

Odd Memories

I have never taken a trip that disappointed me. My spirit leaps at the mere thought of boarding a plane or train to—anywhere. Like Hazlitt, I could spend my whole life roaming, if only I could borrow another lifetime to spend in blissful reminiscence at home.

Whenever my feet begin to itch and I cannot take them to Venice or Samarkand, I lean back and take a token trip—on that gray-goo vehicle that weighs around three pounds and is called the brain. Sometimes I imagine I am in Hong Kong again, or in the Valley of the Butterflies on Rhodes, or in Portofino; or in lovely Devon, or approaching the enchanted island of Santorini, or in the scarcely known Canyon of the Walls of Gold, in Arizona.

Memory sends me off on marvelous journeys-by-free-association—from Jamaica to Jerusalem to Japan. And I

savor the images that pop into my mind. They are not at *all* what you might suspect.

Example: Pisa. Does that name trigger the image of the Leaning Tower? Not to me. When I hear “Pisa,” the image that swims into memory is—a camel. The startling sight of a camel near the Leaning Tower of Pisa buried itself in the “Miscellaneous” drawer of my mental files, where it remained—unattended, but minding its own business—until this morning, when I learned that back in the seventeenth century an Italian soldier brought a humped herd to his native land. He had taken them as loot after a battle against the Turks. They (the camels) married, had babies, and their progeny seem perfectly happy in Pisa.

Or take the name “Nantucket.” Whenever I hear this Algonquin name, a tantalizing scene replays itself on the stage of my memory:

NANTUCKET

Scene: The porch of an old inn.

Enter Old New England Biddy—in erect disdain. Takes rocking chair near mine. Nods. Opens reticule. Lace handkerchief. Violet sachet. She begins to rock, gazing at the sea.

Enter Second Old New England Biddy.

SECOND O.N.E.B. (Spying first O.N.E.B.) Ah, my dear Mrs. Prksmm!

FIRST O.N.E.B. Good morning, Mrs. Bntrkp. Do come sit here.

SECOND O.N.E.B. Thnkyu . . .

FIRST O.N.E.B. And did you visit with the Agrlnts last night?

SECOND O.N.E.B. Oh, yes . . . Indeed . . . Indeed, yes . . . Lovely visit.

FIRST O.N.E.B. And how is dear Vrnca?

SECOND O.N.E.B. Middling.

FIRST O.N.E.B. And Charles? Dear Charles . . .

SECOND O.N.E.B. (sighs) We-ell . . .

FIRST O.N.E.B. I know. . . Did he not use to think himself a beagle?

SECOND O.N.E.B. Mm-hm . . . Still does.

FIRST O.N.E.B. Pity . . .

I can't think of a play on Broadway with dialogue like that.

Here are five more odd segments of life, unforgettably linked in my mind with places I have known:

MADRID

Years ago. . . The sleek, long, gleaming limousine wafted us down the Gran Via, past all the café tables, the startling blondes, the dark, fat couples with their beautifully dressed, invariably spoiled children.

My host, a man of great influence and illustrious lineage, smiled. “Yesterday, my dear León, we did talk about Spain. Spanish temperament. Spanish ways. Pride and Faith—and Arrogance? . . . To you, I am yet a—puzzle, *sí*? *España* is—an enigma, no?”

“Well, my friend, to understand us, you must know this one thing: We Spaniards—we all are raised in the sight of blod. *Blod!* . . . As little children, we go to the bullfights. We see that life-giving red fluid spilling on the sand. *Blod.* And everyone cheers. . .

“So Franco, this fat, clever *caudillo*, is imperative to our peace. Only *he* does keep us from slaughtering one another. . .

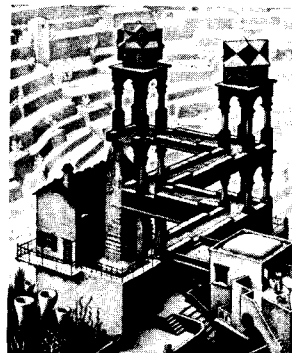
“The civil war . . . *Dios*, what horrors! Murders. Revenges. Savagery. Madness.

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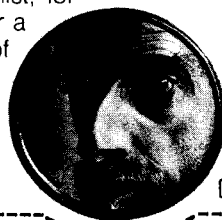
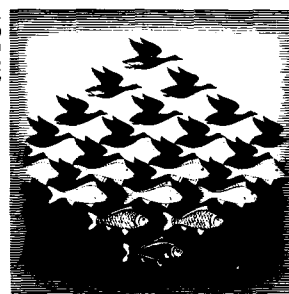
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I know. I saw. . . . Every Spaniard, Léon, keeps a list." He tapped his temple, smiling. "A list of names. People each one would be happy to keel! . . . My list is short. I am no fanatic. Only forty-two names. Forty-two—with each I have an account to settle. . . . If the troubles ever come back, *amigo*, my forty-two—" He drew his forefinger across his throat in a swift, straight, savage line. "Krrrrk!"

It was the most bloodcurdling sound I ever heard from a human throat.

ISTANBUL

Fists. Fists pounding on automobile doors. You're not supposed to blow your horn in Istanbul (at night you blink your headlights on and off, in signal or warning or rage). So Istanbul's drivers stick their left arms out of their windows and bang away furiously on the door panels with their fists. The first time I took a taxi I thought we were being machine-gunned.

My English friend was now banging away road signals as we drove along the Bosphorus. (Greek mythology says that it was here that the goddess Io, turned by Jupiter into a cow, swam across the channel. Bosphorus means "bull's passage.")

We glided past the minarets of the Ortaköy Mosque, the magnificent Dolmabahçe Palace, and Asia Minor lay shining across the strait.

We curved north and up, into the hills, and now my host kept glancing at his watch. "Must get back before sundown." "Appointment?" I asked.

"No, old boy . . . It's just—well, no one in his right mind wants to get caught on this road after sunset."

"Bandits?" I asked.

"No. An army installation . . . Last year, a couple—he was a colleague—driving along here was stopped and abducted by soldiers." He paused. "They both 'served' the regiment—for three days and nights."

His pretty wife shuddered. "Istanbul . . . When we arrived, I wanted a driver's license. The police commissioner was horrified. 'A woman? To drive? Alone? No, no! Is bad in Istanbul. Dangerous.' 'Nonsense,' I said. 'I have a powerful scream.' He turned quite green. 'You will cry out for help? Oh, no. No, no! That is *worst* of things you can do! Men—men will come running from all the directions! . . . It is better, Madame, to be raped by only one.'"

Her husband bore down on the throttle.

SEVILLE

A movie theater. The marquee advertised *Portrait of Jenny*, starring Jennifer Jones and Joseph Cotten. And hanging from the marquee was a banner that said:

¿Qué es el tiempo? ¿Qué es espacio?
Una eterna pregunta, uno misterio,
una ilusión, una fatalidad.

Which means:

What is time? What is space?
An eternal question, a mystery,
an illusion, a fatality.

You don't see marquees like that in Schenectady.

TOKYO

I was strolling down the Ginza when a gentleman in a kimono and a Western fedora clattered up to me on his getsas (clogs), beaming and grinning (the flash of steel in his mouth almost blinded me), jerked downward in the *de rigueur* bow, and said, giggling, "Ah, prease. I speak English. Arrow me. . . ." (The Japanese, terribly proud to know the language of their conquerors, seize every chance to practice their "Engrish.") He held up a cigarette.

I: No, thank you.

JAPANESE GENTLEMAN: Ah, so . . . But, prease. I desire . . . *match*. For light.

I: Ahhh, so!

As I struck a match for my accoster, I remembered something I had heard the day before from a U.S. Navy officer. After wandering around the monstrous warren of Tokyo, he had hailed a taxi. He spoke not a word of Japanese. He gave the driver the name of his hotel, very slowly, very clearly; the driver beamed, nodded, giggled, but made not the slightest move to drive on. It was clear he had not understood.

The officer got a cigarette and, as he struck a match, noticed he was using a matchbook from his hotel. *Banzai!* He held up the matchbook, tapping his finger on the cover sententiously. Now the cabdriver's face lit up. "*Hai!*" he barked. Off zoomed the taxi.

When the cab finally stopped, the driver turned to the officer with a triumphant flourish of the hand.

The navy officer looked out. He was at the entrance to a match factory.

P.S. It was the very factory that made matches for the hotel; its name and address were printed under the strike-bar of the matchbook the officer had so cleverly tapped to guide the driver. □

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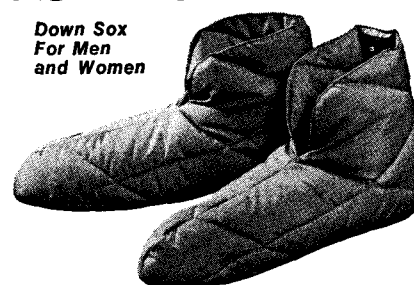
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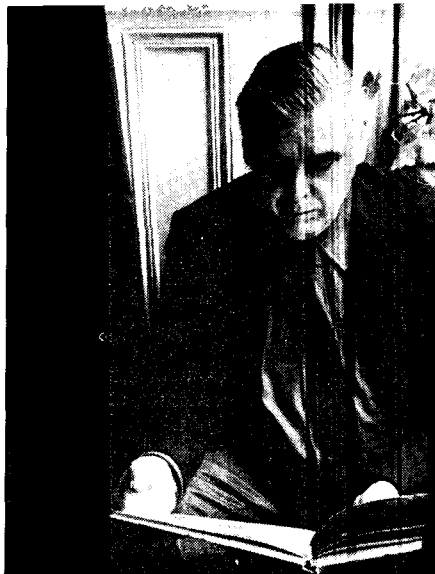
Reviewed by Vivian Mercier

Is there not something deliciously ironical in the ease with which a splenetic pamphleteer, with nothing to show for himself except a bookful of blunders tacked onto a mock scientific theory picked up at second hand from a few lunacy doctors with a literary turn, should be able to create a European scandal by declaring that the greatest creative artists of the century are barren and hysterical madmen?

No, this is not Mercier on West. It is a quotation from a piece written by a self-styled journalist in 1895, which, as the author prophesied, has remained topical ever since.

In the case of *Mortal Wounds* the pamphleteer—a decidedly splenetic one—happens to be Anthony West; he has picked up his mock scientific theory from just one “lunacy doctor,” but one with an undeniable “literary turn,” the late Dr. Eric Berne, author of the best-selling *Games People Play*. West expresses himself a little more circumspectly, saying, “I am confident that insofar as literary criticism has a future it is as a form of applied psychiatry,” but his argument is essentially that of Max Nordau in *Degeneration*. Unfortunately, because of “the familiar editorial stigma of degeneracy, which Nordau calls agoraphobia, or fear of space,” I haven’t room here to repeat the entire argument of Bernard Shaw’s “The Sanity of Art”: You’ll find it in his *Major Critical Essays*, in any good library. I would just like to add to Shaw’s definitive reply to Nordau and all his philistine successors the unoriginal comment that if art arises from psychic trauma, this does not mean that art is itself pathological; on the contrary, it is therapeutic. Yeats’s poem “Ego Dominus Tuus” makes this point more effectively than Lionel Trilling’s answer to Edmund Wilson’s *The Wound and the Bow*.

I don’t believe that West’s book will in fact create a scandal, European or otherwise, for through a curious mixture of cowardice and ineptitude he has buried his attack on D. H. Lawrence and Proust—and, to a lesser extent, on Flaubert and Henry James—in a fifty-five-page postscript to a full-length book about three eccentric women, only one of whom, George Sand, took herself seri-



Anthony West—“Splenetic pamphleteer.”

ously as a novelist or had any right to do so. The other women are Mme de Staël and Mme de Charrière, better known as Belle de Zuylen or Zélide, who charmed the young Benjamin Constant long before he met Mme de Staël and who still earlier received a proposal of marriage from Boswell. Of all three ladies West says,

Their writing can be seen to rise . . . directly from the necessities of their conveniently documented psychological situations. They all had a common compulsion to claim to be more than ordinarily important people, and they all resorted to the novel to justify and reinforce their claims. I have tried to show, by an analysis of their patterns of behavior, the probable sources of their compulsion in the large demands of love denied in early life; and I have tried to show the very direct way in which the content of their work was determined by the forces that dictated their behavior. It is my considered view, for what it may be worth, that these three persons are typical as writers.

On reading this statement in West’s foreword, one naturally assumes that the book to follow will contain much analysis, either literary or psychiatric, of the three ladies’ novels. Not at all. We are given cursory glimpses of two out of Sand’s total production of more than fifty serious works of fiction—psychological, political, and pastoral. She is certainly a better novelist than West and, on the evidence of her letters to Flaubert, a better critic. Not a single novel by Mme de Staël is examined, a fact for which perhaps we ought to be grateful. On the other hand, Mme de Charrière’s entire output of five novels is analyzed with some care. Why the disproportion? Dare one suggest that, since relatively less is known about Zélide than about the others, whose private lives were always in fact sensationally public, West had to

fall back on literary criticism not as “a form of applied psychiatry” but as a form of applied padding?

I suspect that West started out with no more serious intent than to produce a fairly conventional, Peter Quennell-style book: condensed biographies of three colorful, much written about women novelists and travel writers, not unlike his own mother, Rebecca West, who had her moment of notoriety, too. Understandably enough, this rather routine bit of potboiling began to bore him; so he tried to enliven it with some of Berne’s transactional analysis. It must finally have occurred to him that, even if he seemed to prove his point that “the essence of the [novel] form is a pathology, not an esthetic,” readers would revolt: If a sport like Mme de Staël is treated as typical, one can prove anything. Hence the postscript, in which he at least presents two real novelists, Lawrence and Proust, from whom he proceeds to strip their transparent masks. He does this with all the more gusto because he once greatly admired them.

Yet he can really settle nothing by proving that Proust’s “commitment to the reordering and reprocessing of his past experience . . . was in fact a device for restructuring his time in such a way as to exempt him from the necessity of entering into any meaningful human relationships. . . .” Whatever Proust’s motivation, conscious or unconscious, for writing it, *Remembrance of Things Past* is still a great work of art; even viewed as pathology, it can teach us more about “the intermittencies of the heart” than ten Eric Bernes or Anthony West’s laid end to end. I must admit that, like West, I take the old-fashioned or Sainte-Beuve view that there is an organic relationship between a writer’s life and his work, but this is a matter of faith, not knowledge. Even if we could know everything about a writer’s psyche, we should be as far as ever from being able to foretell how it would manifest itself in his art.

To defend his integrity, West now needs to write a full-length book in which he applies his theories without subterfuge to some novelist whom he still admires—Tolstoy, perhaps? Since he himself has written novels, I think he should also tell us frankly what he now believes his own motivation to have been in writing them. Did he feel that love was denied him in early life? Shaw was very frank about the lack of love in his boyhood home—yet he remained convinced of the sanity of art. □