

Foreword

Like all great cities, Paris is a state of mind. Its physical beauties, unforgettable though they are in the bombast of Haussmann's boulevards or the intimacy of its cobbled quarters, could not sustain the idea on their own. There is something more. The reason why you will see a Parisian lingering for an hour or two in a corner café or making a regular pilgrimage to a brasserie from the *belle époque* is because the city is jealous about its character, which it cherishes with the special seriousness reserved for things that may be about to disappear. In Paris, they think they alone have known the secret of how to live a life that is simultaneously elegant and wild.

On the anniversary of Henri Murger's birth, in 1922, a large number of people took to the streets wearing floppy hats and velvet jackets, affecting a determined post-war gaiety, in a public demonstration of belief in the life he had described in his *Scenes from Bohemian Life*. They knew it had gone with the old century, but the idea lingered on and had to be celebrated. Paris mustn't be allowed to forget that behind its façade it had cherished the notion of a counterculture that, for all the deprivations that it represented, was as important as the swagger and the style.

Murger was the father of that idea. Bohemia was said to be 'bordered on the north by hope, work and gaiety; on the south by necessity and courage, on the west and east by slander and his hospital'. Using the image of the wandering gypsy from a part of central Europe that seemed to have no settled boundaries, a savage history and an uncertain future, he found a way of describing a life that combined poverty and hope. When the short stories began to appear in the mid-1840s they circulated only in a small literary circle, but when they were turned into a play in 1849 – just after Europe's year of revolutions – they caught a spirit that Paris evidently wanted to take to itself.

The result was a picture of the artistic life – hedonistic,

dangerously wilful, on the edge – that turned into a permanent illusion. People have been searching for the Bohemian life ever since, especially in Paris. The city bourgeoisie whose grip Murger’s original Bohemians were trying to escape have preserved the idea: at some time in your life you surely *must* rebel, must disappear into the Latin Quarter and cast off convention. You hope to do it without dying of consumption, or going for a week without food, but you might just be able to savour for a short time the experiences that gave Rodolphe and Mimi, Musette and Colline and the rest such emotional adventure in their lives. Like young Americans who had their San Francisco moment in 1968 and then settled down in suburbia, or European kids who took the silk road to India at the same time and then came home, the essence of Murger’s Bohemia was that it was a temporary state. But it was there if you wanted to find it.

After his success, he crossed the Seine and settled in a better part of Paris. All his Bohemians wanted to do the same. Not for them a lifelong commitment to poverty and imprudence. Some day, they would escape. And the allure of these stories surely depends on that feeling of anxiety. If they were happy with their lot, and wanted to disappear from view, we wouldn’t care.

We do. Who can see Mlle Musette heading for the Café Momus (it did exist – at No. 15, rue des Prêtres, Saint-Germain-l’Auxerrois) to join what Murger calls ‘the aristocracy of pleasure’ without feeling a tingle? Mimi’s death in hospital after a last misunderstanding with Rodolphe is melodrama, but is touched with unforgettable pathos. Something about these people compels attention: they inhabit lives that everyone, perhaps, would like to experience, if only for a moment.

Giacomo Puccini knew a good story when he saw one, and understood the longing that these stories explore. No composer of opera has had a better feel for dramatic pace. So by the time

La Bohème had its premiere in Turin in 1896 (with a libretto by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa) he had distilled in music a picture from Murger's stories of the love and death of Rodolphe (Rodolfo) and Mimi that gave it instant and lasting success. It is often said of Puccini that if he had lived longer (he died in 1924) he would have been the king of the Hollywood soundtrack. No-one could combine better the natural gifts of lyricism and musical invention with an understanding of storytelling on stage. By the time Rodolfo and his friends have encountered Mimi in their garret in Act I, and the tragic love affair has been launched, we seem to know everything about Paris and the Bohemians: their impetuous comradeship, their poverty, their passions, the atmosphere of the Latin Quarter in the snow, the personality of a blousy city that can be generous and cruel on a whim. For generations, Puccini's music has embellished that picture and given it colours that don't fade.

You can't resist. Murger says of Francine, the lover of Jacques, that '...for five months this charming creature passed through the miseries of Bohemian life, a smile and song on her lips.' Fun, excitement and melancholy are the heady mix of the Bohemian Quarter where life was hard but unforgettable in its intensity.

These are not the stories of a great novelist. Murger was just a teller of tales, an artist with a sketchbook and a quick pen. But the simple lines leave a memorable picture. Without these characters, and without the idea of a special kind of life that once entrapped them, Paris would not be the place we know. Bohemians will always be with us, trying to escape for a while and to find a way of living free, and maybe we are all a little jealous of them. *What would it be like?* Murger makes you wonder all over again.

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