

## Lessons Served In A Paris Café

Renate Stendhal

I used to wonder, during the many years I spent in Paris, why I could not sit at my desk and gather my thoughts. There was nothing wrong with my desk. My window looked out on the Parisian sky, grey slate roofs and terra cotta chimney pots. A desk with a view. But whenever I started writing, a restlessness would force me down into the streets to my café. Not any café, I have to say. My café was the last one in a semi-circle of cafés around the Luxembourg Gardens, its big windows an arm's length away from the huge old sycamores and chestnut trees of the garden. *Le tout Paris* – everybody, would come strolling through the high, black cast-iron gates of the garden that is really a parc, to settle in the café – mothers and kids, tourists, groups of well made-up old ladies, students from the nearby Sorbonne, publishers from their headquarters at St. Germain,

Whenever I return to Paris I am still drawn to the same café. I choose a table right behind the windows that are open on hot days, and feel at the crossroads between nature and culture. France has always prided itself on being the “country of the center,” where the extremes of life are balanced by style, elegance, and *raffiné* food. Where men have permission to be feminine, and women to be masculine. Where a woman of a certain age is considered forever attractive to anyone much younger. “Paris France,” as Gertrude Stein wrote, “is peaceful and exciting.”

I come from a northern German background. The years of my coming of age were spent in Hamburg, a city of cold wind and heavy skies. The landscape and climate of the north seem to be imbedded in the slow and ponderous temperament of the people – in the archetypal “Gründlichkeit” of the Germans, their necessity of going into deep, introverted mulling over things before a pronouncement can be made. In my little friendship circle of intellectuals and

artists, the women were quiet and the men made pronouncements. They brought forth slowly and thoroughly thought-out arguments, delivered with many pauses to recheck their thinking and possibly allow a new thought to carry on. We used to meet and talk in cafés, acutely aware of the great café culture of the Weimar Republic with Berlin, Vienna, Prague, the Jewish-intellectual capitals of mythic proportion. We were nostalgic about the “Romanisches Café” in Berlin during the Roaring Twenties, where typewriters used to stand on the tables. We felt that all culture had been lost with the Nazi disaster and the termination of the Jews, that all we had left was an inner exile in an increasingly fat, self-satisfied, bourgeois Germany. We sought out the small comfort of a café in distinct Vienna style – Café Oertel in downtown Hamburg, a café with a bakery at street level, and several subdued salons in plush, discreetly striped upholstery and heavy curtains on the first floor. An even better place to vent our frustrated rage over our country and its silence about the past were the waiting rooms of the big Hamburg train stations, with their deep plastic banquettes, their poor food and their night and day traffic. The coming and going of people, the noise of loudspeaker announcements and trains whistling gave us the temporary illusion of being in transit, anonymous travelers on our way somewhere else.

I was the only one of our circle who sought out and found what we were all dreaming of: the chosen exile. After my Hamburg university years I went to Paris to study dance, and a few years later I settled in Paris for good. I became a founding member of an underground theater group inspired by Czechoslovakian theater guru Jerzy Grotowski and by the Living Theater. Now I was in a group of extroverts, high-strung, passionate women and a few men who did everything fast: think, talk, move, create, emote and fall apart. I was in love with one of the women, and I was in love with all of them for their radical difference from me. I was introverted and tongue-tied and overly eager to please while they were constantly spontaneous, loud, brash, and always pleased to be the way they were.

I knew about the French cultural and historical ambivalence toward Germans, the mutual attraction and suspicion resulting from very different cultural roots and many wars. I was not yet aware of French people's own suppressed guilt over their collaboration with the "German beast" under the Vichy régime. I felt passionate about not being recognized as a German. As I was carrying the guilt for the strained Franco-German relations in my bones, I was mortified whenever I was found out. My ambition was to be, if not someone else, at least the one exception from the rule: The good German who did not march in boots and bark orders. I was the blond German girl who had studied French at school and Yiddish at the university, whose manners had to be impeccably refined, whose voice had to be soft and subdued, and whose French was not allowed to have a German accent.

At the same time, I longed to be as free and uninhibited in my speech, as limber and spontaneous in my movements, as unselfconscious and forthcoming in my emotions as was my group of theater eccentrics. None of them knew how deeply I was challenged in my stiff teutonic perfectionism, throwing myself into theater improvisations that demanded everything but my measured self-control as a classical dancer. I valued the challenge, and I managed to adapt, to imitate my companions, to pretend that I was one of them. But secretly I was troubled by their "hysterics," as I would call it, and their unbridled narcissism that made me cringe. I resented their lack of boundaries, dignity, and self-control.

Of course, the make-up of my theater group was extreme. Two members were French-Algerians, "Pieds noirs", my lover was part Vietnamese, one was Italian, another Brazilian. They represented the south to me, the southern edge of France, the untamed, chaotic mediterranean temperament. With time, I recognized my own desire for wanting to be seen, to show myself, to even show off and develop what today would be called a "healthy narcissism". If I ever wanted to leave behind the heavy soil of my homeland, I needed to engage with the extreme opposite

of myself in order to jump-start my transformation. I wanted the best of both worlds, the north and the south. And Paris, France was the place that held the promise of balance I was drawn to: the “country of the center,” where I would feel at home.

In the meantime, I would take my inner turmoil to a café and write the diary – the “diarrhea” – of my laments. Here at least I had a space where I was accepted and protected in my momentary withdrawal from all social interaction. The café, particularly the French café, has always been the place where strangers, exiles, expatriates, artists, outsiders could feel welcome – whereas the French are notorious for not letting outsiders in, for never inviting strangers home. I don’t know another culture whose artists have paid the same amount of colorful homages to this social-cultural institution. The café, as long as it was large and anonymous enough, felt to me like a cocoon around my cultural isolation and self-doubts. The image of myself at a café table, alone with a cup of coffee, a cigarette and a notebook, held my dream of being a writer in the image of Simone de Beauvoir and Sartre who did their writing, thinking and debating in a Parisian café.

When the Women’s Movement started in 1972, I met a number of cultivated, brilliant Parisian women who embodied what I wanted to be. They were bold thinkers, easy and elegant talkers, they were ambitious like men and convinced to the core that they were (at the very least) men’s equals. Through observing and befriending them I understood another level of my attraction to Paris. I recognized that the French-Parisian culture was like a dance in which the perfectly elegant form is a message per se, as important as (if not more important than) the content or depth. The fast play with intellectual forms and the verbal virtuosity cultivated by the French appealed to me as a light-heartedness that I linked to the south, to plenty of sun, to boisterous street cafés, to a *joie de vivre* I had never known. I embraced it as a spirit of

playfulness that was linked to another high value I had never experienced: self-humour.

My friendships with these Parisians surprised me with an unexpected sense of balance. The many meetings, intense café hours and – even – invitations home taught me that my otherness, my teutonic thoroughness, my Germanic culture and depth were highly considered by them. I, too, had something to give, something to show for, something that was mine by nature and culture, something that was desired. Little by little, absorbing more playfulness, elegance, humour, the osmosis of friendship allowed me to gain more balance within myself.

Did I ever feel truly at home in Paris? I would say I felt most at home in my Paris café. The café that best embodied the balance of opposites: the lively public space and the privacy provided by high-backed banquettes. Tables at the window flooded with light, and dark cosy back corners for moody, windy days. Upholstered chairs for the long café hours of a writer in the midst of the busy commotion of city life. Intellectual pursuits and food served around the clock: from the hard-boiled eggs for a breakfast that Parisians like to take standing at the counter, through raw vegetable salads (crudités) and Croque Monsieurs to nightcaps of champagne or hot chocolate with cognac. A tradition of high-quality service combined with a low-key, familial style that speaks to every class of guests and promptly attracts artists and intellectuals in particular. Positioned in the center of a city, with rows of tables on the side-walk, I relish the openness of the café to the street and the world that safeguards my own withdrawal into my inner world.

When I go back to Paris, I don't take my computer along. I take my notebook. The first thing I do upon arrival is to head to my old café, worried that anything might have changed. Every time, I breathe a sigh of relief. Here I am again, just like in my younger years when I could not think at my desk. But now I know what used to draw me, and still draws me to this café.

I notice how the caravan of people strolling outside among the lazy greenery of the Luxemburg Gardens balances the high-strung verbal pace and motion of the café, where waiters in black taylor-made vests and long white aprons flit about like swallows. They still serve the coffee in white porcelain pitchers, a small one for the espresso, a bigger one for the steamed milk, so that everyone can have the perfect individual balance of tastes in their cup. I watch the curls of cigarette smoke rise from every table. My thoughts begin to stretch.

Understanding the language and not understanding it quite like my mother tongue, I can be engaged or disengaged, or both. I am part of the café and I am apart. It is easy to be alone when there is a flurry of ideas, talk, excitement, flirtation, debate all around me. I relax. I get my notebook out, I reach for my pen. I sense the connection to the other expatriate writers, artists and thinkers before me, Janet Flanner or Djuna Barnes or Meret Oppenheim, who had their Pernod and their best ideas at a table in a Paris café.

I can't be lonely here, the way I feel at my desk. I can banter with the waiter, join the conversation at the next table, begin a dialogue of glances with some woman I am curious about. It's in this very café that I met my life companion, years ago, because this American in Paris had also picked Le Rostand as her writing café whenever she passed through Paris.

I feel the centuries of French café culture – a tradition, an atmosphere, a way of life that has been honed and refined to take care of me – body and mind. In my Paris café I have entered a cultural space. I am in the middle of a thought or just drifting. A noise, a word, a sudden movement enters my mind and subtly shakes it. As in a kaleidoskope another picture appears. An idea. I start writing.

Bibliography: see next page

Gertrude Stein, Paris France

Literary Cafés of Paris

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