

Janet Flanner's early "Paris Letters" invite the *New Yorker's* audience to view Paris with condescension. The content and rhetoric of these pieces reverse the traditional hierarchy between French and American cultures, showing her readers that superiority means seeing as the master subject—a seductive perspective for an economically emergent readership.

## The Metropolitan as Master Subject: Janet Flanner's "Paris Letters"

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**E**nduring fascination with Janet Flanner, author of the *New Yorker's* series of "Paris Letters" from 1925 to 1976, should come as no surprise. As has been reported in biographical material by Brenda Wineapple, Shari Benstock, and Janet Weiss, Indiana-born Flanner arrived on the Left Bank in 1921 at the start of the Lost Generation's expatriation, and there became friendly with Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, James Joyce, and Gertrude Stein. An unrepentant if private lesbian, Flanner attended Nancy Barney's famous Sapphic salons and mingled with Djuna Barnes, Collette, and Anaïs Nin. She left Paris only during World War II, remaining long after the great mass of sojourning Americans departed, delivering intelligent essay-reportage every two weeks throughout the tumultuous European mid-century. She was beloved by the French and was knighted in the Legion of Honor in 1948. Her first collection of essays, *Paris was Yesterday*, won a National Book Award in 1972; two other anthologies of her work received popular and critical acclaim, as did her collection of personal letters. Her

writing itself is widely revered: commentators (including those listed above, as well as Terry Castle and the *New Yorker's* Jane Grant) routinely call her the most influential or important female journalist of her age, influential not only in the *New Yorker* but amongst other writers as well. Because of the glamour of her associations—Paris, the Lost Generation—and her intriguing mix of identity markers—female, gay, Midwestern journalist—and the quality of her prose, she offers readers and critics an inviting number of angles from which to appreciate her work.

Especially beloved are the “Paris Letters” written beginning in the 1930s. In their accounts of Flanner’s career, Wineapple, Weiss, and Benstock have noted a sharp contrast between Flanner’s work in the 1920s and what comes after. While the later work is characterized by a commitment to treating French culture, politics, and economics with an ironic but consistent respect, the early work tends toward satirical condescension. Flanner dismissed her output in these first years in a letter to William Shawn: “you will be shocked at how little [of the early material] is worth saving [...] the Letters [have] an intellectual emptiness that is sad” (qtd. in Benstock 105). Though the later work gets more steady praise, many readers disagree with Flanner’s evaluation of her early output. Benstock has noted “a consciousness that was politically motivated” (108), and she applauds Flanner’s veiled feminism and investment in Parisian avant-garde art; Monica Pearl and Wineapple note the skilled way Flanner creates an intimacy with her audience; Castle identifies “a certain complicating, uninhibited, even loverlike gaiety” that celebrates a homosexual way of seeing (188).

What these readings miss is the early letters’ use of a rhetoric that communicates something surprising about power relations between the United States and France—or, more specifically, between her readership and Parisians. The early letters are strikingly comparable to the travel writing Mary Louise Pratt discusses in her seminal *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. Pratt argues that imperial-era travel writing employs a framework of viewing that induces audiences to see foreign territories as appropriable. In an interesting twist, Flanner presents Paris, generally considered the world’s most glamorous and modern city, in this fashion, stripped of its presumed cultural superiority, flattened in the same way Pratt’s writers present their subjects. That Flanner provides this depiction during the height of American expatriation to Paris further complicates our reading: while curiosity about Paris reveals a desire for European cultural worldliness, the increasing American ability to partake in and shape Parisian life necessarily alters the economy of that desire. I argue that Flanner’s adoption of an authorial persona—the androgynous Genêt, whose name appeared on the letters’ by-line—allows her to shape a model of mastery in the form of *New Yorker*-style “sophistication” that rewrites the cultural exchange between

metropolises. By inducing her audience to read Paris in this way, Flanner provides them with a perspective that suits and feeds their growing sense of mastery over the world.

I am not suggesting that Flanner intended to impress this mindset upon her readers. In fact, whether Flanner felt as flippant about Paris as Genêt did is unlikely. Flanner's later abjuration of these letters suggests that she did not; furthermore, as one of the few members of Barney's circle who needed to work, she felt financial pressure to perform the task the *New Yorker* asked of her. More important to this analysis is that the letters reveal interplay between cultural and economic forces and the rhetorical gestures that inform Flanner's performance and its enthusiastic reception. In order to show the nature of this interplay, I make a number of detours before turning to Flanner's letters themselves. First, I discuss the *New Yorker's* creation of its readership and explore this audience's position in a changing America. Next, I highlight the two key, interrelated gestures Flanner deploys in these letters to produce this seductive perspective, and then add how the use of a pseudonym influences reader reception of the performance. Finally, I offer readings of her letters that demonstrate how the letters' form and content enable a kind of seeing they tempt their audience to borrow.

Summarizing the perspectives of the contributors to *Civilization in the United States*, published in 1921, Harold Stearns observed, "The most amusing and pathetic fact in the social life of America today is its emotional and aesthetic starvation" (xii). Both Malcolm Cowley and Frederick Lewis Allen, in two popular accounts of the American 1920s, cite Stearns's collection as typical of the attitude of that decade's highbrow intellectual. Cowley writes, "Almost everywhere, after the [First World] war, one heard the intellectual life of America unfavorably compared with that of Europe. [. . .] Everywhere, in every department of cultural life, Europe offered the models to imitate" (94). Because of the United States' stifling social codes, its consumerist complacency, and its lack of a native artistic tradition, American cultural production would always, these accounts have it, lag behind Europe's. Needless to say, no small number of Europeans loudly ridiculed the United States in a similar vein, and these sentiments mounted as the United States moved toward global economic and political dominance. French anti-Americanism, as Philippe Roger and David Strauss have shown, became more pronounced and vocal as stereotypes about Americans codified in the early decades of the twentieth century. According to this reading, the best option for 1920s artists and intellectuals who took themselves seriously was to go abroad to gain the cultural training their own country could never offer them. And in vast numbers, they did. Americans descended on Europe and especially the Left Bank of Paris in droves. Taking advantage of a French currency crippled by World War I and an economy thirsty for American

tourist dollars, expatriates created the American enclave detailed in Cowley's *Exile's Return*, Robert McAlmon and Kay Boyle's *Being Geniuses Together, 1920–1930*, William Wiser's *The Crazy Years: Paris in the Twenties*, and George Wickes's *Americans in Paris*.

The *New Yorker* sold its audience a different vision of American identity than the one espoused by these expats. The *New Yorker* chose to appeal to, rather than vilify, the philistines intruding into upper-class society that *Vanity Fair* had warned about in 1925: "In place of a society restricted to a few hundred people of good breeding, we now have a social fabric mounting into the thousands, most of whom have inherited no very definite traditional creed of conduct or behavior" (qtd. in Yagoda 60). The *New Yorker* aimed to give these invading thousands a sense that they belonged in high society just as much as the old-money elite they were displacing. As we shall see, Flanner's Paris, which could have been the Paris that reminded them of their inferiority, became instead the Paris these newcomers needed—one that did not position them as culturally impoverished.

The key to the seduction of this readership lay in creating a slippage between stated and intended audiences. As Ben Yagoda and others have documented, Harold Ross intended the periodical to court these striving nouveau-riche through this enticement: the magazine offered readers information they thought they needed to pass as part of the upper crust, while simultaneously pretending those readers already knew everything they needed to. In complimenting them for not needing the material it provided, the *New Yorker* made them feel like they belonged to the class they strove to reach. Ross outlines his strategy for recruiting these readers in an oft-quoted letter to prospective investors: "The *New Yorker* will be a reflection in word and picture of metropolitan life. [. . .] It will not be what is commonly called highbrow or radical. It will be what is commonly called sophisticated, in that it will assume a reasonable degree of entitlement on the part of its readers. [. . .] The *New Yorker* will be the magazine which is not edited for the old lady in Dubuque. [. . .] It expects a considerable national circulation, but this will come from persons who have a metropolitan interest" (qtd. in Yagoda 38–39). Significantly, Ross's first sentence refers to "a picture of metropolitan life," not a picture of New York or urban life. Though the magazine would focus on New York, it converted this particular metropolitan space (or its idealized and privileged aspects) into the quintessential example of metropolitan-ness. He distinguishes the metropolitan audience from the traditionally intellectual ("highbrow"), the socially committed ("radical"), and the old fashioned or provincial ("the old lady in Dubuque"). What I will call "the metropolitan audience" is this group defined by no other concern than becoming more metropolitan, which in Ross's framing becomes no different from being sophisticated. The persons with a metropolitan interest who

lived elsewhere need not have the entitlement the magazine will assume, provided they can keep up with the magazine's version of sophistication. The allure of that sophistication is that the magazine poses it as the equivalent—if not the superior—of the social training the well-born held over the metropolitans. In other words, the *New Yorker* performed a sophistication that made itself seem so elite that other markers of elite identity seemed insignificant; for its audience, then, performative sophistication, which it learned by reading, replaced inherited hallmarks of sophistication in a social hierarchy, justifying the new-money presence atop the pecking order. Ross's belief that this approach would yield a loyal audience and commercial rewards paid off: subscriptions jumped from 3,375 in the magazine's first year, 1925, to 25,069 in 1926 and 43,803 in 1930. Ad income increased from \$36,000 in 1925 to \$389,000 in 1926 and \$1,922,000 in 1930 (Yagoda 96–97). Mary Corey notes that by 1946, the *New Yorker* was outsold among weekly glossy magazines only by stalwarts *Time* and *Newsweek* (x).

Flanner's place in this scheme was to make available an insider's knowledge of the "City of Lights": she begins as the magazine's only foreign correspondent, which speaks to the importance of Paris in the cultural imagination—to be sophisticated, Paris was the chief foreign space one needed to know something about. And Genêt knew the most interesting happenings, the names of the Parisian vanguard, and the city's most up-to-date fashions. But rather than simply telling this material to her audience—and in keeping with the *New Yorker*'s strategy—she made her audience feel they already knew it. She created this illusion using two rhetorical gestures whose interaction taught her audience to turn their noses down on what had been considered the world's most glamorous city.

In Hayden White's articulation, we always read through and against the trope that prefigures a writer's processing and delivery of her material. Flanner's writing operates within what White calls the ironic trope, which "negat[es] on the figurative level what is positively affirmed on the literal level," destabilizing the fixed relationship between what is said and what is meant. White explains that "characterizations of the world cast in the Ironic mode are often regarded as *intrinsically* sophisticated and realistic" insofar as they exhibit a greater self-awareness about linguistic exchange (37, *emph.* White's). This impression of sophistication also stems from what irony demands of an audience. "To read irony," Claire Colebrook states, "you do not just have to know the context; you have to be committed to specific beliefs and positions *within* that context" (12). Part of the immediate sophistication we confer upon irony, then, results from its expectation that we grasp and agree with the context that would make its intent sensible. We must become the readers that the text anticipates to understand fully what the

text intends to do. In order to “get it,” we need to know that we might not get it; irony demands that we perform a complex evaluation of the difference between expression and meaning.

Examining the conventions of the epistolary genre at work in the letters will help reveal how this ironic exchange works. Though much foreign correspondence of the period took the form of the letter, Flanner in particular creates a journalism that privileges the proximity between reader and writer over the writer’s fealty to the subject, thereby producing the intimacy Pearl has written about insightfully (in “What strange intimacy”). Flanner is less concerned with doing justice to what she reports than in sticking to the style of exchange appropriate to her task and audience. Because of the intimacy she creates, the metropolitan public, having found itself for the first time in possession of a modicum of power and in a nation becoming the global hegemon, acquires a knowledge appropriate to the sense it desires for itself—as not inferior to any inherited or traditional hierarchies. Irony, as the tone that invites collusion, turns the colluding pair against the object being ironized. Thus, Flanner lifts her readers above what had been fetishized as the world’s cultural capital.

**T**o expand on the brief summary I gave above, Pratt’s seminal *Imperial Eyes* demonstrates effectively how European travel and discovery narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries produced a sense of ownership over would-be colonial territories through their use of a rhetoric that presupposed dominance and power (3). Important to these narratives was the speaker’s sense that he or she had complete access to the space under examination. The presumption these writers make is that nothing is or can be hidden from the superiority of the European eye.

Alison Blunt and Gillian Rose extend Pratt’s insights by evoking Henry Lefebvre and Donna Haraway to explain how the illusion of transparency—the assumed conceit that all is visible to the European eye—presupposes the master European subject: the male, white, heterosexual, educated, moneyed figure whose eye is so privileged as to be the eye through which we see the world (5–6). Work relying on this illusion of transparency draws the map of relation always in the same way, with itself and its culture at the centre and everywhere else on the periphery. This positioning invariably converts the space described into a territory appropriable by the privileged viewer. The idea that one could know immediately upon viewing erases a culture’s specificity, complexity, and dignity. The reader might rightfully ask how Paris, itself an imperial power, might fit into the paradigm established here. My argument is not that Franco-American relations resemble colonialism. Rather, I mean to say that Flanner’s readership learns to *look* at Paris as though it were akin to a colony, or at least as a space open

for American appropriation. Once one learns to look in this way at a major European capital, one then occupies the affective and imaginary position of the metropole. By implying that she is the master of all she views—Pratt calls this the “monarch-of-all-I-see” gaze—and, through her use of irony, assuming her audience shares this view, Flanner produces a rhetoric that seduces the reader into seeing as the master subject.

**F**lanner was not the only female American journalist working in Europe during the 1920s. As Wineapple notes, Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote a column for *Vanity Fair* in the early part of the decade, and Elizabeth Eyre de Lanux contributed to *Town and Country* (103). Dorothy Thompson headed the Berlin office of an American newspaper, and a number of other American women reported from Europe during the First World War, as did many more—perhaps most notably Martha Gellhorn—in the decades to come. Unlike these other writers, however, Flanner wrote under a male-sounding pseudonym (the myth has it that Ross thought it sounded like a French version of “Janet” [Wineapple 98]) that obscured her gender, and as no *New Yorker* author ever had a picture appear with a by-line (as many women columnists of the era did), readers had little reason to suspect that Flanner was a woman until her fame began to spread in the early 1930s.

Jean-Marie Lutes has noted that, for women journalists in the early 1900s, embodiment played a key role in the affective reception of their writing (6). For women who wrote sensational or stunt stories, their presence in a given place—a psychiatric hospital, the scene of a crime (where social standards suggested proper young women should not be)—made a difference to how readers received stories. Whereas a male writer might rarely make reference to his body, women writers could amplify the emotional investment of readers by reminding them of potential harm to the female body. Gender-specific stereotypes also produced expectations of the female reformist instinct. Because women could claim “Victorian women’s ‘moral authority’” to advocate for progressive causes (Morin 159), they were expected to suggest reforms, and because they were thought to be more emotional, their reaction to abject or pitiful conditions practically impelled them to do so. As a result, what we see in de Lanux or Thompson or Gellhorn is a regular use of the pronoun “I” and, in all but the latter, regular moralistic commentary.

For Flanner, both body and moralism are absent. As several of her biographers have stated, Flanner eschews the personal “I” at all costs, and she refrains from moral interference entirely. Had she not utilized the mask of “Genêt,” readers may have had difficulty swallowing her master-subject positioning. Writing as Genêt effaces Flanner’s gender, allowing her to evade the expectations that might have accompanied

it. This erasure of Flanner's identity characteristics became essential for the transfer of sensibility from writer to audience. By slipping into an invented persona who never doubts his objectivity, Flanner is able to mime the master subject.

An equally compelling means through which Flanner takes on this voice is her straddling of genres. One way of drawing a distinction between travel writing and foreign journalism is to consider how embedded the writer is in the space being described. The travel writer passes through, while the journalist reports regularly from a given spot. I find placing Flanner in either of these categories very difficult, insofar as while she is certainly situated in Paris, she does not write from the fixed, ground-level perspective of the reporter. Rather, to borrow from Benstock's useful articulation, "there is a perceptible space between the language of the letters and their subject matter, a space in which Parisians and Americans move about a mythical city constructed by a woman who continually places herself midway between expatriates and Europeans" (101). While the spaces she discusses do not seem to me mythical, the space that Benstock names shows how dislodged Genêt is from what he/she discusses: more often than not, the birds-eye view belies any sense of eye-witnessing as it is traditionally understood. This blending of genres also prevents Flanner from being situated in a way that could limit her. She transcends ways of viewing in favour of *the* way of viewing, as the master subject. Flanner's masquerading as Genêt enables the pretence of neutrality and objectivity that is essential to a position of mastery, as Judith Butler has pointed out: "within this culture the ethnographic conceit of a neutral gaze will always be a white gaze [. . . which] passes its own perspective off as the omniscient, one that presumes upon and enacts its own perspective as if it were no perspective at all" (391).

**T**he key components of the "Genêt attitude" discussed above—her subject matter's transparency and her ironic perspective—are on display throughout nearly all the "Paris Letters." In a letter dated 1 June 1927, Flanner describes a European celebrity wedding:

It was Paramount Night the other afternoon in the village of Seraincourt, not far from Paris, when pretty Pola de Calupec-Domski-Negri became the bride of Prince Serge Mdvani. Our advance to exhibitors is 500 feet of this special, which has some pretty scenic effects in French scenery and fine close-ups of a champagne buffet, might go well in a neighborhood house but would flop for the first big runs. Socially the cast was weak. [. . .] Certainly came the old subtitles with which every cinema sinner is familiar. "I-am-very-happy-the-prince-was-my-childhood-sweetheart-this-is-the-happiest-moment-of-my-life-kiss-fadeout-cut." However, if the direction was bad for Pola Negri's wedding, the lighting was excellent, it being a sunny day. Besides, no one should be too critical. This was the first time she was married in France. (53)



The metaphor that converts the wedding into an unsatisfying film suggests the event's failure to entertain the speaker, implying that the wedding was a commodity that failed to meet her tastes rather than a newsworthy event. That the press was invited to the wedding and that actress Negri was reputedly publicity hungry might help explain Flanner's choice of metaphor. Nonetheless, even if the event were not particularly noteworthy, Flanner's skewering of the spectacle positions herself and her audience as above being entertained by it; other, less sophisticated individuals might have found it captivating, but Flanner and her readers do not. Flanner chooses to report material that *failed* to entertain her, establishing for her audience not a sense of inferiority but its inverse.

The "pretty scenic effects" and "fine close-ups" speak to her approval of the visual components of the entertainment, but the weakness of the cast and the familiarity of the story make it unsuitable fare for the metropolitans—the audience "for the first big runs." Flanner presumes understanding of provincial tastes when she suggests the story "might go well" at a "neighborhood" cinema, inscribing these tastes as simple and, in turn, the metropolitan's as sophisticated. Through her satirizing of the participants in the wedding, especially the bride, the speaker further insinuates a superiority, shared between herself and her audience, over both the participants in the event and those who might be impressed by it. Negri's recitation of "the old subtitles" fails to impress, and the running together of Negri's purported dialogue with stage directions posits her language as a too-obviously scripted part of the show. Listing Negri's multiple last names and reminding readers that "this was the first time she was married in France" further lampoons the spectacle. The self-aware irony of the second to last sentence—"no one should be too critical"—makes a nod toward the criticism the letter itself performs. At the same time, the sentence sets up the letter's punch line, which contains perhaps the key piece of evidence for taking the wedding lightly.

Flanner here demonstrates total control over her subject matter. She presents the wedding as a performance offered for her entertainment and criticizes it with impunity. The speaker's impressions appear as objective facts: she expresses her subjective judgments as absolutes—"the direction *was bad*, the lighting *was excellent*," not "I found the direction . . ." or "I thought the lighting . . ." The letter's mastery of its subject matter converts a European celebrity-spectacle into an object for derision and mockery.

One might rightly ask whether I am arguing that celebrity weddings must be treated with the utmost seriousness. Regardless of her subject matter, however, Flanner maintains the same demeanour, and it is the consistency of the view—rather than what's being viewed—that is significant to this analysis. Her tacit attitude of total control over her subject and her ironic tone towards it extend, in the letter dated 6 February 1926, across history and French cultural icons:

Anniversaries are useful to an old capital but Paris at the moment is indulging in a recollective orgy. Three immortals are being revived [including] Brillat-Savarin who died a hundred years ago, only three weeks after his “Physiology of Taste” was printed, this being the first book ever to make a hero of the palate. [. . .] Brillat-Savarin, the world’s perfect gourmet and a spicy philosopher, easily gets first place in the public eye. The best of his famous classic aphorisms are today quoted in journals last week devoted to misquoting Miss Helen Wills on the Riviera. [. . .] It is said that he never talked during his famous dinner parties and went to sleep at table immediately after. [. . .] Last month the Chamber of Deputies sat up all night, figuring on how they could cut the national budget. By dawn 35,000 francs worth of coffee, sandwiches and brandy had been consumed gratis from the state bar and the statesmen, still patriotically determined to cut expenses somewhere, fortunately went home before deliberation cost any more. But a few days later they voted 30,000 francs to help celebrate [the] anniversary, without even asking for a glass of water. (46)

Beginning with the aphoristic-sounding “anniversaries are useful to an old capital,” the speaker intimates that she knows something about old capitals and their penchant for celebrating anniversaries: here again, the lack of the personal pronoun presents subjective observation as received wisdom. The statement foregrounds the difference between Europe’s long history and the United States’ youthful vigour. Unlike the vibrant capitals in the United States (especially New York), which do not need their vitality refreshed, Paris and other “old” capitals can use this nourishment.

Her commentary about Brillat-Savarin assumes authoritative knowledge about Parisian society, cooking, and cookbooks. She is certain that his was the first book “to make a hero of the palate,” names him “the perfect gourmet,” knows he finishes in “first place in the public eye,” and feels comfortable determining “the best” of his witticisms. She offers funny pieces of anecdotal gossip whose sources she leaves ambiguous. (“It is said” does not tell us who does the saying.) The speaker emphasizes her assumed cultural expertise with her casual reference to the misquotations in French journals that she, the privileged American observer, is able to apprehend. She does not have to justify making such pronouncements—rather, she can assess them because, her audience understands, they become immediately apparent to the master-subject’s eyes.

Flanner has access to the deliberations and motivations (“patriotically determined”) of the Chamber of Deputies but has enough distance to point out their idiosyncrasies. Her description of their deliberations frames what must have been French news as a piece of inside information immediately discernable to the privileged viewer. The narrator, in presenting this material isolated from other French political matters, positions the Chamber of Deputies as buffoons, ones whose behaviour she is free to interpret. Again, I do not mean to say that the Chamber is above reproach, but Flanner

is not alerting Americans to French political incompetence because she wants to galvanize them into action. The anecdote functions only to solidify Flanner's representation.

Flanner's letters align with the travel-writing tendency, pointed out by Pratt, to depict subjects exclusively in terms of what they offer the metropole; this, too, speaks to the flattening performed by the master-subject perspective. Flanner's description of the late spring "gastronomic tours" in the 16 May 1928 letter engages in this practice:

Early lunch at the Auberge au Clou at Hericy, fourteen of the prettiest kilometers in France skirting the Marne and leading out from charming Melun. At this newly installed and delightful posthouse, the *prix fixe* is forty francs and includes entrees, lobster, fowl, magnificent apple tart and sour cream (as might be suspected, the architectural leaning of the establishment is slightly Norman), and excellent wines for as low as thirty francs. The item to swear by, however, is the hot veal and ham pasty pie which heads this feast and is one of the triumphs of suburban Paris. [. . . Vienne] is a charming old Roman town, containing a temple of Augustus and a pyramid which, of course, you can not eat, the important item being blue trout, boiled alive and served with mysterious, perfected sauce. Push on then to Hospice de Beaune, an ugly village famous for you know what. Order it in early vintages and great bottles. (62–63)

The locations described here are depicted exclusively in terms of the "itinerary" offered for the potential tourist/expatriate. No object or event described is noted for anything other than what it offers the well-to-do traveller on a gourmet binge. Though she calls the "pasty pie" "one of the triumphs of suburban Paris," she does so in the context of trying to explain its value to her home culture. The "ugly village" is important only because one can get good wine on the cheap.

Perhaps the best example of the value-conversion occurs when Flanner describes the pyramid and the temple as items "you can not eat." Because they have no value in the discussion Flanner advances, the speaker dismisses them. They cannot offer travellers much in terms of the sort of satisfaction they seek, so they become incidental. The reader might again object here that Flanner is simply doing her job—telling readers what might be in store for them when they get to France. Nonetheless, as these examples show, her attitude is consistent whether advertising tours or discussing public figures. Parisian culture becomes understood exclusively in terms of its entertainment value to Americans.

Often, that value is located exclusively in scorning the behaviours of traditionally revered culture. The treatment of a well-known Parisian's death in the 1 May 1926 letter exemplifies how the "Paris Letters" generate this kind of value:

The recent death of the dowager Duchess of Rohan brought her for the last time before the notice of Paris, which had noticed her so often during her lifetime and had received from her so many benefits—almost as many as it had given her. She was the prejudiced and energetic head of one of the greatest families in France, and her long life and her salon in the Boulevard des Invalides were arenas where the aristocratic old and democratic new traditions fought and the old tradition, like the old Duchess, died. She was the last of a milieu where men are not men but dukes. She was christened Herminie, married a noble, bore handsome children and then, her duties over, wrote four books of rhyme and dominated conventional Paris society. Then came the war and a new generation. She lost a son in Flanders, turned her salon into a hospital, became a Red Cross nurse. She wrote no more verse. She took to prose. But the end was not yet for this old aristocrat. [. . .] She suffered the indignity of a shop, opened one month ago by one of her daughters. (57)

With a bold irreverence, Flanner satirizes France's attachment to an outdated way of life. The paragraph's first sentence highlights a disproportionate relationship between Paris and its leading citizens, asserting without qualification that the Duchess received more from Paris than she gave to it. That her death "brought her [. . .] before the notice of Paris" implies either that she was a well-known and beloved figure in spite of this imbalance or that, though she may have been forgotten, her obituary notices returned her to prominence (or bemoaned her loss of prominence). Either way, the Duchess is in the public eye, and Genêt, rather than simply reporting her death, interrogates the value of public mourning. The privileged viewer—speaker and audience—can see this misplaced reverence and gets to enjoy its absurdity.

The Duchess's energy, which might be a positive characteristic, leads her to write her books and contribute to the war effort. Flanner makes even these achievements somewhat dubious. After marrying a noble and bearing children, she produces "four books of rhyme"—Flanner's silence on their quality feels damning—and dominates "conventional French society." By suggesting that the energy is what leads to her domination, Flanner poses the Duchess's activities as haughty and impertinent. Coming after Flanner's list of the Duchess's war-effort activities, the short sentence "She wrote no more verse" indicates that she gave up poetry as a consequence of her wartime activity, perhaps out of mourning. But she made no real sacrifice: "she took to prose."

The passage's last sentence drives home the heart of Flanner's critique through its use of a jarring word pairing. To her readers, a "shop" is not an "indignity," nor would it be for anyone except former aristocrats. Flanner asserts that the Duchess "suffered" this "indignity," insinuating that the Duchess experienced her daughter's shop as a painful reminder of the end of aristocracy. For Flanner and her audience, only a relic of the antiquated "milieu where men are not men but dukes" could imagine a merchant

in the family to be an affront. Flanner's knowledge of the Duchess's frustration tells readers that the daughter's shop and the dishonour her mother felt were *news*, something Parisians cared about. The mock sympathy Flanner employs presumably targets the treatment of the Duchess's demise by the Parisian press and points out for her audience the absurdity of this treatment. She teaches her audience that remnants of an outmoded way of life linger in France and that the continued worship of these remnants renders Paris an object of derision.

Don Hausdorff has observed that an early *New Yorker* strategy for dealing with serious domestic issues was to resist differentiating events of political and economic consequence from less significant stories, and to treat each with the same flippant tone (75). Flanner does the same with issues facing France. The typical *New Yorker* equivalencies taught audiences to be irreverent about their own culture. Flanner's instructed them to be irreverent about the place long considered the United States' cultural superior, a gesture that operates in a different register. For example, the economic plight that made possible so much American expatriation and left French businesses desperate for American dollars is treated in the same breezy tone she uses for discussing an art show or a fashion craze. In her 20 March 1926 letter, she explains, "Bread has advanced one franc eighty the kilo; duty on sugar has gone up 25%." The mention of the increase in these prices might seem to indicate a sympathy for those who suffer price hikes for basic necessities, but Flanner quickly shifts attention to luxury items, demonstrating that the initial mentions were simply curiosities: "Other interesting momentary prices are: Renoir's 'Nude a the Toilette,' 27,000 francs; Utrillo's 'Eiffel Tower,' 10,000 francs; Derain's 'Jeune Pensive' 10,000" (51). The mention of food prices function only to segue into a complaint about the French underestimation of art Flanner values: Marcel Duchamps receives "320 francs" for his famous "Mind the Paint," and Flanner explains that "a good hat costs more" (51).

More examples abound. In her 21 December 1925 letter, Flanner writes in her first paragraph, "Governments have been going in and out like lodgers, and the franc, as usual, has been falling." Mentioning the instability of the French government and currency, however, sets up a gag: an impending increase in tobacco prices produced "a run on tobacco shops"; the resulting shortage meant that "everyone, it being cold weather, asked for brandy" when told cigarettes were not available (35). The subsequent paragraphs are about, in order, a wine tasting festival, a literary prize, the rebirth of interest in Midwestern American writing among the French, art news, the opening of a dress shop, and Coco Chanel. Before her detailing of the gastronomic tours discussed above in the 16 May 1928 column, she tells readers that "for fifteen years, Europe has been going through a climatic change." Though the French were "already wrecked by

the war, further deprived of tourist gold—tourists like fair weather,” the people of France were “increasingly harassed by diminishing grain crops caused by the inexplicably increasing cold and tempest” (62). Offering little commentary about these struggles, she then juxtaposes this introduction with a two-page discussion of gastronomic tourism. What sympathy might be produced through discussion of these difficulties is erased when readers remember that Paris is offered here merely for their delight.

**T**ogether, these examples demonstrate the gestures that exemplify and induce in an audience a sense of mastery over the Paris of Flanner’s early letters. The transparency conferred upon Paris makes the speaker into the objective, omniscient observer of all the narrative discusses and reverses the presumed hierarchy between these two cultures. The long-held fantasy of Paris and France as untouchably glamorous and impossibly sophisticated is subverted, and an audience is able to escape long-harboured feelings of inferiority.

Flanner’s performance of this rewriting speaks to the flexibility of power as articulated by Leela Gandhi, who writes of power’s ability to disguise and alter itself: “While it may manifest itself in a show and application of force, it is equally likely to appear as the disinterested purveyor of cultural enlightenment and reform” (14). As Pratt and, more recently, Morin and other postcolonial geographical theorists have shown, the imperial rhetoric of ownership often over-codes journalism and travel writing that may have been benevolent or well intentioned, and imperial ambitions might emerge in intra-national commentary or writing about the metropole coming from a colony. Flanner’s engagement with this rhetoric has perhaps been overlooked by her commentators because of the peculiar dynamics of writing this way about Paris, a city that Americans of the period may have in some senses appropriated but never fully colonized. Yet the dynamics of power and consumption certainly appear in her work, demonstrating how power learns to make itself dominant: to paraphrase Gandhi, power shows up in Flanner as the disinterested purveyor of something called sophistication. The metropolitan sophisticate, safe and secure as the master subject, becomes the ideal consumer, viewing everything as appropriable.

By the end of the 1920s, as Allen observes, “the *New Yorker* forgot the old lady from Dubuque and developed a casual and altogether charming humor with malice toward none” (243). Flanner’s letters either led the way or followed suit, depending on which story one wants to believe. The jocularity that characterized the early *New Yorker* felt incongruous after the onset of the Great Depression, so its domestic writing altered to suit the national mood. As economic and political conditions in Europe worsened, Flanner’s letters begin to admit a degree of seriousness that the early letters eschew.

Still, these early letters provide us with a site for examining journalism that reifies hierarchy as the only way to imagine cross-cultural relations. Floya Anthias has recently written that “a society dedicated to social inclusion and cohesion [. . .] must involve a concerted attack against those constructions of difference and identity that exclude and devalorise” (28). Anthias’s comments are much in keeping with contemporary cosmopolitan thinking (such as that of Ulrich Beck), which has tried to conceive of how to think outside the national and cultural hierarchies that necessarily produce discord and inequality. Kwame Anthony Appiah’s recent espousal, in *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, of conversation as a metaphorical model for communication—one that frames cultural exchange as a talk between two equals—is perhaps one way of relating cultures without exclusive or divisive models. To achieve journalism more like Appiah’s conversation, we simply must begin to locate the power dynamics inherent in even benign-seeming communiqués like the “Paris Letters.” Doing so will enable even greater recognition of the assumptions and perspectives that perpetuate a divided, unequal world.

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