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*Shifting Cultural Centres in
Twentieth-century Paris*

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It is possible to talk of a cultural geography in respect of all of the great European cities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which enables us to identify those specific urban districts that became centres of cultural activity and production, and those institutions, particularly cafés, that served as regular meeting points for writers and artists. In the case of Paris, that cultural geography was initially heavily dependant on the institutions of cultural power, in particular the University and allied institutions of higher education, such as the *grandes écoles*, especially the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and the Ecole Normale Supérieure, and the publishing houses that flourished around the University. In other words, Parisian cultural geography is inextricably enmeshed, as Herbert Lottman reminds us,¹ in the history of the Quartier Latin in particular, and the Rive Gauche in general. What is interesting about Left Bank culture in the nineteenth century, however, is that it is composed of two distinct cultural traditions that will fragment in the early part of the twentieth century, only to reunite in the heyday of Existentialism in Saint-Germain-des-Prés in the immediate aftermath of World War Two. On the one hand, the presence of the University and publishing houses ensures the continuity of an intellectual and academic tradition, essentially concerned with ideas, often in their social and political application, and distrustful of the histrionics of avant-gardism. At the same time, as the nineteenth-century novelist Henri Murger, the author of *Scènes de la vie de bohème*, testifies, the Left Bank, in its student and Beaux-Arts traditions, played host to a nineteenth-century bohemianism that proved no less durable. What is interesting is that while the intellectual tradition remains geographically stable, attached to the cultural institutions on which it depends, the bohemian tradition is far more volatile and shifts across the city, dependant on the constantly changing structure of the urban fabric. In particular, its movement is connected to the growth of centres of transient populations, either in the developing centres of

pleasure in the modern city or in the areas surrounding railway stations, which provide not merely the essential infrastructure for bohemian existence in terms of cheap studios, accommodation, restaurants and cafés, but also the indispensable frontier between the bourgeois city and the *classes dangereuses*² that constitutes the marginal space in which bohemian activity takes place. It is therefore possible to chart the movement of Parisian cultural centres through the migration of bohemianism from the Left Bank to Montmartre, and from Montmartre to Montparnasse, before it rejoins the intellectual tradition in post-war Saint-Germain-des-Prés, with a brief detour through the 'aristocratic' bohemianism of the bar *Le Boeuf sur le toit* in the 1920s. Such an itinerary sheds considerable light not just on the nature of Parisian cultural activity in the twentieth century but on the development of the city itself.

In the beginning was the *Mur*, the Wall, probably one of the single most significant factors in the cultural development of Paris. Montmartre already had a long history as a *lieu de plaisir* for the Parisian population: the village on the hilltop (*Butte*) with its vineyards and leafy taverns was a popular object of summer excursions, while the *quartiers* of Les Porcherons and La Nouvelle France, stretching from the present-day Place du Havre to the faubourg Poissonnière, had acquired already by the early eighteenth century a more seedy reputation for drinking and prostitution.³ The construction, in 1784, of the *Mur des Fermiers Généraux* (the tax-collectors' wall) was crucial in institutionalizing this split between upper and lower Montmartre and in establishing Montmartre as a whole as the major *lieu de plaisir* of the capital. The *Mur des Fermiers Généraux* was both a physical and a fiscal wall, designed to separate the urban population of 600,000 Parisians in an area of high customs tariffs from the relatively cheap outlying districts beyond the city. All the way round the city the Wall was accompanied on the inside by the *chemin de ronde* (circular road) and on the outside by the *boulevards extérieurs* (outer boulevards), with regular points of access at the *barrières*, or customs posts. Because of the differential in duty payable on, among other things, alcohol within and beyond the Wall, the areas surrounding the *barrières* outside the Wall became important *lieux de plaisir*, as did the *boulevards extérieurs*, populated by dance-halls, drinking establishments and, later, places of popular entertainment. The geography of pleasure in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century city is closely allied to the Wall: one of the best-known and most popular dance-halls, for example, the *Bal Bullier*, was at the *barrière* at the end of the Boulevard Saint-Michel, on the site of the current restaurant and café, the *Closerie des Lilas*; the

reminds us, 'l'événement' (*the event*) was the migration in the winter of 1881–82 of the two Left Bank impresarios Emile Goudeau and Rodolphe Salis from the Latin Quarter and the foundation of the first Montmartre music-hall cabaret, Le Chat Noir at 84 Boulevard de Rochechouart. This marked a significant shift of the Parisian *bohème* from the Left Bank to the Right and a new, crucial alliance between bohemianism and commercial entertainment. Salis's cabaret, which involved *chansonniers* (satirical entertainers), music and silhouette-plays, gave rise to multiple imitations, the 'théâtricules de Montmartre' (the little theatres of Montmartre):⁸ L'Enfer, Le Baigne, L'Abbaye de Thélème, Les Frites Révolutionnaires, and, the best-known, Aristide Bruant's Le Mirliton. These cabarets were rapidly accompanied by the creation of the dance-halls that grew out of the Montmartre tradition of *guinguettes*, the most famous of which was La Moulin de la Galette: the Elysée-Montmartre and the Moulin Rouge, which, in its turn, transformed itself into the modern music-hall, with imitators such as the Casino de Paris and the Folies-Bergère. By 1900 lower Montmartre had become the centre of the Parisian entertainment industry, with dance-halls, music-halls, cabarets, the Cirque Médrano and the establishment on the Boulevard de Clichy of the world's largest cinema, the Gaumont-Palace.

It was this national, and international, reputation of Montmartre, boosted by the Exposition Universelle of 1900 and the nation-wide 'Tournées du Chat Noir' (Chat Noir tours), that led to the establishment of the Butte de Montmartre as a centre of bohemia and the artistic avant-garde. The Impressionist painters had already flirted with the area in the last years of the nineteenth century, attracted by the cheap accommodation, the ready availability of studio space, and subject-matter such as Renoir's *Moulin de la Galette* or Lautrec's *Moulin Rouge*. For a young provincial, such as the future inter-war poet and novelist Francis Carco, it had become the natural *quartier* to colonize on a first visit to Paris.⁹ It was also a natural location for the establishment of an avant-garde movement, such as the Cubists in the ramshackle studios of the Bateau-Lavoir, though it is worth recalling that the historic meeting between Picasso and Apollinaire in 1904 took place in Austen's Fox Bar near the Gare Saint-Lazare. The Bateau-Lavoir, with its shifting population of artists and writers, including Picasso, Van Dongen, Braque, the poets Max Jacob and André Salmon, and the inter-war novelist Pierre Mac Orlan, came to define a certain cultural production of the Belle Époque, encompassing both avant-garde and more traditional means of expression, and reliant on the cheap social infrastructure of Montmartre,

as well as upon the proximity of the *lieu de plaisir* in lower Montmartre and the centre of the Parisian press in the Faubourg Montmartre. From 1906 to the outbreak of World War One, the Butte de Montmartre played host to an extraordinary diversity of cultural activity, encompassing the creativity of the avant-garde, presided over by Apollinaire, the bohemians represented by writers such as Mac Orlan, Roland Dorgelès, author of the best-selling *Les Croix de bois* (Wooden crosses) and Carco, and caricaturists like Gus Bofa, Chas Laborde and Poulbot, the inventor of the archetypal Parisian street-urchin. The meeting-point between these different strands of cultural activity, often overtly antagonistic, was the Lapin-Agile on the rue des Saules, which brought together not merely representatives of different artistic tendencies, but also artists, bohemians, workers and criminals, a mixture recorded in Mac Orlan's *Le Quai des brumes* and Dorgelès's *Le Château des brouillards*.

What is remarkable about this cultural mixture is not merely its extraordinary vibrancy but its temporary nature: by the outbreak of World War One most of its major players had left: writers like Mac Orlan, Carco or Dorgelès, sickened by the memory of poverty, all too easily romanticized into the notion of 'la vache enragée' (starvation), had moved away, particularly to Passy, albeit retaining a sentimental, albeit ambiguous, attachment to the *bohème* of the 1900s; the avant-garde moved on, either in the cases of Picasso or Van Dongen through upward mobility, or, in the case of Modigliani, through a poverty unable to cope with rising prices in Montmartre, to Montparnasse. They left behind them a highly resilient literary avant-garde, represented by Pierre Reverdy's poetry review *Nord-Sud*, itself a recognition of the Métro link between Montmartre and the centre of the capital, and the Surrealists in the rue de Fontaine. In the 1930s Montmartre became synonymous with a certain tendency of cultural production that was, in one sense, both aesthetically and politically reactionary, with novelists like Louis-Ferdinand Céline and Marcel Aymé and artists and caricaturists like Vlaminck, Laborde, Daragnès and Ralph Soupault deploring the cosmopolitan nature of the city below and increasingly celebrating the 'France profonde' (essential France) represented by the village on the Butte. It is these survivors from the pre-war avant-garde who come to constitute the 'Ecole de Montmartre' (Montmartre School) in the inter-war years and who exert a powerful influence on young right-wing culture in the years after the Liberation.

By the end of World War One, the cultural centre of gravity of Paris had shifted away from Montmartre, but by no means back to the Quartier

Latin. The *années folles* (crazy years) of the 1920s were centred on not one, but two cultural locations: Montparnasse, for the artistic avant-garde, and the Right Bank venue of Le Boeuf sur le toit for the right-wing, mondain, intelligentsia. The significance of Le Boeuf sur le toit, 'ce bar éclairé brutalement' (this brutally-lit bar),¹⁰ established at 28 rue Boissy d'Anglas, lies in its alliance with a certain Right Bank popular culture associated with the Champs-Élysées, and particularly with the Bal Mabille, and in its ability, under the influence of the poet, novelist, artist and film-maker Jean Cocteau, to unite a particular *mondain* bohemianism, deriving from the world of theatre and ballet, in particular Diaghilev, and a number of writers who were essentially allied to the political right: Cocteau himself and his partner, the young novelist Raymond Radiguet, but also the novelists Paul Morand, François Mauriac and Joseph Kessel. In addition, it played host to a cross-partisan avant-garde, with composers like Darius Milhaud, sculptors such as Zadkine, and the outriders of the literary avant-garde, such as Blaise Cendrars and René Crevel. In particular, its clientele included Surrealists like Aragon, together with worrying fellow-travellers Jacques Rigaut and Drieu la Rochelle, both of whom were obsessed by suicide. As Mauriac records:

The Christian, even the bad Christian if he has kept faith, possesses a sense, an antenna, to detect amongst those who surround him the evil which never pardons. I did not know that Raymond Radiguet, that marvelous trained owl, motionless and unseeing on his stool in the *Boeuf sur le toit*, was on the point of dying. I did not know the Drieu la Rochelle or René Crevel would kill themselves, but I saw with the eyes of the spirit a glow, a sign, suspended over those charming heads. . . .¹¹†

In the inter-war years there was a powerful Right Bank culture, deriving from an essentially Proustian legacy, which was to maintain a cultural importance that lasted into Vichy and into the post-war period, particularly through its influence on the new generation of the 'Hussards', Roger Nimier, Antoine Blondin and Jacques Laurent.

In his memoirs of 1964, *A Moveable Feast*, Ernest Hemingway records his period spent as a young penniless writer in Paris immediately after World War One and emphasizes the dominance of the *quartier* of

†Le chrétien, même le mauvais chrétien s'il a gardé la foi, possède un sens, une antenne pour démêler chez ceux qui l'entourent ce mal qui ne pardonne pas. Je ne savais pas que Raymond Radiguet, celle merveilleuse chouette dressée, immobile et aveugle, sur son tabouret du Boeuf sur le toit, était en train de mourir. Je ne savais pas que Drieu la Rochelle, que René Crevel se tueraient, mais je voyais avec les yeux de l'esprit au-dessus de ces têtes charmantes un lueur, un signe . . .

Montparnasse as an international artistic and intellectual centre: 'In those days many people went to the cafés at the corner of the boulevard Montparnasse and the boulevard Raspail to be seen publicly, and in a way such places anticipated the columnists as the daily substitutes for immortality.'¹² Unlike Montmartre, the borders of Montparnasse are less easy to define. For the author of a guide-book like Clive Holland's *Things seen in Paris* of 1926, the definition of Montparnasse is broad enough to encompass the Latin Quarter and its surrounding quarters: 'The Latin Quarter of Paris is not easy to define, but it may be roughly considered to comprise the area covered by the Boulevard St. Michel, or as it is usually called the Boul. Mich., and the Odeon quarter of the Boulevard Montparnasse from the Gare Montparnasse to the Place de l'Observatoire'.¹³ More precisely, Montparnasse may be said to be bounded on the north-west by the rue de Vaugirard, on the north-east by the rue d'Assas, on the east by the avenue du General Leclerc and the avenue Denfert Rochereau, and on the south by the rue d'Alésia and its extension into the rue de Vouille and the rue de la Convention. As such, it occupies parts of the 6th, 14th and 15th arrondissements and has as its main arteries the avenue du Maine and the Boulevard Raspail, both running diagonally from north-west to south-east, the Boulevard du Montparnasse, from west to east, and the rue de Rennes linking the focal point of the Gare Montparnasse with (further north) the Boulevard Saint-Germain and the city centre. In addition to the railway station, now part of the Maine-Montparnasse development, its major crossroads is the Place Pablo Picasso, formerly the Place Vavin, lined with the cafés La Coupole, Le Dôme, Le Sélect and La Rotonde.

In fact, Montparnasse owes its artistic success in the 1920s to its socially heterogeneous nature, which enabled it, well before World War One, to become established as a modest *quartier de loisirs* (entertainment district) within the capital. Like Montmartre, Montparnasse benefited from the same social development that followed the establishment of the Mur des Fermiers Généraux in 1784, with its accompanying boulevards.¹⁴ The Wall, as we have seen, maintaining high customs tariffs for the city and relatively low prices for, among other things, wine, outside the capital, led to the creation of *lieux de plaisir* – taverns, *ginguettes*, dance-halls – all along its perimeter. It was for this reason that, as in the case of Montmartre, a similar pleasure industry was developed where the Wall ran to the south, along the present-day Boulevard du Montparnasse. In particular, it gave rise to a number of taverns and *ginguettes* in the rue de la Gaîté, and, especially, as we have seen, to the establishment of the most

famous *bal* in Paris, the Bal Bullier, where the Boulevard Saint Michel meets the Boulevard Montparnasse and the Boulevard de l'Observatoire, on the site of the present-day Closerie des Lilas. In other words, from the end of the eighteenth century onwards, Montparnasse constituted a powerful link, through pleasure, between the capital and the *quartier*.

As the nineteenth century progressed, this link was maintained, as was its original nature. With the annexation of the outlying villages in 1860, under the Law of 26 May 1859, Paris expanded to the south as far as the fortifications, now constituted by the 'boulevards des Maréchaux' (the Marshals' Boulevards), the Boulevards Brune and Lefebvre, and absorbed the previously independent communes of Vaugirard, Plaisance and Petit Montrouge. As Albert Demangeon points out, 'These *quartiers eccentricques* (outlying districts) were, par excellence, the habitat of the *classes populaires* (lower classes)',¹⁵ and Montparnasse, along with the *quartiers* of Santé, Petit Montrouge, Plaisance, Javel and Grenelle, was populated by workers and clerks.¹⁶ Essentially, the avenue du Maine came to act as a border between the heavily working-class districts of Vaugirard, Plaisance and Petit Montrouge, dominated by the Chemins de Fer de l'Ouest and by the slaughterhouses on the rue de Vaugirard, but sustaining a thriving and diverse artisanal industry, and the districts towards the Cimetière du Montparnasse and the Jardin du Luxembourg which, while populated by clerks, were also inhabited by the bourgeoisie, particularly along the boulevards themselves. It is for this reason that, by the end of the nineteenth century, Montparnasse had become recognized as one of the Parisian centres 'du plaisir et du crime',¹⁷ a significant interface between the capital's bourgeoisie and its *classes dangereuses*. A novel such as Charles-Louis Philippe's *Bubu de Montparnasse* (1901) plays on its audience's recognition of a social reality by evoking the career of a Parisian pimp, Bubu, a native of the *quartier* of Plaisance who graduates to the aristocracy of the underworld and who use the bars of the avenue du Maine as their headquarters, just as this aristocracy's Right Bank counterparts dominate the Place Pigalle.

In the case of Montparnasse, the *crime* represented by the prostitutes and the pimps of the avenue du Maine goes hand in hand with the *plaisir* of a burgeoning entertainment industry. The rue de la Gaîté, already a centre of *ginguettes* in the early nineteenth century, saw a development throughout the century of popular theatres, such as the Gaité-Montparnasse, and, in the twentieth century, the Théâtre Montparnasse of the celebrated director Gaston Baty. At the same time, the *quartier* witnessed the growth of cinema, notably with the Pathé Cinema in the rue de la

Gaîté, though on nothing like the same scale as in Montmartre or on the Grands Boulevards.¹⁸ What is important about this aspect of the early development of Montparnasse is that it not only illustrates the ability of the main arteries, the former 'boulevards militaires', to develop a thriving context for popular culture,¹⁹ but that it establishes the district as a significant 'quartier d'acculturation du Paris prolétarien' (a district of cultural adaptation for working-class Paris),²⁰ and one that serves as an 'intermediary stage between local centres and . . . the centre of the capital'.²¹ In other words, within the context of the city as a whole and its overall identity, the cultural activity of individual and discrete areas can, given the right circumstances, radiate out and inform the life of the larger organism. What begins as a localized form of entertainment becomes an indispensable facility for the city as a whole, and a defining characteristic of it. In the case of Montparnasse, this fragile connection with the city is ensured both by the establishment of the Gare Montparnasse, a major mainline station linking the capital with the west, and in particular Brittany, which in its turn leads to the establishment of a Breton culture in the *quartier*, and a significant suburban commuter station, and the growth of the Cimetière du Montparnasse as one of the two major Parisian cemeteries, along with the Cimetière du Nord in Montmartre. With the railway station and the cemetery, Montparnasse achieves a role within the life of the capital that goes beyond its specific operation as a *quartier*, which, in its turn, is reflected in the growth of cheap hotels, cheap restaurants and, in particular, the cafés that will become the centres for the artistic activity of the immediate pre-war and post-war periods. The guidebooks of the early 1900s show Montparnasse as a significant, but by no means dominant, *lieu de plaisir* in comparison with the Grands Boulevards and Montmartre.²²

If the 1920s constitute the high point of the success of Montparnasse as a national and international centre of high culture, the seeds of this success were already present in the pre-war era. There was a close and often ambiguous relationship between pre-war Montparnasse and the Latin Quarter of the capital's student population, to the extent that, as we have seen, some guidebooks go so far as to confuse the geographical limits of each district. What is important, however, is that not only is there a significant overspill of student culture into the popular culture of pre-war Montparnasse, particularly on borderline territory such as the Bal Bullier, but also implantation of intellectual activity, more closely associated with the cafés on the Boulevard Saint-Germain, but extending in the 1900s to establishments such as the Closerie des Lilas. Once again,

the importance of the centres of higher education, with their student population and intellectual publishing activity, proves to have been an important factor in both the development and the evolution of cultural centres.

At the same time, Montparnasse before World War One had been a major centre of attraction for emigrés, artistic or political, often from Eastern Europe. William Wiser records, somewhat luridly, that

Before the Russian Revolution the favourite café of Menshevik and Bolshevik conspirators had been *La Coupole*, on the boulevard Montparnasse at place Vavin. Political outcasts like the fiery intellectual Leon Trotsky sat at its table fanning the hopes of fellow exiles, while Lenin, awaiting his hour, preferred to play chess at a corner table.²³

More important than the political exiles, however, was the artistic influx from Eastern Europe into Montparnasse. Again, Wiser comments:

Refugees of one diaspora or another – Lipchitz, Zadkine, Soutine, Chagall – followed their troubled paths to the new ghettos of Montparnasse. The displaced painters and sculptors sought light and cheap living space: at *La Ruche* on the rue Dantzig they found both, and the reassuring company of fellow artists of predominantly Eastern European origin.²⁴

'La Ruche' (the beehive) was an artists' colony established on wasteland near the slaughterhouses of Vaugirard by an amateur sculptor Alfred Boucher. Following the Exposition Universelle of 1900 he assembled a disparate collection of redundant pavilions to be used as studios and living accommodation, the most remarkable of which was Eiffel's circular iron and glass *halle aux vins* (wine market) which, once transported to the rue Dantzig and with its hive-like shape, gave the name La Ruche to the whole development. What is important about La Ruche, apart from its intrinsic artistic innovation, is that it consolidated the growth of artists' studios in the 13th and 14th arrondissements and heralded the arrival of the avant-garde from Montmartre.

In fact, it was the decline of Montmartre as a centre of the literary and artistic avant-garde that propelled Montparnasse into international prominence at the end of World War One. In this way, it was the beneficiary of a cultural ebb and flow throughout the capital in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from the Latin Quarter of Murger's *Scènes de la vie de bohème* in the Second Empire to the Montmartre of the Belle Époque and back to the Left Bank just before and during World War One. Inevitably, it was to fall victim to just such an evolutionary process as the Parisian cultural centre of gravity shifted in the 1930s back to the Latin Quarter and Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

As we have seen, the avant-garde had emigrated to Montmartre at the turn of the century, attracted by the village-like atmosphere of the Butte, its cheap lodgings and restaurants, its studio space and the vibrant social and artistic life of the Place Clichy and the Boulevard de la Chapelle. However, by the outbreak of war, most of the major figures of this avant-garde had abandoned the Butte, either because, like Picasso or Kies van Dongen, they were now rich enough to escape the squalor and hardship of the Bateau Lavoir, or, paradoxically, as in the case of Modigliani, because they could no longer afford to live in a district that was gradually gentrifying. For whatever reason, there was also a prevailing sense that Montmartre had outlived its usefulness as a centre of artistic innovation. As one of its most faithful chroniclers, Francis Carco, recalls:

Mac Orlan had got married; he had left Montmartre and most of our friends, profiting from the welcome extended them by Gus Bofa at *Le Sourire*, went less to the Butte and more to the Boulevards and newspaper offices. We only saw Roland Dorgelès in a taxi. . . . It was the end.^{25†}

And he concludes: 'Montmartre n'était plus' (Montmartre was no more).²⁶

Significantly, avant-garde Montparnasse was the creation of the great artistic impresario of Montmartre, the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, who had already launched Cubism in the Montmartre of the Belle Époque. As Carco comments:

Montparnasse was created by Apollinaire, who took us to see Baty (at the Théâtre Montparnasse) and was treated royally everywhere. His presence in this district, where the mixture of races provokes disquieting undercurrents, created a kind of 'union sacrée' of the arts, fixing it and crystalising it. . . . As a neighbour of his cousin Paul Fort, whose domaine comprised the Boul'Mich', Bullier, the Luxembourg Gardens and the Closerie des Lilas, he traced the limits of his fief and, from the café of the Deux-Magots. . . , extended it along the rue de Rennes and the boulevard Raspail until it crossed the boulevard du Montparnasse. He even sent out scouts as far as Plaisance, where Douanier Rousseau lived, and for a time established his headquarters in the pleasant rue de la Gaîté.^{27‡}

†Or Mac Orlan s'était marié; il avait quitté Montmartre et la plupart des camarades, profitant de l'accueil que leur faisait au Sourire Gus Bofa, fréquentaient moins la Butte que les Boulevards et les salles de rédaction. On ne vit plus Roland Dorgelès qu'en taxi. . . . C'était la fin.

‡Montparnasse est né d'Apollinaire qui, le premier, nous entraînant chez Baty, se vit partout fêté. Sa présence en ces lieux où le mélange des races provoque un inquiétant remous, créait comme une union sacrée des arts, la fixait, la cristallisait. . . . Avant qu'on n'y prît garde, voisinant avec son cousin Paul Fort, dont le domaine comprend le long 'Boul'Mich', Bullier, le Luxembourg et la Closerie des Lilas, il traçait les limites de son fief et, du café des Deux-Magots. . . l'étendait par la rue de Rennes et le Boulevard Raspail

In the wake of Apollinaire, the poets and the painters abandoned Montmartre and joined the nascent artistic community created already by such developments as La Ruche. Most, like the painter Modigliani, who lived in the rue Campagne-Première, had left a Montmartre that they associated only with poverty for an area that offered ample studio space in the form of artisanal workshops, cheap accommodation and the abundant café and restaurant life associated, among other things, with *quartiers* surrounding busy railway stations. In the inter-war years, Montparnasse was home to Chagall, Modigliani, Kisling, Foujita, Friesz, Matisse, Picasso, Pascin, Miro, Max Ernst, Giacometti and Kandinski.²⁸ They congregated in the busy brasseries on the Place Vavin, and even the poorest of them could afford to eat regularly at Marie Wassilieff's *cantine* on the avenue du Maine.²⁹

It was this combination of inexpensive lodgings and food, an artistic community and a healthy popular cultural life centred on dance that attracted émigrés, not merely from Eastern Europe but also, and in far greater numbers, from the United States. Essentially, American visitors fell into one of only two categories: the rich, who congregated in the western 8th and 16th arrondissements, and the bohemian poor who clustered along the Left Bank and, in particular, in Montparnasse. As Hemingway recalls, what attracted him to establishments like the *Dôme* or the *Coupole* was that 'the big cafés were cheap then, too, and all had good beer and the aperitifs cost reasonable prices that were clearly marked on the saucers that were served to them'.³⁰ With the exchange rate in the 1920s in the dollar's favour, even the poorest American visitors could afford an extended stay in Montparnasse, especially if, like the Hemingways, they lived in a 'flat over the sawmill at 113 rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs'.³¹

Where both categories of American could come together, however – the rich and the poor – was in the dance culture of establishments like the *Coupole*, which operated as both a brasserie and dance-hall, and served not merely as the stage for some of the oddest excesses of the 'Crazy Years' but also as the indispensable meeting-point between respectability and bohemianism that defines any major cultural centre. As Clive Holland comments on the *Dôme*:

jusqu'au croisement de ce boulevard avec celui du Montparnasse. N'avait-il point déjà poussé ses éclaireurs vers Plaisance où habitait le douanier Rousseau, et fait durant un temps son quartier général de l'aimable rue de la Gaîté?

If one wishes to gain a little insight into the Bohemia of today one cannot do better than to spend an evening at the *Café du Dôme*. . . . The *Dôme* is the café of all others, perhaps, to which most celebrities visiting Paris seem to gravitate sooner or later. . . . One meets at the *Dôme* many curious types who are doing strange things for a living. On one occasion a man who has trundled a wheelbarrow from Moscow to Paris en route for Madrid . . .³²

In the end, it was this kind of tourism that did for the artistic community of Montparnasse, as it had done to a large extent for that of Montmartre and as it was to do in the late 1940s for Saint-Germain-des-Prés. Wisner records that by the end of the 1920s the 'overcrowded *terrasses* on the Place Vavin were less a sanctuary of the arts than a tourist stop for new hordes of poseurs',³³ and cites the journalist Harold Stearns denouncing the *Sélect* as 'a seething madhouse of drunks, semi-drunks, quarter-drunks and sober maniacs'.³⁴ The delicate ecology of a *lieu de loisirs* depends on relative cheapness as it does on the even interaction between differing social categories. It is this that fosters the artistic activity. But when that balance shifts in favour of the affluent outsider, with the inevitable economic consequences, the artistic activity is bound to move on.

At the same time, the rapid decline of Montparnasse can be attributed to more precise causes. The Wall Street Crash of 1929 and the subsequent Depression cut off the flow of American would-be bohemians. The worsening international situation in the 1930s, together with the rise of the Front Populaire government in France, restored to the French intellectual a prominence based on the written word and sustained polemic. The new culture of 1930s Paris was literary, and it gravitated to the University district and the publishers' *quartier* of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. As such, it contrasted strongly with the painter-dominated culture of the avant-garde movements that occupied Montmartre and Montparnasse, and no longer had any need for its studios or its frivolities. Montparnasse returned in large measure to the role of subsidiary pleasure centre it had played before World War One and which it still continues to exercise.

The cultural centre of gravity moved on – in fact, it moved back: to the Latin Quarter and Saint-Germain-des-Prés. Herbert Lottman's lengthy study of the 'Rive Gauche' emphasizes its importance as a centre of left-wing, committed, intellectual culture throughout the inter-war years and the immediate post-war period, with the assembly hall of the *Mutualité* at the eastern end of the Boulevard Saint-Germain as one of its key loci. It is important to add, however, that even during Montmartre's bohemian phase it retained a role as a centre of non-aligned poetic activity, with

figures such as Apollinaire, Paul Fort and Léon-Paul Fargue, and that, during the inter-war years and beyond, it reflected *engagé* (committed) intellectual life at both poles of the political spectrum. In the 1930s, while the Groupe Octobre, led by the poet Jacques Prévert, and fellow-travelling intellectuals colonized the Café de Flore and the Deux Magots, the Brasserie Lipp on the opposite side of the Boulevard Saint-Germain was the headquarters of Action Française intellectuals, such as Thierry Maulnier's team of the review *Combat*.³⁵ More than Lottman acknowledges, the Left Bank was evenly split during the inter-war years and beyond, between intellectuals of the right and the left, and the division of cultural space between left and right in Saint-Germain-des-Prés reflected that balance of political forces.

In the years immediately following the Liberation, Saint-Germain-des-Prés came to constitute a major cultural centre in Paris, perhaps the last of its kind, but a centre that reunited both left- and right-wing intellectual activity and high and popular culture. Of those on the left, the Existentialists occupied the Flore and the Deux Magots, whilst dissident Communists, such as Marguerite Duras, Edgar Morin and Dionys Mascolo, constituted the Groupe de la rue Saint-Benoît. The right continued to occupy the Brasserie Lipp, while also transforming the Rhumerie Martiniquaise, between the Carrefour Saint-Germain and the Place de l'Odéon, into a major cultural centre, in which the 'Hussards', particularly Nimier and Blondin, rubbed shoulders with left-wing libertarians such as Boris Vian. At the same time, with Vian fulfilling the same role as that played by Apollinaire in an earlier avant-garde, Saint-Germain-des-Prés became the centre of popular cultural activity, strongly allied to a youth culture, through the importation of American dance and, particularly, both New Orleans and be-bop jazz. This was accompanied by a resurgence of cabaret performance, through Vian himself, the avant-garde group Les Frères Jacques, closely allied to the ex-Surrealist novelist Raymond Queneau, and the growth of 'la chanson Rive-Gauche' (Left Bank song), represented by Juliette Gréco, Mouloudji, Léo Ferré and Georges Brassens, whose repertory, often through the mediation of the composer Joseph Kosma, brought high cultural figures such as Aragon, Prévert, Queneau and even Sartre, into a broader cultural domain. The very ambiguity in the term Existentialism, which denotes a technical philosophy, a literary mode, a moral code and an unrestrained exuberant lifestyle, encompasses the blend between high culture, bohemianism and popular culture that characterized the cultures of Montmartre and the Montparnasse and which was soon, probably definitively, to disappear.

For a brief period, from 1945 to 1952, Saint-Germain-des-Prés assumed the mantle of Montmartre in the Belle Epoque and Montparnasse in the 1920s, as a conjuncture of vibrant popular and high culture. Indeed, it almost consciously imitated the *années folles* of the 1920s in the second post-war period, with the same blend of high cultural literary, artistic and intellectual activity and a more generally accessible popular and youth culture based on music, dance, café society and American cultural imports. It was for this reason that Saint-Germain-des-Prés fell victim to the same commercialization of cultural space that destroyed Montmartre, marginalizing its remaining writers and painters, and Montparnasse. In particular the growth of tourism, especially American tourism, drove Sartre and his friends from the Flore and the Deux Magots to the less central Bar de l'Hôtel du Pont Royal. This cycle of bohemianism, pleasure and tourism provides a powerful cultural dynamic in the city, but one which is ultimately fatal to cultural practitioners.

The shifts of cultural space in twentieth-century Paris demonstrate a number of key factors: the alliance between urban geography and cultural activity; the importance of the growth of *lieux de plaisir* for the fostering of bohemianism and high cultural activity, in particular the crucial role played by the Mur des Fermiers Généraux and the colonization of the *Communes limitrophes*; and the fragility of urban cultural centres, dependant on both urban and cultural evolution. What the cultural history of Paris illustrates is the close relationship between student culture, the University, popular culture, bohemianism and high culture, all held together in a complex and delicate ecology and highly vulnerable to urban trends beyond their control. Lottman's own conclusion, that the 'Rive Gauche' vanished as a cultural force with the widespread use of the telephone, to which might be added the development of the mass-media, especially television, coincides with more general sociological trends: the increasing professionalization of the intellectual class, recuperated by the university system, and the progressive demarcation between an industrialized popular culture and the avant-garde, led to a collapse of the traditional bohemianism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The motor force of that bohemianism – the plastic arts – fragmented, at least geographically, and the new cultural industries, particularly the cinema and the mass media, were less conducive to and less dependant on any particular urban locus. For the first half of the century, however, the growth of the city in its most concrete sense was also the growth of its culture.

- 11 References in the text are to the Penguin Classics translation: *Against Nature* (Harmondsworth, 1959) by Robert Baldick.
- 12 Jacques Réda, *Premier livre des reconnaissances* (Paris, 1985), p. 7 (translation mine).
- 2 Nicholas Hewitt: *Shifting Cultural Centres in Twentieth-century Paris*
- 1 See Herbert Lottman, *La Rive Gauche* (Paris, 1981).
- 2 See Louis Chevalier, *Classes laborieuses, classes dangereuses* (Paris, 1958).
- 3 See, for example, Paul Lesourd, *Montmartre* (Paris, 1973).
- 4 *Guide secret de l'étranger célibataire à Paris* (Paris, n.d.).
- 5 *Guide général dans Paris pour 1855, suivi d'une Visite à l'Exposition* (Paris, 1855), p. 128.
- 6 Louis Chevalier, *Montmartre du plaisir et du crime* (Paris, 1980).
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- 8 See: *Guide de Poche 1900. Paris la nuit* (Paris, n.d.).
- 9 See Francis Carco, *De Montmartre au Quartier Latin* (Paris, 1927).
- 10 Jean Cocteau, 'Le Boeuf sur le toit ou the nothing doing bar', *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris 1948), VII, p. 309.
- 11 François Mauriac, *Nouveaux mémoires intérieurs* (Paris, 1965), p. 153.
- 12 Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast* (London, 1964), p. 72.
- 13 Clive Holland, *Things seen in Paris* (London, 1926), p. 108.
- 14 See, for example, Jacques Hillairet, *Evocation du Vieux Paris*, III: *Les Villages* (Paris, 1954), p. 9.
- 15 Albert Demangeon, *Paris. La Ville et sa banlieue* (Paris, 1933), p. 42.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- 17 See Louis Chevalier, *Montmartre du plaisir et du crime*.
- 18 See P.-H. Chombart de Lauwe, *Paris et l'agglomération parisienne* (Paris, 1952), p. 164.
- 19 See Bernard Rouleau, *Mémoires et documents*, 5: *Le Trace des rues de Paris. Formation, Typologie, Fonctions* (Paris, 1967), 'Legende de la Carte XIII'.
- 20 P.-H. Chombart de Lauwe, *Paris et l'agglomération parisienne*, p. 43.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 167.
- 22 See, for example, P. Joanne, *Paris-Diamant* (Paris, 1908).
- 23 William Wiser, *The Crazy Years: Paris in the Twenties* (New York, 1983), p. 85.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- 25 Francis Carco, *De Montmartre au Quartier Latin* (Paris, 1927), p. 97.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 108.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 190.
- 28 See: *Paris. Guide Bleu* (Paris, 1992), p. 386.
- 29 Wiser, *The Crazy Years*, p. 99.
- 30 Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*, p. 89.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 72.
- 32 Clive Holland, *Things seen in Paris*, p. 109.
- 33 Wiser, *The Crazy Years*, p. 207.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 207.
- 35 For a full account of right-wing intellectual activity at this period, see Jacques Laurent, *Histoire égoïste* (Paris, 1976).

3 Jon Kear: *Vénus noire*

- 1 On Josephine Baker's origins see L. Haney, *Naked at the Feast: A Biography of Josephine Baker* (New York, 1981); P. Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra* (London, 1990); P.