

column: Parisien Portrait

## 'And God Created the French' By Louis-Bernard Robitaille

by Raana Haider

**I**f we are to believe the long-standing legend, France has been resented ever since its birth. All its European neighbours, to the north, to the east, even to the south, when they saw this new country in their midst, joined forces at once to pool their indignation and send emissaries before God to voice their complaints. To this single land, they said, God had granted everything: the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, the fertile plain and the proud mountains, the sun of the south and the melancholy mists of the north, cooking with butter and cooking with oil, the inexhaustible subtleties of the most wondrous vineyards in the world and the conviviality of a land where beer flows freely. Was this his idea of divine justice? God gave ear to this torrent of arguments and in his heart of hearts admitted that on this occasion, yes, he had been overly prodigal. So to make up for those unfair benefits and bounties... God created the French. And so the other Europeans went home, mollified. Justice had been done.

Robitaille adds, "The anecdote may not be historically accurate."

Paris has always hosted writers — have been writers, would have been writers, will be writers and those chosen few writers whose writings sell. French-Canadian journalist, Louis-Bernard Robitaille happily falls into the latter category. With two books already published in Montreal and one novel published in Paris, 'Le Republique de Monte Carlo' in 1990 — Robitaille achieved further success with the first English translation of his fourth book in 1997, 'Et Dieu Crea les Français'. The author has been for over twenty years the Paris correspondent for the Montreal daily newspaper La Presse and the bi-weekly newsmagazine L'Actualite. Pierre Salinger, the ardent Francophile American journalist and one-time press secretary to President John F. Kennedy in a review of 'And God Created the French' writes "A biting, loving, and wonderfully knowledgeable insider's guide to Parisians. Few observers know France better than Robitaille."

Louis-Bernard Robitaille has been an intimate observer of Paris and of French society since the mid-sixties when he too, like countless others before him, sat the Cafe de Flore on the Left Bank. "Dressed in a velvet suit and turtleneck, I sat myself down on the terrace of the Cafe de Flore, my left elbow lodged in one neighbour's ribs, my right hand with about six inches' leeway before it would capsize my other neighbour's glass. I thought I spotted Francoise Sagan — which seemed perfectly normal, and a happy omen of events to come. Having ordered a coffee, I flipped open the notebook I had placed in front of me, and took out a pen. No sooner had I done so when a terrifying waiter, strapping and mustachioed, boomed out in a voice that could not be ignored: "No writing on the terrace!"

No. Those bygone days are a things of the past; a bit of history down memory lane. At the Parisien cafes where literary success was achieved (one has to discount all those never made it); in the past, "owners of such establishments... would have been flattered by such cultural consecration. On the contrary. They were appalled by the ensu-

A French historian, Pierre Diudonnat has spent a quarter of a century listing the truly noble families and the bogus noble families. The 1994 edition of his 'Encyclopedia de la Fausse Noblesse et de la Nobless d'Apparence' (The Encyclopedia of False or Ostensible Nobility) in some 669 pages, defrocks some 4000 names of dubious noble affiliation. Another myth shattered. In order to understand the French strata, Diudonnat reminds us that "the 'de' is not in itself an attribute of nobility. Many ancient noble families did not initially sport the particle, whereas it was found among some of the common folk. But it is true that, since for most people the two little letters were synonymous with aristocracy, nobles tended to affix them to the name of one of their fiefdoms. And families of the grand bourgeoisie followed suit to give themselves a semblance of nobility". For our information, Charles de Gaulle "was simply the issue of a very old bourgeois family, and we find as of 1720 a Jean-Baptiste de Gaulle who was prosecutor in the Parliament of Paris."

ing invasion of penniless scribblers from hither and yon, who threatened to monopolize indefinitely — in exchange for the modest price of a small espresso — a precious table that could bring in at the very least the price of a large beer every half-hour". Alas no more word-smiths in a Parisien cafe. Robitaille went on to write his first novel elsewhere in Paris in 1965-1966 "whose only copy I lost in the gents at Heathrow airport the day I returned to Montreal." Literary recognition finally came in 1982 with the publication of his first book.

One should not come to Paris, the City of Wonder to dream? Is he joking? Robitaille jolts the reader with the line, "But to come here to dream, no. Certainly one is taken aback, bewitched, overwhelmed at first by the beauty of Notre Dame or the quays of the Seine. But wait six months or a year, and the astonishment will have fled. Well, almost. Now and then when you least expect it you'll be dazzled anew, on an autumn evening, say, as you cross over the Seine. What endures is the respect and admiration you feel for the Beauty and Perfection you behold as you try to recall, just as it was, that first sense of wonder, the colours and the smells". Perhaps the writer's inspiration, the Muse, Paris succumbs to two proverbs — "Familiarity breeds contempt" (doubtful) and "Absence makes the heart grow fonder" (undoubtedly). It was another Canadian, Sir Wilfred Laurier, Canadian Prime Minister, in an address in Paris, in 1897 who said "My eyes do not grow weary in gazing at this Paris, so full of marvels: Paris the City of Light, as Victor Hugo called it with such truth, beyond dispute the most beautiful of all cities."

One of the enlightening bits of information Robitaille provide us is on the subject of French nobility titles — such as the commonly aristocratic 'de'. The chapter is titled 'The de is not for burning'. Even though noble privilege was abolished in France in 1789. "An impressive number of people try each year to join the ranks, officially and administratively, of the vague dead letter which is all that remains of the French aristocracy" In a matter of speaking I would add; since that vague de is yet sufficiently close to the hearts of many whereby "nobility now caters only to the variety of those who seek it. But the usurper doesn't risk much either, just a snigger here and there. There is no dearth of candidates, therefore, for an expanded name."

A French historian, Pierre Diudonnat has spent a quarter of a century listing the truly noble families and the bogus noble families. The 1994 edition of his 'Encyclopedia de la Fausse Noblesse et de la Nobless d'Apparence' (The Encyclopedia of False or Ostensible Nobility)

in some 669 pages, defrocks some 4000 names of dubious noble affiliation. Another myth shattered. In order to understand the French strata, Diudonnat reminds us that "the 'de' is not in itself an attribute of nobility. Many ancient noble families did not initially sport the particle, whereas it was found among some of the common folk. But it is true that, since for most people the two little letters were synonymous with aristocracy, nobles tended to affix them to the name of one of their fiefdoms. And families of the grand bourgeoisie followed suit to give themselves a semblance of nobility". For our information, Charles de Gaulle "was simply the issue of a very old bourgeois family, and we find as of 1720 a Jean-Baptiste de Gaulle who was prosecutor in the Parliament of Paris."

Further enlightenment on Parisien social makeup is provided for in Robitaille's discussion of 'la bonne societe'. He defines it as, "a relatively unique French category, which groups, loosely speaking, the 'right crowd', the 'people who count' in the media and the state, the defenders of culture, intelligence, refinement and reassuring good taste. This cultural bourgeoisie will be hereinafter referred to by its French name, i.e. la bonne societe." And it is in the seventh arrondissement in which "the heart of real Parisien society beats, and nowhere else; so much power linked to so much discretion commands respect." The hallowed Golden Quadrilateral, a Forbidden City, includes the expanse covering the Rodin museum, any number of ministries, Les Invalides, Boulevard Montparnasse, rue Varennes, Rue de Grenelle and preserved facades hiding members of the Parisien establishment. The social hierarchy extends to the extent that "The Parisien bonne societe may not lack for money, but neither does it consort with the moneyed.... Money exists, like bathtubs and toilets, but should not be shown off, nor publicly discussed. You may think about it all you want, just don't talk about it.... With a clear conscience one espouses what is worthy, cultivated, intelligent, enlightened, refined and reassuringly tasteful."

Yet, quartiers do evolve over the years — slowly. Barriers do become less defined. Robitaille remarks that ultimately, "A neighborhood that yesterday was beneath contempt, today is declared chic by the arbiters of taste for the elite, and becomes acceptable. So goes the sociology of living space in Paris, and the price per square metre follows not far behind, at a moderate but constant speed."

We are in for a treat in his discussion of The Great Presidential Works (GPW) — which they certainly are — since they receive direct patronage of the president (as they once upon a time did under

Louis XIV or Napoleon I). The GPWs include the Grand Louvre (See 'How to do the Louvre in Forty-five Minutes'), D'Orsay museum, Arab Institute, French National Library, the City of Science and Music and the Defense Grand Arch. The author asked one manager of the work site for Cite des Sciences et de la Musique about the difference between an ordinary project and a GPW. "The response is classic in the French mode of expressiveness and expression. "Ah! He replied, with feigned dismay, as though I had asked him to cite, off-the-cuff, the various proofs for the existence of God. "Ah! You know, in such instances, there are no budgetary constraints." He gestured vaguely, and sighed, as though he were contemplating the Infinite or the Great Void. "There is, as it were, no budget at all."

A Thomas Bentley in 'Journal of a Visit to Paris' all the way back in 1776 noted that "The French have very magnificent ideas, and it is their delight to be laying magnificent plans. They begin work with a degree of vigour and expense that exhausts both their patience and their finances." The innate sensitivity of the French to such national needs was apparent even then.

So be it. Thus came about the Bastille Opera. President Mitterrand and his Minister of Culture, Jacques Lang put forth a plan for a popular opera at the Place de la Bastille (the site of the popular uprising against the Bastille prison in 1789). Robitaille argues that, "The seats are as expensive as they were at the old opera, the Palais-Garnier, and they are just as hard to get hold of for the major productions. It cost twice as much as what had been estimated...." On the other hand, the Palais-Garnier, the mammoth classical opera house at the Place de l'Opera, "was one of the most beautiful opera houses in the world, with good acoustics, and it only needed a bit of modernization: it had 2,200 seats (20 per cent of which had an obstructed view) compared to 2,700 today at the Bastille not an enormous difference." Lt. Col Nathaniel Newnham-Davis in 'The Gourmet's Guide to Europe' of 1903 wrote, "An Englishman who loved his Paris beyond any other city of the world once said to me, as we stood chatting in the Place de l'Opera, "If you find the central spot of this square, you may rap your stick upon it and say "This is the centre of the world."

I know about the 'obstructed view.' In an umpteenth unsuccessful attempt to acquire 'proper' seats for a ballet at the Palais-Garnier, I reluctantly agreed to buy tickets at 60 francs — a ridiculously low sum. On the ticket was printed 'partial visibility.' Upon enquiring as to its meaning, I was informed that our vision of the performance of the 'Don Quixote' ballet would be partial i.e. obstructed. Well, an obstructed view is

better than no view — if one is ever to get into a masterpiece of nineteenth century architecture and see a prima ballerina perform. My husband unimpressed at my efforts declined to see a partial performance. I argued that at 60 francs, one could not lose. After all, we would see the interior, like a museum including what is acknowledged to be Charles Garnier's landmark staircase; at worst, see half a ballet and at best, with eyes closed hear a full concert. My husband did not appreciate the bargain of my argument. He stayed. I went with our daughter and her friend.

In an excellent expose on Paris — the heartbeat of France vis-a-vis the rest of the country — Robitaille finds that, "the saga of Parisian centralism harks back uninterrupted to the ninth century AD., and that all the great men and key events in French history have contributed to it.... In France there are only two boxes in the ring; Paris in one corner, and in the other a huge anonymous mass referred to only in negative terms, as 'la province.' An Englishman, Sir William Clayton in his 'Journals' 1861-1914, wrote that, "The heart of France beats in Paris, and the excessive centralisation of the French has centered the hopes and ambitions in their capital."

A brilliant manifestation of this fundamental Parisien thinking is the decision to relocate Ecole Nationale d'Administration (ENA), the National Management School to Strasbourg close to the German border. ENA the bastion of Parisien establishment produces the French political leadership and Parisian bureaucrats. The national powerhouse opened in 1994 at its new address — en province. Yet, "out of 26 months at school they'll spending seven in Strasbourg. That comes down to some boring return trips on the train and a few nights in a hotel. The ENA is now Strasbourg without ever having left Paris." A magnificent compromise surely. Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose? (The more it changes, the more it remains the same?)

Robitaille here paraphrases Prince Salina in the Sicilian novel, Giuseppe Lampedusa's great author, the epic, 'The Leopard'; published in 1958 and later made into a film by Luchino Visconti. "We must change everything so that nothing will change" — a time-honoured teaching. The Economist magazine in an October 1998 issue, discussed 'The Leopard.' To many readers, 'The Leopard' is the greatest Italian novel this century perhaps the greatest ever and uniquely relevant to modern Italy." (And elsewhere). The Economist quotes Lampedusa's most famous line in the book, "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change." Change within continuity. Mobility within immobility. Are these the ingredients,

the motto for the durability and attraction of a city, a people, a nation?

The author interviews a number of French celebrities. As the journalist remarks, "It's an exercise that brings you face to face with the humbleness of your lot in life and the modesty of your profession." He interviewed Isabelle Adjani, the Algerian-German born French actress and President of the Cannes Film Festival of 1997. The French have successfully overestimated the significance of a film festival. Only the French could make a social bonanza complete with starlets and paparazzi and give in an intellectual aura — a meaning, substance, social conscience — and money-making to boot.

Remember the masterpiece 'Adele H' by Francois Truffaut where she portrayed at eighteen the daughter of Victor Hugo? A much sought-after interview with the French music composer, Michel Legrand took place at Fouquet's on the Champs Elysees at the suggestion of Legrand's secretary. It went like this. "There's only one solution. "You invite us to lunch on Wednesday. At Fouquet's practical and it's not expensive." (In fact, it's the most famous show-biz eatery on the Champs Elysees, and not the least expensive). Legrand composed the music for the 1964 cult film 'The Umbrellas of Cherbourg.'

A seasoned journalist, Robitaille is starry-eyed in his interview with Catherine Deneuve, a star since the sixties. Can you blame him? He gushes, "Deneuve the Immaculate. Catherine Deneuve is a consummate modern incarnation of French perfection.... Perfection, of course, of her features, with their steadfast limpidity. It's perfection that is never laboured, that is imbued with intelligence and culture. Perfection, above all, of her musical voice, which with a slight effortless inflection shifts from coldness to amusement, from polite indifference to animation, from spontaneous laughter to boredom. She says, just like that, "Ah, you think so?, and you hear the angels sing."

A cover story on Catherine Deneuve in Le Figaro magazine is titled 'The Consecration of a Mythical Actress.' She is also named 'The New Idol of the Young.' A rap artist, a pure product of the 1990s, Stomy Bugsy in meeting Catherine Deneuve declares: "My greatest dream was to meet her. That has been done.... a bomb of charm... Deneuve is a queen and I am nothing but her d'Artagnan (her knight)." 'Place Vendome,' her latest film released in 1998 is takes place in the luxurious setting of Place Vendome in Paris, a coolly elegant square hosting top international jewellers. Deneuve plays an alcoholic. The film is set in the jewellery business. She has received accolades at the Venice Film Festival for her role in 'Place Vendome.' Robitaille declares at the end of the interview. "She has become, to all intents and purposes, the one star of French cinema, even if she finds the idea 'ridiculous. There are no stars in France." Notwithstanding her statement, the epitomy of French beauty, the face of Catherine Deneuve graces the sculptured head adorning the Hotels de Ville (Town Halls) all over France. Fran Lebowitz in Metropolitan Life states, "Paris is a great beauty. As such it possesses all the qualities that one finds in any other great beauty; chic, sexiness, grandeur, arrogance." The same could be said of Catherine Deneuve.

### poems

#### Two songs in praise of Deity from Geetobitan

by Rabindranath Tagore

I

I am human  
A bemused in a lonely sojourn  
In the universe, in cosmos and the time infinity.  
Thou are present O thou Omnipotent in the endless mystery  
Solitary in silence in Thine's Home of Divinity.  
In this eternal space and time, in this illumined immensity  
Thou are present desiring me — I go desiring to Thee.  
Mute is all din and bustle, the peaceful is the domain —  
Thy is one, alone a fearless as I am into Thine.

II

My liberty  
In the scintillation of light in this sky,  
My liberty  
In the dust on grass.  
Obliterating myself to the remote realm of bodied mind,  
My liberty  
Soars high in the tune of music.  
My liberty  
Within the core of people's heart,  
In the tough task of trifling the paths and perils.  
In the Home of Deity of Divine Lord  
In the blaze of fiery rituals —  
I offer my life  
In the yearning for liberty.

Translated by Tito Choudhury



#### Uncollected Poems of Jibananada Das

Translated by Fakrul Alam

#### Where Have All Those Birds Gone?

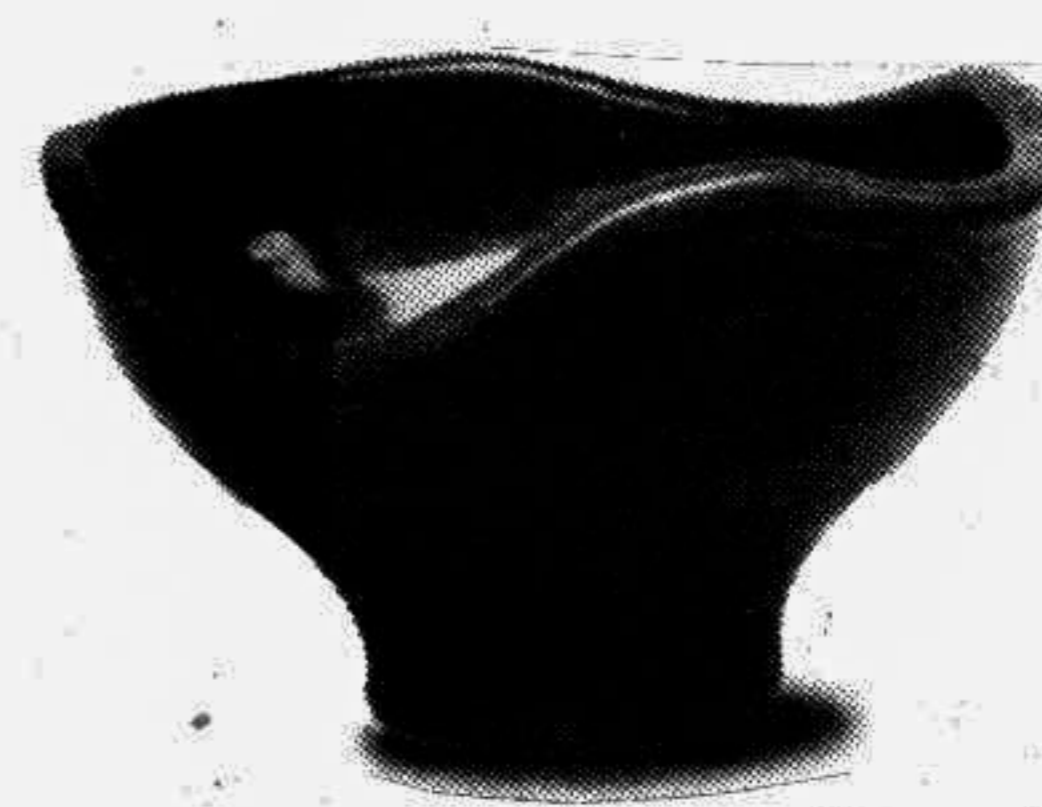
(Kothai Gieche Aaj Sheishob Pakhi)

Where have all those birds gone now — and those horses —  
And the woman in that white house?  
Wet with the fragrance of acacias — tinged with golden sunlight  
Those birds — and those horses  
Have left our world behind;  
My heart, tell me where — where have they all gone now!  
Darkness; like that dead pomegranate, silence.

#### Steadily The Two Small Dark Hands of the Clock

(Tobuo Payer Chinno)

Steadily the two small dark hands of the clock  
Take the two of us towards those mute fields and meadows  
Our courage, resolve, and love would never incline us that way  
Yet our footmarks move us there in profound and measured strides.



#### A Blank Verse

by Alauddin Al Azad

That day late autumn when the gathering  
Dusk had been painting profile vermilion  
Of your pensive face, you presented me  
A handkerchief with word embroidery:  
"Forgel me not!"  
Oh! what a thrill!  
I did not keep it inside my pocket.

Though along gradual advance of night  
Whose black expanded scarf covered the earth  
Except rivers sparkling with reflected  
Stars, and being faded away all harsh sound,  
The path of your walking ahead, zigzag  
Surely, yet not too wet by dewdrops  
To clog the fallen leaves of crossed winter:  
The shriek of hyenas could shake me not  
Neither did I shrink to see the enemy  
Mounted horse frontline for fierce assault  
Nor raise alarm for impending danger:  
They were but fake, wind of fierce skirmish!  
The magic mirror at my hand from far  
Behind had shown your glorious army  
Marching towards the golden victory stand!

Wasted not a single moment, I rushed there  
With bunches of flowers to welcome you  
Strange, you could not recognize me! you  
Stared at me a bit and asked quite quickly—  
"What do you want?"  
I said, "Nothing!"

Suddenly my song of dreams turned a blank verse.