

The Minotaur or The Stop In Oran, Albert Camus

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The Minotaur or The Stop In Oran

for PIERRE GALINDO

There are no more deserts. There are no more islands. Yet there is a need for them. In order to understand the world, one has to turn away from it on occasion; in order to serve men better, one has to hold them at a distance for a time. But where can one find the solitude necessary to vigor, the deep breath in which the mind collects itself and courage gauges its strength? There remain big cities. Simply, certain conditions are required.

The cities Europe offers us are too full of the din of the past. A practiced ear can make out the flapping of wings, a fluttering of souls. The giddy whirl of centuries, of revolutions, of fame can be felt there. There one cannot forget that the Occident was forged in a series of uproars. All that does not make for enough silence.

Paris is often a desert for the heart, but at certain moments from the heights of Pere-Lachaise there blows a revolutionary wind that suddenly fills that desert with flags and fallen glories. So it is with certain Spanish towns, with Florence or with Prague. Salzburg would be peaceful without Mozart. But from time to time there rings out over the Salzach the great proud cry of Don Juan as he plunges toward hell.

Vienna seems more silent; she is a youngster among cities. Her stones are no older than three centuries and their youth is ignorant of melancholy. But Vienna stands at a crossroads of history. Around her echoes the clash of empires. Certain evenings when the sky is suffused with blood, the stone horses on the Ring monuments seem to take wing. In that fleeting moment when everything is reminiscent of power and history, can he distinctly heard, under the charge of the Polish squadrons, the crashing fall of the Ottoman Empire. That does not make for enough silence either.

To be sure, it is just that solitude amid others that men come looking for in European cities. At least, men with a purpose in life. There they can choose their company, take it or leave it. How many minds have been tempered in the trip between their hotel room and the old stones of the Ile Saint Louis! It is true that others have died there of isolation. As for the first, at any rate, there they found their reasons for growing and asserting themselves.

They were alone and they weren't alone. Centuries of history and beauty, the ardent testimony of a thousand lives of the past accompanied them along the Seine and spoke to them both of traditions and of conquests. But their youth urged them to invite such company. There comes a time, there come periods, when it is unwelcome. "It's between us two!" exclaims Rasti-gnac, facing the vast mustiness of Paris. Two, yes, but that is still too many!

The desert itself has assumed significance; it has been glutted with poetry. For all the world's sorrows it is a hallowed spot. But at certain moments the heart wants nothing so much as spots devoid of poetry. Descartes, planning to meditate, chose his desert: the most mercantile city of his era. There he found his solitude and the occasion for perhaps the greatest of our virile poems: "The

first [precept] was never to accept anything as true unless I knew it to be obviously so." It is possible to have less ambition and the same nostalgia. But during the last three centuries Amsterdam has spawned museums. In order to flee poetry and yet recapture the peace of stones, other deserts are needed, other spots without soul and without reprieve. Oran is one of these.

Chapter I, The Street

I have often heard the people of Oran complain: "There is no interesting circle." No, indeed! You wouldn't want one! A few right-thinking people tried to introduce the customs of another world into this desert, faithful to the principle that it is impossible to advance art or ideas without grouping together.[1] The result is such that the only instructive circles remain those of poker-players, boxing enthusiasts, bowlers, and the local associations. There at least the unsophisticated prevails. After all, there exists a certain nobility that does not lend itself to the lofty. It is sterile by nature. And those who want to find it leave the "circles" and go out into the street.

The streets of Oran are doomed to dust, pebbles, and heat. If it rains, there is a deluge and a sea of mud. But rain or shine, the shops have the same extravagant and absurd look. All the bad taste of Europe and the Orient has managed to converge in them. One finds, helter-skelter, marble greyhounds, ballerinas with swans, versions of Diana the huntress in green galalith, discus-throwers and reapers, everything that is used for birthday and wedding gifts, the whole race of painful figurines constantly called forth by a commercial and playful genie on our mantelpieces. But such perseverance in bad taste takes on a baroque aspect that makes one forgive all.

Here, presented in a casket of dust, are the contents of a show window: frightful plaster models of deformed feet, a group of Rembrandt drawings "sacrificed at 150 francs each," practical jokes, tricolored wallets, an eighteenth-century pastel, a mechanical donkey made of plush, bottles of Provence water for preserving green olives, and a wretched wooden virgin with an indecent smile. (So that no one can go away ignorant, the "management" has propped at its base a card saying: "Wooden Virgin.") There can be found in Oran:

- 1) Cafes with filter-glazed counters sprinkled with the legs and wings of flies, the proprietor always smiling despite his always empty cafe. A small black coffee used to cost twelve sous and a large one eighteen.
- 2) Photographers' studios where there has been no progress in technique since the invention of sensitized paper. They exhibit a strange fauna impossible to encounter in the streets, from the pseudo-sailor leaning on a console table to the marriageable girl, badly dressed and arms dangling, standing in front of a sylvan background. It is possible to assume that these are not portraits from life: they are creations.
- 3) An edifying abundance of funeral establishments. It is not that people die more in Oran than elsewhere, but I fancy merely that more is made of it.

The attractive naivete of this nation of merchants is displayed even in their advertising. I read, in the handbill of an Oran movie theater, the advertisement for a third-rate film. I note the adjectives "sumptuous," splendid, extraordinary, amazing, staggering, and "tremendous." At the end the management informs the public of the considerable sacrifices it has undertaken to be able to present this startling "realization." Nevertheless, the price of tickets will not be increased.

It would be wrong to assume that this is merely a manifestation of that love of exaggeration characteristic of the south. Rather, the authors of this marvelous handbill are revealing their sense of psychology. It is essential to overcome the indifference and profound apathy felt in this country the moment there is any question of choosing between two shows, two careers, and, often, even two women. People make up their minds only when forced to do so. And advertising is

well aware of this. It will assume American proportions, having the same reasons, both here and there, for getting desperate.

The streets of Oran inform us as to the two essential pleasures of the local youth: getting one's shoes shined and displaying those same shoes on the boulevard. In order to have a clear idea of the first of these delights, one has to entrust one's shoes, at ten o'clock on a Sunday morning, to the shoe-shiners in Boulevard Gal-lieni. Perched on high armchairs, one can enjoy that peculiar satisfaction produced, even upon a rank outsider, by the sight of men in love with their job, as the shoe-shiners of Oran obviously are. Everything is worked over in detail. Several brushes, three kinds of cloths, the polish mixed with gasoline.

One might think the operation is finished when a perfect shine comes to life under the soft brush. But the same insistent hand covers the glossy surface again with polish, rubs it, dulls it, makes the cream penetrate the heart of the leather, and then brings forth, under the same brush, a double and really definitive gloss sprung from the depths of the leather. The wonders achieved in this way are then exhibited to the connoisseurs. In order to appreciate such pleasures of the boulevard, you ought to see the masquerade of youth taking place every evening on the main arteries of the city.

Between the ages of sixteen and twenty the young people of Oran "Society" borrow their models of elegance from American films and put on their fancy dress before going out to dinner. With wavy, oiled hair protruding from under a felt hat slanted over the left ear and peaked over the right eye, the neck encircled by a collar big enough to accommodate the straggling hair, the microscopic knot of the necktie kept in place by a regulation pin, with thigh-length coat and waist close to the hips, with light-colored and noticeably short trousers, with dazzlingly shiny triple-soled shoes, every evening those youths make the sidewalks ring with their metal-tipped soles. In all things they are bent on imitating the bearing, forthrightness, and superiority of Mr. Clark Gable. For this reason the local carpers commonly nickname those youths, by favor of a casual pronunciation, "Clarques."

At any rate, the main boulevards of Oran are invaded late in the afternoon by an army of attractive adolescents who go to the greatest trouble to look like a bad lot. Inasmuch as the girls of Oran feel traditionally engaged to these softhearted gangsters, they likewise flaunt the make-up and elegance of popular American actresses. Consequently, the same wits call them "Marlenes." Thus on the evening boulevards when the sound of birds rises skyward from the palm trees, dozens of Clarques and Marlenes meet, eye and size up one another, happy to be alive and to cut a figure, indulging for an hour in the intoxication of perfect existences.

There can then be witnessed, the jealous say, the meetings of the American Commission. But in these words lies the bitterness of those over thirty who have no connection with such diversions. They fail to appreciate those daily congresses of youth and romance. These are, in truth, the parliaments of birds that are met in Hindu literature. But no one on the boulevards of Oran debates the problem of being or worries about the way to perfection. There remains nothing but flappings of wings, plumed struttings, coquettish and victorious graces, a great burst of carefree song that disappears with the night.

From here I can hear Klestakov: "I shall soon have to be concerned with something lofty." Alas, he is quite capable of it! If he were urged, he would people this desert within a few years. But for the moment a somewhat secret soul must liberate itself in this facile city with its parade of painted girls unable, nevertheless, to simulate emotion, feigning coyness so badly that the pretense is immediately obvious.

Be concerned with something lofty! Just see: Santa-Cruz cut out of the rock, the mountains, the flat sea, the violent wind and the sun, the great cranes of the harbor, the trains, the hangars, the quays, and the huge ramps climbing up the

city's rock, and in the city itself these diversions and this boredom, this hubbub and this solitude. Perhaps, indeed, all this is not sufficiently lofty. But the great value of such overpopulated islands is that in them the heart strips bare. Silence is no longer possible except in noisy cities.

From Amsterdam Descartes writes to the aged Guez de Balzac: "I go out walking every day amid the confusion of a great crowd, with as much freedom and tranquillity as you could do on your garden paths." [2]

Chapter II, The Desert in Oran

Obliged to live facing a wonderful landscape, the people of Oran have overcome this fearful ordeal by covering their city with very ugly constructions. One expects to find a city open to the sea, washed and refreshed by the evening breeze. And aside from the Spanish quarter,[3] one finds a walled town that turns its back to the sea, that has been built up by turning back on itself like a snail. Oran is a great circular yellow wall covered over with a leaden sky.

In the beginning you wander in the labyrinth, seeking the sea like the sign of Ariadne. But you turn round and round in pale and oppressive streets, and eventually the Minotaur devours the people of Oran: the Minotaur is boredom. For some time the citizens of Oran have given up wandering. They have accepted being eaten.

It is impossible to know what stone is without coming to Oran. In that dustiest of cities, the pebble is king. It is so much appreciated that shopkeepers exhibit it in their show windows to hold papers in place or even for mere display. Piles of them are set up along the streets, doubtless for the eyes' delight, since a year later the pile is still there. Whatever elsewhere derives its poetry from the vegetable kingdom here takes on a stone face.

The hundred or so trees that can be found in the business section have been carefully covered with dust. They are petrified plants whose branches give off an acrid, dusty smell. In Algiers the Arab cemeteries have a well-known mellowness. In Oran, above the Ras-el-Ain ravine, facing the sea this time, flat against the blue sky, are fields of chalky, friable pebbles in which the sun blinds with its fires. Amid these bare bones of the earth a purple geranium, from time to time, contributes its life and fresh blood to the landscape.

The whole city has solidified in a stony matrix. Seen from Les Planteurs, the depth of the cliffs surrounding it is so great that the landscape becomes unreal, so mineral it is. Man is outlawed from it. So much heavy beauty seems to come from another world.

If the desert can be defined as a soulless place where the sky alone is king, then Oran is awaiting her prophets. All around and above the city the brutal nature of Africa is indeed clad in her burning charms. She bursts the unfortunate stage setting with which she is covered; she shrieks forth between all the houses and over all the roofs. If one climbs one of the roads up the mountain of Santa-Cruz, the first thing to be visible is the scattered colored cubes of Oran.

But a little higher and already the jagged cliffs that surround the plateau crouch in the sea like red beasts. Still a little higher and a great vortex of sun and wind sweeps over, airs out, and obscures the untidy city scattered in disorder all over a rocky landscape. The opposition here is between magnificent human anarchy and the permanence of an unchanging sea.

This is enough to make a staggering scent of life rise toward the mountainside road.

There is something implacable about the desert. The mineral sky of Oran, her streets and trees in their coating of dust— everything contributes to creating this dense and impassible universe in which the heart and mind are never distracted from themselves, nor from their sole object, which is man. I am

speaking here of difficult places of retreat. Books are written on Florence or Athens.

Those cities have formed so many European minds that they must have a meaning. They have the means of moving to tears or of uplifting. They quiet a certain spiritual hunger whose bread is memory. But can one be moved by a city where nothing attracts the mind, where the very ugliness is anonymous, where the past is reduced to nothing? Emptiness, boredom, an indifferent sky, what are the charms of such places? Doubtless solitude and, perhaps, the human creature.

For a certain race of men, wherever the human creature is beautiful is a bitter native land. Oran is one of its thousand capitals.

Chapter III, Sports

The Central Sporting Club, on rue du Fondouk in Oran, is giving an evening of boxing which it insists will be appreciated by real enthusiasts. Interpreted, this means that the boxers on the bill are far from being stars, that some of them are entering the ring for the first time, and that consequently you can count, if not on the skill, at least on the courage of the opponents. A native having thrilled me with the firm promise that "blood would flow," I find myself that evening among the real enthusiasts.

Apparently the latter never insist on comfort. To be sure, a ring has been set up at the back of a sort of whitewashed garage, covered with corrugated iron and violently lighted. Folding chairs have been lined up in a square around the ropes. These are the "honor rings." Most of the length of the hall has been filled with seats, and behind them opens a large free space called "lounge" by reason of the fact that not one of the five hundred persons in it could take out a handkerchief without causing serious accidents.

In this rectangular box live and breathe some thousand men and two or three women—the kind who, according to my neighbor, always insist on "attracting attention." Everybody is sweating fiercely. While waiting for the fights of the "young hopefuls" a gigantic phonograph grinds out a Tino Rossi record. This is the sentimental song before the murder.

The patience of a true enthusiast is unlimited. The fight announced for nine o'clock has not even begun at nine thirty and no one has protested. The spring weather is warm and the smell of a humanity in shirt sleeves is exciting. Lively discussion goes on among the periodic explosions of lemon-soda corks and the tireless lament of the Corsican singer. A few late arrivals are wedged into the audience when a spotlight throws a blinding light onto the ring. The fights of the young hopefuls begin.

The young hopefuls, or beginners, who are fighting for the fun of it, are always eager to prove this by massacring each other at the earliest opportunity, in defiance of technique. They were never able to last more than three rounds. The hero of the evening in this regard is young "Kid Airplane," who in regular life sells lottery tickets on cafe terraces. His opponent, indeed, hurtled awkwardly out of the ring at the beginning of the second round after contact with a fist wielded like a propeller.

The crowd got somewhat excited, but this is still an act of courtesy. Gravely it breathes in the hallowed air of the embrocation. It watches these series of slow rites and unregulated sacrifices, made even more authentic by the propitiatory designs, on the white wall, of the fighters' shadows. These are the deliberate ceremonial prologues of a savage religion. The trance will not come until later.

And it so happens that the loudspeaker announces Amar, "the tough Oranese who has never disarmed," against Perez, "the slugger from Algiers." An uninitiate would misinterpret the yelling that greets the introduction of the boxers in the ring. He would imagine some sensational combat in which the boxers were to settle a personal quarrel known to the public. To tell the truth, it is a

quarrel they are going to settle. But it is the one that for the past hundred years has mortally separated Algiers and Oran. Back in history, these two North African cities would have already bled each other white as Pisa and Florence did in happier times.

Their rivalry is all the stronger just because it probably has no basis. Having every reason to like each other, they loathe each other proportionately. The Oranese accuse the citizens of Algiers of "sham." The people of Algiers imply that the Oranese are rustic. These are bloodier insults than they might seem because they are metaphysical. And unable to lay siege to each other, Oran and Algiers meet, compete, and insult each other on the field of sports, statistics, and public works.

Thus a page of history is unfolding in the ring. And the tough Oranese, backed by a thousand yelling voices, is defending against Perez a way of life and the pride of a province. Truth forces me to admit that Amar is not conducting his discussion well. His

argument has a flaw: he lacks reach. The slugger from Algiers, on the contrary, has the required reach in his argument. It lands persuasively between his contradictor's eyes. The Oranese bleeds magnificently amid the vociferations of a wild audience. Despite the repeated encouragements of the gallery and of my neighbor, despite the dauntless shouts of "Kill him!", "Floor him!", the insidious "Below the belt,"

"Oh, the referee missed that one!", the optimistic "He's pooped," "He can't take any more," nevertheless the man from Algiers is proclaimed the winner on points amid interminable catcalls. My neighbor, who is inclined to talk of sportsmanship, applauds ostensibly, while slipping to me in a voice made faint by so many shouts: "So that he won't be able to say back there that we of Oran are savages."

But throughout the audience, fights not included on the program have already broken out. Chairs are brandished, the police clear a path, excitement is at its height. In order to calm these good people and contribute to the return of silence, the "management," without losing a moment, commissions the loudspeaker to boom out "Sambre-et-Meuse." For a few minutes the audience has a really warlike look. Confused clusters of combatants and voluntary referees sway in the grip of policemen; the gallery exults and calls for the rest of the program with wild cries, cock-a-doodle-doo's, and mocking catcalls drowned in the irresistible flood from the military band.

But the announcement of the big fight is enough to restore calm. This takes place suddenly, without flourishes, just as actors leave the stage once the play is finished. With the greatest unconcern, hats are dusted off, chairs are put back in place, and without transition all faces assume the kindly expression of the respectable member of the audience who has paid for his ticket to a family concert.

The last fight pits a French champion of the Navy against an Oran boxer. This time the difference in reach is to the advantage of the latter. But his superiorities, during the first rounds, do not stir the crowd. They are sleeping off the effects of their first excitement; they are sobering up.

They are still short of breath. If they applaud, there is no passion in it. They hiss without animosity. The audience is divided into two camps, as is appropriate in the interest of fairness. But each individual's choice obeys that indifference that follows on great expenditures of energy.

If the Frenchman holds his own, if the Oranese forgets that one doesn't lead with the head, the boxer is bent under a volley of hisses, but immediately pulled upright again by a burst of applause. Not until the seventh round does sport rise to the surface again, at the same time that the real enthusiasts begin to emerge from their fatigue. The Frenchman, to tell the truth, has

touched the mat and, eager to win back points, has hurled himself on his opponent.

"What did I tell you?" said my neighbor; "it's going to be a fight to the finish." Indeed, it is a fight to the finish. Covered with sweat under the pitiless light, both boxers open their guard, close their eyes as they hit, shove with shoulders and knees, swap their blood, and snort with rage. As one man, the audience has stood up and punctuates the efforts of its two heroes.

It receives the blows, returns them, echoes them in a thousand hollow, panting voices. The same ones who had chosen their favorite in indifference cling to their choice through obstinacy and defend it passionately. Every ten seconds a shout from my neighbor pierces my right ear: "Go to it, gob; come on, Navy!" while another man in front of us shouts to the Oranese: "Anda! hombre!"

The man and the gob go to it, and together with them, in this temple of whitewash, iron, and cement, an audience completely given over to gods with cauliflower ears. Every blow that gives a dull sound on the shining pectorals echoes in vast vibrations in the very body of the crowd, which, with the boxers, is making its last effort.

In such an atmosphere a draw is badly received. Indeed, it runs counter to a quite Manichean tendency in the audience. There is good and there is evil, the winner and the loser. One must be either right or wrong. The conclusion of this impeccable logic is immediately provided by two thousand energetic lungs accusing the judges of being sold, or bought. But the gob has walked over and embraced his rival in the ring, drinking in his fraternal sweat. This is enough to make the audience, reversing its view, burst out in sudden applause. My neighbor is right: they are not savages.

The crowd pouring out, under a sky full of silence and stars, has just fought the most exhausting fight. It keeps quiet and disappears furtively, without any energy left for post mortems. There is good and there is evil; that religion is merciless. The band of faithful is now no more than a group of black-and-white shadows disappearing into the night. For force and violence are solitary gods. They contribute nothing to memory. On the contrary, they distribute their miracles by the handful in the present.

They are made for this race without past which celebrates its communions around the prize ring. These are rather difficult rites but ones that simplify everything. Good and evil, winner and loser. At Corinth two temples stood side by side, the temple of Violence and the temple of Necessity.

Chapter IV, Monuments

For many reasons due as much to economics as to metaphysics, it may be said that the Oranese style, if there is one, forcefully and clearly appears in the extraordinary edifice called the Maison du Colon. Oran hardly lacks monuments. The city has its quota of imperial marshals, ministers, and local benefactors. They are found on dusty little squares, resigned to rain and sun, they too converted to stone and boredom. But, in any case, they represent contributions from the outside. In that happy barbary they are the regrettable marks of civilization.

Oran, on the other hand, has raised up her altars and rostra to her own honor.

In the very heart of the mercantile city, having to construct a common home for the innumerable agricultural organizations that keep this country alive, the people of Oran conceived the idea of building solidly a convincing image of their virtues: the Maison du Colon. To judge from the edifice, those virtues are three in number: boldness in taste, love of violence, and a feeling for historical syntheses.

Egypt, Byzantium, and Munich collaborated in the delicate construction of a piece of pastry in the shape of a bowl upside down. Multicolored stones, most

vigorous in effect, have been brought in to outline the roof. These mosaics are so exuberantly persuasive that at first you see nothing but an amorphous effulgence. But with a closer view and your attention called to it, you discover that they have a meaning: a graceful colonist, wearing a bow tie and white pith helmet, is receiving the homage of a procession of slaves dressed in classical style.[4] The edifice and its colored illustrations have been set down in the middle of a square in the to-and-fro of the little two-car trams whose filth is one of the charms of the city.

Oran greatly cherishes also the two lions of its Place d'Armes, or parade ground. Since 1888 they have been sitting in state on opposite sides of the municipal stairs. Their author was named (ain. They have majesty and a stubby torso. It is said that at night they get down from their pedestal one after the other, silently pace around the dark square, and on occasion uninate at length under the big, dusty ficus trees. These, of course, are rumors to which the people of Oran lend an indulgent ear. But it is unlikely.

Despite a certain amount of research, I have not been able to get interested in Cain. I merely learned that he had the reputation of being a skillful animal-sculptor. Yet I often think of him. This is an intellectual bent that comes naturally in Oran. Here is a sonorously named artist who left an unimportant work here. Several hundred thousand people are familiar with the easygoing beasts he put in front of a pretentious town hall.

This is one way of succeeding in art. To be sure, these two lions, like thousands of works of the same type, are proof of something else than talent. Others have created "The Night Watch," "Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata," "David," or the Pharsalian bas-relief called "The Glorification of the Flower." Cain, on the other hand, set up two hilarious snouts on the square of a mercantile province overseas. But the David will go down one day with Florence and the lions will perhaps be saved from the catastrophe. Let me repeat, they are proof of something else.

Can one state this idea clearly? In this work there are insignificance and solidity. Spirit counts for nothing and matter for a great deal. Mediocrity insists upon lasting by all means, including bronze. It is refused a right to eternity, and every day it takes that right. Is it not eternity itself? In any event, such perseverance is capable of stirring, and it involves its lesson, that of all the monuments of Oran, and of Oran herself.

An hour a day, every so often, it forces you to pay attention to something that has no importance. The mind profits from such recurrences. In a sense this is its hygiene, and since it absolutely needs its moments of humility, it seems to me that this chance to indulge in stupidity is better than others. Everything that is ephemeral wants to last. Let us say that everything wants to last. Human productions mean nothing else, and in this regard Cain's lions have the same chances as the ruins of Angkor. This disposes one toward modesty.

There are other Oranese monuments. Or at least they deserve this name because they, too, stand for their city, and perhaps in a more significant way. They are the public works at present covering the coast for some ten kilometers. Apparently it is a matter of transforming the most luminous of bays into a gigantic harbor. In reality it is one more chance for man to come to grips with stone.

In the paintings of certain Flemish masters a theme of strikingly general application recurs insistently: the building of the Tower of Babel. Vast landscapes, rocks climbing up to heaven, steep slopes teeming with workmen, animals, ladders, strange machines, cords, pulleys. Man, moreover, is there only to give scale to the inhuman scope of the construction. This is what the Oran coast makes one think of, west of the city.

Clinging to vast slopes, rails, dump-cars, cranes, tiny trains ... Under a broiling sun, toy-like locomotives round huge blocks of stone amid whistles,

dust, and smoke. Day and night a nation of ants bustles about on the smoking carcass of the mountain. Clinging all up and down a single cord against the side of the cliff, dozens of men, their bellies pushing against the handles of automatic drills, vibrate in empty space all day long and break off whole masses of rock that hurtle down in dust and rumbling.

Farther on, dump-carts tip their loads over the slopes; and the rocks, suddenly poured seaward, bound and roll into the water, each large lump followed by a scattering of lighter stones. At regular intervals, at dead of night or in broad daylight, detonations shake the whole mountain and stir up the sea itself.

Man, in this vast construction field, makes a frontal attack on stone. And if one could forget, for a moment at least, the harsh slavery that makes this work possible, one would have to admire. These stones, torn from the mountain, serve man in his plans. They pile up under the first waves, gradually emerge, and finally take their place to form a jetty, soon covered with men and machines which advance, day after day, toward the open sea.

Without stopping, huge steel jaws bite into the cliff's belly, turn round, and disgorge into the water their overflowing gravel. As the coastal cliff is lowered, the whole coast encroaches irresistibly on the sea.

Of course, destroying stone is not possible. It is merely moved from one place to another. In any case, it will last longer than the men who use it. For the moment, it satisfies their will to action. That in itself is probably useless. But moving things about is the work of men; one must choose doing that or nothing.[5] Obviously the people of Oran have chosen.

In front of that indifferent bay, for many years more they will pile up stones along the coast. In a hundred years—tomorrow, in other words—they will have to begin again. But today these heaps of rocks testify for the men in masks of dust and sweat who move about among them. The true monuments of Oran are still her stones.

Chapter V, Ariadne's Stone

It seems that the people of Oran are like that friend of Flaubert who, on the point of death, casting a last glance at this irreplaceable earth, exclaimed: "Close the window; it's too beautiful." They have closed the window, they have walled themselves in, they have cast out the landscape. But Flaubert's friend, Le Poittevin, died, and after him days continued to be added to days.

Likewise, beyond the yellow walls of Oran, land and sea continue their indifferent dialogue. That permanence in the world has always had contrary charms for man. It drives him to despair and excites him. The world never says but one thing; first it interests, then it bores.

But eventually it wins out by dint of obstinacy. It is always right. Already, at the very gates of Oran, nature raises its voice. In the direction of Canastel there are vast wastelands covered with fragrant brush. There sun and wind speak only of solitude. Above Oran there is the mountain of Santa-Cruz, the plateau and the myriad ravines leading to it. Roads, once carriageable, cling to the slopes overhanging the sea. In the month of January some are covered with flowers. Daisies and buttercups turn them into sumptuous paths, embroidered in yellow and white.

About Sant-Cruzz everything has been said. But if I were to speak of it, I should forget the sacred processions that climb the rugged hill on feast days, in order to recall other pilgrimages. Solitary, they walk in the red stone, rise above the motionless bay, and come to dedicate to nakedness a luminous, perfect hour.

Oran has also its deserts of sand: its beaches. Those encountered near the gates are deserted only in winter and spring. Then they are plateaus covered with

asphodels, peopled with bare little cottages among the flowers. The sea rumbles a bit, down below. Yet already the sun, the faint breeze, the whiteness of the asphodels, the sharp blue of the sky, everything makes one fancy summer—the golden youth then covering the beach, the long hours on the sand and the sudden softness of evening.

Each year on these shores there is a new harvest of girls in flower. Apparently they have but one season. The following year, other cordial blossoms take their place, which, the summer before, were still little girls with bodies as hard as buds. At eleven a.m., coming down from the plateau, all that young flesh, lightly clothed in motley materials, breaks on the sand like a multicolored wave.

One has to go farther (strangely close, however, to that spot where two hundred thousand men are laboring) to discover a still virgin landscape: long, deserted dunes where the passage of men has left no other trace than a worm-eaten hut. From time to time an Arab shepherd drives along the top of the dunes the black and beige spots of his flock of goats. On the beaches of the Oran country every summer morning seems to be the first in the world. Each twilight seems to be the last, solemn agony, announced at sunset by a final glow that darkens every hue.

The sea is ultramarine, the road the color of clotted blood, the beach yellow. Everything disappears with the green sun; an hour later the dunes are bathed in moonlight. Then there are incomparable nights under a rain of stars. Occasionally storms sweep over them, and the lightning flashes flow along the dunes, whiten the sky, and give the sand and one's eyes orange-colored glints.

But this cannot be shared. One has to have lived it. So much solitude and nobility give these places an unforgettable aspect. In the warm moment before daybreak, after confronting the first bitter, black waves, a new creature breasts night's heavy, enveloping water.

The memory of those joys does not make me regret them, and thus I recognize that they were good. After so many years they still last, somewhere in this heart which finds unswerving loyalty so difficult. And I know that today, if I were to go to the deserted dune, the same sky would pour down on me its cargo of breezes and stars. These are lands of innocence.

But innocence needs sand and stones. And man has forgotten how to live among them. At least it seems so, for he has taken refuge in this extraordinary city where boredom sleeps. Nevertheless, that very confrontation constitutes the value of Oran.

The capital of boredom, besieged by innocence and beauty, it is surrounded by an army in which every stone is a soldier. In the city, and at certain hours, however, what a temptation to go over to the enemy! What a temptation to identify oneself with those stones, to melt into that burning and impassive universe that defies history and its ferments!

That is doubtless futile. But there is in every man a profound instinct which is neither that of destruction nor that of creation. It is merely a matter of resembling nothing. In the shadow of the warm walls of Oran, on its dusty asphalt, that invitation is sometimes heard.

It seems that, for a time, the minds that yield to it are never disappointed. This is the darkness of Eurydice and the sleep of Isis. Here are the deserts where thought will collect itself, the cool hand of evening on a troubled heart. On this Mount of Olives, vigil is futile; the mind recalls and approves the sleeping Apostles. Were they really wrong? They nonetheless had their revelation.

Just think of Sakyamuni in the desert. He remained there for years on end, squatting motionless with his eyes on heaven. The very gods envied him that wisdom and that stone-like destiny. In his outstretched hands the swallows had

made their nest. But one day they flew away, answering the call of distant lands. And he who had stifled in himself desire and will, fame and suffering, began to cry. It happens thus that flowers grow on rocks. Yes, let us accept stone when it is necessary.

That secret and that rapture we ask of faces can also be given us by stone. To be sure, this cannot last. But what can last, after all? The secret of faces fades away, and there we are, cast back to the chain of desires. And if stone can do no more for us than the human heart, at least it can do just as much.

"Oh, to be nothing!" For thousands of years this great cry has roused millions of men to revolt against desire and pain. Its dying echoes have reached this far, across centuries and oceans, to the oldest sea in the world. They still reverberate dully against the compact cliffs of Oran. Everybody in this country follows this advice without knowing it. Of course, it is almost futile. Nothingness cannot be achieved any more than the absolute can.

But since we receive as favors the eternal signs brought us by roses or by human suffering, let us not refuse either the rare invitations to sleep that the earth addresses us. Each has as much truth as the other.

This, perhaps, is the Ariadne's thread of this somnambulist and frantic city. Here one learns the virtues, provisional to be sure, of a certain kind of boredom. In order to be spared, one must say "yes" to the Minotaur. This is an old and fecund wisdom. Above the sea, silent at the base of the red cliffs, it is enough to maintain a delicate equilibrium halfway between the two massive headlands which, on the right and left, dip into the clear water.

In the puffing of a coast-guard vessel crawling along the water far out bathed in radiant light, is distinctly heard the muffled call of inhuman and glittering forces: it is the Minotaur's farewell.

It is noon; the very day is being weighed in the balance. His rite accomplished, the traveler receives the reward of his liberation: the little stone, dry and smooth as an asphodel, that he picks up on the cliff. For the initiate the world is no heavier to bear than this stone. Atlas's task is easy; it is sufficient to choose one's hour. Then one realizes that for an hour, a month, a year, these shores can indulge in freedom.

They welcome pell-mell, without even looking at them, the monk, the civil servant, or the conqueror. There are days when I expected to meet, in the streets of Oran, Descartes or Cesare Borgia. That did not happen. But perhaps another will be more fortunate. A great deed, a great work, virile meditation used to call for the solitude of sands or of the convent. There were kept the spiritual vigils of arms. Where could they be better celebrated now than in the emptiness of a big city established for some time in unintellectual beauty?

Here is the little stone, smooth as an asphodel. It is at the beginning of everything. Flowers, tears (if you insist), departures, and struggles are for tomorrow. In the middle of the day when the sky opens its fountains of light in the vast, sonorous space, all the headlands of the coast look like a fleet about to set out. Those heavy galleons of rock and light are trembling on their keels as if they were preparing to steer for sunlit isles.

O mornings in the country of Oran! From the high plateaus the swallows plunge into huge troughs where the air is seething. The whole coast is ready for departure; a shiver of adventure ripples through it. Tomorrow, perhaps, we shall leave together.

1939

The End

Note

[1] Gogol's Klestakov is met in Oran. He yawns and then: "I feel I shall soon have to be concerned with something lofty."

[2] Doubtless in memory of these good words, an Oran lecture-and-discussion group has been founded under the name of Cogito-Club.

[3] And the new boulevard called Front-de-Mer.

[4] Another quality of the Algerian race is, as you see, candor.

[5] This essay deals with a certain temptation. It is essential to have known it. One can then act or not, but with full knowledge of the facts.