

Title: Morning coffee on the Seine

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By RJ Stewart

He rewrote his novel!

My editor informed me by email, alarmed, as suggested by the punctuation. He wanted an interview with the great writer, if I could arrange it. I made a few calls, finally reached him, and he agreed to meet me for coffee.

He asked me to meet him at the *Café Chercher la Rose*, near the *Pont Louis Philippe*. We ordered coffee, and he asked for an American whiskey, which the café did not have. It was the appointed time, 10:45, and very early for me. My work at *Bookman's Journal of Fine Literature* usually does not start until noon, and then two hours often pass before I start my interviews. In view of his fame, it seemed worthwhile to modify my schedule.

He said he wanted to meet near the river, because his idea could be related to its flowing waters. He chose the restaurant, he said, for similar reasons. He said it reminded him of an old melody, a vague ballad that he tried to hum, could not find his voice, and resorted to a pathetic whistle that turned heads in the quiet café and along the *Quai de Bourbon* where women jogged and men strolled in minimal swimwear.

"I can see no reason for the rewrite," I offered.

He did not reply, did not even glance at me. Instead he gazed over the flowing river and spoke abstrusely of the character he had renamed -- *renamed!* -- and the changes he had made to the plot.

I had seen early review copies, and I could see no sense at all in any of the changes. I considered his work one of his best -- maybe the best in all of literature. His protagonist, *L*, was famed and loved by readers around the globe. Changing any aspect of the fictional person was a diminution of great western literature. Here was perhaps the world's greatest living writer sitting with me, a respected man of letters who had created a perfect character, lovable, believable, multiple facets to his being, a fine intellect and a lover, a poet and a soldier, then later a man with profound ideas wanting to be expressed but frustrated by

the ordinary pressure of life and lost love. Why would he change the name – change any aspect! -- of his fine creation?

“I was in the *Jardin des Tuileries* one summer afternoon, smoking a fine Cuban cigar and thinking of Borges. A lovely girl ran by with a gossamer netting fastened to a large hoop. A boy of a similar age, perhaps ten or eleven, ran with her, he holding a container, perhaps a large jar with a metal lid. It was lovely. Indeed, it was lovely,” he said.

The waiter brought the coffees and then announced that he had gone down the street a door or two to his colleague who operated a different café. He had asked after the whiskey, an American bourbon, perhaps, and his colleague had gone to his private room where he tasted wines in order to provide the notes for his menu. There he kept a bottle of bourbon “to cleanse his palette” he said, before a new tasting.

The waiter was delighted, and so was the author. He smiled as if he were a boy receiving a toy horse at a holiday home in the mountains of Spain.

“Splendid! Splendid!”

The waiter joyfully ran his hands through his dark hair, almost dancing with pride at his accomplishment.

The writer sipped the whiskey so slowly that it lasted for the duration of my interview; I think it might have been an hour, but I lost the time. He asked if I would like to try some as well, but I considered the trouble the waiter had gone to, my British accent, my preference for the single malts from our kingdom, and decided it would be entirely unfair to put the dear waiter to any more trouble. I sipped the coffee away, then ordered another, partly to bolster my commitment to an earlier schedule, and to ensure my attentiveness to his idea.

“They giggled delightfully as they pursued a floating butterfly. The girl seemed to me so very swift afoot, but when she neared the insect – they are but insects, you know – it would suddenly drift upward, out of her reach. She would leap in vain, then pause for just a moment, giggling again with the boy and bumping shoulders playfully, as if they could not be having a better time. Two children, don’t you see, two children as yet unfettered with the burdens and contradictions of their approaching adulthood.”

He paused again, wetting his thin lips with the whiskey, then chasing the aroma with the varied flavors of the light-roasted and unmolested coffee he had asked for, *sans lait*. I noticed as he sipped that he preferred to let the whiskey and the coffee flavors merge on his lips first and then on his tongue. I am not sure that he ever swallowed at all, as if it weren’t his stomach he was interested in satisfying.

I had never thought of this artist as an aging man. His lean prose, crafted so carefully, seemed muscular to me, the thing that a young man of both great strength and great talent would produce. Before me this day, on the slowly flowing waters of the great Paris river, was a man who had seen many years, perhaps eighty now; I couldn't recall.

"They tried several times, laughing and leaping into the air to catch the elusive insect. Its flight was something to ponder. It seemed it lacked entirely any predetermined destination. It zigged and zagged, as if changing on a whim, or perhaps distracted by a color, or sensing a source of food from a flower, or attracted to another insect of its own kind. Apart from the occasional close call with the collection netting, it seemed also to be uncaring about its pursuers."

His gaze now had become something of a trance. It occurred to me that the images in his mind were finding expression with me, his biographer and critic, in this placid setting on the banks of the great river, the river of artists and poets, and of the great composers and the librettists, the sculptors who in their time have walked in peace as they contrived the next strokes with their chisels, the forceful swings of their hammers, their hands whitened with marble dust.

"They caught the thing at last. She leapt high, her skirt beautifully backlit in the waning sun, the vague shapes of her legs visible through the cotton, her long hair thrust back in skeins of russet and black. Her friend quickly caught up, and they carefully removed the insect – I believe it was yellow with trimmings of black and white – and placed it in the jar. They stood together, their arms draped over the other's shoulder as children do when their friendship has reached an order of uncommon significance."

He stopped suddenly and reached for his napkin. I thought perhaps that an insect had menaced his eye, or a particle of tree pollen had alighted there annoyingly. When he dabbed his other eye, then traced his *serviette de table* around the edges of both eyes, bowing his head and turning away slightly, I could see that he was hiding the emotion that had come suddenly over him. I realized how privileged I was at that moment, sitting with the perhaps the greatest writer of our time, as his idea took him to a private expression of emotion. I turned away until he collected himself.

"They came by me, quite by chance. My French is not so good, but I ventured anyway. *Que ferez-vous avec le papillon?*

I believe they replied – my French is not so good – that they were heading home to add the *papillon* to their collection. I tried again: *Où voulez-vous garder vos papillons collectés?* They said, I believe they said, that they keep their collected butterflies pinned to a board. I did not

have the vocabulary to ask if they label them, but I have read of other more mature collectors, professionals perhaps, who label their insects by type, along with the date and location of the collection. For scientific purposes. Fixed to a board and unchanging, for examination upon demand. Isn't that interesting? Do you find that interesting?"

He turned directly to me and waited for my eyes to meet his, then he surprised me with a little laugh, a chuckle at first, then a loud belly laugh, and he shook with the delight of his humour. You must know how it is when someone laughs: We seem to find a similar response necessary, and so I laughed with him. The eyes of the people along the great river and at the other tables turned to see what had us so tickled. It was a very fun and memorable moment.

We again wiped away the tears from our eyes, but these were not the same. Then he became reflective again, serious. He turned to me and made the following statement, which I later wrote down as quickly as I could in my notes, because it answered my question, which I had nearly forgotten, and I wanted to get it right.

"It is an allegory, my friend, an illustration, and a childish one," he said, and he chuckled again. I could not help myself; I chuckled, too.

"Ideas ... like butterflies! We chase them happily, with great delight, sometimes joined by our friends, and tripping along in the unnoticed shadows and the bright illumination of the summer suns, collecting them and placing them in jars, pinning them to boards and attaching labels."

The rest of the interview I don't recall. He had said that the book was rewritten, and the name of the character changed to a French name, Pierre Menard, I believe.

Our interview ended and I returned to my flat to record my notes and make my story for *Bookman's*. It was read widely, but I questioned my own writing, because readers were unkind in their letters to my editor.

Years later, I returned to the *Café Chercher la Rose* on a leisure trip to Paris. I found the same table at which we had sat. When the waiter came I ordered a coffee and a small whiskey. Bourbon, *s'il vous plaît*. I was quite pleased and astonished to find that the waiter did not question my order, said *merci*, and soon returned with both beverages, one steaming and the other warmly resting, neat, in an American highball glass.

I sipped them both, very slowly, in the morning sun, the peaceful waters of *La Seine* flowing past. The coffee seemed to perk me up, but the whiskey countered with gauzy calm. From this perspective, with the passage of time, the things that had happened since, and (I am

quite certain) the effect of the caffeine and alcohol, details were vague. It troubled me so that I sat for many moments, concentrating on the interview, on the things he said. I had the *Bookman's* article with me, and thought it surely would help my recall. I read it earnestly, several times through.

At last I paid the waiter, shook his hand, and thanked him for his kind service. I walked away slowly, then along the river, until I came to the bridge. I walked to the middle, took the *Bookman's* journal from my pocket, and tossed it into the river. The current swept it away, out of my sight, so I ran to the other side of the bridge, narrowly dodging traffic, and there it emerged, waterlogged and a few inches below the surface, its words barely discernible as it moved in the river toward the ocean, perhaps where good ideas go to avoid capture.