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## Paree Bis

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## Russell Fraser

### PAREE BIS

Paris is like Heaven, and you must climb the Purgatorial Mountain to get there. That wasn't true when I was younger. Perhaps things change for the worse, a question that needs looking into. The first time I saw Paris I arrived via steamship. Aboard this floating palace, the upper crust dressed for dinner, black tie for the men, evening gowns for the women. I was fiercely republican, a state of mind appropriate to youth, and thought that contrary to nature. Even the hoi polloi, living as I did in steerage, lived out of stand-up trunks with an ironing board that plopped open at the touch of a spring. That was close to forty years ago and life has moved on, moving me in another direction. But Paris has been waiting its turn.

This second time over I fly into Charles de Gaulle, instant bedlam on the outskirts of the city. The flight is unremarkable, like sitting up all night on the subway. Taking off, we dawdle for an hour on the tarmac, the air conditioner, referred to as "air," shutting down while we do this. Beside me, the young man in the tank top needs a bath. Midnight comes and goes with no sign of dinner, and the drinks cart is stalled behind the curtain marked "Executive Class."

Intending to make amends in the A.M., already P.M., Paris time, I head for the busy restaurant on the rue Jacob, around the corner from my hotel. Stars like rosettes are dancing in my head, one, two, or three of them grading temples of cuisine in the red guide. The Tour d'Argent got three stars. How it marches today I haven't a clue, such places being out of my orbit. In the dear dead days, however, a uniformed attendant took you up to the top for dinner. When the bronze doors hissed shut, the lift rose like an exhalation. "C'est bien?" it was saying, more statement than question. From a table by the window you could look down the Seine, past the *flèche* of Notre-Dame, all the way to the Arc de Triomphe. Duck à l'orange was the specialty of the house, patronized by the middle class, respectable *pères* and *mères*, plus the occasional tourist. An uncle like Daddy Warbucks, in town on business, took me along as his guest. I don't know what it cost him but doubt that I would have been staggered. Diners on expense accounts had yet to be heard from,

and the Japanese in their thousands and tens of thousands were still lining up for takeoff.

The restaurant of my choice sprawls over the sidewalk, like a man who has let down his belly. Its outside tables are packed, promising a *bon repas*, but the gutters are choked with rubbish, and inside, the heat, thick with cigarette smoke, vibrates like the skin of a drum. A shouting match at the bar provides local color, language salted with words like “*ordure*” and “*merde*.” Before you can say “*Zut alors!*” however, two hard-looking flics in pale blue uniforms, their kepis left over from the Foreign Legion, appear with batons at the ready. The meal takes longer, not to eat, to serve. *Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*, and fast food is still a no-no in Paris.

Sauntering up to my table, the waiter examines a spot on the ceiling. The more things change, the more they stay the same. I ask about the wine, perhaps a *vin de la maison*? He recoils as if stung, and I settle for a bottle with a label. Dinner begins with snails, *escargots à la bourguignonne*. No bigger than bird shot, they taste like warm felt. The bread is for mopping up with, but there is nothing to mop. Gripping the empty shells with my forceps, I look in vain for the melted butter. Beef tartare is the entrée, and resembles a can of worms with a puddle of egg yolk, like a dying sun, in the middle.

You can eat that way in Paris, and the famous way too. The “poetry” of Bresse butter, slathered on thick *tartines*, delighted Henry James. But though something kindly impressed him, “like the taste of a sweet russet pear,” he came away with a mixed bag, both sweet and sour. French taste is often sour, and the cuisine reflects the national temper. The same is true for their language, brandished like a sword.

Living in the city in earlier days, I hung out at the Alliance Française, practicing moues with the *jeunes filles* in my French class. The old sandstone building not far from the Luxembourg Gardens was sliced into offices and smelled of lemon polish. Each chair in the school room came equipped with a folding arm rest. Propping our copybooks on its ink-stained surface, we ran through daily exercises, beginning with phrases like “*La plume de ma tante*.” Star of the class was “Mr. Eugenides,” Levantine with oily skin and eyes that swiveled like ballbearings. Hateful to the rest of us, he never made a mistake. The trio of leggy German *au pair* girls was more agreeable. They were Lise, Helge, Gertrude called Trudi, and I eyed them over *plume* and *papier*, lust in my heart.

Most days we toured the neighborhood, letting our fingers do the walking for us. At the *charcuterie*, we bought a pork roast, at the *pâtisserie*, little cakes (*gâteaux*) laced with rum. The stationery store sold us pencils (*crayons*) and erasers (*gommes à effacer*). Some purchases we turned back on the salesgirl. “*Non, merci, je veux celui-ci*”: I want this one. Stumbling to my feet in the milliner’s shop, I told the *modiste* that I had no need of thread, “*Je n’ai besoin pas de fil*.” But it didn’t come out like that. It came out *filles*, as in *jeunes filles*. Mr. Eugenides couldn’t believe it, the instructor rolled her eyes, and my credit with Lise, Helge, and Trudi evaporated like steam from a kettle.

All that year I bathed in program music. The hero battled oppression, like Liszt’s Tasso, or made love on the grand scale, like Don Juan in Strauss. At open-air concerts in the Luxembourg Gardens, you could buy a chair on the grass for pennies. Warm evenings I sat on the edge of my chair, soaking up “*Les Préludes*” or the mournful strains of the Love-Death. My loudest “*Bravos!*” went to Tchaikovsky and his 1812 Overture. Above the volleying cannon rose the “*Marseillaise*,” a summons to charge the enemy and die on his bayonets. The cannon was real—I still recall the puffs of smoke—but my elation, like much else in life, didn’t last. Mother Russia stood her ground, while the hero’s star shot from its zenith. Napoleon was this hero and I his loyal ADC. In one scenario I galloped up with tidings of the retreat from Moscow. “*Sire*,” I told him, “the Old Guard dies but never surrenders.”

From stalls on the quais I bought cheap reproductions of Ingres and Delacroix. Thumbed to the faded wallpaper over my bed, swag-bellied pashas flourished their scimitars, *giaours* reined in white Arabian steeds. You knew the odalisques by their lowering eyes. In the ensemble, the Goddess of Liberty Leading the People got pride of place. Years later I came on this stupendous allegory again, folded in quarters in my old Petite Larousse. Bare breasted and striding into the future, the goddess seemed more and less than a woman. As for the people, they were supers at the Paris opera, milling about at stage left.

A few days every week found me scuffling the dusty floors of old churches. I condescended to religion, “the opium of the people,” and parading my emancipated views, hoped to annoy the devout. But I was a novice in the house of learning. I needed churches, my textbooks, and I conned them for matter-of-fact. To my surprise, though, much of what they had to tell me lived on the surface. As people say, it was only skin deep. I couldn’t find any center in these old Paris churches. Everything seemed circumference, and if like me you hoped to get to the point, you went away shaking your head.

Green Michelin in hand, I paced the nave and side chapels, alert to quoins, hood-mould, and squinches. St. Eustache near the Louvre stuck in my memory. Notably carnal, like many churches built in its time, it had a stag's head beneath the gable on the façade. The cross between the antlers made a big impression on the hunter saint the church is named for, but the antlers were the focal point, and the message, if any, was thin. Some churches, vandalized by killjoys in the Age of Reason, had selenite windows, admitting unfiltered light. In stained glass windows, however, Roualt-like cartoons with hallucinated eyes heaped up treasures that rust didn't corrupt. My favorite was St. Nicholas, patron saint of pawn brokers. Donating a marriage portion to three young virgins down on their luck, he saved them from a life of shame in the brothel. There were the three of them, lying naked in bed like Lise, Helge, and Trudi. Behind them the nice old man jingled coins.

The art of our forebears, mine anyway, French on my mother's side, does a number on airtight compartments. Time and place collapse, making everything foreground, and things invade things like the body snatchers in the old horror movie. The crib Christ was born in was also an altar, the site of His death, while Isaac, who carried wood for his own sacrifice, was carrying the cross Christ died on. Past and present lived side by side on a continuous plane, and the past kept coming round again. Upsetting to a forward-looking young man like me, the only progress was a royal progress, movement from one place to another.

The God I saw in the windows wasn't the hairy Krishna you meet in modern churches, nor disembodied like a voice from the whirlwind. Sometimes I saw Him "mewling and puking," or a bestiary encircled Him, lion, ox, eagle, and a man sprouting wings like a bird. These half-human creatures symbolized the Evangelists, also the Word Made Flesh. The winged man was St. Matthew, at the same time Christ Himself. Going up to Heaven—that was what the wings were for—He looked like the rest of us, formed from the dust of the earth. I knew what God should look like, instructed by Michelangelo, whose figures loomed larger than life. This one didn't fit the description.

Living hand to mouth becomes a young man in Paris. My bed sitter on the way to Neuilly had a forty watt bulb on a cord in the ceiling and hot water on Saturday mornings. When you climbed the stairs at night, the hall was pitch dark, but a switch by the staircase triggered a feeble beam, lighting your way up until you reached your apartment. Frenchmen give money's worth but not a nickel extra, and you had to walk fast or the light went out before you got

to the door. From the third floor window you could see the Étoile and parts of two boulevards, spokes of its wheel. Colonel Dax, my landlord, lived on the farther one, Avenue Niel. I walked round once a week to hand over the rent. He liked getting it from me in person.

A thrifty *colon* in his long-ago youth, the Colonel stood to attention for *Algérie Française*. He had a *bête noir*, the radical in the Élysée Palace, De Gaulle. Having just expelled the American NATO contingent, the President was my enemy, Colonel Dax told himself, and the enemy of his enemy was his friend. An engraved dinner invitation, delivered *à la main*, spoke of his and Madame's esteem for "you Americans." Not doubting my pleasure, it omitted the RSVP.

I showed up promptly at 8 P.M., in time to look twice at the small Cézanne on the sitting room wall. Intended for calling cards, the wash basin by the front door was Sèvres. Pale yellow cretonne covered the sofa, yellow plush the dining room chairs. Madame waddled with style, like the fat soprano in the Dance of the Seven Veils. When she sat us at table, invisible hands served up the boeuf en Daube and the fricassé of Volaille in its cream sauce. The wine had already been decanted in goblets, beaded bubbles winking at the brim.

After dinner, talk got on to the Colonel's summer house, his *pied à terre*, he said demurely, on the Normandy coast. "Calvados country," and he topped up my glass. Though a chateau, it wasn't one of the biggies, not Chenonceaux, not Chambord, *non, non!* His French was better than my French, he'd been at it longer, and I took him to say that I might rent his country place for a mere bagatelle in the summer. We were winding up our agreement when understanding dawned. It wasn't the chateau he was offering, *non, non*, but that little swineherd's hut down by the river. My dismay and his outraged sense of my presumption looked at each other over the table. I never had dinner with the Colonel again.

Paris twice or *bis* was different from the first time. *Bis* as in Nice, where the better off go in the winter. If you live long enough and are lucky, you get to join them. Loss goes with gain, though, and I no longer think of skiing the Mont Blanc or drinking the night away with famous writers at the Ritz. Over the years, age has clawed me with his crutch, an old poet's way of saying that I look the worse for wear. In the mirror, the man who looks back at me is like an older cousin, the ne'er-do-well who went to the bad.

Not that there aren't compensations. My juniors call me Sir, and our friendly neighborhood banker is glad to shake my hand when he sees me. But deep

pockets are wasted on the Geritol set. In Sun City, Florida, the restaurants open for dinner at four. They don't do that in Paris. Skipping the *fin* and coffee, I went to bed with the birds.

A lot of the time I spent in museums. Some were old standbys, like the Cluny on the fringes of the Latin Quarter. In this fifteenth-century "hotel," scraps and orts of the past compete with the modern grunge around it, no contest. Newer buildings had been lowered in place when I wasn't there to notice. The renovated picture gallery on the Left Bank, spelling the old Jeu de Paume on the Right, became a rainy day favorite. But too many tourists have the same idea, especially on Sundays when the ticket price drops by half, and the Musée D'Orsay is wall-to-wall people. Imposed order in the picture frames casts its spell, however. The noon hour strikes, time for *déjeuner*, but the hungry sheep in the queue mind their manners. Admonishing its customers, the restaurant on the Middle Level calls itself the Café des Hauteurs.

Order doesn't mean to me what it once did. Starting out in the classroom—as "a rising young asshole," according to my wife, a product of the Sixties—I couldn't handle a compliment from girls in the class without going all flustered or pompous. I stood on my dignity, paid for with a stiff neck. Like the law-and-order crowd, I kept a finger in the dike, fearing the rushing of waters. These days, when I get my shirts laundered, I ask them to leave out the starch. At dishabille, I draw the line, though. Visitors from Woollet, Mass. expect to find it in Paris, everybody's Gay Paree, and some shiver agreeably at the prospect. But the City of Light is primarily that, with a moiety of shadow. Otherwise, its clarity wouldn't persuade you.

Over lunch at the Café des Hauteurs, I thought about the old days, known as "good old days" to most of my generation. The food tasted better then, or maybe my palate hadn't grown jaded. Today's travel, a step down from yesterday's, is what you get through. No native bearers tote your bags, and the American consul doesn't meet you at dockside. But the jet engine gets me places old Cunarders never dreamed of. A casualty of time, my armor-plated assurance has chinks in it now, and I look back with wonder at the savvy young man who got off the boat train to Paris. Hedging my bets, I tell my wife that we ought to go to church on Easter and Christmas. When the moment of truth arrives, however, I roll over and go back to sleep.

On the lower level of the museum, Ingres and Delacroix, youthful enthusiasms, are still asking the world to notice, and going down in the elevator, I renew old acquaintance. "The Lion Hunt" dazzles the way I remember it,

light like first light, plus a vision of life at full tilt. A little awed by Delacroix and his big bow-wow style, I shake myself like a man dozing off. Compared to his brightly lit truth, my hole-in-corner truth seems murky. Sometimes it includes a comic dimension, like the lion on church portals, modeling Bert Lahr in *The Wizard of Oz*. Painters who aim to improve us generally exclude this dimension. If they risked it, the canvas might crack. The king of beasts stands for St. Mark, whose gospel tells of the lion's voice crying in the wilderness, a.k.a. John the Baptist's. At the same time it stands for the Word. An old wives' tale, connecting the two of them, says that the lion sleeps with eyes open, a lookalike for Christ in the tomb.

Most patrons on the ground floor head for Manet and his *alfresco picnic*, startling on a wall to itself. Heads turn toward his young woman, seated on the grass in the state of nature. My feminist friends deplore this painting, a male fantasy, one informs me. But a painter's eye appoints the decadent lunch, and masses of light and shadow, needing each other, put the sexy scene in perspective. *La vie Bohème* plus other things, it makes a composition, depending on particulars that aren't composed but lively.

Like many young men, I thought a good deal about life in the state of nature. It didn't cross my mind that being natural needs a lot of hard work. My inner life, a rich one, featured X-rated movies devoted to Tarzan and Jane. (Maureen O'Hara played Jane to my Tarzan.) In their bower of bliss, Shalt Nots were out, and they did and said the first thing on their minds. I knew what that was, instructed by instinct and Frenchmen with an ax to grind like Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In the land of easy come, easy go, he lived a colorful sex life. Apologies might have been called for, but taking the offensive, always the best defense, he said we were most ourselves when we let it all hang out. In Manet's painting, however, though the woman is naked, the men who keep her company are dressed to the nines. Both are artificial, not a term of reproach, and their sense of order is managed by art.

Across the Seine at my feet and looking over the Tuileries, the turning carousel is orderly, but like the trains than run on time. Sitting in a gondola at the top of the wheel, you get a bird's-eye view of the city. What the bird sees below are little men like wind-up toys, moving through an evacuated place de la Concorde. The city around it reduces to a surveyor's map, where the important features are thrown in relief. Marshal Foch, a cartographer, liked this synoptic view, clearer than the one from the trenches. "*De quoi s'agit il?*" he wanted to know. "What is the essence of the thing?"



Glass doors line the museum's upper level, one framing the Sacré Coeur in Montmartre. Before I saw Paris, I had the view by heart, familiar from paintings and postcards. The great dome, blotting out the sky, says that moribund beats lively. Renoir, Dufy, and others lived in little streets around it, and I picture their angry shades, Gallic and vociferous, worrying its dead-white pretension. Round-the-clock services honor the Sacred Heart, but the church is a cenotaph, nobody home.

Churches in the older time shared the little streets with their neighbors. Some elbowed the neighbors, wanting a place for themselves. I preferred wide-open spaces like Washington, D.C.'s, or the cleared-out piazza before St. Peter's, Rome. I thought you showed respect for the *pièce de résistance* by getting rid of clutter around it. Pope Julius II thought this. Very much a modern man, he knocked down the ancient church that stood for centuries where St. Peter's stands today. Michelangelo lent a hand, helping him build the new church, a city on a hill. Each liked setting the truth in relief.

On the Île de la Cité, old Paris, Ste. Chapelle struggles to lift itself out of the ruck of pawn shops, bistros, and *bureaux de change*. When were they going to bring in the bulldozers and send its less-than-grand environs to the dustbin? The second time round, they composed a net of filaments binding the house of spirit to earth. But putting it that way would come as a surprise to bakers, candlestick makers, and butchers in their blood-spattered aprons.

Ste. Chapelle, a jewel box, collects the light in its coffers. First of all, however, it means to teach us, and its eleven huge windows depict the history of the world. Paris's best, they blaze with holy fury when the sun is on the glass. In their version of history, there is nothing new beneath the sun, and the past isn't put to shame by the future. Samson, carting off the gates of Gaza, looks forward to Christ, rolling back the stone from the tomb. St. Louis, a king of France, built the chapel in the courtyard of his palace. It hitched on to his apartments, or he used the apartments like a *wagon-lit* hitched on to the rear of the church. Going to Mass in the morning, he took the gallery between church and bedroom. Details like this were beneath my young man's notice, but I don't see the same church that I used to.

Close by, Notre-Dame beetles over the Seine. Napoleon had himself crowned in this church, hoping its glamor would rub off on a Johnny-come-lately. Little shops and tenements, still there in his day, infiltrated the colonnade or "parvis," short for paradise. People said it had many mansions. In the age of St. Louis, the open space before the church accommodated mystery plays,

popular entertainments. Later times thought the church should stand alone, like the Eiffel Tower. Sharing this opinion, Baron Hausmann emptied the parvis and quadrupled its size. He was the same who laid out the boulevards, wide enough for a charge of horsemen wielding sabres.

Inside the church, however, nature abhors a vacuum, and side chapels between the buttresses deny the chance for wide open space. Guilds and rich donors paid for the chapels, each a local habitation. They make the great church provincial, full of cranks and byways like the Seventh Arrondissement just across the water. Though Notre-Dame stirs the blood, it isn't St. Paul's London, and there aren't any battle flags or heroes draped in togas. No Napoleon either, no Louis Quatorze. Even St. Louis isn't allowed over the threshold. The ninth king of that name and the best-loved of any, he ruled the kingdom a stone's throw away, but no statue honors his memory. Missed by me earlier, he isn't wholly forgotten, though, and I find him outside on the church doors, kneeling in prayer like his subjects.

Napoleon, a boyhood hero, seemed everywhere in Paris when I lived there that first time. Street names recalled his famous victories, Wagram, Austerlitz, Marengo, and on the Champ-de-Mars near the École Militaire, my head buzzed with words like *gloire* and *honneur*. In this military school, the Little Corporal studied the art of war, including its rhetoric, sometimes high-flown. He could call his men "*mes enfants*" without blushing. After the escape from Elba, they bought him a final turn on stage and he played it for all it was worth. "Shoot if you will this old gray head," he told his would-be captors, words to that effect. Dyed-in-the-wool Frenchmen, they wept and kissed on both cheeks.

My last day in Paris, I go to pay my respects to the Emperor. The long esplanade leading up to the tomb, vista piled on vista, is bordered by stately limes. Over the entrance an equestrian statue of Louis XIV looks toward the Seine, ready to walk on its waters. "Always remember whom you have loved," he instructed his mistress, then died. He was the Sun King, last of the big spenders, and helped usher in the Revolution.

Under Mansard's neoclassical dome, the sarcophagus, red porphyry on a green ground, is like an expensive centerpiece recessed in a circular table. Huge statues stand around it, twelve of them, making you think. The body itself is hearsed in six coffins, like Russian Berioska dolls, the outside coffin of oak. It looks tiny to my eyes, wearier than they were and a little creased at the corners.

Standing there in the late afternoon, ready to go home again, I ask myself whether the Frenchman's cynical "*plus c'est la même chose*" hasn't got it all wrong, after all. But music, barely audible, cuts across my thought. A concealed tape is playing the Eroica, the part you hear when the catafalque passes through silent streets. Black-plumed horses and reversed rifles go with it, and the muffled crepitation of drums. Melancholy but stirring, the music is asking you to join the heroes in Valhalla. I don't want to die romantically, though. True, my body has played me tricks, and like the Ancient Mariner I am apt to recite a long list of woes, if you get within distance. But I wouldn't be twenty again, even for a house in Newark, New Jersey. Maybe forty, with a full head of hair.

Some things never change, like the pair of *gamins* who have sneaked past the ticket taker into the holy of holies. Teasing each other, they are playing prisoner's base above the sunken crypt, slapping hands against the railing. The mustachioed gendarme who patrols this hallowed ground is like the frog in the proverb, *aussi grosse que le boeuf*, puffed up as big as an ox. Wagging a thick finger, he lays it across his lips. "Shh!" he says. "*C'est Napoléon!*" Dancing out of his reach, the little boys ignore him. For all they know, the tomb might be empty.