

# The Last Time We Saw Paris



Sunset on the Seine at Lavacourt, Winter Effect, Claude Monet, 1880

**In 2001 my wife and I** finally landed at Charles de Gaulle Airport and took a cab to the Bastille district. It was mid-November, and there were posters everywhere announcing that "*Beaujolais Nouveau est arrivé!*" (we were there for Thanksgiving and had duck instead of turkey). We stayed a week in Paris, then went to Brussels, with a day trip to the Ardennes and Luxembourg, and after that a few days in Amsterdam. We had planned to go in September, but the flight was of course canceled when the World Trade Center towers were bombarded by two hijacked airliners full of passengers.

The biggest thing about the trip still sticks in my mind, imprinted there as long as I live, as an antidote to what 9/11 set in motion.

We had just flown eleven hours from San Francisco, where we were living at the time. We'd been to Paris seven years before but had taken a boat across the English Channel (this was before the Chunnel was built) and endured a sleepless night, arriving in Dieppe just before dawn and riding a train for an hour to Gare du Nord. So this time we were exhausted from jet lag and collapsed in our hotel.

We woke up at around 5 p.m., and we were starved. We thumbed through our guidebook, but then just decided to check out the restaurants near our hotel. After dinner we spotted a café down from our hotel on the corner. It was a Friday, the air was crisp, and the plate-glass windows were fogged up with not only the after-work but the weekend's-here crowd. We decided to go in. This is what traveling, to me, is all about. It can be unpredictable and even humiliating, but it's exhilarating too. As the French say, *Qui ne risque rien n'a rien*.

The place was hopping and warm with good cheer. Directly opposite the door was a medium-sized bar with the classic zinc top but no stools. We stood near the side wall, which had a ledge to set glasses on. I made my way up to the bar and squeezed in. The bartender was wearing a white dress shirt and black vest and bowtie and had a matching big dark mustache and beard, as if he'd just walked out of a short story by Guy de Maupassant, or was a dead ringer for Maupassant himself. I ordered: "*Je voudrais deux vin rouges, s'il vous plaît.*" I'd like to think I have a good French accent that I hope makes up for the extensive knowledge of the language I'd like to have. I took two years of high school French but none in college, though in grad school I had to pass a competency test in a foreign language and studied on my own. I've always liked foreign languages and have studied them sporadically throughout my life.

So I felt relieved as I carried the glasses of wine over to my wife. We sipped and watched and listened to the melodious words bubble all around us and entrance us as

the *travailleurs*, free for another forty-eight hours, started to unwind.

Soon it was time for me to go up to the bar again and get us another glass of wine.

I stood next to a short but stolid French businessman who had sandy hair and was wearing a dark suit and tie. I repeated my order to the bartender, but the businessman interjected—he wanted me to try this particular kind of wine. He spoke English very well, which always embarrasses me a little, since Americans are infamous for being monolingual. He informed the bartender of his recommendation and paid for my glasses too, despite my protestations. I said *merci beaucoup* and delivered the two glasses to my wife.

Of course this dispels the stereotype, at least for us, that the French (or should I say Parisians) are rude. And to be sure, we encountered a little of that too. Maybe he just spotted a French-American, or at least someone trying to speak the once vaunted lingua franca of the world. The French are notoriously proud of their language and culture, and I empathize with them. I'm partly of French descent myself (nobody ever asks me to repeat my last name in France or Québec), but I'm American through and through.

When we were done with our second glass, I looked for my new friend in the crowd. He was over by a table, with a group of people, standing up and chatting. I walked up to him and said, "*Excusez-moi, voulez-vous plus vin?*" His whole face lit up! He accompanied me to the bar, and I ordered three glasses of the same *vin rouge*.

And he not only came over to join me and my wife, but he brought two or three friends with him!

After we exchanged a little about where we were from, the businessman told me something like: "We were all very sad when 9/11 happened. The French are with our American friends." I

think at that moment I never felt so proud to be an American and so warmhearted toward the French. Back home in the United States some were saying the whole thing was all our fault, American imperialism had brought the scimitar of the Muslim world down on our own heads. In contrast to Paris, when we moved on to Brussels a guy in a blues bar who had two black eyes, a dark beard, and a wool cap said to me in heavily accented English: "Americans are terrorists." To which I replied, "No we aren't, you are."

But our *amis français* did not think that, and had the courage and charity to tell us, an American couple who had wandered into their very French café and spoke their language.

We also told them we were originally from New York state, and the businessman was familiar with Saratoga and Lake George, no doubt having been taught in school North American history like the French and Indian War. But they latched on to the New York part, and the businessman and his friends and a few others locked arms in a sort of circle and started kicking their legs and singing "New York, New York!" Sinatra, at least at that moment for us, had nothing on these true ambassadors for their country. Traveling to foreign lands has taught me to never mistake a person for a government.

Fortunately there were no cell phones at the time, so we didn't take a video or even a photo, since we'd left our cameras back at the hotel.

I say *fortunately* because shooting a video or photo would've greatly detracted from the experience. Smartphones became ubiquitous only a few years after 9/11, and with them digital cameras. Nowadays, as I read somewhere, if there's not a photo or video of it on Instagram, it didn't happen. All the world's a stage, but all the men and women are now merely photographers and videographers.

But long before social media and the internet, more discerning

eyes were wary of the camera. A used book I picked up called *The Magic of Walking*, published in 1967, treats walking rather like traveling; in a section titled "Taking Pictures Without a Camera," the two authors recount how a man asked one of them to recommend photographic gear for a trip to Cairo. When the traveler returned, he was asked, "When do we see some of your pictures?" His answer sounds incredible today:

*I had gone to Egypt to see the Pyramids, but I wasn't going to be allowed to see them. My camera would, and later my friends might, but I would not. I put your bag of marvels on the chair in the hotel room and walked out to see the Pyramids with my own two eyes.*

*What I saw I shall never forget, and it was done without buttons, f stops, or shutter speeds. I thought about it all the way home, and I have no shame. Can you see why it was the only thing to do?*

The authors then quote the memoir of Yousef Karsh, a prominent portrait photographer: "Some pictures are better left in memory alone." As proof, Karsh describes the scene as he was about to leave Helsinki after shooting pictures of Jean Sibelius:

*When Sibelius said goodbye a barefoot, tow-headed boy of five years appeared from nowhere, the composer's great-grandson, and stood before the old man with his hands clasped as if in worship. The sun poured over the profile of these two, the very young and the very old, destiny yet ahead and destiny fulfilled. Nothing could have done justice to the flaxen hair of the child, to the gentleness of the aged man .... (sic)*

*The Magic of Walking* sums it up this way: "And so even Karsh took one of the finest pictures of his career without a camera."

Social media, of course, is now one of the great blights on humanity. That it's supposed to be worth all the havoc it

wreaks because of the occasional good it does is mistaking the illness for the cure.

Philip Agre saw the whole thing coming back in the nineties and first decade of the new millennium. A computer scientist with a doctorate from MIT and a professor in the Information Department at UCLA, he predicted much of the turmoil caused by the internet and personal computers. He was an early, energetic, and influential blogger.

Agre saw how the rapid innovations in his field were leading to a precipice for civilization. In his articles that I read he talks about how the internet would inevitably transform and disrupt society, social structures, and institutions in ways that computer engineers refused to consider. In "Life After Cyberspace" (1999) he says the issue isn't just a matter of social relationships, but social networks. And he talks about how it would all lead to "social shaping." Even William Gibson's *Neuromancer* in 1984 falls way short, Agre says, portraying a cyberspace that existed apart from reality, instead of *embedded* in it, as he foresaw.

In "Yesterday's Tomorrow," which was published in 1998 in the *Times Literary Supplement*, he talks about the utopian beliefs behind the internet. Calling it a sort of "secularized religion" for computer geeks, he traces such claims back to the very origin of America, which he quotes one commentator as saying was the original model for Thomas More's *Utopia*.

Weirdly, but maybe not so weirdly, in 2009 Agre disappeared. A missing person report was filed, and a short time later the Los Angeles police announced that they had found him, and that he was "in good health and self-sufficient." But something seemed fishy. NPR reported that some of the people looking for him implied that there was more to the story. We do know that he stopped writing (or at least publishing), after having been prolific and prescient about all the digital storms that now engulf us—privacy, data collection, surveillance.

For the past decade he seems to have been living off the grid. *The Washington Post* recently reported that a message sent to his last known email address was undeliverable. So why did he drop out and abandon the good cyber fight he waged for so long and so valiantly? Maybe he just got tired of playing Cassandra.

Interestingly, one of Agre's oracles is now manifesting more than ever before. "Yesterday's Tomorrow" concludes that the internet was leading to "global corporatism." Corporatism was the economic system in Italy under fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, whose aim was to have all citizens be a part of either professional organizations or corporations that were ultimately controlled by the state.

Coincidentally the large national law firm my wife has worked at for a decade informed her last month that employees had to get a coronavirus vaccine by October 4 (and possibly booster shots down the road as well) or else. Of course the announcement didn't say "or else," but that's what it amounts to. This is a new trend, spurred on by the president to circumvent the law.

In the same week we were treated to Saigon redux, a calamitous pullout from Kabul. To add international insult to injury, Joe Biden gave a speech doubling down on his nonplan and then ran for cover to Camp David, Jimmy Carter's favorite haunt.

My wife and I had just turned forty in 2001, and we got caught flat-footed in the new post-9/11 world. Now we've just turned sixty and the coronavirus pandemic, which almost certainly originated in China, is perhaps the second major salvo in the war against the people.

Millennials can't imagine the freedom of travel before September 11, 2001—waltzing into an airport and onto the plane with minimum check-in, and not being felt up with a plastic glove. As François Villon lamented, *Mais où sont les neiges*

*d'antan*? The snows of yesteryear have melted, no doubt, because of climate change.

My wife mentioned to me the other day that our passports have to be renewed next year. Will travel (or anything for that matter) ever be the same again, for vaccinated and unvaccinated alike, but especially for the unvaccinated? But even if we never see Paris again, we'll always have the scene of our *amis français* in the crowded café on a Friday evening in mid-November, their arms linked and their legs kicking and their voices belting out "New York, New York" in a French accent, as we sipped our *vin rouge* and others turned our way—for us, *les américains*—the goodwill of an old ally.

We have no photo or video to post (thank God), only what we remember.