



EXQUISITE

Facets of
my France

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By Carsten Sprotte

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Dedicated to the French, who have polished and perpetuated their singular culture over a thousand years. Thank you for welcoming me with open arms. Thank you for providing the substance of almost everything I have named herein as exquisite. Yes, I have adored you the way a man does a woman, and you have made me who I am, the way a woman does a man.

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Foreword

If you have felt the call of France, if you have lingered in its light and revelled in its luxuries, if you have succumbed to its passions and tasted of its delicacies, you may wonder what it is all about, beyond your own delight. Paris is an apotheosis in the human quest to exalt and sublimate the senses. It is a place of things “carefully sought out” -- *exquisit* in Latin.

As an American still smitten after a quarter-century of life in France, I dive body and soul into this question through a collection of life fragments served up as an elaborate French *menu de dégustation* that will give you a taste of France’s multiple facets. It begins with language and ends with love. Along the way, each chapter is like a dish dedicated to a form of cultural expression. There are tastes of architecture, art, craftsmanship, cuisine, wines, fashion, fragrances, and music. There is no imposed order or chronology, and you can take whatever whets your appetite at any given moment.

With all the inroads Paris has made into your heart, she has also opened up pathways to a greater love affair. In terms more sensual than cerebral, EXQUISITE tells of the alchemical transmutation at work in our lives, of which Paris is but a catalyst.

An Exquisite Encounter

As a cowboy *does*, a Parisian constricts his *toes* into pointed *shoes*. If *does* and *toes* and *shoes* were French words, they would rhyme as one grand “O” like *beaux*, *eaux*, and *chateaux*. This I know, because I came to France to join the show. I discovered French when I was 19 and fed up with Texas bullshit. Two years later--*ô la vâche !*--I would be dodging dog dung on the Grands Boulevards and preparing for my grand initiation, my rite of passage. Now, a quarter-century later, the meaning of this self-imposed initiation begins to sprout, like so many dormant seeds in a sudden springtime.

There was a time when nobody bothered to ask immigrants why they came to America. The self-evidence of the answer might as well be inscribed in the Declaration of Independence: *We hold this truth to be self-evident, that all immigrants come to America for the sake of opportunity, opportunity, and opportunity!* Those who actually read the full declaration came for the pursuit of happiness. Many are still running. Others, like my own Danish father, left the rat race before the golden bowl was broken.

I was a *wrong-way* immigrant, leaving America for France. Did I somehow flee opportunity? Did I take the boat to a destination called welfare and despair? During the roaring 90’s, those suspicions were real, and nobody could have gone broke underestimating my financial gains.

On April 1, 2019, at the historic *café Certa*¹, I was asked this question for the one hundred and nineteenth time: *What brought you to Paris?*

This time, the question sprang from authentic curiosity. There were other occasions when the inquiry dissimulated a blaring bias: *how could you leave the greatest nation in the world (Texas) for a third-world welfare state?* That was more or less what my mother thought, at least at the beginning. In the end, her mind would fade away to banish all worry.

From time to time, the inquirer's impetus was quite the opposite :

“I would love to live there too! How did it happen to you?”

There is little time to answer such a question in the course of conventional banter. Imagine pulling out a Henry David Thoreau-style response:

“I came to Paris because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the quintessence of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of

¹ The *café Certa* was a stomping ground for Dada writers a hundred years earlier, but this had nothing to do with my presence there.

life, to live so exquisitely as to put to rout all that was not life, and elevate it to unknown heights.”

Forgive me, scholars. I have altered and hijacked this quotation, landing myself in Paris instead of on Walden Pond. Yet, I feel as though Thoreau might support me in this deviation. The quintessence of life is equally present in the exuberance of spring as it is in the bareness of winter. Life’s marrow is contained in the Baroque as in Zen, in sumptuousness as in simplicity. Many paths may lead to paradise.

What use is such discourse in an elevator-pitch culture? So, to the question of why I came to Paris, I invariably answer: *I came for Love*.

That is the most simple and truthful statement I can formulate. People make of it what they will. You, on the other hand, because you are reading my book, you shall not so lightly get off the hook! You will have the full-blown version, based on the answer I gave for the first time on that first day of April. It was a fresh spring varietal, budding from a mini-epiphany:

I came to Paris for the Exquisite.

As to what that might mean--for it is no small fling-- your imagination is the limit. You can start with the Latin, where *exquisit* means “carefully sought out”. From it are derived the English word *exquisite* and the French word *exquis*. Two words in a single title.

Beyond this etymology a banquet is laid. You must savor its many courses, ending with the *digestif*.

Him: “You must understand, I came to Paris for the Exquisite.”

Her: “I knew you’ve been having an affair.”

“It’s been going on a long time, my dear, but it’s no ordinary affair.”

“You’re irremediably in love with her, aren’t you? I know, I know...how could you not?”

“Yes, I suppose it was the suave sound of her words that enthralled me before all the rest. They were foreign, but I was like an infant who felt the words of his mother’s voice before understanding them. She had already harpooned my heart before I even met her for the first time. When that moment came, she was the image of what I had already heard. Her beauty was exquisite. She could not have been more superbly endowed by nature, yet magnified those gifts with sumptuous attire. Her arts were a splendor, her scents enticing. She prepared for me a banquet of divine delicacies and sumptuous wines. The sweetness of the earth became sublime. All the words her lips would form I would surely learn, and in her presence I would forever remain. Subjugated.”

Now you ask: Who is *she*? And what has she *done* to me?

Many have visited the country called France, but I encountered Her: *La France Exquise*. Hers is a culture that values nature, refinement and beauty above profit, progress, and performance. It is this culture that I espoused: *ma belle mariée*. The France to which I refer is not a nation, an economy, a flag, or a football team. I have no concern for the French with their silly pride, whining civil servants, and retirement plans. I write to celebrate France as the embodiment

of our universal quest for beauty. I refer to *Her* as a woman (*la France est une femme*), because *she* is the spirit of the sublime and the essence of all things exquisite.

Much of what I call exquisite is often referred to as *luxe*, or luxury. But luxury has a provocative edge, fraught with moral ambiguity. *A life of luxury* is spurned by some, whilst others find it seducing. From the Roman to the American republic, a common theme has emerged: luxury is a threat to the strong, virile, self-sacrificing values on which an empire is built and sustained. Add to this a powerful Christian undercurrent that condemns the gratification of the senses incarnated by womankind, and behold: you have made luxury into something both reviled and revered. You have confused Eve with evil, and instilled a fear of the feminine.

What some consider superfluous may in fact contain something essential. Luxury and aesthetics speak of the nature of our longing and our potential.



I - Language and Light

*It was the light of that language...the most exquisite I know.
There is power in a voice, beauty in words, and genius in grammar.
This was my French Revelation.*

Light to the World

In the beginning was la Parole (the Word). Elohim uttered the clarion call let there be light! in the Hebrew language (יְהִי אוֹר). Those words begat heaven and earth, and still resonate in the hearts of Abraham's contending offspring thousands of years later. The second call to bring light into the world was French: *Que les Lumières soient !* Reason was the source of the Enlightenment's lumières, and the French language bore the beams of this light to the world. This became for the French a self-evident mission statement, such that the expression *le rayonnement de la France* is as well-known to them as "land of the free and brave" is to Americans.

In reason as in art, the French have a particular obsession with light. Some etymologists may insist that the French word *luxe* (luxury) is derived not from the Latin word *lux* (light), but instead from *luxus* (sumptuous excess). Still, is not *luxus* derived from *lux*? Regardless, language defines the experience of luxury. As an art of the most refined sensory experiences, luxury requires a medium to express these--a language capable of forming the subtlest of sentiments and distilling with clarity the most lofty ideals. In the same way that a fine champagne can only be appreciated in a proper *coupe or flute*, so also the delight of *dégustation* demands to be named by the perfect words. The medium accentuates the intrinsic qualities of what it conveys.

The French language is, of and by itself, a luxury experience. Those who reduce this to snooty national pride are like tone-deaf music critics. The dwindling few who still master the language feel something greater than pride; they feel immense admiration, if not adoration. Some would give their life for the language, even before their country. Surely I am exaggerating? In 1896, George Clémenceau praised the French language as the genius of its people, the glory of its past...the invincible hope, the solid anchor of the future. Regardless of how proud your countrymen may be that everything is bigger and better where you come from, can you imagine any of your statesmen proclaiming this about your native language? That was only a starter. Nineteenth century French writer Anatole France pontified :

"La langue française est une femme. Et cette femme est si belle, si fière, si modeste, si hardie, si touchante, si voluptueuse, si chaste, si noble, si familière, si folle, si sage, qu'on l'aime de toute son âme, et qu'on n'est jamais tenté de lui être infidèle. "

Yes, he is truly idolizing the French language as if it embodied his feminine ideal: so beautiful, so proud, so modest, so bold, so touching, so voluptuous, so chaste, so noble, so familiar, so wild, so wise, that you love her with all of your soul and could never even be tempted to be unfaithful to her. What has Anatole been sniffing? Here is a man intoxicated by his love of the French language. Before Anatole France incarnated his feminine ideal in the language

itself, the language has, since the time of the troubadours, been dedicated to conquering the heart of the beloved.

Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* was so eloquent in his wooing that he could have won over Roxane, his precious rose, in spite of his nose....if he had only believed. *Cyrano's* tragedy in love was not his prominent proboscis; instead, it was the impossibility of incarnating sentiments that were too perfectly spoken to ever exist. Assassinated, he learns this too late, and in his last breath--the finale of his 1600 alexandrins--he praises his own panache. His words resound like an eternal epitaph. The theatre is sold out, and the audience bursts into applause as if *Cyrano* were a rock star.

What, exactly, is panache? It is the hero's humility and humor, making light of his own tragedy; it is the smile, ever so slight, that crowns his sublime. It is Jupiter with a feather in his hat, an iron tower that evokes lace. By virtue of its excess, it is akin to the spirit of luxury. Hatched by the same hen, we might say.

Language of the Feminine

What is it about this French language that inspires such admiration, if not adoration? Some have said that it is the most difficult language to master, but that in itself would not inspire many to learn it. What makes it exceptional and exquisite? What gives it such panache? I believe the answer has everything to do with our enduring attraction to beauty. Even though the language has been internationally recognized for its grammatical clarity and precision, French is more about beauty than about communication, and even less about business transactions.

Grammatical gender and sexuation are by no means equivalent, but neither are they entirely disconnected. It is difficult to ignore the particular stamp of the feminine on the French language. These foundational notions just happen to be of the feminine gender in French: *la langue* (language), *la France*, *la beauté*, *la raison* (reason), *la sagesse*, *la liberté*, *l'égalité*, *la fraternité*, *la république*. Jean d'Arc was a rallying figure for the Royalists before the Republic was personified as Marianne, a name derived from Marie. Notre Dame has visceral significance in the language and soul of France.

French is the language of luxe because it emerged from a culture containing all the seeds of luxury; through a process of ongoing symbiotic interaction, the language produced a unique cultural florescence. Its vocabulary thus evolved to capture every nuance. The spoken tongue has been deliberately refined to balance vowels and consonants. Its prosody has been perpetually polished like a precious stone. For example, the words “la plus élégante” are pronounced “la pluzélégante”, in adherence to the phonetic rule of elision, referred to in French as liaison. The final consonant of a preceding word blends into the opening vowel of the word that follows. This is why the language enralls the ear much like a velouté tantalizes the tongue. Even poisson pourri sounds poetic, though it's nothing but rotten fish.

Some might object that Texans achieve a similar effect with such expressions as “where's the beef?” (pronounced wherezabeef). While they may be capable of simulating such elegant phonetic effects, their intent is to sound laid-back and down-to-earth. Heaven forbid any signs of literary learning. Deep in the heart of Texas, elegance is no match for ease.

The French language has purposefully refined its prosody without downgrading its grammatical precision. There is never ambiguity regarding who the subject is and when the action is occurring. For example: “Ils entrent” pronounced eelzEntre. This is the third-person plural, present-tense conjugation of the verb “to enter”. The ending consonant is ignored in the spoken language to give full resonance to the vowel. We hear the subject as plural only because of the elision between the subject and the verb. The “E” (pronounced rather like “awe” in English) is like a musical note: the longer life-span gives the sound time to expand. In the ears of Nietzsche, the French language sounded like a *petite musique de chambre*.

The process through which the French language was progressively refined echoes back to the sacred languages of ancient times, notably Sanskrit and Hebrew. Sanskrit was recognized by

NASA computer science as the most perfect human language. French has too many foibles to compare, but it is nevertheless a very deliberate collective masterpiece of human creation, in search of a form of purity. It proceeds from the same worldview as the harmonious and homogeneous architecture of a city like Paris. Indeed, for those who do not speak French, this analogy is perhaps useful to understand its aesthetics.

The musicality of the language itself is such that French *chansons* sound more like vocalized poetry than music. Compare the lyrical British melody Greensleeves, or any Broadway musical or any Beatles tune with a famous French song such as Jacques Brel's "Ne me quitte pas" or Edith Piaf's "Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien". The lyrics of the French songs, and the feeling with which they are pronounced, steal the entire show. If you have an ear for the language, the songs will give you goosebumps; without lyrics, you'll ask for your money back. In contrast, the Anglo-American tunes have all been adapted as purely instrumental music that keeps us humming.

La fin d'une époque ?

Dear French friends, would you please stop being so bamboozled by American catchphrases such as elevator pitch, power plates, business plans, cashflow, co-working, and crowdfunding just because they make you feel like a high-tech, in-the-know, Marlboro-man entrepreneur? Call to mind George W. Bush's hilarious attack on France's social democracy:

“The problem in France is that they have no word for entrepreneur”.

Over half of the English vocabulary was derived from French in the wake of the Norman invasion. Entrepreneur only happens to be one word that survived the transfer perfectly intact.

Dear French friends, you are quick to forget the beauty of your language. You talk her down, toss her around and bruise her up. And you think she'll stick around with you and never leave? I sentence you to isolation in the Mississippi backwaters for forty days and forty nights, where you will hear nothing but gibberish drawl. When the day of your emancipation comes, when the Light in August again upon you shines, and when you rise from that pit to once again hear the sound of your language broadcast from afar, then you will fall to your knees and weep. You will drink every word as infants suck their mother's milk.

The current capitulation of French to Globish marks the final victory of utility over beauty in a war that has been going on for more than a hundred years. This tipping point of Western civilisation presents two poignant paradoxes. To begin, the absolute amount of wealth has never been greater in the history of the world, nor has the total amount spent on luxury goods. The more people grasp for luxury with money alone, the greater the emptiness of every glossy package. Furthermore, just as French is receding, so also is the rule of reason and the capacity for intelligent conversation. The peoples of our “advanced” capitalist civilisation appear to be regressing towards an infantile state of spoon-fed simplifications, even though freely-accessible knowledge is expanding exponentially. The darkness from which the enlightenment sought to deliver mankind is swiftly sweeping over today's mass consciousness. Just as thousands of species have already been eradicated from the earth, so also the steam-roller of mass-produced culture is crushing human and intellectual diversity.

I have not come to mourn *la fin d'une époque*; the winds blow as they will, and in the end the light will prevail. The destruction of life on earth is more tragic than the demise of French, but even the earth will overcome homo sapiens in the end. We may not be able to preserve this delicate language, but we can cherish the rare and fragrant flower it has offered us while it is still here. Remember her, before the golden bowl is broken, the silver cord severed, and the magnum spilled. If we cannot save the French language, we should still never give up our aspiration to restore beauty in our world.

Calme, Luxe, et Volupté

The French language has been my doorway into the experience of all that is exquisite, just as I have experienced the language itself as something exquisite. Passing through its gates has brought me a sense of freshness, liberation, and joie de vivre. Language programs us in subtle ways, which is why a single language is so limiting. I made a good start at learning Spanish and German, but it was only the complete immersion in the French language and culture that changed me. I devoured the French language as a lover.

There are French words to name things that would not have existed for me without French, such as *amuse-bouche* or *haute-couture*. These require explanation rather than translation. There are other words that have an official equivalent in English (such as *embrasser*, *sensuel*, *beau*, *la volupté*, *la féminité*, *un baiser*, *le ravissement*, *l'enchantement*) but that come wrapped in many subtle layers of implicit connotations. This allows us to relive a known experience in a fresh way--such as a kiss (*un baiser*).

Un délice is something deliciously delightful, not restricted to edibles. In the same way, the French can refer to a woman as *délicieuse* on a level far removed from lust. Describe a man as sensual in English and watch those eyebrows round you raise. The same description in French, *un homme sensuel*, is standard and fitting for any man particularly attuned to the pleasure of the senses (not only sex). Similarly, *la volupté* renders the English word voluptuous almost vulgar and trivial. *La volupté* is a state of being in which all that is pleasurable--even a sip of Sancerre--is felt with sexual intensity. This is the atmosphere of Beaudelaire who wrote about *calme, luxe et volupté*.

Finally, there are English words of unmistakable French origin, whose meaning is equivalent, but whose sound in French is more rich and satisfying. The sound of *la grâce* resonates in the throat and mouth like a fine cognac releasing its essence. Over a two-second life-span, the vowel blooms and fades, and that has made all the difference. Similarly, because the English were unable to pronounce *moelleux*, they transformed it into mellow. For certain, as English words go, mellow is softly-padded, but it is not *moelleux*. Watch the lips and listen to the sound of your most attractive Frenchman or woman as they very deliberately pronounce the word *moelleux*. The word is reaching out to smooch you. A French kiss is only a whisper away. What about the name of this book? The French word *exquis* does have the same meaning as the English *exquisite*, but with slightly different poetic pathways. For example, Paul Verlaine's poem "*L'heure exquise*" forever altered the feel of moonlight. In the highlands of Scotland and the backwoods of Texas, it is difficult to speak of the exquisite without sounding precious. The use of the word *exquisite* has diminished dramatically over the past 200 years (see Google Ngram) both in French and English. Neither the industrial revolution nor the information age have brought anything exquisite into our world.

Even the name France is really not the same as La France. The rapidly-uttered English version of France rhymes with ants. The French version is a hymn unto itself. I still remember the first time I heard the late President François Mitterand's new year greeting to the nation. With the demeanor of a Roman emperor, 80 generations down the road, he majestically pronounced in closing:

“Vive la République ! Vive la France !” That final sound seemed to send ripples across the vast, wavy countryside. It also touched something in my heart. I wasn't born or educated in France, so there was no patriotism in this emotion. It was the sound of those words. It was the light of that language, the most exquisite I know. There is power in a voice, beauty in words, and genius in grammar. This was my French Revelation.

Final words

The nuance evoked by a word does not exist unless you are able to sense it, and you can't sense it if you don't focus your attention on it. You can't focus your attention on something you don't even believe exists. My mother, bless her soul, would often scoff at me for buying bottles of wine she considered too expensive. She could taste no difference between mediocre and excellent wine. As for champagne, in her later years, you could replace it with sparkling grape juice without her knowing the difference. What she lacked in olfactory discernment, she made up for in vocabulary. My very same mother, armed with her book of Robert Frost poetry, awakened me early to the sound of words.

What are the most exquisite French words, you may ask? I would say they are words that exist not to be translated, but to be experienced in their particular mode of being. Here are ten to taste before you die: *la joie, l'émerveillement, l'enchantement, le ravissement; la tendresse, la finesse, l'ivresse; l'élan, le génie et la grâce*

Prepare to meet some of them as you read on.



II - Rivers and Rooftops

How does it feel to tango with the timeless?

It feels mysterious, wondrous, grandiose.

That is Paris.

What about falling for the charm of a place?

*It feels like someone has tickled your toes,
or opened a new door to home.*

That is Paris, too.

Veules-les-Roses

It is a failed space mission. Your name is astronaut McLowsky. You have dropped from the sky, somewhere...almost anywhere...in France. Amboise, Arles, or Avignon. Sancerre, Saint-Emilion, or Saint-Cirq-Lapopie. Vaison-la-Romaine or... Veules-les-Roses.

McLowsky: Mission control, do you read me?

Mission control: Roger, your mission has aborted in France. You're one lucky bâtard, McLowsky.

McLowsky: "I'm near a village — getting closer — the sign says "Veules-les-Roses"

"Either you're the next Dr. Zeus, or just feeling a bit dizzy. Can you pull your wits together and spell that, McLowsky?"

"What's the point of having learned French if I have to spell the damn thing to the brightest engineers in the world?"

"Take it easy, McLowsky. My name isn't Picard. We've geolocated you. You've landed near the beaches of Normandy, but the war's over. You're late."

"Now's my chance to discover what those fine men died for. Can you google the place and let me know what I can expect from the natives here?"

"Says it's one of the most beautiful villages in France."

"Come on, haven't you been to France? Half of them say that, and they're never entirely wrong."

"Ok, next fact. It boasts the shortest river in France, with pure water flowing from alabaster heights right down through the village and into the sea."

"Good to know. I was getting tired of all that insipid H2O in plastic packaging. Next?"

"Says its oysters are the best in the world. Nutty and iodine flavor, as if they were a gift from both land and sea."

"Now you're talking. How about a restaurant recommendation?"

"Hold on. Google is yielding some funky results for our search on Veules-les-Roses. Holy cow, have a look at this, McLowsky! If you can crack the code, it sounds like you may have found the gates to paradise."

*A Veules-les-Roses
Tickle your toes.
Les fruits de mer
Y sont légendaires.
Beneath alabaster heights
Where waters meet
Salty and sweet,*

*Je pêche la perle
amongst petals of pink,
precious beyond price.
L'origine du monde.
Le mystère de la mer.
A Veules-les-Roses
Sits the secret
Seemingly nobody knows.*

The pristine earth offers its unique expression of beauty in every land, but in the course of human history there came to be a place of perfection called France: a nation of geometry, of ideal forms, itself conceived in the form of a hexagonal star. Enveloped by five distinct mountain ranges and three coastlines, its inner landscapes are defined by five large rivers and fifty-five affluents. These have sculpted France into a generous womanly body of hills, curves, and hollows. The Louvois fountain, near the Palais-Royal in Paris, features women — breasts revealed — representing four great rivers: La Seine, La Loire, Le Saône, Le Rhône, La Garonne. These are the givers of life. A woman is the giver of form, and the great river cultures of the Near East, from Egypt to Mesopotamia to the Ganges, all paid tribute to the goddess. In France, the goddess was never entirely stripped of her glory. The most iconic cathedral in Paris, as well as Chartres, was dedicated to the mother of Jesus.

Voice of Villages

The Germans have an expression “happy like God in France”, and the English concede that the country’s only flaw is to be inhabited by the French. The Hindus hold the cow sacred, while the French know that their finest cheeses — holy be their name — require des vaches heureuses (happy cows).

A Texan cowboy gone amuck, how fitting for me to make my own soft landing in the cow dung of a French pasture. Bucolic stinkiness is the very stuff of French culinary grandeur; the French represent themselves as a rooster vocalizing proudly upon a mound of manure.

The rooster was on time to wake me that late-summer morning in 1991 — one of my very first in France. I rose to the window of my auberge to see cows grazing in a pasture bordered by hills and woodlands and a brook weaving its way through the meadow, disappearing under a stone bridge. Apples were ripening within reach of my window, and in the distance, following the contours of the valley, the rooftops and church spire of the nearest village beckoned me to visit.

In that moment, near Mirecourt in the eastern province of Lorraine, I felt nostalgia for a paradise lost, but also a bubbling delight in the discovery of an old world that was still vibrantly alive. As a violinist, vibration had brought me to Mirecourt, the seat of France’s greatest violin makers, the heirs of Stradivarius. Unchanged after five-hundred years, the violin belongs to the eternity of ideal forms. It is this feeling of timelessness that also gives depth to the experience of a place.

The marvels of the ancient Indo-European world have vanished. Of Egypt, Babylon, Persia, Phoenicia, Athens, and Rome, only relics remain. Dead are the civilizations that gave rise to them. The integrity of France’s architectural history has been preserved. Its admirable edifices — cathedrals, châteaux, city halls, and other private and public architectural gems — continue to animate French life. The old tree called la France has produced successive shoots over many centuries, but still remains the same tree. The same morning clamor can be heard in the street markets, the same language enthalls the theatre audience, the same bronze church bells ring, and the very same violins sound their inimitable, mellow chords.

France evokes in me the wonder of timelessness. I sense the subtle waves of a recent and distant past that continue to roll up against the shore of my present reality. Every landscape seems to invite contemplation and appreciation. I am not a painter...fortunately. Otherwise, I would have been so caught up in one place as to never make it to the next.

How does it feel to be charmed? *Tombé sous le charme.*

It’s a bit like being gently tickled. Someone or something else is doing it to you, but you can’t explain the effect on you. Why is that particular spot sensitive? Well, perhaps with some attention you can explain it.

Just as the French have been molded by their language, they have shaped their towns and countryside into a harmonious whole. They have created an art of inhabiting the land. The naked earth is incommensurably beautiful, yet mankind can still create beauty from it and upon it. A village that appears like an organic growth within the landscape is an ornament and not an eyesore. This is a good starting point for architecture — and also for charm. It may also be a good starting point for a re-invented world, closer to nature and closer to our true selves. The truth beneath the charm is that we have a deep longing, not for what used to be, but what could yet become. We cannot stop dreaming of that better world that is possible. The voice of the villages rises up to remind us.

Rooftop rhapsody

I feel a sense of deep aesthetic satisfaction every time I see a village that blends into its surrounding environment. It's a reassuring feeling that things are as they should be. I have encountered this in every region of France, without exception. It begins with the rooftops, most visible from afar or from the air. What a marvel for the migratory geese! We should all take a higher view.

Roussillon, in Provence, is a jubilation; its warm-colored clay-tile roofs are set against hills of intense ochre hues. Quézac, in the rugged Cévennes, is a rock and wellspring; its roofs are of thick slate, shaped and layered like fish scales. Mégève, in the mountainous Savoie, is crisp and cozy; its chalets are covered with wooden shingles drawing life from nearby forest slopes. Duclair on the Seine is damp and fair, nestled in the river's curl, like a Norman maiden's hair; its chaumières are thatched of thick hay, layer upon layer.

The quaint village is one facet of French architecture; the other is the majestic elegance of its grand monuments: cathedrals, châteaux, mairies, and other public venues. The sumptuous châteaux of Ile de France and the Loire Valley are adorned with finely hewn and polished shingles of charcoal-grey slate.

What was to become the incomparable capital city of Paris, began as a village on an island of the Seine. There was a river, and there were rooftops. These remain defining elements of Paris. Its inimitable zinc rooftops — a cloak of urban elegance--are forever wedded to earthen-orange chimney tops. This is but one of Paris' many brand images.

Over the ages the city has been and continues to be fashioned, whilst maintaining a remarkable aesthetic homogeneity. Just as you could land anywhere and France and know that you are in France, so it is with the hodge-podge of quartiers that comprise Paris. Parisian-style permeates the whole. There are tree-lined boulevards, cafés on every street corner, sumptuous edifices, and ornate public parks. All of these exist within a dense historical continuum, where some event in recorded history took place wherever you happen to be standing.

So it is that I experience life in Paris as luxe. While some may conceive of luxury as a shopping spree on the rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, I feel exaltation in the art of just looking around, as opposed to only looking ahead or at my smartphone. Over the past twenty years of living in Paris, not a day has gone by when I have not snapped (or felt like snapping) a photo souvenir. My fascination fails to fade.

Miracle at Le Meurice

I can intensify this exalted state to the extreme when I recall how Paris was saved by a sliver of fortune in 1944. Hitler had given instructions to the Nazi commander and governor of the then-occupied Paris, Dietrich von Choltitz, to destroy it. In Hitler's words: "The city must not fall into the enemy's hand except lying in complete rubble". All was in place for the final order. The great monuments were mined. The Seine was set to flood the city. In the final hours, the fate of Paris would be decided at the Hôtel Meurice, during a secret dialogue between von Choltitz and Swedish diplomat Raoul Nordling.

Even though Nordling promised to arrange safe passage for von Choltitz's family who otherwise would be assassinated for his treason, the Nazi commander nevertheless took the risk of sacrificing his family in order to save Paris. As he pondered this terrible choice, he did not put into the balance the thousands of lives he would save. No, those were faceless humans that could not possibly mean more to him than the faces of his very own loved ones. What was it then, that he could not bring himself to do at the final hour?

Was Paris like some immortal idol, such that by saving it he might redeem his soul?

In the final hour, Von Choltitz delivered his verdict, but in the final minutes, Nazi Lieutenant Hegger decided to override his order and detonate the explosives anyway. In the final seconds, Hegger was shot by Lanvin, a Parisian engineer who had been captured to assist in the demolitions.

Majesty prevails over might.

When an event is that close to occurring, it is almost as if it really did. The flickering candle of quantum uncertainty leaves you hanging between dreadful cold sweat and infinite gratitude. There is an alternative reality in which I am grateful not to be present. What can better accentuate the value of something than its imminent destruction? Imagine that you, a child of love, might not have been conceived at all had your parents not taken that honeymoon trip to Paris!

The Eternal and the Ephemeral

Eternity ebbs sous le pont Mirabeau as the Seine says goodbye to Paris, carrying with it a thousand words of love unlocked from its bridges. With their silly locks, those millions of lovers wanted their feelings of love to last forever.

How does it feel to tango with the timeless? It feels mysterious, wondrous, grandiose. That is Paris. What about falling for the charm of a place? It feels like someone has tickled your toes, or opened a new door to home. That is Paris, too.

One is the tower and the arch that exalt their makers into immortality; the other is delicious, delicate, and ephemeral: the sweetness of decrepitude, the smell of a place you will come home to, the final glow of the autumn leaf. Here we are near the secret of the Paris magic show. Watch closely this sleight of hand: now you see it, now you don't! What you first saw was a glimpse of grandeur -- — great works of steel and stone, standing firmly forever.

And there are times when you want to live forever.

Then, under the late-maturing sun, you discover century-old wisteria vines that round the zinc-eaves run. All beauty is gently fading into a blur. Paint while it lasts! You want to be brush-stroked into a tableau yourself, and dissolve into the great Beauty--the charm of the cosmic whole. You want to lose yourself in the eternal ebb and flow.

France has offered it all, beyond what money can buy: the eternal and the ephemeral.



III - Pyres and Spires

*From the pyre must once again rise a lofty spire.
By this noble aim, the destiny of France is defined.
Rise, Our Lady, for yours is the kingdom.*

Paris I Burn

April 15, 2019. As flames consumed its spire, I thought of Notre Dame as a pyre. What greater destruction could have been construed, so deeply embedded in the symbolic soul of Paris? What more sumptuous sacrifice could be offered? What more memorable of a fire-branded Easter, with resurrection now the talk of the town? And on the third day, she rose again.

The historical immensity has been met with emotional intensity. The womb of Paris was in dismay, but her integrity was saved. Sumptuous and superfluous, eternal and essential, Notre Dame de Paris remained to ignite the spirit of those she enchants. What was burning in your heart at that moment? As for myself, I began writing this very book, the original title of which was *Paris I Burn*.

Much of the world wept. Some stirred suspicion and hostility. Within hours, France's greatest fortunes pledged hundreds of millions of Euros to reconstruct the monument. Meanwhile, the nation's proletariat railed as always over the rich doing nothing to improve their miserable lives. Bernard Arnault, the architect and head of the LVMH luxury empire, raffled the giving game with his promise of 200 million Euros. Blessed is a democracy that allows free men to give freely even when the mob manifests its malevolence.

Monsieur Arnault reminds me of an old friend named Harno (pronounced exactly like "Arnault"...at least for the French). Harno is a very old friend indeed...paleolithic in fact, but faithful over the years. I call him to memory after all these eons because he was the founding father of what we have come to call luxury.

Harno was a tribal chief of the Kwakiatl people. On one stone age special occasion, I remember Harno ordering the preparation of a great pyre, on which he would burn the most precious objects known to his people. There were elaborate costumes, coral chains, large animal horns, copper ornaments, and essential oils from rare herbs. Harno had invited the entire tribe, along with neighboring tribes and their chiefs. There would be a sumptuous offering of food and drink for all, and once the feast was over, all would be consumed.

Born and raised in a frugal family and a conservative country where such practices are anathema, I questioned Harno about why he would destroy all his most precious belongings and expose his tribe to hunger.

Harno recognized himself as the most magnificent of chiefs, and he explained that this ritual served to establish himself as such in the eyes of all. You'd have to be magnificent, fearless, and confidently in tune with the magical powers that sustain all things, to dispense with your wealth so extravagantly. In consort with the cosmos, Harno believed that he would be able to conjure even greater abundance from what was sacrificed.

In turn, I attempted to explain to Harno that the most admired men of a future epoch would accumulate unprecedented sums of wealth. Unfortunately, Harno didn't have a conceptual framework for understanding ownership and capital. Trying to make the monetary unit something tangible for him, I suggested that each unit would procure him one small fish. I added that his distant progeny, Monsieur Arnault, would accumulate 104 billion of these.

Perplexed over why someone would stock such bounty, he replied :

“A pile of fish stinks after three days. I like to catch my fish fresh from the sea, where there are always plenty...maybe even more than 104 billion.”

He turned to me with an expression of grandiose amusement:

“I am more magnificent without money!”

The festival I described above was not the only kind that characterized the extravagance of chiefs like Harno. On other occasions, he invited rival chiefs and bestowed upon them the most sumptuous gifts. Such generosity warded off wars by making strangers seem and feel like friends. We could label this “gift-oriented foreign policy,” the stone-age subtleties of which will escape certain contemporary world leaders, Neanderthals as they are.

We have conveniently concluded that our modern western society has made life so much better for so many. This thesis is most eloquently developed by Stephen Pinker in his seminal work “The Better Angels of our Nature”, much acclaimed by billionaire Bill Gates. But Pinker never talked to my old friend Harno, who would have told him that the meaning of life was to be found in awe, not in material well-being. Harno's life was not brutish and short. He felt divine. Long before luxury, he encountered something of *luxe*. Though he would perish in pain, he did not live in vain.

This ecstatic, mystical quest for the divine within man is the undisclosed origin of what we have come to refer to as luxury. It often appears to us as an unreasonable, even immoral, search to fulfill seemingly superfluous desires. The consumption of “luxury products” may indeed be vacuous and illusory, but luxury at its essence embodies perfection, abundance, vitality, and joy. It has given meaning to the word exquisite.

Before Luxury became conspicuously materialistic, *luxe* was profoundly spiritual.

Magnificence

This brings us full-circle back to Mr. Arnault, whose wealth is derived from man's enduring desire to experience luxury. When Mr. Arnault pledges 200 million euros to resurrect the most emblematic of Paris monuments, it's not just about advertising. He is invoking the power of myth.

Mr. Arnault's lavish gesture brought to memory yet another very old (and very dead) friend, from the more recent period we call ancient Rome. His name was Maximus. Not only does he bear a certain physical resemblance to the finely-chiseled Arnault, he too was a patron of public magnificence. Euergetism was a cardinal value for the notables of Rome, and private displays of extravagant wealth were forbidden by sumptuary laws. Unfortunately, the grandiose edifices that bore witness to Maximus mostly perished in the pyre of Pompeii.

Just as French culture derives from the Latin language and a Roman idea of law, Mr. Arnault is a direct descendant of Maximus. His contribution to the resurrection of a vital edifice is a matter of honor, part of his personal pledge to shine the light of French civilization to the four corners of the earth. I do believe he has taken that on as a mission, equally important to him as his ambition to be number one.

With such prestigious albeit forgotten friends, you might wonder if Bernard Arnault is not one of them. I've yet to have a conversation with him, but I did once fill an ephemeral executive position within his empire of the exquisite. I owe him one when it comes to my appreciation of luxury.

Perhaps this is why, when I hear the plebeians decry the hypocrisy of his generosity, I make my protest public. It is not some fluke that Mr. Arnault heads a financial empire founded on luxury, instead of oil or arms. Luxury requires particular sensitivity and an obsession for excellence. Monsieur Arnault, soon to be the wealthiest man in the world, has previously expressed his annoyance over wealth comparisons. He prefers to be recognized as the man who built the world's greatest empire of luxury, the glory of France.

Rise, Our Lady

I do believe that Mr. Arnault was deeply moved by the destruction of Notre Dame. Its marvels of masonry required a level of dedication and craft that we can compare to hand-stitched haute-couture, one of the many expressions of excellence over which he presides. We may not readily associate Notre Dame with luxury, yet it is superfluous to spirituality as champagne is to thirst. The restoration of this timeless cathedral recognizes awe-inspiring beauty. As such, it does not denigrate the indigent as some accuse.

To open our eyes to the beauty and bounty of the world does not imply that we close our eyes on human misery. We can recognize and admire Arnault's vision, determination, and excellence, rather than judge him for not feeding the ducks. When the disgruntled gilets jaunes finally do rise to their aspired level of material ease (the ultimate goal of our social progress), their next likely hope will be to acquire one of the iconic brands over which Mr. Arnault presides. Those who despised him will enrich him further. As it is written: To the one who has will be given more, and he will have more than enough. But to the one who does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.

This was one of Jesus' more provocative parables. He also said:

“man shall not live by bread alone...” (qu'ils mangent de la brioche !)

Radical freedom will always terrify and outrage those who prefer a secure supply of crumbs and hormone-injected salmon. The worst of the French marks an enthralling contrast to the best of them. France can boast a model democracy, world-class civil servants, superb scientists, and excellent engineers, but the enduring fame and flair of the French will always be for aesthetics.

With a panache that has yet to be surpassed, Paris has embodied and defined our modern conception of luxury, standing as a millennial apotheosis in the human quest to sublimate the senses. Seen in this light (the lux of luxury), Mr. Arnault is something like an uncontested symbolic king of France. From the pyre must once again rise a lofty spire. By this noble aim, the destiny of France is defined. Rise, Our Lady, for yours is the kingdom.



IV - Spirits and Souls

Wine is much more than wine.

It is both matter and spirit.

Alchemic.

Elusive.

Light made liquid.

*I have long peered into a wine as into the eyes of my beloved,
in search of the most fitting name,
but always in vain.*

Une petite robe d'été

French wine culture is as much about joie de vivre, the simple pleasures of life, as it is about mastery and excellence. The two are complementary, like haute couture and prêt-à-porter. One is stunning in its extravagance, while the other reminds us how a simple summer dress brings sparkles to a man's eye. As French songwriter Alain Souchon sings: the world turns around a fool's game: sneaking a glance under a girl's skirt.²

The French word for a dress is une robe and it so happens that la robe also refers to the visual aspect of a wine. Upon this discovery, I started viewing every glass of wine as if it were dressed a certain way, alluring me to discover its other qualities.

For me it all began in a sunny, fairy-tale river valley set between two long legs of mountains, one called the Vosges and the other called the Schwarzwald. On both their lower slopes grow vineyards that become orchards, then fields that stretch their way to the banks of the Rhin. Villages speckle the valley and the hills, and their houses are like painted gingerbread, all in bright, bold colors. It is a land of bounty, disputed between nations once at war, but always true to itself. Abundance, thy daughter is named Alsace.

An Alsace wine is like a summer dress³, or a spring flower, or a ray of sunshine in the late autumn. Always served in its special green-stem glass, it blooms into cheer and delight. From its iconic slenderness, you can almost hear the sound of a flute escape. Enchanted, Mozartien, light with tartness ever so slight.

Even after all the drama that came of it for me, the name Alsace rings as something gentle, innocent, and light-hearted. Its wines--Sylvaner, Pinot gris, Riesling, Muscat, Gewurztraminer, Pinot Noir--are like jovial familiar friends. I can also remember six dresses she wore to my delight. I was but a young graduate babbling French, dazzled by my first visit to her postcard-perfect town of Colmar. The bright-eyed charms of Alsace blinded me to its kitsch.

Premature love is like *vin nouveau*, bubbling and best to be quickly drunk. Still, I have a world to thank her for, including my initiation to the most sumptuous of alsace wines, the Gewurztraminer Vendanges Tardives.

² Elles très fières
Sur leurs escabeaux en l'air
Regard méprisant et laissant le vent tout faire
Elles dans le suave
La faiblesse des hommes elles savent
Que la seule chose qui tourne sur terre
C'est leurs robes légères" - Alain Souchon, Sous les jupes des filles

³ Christian Dior concurred with me on this.

A Tale of Terroir

Abandon all attempts to fully appreciate French wine without understanding the untranslatable notion of *terroir*. I could explain that it refers to the characteristics of a specific geographical location, but would still fail to convey how the word resonates in the soul of every Frenchman louder than any church bells at mass. While the Catholic mass is ethereal and holy for some, le terroir is solid and sacred to all.

Le terroir holds the key to what makes every French agricultural product special, wine being the most refined expression. It is the basis of the elaborate French system of AOC (Appellation d'Origine Controlée or designated protected origins), that tells the consumer exactly where the product comes from. Bordeaux is known to the entire world, not as a town but as a wine region. For French wines alone, there are over 300 officially listed origins, yet these only represent half of French wine production.

The excellence of terroir products requires hommes et femmes de terroir, men and women with intimate knowledge and great respect for their unique parcel of earth. The French tend to hold these grounded persons in higher esteem than financial traders and investment bankers. If you were to ask an homme de terroir about his terroir, he might tell you a tale, or recite a poem as if it were about his beloved mother. A winemaker will fashion his wine according to his idea of the terroir. He is the conductor of a music that his terroir composes.

Thycyclide, the Greek politician circa 400BC, is quoted as stating:

“The vine and the olive tree delivered the peoples of the Mediteranean from their barbarian state.”

Even before he spoke these words, there is evidence that wine was already being produced in the Western Languedoc region of France, on a terroir to the northeast of Carcassonne that bears the name of the Roman goddess Minerva (le Minervois). Roaming across this rugged land, we do not expect to meet a philosopher-poet-winemaker, but how else can you describe Borie de Maurel when he describes his terroir and his winemaking?

The light that flows from above is potent and polyphonic. Its indigo is too intense and we only understand fragments of its message. When the north wind confronts the scalding south and the storm strikes the mountains, colors sweep over us like the sea at high tide. Clouds of flint and foaming gray, contours of violet and black current. A wine that will be has already been conceived.

Now stand still, listen and feel the vibration beneath your feet. There is both warmth and coolness, chaos and solidity. Sometimes, you want to take refuge in this earth, as you did in your beginning and as you will at your end. We are of the earth, and at every moment, in each of our acts, she is worthy of veneration. We must mold our activities to her rythmes, receiving her bounty rather than exploiting it.

In a mystery, the sky joins with the earth, and begets from this union an enchanted fruit, suspended in perfect balance between them. Its leaves make the wind sing, and its roots dive deep into slopes of sandstone, shale, marble, and limestone. The vine will harness all of these to bear its fruits.

We must, before all else, learn to be quiet and listen to the signs. Our mastery begins in humility. Nothing can be exacted from the earth. We cannot pull on the vine to accelerate growth, nor must we wage chemical warfare to avoid natural attrition. We must only remain attentive, with an eye on the moon, an ear to the earth, and our hands on the vines. The time will come.

The world may prefer Merlot and Syrah, but here we grow Carignan and Morvedre, best suited to our terroir. We manually harvest at their moment of perfection.

And when that time has come for the fermentation, we use no black magic, no quick tricks. We only seek with all our hearts to reveal the true nature of our terroir, like unto none other. Then, like the storm that shook the mountains, potent scents of liquorice, of violets, or even a touch of truffles, will burst from the glass. The wine will penetrate your being. Clothed in silk and velour, it carries the energy of heaven, earth, and man. Blending with your blood, this dear liquid friend will remind you that it has always been there within you.⁴

Its message, a fragment from the sky, has always been this: you are the miracle. Let the mystery of this gift flow through your veins; you will not feel dulled but instead awakened to a state of *ivresse*!

⁴ Inspired by the words and wines of Borie de Maurel, a winemaker after my own heart.

The Return of a King

When a client confers upon me the honor of searching out his dream home in Paris, the adventure begins with a conversation. In some cases, this conversation is like the *attaque* in wine tasting: the complexity of the wine --and the person-- will unfold over time. Maybe even over centuries.

A professional estate agent is required to know his clients. But what can you know of an actor's royal substance before steps off the stage? Are you dealing with a king of old or an emperor in new clothes? My mission had now been accomplished with an enigmatic client who holds a French name but hails from a foreign land. What remains is the enigma.

He invites me to visit his Paris masterpiece for a champagne toast. Nothing in this home has been left to chance; it is a remarkably deliberate creation. I notice in particular the darkwood, finely-chiseled desk looking out over a courtyard of chestnut trees in the dying of the light. I have never seen a desk quite like this one, with ivory inlays into a wood that appears incandescent like an extra old cognac.

"Your desk is rare and carefully sought out, I have no doubt."

"Macassar Ebony" he confirms, supplementing its latin origin "Diospyros celebica--fruit of the gods."

With his arms resting upon this opulence, I imagine him a commander of the free world in our age where freedom has become a masquerade. Maybe our free world is now but a small kingdom, maybe only a parcel. Royalty is the claim we hold on any domain, however incipient. I am certain he is a king in the center of his being.

It is a common but erroneous belief that opulence leads to decadence, because the source of human depravity lies within, not without. The natural world teems in abundance, and whoever should reign must do so with a mindset of plenty.

He invites me afterward to the restaurant *Le Violon d'Ingres* because he knows I have a thing for violins. To celebrate the new apartment, we begin with champagne. There are very few wines whose price can be expressed as a percentage of a Paris apartment. The 164th Edition of Krug is one of them. The Grande Cuvée is the sun around which all other Krug vintages revolve. I tell him it has been 12 years since I last tasted a Krug champagne, and that I am immensely honored. I am not accustomed to such honor, in fact, and feel slight discomfort at this display of unprecedented largesse.

One cannot choose such a champagne arbitrarily, but I do not yet understand the reason for his choice. He explains that it has been made from over a hundred wines, some dating back to 1990, and over 10 vintages, blending Pinot noir, chardonnay, and Pinot Meunier. It then matured eight years in the Krug cellar. We toast to his new Paris apartment, but there is more to be said about the champagne than anything else just now. We are mesmerized by the bouquet. He suggests apples, peach, and brioche, balanced by complex earth notes. I seem more sensitive to

the floral notes, and wonder if there is not an incipient smokiness. Silently sipping, we then concur that on the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, tightly focused, with a superbly refined mousse. The finish is zesty, complex, and exceptionally long. There are special words reserved for such experiences, and the one that comes to my mind is exquisite.

The life of a grand champagne models our own, when lived consciously; it is an evolution from base thoughts to more subtle sentiments. Set before me is a bottle of Krug and a soul on his singular journey. The dinner will offer me a few more clues to the enigma.

Over a year ago, I had found his future apartment in a stately building offering two elevators, one of which, originally intended for the domestics, descended into the cellar from the kitchen's back door. I was amused that he took notice of this detail: "how convenient for my wine!" Only later did I learn of his honorary membership in the Commanderie de Bordeaux; that he owned and curated one of the finest and most extensive wine cellars in the world; that a Médoc château also bore his name. What do you think would lead a man to travel from his far-away land, searching out the most exquisite French and other European wines over thirty years? Only blood can tell.

A secret is shared by wine and blood, and once you have wine in your blood it will not leave you. In terrible bloodshed, and with mortal regret, you may become severed from the vine--your homeland--but someday you will return to it.

Such describes the gripping intensity of the 17th-century Huguenot exile. Every drop of blood in their veins was French. They worked its soil and cultivated her (France's) vines. Their children played beneath her roofs and their deceased lay buried in her cemeteries. They were racially, linguistically, and culturally français de pure souche. But something non-genetic had contaminated them, altering ever so slightly their belief about that one thing that matters more than all the rest. That one thing, beyond all knowing, that demanded absolute and unquestionable faith, was called the Church, the ultimate banner for bloodshed.

And so thousands of Huguenots--the lucky ones at least--fled their homeland, la France cruelle, to populate distant shores. Those who remained would have to sacrifice their life or their conscience. It is one of the most tragic episodes in the history of France, but also a crucible in the quest for liberté. We must not forget freedom's fragile nature, as clouds of deep division threaten us with darkness once again.

Over three hundred years later, I appeared on the scene and took my cue to herald the homecoming of a Huguenot. A lion of largesse, an architect of great ambitions and a patron of all things exquisite, there can be no doubt: he belongs to the fraternity of the French. His return is like that of a king, and Krug is a king's champagne. In his cellar where 80 000 bottles sleep, I like to imagine each an exiled soul, its memory seeking release, its virtues calling to be named and acclaimed.

Wine Glory

There are wines worth their weight in gold, famous names accessible only to a few: Dom Perignon, Krug, Yquem, Petrus. Is this sensible or insane? I have been to these places and tasted these wines, never as a legitimate consumer and always as a guest or thanks to some other entitlement. Once I had an executive job at LVMH, the greatest empire of luxury the world has yet known (at least in absolute terms).

There are two faces to luxury wines and spirits. In a consumer world, luxury products serve as a proxy of self-worth for those able to acquire them. What is important to such people above all is to demonstrate to others through exterior signs that they are special. This serves to inflate the price indefinitely, since the illusion of self-esteem is worth the maximum that an eager ego is willing to pay.

The vanity of it all does not compromise the underlying excellence of the wine, but the excellence only really exists through an appreciation of its constituent qualities. You may not be a sommelier, but you will need to try your best. If you are fortunate to have between your hands a glass whose liquid contents are worth more than some earn from a month of labor, you must choose your attitude. You could choose to be upset by the scandal of it all, the insane disparity, the injustice, the futility. That would in fact be the easy choice, the one requiring the least effort. Or, you could choose to be far more deliberate in your appreciation of the gift between your hands. For once in your life, you could command all of your senses to man their place on deck and take hold of this once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Now you will know that its price is not excessive. It is the price to be paid for you to realize what is priceless: your own experience in this moment and the journey of your own soul.

The Sipping Point

Twenty years of Christian upbringing and twenty books on personal development were inconsequential in comparison to my first tasting of Hennessy Paradis, that supreme spirit blended from a hundred meticulously curated eaux-de-vie.

Just before this moment of grace, I will have visited the vineyards of Cognac under the late-maturing October sun. I will have toured the legendary Hennessy cellar with its treasures of ageing eaux-de-vie, some dating back to the year 1800. Then, by special invitation I will have passed through the gates of paradise, nestled on seven acres on the banks of the Charente near the town of Cognac, bearing the name Chateau de Bagnolet. It is a property belonging to the Hennessy family since 1841, fashioned into an effigy of art de vivre à la française. Pristinely white like alabaster, the neoclassical chateau features elements of French colonial architecture and a magnificent belle époque winter garden. The cathedral-like glass roof of the winter garden is adorned with special racks to dapple the light, like the leaves of a tree, illuminating an undulating mosaic floor meticulously composed of 250 000 tiny Greek and Italian marble tiles in green and grey hues. Over two hundred varieties of rare trees, bushes, and plants from all five continents offer their beauty to the garden.

Here I am again, back in that moment of grace. The ambiance is elegant and exotic. Fragments of Beaudelaire's verses drift through the air. All is *calme, luxe et volupté*. I already feel intoxicated by the air of Eden, but have yet to taste the famous Paradis. For this, I am led outdoors to gaze out over the vast estate sloping down to the green river. The mosaics of the winter garden mirror its undulation and flow.

Outside on the terrace, a round table has been prepared like an altar, covered by a white table cloth. Upon it sits the sacred bottle, shining like a gemstone, with its shape suggestive of a woman's torso or a Vuillaume violin. In this realm of aesthetic perfection, the three are one and the same. The transparent bottle reveals the color of the elixir: incandescent amber augmented by a hint of deep red. Not a frank color...more like a D minor chord. It not only reflects light but seems to emit its own singular glow. From sight alone, I have an idea of the intensity and complexity of the cognac. I am moved by the thought of those few remaining masters dedicated to their savoir-faire, huddling over the preparation of the precious cognac for decades like hens over their eggs. Over a hundred distinct eaux-de-vie have been maturing in their cellar-sanctuary, awaiting the precise moment when they will be selected for the blend. That is the final stage. Before it, other masters supervised the distillation of wine from ugni blanc grapes into eaux-de-vie. Only 10 of 10 000 wines will be selected for this distillation that occurs in the belly of fanciful copper alambics. Nor must we forget the masters who worked the vines to cultivate

those grapes and harvest them at the perfect moment. It is a chain of mastery that leads us back to the earth, from which came the miracle of the fruit.

Here now, upon the altar, *she* awaits (this bottle like her body), surrounded by three glasses that mirror her form. You cannot escape the golden ratio: the proportions of the glass to the bottle, from the wide base of the glass to its tulip top, and the measure of cognac that is poured into each. There is nothing taken for granted in this ritual, and indeed there is nothing we can think or do in this life that is not without consequence.

I am offered my glass, and take a first nose. The floral aroma stuns me, inescapable yet undefinable. I stand back and I give it a few twirls to coat the glass. The second nose unclothes her and reveals mature fruits...perhaps pineapple or passion fruit, complete with spicy and oak notes. This is what the sommelier tells me, since my tastes are not yet so finely attuned. The liquid is so silky and sensual on the palate that a nervous giggle of delight bubbles out of me. The ineffable sweetness penetrates my mouth and throat, leaving a final hint of *miel de bruyère de Callunes* (no ordinary honey) that will never leave me. It is a potent yet superbly elegant cognac. In every respect, it makes me think of Her.

In that hour, the truth was revealed that this precious elixir was a distillation of the fermented juice of the ugni blanc grape, otherwise dismissed as too acidic for white wine. What was base became noble. Suddenly, I no longer see myself as the guilt-ridden sinner the apostle Paul said I was, nor the insignificant man who had not achieved crowd-roaring renown because he failed to apply the seven habits of highly effective people. No, I was like the ugni blanc grape, destined through alchemy to become admirable. The cognac had not gone to my head, it had instead opened up a space of exceptional clarity. I could become my own alchemist and transmute the prima materia of my life into something uniquely magnificent. All had conspired together toward this moment, bathed in the amber twilight of the gods.

The ultimate metaphor of cognac would only come to me long after the event, as if many layers of life would first need to be soaked. The metaphor is this: we harbor within us a certain number of specific attributes, call them actual or metaphorical genes, each of which is going through a process of transformation during our life-span. These are like the eaux-de-vie (literally waters of life) that mature individually before the time comes for blending. On yet another level, since we are but fractals, we can see ourselves as unique eaux-de-vie, maturing in our bodies like barrels (some more barrel-like than others), awaiting our moment of perfection when we will be blended into the collective consciousness of all human experience, the ultimate Spirit.

We have always thought that hell is a place with others, because of others, but the only enduring paradise is the dissolution of our notion of a separate self.



V - Cuisine and Circumstance

She prepared for me a banquet of divine delicacies and sumptuous wines.

The sweetness of the earth became sublime.

*Those tastes from her lips I would come to name with savory sounds,
and in her presence I would forever remain.*

Subjugated.

From Fungi to Fleur de Lys

La pourriture rhymes with *la nourriture* and *la confiture*. Rot is only a day away from food that nourishes, from jams that delight. The French have ennobled rot, not only by their use of *pourriture noble* to produce divine sweet wines, but also through cheeses in fifty shades of blue (*roquefort, saint-augure, bleu d'auvergne, bleu de bresse, fourme d'ambert, bleu de Jex, bleu des Causses*, etc).

Charles de Gaulle once said “how can you govern a country with 258 varieties of cheese?” How can you, moreover, when 50 of them are deliciously decomposing? De Gaulle grossly underestimated the number of cheese varieties, which explains why he was ousted. Over a period of twenty years, I’ve made a sizeable dent in those innumerable cheeses, and their subtle expressions have left their mark on me.

Anathema to industrial control, there is not one standard taste for a cheese by the same name, and a cheese by any other name is far from being the same cheese. The magic of *le fromage* is akin to the mystery of wine; both are the result of a natural transformation, in constant interaction with their environment. With as many or more cheeses than distinct French wine origins, you end up with inexhaustible combinations. Occasionally, a wine and cheese will bond to release some new and indescribable gustatory *accord*. When that happens, you will not help but quiver with glee.

Alchemy begins with *materia prima*: all that is base contains the essence of the sublime, symbolized by the Fleur de Lys. That is one of the greatest truths we can grasp, and the French have served it to us on a platter.

The royal blazons may be adorned with the iconic *fleur de lys*, but French dinners fit for the emperor are generously garnished with *champignons*. How unexpected that humble fungi, proliferating in damp fields and forests, be held as a prized ingredient of *haute gastronomie*. There is only one fleur de lys, but there are myriad marvels of the mushroom kind: *la girolle, la morille, les pleurotes, la cèpe, la trompette de la mort, la coulemelle*...and the most valued of all, that oddly earthen, transcendent truffle.

Dishes of Diplomacy

It is the year 1896, October 6th. A long, delicious evening is being prepared. You have been invited to the dinner offered by Félix Faure, President of the French Republic, in the honor of the Emperor and Empress of Russia on the occasion of their first visit to France. In perspective, it is only one of many hundreds of dinners that have been and will yet be served at the Elysée Palace (and before it Versailles), illustrating the role of truffles in French diplomacy, and the uncontested supremacy of French cuisine in the Western world.

Your dinner will begin at 19:00 and end at 22:20, after which you are also invited to a special performance at the Opera Garnier, that most sumptuous of all stages. There will be time enough to converse about the following day's momentous event: the inaugural first stone in the construction of the Alexander III bridge that will be completed for the 1900 Universal Exhibition. There will also be time for the most subtle manners of diplomacy: a few advances and concessions made here and there over three and a half hours and twenty courses.

Twenty years later the Bolshevics will spoil the party. Remember your menu from that evening of 1896, before the golden bowl is broken.

Huîtres de Marennes (Oysters from Marennes)

Consommé aux Nids de Salanganes (Broth of Salanganes Nests)

Crème de Volaille (Cream of chicken soup)

Carpes de la Creuse glacées sauce Française (Iced carps from la Creuse in a French sauce)

Selle de Faon aux graines de pins (Venison rump with pine seeds)

Suprêmes de Poulardes aux Truffes du Périgord (Organic chicken breasts⁵ with Périgord truffles)

Terrines de Homard Toulonnaise (Toulon lobster terrines)

Barquettes d'Ortolans des Landes (Basket of ortolans from the Landes)

Oranges de Nice granitées (Iced oranges from Nice)

Citrons de Provence glacés (Iced lemons from Provence)

Faisans flanqués de Perdreaux rôtis sur Croustades (Pheasant flanked with roasted partridge served on a delicat crust)

Truffes au Champagne (Truffles served with Champagne)

Foie gras à la Parisienne

Salade Francillon (Specialty salad⁶, covered with truffles cooked in Champagne)

Aubergines farcies Fermière (Stuffed eggplant)

⁵ Need I comment?

⁶ This salad came into vogue in 1887 when it was presented in a play by Alexandre Dumas titled "Francillon". The method of preparation was explained by the actors, and a famous Parisian restaurant, Le Brebant, picked up on it. No simple salad to prepare, it's ingredients include potatoes, clams, celery, chives, rosemary, tagagon, olive oil, wine vinegar, chablis, beef broth, and butter. Topped with truffles.

Coeurs d'Artichauts à la Créole (Creol-style artichoke hearts)
Abricots et Reine-Claude Montmorency (*Abricots and sweet golden plums from Montmorency*)
Glaces aux Avelines (Hazelnut ice cream)
Gaufres Condé (Condé butter waffles)
Desserts (final sweets)

Vins (Wines)

Xérès Goutte d'Or, Château Lagrange en carafes (decanted), Sauterne en carafes, Champagne rosé en carafes, Château Yquem 1876, Château Laffitte 1875, Clos Vougeot 1874, Roederer frappé.

What I find striking in this menu, in addition to its enormity and the ubiquity of truffles, is how it attempts to represent as many regions in France as possible (with Alsace-Lorraine sadly gone missing). It is a culinary excursion to imagined coasts and countrysides: *une invitation au voyage*. The dinner surely mesmerized the imperial guests for whom it was prepared. I think of my own starry-eyed impressions, as a young man hailing from Texas, when exposed for the first time to a simple five course French dinner. Like the Emperor, I was overthrown.

One hundred and twenty years later, official lunches and dinners offered by the President will be pared down considerably, though still beyond compare with the roast beef and freedom fries proudly served at today's White House. A July 2018 lunch menu offered by President Emmanuel Macron at the Château de Versailles on the occasion of the Congrès de Versailles⁷ was restricted to four courses.

Fraîcheur de tomates de Provence
et crabe au basilic (Freshness of tomato from Provence with crab and basil)
Dos de loup de Méditerranée au citron confit (*Mediterranean sea bass with lemon confit*)
Fromages de France (French cheeses)
Fraises et rhubarbe acidulées,
crème légère à la réglisse (Tartness of strawberries and rhubarb with a light cream and hints of licorice)

Vins/Wines: Château Haut-Sarpe 2007 (Saint-Emilion Grand Cru Classé), Pouilly Fumé "Vieilles Vignes" 2015 (Jean-Pierre Bailly)

French culinary aesthetics have evolved. Notice for example the tendency to describe the sensation a dish is meant to offer, rather than the contents of the dish itself. We have no idea

⁷ The Congrès de Versailles is a momentous parliamentary family reunion of sorts where hundreds of senators rub elbows with hundreds of députés.

what *fraîcheur de tomate* really is, but we know how it should make us feel. The dessert emphasizes “lightness” and “tartness” even though we already expect that from strawberries and rhubarb.

During this historic Congrès de Versailles, the senators and representatives no doubt debated and disagreed, as their vocation prescribed. There is only one unifying moment, when factions can come together and ideologies dissolve. It is the finest of French rituals: the meal of abundance, a conversation cultivated like the cuisine, *à la table de la fraternité*.

Cuisine du Coeur

Seeking safe haven from civil unrest in Paris, a Parisian woman by the name of Babette Hersant finds herself exiled in 19th-century Jutland, the extreme north of Denmark. There she is given room and board by two celibate sisters who perpetuate their deceased father's austere Christian faith within their forlorn community. Babette will for many years serve as their cook...up until the moment of grace when she learns that she holds a winning lottery ticket in Paris, worth 10 000 francs. The amount would allow her to return to the capital of her heart and regain her cosmopolitan lifestyle. Instead, she chooses to prepare a feast for 12 guests on a special occasion in honor of her hosts. She spends the entire 10 000 francs on the most sumptuous ingredients, delivered by boat from France. Nothing of the like has been or ever will be witnessed in this bare and frugal land.

Subtle magic unfolds during the seven-course banquet. The pious sisters had vowed to refrain from pleasure, but all guests eventually succumb to an overwhelming feeling of goodness. Antagonists are reconciled. Old loves are rekindled. Course after course, *joie de vivre* trickles down into their desolate hearts.

None of the guests are aware that prior to her exile, Babette was the head chef of the renowned Café Anglais in Paris. The two sisters are dumbfounded when they learn at the end that Babette has spent every last cent on the meal. Babette tells them:

“A dinner for 12 at the Café Anglais costs 10 000 francs.”

One of the sisters objects:

“But now you have spent everything and will be poor for the rest of your life!”

To which Babette tenderly replies:

“An artist is never poor”.

The sisters are visibly touched by grace at this moment, and one of them declares:

“In paradise, you will be the great artist God intended you to be. Ah, how you will delight the angels!”

Perhaps you will recognize this story from the Danish-French movie *Babette's Feast*. Each time I have watched this scene (once per decade on average), joy wells up and with it flow the tears. I recognize it as an archetypal tale, but it speaks to me personally. I, the son of frugal Danish father and Texan mother, wedded a profligate France. It is the discovery of self, the unfolding into states of being as yet unknown to me, that holds all the personal significance.

Babette unexpectedly unlatches a passage to paradise on earth, when all were looking to Saint Peter to open the gates of heaven.

A Babette-figure entered my life around the same time as the movie, in the person of Edith, my first mother-in-law. The thought of her succulent garden tomato or green-bean salads, or the

gigot d'agneau à l'ail with *flageolets* still makes me salivate. There was something there to compare to many stunning three-star Michelin dinners to which I have been invited over the years. She had no Michelin stars, but more heart than she knew what to do with. All great cuisine emanates from the heart.

That was the secret, really. This affection was oozing out of her with nowhere to go but into the dish. What time and care is called on! A Sunday lunch required two hours of preparation. In a future stage of my life, I would become the cook for women, but in this opening scene, women cooked for me. All I had to do was go down to the cellar and select the wine.

My culinary awakening is a stupendous marker in my life, on that pollen path to an expanded existence. There is a *before* and an *after*. Should I leave France someday, I will have to confront the longest list of cravings!

Deep in the heart of Ariège

Texas has its rednecks, France its *pequenautes*. In their respective cultural contexts, the terms are equally derogatory, but when it's time for a feast they are worlds apart. Deep in the heart of *l'Ariège*, at the toes of the foothills of the Pyrenees, enclaved far from either sea, two rivers flow: one called la Lèze, and another called l'Arize. Along with l'Ariège (also a river), the sounds all blend together--*arizelezeiege*--before they empty into the big mama river: la Garonne. We are as deep into the backwaters (*l'arrière pays*) as we can go; in France there is no other place so utterly paleolithic. The river Arize carved a great cavern called le Mas d'Azil, home to the 10 000-year-old Azilien culture. Early Christians, and later the Cathars, would seek refuge in the cavern.

Agriculture has replaced hunting and gathering; tractors now till the earth instead of plows. Otherwise, there is little new besides Google under the earth-tiled roofs of Ariège. The rolling hills are like peaks and troughs of a seascape frozen in time. Hardly a French tourist ventures into this region, much less an American. I, too, would never have thought to go there, were it not my duty.

I had married a French girl (we were young), and this was the land of her father's family. They were farmers, in the most rudimentary yet noble sense; they raised everything and answered to nobody. There were cows, ducks, *pintades*, and rabbits; figs, blackberries, quinces and melons; green beans, tomatoes, parsley and peas. From the cows came the milk, and from that milk came the butter and cheese.

I had some apprehension prior to my inaugural visit. I knew I would be in for a very, very long meal...potentially long enough for me to taste absolutely everything that their land and toil produced. I was still a voracious 25 years old and endowed with a herculean liver. It was not the eating but the conversation that concerned me. What would we talk about for over four hours? They were farmers, no doubt with very radical views on farming. I was an extraterrestrial; even worse, an American extraterrestrial. Moreover, I was pursuing an MBA, and writing a thesis called *A Strategic Fit for Tomorrow's Eco-Efficient Service Economy* that would someday serve as an obscure bibliographical reference for a book called *Natural Capitalism: The Next Industrial Revolution*.

Somehow I was going to have to set these weighty concerns aside and pontificate on duck liver pâté. My best strategy of course would be to ask questions and listen, intently and enthusiastically, to their farmer tales. But here, on the farthest frontier of French civilization, the language is hardly French; it is a local variant of the larger family of dialects called *Langue d'Oc* or Occitan. If I could catch just half the words, I might be able to follow the thread.

It was, as expected, a very long lunch, but things didn't go so badly for me. Time and time again, I have managed to win over the hearts of a French gathering because I speak French so incredibly well (*for an American as they say*) and because I relish absolutely everything I am served (*unlike an American as they say*). The prize is doubled when they learn I'm from Texas. Suddenly a backwoods French farmer considers himself a missionary of French civilisation.

I need not bore you with all that transpired between the *pastis en apéritif* and the *eau de vie en digestif*. Any self-respecting Frenchman can carry on culinary banter over a four-hour stretch, as long as a next course awaits. That is what we did. At the very merry end of it all, I was given an honorary tour of the animals, where I admired the *pintades* (*guinea fowl*), speckled black and white.

It was not a refined meal like Babette's feast, but it was a generous affair, offered up by a French *paysants* of the most modest means. It revealed to me how in France, cuisine can supersede all social and political divides. All of the French can hold hands around *a cassoulet*. Within its humble context, the meal exemplified sumptuous excess-- the spirit of luxury--that may well have already existed with the Aziliens some ten thousand years ago.

Daughter of Pearl

The giving of nourishment is a natural and intrinsic act for women. It starts in the womb, continues with the breasts, then moves to the table. In a masculine-dominant society, the perceived value of this vital function is roughly equivalent to auto mechanics, and is relegated almost entirely to women.

In French culture, this fundamentally feminine domain has been raised to such a level of art that it involves almost as many men as women. Men have become outstanding, world-class chefs,⁸ but they do so based on the immense culinary heritage left to them by women. Indeed, they owe not only their life to women but also their art. It is feminism turned on its head: instead of women trying to play hardball in a man's world, men play an important role in a feminine world imbued with celebration, art, well-being, and *gourmandise*. There is nothing specifically manly or womanly about the art of cooking, but a culture that exalts cuisine is one that places greater value on the feminine⁹. French culture is perhaps more feminine than any other in the West, and what seductive flavors are packed into its feasts!

Like all great chefs, Chantel dreamt of Paris. How happy I am to have found her a home-- or rather a chateau of a kitchen! She is reputed to be the top female chef in the world, which has led me to wonder what remaining ladder of excellence she must yet climb to be number one chef of the human kind. I also muse over what might be the attributes of a more *feminine* cuisine, and in fact whether a feminine style could ever be ranked number one in a world dominated by masculine preferences. Inspired by her work, here is what we might expect:

- Less austerity, less quantity, and greater *legèreté*
- Dishes born of life experience, where each tells a story,
- A holistic dining experience, with attention to the social interaction surrounding it.
- *Finesse*, that expression of the finest delicacy
- Care for sustainability, using only the finest natural ingredients in honor of the earth, and greater sensitivity to both the medicinal and gustative virtues of plants.
- Rejection of all industrially-produced meats and processed food.
- An intuitive, poetic, even mystical approach, that we might call a *réenchantement de la cuisine*, because too much magic has been taken out of our world.

All of these you will find in her most iconic dishes: *Le Jardin d'Algues* with its attention to numbers and the sacred sea, *By the Great Oak* where the truffles and woodland spirits can be found, *Mont Blanc* where the light of citron confit appears at its peak and where earth and sky meet, or *Oysters and Pearls*, an ode to Mother Nature's exquisite treasures. I see her now as she beams from her new Paris kitchen with her bewitching smile. With its Stradivarius of a stove, a

⁸ It is not that they have greater aptitude than women, but that the demands made on them are such that women seeking a more balanced life are out-competed.

⁹ I reserve any further commentary on the feminine to the end of the EXQUISITE, dedicated entirely to the matter.

percussion section of hanging copper pots and pans, and piccolo-like piercing knives, the world's premier She Chef takes her place on the podium for a new symphony of tastes, textures, and temperatures, hers to blend.

“Decadent, delightful, delicious” is what she has devised.

Now with her own place in Paris, becoming *la crème la de crème de la crème* is only a paradigm shift away.

Ode to Oysters

I was born and raised in an American Christian cult that condemned sex before marriage as sin. Those who have since scoffed at my youthful matrimony glibly ignore its bizarre historical context. Divorce was also a sin, so if you didn't get caught coming in, you got caught getting out. What was even more unusual about that cult was its strict adherence to Levitical dietary code listing those creatures deemed unfit for consumption. No pork, of course. But hot dogs can be made of beef or turkey. No seafood either, but neither does clam chowder have its place on Texan tables.

Confined to this Judeo-Christian straitjacket, on which an entire book could (and will) be written, I still grew to 1.87 meters in height. For at least one decade, I was holier than any of you reading this now. *Holier than thou*.

Where many had fled the old world to escape religious persecution, I fled the new world to escape religious lunacy. That's not exactly how it happened, because I debarked on the beaches of Normandy as a true believer. Gradually, the spirit of the enlightenment began to seep through the walls of my doctrinal confinement, and the hinges of certainty came loose.

More than all, I tearfully thank Babette. Imagine yourself a guest at her generous table garnished with one delicacy after another that your God labels *unclean*. You look into her eyes and see the love she has put into this sumptuous preparation. You look upon the silver platter of oysters, a mosaic of mucus and mother of pearl, gleaming wet with precious waters they secrete as you secretly spie them.

And the Lord God said:

“Anything living in the water that does not have fins and scales you will regard as unclean”.¹⁰

And she, the oyster, said: *come to me darling and drink of my living waters*.

For some, it is the moment when I lost my religion. For others, it is the birth of a new faith.

For sure, it is the dawn of a new diet.

She and I have been intimate ever since. In due season, hardly a day goes by without honoring her life. *Fine de claires, pleine mer, spéciales...* from Normandy, Brittany or Marrenne, at morning, noon, or night. With lemon, vinaigrette, or pure and natural, just as she is.

L'Huître offers herself¹¹ to be eaten alive. She will settle for nothing less than freshness. You cannot wrap her in plastic, freeze her, or inject her with conservatives. You must not put her away to wait, as if something else meant more to you. You must not recklessly set her to repose, and let her vitality leak. You must take her now, and with great care and attention, and before all the rest. She is tightly sealed, and her secrets too, only yielding to those with requisite art. You

¹⁰ Leviticus 11:12

¹¹ Oyster is a feminine noun in French: une huître

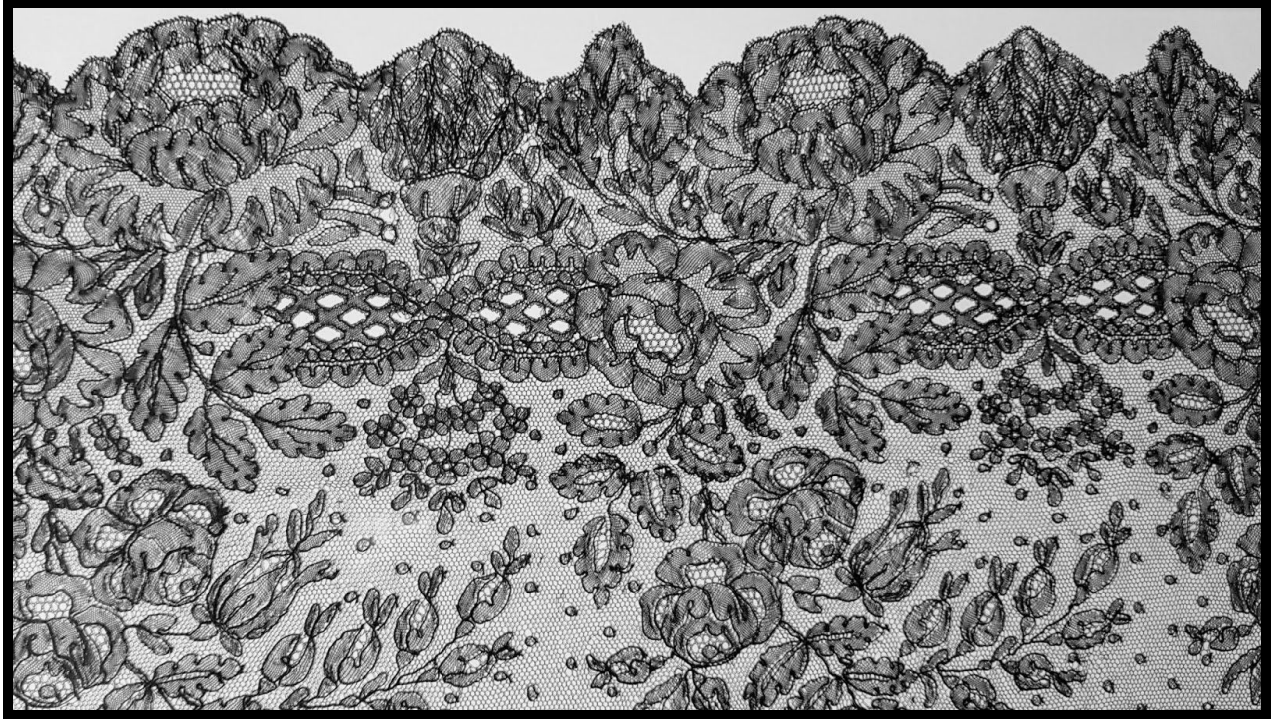
cannot bang or crush her without mutilating her tender mucus, her vital essence. Nor can you poke hastily with your blade without danger to your own flesh. There is a sweet spot from which you may wedge with single-minded focus and also your pledge...until she gives. Then suddenly, all becomes loose and she is there before you, yielding. The impenetrable jewel has joyfully acquiesced.

She shines there in glory like the blossom of an exotic saline flower. In dignity and praise, in contemplation amazed, she desires to be delicately devoured. To drink her waters do not haste; sweeter yet she will make them for you alone to taste. This is what happens whenever I start to talk about oysters. It's a slippery ground for prose. Remember Veules-les-Roses? As I mentioned in my earlier chapter "Rivers and Rooftops" the finest oysters I have ever tasted were from that village near Etretat. Perhaps the beauty of the place enhanced my bliss.

*Beneath alabaster heights
Where waters meet
Salty and sweet,
Je pêche la perle
amongst petals of pink,
precious beyond price.
L'origine du monde.
Le mystère de la mer.
A Veules-les-Roses
Sits the secret
Seemingly nobody knows.*

As you can see, oysters mean the world to me. An entire sea is contained within an oyster, and in a sea an entire world. I ask for no pearl, only possibility. Before I came to France where oysters abound, I had never as much as looked upon one. In addition to the metaphor whose meaning will not have escaped you, they have since come to represent a purity that others deem unclean, a redemptive fruit of what some call sin. They are one of the last remaining undefiled gifts from the sea; they are my communion with its vital salts.

They stand as one of the two great pillars of French cuisine. One is nature, the other is art. You must begin with the freshest ingredients of earth and sea, and to them add your art. The great chef is first and foremost a curator of nature, and the natural bounty of France is to compare with the excellence of her art.



VI - Dior and Dentelle

*There is hope that out of the millions seduced by a woman's body,
a few will awaken to love and be saved by it...
not by the body, but by the feminine essence.
Without women, what would men ever know of love?*

La Parisienne

The style and sophistication that is commonly attributed to the contemporary *parisienne* are only a glimmer of what they were during the *Belle Epoque*. For men, she represented a vaguely inaccessible feminine ideal. For women, she was the absolute fashion reference. Women from all around the world would come, in vain, in an attempt to imitate her. The complexity and cost of the task was always too daunting. Who could manage keeping up with the latest bonnets, hats, head scarves, chales, aprons, buckles, belts, dresses, and above all else, shoes? For the Russians, she appeared as a unique combination of grace, wit, and sensitivity; an endless source of seduction and proof of French superiority over other nations. She was *the woman of whom you dream when you are sixteen and the only one you remember when you are sixty*.¹²

Whereas previous art focused on named portraits, *La Parisienne* was sculpted by Emile Chatrousse in 1876 as an anonymous contemporary woman.¹³

In our day and age, the trimmings of a parisian woman seem a bit too precious and excessive. Now, instead of superfluous fashion accessories of enduring beauty reserved for the few, we have superfluous mass-produced, throw-away products to renew our state of permanent distraction. That is what some have referred to as progress.

¹² From *Le Diable à Paris*, J. Hetzel, 1868, Volume 2 (p. 20-44)
https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Le_Diable_%C3%A0_Paris/S%C3%A9rie_2/Ce_que_c%E2%80%99est_qu%E2%80%99une_Parisienne

¹³ On permanent display at the Petit Palais

Fashion Statement

The enormous difficulty many non French-speakers confront in their pronunciation of even the most basic French words seems to disappear when it comes to iconic brands. Many will a tongue will stumble over *le parfum*, but the entire world knows how to say Dior, Vuitton, Yves-Saint Laurent, Chanel, Hermès, Cartier, and Lacroix.

La haute-couture is more of a challenge to pronounce, and has no practical translation (in English at least). The universal use of *haute-couture* to refer to fashion as art is a tribute to the immense influence of French culture in this predominantly feminine domain.

Dior is my preferred *maison de haute-couture*, even more so since the dazzling 2018 Paris exhibition. Dior is a lucky charm of a name, embedded with the French word for gold (*de l'or*) and rhyming with “I adore” (*J'adore*). It is said that Bernard Arnault, CEO of LVMH and now the wealthiest man in the world, safeguards in the left pocket of his suit jacket, a small door key he found on the floor on that decisive day he entered the Dior headquarters to bid several billion for its control.

If flowers could, from a functional perspective, all resemble simple pansies or daisies, women's attire could also remain unpretentiously basic. Lilies, irises, and roses--call these the most exquisite flowers--have found their counterpart in clothing thanks to Christian Dior. His vocation was to adorn women with fashion and fragrances all as delicate as flowers. As Dior stated himself:

“I think of my work as ephemeral architecture, dedicated to the beauty of the female body.” Given the male domination and degradation to which this female body has been subjected, Dior's vision is ennobling. He has given an exuberant, flamboyant, and joyful expression to that *je ne sais quoi* in women we can call *the feminine*.

Dior Adore

Christian Dior also once said that flowers, after women, are God's most beautiful gift to the world. But I do not adhere to Dior's theology that implicitly places God outside of creation. Of flowers and the feminine, I would rather say:

*The essence of woman reveals itself within a flower,
And the nectar of the goddess within a woman.
Between these three flow divine delicacy and delight.*

Whether you prefer Dior's version or mine, those particular qualities endowed upon women cannot be ignored. For members of the patriarch's club who may be new to such considerations, the female body is the womb of all human life, and its first source of nourishment. This is what makes her body a temple, all the way down to her toes.

*My beloved's feet have five beaux toes:
Poppy, daffodil, lilac, lily and rose.
How I cherish them each only she knows.*

The purple iris is unlike any toe I know. I have always been deeply connected with this flower. My mother used to cut purple irises from the garden and bring them into the house. I would bury my nose deep within them and intoxicate myself with their palpable, mysterious scent. This was the awakening of my most rooted, earthly sensuality. I waited a very long time to find a woman who understood what it was all about. The iris is no girly flower; it is the blossoming of a profound, multi-layered, mature woman. The one I adore.

Lingerie and légèreté

1992. The year I arrived in France was also the year that French lingerie brand Aubade launched its advertising campaign referred to as “*Leçons de séduction*” (Lessons in Seduction). This was a suave series of black & white close-up photos in celebration of female curvature, elevating lingerie to an art form. A new photo would be released every few months, pasted on the walls of metro stations or on street-corner billboards. These were the talk of the town.

They were dangerous, too. In those days before coming to terms with my male body, I would lose myself in the sinuous contours of each of those photos. I was oblivious to all around me. How many traffic accidents I narrowly averted with my eyes bouncing back and forth between breasts and brake lights. My eyes feasted on every single one of those silky and sultry bodies served in a dish of *dentelle*.

“Paris is a moveable feast”, wrote Hemmingway, no doubt referring to something else. Eros, not morality, is the antidote to our pornographic world. Our moral condemnation of desire only darkens its lurking shadow. At the other extreme, pornography bleeds away its vitality. There is greater jubilation within the mystery of what cannot be directly seen; there are sweeter spirits that can be distilled from the raw energy of eros.

Though it has been diluted and trivialized into sexual kitsch, eroticism in its noble form is the art of playfully engaging in the *mystery*. The erotic encounter of man and woman incarnates the bonding of masculine and feminine poles. Our sexual differentiation is an acute experience of separation. We are all separate beings in search of union, the ultimate mystery of which is union with all that exists outside of yourself. We are woven together, unaware, into a cosmic fabric, a web of jewels. Being sexually turned on can bring intense pleasure, or even better in French *la jouissance*, but even that cannot compare to the ecstasy of union with all of life. Just ask Rumi.

The French may not all adhere to my theory of the erotic, but they--both men and women--do celebrate women in a far wider range of their feminine charms. In matters of sexuality, the French have gained a reputation that says less about the French than it does about those who spread it. If any city is like unto a woman, it is Paris; if any country, it is France. It should come as no surprise that French culture celebrates *womanly arts*.

Crème chantilly is white, but the town of Chantilly was also one of the leading weavers of black lace (*dentelle noir*), until Dupont du Mours invented the nylon upon which the entire industry of lingerie is now based. Take a moment to consider the Western world of women’s underclothing without the French.

The word *séduction* is widely used in French, well beyond the morally ambiguous English connotation. In a previous career as a management consultant working for French firms, I had to learn a thing or two about how to *séduire le client*. It didn’t just mean putting on the right shoes and necktie. Seduction is a state of mind that seeks to draw others toward you. It is most

definitely not a sales pitch. It draws upon a vast repertoire of subtle signaling. Plants and animals offer the most lavish and extravagant displays of floral and feathered seduction; second only to these is the French woman, particularly the *parisienne*.

Heavy-handed champions of contemporary feminism downplay the differences between men and women in their attempt to repair thousands of years of oppression. By doing so, they accentuate the masculine instead of elevating the feminine. More women may hold positions of power, but do so by suppressing their feminine qualities that are both poorly understood and sadly underrated. In a world of uni-sex avatars where Eros is neutralized rather than embraced, we may all become equal...and equally devoid of vitality.

The French have a delightful word that translates poorly into a culture where it cannot thrive. This word is *la légèreté*, a *Frenchifful* lightness of being. Anglo culture denigrates it as frivolity. Were it not for *la légèreté*, lace and lingerie would never have existed. Must we somehow legitimize lace? Must we take everything, and in particular our sexual nature, so seriously? Some have become its slaves, and others think they have become its masters. Some hop from pleasure to pleasure and never find the sap; others look neither left nor right for fear that desire may wink. All have been hoodwinked.

Can we instead invite desire into our home for a simple *apéritif*? Just a drink and some *amuses-bouche*. Converse for a while. Then let it go its way, like a flock of birds. Perhaps some great desire may knock one day (and knock your breath away). Perhaps it will absolutely insist on staying for dinner. Well, you'll see how that goes, won't you?

I, too, dabbled in Dante's inferno, but discovered in the end how ultimate beauty was to be found in the nature of perception itself, and that from this state of beauty, sex would rise to the realm of the sublime. The great truth of Blake's popularized verse "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" is not so much that different people find different things beautiful, but that beauty itself is created through our perception. If paradise is not already within us, another's body will never take us there.

Back to Aubade where this all began...

It is true that the brand exploited idealized female forms to sell lingerie. It is true that this dishonors women because it perpetuates a narrow representation of their beauty, as if you were asking all flowers to bloom into the same shape.

Still, Aubade has done better than most in their erotic advertising. There is hope that those who peer long enough through the *veil of dentelle* will ultimately enquire what's behind it all. There is hope that out of the millions seduced by a woman's body, artfully staged, a few will awaken to love and be saved by it...not by the body, but by the feminine essence. Without women, what would men ever know of love?

For some, eroticism remains a sophistication of sexuality and a game of pushing limits. In a more noble sense, it can become an exploration of what is entirely beyond our physical limits: the penetration into a sacred space that cannot be known or named. Pleasure is but a playful partner for Eros the Exquisite.



VII - Proust and Perfume

*In those incomparable gardens of France,
I learned that beauty is the bud from which blooms our joy.
From impenetrable mists of melancholy I emerged,
to search you out and give you a name.
La joie.*

La Madeleine

« *Quand d'un passé ancien rien ne subsiste, après la mort des êtres, après la destruction des choses; seules, plus frêles mais plus vivaces, plus immatérielles, plus persistantes, plus fidèles, l'odeur et la saveur restent encore longtemps, comme des âmes, à se rappeler, à attendre, à espérer, sur la ruine de tout le reste, à porter sans fléchir, sur leur gouttelette presque impalpable, l'édifice immense du souvenir.* » - Excerpt from *A la Recherche de Temps Perdu* by Marcel Proust.

Here is my own compressed translation of this famous Proust excerpt into the American-English language and mindset:

Fragrance and flavor outlast everything else. Even a minute droplet bears an entire edifice of memory.

That's all, folks. And for those who are not familiar with the action of this passage, it flows as follows: Proust tastes a small cake (called a Madeleine) with his tea. Why say more? The subtleties of Proustian sensibilities are simply inaccessible to the ordinary Anglo-American reader. They are like latin vespers pertaining to a finely-attuned French world of olfactory sensation. For most, Proust's madeleine is as foreign as a Japanese tea ceremony. Both beckon us into a realm of the exquisite.

The profundity of Proust's observation is less about the magical powers of fragrance and flavor, and more about the subjectivity of our experience. It inquires into how we can resurrect or create emotions by thought alone. Long before we move our physical bodies to Mars, we may voyage through the infinite dimensions of our psyche. Once we have traveled into that space, Mars may seem like an adolescent pipe-dream. Proust has already brought us to the brink of the ineffable, the gates of an olfactive galaxy.

Coup de grâce à Grasse

If you try to imagine yourself *somewhere*, chances are you will begin with a visual construct of that place. Without it, you would be in no place at all. You would be nowhere. And where might that nowhere be? Maybe in a vast expanse of lavender? Or inside the delicate cathedral of an iris? There are many ideas of paradise. Our earth has lavished us with its myriad manifestations.¹⁴

Now imagine you have parachuted into a lavender field near the Abbey de Sénanque in Provence. You strip off your gear and feel the caress of a balmy breeze that moves and ripples the tide of a lavender field, row after row. Perfectly-aligned, the rows seem to vibrate like beams of violet light radiating outwards from the Abbey, nestled between wooded slopes. The air is infused with scent. The blue of the cloudless sky is dark and deep. You have been plunged into a Van Gogh moment, where the underlying vibration of all visible matter has become accessible to your senses. The scent of lavender is like no other olfactive experience: a fresh, peppery sweetness that fills your lungs and your entire body with a feeling of well-being.

You now understand what is meant by the state of being called *ivresse*. The word sounds so perfect to capture this divine intoxication into which you would gladly abandon yourself forever.

¹⁴ Recall Veules-les-Roses from my chapter "Of Rivers and Rooftops".

Joy by Jean Patou

The symmetry and symbolism of the rose make it the queen of all flowers. Its essence has been extracted, distilled, and transformed into many legendary perfumes. My mother visited Grasse on her honeymoon. That is where she discovered Joy by Jean Patou. She was a frugal, down-to-earth Texan who shunned luxury in all forms. Even though she married a superlatively frugal, down-to-earth Dane, there was at least one parenthesis in her life that allowed for Joy by Jean Patou. She returned from her honeymoon with that little bottle that would last many years. A long stretch of her life would be scentless, since she would never wear any other perfume.

Joy by Jean Patou was the last gift I would offer her before memories vanished from her mind the way perfume does from the skin. Now, as I write these words, all that she was, has been emptied and only the bottle remains. She may yet read them, but they erase as soon as read.

Having eschewed the exquisite in so many other domains, I doubt my mother consciously realized the symbolic significance of her preference for the most expensive perfume in the world. Jean Patou was, on the contrary, very deliberate in his olfactive creation. He called upon Henry Almaras, one of the greatest master perfumers of his time, to create a fragrance based on the most sumptuous base ingredients. At its core there would be *roses de mai*, Bulgarian roses, and jasmin of Grasse; bottom notes of santal and musc; top notes of peach and citrus. A 30ml bottle that you could hold in the palm of your hand would contain 10 600 jasmine flowers and 336 *roses de mai*. The extravagantly potent concentration was intended to bring joy back into a world that seemed to be crashing like stock markets. Patou specifically sought to encapsulate a luminous and generous French *joie de vivre* that he could sell to American women no longer able to travel to France. Joy by Jean Patou, like my mother, was born in a period of despair. How could joy be revealed were it not for the contrast of sorrow?

I have learned that the wide world is full of wonder, that a great ocean of Love will sweep over us all, wherever we have lived and died. But in those incomparable gardens of France where I lingered so long, I learned that beauty is the bud from which blooms our joy. From impenetrable mists of melancholy I emerged, to search you out and give you a name.

La joie.



VIII - Vuillaume et Vuitton

The world-renowned, prestigious Vuitton brand is inscribed in millions of handbags and other fashion accessories for the wealthy. The name Vuillaume is stamped inside several thousand 19th-century string instruments, still resonating music of inestimable value thanks to succeeding generations of not-so-wealthy musicians.

Which name will speak most to you? Vuitton or Vuillaume?

Read before you buy.

A River runs through Us

The historic center of French fiddle fabrication is Mirecourt in Lorraine. A river called *Le Madon* flows down through it from the nearby foothills of the Vosges. Beyond Mirecourt, it feeds into the Moselle, that flows into the Rhine, that empties into the North Sea where all waters become one.

Sitting on the river bank in Mirecourt, you may hear its waters moving swiftly around a few exposed stones, the rising of wind in the willows, quacks from a congregation of ducks, but also the occasional sound of a violin being played in a nearby *atelier de luthier*. Perhaps it was made by the famous Vuillaume? As soon as I hear the sound of a violin, I can already imagine the orchestra tuning up and feel the excitement of the music at the tip of the conductor's baton. Which of the thousand possibilities will it be today? Let's make it Beethoven's overture to *Coriolan*. Yes, that overture is one hell of a start to a story if I've ever heard one!

Down by the river, this is the story I'd like to tell: first there was silence, then came sound, then came music, and finally infinite themes and variations, of which you and me.

In our visible world, the invisible reaches the ears of those who know to listen. How does music come into being? What secret does the silence hold? Where does this music come from that lifts us up into a place of communion with others and with all that exists?

In his time, Bach heard the music of the spheres. Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms as well. Like living wormholes to other dimensions, theirs was a gift of transmission. *A river runs through them*. I received the music of these and other masters (*La Musique*) as the most beautiful and mysterious of all gifts, only to be compared with *Her*¹⁵.

¹⁵ A Hymn to the Feminine

The Magic Baton

My favorite orchestra conductor is the future chief conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic, the finest orchestra in the world. There are two paths to reach that end: one leads to Berlin, and the other requires transforming another orchestra to surpass the renown of Berlin. Regardless, my favorite orchestra conductor will succeed, because with the absolute innocence and power of a child, he is not conscious of any obstacle between his dream and its manifestation. Combining terrific talent with tremendous study, that childlike power completes his golden triad.

For the sublime to be heard, we must play it, again and again. My favorite orchestra conductor dedicates his life to the perfect understanding of the music, such that all parts played together breathe fresh life into existing form. Every performance must have a quality of freshness to it. The music is re-created each and every time. So it is also with the wisdom of the ages. New voices must rise up to speak it anew.

To hold within your mind the moving patterns of more than twelve intertwined parts is a cognitive feat reserved for a gifted few. As with all gifts, it requires an equal measure of discipline. Once the conductor has mastered the score in his own mind, he must manifest his idea of it by means of an orchestra fraught with human foibles. He must share with the orchestra his personal idea of the musical message encoded in the score. What context in the composer's life gave rise to it? How is the work singular and what distinctive features should be brought to light? What freshness can be infused into it? Where are its moments of sacred silence?

Hours and hours of rehearsal will be required for the orchestra to render each musical passage according to the conductor's intent. Intonation, rhythm, phrasing, and timbre will all be dissected, then put back together again into a musical whole. We observe conductors waving their arms and hands in odd patterns, signaling with their eyes, and expressing the emotion of the music with their face and body. They are playing the orchestra as if it were their instrument. Like a human body, all members (organs) of the orchestra are both in direct relation to each other, yet also meta-regulated by the head. The whole is synchronized by a shared rhythmic pulsation.

Music is not a sequence of superposed notes played according to specified rules. Were that the case, a computer would do it better and we could rid the world of orchestras. Turing, the founding father of computer science, suggested that human intelligence could sooner or later be imitated by a machine, but none have yet suggested that a machine can give life to music, except for those who have never felt what music is all about. If a day should indeed come when we have artificial intelligence performing Mahler's 5th Symphony, we can conclude that there are no longer enough humans left to hear and feel. We will have passed into a post-musical age, and *no river shall run through us anymore.*

From time to time (maybe more), conductors are able to transcend ego and effort, attaining that timeless moment when the music floods over everything else. It is when *the river runs through them*. That moment, even if only one, makes all the others worth it.

String theory

What is an orchestra conductor without the musicians of the orchestra, starting with the violinists? A violinist dedicates his life to the perfection of his art with the aim of transcending technique. There is a technique of the right hand, and an entirely different technique of the left. The right, or bow hand, must master speed, pressure, rhythm, precise and sustained axis alignment, before acquiring the more advanced techniques of dynamics, articulation, and expression. The left hand must master the finest nuances of intonation across all possible modes and scales, the execution of notes at all possible tempo and rhythmic patterns, the use of vibrato at different rates of oscillation, the sliding into a note or landing on it precisely. Both hands, performing entirely different movements, one horizontal and one vertical, must be finely coordinated, first on a single string, then simultaneously on two, occasionally brushing three or four.

More than just two hands, the entire body must be held a certain way, and the arms at proper angles depending on the string and the pitch of the note. The breathing must give impulse to the phrasing, and the ear must give instantaneous feedback to finely adjust the intonation and quality of sound. The violinist, like any instrumentalist, must understand and feel the encoded message of the music. Music is emotional encryption to the finest degree, far beyond what prosaic spoken language can convey.

Once or twice, maybe more, a moment of grace comes when the music passes through, uninhibited by ego or effort. The paradoxical key to such a state of grace is not in absolute control, but in letting go to something greater than self, letting go to *the river that runs through us*.

But what is a violinist without a violin? Finally, we come to the subject of Vuillaume! There must be a violin-maker, a *luthier*, able to craft the living matter of wood into the perfect vessel of resonance. It is no trivial craft, requiring at least 10 years of training and experience. Its proportions are not arbitrary, nor its resemblance to a woman's body some fluke in the mind of Ingres the painter. The strings are taught from head to tail, suspended in the air, and touching down midway upon a finely-chiseled piece called the bridge, that sits well beneath the ribs. Beneath the bridge, a small wooden peg called the *sound post* carries the vibrations of the strings to the entire body of the violin, like a directed electrical current. The bow will stroke very near to this bridge and vibrate the string according to its length, as determined by the distance between the bridge and the violinist's finger lightly pressed. The violinist learns to bring forth an ideal quality of sound from his instrument, and no man can produce vibrations in a woman without sufficient art. She waits for him in the impatience of eros as indeed all of creation aspires to the caress of the master's bow.

When a violin is born, so to speak, it only exists as a potential. It must be played, and how it is played will influence its resonating quality. A neglected instrument will not develop. One

that is played with love will return a sound as sumptuous as an aged Sauterne wine. Because they are both invisible, olfaction and audition remain shrouded in a similar mystery. You can no more describe the sound of a Stradivarius than you can describe the fragrance of a rose.

How much of this is science and how much is poetry? I believe that the luthier is the maker of a *thing* that transcends itself. I am not alone in this belief, considering that a Stradivarius has been negotiated at 11 million euros. From a love of craftsmanship taken to its highest perfection¹⁶ along with a love for music, he has entered the noble realm of creators.

Genius, more than technique, distinguishes a fine violin from an immortal one crafted by Stradivarius or Guarneri. Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume also made fine violins, but was even better at acquiring those made by the original masters and copying them. Mirecourt was second to Cremona, but Vuillaume was also instrumental in making Stradivarius a legend. He (Jean-Baptiste) baptized one of the Strads he acquired as the *Messiah*, holding it in reserve as a treasure that few would ever see. He copied it scrupulously, and the copy became the instrument of the concert violinist Henryk Szeryng, whose performance of the Brahms violin concerto I heard at the age of 14. Other legendary violinists such as Ysaye, Suk, and Kreisler played on Vuillaume violins, and more recently Pinkas Zuckerman, Isaac Stern, and Hilary Hahn.

What is a violin-maker without the right wood? It cannot be just any wood: only maple and spruce. It cannot be just any tree: only those grown on certain mountain slopes with just enough, but not too much, sway from the wind. They must be older trees, resulting from slow and difficult growth. Maples of the plain will not do: their life has been too easy. The wood must attain a certain hardness while retaining resilience. When tapped, it has a sound of its own. The tree must be felled at a certain time based on the lunar cycle,¹⁷ and must be split in only a certain way so that it does not break when crafted.

The luthier thus depends on another trade, the *bucheron*, a man who is able to locate and properly cut trees that meet such subtle criteria. A lumberjack hardly seems the appropriate translation for such know-how, but that's all English has to offer.

In this vast web of wonder where composer, conductor, concert hall, instrumentalist, instrument-maker, lumberjack, and tree are weaved together, I have only evoked the works of man. Consider for a moment how the earth gives life to such trees that resonate across time? Consider how a violinist is able to sustain the millions of automated bodily functions while consciously executing an hour-long sequence of coordinated movements with absolute precision? These are the hidden miracles of every living moment, as *the river runs through us*. This is the wonder that resounds from within a violin for those with ears to hear.

¹⁶ L'amour du belle oeuvre jusqu'au bout

¹⁷ <https://phonotheque.hypotheses.org/9063>

Le Violon d'Ingres

A violin, like a human body, is also a metaphorical entity, and more than the sum of its parts. In my mind, it is the most beautiful thing ever made by the hand of man. It is, like *Her*, a vessel through which *the river of all being flows*.

It was not the famous 1924 photo by Man Ray that led me to associate the form of the violin with a woman's body. I became intimate with the former before the latter, and henceforth never touched the body of a woman without a sense of vibrating chords, harmonics, and resonance. The play on a violin is metaphorical lovemaking. The bow is the active agent that creates friction on the string, while the fingers of the left hand activate sound at different frequencies. The body vibrates as a result of this action that is both psychic and physical, and the quality of its resonance will also depend on factors of the same dual nature. The music that arises from this play is a matter of endless wonder. You will want to hear it again and again. To perfect their art, concert violinists will practice eight hours per day for at least ten years. Even to become a decent amateur violinist requires the same dedication for several years. What seems less obvious in our consumerist society is that lovemaking as an art also requires attention, focus, and practice. We don't all have to be concert-level lovemakers, but is it not a paradox that our sex-obsessed society is so ignorant of its art?

As a metaphorical entity, the violin is not limited to her body. Aspects of it can illustrate how we as humans relate to our bodies. Do we not need to hold ourselves erect in a certain way to allow resonance within us? Do we not need to keep our strings taught and in tune so that we ourselves can bring forth music? Do we not need to remain vigilant in our alignment? Such is the core teaching of most spiritual paths, intended to reveal that we are the most exquisite instruments of consciousness.

Handbags from Heaven

And on the eighth day, after his sabbath rest, God created the Vuitton handbag, stuffed with women's dreams. And He saw that it was very good.

So good, in fact, that it generates something like 8 billion euros in sales each year, a figure that has no doubt already been surpassed.

Surely a Vuitton handbag is a finely-crafted object representing French luxury at its best. There is one feature, however, that makes it very different from Vuillaume. If you run around town with a Vuillaume violin, nobody will know and nobody will notice. If you carry a Vuitton bag, on the other hand, or in any hand, almost *everyone* will notice and especially those you *want* to notice. It is the perfect example of ostensible wealth: the need to increase one's sense of self-worth through possessions.

The paradox of our modern age of consumerism is that more and more people possess those luxury goods that are by definition reserved for the upper class. To maintain some sense of rareness and prestige, the price must be increased. Since the product's quality is impeccable, the cost of fabrication remains the same, and marginal profits soar. In 2019, LVMH chairman Bernard Arnault became the second richest man in the world. Consider how big of a handbag would be required to contain 100 billion euros in notes of 500. Consequently, Arnault does not carry a handbag. No doubt his wife does, and by all evidence, handbags are the domain of women.

How does it feel to carry your chosen Vuitton handbag? Maybe it is an extension of yourself, or maybe a projection? You, too, contain *items* that are vital, intimate, and precious. You delight in the perfection of the bag's appearance, and that is also how you like to see yourself. You like others to see you the same way. You have defined a particular style, and your bag represents that style. You are not the same as any other woman; you are beautiful in your own particular way and your bag reminds you of this. Together with your bag, you feel complete, like a violin with its bow. You have discerning tastes and higher values. You want others to know this about you. You have singular charms, and these should be divined. You want to feel your own magnificence in the glitter of their eyes, and your precious bag is always there, by your side, to serve you in this quest.

The dark side of Vuitton is the obsession with image and artificial self-worth. It is the class-illusion that we are somehow more special than someone else. The bright side is that there are no sweatshops and no disposable plastic materials. Highly-skilled workers are well-paid to create beautiful products they are proud of. Vuitton even pays tribute to Vuillaume thanks to its Foundation's support of cello masterclasses with Gauthier Capucon.¹⁸

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<https://www.fondationlouisvuitton.fr/en/music/masterclasse/classe-excellence-violoncelle-gautier-capucon-2018-2019.html>

When every last woman will have her Vuitton handbag, we will happily conclude that our era of economic growth has come to its end. On another hopeful note, of all those women who mistake their bag for their own self-worth, some will turn their admiring attention from the handbag to the mirror, and at last look upon their own natural beauty with astonishment and wonder. They will peer into their blessed body and discover the treasures it holds.

I know a woman who, in a moment of delicious distraction, left her superbly handsome handbag on a Paris park bench. It was gone when she returned, only minutes later. Her heart sank and she held back the grief like a death in the family. It was her last day in Paris. She never returned, but I suspect there is that part of her that will always remain, sealed away in that most special of all handbags.



IX - Orsay and Her Say

*Behind your eyes closed, open your eyes.
Beget beauty into the world by your singular regard.
Manifest what others cannot see: the beauty of your soul,
the beauty from which we are born and to which we return.*

Orsay Overture

Les terraces au bord de l'eau are that raised portion of the Tuileries by the Seine. Most will be familiar with the iconic perspective on the corner of the Louvre, its superb symmetry framed by rows of chestnut trees, immaculately groomed. From on high, you can also look out over the expanse of Tuileries, with its round fountains and manicured flower beds, offset by the harmonious block of buildings on the rue de Rivoli. It is one of those many places in Paris where you realize that architecture is ultimately not about a particular building, but the entire space into which structure is inserted. Streets, buildings, bridges, monuments, and gardens all make the city a coherent work of meta-architecture.

From the same spot on the terrace, when the trees are barren, you can also see the grand clock of the Orsay Museum, just across the river. What you cannot quite see, although it is very near on the far side of the gardens, is the Orangerie museum, the sanctuary of Monet's sweeping exploration of water lilies.

The geometrical particularity of this spot where you are standing is that it is equidistant from these three world-famous museums, and also from the nearly 300 museums that make Paris the museum capital of the world. There is no city with a greater concentration of art, and Paris is of itself a work of art. Millions have and will continue to visit Paris museums, mostly to say they've been. One more item off the bucket list. Ten more to go and you'll feel accomplished. A painting into which an artist has devoted countless hours of his life is noticed hardly more than a street sign.

Art appreciation usually means learning to see the recognized qualities of an acclaimed artistic creation. This academic approach eludes the participative element of the aesthetic experience. Beauty is not something outside of us. We create it by the very way we look at the world around us. It is when we are moved by what moves within us that we break through the shell of our conventional, fabricated self. Therein lies the desolation of the swarming mass of visitors. How many will access the beauty of their own unique regard?

L'Origine du Monde

How beautiful is our own regard? That is perhaps the most important question raised by Gustave Courbet's unfettered zoom on the female pubis. Almost 150 years have transpired since the work stirred up a scandal. Now it is both famous and hardly noticed. It remains shrouded in a more subtle form of shame in our shamelessly pornographic world. The paradox is poignant: images of female genitalia are everywhere, but there is a sinister refusal to *see them* as they are. They are desired yet deprecated, adulated yet mutilated.

English offers little more than scientific or vulgar names for sexual organs, and this is an apt reflection of deeply entrenched social attitudes. We cannot, in polite company, speak of these things because they have no name, and they have no name because we cannot speak of them. Imagine a dinner menu that presents dishes using scientific or vulgar vocabulary.

Is there progress now that we have a more informed dissection of female sexual topography? We can connect the dots of the vagina's hot spots; we can trace the contours of vulva varietals and sit atop the celebrated clitoris. But what names do we have for the whole? Shall we call them "female sex organs"¹⁹, emphasizing their functionality? The situation is slightly better in French, where it feels almost like a relief to be able to refer to *le sexe féminin*. French reserves use of the word "female" (*femelle*) for other animals. As for the word "organ", notice that to avoid redundancy nobody speaks of a "heart organ". The heart, by comparison, is a beautiful word, even sacred to some. Where are the words that sing praise to that which is revealed between her legs? Why is *sanctus, sanctus* not inscribed at her gate? Modern language has failed to name the holy of holies, even in French, because our regard is defiled. That is why Courbet called his painting "The Origin of the World". It is an invitation to wonder and psalm.

¹⁹ This is indeed the translation used on the Orsay Museum website.

Bougeureau in the Bureau

The most sumptuous office I have ever occupied was not, as one might expect, the one I describe during my tenure at LVMH²⁰. No office has ever compared to the Petit Palais in Paris, and I marvel still at my extraordinary fortune.

Those were the penniless days of my internet start-up, called Paris-Sharing.com, an obscure but fierce competitor for Airbnb. Does it really matter that the idea was mine first? And does it really matter that this so-called *bureau* was never reserved for my exclusive personal use? What mattered was that nobody else cared to use it as such. Other start-ups went to co-working spaces or Starbucks, where the defining features were Ikea look-alike furnishings, pseudo-industrial hip, musical hop, and a new coffee each month.

At the Petit Palais, the defining features were nothing less than an apotheosis of *belle époque* architecture and art. I call it a basilica of feminine beauty because I can think of no other museum in this gloriously feminine capital that better captures her. Its architecture offers generous concave volumes with exuberant engraving, the whole enclosing a semi-circular garden with luxuriant plants around a mosaic-tile decorative pool. Ebony statues of female nudes grace the colonnades that surround the garden. The beauty of women is to be admired in every aisle. My trip to the office was a daily meeting with *Marietta* by Corot, *Sarah Bernhardt* by Clairin, a *Parisian Woman* by Chatrousse, *La Parisienne* by Girot, the supremely sensuous *Bacchante* by Clesinger, *The Sleepers* by Courbet, and *La Vierge aux Anges* by Bouguereau. Ah Bouguereau, how he did glorify her flesh! About that, the Orsay has more to say.

After paying my morning dues to them all, I would settle into my violet velvet-upholstered seat at the museum's café before my team arrived. Occasionally, out on the terrace overlooking the garden we would sit, but that was less productive I must admit. The waitresses and the wif came to know us well. We were the most elegant of start-ups, self-incubated in Paris' most wondrous womb.²¹

With me then was my first associate who believed that with the right attitude you could make anything happen--even make me change my mind. Between meetings in the city, when we needed a place for a strategy chat, we would occupy the most prestigious of hotel lobbies. She was always dressed like the First Lady, so nobody would ever doubt we belonged. Perfect imposters. Her words were always gold. She said, "let there be capital", and there was capital. She polished my own words into politically-perfect French.

After the two of us, there were soon three. A persian princess showed up to play. She was dressed in tight jeans, high heels, and a black fitted-suit by Agnès B.

"Meet the next Inès de Fressanges" her attitude seemed to say. About the Petit Palais, she really did say:

²⁰ As described in the Royalty, Thy Name is Woman

²¹ The irony is the city that nourished me also put me out of business, enforcing new laws against Airbnb and any of its look-alikes.

“I want to hold my wedding in this place.”

Like me, she had come to Paris for something exquisite. Life for her was something of a *moveable wedding*. Her wedding would occur not too far away, a banquet cruise on the largest vessel on the Seine. From there, with the smartest man in town, she took on a French castle and made it a place for weddings yet to come. You are now welcome to come and stay.²²

With such dream-ladies by one’s side, is not success guaranteed? But there was me in the middle and I had things to learn. They were both ahead of me, standing beyond that door of magnificence where I entered with hesitant steps.

²² Château de la Houssière, 40 min east of Paris

Lady Lalique

I have spent too much time in front of portraits of a lady. One day she walked right out of the canvas and said “find me the home of my dreams in Paris”. Her allure and grace were of another age, *art nouveau* she had me know. That’s what a dream home in Paris meant for her, and authentically so.

It was a Woody Allen moment, for those who know *Midnight in Paris*. She was so very real and absolutely sincere, this delicious personality from the past. I shall call her Lady Lalique because she reminds me of one of those exquisitely-crafted crystal vases by the same name. *Is she not the vessel of a singular soul, the bearer of a holy light?*

I had yet to learn that she curated art herself, that she had her own museum of lesser-known impressionist works. No doubt, she would want her Paris home to become a work of art. Nothing less than exquisite. How would I *ever* find that? The answer is revealed in another of my books: *You Seek, I Find: House-hunting and Soul-Searching in Paris*. After a month to acquire and a year to aspire, Lady Lalique now has a lifetime to admire.

How do we feel when our home becomes a fitting expression of ourselves? When we are able to materialize, with lesser or greater means, some idea of beauty we have? Maybe we feel harmony, the way we might imagine a seed feels when it has sprouted? Or maybe creator-joy, having imagined and made manifest what did not yet exist.

*We are gods when we dream, and beggars when we think.*²³

In French, *la maison* is a feminine noun. Perhaps that is significant, perhaps it is not. What I do know is that any home deprived of the feminine is not a place I wish to be. Lady Lalique might have this to say: that a home is an extension of ourselves. It is a second visible layer, after our clothing, between ourselves and the world with which we interact. These two layers have much in common: they originate in functional needs but serve as a daily expression of ourselves.

Any form of neglect, mediocrity, banality, or disinterest that is visible in our home reflects upon our invisible self. Every form of extravagance, kitsch, imitation, or excess tells what we are not. Nor can we continue to buy materials and products that degrade life on earth, thinking somehow that it doesn’t matter. Our ignorance has become willful.

Every single object in the home is a choice: be it carefully sought out, conveniently and cheaply acquired, or chosen by someone else. Things don’t just show up to clutter our living space unless our inner space suffers that same lack of attention.

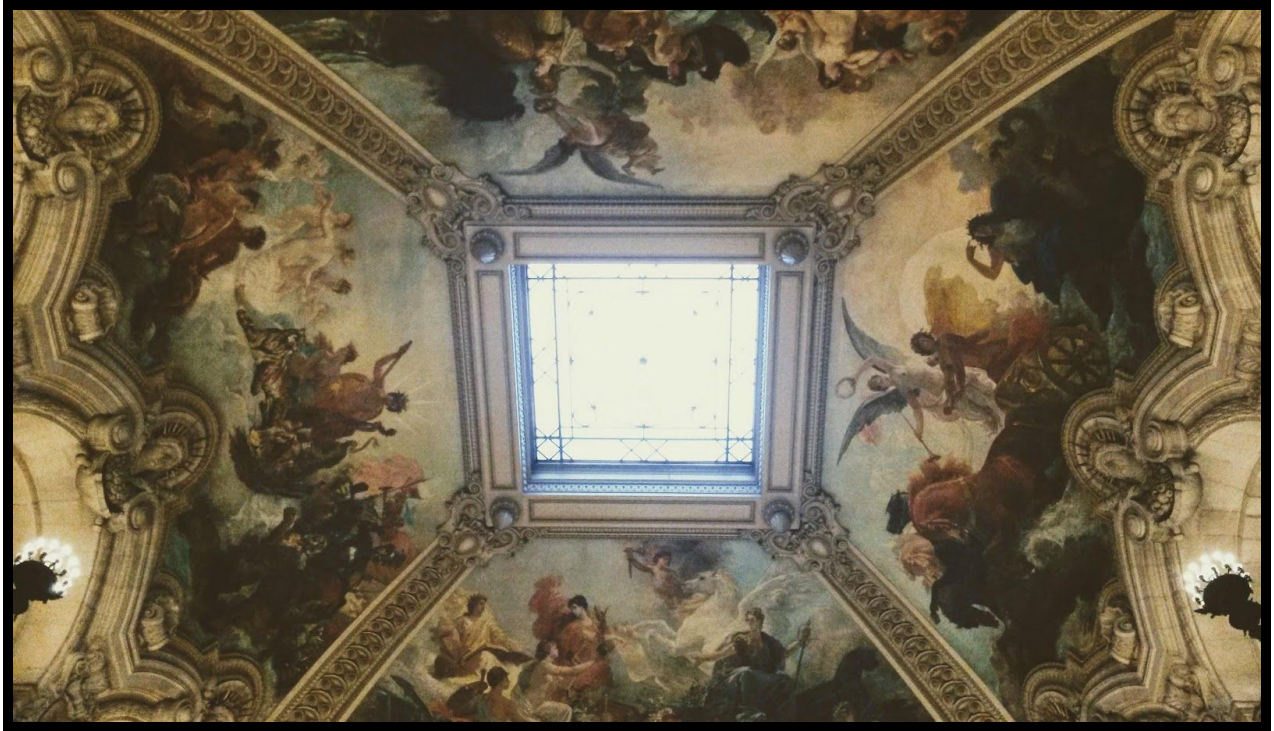
²³ Hölderlin wrote this over a hundred years ago, but through what form of miracle does this thought only reach me now?

Van Gogh and Vibration

The starry sky of Van Gogh is the outer edge of science, a realm where deep mystical intuitions line up for scientific validation once the means are found to prove or disprove them. Van Gogh seemed to have the direct sensorial experience of what some science is now able to theorize: that all of our reality is but vibration.

Science and Van Gogh are closer to each other than ever in their appreciation of the holographic nature of reality, but that has not stopped the global consumer frenzy. The consumer continues to believe in the objective reality of his dollar, and once-despised art of Van Gogh is now the pinnacle of artistic valuation. His Portrait of Dr. Gachet sold for 83 million USD, and over the past thirty years approximately that same number of people will have seen one of his paintings at the Musée d'Orsay. For all that money spent, and all those visits made, so many still persist in their need to see the world through blind eyes.

Behind your eyes closed, open your eyes. Beget beauty into the world by your singular regard. And if you have the talent to paint, then paint what others cannot see: the beauty of your soul, the beauty from which we are born and to which we return.



X. Rhapsody and Rapture

*People believe all sorts of things about what happens at death,
and some volunteer to die for such beliefs,
but music supersedes belief.
Its emotions cannot be countered.
Its bonds of brotherhood cannot be broken.
Against it there is no defence.
It transforms the world not by action upon visible matter,
but by invisible influence upon the heart.*

Prelude

Raised frugally by a Danish father and a Texan mother, the inaccessibility of luxury led me to a treasure of inestimable value. The music of masters is beyond price. Accessible to all, it is appreciated by few. Such music brings us close to a paradise that never manifests itself, one that we intuitively understand but cannot explain. It unfolds as a thousand shades of intimate emotions, unfettered by the events in life that we consider to be their cause.

From the age of 11 when I took up the violin, I recall the *feeling* that Mozart's violin concerto in A major evoked in me. Many years later, when I discovered the lace of lingerie, the clarity of crystal, and the purity of Ruinart champagne, I would think to myself: "those things are all like Mozart". They all produced kindred sentiments.

At the age of 13, under the influence of hormones that nobody had cared to warn me about, I lost myself in the luxuriant *Prélude d'Après-Midi d'un Faune* by Debussy. Upon a soft sun-speckled nest of ferns, tucked away in a shimmering wood, there she lay in wait...my nymph, my goddess. A decade later, when I had finally recovered from this devastating fantasy, I heard Baudelaire's evocation of "*luxe, calme et volupté*". It would take me ten more years to go from my first taste of *Gewurztraminer vendanges tardives* to *Château d'Yquem*. When the infinitely subtle mellowness of those wines touched my tongue, I would think to myself: Those are all like the *Prélude d'Après-Midi d'un Faune*.

Who had ever heard of the Hebrews before Abraham was named? From him sprang the lineage of the righteous: Isaac and Jacob. Similarly, the Germans have their founding father, the focal point in a millennium of Western classical music: Johann Sebastian Bach. The holy trinity would be completed by Mozart and Beethoven. How such astonishing, almost superhuman art could have sprung up on the wrong side of the Rhine will puzzle the French until the end of time. Was Bach some extra-terrestrial who just happened to land in Leipzig? Or is the emotionally interiorized Germanic culture a more fecund source of musical intensity?

The latter would seem a lame hypothesis given that France was a cradle for classical music during the 500 years prior to Bach. Maybe the French just gave up when they realized they were losing the game, in the same way that the USA seems incapable of producing a world-class soccer team.

The immensity of French culture in all domains is such that its unique musical contributions are too easily lost like arcane manuscripts in its national library. No doubt were I not myself a violinist I would know little about them. In the shadow of teutonic titans, French culture produced a distinct quality of classical music, finely attuned to the aesthetics of sound (much like the French language).

The French impressionist composers sought light and color to accentuate this distinction, turning their backs on the density of *Deutsche musik*. Both before and after Bach, and regardless of the composer, French music is woven into the fabric of other arts: the troubadour singers with poetry, Rameau, Couperin, and Ravel with dance²⁴, Debussy with painting, Satie and Poulenc with cuisine.

With cuisine, really? Admittedly, that is an entirely personal association. Both Satie and Poulenc seem to have concocted brief, delicious musical dishes, imaginative and ephemeral like a *menu gastronomique*. Order as your *entrée du jour*, the Larghetto from the Concerto in D minor for two pianos by Poulenc. Now what does that taste like? If words fail you, one thing you know for sure is that it sounds parisian. As you listen to Satie's Gnossienne number 2 "*Avec étonnement*", notice the splattering of sauce is an intense green with an anis taste. *Avec étonnement*²⁵, you learn it's actually made from tarragon! Or how about sprinkling black pepper corns into your vanilla ice cream while discovering one of his *pièces froides*.

²⁴ When was the last time you danced a *pavane*, *bransle*, *gavotte*, or a *sicilienne* ?

²⁵ Surprised

Revelling in Ravel

Eccentricity doesn't equal grandeur, and experts may say that Debussy is the most significant of all French composers. This I cannot contest, but my heart has most revelled in the rhapsodic music of Ravel. From the apotheosis of *Ma Mère L'Oye* to the hair-raising *Tzigane* for violin, his music sweeps over me like a tidal wave. Or, in the case of the Adagio assai from his piano concerto in G major, the melancholy is like raindrops that gently fall upon *her* face.

Is there music that better captures a shimmering bed of leaves, the joy of birds that rise in song, the rays of light that pierces through the morning mists, and the feeling of bliss from a lover's kiss, than "*Levéé de jour*" from *Daphnis and Cloé*? It is the ever-renewed miracle of the morning, and the quintessence of *luxé* in French music.

Is it possible to switch on the feeling of joy, as if tuning into a radio frequency? If so, what would that be worth? Rise to this music of Ravel and surrender to its rhapsody. Allow yourself the luxury of trusting that your life will unfurl in beauty as the dawn. Here is a luxury beyond price.

Rapture and release

Maybe it was my Danish father's fault, but I used to be almost as anti-Wagner as Wagner was anti-Semitic. I wasn't ideologically opposed to his music, but might have explained my aversion using the French expression *c'est too much*.

Wagner is the father of 20th-century French music because its aesthetic developed in opposition to him. No Wagner, no Debussy. No Wagner, no Stravinsky. So it is for all the sons of fathers: always defined by them, for or against.

Everything Wagner undertook was on an epic scale, equal to his ego. A friend of mine and future conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic, convinced me to revisit my reticence and perform a programme dedicated to Wagner's music. He insisted that Wagner, more than any other, explored the entire range of human emotions. It was a good enough reason to give Wagner another chance.

There are too many subtleties of human emotion for any composer to capture them all, and Wagner does not remind me of seeing a baby giggle, or a daffodil sway in the breeze, but he did surely capture every nuance of emotion associated with *longing*, and in the longest form imaginable. The erotic tension of Tristan and Isolde is maintained all the way to the rapture of death, the only state in which the tragic couple could be united.

Wagner pushed the existing musical language to its limits so as to deliberately embody Schopenhauer's idea of death as the apotheosis of human desiring. After Wagner, the Western world collapsed for a while, and France and Germany united in death.

All discourse about death either seems dreadful or conflictual. Doctrines have been built up to harness our fears about death and their proponents will defend them until their last breath. Our society mass-produces death and even seems addicted to it. At the same time, it is the thing we are all trying to avoid at all costs and against all odds. There is some lunatic dwelling in each of us that wants to be immortal.

Where discourse fails, music prevails. Such sublime music has been inspired by death, allowing us to experience it while alive, not as something morbid or frightful, but as an integral part of life itself. Life implies death the way death implies life. Listen to the Funeral March from Beethoven's Eroica Symphony. Go ahead, listen three times, even nine. You will not tire of it and you may think each time *death is one awesome place to be!* Tearless, fearless, you will rise in your magnificence.

Life rises again out of death, and you can feel something of that exaltation in the finale of Mahler's 3rd Symphony or the end of Stravinsky's Firebird Suite. Listen to the last songs by Richard Strauss. *Im Abendrot*, you will rest, stunned yet serene as the evening sky fades to red and the swallows flutter into infinity. And you will whisper to yourself

with a smile: *ah, so this then is death?* If you prefer to think of death with angels that carry you back to a twinkling eternity, you have Faure's Requiem, *In Paradisium*.

Rapture (*höchste Lust!*) is the final word sung by Isolde. In a class of its own, this final scene of Wagner's Tristan and Isolde enacts the rapture of love and death, eros and thanatos, together. Isolde contemplates her deceased Tristan and feels submerged in an ecstasy that drowns out sorrow. It is the end of all separation. Tristan and Isolde are a mythical couple, but Abélard and Héloïse were a historical manifestation of the myth in 12th-century France. I pay tribute to them in my final chapter.

People believe all sorts of things about what happens at death, and some volunteer to die for such beliefs, but music supersedes belief. Its emotions cannot be countered. Its bonds of brotherhood cannot be broken. Against it there is no defence. This is why I see music as another embodiment of the feminine principle: it transforms the world not by action upon visible matter, but by invisible influence on the heart.



XI - Rodin and Romance

All rivers return to the sea, and everything we experience about love leads us closer, sometimes by the most sinuous of paths, to its original fullness.

Love Unlocked

My first mother-in-law died over ten years ago, but we're still friends on Facebook. Perhaps the almighty Mr. Zuckerberg will arrange for her to message me someday. I like to think we have a special tie that supersedes the social network; even in writing this I pay tribute to her legacy in my life. She was such an imposing figure that even my wife at the time hardly had room to breathe in her presence.

She was handicapped, and left us all wondering if she had not somehow created that condition in order to dampen her own fire. She was passionate and extravagant, generous beyond bounds yet self-absorbed in her own woes. She was affectionate, tender and cruel. Once she killed the family's pet rabbit in front of her children and served it for dinner. In preparation for her daughter's wedding for which she spent her life savings, she contrived a series of spectacular and original initiations for me, her future son-in-law. The final rite was to swallow a goldfish swimming in a glass of champagne. I accomplished this deed, unwavering, to the horror of family witnesses. But I was happy to humour her, and have since enjoyed better moments with champagne.

This was how I first became locked into French romance: poisson over passion. I came to France for love. That was what I told them all, but there was never time to unravel the layers of that expression. I fell in love with France just as I was transfixed by that French girl with her melting chocolate eyes, sa coquetterie, and her porcelain hands playing a Debussy prelude. Bread and butter fell in love with berries and bubbles.

We fall in love with what we admire, or what we lack. Our relationship is a form of compensation--until we get that figured out. My initial contact with the French revealed to me just how atrophied my puritan upbringing had left me. Imagine the astonishment of an aboriginal presented for the first time with an Iphone. My first seven course meal produced that kind of marvel in me. In the end it would be a failed marriage. Failed is perhaps a harsh term, but since we promised "until death do we part" there is no escaping the fact that we are still alive...yet forever parted. At least we didn't encumber any Paris bridge with a lock. My mother had predicted, long before I swallowed the goldfish alive, that I would not be happy in that marriage. The extraordinary irony is that she was right, but for all the wrong reasons. She thought France would be the problem, but my fascination with the infinite nuances of French culture never failed. My first wife was my crash course in French culture (and I suppose I was her crushing course in something else).

La France ma belle mariée, until death do we part.

Thousands of "love locks" still weigh upon Paris' bridges, but romantic love is more like the unfettered flow of the Seine beneath *le pont Mirabeau*. Locks are of no avail, and locked-up love will not survive its prison sentence. Some, in spite of those locks, will succeed the great

crossing hand in hand with their chosen one. Such is a worthy goal, and an admirable achievement. As much as success in marriage can define us, our failure can redefine us. All rivers return to the sea, and everything we experience about love leads us closer, sometimes by the most sinuous of paths, to its original fullness.

Fruits of passion

So it is said that Paris is the most romantic of cities. What shocks me about this claim is the understatement. Romance is served up with the same triviality as a *crème brûlée*. Maybe you imagine catching the enticing regard of a stranger in a café. Romance is whatever you call it, but romantic passion is more like the terrible 1910 flood. Do those who seek passion in Paris know the power of its waters unleashed? The destruction it leaves behind, until all is rebuilt?

In the same way that Eros and its arts have been reduced to kinky kitsch in our age of plastic pleasure, so also the art of romance has been bunched into burgeoning protuberances of metallic locks, bearing down on the bridges of Paris. It is the structural integrity of love itself that is threatened.

If you are in the throes of a passionate love affair, an escapade to the Musée Rodin will only deepen your troubles. Rodin's sculptures are passion pressed into stone. You are holding your lover's body and you can't squeeze it or clutch it tight enough. For the life of you, it cannot be held entirely between your hands. You cannot contain it nor merge with it. You are hopelessly separate from that which you love, but your passion drives you ceaselessly toward it. If you become stuck in this state, then you will find yourself engraved into Rodin's rendition of Dante's Inferno.

Never know passion and your life will be half-lived; never placate passion and your life will become dantesque. What is it we wish to extract from passion, that highly inflammable liquid, without killing ourselves? What is it we want to feel when we admire Rodin's sculptures?

The passion of Eros must strip and shake you to the core before the great edifice of your ego can crumble. It is upon your own ruins that a cathedral may rise.

In the year 1119, a passion burned so deeply beneath the roof of Notre Dame that its embers were alone sufficient to set it ablaze in 2019. What we know of the true story of Heloise and Abelard stands as an archetype in the French romantic imagination. Pierre Abélard was a great scholar and philosopher of his age. Heloise was an extraordinarily bright and beautiful young woman, the niece of Fulbert, Notre Dame's canon. Abélard was appointed to teach Heloise, which he did (and she was a very fast learner) before they fatally became lovers. Then came those scenes that our époque would qualify as *hot*, although no amount of bodily contortions can depict the nature of that fire raging within them.

Unspeakable tragedy ensued, as can only be heard in Act 3, Scene 1 of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*. Abélard was brutally emasculated for bringing shame on Fulbert's house. Heloise was separated from the only child born to her, and the couple ended up monk and nun, cast apart

for life. But even that was not enough to quench their passion, distilled into spiritual fervor through their numerous epistles.

Heloise is the prototype of the idealised *femme française*: sophisticated, sensual, and defiant. In an age of religious shackles, she wrote to Abelard:

“The name of mistress instead of wife would be dearer and more honorable for me...” and also

“Even if I could be Queen to the Emperor and have all the power and riches in the world, I’d rather be your whore.”

Stop to think for a moment. How is it possible to prefer being a whore to a queen? Maybe this is what Héloïse was thinking:

Abélard, I will no longer remain silent about our past even though you supplicated me to transcend it. I recall your sudden intrusion into me as the source of my life. It was like a thousand waves that came crashing onto my shores, or like wild horses stampeding in sea’s foam. Your terrifying desire was like a ram repeatedly assaulting me and beating down all the doors and windows inside me. Our hair became tangled in saliva and sweat, and your tongue was upon all my wounds...then I would find myself on the other shore, out of breath, with all of my sails ripped apart...yet radiant in the haven of your arms.

Holy of holies. No, I shall not remain silent about these things!

Your desire for me oozed between my thighs, seeped into my guts, revealed countless precious places on my flesh. Never could I have imagined that this amorphous space hidden in my womb hid so many secret cavities! One after another, you opened them with such imperious sensuality. During these many months where we did nothing else but love each other, the deeper you penetrated into me, the more these deeper spaces revealed themselves to me. Sometimes as I walk in the street, I feel myself swaying to your echo like a cello that continues to vibrate long after the music has stopped. Sometimes I dare not breathe, and move ever so slowly, like a queen crowned by so many precious jewels. Sometimes the space within me resonates like a cathedral, and my emotion is so immense that the tears rain down to the corner of my mouth without me even detecting their salinity. Sometimes, for long hours after you have loved me, I feel you cradled inside me like some clandestine passenger.²⁶

The remains of the legendary lovers lie side by side in the Père Lachaise cemetery, a few blocks away from where I now live. I say “now” because I have roamed Paris even more than those who live on its streets. The ghosts of Abélard and Heloise also continue to roam, meaning that the romantic ideal they embody still permeates our Western subconscious. Who has not, at some point, wanted to love so passionately as to lose oneself?

Passion in love is not a serene state, but it is one of feeling vibrantly alive. Its extreme is not unlike the bond of brotherhood that some men experience in battle, but most would agree that fluids of love are preferable to spilled blood.

²⁶ My own translation of an excerpt from *Une passion entre ciel et chair*, by Christiane Singer

Love in my blood

The diagnostic was certain: an acute case of erotitis. The direct cause: falling in love. This week the symptoms worsened. I was suffering from an excess of vitality. I felt plugged into some invisible source of energy and my body wasn't prepared for such a strong electrical current. The music in my head wouldn't stop a single instant. Like a mother whose breasts burgeon with milk, I had to get up at night to release an excess of sentiment. I was flooded with words of love and couldn't stop them from flowing.

By Thursday, the day I received the news that I was being offered a dream job, my condition had taken a serious turn. I began to fear that such dangerous levels of vitality might do me in. To make matters worse, it was a warm day in May with its maddening sweet air. This was Paris where love seemed to be everywhere.

I started looking for a remedy, or at least a relief. Luckily, I passed by the Place de la Bastille that day where I noticed a temporary blood donor tent had been set up, there at the far end of one of Paris' largest open-air markets. After loading their shopping trolleys with seasonal delights--strawberries *les gariguettes*, green asparagus, fresh halibut, and peonies-- it was hoped that someone might return some of the abundance they enjoyed. Never had I felt such an imperious impulse to give my blood!

A nurse welcomed me and thanked me:

"You know, we were hoping for forty donors by this hour, and we've only had 18."

So I replied:

"In that case, take a double amount from me. I feel like I have way too much at the moment and it's bursting from my veins! On top of that, my blood type is A negative. It's rare, so make the most of it!"

Could she have believed me? I reclined, marveling at the intense bordeaux flowing out of my veins through the plastic tube. What beautiful blood! This was the precious liquid that would restore life to someone unknown to me. I thought of the words of Jesus: *drink, for this is my blood*. I pondered how this little excess of mine could potentially have such great and unpredictable consequences in the lives of other people. It lasted a while, and towards the end I felt dazed and content. When it was finished, I briskly got up, expecting nothing had changed. The tide suddenly pulled back inside me. I tried to warn the nurses. *Je me sens un peu....*

They said I collapsed. What I remember next was the nurse's little slaps on my face.

« *Qu'est-ce qui vous arrive, Monsieur ?* »

The question seemed to reach me from another realm.

"What has happened to me?" I echoe.

“*Vous êtes tombé dans les pommes*²⁷” she replies, surrounded by the medical staff looking vaguely concerned.

“It’s the first time this has ever happened to me. Isn’t that extraordinary? Well, the coming around part at least. I can’t wait to try that again sometime!” I wink.

“It’s a good thing you didn’t fall backwards on your head!” another nurse offered.

“Can you get up now?”

“Even if I couldn’t get up, would it not be a marvelous day to leave one’s life behind?” I replied with a grand smile. That one didn’t go over so well. Those were the days when I was still learning to synchronize my humour with the French.

Whatever the future holds, you will remain for me the accomplishment of that young man’s dream called love. And if it were all only a dream, I would still declare, from that bed from which I no longer rise, that I truly did live that dream.

²⁷ French expression for fainting. Literally: fallen upon the apples.

The Trouble with Troubadours

We have the *troubadours* to thank for what was, in their days, a revolution in romance more sweeping than any we have yet known. From the troubadours we have inherited the romantic ideal of entering through the eyes of another to find a deep heart-connection. It is a quest that devastates us both in its truth and its illusion. Its truth must be celebrated before all things. It is said that love blinds us to our beloved's defects. That is an easy case to make, but what is less acknowledged is how being in love provides a glimpse at the splendor of our beloved in a way that none other can. In a twinkling of the eye, we behold the other in the perfection of what they can become.

As for the illusion of romance, I once was the master. Armed with my violin, my poetic heart, and boundless imagination, I conjured up romantic scenarios the way cooks prepare their *plat du jour*.

So mesmerized she was by the experience itself, by this buck-list of dreams that I delivered one after the other, how could she possibly have ascertained whether I was the right one for her? How could she have known that I would become her hell? So lost in my own game, how could I have known? Now this is hell: to see in the mirror of the eyes of your beloved what you don't want to see about yourself. You don't want to see it because, were it true, you couldn't love yourself, much less imagine you are loved. That Other (who you have chosen) is placed against you as a boundary to your illusion of self-sufficiency and omnipotence. He/She has been invited beneath your armor to slay your self-illusion.

We had met as violinists, matched as standpartners by a cupid-like conductor.

Aimez-vous Brahms?

There was no doubt that both of us loved Brahms, and Dvorak too. The Brahms violin concerto and the 8th Symphony by Dvorak were both on the program in the month of June that year. The violin concerto had filled my head with dreams since I was 12. I would run free across its vast melodic prairies. Now, she and the melody became one. The music flowed through me and I could *feel* her next to me. From the corner of my eyes, I was entranced by the movement of her delicate wrists and fingers.

The concert left me in a state of *ivresse*. Every glance at her sent my heart beating *allegretto*. What was it about her face? It was like a code that needed to be cracked. Was it really the way her smile would engage so entirely? Or was it those lofty high-arched eyebrows that set her apart, the way cathedral ceilings alter space? It was something exquisite, and whatever it was overthrew me. But was it really *her*, after all? Or did we create something between us with a life of its own?

She disappeared after that concert. *There were reasons* for which we had not remained in touch, but six months later I was still soaring on those melodies, under the spell of that first (or

last?) sight of her. And so I did the one thing I *never should have done*, that one thing that has made me who I am. Before I was a child, now I am a man. Before I had a well-ordered, respectable life. Now I have burned to the ground and risen from the rubble. Before I knew nothing of forgiveness except the politeness of the word. Now I know how to bless the *cold and broken hallelujah*.²⁸

The one thing I never should have done was *to inquire about her*. It was like the loose thread that must not be pulled. Once you tug on it, the entire garment comes unravelled. That was the effect of my correspondence with her. My French was not yet perfect, but it was achieving literary excellence at a very fast pace to find the right word for *her*.

Word upon word, week after week, our resistance to each other was eroding. There was a tension building, something like an electrical differential, portending the strike of lightning at any moment. The intensity of our emotions seemed to shape the reality around us. People passing in the street noticed us and smiled, as if we were the actors on a stage. Had we hats to collect, they would have thrown us coins just for being who we were. Paris pays tribute to its lovers.

Then came that evening where she did indeed act on a stage, and I was there secretly watching. She later said she felt my presence. After her theatre performance, we walked out into the warm June evening air, humid and heavy as the rain clouds began to encircle us. The café terraces on rue Montmartre were a frenzy like bees around blossoms. We walked slowly over the cobblestones, entirely absorbed in each other's gaze. I took her hand and stopped our walking. A whiff of hair slipped down next to her eye....

that irresistible trigger of desire.

I took my hand to her face to brush back the hair, then with my palm holding her head I moved my lips toward hers, for the very first time. We saw the lightning flicker out of the corner of our eyes, when our hearts were beating outside of ourselves. Much later the cool drops would begin to fall, along with the night. But for the longest time, there on the cobblestone corner of rue Montmartre, we were welded to each other, our tongues searching the recesses of each other's mouth. We had opened the floodgates of desire and soon there would hardly remain a high place to save ourselves.

So many years afterwards, it is strange to revisit those passages deep in the city, haunted by this passion of which nothing seems to remain. How could she, for whom I lived and breathed, now be gone? Her name is written all over Paris, but there is nobody to read it anymore. Love affairs, like life itself, do end, even though we fantasize about them lasting forever. No doubt, something of it all remains, and that is to be cherished.

There was a time when we lay together, alone in the world, between the dunes and beneath the moon. There was the sound of the sea rolling in and beach grass that swayed in the breeze.

²⁸ Leonard Cohen

*There was a time when I moved in you, and the holy ghost was moving too.*²⁹ These days I am grateful to her the way one might become grateful to a formidable opponent. Thank you for that hell of a ride. I conquered your heart. You devastated mine.

Now I have compassion, not judgement, on those still holding on for dear life through the tempest of passion. Nothing is more exhilarating than a Paris love affair, until you fall in love with life itself.

With all the inroads Paris has made into your flesh, with all the arrows it has shot into your heart, she has also opened up pathways to a greater love affair..something closer to sublime.

²⁹ Leonard Cohen beat me to that one, too.

Fading into the great Beauty

The ritual of romance is, so I suppose, a ring-dance around the secret that sits in the center and knows.³⁰ As an elaborate explanation of my fascination for France, this book has felt like that ring-dance around a secret of sorts. The end is near, and it's time to close in on that secret.

I have come to see Paris as an apotheosis in the human quest to exalt and sublimate the senses. I have lingered her light and revelled in her luxuries; I have succumbed to her passions and tasted her delicacies. But what has it all been about, beyond my own delight? What is the secret behind all that I have called exquisite? Where have these love affairs--for this and for that, for her and for her---brought me in the end? What is the thread of wonder that weaves them together?

“I came to France for love”, I had always said, elusive but truthfully.

In the particular light of France, I have caught a glance of the timeless attributes that I name exquisite. I have been bathed in beauty. I have encountered genius and perceived perfection. I have been struck down by eros, and touched by grace. I have tasted subtle joy, sweet and sour. I have saturated my senses with experiences I sought *outside of myself*. They are like a pantheon of goddesses who have enriched and ennobled me by my adoration.

But now they wind down their alluring dance and set their gaze on me. What are they searching out so intently? I must now learn to set my own gaze inward, behind closed eyes. What is it I will see? Invisible to the eye, there is a subtle alchemy at work in our lives: a transmutation of base material into a more subtle essence. The base material is our self-absorbed state of consciousness, with its limited repertoire of compulsive emotions and behaviours. From this state, we have it within us to rise to a higher level of consciousness. We have it within us to feel elevated emotions as the ultimate elixir. In this process of becoming, through our overcoming, we become the alchemists. The finest champagne will but serve to remind us of what bubbles up within us.

All that I admired held the secret of what I wanted to become. Not just me, but all of us, souls on a singular journey. Some may follow my metaphorical path to France, land of the exquisite, while others will head to Walden Pond to taste of monastic simplicity. Each of these journeys holds a transformative power for the seeker. There is ample room in the field of higher human existence for both Tantra and Kabbalah, all wrapped into the Tao. As we dissolve ourselves into beauty, the names of things and our own name too, blur into the light.

Does my journey end in France? Either way, She will remain with me. Either way, I will be moving on. The end of our journey is to be imagined--a love that cannot be simply stated. It will feel like a rising tide, slowly engulfing everything, lifting us to our dream.

It will reveal us as we truly are. Exquisite.

³⁰ Variations on a theme by Robert Frost

Postscriptum

I salute the dawn of the new year 2020 standing at the tip of the *Ile de la Cité*. Behind me is *Pont Neuf*³¹, before me is the *Pont des Arts*, and all around me is Paris. I take comfort in the continuity of this millennial scene and wish for it to remain a while. The flow of the Seine is constant, ever-changing. She has defined me.

“Stay with me still” I think, as my country of birth comes unhinged,³² and as my country of choice grumbles in civil unrest.

In three month’s time, the entire world will plunge into an unprecedented pandemic panic. But this remains a book about life in the continuum *before and after* that event.

³¹ Pont Neuf, meaning New Bridge, is the oldest bridge in Paris. Whether it is old or new is entirely up to you.

³² What, other than hubris, could cause the self-proclaimed leader of the free world to come unhinged under circumstances that defy fictional imagination?

Gratitude

It is my pleasure to make this work available as a gift to you and hope you will receive it as such. Should I factor in the cost of all that I have received from others, it would become priceless. There is no escaping that all is a gift.

If I have in any way inspired, encouraged, or provoked your thoughts, know that any gift you chose to send back to me will also be received as such, and with my heartfelt thanks. I see this as a cycle of gratitude that benefits us all. You may [click on this link](#) if you wish to contribute, or refer to <http://carstensprotte.com> for more information.