

The Ile Saint-Louis

‘There is an island in Paris [...] the inhabitants of which are quite separate from the rest of [the city], they dine at a different hour, their manners are different; and they talk of crossing the bridge as the ancients talking of crossing the Hellespont and they never signalized themselves by any excesses in the revolution ...’¹⁹

These strange aboriginals observed by the sister of the novelist Maria Edgeworth in the early 19th century were the natives of the Ile Saint-Louis. Their habits, it is true, have over the years fallen more into line with the rest of Paris, but a sense of remoteness, noticeable as soon as one crosses the pont Saint-Louis, still lingers over the island. The change is immediate. There are no métro stations here, no large banks, no supermarkets, little evidence of the hustle of business; the 20th century, held at bay by the wealth of the island’s modern inhabitants, has touched it lightly. ‘If you walk along the streets of the Ile Saint-Louis,’ wrote Balzac, ‘do not ask why you feel gripped by a sort of nervous sadness. For its cause you have only to look at the solitude of the place, at the gloomy aspect of its houses and its large empty hôtels.’²⁰ Even today the streets have changed remarkably little since the 1650s. ‘One of the loneliest places in Paris,’ Vincent Cronin called it in his *Companion Guide*.

It is perhaps this loneliness that prompts nostalgia. In Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), Jake Barnes, the drifting, disillusioned narrator, crosses over to the island with a friend for dinner. Afterwards they walk together round the quais. Hemingway’s description takes in all the classic elements—the *bateau mouche*, the night-time silhouettes, the black water, the lovers under the bridge—and in doing so

* The word hôtel/hotel can be confusing. Where it is used in the sense of a large private residence, I have retained the French accent.

captures something both of his narrator's sense of separateness and of the melancholy that permeates the island:

We walked along under the trees that grew out over the river on the Quai d'Orléans side of the island. Across the river were the broken walls of old houses that were being torn down.

'They're going to cut a street through.'

'They would,' Bill said.

We walked on and circled the island. The river was dark and a *bateau mouche* went by, all bright with lights, going fast and quiet up and out of sight under the bridge. Down the river was Notre Dame squatting against the night sky. We crossed to the left bank of the Seine by the wooden foot-bridge from the Quai de Béthune, and stopped on the bridge and looked down the river at Notre Dame. Standing on the bridge the island looked dark, the houses were high against the sky, and the trees were shadows. [...] We leaned on the wooden rail of the bridge and looked up the river to the lights of the big bridges. Below, the water was smooth and black. It made no sound against the piles of the bridge. A man and a girl passed us. They were walking with their arms around each other.²¹

This was a part of Paris that Hemingway knew well, since the offices of Ford Madox Ford's *Transatlantic Review* were at 29 quai d'Anjou,²² along with the Three Mountains Press. 'We printed and published in a domed wine-vault, exceedingly old and cramped, on the Ile Saint-Louis with a grey view of the Seine below the Quais.'²³ Hemingway was both a contributor to the magazine and a reader for the publishing house. In summer he would read the manuscripts outside by the river, within easy reach of the Rendez-vous des Mariniers, a hotel and restaurant on the quai which had been discovered by John Dos Passos during the First World War and in which he had written his novel *Three Soldiers* (1921) with its affectionate recollections of post-war Paris.

The same restaurant was later frequented by Cyril Connolly. It was natural that a writer so nostalgic in temperament

should have felt drawn to the island. From the drab world of wartime London, where he was editing the literary magazine *Horizon*, he looked back to Paris for images of a life from which he was now cut off: 'Tout mon mal vient de Paris. There befell the original sin and the original ecstasy; there were the holy places—the Cross Roads and the Island. Quai Bourbon, Rue de Vaugirard, Quai d'Anjou.'²⁴ The Island was of course the Ile Saint-Louis, where he had lived for a time before the war. His evocation of it strikes a characteristic note:

The Ile Saint-Louis strains at her moorings, the river eddies round the stone prow where tall poplars stand like masts, and mist rises about the decaying houses which seventeenth-century nobles raised on their meadows. Yielding asphalt, sliding waters; long windows with iron bars set in damp walls; anguish and fear. Rendez-vous des Mariniers, Hôtel de Lauzun: moment of the night when the saint's blood liquefies, when the leaves shiver and presentiments of loss stir within the dark coil of our fatality.²⁵

Today the hôtel de Lauzun, at 17 quai d'Anjou, is owned by the City of Paris and hired out for public lectures. Its past has sometimes been less respectable. Built in the mid-17th century by Louis Le Vau, it was later to become, under the name of hôtel Pimodan, one of the centres of the literary and artistic bohemia of the 19th century and the meeting-place of le Club des Hachichins. Théophile Gautier, the flamboyant author of *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835), joined the Hashish Eaters one December evening in the 1840s:

Although it was only six o'clock, the night was dark. A fog, made thicker by the nearness of the Seine, veiled every object in a cloak which at long intervals was rent by the reddish haloes of the street lamps and the gleams of light escaping from illuminated windows.

The paving stones, slick with rain, glistened under the lamps . . . A keen wind, mingled with hail, lashed one's face, and its guttural whistles were like the high notes of a symphony of which the swollen waves breaking against the arches of the bridges were the bass. The evening lacked none of the harsh poetry of winter.

It was not easy, along this deserted quai, among this mass of sombre buildings, to distinguish the house I was looking for; but my coachman, standing up in his seat, managed to read on a marble plaque the name, from which half the gilt had peeled away, of the ancient hôtel which was the meeting-place of the adepts.

I raised the carved door-knocker—for the use of copper door-bells had not yet penetrated these remote regions—and several times I heard a vain grating sound. Finally, yielding to a more forceful tug, the old rusted bolt gave way and the door with its massive panels could turn on its hinges.²⁶

From one of the bowls of Japanese porcelain displayed inside Gautier is served a green morsel of hashish and then, according to his highly coloured account, he settles to an evening of visions and nightmares in the company of his fellow bohemians.

Later, Gautier himself went to live in the hôtel de Lauzun, following the example of Charles Baudelaire whom he had first met there in 1843 when the poet was renting a two-room apartment on the top floor. Baudelaire had just moved to the Ile Saint-Louis, explaining in a letter to his mother that he was drawn to it by the sense of isolation. He took care, however, that the isolation should not be unrelieved. A few minutes away, in the house which still stands at 6 rue Le Regrattier, he also furnished a small apartment for his mulatto mistress Jeanne Duval. He was twenty-two and had just met her. Known as the *Vénus noire*, she was to become the muse of such poems as 'Les bijoux', 'La chevelure', and 'Parfum exotique'.

The streets of the Ile Saint-Louis, particularly the quais, have exerted a continuing attraction over widely different kinds of writer. It was the building at 1-3 quai d'Anjou of which André Gide noted in his Journal, 'that's the house I should most like to live in'. 'Le seul endroit du monde pour un poète,' Charles-Louis Philippe had written to Francis Carco when the young poet of Montmartre first came to live on the island. But to Carco the atmosphere of the quai de Bourbon seemed oppressive: 'The place was too calm, too secluded,

with its melancholy trees, the river, its old houses.’²⁷ And yet in the end he was drawn back. It was on the second floor of the hôtel Richelieu, at 18 quai de Béthune, that Carco died in 1958.

Gradually the island is changing. The graceless building opposite the pont Marie may perhaps turn out to be a sign of things to come. But for the moment the Ile Saint-Louis manages to remain aloof in the centre of Paris, still displaying the elegant balconies which so attracted Baudelaire, still the island of Connolly’s nostalgic memories.