

GOD IN FRANCE



Harry Clifton

"I would like to be God in France, where no one believes anymore. No calls on me, I could all day in cafés..."

—SAUL BELLOW

Allah of Islam! Yahweh of the Jews!

They were calling upon me
All over Paris. Sabbaths, but the Bon Dieu
Had gone missing. I had set myself free
From Friday at the mosque, that pile of shoes,
Those thousands praying, Saturday Torah scrolls
And lit menorahs, Sundays salvaging souls—
From Daubenton, Des Rosiers, Saint Gervais,
To live again in the body, *l'homme moyen sensuel*

Adrift on the everyday. Streetlife, glass cafés

Were my chosen ground.

Whatever I needed could easily be found
In a few square miles. Massage, phlebotomy,
Thalassal brines and hydrotherapeutics,
Mont Sainte Geneviève, with its hermeneutics,
Clichy for hardcore, all the highs and lows
Of pure bien-être, like a bird in the hand.
Of yes, if I wanted a woman, I knew where to go—

And who could deny me? Human, all my horizons

Were reachable by train

From Austerlitz, Saint Lazare, the Gare de Lyon—
Not that I needed them. Gifted, like Urizen,
With omnipresence, simultaneity,
I could sit here over dinner, and still see
Normandy's apple-belt, or the lightwaves of the South
Collapsing on beaches. None could deny me
The springtime glitter of shad in the rivermouth

Of the long Garonne—that exquisite flesh,
The bone that sticks in the throats
Of twenty centuries. Ichthus the fish,
Like Renan's Christ, was dying, dying out
In the boredom of villages, of Proustian spires,
Provincial time, the echo-sounding fleets
Off La Rochelle, the sleep of the Loire,
The happiness that is almost too complete,
The Sunday afternoons that run on Michelin tyres.

Was that terrible? Tell me, was that sad?
The night of the gods,
Of absences, abscondings, abdications?
Was I to kneel before him, the tramp at the station,
Unpeel his stinking trainers, wash his feet,
Amaze the wage-slaves? In the name of what
Would I drive the midnight circle of philosophers
Out of their TV studios, swivel chairs,
With hempen fire, the rope of castigation?

No, instead I would sit here, I would wait—
A dinner, a café crème,
A glass of brandy. Whatever else, there was time—
Let Judgment take care of itself. To celebrate—
That was the one imperative. Randomness, flux,
Drew themselves about me, as I ate,
Protected by the nearnesses of women, their sex,
Blown sheer through summer dresses, loving my food,
My freedom, as they say a man should.