A Paris invented for the American imagination

Posted by Alan Wirzbicki

June 16, 2011 04:19 AM

By Brooke L. Blower

Thanks to Woody Allen’s film Midnight in Paris and David McCullough’s book The Greater Journey, summer crowds are again satisfying their appetite for that guilty pleasure: the Americans-in-Paris romp. Such celebrations of the adventures of Americans in the City of Lights are certainly fun. But they evoke a version of the city that’s rooted as much in fantasy as fact. Like many guilty pleasures, they actually tell us a lot more about who we are, and about our yearning for an elusive American innocence, than they do about the gritty realities of the French capital.

In his chronicle of artists and apprentices who journeyed to France during the 19th century, McCullough gives us his trademark vignettes, so richly descriptive that you can feel the tight clothing and smell the candles going out. The Americans are well-meaning and hard-working. In turn, Paris is obliging, with picturesque rather than menacing poverty, and where, the author tell us, no drunks stagger through the streets.

With Allen we also get postcard Paris and a parade of illustrious expatriates ripped from history as we follow Owen Wilson’s character on his fantastical journey back to the 1920s. The film’s opening montage sets the tone: shots of Fouquet’s café on the Champs Elysées; the wind-milled Moulin Rouge; squares magically empty of traffic jams; and alleys mercifully free of noise, drug deals, or urine. While Wilson plays the incredulous but enthusiastic initiate, the French serve as scene shifters and helpful guides.

Allen and McCullough may look to different golden ages, but both essentially give us old-timey Paris with mirrored brasseries, obligatory homages to the Eiffel Tower, mustaches, and just a dash of prostitution so things don’t seem too sanitized. It’s the same airbrushed city that wowed moviegoers in An American in Paris and Funny Face. It’s the same depoliticized place that armchair time travelers look for when they pick up Ernest Hemingway’s A Moveable Feast. Here, Americans are bystanders to war and civil unrest, and, in peacetime, the only bad guys around are Englishmen, snooty waiters, or maybe a few fussy bureaucrats.

In this mythical Paris, no one rolls their eyes at your American accent or asks you to defend U.S. foreign policy. No one rubs up against you in line. No one gets arrested. Can’t you see the lights dancing on the Seine? Can’t you hear the accordions? Americans eat this stuff up — but not simply because Allen and McCullough do it so well.

Such a romanticized Paris provides the perfect backdrop for depicting Americans abroad as wide-eyed newcomers exploring foreign lands with only the best intentions, as reluctant heroes who never intended to throw their weight around. The Americans-in-Paris romp allows us to imagine ourselves out in the world, but removed from political quagmires, the burdens of world leadership, anti-American blowback, and other problems, which have, in fact, long plagued tourists and policy-makers alike. Going to Paris was imagined as novel and chic by those coming from a nation with few French immigrants. It wasn’t like a homecoming, which is how many experienced London, Berlin, or Rome. But at the same time, it didn’t seem too threatening. It promised to be only delightfully exotic.

In truth, Paris back then, like today, teemed with conflicts that Americans never fully escaped. In addition to its revolutions and failed insurrections, the city attracted anarchist assassins, angry exiles, and anti-Semites who waged their battles in the streets (not to mention plenty of unruly absinthe drinkers). While Mary Cassatt and John Singer Sargent painted their portraits, distrustful national leaders and a far-right municipal council ruled the capital with an iron fist.

By the 1920s, Paris had become one of the most polarized places in the world. Communists built up their strength in the city’s infamous suburban “red belt,” while its center was ruled by a police prefect, Jean Chiappe,
whom the American press rightly called France’s “best bet” for fascism.

We always focus on the artists and intellectuals. But other Americans came, too, among them vanquished Confederates pining for the age of slavery, materialistic strivers determined to buy culture, and conmen looking to scam their compatriots. By the mid-1920s, 40,000 Americans lived in Paris, and a quarter million or more arrived each tourist season.

In 1926, right-wing protesters, enraged about the bullying power of the dollar and Americans’ refusal to forgive French war debts, ruffled some tourists on the boulevards and forcibly removed others from buses. Parisians grumbled about the spread of English. The following year, left-wing activists sought retribution for the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti in Massachusetts, descending on visitors’ favorite hotspots. The façades of Fouquet’s and the Moulin Rouge, which so enchanted Woody Allen, were destroyed in scuffles between Sacco-Vanzetti rioters and American patrons. Disdaining the capital’s cosmopolitan nightlife, the police prefect raided famous American nightclubs in Montmartre.

But perhaps it’s not the task of popular history to dwell on the confounding state of Franco-American relations but rather to fill that place in the heart that wants to be warmed, to tell stories that make people feel good about who they are. We might regard tales about Americans in Paris as corny and clichéd, or we might relish them for their charm. But whether we criticize those who play to the myths or laud them for delivering la vie en rose, the City of Lights will continue to hold a special place in our culture, because Americans want to believe that they once were and maybe again could be — innocents in the world.

Brooke L. Blower is assistant professor of history at Boston University and the author of Becoming Americans in Paris: Transatlantic Politics and Culture between the World Wars.

CHAPTER 8

Americans in Paris

1924

... it was not a generation of expatriates who found themselves in Paris in those years but a generation whose patria, wherever it may once have been, was now no longer waiting for them anywhere. —Archibald MacLeish

You know, dear, all good Americans go to Paris when they die, and we are dead, as far as they over there are concerned. —William Carlos Williams

DR. DEVON EVANS, the autobiographical hero of William Carlos Williams’s novel A Voyage to Pagany, arrives in Paris with the same awe and excitement that many young American artists felt during the middle years of the twenties. The train that Evans rides crashes toward Paris: “À Paris, à Paris, à Paris... You must not be afraid. —But Evans was uncertain—and American—and this and that and careless. He wanted to write—that was all, and not to have written, but to be writing.”

Paris had traditionally called to the American heart—from Benjamin Franklin to Henry James. If art is truly international, as James and T. S. Eliot believed, then its cultural capital in the twenties was Paris. Stein had arrived in 1903 and Beach in 1916; both remained. Pound came in 1920 and stayed four years; Hemingway came at the end of 1922 and stayed nearly five years. But most American pilgrims stayed only a few weeks or months. By 1924 the migration had gained momentum. Paris was having a notable impact on this second great period of American literature. In the first great period—the “renaissance” of Poe, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Melville, and Hawthorne, before 1860—the American literary consciousness grappled with its own space, both geographical and metaphysical. During the twenties that literary consciousness, according to Irving Howe, “collided with the weight of Europe.” The First World War had brought many writers to Europe and to an encounter with history and the failure of their religious and political beliefs. Hemingway’s young soldier Frederick Henry says in A Farewell to Arms that he is “always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain... Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates.” For meaning, Hemingway and his generation turned to art, that is, to its order and beauty, to the preservation of the word. Style was to be a barrier against chaos and loss of faith.

“Writing in Paris is one of the oldest American customs,” asserts Van Wyck Brooks in a book on Washington Irving. “It all but antedates, with Franklin, the founding of the republic.” For two hundred years—from Benjamin Franklin to James Baldwin—writers have sought Paris, walked the same streets, stayed often in the same hotels. Paris—crossroads of the West—is the place away from home where Americans talk and write, best, witness Franklin’s Autobiography, Jefferson’s Notes on Virginia, Cooper’s Prairie, Irving’s Tales of a Traveler, Benet’s John Brown’s Body, Hemingway’s The Sun Also Rises, and Fitzgerald’s Tender Is the Night. The aesthetic distance that some writers had gained by going to nature—like Thoreau in the preceding century—these writers found in temporary expatriation in France. For some writers this was a pattern of alienation and reintegration necessary to their understanding of America and to their artistic development. In spite of the loud denunciations of the United States by a few, most never shook off—or wished to shake off—their American cultural values. On the contrary, in Paris many “found” America.

During these two hundred years—from Franklin to Baldwin—most artists went to Paris for their education in the center of art and culture. Paris had always tolerated—even loved—the artists, who, in the twenties, even Williams agreed, were little valued in the United States. By 1924, however, there were more immediate reasons to go there. First, the war had eroded American isolationism by bringing many young Americans to France for humanitarian reasons. Second, in 1924 the steamship companies belonging to the North Atlantic Conference created an inexpensive mode of travel called Tourist Third, which brought would-be artists and students by the thousands. Third, there was a favorable rate of exchange (although Italy and Austria had even better rates). The title of one of Hemingway’s Toronto Star Weekly articles explains this: “A Canadian with One Thousand a Year Can Live Very Comfortably and Enjoyably in Paris.” Americans could afford both to go to Paris and to remain there. Besides, to paraphrase Pound, attics were cheap.

In Paris on Parade, written in 1924, Robert Forrest Wilson identifies an “interlocking directorate of the Continental advance movement in English letters: Ford, Beach, Joyce, McAlmon, Bird, Hemingway, Antheil, and Pound.” As Henry James had gone to Paris to meet Flaubert, Sand, Maupassant, Zola, and Dumas, so a young writer of the twenties went to Paris to meet Valéry, Picasso, Stravinsky, and Joyce. One of the most important reasons that writers, including Williams, came to Paris was that their readers lived there. The literary community was in Paris: publishers of the new literature, little reviews that carried the latest poetry and reviews of that poetry, a bookshop and library where all the latest work was available. They could read the latest works in little, inexpensive reviews that they could buy or borrow at Shakespeare and Company. In
America, lamented Carl Sandburg, "It's hell when poets can't afford to buy each other's books." In this single metropolis—the Left Bank was still like a small town—communication and support functioned in their favor. Of course they suffered from the competition and the in-group feuding that have been documented as well as distorted in the memoirs. But here they were challenged, stimulated, reviewed, and—above all—read by the community of literati.

Certainly the sociological factors were to some extent influential in driving them into their exile. The United States tried to regulate reading as well as drinking habits (Prohibition had gone into effect on 16 January 1920). Some artists fled the business ethic signaled by the Coolidge landslide in November, the Red Scare, the Spoon Rivers (the majority of American artists in Paris were midwesterners), and narrow puritanism—the latter being the object of Williams's particular hatred. In his study of the nineteenth-century American artist, Matthew Josephson maintains that creative, individualistic people feel vulnerable and alienated in the society that becomes increasingly mechanical and collective. The artist, he asserts, either takes an antagonistic stand toward society (as did Herman Melville), conceals his work (as did Emily Dickinson), or flees (as did Henry James). Those who fled in the early decades of this century went to Paris to exchange business and moral prejudices for their own aesthetic prejudices. Pound deplored both the American intellectual's contentment in sitting "under the great British bun, carefully collecting and cataloging the droppings" as well as America's rejection of her artists. They were "not a generation of expatriates," explains MacLeish, "but a generation whose patria, wherever it may once have been, was now no longer waiting for them anywhere."