

Lewis Nkosi DOING PARIS WITH BREYTEN



drawings by O. Calvert

Her white dress in the sun was an unbearable shimmer sloping to her body's motion and she passed from sunlight to shadow, mounting the steps. . . . Then her white dress faded beyond a fanlight of muted colour dim with age and lovely with lack of washing, leaving George to stare at the empty maw of the house in hope and despair and baffled youthful lust.

William Faulkner/*Soldier's Pay*

I watched a good-looking girl walk past the table and watched her go up the street and lost sight of her, and watched another, and then saw the first one coming back again. She went by once more and I caught her eye, and she came over and sat at the table.

Ernest Hemingway/*The Sun Also Rises*

1

PARIS IN SUMMER! In the white light of August we grew dim with heat. We sat at Cafe Le Select on Boulevard Montparnasse watching the girls arrive and depart. For days we watched them. At the end of the first week it seemed to me that we had done nothing but watch girls arrive and depart from the cafes. They bore themselves gravely against the wild light of August, against the very motionless stillness of summer, their elegantly French bodies hallowed in a nimbus embrace of startlingly white brightness, sometimes arriving delicately at the crowded cafe, pausing briefly near the entrance to survey the perpetually

shifting scene, then in a carefree moment of sudden, inscrutable decision, stepping firmly toward an empty seat; and the silhouetted men who had hoped against hope that this "careless, unemphatic" body would deposit itself in the empty, the empty adjacent seat would watch it go by, growing lax with despair.

Though they pretended otherwise in their cultivated French *ennui* the girls' departures seemed to me even more spectacular! They would get up from the tables with an air of utmost gravity, pushing back their chairs with little scraping sounds; then carefully weighing their bodies against the concentrated vision of lascivious males, they would pick their way adroitly among tables and chairs, all the time cajoling the eye with an amazing hip-rolling motion that instantly informed the cafe with an atmosphere of an absurdly desolate regret for something we all felt to have been within reach but which we had failed to notice or possess.

It seems to me that French girls do not walk at all! Their movement is a perpetual dance, a subtle abandonment of the body to the gay crowded activity of the street. In no other city have I seen girls walk like that. As days went by it seemed somehow that every walk away from a cafe was a wealthy event to be solemnly witnessed and marvelled at. The swaying hips, the quivering quick narrow breasts inadequately sheltered behind low-necked sweaters, the sly subtle mutilation of air by bare arms and bronzed legs which shocked by their eager surrender to the bawdy, fatal, joy of

sensual movement—Sex: however, unconscious and reluctant these momentous motions and casual pausings, they brought the slumbering sexual images naturally to mind. Something dark and ancient was being celebrated every time a French girl walked away from a cafe. In my mind these girls awakened memories of Zulu women balancing incredible cargo on their sturdy, beautiful necks and the effortless manner in which they negotiated their way up the incline of a hill. To walk like that a girl has to lose all fear of the body and be on terms of absolute trust with it.

PARIS IS OF COURSE a city hopelessly obscured by history, and yet forever accessible even to those who have never seen it, through this history. It is obscured because so much has been written about Paris that it is no longer possible for anyone to arrive in the city for the first time without looking at it through glasses coloured by a wealth of fiction and literary romance. For Africans who neither had the literary technique nor much use for documented history, it is awesomely astounding to see how much of eighteenth and nineteenth century Paris still abides to intrude into the 20th century. It is an intimation of a Past forever engraved in stone, secreted in darkened ageless buildings and weather-bitten statuary.

My first encounter with Paris was in my early boyhood in Durban, South Africa, even before I had raised any hopes of ever walking her streets in some distant future.

Having discovered at an early age that I wanted to write I began a systematic raid of the libraries during which I was continuously but graciously rebuffed by embarrassed English lady librarians, until, one day, in angry desperation, I cornered a mobile library for non-whites in (of all places) Red Square, that scene of many stormy political meetings, during which my rights to read were hotly demanded and unjustly disputed. In those first books I borrowed I was introduced for the first time to the literary embodiment of European history by the works of Dumas, Flaubert, Balzac and Hugo, and I began my first journey to France and to Paris. I grasped at the Collins classics primarily because for any slum boy the neat leather-bound books looked invaluablely posh and expensive; the vocabulary gave me as much pleasure as it gave me trouble; but such is the power of adventure and romance on a boy's imagination that I struggled through the novels with an array of dictionaries until I had garnered a formidable word-list that astonished my essay master. It is to the credit of Dumas' compulsive readability that I pursued his three musketeers through their daily assignments until, many books later, they were no longer sufficiently young or agile to carry them out; whereupon I turned my attention to the rising fortunes of their offsprings till the day I ran out of Dumas' novels. Hugo's *Les Misérables* reduced me to tears and for years I was haunted by the spectre of poor starving wretches in dark narrow streets. It was a picture of Paris that was only counter-balanced by that other Paris of Louis XIV and his powdered, coiffured, glittering courtiers.

My Paris is therefore stubbornly eighteenth and nineteenth century—a city of horses and cobbled streets, a city of revelry, intrigue, romance, violent revolution and desperate sexual liaisons; a city of duels and dark assignments. For me Dumas and Hugo have ruined forever the actual city; I can't possess the Paris of 1965 without possessing the literary ruins of another Paris irrecoverably lost in the shadow of dream and romance. Asleep in the Paris hotel room of 1965 I can still hear the horses of Porthos and D'Artagnan cantering in the midnight streets outside and the dark narrow lanes of Victor Hugo's Paris are still there, fearful with the squandered secrets of yesterday. In fact, so possessed is my imagination that when I see a French lady pouring out tea I stare instinctively and apprehensively at the large stone on her finger, for the 19th century novelist taught me to expect a thimbleful of poison to be stored up inside that gleaming stone, the contents of which might be emptied into somebody's cup at the flicker of the modest eyelashes.

It is perhaps understandable that when I encountered my real Paris for the first time in 1963 I felt that I had been inexcusably let down. It seemed to me that the beautiful city of my dreams had fallen before advancing hordes of American tourists whose pockets bulged with dollars. Each time, or



nearly each time, I put my hand under the cafe tables in St. Germain-des-Pres it came into contact with lumps of chewing gum left there by American coeds from Louisville, Kentucky, or wherever they are supposed to come from! French people, on the other hand, were skinning everyone within range of the cash register. One night in Montmartre we had to protest loudly that we were no American tourists, though we spoke English, before a third had to be taken off the price of the drinks! That—the meanness and the bad weather—finally proved too much for me and I was glad to leave for the quiet of Normandy. It was only during the subsequent visits that I saw the Paris which I had not permitted myself to see during that first encounter. I suppose for everyone there is still enough of the old Paris to cherish the city—there is the air of informality and freedom, the much storied Parisian indifference to what people do with their lives, the inimitable style of the French woman and the much enduring beauty of the city's architecture.

2

I learned to know Paris and French affairs much better than before—I got a certain familiarity with Paris.

The Notebooks of Henry James
THE FIRST TIME I saw Paris was in the summer of 1963 when I was on my way back to Africa. An American television company had signed me on as an interviewer for a series of programmes on African writers. In the hope of tracking down M. Leopold Senghor, the poet-president of the Senegalese Republic, M. Leon Damas, the Martinique poet and French critics specialising in the field of African literature, we flew into Paris on a Thursday in the evening of August 1, 1963. It was a trying time for me; after the hustle and bustle of London interviews my nerves were shot; I was feeling—well, yes—feeling

very black, very irritable, demanding of Paris that it should be everything it was rumoured to be—and more! I find that the entry I made in my ill-kept diary on that occasion tells a grim story of nerves, dark depression and disappointment:

“The drive to the air terminus (Invalides) was disappointing. Paris is so bleak and drab, it reminds me of Ronnie Segal's description of it: ‘an old whore in a dirty shabby corset.’ It started to rain while we were on our way to the terminus. Then we had to wait for a taxi while it poured down on us. Saw my first French policeman wearing a black cape over his dark uniform. Certainly not as tall and forbidding as policemen look elsewhere. Looks rather like an actor impersonating the police. . . .”

On that first, dark, rainy day into the city the outer edges of Paris had seemed to me no more than a “vast post-war slum” and it took me somewhat longer to discover that soft, rose-hued Paris of imperishable beauty and ineluctable romance. It was during the four days I spent in the city in the April of 1964 which confirmed the grievous error I had made on that first dark encounter with Paris. Then this year, through the kindness of a friend, my wife and I were left in possession of a three-roomed apartment on Rue Brézin, very near Montparnasse, from which we made daily sorties into the Quarter. The apartment we occupied was up on the fifth floor, with balconies overlooking a small park and square. Climbing up the narrow winding staircase every day was an arduous task, but one which we soon grew to appreciate after the French police who had been called out one night to suppress a party that had become too boisterous left without firing a shot. It seemed to them a long way to travel to the fifth floor on that winding old-fashioned stairway; so they contented themselves with shouting warnings, and threats from the street below.

It was a beautiful apartment and we slept with the windows open. Lying in bed at night it was possible to gaze across the empty square at the buildings opposite, which were then shrouded in darkness save for the lighted windows that looked like rectangular shapes of muted, coloured, lights against the darkened night sky. Watching Paris from the balcony at night always made me feel as though we were suspended in a void of darkness over the city. In the morning, before we were fully awake, French voices were already assailing the peace in the shopping street below; and in the park, across the street, white and Negro children frolicked in outbursts of energy and noise which were not dissimilar to random explosions of cannon fire. Indeed, the children captured the quarter early in the morning and did not break their siege until late forenoon when they were completely dazed by the sun. The adults, on the other hand, sat contentedly on benches placed inside the park, their faces uplifted to the sun in a dutiful pose of worshipful adoration. By nine o'clock in



the rear balcony the sun was already hot enough to sunbathe; occasionally, I came out in pyjamas to see a young woman, nude as a spear, standing at the balcony window of the apartment across the courtyard, her glossy, shadowless, white skin yellowed to dul gold by the rising sun; her form, so casual, so seemingly free, was always too stark not to be startling; and yet there was nothing erotic about it; I am perhaps making too much of a small incident; but it seemed to me that despite the rapid embourgeoisement of much that is radical and independent in Parisian life, that nude woman symbolised what is still the essence of Paris—a certain worldliness and freedom which attract new waves of exiles to this city every year, young people in flight from the inhibiting provincialism of their own native cities.

3

"What do you do nights, Jake?" asked Krum. "I never see you around."

"Oh, I'm over in the Quarter."

"I'm coming over some night. The 'Dingo.' That's the great place, isn't it?"

"Yes. That, or this new dive, 'The Select'."

Ernest Hemingway/*The Sun Also Rises*
ALL DAY LONG at the Cafe Select, on Boulevard Montparnasse, people arrived, mostly young men and women, to sit at the tables, sunning themselves like lizards. A number of them came to stare and be stared at, and for this purpose dark glasses were worn like armour. When the sun dipped down behind the buildings on the western fringe the migration began to the Coupole across the street. The Dome, the Coupole, and the Select are just three of the Montparnasse cafes which used to be frequented by some of the leading figures of the so-called Lost Generation; and it was surprising to me to find that after two successive generations, writers and artists who now find it unthinkable to be seen at places like Deux Magots,

still haunted these cafes in Montparnasse; and the impression they conveyed was always that of beleaguered artists manning the last front against the creeping inroads of the French bourgeoisie and dollar-laden tourists.

The Coupole, which is full almost every day round about midnight, looks like a large medieval banqueting hall with murals which were painted by famous artists before they became too famous to paint for nothing. We found Giacometti, the internationally famous sculptor, there one night, brooding over a piece of white paper upon which he had been doodling. "In this quarter," a young painter told me, "it is still a shock to hear anyone introduced as a businessman." Like many historic places the Coupole is now threatened with demolition and there are rumours that an American-owned business establishment is to be set up in its place.

At the Select across the street announcements are made at intervals through the loudspeaker system, summoning famous personalities to the telephone. At one time it is a well-known French theatre critic; the next moment it is the small, doll-like, blonde actress of the *nouvelle vague* films: blue eyes, skin like honey and white-fringed conical breasts visible for all the world to see under the plunging neckline of her mustard sweater and scanty bra.

What immediately shocks someone coming from London is to find this casual acceptance of the proximity of glamour and fame and the complete lack of hostility toward the artist. For ages the artist has been part of the community and no one reacts any more. In London any confession that one writes, paints or sculpts is treated as cause either for mirth, pity or as reason for the profoundest distrust. It is also generally assumed that any famous artist who visits a popular pub—except the obscure country places—is either not serious

or is shamelessly cadging for publicity. For a sculptor of Henry Moore's stature to be seen frequenting a pub in Soho would stimulate so much doubt about his sense of propriety as to be actually damaging to his reputation. That is because the relationship between the artist and his society in England is still essentially one of suspicion and distrust. Yet in Paris, there was Giacometti, to be seen almost every night either at the Coupole or the Dome, and his presence there was treated by the cafe crowd with respectful but most casual interest.

Our own guide into the Latin Quarter of 1965 was Breyten Breytenbach, a South African painter and poet who has lived in Paris for five years and speaks fluent French. Breyten is something rare among Afrikaners: he has pushed his rebellion against the Afrikaners' narrow parochialism to a point where, without making any political gestures, he has been able to mix and be accepted by some very left-wing artists in Paris. His estrangement from his own Afrikaner people was perhaps sealed when he married a Vietnamese girl, the daughter of a former Vice-President of South Vietnam. On one score at least the decision could not have been very difficult to make, for Yolande Breytenbach is a ravishing beauty; and being Paris-born she combines naturally and gracefully the occidental and the oriental sides of her upbringing.

Each day then we carried to the café our neat stack of notebooks, papers and pens which we heroically supposed were mightier than swords and each day we suffered cruel defeat in the face of other, more numerous, diversionary interests. How any writer has been able to work in a Paris café is the kind of mystery that I cannot hope to unravel. Yet it seems that the lonely and the homeless, the dwellers in cold-water flats, the romantic searchers and the predatory, have, each in his own season, sometimes found it necessary to annex a Paris café as a place in which to work, to rendezvous, or simply to become part of the daily drift to nowhere. I know of no other city where it is so easy to drift and more difficult to work.

For an African in Europe the Paris café is what gives street life its tang, sharpness and point. At the Coupole one night, a young Dutch painter told me: "I've visited London from time to time; I'm afraid I cannot live there. For a painter there is no community, no place to meet other painters, and everything closes so early!" He shrugged his shoulders and surveyed the boulevard which at the hour of midnight was swirling with September crowds. It is true, of course, that we have the English pub in London; but the business hours are so restrictive that they only compel the sleepless, neurotic artist as well as the potential sexual offender to roam the streets aimlessly after hours. "Time, gentlemen, time," a cry in which the English take such secret pride, is a cruel, mindless surrender to self-inflicted pain and discomfort. After 11 p.m. in London you really have no place in which to meet your friends except in some

noisy discotheque, or dreary expensive nightclub or some sad, indescribably pretentious restaurant.

Perhaps the observation is no longer fresh, but after spending two months in Paris it was possible to discover anew just how effectively the café has served Parisian society as the focus of the city's social life. The rich may have Maxim's but the poor have the café in which it is possible to lunch on a sandwich and cheap red wine while calmly enduring the withering scornful gaze of the *garçon*. I am also certain that not only are the sins of murder, adultery and theft conceived mostly at the café table, but important books, plans for revolutionary warfare and the assassinations of national figures thousands of miles away from French soil continue to be plotted at the café table.

In the space of one morning at the Café Select we had spoken to an African student from Kenya, a Negro musician from Martinique, a coloured painter from the United States. Walking by to buy English newspapers from a kiosk I caught a glimpse of a member of the Pan-Africanist Congress (South Africa) concealed behind his dark glasses; then sat down with a French girl who was a member of the Liberatory Committee of Portuguese Guinea and then chatted with a London representative of the African National Congress recently flown in to collect some paintings for his London exhibition. Indeed, I would not have been surprised to find a member of Dr. Verwoerd's Government similarly anchored in a nearby seat. Paris is truly a city of exiles and the café is its window to the world. Here it is well-nigh impossible for any young woman to nourish her dreams of solitude or to indulge small private griefs and disappointments without being offered a shoulder to cry on. And any Frenchman, however puny, imagines that his shoulder is broad enough to offer to any young woman in distress.

In London I have often been appalled by the depth of loneliness to which single girls from the provinces are condemned, especially if they are shy and retiring by nature. There is no way whatever to meet boys in an atmosphere of freedom, without feeling a sense of commitment, save by attending numerous, insupportably dull, parties from which any girl is lucky to emerge with a bumbling oaf who is capable of defending the cause of human reason in tolerably good English. As a consequence, any "decent" English girl who finds herself approached by a strange man in the street feels it her moral obligation to reach under her tweed skirt for a former Girl Guide whistle. Talk about "sexual revolution"; it would be more accurate to describe it as "sexual panic"!

One can understand, of course, why it is now generally believed that because French girls are friendly they are just as ready for a rumble. In Paris, especially in a café, there is no opprobrium which attaches to a girl for speaking to a complete stranger, an attitude which appeals enormously to a

great many Africans like myself, brought up to feel that it is failing in one's social obligation to sit next to a young woman without paying her some gallant attention, however unprepossessing she looks. I was therefore happily surprised by the freedom of Paris! Here at the crowded or almost empty café, dreams are finally harvested or nullified: the golden woman in your troubled feverish dreams arrives mercifully on the appointed hour to sit in full view at the table across from yours. Naturally, it may take a certain amount of ingenuity and hard talk to convince her that you are indeed the Prince destined to sweep her off her feet; but at least the woman of your fantasies is not forever imprisoned in some obscure dream of a super Mayfair nightclub or country estate, forever fleshless and inaccessible to your sweaty, tobacco-stained fingers!

4

In the corner a huge American Negro with his arms around a lovely French tart, roared a song to her in a rich beautiful voice and suddenly . . .

F. Scott Fitzgerald/*The Crack Up*

When evening came and the dense heat of a summer day had changed into a bracing sensual coolness of a Paris evening, we rode a cab from St. Michel to Rue Brezin, collecting liquor bottles as we went along. The old woman hauled the bottles down from the shelves as we pointed them out at the shop; then as we seized them, ready to leave, she held our attention with her fretful insistent desire to talk. "You're lovers?" she said. "Young love is a beautiful thing, no?" The French girl and I laughed, but did not explain that we were not lovers because it seemed a good thing to give flesh to the old woman's nostalgia for a departed youth. After the damp fog of England's racism it was also refreshing to find an old woman who was able to take interracial love so much for granted; indeed, this was a prelude to a bright, orgiastic night of dance, talk and drinking which went on for two days. The police came, shouted their threats, then left, and the party went on, a little quieter but still wanton enough, sharpened at times by intellectual contention. After a long evening of theoretical debate with someone a French girl gave up on the English language: "I'm too tired to think in English!" Raymond Kunene, the Zulu poet, shuttled between the bookshelves and the dance floor, was seen at one time executing a spectacular war dance which brought a passionate exaltation to the face of an old Negro painter, Beauford Delaney, for twelve years self-exiled from the United States. "I came to Paris for a weekend and stayed for twelve years!" Now drawn to the madcap frolic of that Zulu dance Beauford Delaney looked both sombre and fervid, sad and ecstatic, already beginning to ask himself what Africa meant to him, which is to say, he had already started on that long journey into the dark night of the Negro psyche where every question leads to the nightmare of slave ships. But if there is anything that Paris

teaches it is that exile is the modern condition; and yet for the Negro and the African this is also the century of reunion; here in the warm intimate hour of midnight, with the city slumbering in the darkness, exile spoke to exile, the South African to the doubly exiled American Negro, and out there at the café tables one knew there were others just as exiled, just as quick, just as reckless, just as driven, each knowing the truth of his loneliness only in the private cells of his body, or in the illuminated faces of those who had similarly suffered. Dancing, jumping up and down, fierce in dispute, gaiety and sadness was finally their portion. "Aren't they jus' beautiful people!" Delaney enthused.

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