

From a Feast to the Moon – Two Journalists Define Paris

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FROM its street-side cafes to the gargoyles of Notre Dame, Paris suggests a mystique equaled by few cities. Attracted to its history, culture, and reputation as a haven for creativity, American writers in particular have hungered for this city of light. In the writing salons of the 1920s to the rented apartments of more recent expatriates, writers have attempted to capture the essence of Paris through memoir. Comparing two accounts by two American journalists of living in Paris in similar circumstances reveals the rich variety that memoir can offer on any topic or place, even a city so universally romanticized and revered as Paris. Ernest Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* (1964) details the author's youthful years in Paris as recounted near the end of his life. Adam Gopnik's *Paris to the Moon* (2000), meanwhile, provides a contemporary outlook on the city from the late 1990s. Gopnik, who was in his early forties at the time, wrote *The New Yorker* columns during his family's stay in Paris—his book, with the addition of an introductory chapter plus four new chapters, consists of these essays.

The circumstances of the writing of both works are strikingly similar. Both writers lived in Paris for roughly five years —Hemingway between 1921 and 1926, and Gopnik from 1995 to 2000. Both lived in Paris with a wife and a young son. Both were also journalists by trade. Both authors first published their memoirs as a series of essays, resulting in approaches that favor the impressionistic meanderings of memory rather than strict rules of chronology. Despite these various parallels in life circumstances, however, their accounts of Paris unfold very differently. Hemingway experiences Paris intimately as the site of personal transformation while Gopnik explores the city from the more objective stance of an intercultural perspective. Both authors chronicle the differences encountered between Parisian and American lifestyles, but while Hemingway embraces these differences to fuel his creativity, Gopnik maintains a distance throughout his work. Details in each memoir, such as Gopnik's pointed commentary on city guidelines and Hemingway's enthusiasm for writing in a cold apartment, speak clearly of the two authors' differing responses to Paris. The fact that Hemingway's stay in Paris is indefinite, while in the first chapter Gopnik hints his family will eventually return to America, further contribute to their contrasting viewpoints. Hemingway's Paris springs from the page as a muse, a character of place that Gopnik's memoir, particularly with its journalistic slant, hesitates to produce.

These differing perspectives on Paris emerge through the memoirs' descriptive language. *A Moveable Feast* launches the reader into Paris with a smack of winter cold. The immediacy of "Then there was the bad weather" places the reader at the writer's side in the midst of the city (3). This opening phrase establishes the authority of the narrator and expresses his familiarity with the city and its changeable weather. From the outdoor chill, Hemingway takes the reader into the warmth of a café, where he begins to write. A dark-haired girl intrigues him, as do the shavings of his pencil on the saucer. Sitting in the café, Hemingway decides that "you [the dark-haired girl] belong to me and all Paris belongs to me and I belong to this notebook and this pencil" (6). Through trademark declarative sentences, Hemingway claims a kinship with the city. Even though he and his family will soon leave the wintry rain of Paris for crisp Alpine snows, the reader quickly learns in these introductory sentences that the author/narrator identifies with Paris.

Later chapters present Paris as Hemingway's muse. "It was easy then because there was always one true sentence that I knew or had seen or had heard someone say" (12). The city's cafes, a warm apartment with the cat,

even the people he meets invigorate Hemingway's writing. Throughout *A Moveable Feast*, settings such as these suggest Paris as a source of Hemingway's inspiration, or what critic Edward C. Knox describes as "a site of personal metamorphosis" (14). The city and its cafes become crucial to the writer as he struggles with his newfound craft, writing a novel being a departure from the security that journalism offers him and his family.

While Hemingway's opening displays an understanding and acceptance of his environment, even during winter's rain, Gopnik focuses on the unfamiliar world he and his family encounter. The opening passages of *Paris to the Moon*, which Gopnik wrote after his stay in Paris, reveal a writing style laden with details, very unlike Hemingway's sparse prose in *A Moveable Feast*. Through more elaborate prose than Hemingway's, Gopnik begins the book with his family's looking through a storefront window at an engraving that will later give him the title of his book: "Not long after we moved to Paris, in the fall of 1995, my wife, Martha, and I saw, in the window of a shop on the rue Saint-Sulpice, a nineteenth-century engraving, done in the manner, though I'm now inclined to think not from the hand, of Daumier" (3). The author describes a fanciful image of a train traveling on tracks that lead straight to the moon. Parisians on the platform, dressed in period clothing of the nineteenth century, look on with calm acceptance as the train ascends. Metaphorically in this scene, Gopnik and his family are outsiders looking through a window into Parisian life. Compared to the relaxed comfort of Hemingway's cafes, Gopnik's elaborate and reverent account of this engraving, which he uses as a dreamy metaphor for Americans journeying to Paris, ironically separates Gopnik from the city. Spiritual writer Martin Buber suggests that responding to experiences as the "It" without embracing them fully within the "I" of self creates further distance from those experiences: "He who lives with *It* alone robs himself of the uniqueness of his reality" (Qtd. in Birnbaum 393). Although Buber's ideas apply to religious experience, Gopnik's admiration of the Paris engraving produces a similar remoteness.

On the craft of writing, Gopnik does not speak in the self-conscious style of Hemingway. Writes Gopnik somewhat pragmatically, "Writing isn't the transformation of stuff into things. It is just the transformation of symbols into other symbols" (177). The act of transforming one idea into another sets a tone for Gopnik's work in Paris. The city, rather than a source of inspiration as a place to be celebrated for being what it so beautifully is, becomes instead the site of the author's latest journalistic assignment. Knox describes Gopnik as "a prior 'I' with credentials and a writerly reputation

already established in high journalism” (15). With a career well in hand, Gopnik does not have much to lose; given his secure position as a columnist for *The New Yorker*, Paris becomes more a setting than a way of life.

Economic status also impacts the outlook on Paris each writer displays. While Paris inspires him, Hemingway also voices economic distress, particularly given his career shift from journalism to writing fiction. “There is no money coming in since I quit journalism,” he admits to Sylvia Beach, owner of Shakespeare and Company, the well-known bookshop and gathering place for expatriate writers (71). Hemingway describes a few of the ways he saves money, including borrowing books instead of buying them, and skipping lunch both to save money and heighten his sensibilities for writing.

Despite these worries, the Hemingway portrayed in *A Moveable Feast* manages to eat in restaurants, indulge in wine, and gamble on local horse races. Although the Hemingways are not wealthy, their financial straits in the memoir never surface as dire. The writer of *A Moveable Feast* gets by, but prefers not to live in too grand a style. “It is necessary to handle yourself better when you have to cut down on food so you will not get too much hunger-thinking,” Hemingway writes (75). In missing meals to sharpen creativity, Hemingway embraces the romantic notion of great art emerging from pain. As critic Cristina Nehring remarks, “it’s easy to romanticize poverty—as Hemingway does in *A Moveable Feast*” (79). His depiction of a no-frills existence in Paris resonates with greater believability when the author merges his family’s moderate need with his more tangible and convincing hunger for creative achievement. “Hunger is good discipline,” Hemingway claims, “and you learn from it” (75), suggesting his craving for creative challenge. He attributes a similar hunger to other artists, such as the painter Cézanne: “I used to wonder if he were hungry too when he painted [...]. Later I thought Cézanne was probably hungry in a different way” (69). Hemingway’s description of physical hunger in Paris is overshadowed even more convincingly by his artistic appetite.

Gopnik’s memoir also bears the influence of economic concerns. In *Paris to the Moon*, Gopnik and his family are free to enjoy many restaurants, join a health club, and hire a nanny who watches their son regularly. With his writing position assured, Gopnik displays little of the creative hunger Hemingway experiences in *A Moveable Feast*. While such security gives Gopnik greater freedom, Nehring also sees this perspective as an unrealized cloak that shields him from fully experiencing Paris: “his is in fact a sheltered existence in Paris —sheltered not just from the ordinary but

from the truly extraordinary aspects of Parisian life” (79). The author’s choices, such as taking a taxi ride home rather than the Paris Metro, suggest a tourist’s viewpoint rather than that of an expatriate attuned to the city’s rhythms. While no shame exists in living well, remaining unaware of how ordinary people live presents its own dangerous bias. Just as Hemingway’s memoir ventures into dubious territory by romanticizing financial hardships, Gopnik faces a corresponding risk in displaying unconscious or unexamined assumptions about the everyday comforts he enjoys.

Any expatriate chooses, in many ways unconsciously, the extent to which he or she fits into a new environment. The narrators of *A Moveable Feast* and *Paris to the Moon* both display varying levels of integration as expatriates in Paris. In these two accounts of time spent in Paris, two different versions of the city take shape that expose the comfort level each author experiences along the way: for Hemingway, Paris is a creative force actively spurring his own writing, while for Gopnik, Paris is a place whose culture he explores, always maintaining his distance from it.

Hemingway’s connection with Paris emerges in small details such as evening walks or hours writing in cafes. Surprising weather and the smells of fresh-baked bread swirl together, creating an artistic, composite description of the city: “It was a lovely evening and I had worked hard all day and left the flat over the sawmill [...] crossed the street and went into the back door of the bakery that fronted on the Boulevard Montparnasse and out through the good bread smells of the ovens [...]” (99). The Paris Hemingway describes is displayed in sensory details that reveal his connection with the city. A study guide section included with *Paris to the Moon* notes that, although Hemingway’s memoir is the most well-known work on Paris, “it is more about Americans than about Paris” (343). While this might be true in a literal sense, it is Hemingway’s self-discovery and creative appetite that help reveal Paris as a critical element in the book, as if the place itself is a character in the narrative. Whether at home in his apartment or in one of the many Paris cafes, Hemingway finds Paris a hospitable setting for his growing creativity. He links being in Paris with his success at writing: “I worked better than I had ever done. In those days you did not really need anything, not even the rabbit’s foot, but it was good to feel it in your pocket” (96). He also gains inspiration from other expatriate artists living in Paris at that time and develops a kinship with the French. He expresses sorrow for two French waiters, for instance, when he learns that their café’s management is forcing them to shave their mustaches in order to look more American. “Jean has had a mustache all his life. That’s a

dragoon's mustache. He served in a cavalry regiment," Hemingway protests (139). Such interactions help illustrate his understanding of and identification with Parisian life.

Despite the advantages he enjoys within a city that has opened itself to Americans, Gopnik remains fascinated by the differences he finds between French and American culture. Gopnik's Paris of 1995–2000, while not the haven of artistic freedom that Hemingway enjoyed during the 1920s, is nonetheless a time of peace for France. Rather than opting for the path of personal and creative growth chosen by Hemingway, Gopnik relays news events during his time in Paris such as employee strikes and press conferences. Such occurrences, while giving him glimpses into political aspects of the city, do not bring him closer to it. As a reporter, he remains distanced from the daily lives of Parisians; his reportorial objective stance precludes any closer contact. Rather than participating in Paris life, Gopnik emerges as an outside observer. Somewhat paradoxically, the memoir's dialogue, which is sparse, adds to the narrator's distance from everyday Parisian life. Although Gopnik speaks French, he decides that "The space between the average Frenchman (or Italian or German) and the average American is just as great as it's ever been, because language remains in place, and it remains *hard*" (98). Rather than revealing itself through conversations Gopnik has with its inhabitants, Paris emerges primarily through the subjective interiorized view of cultural difference. He is, as Knox observes, less concerned with the interpersonal and "more concerned with cultural difference and building intercultural contrasts" (24). Rather than fully integrating himself into the life of the city, Gopnik, through hints that he and his family will one day return to New York, remains a step apart. By contrast, in *A Moveable Feast* Hemingway reveals no time frame for returning to America, a factor that allows the author to embrace Paris more fully.

The titles of the two works help illustrate the perspectives of each author toward Paris. In 1950, Hemingway described Paris to a friend as "a moveable feast," a term hinting not only at the city's rich cuisine, but also its artistic possibilities or its role as a muse to inspire creativity. While Hemingway's Paris is hardly perfect, admits Nehring, it sparkles nonetheless with "an element of mystery, a recognition of difference, a feeling of possibility" (81). Hemingway's title implies both discovery and an appetite for the unexpected, an embracing of adventure.

Gopnik's memoir's title, taken from the Paris engraving described in the book's introduction, implies beauty, yet also remoteness. Pairing the moon

and Paris emphasizes a dreamlike quality of distance, a sense of space and time not easily broached. While Gopnik no doubt treasured his time in Paris, his account focuses more on idiosyncrasies of Parisian life than Hemingway's depiction of self-awareness molded from a stranger's experience in a new culture. As Knox observes, "Gopnik is most concerned with getting the focus of his intercultural lens right" (28), privileging the distance that his role as a journalist affords him. When speaking of his five-year-old son in Paris, Gopnik comes closest to revealing a personal connection to the city, yet the author's distanced reflections throughout the work ultimately place him just as the introduction does, an outsider looking at the untouchable. In an interview with *Publishers Weekly*, Gopnik shows himself aware of his characteristic response to Paris: "Henry James wrote that the burden of the American abroad is the constant burden of comparison. And that theme runs right through my book" (105). The author never fully stops comparing New York to Paris long enough to see Paris just for itself.

In examining these two books' differing viewpoints of Paris, it is worth mentioning the discrepancy in age between the two authors portrayed. Hemingway's memoir takes place during his twenties; Gopnik's in his early forties. A self-portrait of a young man in his twenties could be expected to display more romantic notions than that of a middle-aged man, just as we expect a description of mid-life to focus more heavily on the analytical than the passional. Moreover, Hemingway's recounting of his time in Paris later in life might be expected to smooth over rough aspects of his stay there. In contrast to Hemingway's recollection of Paris years after the fact, Gopnik's "real-time" approach of writing his essays onsite further contributes to his investigative, questioning, and even homesick approach. And that he knows from the outset that his stay in Paris will be temporary encourages Gopnik always to feel that Paris is a place apart.

By experiencing what Paris means to Hemingway, we learn not only about Hemingway, but its essence as a character in *A Moveable Feast*. Gopnik's memoir, while also revealing a fondness for Paris, focuses more precisely on the city as a site of difference between French and American life. The Paris Gopnik presents is a city easily located on a map, a detailed one with restaurants and gardens pinpointed along the way. Gopnik's Paris is a city of the mind, a site for exploring differences; for Hemingway, Paris resonates more deeply as a place felt as well as lived in. His frank portrayal of sensory detail and reactions to it, along with the impact of place on his own creative process, result in a city that the reader, too, comes to know.

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