

In Paris -- Miniskirts of the Mind

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AROUND the display tables of university bookstores, "the latest fashion from Paris" does not refer to the length of skirts. It refers to a series of startling ideas and images out of the French mind. In paraphrase: That truth is castrating and humanism oppressive. That the ego is infinitely dissolvable. That a person is made up of syllables and life is really a run-on sentence that only death can bring to an end. That nihilism is the only defensible philosophy for modern times. That May 1968 says it all.

So beware. Don't be misled by that academic vernacular spoken on college campuses. When some stylish student reproves "Oh, that went out a year ago," it is not Pierre Cardin she has on her mind. What she has on her mind is some form of French-spoken consciousness. An author: Sartre, Lévi-

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Strauss, Piaget, Barthes, Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, Kristeva. A text : "Being and Nothingness," "The Order of Things," "Of Grammatology." A movement: existentialism, structuralism, deconstructionism. A Gaulish mantra: semiology, post-modern feminism, intertextuality, the arbitrariness of the sign. A meditation: on negation, on impiety, on the void.

Why does the "latest fashion from Paris" have such sex appeal for British and American scholars
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and their students? Cynics think it is because they are so difficult to read. It is easy to sympathize with that view. I remember spending nearly a year, during graduate school days, returning again and again to a single page, the first page, of an impenetrable essay by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan.

Run-on sentences, such as "A written piece is in fact distinguished by a prevalence of the 'text' in the sense which that factor of speech will be seen to take on in this essay, a factor which makes possible the kind of tightening up that I like in order to leave the reader no other way out than the way in, which I prefer to be difficult," are not only difficult. One wants to bring them, and it, and him, to an end.

I probably should not have obsessed so much on Lacan's writings that academic year. It was 1968 and there were other things to do.

Yet a footnote to the essay informed the reader that Lacan had originally presented his syllables and run-on sentences as a lecture, in the Descartes Amphitheater of the Sorbonne. I just couldn't shake the image of René Descartes, dressed in 17th-century habit, sitting there in the audience with his hands over his ears, compulsively chanting to himself "Cogito, ergo sum: cogito, ergo sum."

By the time I finally gave up on Lacan, convinced he was an impostor, he was out of style. I had missed the next wave.

I then took to reading French texts in a great hurry, which is the way I began to suspect they were written.

I was initially encouraged in that view by a story circulating around Cambridge, Mass., in the late 1960's about a talk at Clark University, given by the French-speaking psychologist and structuralist Jean Piaget. During the question-and-answer period it appeared to members of his audience that Piaget was furiously taking notes. It turned out he was writing a book.

When I next learned that Jean-Paul Sartre deliberately wrote his nonfiction while on "speed," I became a vocal advocate of the fast read. It helped to read "the latest fashion from Paris" in a hurry. One could spend more time around the display table in the university bookstore, watching for the next wave.

Yet ultimately it turned out to be a mistake. The cynics were wrong. There was a *raison d'être* for the French mind, and fashion had little to do with it.

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It was Emile Durkheim who enlightened me. Durkheim was one of the founding fathers of 20th-century anthropology and sociology. More important, he was French.

In December of 1913 Durkheim actually stood up in front of an audience in Paris to deliver a series of lectures defending French national culture against the assaults of William James, John Dewey and the Pragmatists.

The Pragmatists argued that actions speak louder than words. If James and Dewey are right, Durkheim forewarned, then "the whole French mind would have to be transformed."

I like to think that Durkheim delivered his lectures in the Descartes Amphitheater of the Sorbonne. The French mind was carefully inspected, and then certified: unconditionally rational. "Reason" was appointed the supreme judge of life. I feel confident Descartes was listening.

Descartes is often held responsible, by British and American common sense, for the corrosive powers of rational doubt. The accusation is not fair. Turning common sense into nonsense has always been a very French thing to do.

Descartes was an introspective man who probed his meditations for things he could be absolutely, positively, sure of. He doubted his way to the view that even the things we see for ourselves — the visual perception of your hand, or of this essay — cannot be trusted. For the things we think we see for ourselves just might be illusory images, movies systematically projected onto our retinas by some very powerful demonic cinematographer. Woody Allen, for example.

I have sometimes wondered whether Descartes was for real, or whether he just might have been a monk from Tibet, or an ancient Pythagorean, or per-

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haps Woody Allen, disguised as a French philosopher.

In any case, the accusation is unfair because long before Descartes's meditations, common sense had lost its grip on the French mind. Between 1337 and 1453, during the Hundred Years War, all Anglo-Saxon influences were driven out of France. Joan of Arc had transcendental visions. Revelation held sway.

And much earlier, in the seventh century, common sense had succumbed, miraculously, to the piety of St. Denis. St. Denis, you may remember from legend, refused to stop preaching the Gospel, despite some rather serious intimidation from civil authorities.

So deep was St. Denis's faith in God that after he had been "scourged, imprisoned, racked, thrown to wild beasts, burnt at the stake and ultimately beheaded," he picked up his decapitated head, placed it under his arm and, led by an angel, walked from Montmartre to what was to become the Abbey of St. Denis. It seems likely that his route took him past some literary cafes.

It was 10 centuries later that Descartes hung his own head on logic. He thought he had found the really real in "cogito, ergo sum," "I think, therefore I am." He apparently did not anticipate Lacan: I think, therefore I am the language I speak, which is a run-on sentence.

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It was 1966 when I made my first pilgrimage to the Left Bank of Paris. It wasn't my head I had in my hand. It was "Europe on Five Dollars a Day."

I stayed in a pension on the Rue des Ecoles. Even "School Street" seems to have sex appeal when spoken in French.

*There is a doubtful history
of France, a tea sippers'
chronicle of anarchy, chaos
and disrupted schedules.*

In 1966, structuralism was in.

The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss was dining out, studying the meaning of food, and asking some very serious questions: why do cannibals roast their enemies yet boil their kinsmen? His book "La Pensée Sauvage," which could be translated as either "The Savage Mind" or "The Wild Pansy," was the latest fashion in Paris.

Wild pansies and cannibal cuisine, and almost everything else, kept reminding Mr. Lévi-Strauss of linguistics. The linguist and "semiologist" Ferdinand de Saussure had taught him that life is language, and the world is made of words.

By the time I reached Paris, structuralism was succeeding, as a parody of humanism. The structuralists gave you a surreal account of life, as if it had been experienced from outer space. They transported you just far enough away from things so that wherever you looked everything seemed the same, abstract and linguistic. Structuralism was humanism, from a dehumanizing distance. Existentialism, and anything else near at hand, or personal, was out.

Mr. Lévi-Strauss had a certain sex appeal. He was ambiguous, ironical and witty. He was difficult to read. He was absurd. He thought like Salvador Dali, yet dressed up like he was on his way to synagogue. He was French.

I spent much of my time on the Left Bank, wandering aimlessly through bookstores and cafes, confident that I would chance upon Jean-Paul Sartre and Claude Lévi-Strauss arguing.

Being American, I still expected the French to be earnest intellectuals, who busied themselves, over coffee or wine, trying to bring to a conclusive end the important debates of the day: Was modern culture lost in a hall of mirrors? Was the modern individual fundamentally cut off from others and adrift in a void? Was there really a deeper meaning and underlying unity to life, a mathematical or linguistic foundation for it all?

Only later did I learn the parables of Gaul. That reality is incomplete, if viewed from any one point of view; and it is incoherent, if viewed from all points of view at once. That life is a never-ending quest to overcome partial views. That anything important enough to argue about is meant to go in and out of style.

The French mind, to my delight, had found a way to stay on School Street forever.

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Unlike their British critics, the French are too incredulous, playful and unsettling to care much for the distinction between radical doubt and reasonable doubt. The English, of course, have had their share of skeptics. But it is a different beast.

If you are an English skeptic you sit in a leather chair in your study and reason yourself into the belief that time is unreal. Then you punctually go off to tea. You keep your doubts to yourself, or you cast them on the French.

The English believe that when reason turns radical its ultimate act is to annihilate itself. They think it is impossible to drink tea and hold your head in your hand at the same time. And just forget about the angel. There is a doubtful history of France, a tea sippers' chronicle of anarchy, chaos and disrupted schedules.

It is one thing, so the argument goes, to use reason to deflate religious dogma, revealed truth, Holy Scripture and the power of clergy and aristocracy. That is the France of Voltaire, Diderot and the "Encyclopédie." Profaning the sacred. Toppling kings. Hooray!

It is quite another thing to use reason to dismantle the authority of science, logic, common sense, and all the other powers of the bourgeoisie, and to leave nothing, run-on sentences and the latest fashion from Paris in their place. That is the France of Robespierre, the Law of Suspects and the Reign of Terror.

Some tea sippers argue that it is not the French language, or even the French kiss, but the French guillotine that is the ultimate symbol of the French mind. Titillated by Parisian extravagance, and fascinated by what they fear, the critics seem to hope for the worst. And the French just love to give them what they want, as long as it helps them miss the point.

In 1889, for example, as if to celebrate the 100-year

anniversary of the Revolution, Paul Gauguin, the artist who is the post-modern icon for almost everything French, decapitated himself.

He did it esthetically, by means of a ceramic self-portrait entitled "Jug in the Form of a Head," which was recently on display for rabid crowds at a Gauguin exhibit in the United States.

On the front of the jug is sculptured Gauguin's face. It is bloody. It is Christlike.

The jug, of course, has a drinking hole. It is the severed top of Gauguin's head. Is this Pragmatism profaned?

No. Gauguin's "Jug in the Form of a Head" is an act of liberation, profoundly reminiscent of that most transcendental moment at Hindu funerals, when the son strikes open the cremated head of his father. Why does the son do it? So as to let his father's soul go free.

While it may come in handy to have pious children, Gauguin preferred to do things on his own. In a world made of words and images, he found a way to set himself free, in style.

He is quoted at the threshold to his exhibit, "There is no such thing as exaggerated art"; "There is salvation only in extremes."

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I have been told by neurologists that the French mind has two cerebral hemispheres, traversed by the fibers of the corpus callosum. That is not the whole story. Being French, it also has two banks, the right and the left, connected by a bridge of irony.

Each side negates what the other creates, while gamboling across the other's territory.

First, the right bank of the French mind alleges, trying hard not to laugh, that life is methodical and logical and administrative. It sends us in search of deep rational meanings — even where none are to be found. A grammatical analysis of appetizers, or of roasted enemies and boiled kin. An appreciation of the meaning of myths, reduced to a mathematical equation.

The left bank smiles. It heckles. It parodies. It saunters, with cunning, down pathways of impiety.

A literary analysis of a comic strip.

A psychoanalysis conducted in the therapist's bathroom, while he shaves.

The Easter bunny resurrected out of Jesus' grave.

Loyalty and valor as Antichrists. Privilege as a sin. Nature, reference and truth as accusations. Science and humanism as despots.

Their undoing as an act of heroism, which in turn must be undone, which in turn must be undone and undone again. . . .

The left bank meanders, to the left. It subverts. It decomposes. It reframes. It scorns attachments. It invites discomfort with familiar, and established, things.

It listens to unquestionable answers about "traditional values" and retorts with unanswerable questions: "Which tradition of values?" It seeks the alien in Tahiti and celebrates it, but refuses to understand it or speak its language. It won't be pinned down by knowledge. It stays on the move.

That is how the French walk and hold their heads in their hands at the same time. They do it with mirrors: and then, captivated by their magic and pleased with their deceptions, they disappear into a puff of smoke that isn't really there.

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Julia Kristeva (linguist, literary critic, psychoanalyst and "post-modern feminist" — the combination is the latest fashion from Paris) has remarked, somewhat in the spirit of Gauguin, that "a person of the 20th century can exist honestly only as a foreigner."

Ms. Kristeva seems to be trapped in a time warp. Seeking salvation by detaching yourself from everything is nothing new. Post-modernism is a premodern state of mind.

When I did not find Sartre and Claude Lévi-Strauss arguing in the Left Bank cafes, I took a time machine to a remote district in India to do anthropology, and — don't laugh too hard — to get some answers.

In the East, where Descartes would have felt at

home, they know how to give style and character to their doctrines. They honor those who radically doubt the reality of established things. They feed them, and thereby gain religious merit. And then they send them off to a forest or a monastery or a cave to be free thinkers for a while. They don't have cafes or university bookstores.

In the spring of 1968, while students sat-in instead of hanging around in the bookstore, mendicants of the Mahima Dharma order were on the loose in India. Individualized points in random motion, ego-alienated, the virtuosi of the cult wander naked through the paddy lands in search of nothingness, the formless, the void. They won't go into any Hindu temple because they know there is nothing there. They stay on the move, radically bound by a list of strictures: don't spend more than one night at any one place, avoid contact with relatives, never speak or think of any event that has already occurred.

The first time I saw a Mahima Dharma ascetic doing his thing, it seemed like the "latest fashion from Paris," displayed out on the street. A parody on being and nothingness dramatized in daily routine. Everyone else went on farming, praying and performing their sacraments. I thought of Jacques Lacan.

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I was wrong about Lacan. French students are more devout than their professors. The students in

*For this fully clothed
Mahima Dharma on the
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Lacan's seminar in 1954-55 recorded, and took possession of, his words. Their transcripts, in two volumes, have recently been published in English. The miniskirt has returned.

I had missed the point of Lacan's disjointed syllables and run-on sentences, with no subject and no topic. They are worth reading, slowly.

Lacan had been giving style to his doctrines all along. For this fully clothed Mahima Dharma, on the loose on the Left Bank of Paris, "nothing" was the only thing left to say, and a breath of air the only thing to be.

It just so happens that 1954 was the year I tried to save my self by playing hooky from the methodical and logical and suffocating regime of fourth grade at Public School 86 in the Bronx. I nearly dropped out that year. I hadn't yet tuned in. I didn't know how to breathe.

I would much rather have been in Paris, in those seminars at the Société Française de Psychoanalyse. On Nov. 30, 1954, Mr. Lévi-Strauss lectured. On Jan. 18, 1955, it was Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Lacan led the discussion, and the more he exposed the less there was to see. "The subject who believes in himself, who believes that he is himself" is "a common enough madness, which isn't complete madness, because it belongs to the order of belief."

That is what I tried to tell them at P. S. 86. Lacan would have understood. The French understand. Obscurity, ambiguity, elusiveness, disappearance and every one of the other ways of playing hooky have a certain dignity, as heroic acts of resistance to the terrors of an all too efficient regime.

While for the faithless it is difficult to believe that the post-modern French mind can reproduce the miracle of St. Denis, around those marvelous display tables at university bookstores the legend still grows that the latest fashion from Paris will set you free.