

The Beauty of Human Error

In Memoriam Professor

Aleksander Jackiewicz

Act I. The Eiffel Tower

The Eiffel Tower was erected upon the occasion of the World Exhibition in 1889 and conceived as the attraction and embellishment of the event. Its author, as the name indicates, was engineer Gustave Eiffel, earlier known as the builder of a viaduct over the Sioule (1869), a bridge in Porto (1876), and, predominantly, the 122 metre-tall Garabit Viaduct (1878), a technological miracle of its time. The tower brought him not only immortal renown but also the Legion of Honour, which Eiffel received on inauguration day (31 March 1889) from Minister of Trade Trade Édouard Lockroy (in place of Prime Minister Pierre Emmanuel Tirard, who became short of breath and could not reach the uppermost platform; lifts were installed several weeks later). The Tower is 301 meters high and weighs 9 699 tons.

“This tower is the fulfilment of an eternal dream...” - Prime Minister Tirard said without undue exaggeration in his inauguration speech. Designs for soaring constructions “befitting the capital of the world” had been presented already to Charles VII, Francis I, Henry IV, Louis XV and Napoleon... Almost at the last moment the realisation of Alfred Picard’s monumental project was hampered by the July Revolution. To the end of 1886 Eiffel’s rival was Jules Bourdais, supporter of a cylindrical tower, also 300 meters tall and topped with a hundred powerful floodlights that would *illuminate evenly not only Paris but also the whole of Bois Boulogne, Neuilly and Levallois, all the way to the Seine. Taking into consideration the height of our houses, wrote a malicious journalist, standing like cliffs along narrow canyons, and the fact that the streets of Paris do not radiate concentrically from the site intended for this monstrous column one may presume that the city roofs alone would become flooded with light; hence, probably contrary to the intentions of the authors, only our cats will benefit while pedestrians will continue breaking their legs in the darkness.*¹

Despite “eternal dreams” the ultimate decision to embark upon building a “steel construction accord-

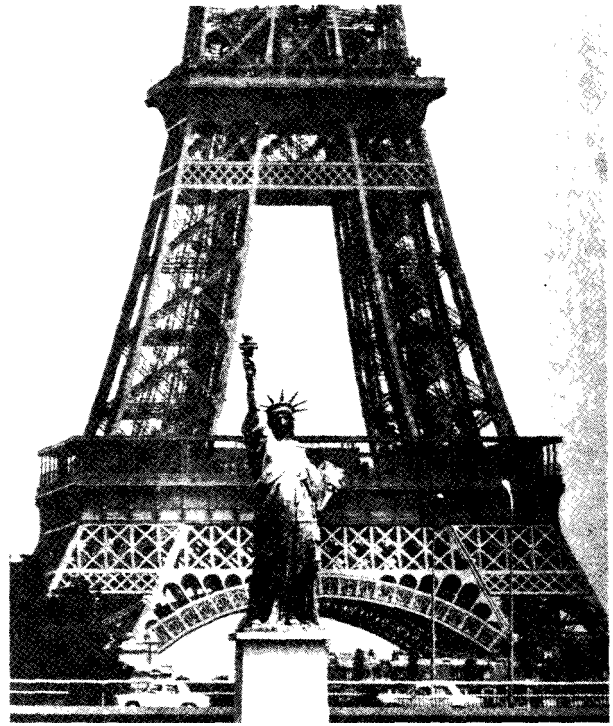
ing to calculations made by engineer Gustave Eiffel”, signed on 8 January 1887 by Eduard Lockroy and the prefect of Paris Eugène Poubelle (yes! – the one responsible for dustbins), produced a storm of solemn protests.

On 14 February “Le Temps” published an open letter addressed to Adolphe Alphand, chief architect of Paris. The signatories included, i.a. Guy de Maupassant, Alexandre Dumas, Sully Prudhomme, poets: François Coppée, Leconte de Lisle, painters: Jean Louis Meissonier, Leon Bonnat, William-Adolphe Bouguerau, Adolphe Willette, architects headed by the designer of the Paris Opera Charles Garnier, musicians, with Charles Gounod, and actors, including Victorien Sardou...: Citizen and dear countryman! *We, the writers, painters, sculptors, architects and amateurs devoted to the beauty of Paris that had remained intact until now, come to protest with all our might and indignation, in the name of the unrecognised French taste, French art, and French history that now find themselves threatened – we protest the construction, on the very earth of our capital, the useless and monstrous Eiffel Tower that public spite, often imbued with good sense and a spirit of justice, has already christened the Tower of Babel.* Without succumbing to chauvinistic exaggeration we may boldly state that Paris is undoubtedly the most beautiful city in the world. Along its streets, wide boulevards, enchanting riverbanks and promenades there tower the most magnificent works of mankind. The spirit of France, the author of those masterpieces, delights in this flourishing of stone dignity. The Italians, the Germans, and the Dutch, albeit correctly proud of their artistic heritage, do not possess anything comparable with ours, and thus Paris stirs curiosity and admiration in all corners of the world. Are we to desecrate all this? Is Paris to subject itself to the tradesman’s mentality of a machine constructor by losing its beauty and honour? Yes! – This tower, which even commercialised America would not want, is unquestionably an insult to the town. Everyone feels this, all repeat this, all are anxious; we are merely a weak echo of a rightly disturbed public opinion. Foreigners arriving at our exhibition will cry out in surprise: “This is the monstrosity chosen by the French to give witness to their taste!?”. Mercilessly jeering, they will be right. Paris of the lofty Gothic, Paris of Jean Goujon, Pilon, Puget, Rude, de Barye, etc. ... will become Paris of Mr. Eiffel. In order to understand the legitimacy of our outrage it suffices to imagine this ridiculous Tower ruling over Paris in the manner of a pillar of black factory smoke and smothering with its barbaric weight Notre-Dame, Saint-Chapelle, Tour Saint-Jacques, the Louvre, the Dôme des Invalides, L’Arc de Triomphe ... All our monuments humiliated and belittled, vanishing in this mad dream. For twenty long years – we shall be forced to watch how the shadow of an atrocious column

made of twisted tin will fall upon this city, trembling with the troubled genius of past centuries. – We turn to you, Sir, who loves Paris so much, who has granted it so much beauty, who has protected it so many times against the devastation and vandalism of industry, and who has the honour to shield it once again. We turn to you, Sir, while guarding the cause of Paris because we know that as an artist who loves all that is beautiful, great and just, you will devote all your energy and eloquence. And if our call will remain unheeded, if our arguments will be rejected, if Paris will insist to be defiled, then let us, the signatories, and you, Sir, at least leave for posterity this protest, which does us honour.³

The signatories did not have to wait long for a riposte: the Tower is not a useless object – Lockroy replied, nor is it an ordinary attraction at the World Exhibition; on the contrary, it provides science with invaluable services. Eugène-Melchior de Vogüé stated that the Tower is the immortal victory of masonic lodges over degenerate clericals, a blow dealt against parochial mystifications, revenge for the defeat of the freemasons of Senaar, and an embodiment of the omnipotence of science raising the tower of Babel, an edifice forbidden by the Biblical God.⁴ Magnificent proof of the industrial power of our land; a monument of secular genius; an extraordinary flight of secular thought ... – added others, and Gaston Tissandier concluded that the Tower will symbolise not only the skills of contemporary engineering, but the whole age of Science and Industry, in which we live; it will become a monument of gratitude for the heroes of scientific renaissance at the end of the eighteenth century and the Revolution of 1789, who delineated the paths of progress.⁵

As the construction work advanced and the Tower grew, the opinions of its supporters became louder and more exalted. The above cited de Vogüé, speaking in the name of the Eiffel Tower, addressed the bell towers of the Notre-Dame cathedral: *You old abandoned towers, which no one obeys any longer. Do you not see that the poles of the Earth, now turning around my steel axis, have changed? I am the power of the universe brought under control by the genius of calculations. Human thought runs along my members. My forehead is encircled by radiance brought from the sources of light. You were ignorance, and I am Science!*⁶ An anonymous author of *Guide officiel de la Tour Eiffel* echoed his opinion: *Only from here (from the second platform of the Tower – L. S.) it is possible to grasp the great progress of History. Here, Nature and History demonstrate their peak. It is here - on the plain stretching at your feet that the past took place. It is here (on the Tower – L. S.) that the future will become fulfilled. (...) Thanks to its form of a factory chimney the Tower triumphantly guided into Paris industry, of which attempts were made to deprive the city. Soaring proudly, it*



*reminds the heavens about the might of progress, the victory of Science and Industry.*⁷ The praise was crowned with Adolphe David's *Symphonic Poem*, opus 63:

- Engineers and workers arrive at Champ de Mars (lento)
- Beginning of work and the Tower foundations (moderato)
- The clangor of iron (moderato e martellato)
- Ironworkers (allegro et gaiement)
- Turmoil and anxiety among the workers (allegro mouvemente)
- First platform, the Tower grows, the summit is closer (andante cantabile)
- People on the Tower (moderato accelerando e crescendo jusqu'à la fin)
- The French national anthem and flag (lento e grandioso).

It should be added that according to its adherents the localisation of the Eiffel Tower accentuated its symbolic dimension. Up to 1765 Champ de Mars had been covered with vineyards, and then, for the next 15 years, it served as a training area for cadets of the nearby Military Academy. From that time, however, it became renowned for numerous spectacular events:

1783 – the Robert brothers launched a huge balloon (which fell in Gonesse, near Ecouen, causing panic among the local peasants),

1794 – the Blanchard balloon,

14 July 1790 – Fête de la Fédération under Talleyrand. In pouring rain more than 300 000 Parisians swore an oath of loyalty to the Nation and the Constitution,

10 November 1794 - the execution of Jean Bailie, astronomer and mer of Paris (the same who responded to a comment made by the hangman, who noticed that he was shivering with fear: *Oui, mais c'est seulement de froid* (Yes, but it is only the cold).

8 June 1794 – Apotheosis, the Festival of the Supreme Being, organized by Robespierre,

10 November 1804 - Napoleon presented the Legions with eagles,

1863 – the launch of “Le Geant”, a two-storey balloon built by A. Nadar,

1867 – International Exhibition,

1878 – World Exhibition.

The construction of the Tower lasted 26 months (795 days, to be precise). The Parisian press reported about the course of the work with growing enthusiasm: *The workers compete zealously, full of admiration for the common task. They do not fear exhaustion or inclement weather: be it winter or the hottest summer days they labour with total devotion, courage and an undeterred will to successfully complete the Tower* - wrote “Le cri du peuple” in June 1887. “Le Rappel” added on 13 August: *The number of curious onlookers watching the construction continues to grow. Foreigners passing through Paris return from the site of the great undertaking delighted and slightly jealous. (...) All agree that the Tower appears to be growing by itself.*

Finally, on 1 April 1889, after all the speeches, celebrations, orders, and ribbons tourists mounted the Tower. The guest book placed next to the entrance to the stairs makes it possible to learn about their first impressions⁸. *What summit will the genius of the French reach in 1989? – The clouds will tell!* (a visitor from Brazil); *Oh Egypt, my beloved homeland, how I would like to see from the peaks of the pyramids a work as mighty and magnificent as the Eiffel Tower, erected with the hands of your children!*; *Oh my native land! When will you achieve such a success?* (a Hungarian); *French genius, you will always be foremost in the world!*; *Seeing the Eiffel Tower I am proud to be French; Just as on the Tower of Babel here too a great mixture of languages but it does not divide people – on the contrary, it unites in a unanimous adoration of France* (a Greek woman); *I discovered on the Tower the expanse of my native seas* (a Breton). Only a certain Bloumette expressed some distance: *The more I admire the Eiffel Tower the more I experience the infinitesimal nature of high heels*; a sergeant of the 18th infantry regiment preceded Freudian interpretations and wrote succinctly and concisely: *An imposing penis!*. The sole sceptical and embittered reaction of the day was the one (is this not an additional symbol?) of our kinsman from the land on the Vistula: *We build ever higher, we fall ever lower. Stanislas Skarżyński*. Fortunately, his voice was drowned in the general clamour.

The opponents proposed aesthetic arguments against the Tower, which they regarded as “mon-

strous”, “hideous”, “ridiculous”, “horrible”, “made not of stone” but of “tin twisted with screws”; it “smothers the town’s monuments with its barbaric weight” and is the reason why “Gothic Paris will become the Paris of Mr. Eiffel”, etc. Ethical arguments proclaimed: “the Tower is a profanity”, “it robs of all honour”, “it humiliates”, is “an insult” and “a new Tower of Babel”, while utilitarian arguments added: “it is useless” and, finally, socio-ideological ones claimed that the Tower was created by the “tradesman’s mentality of a machine constructor”, “even commercialised America would not want it”, it is an “industrial product”...

Counter-arguments include: “victory over the clergy”, “parochial mystifications”, “ignorance” and the “past”; a triumph of “iron”, “industry”, “science”, “free thought”, “secular genius”, the “future”, the “tradition of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution”, “usefulness”, and, finally, a pathos-suffused admission: “Yes, this is the new Tower of Babel”.

It is easy to notice that the symmetric arguments and counter-arguments seem to be arranged in two opposition cycles:

1 – industry: art; engineer: artist; iron: stone,

2 – the future: the past; science: religion; freedom: tradition.

Take the first contrast – industry: art.

The French: *l’industrie* (and the Polish: *industrializacja*/industrialisation) is derived from the Latin: *industria*, i.e. collective work, the activity of a closed group of the initiated... Up to the eighteenth century *chevalier d’industrie* signified a felon, a member of a band of thieves. This negative timbre survived all the way to the middle of the nineteenth century suggesting unsuitable, common, and even degrading activity. Art, on the other hand, from the Latin: *ars-tis* (talent) and the Indo-European *aritus/ritus*, refers to a rite, sacral activity, the sacred, an encounter of the individual and the sacred.

Upon the etymological level the distinction into industry and art thus delineated further contrasts:

industry: art

the collective: the individual

the profane: the sacral.

Parallel, the iron: stone opposition, in which iron is a transposed material while stone “was begat without human intervention” places us *vis a vis* a fundamental, structural culture: nature opposition.

Myth - Roland Barthes maintained – *consists in overturning culture into nature or, at least, the social, the cultural, the ideological, the historical into the “natural”*. *What is nothing but a product of class division and its moral, cultural and aesthetic consequences is presented (stated) as being a “matter of course”; under the effect of mythical inversion, the quite contingent foundations of the utterance become Common Sense, Right Reason, the Norm, General Opinion, in short the doxa (which is*

the secular figure of the Origin).⁹ The basic function of collective impression thus consists of a permanent transition of the cultural to the natural, the mythical justification and integration of culture. Meanwhile, in the peculiar case of the adherents of the Eiffel Tower we are dealing with an opposite tendency - we reject Nature! We consciously speak in favour of the transposed. We do not want revealed traditions but truths created by us. We are the future! We are the heretics! ... So many dreams of Castorp and Settembrini are to be found here, so many predictions of futurism and Surrealism.

An anthropologist, however, knows, and this is the painful complaint of his (*nomen omen*) profession, that there is no truth or liberty, and that a myth will only replace a previous myth. The myth cherished by the supporters of the Tower was emancipated society without tradition, religion, and the past, progressing towards unruffled freedom just a step away. This is freedom devoid of tedious injunctions and numbing taboos from the past. Industry, iron, science!

Fifty years later, miniature Eiffel towers advertised (and sometimes still do) spots for cosy rendezvous in Portugal, Central America, the Far East, "all the corners of the world". Decorations depicting the Tower are also, in our epoch, an indispensable component of Parisian cabarets, which, like "Folies-Bergère" or "Crazy Horse" consider or offer themselves as truly liberated "in the Parisian spirit". Even in private brothel apartments in St. Denis a small golden model of the Tower is virtually unavoidable.

Once: industry, iron, science; now: nudity, plumes, Chanel... New generations ruthlessly travestied the ideas of the adherents of engineer Eiffel. Did they actually betray the message?

In June 1984 the lesbians of Paris, demanding the right to legal marriage, carried at the head of their procession a cardboard Eiffel Tower, and in the back a banner: "May secular thought win" The Sun emerged from behind the clouds and smiled upon the Tower.

Act II. *L'Art de Triomphe*

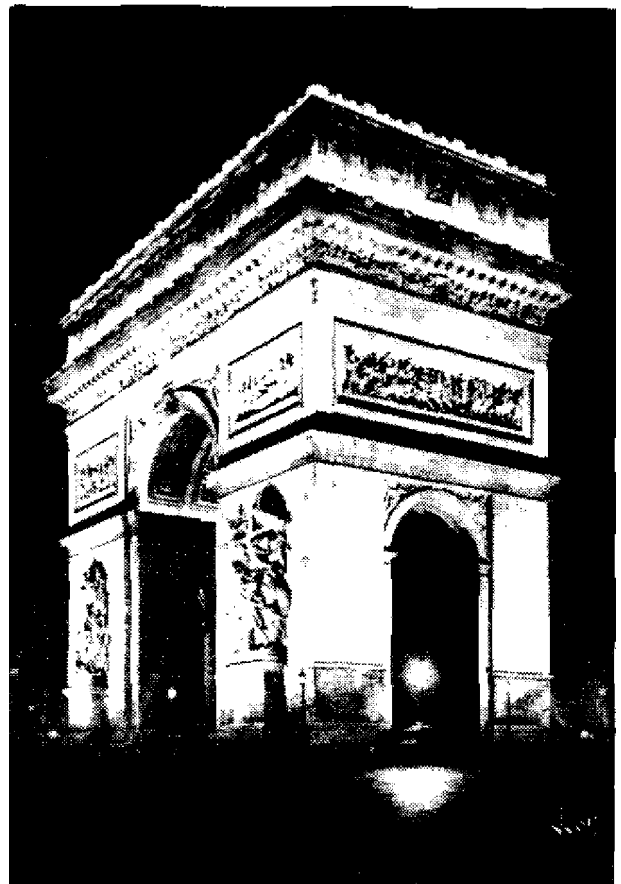
The construction of L'Arc de Triomphe announced by Napoleon on the battlefield at Austerlitz went on for thirty years (15 August 1806 – 29 July 1836). In the meantime, France witnessed the fall of the Empire, the Cossacks entering Paris, the Bourbon Restoration, the Hundred Days, another Restoration, the July Revolution, the onset of the reign of Louis Philippe ...

Originally, the Arc was to stand in the present-day Place de la Bastille, since this was the route along which the army returned from the East along St. Antoine. The project was changed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs Jean-Baptiste de Nompère de Cham-

pagny, who skilfully suggested to the Emperor that the Arc, soaring over the Étoile tollgate, would be visible from the Tuileries, and thus always before the eyes of the Triumphant Commander; more, His Majesty will ride under it while on his way to Malmaison.¹⁰

The walls of the Arc were 5,40 meters tall when suddenly Jean-François Chalgrin, the author of the design and chief architect, died on 20 January 1811. Work conducted under the supervision of his loyal student Louis-Robert Goust during the tragic days of the fall of the Empire, attained a height of 20 metres. A seven years-long delay now followed. Construction was not renewed until 9 October 1823 upon the basis of an ordinance issued by Louis XVIII but with a new decoration-ideological programme. The Arc was now to laud Bourbon supremacy in the Spanish war. Goust was assigned a political controller – the ultra-royalist architect Jean-Nicholas Huyot, who by systematically questioning all of Chalgrin's drawings ultimately, in February 1830, led to Goust's discharge.

Huyot's triumph was short-lived. Five months later, the July Revolution abolished the Bourbon dynasty. Louis Philippe returned to the original conception of the Arc – a monument commemorating the glorious victories won by the Revolution and the Empire; its realisation was entrusted to Abel Blount, whose name was etched for all eternity at the top of the eastern pillar.



The Arc is 49,5 metres high and 22 metres deep, decorated with sculptures, bas-reliefs, and numerous inscriptions.

1. Sculptures.

- From the Champs-Élysées

on the right pillar: *The Departure of the Volunteers of 1792* by François Rude (a student of Pierre Cordelier); a sculpture today known as *La Marseillaise*, whose name comes from the “genius of war” dominating a group of female figures;

on the left pillar: *Napoleon's Triumph* by Jean Pierre Cortot.

From Neuilly:

two allegories by Antoine Étex: *Resistance* (on the right) and *Peace* (on the left).

2. Bas-reliefs.

- From the Champs-Élysées:

on the right: Death of François Séverin Marceau-Desgravières at Altenkirchen 21 September 1796,

on the left: The Battle of Aboukir (25 July 1799).

Kincei Mustapha surrenders to Bonaparte and Murat.

- From Neuilly:

on the right: General Bonaparte on the bridge at Arcole, 17 November, 1796. In the foreground: Bonaparte and the drummer boy André Etienne;

on the left: Capture of Alexandria by Kléber (2 July 1798).

- From Avenue de Wagram:

Battle of Austerlitz (2 December 1805). Napoleon leads the Guards to attack.

- From Avenue Kléber:

Battle of Jemmapes (6 November 1792). Charles Dumouriez begins the cavalry attack. In the background, amongst the staff officers: the recognisable figure of the Count of Chartres – the later King Louis Philippe

3. Inscriptions.

A. 150 names of localities associated with the military successes of the Republic, the Directorate, and the Empire. Looking at a map of present-day Europe we find 35 sites in Italy, 29 in former West Germany, 25 in Spain, ten in France, nine in the former Soviet Union, eight in former East Germany, seven in Belgium, five each in Egypt, Austria and Poland (according to the spelling from the Arc: Pultusk, Ostrolenka, Eylau, Danzig, Breslaw), four in The Netherlands, two in Portugal, and one each in former Czechoslovakia (Austerlitz), Luxembourg (Luxembourg), former Yugoslavia (Montenegro), Switzerland (Zurich), Israel (Jaffa) and Hungary (Raab-Győr).

B. Names of 660 military commanders representing over ten nationalities. Alongside the French they include Germans, Italians, Belgians, the Dutch, the Swiss, Spaniards, seven Poles: Kniaziewicz, Poniatowsky (Poniatowski), Lasowski (Łazowski), Dombrowski (Dąbrowski), Zayonscheck (Zajączek),

Sulkosky (Sulkowski), Klopisky (Chłapowski)... and even commanders from Austria (Scherer), Ireland (Kilmaine), Dominicana (Briux) and Venezuela (Miranda).

From Place de l'Étoile (today: Place Charles de Gaulle-Étoile), crowned with L'Arc de Triomphe, there radiates a dozen (since 1854) wide avenues: Avenue des Champs-Élysée and, counting clockwise, Avenue Marceau (François Marceau-Desgravières, 1769-1796 – revolutionary general, victor from Coblenz and Neuwied, died at Altenkirchen aged 27), Avenue d'Iéna (Napoleon's victory over the Prussian army, 14 October 1806), Avenue Kléber (Jean Baptiste Kléber, 1753-1800 – victor from Fleurus, commander of the Egyptian army, stabbed in Cairo), Avenue Victor Hugo, Avenue Foch, Avenue de la Grande Armée (from 1805 this was the official name of Napoleon's Army), Avenue Carnot (Lazare Carnot, 1753-1823 – leading activist of the French Revolution, member of the Directorate, provisional minister of war serving under Napoleon, later an opponent of Napoleon, during the Hundred Days accepted the post of minister of internal affairs, exiled in 1816, devoted himself to research), Avenue Mac-Mahon (Esme-Patrice Mac-Mahon, 1808-1898 – general, royalist, distinguished during the Crimean War and at Magenta, stifled the Paris Commune, President of France, in 1873-1879), Avenue de Wagram (Napoleon's victory over the Austrians, 4-6 July 1809), Avenue Hoche (Louis Lazare Hoche, 1768-1797 – revolutionary general, cruelly pacified the Vendéans) and Avenue de Friedland (Napoleon's victory over the Russian army, 14 July 1807).

The Arc closes one of the most magnificent vistas of urban planning in the world: Place de l'Étoile - Champs-Élysées – Place de la Concorde with the Luxor Obelisk (thirteenth century B.C.) - the Tuileries Garden - Arc de Triomphe du Carrousel – the Louvre.

In a poem mentioning his father, a general whose name was omitted from L'Arc de Triomphe, ¹¹ Victor Hugo wrote:

*Oh! dans ces jours lointains où l'on n'ose descendre
sur ce bloc triomphal ou revit tout l'empire
ou l'histoire dictait ce qu'il dictait ce qu'il fallait écrire
vous avez oublié sire un nom militaire
celui que je soutiens et que portait mon père*

*c'était un vieux soldat, brave entre les plus braves
dont le sabre jamais ne dormait au fourreau
et que napoléon enviait à moreau
pourtant sur votre mur, il est oublié sire
et vous avez eu tort et je dois vous le dire*

*car le poète pur, de la foule éloigné
qui vous aborde ici de son vers indigné*

*sire! et qui vous souhaite un long règne prospère
n'est-ce pas de ceux qu'on flatte en oubliant leur
père.*

L'Arc de Triomphe was intended to be a monument commemorating the power of the French army, national pride, and the invincible might of the Empire. It served as a point of departure for the funeral corteges of Ferdinand Foch (1926), Joseph Joffre (1931), Philip Leclerc (1947), Jean-Marie Lattre de Tassigny (1952) and the hero of colonial wars - Louis Lyautey (1961). It is here, next to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, established in 1921, that the ceremonial changing of the guard is held. Here runs the obligatory route of all war parades...

The tourists, however, blissfully unaware of the blood-stained pages of military history and visiting colourful Paris distant from the roar of canons and the dust of the battlefields, lift their heads to seek on the Arc the names of native localities or familiar sounding surnames. The English appropriate Clarke, MacDonald, Hatry, and Pierce; the Germans - Kellerman, Struts, Stengel... the Spaniards - Almeras, Miquel, Loverd...; the Portuguese - Cosmao, Dugua...; the Lithuanians - Baltus; and the Czechs (I heard this!) - Zayonscheck... Never mind the fact that those dead are probably rolling over in their graves. In this chaotic mixture of languages the Arc becomes a sign of cosmopolitanism rising above national frontiers, armies, and a gung-ho legacy.

Paradoxically, it is those clueless tourists who are right. From the very onset, albeit independently of the intentions of its authors (naturally, if we recognise them as individuals working on sketches and not the collective genius of history), the Arc was already a symbol of that, which is most alien to the power of armies and the might of empires – a symbol of tolerance and probably the only building in the world from which the revolutionary Dumouriez, Emperor Napoleon, and King Louis Philippe Bourbon look down; this is the starting point of the exits of avenues named after the perpetrator of regicide Carnot and the reactionary monarchist and hangman of the Communards Mac-Mahon, together with Victor Hugo, defender of the latter's right to asylum (a stand for which he was exiled from Belgium), the bloody enemy of religion Hoch and the self-declared supporter of clericalism Foch... . Recall yet another vista from the Arc spanning from the nineteenth century (Champs-Élysée), towards ancient Egypt, the sixteenth century (the Tuileries Garden) and the thirteenth century (the Louvre).... It becomes apparent that Place de l'Étoile is the site of overcoming and eradicating contradictions between epochs, ideologies, and nations. A site for unity, for everyone, a refuge. *Coincidentia oppositorum*.

Even more so considering that the patron of this conciliation of the opposites is the powerful shadow of the One who was the god of war and the little corporal, a monarch and a liberator of nations in the name of the ideals of the revolution, an Italian Corsican and “the greatest Frenchman”, a tyrant and the one who: *augured ultimate salvation/ For men's long-exiled liberties* (Pushkin).¹²

Naturally, one could say that these are mere intellectual speculations and theoretical paradoxes. Let us then take a look at the Arc guest book¹³. *What joy to see the gateway to liberty* (a Czech); *Only twice in my lifetime could I experience similar uplifting moments - seeing the Statue of Liberty in New York and the Arch of Triumph in Paris!* (a Moroccan); *Welcome, land of asylum and human rights!* (a Romanian); *France! You are forever the homeland of liberty!* (a tourist from Lyon)... Not by accident do covers of guidebooks and albums showing Paris as a multicultural town, the capital of liberty, feature the Arc de Triomphe, while the night life and frenzy offered by the same town are accompanied by our old familiar friend, the Eiffel Tower.

As long as Ravic from Erich Marie Remarque's *Luk Triumfalny* found in Paris refuge and shelter, the massive grey shape of L'Arc de Triomphe, as if made of liquid silver, towered above¹⁴. When, however, the French police arrested and deported the refugees, and when we know that the ominous time of nationalist hordes and ideologies is returning, the square turned into a sea of darkness, in which even L'Arc de Triomphe vanished.¹⁵

Act III. The Sacré-Coeur Basilica

Vineyards, mills, wooden cottages, a dozen crystal clean fountains, deep caverns – remnants of gypsum mines, the small church of St. Peter, eight cosy streets, and a small square. The fact that Montmartre Hill (from: *mar tray* – execution site) preserved its Arcadian character all the way to the 1870s is a strange caprice of history considering that already Louis XVI wished to erect here a royal necropolis (the project was well advanced), the Directorate – a mausoleum, Napoleon – a Temple of Peace, and Louis XVIII – a monumental column (the subscription was initiated). History too did not spare the hill. In 1814 it was the site of a bivouac of the Russian army (which set fire to half a century) and in 1815 - of the English. In June 1848 the insurgents waged their last bloody battle here, and on 22 May 1871 the famous platoon of woman-Communards, including Liza Michel and Elisabeth Dmitrieff, put up desperate resistance against the first army corps of Versailles led by General Ladmirault¹⁶. But afterwards the vineyards once again flourished, orchards blossomed, and trees forgot all about the past ...

It was precisely illusory longing for bucolic idyll and freedom as well as a much more rational one for

cheaper life that in 1860-1865 inspired a group of young painters, the so-called Manet Company, to settle down on the hill.

Renoir worked in studios in, successively, Tourlaque, Caulaincourt (slightly lower) and Cortot streets; Degas – in Blanche, Lepic and Fontaine streets; Cézanne – in Hégésippe-Moreau; Van Gogh and his brother Theo lived in rue Lepic. Then there was Manet, Monet, Pissarro, Sisley... This group of peers (in 1865 the oldest, Pissarro, was 25 years old, and the youngest, Renoir, was 24) made Montmartre famous across the world. The site of their meetings - Café Guerbois - became the stuff of legends but already when... the artists had long left the hill.

On 24 May 1873 the Adolphe Thiers cabinet was forced to announce its resignation by 362 votes against 342. On the same day, Thiers, whom Polish textbooks depict as a reactionary and the hangman of the Paris Commune, was recognised by the Parliamentary majority as much too soft, liberal, and republican. One of the first steps made by the new monarchist cabinet was to issue a decree (24 July 1873), proposed by the renowned extremists Hubert Rouault de Fleury and Alexandre Legentil about the erection of the Sacré-Cœur basilica on top of Montmartre.

A competition was immediately announced in December of the same year¹⁷, and the design chosen from among 78 projects was the one by the architect Paul Labadie, modelled on the Romanesque-Byzantine church in Saint-Front (Périgueux).

The text of the resolution passed on 24 July 1873 mentions the need to *expiate the crimes of the Commune* and for the Papacy's loss of secular power... . It thus constituted an arrogant demonstration of the clerical conservatism of the new authorities, easily recognised by French society. In a country still partly occupied by the Prussian army (which left Nancy on 5 August 1873, and Conflans and Jarnay in as late as September) the resolution also reflected fierce opposition against the anti-religious Kulturkampf policy consistently conducted by Berlin (14 May 1873 – the enactment of a law against the Jesuits, 14 May 1873 – the dissolution of smaller seminaries and the restriction of the bishops' jurisdiction) and thus, *mutatis mutandis*, featured an anti-German hue. Finally, the choice of the Abadi project contained an easily discernible pro-Russian gesture. Not without reason was the Russian Ambassador Alexander Gorchakov invited to the first display of the model. By referring to the traditions of the East the white domes of the Sacré-Cœur were supposed to evoke Franco-Russian political rapprochement. Unfortunately, an excess of politics usually does not exert a favourable impact on works of art....

Building the Sacré-Cœur basilica took 38 years – from the instalment of the cornerstone on 1 February 1874 to the completion of the bell tower in 1912; even

then, work on the interior had to be continued with an interval during the Great War; ultimately, consecration took place on 16 October 1919 in the presence of nine cardinals, 12 archbishops, and 98 bishops from all over Europe.

All agree - Josette Devin wrote - about the extraordinary ugliness of this building, unfortunately one of the most conspicuous and known in Paris. The war of 1870 thus proved to be just as unfortunate for France as for the beauty of Paris... . Next, however, he added that surprisingly, just as in the ugliness of a beloved face we start to perceive charm and beauty, the Parisians grew used to to Sacré-Cœur and even shower the basilica with sincere affection.¹⁸

In reality, not everyone was compelled to grow accustomed. The church is living proof of French light-heartedness and contempt for the well-worn canons of beauty - the "Times" wrote in October 1919. Just as the Impressionists overcame the aesthetic images of their epoch, so today these white walls accomplish the same on the very same spot... . In an interview given to "Le Figaro" upon the occasion of shooting the film *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937) director Wilhelm Dieterle went even further: *I am not surprised that the Impressionists were so fascinated with the Parisian lightness of this fantastic building in the white afterglow...*

When in about 1907 the walls of Sacré-Cœur were already tall enough to imagine their ultimate shape, Manet (d. 1883), Van Gogh (d. 1890), Sisley (d. 1899), Pissarro (d. 1903), and Cézanne (d. 1906) were no longer among the living. Others had left Montmartre long ago, driven away, as in the case of Monet, by the hubbub of the great construction site. But who cares?

Day and night, steps leading to the basilica are full of colourful throngs of tourists longing for the careless subtlety of Parisian life, wishing to imbibe the legend of the Montmartre of the Impressionists and the Bohème, and taking photographs against the backdrop of the Byzantine gates of the sanctuary. When I asked them, by no means facetiously but simply as a curious anthropologist, what Impressionist work was their favourite, more than 50% answered: Sacré-Cœur. This should not come as a surprise when reading travelogues and looking at the collages featured on postcards or the canvases by thousands of mediocre painters on show in Place du Tertre. The basilica has simply gotten mixed up with the Bohème, and so-called historical facts have once again proved to be non-essential and dissolved – this time - in the fumes of absinthe.

Postscript

The beauty of human error? Or, actually, of three assorted errors: the change of the subject of ideology (the Eiffel Tower), the change of ideology itself (L'Arc

de Triomphe) and, finally, the change of chronological transposition (Sacré-Coeur). These differences, however, are secondary and the essence lies in the dynamic emanated by ostensibly unchanging and static objects. “Ostensibly”, since this is an illusory static quality. The Eiffel Tower was quite different in the positive and optimistic era of Jules Verne than in the passionate and decadent “belle époque”. Similarly, the meaning of the Notre Dame cathedral, *Mona Lisa*, and Van Gogh’s *Sunflowers* also changed. An historian of art is supposed to describe an artwork (while an historian – an event) as such or, eventually, against the background of “its”: time, i.e. that for which it was intended.

The anthropologist is interested in an object within the dynamic context of culture, an ever-living mythical object. The beauty of human error – is it not already an error that the Notre Dame cathedral is an “historical monument”, that people “tour” it, that the police regulate traffic in the cathedral naves during Midnight Mass? Is this not a new sign within an equally novel system of values? A new myth? Structural anthropology is charged with “losing the author”, with no longer remembering who was the architect of L’Arc de Triomphe and who painted *Sunflowers*. What a misunderstanding! Structural anthropology does not deal with something that can be found in every lexicon. Instead, by studying the subtle game of meanings and myths it continues to rediscover the authentic author: lost in the labyrinth of history, unaware, but still the untiring genius of social imagery.

Otherwise, all is true: Paris is the city of liberty, lightheartedness, cosmopolitanism, subtlety, frivolous ambiguity. It is also a refuge, the capital of the world and *coincidentia oppositorum*.

Everyone who reclines on the lawn in front of the Eiffel Tower may feel how *Axis Mundi* – the axis of the world – runs across his navel.¹⁹

Endnotes

- 1 A. Picard, *Tours de 300 metres de hauteur*, “Revue de l’architecture et des travaux publics”, 1885, p. 32.
- 2 According to the original project the Tower was to be pulled down after twenty years.
- 3 After: H. Leyrette, *Gustave Eiffel*, Paris 1986, p. 172 and 174.
- 4 E. M. de Vogue, *A travers l’Exposition*, “Revue des Deux Mondes”, VII/1889, p. 19.
- 5 G. Tissandier, *La Tour*, “Le Figaro” (special edition), 2 April 1889.
- 6 E. M. de Vogue, op. cit., pp. 24-25.
- 7 *Guide officiel de la Tour Eiffel*, Paris 1987, pp. 5-6.
- 8 After: J. P. Spilmont, M. Friedman, *Memoires de la Tour Eiffel*, Paris 1983, pp. 191-193.
- 9 R. Barthes, *Changer l’objet lui-même*, “Esprit”, vol. IV/1970, p. 6.
- 10 H. Dillange, *L’Arc de Triomphe et le Carrousel*, Rennes 1983.

- 11 V. Hugo, *L’Arc de Triomphe*.
- 12 A. S. Pushkin, *Napoleon*, [in:] *Dzieła wybrane*, Warszawa 1965, p. 92.
- 13 Visitors’ book at the Arc de Triomphe Museum, available at the Museum - year 1986.
- 14 E. M. Remarque, *Łuk Triumfalny*, Warszawa 1973, p. 117 and 370.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 482.
- 16 W. Serman, *La Commune de Paris*, Paris 1986, p. 500.
- 17 J. Hillairet, *Dictionnaire historique des rues de Paris*, Paris 1980, vol. I, p. 269.
- 18 J. Devin, *Paris de toujours*, Paris 1968, p. 149.
- 19 Salvador Dali was wrong – the axis of the world (*centre du monde*) is not situated at the train station in Perpignan.

