



Crossings of the Seine

by

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Friends of mine congratulated me on having arrived in Paris when I did, following a spell of inclement weather.

"Now it is like summer again," they said, "the good weather is back."

I did not have the gracelessness to tell them that I was sorry to hear about this development, that I had traveled to far too many sunny places blessed with the type of weather commonly called good, and that I longed to sample in Paris the solitude that comes with rain and with mist, with cold and with damp, and the reflective calm that often accompanies these climatic vicissitudes.

My friends in Paris were not wrong. The skies had indeed cleared and the temperature had soared into the eighties on my first few days in the city when I walked tee-shirted along the Seine beneath the horse chestnut and poplar trees, my eyes screened from the harsh glare of the equinoctial sun behind the tinted lenses of aviator sunglasses.

Yet the good weather was not to last, and one morning I awake to discover Parisian skies that are no longer clear but teeming with clouds. Overnight the mercury has plunged into the low fifties and cold rain has fallen. With a surprising swiftness, autumn has come to Paris, and while others lament the summer's passing, I for one am secretly glad.

On this morning walk by the Seine, I cross the Pont Royal heading toward the Left Bank. Early morning joggers pass me on their morning run. Moving at a slower pace and dressed in business suits are members of the Parisian work force, the probable destination of many the Louvre Metro stop not far away from whose depths I have just emerged.

Looking right, I see the domed black rooftop of the Grand Palais. Looking left, a vista across the Seine toward Pont Neuf; behind me is the Louvre and directly ahead, a view along Rue du Bac. Rain has fallen during my ride on the Metro from my lodgings in Montmartre. The pavement is covered with dark splotches. Overhead, the sky is gathering itself together, bunching up like a fist, preparing to strike again.

At this hour, the stalls of booksellers lining the quayside are locked up, save for one early riser, a black Parisian with a face that for all the world resembles the photograph of the poet e.e. cummings that appears on the jacket of his first "Collected Poems" edition. I met this same fellow yesterday afternoon on my previous stroll along the river when a copy of Henry Miller's "Tropic of Cancer," in French, interested me briefly.

As light rain begins falling I descend stone steps festooned with wet, golden leaves to come down to the bank of the Seine where cobbled paving stones reflect my distorted image. A lone walker moves at a leisurely pace towards the same steps I have just descended. On the opposite bank, a tractor is moving earth, part of intensive ongoing construction and excavation of antiquities in the vicinity of the Louvre. Further on, barges are moored against the quayside, and to my right on the next bridge downriver, the Carrousel, traffic moves with the slow, coiling rhythm of a snake.

Across the river is the south wing of Louvre, its black slate roof the exact color of the lowering sky. I search in vain for any sign of the sunbathers of yesterday -- young men stripped to the waist, working on



Houseboats moored along the quayside. Eiffel Tower in background.

their tans along the riverbank -- but in the morning cold and rain they have all disappeared. My only company is a lone willow that stands guard over lugubrious green waters that lap softly against the ancient stonework like tongues of cats lapping milk. I decide to forgo a walk along the riverbank and again ascend to the street above.

On street level, I cross from the river side of the boulevard to the fashionable shops which line the Quay Voltaire. Here I pause to read the placard on the wall of the Restaurant Voltaire. The placard proclaims this to be the house where Voltaire, one of France's greatest writers and the man who coined the phrase, "If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent Him," died on 30 May 1778, on the eve of a revolution that his fight against *L'Infame* had helped usher in, and which resorted to excesses which he would certainly have deplored.

I cross the street again and am back with the river on my right walking



View of the Alexander Bridge facing upriver.

upstream toward the next major bridge, the Concorde. However, before I can pass Pont Royal, a man in a loud, open-necked shirt asks me to snap his photo. I take the camera from him and press the button. Nothing happens. He apologizes and winds the film.

"This time it will work," he says, smiling his assurance.

Work it does. After I have taken his picture, I ask him to take mine.

"Where shall I send it?" he wants

to know.

I give him my business card. As he studies it I ask him where he hails from. "Kuwait City," he says in his accented English. He has come to Paris to study chemistry at the College de France. I wish him *bon chance* and press on. Later, when I turn, I see his small figure in the distance, camera in hand, snapping photographs of a *bateau mouche* passing below. I have a feeling that in time, a glossy color photograph of me will arrive by international mail; my new friend strikes me as a man of his word.

Now I stand at a crosswalk opposite a stoplight, waiting for a red digital human figure to change to green so that I may cross in safety. Meanwhile I watch traffic flow across the bridge from the Quai des Tuilleries onto the Quai Voltaire: A blue cement truck with a yellow canister lumbers by, followed by a yellow-and-green tour bus. Another bus decorated with a gay pattern of parti-colored triangles soon follows. A Citroen with a brown body, yellow bumpers and a Gallic nose straggles behind the queue as the light changes.

I proceed towards Invalides, passing the former train station that now houses the Musee D'Orsay where the Barnes Show (September 8th to January 2nd) is currently being held. Though it is still early, a line has already formed along the quayside. On my side of the quay are moored the exposition boats called *bateaux mouches*. Storm clouds are gathering ominously to the east as I walk into the weather, heedless of getting caught in a downpour. A light rain soon begins to fall, dimpling the green waters. A barge chugs past, churning up a white, spreading wake. I watch it awhile and then continue on, having turned my jacket collar up.

Now I pass the Bateabus embarkation point. This ferry service, according to a sign, stops at Solferino and shuttles passengers from la Bourdonnais to the Quai De l'Hotel Deville. I proceed along the Quai Anatole France. On the quayside of La Plage De Paris, across from the Institute of Scientific Research, the Joly, a barge, offers an assortment of potted plants for sale. A small, straw-colored mongrel wags its tail as I

approach. At nearby Les Bans Deligny, courses in boating are given and permits may be secured, according to the sign. A bar and restaurant are also on premises.

Muted fall foliage presents itself on Quai Anatole France as I approach the Pont de la Concorde. Here, to my left, on the Quai D'Orsay, is the colonnaded front of the Assemblee Nationale where statues of Sully, Athena, D'Aguesseau and Colbert flank the stairs. More important, perhaps, is a small plaque unobtrusively commemorating the spot where Resistance fighters fell during the liberation of Paris in 1944. To my right, on the other side of the bridge, is the Place de la Concorde, where a transplanted Egyptian obelisk juts against the slate-colored clouds. During the days of the Terror it was an ominous place, for here the guillotine fell with the hunger of a Moloch upon those condemned to death by the Directory, among whose victims was Louis XVI. The antenna-festooned tip of the Eiffel Tower juts skyward to my left, and the black dome roof of the Grand Palais, larger with increased proximity, is again sighted in the near distance.

I have reached Pont Alexandre III. Statues of the goddess Victory bearing gilded swords guard the bridge approaches. A placard proclaims that this bridge was built under the direction of Alfred Picard for the Paris Exposition of 1900. It does not say that the Grand Palais and the Eiffel Tower were also part of this building program, but I know these things already. To my left,



A graffiti-scarred Triton guards the river in this view from the Alexander Bridge.

the gilded lead dome of Invalides gleams dully under parting clouds. To the right, two other domes of the Petit Palais are seen. The bridge also boasts ornate rococo lamp stanchions, sheathed in the verdure of slow oxidation.

Cherubs disport at the base of these lamp posts. One cherub clutches a fish in his hand. A water nymph astride a much larger fish playfully aims a trident at some unseen target. A lion with an open mouth faces the river in the direction of the Louvre. Initials of lovers, telephone numbers, scribbled mementos of past assignations, are etched into the verdigris crust of a balustrade fronting the Seine. From the center of the bridge, I have a good view of the heights of the Chaillot Quarter in the approximate vicinity of the Avenue Montaigne where apartment blocks crowd one another against the skyline. But the rain is worsening and even I must depart for the safety of the nearby Metro or risk a thorough drenching. Like MacArthur, however, I shall return.

I am back again on another day. Winds have come, piling the black



An ochre-walled house basks in the midday sun on the Left Bank of the Seine.

clouds high and sweeping the rain before them like an invisible broom. The temperature has dropped like a body weighted with lead. The Parisians are no longer wearing tee-shirts. They are dressed in sweaters and jackets. They have surrendered to the inevitable. It is an illusion perhaps, but the hues of autumn seem to have deepened in the trees seemingly overnight and the

wet sidewalks are more thickly carpeted with leaves than I remember them from my previous walks.

A German tour group passes me as I look out across the river, leaning on the stone top of the barrier wall. I catch phrases that my mother and grandmother, who are from Vienna, Austria, taught me as a child and with whom I continue to practice the language of their native country.

The German invasion passes me by and I am moving again. Walking past another Bateabus stop I reach the Pont des Arts, a steel overpass dedicated to Vercors, the author of "Le Silence de la Mar." The bridge has a floor of plain wood planking with a row of potted shrubbery in its center. The span rests on large concrete buttresses. A Parisian sanitation man, one of the *Funcionnaires* as they are known, in green cap and overalls, sweeps up coin-shaped yellow leaves with a broom with green nylon bristles instead of straw.

The *Funcionnaires* have menial jobs, but they hold those jobs for life with good pay and benefits. Furthermore, each *Funcionnaire* is his own boss working his own territory. To be a *Funcionnaire*, I reflect, is not such an unhappy thing. As I walk along, I become conscious of subtle connections in the muted color scheme: Gray-green Seine water. Grey-brown building walls. Slate-colored sky. Parchment-colored edges of horse chestnut trees along the quayside.

Suddenly a *bateau mouche* slides by, and some tourists onboard snap pictures of me. I wave to them, temporarily becoming a Frenchman for their benefit. If it makes them happy, why not? I am the new Chevalier, and they are my public.

I am now approaching the Pont Neuf along the Quai de Conti, the bridge that crosses the upstream end of the Ile de la Cite. Moored not far from the bridge is a two-masted barge, the Leopold. A family group prepares to leave the barge for an outing on shore. I ask where they are from and where they are going, first in English, then in halting German, saving my atrocious French as a last resort. I am told, in much better German than my own, that they are from Holland and that they will be staying in Paris for another week before traveling on toward the south of France.

There is ongoing construction on the quayside as I reach the foot of the Pont Neuf. I ascend the stairs and walk a short distance toward the



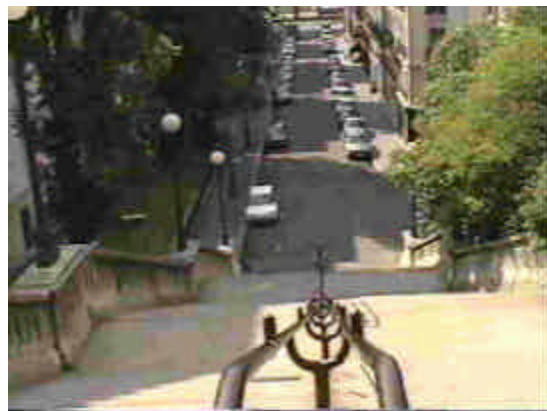
Tree-lined promenades flank a local street near the river.

center. Here I stop and watch as a yellow crane maneuvers large concrete slabs into position on the construction site. The bridge has arched sitting areas where one can look out across the river. The bridge affords many excellent vantage points from which to view Paris, chiefly because it is among the least obscured by nearby structures. On my left, I can see the buildings of the Institut de France while the Sandon and Conforma hotels are prominently visible on my right.

Crossing the bridge, I pass the bronze statue of Henri IV that occupies its center, said to contain a copy of Voltaire's epic poem "La Henriade" and a statue of Napoleon. Beyond, boats are moored. These belong to the Pont Neuf tour service which runs regular Seine tours from September to May and which offers evening as well as day excursions. Now I am on the other side of Cite island and crossing Pont Neuf toward the Right Bank of the Seine. Up ahead, a *Funcionnaire* hoses down the large rectangular paving blocks with which the bridge is paved. The small green truck to which the spray nozzle is attached by a short, flexible hose seems to contain a great deal of water. More amazing still is that somehow the *Funcionnaire* doesn't get a drop on passersby.

Now, thanks to his efforts, as the sun reluctantly emerges from behind a bank of clouds, a section of bridge briefly glistens, reflecting the images of pedestrians and the lights of passing vehicles as seen through the eye of a Cezanne or Monet. From the Metro station on the opposite side of Pont Neuf, looking west, the peaked conical roofs of the Conciergerie present themselves, while to the east, the black dome of the Institut de France challenges the steelwork pinnacle of the Eiffel Tower for supremacy of the Parisian skyline.

No longer on the Ile de la Cite, but still walking downriver from Pont Neuf on the Right Bank, I pass the smart shops on the Quai de la



View down a step street facing the Debilly bridge.

Megisserie. Here, caged white doves in the Oisellene du Pont Neuf perch above a bed of sawdust, for sale for under fifty francs. Gerbils, rabbits and pigeons are also available. Nearby, in a glass tank, small green turtles with pulsing throats climb across one another's backs. For one hundred sixty francs, one can purchase a rooster or hen; a sign on the shop promises a large selection of excellent egg layers. A cock crows as I pass. Is he saying, "Take me away from all of this?" For those who do not wish to



A boat approaches the steel-arch Debilly Footbridge, completed in 1900.

purchase live animals, the shop also sells a selection of Dumbo and Mickey Mouse dolls.

The area is a Parisian flower district as well as a lure for pet fanciers. Plants are offered for sale in abundance, and merchants have trucked their leafy wares out into the street for the inspection of passersby and to benefit from the fresh air and waning sunlight. In one store, I ask about the cactus plants I see for sale. I am told that the cactus, like the

tulips, come from huge, highly automated plant factories in Holland, not the deserts of Arizona or New Mexico as one from the U.S. might expect. Despite this, they look every bit as authentic as succulents reared in the United States.

Soon I come to Pont Au Change. I cross over toward La Conciergerie and St. Chapelle. A newsstand on the Ile displays French fashion magazines, "Playboy" and other light reading fare. Crisis in Moscow? Train wreck in Alabama? More trouble with Iraq? Here, fashion news reigns supreme; let CNN be the bearer of global bad tidings. Ahead, the Conciergerie with its high cone-shaped towers, resembles an illustration in a children's book, complete but for gaudy banners fluttering in the breeze. On the wide square opposite the gilded gate of the Palais de Justice I pause above a Metro ventilation grating to look up at the spire of St. Chapelle, the architectural precursor of another of the Ile's notable structures, Notre Dame. More plants are for sale here in stalls along the Rue de Lutece opposite Place Louis Lepine which abuts the Police

Prefecture and is named after a famous Parisian police superintendent. We, alas, only have Colombo.

For a little while, I sit and sip Campari at a bistro opposite the Palace of Justice, with tourists posing for photos in front of its gate and gendarmes ushering official-looking vehicles in and out of its drive. Growing weary of sitting, again experiencing the restlessness which has seized hold of me in Paris, I rise and proceed on my way. Before long I have passed through the Parc Lutece. I am now on Pont St. Michel, a small bridge spanning a narrow part of the Ile. Currents eddy around the two egg-shaped stone buttresses anchored in the bottom of the Seine. A flatbed truck passes by, carrying red crates of Coca Cola, a sight more ubiquitous than the French beret these days, it seems.

On a whim I decide to walk down the stone steps to the riverbank and make my way to the bridge ahead. At the foot of the stairs I look back and see that the bridge bears wreathed "Ns" for Napoleon along its side. Down this close to the water, I can smell the rich briny odors of the river and hear the slap of the water against the smooth stone embankments. The street noise has receded from above, soaked up by the tons of dressed stone blocks which surround me.



The Seine, looking downriver toward the next bridge to cross.

I pause awhile and relish the stillness, my only companions the white river terns that glide above the waters and perch on the lichen-encrusted retaining wall.

Having reached the next bridge, Petit Pont, I walk up the stairs to hear the street sounds suddenly return with the bells of Notre Dame chiming the noon hour. I leave the Seine temporarily and walk through the park abutting Notre Dame, inspecting the stone gargoyles and ornate filigree steeple. It is now early afternoon.

Tourists throng the street, and I can now hear my native Americanese spoken with increasing frequency; the doughty Teutons of morning have been displaced by the late-rising Anglo-Saxons.

Again I choose to descend below the hubbub, seeking solace at the level of the Seine, calm against her bosom (after all, the name of the river

is remarkably similar to the French word for breast). I am rewarded by the sudden appearance of a big barge carrying a mound of gravel that all of a sudden comes chugging past me. Only inches away, big as life and exemplifying the word "barge" with its size and the sounds it makes, it is churning up a frothing white wake. Graffiti on the walls tells the tale of lovers rivaling those storied exploits of the Montagues and Capulets. More graffiti is dedicated to the memory of Jim Morrison, who like Poe, is an American *bete noir* whom the French have claimed in death as their own. Here by the water's edge I sit and rest awhile before again returning to street level, walking up stairs leading to Pont au Double, a bridge sheathed with copper which has been turned green by time.

Portrait artists have set up shop here, working the crowds that have come to see the Ile and to view Notre Dame. The grounds of the church are pleasant, and a tree garden flanks the building's rear. I walk to the final Ile bridge called the Pont de l'Archeveche. Small and narrow, it has plain iron railings painted a dull green that are chipped by weathering. I do not cross this homely little bridge, but instead double back into the park at the downstream tip of the island, one whose walls bear a dedication to the French martyrs of 1945. I descend the stairs into the Deportation Memorial. Though it had not been my destination, I had known of it before, yet I had never visited it and I had utterly forgotten its existence until just now. The sight of the memorial is completely unexpected and perhaps for this reason, intensely moving.

The memorial is empty except for a man in a plum-colored nylon windbreaker who was already walking down as I arrived. We don't speak, nor do we exchange glances, but as I linger I sense that he is hesitant to leave, wondering perhaps whether the crewcut man in black leather jacket, collar turned up against the wind, is a potential vandal in a Europe where fascism has again reared its ugly head. He does not know, he cannot



Looking up a step street leading from the Debilly Footbridge to Avenue President Wilson.

know, that my father was a prisoner at some of the concentration camps whose names are etched in the memorial's white stone walls. After some moments, he leaves and I am alone, staring through iron bars at an eternal pinpoint of light that glows at the end of a corridor flanked by panels lined with what appear to be pebbles; perhaps six million of them, perhaps not.

A barge laden with gravel passes the tip of the island as I emerge, with a second barge following close behind. I wonder for a moment how many pebbles lie in those two great heaps within the barges, though I do not pursue this potential synchronicity nor dwell on its disquieting associations. Instead I wander across to Pont St. Louis and cross over onto the Ile Saint Louis, the smaller of the two main Seine islands.

I realize now that I have been walking for several hours since originally setting out. Before I decide whether to return to my short-stay apartment or to press on to yet another bridge and ramble into yet another quarter of Paris, strains of music catch my attention. A Gypsy organ grinder is playing a sprightly air and I linger awhile to watch and to listen. Beside him, curled up in a brown wicker basket, asleep on a blue cushion, is a small black dog.

On impulse I reach into my pocket, take out a five Franc piece and toss the coin into the organ grinder's cup. He thanks me as I turn to walk across yet another bridge, to begin yet another crossing of the Seine.