



Through Parisian Eyes

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Through Parisian Eyes is a collection of crisp, elegant interviews with some major artists and writers covering roughly 1975-1985. Each interview is a semi-narrative, bringing to the foreground the interviewee's achievements and idiosyncrasies and often presupposing the reader's familiarity with French, particularly Parisian, culture.

The journalist's excellent bedside manner only once betrays impatience — with a rather hysterical, unintentionally funny Yves Montand who cannot stop talking politics while she attempts to have him talk about art. But this, of course, is precisely the point made throughout the book: politics is the blood of French intellectual life; its passions may well swipe at individuals or neighbouring coteries but its thrust is French society as a whole (not to mention the world, which French intellectuals whatever their field feel qualified to adjudicate on).

Such is the sweep of Olivier Todd, former co-editor of the weekly *L'Express*, who fulminates against the political biases of Marxists, communists, libertarians and, especially, Sartre on domestic issues as well as the USSR, the United States, Nazi Germany and Vietnam, to name some. Sartre, by the way, helped Todd at the beginning of his career. Todd's own biases glow, but Sartre's temporary, albeit ambivalent, sympathy for the French Communist Party was really too much. ("Why should uneducated masses carry cultural thinking? It's idiotic. I think today that one should write a defence of the bourgeoisie.")

A similar tone is adopted by Bernard-Henri Lévy, media star of the New Right, calculatedly billeted 10 years ago as the New Left. Régis Debray, author, former guerilla fighter in Bolivia (where he was imprisoned) and Mitterrand's adviser on the Third World, is a lamb by comparison. Françoise Sagan, who, like Todd, enjoyed Sartre's friendship, believes Parisian intellectuals are fickle.

Debray speaks of the criticism levelled at him by intellectuals for agreeing to work in the Elysée Palace. But then, most references in the interviews to Mitterrand's call for support from intellectuals when he first took office are made disparagingly. So, too, is dismissed the generous policy of the Minister for Culture, Jack Lang, who was demoted to the position of secretary after four years and removed from government in 1986, when the Right won a parliamentary majority.



Camber Porter tends to stress the “traditional polarisation of Right and Left in France”, but it seems from her interviews that only the Right knows it's on the Right. Meanwhile the Left, excluding Debray, wishes it was somewhere else, which has been Mitterrand's problem for some years, except that he has always known he wants to be at the Elysée.

If Parisian intellectuals are the barometer of France, what does all this suggest, not only for France but for European Community, when the barriers between nations go down in 1992? The “pluralistic” society evoked by conservatives, though with varying shades of Right? -

The presidential results will give us a clue, but only time, as they say, will tell.

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