PARIS TO THE MOON

Adam Gopnik

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"I dare say, moreover," she pursued with an interested gravity, "that I do, that we all do here, run too much to mere eye. But how can it be helped? We're all looking at each other—and in the light of Paris one sees what things resemble. That's what the light of Paris seems always to show. It's the fault of the light of Paris—dear old light!"

"Dear Old Paris!" little Bilham echoed.

"Everything, everyone shows," Miss Barrace went on.

"But for what they really are?" Strether asked.

"Oh, I like your Boston 'reallys'! But sometimes—yes."

—*The Ambassadors*

The Winter Circus,

CHRISTMAS JOURNAL 1

It is the weather reports on CNN that will scare you most. They must come from a studio in Atlanta, like most things on the cable network, but they tell about the European weather, and only the European weather, and they treat Europe as if it were, for CNN's purposes, one solid block of air with dirt down beneath, one continuous area of high- and low-pressure systems bumping into one another over a happy common land, just like the tristate area, or "here in the Southland," or "up in the heart of the North country," or any of the other cheerful areas into which American television stations divide the country.

The job of the European weatherman (or -woman) seems to be pretty low on the CNN totem pole. They keep changing. One day it is a blow-dried midwesterner; the next a corn-fed, nicely Jane Pauleyish woman; the next a portly black guy. Each one points in turn to the big map of Europe, with the swirling satellite photo superimposed, and then, with the limitless cheeriness

of an American announcer, calls out the temperature and tomorrow's forecast for every site of the more intolerable tragedies of the twentieth century.

"If you're headed to Warsaw tonight, you may just want to pack that extra sweater, but if business is pulling you over on that quick trip to St. Petersburg"—quick, impish, professional wink—"you'd better make sure that you've got the overcoat. Looking at snow there *all* night long.

"We're looking at sunny weather throughout Italy, from Rome right up to Venice. Looks like another mild night in France, though of course there'll be snow in the mountains around Savoy. In the Basque country, some *really chilly temperatures. Nice* skiing, though. More mild weather in Prague and Budapest, though looking up at Vienna . . ." All the old capitals of Old Europe, the sites of the ghettoes and the massacres and the opera houses, the border with Spain where they turned the refugees away and Walter Benjamin died in despair, all treated in the spirit, with the same sound, that I can recall from every night in my childhood in West Philadelphia, when "Dr." Somebody or other—a "certified meteorologist"—gave the weather for the tristate area and threw in the highs and lows in Atlantic City "for all of you heading for the shore."

We have won as large a victory as any country has ever won—no empire has ever stood in so much power, cultural, political, economic, military—and all we can do is smile and say that you might want to pack a sweater for the imperial parade.

When the cable television man came to hook us up on the first morning of the general strike, you could hear the demonstrators out on the boulevard, singing and marching. But the bland emissary from the age of global information worked on, stringing the wire and hooking up the decoder boxes. He finally handed us three different remotes and then ran through the thirty-odd

channels like a priest reciting the catechism. "Here is CNN, news in America. Here is MTV. Here is French MTV," the cable man explained. "Here is Euronews, in English. Here is Eurosport." A 49ers-Dolphins game was in progress. There it was, truly, the same familiar ribbon of information and entertainment that girdles the world now—literally (really, truly literally) encircling the atmosphere, electric rain. All you have to do is hold out a hand to catch it.

Luke, at least, has found a home, shelter from the electronic rain and global weather. He lives in the Luxembourg Gardens. We go there nearly every day, even in the chill November days among the fallen leaves. The design of the gardens is nearly perfect for a small child. There is a playground; there is a puppet theater, where he is too small to go yet, but outside the puppet theater there is a woman selling balloons, and every morning he points to his wrist and says his all-purpose word, *bu-bel*, which means balloon, ball, whatever it is meant to mean. But then, when we get to the gardens and the po-faced woman goes to tie the balloon to his wrist, he leaps back with fear and demands to have it taken off again. Approach and avoidance with older women.

He rides the carousel, the fallen leaves piled neatly all around it, and though bent-up it is a beauty. The animals are chipped, the paint is peeling, the giraffe and elephant are missing hooves and tusks, and the carousel is musicless and graceless. The older children ride the outside horses. A God-only-knows-how-old carousel motor complains and heaves and wheezes and finally picks up enough momentum to turn the platform around, while the carousel attendant hands a baton to each of the older children riding the outside horses. Then he unhooks a pear-shaped wooden egg from the roof of his little station, at the edge of the turning platform, and slips little metal rings with leather tags attached into the egg. As the children race around, the little rings drop one after another into the egg and dangle from its base, the

small leather tags acting as a kind of target, a sighting mechanism, so that the children can see the rings. The older children try to catch the rings with the sticks.

It looks tricky; it looks *hard*. The kids have to hold the weather-beaten sticks up just so; there's just one angle, one way to do it. As the carousel picks up speed, it gets going whirring fast, and the hand-eye, or rather hand–eye–painted horse, coordination you need looks terrifyingly accomplished. To make things even harder, if two children are mounted one right behind the other, and the first child lances the ring, it means that the next ring, slipping down, only arrives at the base of the wooden egg as the next child arrives, making it just about impossible to aim. If the first child just knocks the ring, on the other hand, the ring starts trembling widely enough to make a good grab impossible. It is a tough game, and what makes it odder is that there is no reward for doing well at it. I have read about this game all my life: going for the Big Brass Ring! It's an American metaphor. But here there are little tin rings, and no reward for getting them except the satisfaction of having done it. You don't even get to keep the tin rings for a moment of triumph—Look, Mama!—to show the cluttered stick, rings on it like plums on the branch of a plum tree. The keeper takes back the batons before the carousel has even stopped.

It is hard for me to imagine Luke ever doing this: sitting up there, skewering his rings. For the moment, for a long moment, we sit together in the little chariots and just spin. He keeps his eyes locked on the big kids with the sticks, who come under the heading of Everything He Desires: a stick, a task, a seat on the outside horse. (For me, the sticks and rings game on the carousel looks more like a symbolic pageant. A Writer's Life: hard job, done intently, for no reason. Cioran used to walk in these gardens. I wonder if he watched this.) The reward for the Parisian children is, perhaps, the simple continuity, the reality that the spinning will never get a prize, but that it will also never stop.

After all, spinning is its own reward. There wouldn't be carousels if it weren't so.

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On nice days, when we don't have time to go all the way to the gardens, Luke and I go to the musical horse outside the *Oiseau de Paradis* ("Bird of Paradise"), a toy store on the boulevard Saint-Germain, and he solemnly rides up and down on it while it plays "Camptown Races." On rainy days, we go to Deyrolle on the rue du Bac. It is an extraordinary place. It is on the second floor—almost all of the second story—of one of the old *hôtels particuliers*. It is, I suppose, a taxidermists' supply house and a supplier too of educational charts. But it is also one of the great surrealist sites of Paris. Downstairs, at street level, there is the old-fashioned kind of come-hither wraparound window entrance, so that you enter a deep-set door between two vitrines, an architecture that must have been familiar once in Paris—it was the architecture of every South Street shoe store in my childhood—though it is fairly rare now. (Mostly the windows here are one sheet of plate glass, with a kind of false front showing the goods and the store behind.) But here you walk past a "seasonal" window, filled with taxidermized animals and bare minimum decor: artificial fallen leaves for autumn, cotton ball "snow" for winter, a few silk flowers for spring. Sometimes the animals inside the windows change too—an ancient, yellowing polar bear right now represents the Spirit of Christmas—but mostly it is the same bunch all year: a fox, a raccoon, a moose. (The polar bear must have been brought down on the same expedition that is celebrated in the window of a lead-soldier store on the rue des Ciseaux, which shows an otherwise unrecorded late-nineteenth-century *French* expedition to the North Pole, with the tricolor hanging over an igloo and reindeer entrecôte in a chef's *sauteuse.*)

When you open the door at Deyrolle, there is a moose on your

left, and then an odd display case straight ahead, with snake embryos in little jars of formaldehyde. If you go up the stairs—and Luke will only go up the stairs clutching tightly to my chest—you will find at the top an entire bestiary waiting patiently for your arrival, not in casements or vitrines but just standing on all fours on the floor around the casements and vitrines, looking bored and social, like writers at a New York book party. They just stand there. There are several lions, genuinely terrifying in their direct address. They have been taxidermized—*reanimated* is the correct term—not to look fierce but just to look bored—these are French lions, after all—which of course makes them look more fierce.

And then a baby elephant and a jaguar and a gorilla, all just *there,* with all the other natural things—skeletons and skulls and case upon case of butterflies and beetles—all around. The walls are painted a fading blue-green; the cases are all wood and glass. The main showroom is a two-story space, with a balcony up above. They keep the ordinary farm animals, sheep and goats, up there, looking down on the stars, like the extras in *Les Enfants du Paradis.*

There are also—and this is the weirdest touch—lots of domestic animals, family pets, Siamese and Scotties and cockers, who stand there on the floor too, among the lions and jaguars, looking furtive, forlorn, a little lost. Mme. Orlovska, the owner, who has become a friend, explains that they are unclaimed taxidermized pets from the old Deyrolle regime. Apparently year after year people would come in, weeping and clutching the cold bodies of Fido and Minochette, the house pets, and beg to have them taxidermized, restored, revivified. The taxidermists would go to laborious work, and then, two or three months later, when the pet was at last stuffed into its immortality, the owner, consoled with a new living (though mortal) pet, would have forgotten all about it. No answer to calls or bills or what she calls "commands of conscience." So the unwanted permanent pets—

who were perhaps, as pets always are, mere courtesans of affection, feigning a feeling for food—got replaced, as courtesans will, and found themselves at the feet of the lions and elephants.

The big game are themselves souvenirs of a hotter time in Deyrolle's history, when hunters would have their African catches mounted and leave an extra lion or a leftover gnu to the house, as a sort of tip, like gamblers in Monte Carlo in the same period giving a chip or two to the croupier. Deyrolle makes its money now, Madame explains, mostly selling bugs and butterflies to decorators. "We can't find any large game anymore," she complains. "The laws are so absurdly tight. If a lion dies in a circus, we cannot touch it. If an elephant falls over in a zoo, we cannot reanimate it. Is it better for a thing of beauty to die and molder away than to be made a work of art?" (The government is worried, as governments will be, I suppose, that if fallen elephants are turned into merchandise, however lovely, then sooner or later elephants will not just be falling. Elephants will be nudged.)

Luke is as frightened (and fascinated) by the small game as he is by the large; he clings to me tightly throughout—and then every day demands to be taken back. I think he feels about it the same way that I feel about the Baudrillard seminar I am attending at the Beaubourg. It's scary, but you learn something.

I've attended this public seminar, given by Baudrillard and friends at the Beaubourg. Jean Baudrillard is, or anyway *was*, the terror of West Broadway back in the eighties. He was the inventor of the theory of "the simulacra," among much else, and famously insisted that "reality" had disappeared and that all that was left in its place was a world of media images and simulated events. ("The Gulf War Did Not Take Place" was his famous slogan, meaning that it was a pure television production.) Before the seminar I imagined Baudrillard as tall and spectral and high-

domed as Barthes had been. He turns out to be a stocky, friendly little guy in his fifties, with a leather jacket and a weather-beaten complexion.

The seminar consists of a three- or four-man panel: an economist; a sociologist; Leo Scher, the all-around thinker. Each gives a presentation, and then Baudrillard comments. The other day, for instance, the economist was giving a lecture on exponentiality. "Exponentiality is fatality," he announced grimly, and went on to point out what every first-year biology student is told, that the "exponential" proliferation of biological life—each codfish has a million codfish children; each codfish child has a million of its own children—means that the codfish, or slime mold or antelope or, for that matter, French intellectuals, would cover the world in ten or so generations, unless there were something—several somethings—there to check them.

(The girl in front of me scribbled in her book, in French, of course, "Exponentiality is Fatality.")

"Therefore," said the economist, "I propose that there must exist in the biological sphere a principle, which I will call the Regulon"—he wrote the word in capitals on the blackboard—"which prevents this from happening. I call this principle the Regulon."

No one protested, or pointed out that, as I think is the case, Darwin (among many others) had solved this problem awhile ago without recourse to the Regulon. (Predators eat most of the codfish; the rest just die. Life is hard; the Regulon is called life, or death.) Baudrillard nodded gravely at the end of the exposition. "But yours underlines the point I am making," he added, almost plaintively. He paused and then pronounced: "There is no Regulon in the Semiosphere." (And she wrote it down and underscored it: "There is no Regulon in the Semiosphere.")

There Is No Regulon in the Semiosphere. There is no way of stopping media signs from proliferating, no natural barrier to the endless flow and reproduction of electronic information, no way

of keeping the CNN weatherman out of your sky. There is nothing to eat them. There Is No Regulon in the Semiosphere is an abstract way of saying that there is no "natural predator" to stop the proliferation of movies and television; they do overwhelm the world, and with it reality. It is hard to see how you save the carousel and the musical horse in a world of video games, not because the carousel and musical horse are less attractive to children than the Game Boy, but because the carousel and the musical horse are single things in one fixed place and the video games are everywhere, no Regulon to eat them up.

When I lived here with my family, in the early seventies, there was nothing I liked more than walking up the boulevard Beaumarchais to the Cirque d'Hiver, the Winter Circus. It is a wooden octagon, visible from the boulevard, but set well back, on a little street of its own. A frieze, a kind of parody of the Panathenaic procession, runs around its roof: clowns and jugglers and acrobats in bas-relief. Inside, it has a hushed, intimate quality; the hard wooden bleachers are pitched very high. I don't recall that I ever actually went inside when I was a kid—I was too busy with movies—it just seemed like the right place to walk to. But now we've been to a winter circus at the Winter Circus. The Cirque du Soleil, from back home in Montreal, put on its slightly New Age show, and we took Luke and sat in the top rows. They brought the lights down when the circus began, as though it were a play, which struck me as an odd thing. I always think of circuses sharing the light of their spectators. (What happened to the summer circus? I used to think that the circuses must have toured all summer and then came into winter retreat on the rue Amelot. But now I suspect that there was a summer circus once too, but they closed it. The Circus. Regulon got it, I guess.)

It was a good circus, though a little long on New Age, New Vaudeville, and Zen acrobats and a little short, absent in fact, on

the lions and bears I had promised Luke. (We have a standing joke about lions in Paris; as I push his *poussette*, I announce that I am terrified that there may be lions in this quarter of Paris—"and I'm so scared of lions"—and he roars, lustily.) At the end, though, the troupe took its final bow and threw those little glowing green bracelets up into the audience as a favor. A few came up as high as we were. The French fathers, soccer players to a man, snatched at them from the wrist as they flew up, like men slapping futilely at mosquitoes. I stood up and with years of incompetent Central Park softball under my belt, I pounded my right fist into the left and pulled one in like a pop-up. Then I handed it to Luke. The other fathers in the row looked at me with pure hate. I shrugged and have never felt so obnoxious, so proud, so imperial, so American.

We have found Luke a baby-sitter, or I suppose I have to say a nanny. Her name is Nisha Shaw, she comes from Sri Lanka, has long hair in a beautiful braid and beautiful lilting English, and she is the wife of the philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy's chauffeur. She is lovely and loving, and she sings all day to Luke in a high-pitched soprano, singing songs that seem just out of focus—"Blowin' in the Wind" and a song that begins "Softly sings the donkey/As he goes to hay/If you don't come with him/He will go away." Softly sings the donkey—the theme tune of the American liberal abroad. We have already, in a few weeks, become a strange island of Sri Lankan, Icelandic-Canadian, West Philadelphian, Franco-American civilization within a bigger culture. I imagine these are songs that she's heard over the radio and in school, songs that are part of her own little monoculture, just as we have made up ours.

Every morning as Luke and I wait for Nisha to arrive before I go to work in my office, we look out from the kitchen into the courtyard. Every morning, just at eight-fifteen, a hand emerges,

holding at its end a tablecloth or a sheet or something that it shakes out. She is known as the Shaky Lady, the Aurora, or Dawn Goddess, of our home. We made up a song in her honor—Oh, Shaky Lady/Oh, Shaky Lady, be good to me"—and she seems to shake with such authority, such intensity.

The odd thing in making a big move is the knowledge that your life will be composed of hundreds of small things that you will arrive at only by trial and error, and that for all the strikes and seminars you attend, the real flavor of life will be determined, shaped, by these things. The Semiosphere comes at you in little bursts. Where will your hair be cut? What kind of coffee will you buy, and where? We have been searching for the right mocha, everywhere we go: at La Vieille France, a pastry store on the rue de Buci; at Hédiard, on the place de la Madeleine; at Whittard, an English coffee importer that has a counter in the Conran on the rue du Bac. Our old Dean & DeLuca blend is gone now, and we must find a new one. The Shaky Lady will preside over some kind of coffee, but even she cannot know quite which one, not just yet.

We have been trying to furnish our place—we had minimal furniture in the New York loft, really, chairs and rugs and rattraps—and on Sundays we go up to the Marché aux Puces, the flea market, which remains a wonder, though the only fleas in it all have Platinum American Express cards. (It isn't cheap.) The Métro ride up to the porte de Clignancourt is a joy, though, just for the names of the stations in northern Paris: Château Rouge, Château d'Eau—what *was* the Red Castle? what was the *Water* Tower?—Poissonniers, Gare du Nord, with its lovely, thirties, Gabinish overtones. We come up, back home, at Odéon, under the statue of Danton, and a single limb of a chestnut tree hangs over the Métro stairs. It's dark already at five o'clock, the limb silhouetted against the moonlit sky while the crowd presses against you on the stairs. What an old place France is, the attic bursting

with old caned chairs and zinc bars and peeling dressers and varnished settees. The feeling is totally different from an antiques fair in America; this is the attic of a civilization.

Today we stop at Le Biron for lunch; the restaurants up at the flea market—Le Biron, Le Voltaire—are among the few real bistros left, in the sense of simple places with some culinary pretension that maintain an air of joie de vivre. The poor madame is terribly overworked, and we feel for her, but lunch, simple chicken, takes an hour and a half. The *tarte tatin* is very good, though. After lunch, on this freezing cold day, faint light raking through the stalls, Luke and I stop at the little bar with a Django-style swing band: two gypsy guitarists with ancient electrics with f-holes, joined by a good-looking blonde with an alto sax. There's a couple smoking endless Gauloises next to us. I ordered, with a thrilling automatic feeling, a café-calva and a grenadine for Luke. They played the old American songs—"All of Me," "There Will Never Be Another You"—some Jobim too, really swinging it. Martha was off shopping at Vernaison for a plain old table. A perfect half hour.

Martha insisted on taking a cab home, declaring it too cold to get on the Métro. The cabbie, observing Luke, began a disquisition on children. Only children—we explained in French that he won't be, or we hoped he wouldn't be—are, he explained, the cause of the high modern divorce rate: The boy arrives, and the man feels jealous; there is another man in his wife's life (well, another being), and this leads to jealousy, a lover; and the whole cycle begins again. (Why a second child would cure this . . .) This is why women must have three children and stay home. "The school instructs," he explained, "but the family educates." I couldn't decide whether to give him a large or small tip.

It is odd to think that for so long people came to Paris mostly for the sex. "City of the naughty spree," Auden wrote disdain-

fully in the twenties, "La Vie Parisienne, Les Folies-Bergère, Mademoiselle Fifi, bedroom mirrors and bidets, lingerie and adultery." These days the city's reputation for naughtiness has pretty much diminished away to nothing. Now the dirty movies get made in Amsterdam; the dirty drawings get sent in from Tokyo; and Oriental and even German towns, of all places, are the places you go for sexual experiment. (Even the bidets are gone from Paris, mostly converted into bizarre plug-in electric toilets, which roar as they chew up human waste, in a frenzy of sanitary appetite, and then send it out, chastened, down the ordinary water pipes.)

Things have become so run-down, or cleaned up, sexually here that France has even reached the point where it is running a bimbo deficit and has to import its sex objects. Just last week Sharon Stone was flown in to Paris to be made a Chevalier of Arts and Letters by the French minister of culture, M. Philippe Douste-Blazy. The award struck many Parisians as ridiculous, but it was, in its crude way, a logical part of a consistent cultural policy. Despite their reputation, the French are not really cultural chauvinists at all. They remain chauvinists about their judgment, a different thing; increasingly their judgment *is* their culture. They want to be free to continue to reinvent American culture in their own image, finding art forms where back home we saw only hackwork and actresses where we saw only bimbos. (The award to Sharon Stone was for "her services to world culture.") They don't mind if the Americans make the movies so long as they get to pass out the medals. Pinning a decoration on Sharon Stone is the perfect way of looking down your nose at U.S. cultural imperialism while simultaneously fondling its chest.

The one exception to the erotic milding of Paris are the lingerie ads, which still fill the boulevards and billboards. The ads—

particularly the ones for Aubade—are sharply, unsettlingly erotic, to a male viewer, and differ from their American counterparts in not seeming particularly modern. Women are, as we would say, reduced to body parts; the Aubade ads isolate breasts or thighs or legs as relentlessly as a prep cook at KFC, each part dressed up in a somewhat rococo bit of underwear, lace and thong, in sculpted-lit black and white, very Hurrell, with a mocking "rule" underneath it—i.e., "Rule Twenty-four: Feign Indifference."

There is something stimulating but old-fashioned about these posters (which, for a week or two at a time, are everywhere, on every bus stop, on every bus). They are *coquettish,* a word I had never associated with a feeling before. For all the complaints about a new puritanism, the truth is that feminism in America has, by restoring an edge of unpredictability and danger to the way women behave and the way men react to that behavior, added to the total of tension on which desire depends. The edgy, complicated, reverse-spin coding of New York life—this skintight dress is not a come-on but its opposite, a declaration of independence meant not for you but for me—is unknown here. Here, the intellectuals wear black, and the models wear Alaïa.

The other evening, for instance, we went to a dinner party where the philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy appeared with his wife, the amazing-looking Arielle Dombasle (who wore a bathing suit in one of those philosophical-erotic-talky French films, from the time when philosophical-erotic-talky French films were the delight of the Upper West Side). She wore a skintight lamé dress. We saw her a week or so later and she was wearing another clinging lamé dress, as though out of obligation to her own image, her own invention. *Désir* in Paris is surreptitious but not ironic; everyone has affairs, but no one has reverse-spin coding. In New York the woman in the clinging dress is probably a professor at Hunter, while the girl in all black with no makeup reading the

French papers may be Sharon Stone. You could tell by the medal, I suppose.

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Mostly, we shop at BHV, the department store on the rue de Rivoli, which has become our home, our Luxembourg Gardens. BHV—the Bazar de l'Hôtel de Ville, the City Hall Bazaar—is always called by its initials (bay-ash-vay), and it is an old store, one of the great nineteenth-century department stores on the Right Bank that are the children of the Galeries Lafayette. As I say, it is on the rue de Rivoli; in fact that famous Robert Doisneau photograph of the two lovers kissing is set on the rue de Rivoli just outside BHV. This is doubly ironic: first, because the narrow strip of the rue de Rivoli in front of BHV is about the last place in the world that you would want to share a passionate kiss—it would be a bit like kissing at the entrance to the BMT near Macy's—and of course, it explains why they did it anyway. They are not sundered lovers but a young couple who have managed to buy an electric oven and emerge alive. Anyone who has spent time at BHV knows that they are kissing not from an onset of passion but from gratitude at having gotten out again.

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BHV, in its current form, seems to have been invented by a Frenchman who visited an E. J. Korvette's in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, sometime in the early 1960s and, maddened with love, decided to reproduce it down to the least detail. There's the same smell of popcorn, the same cheery help, the same discount appliances stretching as far as the eye can see. It is the Parisian tradition that the landlord does not supply appliances. They must all be bought, and you take them with you when you leave. We had a whole run of things to buy, none of which, as lifelong Manhattan renters, we had ever had to buy before: a refrigerator, an oven, a stove. We *had*, oddly enough, once bought a wonderful French dishwasher, a Miele, silent as a Greek oracle, to add to our old loft. But we couldn't use even this, since most of the old appliances run on American 110 volts and France uses 220 volts. You either have to get the insides of the machine changed or else buy something new.

We became hypnotized, bewitched by the curious selling rhythms of BHV: a mixture of confidence, arrogance, and an American-style straightforwardness, with the odd difference that here the customer is always, entirely wrong. We bought a toaster, which promptly shorted out the first time we used it. We brought it back. "What did you toast in it?" the return man asked, haughty for all that he was wearing a regulation oversize checked vest, the uniform of BHV. "Raisin brioche," we answered honestly. He looked shocked, disgusted, appalled, though not surprised. "What do you expect if you put bread with raisins in it?" he asked. But he let us have a new one anyway.

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The week before Christmas I had to go out to buy Christmas tree lights at Bon Marché, the Left Bank department store. Ours didn't work, for reasons I don't understand, since a lot of the electric lamps we brought with us *do* work. Apparently some American lights shine in Paris, and some don't, don't ask why. (Henry James wrote whole novels on this theme, after all.) Instead of coming in strands that you can wrap around the tree, though, the French Christmas tree lights come in *guirlandes*—garlands—closed circles of lights without beginnings or endings. A thin cord with a plug at the end shoots out from the middle of the garland. (They cost a fortune too: twenty-five dollars for as many lights as you can get on Canal Street for five.) These garlands are packed into the box just the way strands are—light by light in little cardboard notches in a horizontal row—so it's only when you take them out of the box that you realize that what you've got is a ring, not a rope.

This means that the only way to get the Christmas lights on the Christmas tree is to lasso it. You have to get up on a ladder, hold the lights out as a loop, and then, pitching forward a bit, throw the entire garland right over the top of the tree, rodeo style. This is harder to do than it sounds and even more dangerous than it looks. I suppose you could pick up the tree and shimmy the lights on from down below, like a pair of *caleçons*, but this would require someone to pick up the tree so you could do it. I can't really see the advantages of having a garland over a string. A string is easier to use—you just start at the bottom and wrap it right around the tree, merrily ascending—and this seems to me not cultural prejudice but a practical fact. (But then all cultural prejudices seem like practical facts to the prejudiced.) Still, the garlands are all there is. Martha kept sending me back to buy more.

Even then it wasn't finished. I had had the pointed inspiration of buying blue lights for the Christmas tree this year, where in New York we always had white ones. Since we had moved, changed cultures, I couldn't think of a better marker, a clearer declaration of difference and a new beginning, than having blue lights on the tree instead of white ones. But when I brought them home and did my Roy Rogers bit again and we turned them on and then turned off the lights in the living room, no one liked the look of them. The blue lights looked, well, blue. I doggedly, painstakingly packed them back into the box, took them back to Bon Marché, and tried to exchange them for white lights.

The trouble now was that the new white lights I got were white lights that were all twinkling ones. I saw the word *clignotant* on the box, and I knew that it meant blinking, but somehow I didn't associate the word *blinking* with the concept "These lights blink off and on." It was the same thing with the garlands, come to think of it. It said *guirlande* right on the box, and I knew perfectly well what *guirlande* meant; but I am not yet able to make the transposition from what things say to what they mean. I saw the word *guirlande* on the box, but I didn't quite *believe* it. In New York I believe everything I read, even if it appears in the *New York Post*. In France I am always prepared to give words the benefit of a poetic doubt. I see the word *guirlande* and shrug and think that maybe *garland* is just the French seasonal Christmas light–specific idiom for a string. The box says, "They blink," and I think they don't.

I found this out of course only after I had already put the lights on the tree, plugged them in, and watched them blinking. I liked the effect okay, but Martha was having none of it. She thought it looked horrible—*sequiny and vulgar* were her words—so back I went to Bon Marché on the afternoon of Christmas Eve, for the third time, to buy a garland of unblinking white lights. This time the saleswoman gave me a really hard time. It was bad enough not knowing what color you want, but not even knowing if you wanted shimmer or a solid glow? I got them home at last and felt unreasonably proud of the garland of lights: a closed circle, desire and fulfillment meeting in a neat French ring, and just shining.

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For all the talk about globalization, the unification of the world through technology, etc., the truth is that *only* information is being globalized (and then only for people who speak English). There *is* a Regulon in the Semiosphere. It is called a plug. The necessities of life—plugs and voltages and battery types and . . . are *more* compartmentalized, more provincialized, more exhaustingly different now from country to country than what they were a century or even two centuries ago. A chamber pot, after all, was always a chamber pot in whatever country you happened to be sitting; a pen was a pen since a feather was a feather. But to plug in your computer now takes a range of plugs and adapters—three prongs and two prongs and two small prongs

with a big prong and three tiny prongs in a row—that look like sexual aids for jaded courtesans in de Sade. We are unified by our machines and divided up by the outlets we use to *brancher* them.

Fish, too. Fish and plugs are the two great differences, the two things that are never quite alike from country to country. Fish are sort of alike but maddeningly not exactly alike. You have to learn the translations. A *bar* is sort of but not quite a sea bass, a *rouget* like a red snapper but actually smaller and more dapper—weirdly *snappier.* A turbot is not a flounder. Even French oysters, the most delicious in the world, have a salty, sea brine, bracing taste, not better than plump, sweet American oysters, but different—far more different than the difference, real though it is, between French lamb and American, or a French chicken and a good American one.

Globalization stops short at the baseboard and the coastline, wherever the electricity and the seafood come charging in. The reason for the differences are plain enough. You can't farm line-caught fish, and the variety of plugs is the consequence of the basic difference in the European decision to have 220-volt outlets where we have only 110. This means that the Europeans worry more about shocks. They add a third plug to ground the charge, the baseboard equivalent of a social safety net. Each country does it a little differently. The French have light, dapper, rounded three-prong plugs with two little cylindrical probes and a third, thicker one; the British have three immensely heavy prongs; and the Italians, I recall, have an odd, all-in-line arrangement. All of them feature that third grounding element to keep the shocks from passing from the surging current directly into the room and the people who live there. Only America remains ungrounded.

To make the transition from country to country, plug to plug, you also need to know more than anyone can—well, anyway, more than I do—about what things have motors and which

don't. (Motors aren't adaptable, even with adapters. You have to get converters for them that turn out to be big, heavy black boxes—odd, in this day of the streamlined and transistorized—that do something or other to the current.)

I plugged in my Stylewriter Mac printer the third day here to print something out, and as it began to print, it also immediately began to smoke. Disconcerting plumes of flame shot from it, as though it were being executed in Florida. Horrible sight, particularly as *it kept on printing* even as it destructed, another symbol of the writer's life. So I had to buy a new one, whose software is all in French. I am learning French computerese: *brancher, imprimer, annuler* . . . Even the common language of the bank machine is odd. We got our bank cards from our new bank, but whereas in New York you have to punch out your code—ours was Luke's birthday—here you are assigned your code by the bank, with no appeals. You are 3431, you are 1676, that is it.

There is a separate language of appliance design in France, which we are learning as we wander, pushing the *poussette* in and out of the rows on the second floor of the BHV. Things are smaller, but they are also much quieter and more streamlined. In the kitchen, when you *branché* them, they *hum,* discreetly, impatiently. They all are slim, white, molded, with the buttons and lights neatly small, rectangular, and inset into the white plastic. The hulking, growling American appliances we had at home, with their freezers on top and their sunset brown faces, all were solid, vast and seemed to imply survivalism. You could go cruising in them. The French appliances, with their blinking lights and set-back press buttons on the front, imply sociability and connection.

It is as if all American appliances dreamed of being cars while all French appliances dreamed of being telephones. The French freezer is, in a French refrigerator, always on the bottom rather than the top and is composed of drawers and secret compartments, like an old writing desk; you are supposed to fill it with

culinary billets-doux, little extras, like *petits pois,* instead of with next week's dinner, as you do in an American freezer.

Parisians love telephones, all kinds of telephones. They don't use them the way that Americans use telephones, but they just *love* them, the way that Americans love cars. (This is partly because telephones are newly arriving; when we lived here in the early seventies, a year went by, and we still didn't have a phone.) The cellular phone, which back in New York still seemed to me to be mostly in the hands of real estate agents and salespeople—those who were, in a sense, on call, biddable—is here in everyone's hands. You walk down the boulevard, and everyone is *talking,* a phone clutched to the ear. What you never see, though, is someone walking down the street with a Walkman on, as everyone does in New York. (I miss my walks with my Walkman, in fact, probably more than any other single thing about life here so far: the music, the isolation, the sense of life as a sound track, the pure release of it. Nobody here wants to shut the city out. They are talkers, not silent listeners.)

They don't have answering machines either, or at least don't rely on them to do all the work of protection and sorting and screening that New Yorkers do. If you call people, and they're home, they answer; they have the same law-abiding approach to these calls that Americans have to parking. You park where you're supposed to park, whereas people in Paris will park anywhere. It is not so much that the phone transformed France and the car transformed America as that both fitted right in, as I suppose technologies must, with what people had wanted all along. Not new desires made by new machines but new machines matching the same old needs. The phone replaced the system of pneumatic messages—the *pneus*—that used to race around Paris, and there is something *pneu* about them even now: French telephone conversations tend to be sharp, pointy, rather than expansive.

There is an odd, seemingly purposeful looking-glass quality to

a lot of the things we have to buy. The Braun coffeemaker with a thermos that we had in New York is available here, but oddly only in black, whereas the one in New York was available only in white.

Luke loves BHV for the music. All day long it plays excited, taped Christmas shopping announcements, backed with appropriate tunes. Some of the tunes we recognize—it plays the *Looney Tunes* theme, for instance—and some seem vaguely familiar but are hard to name, so we give our own names to them: "The Love Theme from BHV," "BHV's Victory at Sea," and the "BHV Christmas Anthem." His ears undimmed by fifteen years of the IRT, Luke can hear them all even over the din of appliance shopping, and when he notices a favorite, he rises from his stroller, a cobra in mittens, and sways solemnly back and forth.

About five days before Christmas, BHV was decked out for the holidays—though, with the strikes shutting down transportation, there was hardly a soul in sight. Twenty years ago there was no Christmas in Paris. Oh, there was a holiday, of course, and even the gaunt, Gaullist figure of Père Noël, an ascetic and intellectualized version of Santa. But the great American department store potlatch was unknown. All that's changed beyond recognition now. That central ritual of bountiful capitalism, the department store Christmas, is in late but absurdly full bloom here, and with an American flavor so pronounced that it hardly seems American anymore, just part of an international style. The dome of Printemps, on the boulevard Haussmann, for instance, is this year decorated with stylized Stars and Stripes and life-size figures of Jimmy Dean and Marilyn and Clark and Bogie and even Babe Ruth. Now at BHV there are artificial evergreens, and tree decoration departments, and a Santa—get your picture with the old guy—and boughs of evergreen hung everywhere, and artificial snow, even though it never snows in Paris at all. On this afternoon, the "BHV Christmas Anthem" began to rise from every loudspeaker on every floor. Only now, as Luke swayed in

his stroller, I could hear it clearly for the first time, loud and ringing through the almost empty store, and I understood at last why it had sounded so oddly familiar. It was the theme from *Entertainment Tonight*. Maybe there is no Regulon in the Semiosphere after all.