

# The Expatriot

COMMUNIQUÉ N°5

MAY 1995



**I**N 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

## May 2, 1995

**Why I do it** Some of you may be wondering by this time why I go to all the trouble of writing down all these events, many of which are, after all, mostly banalities. The thought has occurred to me that it is a vaguely egotistical undertaking, the underlying assumption of which is that I think anyone would have the slightest interest in reading about my admittedly very personal, even boring, experiences while living abroad. As if my experiences were somehow unique and special to anyone but myself. As if I have some special wisdom to bring to bear on a project that many writers vastly more skilled than I have undertaken professionally with great success.

In this regard, I am reminded of a relative of mine who always travels with various forms of photographic equipment. While on the road, he's (I use "he" here, but in fact, will leave the gender unspecified) always in a hurry to get to the next attraction so that he can make a permanent image of it, adding it to his collection of places visited. While actually at the attraction, he does very little *being* in terms of absorbing the ambience of the place and actually living it. One might argue that he does not even *see* the place he records with his own eyes, instead seeing it only as mediated by a viewfinder. To

me it seems that what he really likes is not *travelling*, but rather *collecting*. Travelling is simply for him a means to that end. To some extent I can relate to this; looking at photographs and mementoes of one's own journeys is pleasant. But of greater importance, for me, is to make an effort to be aware of where I am while I'm there, to soak up as much of the flavor of a particular place as I can. I usually do not immediately photograph anything. Circumstances permitting, I study the place; I put myself in various points of view to learn what's special about it. I look up, down, and around, sometimes to the great consternation of my travelling companions. If I even decide to take a picture, I try to frame it so that it will do a good job (for me) of bringing back the memory and feeling of the place later, when the photograph is all that is left.

In my opinion, it seems somehow *almost* (not quite) irresponsible to go to all the trouble of travelling to a place, only to forget all the minor details, so engrossing at the time of the visit, that give the sojourn color. It feels somewhat as if a detail or an impression experienced is not real unless it is recorded. I know this is a false perception, but it seems all too easy to lose some important element of the experience as it recedes in time. Memory, as we all know, is a tricky thing. It effaces some details, it augments others out of all proportion. Sometimes a mere sales receipt can do a better job of restoring the feeling of an event or place remembered than can the most thorough recording. I know this because I compulsively saved all the sales receipts from my first trip to Europe ten years ago. Not to keep track of my expenditures, really, but mostly to have a precise record of the dates that I visited certain places. (Why was I interested in these precise dates? I cannot honestly say.)

An example: a receipt for a night's stay at the Hotel Terminus in Narbonne, France, sometime in March, 1984 (I don't have the receipt here with me for reference). A small slip of quadrille paper, personalized for the hotel only by the impression of a rubber stamp bearing the hotel's name. The amounts written in blue ball-point. I

can remember the sound of the pen scratching across the paper; the tiny lobby with a middle-aged woman clerk sitting behind a wooden countertop with its requisite bell, guest book, potted plants, etc. (oddly, I haven't a clue as to what the woman looked like). I remember my brother Roger and I were travelling together. We had planned to travel further that day (we had rail passes, so it didn't matter where we stopped) but while waiting for the train to leave the station, a voice came over the intercom and told everyone, rather calmly it seems in retrospect, to get off the train. I didn't understand why we were supposed to get off, but we dutifully followed the rest of the passengers onto the platform. We were tired anyway, we decided, so we decided to take a hotel room for the night. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. I remember asking the hotel clerk if she knew what had happened on the train. "*Il y a une bombe, monsieur.*" There was some sort of bomb threat on the train. I remember her exact tone of voice as she said it, as if she were surprised that I hadn't understood something so urgent. I remember being a bit thrilled at the thought of being the innocent bystander of a terrorist attack. How positively exciting, I thought. (We were, after all, out of apparent danger at this point.) I remember a narrow turning stairwell leading up to our room on the third floor, the narrow ovoid rotunda in the middle of the floor of the hallway that allowed you to see down to the ground floor.

In these writings, although they are similar in basic impulse to the collecting and documenting activities described above, I am attempting something else, less chaotic perhaps. Although there is a certain amount of charm to my shoebox-ful of European receipts and ticket stubs, what I want to do with *The Expatriot* is less personal, for I want to share these observations I make with you, the reader. I am trying to record things that cannot be photographed or collected. I am trying to record my basic impressions of places and events only as they interest me, and in proportion to the extent to which they interest me. Some of them I record because of their im-

pressive or unusual, even unforgettable nature. But most of these impressions that I record here do not have the opportunity to be firmly fixed, often because they are not particularly dramatic, and so are in danger of being lost. So I write them down.

Once written, then what? Well, I am a compulsive publisher, my history has amply born out this claim, and so therefore I commit these memories to type. In a way, efficiency is also an issue; it saves me from having to write long letters. When the people I correspond with write and ask me what I've been up to, I can now simply point to this, *The Expatriot*, and give them more information than they probably want. From my perspective, it certainly beats repeating the same dull itinerary of micro-events in each answering letter that I feel obliged to supply.

I believe I am not stepping out onto too thin a limb to say that I believe it goes beyond this, as well. There is some philosophy involved in what I do here. I am here looking for something, its contours and contents only suspected existing, not certain of being found. By replacing one set of life banalities with a new set, I hope to qualitatively transform my awareness of what my life is and what it can be (in abstract terms. In more concrete terms, I wanted a "change."). The only career I have ever admitted to having is that of leading an interesting life, to circumvent "the standard of boredom" so bemoaned by the situationists. But this is not in the least sense a "situationist" project. My coming here is largely motivated by curiosity and a need to develop. In this, the journey is an internal one as much as it is in time and space.

**Everyday Banalities** Through no conscious effort on my part, my existence here has begun to take on many of the hallmarks of a routine. The daily order which I find I am by second nature imposing on quotidian events is comforting in its way. It shows me that it's possible to dramatically dislocate oneself and still not leave much in the way of habits, minor gestural symbols of self, behind. I suspect that

the same would be true if I went to live in Borneo or Greenland, as well, although some might find this to be a tall claim.

I wake up every morning, usually before 10:00. My first duty to myself, after the obvious ones, is to boil water for my coffee. I prefer the small red saucepan for this, as I feel that the water comes to ebullition sooner in it. By this time, Philippe is usually at work, or in his study reading or writing. Two heaping spoonsful of “Café Jubilee Lyophilisé” instant go into the dry bottom of my large white glass half-liter coffee cup (This is the least expensive instant coffee I’ve found in the Champion *supermarché* on the corner that makes a decently potable cup. For our current kitchen setup, I find the convenience of instant preferable to the ordeal occasioned by making fresh-brewed). Two pieces of “Daddy *sucre en morceaux, calibre n°3*” sugar. The water boils. I fill my cup to precisely two-thirds full. I stir. As the freeze-dried particles of coffee disassemble, a pleasing layer of brownish foam floats to the top. I fill the rest of the cup with cold milk, *demi-écrémé*, or “half-uncreamed.” This brings it to the correct temperature for drinking.

What to eat. This differs. Sometimes it is a four-inch segment of a *baguette de campagne* from the boulangerie some thirty steps, diagonally across, from our street-level door. On it, I might put a thin layer of “Fruit d’Or *margarine au tournesol*,” if there’s any left, and on top of that some jam. “Bonne Maman” makes an excellent *confiture aux cerises noires* that I relish. Sometimes I eat “Kellogg’s Corn Flakes” (this is actually what the French call them) although I must report that they seem generally to have a darker, more toasted taste here, as if left in the oven a little longer than their homegrown (which is to say, American) counterparts. I also enjoy “Weetabix,” a sort of British version of shredded wheat which becomes agreeably mushy when you add milk. I get the impression from the coats-of-arms on the package that the Royal Family enjoys Weetabix, too. I don’t think this *necessarily* puts me in good company.

Fast broken, I generally read for a while. Sometimes there is a

*Libération* (the left-wing daily) or a *Le Monde* (the right-wing daily) lying around, and I peruse the articles. I occasionally buy books and magazines. The *Que sais-je?* series that I wrote about in the last issue (no. 4, p. 2003) exerts a continued fascination; I have acquired seven of these volumes, some used, some new; *Hypnosis and Suggestion*, *The Calendar*, *Indo-European*, *Printing*, and *Armenia* are a few of the titles. Philippe has a lot of books neatly arranged in compulsive order on shelves; two of which I've dipped into lately are: *The Confessions of an English Opium Eater* by Thomas de Quincey, and *Œuvres complètes* by Lautréamont.

Every day, usually in the morning, I go to the post office. It's a habit I enjoy, as much for the constitutional it provides as for the payoff at the end. I've been indulging this habit for years, and have found that I can satisfy this daily craving merely by substituting Bordeaux's post office for Iowa City's. Even if there are no letters for me, I enjoy the walk. Recently, I've tended to take the same route everyday, for I tend to be a creature of habit. I stick to the busier streets, because they are the more interesting. There are lots of shop windows to peer into and people always hanging out in the sidewalk cafes. Now that the weather is becoming pleasant and warm, these establishments are doing a booming business. In some places it is difficult to walk because there are so many tables and chairs from these cafes spread out on the walkway. The leaves of the trees are turning green, providing a dense canopy of foliage which on hot days are remarkably effective at soothing the heat. Bordeaux is much more beautiful and interesting in the spring and summer than it is in the gray winter. Men are now riding around the sidewalks on little motorcycle-vacuum cleaner contraptions sucking up all the dog shit. The cafes are now selling ice cream on the street. The passersby seem as lighthearted as they are lightly dressed.

I take long walks. I browse in the *bouquinistes* (used book sellers) and occasionally buy a *bouquin* (used book). I peer into the windows of the many restaurants and cafes, longing to be able to

afford to go in and sit down and eat an exciting meal. (A simple coffee is always at least a dollar, and of course, the “bottomless cup,” so widespread in the Midwest, is unheard of.) Occasionally, I go down to the *Place St.-Michel* and look at the tawdry wares offered at the flea market there. I wander down past the *Église Ste-Croix*, in the direction of the *Gare St.-Jean* (the train station) and spend an hour in a *magasin d’occas’(ions)*, where they sell many used items. They have lots of paper and office supplies there very cheap, rehabilitated stock from other stores that have gone out of business, which as I said before, I adore.

**My Decision** After having been here for some five months, I am now certain that I do not want to live here. This decision has nothing to do with any perceived flaws in the place, for my stay here has been very agreeable. The people I have met have all been extremely kind, helpful and generous. I freely admit that I have not energetically looked for work in order to maintain my stay. I suffer a severe psychological block when it comes to looking for work. The employment situation here and the language barrier only compounds the difficulty. But this is not really why I am not planning to stay here past the autumn, which is when my savings should run out.

The main point for me is what I am doing versus what I could be doing. I am a project-oriented person. I am flexible enough that I can do a project like *The Expatriot* here, but it exacts some compromises. There are many things I could easily do in the United States that I cannot afford to do here; such as work in a larger format, include lots of images, have access to better equipment, support myself and my project with a menial halftime job. These things are possible here, but not for me, at least not until after a period of perhaps a few years of acclimation. I miss the real sense symbiosis I feel with American ways of doing things and American systems, of improvising with systems and constructs I know and understand well, and making things work more or less on my own terms.



That decision taken, I can now set aside any anxiety or sense of urgency I felt toward finding a way to make money. I am free now to think of it as a kind of retreat, a refueling stop, a recharging of intellectual batteries, so to speak. So far I have already accumulated enough new ideas, and clarifications of old ideas, to last me for a long time when I return to America.

## April 15, 1995

**Alexander Trocchi** At Philippe's recommendation, I read an anthology by Alexander Trocchi entitled *The Outsiders*. Trocchi was once a member of the Situationist International, and later founded his own Project Sigma, a radical culture think-tank, with the *Sigma Portfolio* as its megaphone. I enjoyed all of the stories in the book, which in general seemed to feature an amoral main character with intellectual leanings as he creates and negotiates events in his life. When Trocchi moved from his native Scotland to France, he had this to report in a letter he wrote to a friend:

...we got a furnished room where we could cook, a small room on the fourth floor of a dilapidated hotel. For this room—its condition is appalling—we pay more than ten pounds a month. ... Restaurant meals for all are very expensive. It is much cheaper 'doing for oneself.' The shops are stacked with exciting kinds of food but prices are far higher than at home.

A violinist lives in the next room. I began to despair of my French because I couldn't understand a word he said. Laboriously I tried to follow him. Politely, he spoke more slowly, stressing the infinitive of the verb and waving his hands about in the air. It was only after a week that I found out he was a Brazilian and couldn't speak French. He knew about ten words of the language and flung them about with a vicious Latin-American fluency that seem to proclaim him a master of the tongue.

The 'intellectual elite'—if one is to believe the management of

the cafe ‘Deux Magots’—is at St.-Germain-des-Prés. It is here that the nightclubs offer one ‘Les soirées existentialistes.’ It is all this long hair, the talk, the obvious tourist traps, that lead me to think (I may change my mind) that the creative centre is in the process of moving on....

We had been in the furnished room for less than a week when we became aware that we were not alone. We were infested with ‘peen’eads,’ a breed of bug that grows red on bloodfeasts. I had read about them—in Miller, in Céline, in Elliot Paul. But although I granted their existence, I had previously looked upon them (*qua dramatis personae* in autobiographies) as a sort of poetic licence, an appendix of the garret dweller in post-Dostoyevskian fiction. I had been wandering about Montmartre one night and returned to the room rather late. I fell asleep quickly. Then I was aware that the light was on and Betty, clutching her nightclothes about her, was telling me to waken up—bedbugs! Gorgeous fat creatures gutted with our blood, minute ones spumed hungry from the walls. We spent an hour searching every crevice in the sheets, blankets, mattress. We found a spent match beneath the mattress. Doubtless a bugtrap of a previous tenant. The Brazilian next door tells me he has fought the advance of ‘la peste’ for three months. An extremely dapper little man, he is frantic but helpless. And for the moment we are helpless too....

Although I don’t have problems with bedbugs, I do have a problem with mosquitoes. As a rule, French homes and apartments don’t have screens on their windows. When it’s hot out, we of course have the windows open for most of the time. The mosquitoes only seem to be bothersome at night when I’m trying to sleep. They have a tendency to buzz right next to my ear and be generally irritating. I turned on the light in the middle of the night one night and saw at least a dozen of them sitting on the wall, clustered near my bed, waiting for their chance at lunch. I got out of bed and swatted as many of them as I

could manage in my drowsy stupor. Now there are little bloodstains on the wall where I swatted each one of the feasting beasts.

## April 25, 1995

**Again, the Dordogne** For Easter vacation, lasting two weeks, we went to Bergerac again, and stayed with Philippe's mother. In between ironing my underwear and acquainting me with vegetables I might not know ("*Oui, madame Billé, we have leeks in America,*") she was harassing Philippe, as mothers do, for some reason or other. ("*I am oppressed by my mother,*" Philippe once exclaimed to me in English, to at once spare his mother's feelings, I suppose, and to express his exasperation.) She is the doting type, but very sweet.

It was good to have the use of her car to go driving in the countryside on the days when it wasn't raining. Bergerac is in the heart of the Perigord region, which corresponds fairly precisely to the *département* (the French political subdivision roughly corresponding to our "state") of Dordogne. It is wine country. The vast majority of tillable land is turned over to grape vines, shockingly unfecund-looking this time of the year, each plant a single gnarly stem poking through the soil in rows, each tied to a wire running the length of the field, with a few wrinkly green leaves coming out the top. The hills are covered with these vines, at the apparent expense of nearly any other crop.

The landscape is an irregular patchwork of vineyards and forested areas, sprinkled liberally with nominal villages, often as few as a dozen archaic stone structures bunched around a crossroads. At many crossroads within these villages, or sometimes out in the countryside sitting all by themselves, there are crucifixes in wrought iron or stone or statues of the Virgin Mary erected as if to say, "*This is a catholic community. Be careful.*"

Meandering through this photogenic landscape is the Dordogne River, a broad waterway with a pebbly bed, flanked on one side, the

other or both with massive limestone cliffs riddled with caves like a wheel of *gruyère*. If the river writhes like a leisurely snake through this land, then the roads follow suit to keep harmony; many's the bend in the road where an ancient chateau, windmill, water wheel or other picturesque structure suddenly looms up, as if you'd turned the page in a fairy tale book.

**The Land of the Troglodytes** The valleys of the Vézère and Dordogne Rivers around Les Eyzies are advertised in the tourist brochures and guide books as the *Vallée de l'Homme* (Valley of Man), for in them can be found dozens of important archaeological sites which date back to the days of the first people in Europe some 50,000 years ago. A little farther north than we ever ventured lie the famous Lascaux Caves, where the most extensive and perfectly preserved examples of the paintings of prehistoric man are sheltered.

One remarkable site that we did visit, hanging over a bend in the Vézère, is called La Roque St.-Christophe, a "*cité troglodytique*" which was more or less continuously inhabited until the Middle Ages. Here a high limestone cliff rises up from the edge of the river, circumscribing its leisurely horseshoe. About halfway up the cliff face, a layer of rock has been removed to a depth of perhaps fifteen or twenty feet, a slit in the rock about eight feet high, which has as a result a flat floor or shelf protected by a thick stone overhanging roof. It is immense, once the site of a cliff-city of some 3,000 inhabitants. At one time, these dwellings had the aspect of caves, but as time went on and people continued to inhabit the site, house and store fronts were put up on the cliff face to enclose the interior spaces carved into the rock. According to the tourist information, "*...this immense natural stronghold was one of the bastions of defense against the Norman Invasion.*"

Later that day, we came to a roadside overlook hovering over a section of valley where the Dordogne and the Vézère Rivers meet. The centerpiece of this view was a *cingle*, or a broad meander in the

## VALLÉE DE DORDOGNE Cingle de LIMEUIL

La route de corniche, qui longe la falaise calcaire, domine un méandre naturel de la Dordogne enserrant la riche vallée d'Alles, avec son parcellaire bien marqué, hérissé çà et là de peupliers.

Aux pieds du village de Limeuil, le confluent de la Vézère et de la Dordogne avec ses ponts coudés à angle droit.

The summit road along the edge of the limestone cliff, overlooks a meander in the Dordogne River and hems in the fertile Alles Valley, with its chessboard fields on which poplar groves are the pieces of an abandoned endgame.

The waters of the confluence of the Vézère and the Dordogne lap the feet of the village of Limeuil with its right-angled bridges.

See location of other sites and monuments overleaf

Die reiche P...  
gne ...  
Wang des K...  
sens überre...  
die natürlic...  
bliefe ...  
markt...  
auf

river in the shape of a whip being lashed. From the edge of the cliff, we got an aerial view of the scene described in the above graphic, a redraft of part of the informative tourist sign posted next to the parking area, which explained in French (I translate):

The summit road, which runs the length of the limestone cliff, looks over a natural meander of the Dordogne encircling the fertile Alles Valley, with its well-marked parcels of land bristling here and there with poplars. ...

and in a much more interesting English:

The summit road along the edge of the limestone cliff, overlooks a meander in the Dordogne River and hems in the fertile Alles Valley, with its chessboard fields on which poplar groves are the pieces of an abandoned endgame. ...

I was impressed by the improvement brought to the original text by this liberal translation, and enjoyed the image of the chessboard, totally lacking in its French counterpart, probably a fanciful inven-

tion of the translator of the signboard. I wondered if perhaps it was because the board of tourism had hired a frustrated English writer who, in a small act of subversive improvement, found the opportunity to slip this brief outburst of creativity by.

As we drove away from the viewpoint, Philippe commented, “How like a chessboard are the well-marked parcels of land in the Alles Valley.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “And how the bristling poplars on them resemble the scattered pieces of an abandoned endgame.”

**The Bramble** The following day, we visited the piece of land that Philippe has decided to buy. In it, he plans to care for the trees and cultivate his own personal forest, which for him is nothing less than an extension of his family. He gets great pleasure in recognizing a species of tree, and then, to clinch the identification, in saying aloud the Latin name of the plant, genus and species, almost like a prayer.

Right now, the “bramble,” as I have dubbed it, is a small patch of farmland that has lain fallow for some twenty years. Its main features are summarized in the following checklist:

- √ overgrowth of thorny vines
- √ young saplings growing much too closely together
- √ little yellow butterflies dancing in the sunlight
- √ bee’s nest, wildflowers (various sorts)
- √ chirping songbirds, buzzing insects
- √ babbling brook w/rocks
- √ *Crataegus oxyacantha* (hawthorns)
- √ *Ulmus minor* (elms)
- √ *Acer campestre* (maples)
- √ alders, oaks, briars, ashes, sloes, and elders
- √ mushrooms as big as saucers.

While Philippe catalogued the species of trees present (of which there are nine significantly represented, I was later informed), I used

the time to clear a short path from the road through the natural barrier of thorny vines that had grown up around the periphery, so as to reach the interior without being continually snagged. I used my Swiss army knife, which was surprisingly effective. This reminded me of the tree-house building and woods-exploring activity I used to do as a boy, and so was pleasingly nostalgic.

**The Arcades, the Bastides** The next day, Samuel and Sonia arrived from Bordeaux. We went to pick them up at the station in Ste.-Foy-la-Grande (not to imply that a “Ste.-Foy-la-Petite” exists, for it doesn’t seem to). We drove through the *centre ville*, which I found, more than anything, reminded me of paintings by de Chirico. Typical of a whole class of these “*bastide*” villages, of which Monpazier (which we visited later) is a better example, the main square is characteristically surrounded by broad arcades in stone and wood, above which the buildings rise. These arcades cover inviting walkways which pass in front of the shops the sidewalk cafes. They are evidently quite old with massive pillars, huge wooden ceiling beams, and stone archways looking out into the street. Underneath the shelter that these arcades provide are the normal businesses that one would find in any French village; newsstands, *épiceries*, *boulangeries*, *charcuteries*, sidewalk cafes, and the like. Protected from the rain during the winter and the heat during the summer, this form of village architecture has loads of charm and is very practical, at the same time. We passed through maybe half a dozen other such villages in our drives that exhibited, to a greater or lesser degree, this design element. According to Philippe, this style of town square is the result of an influence from the English, who were politically dominant in the Aquitaine region during the Middle Ages.

Because I am particularly interested in very ancient things, and because my appetite for this interest was whetted by our visit to the troglodyte city, we went looking for some dolmens which were marked on the roadmap. Dolmens served some sort of ceremonial

function for the culture that built them; precisely what, I'm not sure. They are likely Celtic in origin, less old than La Roque St.-Christophe, but nonetheless, thousands of years old. Millennia of neglect have reduced the two that we saw to not much to look at, but could not deprive them of a certain magnetism. The form of dolmens is characterized by one large, evidently very heavy, flat rock laid like a table top over two rocks stood upright in the earth. As for the two specimens we observed that day, they had for the most part collapsed or settled into the earth, so that the structure was not at first glance obvious, but upon inspection, it was possible to understand that they were necessarily artificial. One of them was at the end of someone's driveway and covered with brush. We almost walked right past it while looking for it.

While driving with Sonia and Samuel, we stopped at an *allée couverte*, near the commune of Nojals-et-Clottes. This was much more impressive, a line of dolmen-structures, forming a "covered alley," as the French name suggests. Although it was raining, we got out of the car to take a few photographs. The rain's heavy atmosphere only served to increase the magnetism of the dolmen.

**Montaigne's Tower and Library** On the way back to Bordeaux at the end of Easter vacation, we visited the former home of Montaigne, in the town of St.-Michel-de-Montaigne. A former mayor of Bordeaux and a philosopher, Montaigne, together with Montesquieu and Mauriac, form the "Three M's" in the literary hagiography of the Aquitaine (these three writers all hail from the area). The chateau is off limits, but a tour of the tower, wherein is housed the library where Montaigne wrote his celebrated essays, can be had for a modest fee. In addition, bottles of wine bearing the *Château de Montaigne* label were for sale.

The ground floor of Montaigne's tower houses a chapel, a perfectly round room occupying the ground floor of the structure. The walls were painted with *trompe l'œil* niches and little neoclassical



columns. In spite of the paint having faded with age, each image was clearly visible; evocative remnants of a different era of interior decor. The domed ceiling was deep blue and evenly spaced with gold-painted stars (not a representation of the skies, but rather some antiquated ideal of the heavens).

The upper two stories housed successively the bedroom where Montaigne died and the library where he worked. Against one wall of the bedroom there was a bed belonging to a later occupant on which lay a moldering quilt covered with tattered appliques and embroidery. The library at the top of the tower was much more interesting. Carved into the beams which ran across the ceiling were his favorite quotations, many of them in Greek and Latin. The books had been removed and his shelves lay bare, but there was a desk there with some xeroxed facsimiles of some of his manuscripts and papers which one could peruse.

Philippe took the opportunity to buy a bottle of Montaigne red, just to see what a “philosophical wine” might taste like. Strangely, it seemed to have little flavor.

## May 2, 1995

**Music of the Streets** At least twice a day, although not at regular times, a particular voice can be heard on *rue Ste.-Catherine*. It’s a strong voice, and it chants with something of a lilting singsong pattern, a repeated figure, which goes like this:

*Aaaah<sup>2</sup>, c’est<sup>2</sup> jo<sup>2</sup>li<sup>1</sup>! C’est<sup>1</sup> jo<sup>1</sup>li<sup>3</sup>, c’est<sup>2</sup> jo<sup>2</sup>li<sup>1</sup>!*

I have indicated the tones he uses. The superscript (1) is the lowest, (2) is a middle tone and (3) is the highest in pitch. The timing is like this: *Aaaah* is a whole note; *c’est* is a half note, *jo* is quarter, *li* half; followed by a whole rest, then *C’est* is half again; *jo* quarter and *li* half; followed by a quarter rest; and finally, *c’est* is half once again, *jo* is again quarter, and *li* half; followed by several whole rests, and

then he repeats the figure as he passes by under our window. A translation of the words reveals that he cries:

“Ah, it’s pretty; it’s pretty, it’s pretty.”

The first time I heard this call, it brought me to the window to see what sort of individual was making these melodious and not unpleasant sounds. I looked down, and all I saw was an Arab carpet salesman, sporting a little skullcap and in his bedroom slippers. Even on the hottest days, he seems to wear a leather overcoat; and adding to his burden, his shoulders are always draped with the rugs that are his wares. He’s telling us they are pretty so that we will want to buy them.

Our apartment has windows that look out in two opposing directions, because it runs the entire depth of the building it’s in. The view from the front room window is only intermittently interesting, which is to say it’s only interesting when something interesting is happening down below in *rue Ste.-Catherine*; a fight perhaps with someone being kicked in the head while lying on the cobblestones clinging to a bicycle by its rear tire, or the weekly Saturday afternoon, two o’clock, demonstration with marchers, banners, and trucks with loudspeakers and the occasional firecracker. The view from the kitchen window is just rooftops and pigeons, and can be nice if the light is just right. The best view is from the toilet. Although you have to stand on the stool to do so, from there you can see a little courtyard with potted plants a story below, sheltered from the crush of the street by buildings on all sides. In the distance stands the *Grosse Cloche*, a double-turreted 15th-century clock tower marking the edge of old Bordeaux. Often you can hear street-musician music, or the loud-stereo music invading via living room window. But better is the music one hears from the rear of our apartment, from the toilet; our neighbor playing his lovely Spanish guitar.

Ambulances in Bordeaux have an interesting siren, which I like musically. Its alert consists of three brassy electronic tones in a re-

peating pattern, low tone/high tone/low tone, with a short silence between each figure. In my opinion, it is excellent sound design, because it is much easier with this type of siren to know exactly what direction the sound is coming from.

A common sound in Bordeaux, whether you are walking around the *Place de la Victoire* or down *Cours Victor Hugo*, is the cheery blast of a car horn (of some duration) followed by the melancholy screech of car tires on asphalt (of perhaps longer duration). If you are a lucky listener, this lively musical figure is neatly punctuated at the end by the lively smack of headlights meeting bumpers.

**Epithets and expletives** The French tend to express annoyance with bodily functions. *Ça me fait chier* is used to mean “that bores me; that annoys me,” but a literal translation reveals that it means “that makes me shit.” *C’est chiant(e)* follows the same derivation; “that’s annoying” is expressed by saying “that’s shitting.” Another one is *ça me gonfle*, having a similar meaning to the above; but word-for-word means “that bloats me.”

*Con* means, but is not as strong an oath as is our “cunt.” *C’est con* is an expression used simply to mean “that’s ridiculous” or “that’s stupid,” and is sometimes as strong as “that’s asinine.” I’ve seen the word *con* translated into English subtitles in movies as “asshole.” Its derived noun is *connerie*, which means “nonsense.” Often, children are told to “stop that *connerie*” if they are exasperating their parents. In an interesting twist, and I’m not sure what this says about our respective cultural symbology involving genitalia, *une tête de con*, a “cunt head,” is used where we might, in American English, say “dickhead,” that is to say, someone who is not very bright or is ideologically offensive in our estimation.

The word for “to really annoy” or “to piss off” is *s’emmerder*. Its root is the word *merde*, which means “shit.” When I break this word down into its constituent parts, I find that it means “to bring shit to (someone).” If you want to tell someone who is causing a problem

to get their act together and stop bugging you, you use the verb *se démerder*, which means (in terms, again, of its constituents) “to get (oneself) out of the shit.”

## May 9, 1995

**Abstracted Vignettes to Close the Piece** I am explaining something to a friend in French. She takes a heavy drag on her cigarette, listening intently. Rather than inhaling the smoke, and stopping to smile in response, it spills out of her mouth, thick as milk, in baroque curls, until I can see only her smiling eyes as if sculpted out of a cloud of the finest white marble, like the one from which St. François-Xavier, in his exaltation, rises in the *Église St.-Paul*.

In a store that caters to tourists, I momentarily misread a sign which seems to say, “*English Broken Here.*”

A church seems to float in space, its dimly lit hulk defined by the light percolating outward from a pattern of small openings in its spire; the cobbles shine in the moonlight and the details visible on them and the rough gray stone exteriors are counterpointed by the smooth dark blue glasslike clarity of the sky strewn with stars.

Wandering aimlessly amid the shops and shoppers on the cobbled sidestreet, I find myself unexpectedly surrounded by a group of men walking by happenstance in the same direction as I. Their clothing bears a consistent awkwardness, and only subtleties can distinguish it from any other passer’sby on the street. A bit foreign, uncanny really. Disheveled, greasy hair, somber colors coordinated with unconventional taste. It takes a moment for me to orient to their language, which is not French. It is Russian.

A man at a dinner party speaking French with a strong Liverpool accent. His sentences are like collages. He speaks rapidfire French Liverpudlianly. He occasionally uses a near-identical English cognate which he drops into the sentence, like a frightened orphan, with its English pronunciation intact. He says “television” and “electric-

cian” with the accent on the third syllable, like a Beatle or something. I am reminded of “*Michelle, ma belle,*” *sont des mots qui vont très bien ensemble, très bien ensemble.* (The annoying melody sticks in my head for several days after.) I imagine the French listeners are rolling their eyes inside. I know I am.

The woman has a defeated look. Placed by her inside the photo-booth, her child wails bloody murder as the flash lamps record this unhappy image, one, two, three, four.

In the supermarket checkout, a few customers ahead of me, a young couple whose English dialect betrays them as Californians. I enjoy the feeling of having identified them, although I make no effort to verify my observation. They are purchasing, among other things, apples. The apples have not been weighed before coming to the checkout, and the clerk is a bit impatient with the pair. I think to myself, there goes me a but a few months ago. I feel slightly smug, because I know you have to weigh your fruits and vegetables before getting to the checkout. ☒

## Boîte Postale 249

Formerly “Mail Corner”

**Y**OU ALL KNOW by now how I feel about mail, so I won’t go into that. Often, it’s interesting to note a recurring theme appearing in several letters, occasionally by chance, but sometimes spurred on by something read here. An interesting theme in this month’s mail: after reading my dream in *The Expatriot* no. 3 (“An Odd, Maybe Important, Dream,” p. 1952) several of my friends decided to play along by sharing their dreams with me. John, whom I will be visiting in Prague in May (read the full report in the next *Expatriot*), shares this:

There was a row of glass windows, textured, in a room. I had a knife and began to cut into the panes which split like gelatinous

plastic at the surface. I was interested in the way the knife had cut the material, but soon discovered the effect the cuts made on the light coming through the windows. I finished the row and looked about the room and at my windows. The room was blue, with auditorium seats and a pool of water where lecturers would stand... I took a last look at the windows and the trees and an old quarry obscured by my knifework, thought that it was possible to consider it art—I liked it—, and left. There was controversy and debate; some thought it clever and beautiful; others, violent and a waste of good windows....

Well, friend, construction and destruction are often two sides of a single coin. If you want to build a wooden house, you have to cut down a few trees.

Mickey did not want to share with us her dreams, so instead she sends along her husband's dream, which goes like this: “[*Tom dreamed that*] ...*I was baking rats, and I was so happy because they were coming out perfectly, all brown and crispy on the edges. Man, I thought I had weird dreams. I don't even want to contemplate the underlying meanings of that one.*” I'm not really sure that I do, for that matter.

Ralph sent a copy of his fabulous *Spectaclist* (vol. 1 no. 2), my favorite article in which is “Las Vegas: The New City,” which only qualifies here by the slim fact of mentioning dreams (and its high quality). An excerpt from his snappy prose follows:

Odds. Chance. These words have new meaning. They no longer demarcate the limits of probabilities. Within this world they now describe the edges of a terrain of possibilities of what could be. You probably will not win, but the new axiom of our dream's logic is “You might....”

Every child knows it can happen. That's what we remember. Christmas. Birthdays. Television. Seemingly depthless ponds and tunnels to China. All that was once true. Could it be again? Had we

just forgotten to believe, or believe hard enough? We wanted to forget the witches, the monsters, the dark. Had we forgotten too much?...

He also includes in *The Spectaculist*, subtitled “a speculative journal of arts, media, and culture,” a text written by yours-truly entitled “John Doe Seeks Spectaculist Candidacy,” a little piece of political satire I whipped up in my spare time.

Steve writes that he, his wife Arda and their daughter Nina will be visiting Egypt soon, and will also be making stops in Amsterdam and London. He encloses a “1995 Presidential Poll and Democratic Party Membership Acceptance Form,” which mimics an opinion poll questionnaire, but is really a not-very cleverly-disguised fund-raising drive masquerading as “your opinions really matter, let us know what you think.” It served amply to remind me that the two-year-long presidential campaign has already begun in the United States for a man who won’t take office until 1997.

Tim, who is in the U.S. Army Reserves, has been in Guatemala, where a bomb exploded at the airport two days after his arrival, killing eight Guatemalan soldiers. Later, a grenade went off some two blocks away from where reside the Guatemalan president and an American diplomat. It seems to me that I remember hearing something about one or both of these events in the French news.

Brian writes of a situation that he was reminded of in reading “Questions and Dim Answers” (no. 4, p. 1984):

“...My friend Nancy...immigrated from Taiwan when she was seven.... English has become her dominant language. She still speaks Chinese with her parents though who don’t speak much English. She ends up in this situation where she can’t talk to her parents about anything more sophisticated that she did when she was seven, a big problem as she’s become an adult. One could argue that this is true of all parent/child relationships but it’s especially interesting for me that in Nancy’s case it’s framed as a problem of language...”

## \* RAY JOHNSON \*

Expires-  
FRIDAY  
**13**  
JANUARY  
1995

Room **247** | Baron's Cove Inn

SAG HARBOR COVE

Backstroke to

NATALIE WOOD

Life is wasted on the living

**Suicide Update Update** Owen writes about a wake he attended in honor of Guy Debord, where they showed the film *Son art et son temps* (see no. 4, p. 2006). Apparently rock critic and *Lipstick Traces* author Greil Marcus was there and, according to Owen, "...was surprisingly sensitive, seemed on the verge of tears when he spoke...". It would strain credulity to think that Debord might have wanted a wake, or Marcus's tears.

Uta, who says *The Expatriot* "...is again so darn interesting," sends a xerox of "Returned to Sender: Remembering Ray Johnson," a collection of reminiscences by various artists who knew Johnson. It appeared in the April issue of *Artforum*. She says, "...I figure you've either already seen this or find *Artforum* too corporate to look at." I hadn't seen it; thanks for sending it. The article feels like a kind of slimy corporate opportunism to me, but then again, the guy just died, so that justifies some ink, I suppose.

And finally, Jon, Jr., who was recently in Paris presenting his work at the *Musée de la Poste*, sends along the above graphic, created in Ray Johnson's honor (my apologies to Ersatz Ephemera, the originators of this piece, for my redraft of it).

**XP**

**THE EXPATRIOT**

<http://xp.detritus.net/>