

The France Trilogy

Bart Van Loo

An extract

Original title De Frankrijktrilogie
Publisher De Bezige Bij, 2012

Translation Dutch into English
Translator Rosalind Buck

© Bart Van Loo/Rosalind Buck/De Bezige Bij/Flanders Literature – this text cannot be copied nor made public by means of (digital) print, copy, internet or in any other way without prior consent from the rights holders.

France in a thousand and something pages

People need guides. I'm no different. It was an unorthodox French teacher who planted the seed for what later blossomed into this trilogy. Herman Geudens talked about French culture as if it were a treasure captured by the conquistadores, lying there for the taking. He gave me the key to the treasure chest. I pushed it open under my own steam and before I knew what was happening, I'd fallen into it. *Je suis tombé dedans*. Like Obelix, into a seething, foaming cauldron of magic potion. 'Bart Van Loo, the Obelix of French culture', wrote the author Willem van Zadelhoff once. If the truth be known: the physical resemblance to his friend Asterix is more striking.

One day, I decided to make my dreams come true, gave up my job in education and started living from voice and pen. Now leading a public existence, and then living like a monk. Thanks to readings and articles I was able to finance my trips to the butcher and the baker. Sometimes I retired to a monastery, my Antwerp flat or somewhere in France to read and write in peace and quiet. To begin with, I spent the majority of my time travelling. Zigzagging endlessly, with a pile of books as my only compass. My travels described extravagant arabesques through France. *Paris Return*, the first part of my trilogy, is the result of tens of thousand of pages and thousands of kilometres of enjoyable reading.

At the time, I was often looked on with pity: reading great tomes of French novels and then travelling in the footsteps of the characters and authors to boot. People couldn't understand why I was wasting my precious time like that. The frown disappeared when I came up with my reply. First of all, these writers' novels were wonders of world literature, stories you can snuggle up with, intrigues that sweep you mercilessly away and sumptuously packaged pondering that allow you to view reality in a different way. What's more, the books and lives of famous authors such as Gustave Flaubert en Victor Hugo took me to every remote corner of France. To Paris, naturally, but also to the Côte d'Azur, Picardy, Normandy and Provence. From the rocks of Etretat, via the Eiffel Tower to the Pont du Gard. In short, I ended up in all kinds of well-known places, but thanks to my writers I saw them through other eyes. And en route I discovered numerous fascinating, but unknown regions, charming but forgotten, out-of-the-way villages.

I travelled in all seasons, alone or in company, by train, by car, by bike or by boat and, naturally, by foot. Hoteliers and museum curators, guides and chance passers-by answered my innumerable

questions with good will or otherwise. I hurdled barbed wire and crept along forbidden pathways to photograph an author's house. I sat, book in hand, daydreaming in parks and churchyards. Time and again, I searched the real world for similarities with what my writers had once written in novels. Now be honest, who wouldn't like to step into a scene from a book?

But it didn't stop there. Before I knew it, in restaurants I was ordering what my writers had eaten. It started with Honoré de Balzac's *rillettes de Tours* in the 12th century auberge in Saché. After that, I went in search of the same Balzac's salmon, Alexandre Dumas' chicken and Jean Cocteau's lamb filet. While I was putting the finishing touches to *Paris Return* I suddenly had the sneaking urge to continue that gastronomic quest. After all, France is the land of haute cuisine. But how is that? Which chefs built up that reputation? How do their best authors write about the culinary treasures of their homeland? And, naturally, how do those world-famous dishes taste?

That quest demanded discipline and stamina. I buried myself in the wonderful cookery book by Alexandre Dumas (yes, he of *The Three Musketeers*), browsed through Auguste Escoffier's world famous *Guide Culinnaire* and went through my library with a fine-toothed comb looking for gastronomic passages. Naturally, I also treated my taste buds. I have fond memories of the succulent lamb at Le Train Bleu in Paris and the beef cooked in hay by Bernard Loiseau in bon vivant Saulieu. And of the unknown restaurant in the Limousin, where I was served a delicious *tête de veau* but the address of which, much to my annoyance, I failed to note. From time to time, I even set to myself. And so, *Like a Chef in France* emerged, somewhere halfway between kitchen and writing desk, between restaurant and reading corner.

There is a practical side to each part of the trilogy. You can read *Paris Return* at home, for example, but thanks to the maps that have been included, it can serve as an alternative travel guide. You can read *Like a Chef in France* in your armchair, but at the same time it contains numerous rare, classic recipes that demand to be tried out. I leave the practical side of *Oh Vermillion Slit!* to the reader's imagination, but it seemed logical to me, after extensive travelling and eating, to finally explore the age-old French erotic tradition. As Brantôme put it: 'I have heard that even foreigners prefer our women to others, even if only because a few sensual words sound far better in French than in other languages'. While writing the third part, I had a wonderful chance meeting with a French woman. Since which, I would be the last to contradict Brantôme.

In *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (1985) by Haruki Murakami, the names of French writers crop up all the time. This novel by the great contemporary Japanese author is saturated with French culture. Strikingly, in the Lowlands, it seems to be fading into obscurity. Despite the fact that France remains the all-time favourite holiday destination, French writers are being read less and less, only a minority of the population speaks the language and few are familiar with the country's history. In short, the average Fleming or Dutch person is gradually losing contact with French tradition. No, you will not hear me declaiming that France is the promised land. I'm not a died-in-the-wool Francophile flag-waver, but it is an evolution I regret.

Those in their early thirties and certainly adolescents who can come up with more than two key words at the mention of the names Charles Baudelaire, Emile Zola, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Georges Brassens, Serge Gainsbourg, Jacques Tati, Louis de Funès or Auguste Escoffier are thin on the ground. It's a pity, as a great deal of beauty and insight threatens to be lost. I would like to champion an increasingly repressed culture. Talks and performances contribute and, over the past few years, with my blog (bartvanloo.blogspot.com) I have also been painting the virtual town *bleu.blanc.rouge*.

In *Hard-Boiled Wonderland*, Nobel Prize candidate Murakami presents his readers with an extraordinary ending. The main characters know that they only have twenty-four hours to live. They consider how to spend that time. The hero makes a date with a pretty librarian he has recently met. First a bite to eat, then they travel snugly to eternity together. But it is the choice of the female protagonist, in particular, that is astonishing. She withdraws into solitude and... reads a Balzac novel. Dear readers, let's not wait until the fateful last day; from now on, let's combine all the activities of Murakami's hero and heroine with a French flourish: travelling and looking, eating and reading, making love and dreaming.

Bart Van Loo, Antwerp, spring 2011

Foreword

I'm running, fagged out, along the Seine. The sweat runs in rivulets from my chin. I'm nearing my wit's end. It's my last literary forage in the French capital. My book is already well underway, but to round things off I was going to tag along with my Parisian friend Patrick on a tour of secluded literary spots. My plans are now threatening to fall apart.

It all started when I arrived at Gare du Nord station. Sauntering along the platform I suddenly realise I can't remember where I agreed to meet Patrick. I rack my brains. I've got an inkling that the walk - which other Parisians are taking part in, too - sets off in Place Saint Michel, by the fountain, a stone's throw from the Seine. My intuition has saved me several times in such a situation. Reassured, I take the metro, nestle down in a café in the square, order breakfast and enjoy the typical Parisian daybreak. The smell of hot croissants, men and women drinking a *café noir* at the *zinc*, while reading the paper. And I wait. And wait. No Patrick.

Quarter past ten I give up waiting and run to an internet café in rue Saint-André des Arts to dig up his number. I've forgotten it, of course. Found it. Back in the square I run into the first café I come to. Down the stairs to the loos. I haven't got a phone card, so I have to look for a phone that takes coins. They're usually in the urinals in cafés. I punch in the number and get his wife Elizabeth. I've made a mistake, I'm late and don't know where I'm supposed to be. Not Place, but Quai Saint-Michel. Well I'm blowed! Almost exactly where I first met him. No time for nostalgic outpourings, though, back onto the street. Too late, of course. Back into the basement of some bistro. Elizabeth again, who tells me that the next stop is Quai Malaquais and the group will then take rue de Seine in the direction of rue de Condé. Why didn't I ask before?

So here I am running, fagged out, along the Seine. On a bit, nobody on Quai Malaquais. My engine is gradually beginning to stutter, but I persevere valiantly and dive into rue de Seine, wide-eyed. Can't be long now. On the way, I pass the narrow rue Visconti, catching a glimpse of the house where Balzac tried to run a printing press. He is perhaps the very greatest in this book. The stachanovist of French literature, the first writer I really came to love. As I run, I think of his strange little writer's room near the meandering Indre in Saché, of the most delightful shoulder scene in all literature in *Le Lys dans la vallée*, his impossible love for the impossible Madame Hanska from the Ukraine and, naturally, his intriguing descriptions of Paris in *Illusions Perdues*. I lose track in my musings, forget to turn left, then take a detour along rue de Tournon, where I see the sign for Hôtel du Sénat hanging. The place where the young Provençal Alphonse Daudet came to try his

literary fortune. Unknown and unloved, a discovery. The perfect guide for (re)discovering Provence, but also the author of two fantastic Paris novels. The owner of a villa in the Essonne, where I spent a few nights in his room. At the end of the street I turn left. On my way to rue de Condé. To my right is the unsurpassed Jardin du Luxembourg. I know I can find a statue of George Sand there, but in my mind's eye what I actually see is the young Victor Hugo walking around. Meeting his Adèle under the plane trees. And later, the already besotted Marius from *Les Misérables*, who, in his turn, will win Cosette. A great Paris novel, which, to my amazement, he largely wrote during his exile in the Canary Island. I can see myself on the bike again. My nose in the wind. Riding after Hugo. The hydrangeas of Jersey. Hauteville House on Guernsey. Seasick on the boat to Sark. Just before running into rue de Condé I spy the cupola of the Pantheon in the distance. The roof of the famous mausoleum for distinguished French citizens. A few years ago, I was there when Alexandre Dumas senior, the spiritual father of *The Three Musketeers*, experienced his rather posthumous *heure de gloire*. If necessary, the French exhume their great writers in order to pay them homage. Bizarre, but an unforgettable evening. Crammed in amongst the masses. His *Vingt ans après* in my hand. Goose bumps.

All of a sudden, I realise this hellish course can't be a coincidence. It's as if fate were chasing me at the run through my reading and travelling adventures of the past few years. Tens of thousands of pages. Thousands of kilometres. And suddenly I'm really out of breath. I've had it; it's as if the kilometres and pages are suddenly taking their toll. It was great, but I'm glad the end is in sight now. What did I get myself into? A book about the *monstres sacrés* of French literature. David, up against several Goliaths. Not haphazardly, but tracing their works and lives, striding along in their footsteps. I occasionally considered giving up, but after a while the bug always came back with a vengeance.

Reading, writing and travelling is therefore a combination not to be scorned. I drag myself back to rue de Seine. And, exhausted, bump into Patrick. Relieved, he calls his wife. 'Elizabeth, we've got him'. As if he was talking about a runaway dog. Bravely, I walk my last literary kilometres through Paris. Did anyone ever get muscly calves from literature, I wonder? Reading is travelling in your head. Or you can combine the word with the deed and travel in the footsteps of your favourite authors, in this case the famous prose writers of 19th-century France. The nineteenth century? Dead and buried French writers? Thick, unreadable books? I've been subject to no lack of questioning and frowning over the past few years. Unjustifiably, as an awful lot of 19th-century French prose is literature of the highest echelon and reads quite easily. I looked for the places where the authors lived and worked, but also the places we can still visit this day with their novels in the hand. Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas Senior, George Sand, Honoré de Balzac, Emile Zola, Alphonse Daudet, Guy de Maupassant and Gustave Flaubert took me to the most diverse corners of France and, naturally, also Paris, the literary capital of 19th century. *Paris Return* is a modest attempt at turfing the billet-doux out of the corner of misplaced intellectualism and dusty dullness without therefore resorting to simplism and clichés.

It goes without saying that reading constitutes the beginning and the end of this book. I read, went travelling, and will continue reading. But since Hugo, Balzac and Zola I see Paris differently. And after the numerous tours of the French capital I read each (new) novel with different eyes. Wandering over the Canary Islands has helped me understand Hugo's exile better. Re-reading the outspokenly sensual prose in Daudet's *Lettres de mon Moulin* in Provence was, in all senses, a delicious experience. Anyone who has dragged the heavy burden of a broken heart through lonely steers will look on the beloved castles of Balzac's de Vandenesse in Touraine with sincere emotion.

After which, on a second reading, *Le Lys dans la vallée* will rise again in your hands as a new novel. And so forth. The authentic shards of the past have brought the featured writers and their books closer to me. Phrases such as ‘I feel Hugo’s presence’ and ‘for a moment I feel just like Félix de Vandenesse’ crop up casually from time to time in my text. And that is no gratuitous boasting. More than once, seeking out sometimes disappeared remnants of the past evoked moments of genuine excitement and emotion. At the end, I actually surprised myself when an incessant stream of miscellaneous letters to Gustave Flaubert flowed from my pen. The chastening conclusion to years of reading and travelling.

I had no intention of writing an academic book, but I have endeavoured to link interesting biographical facts and personal travel notes to specific text insight. I also realised all too well that the water has long since gone off the boil. Libraries full have been written about these authors. Which does not mean they are frequently read. It is for that very reason that I would like to break a lance for them, especially as there are now some excellent translations available. First and foremost, *Paris Return* is intended as an unpretentious tour through the lives and works of a number of great French writers but, with the maps and addresses I have added, it is also certainly intended to help the reader to take a different kind of trip across France. Reading always involves an element of travel. Travelling always involves an element of reading.

Bart Van Loo

Antwerp, Spring 2006

Like a chef in France

Literary recipes and culinary tales

‘What? Yet another book on food? The public has literally been inundated with a tidal wave of such writings in the past few years’

Menon, *manuel des officiers de bouche*, 1759

Amuse-gueule

In France, gastronomy is cherished as one of the most precious treasures of national heritage. You therefore need not necessarily be a *maitre cuisinier* yourself, but every right-minded Frenchy knows how to value a succulent meal and can effortlessly wax lyrical about it for some time afterwards. Every now and again he will ruminate on the gastronomic highlights of his life with relish. The Francophile English king Edward VII (1841-1910) once let rip at a Germany ambassador who downed an excellent Bordeaux without it letting it touch the sides. ‘Sir, if you have the honour to drink a wine of such quality, then first look at it, smell it and finally sip it. And afterwards, talk about it for a long time...’

The French can, indeed, talk about food as the best of them, but do they also concoct appetizing texts with the pen? I raided a number of libraries and fell upon a treasure trove. Since time immemorial, French writers have been feeding on the sensual pleasures associated with cooking. Four years ago, an initial, modest sample of my literary-culinary quest was published. The book did

well and, after a while, it sold out. The result was therefore more than gratifying, but I was still not entirely satisfied. The talks I gave took me to every corner of Flanders and the Netherlands and only served to whet my appetite. In the meantime, the literary-culinary material continuing piling up in my study. Last year, my understanding publisher tapped me gently on the shoulder and kindly suggested I produce a final version of the book. It would take no time at all, said the ever-optimistic Harold Polis.

Until I entered the culinary arena with literary hunger and historic curiosity. The piled-up sheets of manuscript swiftly rose to the heavens, like puff pastry. Although quite a lot of ingredients from the first edition were swept from the writing and kitchen table, the book steadily thickened and almost doubled in size. Before I knew it, I had set out on an extensive gastronomic adventure. In the new edition, it seemed perfectly natural to serve the rich history of French gastronomy as an hors-d'oeuvre. What was mediaeval cuisine like? Did the French Revolution also have a culinary revolution in store? What can you learn from major culinary writings from hundreds of years ago? Which chefs left their mark? I read innumerable reference works and, thanks to the virtually limitless possibilities of the internet, I strayed through cookery books from bygone eras. At the same time, I tried to place the views of literary contemporaries in the succession of culinary trends. Famous chefs (Taillevent, La Varenne, Menon, Carême, Escoffier...) and no less famous writers (Montaigne, Molière, Rousseau, Dumas...) stole the main role in this tale and their work immediately provided raw ingredients for the second part of the book, which is seen to be a literary cookbook. Starters, main dishes and puddings, but also the sections on alcohol and menus do, indeed, expand on appetizing details from the historical hors-d'oeuvre. It was a challenge to link literary and culinary texts from the same period. In the third and last chapter, by way of a pousse-café I offer the reader diverse culinary reflections and fantasies.

Like a Chef in France constituted the ideal vehicle for making unknown but delicious French texts accessible to a Dutch-language readership, which can now ascertain that the reputedly so serious French literature also occasionally adopts a more frivolous tone. Do the works of François-René de Chateaubriand give away the secret of the ideal steak? What is the link between Rimbaud and a perfectly fried egg? How did Alexandre Dumas cook elephant's foot? Are the eating habits of Sade's heroes also perverse? What, according to Pierre Louÿs, is the favourite dish of lesbians? In addition to many delicious stories, the new *Like a Chef in France* also contains numerous handy recipes for all occasions. Why not treat your well-read loved one to Marguerite Duras's leek soup, or Honoré de Balzac's omelette? Or let your dear bookworm determine by experience whether Mallarmé's chicken is tastier than Dumas' chicken. Perhaps you have been dreaming for years of serving fish to hundreds of guests or conjuring up a gargantuan giant egg from your pots and pans? Serving asparagus disguised as peas? Reading the whole of Proust on a diet of homemade madeleines? From now on, you will be able to satisfy your hunger and that of your loved ones with inspiration and not only serve them a tasty meal but also treat them to an appropriate piece of literature (read aloud, why not?). Despite this pantagruelian culinary slalom my own appetite was not completely staved, though. Browsing through age-old cookery books, I therefore attempted, in passing, to find out which French cooks produced the béchamel sauce, vol-au-vent, peach melba and other mythical dishes from their chef's hats and unravel the often mysterious origins of French classics, such as tripes à la mode de Caen, bouillabaisse and cassoulet. In the end, a search of the Antwerp City Library and the Royal Library in The Hague produced valuable material for illustrations.

I primarily wrote *Like a Chef in France* for myself, to answer the many gastronomic questions bubbling up inside me. Hopefully, the literary, culinary and historical paths have also led to a substantial book for all who love France and literature. A book to polish off in one go or to savour bit by bit. 'The discovery of a new dish contributes more to the happiness of mankind than the

discovery of a star,' Brillaat-Savarin told us already, but Baudelaire was also right when he wrote that 'any healthy man can go without food for two days', adding emphatically, 'but not without poetry'. *Like a Chef in France* endeavours to appease both the Godfather of gastronomy and the prince of poets in an infectious manner. Twice as tasty!

Pastis

'Pastis is like breasts...'

France. You only have to hear the word and you immediately see a Renault 2CV, a Renault 4 or a Citroën DS pattering through an idyllic landscape. In a little while, the vehicle comes to a stop under a plane tree in a little market square. An old man gets out. He's wearing a black beret basque and walks with a baguette under his arm into his local bar, where he orders a pastis in a Provencal accent. Now and again, human imagination likes to work in clichés. From time to time those clichés are destroyed. But preferably not immediately. First, let's sit down and enjoy a Ricard or a 51. And once the magic potion has undergone its miraculous metamorphosis from transparent to cloudy, the best-read friend in your heavenly company raises his glass and speaks a few words that refresh the thirsty man before a drop has passed his lips. His hand rises in the air, the pastis glass hangs crookedly, his nose straightens out. 'As Fernandel once said,' and he leaves a pause until everyone is hanging on his words, 'pastis is like breasts: One is too few and three is too many'.

Pastis and kéma – black and green olives, gherkins and all kinds of vegetables cooked in vinegar - are part of the Marseillais art of living. A time when people could still talk to one another, when they still had something to say to one another. Naturally that made you thirsty. And yes, it took time. But time didn't matter. There was no hurry. Everything could wait another five minutes. That era was no worse or better than ours. But joy and sorrow were simply shared, without any false shame. Even the greatest miseries were imparted. You were never alone. All you had to do was go to Felix' restaurant. Or Marius'. Or Lucien's. And dramas engendered during a restless sleep vanished in anise vapours.

(Jean-Claude Izzo, *Chourmo*, 1996)

The legend destroyed

However strongly you associate France with pastis, the star-anise-flavoured beverage has been around for less than a hundred years. After absinth was banned in 1915, from 1920 onwards it was once again permitted to produce anise liqueurs on the condition that they didn't exceed the 30° alcohol content. That was adjusted to 40° in 1922 and 45° in 1938. It was primarily in Provence that pastis enjoyed an overwhelming popularity from the word go. The rest of France followed. The white fairy had driven out the green. The name itself only cropped up in 1932 and comes from the Provencal word for mixture (pastís). Paul Ricard's pastis ('le vrai pastis de Marseille') fought a hard competitive battle with the Pernod brand, but from 1975 onwards the two manufacturers joined forces and now market the well-known brands Ricard and Pastis 51. Recent counts show that the average frog drinks two litres of pastis a year, a total of some 112 million litres. Evidently, they frequently disregard Fernandel's (1903-1971) advice.

Seduction

‘She opened her legs like a book’

‘Take this, read it, there is nothing to be afraid of’

Denis Diderot, *The Indiscrete Jewels*.

I can't find my keys. After two months, I'm back home, but I can't get in. I search my luggage fruitlessly again and try to reconstruct the past few hours from the moment I closed the door of Villa Marguerite Yourcenar behind me with a sigh. The end of sixty inspiring days in the thrilling company of Rabelais, Sade, Apollinaire and lesser-known figures such as Brantôme, Crébillon junior and Vivant Denon. All authors of works drenched with sensuality. All of them Frenchmen, too, which is no coincidence. Over the past thousand years, the French erotic tradition has, without doubt, been trend setting in Western culture. With the exception of a few memorable but still little-read examples, that stirring blaze has ended up in the margins of history. Perhaps the book that I finished on Mont Noir in French Flanders can rekindle the flame and pass on the fire to a horde of slightly intoxicated readers. That is what flashed though my mind as the door to the writers' residence fell to. I would have done better to think about the keys, which were still in my room.

The only friend who has a spare key is on holiday. Night falls. I order a taxi and get it to take me and my luggage to a nearby hotel. Hotel du Commerce, next to the Royal Museum for Fine Arts in Antwerp. The establishment has intrigued me for years. I check in and have to pay up front. ‘Sixty-nine euros, please,’ says the woman at the desk. She helps me carry my bags to my room. She asks if I'm planning to stay long in Antwerp. I tell her I'm considering it. When I ask what time I can have my coffee in the morning, she gives me a disarming smile. ‘We don't serve breakfast here’. She's about to say something else, but the phone is ringing downstairs.

I sit on the bed and get undressed. The walls are hung with erotic engravings. A photograph of a naked woman. And mirrors, even on the ceiling. I switch off the light and try to sleep. I can't. I put the light on again, but evidently I've pushed another button. Black lights. To kill time I dig into my case of erotica. Before I know it, the bed is covered with books, the pages of which are illuminated in the ultraviolet beams. I thumb from one sensual work to another, read a titivating paragraph here, a skittish verse there. Searching for favourite passages, I bump into another that seems perfect for my book. I banish that thought from my mind immediately: it's time to finish it. And yet I stray further into often centuries-old desires. Gradually, I feel the blood flowing more quickly through my veins. Glancing up from reading Guillaume Apollinaire's *Les Onze Mille Verges* (Eleven Thousand Rods, 1907), I see in the big mirror in front of me what I've been feeling swelling up for some time. Just then, there is the sound of sighing and moaning from the room beneath me and I can hear bodies moving around on a cheap mattress. ‘She opened her legs like a book,’ whispers Apollinaire in my hands. A cautious smile spreading across my face, I lay the tattered Guillaume aside and pick up Pierre Louÿs' *Manuel de civilité pour les petites filles* (Young Girls' Handbook of Manners, 1926). ‘Do not say: Respectable novels bore me to death. Say: I would like to read something interesting’.

The silhouette of the Museum of Fine Arts is dimly visible through the curtains. I think about the fact that inside, at almost the same height as I am now, Jean Fouquet's *Madonna Surrounded by Seraphim and Cherubim* hangs on the museum wall. And that the 15th-century Mary, swathed in

blue, white and red garments is devoutly lowering her gaze while baring an impressive breast. My thoughts are all over the place. 'Do not say: I feel like fucking. Say: I am nervous'.

I try to concentrate on reading Louÿs. Is this pornographic or erotic? Over time, art forms that focus on sex without love have been labelled as pornographic (from *pórnê*, the Greek for prostitute). Today pornography has acquired a name for seeking to titillate people sexually, often in a straightforward, rather unsubtle way. An animal grunt. Then a sharp cry. The guests in the room above have also gone into action. The lady cries out something incoherent as if something doesn't please her. I prick up my ears. The message is clear; the packaging not very elevating. 'Do not say: His prick is too big for my mouth. Say: I feel like a little girl when I talk to him'.

Erotica, on the other hand, is supposed to encompass all the phenomena and feelings associated with sensual love. The dividing line is not entirely clear. I often hear that erotica is suggestive, while pornography shows the raw truth. Sensual novels, however, often include both dimensions. The border where erotica ends and pornography begins will be different for everybody. Perhaps pornography is other people's erotica?

I hear the door of the room above me open and shut. Hasty footsteps on the laminate flooring. A commotion. Smacking. The other rooms see it as a signal to redouble their efforts. The rutting resonates through the paper-thin walls. This is no longer a hidden passion flowing through the halls of this assignation hotel, 'it is Venus herself, fastened to her prey'. While Racine's famous words from *Phèdre* (1677) well up in me, a climax is reached below. Seconds later, the couple in the adjacent room follows suit, with slightly more enthusiasm. Above me, they put on a final sprint. The release is unbelievably great. 'Do not say: I came like crazy. Say: I'm feeling a little tired'.

Silence returns. Suddenly, to my amazement, I can hear the same identical groaning coming from everywhere. Intuitively, I switch on the television and find myself in the porno film my neighbours are watching. The detail shots multiply in the mirrors of my room. The lust is lighting up my bed sheets, too. 'Say: I'm never bored alone'.

All of a sudden, I realise how I have been reading my way through the days like a stubborn anachronism over the past few years. The book is finished as a carrier of sexual pleasure. The Hotel du Commerce doesn't lie. While I was seeking some sensual diversion on printed paper just now, my peers are now opting straight for flickering images to boost their desires.

It's light when I awake, confused. I've hardly slept and can barely open my eyes. The first image I take in is what is shown in the mirror on the ceiling. Me, half naked. The sheets spread all around. Between my legs lies Rabelais. To my left, Apollinaire, on the other side Louÿs. Diderot's rear is trying to conceal itself under the pillow. Ronsard and Nin lie side by side at the foot. Sade has fallen out of bed. I get up and brush my teeth. With an accurate and almost tender gesture I sweep all the authors into my case, carry them whistling down the stairs and step out onto the street with a broad smile. It took some doing, but my book is finished. Now I'm sure of it.