



## Introduction

# Friends and Strangers

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As the child of an emblematic eighteenth-century revolution, a one-time superpower proprietor of a global commercial empire, and a notoriously monolingual nation-state that considers itself both apart from and the center of the world, France shares much with the United States, though it has always been the differences that intrigue and irritate. Like tourists with their oohing and umbrage, politicians play these opposing responses out in a Manichean shadow theater of televised embraces and mean asides. The reality of the French-American relationship is far more complex than this binary formulation, however, if only because both parties bring such finely honed complexes of superiority and inferiority to it, each shiftingly sure and unsure about whether to lecture to or learn from the other. On one side, *au hasard*, French admiration for that American can-do grin and appealing creative energy, then distrust of the individualistic work obsession and the conformity of the puritan and the consumer. On the other, American envy of the French so fashionably dark in their refined intelligence or bathed in a sunny sidewalk-café love of the moment, then irritation with their rudeness, cowardice, caprice. Etc. *The Married Man* in Edmund White's recent novel comes also to represent this twinned allure and annoyance: "He loved Julien—and he certainly resented him." In the broadest cultural sense the French-American relationship has always been that of juxtaposed magnets, capable of surprising, mysterious pulses of attraction and repulsion across a charged field of difference.

While this special issue of *Twentieth-Century Literature* will naturally address the extremes of this cultural Left and Right Bank, its real subject

is, of course, *le Pont des Arts* that connects them. Beginning well before the First World War American writers moved in number to France, wrote and set stories there, understood and misunderstood it, took inspiration from its living writers and august literary tradition. Some escaped an America of political, racial, and sexual restraint; some found truths intuited but repressed at home confirmed in the foreign environment and shaped their distinctive American voices in the free, cosmopolitan air of Paris. Though today France's importance on the world's intellectual and artistic stage has arguably diminished, the relation with France and its culture figured—often significantly, at times decisively—in America's contributions to major literary and critical currents of the twentieth century: the modernist revolution, the creation and dissemination of the existential vision, postwar African-American writing, the beat movement, poststructuralism. Willa Cather recruited George Sand to the cause of Midwestern regionalism. Fleeing a “mass of dolts,” Ezra Pound baptized a new movement *imagisme* and set one of its most memorable achievements in the Paris metro. John Ashbery took up residence in Paris and immersed himself in a French surrealism that was to determine the very nature of the New York school.

Two hundred years earlier, against a background of accord on certain Enlightenment principles and France's role as distant *tuteur* to the American sapling, the young nation sent its greatest writer off as the first American minister to Paris, but we cannot talk about a significant French-American literary relationship until at least the next century. The struggling former colonies that signed an end to their revolution on today's rue Jacob would need first to forge an identity on their own rough and active terms. Cultivated and flourishing, a free man in Paris, Thomas Jefferson would finally return to Washington, there to symbolically enact the grafting to inherited European values of new American realities by doubling the nation's size through its purchase from France of the Louisiana Territory. The central elements of what we now identify as the American character were profoundly shaped by the ten decades to follow: the profitable, manifestly destined, genocidal march west through that territory; a nation divided over race and nearly destroyed; an immigrant-powered industrial revolution that would make America by 1900 the world's leading producer of steel and wealth, and the dominant power for the coming century.

Throughout this period, as American literature underwent its throes of self-creation, its authors turned toward France and French culture in ways that nearly always speak tellingly about their own work. Depicting, discussing, disagreeing with the other, they define themselves—and the French were an intimidating other: Old World-weighty with tradition and high culture, artistically nimble in a nineteenth century of impressionism, Balzac's social realism, *le symbolisme* of Baudelaire and Mallarmé. To such dominant figures as Fenimore Cooper or Mark Twain, bristlingly defensive about American democracy, the French were less the revolutionaries who lionized Thomas Paine than those who, imprisoning him for his later opposition to the Terror, were imprisoned still in outmoded conceptions. Barguing the Duke and Dauphin into Huck's utopia of two, Twain targeted Continental social inequality and savaged the decadent pomposity of its vestigial aristocracies. The antihistorical Emerson too resisted the Old World, or for that matter the Old. While his romanticism resembled Wordsworth's early bliss before "France on top of the golden hours," he insisted upon an American rather than a French repudiation of the past, at its heart stood, broad shouldered as any Whitman, a fundamental frontier irreverence before all inherited standards, conceiving of imitation as suicide and the poet as an "emperor in his own right."

Other American authors of the period, however, were more than willing to enter into artistic debt and other forms of cultural transaction. Dreiser, Crane, and Norris openly conceded their rich and bitter inheritance from Balzac, from Maupassant and Zola. Stark French naturalism would find its place, of course, not within the democratic dream but on its failed, dark side. In the shadow of Standard Oil, US Steel, and J. P. Morgan and Co., the lessons many in the New World were learning about social inequality and emerging aristocracies recalled those internalized long before in the Old. Where America's realists found in *Père Goriot* or *Germinal* parallels to lives in the Gilded Age, the great internationalists were drawn more to difference in their substantial literary dealings with France. Henry James's international theme resonates today, as the name of Isabel, *la naïve* in Diane Johnson's 1990s social comedy *Le Divorce*, reminds us; the subject of Henry Adams is not Newman in the Old World but a new world that has lost its way. The France of James and Adams is as much constructed as observed: respectively, an elegant space of cultural difference for the subtle revelation of psychological change and a

sentimental education, and a nostalgically idealized paradise lost, piston-free and virginal, Chartres as Ruskin's Venice.

Something of the complexity of the twentieth-century American writer's dealings with France and French culture is already apparent here. Against a background of defensive American primitivism, the recognition that certain aspects of French society and art speak to American experience and aesthetic needs runs parallel to the theme of the rustic's heady encounter with the sensual and decadently sophisticated, and the mythic portrayal of a foreign land of timeless harmony, at ease in the harness of tradition and an inherited respect for artist and artisan. With America's growing economic and military might, its invention of the modern consumer society, and the consequent hardening of certain American character traits, France would continue to play these roles and whatever others American writers found necessary.

This "France" is, again, a construct, a supplely subjective projection born in fact and cliché, and shaped by personal and artistic need. Lost in her Midwest, Cather turned gratefully to Sand's parallel explorations of a woman's narrow provincial life in her sleepy Berry. Richard Wright came to Paris not because it resembled America but because it did not (though, escaping Jim Crow, he would reluctantly recognize his native land in French racism during the Algerian War). Faulkner's France was a spiritual *terre d'accueil*, its gift much of the little early recognition as a serious writer that he would receive; hacking in Hollywood and still entering the Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine writing contest as late as 1946, he would confide wistfully that "in France I am the father of a literary movement." Hemingway followed the Seine-to-Liffey model of fellow exile Joyce, on the Left Bank obsessively recreating Michigan trout streams and creating a narrative voice for his age. Elizabeth Bishop asked questions of travel, challenging borders of selfhood and memory on the quai d'Orléans of Proust's Swann. Leaving her childhood nonhomes for the first of many adult foreign residencies, Bishop deliberately explored the French symbolist and surrealist aesthetic and began exploring her distinctive poetic space, that place where, as she says in "Paris, 7 a.m.," observation is "like introspection / . . . or retrospection."

The great period of French-American literary cross-fertilization occurred, unquestionably, in the century's middle decades, when authors on both sides of the Atlantic gave varied meanings to Sartre's *existentialisme* and elaborated the narrative and stylistic apparatus necessary to them.

Though the term was oversimplified in generations of humanities classes and remains familiar to the point of cliché, its sheer heroism at the time should not be forgotten. The culmination of a century's struggling with an absent god, it was an exhilarating Big Idea in a world beyond them; and the intellectual center of the Western world was for a decade or two no more than an elegant, worried stroll from the Jardin de Luxembourg. The thirties through the sixties brought together the writers of both countries in rich mutual exchange, with such as Barth, Ellison, and Mailer riffing Stateside on the absurd, and Sartre writing in the *Atlantic Monthly* that "the greatest literary development in France between 1929 and 1939 was the discovery of Faulkner, Dos Passos, Hemingway, Caldwell, and Steinbeck." The wild child of Céline, Heller's Yossarian discovers the sickening truth of things (from the Snowden *d'antan*) above Avignon. Openly closing *Catch 22* is his leap to safety from the dead maze of a society that Western man had created and that French and Americans had helped each other recognize. Camus contributed imagery—the Sisyphean task, *la chute*, the death leap or Meursault—that allowed others to think and feel the existential dilemma. Decades on, for Americans Camus's *L'Etranger* remains the essential French novel, the one you read if no other. Meursault's sunstunned, senseless act was the case that launched a thousand trips, those generations shuttling off on study abroad to Paris and Aix.

The weight of the existential, bleak but bracingly human in its ethical dimension, was the dark matter that held together the French and American literary relationship for many years. More recently the French contribution has seemed thinner, windier—but it is, arguably, no less central to its age. In Butor, Sarraute, Robbe-Grillet, Simon, *le nouveau roman* of the fifties and sixties draws on the existential vision but desiccates it (unlike a concurrent phenomenon, cinema's *nouvelle vague*, whose jump-cut discontinuity and challenges to convention, however intellectualized by their *auteurs*, brought flesh and blood to the screen). Beyond the occasional Hawkes or (Paris-born) Federman, it was a fragile flagpole round which to rally, but its sense of the diminished author, the (re-)reader, and the *mise-en-abyme* showed one way toward postmodern theory. Deeply inflected by the French, critical thought at the confluence of linguistics, literature, and anthropology has for decades filled American seminar rooms and literary journals. Against the spacious humanity of Stendhal and Céline, or the dense moral outrage of Sartre and Gide, some may won-

der what has become of the *substantifique moelle* in the talk of structures and their deconstruction, in a world where the thing seems to matter less than the take on it. All postmodern critical excess aside, however, there's an abundant old-fashioned moral weight to exposing what presents itself as true and natural as the linguistic, and finally political, construction it is.

The fact that former French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin is married to Sylviane Agacinski, feminist scholar and Jacques Derrida's former wife, could be inflated symbolically to suggest the predominant role of theory in the country that brought us Descartes and the equation of existence and thought. Or it could represent more or less the opposite, the special way "thought" and "existence," while distinct, manage such congenial coexistence in France. Today, as throughout the twentieth century, a large number of significant American writers call France home. I would contend that the particular France many have constructed is a place where the life of the mind is respected as natural but also where *savoir* is indissociable from *vivre*. At its heart is a real talent for living too often eroded and unrewarded by the efficient, practical near-future orientation of American society.

The legendary French "presentness," their knack for the private moment and living the little things richly, is certainly not unthreatened. Isn't that what a "peasants' movement" dismantling the local McDonald's is really saying? And who is the colorfully mustached antiglobalization leader José Bové if not Astérix fighting off the New Romans? To some extent the Americans are but convenient villains in that they simply predict changes already sensed in postindustrial France. Loss or fear of loss is inherent in the lush nostalgia of Amélie Poulain's Montmartre of the mind, or in the minihymns to life's tiny pleasures that constitute the late-nineties surprise French bestseller *La première gorgée de bière et autres plaisirs minuscules*. Add to this other forms of commercialization—those clockwork buses through the "thyme-scented hillsides" along the Peter Mayle Trail, this week's new cookbook from a country farmhouse—and it becomes risky indeed to bring up the charm of the French *quotidien*. Yet, while it is perhaps clear that we can no longer speak about a timeless France, many still gratefully recognize traditional rhythms in French daily and seasonal life, and find them authentic, comforting, freeing. Especially to the sons and daughters of permanent self-creation, individual initiative, and endless consumer choice, France can still intimate forms

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of meaningful connection and act as a clarifying reminder of the simple in its full importance.

Paris-based American Arthur Gregor published “At the Winery” in the first year of the new century. Though they seem at first to frame absence, the questions with which the poem begins and ends finally whisper fertile, momentarily shared presence. The evening scene is a Loire Valley courtyard where the waiting speaker—the figure of the observing, apart, somehow yearning expatriate—watches pairs or groups of old and young villagers hurrying under raindrops and catches the fugitive vision of a baby hoisted up for others to see. No defensive cradling as this Madonna presents the infant to the world:

What was this sense of a  
connectedness to something other than  
work or family? Was it  
the meaning of wine that had united us,  
draught we shared as each the rain?  
or was it in something that the child  
held up brought back to us—  
the oneness at our beginning  
that each unknowingly just then  
drank of again?

## §

The texture of French daily life—or rather, Americans rubbing up against that foreign texture, the friction, the warmth, its strangeness—is the subject of Edward Knox’s contribution to the present volume. Within a long tradition of sojourner texts, Knox treats three attempts in nonfiction prose to render and make sense of a stay in Paris at the end of the last century: Michael Lewis’s twenty-three *Slate* dispatches, David Sedaris’s *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, and Adam Gopnik’s collected and reworked *New Yorker* pieces, *Paris to the Moon*. Knox presents Lewis’s contributions with an objectivity that is commendable, given their occasionally stunning boorishness. Even before so elegantly stating that Paris teaches one “how to be an asshole,” the tone is set by Lewis’s explanation of his stay in France as, under the weight of incipient parenthood, a last opportunity “to just go somewhere and screw off.” Here, not only insensitive but wrong, Lewis

inadvertently puts his finger on an important illusion about this kind of travel literature, namely that it's written by people with nothing but time on their hands, time, variously, to complain and wish you were home, time to observe and think seriously about the foreign environment, the other, the self. Certainly there's more time than under the job yoke, but the daily lives of these writers, we find, are—perhaps in protective reaction to the ambient foreignness—surprisingly ordered by domestic, school, and other routines. Gopnik calls his book “mostly stories about raising a kid in foreign parts.”

Knox catches each different “I,” the ways it “sees,” and the “France” it imagines, pursues, or settles for. The mode of the sojourn text, unsurprisingly, is more or less constant cultural comparison, its background lonely irritation, irritation become reflection, or reflection flashing briefly into enlightenment. Sedaris comes off charming and self-effacingly lightweight, and occasionally he'll backhand home a winner. “I've never considered myself an across-the-board apologist for the French,” he writes, “but there's a lot to be said for an entire population that never, under any circumstances, talks during the picture.” Of the three, however, Knox correctly insists that only Adam Gopnik's work rises to the level of the literary essay. Knox thus rightly devotes considerable space to Gopnik, and notably to the rhetorical strategies he so tellingly employs—analogy, chiasmus, metonym—in his amplifications upon hidden French cultural logic, on the big story in little things, and the coexistence of the monumentally official with the “the most beautiful commonplace culture there has ever been.”

Carol Singley's contribution concerns another, even more unreserved, champion of France, Edith Wharton, who—the idea boggles today—wrote *French Ways and Their Meaning* partly as a guide for American servicemen in France after the Great War. While Wharton could trimly anticipate the neat paradoxes of Gopnik (“the French are traditional about small things because they are so free about big ones”), at other times it's a hoot to imagine the doughboys fishing her pamphlet out of their packs. “The French are the most human of the human race,” they'd read. “They have used their longer experience and their keener senses for the joy and enlightenment of the races still agropo for self-expression.” Singley's subject is the imposing—and, before this essay, unremarked—weight of nineteenth-century French positivist Ernest Renan's speculations about nationhood in Wharton's thought and work. For beyond such occasion-

al, embarrassing pronouncements as those quoted above, Wharton was a searching thinker open to Renan's modern questioning of what he considered dangerously romantic conceptions of nationhood; under his influence, she moved toward a view of the nation as a mobile, continually recreated entity and not as mysteriously innate or organic. Singley's picture of subtle philosophical influence necessarily engages the complexities, even blurring inconsistencies, of a Wharton juggling the personal motivations and discoveries of long expatriation, religious faith and shocked modern doubt, elitist nostalgia and positivist progressivism, anger at isolationist America and fear of ugly nationalism with its incalculable human cost.

Wharton's France was a gift to all humanity. Shedding back-home blinders and puritanical restraints, many American expatriates might put it otherwise, tending more toward Gertrude Stein's argument: "It was not what France gave you but what it did not take away from you that was important." This was certainly the case for the fascinating group of American women referred to as the Rope. Rebecca Rauve examines these writers, their mercurial personal, literary, and amorous interactions, and the weighty influence of their Armenian guru, the mysterious, charismatic Gurdjieff. The between-wars Paris behind this bustling self-improving, New-Agey foreground calls attention to itself if only by its extreme discretion, its tolerant cosmopolitan neutrality. Not infrequently lesbian, Rope writers lived the heady freedom of an expatriation drawing clearly upon its etymological root. Asking why, curiously, they then chose to bind themselves to the orphic, cult-like paternalism of a spiritual leader who opposed homosexuality, Rauve indirectly addresses the interplay of personal freedom and its voluntary abdication, a disciplined adherence to externally imposed artistic precepts, within the creative process.

Literary and cultural interplay of another sort is at the heart of Carolyn Durham's essay. Within a surprisingly abundant body of recent American fiction and nonfiction about or set in France, Durham focuses on three popular 1990s mysteries that take as their backdrop the 1920s Left Bank of Stein, Hemingway, and company. Rewriting modernism—or, more correctly, its pop-culturally iconic figures and events—into a post-modern, intertextual collage (or *bricolage*), these authors turn, significantly, to the genre of the popular mystery, with its dark spaces, deceptive surfaces, and false leads. The essay explores the ironies and appropriateness

in intertwining Joyce and Agatha Christie, literary dislocation and the mystery's formulaic codes.

Along the way Durham points to the French connection in the development and propagation of the detective story—through, say, the trope of “mysterious Paris” or Enlightenment reason begetting the sleuth's ratiocination—but her focus on Poe's Dupin rightly highlights the culturally collaborative nature of the genre. We might add to this tale of giving and taking Duhamel's *Série noire*, which brought dozens of translated American detective novels to a hungry—and analytic—reading public. The early acclaim for a Dashiell Hammet highlights a French willingness to treat with critical respect what was first dismissed *outré atlantique* as popular entertainment (cf., later, the first films of Clint Eastwood). Well before the Gallimard series no less a writer than Camus would draw significantly upon the pulp *policier* in creating his distinctively cold narrative eye on an indifferent world, the clipped dialogue, the neutral surfaces. The debt in *L'Étranger*—*le roman noir* at its darkest—to Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* is well known; far from superficial borrowing, the many parallels in plot and voice are authentic marks of the profound, affectionate literary appropriation that distinguished much Franco-American literary exchange in the last century.

Jay Bochner chronicles decades of such exchange in an embedded, obliquely encoded literary conversation between Blaise Cendrars and Henry Miller. Drawing on recently published correspondence, Bochner teases out the implications of a seemingly incidental reference to Cendrars's novel *Moravagine* in *Tropic of Cancer*, written before the authors physically met. Their more important literary meetings seem to take place in a fluid, unstable place, where biography bleeds into fiction and all boundaries of genre are at best indistinct. Though Cendrars would later “forget” his review of *Tropic*—the book's first!—and it is only Miller who comes off as grateful, their literary transactions are presented as mutual, perhaps more surprisingly in Cendrars's struggling toward the personal voice of his 1940s “saga” with the talky model of Miller's metafictional self-reflexiveness clearly echoing in his ears. As similar as these wild personages may seem, particularly fascinating is their understanding at cross-purposes of the archetypally American Whitman and Emerson and the radically different “uses” they make of these influences.

Miller's version of the “epic” night of the first meeting with his idol tells us much about his relationship with the city Cendrars himself felt

no foreign writer captured as well. This is the Paris of *Tropic*, the underbelly of Montmartre, the Rabellaisian lobsters and Chartreuse and pigeons, the “whores hanging on to us, and Cendrars . . . urging me to take one, take two. . . .” That is, until Miller abruptly, “unceremoniously” skips out, apparently fleeing the literal sex into which, literarily, he of course plunges with such abandon. As Bochner argues, then, the fictionalized Paris of *Tropic of Cancer* is perhaps “not a city seen and absorbed but the rendition of this desire to absorb,” less *porn* than *graphy*.

In his contribution to the present volume, Michael Hollington might say that Miller was in good company, for what was F. Scott Fitzgerald’s relationship to France if not fundamentally verbal? Though Fitzgerald spoke famously atrocious French, he yearningly lingered on the sounds and names associated with the French-Canadian city of his birth and, later, with the European high life, and the consequences for his writing were significant. Present directly in place and personal names or etymologically inlaid, Fitzgerald’s French is for the most part a “language of dreams” glamorously bespeaking sexual and social success. Of course, the Fitzgerald dream also implies a pained, hungover awakening, and the same sounds and signifiers can come equally to signal pretension and the hollowness of class distinction. Hollington examines *Tender Is the Night* with particular attention, for it is there that Fitzgerald most extensively exploits the varied meanings he clearly associated with the language, notably in his evocative development of the theme of decline and dissolution, a central preoccupation not only of Fitzgerald but of other American and European modernists. Linking Dick Diver’s descent in part to verbal failure, signposting it in French, Fitzgerald seems to have drawn upon his own difficult dealings with a language that endlessly promised and then finally refused its treasures.

The essays in this volume constitute an ambitious survey of a literary relationship which, abundant both in promise and disappointment like that of Fitzgerald with the language, has served as a similarly rich imaginative and emotional stimulus to generations of American writers. I offer my warm thanks to the numerous scholars who submitted essays for this special issue and my particular gratitude to the talented and understanding authors whose fine work here appears. Many thanks as well to Jim Martin, to *TCL*’s peerless editor Lee Zimmerman, and to numerous dear friends, whom I will not embarrass by naming, for their clear-headed advice and affectionate patience.