



My name is John and I'm retired (except for some freelance translation) and like to travel alone. I take lots of photos, look for second-hand books which become part of the journey, keep a log and collect fridge magnets. I try to give my trips form and meaning with missions and quests. This is Part 2 of the **Pilgrim Chronicles**.

Paris and Italy 2011

It's October 11, 2011, and the plan is to travel for twenty-eight days, beginning in Paris where I've arranged to exchange apartments with a stranger for fifteen days, and then who knows where. I'll decide later based on weather conditions and other considerations. I start the trip with an unfinished book about my favorite monk, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path*, by William H. Shannon.

The trip officially begins at the airport where I treat myself to an overpriced beer. Should I call the (presumably Ex-) girlfriend, whom I haven't heard from in six weeks? The last thing she said was to wait for her to call, to give her time to adjust to the new situation (I had asked her to move out and reboot our relationship). I decide to call, but there's no answer and I suspect she's probably avoiding me, anticipating my call.

Day 1 of the trip is actually spread out over two days with little sleep on an overnight flight. I arrive in Paris and go directly to Marie's apartment, where I'll be staying in Rue Pierre Larousse. The apartment is small and comfortable, much like mine, and Marie is delightful.

The first thing I do is take the Metro to Avenue de Clichy in the neighborhood where the Ex and I lived in a tiny studio apartment for a month last year, just to make sure it wasn't a dream. The neighborhood hasn't changed and I recognize the same bakers and shopkeepers. It all looks very familiar and a bit seedy compared to where I'm staying now. I have dinner at the cheap, friendly Kurdish restaurant I liked so much and it takes a long time to get home in rush-hour – the worst congestion I've ever experienced in Paris. I'm so tired, I keep falling asleep on the bus and I'm in bed by 9:30.

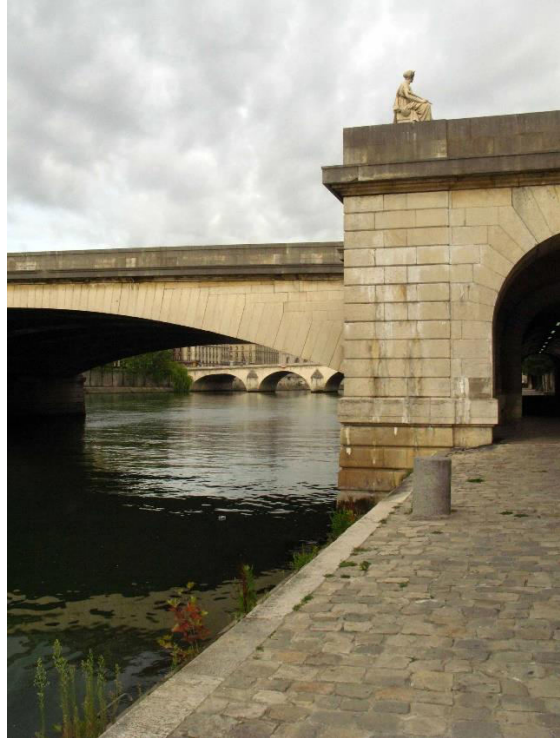
After eleven hours of solid sleep, I remind myself in the morning of Day 2 that it will take a few days to adjust to life on the road. It's good to break the routine, sometimes drastically, like going overseas for a month with no plan. I felt a bit sad last night, reminiscing about the Ex on Avenue de Clichy. What a story. I was almost married and now I find myself alone again, maybe for good.

My first Parisian coffee reminds me where I am. Okay, let's go! I'm off to the Catacombes de Paris, an underground ossuary packed with the artfully arranged bones of about six million Parisians, a short walk from where I'm staying.

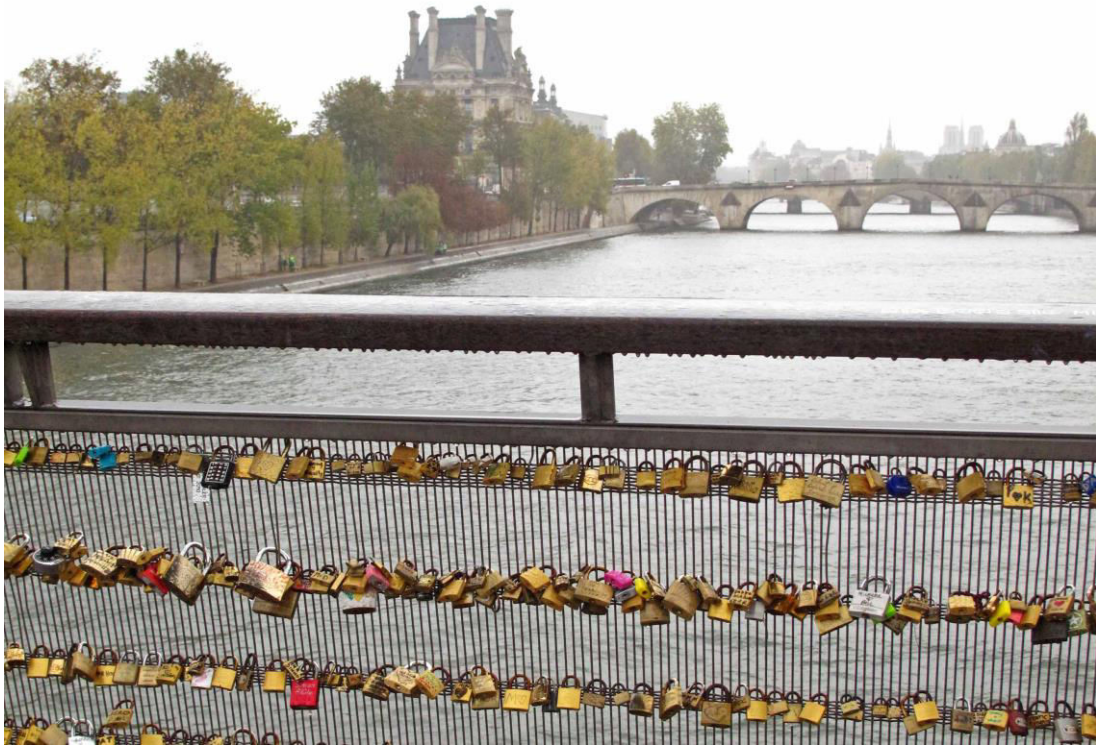
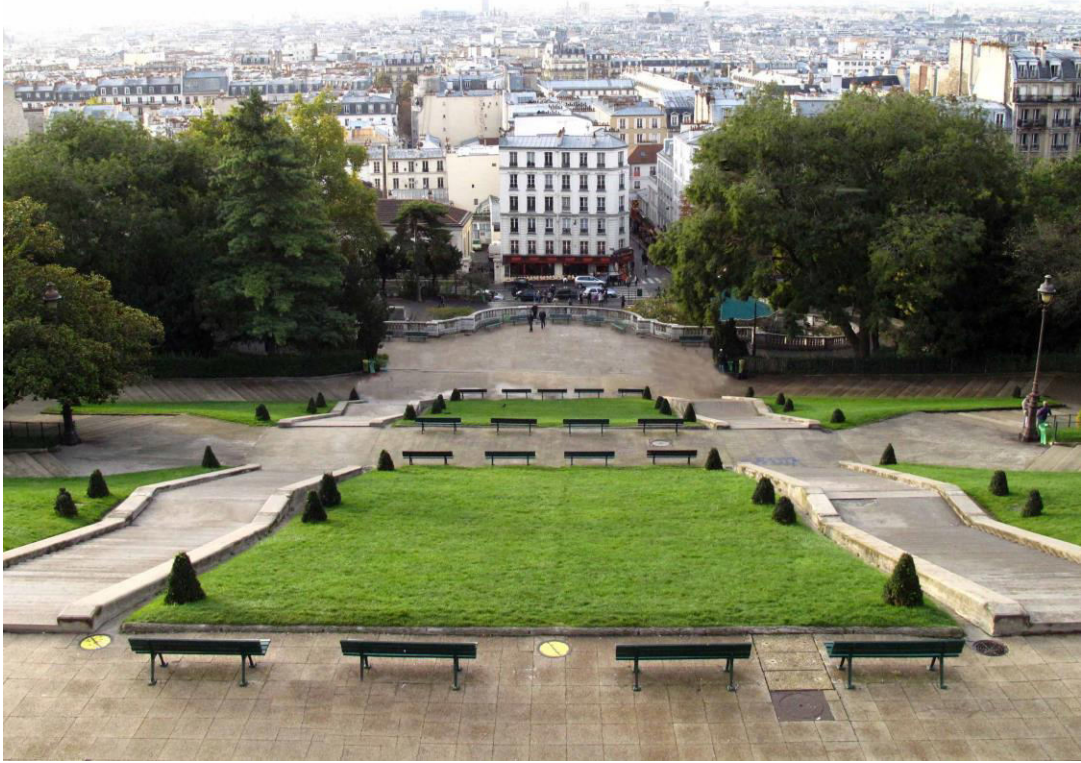
So many dead people. There are moments when I find myself absolutely alone in the underground tunnels. I run my fingers lightly over the bones, surprised by how almost weightless a skull is when I pick one up and hold it in my hands; and the hollow, clacking sound when I tap my finger on the top of the dead stranger's head.

I visit two English used book stores in the Latin Quarter and find the first book I will read on this trip after I finish with Merton: *Report to Greco*, an autobiographical novel by one of my mentors, Nikos Kazantzakis. At the end of the afternoon, I sit down with a Happy Hour beer on Rue St. Jacques – maybe I'll do this every day.

A terrible, sleepless night is my first ever experience of jet lag. Pumped up with coffee on Day 3, I set off for Versailles on a beautiful, slightly chilly day. A major theme of Kazantzakis' last book is his approaching death. He asks for ten more years to finish his work. I probably have ten more good years, so I better get to work on my own stuff.



Paris



Paris



Paris, La Defense



Paris

Versailles is spectacular, at least the gardens and environs – I don't go inside because the lineup is ridiculous and over-the-top luxury interiors make me edgy and nervous anyway. I get some nice shots of the grounds in brilliant October sunlight and on the train back I meet a fellow Canadian, a retired RCMP officer, with whom I have a pleasant conversation.

So many people everywhere on Day 4. St. Denis Basilica in the north end is impressive, the neighborhood of St. Denis itself a bit third-world. I consider going on an organized walking tour but change my mind. I walk down Boulevard du Temple instead and treat myself to a good meal. It's Saturday and there are several demonstrations and marches in the Temple/Bastille neighborhood, one in support of the sans-papiers (illegal immigrants). I wonder what would happen if this city opened its doors to the destitute of its former colonies. Would it become third-world itself? I try to go to a film but nearby Rue D'Alesia is insane on a Saturday night. I return to my lodgings instead and, without any of the distractions of home, get a lot of work done.

The plan on Day 5 is to go to mass and then to La Defense. A great, rousing sermon is delivered by a Catholic Passionist priest at St. Joseph, the American Church. Such a strange location, in the basement of an enormous modern building, very close to the Arc de Triomphe. I've heard the same theme over and over again since I started going to mass a few months ago: action, action, action! Platitudes and affirmations mean nothing without action. Give unto Caesar what is Caesar's, unto God what is God's. What did I give to God today?

La Defense is the ultra-modern business quarter on the outskirts of Paris. Not so interesting but nicely quiet and deserted on a Sunday morning. In contrast, later in the afternoon there are far too many people in the Jardin Luxembourg. Missing The Ex today - I have my life and liberty back but without intimacy. Some claim to feel intimacy with God. I return to Happy Hour on St. Jacques, feeling pretty lonely. It's a weekend thing, I think. The most romantic city in the world is teeming with happy couples on the weekend.



Versailles

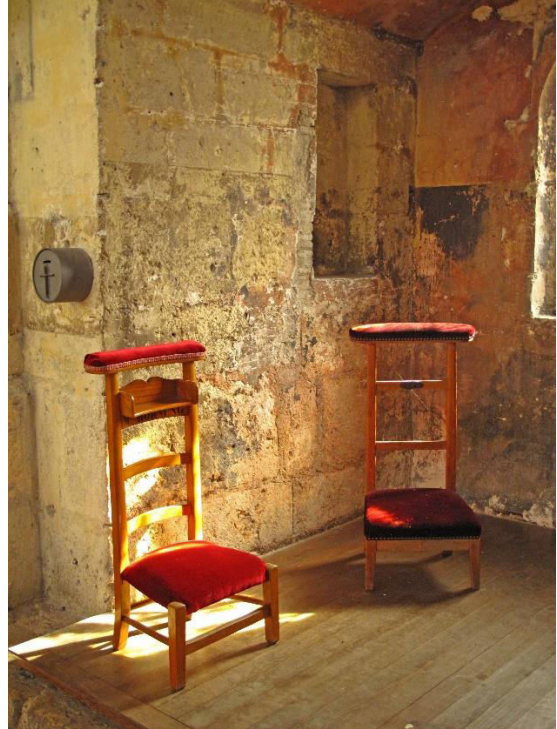
I decide to take the train to Chartres on Day 6. It's a grey morning but the sun is supposed to come out soon. I consider writing to The Ex one last time, maybe on Wednesday, and if I get no response, dispose of the wallet photo somewhere (Notre Dame?) on Friday. Chartres is beautiful but the cathedral is being restored and much of the interior (and screeching stone grinders) are hidden behind ceiling-to-floor plastic sheets.

The town is very nice and very quiet. The tiny church of St. Aignan close to the Cathedral is a gem where I find myself alone for about thirty minutes – time to think and take some memorable photos with soft light streaming through stained glass. I have a pleasant lunch on a bench in a sunny square and head back in the late afternoon.

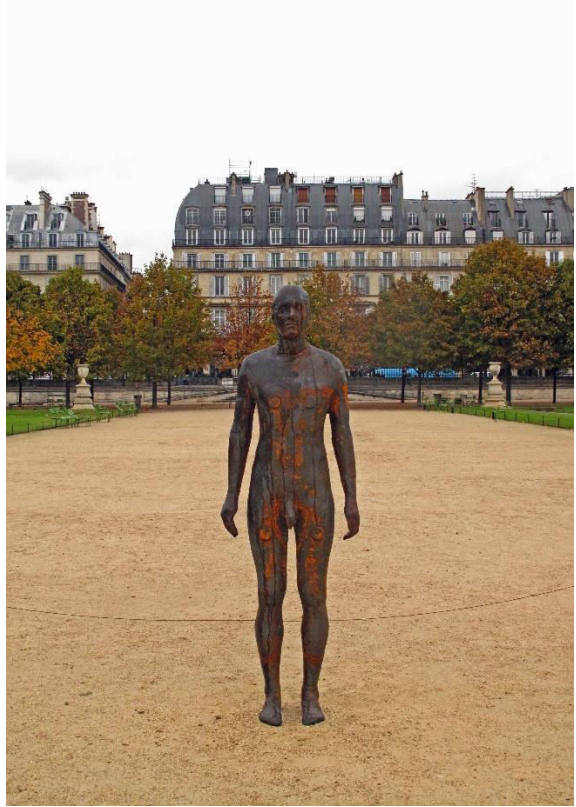
It's laundry and Kazantzakis in the morning of Day 7, my first rainy day in Paris. Later, I walk through the Jardin des Tuileries just after heavy rain begins to fall and the tourists have scattered and I get some nice photos devoid of humans. In the afternoon I stroll down Canal St. Martin – is there anything more European than urban canals?

I spend most of the evening transcribing excerpts by hand from the book on Merton, a book about the good monk's views on contemplation and contemplatives, solitude and the divine. He writes about what he calls active contemplation, about living comfortably with one's own thoughts. Independent of exterior supports, the contemplative "derives inner satisfaction from spiritual creativeness: thinking his own thoughts, reaching his own conclusions, looking at his own life and directing it in accordance with his own inner truth, discovered in meditation and under the eyes of God."

It's cold in the morning of Day 8 at Sacré-Cœur Basilica at the top of Montmartre, and I don't feel much like being a tourist today. Maybe I'll look for quiet places or just go home and read. I treat myself to a café crème and pain au raisin down the hill on Boulevard du Clichy in the Pigalle district. An intriguing woman directly behind me at the counter orders the exact same thing and then follows me up to the empty second floor and sits at the table next to me. I allow my imagination to wander and fantasize about her, but five minutes later she gets up and walks out of my life.



Chartres



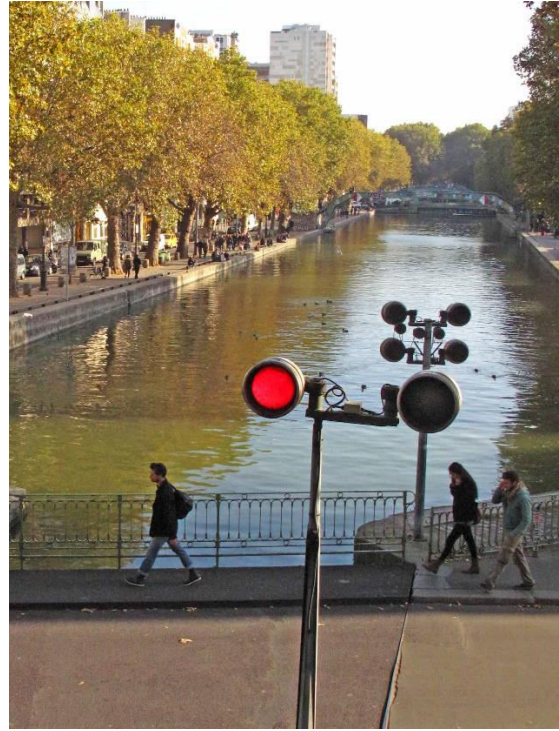
Jardin des Tuileries



Sacré-Cœur



Metro Line 6



Canal St. Martin



Place des Vosges

In the evening I send the final email to the Ex: *Dear E, I think I've waited long enough for some kind of news. Could you at least confirm that we are finished?* I'll give her until Friday 6 p.m. to answer, otherwise, as far as I'm concerned, it's over. And if she responds with any sort of prerequisite conditions, for once I will be honest and break it off for good.

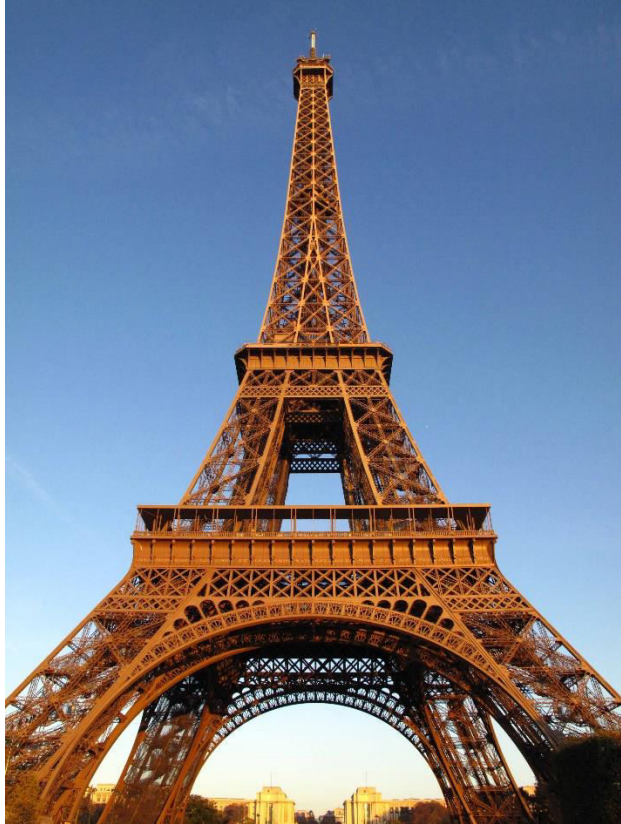
I decide to go to the Eiffel Tower very early on Day 9 and it turns out to be a great morning. It's chilly but the light is beautiful and I spend a lot of time centered directly in front of the Tower, looking up, taking shots and waiting for the sun to rise completely. As I linger in this perfect position, two tourist couples, one Chinese, one Indian, ask me to take photos of them with their cameras, which I take on one knee with the Tower looming above and behind them in the golden morning light, shots so good I imagine them as keepsakes for centuries to come.

I have an excellent coffee and pain au raisin, best yet, at the Croissanterie near St. Sulpice. Then I take my first group historical walking tour of St. Germain des Prés, which turns out to be pretty interesting, especially seeing the hotel where Oscar Wilde spent his last days, and Picasso's home and studio on Rue des Grands-Augustins. St. Germain used to be a place where starving artists could afford to live, now it's the most expensive neighborhood in Paris. This is what happens – it's starting to happen to my own neighborhood back home. There's no going back or standing still, we have to be constantly creating new special places.

No word from the Ex last night. So much walking today. I tried to go to the Musée de l'Orangerie but was once again discouraged by crazy crowds, but I got some good shots and did some good editing. I'm enjoying the working part of this trek very much.

In the morning of Day 10 at Parc Monceau, the oldest public park in Paris, the peace and quiet is broken only by panting, ever-suffering joggers. I say a prayer at St. Joseph's for the Ex. Only a few hours left before I let go of the wallet photo. I'm surprised at how derisive Kazantzakis is about women. Is he trying to tell me something? To give up, once and for all, the residual fantasy of finding fulfillment in a soul mate?

The Cinémathèque Française is fantastic. Eight Euros gets me into the museum, the *Metropolis* exhibit and a film. The screening room is nice as well - everything is perfect except for the film, *Freedom*, which might be the dreariest film I've ever seen, about two people slowly starving to death in a Moroccan desert.



Parc Monceau

This is it: six o'clock and I'm officially a solitary man. I make my way to Notre Dame, planning to stash the photo in a nook or cranny and then mark the occasion with a drink on St. Jacques, but I'm stymied. The church is closed. I have a fast-food dinner at a kabob shop on St. Jacques instead and feel sick afterward from the grease and salt. I guess I'll perform the ritual tomorrow. Does this mean her deadline is extended? Not at all. I take out the photo and write a good-bye on the back in tiny letters.

It's damp and cold as I set off for Notre Dame in the morning of Day 11. I figure I'll do my business at the Cathedral and then go to Le Croissanterie for my fix of coffee and pain au raisin, but there's a huge lineup and when I eventually get in, and it's too crowded to look for a secluded nook or cranny which doesn't seem to exist anyway.

I end up finding the perfect cranny behind a rectangular, close-to-the-floor stone plaque on the north side of the tiny Église Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre not far away, just across the Seine, where I find myself completely alone for a few minutes to perform my little ritual. I light two candles for us on a stand above the plaque, say a prayer and kiss the photo before I squeeze it into the cranny.

There's a lot in *Report to Greco* about women and the devil – the choice between being with a woman and doing God's work. Kazantzakis says there is nothing better than a good male friend. I wish I had a sidekick – a partner in crime! In the evening I find a cheap flight to Pisa on the Web; I'm finally going to visit the Fatherland. I make a stupid mistake booking the flight which might end up costing me a 100 Euros.

On Day 12 I make the last half of a mass at St. Sulpice and take communion, so maybe I won't end up at St. Joseph's for five o'clock mass, but I'll try to keep the Sabbath clean and contemplative. I dreamt last night I was handed a sheet of paper by my old nemesis from my days as a Union Boss. He wanted me to sign the paper on behalf of the Union, which I did, realizing almost immediately that I had no right. I don't represent anyone anymore, just myself. It was a useful thing I did for twenty-five years but I shouldn't romanticize the legacy, and the most important thing to understand now is that it's over. I don't need to think in dualistic, oppositional ways anymore.



Bercy Stadium



Rue St. Jacques

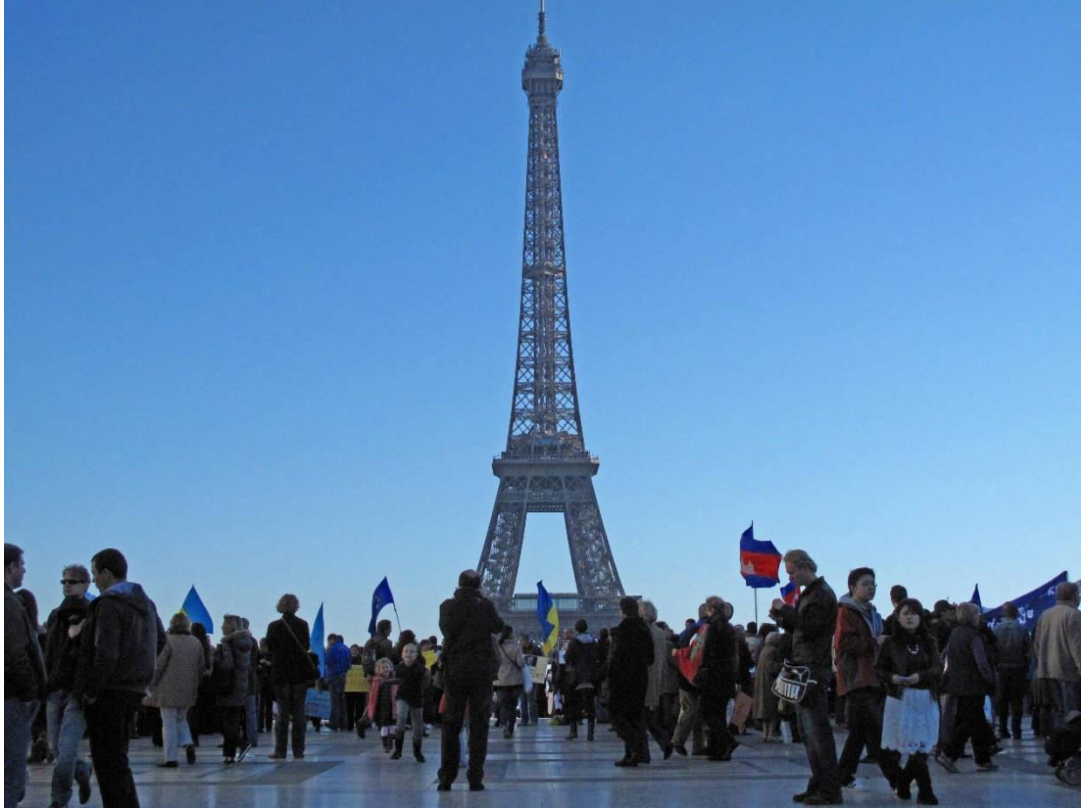
In the afternoon I explore western Paris, beginning at Parc Citroën and walking back to the Eiffel Tower where across the Seine the Trocadéro is full of demonstrators of all sorts, this being one of those places that exist in the spotlight.

A beautiful image emerges from Kazantzakis: *When you reach the Abyss, build a bridge*. I treat myself by booking a room at a very nice hotel, a former monastery built in the 14th century, for my first two days in Pisa. That night I dream about the Union again. This past life is not fading without a struggle, but whatever it takes, I'm committed to this new life of reading, writing, making pictures and contemplation.

In the morning of Day 13 Merton says that opening oneself up to love of all creatures is the only path to contemplation: to escape "from the prison of my own selfhood" so as to "enter by love into a union with the life that dwells and sings within the essence of every creature and in the core of our own souls." And is it just a coincidence that Kazantzakis speaks about his "favorite saint, Francis" this morning, only days before I will make my own pilgrimage to Assisi?

It's a very good reading-and-writing start to the day. Amazing that Kazantzakis discovered Nietzsche, another mentor, in Paris when a young student remarked on his resemblance to the German philosopher and brought him *Thus Spake Zarathustra* while he was sitting in the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, which is very close to where I found *Report to Greco* at the San Francisco Book Co. in the Latin Quarter. Kazantzakis emphasizes the necessity of never working again: "I vowed never to shut myself up inside the four walls of an office, never to come to terms with the good life, never to sign an agreement with necessity."

I shut myself up inside four walls for thirty-five years before I was pardoned with a pension, but I can honestly say I never came to terms with the good life, and I'll never allow myself to be confined again in the time I have left. I'll travel as long as I can, then settle down, get myself a dog and do the things I do closer to home.



Paris

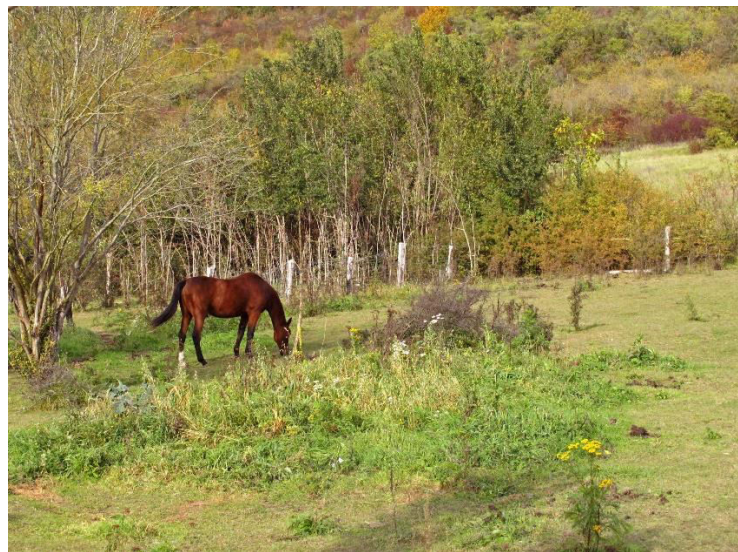
The long wait at Gare Saint Lazare for the train to Giverny and Monet's Garden is not a problem. Double espresso, pain au raisin and a warm, relatively quiet place to read and write make it a pleasure. I'm writing like a demon now, reading like a monk. And the photos - my photo of Parc Monceau has inspired me to look for beauty in the most ordinary of places: in nature mostly, harder to find in urban settings, but maybe I just need to open my eyes a little wider.

Everything is dying at Monet's Garden. Unlike leaves, which display glorious colors in death, many plants and flowers in the garden have simply lost their color, some have even turned a morbid black. It's all very beautiful nonetheless. I walk the four kilometers back to the train station and get a nice taste of French countryside in late afternoon autumn sunlight.

On the train back I experience the sensation of a cavernous space behind my eyes where every detail of everything I've ever seen or lived is accessible, like tiny building blocks that I can use to construct any image or pattern I can imagine. It feels like a whole other world, separate from the one in front of me. The sensation is something new and extremely interesting.

On Day 14 I'm halfway through the trip, preparing to shift gears and change location for part two in Italy, the Fatherland. Today will be laundry and history. The day begins with Easyjet trying my patience for the fourth day in a row. I'm determined to get a refund for a mistake that was only partially my fault, but it's proving near impossible to speak to a human being about it.

Kazantzakis says, "In all heaven and earth, nothing so closely resembles God as the spirit of man." The Musée Carnavelet, housed in two neighboring mansions, is interesting with its exhibit of the French working class in such posh surroundings. I end up walking all the way home, passing through Montparnasse Cemetery to pay my respects to Simone and Jean-Paul. I finally get to talk to a real person at Easyjet and decide to try and fix the problem with cash at their counter at Orly Airport before I board my flight to Pisa. If not, I'll just book another flight with someone else. It's only money.



Giverny

Feeling achy and a warm, honest, physical fatigue in the morning of Day 15, I decide to take it easy, do some errands, scour the English used bookshops, and do a group historical walk at 2:30. The *Two Islands* walk covers Île de la Cité and Île St. Louis, the oldest parts of the city. It gives a real sense of the layers upon layers of history that exist here. In the evening I finish transcribing the Merton excerpts. The author says we need to understand Merton's interpretation of The Fall: "Because of the The Fall, our outer self masks our inner self, so that we do not know who we are. The only way we can return to unity in our own being and to communion with God is through contemplation." Nothing else can fix our brokenness, not even a soul mate.

At Orly Airport on Day 16 I tell myself to let go of the stress of getting mugged by yet another faceless, outlaw corporation and try to appreciate the fact that, at age fifty-seven, I'm about to set foot in the land of my ancestors for the first time. Pisa to Florence to Assisi to Rome: this is the plan. "The Paternal Soil" is what Kazantzakis calls the fatherland, suggesting our souls are attached to soil, especially the soil that contains the bones of our ancestors. Strange emotions rise in my chest, in my head and my eyes as the plane descends into Pisa.

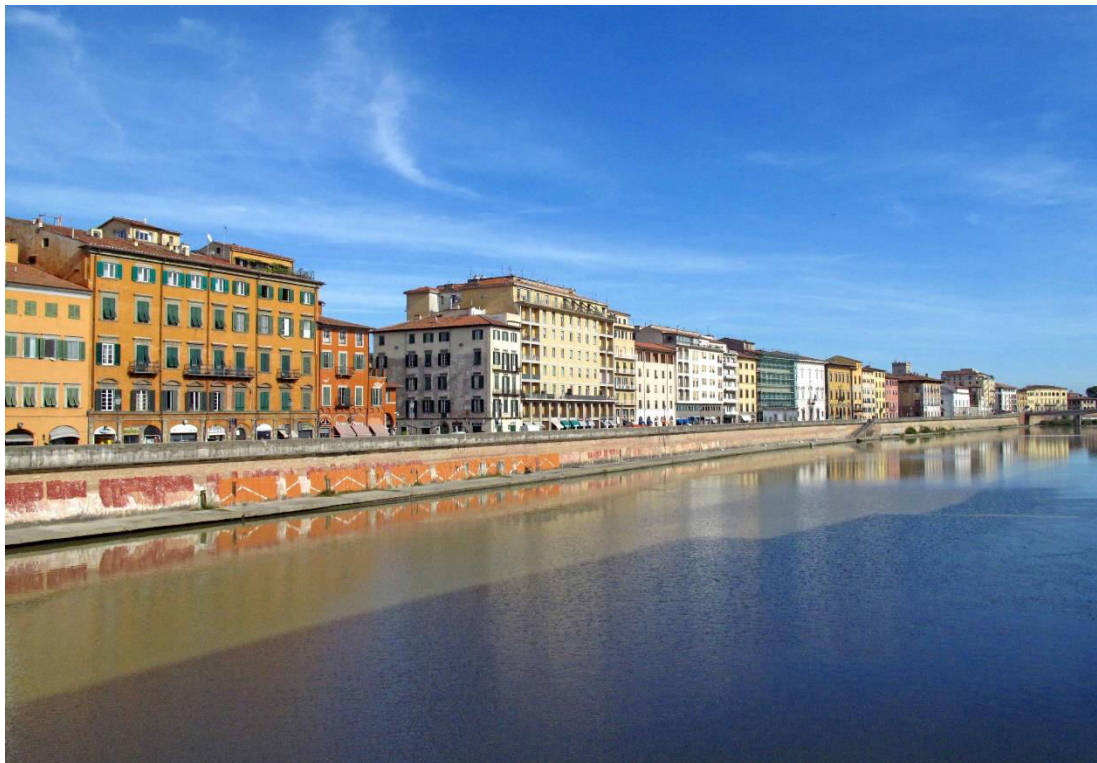
My first impression is that everything, including the people, looks familiar. I leave my bag at my beautiful hotel/monastery and walk towards the Arno River. As soon as I see it in the late afternoon light I take what might be the best photos of the trip. I don't think I've ever seen more beautiful light, except maybe on the cover of an album of Italian songs my father owned in my childhood. I remember trying to imagine him living in this mythic place of golden light and rich, saturated colors. I walk along the river, then through the center of town to the Leaning Tower which takes only about thirty minutes. Kazantzakis says, "If we open a riverbed by writing or acting, reality may flow into that riverbed, into a course it would not have taken had we not intervened... My purpose in writing was not beauty, it was deliverance." I'm very happy to be here.



Pisa



Pisa

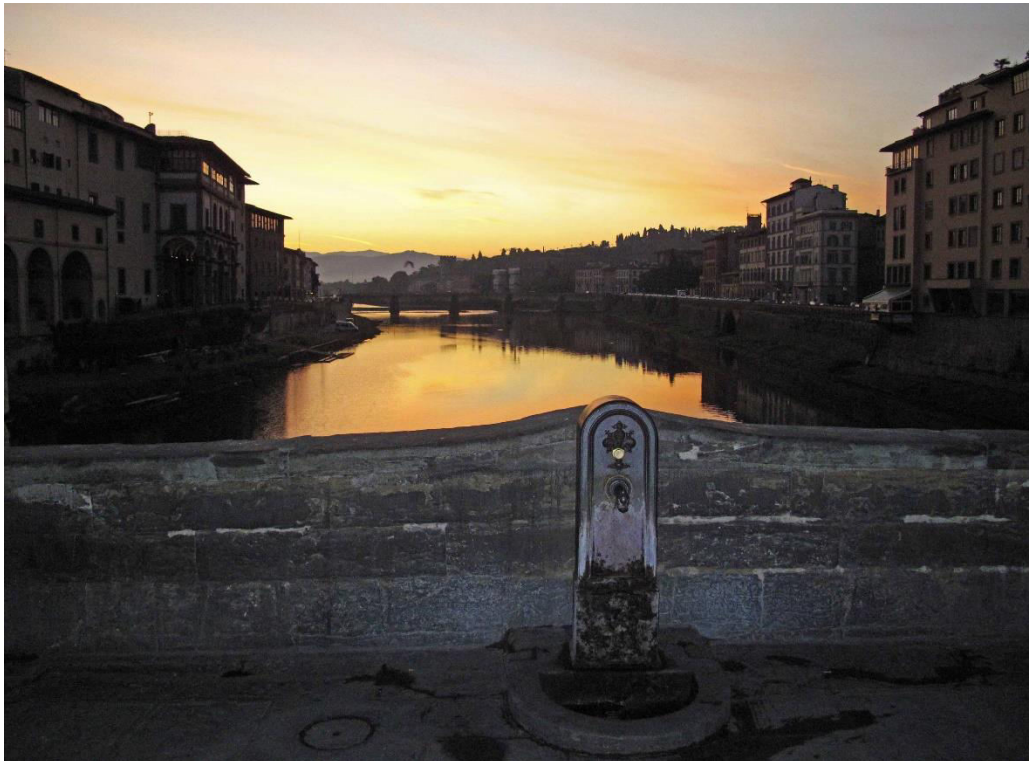


Pisa

The feet are bad on Day 17 but I persist regardless and climb the three hundred steps to the top of the Leaning Tower to see everything else there is to see in “Miracle Square”. I feel very human climbing the famous stairs like a billion people before me. I find myself unusually attracted to the local short and ample women - something in my genetic memory maybe. And my stomach feels fantastic, like it’s at home in this country. Breakfast, lunch and dinner are amazing. The Tower, the Cathedral, the Baptistery and the Monumental Cemetery are all magnificent. But so old! Maybe I need a woman just to remind me that I’m not so old – NOT DEAD YET!

Just when I told myself that my stomach feels perfect, I’m up four times in the night to evacuate, feeling sick with a slight fever and incredibly vivid dreams in my 700-year-old cell. Maybe I was meant to read, between dreams, in the middle of the night, Odysseus say to Kazantzakis, “You have been delivered from deliverance.” And to read Kazantzakis speak of the wisdom of old age when we can stand before the abyss calmly, sail into it and create a path for someone in the future to carry on further. The message is to let go of the securities of home, work, family and friends. Set your prow calmly toward the abyss and don’t stop except to come home occasionally to rest and regroup. In spite of the night’s ordeal, I eat a good breakfast and make it to the train station easily on Day 18.

Florence is magical but crazy, full of tourists, my hotel room just down the street from the famous Duomo Cathedral. I walk and walk and soak up as much beauty as I can until it gets dark. After a night interrupted constantly by young American revelers outside my window, I get up very early Sunday morning and find the famous city deserted except for street-cleaning vehicles removing waste and washing down the cobblestones. I watch the sun come up alone on the Ponte Vecchio and have a delicious cappuccino and dolce (chocolate-filled pastry) for breakfast. I need to take it easy today; after three weeks of walking, the feet have become a problem.



Ponte Vecchio, Florence

By one o'clock the feet are finished. Nothing's working out today. The Duomo is closed in the morning and then again in the afternoon and there are thousands of people waiting to get into the Uffizi Gallery. At least I've bought my train ticket to Assisi. I'm getting more and more tired of being a tourist. When I get back home I'll try more than ever to appreciate the peace and quiet of my cave. Maybe take shorter trips and pilgrimages in the future or go to places where it's simple to rent a car and drive, like Iceland. I've still got Rome left to cover; I have to figure something out. Maybe I'll just restrict the wandering, be more disciplined and organized with activities and itineraries. I feel like I'm drowning in a sea of tourists in Florence and I forget to go to mass on a Sunday in a city full of magnificent churches.

Day 20 is Halloween and I decide to ride the buses. I buy four tickets and start the day again with a chocolate dolce and cappuccino. First, I take the bus up to the Piazza di Michelangelo and get some nice panoramic shots of the city, but it's freezing cold. I come back down and wait an hour to get into the Duomo where I end up spending less than ten minutes in the dark Cathedral before catching another bus for the scenic view of the city (version north) from Fiesole, which ends up being a waste of time because it's so hazy the city is barely visible.

It was a good day strategically as far as the feet are concerned, but from now on I'm going to have to avoid churches which are all starting to look alike, except of course tomorrow in Assisi, and maybe St. Peter's in Rome. What the hell, can't avoid the churches. I'm glad to be leaving Florence and its hordes of tourists.

I'm off to see St. Francis on Day 21. The misty Italian countryside in the train window is obscured but beautiful nonetheless – must be spectacular on a clear summer day. What a strange book to find in Florence: *Witness*, an autobiography of John G. Bennett, one of George Gurdjieff's (yet another mentor) most ardent followers, on the rejects shelf of a second-hand bookstore for 50 cents. Bennett talks about a fifth dimension where time moves in all directions. He offers the metaphor of a train heading in one direction but approaching a junction where other directions become possible: "Life as we live it flows in more than one track of time. The tracks are separated by our different states of consciousness, and our memory tends to run back along one track to the exclusion of the others."



Florence



Florence



Florence

I never reach the hermitage above Assisi because I can't find a taxi (a drawback of traveling off-season) and my feet aren't up for the climb. I take the bus up into the hills as far as it goes where a young couple insists on taking my photo after I take one for them. Holding my fingers up to give the young man instructions, the photo will make it look like I'm taking a shot of myself with an invisible camera, with beautiful Umbrian landscape as a background. The town and the churches are very nice but, as I've come to expect in tourist-centered Europe, very well-scrubbed with everything looking the same after a while. I don't feel St. Francis here, except maybe when I find myself alone in the monastery behind Mary of Angels Cathedral where I see a huge, slow-moving house fly in one of the cells and for a moment think it might be the saint himself.

The hotel in Assisi is old-school nice but the owners, two very charming middle-aged, well-dressed brothers, are always a bit drunk and unhelpful and the whole town seems retro. I think it would take a longer visit to get used to the slower pace and foreignness of this place. In the evening I experience another glimpse of the space behind my eyes, this time as a huge stadium-like structure with walls as insubstantial as light, walls that can expand outwards to accommodate anything I might imagine.

I just miss the train to Rome on Day 22, then jump on the wrong train, and finally get off twenty minutes later to buy a new ticket, this one on the high-speed train. For a few extra dollars, I'll be on the streets of Rome before noon. I still have to learn how to catch trains and planes with less tension and worry. What's the worst that can happen? If I miss a connection, I've got money to catch the next one, no sweat. Reading Bennett's descriptions of how difficult it was to travel ninety years ago, I realize how trivial my inconveniences are. 95% of the Easyjet stress was self-inflicted. There was no rush, I could have waited to solve the problem and, besides, it sparked a chain reaction that brought me to Rome!



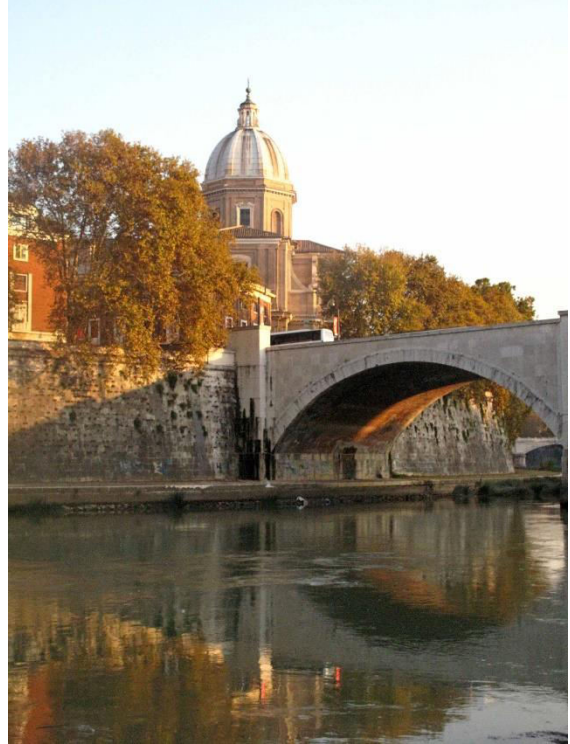
Assisi

I drop my bag at the hotel and take the Metro to the Vatican and St. Peter's, which is a bit over the top, with dramatic light pouring through huge stained-glass windows into the stadium-sized cathedral. I don't linger – far too many people. Outside in the square I have a nice conversation with a retired American priest who lives in a trailer back home (a lifestyle choice I never considered). I walk down to the Tiber, past the Castel Sant Angelo, then down to the walkway at water level, where I find myself virtually alone beside the famous river. Are people allowed to be down here? The shallow water is a pleasant milky grey-green with large clumps of reeds sticking out in random patches and it's oddly quiet below street level in this bustling city. It's been a good day. I'm very happy to be here.

The Ascot Hotel close to the central Termini train station will be my home for the next five days. I'll make it a point to do little things to make it feel like a refuge from the day's wanderings, mishaps and adventures. Good wine, good room, great neighborhood, and I'm already friendly with the Pakistani guy doing my laundry across the street and the Middle Eastern guys at the kabob shop. Who would have thought I would feel so immediately at home in Rome? And the 150th celebration of Italian unification is on Friday - a free outdoor Ennio Morricone concert! Great timing. The feet are a mess but I'll trudge along one way or another.

I spend the first ninety minutes of Day 23 in a rat's maze, trying to take the subway in morning rush-hour madness inside the Termini Station. Bad signage, indifferent transit workers, broken trains, too many people, and to top it all off I forgot my bus pass (at least I thought I did). I go all the way back to the hotel only to discover it was in my pants pocket all along. After all this, I end up taking the subway for just one stop and then walking. Slow down, I tell myself again. Relax, it's overcast this morning anyway, not a good time for photos. I pull out the map to try to figure out where I am. Sometimes I think this city wants you to get lost.

I do the wonder-of-the-world Coliseum and a bus tour and then find a nice quiet spot by the Tiber to take a break. I think I've had enough with ruins and churches – I'll just wander for the next few days and celebrate the national holiday tomorrow with everyone else. But then I step into Santa Maria degli Angeli e dei Martiri near my hotel and discover the most beautiful church so far, combining art and science with religion and built inside the remains of the massive 4th century Roman Baths of Diocletian.



Rome

I've just about forgotten home by now, looking forward to how strange it will be to return. In a way, Paris feels more like home at this moment than Montreal. I have to get some translation work done tonight, deadline Sunday. Dinner is fantastic, the book is fantastic, and I feel great and focused without TV and all my other wasteful habits.

On Day 24 I try but never make it to the sea. I take the train to Lido, a depressing suburb at first glance and too big to wander around with no signage pointing to the sea. I have a quick coffee then hop on a bus outside the train station, gambling that it might take me to the ocean, but it winds this way and that, up and down streets, going nowhere of interest. I give up on what seems to have become a gray day, cut my losses, take the same bus back to the train station and head back to Rome.

I end up in the most touristic part of the city, searching for the Pantheon, the oldest continuously occupied building in the world. I find an interesting little archeological site under the tiny Trevi Theatre close to the famous fountain where I'm alone for forty minutes in what is actually an ancient multi-story home. I leave with a real sense of the layers of history under this city, the same feeling experienced in Paris. One display had huge piles of coins found on the site with dates spanning 400 years, but none later than 455 A.D., the date of a barbarian sacking of the city. I try to imagine the terror the citizens of Rome, the inhabitants of this house, must have felt when the Barbarians came, how much blood must have been spilled, innocent people slaughtered.

I have another good dinner and end the day with the Morricone concert in the Piazza della Popolo, parts of which are fantastic, but the huge crowd is claustrophobic. Everyone is handed a small Italian flag when they enter the piazza, but hardly anyone bothers to wave it. Not a very patriotic bunch these Italians.

I'm tired of being a tourist and not sure what to do on Day 25. Negative thoughts result in the most frustrating morning of the trip. I try to go to the Roman catacombs but encounter horrible/non-existent signage, canceled buses (because of yet another demonstration) and the usual confusing maze of poorly-identified streets radiating away from yet another piazza. I waste two hours moving about in circles before I surrender and allow myself to get lost. All of this after a bad "American-style" breakfast – when will I learn not to fall for tourist traps?



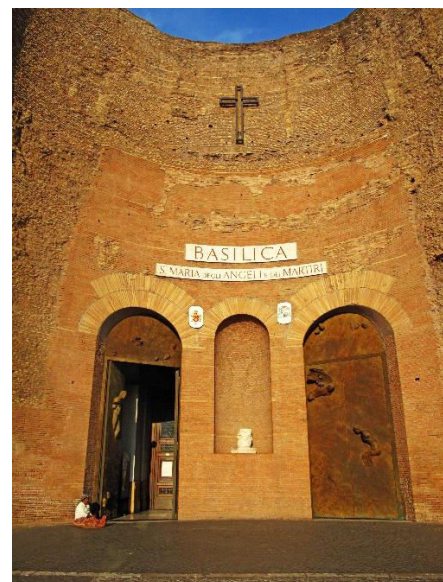
Rome

But the day is more than saved by Cinecittà, the studios founded in 1937 by Benito Mussolini. A charming exhibit and guided tour evoke what this cultural landmark of Italian and world cinema represents. There are so few people I find myself alone in a room more than once. And easy to get to for a change - in the suburbs with its own designated metro station and not a confusing/disorienting piazza in sight. Sitting in the studio café surrounded by fantastic Felliniesque props, I experience the space behind my eyes a third time, this time sensing that the expandable, elastic walls can be pushed so far outward as to overlap (maybe even encompass) the world in front.

Day 26, my last day in Rome, begins early with beautiful sunlight on a day when torrential thunder showers are forecast. I have my favorite breakfast of cappuccino and dolce in the Piazza della Repubblica facing my favorite church, Santa Maria degli Angeli e dei Martiri. I have a relaxed morning and afternoon, with English mass at Santa Susannah, the American church, where multilayered history is once again evident. Santa Susannah was beheaded in 293 A.D. for refusing to marry the Emperor's cousin, and she is actually under the altar, with the remains of her house even further under the church. And I finally make it to the San Callisto catacombs, a 2,000-year-old cemetery which used to be full of popes and martyrs but is mostly empty of human remains now.

I end the day at the Palazzo Venezia, Il Duce's old headquarters, which is now a museum. Unfortunately, the famous balcony on which the buffoon mugged and ranted at the world is not accessible. The trip is really winding down now. One more night in Paris ahead of me. It's pouring rain on my last night in Rome and Pakistanis are selling umbrellas for five Euros on every corner.

One last tour of the neighborhood in the morning of Day 27 ends with a cappuccino at my local, the Li Rong café, run by Chinese-Italians. Santa Maria degli Angeli remains the most beautiful church I've seen on this trip. I explore it thoroughly one last time and learn some of its history. It's said to be Michelangelo's last architectural masterpiece; he was eighty-six when he finished it, which makes me feel I may have time to finish whatever it is I'm supposed to finish.



Rome

Now begins the long two-part journey home. I'll do my best to slow it down and de-stress the process - try to enjoy it. I arrive at the airport for my flight to Paris three hours early, buy a slice of pizza and a coke at the first snack bar I see and find a table to read and write. I *will* focus on my work when I get home. I *will* take the advice I've been given twice on this trip and live every day like it's my first and last.

In Paris, I have a nice dinner and long walk with Marie at the end of the day. She really enjoyed my apartment and says I'm the perfect swap-mate. I like her knowledge and appreciation of architecture and her cultivation. She shows me interesting parts of Paris around the Gare du Nord which I've never seen before and I tell her we'll keep in touch.

On Day 28 I'm finally going home. I set out early to avoid the complications of a one-day transit strike/slowdown. The early start also neutralizes the slight but pointless panic-stress that I would normally have felt when I discover that my flight number, departure time and terminal have all been changed. Who cares I tell myself, just slowly walk over to the ticket counter to verify that you have the right ticket and then calmly over to the proper gate. I'm getting better at this.

The airplane's DVD player is broken which means no bad movies to kill time on a long flight. I finish the Bennett book and even finish transcribing all the excerpts. I do some writing as well, and just when it seems that I've got nothing left to say or do, turbulence makes me aware of how good uneventful dullness can be, how it's almost always wrong to complain or succumb to boredom, if only because it's usually attributable to a lack of imagination.

Bennett was an excellent companion on this trip. Just as deep as Kazantzakis but not as serious and prophesying. In the toilet having a shaky airplane pee, I realize how happy I am again, free of the self-doubt and confusion that comes with a jealous and judgmental girlfriend. I don't feel even slightly guilty anymore for the things I do and think and look at, and I vow never to allow myself to be prisoner to a woman's moods again.

The turbulence continues and the pilot casually explains that we are going to have to fly through 200-kilometer winds for a while, something I really didn't need to know. You can feel the stress in the airplane at times like this, everyone becoming quiet, reminded of how precarious and unnatural a position we are in, high up in the sky, on the wrong side of the clouds, in a flimsy cylinder with stiff, bobbing wings. So easy to forget this

when the flying is smooth but almost impossible to focus on anything else when turbulence is bouncing us around in our seats. The turbulence finally ends just in time for the descent into Montreal to begin. I love this part of the journey.

Each journey changes us. I resolve to do my best to keep my traveler eyes open and remain focused on the meaningful. Gurdjieff says that “When a man has had experience of Reality, he is responsible for what he does with his life.” When I get home, I unpack immediately as I always do, and all the objects attached to me wiggle and slide back into their assigned places. And my life becomes stable and comfortable again as I myself wiggle and slide back into my own little nook.

Each journey changes me. The most significant thing that happened on this trip, I think, was the discovery of the space behind my eyes where everything exists and anything is possible. But the space is an abyss that needs bridges to connect it to the space in front, the reality we share with everyone else. Kazantzakis says our mission is to connect this outer world to the inner world, to transubstantiate matter into spirit and vice versa. Everyone finds their own position between dreaming and consciousness, but when we are aware of both worlds at the same time there is luminosity.

Photos can make the world look perfect and fixed, but reality is often ugly and cruel. Being in love can make the world look perfect and fixed as well, seen through rose-colored glasses, but it’s an illusion that doesn’t last. Detached, altruistic love freely given with actions, not just emotion, however, seems to resonate with ripple effects that begin in the moment but last forever. Maybe this is what it means to live an eternal life.

A few weeks later I find a quote on a folded slip of paper in my travel jacket, materializing like something from that other dimension of faraway places. It’s Thomas Merton saying, “You have to experience duality for a long time until you see it’s not there... any moment you can break through to the underlying unity which is God’s gift.” When you come to an abyss, don’t despair, build a bridge.