FLANDERS LITERATURE

Arriving in Avignon

A record

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In the diary that he has kept since he was eighteen, the name of the town is mentioned explicitly at least ten times within a period of four years. An investigation of the routes that he probably followed on the various journeys documented in the same diary and spread over eight years, including the above¬mentioned four, leads one, moreover, to the conclusion that he must have got into or out of a train in that town's station, or else must have traveled through that station on a train, or trav¬eled in some other vehicle through or around the edge of that town, about twenty times. These are facts and figures that are difficult to argue with, and yet it's quite possible that he'll none¬theless maintain that Avignon means little or nothing to him. In response to that one should say that he ought to know better; that it is unlikely at best for someone who is not a professional traveler "just happening" "with impunity" to be repeatedly in the same place, about nine hundred kilometers from his home¬town, on average three or perhaps four times a year over a pe¬riod of eight years, and whose view of that place, because of his various visits, their dates often falling outside the usual holiday periods, must of course have differed considerably from that of those tourists for whom this town is just the first leg of a trip through the South of France, and then too from that of the vacationers who stop in at the town on their way to the Medi¬terranean coast and are only urged on to greater haste by all its southern features; and given, finally, that Avignon, though pri¬marily a transit hub, has none of the cosmopolitan neutrality of other such cities—for instance, Paris, which he had to pass through whenever he traveled by rail—that it is, again, unlikely at best for someone like him, and a northerner to boot, to be so often in the same town and have it make no impression upon him. Alternatively, one could ask him curtly: Have you been to the town or not, yes or no?—"Of course I have."—On more than one occasion?—"Definitely."—Including at times of the year that for most of us would be unusual?—"Certainly." Though actually, the main thing is to get him to accept that his experi¬ence of Avignon as an essentially arbitrary town (which could thus be replaced either by Prague, a town he's never set foot in, or indeed by his hometown) and perhaps even as an arbitrary object (just not so central an object, so exclusively personal, that any statement about it would become problematic)—how¬ever fragmentary and unsystematic this experience, however inadequate for a historian, a geographer, an economist, a soci¬ologist, an archaeologist, a compiler of travel guides, or even a tourist—precisely because of its randomness, its physical, syn¬thetic innocence, offers the chance of an exploration, of course lacking the thoroughness of a scientific research project, but being therefore a report that would have room for everything that scientists must neglect for the sake of objectivity: an ordi¬nary human statement that might satisfy in us precisely what all scientific literature fails to satisfy.

And then it turns out that his very first contact with the town on the Rhone (apart from a purely verbal one, when as a toddler he had learned to sing the dance tune that goes: *Sur le pont / d'Avignon / on y danse, on y danse / sur le pont d'Avignon / on y danse tous en rond*—and it was only recently that he'd heard that the lyrics originally went *Sous le pont d'Avignon*, when the *Pont Saint-Bénezet* still spanned the river and people crossed in the shadow of its arches to dance on the *île de la Barthelasse*) actu¬ally predates the earliest entries in the preserved diary by sev¬eral years: He was fourteen, and the first and ultimately last full-force family trip in the first post-war car through Southwest France and Northern Spain had been interrupted at the start of the return journey in the village of Remoulins (near Pont-du-Gard on the right bank of the Rhone) by a breakdown requiring the replacement of parts that in the France of the time were ob¬tainable only in Paris; for him, however, since he had passed the entrance exam to an insane asylum masquerading as an officers' training academy where the academic year began earlier than elsewhere, a speedy return to Brussels was required, so it was decided that he would travel home with his mother by train, his older brother accompanying them as far as Paris, while the fa¬ther, sister, and younger brother would stay in Remoulins. That's as far as the anecdote goes. But what does it mean to a boy who one autumn day drives for the first time—in a coach rather than a taxi? or in the garage-owner's car? he has forgotten—over the Pont Saint-Pierre across the Rhone to Avignon Station? Well, he's fourteen. Up till then he was a definitely non-brilliant pupil at a Jesuit college, he's a patrol leader in a scout troop; he doesn't yet wear glasses; he's taller than the other boys in his class; in Spain he wore shorts, his older brother ordinary long trousers; up till now he has smoked few if any cigarettes. An adolescent? Nowhere near. Preadolescent? In any case, less likely then to find himself in crisis, less likely at the very least to find himself beset by bewildering fantasies or disturbing questions than in the previous two years. He still wears his hair parted on the left, which gives him a smart, respectable look. He's also still an ab¬solute virgin. For quite some time there's been an unusual lack of intimacy in his relationship with his housemates; in fact he has no friendships to speak of, and since he doesn't belong to a single natural, freeform group of adolescents, he cannot com¬pare himself with any of his peers. Is there anything more awk¬ward than wasting words on such a solitary, vague individual? It's as if each word is harshly, overbearingly imposing its form on something that is of course formless. Perhaps one should express it like this: appearance and strength almost those of man, but a skin, a heart, a brain like a child's—or perhaps a girl's? Facts. On the way there he got drunk for the first time with his older brother in Fontainebleau, and he's very proud that no one in the Hôtel de l'Aigle Noir noticed a thing. In the last months of the school year, almost every morning, in the empty Ursulinenstraat on his way to school Mass, he met a girl with long straight hair who clutched her schoolbag to her bosom like a tiny lover—and he felt an astonishment that was new, and impressive, not just his earlier vague curiosity. In Périgueux he drank rosé wine for the first time, and laughed with the others because his father was slightly tipsy, or acted as if he was. On the beach in Biarritz he was fascinated by a dark-blue bathing suit—and was it for that reason and at that time that his sister, who is the eldest, praised his good taste? In San Sebastián or Pamplona a bullfight left him cold, perhaps his revulsion was all channeled into his contempt for the picador. In Tudela he gaped at the gold plate of a Spanish church during Sunday Mass. In the empty Gran Hotel in Saragossa he made an attempt to strike up a conversation with a bellboy of his age or slightly younger, whom he found attractive? pretty? likeable?, and of¬fered him something—a cigarette?—but neither of them found a viable means of verbal communication, and when the pres¬ence of his older brother behind him became too much for him, and behind the bellboy a smarmy, hurried, plump grownup member of the hotel staff approached as if trying to avert a di¬saster with a smile, and he saw in the way the other boy looked at the waiter a helpless readiness to conform unconditionally to the norms of the grownups, and the cigarette was refused—the approach foundered, and humiliated by the meekness of the other boy, he bit his lip, and the deeply blushing prince resolved never again to embarrass his subjects by infringing upon eti¬quette. Barcelona, and the cyclopean cliffs of

Montserrat. Did he tell his sister anything about the very young blonde girl in Lloret? (Lloret with at most three hotels, including one—theirs—where the roof leaked; where in the mornings before ten o'clock you saw no one under the palms on the promenade except children with their black-and-white uniformed nannies; where in the tent close to the high-tide mark deadly serious children of ten congregated to dance.) It's not impossible that he joked with his sister and younger brother about being in love during the days they spent lying on the beach eating small, very sweet grapes: joking, although painful, was still at least talking about her, us¬ing words to describe her; and what else could he do? When she frolicked in the sand with her Spanish boyfriends, he felt like a stuffy furtive old voyeur ogling young girls, and in the evenings when she danced he could only look, peep longingly, he couldn't dance, but talking to her was impossible, smiling at her, touch¬ing her unthinkable; not even—and how much he would have liked to do so—the evening she started to cry for some reason he couldn't guess, and left the dance tent for the only movie the¬ater in town where for hours he divided his attention between her shadow and a noisy and probably stupid Mexican comedy, of which he understood not a word: condemned, provisional, extranjero, or worse still: turista. This is the immediate past that this overgrown boy brings with him if not into Avignon, then over the Rhone. Shortly he will try in vain to make his helpless passion for the girl of Lloret degenerate into doggerel. In eight years' time he will basically not behave any differently towards the student Christiane than he did with the girl in Lloret: a beg-gar, a plague victim perhaps who doesn't dare enter the town gate until someone extends a hand to conduct him in. He will never say anything to his sister about the morning girl-in-Ursu¬linenstraat whom he will never meet again. It will be another ten years before he acknowledges that her whole attitude was recep¬tive, expectant, compliant, and that the girl in Lloret probably flirted with him too, more or less unconsciously. During future holidays he won't so much as open his mouth at home—even now he avoids mentioning school. The boys in his dormitory will prove no more approachable than the bellboy from the Gran Hotel, although he will once and for all adopt their lan-guage, Flemish, as his own. Everything will happen there as if from the very first days a hunched, frozen, shivering war or¬phan, eyes wide with fear, were hiding inside his strapping body, always far too terrified to understand what's happening to him. When in six years' time he decides to run away from the "insane asylum," the sanctuary he plans on will not be his family's Brus¬sels mansion—he will apply for a visa for Spain; and it won't be a housemate who persuades him at the last moment to flee in a less adventurous way. Between this as yet unsuspected, life-changing future, which will descend upon him like a supernatu¬ral vocation, which will pounce upon him like a disaster, and then his harmless past, like one long holiday: the town of Avi¬gnon? But even if he really did enter the town at this time, on the way to the "asylum," it's basically as though after crossing the bridge he drove immediately down the Boulevard de l'Oulle, the Boulevard Saint-Dominique, and the Boulevard d'Estienne d'Orves, right to the station. In that case he must have looked at the smooth, surprisingly clean, almost white walls, but it's not certain that they inspired any feelings in him other than a mem¬ory of the wooden toy castle, with battlements, keep, and draw¬bridge, in which, not so long ago, he could arrange only anach¬ronistic tin or plaster soldiers. Because this very first real move¬ment in the direction of Avignon is dominated—even more so than by innocent curiosity about the "asylum"—by excitement at the prospect of his first journey on an express. The very fact that that train had its own name gave it the glamour of an Orient Express, a Trans-Siberian. Even before he could attach any mean¬ing to the fact that the name of the northwesterly wind that the express had been given was also that of a great poet (many of whose works first appeared in Avignon), that association of train and wind (Faster-than-the-Wind was the name of a character from a children's book his father had once given him) was bound to make the experience of any journey on the Mistral into an event. Perhaps it would have been a disappointment to observe that the train that pulled into the station was actually no differ¬ent from other trains—the Mistral was probably still pulled by a steam engine at that time, at least until it reached Lyon—if one's attention had not been distracted by the excitement of boarding, the suitcases that mustn't be forgotten, the

reserved seat that one must find, his mother's alarm, the jostling, the noise. And even after the train had left, it would have been disappointing to note that one felt little of the celebrated top speeds as printed in the train corridor next to the map of France, but then the prospect of his first visit to a restaurant car was sufficient to keep up the suspense. So his very first move in the direction of Avignon turns out ultimately to have been a move away from Avignon. Just as a spiral never truly turns in upon its center, but at each point is always a little less perpendicular to its origin than the circumference drawn through that point.

Avignon, September 29, 1843 . . . The district that I am now traversing is very fine . . . it is impossible to find a country more nearly resembling Spain. There is the same aspect of town and landscape; the workmen lie in the shade and drop their cloaks with a tragic air that is Andalusian; the odor of garlic and oil is mingled with that of oranges and jasmine; the streets are shaded with linen during the day, and the women have small, well-shod feet; there is nothing, even to the patois, that has not a flavor of Spain. A still closer relation exists in its abundance of gnats, fleas, and other insects, making sleep impossible . . . This is from Mérimée's Letters to an Incognita, a two-volume book, of which he was given a secondhand copy bought in England by his younger brother. But more than his memories of Spain, it will be two Greek journeys that decisively win him over to the country into which Avignon gives access. Ionic or Doric col¬umns, new names (Nauplia, Mykene, Bassai, Athene, Rhodos, Andritsaina, and also Charilao or Charitheo, borne by a mule-driver), traveling companions (the unattainable girl Kitty; the memory of ambiguous expressions of affection on the part of an American cabin companion on the SS Barletta, which he, however unconsciously, had answered no less ambiguously now generating the same unease as the Hermes of Praxiteles in the cramped space of the museum at Olympia), shrines with very un-Classical, gruesome origins (fatal Eleusinian Mysteries, panic-striking thunderstorms above the Delphic chaos, human sacrifices demanded by Olympian Hera)—ultimately this rev¬elation is satisfyingly subsumed in the poetic contemplation of olives and cypresses. There is a decisive moment when he—an up-and-coming youth of seventeen who combs his hair back and whose beard is starting to grow? in the corridor of a train out of Salonica?—looks out of the window at the break of day. He did not know, still doesn't know if the train had already passed Avignon, and whether the hills or mountains, behind whose inky black bulk the multicolored light rose even more glori¬ously, were called les Alpilles or les Baronnies, but he saw that there beyond the train window the same silence reigned and the same light—I must come back here, he decided—the same light and the same silence as in the early morning of August 2, 1954,quite a while before dawn, when the engines had fallen silent, and when he got up on deck he saw that the ship was scraping its way between two tall, almost vertical cliffs, from the fore¬deck one could see the chugging tug out ahead; then the tall cliffs dropped away, cables were paid out, the tugboat continued by itself in a wide arc, and as the deck slid past the cliff he felt as though he were being pushed face-down into a pillow of aro¬mas that he would only afterward be able to label as resin and thyme, it was suddenly so still—because the tug was already too far away or had moored, because no orders, or only muffled ones, were heard—so quiet that one could hear the tinkling or bleating of a herd on the fragrant hill; and one could do nothing but stare dumbstruck at the light everywhere, the small jetty where there were still a few electric bulbs burning, the water without a ripple, a light that spanned all colors from golden red toward the bow to star-filled blue-black above the poop deck, as overwhelming as the scent that one drunkenly inhaled in a speechless admiration that retained nothing of any emotion, any feeling, but was on the contrary an absence, a sense of being relieved of all feeling.