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La Rive Gauche: Paris and the American Literary Identity

There is no shortage of nostalgia for the decade between the two World Wars, the 1920's. Depictions of the decade in contemporary literature and film romanticize the era in which flappers danced the Charleston, jazz provided the soundtrack for an ordinary walk down the street, and life was nothing more serious than a grand party. In the collective imagination, Paris held the biggest party. In reality, however, there was serious work being done as well. After all, some of the most enduring and influential art and literature were created during this decade in Paris. New ideas abounded; new forms of artistic expression established. Indeed, the Left Bank of the River Seine seems the breeding ground for some of the greatest artistic and intellectual achievements of the Modern Era.

The Paris of the 1920's was home to a large amount American citizens, particularly many of America's soon-to-be prominent writers. Hemingway, Pound, Fitzgerald all lived on the banks of the river. It is there that they established themselves as founding members of American Modernist Literature. It may seem strange that an American literary identity could be founded in a foreign country, but much of it was, and that begs the question: Why Paris? Ironically, the American writer found more freedom in Paris. Promises of freedom, opportunity and success

from the New World had failed to deliver. Disillusioned by their country's empty promises, they rejected them. In doing so, these writers put America on the literary map of the world and influenced generations of American writers to come.

World War I brought many Americans to Europe. In his lecture for *The Modern Scholar*, Professor Michael Sheldon points out that "the First World War caused more than a million Americans to go to France". Many Americans who may never have stepped foot overseas had the chance to experience the "cosmopolitan delights of Paris". The past is alive in Paris, it's "beauty...the result of efforts over many generations". This connection to the past inspired many to stay or hope to return (Sheldon, 11). Proximity to Paris and Europe not only provided a link to the past; for writers and artists it held the link to a successful future. Many British, French and Germans lives were lost in The Great War. This sad truth made the level of competition lower for Americans in Europe, gave them a "chance to shine in any endeavor". Paris, with its beauty and rich cultural history, offered "the Lost Generation... a little space in the world where life seemed worth living again...where the dazzle of art and romance could temporarily obscure the blight of war" (Sheldon, 8).

While proximity and chance may have brought many an expatriate to Paris, the cost of living compelled them to stay. In his memoir, *A Moveable Feast*, Hemingway sums up his Paris experience with one line: "This is what it was like when we were happy and poor" (211). The United States was already becoming a costly place; in Paris, one could be a starving artist without actually starving. Alex Zwerdling, author of the article *The European Capitals of American Literature*, says the exchange rate between France and the United States during the 1920's "was so favorable that money would go twice as far"(4). Zwerdling cites a letter from Ezra Pound in which Pound urges a friend to move to Paris. Pound writes that his rent has

decreased some fifty percent between the years 1921 and 1924 and that a three course meal “including wine and coffee might come to 30 cents” (4-5). According to Pound, there was no shame in being poor in Paris, it was “decent an honorable” whereas in the United States, poverty “lays open to insults on all sides” (Zwerdling, 4). In *The Sweet Madness of Montparnasse*, American writer for *The Paris Tribune*, Wambly Bald, reminisces: “we rarely had a dime when payday came around” and there was “a total indifference as to who you were and what you had accomplished” (285). This attitude coupled with Paris’s affordability allowed artists and writers a place to live and work. They did not have to take so much time away from their art in order to make a living.

Favorable economic circumstances in Paris extended to other areas important to a writer. Printing costs in Europe were vastly less expensive than those in the United States. While a “bohemian-in-training” may be able to “carry on the fiction of being a writer much longer than one could at home” (Zwerdling, 4), the reality of being a published writer in Europe was a far greater possibility than in the United States. The lower cost of production enabled more risks to be taken. In his book, *Expatriates and Patriots*, Ernest Earnests points out that the “devaluation of European Currencies” affected the cost of printing in Europe. Whereas literary magazines were expensive to produce in the United States, in places like Vienna five hundred copies of a book or magazine could be printed for \$25. In Berlin “typesetting and printing for three thousand copies cost only \$150 (256). In the United States, because of high cost of printing, literary magazines and publishers were reluctant to take on new authors. Earnest states that “the established journals and publishers were wary of new writers”. Writer William Carlos Williams in turn lamented about “the universal refusal to publish and pay for available new work by young poets” (256). The lower cost of printing overseas would attract many American writers; their

work would have a better chance of being published. It can be inferred that with production costs lower, a magazine would have been more open to accepting work by unknowns, the low overhead allowing for less need of name recognition. These low costs would have also affected the material publishers were willing to print.

It is fairly common knowledge that the 1920's in the United States was the decade of Prohibition. Certainly many Americans found ways around the laws prohibiting the transportation, sale and consumption of alcohol; the films, literature and art of the time certainly show a great many people imbibing in speakeasies. Still, the enactment of Prohibition reflected the puritanical foundation on which America was built and it can be inferred that these foundations still had hold of the American sensibility. Puritanical values provide another reason for the mass exodus of American writers to Paris. These sensibilities along with production costs would compound the impossibility for a new type of writer to receive audience.

Even prior to the 1920's writers found America stifling. Henry James went to Paris, ultimately setting up home in London. Others followed suit. As far back as 1875 "many of [United States'] best writers felt that their own country was hostile or indifferent to their work". Sinclair Lewis opined that the American writer had "no institution, no group, to which he can turn for inspiration, whose criticism he can accept and whose praise will be precious to him" (Zwerdling, 2). Whether it was due to the influence of capitalism or a deep-seeded Puritanical sensibility, the American publishing world seemed not ready for a new movement in literature. It is not difficult to imagine why the expatriates would be drawn to Paris where there was less censorship and materialism, more opportunity and affordability.

Earnest goes a step further than Zwerdling in his suggestion of the pressures placed on the American writer's creativity. While Zwerdling points out an indifference to writers, Earnest

suggests that writers in America were dealing with an attack on intellectualism. He claims that a “profound change took place in American life beginning in the latter part of the nineteenth century”. He proposes that this change was in large part due to Industrialization: “the rapidity of social change, especially the shift from a rural society to an urban society” (269). The focus of politicians and professionals on the building of various states of commerce and manufacturing took away from the perceived value of the intellectual’s contribution to society. Writers and social critics of the day no doubt felt this shift, and if they wrote about it, their criticisms were noted and not embraced. Earnest states that whereas once farmers and artisans traveled far and wide to hear Ralph Waldo Emerson speak, by the 1920’s magazines like Saturday Evening Post and American Magazine “were creating a pantheon of leaders of business and industry” and “writers of the twenties...were attacked as subversive and un-American”. This time also saw the “dismissals of college professors for alleged radicalism” (271). It is sobering and hard to believe that at such an early stage in its development, the basic freedoms on which the country was founded could be so restricted and limited.

In the United States of the 1920’s the writer was the outsider. Ernest states that “American literature was not regarded as a respectable college subject until after the 1920’s”. He conveys the opinion of Barrett Wendell, a professor of American literature at Harvard University in 1921. Reportedly he said to his classes, “Gentlemen, this is a course in American letters; there is no American literature” (255). If this attitude was prevalent within America’s intellectual circles, the alienation of the writer in America would be tenfold. Already, Americans seemed more interested in monetary growth than in culture, but if Wendell’s attitude was the prevailing one among academic circles, then it is easy to imagine that American writers must have felt further alienated. They were the outsiders of the outsiders. It would then seem even more impossible for

a would-be literary giant to find his or her way. But in Paris, a city in a country that “attaches itself to culture... respects culture heroes the way other countries revere business men, players of ball games” (Harris, *The Culture Ploy* 51), the expatriates were on the inside. Paris became their base, their foundation from which they could take an honest look at their country and give it a literary voice.

There is some consensus to the thought that “most of the expatriates in Paris would not have stayed ten weeks had there not been other Americans there to talk to” (Earnest, 274). This is probably true to a very large degree. In retrospect, these writers were not necessarily looking to become something other than American. They were looking to write as they wished and found they could not necessarily do that in their own country. Much of what they wrote in their time away from American soil is required reading now. Zwerdling says that the expatriates of the 1920’s created “a new kind of literature, one strangely in keeping with America’s role as an international power” (1). Ironically, these writers could not find the freedom they required to produce some of the greatest pieces of American literature in America, the land of the free. But even more ironic than this contradiction is Earnest’s statement that “an expatriation motivated as never before by a rejection of native culture and values – ended in the rediscovery of America” (275).

The expatriates of the 1920’s were not the last Americans to look to Paris to fulfill their literary ambitions. Some twenty years after the expatriates came home, James Baldwin, would find in Paris the means for success as a writer. Having lived in Paris and France for much of his life, he recognized the effects that distance and displacement can have on one’s sense of self and

identity. Like the expatriates of the Lost Generation, he felt limited by American conventions and sensibilities, perhaps even more so due to the color of his skin.

In the article, “Another Country”, written for *The New Yorker* magazine, Claudia Roth Pierpont suggests that “there was no shortage of reasons for a young black man to leave the country in 1948. Devastation was all around: his contemporaries, out on Lenox Avenue, were steadily going to jail or were on ‘the needle’”. While Baldwin had started to write his first novel and had begun to publish (mostly book reviews), the thought of Baldwin making it as a writer in America was difficult to believe. (2).

The prospect of being seen as an American writer indistinguishable from the label of African-American writer would be even more difficult to believe. Of course, Baldwin was no less an American writer than Hemingway, but the distinction between the two reflected for Baldwin the great divide between race in America. In *The Divided Mind of James Baldwin*, C.W.E Bigsby says that “for a black American [a move to Paris] afforded him the only opportunity to venture outside of the myth that defined him” (125). This portion of the paper, however, is not so concerned in finding a connection between the circumstances which led the expatriates to Paris and those that led Baldwin to Paris. Rather, this portion of the paper is concerned with Baldwin’s thoughts on identity, its discovery in a foreign land and its connection to finding a place in the world.

A “Question of Identity”, from Baldwin’s book of essays, *Notes of a Native Son*, is an attainable yet complicated essay. It discusses American students in Paris – “a social phenomenon so amorphous as to at once demand and defy the generality” (110) – what connects them to and distinguishes them from each other, with the ultimate goal of determining why they are in Paris in the first place. Baldwin looks at the two opposing extremes: the “student who embraces Home,

and the student who embraces The Continent”. He details how experience of each will vary, but that each student’s experience will lead to the same end: confusion. “The American in Europe is everywhere confronted with the question of his identity, and this may be taken as the key to all the contradictions one encounters when attempting to discuss him”. How they are “distinguished from each other” is “by the ways in which they come to terms, or fail to come to terms with their confusion” (119). He claims that “in the heart of the confusion” is that which the student “came so blindly to seeking: the terms on which he is related to his country, and to the world” (121). Baldwin seems to believe that this confusion is based on the “unconscious assumption that it is possible to consider a person apart from all the forces which have produced him”. This assumption is based on American history, “which is the total, and willing, alienation of entire peoples and their forebears” (121). Baldwin seems to be suggesting that the identity on which America was formed and/or the foundation from which this country’s people have formed a national identity involves a history of turning “resolutely away from the past”(121). Alienation from the world and from the self, therefore, is imbedded within the founding structure of America. This may explain why it is often more difficult to discuss American culture than it is to discuss the culture of another nation. It is difficult to determine what is that connects Americans to each other outside of the shared confusion. In order to “end the alienation of the American from himself” he must discover his own country. Using Paris as his “vantage point”, he can discover his own country, its “unprecedented people, with a unique and individual past”. This is how he can “find the terms on which he is related to his country, and to the world” (121-122).

Giovanni’s Room is a short novel written by James Baldwin and published in 1956. Still considered Baldwin’s most controversial novel, it was published by a small publishing firm in London before being published in the United States. It is frank depiction of a love affair between

two men, the American, David, and the Italian, Giovanni, who meet in Paris. The novel offers an illuminating example of identity's influence on one's ability to give and receive love.

At the beginning of the novel, David is in the south of France reflecting on the story of which he is about to unfold. Having lost his mother at a young age, David has grown up with his father in Brooklyn. During his adolescence, David has a sexual encounter with his friend Joey, of whom David is very fond. Scared and ashamed, David retreats from Joey and later bullies him. To further himself from his shame, he begins to take after his father – drinking and womanizing. Eventually David flees to Paris. There he meets a girl, Hella and later he proposes marriage. While she is in Spain contemplating the possible engagement, David meets up with an old acquaintance. David and Jacques meet the titular Giovanni. David begins a love affair with Giovanni. The affair will ultimately end in ruin. But the story is David's. The responsibility is David's as well.

In his book, *Exiled in Paris*, James Campbell calls *Giovanni's Room*, “an antiquated morality tale in which the heroine is tempted away from the path of virtue, risking doom”. David is the heroine and virtue is the “acceptance of physical love between two men” (119). The moment in which he made the decision to leave Joey without explanation, David later recognizes as “perhaps the crucial, defining moment, the moment that changed all others” (*Room*, 10). The natural desire and joy he felt with Joey quickly transformed into a threat to his sense of self. “That body suddenly seemed the black opening of a cavern in which I would be tortured until madness came, in which I would lose my manhood” (10). David's identity is intertwined with his understanding of manhood, an understanding he came to by watching his father.

In the essay, *Baldwin: Nothing Less than Courageous*, Gabriel Welsh suggests that Giovanni's *Room* “meditates on American identity, as its expat protagonist mulls over the very nature of

masculinity identity, a cipher for American identity as he understands it”(76). The examples set by his womanizing father have informed him that a man is not a man unless he is with a woman and a threat to David’s manhood is a threat to the very core of his identity. So, David chooses to follow the path his father has made for him.

Eventually, for David, this way of living becomes too much. He flees to Paris to find himself. David offers the reader no indication as to why he chooses Paris. Campbell suggests that Baldwin chose Paris as the setting for his novel partly because “he happened to be there”, but, more importantly, for the “mythical freedoms the city grants its temporary residents” (118). David says he went to Paris to “find himself” - “an interesting phrase, not current...in the language of any other people” than that of Americans. It “certainly does not mean what it says but betrays a nagging suspicion that something has been misplaced” (*Room*, 21). But what has David misplaced? Campbell believes that Paris’s “mythical freedoms” give David the ability “to follow, for a short season, his natural desire which, if he permits it, could lead him to the grail of all Baldwin’s stories: love” (118). Perhaps, David has misplaced his nature and the journey to Paris could afford the opportunity to find or replace it.

While David is far from the presence of his father, he is no less constricted by his notions of manhood and identity. He takes up a relationship with an American woman named Hella. “I thought she would be fun to have fun with...I’m not sure... that it ever meant more than that to me” (3). Later, with Hella in Spain, David is able to call on an acquaintance, a gay, Belgium-born American named Jacques. David describes Jacques with polarities: “He could be unbelievably generous, he could be unspeakably stingy. Though he wanted to trust everybody, he was incapable of trusting a living soul”. David’s contempt for Jacques, he recognizes in

hindsight as “self-contempt” (22). He identifies with Jacques’s sexuality and this is the root of his self-loathing.

David and Jacques spend the night visiting gay bars in Paris. At one, owned by Guillaume, an acquaintance of both men, David meets the Italian bartender, Giovanni. The flirtatious banter between Giovanni and David offers an interesting distinction between European and American attitudes. Giovanni remarks about the American’s “funny sense of time... as though with enough time and all that fearful energy and virtue you people have, everything will be settled, solved, put in its place... I mean all the serious, dreadful things, like pain and death and love, in which you Americans do not believe” (33). Later Giovanni likens time to “water for the fish” that, “nobody gets out of” where the “big fish eat the little fish and the ocean doesn’t care”. David’s response is to laugh. “I don’t believe *that*”, he says. “Time is not water and we’re not fish and you can choose to be eaten and also not to eat” (33) Giovanni accepts that nature cannot be denied. David thinks he has choice; he does recognize that, although, in America, “the little fish...have gotten together and are nibbling at the body of the whale”, it “will not make them whales.”(35)

Campbell suggests that by putting David next to Giovanni, “a fiery lover of life”, Baldwin’s goal is to show that David has “cut himself off from experience- his experience of his own desires- and hence from love, for the acceptance of the love of another requires the courage to face the truth about oneself”(117). The night that David and Giovanni meet, Jacques sees the spark between them. He implores David to “love him and let him love you” for nothing else on Earth really matters (55). David, however, is threatened and tries to keep his feelings at bay. The moments that gay men can share, even in Paris, would be brief and covert. Jacques tell David to make the most of them. “If you think of them as dirty, then they *will* be dirty- they will be dirty because you will be giving nothing, you will be despising your flesh and his” or Jacques says,

“you can give each other something which will make both of you better-forever” (57). Jacques is telling David that if the moments that David and Giovanni are the manifestation of honest desire, only what is in David’s mind can taint the experience.

David and Giovanni begin a love affair that night. David moves into Giovanni’s place while Hella is away. David remains conflicted, elated and ashamed. “Beneath the joy, of course, was anguish and beneath the amazement was fear” (75). The reader understands that Giovanni could provide for David what Paris could provide for the American students that Baldwin wrote about: a vantage point from which to see himself clearly. But David never gives the matter his full attention. Rather than give himself over to Giovanni and his love, he reminds Giovanni that their affair will have to end once Hella is back.

In Hella, David can continue his self-delusion. He can stay in country, “embrace Home” rather than “embrace the Continent” (Giovanni) and from that vantage point take a hard look within. David explains: “I wanted children. I wanted to be inside again, with light and safety, with my manhood unquestioned”. He wanted a woman, not a man, to be his “steady ground” and he wanted to make it “real” (103). But, the thing is, it is not real. During a visit to Giovanni’s after Hella’s return, David seems to understand this. Giovanni is jobless, scared and desperate. David says: “And I felt, standing so close to him, feeling such a passion to keep him from terror, that a decision-once again!- had taken been taken from my hands. For neither my father nor Hella was real at that moment. And yet even this was not as real as my despairing sense that nothing was real for me” (110). David has the means to put an end to his self-alienation in Giovanni, to reject the delusions on which his identity is built, and embrace what is real, the love between himself and Giovanni. Yet, his understanding of what it means to be a man is so overpowering, his sense of self so weak, that he finally rejects all that is natural. This, according

to Campbell's analysis, is David's "sin". Campbell suggests that the "realm of damnation is all around, in unhappy social conformity, which is finally the path David takes". (119).

Giovanni recognizes David's rejection for what it is at once. David only understands it retrospectively. When David informs Giovanni that he is leaving him for Hella, Giovanni responds: "You are not leaving me for her... You lie so much you have come to believe you own lies". He accuses David of wanting to kill him with all his "lying little moralities" (140) which are at the heart of the real reason David ultimately leaves Giovanni.

David's rejection of Giovanni leads the Italian man into a downward spiral. Giovanni's nature is too honest, too passionate to withstand David's betrayal. Giovanni becomes more and more confused, desperate. Finally, in what David imagines to be a fit of rage and desperation brought on by an altercation between Giovanni and his former boss, Giovanni kills Guillaume. Giovanni flees. The media has a field day exposing Giovanni's sexuality, calling it perverse. Eventually, Giovanni is captured and sentenced to death.

David is alone in the south of France. Hella has left, having caught David at a gay bar, thus confirming her suspicions. David is alone with the news of Giovanni's fate. David really looks at himself. "I look at my body, which is under sentence of death...It is trapped in my mirror... I long to crack that mirror and be free...I look at my sex, my troubling sex, and wonder how it can be redeemed". (167-168). When David leaves the inn and steps out onto the street he is holding the letter Jacques has sent with the news of Giovanni's execution. In the final paragraph of the novel, David seems to attempt to throw the past away, to forget Giovanni, and move on. "I take the blue envelope which Jacques has sent me and tear it slowly into many pieces, watching them dance in the wind, watching the wind carry them away". But whether this action is symbolic of the further alienation of David from Giovanni and, therefore, from himself, or whether it is

David's way of setting Giovanni and himself free from world that would condemn their love, it is of no matter. "Yet," David states, "as I turn and begin walking toward the waiting people, the wind blows some of them back on me" (169).

As the work of American expatriates living in Paris demonstrates, American literature possess an individual and idiosyncratic voice that remains steadfast regardless of where and when each work was constructed. That the writers of the Lost Generation lived and created much of their work under the Parisian influence had little effect on the voice that came through. However, it is entirely possible that, without their individual and collective experience in Paris, these works may not have been created at all. The climate and values of the United States at that time were limiting for many emerging writers. Paris provided a place for them to thrive.

The issue of identity, particularly an American identity, is a complicated and dense area to examine. Certainly it is important and certainly it exists. It is in our art, our music, our literature. Even as we are often incapable of pointing to it, it exists. As James Baldwin pointed out in much of his work, even as it turns away from itself or contradicts itself, it is there. An attempt to understand how we, as Americans, are related to our country and the world, can greatly aid in our ability to know ourselves both collectively and as individuals. If the attempt is made and luck allows, we just might find ourselves in Paris.

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