Neither Here Nor There: Travels in Europe

Bill Bryson

In the morning I got up early and went for a long walk through the sleeping streets. I love to watch cities wake up, and Paris wakes up more abruptly, more startlingly, than any place I know. One minute you have the city to yourself: it's just you and a guy delivering crates of bread, and a couple of droning street-cleaning machines. (It might be worth noting here that Paris spends £58 a year a head on street-cleaning compared with £17 a head in London, which explains why Paris gleams and London is a toilet.) Then all at once it's frantic: cars and buses swishing past in sudden abundance, cafés and kiosks opening, people flying out of Metro stations like flocks of startled birds, movement everywhere, thousands and thousands of pairs of hurrying legs.

By half-past eight Paris is a terrible place for walking. There's too much traffic. A blue haze of uncombusted diesel hangs over every boulevard. I know Baron Haussmann made Paris a grand place to look at, but the man had no concept of traffic flow. At the Arc de Triomphe alone thirteen roads come together. Can you imagine that? I mean to say, here you have a city with the world's most pathologically aggressive drivers – drivers who in other circumstances would be given injections of thorazine from syringes the size of bicycle pumps and confined to their beds with leather straps – and you give them an open space where they can all try to go in any of thirteen directions at once. Is that asking for trouble or what?

It's interesting to note that the French have had this reputation for bad driving since long before the invention of the internal combustion engine. Even in

the eighteenth century British travellers to Paris were remarking on what lunatic drivers the French were, on 'the astonishing speed with which the carriages and people moved through the streets... It was not an uncommon sight to see a child run over and probably killed.' I quote from *The Grand Tour* by Christopher Hibbert, a book whose great virtue is in pointing out that the peoples of Europe have for at least 300 years been living up to their stereotypes. As long ago as the sixteenth century, travellers were describing the Italians as voluble, unreliable and hopelessly corrupt, the Germans as gluttonous, the Swiss as irritatingly officious and tidy, the French as, well, insufferably French.

You also constantly keep coming up against these monumental squares and open spaces that are all but impossible to cross on foot. My wife and I went to Paris on our honeymoon and foolishly tried to cross the Place de la Concorde without first leaving our names at the embassy. Somehow she managed to get to the obelisk in the centre, but I was stranded in the midst of a circus maximus of killer automobiles, waving weakly to my dear spouse of two days and whimpering softly while hundreds and hundreds of little buff-coloured Renaults were bearing down on me with their drivers all wearing expressions like Jack Nicholson in *Batman*.

It still happens now. At the Place de la Bastille, a vast open space dominated on its north-eastern side by a glossy new structure that I supposed to be the Paris branch of the Bradford and Bingley Building Society but which proved upon closer inspection to be the new Paris opera house, I spent three-quarters of an hour trying to get from the Rue de Lyon to the Rue de St-Antoine. The problem is that the pedestrian-crossing lights have been designed with the clear purpose of leaving the foreign visitor confused, humiliated and, if all goes to plan, dead.

This is what happens: you arrive at a square to find

all the traffic stopped, but the pedestrian light is red and you know that if you venture so much as a foot off the kerb all the cars will surge forward and turn you into a gooey crêpe. So you wait. After a minute, a blind person comes along and crosses the great cobbled plain without hesitating. Then a ninety-year-old lady in a motorized wheelchair trundles past and wobbles across the cobbles to the other side of the square a quarter of a mile away.

You are uncomfortably aware that all the drivers within 150 yards are sitting with moistened lips watching you expectantly, so you pretend that you don't really want to cross the street at all, that actually you've come over here to look at this interesting fin-de-siècle lamppost. After another minute 150 pre-school children are herded across by their teachers, and then the blind man returns from the other direction with two bags of shopping. Finally, the pedestrian light turns green and you step off the kerb and all the cars come charging at you. And I don't care how paranoid and irrational this sounds, but I know for a fact that the people of Paris want me dead.

Eventually I gave up trying to cross streets in any kind of methodical way and instead just followed whatever route looked least threatening. So it was with some difficulty and not a little surprise that I managed to pick my way by early afternoon to the Louvre, where I found a long immobile queue curled around the entrance courtyard like an abandoned garden hose. I hovered, undecided whether to join the queue, come back later in the faint hope that it would have shrunk, or act like a Frenchman and jump it. The French were remarkably shameless about this. Every few minutes one would approach the front of the queue, affect to look at his wristwatch and then duck under the barrier and disappear through the door with the people at the front. No one protested, which surprised me. In New York, from where many of these people came, judging

by their accents and the bullet holes in their trench coats, the queue jumpers would have been seized by the crowd and had their limbs torn from their sockets. I actually saw this happen to a man once at Shea Stadium. It was ugly, but you couldn't help but cheer. Even in London the miscreants would have received a various rebuke – 'I say, kindly take your place at the back of the queue, there's a good fellow' – but here there was not a peep of protest.

I couldn't bring myself to jump the queue, but equally I couldn't stand among so much motionless humanity while others were flouting the rule of order and getting away with it. So I passed on, and was rather relieved. The last time I went to the Louvre, in 1973 with Katz, it was swarming with visitors and impossible to see anything. The 'Mona Lisa' was like a postage stamp viewed through a crowd of heads from another building and clearly things had not improved since then.

Besides, there was only one painting I especially wanted to see and that was a remarkable eighteenth-century work, evidently unnoticed by any visitor but me for 200 years among the Louvre's endless corridors. I almost walked past it myself but something about it nicked the edge of my gaze and made me turn. It was a painting of two aristocratic ladies, young and not terribly attractive, standing side by side and wearing nothing at all but their jewels and sly smiles. And here's the thing: one of them had her finger plugged casually – one might almost say absent-mindedly – into the other's fundament. I can say with some certainty that this was an activity quite unknown in Iowa, even among the wealthy and well-travelled, and I went straight off to find Katz, who had cried in dismay fifteen minutes after entering the Louvre, 'There's nothing but pictures and shit in this place,' and departed moodily for the coffee shop, saying he would wait there for me for thirty minutes and no more. I found him sitting with a Coke, complaining bitterly

that he had had to pay two francs for it *and* give a handful of centimes to an old crone for the privilege of peeing in the men's room ('*and* she watched me the whole time').

'Never mind about that,' I said. 'You've got to come and see this painting.'

'What for?'

'It's very special.'

'Why?'

'It just is, believe me. You'll be thanking me in a minute.'

'What's so special about it?'

I told him. He refused to believe it. No such picture had ever been painted, and if it had been painted it wouldn't be hanging in a public gallery. But he came. And the thing is, I couldn't for the life of me find it. Katz was convinced it was just a cruel joke, designed to waste his time and deprive him of the last two ounces of his Coke, and he spent the rest of the day in a tetchy frame of mind.

Katz was in a tetchy frame of mind throughout most of our stay in Paris. He was convinced everything was out to get him. On the morning of our second day, we were strolling down the Champs-Elysées when a bird shit on his head. 'Did you know a bird's shit on your head?' I asked a block or two later.

Instinctively Katz put a hand to his head, looked at it in horror – he was always something of a sissy where excrement was concerned; I once saw him running through Greenwood Park in Des Moines like the figure in Edvard Munch's 'The Scream' just because he had inadvertently probed some dog shit with the tip of his finger – and with only a mumbled 'Wait here' walked with ramrod stiffness in the direction of our hotel. When he reappeared twenty minutes later he smelled overpoweringly of Brut aftershave and his hair was plastered down like a third-rate Spanish gigolo's, but he appeared to have regained his composure. 'I'm

ready now,' he announced.

Almost immediately another bird shit on his head. Only this time it *really* shit. I don't want to get too graphic, in case you're snacking or anything, but if you can imagine a pot of yoghurt upended onto his scalp, I think you'll get the picture. 'Gosh, Steve, that was one sick bird,' I observed helpfully.

Katz was literally speechless. Without a word he turned and walked stiffly back to the hotel, ignoring the turning heads of passers-by. He was gone for nearly an hour. When at last he returned, he was wearing a windcheater with the hood up. 'Just don't say a word,' he warned me and strode past. He never really warmed to Paris after that.

With the Louvre packed I went instead to the new – new to me, at any rate – Musée d'Orsay, on the Left Bank opposite the Tuileries. When I had last passed it, sixteen years before, it had been a derelict hulk, the shell of the old Gare d'Orsay, but some person of vision had decided to restore the old station as a museum and it is simply wonderful, both as a building and as a collection of pictures. I spent two happy hours there, and afterwards checked out the situation at the Louvre – still hopelessly crowded – and instead went to the Pompidou Centre, which I was determined to try to like, but I couldn't. Everything about it seemed wrong. For one thing it was a bit weathered and faded, like a child's toy that has been left out over winter, which surprised me because it is only a dozen years old and the government had just spent £40 million refurbishing it, but I guess that's what you get when you build with plastic. And it seemed much too overbearing a structure for its cramped neighbourhood. It would be an altogether different building in a park.

But what I really dislike about buildings like the Pompidou Centre, and Paris is choking on them, is that they are just showing off. Here's Richard Rogers saying to the world, 'Look, I put all the pipes on the

outside. Am I cute enough to kiss?' I could excuse that if some consideration were given to function. No one seems to have thought what the Pompidou Centre should do – that it should be a gathering place, a haven, because inside it's just crowded and confusing. It has none of the sense of space and light and majestic calm of the Musée d'Orsay. It's like a department store on the first day of a big sale. There's hardly any place to sit and no focal point – no big clock or anything – at which to meet someone. It has no heart.

Outside it's no better. The main plaza on the Rue St-Martin is in the shade during the best part of the day and is built on a slope, so it's dark and the rain never dries and again there's no place to sit. If they had made the slope into a kind of amphitheatre, people could sit on the steps, but now if you sit down you feel as if you are going to slide to the bottom.

I have nothing against novelty in buildings – I am quite taken with the glass pyramid at the Louvre and those buildings at La Défense that have the huge holes in the middle – but I just hate the way architects and city planners and everyone else responsible for urban life seems to have lost sight of what cities are for. They are for people. That seems obvious enough, but for half a century we have been building cities that are for almost anything else: for cars, for businesses, for developers, for people with money and bold visions who refuse to see cities from ground level, as places in which people must live and function and get around. Why should I have to walk through a damp tunnel and negotiate two sets of stairs to get across a busy street? Why should cars be given priority over me? How can we be so rich and so stupid at the same time? It is the curse of our century – too much money, too little sense – and the Pompidou seems to me a kind of celebration of that in plastic.

One evening I walked over to the Place de la République and had a nostalgic dinner at a bistro called

Le Thermomètre. My wife and I spent our honeymoon in the Hotel Moderne across the way (now a Holiday Inn, alas, alas) and dined nightly at the Thermomètre because it was cheap and we had next to no money. I had spent the whole of my savings, some £18, on a suit for the wedding – a remarkable piece of apparel with lapels that had been modelled on the tail fins of a 1957 Coupe de Ville and trousers so copiously flared that when I walked you didn't see my legs move – and had to borrow £12 spending money from my father-in-law in order, as I pointed out, to keep his daughter from starving during her first week of married life. I expected the Thermomètre to be full of happy memories, but I couldn't remember anything about it at all, except that it had the fiercest toilet attendant in Paris, a woman who looked like a Russian wrestler – a male Russian wrestler – and who sat at a table in the basement with a pink dish full of small coins and craned her head to watch you while you had a pee to make sure you didn't dribble on the tiles or pocket any of the urinal cakes. It is hard enough to pee when you are aware that someone's eyes are on you, but when you fear that at any moment you will be felled by a rabbit chop to the kidneys for taking too much time, you seize up altogether. My urine turned solid. You couldn't have cleared my system with Draino. So eventually I would hoist up my zip and return unrelieved to the table, and spend the night doing a series of Niagara Falls impressions back at the hotel. The toilet attendant, I'm pleased to say, was no longer there. There was no toilet attendant at all these days. No urinal cakes either, come to that.

It took me two or three days to notice it, but the people of Paris have become polite over the last twenty years. They don't exactly rush up and embrace you and thank you for winning the war for them, but they have certainly become more patient and accommodating. The cab drivers are still complete jerks, but everyone else – shopkeepers, waiters, the police – seemed

almost friendly. I even saw a waiter smile once. And somebody held open a door for me instead of letting it bang in my face.

It began to unsettle me. Then on my last night, as I was strolling near the Seine, a well-dressed family of two adults and two teenage children swept past me on the narrow pavement and without breaking stride or interrupting their animated conversation flicked me into the gutter. I could have hugged them.

On the morning of my departure I trudged through a grey rain to the Gare de Lyon to get a cab to the Gare du Nord and a train to Brussels. Because of the rain, there were no cabs so I stood and waited. For five minutes I was the only person there, but gradually other people came along and took places behind me. When at last a cab arrived and pulled up directly in front of me, I was astonished to discover that seventeen grown men and women believed they had a perfect right to try to get in ahead of me. A middle-aged man in a cashmere coat who was obviously wealthy and well-educated actually laid hands on me. I maintained possession by making a series of aggrieved Gallic honking noises – 'Mais non! Mais non!'- and using my bulk to block the door. I leaped in, resisting the chance to catch the pushy man's tie in the door and let him trot along with us to the Gare du Nord, and just told the driver to get me the hell out of there. He looked at me as if I were a large, imperfectly formed piece of shit, and with a disgusted sigh engaged first gear. I was glad to see some things never change.