

A Sport and a Pastime

James Salter

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I spot the book recently at the Harvard Coop bookstore in Cambridge, Mass. It is prominently displayed and sports an enthusiastic foreword lauding it as a masterpiece of erotic fiction at its most realistic. Surely this is titillating enough to induce you to dip into it. Furthermore the author, whom I have never heard of, is depicted as a master of English prose. Have I missed something all those years?

Invariably hyperbolic praise leaves you disappointed, you set your expectations impossibly high, and those are bound not to be met. Your first impression is that the novel written in 1967 and set in 1962 is an emulation of Hemingway. France seen from the perspective of an American. But where Hemingway is succinct and hard-boiled, Salter is voluble and rambling. Often you get lost, not because of any difficulties, but just out of distraction. Too many irrelevant words are thrown at you, so you get wearied of keeping your attention. It also serves as a warning to you. Will this be how you would appear to a detached reader when engaged in writing what you think is captivating prose? For all his shortcomings as apparent from the outside, from the inside the author may appear to you as a much more accomplished writer than you would ever hope to be.

The setting is France, and the characters are Americans set among the French, whom they invariably view as interesting specimen speaking a language hard to keep up with (just to annoy them?). The crowd is vaguely artistic, too caught up in the potential beauty of life to actually live it, it is instead indefinitely postponed. The narrator has discovered a place in the French country side, which he feels must be the quintessential France. A romantic idea of the tourist, not to be a tourist any longer. He meets up with a Yale drop-out, some ten years younger than him, but nevertheless a man of who he is in awe. A drop-out, but surely not because of not measuring up but because he is too big to fit. Such a brilliant mind (and there are hints at mathematical proficiency) set to make life into an adventure.

What happens is that the drop-out, by name of Dean hooks up with a young woman referred to as Anne-Marie of eighteen already experienced and seduced. The combination of almost child-like innocence and carnal sophistication must be what is meant to strike the nerves of the excited readers. If such combinations do not really enthrall you, but rather turn you off, what ensues is bound to be a bit tedious, not to say slightly revolting. But after all sex at its core is a combination of lust and revulsion, the latter everywhere dense, making for a precarious balance. Sex encountered in the flesh between people, you may or may not know, is invariably disgusting, and the mere beholding of it indecent. But this does not seem to hold on the screen between idealized people. Then it becomes part of a daydream, in which the lustful pleasures may be enjoyed vicariously and legitimately. This is what the narrator seems to be doing. Imagining the details of a sexual relationship between his admired friend, whose sexual prowess he assumes to be superior to his own, with the young woman, for whom he may be lusting, but too shy and inhibited to actually

daring to possess her himself. So as readers we are presented to a sexual Odyssey through the French countryside, where Dean and Anne-Marie stay at cheap hotels consummated by mutual desire. There are frequent references to the nakedness of the young woman, her stripping, her pointed breasts, as well as the hard prick of the young man. There are repeated hints at oral and anal sex without being too explicit. But does it all take place in reality, or are we only witnessing erotic fantasies and wishes of the narrator projected onto a couple to make it more real and tangible? If so, what may otherwise be just a sordid pornographic extravaganza now acquires a literary alibi; similar to what a fastidious observer may have resort to, when confronting a picture of a young naked woman on a beach, namely commenting on the interesting texture of the sand.

So what does the much acclaimed word-painting of the author amounts to? Actually not much is applied to the erotic scenes, much more to the depiction of the atmosphere of bored and lost expatriates set against a background of French countryside changing through the seasons. Just as Nabokov's *Lolita* gives a documentary of gaudy American motels of the fifties, the fastidious reader may derive some pleasure in partaking of a documentary of France in the early sixties, be it a meager such. Incidentally my first visit to France was in the summer of 1967, spending a few weeks in Cavalaire on the edge of the French Riviera. Do I have any specific memories helping me to gauge the atmosphere of the time? I doubt it.

And how does it end? In a sense in the cheapest way available to an author, namely killing off the main character, in this case Dean, after he has returned to the States. For all their fascination of foreign cultures it is very hard for the average American to realize that one can live permanently in any other country than the States.

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