

**Confessions of a Young Philosopher**

by

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## Chapter One

### Green Age

In the year when this memoir begins, I was twenty-one and on a Fulbright grant to study the Concept of Man in Aesthetic Experience. In Paris, appropriately enough.

It was a leaf-blown Saturday afternoon in November. I had come up the rue de Vaugirard at noon to the Luxembourg Gardens, facing which was the Jewish student restaurant. Since, assuming religious need, that restaurant let anyone who paid for a ticket eat there, it became a place for friends to meet whose student cards had assigned them to separate restaurants, and the solution for those who weren't now or never had been "students," but still needed a cheap meal. Those were the days of the Algerian struggle for independence from France, so a good number of Arab students ate there too, whenever the Foyer Musulman was closed, its entire staff having been placed under arrest.

#### CLOSED

"They are never open on Saturdays," said the bearded, unfamiliar voice beside me, in English. It was a dark-clad foreign student, not French, and surely not American. He was thin, a little taller than me. I did not notice how he looked, particularly.

"Oh, of course. It's the Jewish restaurant! I should have known that."

"Well, for my part, I'm going to another," he remarked, in French.

"Fine, I shall go with you," I rejoined, in the same language. "The ones I have tickets for are all closed."

"You can always eat at the Beaux Arts. They let anybody in. You only have to show that you have a card for *some* student restaurant."

We moved around in a kind of do-si-do on the sidewalk. Vaguely I noticed that I did not feel crowded, although, with people usually, I did. We had started walking.

"How is the food there?"

"Bad, but about like the others."

"Oh." We were pacing along at a fast clip, keeping a rough step. "What nationality are you?" I asked curiously.

"Grrreeek."

"Are you really?" I'd never met a modern Greek, though I felt I had met many ancient ones. "No, really? How marvelous. I was just studying a little Greek. How simply *splendid* to be Greek. And what city are you from in Greece?"

"Ahhthens," he pronounced for me.

"Oh really." It was olive and gold, in my young philosopher's imagination -- a place of mystery and light at the start of the tunnel formed by this history-encumbered, sharp, grey presentness of Paris.

"You sound like Montesquieu's '*Comment peut-on etre persan?*'" (How can one be a Persian?) he said dryly. But he couldn't help being a little pleased. "Whhaht are you stud-y-ing?" he inquired in English.

"*La philo*," I said shyly, thinking, oh dear, this will sink me.

"Ha-hah! So am I," he exclaimed, in somewhat stilted but evident delight this time.

Into what female company, I wondered, was he accommodating me in his mind? De Beauvoir? Héloïse? Or perhaps someone else he knew, more accessible and less celebrated? Many things were acceptable here, in a certain milieu at least, that were still viewed as anomalous in the States.

"It's a good thing you came by, or else I would have gone hungry this afternoon. But never mind. I would've done it for the sake of the good Lord."

"And what a peculiar sublimation that would have been!" he answered at once.

I laughed. The Parisians whom I'd met so far did not use those Freudian terms, although they understood them.

"Are you Jeweeesh?"

"Yes."

"You have a very Jewish face."

I'd once read an ethnographic essay on the Greeks. It portrayed them as very puritanic. The thoughts of these people never went below the face, the eyes. He was steering us unerringly through winding side streets, nearly aborted alleys, and seemingly doorless doorways till we came up to the *Foyer des Beaux Arts*. It held the usual crush of self-preoccupied, sternly red-mouthed, bearded young Frenchmen, dark hair billowing and dancing to frame their white faces and necks. Like memory itself, French students in those days never wore anything bright. In their dark suits, they still showed the after-effects of nineteenth-century realism, in the style of the painter Courbet. Or, if they wore

more informal, dark sweaters and pants, then they'd shifted in time as far forward as post- impressionism and the style of Manet. Since the monitors *were* lax on the pass rules, they simply took our tickets, and we elbowed through the penumbra.

We chattered, seated at one of the crowded long tables, over plates clattering and decorously aggressive demands for the bread and the salt from every quarter. He had been to Israel with a close Israeli friend, he said. In fact, he had tried to sign up during one of their recent military campaigns, but they had not accepted him.

In the Paris of students, in those days, being Jewish gave one somewhat more importance than being a blandly uncomplicated American. Americans had to answer for segregation. For wealth. For escaping the bombs and the invaders. Jews had only to accept, without of course overdoing it, the prestige of having been -- as a group -- singled out for outstanding victimization by the still-unforgotten German Occupation. Mind, the prestige was not moral. It was fleshly. One *was* a certain condensate of historical suffering and endurance. Essence is what has been, as a German philosopher said. The "essences" acknowledged here were aesthetic. The word "aesthetic" comes from the Greek, *aisthetikos*, meaning roughly, "pertaining to perception." So it was aesthetically important to be seen as an essence incarnate. It started one off socially, giving one at least the presumption of shape.

"What connection does your mind trace between Hellenic civilization and that of Israel?" I asked him. I wasn't an expert at small talk. Besides, I genuinely wanted to know. Why did I want to know? I was pretty aestheticized myself. On the other hand, perhaps the question was not exactly a bit of posturing, but a deep one, still being turned over inside the astral precincts of Western philosophy. And maybe I had asked it because I wanted the answer -- not about how his thinking processes went, but about the connection itself, between Athens and Jerusalem.

He made some not-lame rejoinder, though what it was has slipped from my memory now.

He had liked Israel a good deal, he was saying at the *Beaux Arts*. I was impressed with his wholeheartedness. I'd read that modern Greeks were highly ethnocentric. It felt very easy to me to be so judicious in taking the measure of his historical form, since I felt so balanced and stabilized within my own.

We turned to the question of my ostensible Fulbright project in Paris. Had I met a certain philosopher of art at the Sorbonne?

Yes, I had. It was one of a number of such meetings that that my advisor from the *Commission Franco-Americaine* was then, to my chagrin, arranging. Others, more preprofessional than I, might have coveted these presentations, which I found forced and embarrassing. I explained this.

What did I think of him?

"You know" -- I swept my hands in a V shape upwards -- "he is Catholic."

Two German students seated across from us burst out laughing.

"For my part," I continued, with all the airy pseudo-decisiveness of youth, "I think that Christianity is mostly a phenomenon of art, and that *art* is the meaning of 'the word made flesh.'"

"Yes of course," the Greek student said emphatically.

"And how much of the classic, ancient Greece is still preserved in that country today?" I really, naively wanted to know.

"It is preserved through the culture of Byzantium. It is a Byzantine classicism."

I thought of the vast interior of Hagia Sophia, erstwhile great cathedral of the Eastern Church in what had been Constantinople. Its glass-and-gold-inlaid mosaics were lighting up the inside of a mere dark, closeted dome. And outside, there was still the sky -- now more remote. Poor Greece. My head was full of thoughts, that day. I didn't think about him, particularly.

We walked back together down one of the broad avenues of the Latin Quarter. The last few brown leaves clung to the November branches, while our leisurely path lay empty under the strong fall sunlight. It seemed an unusual day.

I was asking Pheidias about a modern Greek film in a village setting that I had seen. Was it true in real life, as in the film, that when you are a Greek girl from such a village, and you are seen speaking alone to a man, "*the very walls of the village* will turn against you"?

He laughed. "When I was a boy fleeing the communists, a peasant sheltered me. The same man who hid me had, some time before, killed his sister with a knife because she had a lover."

"Did this man feel no remorse?"

"No. He thought he had done well."

"Did she not leave even the thinnest trace of a shadow over his days?"

"Well, when I pointed out to him that in *another milieu* what his sister had done would have been taken as quite normal, so as to show him how unnecessary was what he did -- when he understood that -- afterwards he was quite sorry." Placid and nonjudgmental when describing the limitations of the peasant's outlook, he was fiercely disapproving as he gave his quick contrasting

sketch of the "other milieu" of the libertine upper classes. So unhealthy! he opined.

"So the film I saw was not that realistic?"

"What film is? American westerns do not show the reality of America, do they?"

"I suppose not. But then again, perhaps in their way they do show something" -- amending my reservation as he looked his scepticism -- "of the American *unconscious* at least."

He nodded sharply.

I had read very little Freud and, like most girls of the era, I was aware that the language of Freud tended to put you in rather a less flattering light than you wanted to be in. But if you aimed to talk to people and to move on their plane, you had to find common vocabulary. *N'est-ce pas?* And here, in Paris, the ability to make sociological or Freudian references seemed a rarity. It bespoke an "advanced" mentality.

We had come to a halt before the door of his building. "You live *here?*" I said in English. "How lucky you are!"

"Through a friend," he grinned dryly. "In Paris, it's always through a friend."

I smiled through the cold. It was time to go.

"I would like to sketch you some time."

Ah. "Okay. But fully clothed, you mean," I added, having myself sketched from life at the Art Students League in New York City.

"Yes, of course. The face only." He shook his head with decisive disapproval, apparently as puritanic as the rural Greeks I'd read about. They looked only at the face. A woman was her face. Then again, this man was not rural.

"You have an extraordinary face." He was looking at me pointedly and speaking English. "Very Jewish." Pause. Then rapidly, "And very beautiful ... if I may *say* so."

We exchanged names and the other information.

I was looking down, frozen in modestly exquisite acceptance of the compliment he'd delivered, the first of that kind that I felt I *deserved*.

Some weeks later, I was walking with a southern woman friend, Harper, next to the curved wall of the Luxembourg Gardens. My friend had a Fulbright grant in Paris to study sculpture. As we two young women neared the corner of the rue de Vaugirard, a too thin, pale-cheeked figure was in front of me, reaching out to shake my hand, and saying that he had not had the means of telephoning before now, having lost my address.

I didn't at all recognize him. Throughout our first meeting, I had adopted what seemed to me to be the local custom of communicating verbally and through the pores, sight unseen. Now I was embarrassed. I certainly couldn't situate him in the prepackaged, American terms. His clothing was dark, nondescript and would probably always hang too loose. He had the look of someone who'd been hungry or ill at some time in his earlier years. His eyes were archaic. They had depth, and the eyelids had great precision. They were not Byzantine post-classical. They were preclassical.

There seemed to be a drama under way. I did not think it would be fair to the rest of the cast and the producers to back out now or ask them to get the understudy, though it occurred to me that might be prudent. So we set a time for me to sit for him.

The apartment of his married sister, where he took me that first time, was a large, nearly unfurnished room, except for a "kitchen" that was curtained off and -- this was the attraction of the place for him -- a phonograph, which proved not to work, on the bare wooden floor. But for young married people's quarters in Paris at that time, it was not bad at all. A Frenchwoman of a certain age, dressed with elegant simplicity, had been there when we first entered the place.

My impression was that she was the mother of his sister's husband, his sister's *belle-mère*. At any rate, he had escorted the two of us through his sketchbook, with its lead-pencil studies of successive nude French girls, all of whom he seemed to *know*. Overprecise, was my quick estimate of the sketches. They were drawn with the hard lead of someone who grips reality too tightly and does not trust himself to admit the spaces. I had sketched from the life too, but never from someone I knew personally!

The Frenchwoman said, upper-class laughter pirouetting in the round tones of her voice, "The poor one. She must be *cold*." In this social ingathering of femininity, present and absent, dressed and undressed, Pheidias was at ease and bantering. I merely eyed these cool pages of pensive girls doubtfully, while exchanging portions of civilities with the Frenchwoman, who in her turn had taken tactful, rapid leave.

After briefly looking about the place, I took the seat that he offered: some few faded cushions on the floor. "How shall I sit?"

"Comfortably," he said sweetly. "When you are comfortable, you are graceful."

At any rate, when one was comfortable, one could hold the pose for a long time, as I knew, since I was not unaccustomed to posing for friends. Fully clothed, of course. At my insistence, he had rushed up a cup of coffee before we began, in response to my claim to be starving. He moved now in rapid, staccato segments around me with the kitchen stuff, stiff and short on breath. "I do not know why I am so nervous tonight."

Yes, well, perhaps I do know, I thought. At length, he assumed his place across the floor from me, dark, cross-legged, and in dead earnest. After a silence broken only by the pencil's scratching, he asked, "What sports do you like?"

(*Discus throwing!* Harper later told me that I could have said.) "I like all sports," I answered instead truthfully, "but I'm not good at any. Mostly I like being alone in nature, walking in the rain, watching the birds that take shelter under the leaves when it rains, and watching the early flowers that just fall so willingly --without any *arrière pensée*" (regrets, second thoughts).

"Have you read any books on psychology?" he broke in.

"Everybody has read some books on psychology."

"Tch, tch." He shook his head disapprovingly. "If you had read any psychology, you would recognize that these are substitutes for sexual needs. You would know yourself better."

"Have all your feelings about nature been replaced by feelings about sex?" I asked him curiously.

"Not all." He had been disappointed by his first sexual experience, he told me, as he went on with the pencil sketching, black, white, up, down.

Very few well-mannered American men of that time would have described *any* experience of theirs as a "first sexual experience," and none would have confessed to a girl that he was "disappointed" by it! What a strange, sensually overfurnished world he lived in, I thought, despite these bare floors.

"But every time I deed eet, I was disappointed," Pheidias said artlessly, with a candid severity.

We spoke English and French interchangeably. In French, we were still using the *vous* form. Too bad English was no longer furnished with it. I liked personal relations to have these receding and ascending stages, because even back then I thought real life should have a story line.

Goodness, but the plot was thickening rather fast, even for me. He was, as it turned out, a communist! How had that come about?

"Don't you find that communists have *mauvaise foi*?" I was asking Pheidias now hastily, in French.

"What do you mean by 'bad faith'?" he smiled crookedly, in English. "That ... they are really cynical."

"There are communists who serve out their careers in obscure provincial posts in France, sacrificing their whole lives for an ideal they themselves will never live to see. Do you call this 'cynicism'?"

"They seem to me to be involved with death," I said absolutely. "That's what I think of their materialism. That it's a preoccupation with death."

"I know what will happen to me when I die," Pheidias said disapprovingly. "I will rot."

"Oh, I will *too*. And the worms will eat me, and the grass will grow over it, and the birds will build their nests from it, and everybody will be happy except me!" I laughed.

He laughed too and shook his head, as if the objects of his disapproval were dissolving, slightly, into light.

As we left his sister's place to look for a restaurant that did an evening trade for poor and hungry students, I asked him why he'd never joined the Communist Party.

"Because," he replied, not unintelligently, "I don't like trouble." "You sure talk a lot of trouble."

"Wh-what?"

"That's a country expression. I said that you *talk* a lot of trouble." "Oh. Ha-ha!" He laughed appreciatively.

I felt I was doing quite well, as we walked into the night streets side by side. I remember his having to run all the way up the four flights of stairs to retrieve one of those French books on aesthetics, with the pages not yet cut, that I was always ferrying around with me and had left by the door in his sister's apartment.

"How nice you are," I said sincerely, as he ran up to me, fresh, slim, and tireless. He said nothing, but his face was absorbent of every light and shadow in the breathless evening.