

Romancing Paris



Again

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Text

Bob Biderman

Images

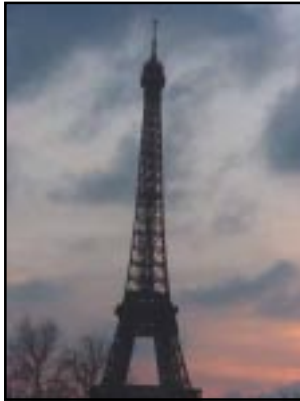
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and
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Paris used to be our spiritual stomping grounds. A city of light and energy where 'Soixante-huit' wasn't a number but a glorious adjective. It was a city of grand memories and erotic desires - a city of art and expression. But, most of all, it was the centre of resistance to all things colourless and bland.

Yet over the years that idea of Paris had started fading, to be replaced by a city with harsher edges and brasher tones. Europe was changing, and there were things I liked about that. But Paris was changing as well.



We travelled by Eurostar. It gave us time to absorb the transition from the Anglo to the Gallic world. The tunnel has become a symbolic connection. A great metal tube under the water anchoring Britain to the European continent. Both ends of the tube are the same, a landscape flat and dreary. It only takes thirty minutes to traverse. But, mentally, it's hundreds of miles.

On the trip we dream of when we were younger and the romance of voyages past.



The area where we had booked our hotel - a ten minute walk south from the Gare du Nord along rue Sebastopol - is one I had come to know well. A rich, multi-ethnic mélange of Arabs, Asians and Eastern-Europeans, it is alive with a vibrancy that lasts from early morning to late at night.



Our hotel was on a small street which ran from Faubourg St. Denis to Sebastopol. We asked for a quiet room on the top floor overlooking a peaceful courtyard. It was pleasant enough, carved out of an attic space with the old wooden beams still exposed.



That evening we had dinner at the Aquarius - a small vegetarian cafe in La Marais. It was recommended to us by the young receptionist at our hotel who was a vegetarian herself. Being a vegetarian in Paris is something like being a teetotaler in Scotland. It's not unknown, but people do think you very eccentric.



It was a curious mix of cultures here. At first it appeared to be laid-back, a la California. But it had an overlay of French propriety as well. The food was fresh and wholesome but very basic.



After dinner we strolled down to the River. The evening was crisp and clear after the rain. Outside the Hotel de Ville someone had constructed an ice-skating rink.



It was an imaginative enterprise, having a feel of both simplicity and grandeur. At the far end an enormous screen was projecting a series of absurd cartoons in brilliant colours. It could have been dreadful, but it wasn't. Somehow, it impressed me as distinctly French. A combination of modernism and the ancient regime melded together with a sense of serious playfulness.



We walked across the river, glowing in polarized light. On the other side, a quiet park had given over its space to a strange, open-air exhibition. It wasn't till we got closer that we saw that the enormous metallic sculptures were actually upended automobiles with their bonnets planted in the soil.



Next to the sculpture garden was a little passage. Tucked away from the road was one of my favourite bookshops - the City Lights of Paris, Shakespeare and Co. It used to be wonderful coming in here and finding copies of my books, used and tattered, and in a curious way, feeling somehow linked to their travels.



It was warm inside, a sort of cosy mustiness. It seemed to haven't changed much from the old days. There was very little of a literary hierarchy here. It was enough to be a writer on the road to be offered a meal and a place to stay upstairs.



Joy found herself talking with a young man who travelled here from Portland and was trying to make Paris his base. Like countless other American expats, he had ended up making Shakespeare & Co. his spiritual home.



Strolling further up into St Germain we chanced upon a most amazing sight. A group of workers had gone out on strike at the Left Bank McDonalds, totally disrupting service there. The fact that no police were on the scene bashing heads was quite remarkable. However, McDonalds is both in and out of favour at the present time. It's both the symbol of fast food trash and young grunge chic depending on whom you ask. The strikers, though, were having a jolly time.



The Left Bank cafes were puffed out in their neon lit grandeur. I don't fancy them at all. Overpriced and exuding a sense of bourgeois stuffiness, they're full of pretence and their coffee is terrible.



We took the metro back to Strasbourg-St. Denis and walked up the street in search of a bottle of mineral water to take to the hotel with us. There were several Indian shops still open. We went down Brady Passage where about a dozen curry parlours have crammed together forming a bit of Parisian Calcutta. Each restaurant has a barker stationed outside trying to lure you in for a late night heart-burn.



I wanted to stop for a nightcap at one of my favourite neighbourhood cafes - Chez Jeannette, on Faubourg St. Denis. But by then we were ready for bed.



In the morning we visited Belleville. Many years ago this area was filled with Eastern European Jews from the Russian Pale. Now the immigrants are from Tunisia. In Belleville, instead of bagels you get Jewish couscous.



The buildings here are still old and prices are relatively cheap. But the area is being redeveloped and it's only a matter of time before the poor are forced further out to the periphery.



Two very special people were from Belleville. My father and Edith Piaf. I never managed to find the tenement house my father lived in as a child. But I did locate the stairs where - according to legend - the infant Piaf was abandoned.



At the top of rue de Belleville there is a wonderful mural of a black jazz artist. You get the distinct feeling that music is very much part of the memory of old Belleville.



At the bottom of the Belleville hill the area takes on a more Oriental flavour. We had lunch in a Vietnamese noodle cafe. Noodle cafes are many and numerous here. You can take your pick. We found a very good one.



The young man who ran the cafe was quite happy to make Joy a special vegetarian meal. As the place had a distinctly Buddhist decor we had felt the chances of that were pretty good. I, myself, had a steaming bowl of Pho (Vietnamese chicken noodle soup). At the end, the patron brought us a special desert - a bowl of pudding made from onions, chickpeas, tapioca and lotus.



The next day we took the metro to Les Halles. Memories of the old market came back to me. I remembered being there forty years ago tasting the delights of fresh onion soup at the stalls which fed the market workers.



Nowadays Les Halles is a subterranean shopping centre, not unlike the urban monstrosities which have taken over the world (though, thankfully, here it's underground.) But over the holiday season small merchants were allowed to set up their wares in the plaza above. In Paris, small is beautiful. Especially when it comes to food and drink.



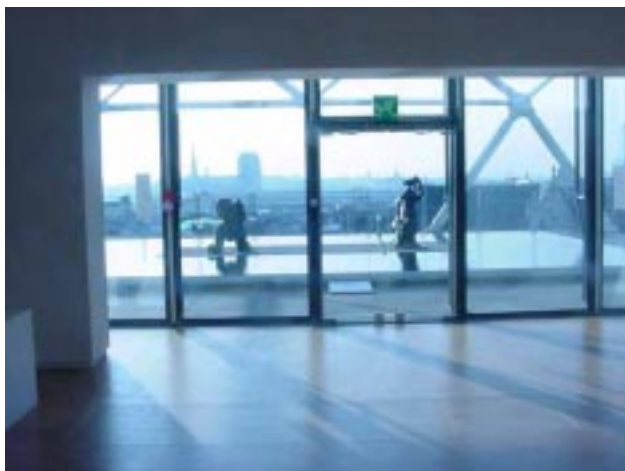
We continued on to the Beaubourg, an area of grand Napoleonic buildings and wide esplanades.



At the heart of the Beaubourg is the Pompidou, the National Centre of Arts and Culture. It was closed for a major refurbishment last time I was in Paris. Though I was a great admirer of the Pompidou and anxious to see what they had done, I was sadly disappointed. Not by the architectural changes, but by the new policies imposed when it reopened. In years past, the Pompidou was the most accessible cultural space in Paris. It had been inventive, inclusive and, most of all, free. It wasn't any longer.



Now you couldn't even take that marvellous ride up the side of the building to the most glorious view of the city without paying the price of admission. A young Algerian who wanted to take the escalator to the roof was turned away and told he would need to buy a ticket to the museum.



We paid to go up, but I did it with a heavy heart. Not because I couldn't part with the cash but because of everything it represented. It was as if the last bastion of free expression had fallen. Even so, the Pompidou is such a magnificent space that, in spite of myself, I still found it inspiring.



The permanent collection contains some of my favourite works of art. But more than that, it's the space where these works reside that makes this gallery so remarkable. Extraordinary light from the Paris skies flows in from every conceivable angle.



We continued on to the top where in former years one could take a cheap coffee on the patio and gaze out at the best view Paris has to offer.



But the simple cafeteria has been replaced with a fancy dining hall.



We managed to convince the maitre d' to let us sit there for a while without ordering food. The place was nearly empty. In former years it would have been filled with people who had a few hours to kill and used the space the way it was meant to be used. Now it too has been sectioned off and given over to the moneyed classes.



We picked up some bread and cheese and took it to the Tuileries.



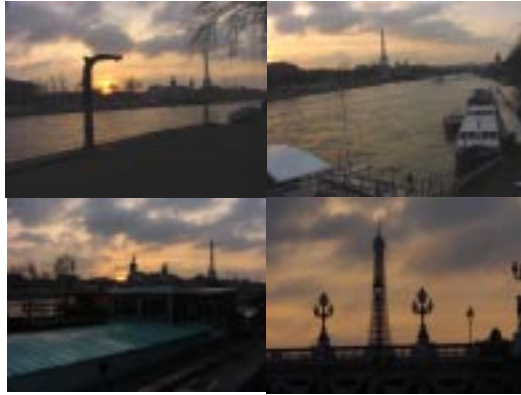
We ate on a bench overlooking a pond.



I love the mix of people here. But most especially the charm it brings out in children by the simplicity of the games and entertainment.



Further on, by the Concorde, a carnival had sprung up. A film company was using the event as a backdrop for a glitzy photo shoot.



We strolled along the river watching the setting sun and realised once again how much the Eiffel tower dominates the evening landscape. It's almost impossible to imagine what the Paris skyline would be without it.



We stopped for a drink at La Mascotte as the evening was getting cold. Then we continued on to L'Etoile.



The bright lights and crowds on the Champs Elysee was in striking contrast to the tranquility of the river. But I like the buzz of this grand boulevard even with all the glitz and neon. There's a strong animal energy you feel.



The next day we took the metro to La Bastille. After years of neglect the area has become revitalised - probably due to the new Opera house - and has become a centre for students and artists.



My favourite cafe there is des Phares - one of the original philosophy cafes that started emerging a decade ago. It's still a great place to sit and observe even though it's become slightly pretentious.



One of our favourite pastimes is wandering through the markets, even though we rarely buy anything. The market at La Bastille is a great place for any food voyeur.



Not far from the market we chanced upon an interesting looking cafe that specialised in tangines. It was a lucky find. A good tangine is a delicate mix of flavours that can either be great or terrible. It's always a treat to chance upon a place like this. For me it's somehow akin to discovering a lost continent (though not a very big one).



After lunch we walked over to the yacht harbour built along the canal that runs from the Seine up to Place de la Bastille and then continued down to the river.



It's the walks along the Seine that I love best about Paris. There is something very special about the perspective here. It's something I've found no place else in the world.



There is a magic which goes beyond language or picture. It's something intuitive, understood by romantics, no matter how young or how old.



It's here that Paris is eternal.



And it's why we always come back.