

A QUIET, CHEAP PLACE TO WRITE OR, THE AVATARS OF SILENCE

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ABSTRACT. This paper aims at identifying major issues related to the process of writing, as reflected in Patrick Leigh Fermor's book, *A Time to Keep Silence*, and also in his correspondence with various people. The famous travel author associated with Romania and its pre-WWII Golden Age, as remembered and recreated in *Between the Woods and the Water*, produced, at the beginning of his literary career, in the early 1950s, a book showing the painstaking of growing into a writer. At the same time, the atmosphere and the spirit of certain places an author would always be willing to fantasize about was wonderfully captured in his book on silence. A *heretic* (read Protestant) from across the Channel, he spent some time in a French Catholic monastery in the years right after WWII, as a result of his search for the perfect place to write. His major experience while at St. Wandrille Abbey, and in a couple of similar locations, definitely contrasted the type of life he previously used to share with some of his socialite friends. Inside the monastic shelters, Fermor eventually engaged in their silence code, and that provided him with a peculiar understanding of an alternative way of life, and a rather compelled return to the roots of his own identity.

KEY WORDS: place to write, monastery, solitude, silence, identity

Introduction. Ivory Towers, Manors and Hotels

In the summer of 1948, Patrick Leigh Fermor, aka Paddy or Major Fermor as people had started to know him due to his heroic deeds as SOE (Special Operations Executive, a British organisation responsible for training and coordinating the operations of partisan groups in countries occupied by the enemies during WWII) officer in occupied Crete during WWII, found himself jobless, without money and a proper/university education, yet very much in love and with a lot of supporting friends. Their entire world had just been shattered and somehow people like Paddy and his dear ones were trying to fix and assemble it back, while still looking over their shoulder to what they must have perceived like a lost and glamorous age, the inter-war Golden Age.

Paddy felt, and he also knew, that he was capable to write, however the road to becoming an accomplished writer would take many and unexpected turns and twists. Some of them came from his own undeniable doubts, others

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from the temptations that everyday life, in the circles he was attending, fully displayed in the process of reconstructing, as already mentioned, a European state of mind and spirituality as well. Yet not having a house, a place of his own, made him even more restless and prone to finding extravagant solutions.

Some friends proved very helpful in this respect and provided him with their hospitality, such being the case of the Gadencourt farmhouse, in Normandy. It was the property of the Smarts, whom he knew from wartime Cairo. Amy Smart, née Nimr (1898-1974), was an Egyptian born artist. Her husband, Walter Smart, had worked for the British Embassy in Cairo in the 1930s and he was to become the model for Lawrence Durrell's *Mountolive*.

While at Gadencourt, Paddy began working at *The Traveller's Tree*, a book based on the notes taken during his travel in Central America in the autumn of 1947. It was his very first book, and he was happy to benefit from a very stimulating environment—"I love this life, and hate the idea of leaving it" (Cooper 20013: 231). He was soon to discover the joys of a true writer's labour, as his endeavours until then had been entirely journalistic—"How different writing a book is to writing articles!" (Cooper 20013: 231) Still, a sentence in the same context, *i.e.* a letter to his lover, Joan Rayner, points to the well-known *writer's block* and to some circumstantial, and in the long run not very efficient, solutions—"If ever the Muse flags, I nip into the dining room and swallow a *coup de rouge*..." (Cooper 20013: 231).

At times he seemed totally absorbed in the frenzied process of producing the book—"I only move from my desk—a heavenly *malampia* of books and papers now—from 9 a.m. till 9 p.m., for mealtimes which I never thought, seriously, I could do..." (Sisman 2016: 49). Surrounded by the works of classical authors such as Molière, Tacitus, Racine and Corneille, he found the *milieu* "tremendously invigorating. All writers should be equipped with these auxiliaries" (Sisman 2016: 49).

Somehow, the atmosphere at Gadencourt might have brought back sweet memories, probably from his travels in the early 1930s, especially from the sojourns spent in several Transylvanian manors and the prolonged talks with his hosts there; or from the late 1930s, and particularly the winters spent at the Moldavian estate of his Romanian lover, the princess Balasha Cantacuzène. The name of the place was Băleni, a village near Galatzi, where Balasha co-owned what had been left from a larger estate. There,

snow reached the windowsills and lasted till spring. There were cloudy rides under a sky full of rooks; otherwise, it was an indoor life of painting, writing, reading, talk, and lamp-lit evenings with Mallarmé, Apollinaire, Proust and Gide handy; there was *Les Enfants Terribles* and *Le Grand Meaulnes* and *L'Aiglon* read aloud; all these were early debarbarizing steps in beguiling and unknown territory. (Fermor 2004: 44)

Romania was now far away and on the other side of the Iron Curtain, so the would-be writer had at his disposal, in the late 1940s, locations associated with traditional destinations for British subjects. According to his biographer, Paddy “was rarely in one place for more than a month or two, shifting mainly between Italy, Greece, England and France” (Cooper 2013: 238). Paddy belonged to a post-war generation, with some of its representatives seriously considering travel writing as the basis of a writing career since, according to Peter Hulme, they “felt the need for the kind of direct engagement with social and political issues” (Hulme and Youngs 2013: 89), something that travel writing and journalism as well “seemed to offer” (Hulme and Youngs 2013: 89).

As for his destinations, the paradox consisted in the fact that he was actually catching up with very old patterns of travel. His pre-war deambulations had taken him to Central and Eastern Europe and, eventually, Constantinople. But his post-war ones resembled those of the 17th century Grand Tour, the leading purpose of which was “to round up the education of young men of the ruling classes by exposing them to the treasured artifacts and ennobling society of the Continent” (Buzard in Hulme and Youngs 2013: 38). Thus, a “Grand Tour of France and the Giro of Italy”, as recommended by Richard Lassels in his *An Italian Voyage*, published in 1670, would contribute to mastering languages and refining “the manners and gracious behavior necessary to civilized men” (Buzard in Hulme and Youngs 2013: 39). However, a detour up-north, before arriving in Italy or France, in places such as Berlin, Dresden and Vienna, would make the young traveler “fit for the last polish”. Paddy had travelled through France, Germany and Austria, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria in the early 1930s; and while staying in Romania, in the late 1930s, he had spent lovely interludes in England and France with Balasha, so one might conclude that his polishing had been happily completed to a higher degree of refinement.

After the war, he resumed his travels and sojourns with friends, except that Eastern Europe was now closed for them and it would remain like that until 1965, when he first dared to venture across the Iron Curtain. Many of his letters, in which lovely memories had been exchanged, to and from people in those countries, must have been lost, unfortunately, making it very difficult for a researcher to recreate the picture of their friendship and of their epoch.

So, a place like Gandencourt in France helped Paddy, and that worked well until the early 1960s, to make up for such a loss, as the owners of the house allowed him to spend plenty of time either in their company or alone, and they did not mind his inviting other people as well. “If you come to France, do come and stay” (Sisman 2016: 114), he was writing to his Greek

friend George Katsimbalis, on November 5 1955. A reputed Greek author, poet and raconteur, George Katsimbalis (1899-1978) was also the protagonist of one of Henry Miller's best books, the half-travelogue and half-novel, *The Colossus of Marousi* (1941). "If you come to France, please for heaven's sake telephone..." (Sisman 2016: 118), he wrote on 7 January 1956 to Ann Fleming, the director of Queen Anne Press, which had published, in 1953, the first limited edition of *A Time to Keep Silence*. "It's only an hour from Paris", he added and also mentioned "a gastronomic pilgrimage to the starred restaurants of Normandy" (Sisman 2016: 118). A British socialite, Anne Fleming (1913-1981) was also the wife of Ian Fleming, the author of James Bond series.

Still, Gadencourt worked only as a temporary heaven, and he had to return to Paris, every now and then, at Hotel Louisiane where, according to his biographer, at a certain stage, his fellow guests "included Simone de Beauvoir and Juliette Gréco" (Cooper 230). He might have been totally unaware of such a distinguished company, although he was going to have a brief affair with the latter, the singer/actress and muse of existentialism, as she came to be known. It would happen a decade later, while in Africa, where Juliette Gréco was shooting *The Roots of Heaven* as the female star. The film, based on Romain Gary's novel, *Les racines du ciel*, would have its script co-written by Paddy.

Monastic Shelters

Nevertheless, such frivolous though enjoyable episodes as the ones mentioned above could not prevent Patrick Leigh Fermor from experiencing severe gaps in his writing. On the contrary, and especially in the very first years of writing, there were moments in which he could find no solutions to move on and to honour the promises made to his editors.

Sometime in 1948, he was told that non-paying guests were taken in by the abbey of Saint-Wandrille in Normandy, "even if their reasons for staying did not include religious retreat or instruction" (Cooper 2013: 232), so he decided to try his luck. In the beginning, the novelty of the place seemed all right, despite restrictions, as detectable in a letter to his future wife, Joan Rayner—"I'm a bit more resigned to this place at the moment, and now that I've established my rights as a defaulter at Mass every day, it's not too bad" (Sisman 2018: 28); and things looked even promising in early September 1948, given also the natural setting—"The weather has been perfect, and I have been writing away out of doors under a chestnut tree" (Sisman 2018: 28).

He was impressed by the kindness of the monks, appreciating their discretion and good manners, however he maintained a sort of reserve—"I'm not feeling an atom more disposed to religion at the moment" (Sisman 2018:

30). During one of his daily, half an hour after luncheon, conversations with either the Abbé or the Père Hôtelier, the latter confided to him that “his conversion from atheism and monastic vocation was entirely under the influence of Huysmans” (ibidem) Interestingly enough, Paddy had probably discovered Huysmans’s writings on Catholicism while at Gadencourt, just a couple of months earlier, and had connected with the decadent French writer almost instantly. “Above all, he was exhilarated by the author’s style.” said Artemis Cooper (2013: 231), thus it was less about religion and Huysman’s struggling with his return to Church, but more about a kindred spirit. In fact, in the years to come Paddy himself was to be acknowledged as a major stylist, of the 20th century English prose respectively. “Here was someone,” continued Cooper on Huysmans, “who could take eight pages to describe the effects of dawn breaking inside Chartres Cathedral, with an almost hallucinatory intensity (Cooper 2013: 230). Therefore we may presume that Patrick Leigh Fermor had arrived at Saint Wandrille filled with literary expectations, which might have created a kind of aura to that alternative life style. He might have grown, just like Durtal, Huysman’s protagonist of the novel *En Route*—a novel said to have soothed the pain of incarceration for Oscar Wilde while in the Reading jail—, “enthusiastic in thinking of the convents” (Cooper 2013: 230) But, unlike Durtal, Paddy did not want “to be earthed up among them, sheltered from the herd, not to know what books appear, what newspapers are printed” (Cooper 2013: 230).

On the one hand, part of his expectations were met even through the unusual writing setting from his room—“a pontifical looking *prie-dieu* [prayer-stool], and two tables, one of them a giant *escritoire* on which I am writing now, seated in a high-backed embroidered armchair.” (Sisman 2016: 38); and they eventually bore fruit, as stated in a letter to Joan from 11 October—“my guilt has been evaporating this last week. I think it must be because I’m doing some work. (idem: 26)

On the other hand, he was gradually becoming aware of the distance between the world he was inhabiting at that particular moment and the one he had left behind, as reflected in a slightly angered sentence addressed to his lover—“You’re in a capital city, I’m in an abbey, don’t I know what it means!” (Sisman 2016: 39); and he even warned her not to give full credit to his lines, which were actually going to form the substance of a couple of articles and later of a highly appreciated book—“And don’t you think these accounts of cenobitic [monastic] splendor mean I’m OK here alone!” (Sisman 2016: 39) Isolation and solitude had started to take their toll, as obvious in a bizarre episode described in the same letter:

Still thinking about the deserts of Chalcedon and Paphlagonia, I walked through the archway, and happening to look to my left, saw a tall monk standing there, his face invisible in his cowl, his hands folded in his sleeves, quite silent. It was so

frightening, I nearly let out a scream, and can still feel my heart thumping. (Sisman 2016: 36)

Such images were not to remain singular, as they were pointing to a reality he was going to encompass in later shorter, and shortly after, monastic stages. A month at St Wandrille was followed by a brief return to Paris, and then he went to another Benedictine Abbey, the monastery of Saint-Jean-de-Solesmes on the river Sarthe. “A much dourer, more Victorian, forbidding place than St W[andrille]” (Sisman 2018: 33), he was writing to Joan in December 1948. He acknowledged that the Plainsong/plainchant, the tradition of which had been revived after the French Revolution by one of the abbots, Dom Prosper Guéranjer,—“is amazing, but, for every other point of view, it’s a dungeon compared to my old home.” (ibidem)

As for the ivory tower prospects, things looked apparently convenient, yet not encouraging enough—“A lovely comfy room, however, shaded lights, open fire etc.” he admitted—“But I don’t want to stay long.” (ibidem) Just like at St. Wandrille he was “writing like anything” (Sisman 2016: 40), often loosing track of the time, which sometimes bothered him as he kept missing the 3:30 post—“I always think it’s earlier and the bloody thing has left by the time I get ready” (Sisman 2016: 40). Letters to his lover and friends had to be put off until the next day and the next, as the monastery had started to work its spell on him—“Apart from all this, it’s a delightful place, with a great atmosphere of scholarship and serious meditation” (Sisman 2016: 41).

In the second half of December he went back to Normandy, this time for a ten day stay in the monastery of La Grande Trappe, home to the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance. Like Huysmans’ *Durtal*, Paddy would encounter an even more austere way of life, “one of continual prayer and total silence” (Cooper 2013: 234). Nevertheless, he was determined to resist and keep up the good writing, as he had already confessed in a letter from Solesmes to Alexander Mourouzi, a friend from pre-war Roumania—“The least distraction—even the most boring thing—is excuse enough to prevent me from actually working and this is the reason I hide myself in monasteries” (Sisman 2018: 38).

An Alternative Life-Style: Writing at the Place and Writing about the Place

He would occasionally spend time at St. Wandrille in the following decade, but just one year later his feelings towards it appeared to have changed—“It’s lovely and quiet here, but it is quite failing to cast the same sort of spell on me that it did last year.” (idem: 42) He blamed it, in another letter to Joan, on a kind of *having consummated the marriage* act—“Perhaps having written and talked about St Wandrille so much has dissipated some of the charm.” (ibidem) Somehow unintentionally, he was pointing to the distinction between *writing at the place* and *writing about the place*.

Writing at the place had been nevertheless successful and it proved its added value again in 1957, when, according to Cooper (2013: 301), in February Paddy was busy at Saint-Wandrille, correcting the latest typescript of his first travel book on Greece, *Mani*. And in April the same year, also at St. Wandrille, he was enthusiastic about the renewed speeding of his work—“All goes splendidly. This extraordinary place really does seem to do the trick” (Sisman 2016: 144).

Still, Paddy continued to feel the pressure of the monastic life style, so he needed to interact more with the people he cared about. Joan, his lover, was just one of the many recipients of his letters, with some of the sentences being replicated for different addressees. “I got off to a whizz-bang start, and have done more in three days than any ten in London” (Sisman 2016: 144), he was writing to Joan and he would use almost exactly the same words in another letter from April, to Diana Cooper, a famous London socialite and a dear friend of his (and also a famous beauty and a member of the *Bright Young* group; between 1944 and 1948, Diana’s husband, Lord Duff Cooper, served as Britain’s Ambassador to France)—“I got off to a whizz-bang start and have already written more here than I have done for any week in London recently.” (Sisman 2018: 133)

As for *writing about the place*, in 1957 his notes and fragments from the previous letters had already made their way into what was the first edition of *A Time to Keep Silence*, in which he had corroborated experiences from the French monasteries with travel notes on the first Christian monasteries in Cappadocia. The book, published in 1953, was going to be re-edited by his 1957 publisher, Jock Murray, and was well received by both readers and critics.

In her introduction to the 2007 American edition, Karen Armstrong underlined the difficulties Paddy used to have in resuming, when returning to Paris and to other places of the secular world, his ordinary life. Once having adapted to the monastic lifestyle and isolation, his values and priorities underwent significant changes. Armstrong, who happened to have had a longer first-hand experience of monastic life as she was a nun for several years, sympathized with Leigh Fermor, but she also mentioned his remark one day to the Abbot of St Wandrille about “what a blessed relief it was to refrain from talking all day long. “Yes”, the Abbot replied; “in the outsideworld, speech is gravely abused” (in the original text, the words of the Abbot are rendered in French: “Oui”, the Abbot said, “c’est une chose merveilleuse. Dans le monde hors denos murs, on fait un grand abuse de la parole”):

After Patrick Leigh Fermor’s death in June 2011, Colin Thubron, in his profile of the writer from *the New York Review of Books*, remarked the conflict, never quite resolved, between Paddy’s “natural gregariosness and the

solitude of writing”. *A Time to Keep Silence*, labeled by Thubron as *intriguing*, pointed to the retreat in the French monasteries “not as a religious exercise, but as a need for a haven for writing” (Thubron 2011). As for the nature of the changes in the process, the question mark remained with regard to their leading to a full self-revelation.

This dilemma was also highlighted by Michael Duggan, in a 2018 pretty long article, as he remembered some sentences from an earlier conversation with Paddy’s biographer, according to whom Paddy “could live without answers to the big questions: what am I doing here, why is there evil in the world, what has God got to do with it”, and that made the difference between him and other of his contemporary writers, like Evelyn Waugh or Graham Greene. Among Paddy’s literary idols, Duggan mentioned Huysmans, “who sparked his interest in monasticism” (Dugan 2018), and St Basil of Caesarea, whose writings were felt by Paddy like well ahead his times—“sprinkled with classical allusions one would expect more readily in the writings of a fifteenth-century humanist than in those of a Doctor of the Church living in the reign of Julian (known as the Apostate, Roman emperor between 361 and 363, famous for rejecting Christianity and for promoting Neoplatonic Hellenism in its place” (Fermor in Duggan 2018).

Born an Anglican, but surprisingly identifying himself at the age of thirty, on official forms, as a Roman Catholic, Patrick Leigh Fermor spent half of his long life in a village from Eastern Orthodox Greece, where he eventually built himself a *writer’s treat and retreat*. And he minded most Christian holidays, from all sides of the spectre, as one can notice when reading his correspondence with friends from different parts of the world. In this respect, one could read *A Time to Keep Silence* as an enriching stage towards a humanism/ecumenism that helped him to entertain and sustain the image of “a sort of eternal, cultural Europe, (...) where life was dictated by the rounds of the seasons and the feasts of the Church” (Duggan 2018).

Far from the Outside World

They work like blacks at their various tasks, covered in filthy old ‘working habits’—hoods and cowls made of dungaree—in the woods, in the kitchen garden, in the bootblack factory etc.—you see them all over the place—and they go to church seven times a day. (Sisman 2018: 133)

Paddy confessed of having picked up “a superficial acquaintance with monastic matters while staying as a guest” (Fermor 2007), therefore he maintained a certain reserve and cautiousness when time came to testify on his experiences —“to write about them was *intrusive and indiscreet* (italics ours)” (Fermor 2007). The above fragment from the 1957 letter to Diana Cooper is in line with Karen Armstrong’s observation, from her introduction to the

2007 edition of *A Time to Keep Silence*, *i.e.* that people from all times and cultures have embraced varieties of life styles, among which the one dedicated to silence and praying could be counted. The attraction to this dimension is comparable to an artist's endeavours, though implying a more rigorous discipline, as the monks do the same things every day, they dress alike, etc.

In this respect, they “shun individuality and personal style” (Armstrong), which is quite the opposite to a writer's expectations. Still, as noted by Paddy in the same letter—“One of the extraordinary things about a place like this is the amount the monks manage to get into the day” (Sisman 2018: 133). So the concrete results were quite outstanding, something that also happened to his writing labours—“Strange that the same habitat should prove favourable to ambitions so glaringly opposed” (Fermor 2004: 67).

Austerity was part of the game—“It's 8 a.m. and I'm just back in my room (...) after a breakfast of brown bread & coffee standing up in the refectory” (Sisman 2018: 133). Reminiscences of his older life are brought to the surface in a letter to Joan, underlying both his past vulnerabilities and his emerging new sort of energy, physical and intellectual as well—“I haven't drunk anything for three days and feel wonderfully clear-headed and light, the whites of my eyes are becoming as clear as porcelain” (Sisman 2016: 35).

Still, smoking was not allowed in the cloisters, permission to speak to the monks had to be asked from the Abbot, no noise was to be made while walking about the Abbey, so gradually the place was assuming “the character of an enormous tomb, a necropolis of which I was the only living inhabitant” (Fermor 2007). It felt like a mortification of the spirit as well, not only of the flesh, and in her book, Artemis Cooper (2013: 233) contrasted Paddy's state of mind in the Benedictine Abbey with the party life his dear ones might have enjoyed at the same hour—“By nine o'clock—just when his friends in Paris were beginning to think about how to spend the evening—the whole monastery was asleep.” The basic rule was very simple, *i.e.* no one should in anyway disturb the everyday life of the monastery, which was, according to the printed “Rules for the Guests' Wing” on the inner side of his door, wrapped up in *silence*:

A guest's day began at 8:15 with the office of Prime and breakfast in silence. At 10 the Conventual High Mass was sandwiched between Tierce and Sext. Luncheon at 1. Nones and Vespers at 5 p.m. Supper at 7:30, then, at 8:30, Compline and to bed in silence at 9. (Fermor 2007)

Of course, the rules for the guests were different from those for the monks, but even so, to Paddy “the programme of life in a Benedictine abbey (...) appeared at first forbidding” (Fermor 2007). Later, when comparing it with the horarium in La Grande Trappe, it seemed like “the mildest *villeggiatura*”

(Fermor 2007). Readers are not given a detailed horarium, but are told instead that “A Trappist monk rises at one or two in the morning according to the season” and that “Seven hours of his day are spent in church” (Fermor 2007). In his *En Route*, Huysmans had been more generous and exact with the details, underlining his protagonist’s relief when realizing that Retreatants in a Trappist monastery, such as himself, were supposed to rise at four. As for the monks, their first part of the day looked as follows:

Morning.

1. Rise. Little Office. Prayer till 1.30.
2. Grand Canonical Office chanted.
- 5.30. Prime, Morning Mass, 6 o’clock.
- 6.45. Chapter Instructions. *Great Silence*.
- 9.15. Asperges, Tierce, Procession.
10. High Mass.
- 11.10. Sext and special examination.
- 11.30. Angelus, Dinner.
- 12.15. Siesta, *Great Silence* (italics ours). (Huysmans 2013)

Silence and Solitude

Just like the other books of Patrick Leigh Fermor, *A Time to Keep Silence* had (at least) one epigraph. The second was from the Ecclesiastes, III, 1 & 7, and together with the title, they pointed to the most important principle, and also to the philosophy of life, in a monastic environment. “To every thing there is a season and a time to every purpose under heaven... a time to keep silence and a time to speak” (as quoted in Fermor) it was written in the Bible, something existentialist thinkers further elaborated on, pondering over the difference between a time to act and a time to testify about that particular acting.

Apparently, in the monasteries Paddy spent most of his autumn towards winter of 1948, there was less acting and people lived even without speaking or barely speaking. “I’ve been wondering what can be done about these silent meals in the refectory, and am just beginning to see daylight” (Sisman 2016: 34), he was writing to Joan on October 12. Since all meals were taken in silence, all talk was performed in a low voice, and the periods of silence were rigorously observed, Paddy came to imagine, but only up to a certain moment, that all the monks were “almost incapable of laughter, of curiosity or any of the more ordinary manifestations of personal feeling” (Fermor 2007).

A higher degree of silence was to be met in the Trappist monastery, where “except for certain officers in the hierarchy (...) the rule of silence is absolute” (Fermor 2007). Paddy also mentioned a “special deaf and dumb language”

developed for cases of necessity. In Huysmans's *En Route* (2013) readers could notice that the Retreatants, those who came to stay with the Trappist monks for a shorter period, and the Oblates, those who dedicated their lives to God without taking the vows, were allowed to communicate but within specific intervals, such as during the meal. An exception only made to reinforce the rule—"As for that question of silence, as for those of the hours of rising and going to bed, and the offices, the rule allows no modification, it must be observed to the letter" (Huysmans 2013).

However, it was exactly that bizarre, as it seemed, phenomenon or state of silence that would boost the religious conversion of Huysmans's *Durtal*, and *mutatis mutandis* from fiction to non-fiction, Patrick Leigh Fermor's creative energy. Unlike Durtal, who had benefitted from recommendation letters, Paddy had arrived "unknown and unannounced, a citizen of the heretic island across the Channel, without even the excuse that I wished to go into retreat" (Fermor 2007). In his very first afternoon at the monastery he experienced a writer's block and in the evening he was suffering from what Pascal had declared "to be the cause of all human evils", *i.e.* man's inability to sit *quietly* in a room alone.

In time, he would come to appreciate the stillness of his room and of the entire place, as it had "put the roar of the chariot-wheels temporarily out of ear-shot" (Sisman 2016: 26). The almost perpetual silence kept by the monks and their followers/companions, contributed to directing their attention within (Armstrong in Fermor 2007), as the ultimate purpose was, in fact, the search for one's identity. The Abbey came to be perceived as the reverse of the initial *necropolis*, not, "indeed, a Thelema or Nepenthe, but a *silent university*" (Fermor 2007), italics ours.

In this last quote references can take us to the non-fictional Abbey of Thelema, founded in 1920 by the English occultist Arthur Crowley (in Cefalù, Sicily, and later to be demolished by Italian authorities under Mussolini, as a result of the international scandal promoted in British tabloids). This may be in line with Paddy's discoveries in the library—"piled up in a dark corner in a trunk and covered with dust", as revealed in a letter to Joan (Sisman 2016: 34), "a mass of tenth- to sixteenth-century folios bound in vellum, all dealing with the point where mysticism and necromancy merge." On the other hand, we should not forget that Crowley claimed that he had modeled his outrageous establishment after the fictional Abbaye de Thélème from *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, whose author François Rabelais used to be a Franciscan and later a Benedictine monk.

But, as Paddy had pointed out, St Wandrille of his century was a *silent university*, where he could find the energy required to carry on his projects, while enlarging his knowledge on the monastic or heremitic habits. "The library has a mass of stuff about Stylites, which I am devouring. It's too

enthraling and insane” (Sisman 2016: 30), he confessed with unrestrained enthusiasm on getting deeper into details that looked, at least on page, appealing to the 1948 Parisian *flâneur*—“food, sanitary arrangements, fasts, mortifications, hair shirts, flagellations, etc.” (Sisman 2016: 30). Something one finds it difficult to assess, since Patrick Leigh Fermor was a traveller with a flair for languages and scholarship. His *flâneur* features were only part of a complex portrait.

Given his crave for knowledge, a monastic library was the perfect place to bridge the gap between his previous, exuberant experiences, typical for a socialite, and the extremes of an alternative life style, the way they had been undertaken and reached by the ancient Stylites. The valuable clusters of information acquired at St. Wandrille, on the famous reclusive saints, might have proved helpful and alleviating when later encountering similar ways of behaviour in the Monastery of La Grande Trappe. “My initial depression had evaporated after a day or two,” would acknowledge Paddy, “and turned into a kind of masochistic enjoyment of the sad charm of the Trappe, of the absolute silence and solitude” (Fermor 2007).

Such book shrines had their specific structure and rigors, varying from one location to another—“The library is enormous, much bigger than the one at Saint-Wandrille, and wonderfully kept up with card indexes” (Sisman 2016: 41), he was writing to Joan from Solesmes in late November 1948. Then he complained about regulations, which would prevent him from playing his beloved role of *bookworm on the run*—“but it’s terrible difficult to get in, or take books out, it’s so efficient. No question of browsing all night by myself, as I did at St W., then locking it up with my own key (Sisman 2016: 41).

Michael Duggan remarked Paddy’s admiration for the role played by the Western monks in preserving some of “the things he loved: literature, the classics, scholarship and the humanities.” In the company of some of them, “the small number of living monks he was *permitted to speak with*” (Duggan 2018), italics ours. Paddy could find a balance and erudition proper to great minds from the outside world, yet augmented with a grain of calmness specific to the monastic community—“I wander about under the trees for half an hour after luncheon with the Abbé or the Père Hôtelier every day”, he was writing to Joan during his comeback to St Wandrille in May 1949, “talking about religion, philosophy, history, Greek and Roman poetry etc. Very pleasant and satisfactory” (Sisman 2018: 30). The fixed schedule, the stillness of the environment, the magic frame of the library, the peripatetics’ daily encounters, all these contributed to renewing his spirit and to changing his priorities. “I think it is this strange conjunction of silence and *recueillement* [contemplation] with this busy exploitation of every second of the day”,

acknowledged Paddy in the letter to Diana Cooper, “that shames and goads one out of selfish and moody sloth” (Sisman 2018: 133-134).

Conclusions: On Leaving the Tower(s) and a Letter to a Romanian Friend

When analyzing, in Huysmans’s *Durtal*, the changes resulted from all the privations undergone in a Trappist monastery, critics underlined the character’s newly gained “receptivity to everything that had been earlier drowned out by his own nagging discontents” (Ziegler 1986, in *RMLL* 209-210). This receptivity allowed the character to shift from the awareness wrongly turned within, in a selfish mode, to a deeper awareness of the self, enabling the latter to claim/forge a gap-bridging identity, at the same time “directed at the world outside, at nature” (Ziegler 1986, in *RMLL* 209-210).

In Patrick Leigh Fermor’s book, this progressive awareness is also captured. “At St. Wandrille I was inhabiting at last a *tower of solid ivory*”, wrote Paddy about his first destination and stage, pointing to his peculiar condition “and I, not the monks, was the escapis” (Fermor 2007). To the shining image of a writer’s retreat from the above quote one could oppose the names invoked when the pictorial dimension of the last destination, La Grande Trappe, is noted: Breughel, Hieronymus Bosch and Grünewald. The darkened landscape somehow reflected one of Paddy’s conclusions with regard to another path a monk or a Retreatant can choose—“for a humble and completely unintellectual simplicity is one of the characteristics of the Trappist order” (Fermor 2007).

It sounds pretty harsh, all the more with the name Paddy had invoked just a few lines before in the book, *i.e.* of his famous contemporary, the Cistercian monk Thomas Merton. (A proponent of interfaith understanding, Thomas Merton, 1915-1968 was an American Trappist monk and author of many essays and books, among them the most famous was *The Seven Storey Mountain*, published in 1948.) Merton was mentioned when Paddy referred to “certain spiritual consolations” one could still find in a life of penance, according to Cistercians. The first of the tree such consolations, called *unctions* was “the experience of liberty regained by the shedding of all earthly possessions and vanities and ambitions”, which was the focus of Merton’s book *Elected Silence*.

The Trappists branched off from the Cistercians, and they all followed, to various degrees, the rule of Saint Benedict. As for the Benedictines, Paddy remarked, in the last part of *A Time to Keep Silence*, that they had found their sources of inspiration in the rules instated by Saint Basil of Caesarea for the monasteries in Cappadocia, in a landscape that Hyeronimus Bosch, at least, could have found *motivating*:

a dead, ashen world, lit with the blinding pallor of a waste of asbestos, filled, not with craters and shell-holes, but with cones and pyramids and monoliths from fifty

to a couple of hundred feet high, *each one a rigid isosceles of white volcanic rock like the headgear of a procession of Spanish penitents during Passion Week* (italics ours). (Fermor 2007)

It takes a writer like Patrick Leigh Fermor to reunite, in one sentence-blow, two distinct geographically and, in time, spiritually spaces so far apart. But our question would be where does Patrick Leigh Fermor stand in between the two major options? Between the *ivorian* St Wandrille and La Grade Trappe/as rooted in a Cappadocian *zeitgeist*? An encouraging answer, yet not Paddy's, readers could get when he asked a monk from the first Normandy Abbey to find the words to sum up the way of life there—"He paused a moment and said, "Have you ever been in love?" I said, "Yes." A large Fernandel smile spread across his face. (France's top comic actor at the time, Fernandel's (1903-1971) trademark was a benign caballine smile.) "Eh bien", he said, "c'est exactement pareil..." (Fermor 2007).

As for Paddy's true or ultimate answer, we believe one can find it in the letter from Solesmes already mentioned, to his Romanian friend Alexander Mourouzi. After asking for his correspondant's forgiveness for failing to write on regular bases, something Alexander badly needed as he was in a would-be communist country, Paddy remembered that his Romanian friend had used to share the same passion for literature and the craft of writing—"Are you writing now, A[lexander]? I so enjoyed what you wrote back then" (Fermor 2007). They had met in the 1930s, when Paddy had spent almost four years in Romania before leaving for Britain at the outbreak of WWII, at the end of which Alexander failed to escape from the country that was going to become a Soviet satellite: "I fear that the current situation—the anxiety and loss you're having to endure—is hardly conducive to work" (Fermor 2007). Alexander Mourouzi used to live at Golășei, an estate very close to Băleni, so they frequently met and got to know each other well.

The solution comes through, of course, writing. Although people like Alexander and Paddy were suffering from the same evil, exquisitely described in Goncharov's *Oblomov*, *i.e.* "an inability to start and a lack of faith in what we do because of our high standards" (Fermor 2007: 38), the British traveler, soldier and aspiring writer had faith in the future, and his closing formula pertained to both personal histories and to the spiritual history of our part of the world—"Write to me soon, tell me what you are thinking, reading, writing. I have absolutely no idea how, but I feel sure these vicissitudes will be overcome and that Byzantium will be saved" (Fermor 2007), this term being a formula Patrick Leigh Fermor employed quite often, part of a further study will be dedicated to its contexts.

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