

The Expatriot

COMMUNIQUÉ N°3

• MARCH 1995



SUICIDE SPECIAL!

IN CASE YOU are interested, all previous issues of *The Expatriot* are continuously available. A simple, personal letter is enough to secure the next issue; if you're too lazy to write, you have to pay. Since it costs me about \$1 to mail a single copy to the United States, and not much less elsewhere, please be so kind as to include this amount, in cash, for each issue you would like to have. (For my correspondents in France, 5F will cover this expense.) Your comments and suggestions are also greatly appreciated.

THE EXPATRIOT

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March 6, 1995

AS SOME OF YOU will recall, I published a brief account of the suicide of Guy Debord and what the man meant to me in the last issue of *The Expatriot* [SEE n°2, p. 1920]. In the intervening weeks since that issue appeared, some interesting new facts have come to light, as well as some bizarre and irreconcilable coincidences. These occurrences, as well as my thinking about them, are part of the everyday situation I experience, and I have puzzled over their possible meaning for many hours. Because this is a journal of my experiences here, and this puzzling forms an important part of that, I have decided to share with my readers some of the information that I have gathered concerning the deaths of Guy Debord and Ray Johnson. This information has all been sent to me by readers. To them, I extend my gratitude.

The first item (p. 1938) is a personal account of someone who befriended Debord during the last few years of his life. I include it here because this was really the only personal glimpse of the man that I had ever come across.

The next clipping (p. 1940) concerns what to me is the most interesting turn in this knot of information; that is, the total lack of accord between what was printed in the *San Francisco Chronicle* and what has appeared in the press over here. When I received this article, I read it incredulously. I asked my French informants what they knew about this, and none of them had heard any mention in the French press of any suicide pact. One informant in particular could not reconcile his image of Debord's character as a man who would be on friendly terms at all with Roger Stéphane, who apparently was a conservative DeGaulist literary critic.

The third item (pp. 1941–42) is a tract that the Neoist Alliance of London published 'in favor of' suicide.

The final piece on Debord (p. 1943) is a

☛ p. 1947

Merri Jolivet*

«Together we made a grand voyage in place»

«It was four years ago that a friend pointed out to me in passing the presence of Guy Debord in the quarter that I frequented. He told me that I might well run into him some day. This happened by pure chance at a wine bistrot in the 14th *arrondissement*. We found ourselves face to face at a table. I didn't know what he looked like. He introduced himself. Guy Debord. For more than a year, 1990–1991, we saw each other almost daily. In cafes, restaurants, at his place. Once in a while he'd invite me over. He never phoned; he'd write. There we'd be, his wife, Alice; Dominique, mine; he and I around a dinner that he had sometimes spent the entire day preparing. One day, he received me in his office where we spent more than an hour look-

ing at his library, a glassed-in library in which he had arranged all of the books that he loved. It was there that he offered me a copy of *Mémoires*, a rare edition with a sandpaper cover.

»I could have, but I never decided to take photographs of him, just as I never visited him after he moved from Paris. I only learned of his departure when an invitation to an exhibition I had sent him was returned with the notice: 'departed without leaving forwarding address.' And from then on, he never wrote me.

»Our story is mostly one of repeated meetings from day to day, in one bistrot or another. We drank modest country wines that had no pretension, even though at his house he always uncorked great vintages. After having well drunk,

we would go out together. This is how, once, in front of the prefecture of police, I remember having exchanged with him the worst insanities. Part of the reason for this was a certain taste he had for provocation.

»We also were in the habit of exchanging gifts. I gave him the ends of pencils that I saved because he couldn't stand to write with new ones. Another time he offered me a book by a 14th-century Persian poet devoted to wine.

»It was a very delicate relationship. When we weren't alone, there were never more than four or five others persons seated at the table with us. His wife usually accompanied him. A natural *bon vivant*, he nonetheless suffered to read all the slanders which had been written about him, and considered himself under a permanent and diffuse threat at all times. When someone like Régis Debray or Philippe Sollers wrote a text that extolled him, he felt nothing but irritation. This put him on edge and he believed that in general this type of initiative was little more than opportunism. He saw few intellectuals in a favorable light, and my friendship with Felix Guattari didn't sit well with him.

»He had no television, and he

was curious about everything. He spoke with the same elegance that he displayed in his writings. His speech was precise in the extreme, never banal, and through it, one had the impression that he was thinking out loud. His conversation had a rare quality. Later, when we were in the street, he exercised his talents as observer of everything, advertising, urban decor, architecture, etc. He never missed an opportunity to use his critical mind. Whether it was four in the morning after an evening spent drinking or whether it was noon when it came time for lunch. He was a marvel at controlling the effects of wine. If it happened that we changed cafes often, it was because of the variable quality of the wine.

»He never displayed any form of effusiveness. He was a passionate and refined aristocrat. I never knew in him the smallest vulgarity, nor the least triviality. It was a grand voyage in place that I was privy to at that time with him.»

**Reported by Hervé
GAUVILLE**

*Painter. Last work: decoration of the Centre de tri postal de la Défence.

TRANSLATION / XP

French Intelligentsia Shocked by Suicides

BY STEPHEN SCHWARTZ

Chronicle Staff Writer

An apparent triple suicide pact, with one of France's most famous radical intellectuals taking his life, followed within three days by two of his closest friends, has shaken the European literary and academic circles.

The main player in the bizarre drama, Guy Debord, 62, shot himself to death at his home in the Haute-Loire district on December 1. Debord, an inveterate intellectual jester with the seriousness of a 19-century anarchist and the wit of a Voltaire, was the founder in the 1950s of a radical cultural theory known as situationism.

Two days after Debord's death, publisher Gerard Voitey, who had been involved in Debord's renowned publishing enterprise, Champ Libre (Free Field), was found dead at the wheel of his car near a lake. He had fired one shot from a pistol into his head.

Third Victim

The next day, 75-year-old Roger Stephane, a prominent critic and

friend of Debord and Voitey as well as of French novelist Andre Malraux, shot himself in a Paris apartment where he lived with his dogs and piles of books.

Speculation in France on the causes of the triple suicide range from disappointment with the failed leftist hopes of the past 30 years to predictable hints about AIDS. European media report that an investigation continues. French police believe the three deaths were linked but have released no solid evidence of a suicide pact.

The affair echoes the mysterious death in 1984 of Debord's financial patron, Gerard Lebovici, a gay radical and co-director of the Champ Libre house, who was shot dead at point-blank range in a Paris garage.

Debord's name had surfaced in the investigation of Lebovici's death, leading to a court suit and a series of bitter writings by Debord, who memorialized Lebovici through furious condemnation of French intellectual life, even angrily withdrawing his own works from the public. ... [EXCERPT]

NO USELESS --- LENIENCY

On 30 November 1994, Guy Debord killed himself, apparently without reason. He was 62 years old and had been a bohemian intellectual for the past forty years. The ‘avant-garde’ essayist had secured himself a major publishing deal, attractively furnished homes in Paris and Champot, televisions, washing machines, refrigerators, garbage disposal units, and even an aquarium. While the funeral orations and other ‘tributes’ are still ringing in our ears, the Neoist Alliance asserts that the most urgent task of those defending freedom is the destruction of idols, and the suppression of corpses, especially when, as in Debord’s case, they present themselves in the name of liberty. Let the dead bury their dead, we will blaze a trail to new modes of being.

Debord did not die for our sins, this non-man killed himself so that his highly spectacular image could be reproduced everywhere. The cultural assassin re-emerges, not as the vengeance of Dada, but as the cutting edge of recuperation! Everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation. The spectacle in general, as the concrete inversion of life, is the autonomous movement of the non-living. Death obliterates the boundaries between self and other, true and false, reducing Debord’s suicide to the level of self-serving rhetoric. Only the Neoist Alliance has grasped the necessary conjunction between nihilism and historical consciousness, now allowing a new generation to spit on the graves of neo-surrealist epigones.

OVERTHROW THE --- HUMAN RACE

THE HEALING POWER OF DOUBT

Anyone can be killed for any reason, but start by killing yourself. The moralists of the left, right and centre all do their collective part, despite the fact that they imagine themselves to be motivated by the very beliefs we will ultimately negate. “Self-destruction” is a semantic swindle. Rhetoric against suicide is simply a reactionary resistance to change. Only total opposition, both theoretical and practical (i.e. death), is irrecuperable. Anything else will necessarily appear absolutist and contradictory.

TO THOSE ABOUT TO DIE

Guy Debord

Bruce Kent

Alain de Benoist

Tony Blair

Ian Bone

Peter Lamborn Wilson

Richard Burns

P.J. O'Rourke

Salman Rushdie

Ronald Reagan

Martin Amis

Auberon Waugh

BELIEF IS THE ENEMY

Issued by the Neoist Alliance, BM Senior, London WC1N 3XX, UK.

END SOCIAL RELATIONS

III

«I have observed that most of those who have left their memoirs have only done a good job of showing us their sins and bad habits when, by chance, they have mistaken them for prowess or good instinct, such as happens sometimes.»

Alexis de Tocqueville,
Souvenirs.

After the circumstances which I have just recounted, the thing that has no doubt most marked my entire life is my habit of drinking, acquired early. Wine, spirits and beers; the moments when these thrust themselves upon me and the times they thrust again, have traced the principle course and meanderings of entire days, weeks, and years. There have been two or three other passions, which I will talk about later, that have almost continually occupied a large part of this life. But drinking in particular has been the most constant and the most present. Among the small number of things that have pleased me, or that I knew how to do well, that which I assuredly knew how to do the best is to drink. However much I have read, I have drunk more. I have written much less than most of those who write; but I have drunk much more than most of those who drink. I can count myself among those of whom Baltasar Gracián, thinking of an elite he discerned only among the Germans — but very unjustly to the detriment of the French, as I think my case shows —, could say: «There are those who have been drunk only once, but it has lasted them their entire life.»

Therefore I am a bit surprised, having read so frequently the most extravagant slanders or the most unjust critiques directed at me, to

see that some thirty years, and more, have passed without a single malcontent having exposed my drunkenness as an argument, at least implicit, against my scandalous ideas; with the sole exception, albeit lately, being a tract by some drugged youths in England, who revealed around 1980 that I was henceforth worn out by alcohol, and that I had therefore become harmless. I have not for a moment dreamt of hiding this perhaps contestable side of my personality, and it has been beyond a doubt to anyone who has met me more than once or twice. I can even point out, each time it occurs, in Venice as in Cadiz, in Hamburg as in Lisbon, that it takes only a few days for me to earn the great esteem of drinking partners whom I have only just met in local cafes.

To begin with, I loved, like everyone, the effect of light inebriation. Soon after I loved the sensation when one goes beyond the point of violent drunkenness to feel a magnificent and awe-inspiring peace, the true taste of the passage of time. Although this occurred perhaps only once or twice a week during the first few decades, it's nonetheless a fact that I have been continually drunk for periods lasting several months and even then, the rest of the time, I drank a lot.

The large variety of emptied bottled lies in a state of disarray, however, they are all the same susceptible to an *a posteriori* classification. First of all, I can distinguish between drinks that I drank in their country of origin, and those that I drank in Paris; but then one could find almost anything to drink in mid-century Paris. My drinking experiences can be subdivided simply among the beverages I drank at home or at the homes of friends; and the drinks I drank in cafes, wine cellars, bars, restaurants; or in the streets, notably in terraces.

The changing conditions brought on by each hour of the day almost always takes a deciding role in the necessary renewal of a binge. Each hour suggests its reasonable preference from among the possibilities offered. There is what one drinks in the morning, and for a

rather long time, this was the moment for beer. In *Cannery Row*, a character whom one can see is a connoisseur professes that « nothing is better than a beer in the morning ». But often, upon waking, I felt a need for Russian vodka. There is what one drinks with meals, and during the afternoons that stretch between them. There is wine in the evenings, and with it, spirits, and after this beer is always pleasant, for then beer makes you thirsty. There is that which one drinks at the end of the night, at the moment when the day begins again. One can see that all of this has left me precious little time to write, and this suits my purpose : writing should remain rare, since before finding what is excellent in it, one needs to have drunk for a long time.

I have often walked around great cities of Europe, and I have appreciated in these places everything that deserved it. The catalogue on this matter would be vast. There were the beers of England, where one mixes the strong ones and the light ones in pints; and the great draughts of Munich; and the Irish ones; and the most classic, the Czech beer of Pilsen; and the admirable baroqueness of the *gueuze* around Brussels, which bore the distinct taste of each artisanal brewery, and could not be transported any distance. There were the fruit liqueurs of Alsace; the rum of Jamaica; punches, Aalborg aquavit, the *grappa* of Turin, cognac, cocktails; the incomparable *mezcal* of Mexico. There were all the wines of France, of which the nicest come from Burgundy; there were the wines of Italy, and above all the *barolo* of the Langhe, the Toscan *chiantis*; there were the wines of Spain, the *riogas* of old Castile or the *jumilla* of Murcia.

I would have had few illnesses, if along the way alcohol hadn't brought me some; from insomnia to vertigo, including the gout. « Beautiful like the trembling of an alcoholic's hands », said Lautréamont. There were mornings that were stirring, yet difficult.

« It is better to hide one's unreasonableness, but it is difficult in debauchery and drunkenness », Heraclitus could ponder. And yet

Machiavelli wrote to Francesco Vettori : « Whoever sees our letters, ... it will seem to him that we are serious men entirely given to great things, that our hearts cannot conceive a thought not full of honor and grandeur. But after that, turning the page, our persons will appear to him as weak, inconstant, sons-of-bitches, entirely given to vanities. And if someone thinks us unworthy for this matter, I myself find it commendable, for we imitate nature, which is ever-changing. » Vauvenargues formulated this too-often forgotten rule : « In order to decide if an author contradicts himself, it has to be impossible to reconcile him. »

Some of my reasons for drinking, however, are estimable. I can well demonstrate, as could Li Po, this noble satisfaction : « For thirty years, I've been hiding my notoriety in taverns. »

The majority of wines, almost all the spirits, and every one of the beers of which I here evoke the memory have today entirely lost their taste. This has occurred with the advance of industry, first on the world market, and then locally, along with the movement toward the suppression or reeducation of social classes which have long remained independent of industrial production. For here on, the interplay of various state regulations prohibits almost anything which isn't produced industrially. In order to continue to sell, the bottles have faithfully guarded their labels, and this exactitude gives the assurance that one can photograph them as they were, but not drink them.

Neither I nor my drinking companions have felt at any moment bothered by our excess. My good table companions and I were gathered « at the banquet of life » without stopping to think that everything we were drinking with such wantonness would subsequently be lost to those who came after us. In the memory of a drunkard, one could never imagine that one could see the drinks disappear from the world before the drinker.

TRANSLATION / XP

p. 1937 ↗ translation of Chapter III of his 1989 autobiography, *Panégryrique*. Debord had a reputation for drinking a lot, and was quite probably an alcoholic. Philippe has suggested that it is possible that his alcoholism, or some incurable disease brought on by abuse of the drink, that lead him to the suicide. This text might provide some evidence.

These excerpts sum up all of the most interesting information I have concerning Debord's death. However, I continue to be interested in this issue, so if any of my readers have any more information they'd like to share with me, it would be most appreciated.

The Death of Ray Johnson

NOT LONG AGO, I received the clipping which follows (p. 1949), from a reader in Iowa City, concerning the death of another marginal cultural figure of whom I had become aware through my publishing activities in the 1980s: the founder of the New York Correspondance School, Ray Johnson. He, too, committed suicide; but whereas Debord used a rifle in his own home, Johnson drove some fifty miles looking for a bridge to leap off of.

I was actually in contact with Johnson, briefly, in the "mail art" network in 1983. I had just begun to publish my own magazine and I decided to send Johnson a copy of my first issue (I had gotten his address from another mail artist). I was very pleased when he wrote back a witty letter decorated with his trademark bunny heads (see right), containing two dollars for the next issue. I enclosed a letter with that issue when it came out, but I never heard from Johnson after that.



Readers of my previous publications might remember seeing an announcement for Johnson's death already. It seems he inaugurated a mail art project in 1989 commemorating his own death in that

year. I remember thinking that the announcement I received was probably some kind of hoax (my own band was certainly not beneath that sort of thing at the time) but I liked the graphic quality of the announcement, and because I had personal (postal) contact with Johnson, ran it in my then current issue.

Philippe relates that sometime about this time he had written to Johnson, motivated by a curiosity brought about by seeing his name referenced everywhere in the mail art world. He was not pleased with what he got back: a summary announcement of Johnson's death by someone who had apparently taken over answering Johnson's mail, and without stopping for breath, this guy was putting out a call for submissions to his own mail art project. Philippe was understandably a little offended by this, and discarded the letter.

The article that follows comes from the *New York Times*. It serves here to highlight an attitude which I find more than a little disturbing. It seems that survivors of self-killed cult(ural) figures want to transmute the suicide into an esthetic gesture. The tendency here is to trivialize the life of the man by apparently saying that, because this action of his is difficult for us to accept, we must appreciate it in the framework of art. An echo of this can be read in the tract published by the Neoist Alliance concerning Debord, as well, only the accusation levelled here is that Debord wanted to be a radical philosopher version of Kurt Cobain ("a good career move").

The act of suicide, to state what is perhaps obvious, is an extreme of human experience. It is the point where a person's torment from life or very profound apathy toward it becomes more pronounced and sustained than the will to live itself. For some, it is an act of cowardice; for others it is pure courage. But it is never as trivial, relatively speaking, as art, even if the life lived up to that point has been unmitigatedly banal. We may not mourn the deaths of figures who were perfect strangers, yet household names, but it seems important to recognize that there were no doubt overwhelmingly non-artistic motives behind these suicides. ✉

Friends of an Enigmatic Artist See a Riddle in His Death

By **PETER MARKS**

Special to the New York Times

SAG HARBOR, N.Y., Feb. 10 — If Ray Johnson lived an enigmatic life, his death has proved to be the ultimate riddle.

In the weeks since the police fished his body out of an icy cove by this old fishing village on Long Island, anguished friends and admirers of the eccentric artist — a man largely unknown to the general public but considered a genius by many in the art world — have been racking their brains, rereading his correspondence, even retracing his last steps as they try to uncover what many of them believe must be the hidden meaning of his strange death.

The body of the 67-year-old artist was found floating 50 feet offshore on Jan. 14, an apparent suicide by drowning. But the reasons he might have killed himself elude both the police and his friends and fans. Although some tantalizing clues emerged after his death, he had told no one of his plans to make the 50-mile drive from his home in Locust Valley, N.Y., to Sag Harbor, where, on the

evening of Jan. 13, he jumped from a highway bridge over Sag Harbor Cove and was last seen backstroking into the distance, the police say.

What torments many who knew Mr. Johnson is not only the question of why, but whether the artist left clues in the pieces of art he mailed to them, or perhaps in the surrounding he chose for his death. For if there is any belief that unites his friends about the last day of his life, it is that Ray Johnson would never have passed up such a dramatic moment in which to impart a message. ...

"It seems to me the key is deliberately missing," said John Ritter, a lawyer hired by two of Johnson's closest friends. "This is like a grand collage, and I've got to find all these pieces and markers and where they're pointing me." ...

"The whole core of Ray was the conundrum, the enigma and the subtlety and the play of images that intersected," said Edvard Lieber, an artist and friend of Mr. Johnson's who visited Sag Harbor after learning of his death. He found a rich trove of potential clues, all linked to Mr. Johnson's love of wordplay and coincidence.

For instance, Mr. Johnson left his Volkswagen parked in front of a 7-Eleven convenience store, a block from the bridge. To Mr. Johnson's friends, such an act would not be unintentional. "Seven-eleven is obvious, in terms of chance and the throw of the dice," Mr. Lieber said.

But for Mr. Lieber, the strongest indications Mr. Johnson had been planning something came during a phone conversation they had the day before he died. At the time he thought it was just idle chat, the kind of thing Mr. Johnson said a thousand times. Now, he is haunted by the words. "He said to me, 'I have a new project, the biggest I've ever undertaken, the most important one in my life.'"

Mr. Johnson was a kind of scamp in the art world, an iconoclast who sometimes seemed to deliberately sabotage his own career. Though he was revered by other artists for his elaborate collages, many of which reflected his fascination with celebrity and pop culture, his fragile ego sometimes got in the way of wider acclaim. For long stretches of his career, he refused to sell his work, at least through conventional channels, and sometimes became enmeshed in fights even with college galleries that wanted to show his work.

"Ray was the author of his own obscurity," said Richard Feigen, a New York art dealer who represented Mr. Johnson for many years.

Mr. Feigen says that he loved Mr. Johnson and much of his work, which was collected by artists like Warhol and Jasper Johns.

"I think Ray will become famous after his death, because he won't be around to impede the dissemination of his work," Mr. Feigen said.

Beside the collages, Mr. Johnson's main preoccupation, and what attracted a following outside the mainstream art world, was his championing of what came to be known as mail, or correspondence, art. He and hundreds of his correspondents, through a loose-knit network he called the New York Correspondence School, sent artwork back and forth through the mail; many of his were adorned with bunny heads that came to be his trademark.

Almost everything about him was a contradiction. Though friends say he lived frugally and never appeared to hold a job, \$400,000 was found in his various bank accounts after his death, Sag Harbor police say. ...

A few days after he died, a post card addressed to Mr. Johnson arrived in Locust Valley. On the card, which bore a Los Angeles postmark, someone had written the date "1-13-95." It was decorated with a bunny head with Mr. Johnson's likeness, and it was signed "Ray Johnson."

"If you are reading this, I must be dead," it said. [EXCERPT]

February 9, 1995

My Friends Send Letters I went to the post office today. This is a fairly long, but pleasant walk, taking me down *Rue Ste.-Catherine* to *Place St.-Projet*, which is where I usually mail letters. But I wanted to check the *boîte postale* (p.o. box) today, so I continued my walk past the *Cathédrale St.-André* to the always bustling *Place Gambetta* and then, a few blocks farther west, to Meriadeck, where the large, modern central post office is found.

I got three letters today. One from my mother, who reports that she has finally succeeded in selling my Grandpa's (her father's) farm, the one I grew up on. She sounded positive about it, but for me there was a little pang, as I felt some important part of my past being pulled out from under my feet.

She also wonders in her letter if I am near any of the flooding that's been going on in France lately, which I am not.

One letter from Owen, a Berkeley filmmaker who visited me in Iowa last June. Together we staged a Flag Day event (on June 14) on the Pentacrest (Iowa City's main city square) where we set up a table with a sheet cake decorated like a flag and invited passersby to "Eat Flag." Among other activities, Owen filmed the event and the reactions of people who passed by as part of a larger film project called "The Plagiarist." Owen writes: *Unfortunately thought of you as I read of Debord's parting shot. Strange timing, though the guy wasn't the kind to shed any tears over. Just a blurry marker in time, as his publications become all that exists, his body second. I'm gonna resume work on my plagiarist film soon...*

Also got a letter from Florian, with whom I hung out at the Festival of Plagiarism in Glasgow in 1989. He lives in Berlin and has invited me up for a stay. He writes that *The Expatriot* is: *...one more puzzle piece in a sporadic theory of 'densification and shifting' in contemporary migration. The way from Europe to America seems*

easier than vice versa. Eating at McDonald's, for example, is then rather an exercise in thoroughly screwing up notions of the "familiar" and the "foreign." (I felt greatly contained in the U.S. and didn't want to go back.)

February 10, 1995

An Odd, Maybe Important, Dream I was travelling with my sister we were trying to get to Spain in a two-wing propeller plane. The sky was flat blue like construction paper with backlit pinholes for stars. The sun was coming up, the edges by the horizon were pink and white, like the petals of a flower. We flew over sand dunes. It was warm and windy. We made a stop somewhere I don't remember why. I got off alone with my tiny suitcase the size of a lunch box I was in Arabia. I walked for a time. There was a seaside tourist town in the United Arab Emirates. I walked down the main drag; sleazy tourist joints to my left and a dirty beach to my right. The beach was about five feet wide I was on a boardwalk. The sky was still flat but pink with stars it was still dawn. I saw a McDonald's, entered. Up a flight of stairs to a corridor at the top was a little ticket window ("*guichet*," I thought in French) a young woman in a McDonald's smock and cap behind it. She was talking to a friend on the outside of the window I did not hear what they said. The friend was black, I thought she must be American, she glowered at me knowingly and walked off. The woman behind the window a girl really was mulatto I said Do you speak American? She nodded wearily. I said Do you know of a cheap hotel where I could spend the night? She said Sure, Big Pete's. I said How much? She said 30 pounds. I said How much is that in American? She said Wait a minute I'll see. She punched up some numbers on a cash register. A dollar she said. I thought How can that be I went inside the ticket window to see for myself. The cash register said six on it I pressed some buttons, some other numbers came up. Oh yeah, that's right, I said aloud. The other woman returned angry. I ducked out and said It's all my fault, trying not to

get the young girl in trouble I left. Back on the street I looked for Big Pete's. I stopped a man in a pointed kind of turban (yet curling like it was starched or wired and coming undone) and white robes and a pointy black beard and bought some local currency from him. The big denomination bill was colorful and I didn't look too closely at it, sort of engraved orange swoops with purple engraving on it, but the small denominations looked exactly like American dollars, but waidaminnit, printed on tissue paper, wrong proportions, too, with big blobby printing. The color of the ink was mint green and I thought Waidaminnit This is Not an American Dollar turning it over and over again, inspecting both sides in disbelief. There are winged camels hiding in the filigree! And George Washington wears a beard and a pointy turban. And sunglasses! And smoking a cigarette! In fact It Is the Man Who Sold Them To Me! Get back here, you! But he was gone. When I came to and looked up I was in the lobby of a hotel standing on a thick red rug. The check-in desk to my left and five people to my right lounging on a thick blue carpet and throw pillows and ottomans that looked like the felt "tomato" pincushion my mother used to have. Two were Asian with very dark skin, they struck me as Filipinos, the rest looked like I don't remember, two women, two men, cocktail attire. I walked over to them, said Do you speak English? The Asians nodded. I asked Do you know of a cheap hotel? They looked at each other, one looked back and said Yes, Bold Pablo's, it's pretty nice since they got the hoses fixed. I said great where is it? They said Go down a long street turn right and walk a while. I started walking and walked down a boardwalk away from the sea. Soon I realized that I was awake.

February 14, 1995

The Tempo of a Day A day passes, I spend it alone, Philippe busy with work and other things. I listen to a particular disk of piano music by Erik Satie repeatedly, responding favorably to the "French" mood it sets in our rooms. I read, I take vocabulary notes, I scold

myself for not seriously looking for a way to make a little money. Finally, I knock together a small announcement for the bulletin boards at the university where Philippe teaches Portuguese, which reads: “*Étudiant Américain: diplômé de l’Université d’Iowa: disponible pour cours d’anglais et conversation*” with our phone number. Yes, I can be your American tutor. I am a “student” of life. I can chat or I can teach a class. Maybe I can get some people who want to perfect their English, maybe I can ask for ten dollars an hour.

I go out for a walk, I shop (to be clear: I browse), my footfalls on the cobblestones setting the cadence for an internal replay of Satie’s *Je te veux (Valse)* mixed together with striking French sentences I remember by heart because I read and reread them, trying to figure out their principle parts, workings and structure. The tantalizing mystery of French eludes any clear comprehension of how it is that these people construct thoughts in the way that they do. The biggest thing to avoid, of course, is to do a direct word-for-word translation from English to French; this often is incomprehensible to them, and always sounds odd. Knowing how to say something in French is mostly a matter of circumlocuting the thought from its English into something different that you know how to say in French. You talk around things more than you talk about things. This is the only way to hit the *cible*, or target.

I come home, Philippe arrives shortly. I find myself saying, “We don’t get out of the apartment enough,” and he concurs, his assent reserved in tone. He offers the information that there is a *vernissage*, an art opening, tonight. I decide that, despite my misgivings about art openings and such, it would simply be good to get out and rub shoulders. With that, we put on our coats and go.

La Place de la Victoire is a major conjunction of bus routes, thoroughfares and a large underground parking lot, and during the day, its noisy crush can tend to put one on edge. The steady churn of traffic in the roundabout, Bordeaux’s student population running

errands like panicked birds, attempts by the *opprimés* to fleece passersby, negotiating an obstacle course marked only by piles of dog shit, tend to make visits there postponed or avoided whenever possible. At night the place is transformed. All of the above elements are still there in force, to be sure, but the descent of the sun and the commensurate mounting of artificial sources of light give the place an agreeable urban hum, as if the esthetic gesture of a busy city plaza weren't complete without night, stars and neon. Adding light rain to the picture creates a scene reminiscent to me of the opening scene from the F.W. Murnau silent film *The Last Laugh*.

As we came to the open space of *Victoire* en route to our *vernissage*, the streets shone with rain, as if with a fresh coat of varnish, or the egg white on *brioche*. The tires spinning along the pavement threw up a fine mist of water, which changed their normal rubbery hum into a sound that crackled with moisture. A blue neon arrow perched high atop a four-story building ripped the sky in alternating off/on, and informed me, in 12-foot blue neon letters, that "R. U. CENTRAL" was occupying space in the building beneath. It argued for dominance with the neighboring hangout "Le Quartier Latin," a tongue of neon with two tiers of letters. Their discussion went like this: ON on OFF off on ON off OFF on off ON on OFF, etc. Huge articulated buses the size of train cars swung into place, and simultaneously disgorged and sucked on passengers from three different openings.

We passed through this scene, Philippe walking quickly, as is his habit, I trailing behind some steps, slowed down a bit by my naturally slower gait, my fascination with the surroundings, and, as often happens, Philippe nimbly dodges some moving obstacle; a pedestrian, a car at a zebra crossing, while I, lagging behind, have to wait for it to pass. It's the price you pay for tourism.

Veering onto a side street and heading south, the rain was light, barely even wet, giving our blurred trajectory of moving through space the texture of slipping through time, a dreamlike quality. The

street sounds were muffled by a quilt of thick dampness, the product of the mist which fell. I noted with interest the effect it had on the loud hack of a street person as he spit up phlegm, the combination of the closeness of the building facades and the moist air giving it a sound effect not unlike that applied to Elvis Presley's voice as recorded at the Sun Studios in Memphis, Tennessee, in the early part of his career. "Slap-back" echo is what it's called.

The Art Opening, and After We made it to the *vernissage* in good time, a crowd there milling about the artwork, an installation incorporating video and sound, fused to a labyrinth of black plastic draped from a frame. It was a single concept, overproduced, the thinness of the idea unable to support the weight of the structure it produced. Typical student work; an ambitious gesture, its reach outstripping by kilometers its grasp. We were about to leave when Philippe spotted Gilles, crouching in a corner, doing a sketch and gesticulating to a man for whom the sketch was apparently to provide some necessary information.

Gilles was someone I knew, having met him during my visit in 1989. An animated character with an urgent life-style, Gilles knows how to have fun. He invited us out for a drink; we accepted. We crossed the square surrounding the *Église St.-Croix*, which abuts the *Galerie du Triangle*, site of the *vernissage*, and ducked into a watering hole frequented by Gilles, which sat on the other side. The help was familiar with Gilles' face and demeanor. He ordered a round of *kir*, a garnet-colored drink consisting of white wine and *cassis*. He bellowed "*Au feu!*" ("To the fire!") whenever he wanted more.

I like Gilles. He has an energetic take on things and a voracious appetite for talk. Throughout the evening, he forced out a few words in tortured, overly emphatic English, in spite of my encouragements to him to use French with me. His accent in English sounded like Downs'-syndrome Romanian, though I could understand his French quite well. He, Philippe and I sat and talked in the dim smoky room,

small for its current occupancy, ten tables packed with young people no doubt discussing earnestly the latest cultural issues and such. More rounds of drinks came and before I knew it, I was wobbly, not minding any more my inability to be elegant and flowing in French. I shared my opinions haltingly with Gilles and anyone who'd listen. Our conversation was frequently interrupted by visits from friends and students of Gilles who stopped at our table to ask him a question or to be introduced to "the American."

This went on for some hours, up until the point, and even after, the bar started making overtures to close. The room slowly emptied, chairs went up on tables, and still Gilles was milking the bar for more intoxicating liquid.

At some point, a man who had joined us, and with whom I spoke about travelling (he apparently was envious at my having been to another continent, but the envy was reversed when I discovered he'd been to Morocco), suggested we get something to eat, as it was only 10:30 and *Los Dos Hermanos*, on the *Cours Victor Hugo* very near to our apartment, was still open and served good Spanish fare. I was hungry so Philippe, Gilles, the man who suggested the place and I piled into his car and plied the car-canyons to this grub stake.

Los Dos Hermanos is a narrow glass-fronted cafe with a formica and stainless steel interior, very clean and late-fifties. One table next to the bar (in a narrow place such as this, all the tables are next to the bar) was already occupied by friends of Gilles. We took a table next to them and Philippe and I ordered *tortilla*, the least expensive item on the menu. (Spanish *tortillas* have little in common with their New-World counterparts, which are thin corn wafers cooked on a griddle. In Spain, and at *Los Dos Hermanos*, they are a floured omelette with cubes of potato and onion, fried on both sides, about three inches thick and cut into wedges like pie.)

Gilles ordered a bottle of wine and a plate of what looked like raw bacon. As before, we were all enmeshed in lively conversation,

when Gilles took out his camera and began snapping flash pictures. Not finding my *tortilla* particularly satisfying to my taste buds, I sampled Gilles untouched plate of smoked ruby-red fatty pork. It was tasty, a lot like ham. The other man offered me a taste of his dish, baby squid in its own ink. This was a remarkable dish, purplish-black, the ink giving it an interesting dark flavor that befit its color. Gilles was in top form by now, prattling on about being an artist and such. At some point he made the vainglorious pronouncement, “I am a painter!”

I took this in the spirit of the moment, realizing that Gilles was as drunk as the rest of us, but I also realized at the same time that sobriety would not necessarily have held these words back from passing his lips. I decided to tease him a bit.

“Oh yeah,” I said, pointing at his annoying little red flash camera, “this is not a paintbrush.”

This seemed innocent, meaningless, an appropriate non-sequitur in an attempt to deflate a bit the proceedings. Or at least that’s what I thought. Gilles reached down, snatched up his camera, and in a fluid gesture that might even be considered graceful, flung it over his shoulder, and narrowly missed hitting one of the bar patrons. The camera struck the edge of the bar, bounced, and broke into several pieces on the hard terrazzo floor.

The bar suddenly felt quiet and uncomfortable, the suffocating stares of everyone there directed at Gilles (and our table), who didn’t seem to realize that he’d done anything inappropriate.

Los Dos Hermanos didn’t seem the same after that. Philippe and I hung around just long enough to be polite (I spent a minute or two trying to put the smashed camera back together, but there were some pieces missing). We paid our bill, thanked Gilles for a lovely evening, and wobbled back to our apartment.

XP

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