syndicale de la Librairie (FFSL) argued that it threatened the independence of the bookshops, neutralizing the competition and reinforcing the control of the editors over the book industry. Then once the law was passed, its opponents found all sorts of ways around it. The Fnac began a 'read it again' policy, buying back books and reselling them used. Or they would send books published in France to the Fnac in Belgium then reimport them, since imported books were not subject to the *prix unique* law. Or they very simply offered illegal discounts, calling their special discounts the 'Prix Lang', or the 'Prix Mitterrand.'

One of the government's new pet projects is to help out the *bouquinistes*, the open-air bookstalls (900 of them, according to the city of Paris) which line both sides of the Seine in the middle of the city, part of a tradition of bookselling by the Seine which dates back to the sixteenth century. The *bouquinistes* have fallen on hard times as the tourists coming through now prefer to buy tchotchkes and posters rather than used paperback books. The mayor of Paris has launched an initiative to save these hardy booksellers, inviting them to town-hall meetings to discuss how to meet demand without compromising the quality of their offerings, which often include rare and antique books. Plans include a walking tour of the *bouquinistes*, more participation in Paris's literary events, and a literary prize. They also took part in the inaugural 2009 edition of *Paris en Toutes Lettres*, hosting authors and readings (one even put on a marionette performance).

The government can't always help out, however. In 1999 the venerable bookshop of the Presses Universitaires de France, founded in 1920 in the Place de la Sorbonne, faced such financial trouble that they eventually had to sell, and the split-level bookshop on the corner of the Blvd St Michel became L'Univers

du Livre and then La Librairie de la Sorbonne. Which was all well and good, until the CPE riots of 2006, when a gang of *casseurs* [a French euphemism for ‘people who break shit for no reason’] *l’a cassé*, its front windows smashed in, its insides ravaged. The space was renovated, but the bookshop closed down, and is now occupied by a sporty clothing shop, Delaveine.

At *Paris en Toutes Lettres* – or *Paris Spelled Out* – they’re giving out buttons: ‘*N’oubliez pas de lire!*’ ‘Don’t forget to read!’ It’s true – with all the events scheduled for this newest of Parisian literary festivals, the reminder that we’re all supposed to be here for the books seems superfluous but isn’t. When are we supposed to grab a quiet moment with a book when we’re busy running between the Théâtre du Châtelet (where writers are taking turns talking about their favourite writers) and the Stalingrad metro station (where there is a rock concert featuring the poetry of Baudelaire)? There’s no time to read when you’re staying up all night with the Oulipians, who hosted a reading that began at 11 o’clock at night and went on until the wee hours of the morning. Or when you’re running to catch the *Exercices de Style* bus, on which actors read from Queneau’s famous collection of ninety-nine versions of the same story: man gets on a bus.

But the point of *Paris en Toutes Lettres* is not you alone with a book, it is to get you out of your house and sharing the experience of language with perfect strangers, and coupling it with the other arts. If cinema is the seventh art, then eventiness *à la parisienne* is the previously undreamt-of eighth art – a blend of the previous seven. The five-day long festival is organized around three major themes: Paris is a novel, cosmopolitan Paris, and Paris, scene of reading and writing. Attendees took literary walking tours of Françoise Sagan’s Paris, or they attended the homage to Aimé Césaire, or the one to Boris Vian. They could suggest dead writers who deserve to have streets named after them. They could watch the ‘Attempt to tire out an author’, in which the Oulipian Jacques Jouet wrote a novel in public for four days in the Place Stalingrad. The Comédie Française took to the Pont des Arts to read texts by Victor

Hugo, Balzac, Alphonse Daudet, and yes, Baudelaire. Passersby murmured to each other as they read. ‘What beautiful diction she has,’ said one. ‘Now this is beautiful French,’ said another. Nancy Huston read from Anaïs Nin’s diaries (the section where she has sex with her father).

This kind of heterogeneity can also be found in the more interesting examples of contemporary French writing. The writer and translator Christophe Claro has been bringing daring and eccentric texts of the Anglophone world to France for years now – Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, Salman Rushdie, and the three Williams (Gass, Gaddis & Vollmann) – as if in an effort to shake things up on the French scene. He, along with a group of like-minded writers and editors, came together in 2004 to form a literary collective called ‘Inculté’ (‘Uneducated’ or ‘Uncultured’). More of a laboratory than an organized group, Inculte began as a quarterly literary and philosophical magazine, ‘but now we also publish books: novels, essays, French and foreign, and also collective novels,’ says Claro. ‘We meet often, decide together – there’s no leader. Most of us are quite Deleuzian in our approach and methods. We also think that there no such things as specialists when it comes to certain themes (imprisonment, obscenity, etc.).’

Playing with genres, pastiche, with different voices, with the monstrous capabilities of language to deform itself, the plasticity of the novel as form, allowing the writer ‘to write both against and with the novelistic.’ François Monti, who writes the litblog *Tabula Rasa*, told me ‘I would not say the French literary scene is vibrant but it’s in better shape than many admit. What France lacks at the moment is may be a movement or a shared dynamic. A group like Inculte may be trying to create a sort of impulse, but so far it hasn’t really worked out. In fact, if there is one thing that seems to be absent in France, it’s theorists. And I do not mean academics, I mean writers who are interested enough by their craft to write about it and place it in context. Figures like Gass and Barth for the postmodernist American movement. Or, right here in Europe and right now, Eloy Fernández Porta or Agustín Fernández Mallo in Spain, who are also part of a

loose movement and are contributing to articulate in theory what they are doing practically. But I don’t really have the impression the French are interested in the process of literature. It’s the idea of Literature that appeals to them.’

French publishing is not suffering as badly from the economic downturn as its Anglo-Saxon counterparts; Ronald Blunden, head of communications at Hachette, told France 24 that this is because ‘French editors take on minimal debt.’ Despite reports in March that the market was holding – sales figures for January 2009 were up 4% over the previous year – the publishing group La Martinière cut forty-four jobs in an effort to reduce costs over the next three years, reported Barbara Casassus for the *Bookseller*. The annual Parisian literary festival *Lire en fête*, sponsored by the Minister of Culture, was cancelled for 2009, to return in 2010. In spite of the fact that three million people visited the 2008 instalment, at a cost of 900,000 euros to produce the event, given that the budget had risen by 20% over the last three years, it was decided that the format needed to be rethought. Other annual events, like the Marathon des Mots in Toulouse, or the Rendez-vous de l’histoire in Blois, cost about a million euros to produce.

On the Livres Hebdo website, bookstore owners were asked how they will combat the crisis. Amongst the predictable grumbling about the limited options, two responses stood out:

Surprise and innovate even the simple things: invite soloists from the conservatory to bring music into our stores, host exhibitions of young artists, hold public readings in the street, participate in book crossing [Ed: According to Wikipedia, ‘the practice of leaving a book in a public place, to be picked up and read by others, who then do likewise’], sponsor performances at a local school, organise a poetry slam . . .

and

Go out! Go outside of our walls to invite people in to read, taking advantage of local events to bounce back and show them what we’ve got! ◇

This is Crispin

By Joe Dunthorne

Constraints

The weather was palindromic on the day we tried to infiltrate experimental French literature. Rain, clouds, sun, clouds, rain. We wanted to be part of the Oulipo, a group of writers and mathematicians who formed in Paris in the 60s. They use formal, often mathematical, structures as a way of composing literature.

Myself and two colleagues had been invited to read our Oulipo-inspired poems before some of the founding members. Stepping in to the Calder Bookshop in Waterloo was not unlike interrupting a meeting of the wizard's guild: mythical beards, exotic surnames and a certain Gallic suspicion as we arrived, clutching our print-outs.

The Oulipo's most famous invention is N+7, a form where the nouns in any given text are replaced by the noun seven places below it in the dictionary. Here are two examples taken from the Oulipo Compendium, published in the UK by Atlas Press.

To be or not to be: that is the quibble.

And this, from another bestseller:

In the bend, God created the hen and the education. And the education was without founder and void; and death was upon the falsehood of the demand. And the sport of God moved upon the falsehood of the wealth and God said: let there be limit, and there was limit.

We had assumed, from evidence like this, that perhaps the Oulipo do not take themselves seriously. The title *Ou-Li-Po* stands for *Ouvroir de Literature Potential*, which translates roughly as the Workshop for Potential Literature. The word *Ouvroir*, apart from meaning workshop, also means a group of ladies meeting to do charitable work. This highlights two things. One, that unlike most literary movements, the Oulipo have a sense of humour. We would learn that a sense of humour is not incompatible with seriousness. Secondly, it suggests their

inventions are an act of charity, and are intended for all who wish to use them. Which is lucky, because we'd borrowed one of their creations – the lipogram, a form where one or more letters are not used. The most famous lipogram is Georges Perec's *La Disparition*. On its publications in France, some reviewers did not notice that it avoids *e*, the most commonly used letter in French. There's even an English translation, *A Void*, the title of which, some have suggested, acts as a mini-review of the book. We had created univocal lipograms – or univocalisms – poems which disallow all but one vowel.

The Oulipo meet monthly for dinner. The largely French-speaking group now includes British and American members, but the meetings are still held in Paris. At each meeting, new constraints or forms are proposed and discussed, inexpensive but good quality wine is drunk, exquisite cheeses are brought out on a trolley. Or at least, that's what we imagine it is like. So you can understand our desire to join. We had become the Oulipian fan-boys, fantasising about their after-dinner patter, blushing at single-vowel words. Taramasalata. Beekeepers. Hubbub.

We understood that joining the group would be difficult. We would have to try and compete with famous Oulipians like Raymond Queneau and Italo Calvino. Plus, we were held back by another of their arbitrary constraints, that there can be no more members than can fit physically sitting around the one dining table. I would argue that, although I am long, I have narrow hips, and could tuck in discreetly on a stool.

SO BACK TO our gig. All the big hitters (to us) were there: Fournel, Monk, Bellos, Benabou, Le Tellier, Chapman. Our main worry was that they wouldn't like the content of our poems. But as I watched my colleague, Tim, read his univocalism in the key of A, *Gay Day*, and simulate anal sex on stage, I looked out across the worn faces of the OULIPO and did not register the slightest hint of disgust. How

could I be so patronizing? These are the avant-garde! Nothing so trivial as content could offend them.

After stepping offstage, we waited expectantly to be drawn into a warm, left-field embrace, and to hear the words: *Welcome, friends, to the OULIPO*. But, after the applause, there was a strange sadness in the room.

Stanley Chapman, a British Oulipian, translator, architect and pataphysician (that's 'the science of imaginary solutions') flicked his beard and hobbled towards us. His arms were not raised for a hug.

'You shouldn't have used Y,' he said. 'Y is a vowel.'

He had the expression of a man who, having left his finest painting to dry in the garden, has watched a cat mark its territory over the canvas.

In our poems, we'd allowed ourselves words like *cry*, *why*, *my* because, surely everyone knows, there are only five vowels.

Then came British writer, translator and Oulipian, Ian Monk. 'Yeah that was okay. You use Y though, which is a vowel.'

And so on, a querulous chorus: 'Why Y? Why Y?'

So we ran from the Calder Bookshop. Apparently, we'd cheated.

Just when we thought we'd won experimental literature, they changed the rules at the last minute. In a drunken team talk, later that night, we discussed our options: should we go back through the poems and try to de-'y' them? Should we just start again? Who could we blame: our schools, our parents, each other? No, the answer was simpler than that. Take the feelings of bitterness and rejection, and channel them into a campaign for which we have now printed T-shirts: *Don't Suppress the Y*.

One of the things we discovered when writing our univocalisms was that each vowel tries to decide its own content. 'A' is a flamboyant gourmand. 'E' is a verbose zealot. I earns more in a week than you do in a year. 'O' is a monged-out stoner. 'U' is a bigot and sexual deviant. All life is there.

For us, one of the important tools for fighting back against each vowel's genetic predisposition was the flexibility of Y. So we have made a stance, to step out on

our own, with the Y as our symbol of rebellion – sticking two fingers up at our heroes, and making the shape of a Y.

This is fortunate, because Paul Fournel, the current president, has been quoted as saying: ‘If you *don’t* want to be a member, just ask to be let in.’

I would like to state, on the record, that I really, desperately don’t want to join. I wouldn’t be a member even if you wrote me a nice letter and took me out for lunch at a sweet little Parisian bistro and you told me anecdotes about Raymond Queneau and I made you laugh and our hands touched across the table and . . .

Forget it. Here’s my poem, written in the key of ‘I’.

This is Crispin

It’s six-thirty. City drinks. Crispin sidling in:

Hi Dimitri, Hi Rick. Clinking.

Simplistic chimps. Rich twits in wi-fi mist,
pinstriping in illicit strip pits,
high fiving, drinking Kirin,
dipping digits in thrift inhibiting whitish sniff.

Crispin distils his philistinisms:

‘Girl in mini-skirt? Kinky bitch.

Girl with shiny lipstick? Rim-licking bint.’

Crispin sticks his crisp fifty
twixt Cindy’s tits.

In chichi vinyl spinning district,
Crispin’s in with Ministry’s VIP list:
DJ Micky Finn mixing glitch
with grimy D ’n’ B
with slinky Mississippi riffs:
MCs rip mics. Chic girls in tightly
fitting PVC bikinis.

It’s midnight.

Crispin, with his vivid wick-dipping
instinct,
digs this Irish-Finnish hybrid chick:
idyllic lips, stripy highlights, pink skin-
bib.

Fit! thinks Crispin, circling, kissing his
thin cig.

‘Hi, I’m Cris!’

Miss Hybrid sniffs icily, implicit diss. ‘I’m
Izzy.’

Timid minx, thinks Crispin, I’ll mimic
MTV:

grinding his hips, lip-syncing lyrics, dys-
rhythmic twisting. Izzy cringing.

With Izzy’s midriff libidinizing him,

Crispin isn’t shy:

‘Izzy, FYI, I’m this city bigwig

I’m fricking rich, I’m witty,

my stylist thinks I’m dishy.

With girth, with virility,

my dick is my gift.’

‘If pigs fly, dimwit. Which gift is it: Cys-
titis? Syphilis?’ is Izzy’s biting criticism.

I’ll fix this prissy bitch, Crispin thinks,
slipping pills in Miss Finn’s gin.

It’s sixty mins. ’til Izzy’s sky high:

iris tiny, bliss rising, frigidity sinks.

Crispin sidling with impish grin,
‘Hi Izz, try my pricy whisky drink, I
insist!’

flicks his glinting wrist: shiny Swiss bling.
Izzy’s visibly dizzy.

In Crispin’s nippy Mitsi
with its rims spinning
Izzy’s lying flimsy. Gripping spindly pins,
Crispin zips his fly. His hi-fi inflicts:
P. Diddy, Limp Bizkit, Will Smith, Sting.

It’s six thirty – first light.

Ditching Izzy, Crispin splits.

PC Sid Grist finds Crispin driving wildly.
‘PC Grist, this is silly, will fifty British fix
this?’

Flinging him in clink,
PC Grist finds spliffs, pills,
billy whizz within Crispin’s silk shirt.
‘My, my, sir – rich pickings!’ Sid chirps,
‘big illicit picnic!’

Sid sits grinning whilst Crispin strips,
his dignity dwindling. Sid firmly frisks
his pimply thighs, his ribs,
his shins, his shrinking winky,
his milky skin, inch by inch.

PC Sid finds Crispin is: itty-bit ticklish.

Crispin’s crying: ‘Filthy pig!

This is infringing my civil rights!’

‘Civil rights, is it? I think civil rights is
silly.’

Sid sings, bringing his sin disciplining
birch

within sight.

‘Crispin, this is my hitting stick.

Hitting stick, this is Crispin.’

ANYONE WHO FINDS themselves stand-
ing outside the STAR HAND CAR WASH
AND CAR PARK in tears of happiness,
should visit our blog of photos of found
univocalisms: *These Wretched Letters Were
Wherever We Went*. You can send photos
of univocalisms to univocalism@gmail.
com and we’ll post them. Extra points for
ones that include ‘Y’.

Un Homme Fatal

Hugo Vickers on the extraordinary life and times of the Baron de Redé

ALEXIS de Redé was by no means a household name, yet he merited a substantial obituary when he died in the summer of 2004. Essentially he was a private man, though there were certainly moments of flamboyance in the public eye, when he staged memorable costume balls. He was of course widely known in a particular circle – the world of international society, the world of the auction house, the *antiquaire* and in the world of *haute couture* and *haute cuisine*. And since his death he has reached out to a new generation through his memoirs.

In his lifetime he was variously described as ‘the Eugène de Rastignac of modern Paris’ (by ‘Chips’ Channon), ‘La Pompadour de nos jours’ (by Nancy Mitford) and ‘the best host in all Europe’ (by *W Magazine*). He lived a life of self-imposed luxury and exquisite perfection, which extended to furniture, food, courtesies and flowers.

He was a feature of that section of international high society where dwell a group of immensely rich people, largely absent from the gossip columns, sometimes surrounded by bodyguards, travelling from one of their exquisite houses to another in private planes, but causing no ripples as they go. Though he did not own a private plane, Alexis de Redé was in that set.

The American style guru Eleanor Lambert, who had spent her life monitoring international society and style-setters, said of this group: ‘They still exist, but they don’t make an impact.’ Alexis de Redé made an impact – a quiet impact, if that is possible.

When asked for what he would best like to be remembered, he replied, with no hesitation, as the man who had restored and preserved the Hotel Lambert, the magnificent home – palace almost – in which he lived from 1948 until his death in July 2004 – and as a thoughtful and generous host. He was both those things.

The Baron lived within a particular orbit. When asked what he most hated,

he did not fulminate against Iraq or President George Bush, he condemned men who failed to wear a white shirt after 6 p.m. On this he insisted. He declared that he despised a man whose socks were so short that if he crossed his legs, some pink skin was exposed between the sock and the trousers. Fortunately he was not pressed on the vexed issue of collars, cuffs, turn-ups, vents in jackets or colours of suits, nor on the various proprieties and otherwise of ladies’ fashions.

There were other things on which he insisted. If he gave a party, he liked the buffet to look as fresh at the end of the evening as at the beginning, so the plates were replaced regularly with fresh food as this was taken. ‘There is nothing more depressing than fish bones at the end of the evening,’ he declared. A man in quest of a bowl groaning with the finest caviar at three o’clock in the morning would not have been disappointed.

The Baron did not like cocktail parties where people stood about, gazing over each other’s shoulders, nor buffets where the food was poised precariously on the knee. He insisted that the orchids and clusters of sweet Williams be sprayed with water to give a dewy effect before luncheon parties. Others tried to copy this but never quite got it right. His dewdrops never fell on the table.

An aura of calm surrounded the Baron. He was not given to hyperbole or exaggeration. He claimed to have the gift of remaining silent in eight different languages. A trip to some enviable tropical island might be judged ‘very agreeable’ – a delay in travel arrangements dismissed as ‘not very amusing’.

He established various fashions – he wore two silk scarves simultaneously when going out in the evening – one white, one black. There is the moccasin called the Redé. There was also a little cake sold on the Ile St Louis, also called the Redé. He filled an entire cupboard with the shoes of Mr Cleverly in London. These are undoubtedly stylish but they restrict the feet. There is so little to stand

on that many men trip over and break their hips, especially since they can only afford the shoes at what one might call the hip-breaking age.

The Baron did not travel lightly in life. He was invariably accompanied by a large quantity of Louis Vuitton suitcases.

So, who was the Baron de Redé? And how did he become himself? He was a languid figure who gave the impression that he had led a rarefied life far from the general fray, which was not entirely the case. There is no question that he was that rare creature, the self-creation.

He followed in a long line of such figures in the tradition of Proust’s Baron de Charlus – in real life the poet and aesthete Robert de Montesquiou, of an earlier generation, who lived extravagantly at the Palais Rose in Paris, married to a Gould heiress of questionable beauty (he referred to the marital bedchamber as *la chambre expiatoire*), and Etienne de Beaumont, an early friend of Alexis’s in Paris, who lived on into the 1950s, into a virtually alien age.

Etienne de Beaumont was a tremendous figure, who gave memorable parties, and as the Baron put it, ‘engaged his private tastes despite being happily married’. Like the Baron he was exacting as a host. He forbade those who came to his costume balls to come in bathing dresses or as matelots, considering these options too lazy.

It was the age of the fancy-dress ball in Paris – of the famous Diaghilev dancer Serge Lifar, who appeared as Vestris dressed by Coco Chanel at a Beaumont ball when guests were exhorted to evoke characters from Racine’s theatre or from Racine’s times. Misia Sert arrived, dressed as the Merry Widow.

It was the world of Christian Bérard, who adorned Marie-Blanche de Polignac’s dining-room in her home in the rue Barbet de Jouy in Paris with his frescoes. She even had her favourite poodle, Bachy-Bouzouk II, painted by Bérard and turned this into a tapestry, based on his picture.

It was the age of Don Carlos de Beistegui, one of the great foreign men of taste who found Europe such a draw. After the war the French were bankrupt and these rich Mexicans and Chileans reigned supreme with fortunes based on silver or even guano. They could afford

to undertake many flights of fancy – architectural and otherwise.

Beistegui was Mexican by birth, educated at Eton, a rich cosmopolitan almost without national allegiance. Though everything he did was for his own amusement, he established an elaborate form of country house style to which many rich people still aspire today. The designer, David Hicks, admitted only to having been influenced by Beistegui.

EARLY LIFE

Alexis himself was born in Zurich, Switzerland on 4 February 1922, the son of Oscar von Rosenberg, a Jewish banker from Austro-Hungary, who became a citizen of Lichtenstein and was given the title of Baron de Redé by the Emperor of Austria in 1916. This was a genuine title though it does not appear in the *Almanach de Gotha*. There was a book of Redés. Inevitably, Nancy Mitford and others questioned its validity. Alexis's mother was descended from the von Kaullas, a German-Jewish family, who had been part owners of the Bank of Württemberg with the Kings of that country. Thus, while in due season, Alexis assumed the title of Baron de Redé, inherited from his father, in his early youth he was known as Dickie Rosenberg.

Young Alexis was brought up a Protestant, spending his early years in a suite of sixteen rooms in a Zurich hotel with his mother, brother and disadvantaged sister, his father visiting but occasionally. When he was nine, his mother left for Vienna, where she was informed that her husband was keeping a mistress in Paris. Three weeks later she died of leukaemia.

Young Alexis and his brother were sent to Le Rosey, where the future Shah of Persia, Prince Rainier of Monaco, and Richard Helms (later a disgraced Director of the CIA in Washington) were fellow pupils. One trait became clear while at the school – Alexis showed a considerable aptitude for finance and figures. The other boys used to come and ask him for help with complicated mathematical problems.

Alexis was at the school at a period when Nazism was becoming a growing threat, as he discovered when a German friend at the school announced that he would now no longer speak to him.

In 1939, Oscar Rosenberg, his father,

committed suicide on account of spiralling financial problems, leaving his children a small degree of income from a life insurance policy. Alexis found himself in the care of an unsympathetic guardian, who treated him unkindly.

Alexis was perhaps not wholly admirable in deciding that Europe was not the place for him in wartime, but in this he was far from unique. He set off by boat to New York, with an umbrella from Swaine, Adeney in his hand. He was meant to be in the care of an aunt in Albany, who consigned him to two spinster ladies, who had booked him a room at the YMCA. This did not appeal to him, and fearing that his virginity would be instantly prised from him, he moved to the Weston Hotel and later to an apartment on East 79th Street. He lived on an income of about \$200 a month.

Presently he went to California to try his luck working for an antique dealer, and made friends with the artist Salvador Dalí and his wife, but in 1941 he returned to New York.

Here he was taken under the wing of the famous decorator, Elsie de Wolfe, sometimes escorting her young poodle, Blu-Blu, to the Stork Club.

He was taken up by a man called Lucius Beebe, dining nightly with him, wearing a very high collar, the pair never speaking. Mr Beebe was one of the great social columnists of his day, sartorially elegant, owning a private railroad car, and once reporting on a fire, while himself dressed in a morning coat. As far as the social world was concerned, Mr Beebe only interested himself in a group of 300–400 people.

Alexis's fortunes changed when on another occasion, he was spotted in a restaurant called Le Bruxelles, in New York by Arturo Lopez-Wilshaw, an immensely rich Chilean, with a fortune derived from guano, which was used for agricultural purposes. Although married to his cousin Patricia Lopez-Huici, a marriage entered into in the hope of children that did not materialize, Arturo Lopez had enjoyed a number of homosexual relationships with various partners, including one of the Rocky Twins who had danced with Mistinguett in Paris.

Before the war Arturo had bought a house in Neuilly, 14 rue du Centre, which he rebuilt and furnished with priceless

treasures, paying special attention to provenance and authenticity.

During the war he settled in New York, on a large part of a floor of the St Regis Hotel, waiting for the tiresome business of war in Europe to end so that they could return to Paris and the rue du Centre and resume his social life there.

Lopez saw Alexis again at a party at Mrs Grace Wilson Vanderbilt's and marched him off to a seedy hotel, called the Winslow, on 55th and Madison, for a tryst. He became, in short, the protector of Alexis.

The story was that Arturo Lopez offered Redé one million dollars to return to Europe with him and be his 'friend'. It was difficult to pin him down on the matter in later life. He once went so far as to declare: 'Sex has never played a big part in my life!' When pressed, he conceded that Arturo was his first lover, though by no means the first person who had approached him. This did not solve the question as to whether a million dollars was simply handed over. In conclusion it would appear that a million dollars was but the tip of the iceberg, and a much larger fortune was on the distant horizon.

The monetary arrangements having been resolved to everyone's satisfaction, Alexis was able to avoid the US military draft, did not go to war to fight for America or any other country, and when hostilities ceased, he followed his protector to France.

He arrived in Paris in the company of Lady Mendl (Elsie de Wolfe) in June 1946 and was instantly swept into the centre of chic Parisian life. Like Charlie Beistegui, Lopez's fortune went a long way and meant that he was able to live at a pace way beyond that of most of the French. The Lopez set was always a little aloof from Paris life, entertaining the very grand and the very rich. The writer Philippe Jullian described their world as like a small eighteenth-century court, with all the intrigues invariably associated with such courts.

Alexis then joined the world of figures such as Count Etienne de Beaumont, the poet and patron of the Surrealists, Marie-Laure de Noailles (who fell in love with Redé, and seduced him twice), musicians such as Henri Sauguet, Georges Auric and Francis Poulenc, and the artist Christian Bérard. Important influences were the

interior decorators, Georges Geffroy and Victor Grandpierre. The Duke and Duchess of Windsor also settled back in Paris at about this time and were very much part of that set. Alexis himself took an apartment at the Hotel Meurice, which he soon decorated to his taste.

Alexis entered a complicated ménage. Arturo still lived with his wife Patricia, a well-known figure in the Paris social world, dressed by the top designers, and there hovered on the scene his pre-war English boyfriend, Tony Pawson (the man with the smallest waist in the British Army). But during a stay at La Garoupe on the Cap d'Antibes, some incriminating letters written by the American homosexual playboy Jimmy Donahue to Pawson were discovered and brought to Lopez's attention. The Baron may have played a part in this discovery. Pawson was presently sent packing by Lopez, who removed all the furniture from the apartment in the rue de Lille that he had allowed him to use, leaving only the bed.

Even without Pawson, the arrival of Redé into this ménage was at first uncomfortable, with many of the grand ladies less than inclined to accept his hospitality. But Redé's languid charm and exceptional good looks gradually won him many friends.

HOTEL LAMBERT

His position in Paris life was greatly enhanced by his move, in 1949, into a magnificent apartment in the Hotel Lambert, on the Ile St Louis. This he restored to more than its former glory, filling it with well-chosen treasures. The Lambert was originally built by Louis Le Vau before the 1640s and is named after Jean-Baptiste Lambert, Private Secretary to Louis XIII. Voltaire had lived there in the 1730s, and Mozart once played there. It was owned by the Princes Czartoryski until the Baron persuaded Marie-Hélène de Rothschild to force Guy to buy it, in 1975.

It is situated at the easterly tip of the Ile St Louis. As so often the double doors that open from the narrow street are deceptive. Once admitted, the visitor is in a magnificent courtyard, heading to the great staircase that led up past the apartments lately occupied (on rare occasions) by Guy de Rothschild, and up to the

apartments of the Baron. No cars were ever allowed to park in the courtyard – on instructions from the Baron – entirely on aesthetic grounds.

In his apartment, the Hercules Gallery, scene of so many fantastic dinners and balls, was the first sight to be seen. For parties there were long tables or round tables with waiters behind every chair. The table plans were drawn by Serebriakoff. Alexis once built an entire staircase from this gallery into the garden where he established a discotheque for the night.

Turning right, the visitor entered the library, with its fine bookcase designed by Georges Geffroy in 1948, which Cecil Beaton said needed blue columns and a blue background so these were indeed painted blue. Geffroy was an important influence on the Baron – as was Victor Grandpierre and indeed Emilio Terry. One day Geffroy and Terry had a ferocious argument as to whether Ledoux or Gabriel was the better architect. This altercation became so heated that one of them hit the other over the head with his umbrella. As the Baron commented: 'It was a period when people felt passionately about things. I don't see people brandishing umbrellas over such matters these days.'

The library also contained a set of fantastic silver chairs, some matching ones having belonged to Louis XIV at Versailles but he melted his down when short of money.

The salon was the largest room and contained a wonderful Louis XV rosewood desk, richly adorned with bronze, stamped Dubois et JME, variously from the collection of Sir Richard Wallace, Lady Sackville, and Arturo Lopez.

Beyond this room was the Salle des Muses where, more often than not, luncheon was served. The Baron made a point of not having a dining room as such. He ate wher-

ever it suited him, in the Georgian way. The Salle des Muses contained a magnificent desk of which the Queen has the pair at Windsor.

As with so many French apartments, the main rooms were grand and splendid, whereas the bedroom floor was basically one long corridor, reached by a narrow staircase. Off this was the Baron's bedroom, which had been Voltaire's when he lived there with his mistress. There was a laundry room where every day the Baron's shirts were ironed, and an office for the secretary.

The Lambert gave Alexis a place to entertain, which he proceeded to do in lavish style for the next fifty-five years. When 'Chips' Channon dined in the Hercules Gallery in 1951, he wrote, 'It is fantastic that this sort of thing can exist in this age.'

Alexis was sketched by Cecil Beaton for the *Glass of Fashion*, thus elevating him – as early as 1954 – to the position of a trendsetter in the world of fashion.

Officially Lopez lived with his wife at Neuilly, but unofficially he lived with Redé at the Lambert. Thus he and Redé arrived in Neuilly in a celebrated basket-work adorned Rolls Royce to preside over lavish entertainments and then departed later for the Lambert.

There was also a yacht, *La Gaviota*, fab-



ulously decorated by Geffroy. On board this yacht, Lopez, his wife and Alexis travelled the high seas together for many months each year, not always in perfect harmony, taking the same friends with them. Even Greta Garbo came on board. The furniture was of such high quality that some pieces were moved from the yacht straight into the Lambert when Alexis sold it in the 60s.

When not sailing or in Paris, they spent the early months of each year at St Moritz, Arturo storing furniture which was brought out each year to adorn his suite at the Palace Hotel. Cocteau was much in evidence, as the permanent guest of Francine Weisweiller, at whose expense he and his entourage lived for some years – until eventually, she acquired a boyfriend and chucked him out.

Marie-Laure de Noailles played a considerable role in making Alexis respectable. She was in love with him and made several attempts to seduce him – once in a bed, once between two doors, and once as was said *il n'est pas venu*. The Baron

hastened to point out that *il n'est pas venu* should read: 'He did not turn up.'

In that closed world of Paris society there were many rather petty dramas, none more so than when Christian Mégret wrote his book *Danae*. This was a racy piece of fiction in the style of an early Harold Robbins. The point is that it was the Baron's early life told as fiction – the stories having come from Ghislaine de Polignac, Mégret's mistress. Lopez was livid and did not speak to Ghislaine for some years, and the Baron claimed never to have read it.

The 50s were memorable for some stunning balls, none more so than the Beistegui Ball at the Palazzo Labia in Venice in September 1951. This was without doubt the greatest ball given in the latter part of the twentieth century, with arrivals by barge and gondola in the Grand Canal, a neverending series of tableaux, and the guests going down into the crowd in the Campo nearby to dance with the Venetians, who called out 'Don Carlos, Don Carlos' in admiration of Beistegui's extravagant invasion of their city.

Redé boosted the early careers of designers such as Pierre Cardin and Yves Saint Laurent. For a Beaumont Ball – le Bal des Rois – in the rue Masseran in 1949 he commissioned Cardin, then working alone in an upstairs atelier, to create a costume for him. When Redé gave the Bal des Têtes at the Lambert in 1956, at which the Duchess of Windsor was one of the judges, the young Saint Laurent made many of the headdresses, thus meeting many important clients.

During these years Alexis formed a business partnership with Prince Rupert Loewenstein, and they took control of the merchant bank, Leopold Joseph & Co. At the invitation of Christopher Gibbs, Rupert took over the finances of the Rolling Stones, sorting out their contracts, zealously negotiating deals for them and informing them when the money was running low and they needed to do another tour. Alexis was not in tune with Mick Jagger and co. but admired their stamina and, as a mark of his respect, encouraged Charlie Watts to invest in some Cleverly shoes.



Business was always a part of Alexis's life. The *Financial Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* were daily features in his bedroom. In order to lead the life he led, he needed and luckily possessed great business acumen. He balanced the posed life of a social figure with the cut and thrust of a life in high finance. He was a founder of Artemis, the firm which acquired and exhibited important works of art, and had as many museums as their clients.

Arturo Lopez died in March 1962, at the age of nearly 62. A long-time alcoholic and money-spender, there is no question that Alexis had made his life more interesting, inspiring him to do useful things, and not only that – he invested his money wisely so that both the Lopez fortune and his own grew immeasurably over the years. Everything he touched turned to gold.

After the death of Lopez, the fortune was divided equally between Alexis and Arturo's widow Patricia. They who had never much been friends, then turned to each other, Alexis advising her, and staying with her each summer at St Tropez. But she gave up the world of *haute couture* and her clothes can now be found in various costume museums in Paris.

MARIE-HÉLÈNE DE ROTHSCHILD

After a suitable break, Alexis became the close friend and servant cavaliere to Marie-Hélène de Rothschild, one of Paris's most energetic hostesses.

This was an interesting friendship. Marie-Hélène was demanding and overbearing, but Alexis adored her. They put their heads together over everything imaginable, particularly organizing extravagant parties, but also arranging bibelots and giving each other expensive presents. Thus when it seemed that Alexis might be flung out of the Lambert, Marie-Hélène came to his rescue. She rang her husband Guy at the bank and asked him if he were feeling courageous. He listened nervously and she persuaded him to buy the Lambert. They occupied the very grand lower floor, where they housed part of their collection. Guy never liked it much.

They went into racing together and often attended race meetings with Maria Callas, Richard Burton and Elizabeth

Taylor. Redé had some success on the turf which made him well known in France for a time. He won the Prix de Diane (French Oaks) with *Rescousse* in 1972, and came second in the same year at the Arc de Triomphe, with *Plében*.

Marie-Hélène loved a party as did Alexis. Many were given at the Lambert over the years.

THE ORIENTAL BALL

The most spectacular was the Oriental Ball again at the Lambert in December 1969. Turbaned figures sat on two giant *papier-maché* elephants in the courtyard and half-naked men dressed as Nubian slaves, bearing torches, lined the stairs. One guest arrived in the back of a lorry, her metal costume being so rigid. All the guests were drawn by Serebriakoff. Some were sparsely clad for the night, in particular Brigitte Bardot and the celebrated Odile Rodin, widow of the famous stud, Porfirio Rubirosa. Their costumes were diverting to the male eye.

PROUST AND THE SURREALIST BALL

At the Chateau de Ferrieres, there was the Proust Ball of 1971 (given by Marie-Hélène), at which the actress Marisa Berenson appeared as the Marchesa Casati. This was the occasion when Cecil Beaton took photographs of all the guests, and wrote his memorable description of Elizabeth Taylor: 'Her breasts, hanging and huge, were like those of a peasant woman suckling her young in Peru.'

The following year Marie-Hélène gave the famous Surrealist Ball to which Alexis wore a mask designed by Salvador Dalí. One of the guests was Audrey Hepburn, peering out of a birdcage.

ADIEU À MARIE-HÉLÈNE

Marie-Hélène became ill in the 1980s and died in 1996. Alexis sat by her bedside during her long illness, and after her death he became a rather sad figure, whereas the actual widower, Guy de Rothschild, took on a new lease of life, and finally died aged 98 in June 2007.

For a while, Alexis was seen out and about with Liza Minnelli, and later became a great friend of Charlotte Aillaud, the sister of Juliette Greco. She

knew about different forms of art, culture and particularly music. She was his constant companion until the end and they invariably went out together every evening to concerts or films or to a restaurant. She brought figures such as Françoise Sagan, the French writer, to the Lambert.

During those last years, there was no diminution in the luxury with which he surrounded himself and it was natural for him to take his own sheets with him when he checked into the American Hospital. He remained as laconic as ever, and there was little that happened in the *beau monde* worldwide, about which he was not *au courant*.

In 2003 he was appointed Commandeur des Arts et Lettres for his restoration of the Hotel Lambert, giving a most elegant speech, written for him by Charlotte Aillaud. He died the following year, in July 2004. His dachshund Whisky went to Guy de Rothschild at Ferrieres.

Alexis de Redé had lived at the pinnacle of French society, closeted in one of the most beautiful *hôtels particulier* in Paris – *un homme fatal* – described after his death as 'a silent charmer of such extreme elegance, who might otherwise have been a fictional creation of Jean Cocteau'.

The following spring he was catapulted posthumously into the spotlight when his memoirs were published. These have since become a major collector's item, achieving the record price of £500 for a single copy in the summer of 2009. At the same time there was the great sale of his possessions in Paris on 16–17 March 2005. Some 7,000 people trooped through the halls of the Galerie Charpentier – Sotheby's of Paris – to inspect his collection of furniture and bibelots, the stuff of *haute décor* run riot. It was described as the opening of one of those rare time capsules – the collection of one of those young men of the 1940s and 1950s who had made a religion of the pursuit of beauty.

—Hugo Vickers first met the Baron at a ball given by Mrs H.J. Heinz in 1983. He visited him frequently in Paris from 2001–4, and is the editor of Alexis: The Memoirs of the Baron de Redé (published by Dovecote Press in 2005).

Leaving Paris, 1950

Sybille Bedford heads for the south

SO IN DUE course in the pre-dawn light of a fine Sunday morning in May, we were rolling along unobstructed the near-empty Boulevard Raspail, reached the *quatorzième* at Denfert-Rochereau, turned into the Avenue du Général Leclerc towards la Porte d'Orléans – before us *la Route* . . . How often have I done this, before and since, setting out for the south, driving – all leisure and speed? The experience has entered spirit and bone . . .

Peeling off the kilometers . . . sizzling down the long black liquid reaches of the Nationale Sept, the plane trees going sha-sha-sha . . . through the open window, the windscreen yellowing with crushed midges . . . with the Michelin beside [us] . . .

(That was Cyril Connolly: his words are more potent than I would be able to make mine. Seldom have I resisted quoting at least one passage by him per book.) Our journey this time was not quite like that, the lyrical quality turned out hard to maintain. We were still in a decade before motor traffic glut and ubiquitous autoroutes, but we were also in the decade when cars had been getting worn down and new ones rashly built of poor stuff. Allannah Harper's little new Renault was not the happiest piece of *nouvelle construction*. Engine in the back, boot in front, a perilous distribution of weight, counter-balanced in our case by having filled the front space to the gunwales with bags – that space was not designed for the stocking of neat luggage – bulging with *my* belongings, which were books and the rudiments of clothes. Ourselves we had disposed into a living-space meant for four. Well, we were three.

So two in front, one in the back in turns: we were going to share the driving in shifts – long shifts if we were to make Paris–Rome–Paris in five and a half days, with the proper stops for sights at Pisa and at Florence. This meant that we had to get to Rome by the second day's night, however late. The back-seat space

was shared with the ingeniously encased spare-wheel, an encumbrance to which we had added overnight necessities, such as sponge-bags, changes of linen, sweaters, as well as basic sustenance: ham, Gruyère, hard-boiled eggs, a few apples from Les Coudrais. There could be no question of stopping at any of the *lieux gastronomiques* we were going to pass, nor for a snack at a café or a picnic by the side of the road, only a darting for bread and Evian water in one of the numerous main streets – animated as the morning got alive – we had to pass through. We would eat in the car as we bowled along. (We had our clasp-knives, mine a Swiss-Army, and well-laundered kitchen towels for our laps.) Our spirits were high and the day was as fine as its dawn had promised.

The shock, noise and all, was so instant – that kind always is – that there was no time to feel fear. *A blow-out*. Fortunately it had been Pierre's turn at the wheel – within seconds we were stationary, upright, on a safe edge. Next steps went smoothly: we found tools, jack and all, strapped beneath a seat, changed wheels, pushed the dead one, dusty, greasy, limp, into its case. What next? Wasn't that tyre, *all* the tyres, supposed to be new or as good as?

Allannah had only had the car for a few weeks . . . The tyres were new all right, it was the quality that was at fault – ersatz. Pierre refused to go on without a sound spare wheel. Repairs, if feasible, would take too long. So get, buy, *find* another – tyres, new or second-hand, were in short supply. The right size? Those small Renaults *were* for export and few of them yet about in France. Well, we could only try. Moreover, it was Sunday.

Gingerly we went on, driving without a *roue de secours*. We were still only somewhere north of the town of Sens. Then we did find a garage open and willing to sell us another brand-new spare. Black market. We moved on again, we had lost time: it could have been worse. We'd make up for it.

Less than two hours and less than

another hundred kilometres on, bang – another blow-out. This time a front wheel. Simone had been driving. She, too, coped well. *They* saw the farcical as well as the disastrous side of the situation. This *was* a ridiculous enterprise. For me, the thing to do was to live up to the Mimerel spirit. So once more we went through the rigmarole – aggravated now by the approach of the sacred hour of the French: *le déjeuner*. When we did get to the point of paying for another 'new' tyre, Pierre turned to us: what do we have by way of money? Simone said she was carrying some francs, she had faced the bank . . . not for much, it didn't seem a good idea at this moment to involve the manager . . . *Quite*. I piped up. I had brought dollars. (Allannah's generous arrangement – nearing its end now . . . Curious how Allannah had come to underwrite this journey in one way or another.) Dollars, exchange controls being still in full swing, seemed a good way of being able to pay one's way beyond the border. There was certain to be a market for them whenever one had to draw purse. How many lire we could expect, how long these dollars would have to last me, I didn't know; at the moment we were still quite a way from Italy. Pierre told us that two blow-outs in one morning might well be a coincidence and not necessarily an indication of an impending serial repetition. Silently, I dredged up two lines by Racine (correctly?):

*Seigneur! Trop de soucis entraînent trop de soins,
Je ne veux point prévoir les malheurs de si loin . . .*

Alas such was not my way. Anxious apprehension was the unbridled response to any possible future misfortune. I took my turn in the driver's seat, they folded their kitchen towels over their laps, began peeling eggs, cutting bread, hand-feeding me a length of ham sandwich at the wheel.

We were rolling along at quite a good clip. Our forced delays, Pierre told us, must never reach Allannah's ears. It would belittle her kind deed: she loved her car and had a high opinion of it; moreover she might, God forbid, feel that *she* ought to pay for those *new* new tyres.

Could *we* pay for any more if . . . ?

Simone said; none of us as yet had owned up to any exact amount of cash in hand. My mind conjured up the winery in the Loire, the account's office, the invoices . . . Firmly I switched it back to Racine.

In the event Pierre proved right. No more burst tyres, not as much as a puncture – the car performed impeccably (within its limits). All the way.

We got to Lyon, we crossed Lyon, Pierre navigating, we passed Vienne-sur-Rhône and the gates of La Pyramide, the three-star – four fourchettes – Michelin restaurant . . . There we would have liked to eat – oh, their cervelas, their unique house white wine, Le Condrieu. (La Pyramide – chez Point – in those lean, restricted post-war years, was one of the handful of restaurants declared *Monument National* by the government – that is, exempt of all rationing restraints.)

By mid-afternoon we were well beyond Valence: *in the Midi* . . . One sniffed the air, breathed the herbal wind . . . (Why did we ever give up living there?) Somewhere south of Orange, we saw another imposing *hostellerie*, a terrace open to a flowering garden. A sudden need to be still, to stretch, of a sustenance presented other than to monkeys in a cage. Enough of counting minutes. We stopped. The place was silent, empty, we were swiftly, elegantly served – not a tea *à l'anglaise*, just some China tea and a few *sablés* presented in fine porcelain on an

immaculate cloth. It was what we had needed, reposeful if short.

The bill was extortionate. I protested. They were indignant: did we realize where this was . . .? Their stars . . . (They had stars all right.) Pierre just drew his portefeuille.

We left, I marching out, head high . . . Halfway down the garden path, I realized that I was without my shoulder-bag (dollars and all . . .). But already the young woman receptionist came running after us swinging my bag, all charm and smiles. I thanked her. Pierre grinned, enchanted.

It was a good way still, down from Avignon, Aix-en-Provence, through back-country – one glimpse of that austere fragment, the basilica at Saint-Maximin-la-Sainte Baume, Brignoles: another crowded market town to pass through, down the coast by Fréjus, then on to the long pull along the Côte d'Azur: Cannes, Juan, Nice, Monte-Carlo, Menton, Ventimiglia, where we crossed the border into the Italian Riviera. Somewhere by the Ligurian, we saw an albergo still lit . . . We stopped. We called it a day. I forget where it was on that string of fishing ports, shipyards and small resorts on the Gulf of Genoa . . . Pietra Ligure it may have been, or Spotorno. *Quien sabe?* Whoever they were, they were welcoming, kind and helpful beyond any call of duty. If it was not yet midnight, it was not far from it. At what hour had we risen to our

alarm clocks on that morning?

Yes, they could give us rooms. A *matrimoniale*, a doublebedded one plus a single. *Prego. Subito. Not subito*, we said, not at once – we needed something to eat. We were led straight to a table under leaves – it was still balmy. Little beads of light switched on. One could hear the sea. Bottles of wine and Pellegrino water appeared. Was it *antipasti* we'd like? *Salume*, some ham? No; it was something hot we craved. Bowls of chicken broth with floating leaves were brought while solid food was being cooked – *not* warmed up – somewhere indoors. I would like to be able to say that it was the local dish, now much abused, *trenette*, those long, matchstick-shaped strands creamed with a basil pesto, or that some fish had just come in; again I cannot remember beyond that it had been honest Italian family food, and that we, reanimated now, devoured it happily.

We did leave at first light and we drove through Genoa and over the Bracco pass and we saw the adorable trio, the Duomo, the Battistero, the Tower at Pisa dropped down on their rectangle of grass as by the hand of God, and in Florence we stood in the Piazza della Signoria and in the Cappella Medici and trotted at pace through the Uffizi, the Pitti and the Bargello, and after nightfall we entered Rome by the via Flaminia through the Porta del Popolo. ◇