

Robert Wexelblatt

PETITE SUITE LITTERAIRE

1. *Un Après-Midi à Paris - Trio Existentiel*

One day in September, a week after the bourgeoisie had returned from their August in the country, J.P. and Simone sat at their usual table outside the Café de Flore. He had ordered an anisette. “It makes a change,” he said. Simone chose a pastis. Between the two there was but one mood; that is, both were bored. To Simone, it was simply a case of seasonal ennui. If he had more energy, J.P. might have attributed his condition to being condemned to freedom, though in reality it was mostly a matter of a workaholic having time on his hands. His mind reverted to a slight he had received that morning from the editor of an excessively respected journal. He had told the story to Simone, hoping for sympathy. “Bertrand must think I look too intelligent to keep my word.” But Simone was uninterested in the matter of the editor; she was thinking of a certain purple dress she had seen in a shop window. “Buying,” she mused a little guiltily, “is a profound pleasure.” Of course, she didn’t say this out loud. What she did say was, “Look. Isn’t that Albert?”

It was indeed Albert, who was hurriedly coming down the Boulevard Saint-Germain looking like a man with a migraine. On one side of him was a man Simone felt certain must be a Pied-Noir; he was thin and sported a Franco-Hitlerian mustache—not Franco as in *French* but as in *Francisco*. On the other side

of Albert strode a young fellow J.P. recognized as an Algerian journalist, not the sort to pull his punches. More than a decade later, J.P. would invite the perceptive Arab to contribute to the pages of *Libération*.

The Pied Noir was yelling in Albert's right ear, the Algerian in the left one.

"Poor Albert. As a rule, he looks like Bogart, but today he resembles Superman in the issue where he's unable to turn off his super-hearing and the villains torment him by bashing trashcans near his head." Simone knew about everything, not just American movies but even their comic books.

Catching sight of the bored couple, Albert broke away from his tormentors and dropped into the spare chair at their little round table.

"Ouf!" he groaned.

"Egg?" asked Simone.

J.P. corrected her. "Not *oeuf*, ma chère. *Ouf*."

The waiter, who was even more bored than J.P. and Simone, meandered over and stood by Albert as if, having committed some terrible faux pas in his adolescence, he was still being punished for it.

"Two aspirin and a Pernod."

The waiter withdrew.

Meanwhile, the Pied Noir and the Algerian journalist came to blows. The fight was not edifying, nor did it last long enough to be entertaining. As the Pied Noir was the first to hit the sidewalk, Simone pronounced the Algerian the winner, as she said "more or less." The two combatants straightened their clothes. The Pied Noir also smoothed his hair, a gesture the curly-headed Algerian could omit. Dignity restored, they stalked off in opposite directions.

"That's what you get," said J.P. to Albert.

"For what?"

"For not choosing, for not properly committing. Without engagement, what can you expect but to be pulled this way and that? Oh, you shake things up; I'll give you that. But only those who aren't rowing have time to rock the boat."

"What did you see in the monster Stalin?" Albert retorted.

Simone answered for J.P. "Someone to admire at a safe distance."

J.P. answered for himself. "Stalin stood up for the people, the common people, for the collective interest."

"One leader, one people? What's that signify but one master and millions of slaves? The welfare of the people has always been the tyrant's alibi."

"Speaking of alibis," said Simone, "what's Freud's?"

"Freud? Freud showed the way. Unfortunately, it was the wrong way. What we need is a truly existential psychoanalysis," said J.P.

Having turned the conversation in a more satisfactory direction, Simone went on at length. "The man has the prurient curiosity of an adolescent. Freud claims to want to understand women but the best he can come up with is penis envy. He doesn't begin to grasp what the erotic is for a female, that sexual pleasure in women is a magic spell, that it demands abandonment." She then called Freud a rude name.

Albert said that Freud reminded him of a certain painter. "I told him that it wasn't his paintings I admire but his painting."

The Pied Noir and the Algerian returned to resume their argument.

"You're a man of the Right," J.P. accused Albert.

"No, of the Left," Albert protested.

"Right."

"Left."

Overhearing this, the Pied Noir, a veteran, began instinctively to march in place.

"Phallocrat," said Simone to Albert.

"Democrat," he replied.

"Same thing," said J.P.

"That's true," said Simone. "The women of Athens weren't allowed to vote."

"No, not even Saint Lysistrata."

"Apropos, I've broken up with Catherine."

"Too bad, Albert," said J.P. indifferently.

"But entirely predictable," added Simone, who had always been vaguely impressed by the speed with which Albert changed partners. "So, you'll never see her again?"

Albert's reply was one that Simone could tell he had trotted out on many similar occasions. "Friendship," he declared, "may end in love, but love in friendship—never."

The Pied Noir and the Algerian, worn out with arguing, approached the table and appealed to Albert. He pretended they were not there at all. His headache had finally gone away and he didn't want it coming back.

And so, the discourse continued as dusk fell. The Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe, lit up, looked on impassively.

The waiter came over to say that he deeply regretted to inform them that unfortunately the café would be closing for two hours. The staff had to prepare for a special dinner.

"For the President of the Republic?"

"No, Monsieur. For Mademoiselle Chanel."

"What? That Fascist?"

The waiter gave a Gallic shrug.

The three rose to leave.

Albert and J.P. shook hands. "The need to be right is the sign of a vulgar mind," the former whispered into the ear of the latter.

"We don't judge the people we love," the latter whispered into the ear of the former.

Holding one hand out to Albert and, with the other, taking J.P.'s arm, Simone smiled complacently.

Then they departed, Simone and J.P. turning to the left, Albert to the right.

Nobody left a tip.

2. *Un Automne à Vienne et Lyme Regis - Ouverture et Duo Érotique*

In 1803, Ludwig van Beethoven was erupting. He spewed out three symphonies, including the astonishing *Third*, completed before the summer was over. High into the cooling air of Vienna shot the *Waldstein*; from the open casements of Schwarzschanerstrasse 15 wafted the motifs that would congeal into Opus 47, the maestro's ninth and best violin sonata. Yet this *annus mirabilis* had its disappointments.

Twice the maestro was compelled by his conscience to alter his dedications. Everyone knows the first case. Bonaparte let the composer down, dashed his liberal hopes, when he crowned himself emperor. The *Eroica* was furiously rededicated “to the memory of a great man.” The second case is less well known.

Not yet deaf, not yet cut off from good fellowship, Beethoven good-naturedly accepted the impertinent yet sound suggestions of the virtuoso who was to premier his new sonata. His homely English name notwithstanding, George Bridgewater was an African-European born in Poland, a prodigy. Their happy collaboration prompted a dedication that is at once mocking, affectionate, and racist: *Sonata per un mulattico lunatico*. How Bridgewater felt about this is unknown; however, we do know that the “*lunatico*” made an insulting remark about a certain lady in Beethoven’s hearing, perhaps even for the composer’s amusement. Perhaps Bridgewater wasn’t striking back at Beethoven; maybe he was entirely unaware that the lady he traduced was one Beethoven knew and admired. Anyway, that was that. The *mulattico lunatico* was blotted out in favor of Rudolphe Kreutzer, a musical rather than imperial Frenchman. So far as anybody knows, Kreutzer never played the piece.

The *Kreutzer Sonata* is so amorous that, eighty-six years later, Tolstoy wrote a novella which comes near blaming the music’s sexiness for adultery and murder. This was Tolstoy on his way to his final ascetic, music-mistrusting phase, but those in authority entirely mistook the work’s puritanism. The Russian government censored it, perhaps more for its narrator’s critique of marriage (Tolstoy’s wasn’t exactly happy) than for the lurid *crime passionnel*. The United States Post Office, seldom praised for insightful literary criticism, banned the book also, and President Theodore Roosevelt did himself little honor in branding its author “a sexual and moral pervert.”

Did Kreutzer make it a point not to play the sonata? Did he think it cursed, or did he just not care for the piece—or for Beethoven? Ironic that its rededication to him should be the one thing for which he’s remembered. But for Beethoven’s crush and Bridgewater’s impropriety, Kreutzer would today be as forgotten as are his own compositions. We can speculate that Beethoven fancied the lady so casually (or deliberately) insulted by Bridgewater; we might even suppose that it is his longing for her that infuses Opus 47, and that Beethoven’s wrath—a fearful thing to see, though glorious to hear—was more amorous than racist.

What else is there to say?

Will Eros always find a way?

Meanwhile, at the other end of Europe, a quite different eruption was preparing itself, one of enlightenment and release. Don't dishonor yourself by supposing it some vulgar tale of a hormone-crazed youth and a frustrated older woman. Think rather of a pair of billiard balls careering across a green table, solid, kinetic, hard. They collide, rebound, then rush off, each in a new direction.

George is fifteen. Jane is twenty-eight. Both are virgins.

"I despise cricket even more than Latin, almost more than mathematics."

"Haven't you found that when people say they despise an activity it's generally because they aren't good at it?"

"Yes. I'm being unfair. Harrow isn't really so harrowing. You're right. The problem isn't with the school but with me. I'm paralyzed—I couldn't go back last month because of—"

"Yes?"

He shook his head, like a horse tossing its mane. "Oh, call it yearning."

"Yearning? I see. So, the way things are isn't the way you'd prefer them to be?"

"Are they ever? For *anyone*? They certainly aren't for my poor ruined and widowed mother. Are they for you?"

"Oh, me. Never mind me. Still, we owe much to the difference between is and ought."

"Dissatisfaction."

"Yes. But also morality, religion, progress, invention, along with both tragedy and comedy."

"Something's rotten in the state of Denmark? Am I just a boy to you? Are you making fun of me?"

She laughed. "Is there something else I ought to make of you?" Jane couldn't help but tease; it was her nature, her manner of dealing with a world she understood so much better than it understood itself.

But George bridled. After all, he was not the world. And he was proud. At school, he was prepared to fight at any hint of a slight—such as some too-justified crack about his father, the "Mad Jack"

who got hold of his second wife's money by taking her name. This name was passed on to George along with certain qualities and traits, including pride. And yet, though he couldn't have said why, George found being teased by Jane more agreeable than being praised by his mother. He did resent the way Jane brought him down, yet he enjoyed it at the same time. It was perplexing. Anyway, talking with his mother was no help for what was ailing him. It was only during his strolls with this witty woman that he was able to forget his charming Mary for a time. But even then, to his dismay, he could be afflicted by one of his stubborn erections. Evidently, a part of him had acquired a will of its own. He began to call it "Mad Jack," as if it were the spirit of his father. He couldn't decide if he resented Jack or approved of him, wanted to suppress or abet him. In short, George's feelings were a *mélange* of baffled, tangled potentiality.

Resignation to her unmarried state did not prevent Jane from being fascinated by everything that happens between men and women up until the wedding night. She thought about it, imagined it, wrote about it. This writing was the consequence of her reading, and the novels she read were about young people—chiefly young women—making their way to financial and marital security. So far, so good. But, for Jane, romance divorced from reality was simply ridiculous. In fact, she was ridiculing it right there in Lyme Regis, working away at her counter-novel. During the precious hours when she would write while Cassie drew, Jane worked at sending up the Gothic fantasies over which the women she knew so immoderately enthused. To Cassandra, she had compared them to a gaggle of Quixotes, looking at the world through thick, wavy lenses, mistaking men for monsters, cellars for dungeons, and all to the end of puffing up extravagant, factitious passions.

Satire was good literature's revenge on bad writing—at least, it would be hers. She doubted her anti-Gothic novel, or anything she wrote, would ever be published. She told herself it didn't matter as she already had her ideal reader in Cassandra, who, it seemed, would also never marry.

When the weather turned, poor Cassie caught a cold and was unable to join Jane for their daily walk along the promenade. Over her mother's objections, Jane went down to the sea wall by herself. It was on one of these jaunts that she met George, likewise a solitary walker and refugee from a vigilant mother. He was a quite handsome boy, educated, and as eager to talk as Jane was to listen. He looked older than his age.

"I couldn't go back."

“Because of Miss Chaworth?”

“Mary’s divine. But all this adoring from afar. . .” He threw up a hand, exasperated, very likely with himself.

“You know what you don’t want. Do you know what you *do*?”

“Too much. I’m all wanting. I want everything.”

“Ah, I see. And if you got everything, where would you keep it?”

He glanced at her with annoyance, then broke into a smile. “And what about you? What is it you want?”

“Oh, I? Sometimes I want. . . to want.”

“You’re remarkable, you know, quite unlike anyone I’ve ever met.”

Jane blushed. “You’re too kind. And so very young. You can’t have met so many people.”

“That again.”

“It’s true. The young are impatient.”

“And so I am. Out of patience entirely. I want to grab hold.”

“You have greedy hands?”

“You would say so I think, you who are without greed.”

“Don’t be too quick to judge.”

George halted and took her soft hand in his greedy one. She wasn’t young and beautiful like Mary Chaworth, but she was there and, though she concealed it well, he sensed that she enjoyed his physical proximity. He certainly admired her and, besides, there was Mad Jack acting up again.

The one night they somehow arranged to spend together set George off on a life of motion, notoriety, acclaim, scandal, a life famously crowded with affairs: Augusta, Elizabeth, Caroline, Claire, Isabella, Teresa, les Macris, Elena, Marianna, Margarita, and so on.

As for Jane, romance and reality would ever after have a complicated relationship for her. She imagined George over and over, aged him, filled him in, gave him some good lines, varied his location, income, hairline, and avocations; but she kept him as she’d have liked, witty, well-read, sympathetic, ever desirable and always dependable.

Even before she left Dorset, the George she imagined he would soon become merged with Henry T., the level-headed hero of her novel. Henry speaks for Jane when he says, “The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid.” Jane was well enough pleased with her Henry; however, it was some years later that her successive portraits George attained perfection in the person of Fitzwilliam D. who, at the close of his good novel, is twenty-eight years old.

3. *Un Voyage à Omsk – Quator Franco-Russe*

Despair drove her from paralysis to frenzy. Her reputation, her position in society were lost, her child, money, both her lover and her husband. She scarcely knew what she had become; she could only recall—with a bitter chill that made her tremble all over—who she had been. Her life was already over in every sense but one. *Pourquoi pas cela aussi?*

Ivan was born in 1818. Fyodor and Gustav both entered the world three years later. Sunlight first struck Leo’s face in 1828. That the four knew one another is not particularly surprising, but it was chiefly down to Ivan. He may have been practically an expatriate, very nearly a Frenchman; nevertheless, he felt himself to be *un vrai Russe*, and sometimes it was necessary to say so. Anyway, it was always about Russia that he wrote.

Ivan and Gustave became fast friends from the moment they met. They were kindred spirits with sympathetic views: in religion agnostic, in politics liberal, in philosophy rational. They were aesthetic confrères, both pessimistic but not quick to render judgments, meticulous formalists with an urge toward purity. Though he would have liked to, Ivan couldn’t get on anywhere near so well with his countrymen, Fyodor and Leo. The former despised him for his admiring the West and mocked him cruelly in a novel. As for the latter, after they spent some days together in Paris, Leo declared Ivan “a bore” and refused to speak to him for seventeen years.

Gustave and Ivan were not without their differences, though. Gustave was a licentious, libidinous man. Ivan was mostly not. Gustave couldn’t count all the prostitutes—female and male—he’d paid, let

alone how much. Ivan's life was more sedate. He never married, though, in his early years, he did interfere with the family serfs. The consequence of one of these dalliances was an illegitimate daughter. As a writer, he was more drawn to the nuances of romance than the brutalities of sex. But their few differences only added seasoning to the friendship.

Both men loved to travel. In 1850, Gustave went to Egypt, a country that allowed wide scope to his Don Juanism. Ivan did not accompany his friend to the Levant, but he too felt the itch to be away from France. When the first leaves began to fall, he was overwhelmed by nostalgia. He yearned to see peasants hunting for mushrooms underneath birch trees; he longed for the sight of troikas and the noise of sledges driven by bearded coachmen all bundled up in bear skin robes, sporting huge fur hats, and reeking of vodka. He wanted to see Russia's dense forests and wide steppes, the braided uniforms of its cavalry officers, the timorous clerks hurrying from one government office to another, the babushkas who cross themselves twenty times a day and hoard half-rubles in old stockings.

He went first to St. Petersburg, the most European place in Russia. In a remarkable book that, despite himself, Ivan would admire nearly as much he deplored, Fyodor would call the city "the most intentional in the world." Ivan took satisfaction in any truth succinctly expressed.

Soon after he settled into his hotel, Ivan thought of old friends on whom he should be paying calls. Among these was Vissarion Grigoryevich, the critic who had been so gracious when he was just starting out, praising him when praise was least merited but meant the most. He went to the critic's townhouse, knocked, then had a long wait. The door was eventually opened—partially—by an aged servant in a threadbare livery jacket and wide trousers. This man drew back in shock when Ivan asked to see his master.

"But it's two years since the master passed away," said the fellow, then crossed himself once for each year.

For some reason, Ivan felt obliged to explain himself. "I didn't know. I've been abroad."

"It was the consumption," the servant reported. "And maybe it was just as well."

"Just as well?"

"If the master hadn't coughed out his life at just the right time, he'd have been arrested and sent off to Siberia to freeze."

Ivan was horrified and not for the first time felt fury at his country's backwardness, its insatiable taste for tyranny, its determination to snuff out any little spark of progress.

"I had no idea. And his wife. . . I mean, his widow?"

"The mistress is unwell. No visitors," declared the servant then rudely shut the door.

As he made his way back toward the Nevsky Prospekt, Ivan recalled what the late Vissarion Grigoryevich had written about Fyodor, that he was Nikolai's true heir. It had required effort not to be jealous of this praise, which he found not only extravagant but puzzling. After all, wasn't it he, Ivan, who, like Nikolai, lived abroad and wrote of Russia? He had read the book that impressed Vissarion Grigoryevich and a few of Fyodor's short stories. He thought the novel mawkish but admitted that Fyodor did indeed show promise; moreover, he noted with approval the salutary influence of Balzac. Fyodor, he supposed, must be, like him, be a foe of Russian obscurantism. Ivan had not given Fyodor a thought in years. It was the servant's saying that his master had evaded arrest only by dying that reminded Ivan of Fyodor. The poor fellow really had been sent to Siberia.

Ivan had followed the Petrashevsky trial with dismay. He was indignant when he learned the story of the phony execution, the last-minute commutation to a long stretch in Siberia. Now the memory of these events and the feelings they had evoked returned.

Ivan made inquiries among his contacts and discovered that Fyodor was incarcerated in Omsk—Omsk, which is further from Petersburg than Petersburg is from Paris. But as Ivan had promised himself to see the interior of his native land, he resolved to make the trek to western Siberia and pay a visit of charity. Perhaps a collegial visit would give heart to the unfortunate Fyodor and help him to endure his suffering.

The journey was even more arduous than Ivan had imagined. The inns were just as repellent as he remembered—the same aromas of sweat, urine, raw onion, and alcohol; the same thin, infested mattresses and low, smoke-darkened ceilings; the same toadying and over-charging; the same superstition masquerading as religion. The further you go into Russia, he reflected, the more nothing changes—to go east is to go backwards. Yet some of the scenery pleased Ivan, especially the deep forests. He recalled his childhood with the kind of sentiment that is customary on such occasions. He was twice hospitably received on estates owned by old Moscow friends who had given up and become country squires. The sister of one flirted with him, a widow who wasn't even bad looking.

When he at last reached Omsk, Ivan easily obtained permission to see Fyodor. The prison was absolutely dreadful, but the officials were not punctilious. He didn't even have to pay a bribe.

Ivan naively supposed that, as an educated political prisoner, Fyodor would be better treated than the common criminals, that he might even be separately accommodated. He was quickly disabused of this illusion.

Fyodor looked thin and unhealthy; his beard was brittle, scraggly and full of gray hairs. He was almost excessively moved by Ivan's visit. He hugged him then kissed his cheeks over and over and wouldn't let go of his hands. "How wonderful of you to come!" he exclaimed. "Here, you know, one always thinks one is forgotten, like the dead."

Ivan spent two afternoons with Fyodor in a little whitewashed room the officer in charge had made available to them. There was even a rusty old samovar. Fyodor spoke like the deprived creature he was, one starved for an educated listener. He talked with a sort of exalted feverishness for which Ivan did not care. He was even less pleased to learn that the Tsar's remedy was working, that Fyodor's views had undergone a counter-revolution and that he was all too happy to proclaim them. He denigrated the West as godless, superficial and un-Russian. Salvation lay in Christ and humility, in giving up the egoism that permeated everything that came from Europe. Ivan attempted to discourage Fyodor's politico-religious harangues by simply not commenting on them. When this tactic failed, he changed the subject by asking Fyodor to tell him stories he had picked up from his fellow prisoners.

"You want material, eh?"

"Yes, you could say that."

"Very well, then."

The tales were lurid, pathetic, violent, vile. This one had stolen the life-savings of an old veteran who had lost both an arm and a leg. Another had murdered a whole family—even an infant—in a drunken rage. An axe murderer, an embezzler, a confidence trickster, an abuser of children, pimps. One tale of child rape might have made even Gustave blanch.

The story that most intrigued Ivan was that of a man, a well-off Muscovite, a court counselor, whose wife was seduced and abandoned by a Guards officer. The man took pains in plotting his revenge, even hiring two railway workers to help. "They waited for the man outside The Yar, where he often spent

a night of dissipation. As soon as it was safe, they threw a sack over his head and dragged him into an alley off Kuznetsky Most. They used iron bars. Apparently, even his mother wasn't able to recognize him."

"What of the wife?" Ivan asked.

"Oh, he'd never have harmed *her*," said Fyodor. "He loved her too dearly. In fact, at his trial he confessed that it wasn't for seducing his wife that he killed the officer. It was because he had abandoned her and the woman killed herself. He swore that if the officer had run off with his wife, he could have born it. Then he would have known she was safe."

"Terrible story. How did the woman commit suicide?"

Fyodor shrugged. To him, the wife was a minor character, a prop; it was the fate of the court councilor that interested him. "The fellow died more than a year ago. Typhoid. Now I can't recall exactly how the woman did away with herself. Poison or hanging or a pistol or—who knows—perhaps she leapt under a carriage. Every story here is one of ruin and despair. But there are many who become humble, remorseful, and redeem themselves. Yes, it's so. And it is quite beautiful when some lost soul, with the aid of Father Vassily and God's grace, at last repents and finds his way to Christ." Though he didn't say so, Fyodor clearly meant to include himself among the redeemed.

As he made his way west from Omsk, the landscape now seemed to Ivan endlessly flat and desolate, a pointless country of muddy roads, brown grass, and impenetrable timber. When he arrived in Paris, Ivan felt like a diver who has just extricated himself from a tangle of weeds and risen joyfully into the light.

Gustave was already back from Egypt and had left a message for him. The two friends enjoyed a reunion dinner that very night at La Petite Chaise. They also met the following afternoon and the morning after that as well. They had much to say to one another. Save for the usual complaints about delays, disgusting food, wretched accommodations, bad roads, greedy natives, corrupt border officials, insatiable bedbugs, and stomach troubles, the chief topics were their adventures in Egypt and Russia. Gustave's stories were many, scandalous, and amusing. Ivan could hardly match his friend's but he did have his trip to Omsk. He told Gustave about going all that way to see the imprisoned Fyodor. In the course of his narrative, he told Gustave the anecdote of the respectable adulteress who killed herself. He said that she

was of greater interest than her vengeful husband or faithless lover. Gustave asked why. Ivan explained that the motives of the two men were obvious and their feelings clichés. Of course, the same might be said of the woman as well; and yet he thought she might have been something original.

Of all that Ivan reported about his journey, it was this story that most intrigued Gustave.

Twenty years later, when Leo grudgingly agreed to receive him on his estate, Ivan asked if he were in communication with Fyodor.

Leo was curt. “No.”

“I wonder,” said Ivan thoughtfully, “if he really has convinced himself of God’s existence. He seems to write about the question compulsively.”

“I should say he has a good opinion of God and poor one of you.”

Ivan nodded modestly. “I know and I regret it. But what can I do? And it’s all the more vexing because, when he was imprisoned in Siberia, I went all that way just to pay the fellow a visit.”

“You did?”

“Yes, to Omsk.”

“Omsk,” Leo repeated. “What did you talk about?”

Ivan remembered being displeased by Fyodor’s conversion to Slavophilism, to his white, Siberian Christ. Apart from that, all he was able to recall was the story that had so interested his friend Gustave, the one about the adulteress who killed herself.

And so, he told it to Leo as well.