

Representations of *la Parisienne* in a British Relocation Narrative

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Abstract: This paper investigates an Englishman’s representations of French women, with particular focus on the portrayal of a Parisian lady, as revealed by a first-person narrative belonging to the relocation memoirs. Considered either as a “full-fledged genre”, under the name of *literature of accommodation* (E. C. Knox), or as a subgenre of travel literature, under the name of *relocation narrative* (L. A. Mastellotto), where Anglophone writers have lifestyle migrants relate their experience of settling in a French locale, these home-abroad books offer a window on the views held on the natives both before and after the narrators’ settlement in the country of their choice.

While relying on the premise that no individual can be the absolute quintessence of the culture he lives in, our analysis retraces the dynamics of the traits creating the portrait of what makes a *Parisienne* be a *Parisienne*, as perceived by an Englishman in Paris.

Keywords: representation, relocation narrative, life style migration, *la Parisienne*.

Preamble

By their nature, relocation narratives written in 20th and 21st centuries by Anglophone writers who relate their settlement experience as lifestyle migrants in France are imbued with representations of the novel environment they are becoming accustomed to. “At the intersection of life writing and travel writing” [Mastellotto, 2013: 2, 2018: 291], in the American critique bearing the name of “literature of accommodation” [Knox, 2003: 95], this subgenre of travel memoirs implies constant reflection upon a considerable array of life aspects to which the narrator used to be familiar in his native country and the slightly or substantially different outlooks on them he is discovering in his new host country and with which he is in the process of getting acquainted. As “relatively influent individuals, moving either part-time or full-time, permanently or temporarily, to places which, for various reasons, signify for the migrants something loosely defined as quality of life” [Benson, O’Reilly, 2009: 621], the Anglophone narrators engage in a familiarization process with the French milieu, a process encompassing several stages.

Roughly speaking, at first glance one might posit that, by triggering comparisons between what a foreigner had been used to and what he is now confronted with in his country of choice, the narration of such a dwelling-in-

difference experience cannot but rely on parallels drawn between two *opposing* countries. Yet, upon careful assessment of the intercultural competence pervading these pieces of writing, it can be seen that the dynamics of the Anglo-French relations must not be read in the key of representativeness of two *opposing* cultures, for the aforementioned competence goes well beyond the oversimplification and mummification of the transnational in the mere instance of The Representative of an opposing cultural block, doomed, in his turn, to hit his head against a contrasting cultural block, the one specific to the chosen country of residence. The temptation may be great, yet it is obvious that no individual can know and embody the whole of the culture they have been brought up in: “aucun individu n’est familier avec le tout de la culture à laquelle il appartient ou se réfère. [...] Les représentations et les ‘caractéristiques’ culturelles ne sont pas des entités *sui generis*, mais actualisent en contexte la relation aux autres.” [Pretceille, 2017: 10].

That being said, the narrative will disclose representations and stereotypes that the quester of a better quality of life used to have before moving to the new locale and against which he will measure the locals he meets in his search for the good life in his country of choice; among these, some will be preserved, and others altered. Among the elements that will come out as previous representations reinforced or weakened by the subsequent first-hand experience, we can mention the way people are and their ways of doing things.

Before...

One of the two strains of the Anglophones’ accounts of their accommodation process to life in France, delineated by the location in which they settle, is the Parisian setting (its counterpart being the south of the country, *la Provence*, more precisely). The topics usually brought to the fore in these books with a mix of irony and self-deprecation resulting in an all-pervasive humour, such as “issues of intellectual and artistic culture” and a wide range of “institutional practices” [Knox, 2003: 95], will often be set against the background of the presentation of a love interest with a *Parisienne*. This is also the case with Michael Sadler’s book, *An Englishman in Paris. L’éducation continentale*, first published in 2002 by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd.

Refined, elegant, sophisticated, cultured, snobbish, mysterious, cryptic, flirtatious, libertine, frustrating, incisive, blowing hot and cold on their relationships, fickle are traits that at one point or another characterise the Parisian lady constantly interacting with the Englishman who is in the process of settling in Paris. The novel actually encapsulates two types of representations of French women: the ones before and the ones after Michael’s (the British professor turned narrator) leaving for France. As far as the “before images” are concerned, there are two instances evoking French women and the impressions left by them on British imagination. The first representation of a French lady the reader is confronted with in the novel is apparent in the second chapter of the thirty making up the recounting of the narrator’s departure from England – the country that had been

his pillow, as he puts it – and arrival in France – the country that would be his *réveil*. The image comes out, more precisely, from the disclosure of the reasons that prompted the British professor's move to the cross-Channel country:

For a long time I had been secretly troubled by the idea that I wanted to live in France. First there was the language. I'd had a French mistress at primary school – she was married to a local businessman – and a French master at secondary. I was in love with her and in awe of the second. When they spoke French they were different, exciting, electric.

[Sadler, 2003: 6].

The image conjured up in the British boy's mind by both the French woman and the French man who taught him French in primary and secondary school revolves around one main acoustic element: the overwhelming impression he is under whenever he hears his French teachers, as the pronunciation specific to the French language turns each utterance into a successful electrifying performance that the pupil is delighted to have the opportunity to witness, endowing the speakers with high-intensity attributes such as “exciting and electric”.

The second time a representation of a French woman is mentioned in the book is brought about by the recollection of the French-themed fancy dress party thrown by the village Abesbury under Lyme in Michael's honour right before his departure for the foreign soil. This is an opportunity for the reader to discover France as viewed from the cliffs of an English village, this representation being a collective one. The very invitation to the main guest which humorously reads: “Come dressed as a frog” alludes to an age-old British stereotype identifying the French (and the Dutch) as frog-leg eaters.

An element which may seem trivial but which actually is not without significance regarding the ideas the English have of French men and women is the space allotted to the male and the female representations in the textual economy of the chapter which translates into a contrast between lengthy paragraphs for the description of the French male personalities and one single paragraph for the French female icons. Consequently, the men's attire provides the writer with the opportunity to describe a wide range of personages and symbols embodied and staged in a humorous key by the British locals. The detailed description of the discrepancy between what the Englishmen had meant to be in relation to the French culture and how they were actually perceived by their guest of honour spans several paragraphs. The men come dressed up as: General de Gaulle, a member of the French Resistance, a Briton in a striped Breton pullover, the tennis player and singer Yannick Noah, the actor Gérard Depardieu, the character Major Thompson from Pierre Daninos' books or plainly the red medal insignia of the highest French order of merit, la *légion d'honneur*. If the presentation of each interpretation of the French personalities or symbols and of the attempt at impersonating them benefits from consistent paragraphs imbued in humor (as the attempts are not always successful, resulting in ironic misinterpretations), the representation of the French women according to the characters that all the

English ladies attending the party choose to interpret stands out as monochrome, thus requiring far less textual space to be described. The ladies' presentation occupies a mere paragraph as they all come dressed up as one single collective character: the glamorous girls in a French cancan dancer troupe:

The most surprising were the ladies. Anyone driving by accident through Abesbury that Saturday evening wouldn't have believed his eyes. The main street – which stretches from the surviving sub-post office to St John's Church passing by the seed merchants and the souvenir shop – looked like Pigalle on a hot summer night. Extraordinary creatures, encased in tight satin, their breasts welling up and out of their laced bodies like cream boiling over from a saucepan, waited on the pavements under the lampposts as their husbands parked the Rover. "Hello, darling, looking for a good time?" they called out to Bob Foster as he drove his muck-spreader back to the farm, with the result that he nearly ran over Maurice Hope's neurotic Labrador. [Sadler, 2003: 6].

The women are indistinct, all of them recreating the atmosphere of Place Pigalle "on a hot summer night" with flirty enticing women recalling the cabaret ambiance where the 19th century French cancan dance with girls kicking their legs high and lifting their skirts was a must.

...and after settling in a French locale

Then comes the moment when the Englishman who has crossed the Channel to continental Europe makes the acquaintance of *la Parisienne*. They meet at a dinner party in the quartier La Bastille at a common acquaintance's place, Bernard Dubost. As one of her attributes will remain "mysterious" all throughout their future relationship, the Parisian lady will not be named nor identified as a potential love interest from the onset, being introduced in the passage dedicated to the presentation of the dinner guests by the noun phrase "a striking brunette in trousers". Her name and marital status will be kept secret at that dinner party. The reader is merely told that she is the one who comes to Michael's assistance in the conversation when he falls behind due to his poor control of the French language and of the French cultural references hinted at all evening long by the dinner guests, which leaves him feeling "like an elephant running after a will o' the wisp". As at one point he does not understand what "bleu" means in terms of cooked meat, "sensing my confusion the sparkling brunette came to my assistance. *Bleu*, she began to explain, is an adjective which dates from the time that the Cossacks used to slip their steak between their bum and the saddle in order to cook it. The dye from their trousers subjected the steak to inordinate friction... But she never finished the sentence." [Sadler, 2003: 27]. The explanation is left unfinished, as the conversation meanders to other topics, just as the presentation of the brunette does not seem to lead to anything else since at the end of the night, after browsing through the visiting cards he has received from the Parisians, the narrator regretfully notices that there is none from "the sparkling brunette" [Sadler, 2003: 30].

Yet the two shall meet again, and this time on Edith Delluc's telephone invitation *à une petite soirée informelle* at her house. The mystery continues, as Michael pretends to have recognized the name but actually does not succeed in putting it to a face and seems to have understood a "we" in the invitation, which would mean his future host is married or at least seeing someone. Nevertheless, the flirt already seeps into the brief exchange over the phone in the form of an allusion to the first *diner en ville* where they had met said in a certain inflection of the voice: "And this time, Monsieur Sadler, don't forget the code!" There was a playful lilt in her voice. I blushed." [Sadler, 2003: 49] The warning-reproach that alludes to the first dinner when he had mislaid the digicode and had had trouble getting to Bernard's flat institutes a power imbalance in favour of the *Parisienne*.

This power imbalance grows the second time they see each other when the Englishman makes a blunder at the outset of the visit, mistaking the person who opens the door – the maid –, for the mistress of the house – Edith –, offering flowers to the former. The faux pas puts him in an awkward position while asserting Edith's superiority in this power game: "Bad start. She must find me *tarte* or *plouc*." [Sadler, 2003: 49]. This fear regarding his potential clumsiness and tactlessness will never leave him, making him wonder from time to time: "Did Edith's badinage conceal a note of annoyance? Was I supposed to be more difficult? Had my Englishness lost its charm? I suddenly felt on edge." [Sadler, 2003: 88]. When meetings will be arranged by Edith for a particular time, although aware that punctuality is not glamorous in Parisians' eyes, Michael will show up on time or even before the fixed time, all the while musing on the reversed values assigned to being punctual and on how his eagerness to see Edith must make him look in her eyes: "As always I arrived early. There is undoubtedly something *plouc* about punctuality. No one *chic* I have ever met arrives on time. Not keeping people waiting is a sign of an attention and a generosity to others that is somehow unbecoming." [Sadler, 2003: 64]. At times, sensing the potential danger in a situation that would make him look like a yokel, Michael will just play along and agree with Edith, even though he does not know exactly what he is agreeing to, for the purpose of the conversation with her will be less the exchange of information and more the projection of a worldly image of himself in front of the Parisian lady:

Michael! Quel plaisir! I am so pleased to see you! I 'ope the journey was not too difficult. *Bison faté* said that today was a *journée rouge*." The fact that Big Chief Cuning Bison had said that today would be a red one didn't mean much to me – I learned later she was referring to the traffic forecast – but I concurred to avoid the *tarte/plouc* syndrome.

[Sadler, 2003: 87]

As for the evolution of the way the Englishman perceives the *Parisienne* the second time they meet, the epithet attached to her initial identification as a *brunette* changes from *striking* or *sparkling* to *ebullient*, preserving the sense of overwhelming energy felt by the author when he was first introduced to her. Edith's portrait encompasses traits ranging from physical characteristics: "very delicate neck and

wrists”, “full mouth” to style “extremely elegant, wearing a black sheath dress, and heavy gold jewellery” and attitude, as “a sardonic smile” is “always ready to lighten its corners.” [Sadler, 2003: 49].

The pronunciation-related detail that had made Michael as a child fall in love with his French mistress in primary school is prolonged now into adulthood only that this time he finds the French accent in English delightful. Phrases like *le crumbelle* (the crumble), *it's 'ot* (it's hot), *you 'ave to spend ze New Yeaar in ze big 'ouse* (You have to spend the New Year in the big house), *I'ope* (I hope), *You don't know ze Île de Re? It ees paradise!* (You don't know the Île de Re? It is paradise!) hold a seductive grip on Michael, confirming the stereotyped fragility of French ladies' accent in English.

The house where the Parisian woman lives rises to Parisian standards of luxury, conjuring up images from a palace: high ceilings, furniture in the French Empire style, a solemn stern style specific to the time of Napoleon I that required imposing items of furniture meant to be an expression of wealth and a display of incredible splendour [*cf.* Thieffryde Witte, Champollion, 1999: 56], tapestries reminding of the art of the Middle Ages with unavoidable (how else? the Brit would say about the French) gallant scenes:

The flat was immense, the ceilings so high that even the furniture, a very imposing collection of chunky *meubles Empire* – chairs and settees dressed up like admirals of the fleet with crests, braid and tassels – looked surprisingly small. On the wall hung tapestries depicting *des scenes galantes* – love scenes – young ladies in Laura Ashley wooed in the middle of flocks of disapproving unicorns. [Sadler, 2003: 50]

The description of the first impression is imbued with humour and nuances of mockery as the pieces of furniture trigger a simile and a personification alluding to the navy hierarchy (the chairs and settees are like admirals), while the tapestries awake the reference to a quintessentially English lifestyle brand founded by Laura Ashley in the mid-20th century (the enraptured young ladies who are scowled at by innocent unicorns seem to be dressed in the Welsh designer's romantic patterns with a 19th-century rural feel). The transition from “so French” to “so English” is proof that no one should take themselves too seriously and that anyone, regardless of on which part of the Channel they live, may fall victim to ridicule when “less” is not considered to be “more”.

Yet once the *soirée* starts, *la Parisienne's* charm will operate on her particular English guest. The preparation of the desert (meaning going into the kitchen at Edith's call for a helping hand and handing her a Limoges plate to put the crumble freshly taken out of an oven) gives him the opportunity to start wondering if there is a spark between them:

I took the porcelain plate – doubtless Limoges, but this was hardly the moment to peek at the hallmark – and was at her side in a trice. [...] She went to take the Limoges plate from me slipping her right hand under the dish. Inevitably our fingertips met. They met because the plate had to be supported. But they met for longer than it takes to

manoeuvre a crumble into a sliding position. They touched, they grazed, they lingered, they dallied under the dish. She could have retracted her fingers. I could have done the same. Neither of us moved. The moment was ephemeral but highly charged, erotic. Was this a pass? *Me drague-t-elle?* I was delightfully troubled. “Careful, Michael. It’s ‘ot.” You can say that again. She smiled, I smiled. [Sadler, 2003: 52]

The fleeting tactile moment with the Parisian lady is scrutinized in minute detail, in each of the fractions making it up. The return to the living room afterwards is recounted with self-deprecating humour as a victorious return of the hero from an experience that has initiated him in the secrets of love, stripping him bare of his naivety: “I left the dining room a mere boy, I returned a character from the *Liaisons dangereuses*. I am the Marquis de Valmont, the John Malkovich of the crumble.” [Sadler, 2003: 52] The use of the literary and cinematic references, the character le Marquis de Valmont from the scandalous XVIIIth century novel *Dangerous Liaisons* by P. Choderlos de Laclos, played by John Malkovich in the 1989 Oscar-nominated production, hint to the devastatingly passionate effect Edith has on Michael.

Yet the scene of seduction encapsulated in a gesture that elates Michael who lets his imagination run free, elongating an ephemeral moment and endowing it with erotic connotations is in an area of delightful uncertainty. The same undetermined atmosphere will prevail on the occasion of another of Edith’s invitations, this time outside Paris. At the New Year’s Eve party, in La Touraine, at Deluc’s *résidence secondaire*, Michael saves the day (or the night, more precisely) by urging the company to be honest and say how they really feel about topics that they had been discussing for ages, whenever they met. His abrupt manner at what seemed to be heading towards a downright boring dinner party is found exquisitely refreshing and all the French love him. Edith cannot but show her appreciation:

Edith adored me. I had turned a terrible evening into a great party. I was the unfreezer. She drew me towards her and kissed me on both cheeks. Like a lingering finger under the crumble, each kiss lasted a fraction of a second longer than a thank-you kiss needed to last. A kiss that lingers one second longer. Or was this just my imagination?

[Sadler, 2003: 96]

The doubt over the innocence or the flirtatious nature of these tactile moments seems to be finally dispelled on New Year’s Eve, just before the stroke of midnight, when the hosts and the guests form a circle in a kitchen and sing *Auld Lang Syne* in English and Edith and Michael kiss again. The revelation confirming his power of attraction surges up triumphantly supplanting the uncertainty of the previous indirect free style: “After this we all kissed again – which allowed me to confirm the fractionally protracted duration of Edith’s embrace.” [Sadler, 2003: 96]

The constant act of wondering performed by Michael regarding his position and status in Edith’s eyes, his sense of victory as well as his sense of failure, now and then, will be possible under rather peculiar circumstances that point to essential characteristics of the Parisian lady, that is self-confidence,

boldness, adventurousness and libertinism in an exciting and rather shocking situation from which the French supposedly do not shy away. This is how the Englishman's walk on a tightrope will be done against the background of a challenge issued by one of the guests at the first *soirée informelle* to which Edith had invited him. The discussion between the French turns (inevitably, the English narrator seems to intimate) to rather racy topics, as it had also been the case with the first dinner party at Bernard's place: "either because of the amount of liquid carpet we had been drinking, or simply by tradition, all the guests, once the desert arrived, began to talk cul – literally *arse* but, part for the whole, normally *sex*?" [Sadler 2003: 53]. The question "Is friendship possible between sexes?" is raised at one point of the evening. Different opinions are vividly exchanged and the conversations climax with a dare floating in the air and verbalized by Edith herself as a defiant reaction to a statement made by one of the guests:

"There are two kinds of friendship. Pre-friendship and post-friendship. And the former dwells indubitably in the shadow of an undeclared sensuality." "Mais non!" "Mais si!" Edith stood, her eyes afire. She is small, slight, muscular and very beautiful. There are dimples at the tops of her arms as she gesticulates. She points at me. "Michael needs a guide in the discovery of France. [...] And I can tell you here and now that I am quite able to be Mr Sadler's friend without ever being any question either of orgasm or penetration between us." "Chiche", said Roland. [Sadler, 2003: 54].

Edith's description from the moment when she makes the all-important decision of educating Michael in the intricacies of high-class life in Paris seems to combine "what the French most love [...] – the idea that every foreigner is a potential convert to the great cause of Frenchness" (as the English narrator puts it [Sadler, 2003: 21]) with playing-with-fire sensuality. To add to the bizarreness of this situation with its dare addressed to Edith to be friends with a man without getting romantically involved, upon hearing his wife accepting it on the spot by declaring she will make her English guest the object of her experiment, all Roland (the husband) has to comment to the unromantic/romantic prospect of the project so readily undertaken by his wife is "*Chiche!*", an interjection which seals the dare and which, could be argued by the Englishman, only renders this Gallic situation even more libertine.

The education process which enchants Michael, will show a *Parisienne* particularly proud of her lifestyle in the French capital, decisive, intent on not letting the Englishman make any faux pas according to the Parisian *savoir-faire* and who does not mince her words when the Englishman's conduct fails short of observing the unwritten Parisian rules. By way of consequence, there is a big gulf between what the Englishman first imagines will make the object of his education in the French capital and what Parisian staples Edith chooses to introduce him to:

Edith Delluc was determined to take my education in hand. She rang me a few days after dinner, fired by her husband's *chiche*. We were to start with some of the cultural highlights of the capital. A rendezvous was fixed for the following Tuesday in a brasserie

on the Boulevard Saint-Germain, Chez Lipp. I presumed that we would then be off to visit the Panthéon, The Conciergerie or the Louvre. [Sadler, 2003: 64].

While Michael expects to be introduced to the landmarks pertaining to the visible part of culture seen as an iceberg [Hall, 1976] Edith's educational agenda comprises cultural highlights that concur the entry in the *Franco-Parisian Dictionary* which says that when the verdict "ça ne s'adresse pas à tout le monde" (this is not for everybody) is uttered, in Parisian language it actually translates into "ça s'adresse aux Parisiens." (this is for Parisians only) [Cassely, Saféris, 2017: 125]. This is why a brasserie (chez Lipp) is chosen over a renowned monument, a medieval royal palace or the largest museum in the world as a first insight into what it means to be a Parisian; this is also why, when the naïve Michael waits for Edith in the upstairs room of this brasserie, his social mistake will be harshly criticised by the French woman:

Clearly I had no idea where I was. Quand même! Chez Lipp is no ordinary brasserie. Lipp has been an institution since it was founded in 1880 by Léonard Lipp. Chez Lipp is the Medicis' court. Verlaine, Proust, Gide, Hemingway used to come here. Lipp is the select meeting-place of politicians, of men of letters, lawyers, media moguls, of the great and powerful. It is here that reputations are made and undone. Here that presidents Pompidou, Girard d'Estaing and Mitterrand would come for a late night *cervelas remoulade* and *piéd de porc*. Here that Bernard Pivot brings his literary guests after the late Friday night show. And I went upstairs? [...] I was chastened. No easy job being a Parisian.

[Sadler, 2003: 66-67]

The first lesson leaves Michael deeply perplexed as it seems that once again he has acted like a *plouc* deeply rooted in his state of liminality, and Edith's attempt to bring him to the centre of what it means being a Parisian will be no easy task. Although ardently desired by the Englishman, the education process in the Parisian ways will not run smoothly, it will unfold with ups and downs as there are times when Edith does not seem to be entirely committed to it. As she promised to take charge of his Parisian education, she issues different invitations to cultural events but does not always follow through herself, standing him up. However, the bitter disappointment on the Englishman's part will soon be followed by forgiveness and impatient expectation of the next vernissage or play. The flirt will turn into consummated passion but once it reaches this stage it will have already run its course and the Parisian woman will find another foreign love (or rather flirt) interest in the person of a seven-foot tall American, the chummy Gary who smiles all the time. The allure of the foreign soil remains with *la Parisienne* but the suddenly "less exotic" British man [Sadler, 2003: 163] will be replaced with a laid-back American whose slogan seems to be "Great! Why not? Great", leaving him to ponder on what seems a confirmed instance of the stereotype regarding the French infatuation with America.

Conclusion

Based on the experience gained during a voluntary lifestyle-motivated migration by an Anglophone writer, the relocation narratives highlight quality-of-life values found on foreign soil, in France. The process of “going native” enables the foreign writer turned narrator to reveal (with a mixture of irony, ambivalence and affection) a series of representations she/he had on the people in the host country before her/his chosen French residency as well as after settling in the novel milieu.

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