

Zo d'Axa

A Road

1895

Foreigners everywhere!

There aren't many fewer of them in Paris than in this London where I have vegetated in the vacation of an outlaw for the past three months.

Here, for example, you don't become acclimated, not even superficially. You can't overcome the natives' absolute reserve; you don't in any way penetrate the surrounding environment. You feel you are materially pushed to the side. Isolation weighs on you in the compact sadness of the fog.

You frequent the international clubs in vain: they're disappointing.

The solidarity of certain revolutionary groups has the ostentation of charity: it is nothing but a distressing spectacle. And what is more, bad tempered suspicions fly, giving any enthusiasm a cold shower. Accusations are exchanged. Argument and invective win out over discussion.

Mistrust rules.

You have to return to your room and your solitude. But the little room facing onto the courtyard on the top floor of a gloomy house is cause for nostalgia.

You could count the number of exiles who enjoy a comfortable home.

The rest unconsciously drag their feet to the area around Whitechapel, down there behind the Tower of London. They wander the poverty-stricken alleys, coming out onto the main streets when the scurrying crowd is leaving the factories and docks and then rises in a tide it would be pleasant to drown in.

In the big cities you pass though it's not the wealthy boulevards or the communal buildings that are the most interesting. You rarely halt during museum visits, since rare are the works of yore that still move us. Monuments only have the beauty of their harmony, and when this proud totality no longer exists they stand there like old stones that a historic memory doesn't suffice to magnify.

But it is still fascinating to seek out the salient traits of a race by making contact with the soul of the people. And you go to the poor quarters, among the shops of the lower professions, in the streets where kids run barefoot, down streets where here and there the vast buildings — popular barracks — looming over leprous mounds, look like giant hives for the wretched.

The cells of these hives are narrow, the walls of these hovels are close to each other and have no fireplace. The compressed life of these dumps overflows onto the muddy sidewalks, sometimes livened by a ray of sunlight. When this happens the rushing about is like a commotion of an anthill.

Outdoors in the daylight there's endlessly renewed labor. Pale women wash coarse linen. Potatoes are cooking on heaters whose fire is fanned by for the meal that will later be eaten, seated on wobbly chairs in front of the door. And these people all know each other, they call out to each other, moves, exist in a special lifestyle, with its characteristic usages, determined customs, an original spirit and morals whose brutal side evokes the primitiveness of a type.

In London I commonly felt hostility in the gazes that fall on you as if to forbid you from approaching: "Go away!"

Every Englishman strangely symbolizes his country.

These island dwellers are so many unapproachable islands where the sap of warm colored plants sleeps.

It's so monotonous, it's so neutral, it's so gray . . . and I've had enough of it!

To leave!

It's not that you delude yourself by dreaming of a fraternal reception under other skies. The outlaw knows that every asylum is uncertain. He knows that he will be as suspect in Geneva as he is in Brussels, in Spain as in Italy. But when you're tired of sojourning it's true that you don't need a goal to set out on the road.

To leave, to go anywhere . . .

The voyage! To go, fleeing spleen. In the beginning, every place has its charms. Everything is beautiful for an hour at least.

Wisdom resides in not staying.

To pass, gleaning impressions, tasting new sensations and the savor of the earth. And then go back on the road, no doubt towards some unreachable fatherland. Vagabond, pilgrim, beggar on a voyage of exploration, of conquest. Unsatisfied, like Don Juan, but with a higher love. The dress you want to tear is the veil on the horizon.

The green, deep Thames carries so many adventurous desires along on its waters.

After Westminster, after the Tower, after the docks, beyond Blackwell it opens up. The ships glide towards the sea and their whistles are calls you hear with a start.

It was in Blackwell that one morning, without any real plan, I took the boat to Holland. If I would have had a few more shillings I would just as well have embarked to see Sweden or take a look at Calcutta.

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The crossing from London to Rotterdam lasts a day and a night. The price isn't very high, fifteen francs for third class. And for a short sea voyage the lowest class is not noticeably worse than first. You enjoy standing contemplating the battle of the waves, and on the open sea watching the sky sink into the waters.

All places are the same for this infinite spectacle, forward as well as aft.

In any case, third class is imposed on you when all you have is a few *louis*. This is my case, and my baggage is light and the velvet of my suit is rustic.

In third class you meet few people travelling for pleasure. There are nothing but poor people being repatriated, workers hoping to find work far from their city.

No tourists.

The latter want to be pampered and comfortable. Even the most modest among them. They prefer to wait and swell their savings so they can travel in second class. They embark with their wallets full, holding a roundtrip ticket and coupons for pre-arranged hotels. Not having to rub elbows with them is the immeasurable advantage of traveling third class.

The insipid chatter of mighty is nowhere more pitiful than in the majesty of the open sea.

It's as if you're being pursued. . .

You're better off with the puerile talk of the passengers in steerage, of the penniless who are free of poses and aren't afraid to express their naïve sentiments. None of the irritating drone or the mannered recitation of triumphant commonplaces. They speak of hope and difficulties. And according to the weather and the hour, they give free rein to colorful language.

And it also happens that in third class chance gives birth to camaraderie. I went down the Thames in the amiable company of some needy troubadours who paid for their transport by singing the waltzes of their country.

Dark heads on supple gypsy bodies of gypsies with boisterous violins. They were returning from a tour around the Scottish countryside.

They were emigrating, fleeing winter.

Some of them spoke French and told me of their nomadic life. There was beauty and seductiveness in its carefree nature. They simply kept going forward, nothing but sun, fresh air, and music.

I wasn't with them long enough.

Seated in the front of the ship, camped on valises while their violins rested in their cloth cases, we distractedly watched the sure-handed functioning of the tugboats and the whimsicality of the sailboats.

Fewer factories along the river, lagoons of red earth where sheep grazed on the sparse grass. The Thames widened again. It was Greenwich, and in the evening we felt the waves' backwash.

We'd reached the sea.

I didn't know the strange melody my companions saluted it with. But their instruments, their voices, and the sound of the water harmonized in the rhythm of a lullaby.

At night, having had an aperitif of salty air, we were hungry, and they sliced off large chunks of ham and fraternally circulated a whiskey gourd.

Upon arriving in Rotterdam we went the next day to an inn at the port. And while they improvised a concert, I went to see the old houses with their stepped roofs, squeaky clean on the canals of this vulgar Venice.

The musicians soon told me they were going to stay there for two weeks. That was more than I could do. Good wishes, farewell, handshakes.

Not faraway, at its mouth, the Rhine sent me the clean reflection of its old castles. The same pressing desire that had caused me to go down one river pushed me to go up another. The Thames, the Rhine! Isn't it as if they were the prolongation of a seductive highway?

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From the light steamship, sparkling under the sun, we see Patras at the foot of the mountain opposite Missolonghi.

On the small square near the port, not far from the market, the scurry of a Sunday. Brightly colored European garb, timeless fashions. Church services were ending. The women's beautiful faces, lost under the edifices of their hats. Old Greeks in national costumes, the short pleated skirt of a female dancer. And the polychromatic, shimmering crowd, turning like a merry-go-round on the square with its three dusty palm trees.

On the terrace of a Moorish café, where anisette and "mastic" were served amidst saucers of olives on small, low tables, I piously gave myself over to my first hookah.

The light tobacco is slowly consumed in the red clay chimney under the scented coal, while in the carafe with its copper armature the water purrs its strange gluggings. The hookah stands hieratically and the long tube with its triangular amber tip unfurls like the rings of some sacred serpent.

It's quite a change from rotgut whiskey.

And I have to say that from the decorative point of view there is an analogous difference between the men of that country and the inhabitants of ours. These Greeks show signs of their pedigree. The least turkey farmer has the inbred distinction that our swells seek in vain. With his delicate features, even the peasant preserves the aristocratic imprint that imperiously expresses the glorious line of his ancestors.

Their proud bearing and this whimsicality in attire explain the *laissez-aller* that you note in the carrying out of daily tasks. Commerce doesn't enthuse them, and their agriculture is strange. In fields I saw potatoes and lilies mixed together in the barbarous furrows.

The train I took to Athens on a bright sunny morning stopped at every single station.

Constantly getting on, getting off, renewing themselves, there were peasants snacking on coarse bread and eating goat cheese to pass the short trip. Priests and longhaired beggars filling their pockets travel from here to the next village, along with poorly dressed soldiers singing strange nasal tunes.

Tourists in their sleeping cars have no idea how well you get to know a people through a prolonged stay in a vulgar passenger car, and to what extent it allows you to enter into contact with them.

A klepht¹ goes to the city to stock up on gunpowder. Seated in a corner of the wagon he seems to isolate himself, his pistol butts forming commas on his leather belt.

He has both the burnoose and the hardiness of a Kabyle.

You see more and more similarities between Arabs and Greeks.

The free mountain man — shepherd, hunter, perhaps “collector of indirect taxation from strolling rich men” — possesses the tranquil majesty of a qadi² after a razzia³.

Here, on the arid plains of Megara, where the houses are cabins of red clay, you would almost think you were under the scorched trees of a Saharan oasis.

The décor changes.

Having gone around a hill, Athens is in view. Standing over the styleless buildings of a provincial city geometrically sliced up by the layout of the streets, stands the rock of the Acropolis, the pedestal of the Parthenon.

The Parthenon stands out in the impeccability of its serene columns, and the Acropolis looks like the final entrenchment of a haughty past, disdainful of the modern effort eating away at its base.

It's not that I exalt the vestiges of a vanished world. It's that I tell myself that our world will leave nothing but refuse.

I am a stranger to the emotional respect of archeologists before antique stones. The stadium led me to reminisce. Illisus made me think less of the Argonauts than of college, of homework, of teachers.

College. The first prison. Academic Procrustean bed, a training for the barracks, a miniature society so ugly that it is the seed of Society.

And anyway, how can you isolate yourself, bring the past back to life, imagine warriors and chariots in these arenas alongside the tramway? How can you dream of paganism in these temples rising from archeological digs where Orthodox tapers have religiously daubed Holy Virgins as their vestals?

¹ Greek bandit

² Muslim judge

³ Raid

I don't accompany the Englishmen who stroll with their Baedeker, swooning at the sight of shapeless blocks for the sole reason that this debris is catalogued in their guidebook. They don't miss a single piece of debris, not a single mutilated drawing. They drag their hands over the mosaics in the baths:

Socrates passed here!

I don't frequent clinical museums: venerable pieces of statues, arm of Venus, leg of Apollo, labeled torso: all of surgical Greece.

As much as I appreciate those primitive works in which the essential is harmonious, which are triumphant in the esthetic of synthesis, to the same extent the race of amateurs digging into piles of illustrious crumbs appears to me grotesque. Amphora handles, brick shards, poor crumbs under glass. . . The sight of a stone floating down a stream in its eternal vagabondage inspires more thoughts in me.

I had arrived in Athens in distress.

I hoped to find a letter at the post office. Nothing. I had to wait several days.

At the doors of restaurants I melancholically contemplated the little suckling pigs grilling in the most joyful poses and satisfied myself with small portions in suburban greasy spoons.

Did I get to eat the finest foods of Greek antiquity? In any case I remembered the philosophers who once slept on the temple porch. One evening I went to the Parthenon and only came down the next morning. I will say in support of the renown of this client-free asylum that for morning soup we enjoyed a unique feast: the awakening of a golden countryside at the feet of Mount Hymette.

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