

The background of the cover is an abstract painting. It features a large, vibrant red area at the top, which transitions into a deep blue area below. The bottom right corner is dominated by broad, white brushstrokes that sweep across the frame. The overall effect is one of dynamic, expressive movement.

Julian Barnes

Something to
Declare

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PICADOR



First published 2002 by Picador

This edition published 2002 by Picador
an imprint of Pan Macmillan Ltd
Pan Macmillan, 20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 0 330 48926 7

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1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

Typeset by Intype London Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Mackays of Chatham plc, Chatham, Kent

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A.L.B.
1909-1992

K.M.B.
1915-1997

Preface

I FIRST WENT TO FRANCE in the summer of 1959 at the age of thirteen. My pre-adolescence had been car-free and island-bound; now there stood in front of our house a gun-metal-grey Triumph Mayflower, bought secondhand, suddenly affordable thanks to a £200 grant from Great Aunt Edie. It struck me then – as any car would have done – as deeply handsome, if perhaps a little too boxy and sharp-edged for true elegance; last year, in a poll of British autophiles, it was voted one of the ten ugliest cars ever built. Registration plate RTW1, red leather upholstery, walnut dashboard, no radio, and a blue metal RAC badge on the front. (The RAC man, portly and moustachioed, with heavy patched boots and a subservient manner, had arrived to enrol us. His first, preposterous question to my father – ‘Now, sir, how many cars have you got?’ – passed into quiet family myth.) That cars were intended not just for safe commuting but also for perilous voyage was endorsed by the Triumph’s subtitle, and further by its illustrative hubcaps: at their centre was an emblematic boss depicting, in blue and red enamel, a Mercator projection of the globe.

Our first expedition was from suburban Middlesex to provincial France. At Newhaven we watched nervously as the Mayflower was slung by crane with routine insouciance over our heads and down into the ferry’s hold. The metal RAC badge at the front was now matched by a metal GB plate at the rear. My mother drove; my father map-read and performed emergency hand-signals; my brother and I sat in the back and

worried. Over the next few summers we would loop our way through different regions of France, mostly avoiding large cities and always avoiding Paris. We would visit châteaux and churches, grottoes and museums, inducing in me a lifelong phobia for the guided tour. I was the official photographer, first in black-and-white (home processed), later in colour transparency. My parents tended to feature only when the viewfinder's vista seemed dull; then, remembering the dictates of *Amateur Photographer*, I would summon them to provide 'foreground interest'. We picnicked at lunchtime and towards five o'clock would start looking for a small hotel; the red Michelin was our missal. In those days, as soon as you left the Channel ports behind, the roads were empty of non-French cars; when you saw another GB coming in your direction, you would wave (though never, in our family, hoot).

That first, monstrous expedition into the exotic was a gentle tour of Normandy. From Dieppe we drove to Cany-Barville, of which I remember only two things: a vast and watery soup pullulating with some non-British grain or pulse; and being sent out on my first foreign morning for the newspaper. Which one did they want? Oh, just get the local one, my father replied unhelpfully. I had the normal adolescent's self-consciousness – that's to say, one that weighs like a stone-filled rucksack and feels of a different order to everyone else's. It was a heroic journey across the street and towards the shop, imperilled at every step by garlic-chewing low-lives who drank red wine for breakfast and cut their bread – and youngsters' throats – with pocket knives. '*Le journal de la région*,' I repeated mantrically to myself, '*Le journal de la région, le journal de la région*.' I no longer remember if I even uttered the words, or just flung my coins at some nicotined child-molester with a cry of 'Keep the change.' All I remember is the purity of my fear, the absolute-ness of my embarrassment, and the lack of vivid praise from my parents on my safe return.

From Cany-Barville to Thury-Harcourt: did all French villages have such solemn hyphenation? None of that Something-upon-Whatsit, Thingummy-in-the-Tum-Tum. Cany-Barville, Thury-Harcourt: this was different, grave. Thereafter, my memories become slighter, more banal; perhaps not even memories, but half-forgotten impressions revived by photographs. A brown-beamed coaching inn, a rough-fleeced donkey in a rough-grassed park, my first squat French château with pepperpot towers (Combours), my first soaring ditto (Josselin). Then first viewings of Chartres, the Bayeux Tapestry and Chateaubriand's aqueous tomb. On the tranquil roads we mingled with traffic of lustrous oddity. French cars were very unMayflowery: curved in the weirdest places, coloured according to a different palette, and often formidably eccentric – witness the Panhard. They had corrugated butchers' vans, Deux Chevaux with canvas stacker seats, Maigret Citroëns, and later the otherworldly DS, whose initials punned on divinity.

And then there was the formidable eccentricity of the food. Their butter was wanly unsalted, blood came out of their meat, and they would put anything, absolutely anything, into soup. They grew perfectly edible tomatoes and then doused them in foul vinaigrette; ditto lettuce, ditto carrots, ditto beetroot. Normally you could detect that foul vinaigrette had been slimed over the salad; but sometimes they fooled you by slurping it into the bottom of the bowl, so that when with hopeful heart you lifted a leaf from the top . . . Bread was good (but see butter); chips were good (but see meat); vegetables were unpredictable. What were those things that weren't proper runner beans but round, fat, overcooked, and – cold! There was pâté: forget it, anything could have gone into that; though not as anything as the anything that went into their gristly, warty *saucissons*, assembled from the disposings of an axe murderer. There was cheese. No, there were thousands of cheeses, and I would eat only one of them – Gruyère. Fruit

was reliable – not much they could do to ruin that; indeed, they grew very large and juicy red apples you could positively look forward to. They liked onions far too much. They brushed their teeth with garlic paste. They camouflaged quite edible meat and fish with sauces of dubious origin and name. Then there was wine, which bore a close resemblance to vinaigrette; and coffee, which I hated. Occasionally there would be a noxious, unassessable dish which explained all too well what you found and smelt behind the teak-stained door of *les waters*, where gigantic feet in knobbed porcelain awaited you, followed by a gigantic flush which drenched your turn-ups.

Where does your love of France come from, Monsieur Barnes? Oh, I reply, both my parents taught French; I went to France with them on holiday; I read French at school and university; I taught for a year at a Catholic school in Rennes (where my gastronomic conservatism was unpicked); my favourite writer is Flaubert; many of my intellectual reference points are French; and so on. It does the job as an answer; but it's an untruthfully smooth narrative. Those early holidays were filled with anxiety (would anyone understand a word I said? would my father get ratty in the heat? would we fail to find a hotel room with twin beds, since my brother, no doubt for good reason, declined to bunk down with me?) Later, in the long silent quarrel and *faux* existentialism of late adolescence, I took against my parents' values and therefore against their love of France. At university I gave up languages for philosophy, found myself ill-equipped for it, and returned reluctantly to French. In my twenties, other countries appealed more. It was only in my thirties that I started seeing France again with non-filial, non-academic eyes.

Doubtless there was an element of cultural snobbery in my initial preference for things Gallic: their Romantics seemed more romantic than ours, their Decadents more decadent,

their Moderns more modern. Rimbaud versus Swinburne was simply no contest; Voltaire seemed just smarter than Dr Johnson. Some of these early judgements were correct: it wasn't hard – or wrong – to prefer French cinema of the Sixties to ours. And culture maintained my relationship with France in those years of separation: books, art, song, films, sport. Later, when I began returning to France regularly, it was often to the kind of France – provincial, villagey, underpopulated – that my parents preferred. My automatic images of 'being in France' are initially pictorial: quiet canals lined with trees as regular as comb-teeth; a hunched bridge across shallow, pebbly water; dormant vines resting their flayed arms on taut wires; a scatter of fowl panicking on a dung-strewn back road; morning mist shifting like dry ice around a fat hayrick. And when my images stop being pastoral, they do not change much in key: not to Paris or the larger cities or some yelping exhibitionist beach, but to quiet working villages with rusting café tables, lunchtime torpor, pollarded plane-trees, the dusty thud of boules and an all-purpose *épicerie*; here a house-wall still bears a faded DUBO, DUBON, DUBONNET and a war memorial lists the brutal necropolis of 1914–18. Not much agri-business here; not much rural unemployment visible. Where are your stropic farmers and your goitered drunks? Don't forget that the mayor's wife writes poison pen letters, and there was a nasty unsolved murder down by the picturesquely disused *lavoir*. Fill in, beneath those pollarded trees, the chaotically parked cars, the patient Malian with his blanketful of bangles, the back-blast of a thunderous lorry; erase the *épicerie* and replace it with the out-of-town supermarket. Yes, but I like most of that too.

Is my view of France partial? Certainly. Knowing a second country means choosing what you want from it, finding antitheses to your normal, English, urban life; discarding the sense of responsibility you feel about your own country, giving

yourself a rest from the bilious emotions stirred by your own public representatives. My partial France is provincial in topography and contrarian in spirit; a France of the regions rather than the centre, of José Bové rather than sleek-suited Eurocrat, of Cathar martyr rather than papal legate. The cultural period I am constantly drawn back to is roughly 1850–1925, from the culmination of Realism to the fission of Modernism: a wondrous stretch not just for French culture but also for French cultural hospitality. It still seems miraculous that a well-connected Parisian could, within the space of fifteen years, have examined the still-wet *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, attended the première of *The Rite of Spring*, and bought a first edition of *Ulysses*, all without having to catch the Métro, let alone a steamer.

Central for me in the development of the modern sensibility is the figure of Gustave Flaubert. 'I wish he'd *shut up* about Flaubert,' Kingsley Amis, with pop-eyed truculence, once complained to a friend of mine. Fat chance: Flaubert, the writer's writer *par excellence*, the saint and martyr of literature, the perfecter of realism, the creator of the modern novel with *Madame Bovary*, and then, a quarter of a century later, the assistant creator of the modernist novel with *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. According to Cyril Connolly, *Bouvard et Pécuchet* was Joyce's favourite novel (Richard Ellmann thought this probable, if lacking documentary proof). Not Shutting Up About Flaubert – see the second half of this book – remains a necessary pleasure. When the *Times Literary Supplement* sent me the fourth volume of his *Correspondance* for review in 1998, the semi-satirical comp-slip tucked into the book read, 'Could we have a million words, please (by April 13, if possible)?'

In *Bouvard et Pécuchet* there is a scene in which the two anti-heroes visit Fécamp. They walk along the shoreline, and Pécuchet, who has temporarily turned geologist, speculates on the consequences of an earthquake beneath the English

Channel. The water, he explains to his friend, would rush out into the Atlantic, the coastlines would begin to totter, and then the two land-masses would shuffle across and reunite after all these millennia. Bouvard, terrified by the prospect, runs away – as much, you might conclude, at the notion of the British coming any nearer as at the catastrophe itself.

Despite our membership of the European Union, despite the Channel Tunnel's visual abolition of water and cliff, some of my compatriots still exhibit a Bouvardian alarm at having the French as neighbours, let alone closer ones. Francophobia remains our first form of Europhobia, though not of xenophobia (ethnic minorities have edged out the French in that regard). The French are genuinely puzzled by the bile of our tabloid press, shocked that a country known for phlegm and decorous manners can also deal in such jeering contempt. It's not really you, I try to explain; it's just that you are more than yourselves, you have become the symbol of all that is foreign; everything, not just Frenchness, begins at Calais. Whereas you may look across your different frontiers and be offered a choice of four great civilizations, we in our offshore islands are surrounded by you on one side and fish on the other three. No wonder we feel about you more strongly, more obsessingly – whether as Francophile or Francophobe – than you feel about us.

Each time I give this explanation, I am less convinced by my words. Yes, they're sort of true; but it's also the case that the French are so . . . well, French, and therefore designed by God to seem as provokingly dissimilar from the British as possible. Catholic, Cartesian, Mediterranean; Machiavellian in politics, Jesuitical in argument, Casanovan in sex; relaxed about pleasure, and treating the arts as central to life, rather than some add-on, like a set of alloy wheels. What assemblage could be better targeted to enrage the puritanical lager-lunkhead blessed and prodded by our tabloid press, or even

some posher patriots? When Salman Rushdie received his *fatwa*, British Airways refused to let him fly with them. Air France, asked their position, replied: 'We respect the French custom regarding the rights of man, which means that we transport passengers without discrimination. If Mr Rushdie wished to travel with Air France, he would not be refused.' It was an enraging piece of one-upmanship, morally superior, flourishing *les droits de l'homme* in our faces (as if the French had invented them!), and above all, *right*. In public life, the French are just as hypocritical as we are; the difference would seem to be that their hypocrisy pays lip-service to idealism, whereas ours pays lip-service to pragmatism.

Such differences ought to survive in the name of biodiversity. We are losing human languages almost as fast as we are losing animal species; we are also losing something much less quantifiable, human difference. 'Oh, but surely, Monsieur Barnes, you are still quite entirely British, and I am no less *Franche, hein?*' Yes – that's to say, no. I may and do seem very British to a French interlocutor, and s/he thoroughly French to me. But I am less British than my father, and he less than my grandfather. So what, Monsieur Barnes? Your grandfather, you tell me, went abroad only once in his life, to France for the First World War; your father was engaged in the second. Surely a bit of globalization and European homogenization is a small price to pay for the fact that you managed to dodge the third? Isn't the last half-century of European peace something to celebrate? And here you are, complaining that French shopkeepers no longer take four-hour lunch-breaks, and what's that High Street store doing just down the road from the Beaubourg?

Yes – that's to say, no. The European Union seems nowadays to be less about friendly difference than about centralization of power and commercial harmonization: in other words, creating an ever-bigger pool of docile consumers

for transnational corporations. When the British were enthusiastically helping the Americans to bomb Serbia, one of the slimiest arguments around was: 'This proves the European project has an ethical as well as an economic dimension.' (Well, don't forget all those rebuilding contracts after the war . . .) In its imperial days, Britain was a great standardizer and centralizer; now it likes to present itself as a bulwark against over-zealous federalism. To the European eye, this is no more than self-interested idling. So what's your position, Monsieur Barnes? Europhile but Bureausceptic, internationalist but culturally protectionist, liberal-left, green. Not many votes there, *mon ami*. My brother is a philosophical anarchist with an ambition 'not to live anywhere'. My mother described herself as true blue. My father was taciturn with liberal tendencies. Some political biodiversity there, at least.

In 1997 I went to France with my parents for the last time. For once I was taking them, rather than the other way round. My mother had died a few months previously, my father in 1992, and I was transporting their ashes towards a final scattering on the Côte Atlantique. We took the Eurostar, familiar to me, but a first time for them. I had the necessary 'out-of-England' certificate for my mother, but had failed to get one for my father, so watched the x-ray machine at Waterloo Station with a certain apprehension. In a holdall, beneath a couple of shirts, my father was in the traditional oak casket, my mother in a heavy-duty plastic screw-top jar. I was doing the first leg to Paris; my niece would transport them to the Indre, then my brother and his wife would take them on westwards.

In my Paris hotel room I switched my parents to a plastic shoulder-bag from a London clothes shop (it had at least a French name: *Les Deux Zèbres*). I tested for weight: heavy still, but the bag seemed solid. My niece lived up in the 18^e. When I got to her apartment block, the entryphone had broken

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One

An Englishman Abroad



A typical Ultimate Peasant