

Francis-Noël Thomas

Tea

I DID NOT COME FROM A TEA DRINKING FAMILY. MY MATERNAL GRANDMOTHER, who was born to landless peasants in Sicily and who, after having run a butcher shop to support her six children, became by her own account “a lady” after her children were grown and she had remarried, associated tea with the British movies she saw on television in the early 1950s. In her broken but confident and rhetorically astute English, she summed up all of these films in one phrase: “Ava-cuppa-tea.” She asserted in a manner that brooked neither contradiction nor qualification that this imperative—which in her articulation sounded like a single word—represented all the dialogue and the subsequent taking of tea all the action in each of them. She regarded these films not as works of fiction but as documents of current British life that formed, collectively, a complete and reliable guide to British culture. She did not claim in so many words that excessive tea drinking was the cause of Britain’s decline into postwar impotence and the loss of empire, but this thesis was unmistakably conveyed by the contemptuous tone in which she enunciated this universal plot summary of the entire output of the British film industry of the 1940s. I don’t recall my grandmother’s ever drinking tea herself—although according to my father’s later testimony she did so on at least one occasion. She drank cheap domestic wine, coffee, and ginger ale, like any sensible person.

My father, who had a severely limited appreciation for his mother-in-law’s views of British culture and of most other things, nevertheless shared her contempt for tea. He was quite a good storyteller—so was my grandmother—and late in his life, long after my grandmother had died, he recalled in a nostalgic oral narrative his courtship of my mother. After several failed attempts to find someone to introduce him to her—at the time an astonishingly beautiful girl of eighteen—he finally succeeded and was invited by her mother to tea. “Tea!” he said. It is remarkable how much contempt, how much scorn, how great a sense of the absurdity of this invitation he could incorporate into the pronunciation of this single word. It was as if he knew then that he was about to marry the daughter of a cultural ignoramus with ridiculous pretensions.

My mother almost never made tea, but she retained to the end of her life at least a half-dozen ornate tea sets, and for years she collected delicate teacups. The cups were stored in a china cabinet in the dining room and used only on the most exceptional occasions—when they were filled with coffee—the tea sets themselves, never.

My grandmother died the year before I first traveled to England. I’m sure

she would have wondered about my mental competence had she known I was going to cross the ocean in order to spend time in a country that had dissolved its former greatness in endless cups of tea. By that time, I had drunk tea on occasion in graduate school—mostly at a local institution sponsored by the Division of the Social Sciences and known on campus as Soc Tea (the “Soc” pronounced with a long o and a soft c as in “ocean”—a shortened form of social). I was indifferent to the tea—which was also indifferent. I went to Soc Tea to meet women graduate students. I don’t believe I ever had seen so many attractive women in one room before—and perhaps I haven’t since. I’m sure my father would have been astonished to learn that, in what he would have regarded as a culture greatly superior to the one he grew up in, courting attractive women still involved the outlandish pretension of drinking tea.

I must have drunk tea on my first visit to London, and on subsequent visits too, but the tea made no impression on me. The great gastronomic discovery of the time I spent in England, scones, came several trips later. I don’t remember what I drank with them.

All of my academic degrees are in the English language and its literature, but I was never an Anglophile. My technical knowledge of the language is casual and my knowledge of the literature almost arbitrarily selective. The culture I felt passionate about, the language I fell in love with, and the literature I felt an elective affinity for from the twelfth century to the twentieth in almost every register of its classic progression was French—from *chansons de geste* and the Anglo-Norman verse obituaries known as *histoires* to the romances of Chrétien de Troyes; from the transcript of Jeanne d’Arc’s trial to Montaigne’s essays and Pascal’s polemics; from Madame de Sévigné’s letters and Racine’s account of Port-Royal to Saint-Simon’s *mémoires*; from Stendhal’s novels and Flaubert’s to Proust’s unexampled and eccentric masterpiece; from the seventy years of Julien Green’s journal to the erotic fantasies of Dominique Aury.

It was France that shaped my tastes for food and drink, too, from raw bass to roast dove and from the delightful minor growths of Ladoix and Savigny-lès-Beaune to the sublime heights of Corton-Charlemagne and Bienvenue-Bâtard-Montrachet. And it was in Paris, by the sheerest of happy chances, that I had my first serious encounter with tea after various near-misses and false starts.

To the extent that tea is associated with France at all, among Americans more-or-less acquainted with both French culture and what I now think of as the wine of China, it is probably limited to the famous account in *Du côté de chez Swann* of the moment the narrator recovers his unconscious memory by tasting a madeleine dipped into tea.

I knew this passage very well from a young age, but, enthralled as I was with Proust, his masterpiece had not led me to learn anything much about tea. In retrospect, it is a shame that my grandmother had never encountered Proust on the page—I would love to have heard her recount the narrator’s mother saying to him “Ava-cuppa-tea,” heard my grandmother’s scorn at this hypersensitive emotional invalid’s declining the invitation, her presentation of his halfhearted

decision to do something he never did—take some tea, without realizing it would change his life, and her revelation of the magical return of the past that ensued. Would she have emphasized that the magic occurred only because—in contrast to the English who did nothing but drink tea—he limited himself to a single cup in his entire adult life?

I had tasted excellent madeleines at *À L'Espérance*, Marc Meneau's *restaurant avec chambres* in Saint-Père at the foot of the hill of Vézelay, the village where Mary Magdalene—after whom the madeleine is named—it has been improbably claimed since the twelfth century, rests in the crypt of the famous Romanesque basilica, also named for her. Vézelay and its environs is surely the culturally (and as it happened the gastronomically) right place to become acquainted with madeleines, but I did not taste them with tea.

I no longer remember where I got my early, ridiculous ideas about tea. Where did I first hear of Earl Grey? How did I get the idea that if one were going to drink tea at all, it should be adulterated with *bergamote*—which is what the French call Earl Grey tea. I do remember that I learned this French term for Earl Grey in a *salon de thé* in the Marais, a very kinky establishment whose former premises are now occupied by a store selling handbags and women's shoes. I had gone there for several years when it was the height of chic and never had tea—chocolate, yes, coffee, yes, nectar of apricots, yes, tea, never.

One winter evening, a few days before I was to return to the United States, after picking up a new suit on the other side of town and doing a few last minute errands, I arrived at the *salon de thé* needing something, although I was uncertain what. I was feeling a little out of sorts. The early darkness of winter? My pending departure? I'm not sure. In those years, the Marais was almost sacred ground for me. The most precious elements of seventeenth-century French culture converged on my imagination as I sat there. I could not be in the Marais—even in a very *branché* salon de thé—without feeling surrounded by a past I admired to the point of reverence: Madame de Sévigné had been born and had lived most of her life within a few blocks of this tea room; Le Brun, the picture merchant, had lived in the Hôtel Lamoignon just down the street—Vermeer's *Astronomer* and Holbein's *Ambassadors* had passed through Le Brun's hands there; the last remaining scraps of Pierre Berton's sculpture—patched together remnants of an altarpiece from the church of Saint-Merri—were in the nearby Hôtel Carnavalet, one of La Sévigné's former residences, and seven generations of the Couperin family had been organists at the church of Saint-Gervais, a short walk from where I now sat. It was already about six in the evening; the salon closed at seven, and I found myself alone in that pleasant room I liked so much, receiving the undivided and very gratifying attention of an extremely attractive server I had fallen in love with at first sight a couple of years before. I think it was she who suggested tea, and then she laid out on the impractically low table in front of my deep leather armchair what seemed like a dozen items in a tea service and brought me a pot of some sort of tea. Every gesture she made was unselfconsciously exquisite. I don't actually remember anything about the tea; the moment, however, was magical.

But, of course, she remembered me. “Your French,” she said, “is getting to be really good.” Demure, sexy, charming, beautiful, she was a compelling presence and a shameless flatterer. The performance was unforgettable. At that moment, for me at least, she was the flower of an eight-hundred-year progression that flowed from the mystique of *la France douce et belle* directly to the rue des Francs Bourgeois. She was Guenièvre, the Princesse de Clèves, and Gilberte Swann rolled into one, and she was not a creature of paper and ink—she was right there, *imaginaire* made flesh.

The salon in the Marais and the charming Chantal were both nothing more than a memory to me, when I found myself one exceptionally hot day in June some years later in a neighborhood I had once frequented for the sake of a restaurant but where I hadn’t been for years. Being there—and I no longer remember what I was doing there that day—was like stepping back into my own half-forgotten past, as if I had gone back to Soc Tea after a fifteen or twenty year absence. Just on the other side of the narrow street from the restaurant and a few steps towards the Quai des Grands-Augustins, I came across something I didn’t remember having been there at all—the display window of a tea merchant. The shop was attractive and just around the corner at the entrance was a menu with a notice indicating that on the second floor there was a tea room. Yes, I said to myself. Perhaps I’ll have some tea.

The tea room of this establishment was like nothing I had ever seen before. It was a nineteenth-century French Sinophile’s fantasy of a tea room, like an annotated and beautifully produced volume containing a mixture of exotic travel narrative, nostalgia, revelation, and personal confession—*La voie du thé* by a hitherto unknown soul-mate of Pierre Loti—come magically to life on the rue des Grands-Augustins.

I found myself in an irregularly shaped room with a beautiful parquet floor and a dozen or so tables, classically dressed, two or three young men in white linen suits, a counter behind which a tea master was at work in front of a wall of hundreds of metal tea canisters. The room was beautiful, but it was a room designed to allow someone who knew precisely what he was doing to make tea for people who knew how to drink it. The chairs were of Chinese design with perfectly flat seats (very comfortable) and there were small touches of a former China as filtered through an antiquated French sensibility discreetly incorporated into the room. But the design of the room centered around tea; the salon did not sell charm and ambiance primarily, like the salon in the Marais; it was a shrine to tea.

The menu listed hundreds of teas in the classic families of tea. The tea came not only from China, India, Japan, Ceylon but from some two dozen less prominent producing countries including Australia, Mozambique, and Brazil. The list was longer than the wine list at Taillevent and came with a book which gave a brief account of each of the teas. The book, soft-covered and just the right size for the hand and the table, was called *L’Art français du thé*; its cover featured a kind of seal that announced in an unmistakably nineteenth-century

design, *Maison fondée en 1854, thé qualité supérieur, Mariage Frères* and the house motto: “*Les meilleurs crus/La grande tradition.*” On the inside flap, there were photographs of the brothers Mariage, Édouard (1828–1890) and Henri (1827–1907), nineteenth-century descendants of a pioneering French tea importer.

The personalities of the Mariage brothers evidently continued to mark the business and the salon in ethos and in detail almost ninety years after the longer-lived brother had died. It was the very opposite of one of those *branché* salons in the Marais, here today and turned into a fashion boutique tomorrow. Mariage Frères was the local manifestation of *La civilisation du thé*, as much a cultural institution as a business. It reminded me of the Bibliothèque nationale before the collections moved to the library’s ghastly new premises or the *documentation du Louvre*, where I had spent many afternoons reading through files on individual paintings replete with handwritten appraisals and orders for restoration or framing from long-dead curators. Drinking tea at Mariage Frères was like a visit to a rare book dealer where experience, knowledge, connoisseurship, and slightly loopy passion—turned into refined mania—had soaked slowly into the premises until they had become as much a presence as the books themselves.

It was in this room that I came to understand that I had never before known anything about tea and that I never before had tasted tea properly brewed. *L’Art français du thé* described teas from the best gardens of China and India. I read for a while before making a choice, and it was a happy choice because, as I was to discover, I had a strong preference for the great unsmoked black teas of China, the greatest of them too nuanced, too delicate to drink with any food at all—the idea of soaking a madeleine in such tea Oh, well, Proust was a very great writer; it is not important that he was an ignoramus when it came to tea.

Acquiring a taste for great teas properly made brings with it certain difficulties. To begin with, it can make coffee seem blunt. What you want is tea, and while Mariage Frères will send tea anywhere, you discover that when you’re traveling you can almost never find tea you are willing to drink. The tea itself is frequently unacceptable even when it isn’t adulterated with spices or dried fruit and it is almost never properly made—the water is not the right temperature, the pot is an absurdity, the tea, whether loose or in bags or in some metal contraption, is not timed properly and is sometimes impossible to remove from the water before it begins to ruin the beverage.

I have ordered tea in places that call themselves tea rooms where an open glass of tepid water was brought to my table along with a tea bag filled with tasteless ground twigs. I have been served breakfast in luxury hotels where I was offered a pot of hot water and a handful of loose tea of half-decent quality. One was expected to put the tea in a pot and pour the water over it, but there was no way to remove the tea. After the initial three minutes, you were obliged to sit by helplessly as the beverage was ruined by the acidic elements that were released after the tea had yielded the flavor it was meant to yield. The resulting anxiety and irritation, of course, destroyed the experience.

The drinking of tea is not meant to be folded into urgency or anxiety of any

sort. It is a practically sacramental beverage meant to relax mind and body and conduct the drinker into a cleansing state of quasi-meditation. The surroundings make a difference; they are meant to encourage an inward tranquility, and the tea itself is meant to detach one from the agitation of the everyday world.

The experience shares something with other semi-sacramental experiences, experiences that are not meant to deny the realities of the everyday world but to be exceptions to its distractions, respites from the fervid imagination that is never entirely focused on where it is and works tirelessly to create impossible desires—the desire to be younger, richer, more accomplished; the desire to be here with a woman you once had a glimpse of in a restaurant in Brussels, here but served by a favorite waiter who disappeared some time ago, here but able to speak Chinese; not here, but in Alain Chapel's enclosed garden in Mionnay, a village between Lyon and Bourg-en-Bresse, on a sunny afternoon but being served the tea you are now drinking by the serving staff of this very salon. Here, but . . . not here.

The conditions proper to drinking tea are not the optimal conditions for the business of running a tea room. It is best when there are just a few clients, when the room is tranquil, when the staff is not harassed and overworked. You sit at your table, take in the beauty of the room, feel the texture of the tablecloth, acknowledge the complicity you have with the extravagant dream of bringing back to life in a little corner of old Paris this bit of a China that has all but disappeared.

The table is beautiful in its simplicity and each object set there is the result of a careful and deliberate choice. The design of the cup and especially the design of the tea pot enclosed in a felt-lined metal covering are like perfect and elegant solutions to classic mathematical problems. They leave nothing further to be desired. They induce comfort and tranquility. There is no detail that the Mariage brothers did not spend time considering.

The tea master himself brings the tea to your table, pours out a cup for you and pronounces its name: "*Monsieur, le thé noir de Chine, Yunnan d'or.*" You look at the tea in the cup, admire its beautiful orange-red tint; you take in its delicate perfume; you taste this incomparable beverage that in return for your willingness to focus on it with a clear mind, mysteriously relieves all your anxieties, dissolves all your disquieting fantasies, submerges all your endless and incessant desires by its direct encounter with your body: you taste it on your tongue, in your mouth, and then feel its warmth and assurance in your chest. You are sitting at a table in Paris, and you are in touch with another world, where all the deceptions and compromises of the world of human ambition and striving are gone. It is as if you were newly created while retaining the knowledge you have acquired over a lifetime. Your cares, your satisfactions, your disappointments, your regrets are suspended for a few privileged moments. You have no desire except the desire to look at this beverage, drink it, feel it suffused in your body, be here.