Notes from Paris

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Abbot Groult (1760-1843), after whom my street is named, was a benefactor to the community of Vaugirard. So say the blue plates on both sides of the intersection. The sanitation crews used to move up that street at 6:40 a.m. everyday. They were somewhat louder on Sundays. Now the pick-up takes place at 9:50 p.m. — sounding like a curfew call.

Rue du Commerce, between La Motte-Piquet and rue des Entrepreneurs, is not as wide and not as long as Commercial Street, its London counterpart; but nor do its shops close on Sundays.

The Mairie d’Issy-Porte de la Chapelle subway line is the longest of the Paris Métro. It zigzags through the city from North to South and vice versa. Its original name was “Nord-Sud”.

On the Auteuil-Austerlitz line, some trains have six — not the customary five — cars, in two units of three. The brake couplings are by Westinghouse.

None of these trains have stopped at the Cluny and Croix Rouge stations for a long time.

The Cluny station was once dark and hard to spot as trains rode from Odéon to Maubert-Mutualité. Now it is being redecorated for resumed service. Signatures of famous people wind their mosaic tiles around the freshly finished ceiling. Its new name: “Cluny-la Sorbonne”.

The Croix Rouge station is lighted and made up to look like a beach with bathers in swimming trunks under white umbrellas. A funny sight.

The area around the Pantheon is being repaved with calibrated, cubic-shaped cobblestones. In 1968, twenty years ago, cobblestones of the same model had flown about. Afterwards, all streets in the Latin Quarter were topped with asphalt. In Gustave Flaubert’s *Dictionary of Accepted Ideas* one can read: “Macadam put an end to revolutions because there are no more cobblestones to erect barricades.” The jury must still be out.

"That Daylight Savings Time has done nothing for us!" (A Barker to a colleague, in front of a strip joint in Pigalle).

Onlookers are from Frankfurt a. M., as one can read on the side of the nearest tourist bus. It is also written, but in smaller letters of the cursive type, that the bus is equipped with air conditioning, a hot and cold drinks dispenser, stereo sound and
two bathrooms. A comforting thought.

"I like it when it rains and there are no taxis," says my friend, the Canadian writer. "How can you?" wonder most Parisians.

This winter, the Seine's high waters have made the square of Vert Galant, below the Pont Neuf, an island again.

Upstream, behind Notre Dame, from four to seven p.m. on Saturday 19, 1987, Joseph Czapski, the Polish writer, hard of hearing and quivering from age, was signing two of his books for his guests at the Libella bookstore. These are memoirs of sorts; the years 1939 to 1945 in places named — they appear in capital letters on the invitation cards — GRIAZOWIETZ and STAROBIELSK. Outside it is sundown, pink clouds above the city.

Monday, 4:30 pm; still drizzling. In each puddle, a rainbow.

Sunday, April 24, is election day: first round of the French presidential balloting. The Bordeaux-Paris Sunday night express slows down south of Tours: The tracks are being improved for the new high speed trains. The Express finally comes to a halt near a small town. Fittingly enough, its name is Villeperdue (Lost City). There is no one around, but gardens line the railroad bed. The one across our car contains seven bee hives. These are of the "Dadant" type, painted the customary faded green.

The Express pulls into the Tours-Saint Pierre des Corps station at 8:00 p.m. As the polls have just closed nationwide, the first estimates are announced on all TV channels. A young couple who just walked into our compartment has a pocket radio. It must be listened to with earphones. The young woman relays the figures, adding her own comments: she finds the scores of the right wing candidates dangerously high, then she cheers the leftist's results and, more moderately, the good showing of the incumbent. She cannot be more than twenty-two. Her diction — clean vowels, precise linkings — is that of the good bourgeoisie from Tours. She wears smartly cut pants — beige gabardine — and her blonde hair is elegantly curled. It must be the definition of radical chic; the emphasis on chic is verifiable. Her friend sports his hair swept back, a la Marmoz — the pioneer of the South American transcontinental airlines in the 1930's. He has a green trenchcoat to go with it.

The lady, on the window side, is two generations older. She is returning from Dax, a small town at the southwest tip of France and famous for its rugby team and hot springs known to cure arthritis. Earlier, as she reached for her suitcase in the luggage rack, she explained that she could not have attempted as much three weeks ago, on her way to Dax. A young man is explaining the flight, how for the German by flat intonation, than ships." Rochelle, an old man, he is out of A-10 supersonic — the limits — the second floor.

The two rooms, radio. They have a pocket and final round time.

The train architecturally found in all.

The Express is victory. Under the conservative.

One of the couple throw coins in.

And yet the election at a rainy night, the best sound,
Thanks to family connections he is stationed at headquarters in Paris.

Her way to Dax. Presently, she offers no opinion on the political debate. Her facial expression, though, shows the mild disapproval of a long time subscriber to the conservative daily *Le Figaro*, used to expect the worst.

A younger woman, near the aisle, pretends not to hear the election returns. She is explaining to her male companion — a cousin, apparently — that she now works for the German magazine *Prima* (she "sells advertising"). Her accent — clipped vowels, flat intonation — sounds like Brittany. Her cousin is doing his military service in the navy. Thanks to family connections he is stationed at the headquarters in Paris: "The number one navy base in the country," he adds, smiling, a finesse which must have been threadbare twenty years ago. He winks again: "Of course we have more buses than ships." He has a boat of his own, we are informed, a catamaran, moored at La Rochelle, and he is planning to "make it spin" in the Atlantic come summer when he is out of uniform. He stops smiling to explain his current concern: an access to the A-10 superhigl·may to be built is going to nit into the park of his family’s mansion — the limits of its connections, obviously. They think that they will see, from the second floor windows, the top of trucks going back and forth.

The two radicals nod their commiseration, to a degree. They have turned off their radio. They look relieved: it is clear that the President will be reelected in the second and final round two weeks hence. The dark forces have been held in check one more time.

The train follows the Loire valley. Every window in sight conforms to the classic architectural golden number, the ratio of which, between height and width, can be found in all good encyclopedia.

The Express stops in the Paris Austerlitz station at the appointed time; another minor victory. Under the metallic arches of its entrance fourteen musicians — students at the conservatory, says a handwritten sign — are playing Johann Pachelbel's Canon. One of the cellists is a boy of twelve. People are gathering silently around them; most throw coins in their instruments' open cases. Someone says: "Music here is a good idea."

And yet there was more music to come on the second round of the presidential election at a party to celebrate the incumbent's success. Place de la République on a rainy night. The reggae groups were from the French West Indies. They have the best sound, say those who are knowledgeable. A definitive statement.