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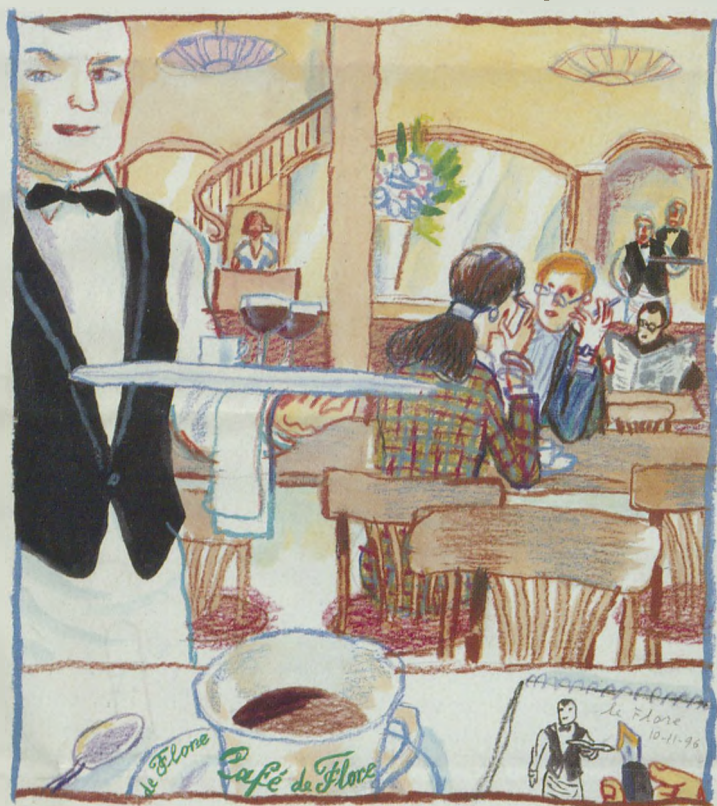
A TALE OF TWO CAFÉS

What's the difference between the Flore and the Deux Magots? The essence of fashionability.

BY ADAM GOPNIK

I HAVE been brooding a lot lately on what I have come to think of as the Two-Café Problem. The form is borrowed from the old Three-Body Problem, which perplexed mathematicians late into the nineteenth cen-

I began to brood not long ago, on a beautiful Saturday in October, when I arranged to meet my friend Nicole Wisniak at the Café de Flore, on the Boulevard Saint-Germain, for lunch. Nicole is the editor, publisher, advertising-



The Café de Flore: History keeps wiping the table clean.

ture, and which, as I vaguely understand it, involved calculating the weird swerves and dodges that three planets worked on each other when the force of gravity was working on them all. My problem looks simpler, because all it involves is the interaction of a couple of places in Paris where you can eat omelettes and drink coffee. It's still pretty tricky, though, because what fills in for gravity is the force of fashion—arbitrary, or arbitrary-seeming, taste—which in Paris is powerful enough to turn planets from their orbits and make every apple fall upward.

account manager, and art director of the magazine *Égoïste*, and is a woman of such original chic that in her presence I feel even more ingenuous and American than I usually do, as though pinned to the back of my jacket were a particularly embarrassing American license plate: "Pennsylvania: The Keystone State" or "Explore Minnesota: 10,000 Lakes."

When we got to the Flore and looked around, upstairs and down, we couldn't find an empty table—that kind of Saturday—so we went outside and thought about where to go. I looked, a

little longingly, at the Café aux Deux Magots, just down the street, on the Place Saint-Germain-des-Prés. The two cafés are separated only by the tiny, narrow Rue Saint-Benoît. I turned to Nicole. "Why don't we just go in there?" I said.

A smile passed across Nicole's face—one of slight squeamishness mixed with incapacity. "I don't know," she said, at a loss for the usual epigrammatic summary of the situation. "We used to go there, I think . . . twenty years ago . . ." Her voice trailed off, and again she got a funny smile on her face. She couldn't say why, but she knew that it was impossible.

A taboo as real as any that Malinowski studied among the Trobriand Islanders kept us out, though why it existed and how it kept its spell I had no idea. Still, one of the things you learn if you live as a curious observer (or as an observed curiosity) on the fringes of the fashionable world in Paris is that the Flore remains the most fashionable place in Paris, while the Deux Magots was long ago abandoned by people who think of themselves as belonging to the world, to *ce pays-ci*—this country here, as the inhabitants of Versailles called *their* little fashionable island. Somehow, at some point, in a past that was right around the corner but—to Nicole, at least—was irretrievable, something had happened to make the Café de Flore the most fashionable place in Paris and the Deux Magots the least.

IN Paris, explanations come in a predictable sequence, no matter what is being explained. First comes the explanation in terms of the unique, romantic individual, then the explanation in terms of ideological absolutes, and then the explanation in terms of the futility of all explanation. So, for instance, if your clothes dryer breaks down and you want to get the people from BHV—the strange Sears, Roebuck of Paris—to come and fix it, you will be told, first, that only one man knows how it works and he cannot be found (explanation in terms of the gifts of the romanticized individual); next, that it cannot be fixed for a week, because of a store policy (explanation in terms of ideological necessity); and, finally, that you are perfectly right to find all this exasperating, but nothing can be done, because it is in the nature

of things for a dryer to break down, dryers are like that (futility of explanation itself). "They are sensitive machines, they are ill-suited to the task, no one has ever made one successfully," the store bureaucrat in charge of service says, sighing. "*C'est normal.*" And what works small works big, too. The same sequence that explains the broken dryer also governs the explanations of the French Revolution which have been offered by the major French historians. "Voltaire did all this!" was de La Villette's explanation (only one workman); an inevitable fight between the bourgeoisie and the aristocrats, the Marxists said (store policy); until, finally, Foucault announced that there is nothing really worth explaining in the coming of the Reign of Terror, since everything in Western culture, seen properly, is a reign of terror (all dryers are like that).

"It's a good question," a friend who has been a figure in the French media since the forties, and who eats lunch at the Flore every day, told me when I quizzed him about why, and when, exactly, and how the Flore had outstripped the Deux Magots. We were sitting, as it happened, at the Flore, eating good, wildly overpriced omelettes. The downstairs room was as pleasantly red and melancholy as it always is, with its square, rather than round, tables, which give the impression that all the tables are corner tables.

In the week or so since my first inquiry, I had been doing some reading. The Deux Magots and the Flore had, I knew, existed beside each other for more than a century. The Flore had long had a white marquee with green lettering, the Deux Magots a green marquee with gilt lettering. The interior of the Flore had always been decorated in red leather—what the French call moleskin—and the Deux Magots in brown. But I had only just learned that, like so many timeless things in Paris, they got timeless right after the horror of the Franco-Prussian War. Although there had always been a church at Saint-Germain, the topography of the Place Saint-Germain—the square itself—dates back only to the eighteen-seventies.

The Deux Magots is the modest inheritor of a silk-lingerie store of that name which stood on the spot for decades, until the eighteen-sixties, when

the growth of the big department stores across the river drove it out of business. The owners eventually rented out the space to a *café liquoriste*, who kept the name and started serving coffee. No one knows exactly when the two famous statues of Chinese mandarins—the Deux Magots—were installed; Anatole France, in his memoirs, written at the turn of the century, speaks of a big picture of three *magots* that used to hang in the lingerie store. The Flore, on the other hand, has no prehistory; founded in 1870, it was always a café, and was called the Flore because of a statue of the goddess Flora that used to stand outside. Then, in 1880, Léonard Lipp, an Alsatian who had fled the German occupation of his province, opened a *brasserie* across the street, and the basic topography of the new square was in place.



For many years, the Deux Magots was the more famous and fashionable of the two cafés. It was there that Oscar Wilde went to drink after he left England; he died about five blocks away. And it was there that Joyce went to drink Swiss white wine, with everybody except Hemingway, with whom he drank dry sherry, because Hemingway wasn't everybody. (That's how Hemingway tells it, anyway.) The presence of so much history ought to be unmanaging, or even just embarrassing. In Paris, it isn't, not because the past is so hallowed but because it doesn't seem to be there. The unsentimental efficiency of French commonplace civilization, of which the French café is the highest embodiment, is so brisk that it disarms nostalgia. History keeps wiping the table off and asking you, a little impatiently, what you'll have now.

Not until the nineteen-forties—I had learned a lot of this in the course of reading Olivier Todd's excellent new biography of Camus, one of the big books here this year—did the triangle of the two cafés and the Brasserie Lipp at Saint-Germain-des-Prés become legendary. This was when the group of *résistants* came into being, and a culture to go with them—when Camus and Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, as the cliché has it, brooded in one corner of the Deux Magots while Juliette Greco sang sad songs in another. The odd thing is

that the cliché is almost entirely true. It was at the Deux Magots, for instance, that Sartre saw his famous philosophical *garçon*, of whom he wrote, "His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He comes toward the patrons with a step a little too quick. He bends forward a little too eagerly, his eyes express an interest too solicitous for the order of the customer." (I still get waiters like that.)

Yet, fifty years after the classic period, one café is more fashionable than ever and the other is not fashionable at all. You might not see this at once. At the Flore, the fashionable people are spread out among the tables rather than concentrated in one spot or area; they occupy the place clandestinely, following the law of Inverse Natural Appeal. The *terrasse* of the Flore, even on a sunny and perfect day (*especially*

on a sunny and perfect day), is off limits; the inner room, with its red mole-skin banquettes, is acceptable; but by far the most O.K. place to sit is upstairs (I was sitting there now, with my friend), and the banquettes are made of an ugly tan leatherette. (The law of Inverse Natural Appeal is at work: the outlawed *terrasse* is, as it happens, an extraordinarily pleasant place to sit; the inner room is a very pleasant place to sit; and the upstairs room is reminiscent of the cocktail lounge of a Howard Johnson's.)

The sounds of the higher French conversation, with its lovely murmur of certainties and, rising from the banquettes, the favorite words of fashionable French people, resonated all around. *Perversité*, which means "perversity" but is used as a word of praise, suggests something—a book, a dish, a politician—that is aristocratic. *C'est normal*, which means something like "No problem," and can also refer to any political or literary situation, is different from the American phrase in that its emphasis is not on a difficulty surmounted or evaded but on the return to a familiar, homeostatic atmosphere of comfort: something that happens may seem unusual (say, the revelation that a former Defense Minister might have been an East-bloc agent) but, properly understood, is not shocking at all—it's *normal*, even if a little deplorable. And from table after table, like the sound of a tolling bell, rises

the connective *donc*, which just means "so," or "therefore," but, when used in literary and worldly conversation, and rung with sufficient force, means "It must therefore follow as the night the day," and always sounds to me as conclusive as Gideon's trumpet.

"But it all has to do with the character of two men, Boubal and Cazes," my friend said. Paul Boubal was the owner of the Flore from 1939 to 1983—he died five years later—and Roger Cazes was the owner not of the Deux Magots but of the Brasserie Lipp, across the street. "That is to say, both Cazes and Boubal were from the Auvergne—they were countrymen—and, though each thought the other was running a sneaky business, each respected the other and frequented the other's place. This produced, in the fifties, a natural compact, a kind of family feeling between the two places. I mean family feeling in the real sense—of dependence and suspicion and resentment. The owner of the Deux Magots was a much more timid fellow. He was left out of the compact." So the real force working was that of the Lipp: it was the third planet, perturbing the orbits of the two others.

There it was, the explanation in terms of the romantic individual in almost perfect form, along with the bonus of a touch of *terroir*, the French affection for a bit of native land. Then someone suggested that I speak to the essayist and editor Jean-Paul Enthoven, who is the author of the season's most winning col-

lection of literary essays, "Les Enfants de Saturne." Enthoven, I was told, would be sure to have an explanation; he could explain anything Parisian.

"Here is my hypothesis," he announced when I reached him on the phone at his office, at the publishing house of Grasset. "You must go back to the twenties and thirties, when the Flore became identified with the extreme right and the Deux Magots, by default, with the left. Charles Maurras, the founder of Action Française, used the Flore as his home base." Maurras was simultaneously one of the most important stylists in French literature—a member of the French Academy, and a crucial influence on T. S. Eliot, among other modernists—and a right-wing anti-Semite. "Before it was anyone else's place, it was Maurras's. His most famous polemic was even named after the café—'Au Signe de Flore.' Maurras was a malevolent force, in that everything he touched was simultaneously disgraced and hallowed."




Enthoven went on to say, "This meant that by the time of the Occupation, when Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir came to Saint-Germain and began their *résistance*, they had to avoid the Flore like a plague, since it had been contaminated by Maurras. But then the tourists began to crowd into the Deux Magots in order to look at Sartre and de Beauvoir. The place became overcrowded, and eventually the intellectuals noticed the emptiness of the Flore next door. By then Maurras was gone,

the Occupation had passed, and, confronted with a choice between the pollution of Maurras and the pollution of tourism, the intellectuals chose to remake the emptiness rather than abide with the many. So they went across the street and have never returned." He stopped for a second, as if readying himself for an aphorism, and then said, "The Deux Magots was sacralized by Sartre, desacralized by the tourists, and then left vacant by history." 1870, 1940, I thought. Like so many lovely things in Paris, the two cafés were given shape by the first German invasion and then in one way or another were deformed by the second.

It was left to another, more dour friend to supply the futility-of-explanation explanation, over coffee at a lesser, more despairing café—neither fashionable nor unfashionable, just a place where you go to talk. "There is nothing to explain here," he said. "The explanation is a simple, Saussurean one." He was referring, I realized after a moment, to the father of modern linguistics, who was the first to point out that signs get their meanings not by being like the things they stand for but by being different from other signs: a sign for black means black because it isn't like the sign for white.

"The fashionable exists only in relation to something that is *not* that way," he went on. "The relationship between the modishness of the Flore and the unmodishness of the Deux Magots isn't just possibly arbitrary. It's *necessarily* arbitrary. If you place *any* two things side by side, one will become fashionable and the other will not. It's a necessity determined by the entire idea of fashion. A world in which everything is fashionable is impossible to imagine, because it implies that there would be nothing to provide a contrast. The reason that, when you place any two things side by side, one becomes chic and the other does not is that it's in the nature of desire to choose, and to choose *absolutely*. That's the mythological lesson of the great choice among the beauties: they are all beautiful—they are goddesses—and yet a man must choose. And what was the chooser's name? Paris. *C'est normal.*" ♦

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R. Chant

