SABBATICAL REPORT


American writers and scholars living in Paris have long augmented their professional output with travel narratives depicting the life of the American expatriate in Paris. These expatriates have had a connection to the spirit of Paris. I have a spiritual connection to Paris which many have not explored in print. My sabbatical project has been to document the spiritual journey of a pilgrim, a sojourner, and a protestant in a foreign, nominally Roman Catholic and yet increasingly indomitably secular country. This is, I believe, uncharted territory which deserves to be presented to students of all ages who look forward to spending or have already spent examined time in a much-loved other country. I have collated a collection of 30 years’ material which chronicles such a spiritual journey. This work will, I hope, make a unique Christian contribution to a well established canon of expatriate literature.

I have recently revisited the letters I wrote home from Paris against the backdrop of two of Susan Mary Alsop’s books, *To Marietta From Paris: 1945 – 1960* (1975) and *Yankees at the Court: The First Americans in Paris* (1982). The latter is a lively historical account of America’s first diplomats at Versailles between 1775 and 1785 during the early formation of our Republic. The former is a social history of Mrs. Alsop’s own experience as wife of an American attaché to the United States Embassy in Paris.

There is a remarkable literary tradition of American writers living in Paris as expatriates. In the 20th century alone, these authors include Edith Wharton, Ernest
Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, Mary McCarthy, Truman Capote, James Baldwin, Sylvia Plath, among others, who are known as novelists, poets, and essayists. Certainly the insights on the very real cultural differences between French and American manners which are definitively evoked at the beginning of the century in Mrs. Wharton’s *Madame de Treymes* (1907) and *The Reef* (1912) are restated at its end by Diane Johnson in *Le Divorce* (1997) and *Le Mariage* (2000).

And yet, there is, too, a formidable body of literature by these novelists, poets, and essayists writing about their lives lived in Paris which has a compelling intimacy and immediacy. The capacity of the sojourner to be in Paris, without being of Paris, gives these writers the freedom to be, to grow, to create in a place singularly receptive and famously inspiring to the creative spirit. Mrs. Wharton’s magisterial book, written with the revivalist architect Ogden Codman, Jr., *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), described by Henry Hope Reed as “one of the best books on what we call interior decoration,” precedes her reputation as a novelist. From Janet Flanner’s fascinating *Paris Was Yesterday*, her journals spanning 40 years, Gertrude Stein’s *Paris France* (1940), *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* (1956), Ernest Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast* (1964), Truman Capote’s *The White Rose* (1970), James Baldwin’s *No Name in the Street* (1972), to the recent sensations of Adam Gopnik’s *Paris to the Moon*, Thad Carhart’s *The Piano Shop on the Left Bank*, and Diane Johnson’s historical exploration, published just last fall, of the Saint Germain district in which she lives six months of the year, American authors living in Paris write about life in this exceptional place and the ways in which this experience transforms them. Judging from the number and success of these books, many readers have been delighted to share that life vicariously!

My own transformation in Paris began 36 years ago. One of my sisters and I were traveling throughout western Europe. We arrived late one night in Paris, and we were exhausted from living out of suitcases for already two months; we hugged our bags up five flights of rickety stairs to a tiny room whose four walls and ceiling were papered
with enormous bright orange flowers on a hideous brownish-purple ground. I began to weep, and my startled sister asked, “what in the world is the matter with you?” “Oh,” said I, “I didn’t think Paris would be like this!” “For heaven’s sake, go to sleep!” In the morning, the sky was blue, the sun was shining, and the towers of St Sulpice were within arm’s reach outside our window! We stayed in France for nearly two months, one of those months, in Paris itself. Within three years I was back to study at the Sorbonne and prepare a master’s degree in French literature.

Rereading for the first time in 30 years those letters to my parents from that academic year in Paris is striking to me. Except for passing references to a few professors, there is very little in them about what they were saying and what I was reading. There are multiple mentions of what I am doing and seeing on my way to Poetry and on my way home from 18th century, but no discussion of the content of my courses at the Sorbonne. And yet, I had remembered that year as foundational to everything I have thought and taught ever since. I am also struck in the 1973 - 74 letters by how little contact I had with the French during that time. One of the serious talks I have with my students before they go abroad is to help them think through strategies to brace themselves for the loneliness. Surely the experience of being the Other is an important spiritual and intellectual discipline; and yet unmitigated isolation can be destructive. I was extremely shy about my French in those days, so I “allowed” myself Sundays in English — after all, how could I worship thoughtfully in a French church when I was so nervous about my language skills? But, of course, it isn’t just Sunday: one meets the other students at coffee after the service and then starts going to the Student Group on Wednesday evenings; all of a sudden one is speaking English all the time because one has made friends in English. My landlady was French, but my singing teacher was an American colleague and friend of my parents who had a studio in Paris; my friends at Church were British; and the courses designated for foreigners at the Sorbonne were full of foreigners — mostly American!
The dominating themes of the 1973 – 74 letters were how much everything cost, how dramatically the exchange of dollars into francs fluctuated, and how best to navigate the exigencies of French bank accounts for aliens. There is, too, I will admit, rather a dizzying schedule of museum, theatre, concert, and opera going but always accompanied by the price of the ticket! I do acknowledge, of course, that the writer speaks to a particular reader! Here’s an example from March, 1974: I’m writing to my parents about going to the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. The theatre was built by Ganna Walska, so that she would always have a place to sing: when she retired from the operatic stage, she gave the theatre to the République, moved to Santa Barbara, and created her famous garden, Lotusland; she was also a benefactor of my parents’ opera company in Santa Barbara.

Saturday night — all ready for bed but wanted to finish this in time to mail on the way to the gare in the morning. (Corneille’s) *Polyèucte* was very nicely done — and I actually followed the whole thing! We arrived at curtain time, and all the 13FF seats were gone; so we spent 19FF and sat in the *orchestre* of Madame Walska’s theatre! My Dears, never was $3.80 better spent! What luxury! And when you have a “fauteuil” in a French theatre, it really is one! Individual arm chairs upholstered in pink velvet! And we could see the actors’ faces and didn’t have to lean *any* way!! Oh, bliss! The walk home was exquisite — the sun shining brightly, most of the sky a brilliant blue with an enormous mass of black show cloud moving rapidly across half the sky, leaving in its wake pretty pink clouds in the setting sun. It was glorious!

Here’s another one from earlier the same winter:

Tonight I braved the pouring rain to see *Tosca* — well worth it if only for the first act. The singing wasn’t much, but the tenor was good, and the Scarpia a marvelous actor. The Tosca had no sweep vocally or in *caractère*. But the first act was a wow! They had a grill across the stage diagonally so that the
action was in the chapel downstage and the back of the stage was the nave. But it was exactly like any church in town (Paris) you go into — with little chapels — with paintings and statues — lining the nave, and they even had those funny low-chair-high-back russet-seat jobs that are individual prie-dieu for the congregation. Then at the end of the acte, everyone came in for mass — beautifully costumed — singly and in small groups until the nave was filled — but Scarpia and Tosca were alone in the chapel — when the processional started in the nave. And it was a Roman procession: little boys in red robes with white surplices, priests in black robes with white lace-embroidered surplices, monks, the bishop under a canopy — the whole bit! Then the second act opened with Scarpia finishing dinner — and really eating the cheese! — at a table set with white embroidered cloth, silver wine ewer, silver bowl filled with fruit, etc.

You get these French on mise-en-scène, and they simply can’t be beat! The singing is not very exciting, but, oh, the spectacle!

I hear that “You get these French on mise-en-scène” in my own voice and am aware that what startles me today about those early letters is that I was literally — and quite naturally — a sojourner in France, in Paris, embracing all that was admirable as only an enthusiastic listener and spectator can, but not — again, quite naturally — as a participant. Except, of course, for the church which, in the course of that year, became a pivot point for me spiritually, intellectually, and musically. A mission under the aegis of the Intercontinental Church Society, St Michael’s English Church represents the Anglican Communion’s outreach to all corners of the world as well as a home away from home for Christians of all nationalities visiting and living in Paris. Originally dedicated by Queen Victoria as the British Embassy Chapel, St Michael’s had just emerged from a long and grueling battle with the present Queen’s ambassador to France and had been
disestablished because it was “too evangelical.” The rector of St Michael’s had expected the church to function as a mission, serving Paris and its suburbs; the British ambassador to France was insisting on a church which was principally ceremonial and primarily for the use of the Embassy and its personnel.

As an American and a protestant living away from home for the first time, I found myself in an Anglican church itself on foreign soil representing the state religion of Great Britain whose chief diplomatic officer had cut it off from any formal relationship with its Embassy. Yet, there it stood and continues to stand, maintaining its ministry against the rich cultural background of France. St Michael’s worship, teaching, and fellowship became an anchor for me in that first year as a student in Paris (1973 – 74) and has remained a constant in my life ever since both abroad and at home, inasmuch as I am still a prayer partner and a pledging and voting member there. With this spiritual mainstay, all the dimensions of my life in Paris have continued to influence my intellectual and social formation for 30 years: as a student of music, of literature, of horticulture, and as a guest welcomed into many French families and made a friend by members in each of their generations. Throughout my years at Westmont I have shared with my students various experiences in France which have revealed to me so many aspects of the French character, the people’s attitudes, and their world vision, all of which are quite beyond the culture and civilization even an academic tourist encounters. In all the books about Americans living in Paris, I have not yet come across one which has explored a personal spiritual journey in a context of state-established religion, nor the close fellowship of an American evangelical Anglican with French Roman Catholics. I have never forgot meeting the son of my espalier teacher: he was — and is still — a tribunal judge; he and 13 of his colleagues in his judicial district in Normandy spent one week-end each month at a monastery retreat, mentored by a monk who had been trained as a judge, discussing and praying over their cases.
I have collected my travel narrative in book form, with my letters documenting the experience and giving witness to an individual vision of living as a sojourner in a foreign land over a 33-year period. I had originally proposed to arrange my activities by subject: a church home; living quarters; concerts and opera productions; museums and theatre; the Ecole d'Horticulture des Jardins du Luxembourg; the Institut Catholique and the Université de Paris – Sorbonne; friends who become family and families who become friends. During the 14 months between approval of the project and the beginning of the sabbatical leave, multiple student workers transcribed the letters written on aerograms and that wonderful graph paper in French student notebooks into a printed, single-spaced text of more than 350 pages! My wise little sister asked me why I was imposing a structure on the letters; why not reread them as a text and allow them to take their own form. She was so right! The letters recount the unfolding of a life, in which all the threads of what I was referring to as "subjects" were interwoven throughout the decades among the associations I have had over a lifetime in France.

Instead, therefore, I have preserved the chronological survey that the letters document, shaping the context for them and drawing conclusions from them with informal essays. I trust that the manuscript will manifest a witness to our students — dare I hope, even to a book-buying public? — of a sustained relationship with an Other, and an analysis of a life lived as a sojourner in a foreign land. The range of subjects addressed offers multiple opportunities to reflect on spiritual attitudes and practices as a dimension of cultural difference. As distinct from the expatriate literature in which secular writers deal with the social and artistic communities in which they find a home, I have focused on the evangelical community that I found on arrival in Paris and that has undergirded my entire experience there. This work chronicles an archetypical experience of the stranger in a strange land who finds a temporary home and a foretaste of her eternal home.