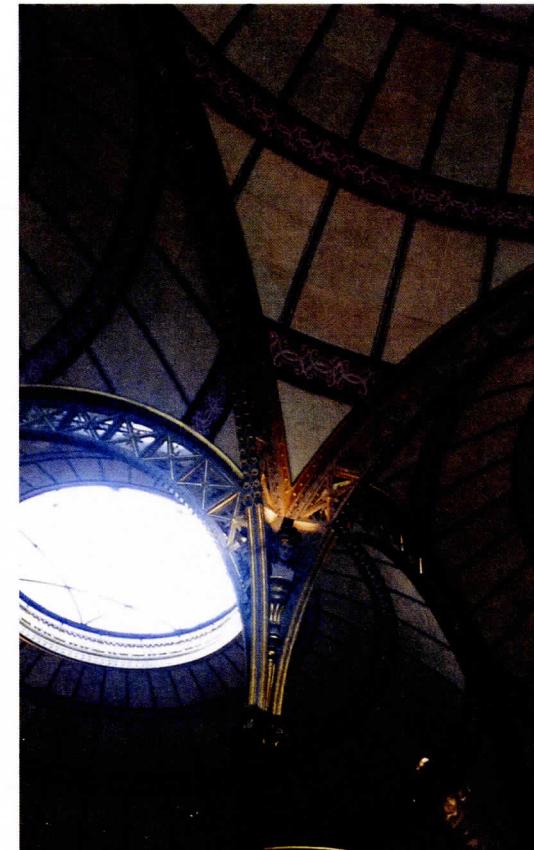


Paris is often a desert for the heart.

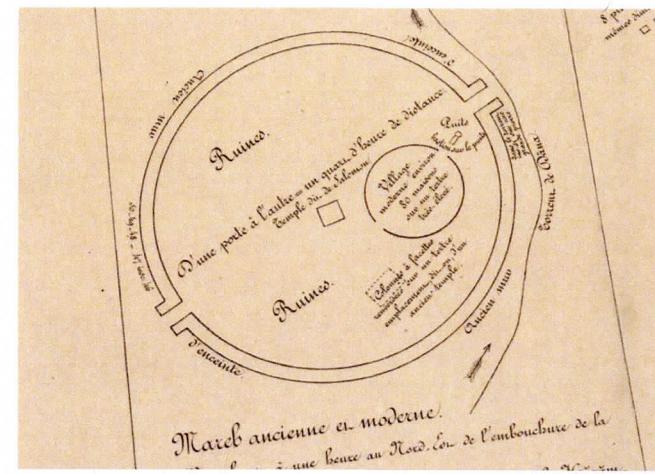
Albert Camus. *Le Minotaure ou la halte d'Oran*

by
Alvaro Velasco

The Second Empire-cut chair you are sitting at, in its polished *ébéniste* ornament, shines contrastingly to the elaborated eighteen-hundreds' mosaic floor. The table neither helps focus that much. Its black-lacquered synthetic conglomerate recesses to the background of the manuscript. Certainly the old chart stands out from it. *Mareb ancienne et moderne*. It is the ramshackle cotton of the chart makes you wonder if the latter makes any sense. *Mareb*, the name to which the legend of the Queen of Sheba is attached seems to you only an *anncienne*, belonging to an immemorial past of sumptuousness and exotic odour. The chart lays facing you as its reverse. A sober double-line encircles the former protective wall. Now, it is lying somewhere far East, buried under the sand. The Queen embellished by the XIX century gusto for anything that smelled exotic or far, rises as one more cariatide holding the archive, preventing collapse. The great retinues of spices, ostriches of Ethiopia, and the frankincense from Iran; the pearls that once embellished the queen's eyes remain shut beneath centuries gone by. But, in Paris, only a layer of dust covers the chart. And your gentle thumb reshuffles its history and places you at its core.



Not that the circling wall is mirrored by Labrouste's dome above you, but the chart makes you wonder whether Paris has something of desert about it. Not in the sense of having forged legends from Chateaubriand through Hugo to Flaubert. Arnauld tried his through Sheba; but he was lost in forgetfulness. It took André Malraux to resurrect his legend. Malraux followed the steps of Arnauld from the air; however, even his *Au-dessus du desert d'Arabie* was displaced to the role of secondary writing in his oeuvre. The connection Paris-desert it is something beyond a flight in a Farman 190. It is rather something that Arnauld embedded when he draw the chart.



Ici vous avez votre demande, monsieur. Dated 1939, but not published until 1950, you receive the folio of *Le Minotaure*, and in its first pages its challenge.

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

It's the paradox of an exile in main streets. Le Boulevard des Italiens, la Rue de Richelieu...they become his spaces for withdrawal. It is not that '*sous le pavé, la plage!*'; it is rather the cobblestones that are the revolution themselves. Here Camus is not the Icarus that Le Corbusier played to be over the desert in his *Aircraft*. He is not escaping the labyrinth of the city, lifting his eyes, indicting from above. Camus makes you face the Minotaur, eye to eye, surrounded as you are by a multileveled maze of books. From the cornice that suspends the domed ceiling, Ovid's profile in whispers that Ariadne was de Chirico's talisman, but none of the Surrealists inherited that from him. There is no more thread in Paris than the one of Yves Saint-Laurent—which ironically, as Camus, was born in Oran.

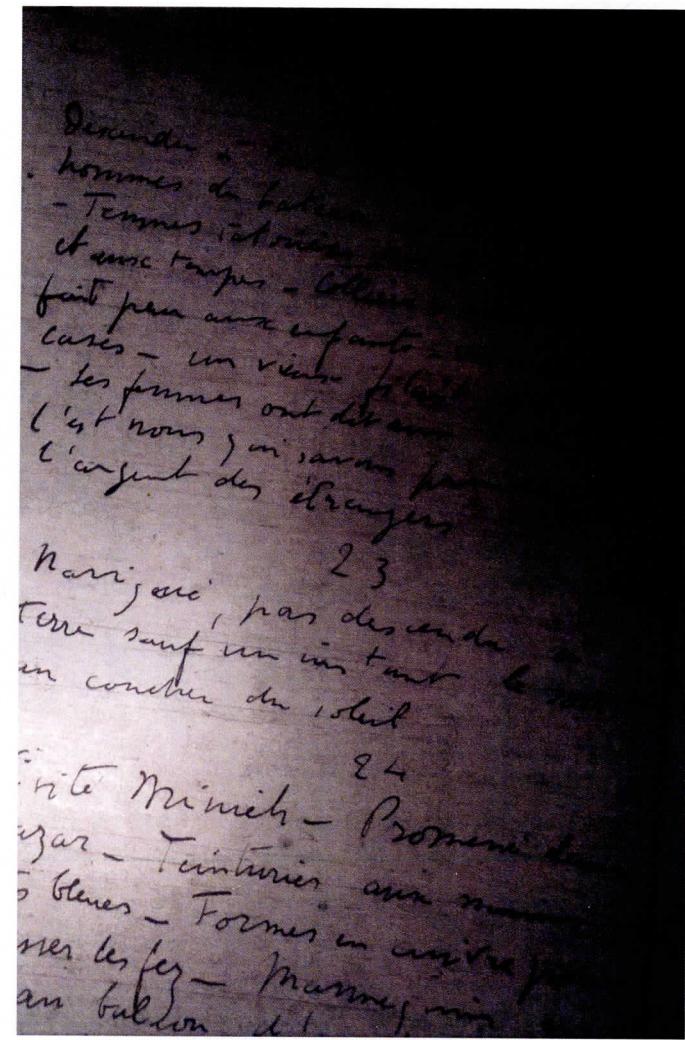
Il n'y a plus de déserts. Il n'y a plus d'îles. Le besoin pourtant s'en fait sentir. Pour comprendre le monde, il faut parfois se détourner ; pour mieux servir les hommes, les tenir un moment à distance. Mais où trouver la solitude nécessaire à la force, la longue respiration ? L'esprit se rassemble et le courage se mesure ? Il reste les grandes villes. Simplement, il y faut encore des conditions.

Les villes que l'Europe nous offre sont trop pleines des rumeurs du passé. Une oreille exercée peut y percevoir battants d'âmes, une palpitation d'âmes. Il y sent le vertige des siècles, de

In Camus's folio the tension between what is local and what is foreign plays a subtle game. To him, Paris is 'inherited-ly' local, as Oran is local by birth. As the main character in his *L'Étranger*, Camus makes you feel "a citizen of France, domiciled in North Africa, a man of the Mediterranean, an *homme du midi*(...)". But in that condition of being at midi(noon), of being at the centre, his is a desperate search for the periphery. Paris is built up over it is history. However, precisely that weight of the past buries its present down. Camus walked the banks of the Seine and the heights of Père-Lachaise in the search of a deserted solitude. But the deaths of history always filled the unpopulated land. Only when back to his folio, his traces over the white thirsted for sand rather than signs. And back in archive, at the central hour, the oculi of Labrouste's domes become your artificial suns. You're not at the verges, you're seating at the core of the *Ile arrodissement*. And yet the vortex-like feeling pulls you towards where Camus starts: "It's between us two!" exclaims Rastignac, facing the vast mustiness of Paris. Two, yes, but that is still too many!" A quarrel between the city and the self that will be settled on an arena of sand.



Camus text moves from Paris to Oran. However, the North African city has lost its connection with the desert. Rather than the beautiful orbital position of Helene Cixous in *Ex Cities*,—"I am from Oran. I translate: I am from *Hors En*[Out In]. I go from *Or*[gold] in *Hors*. I translate: I go from *Hors* in *Hors*. To start with I am from without[*du hors*]"—for Camus Oran has constituted itself a centre of a sort. "Oran is a great circular yellow wall covered over with a leaden sky. In the beginning you wander in the labyrinth, seeking the sea like the sign of Ariadne." And by the time you are drawn to the centre of the maze, new unpublished material is brought to your table. *Carnet de notes prises durant un voyage en Egypte, 22 novembre - 21 décembre 1906*. The notebook gathers the thoughts of arguably the most eccentric writer of France in the Twentieth-century—Raymond Roussel. Literary predecessor of the Surrealist, it was his first trip to Egypt. Somehow, the scattered notes constitute his first impressions, pre-dating three years the publication of his famous *Impressions d'Afrique*. However, to the mind-blowing elaborated prose of the book, the notations have a feeling of ordinary diary writing. "22 nov. / Descendu à terre suivés de dense homes du bateau." But precisely that ordinariness bring the uncanniness to his notes. Reading the diary at the archives, you have the feeling Dali described when painting his homage to Roussel—*Impressions of Africa, 1938*—he stated: "I remember it so well, even though I've never been there." Roussel's carnet has the quality of moving the day work of researching into a day-dreaming landscape. Rather grotesque.



But as a counter-figure, Camus awakes you from the Surrealist sleep of reason into the desire of plain light. What his desert journey is searching is illumination. Ariadne's mark is in the sky. "It is noon; the very day is being weighed in the balance. His rite accomplished, the traveller receives the reward of his liberation; the little stone, dry and smooth as an asphodel, that he picks up on the cliff." His question of the desert, to the 'other', is not in the exotic, the Romantic imaginary of Sheba, the legends of adventures, or Surreal extravagances. To his opening search—"(...)there is a need for [deserts]. In order to understand the world, one has to turn away from it on occasion; in order to serve men better, one has to hold them at a distance for a time"—, Camus's answer lays both in Paris and Oran. His questions of finding 'the other' is paradoxically an *endo*-tic one.

"In the city, and at certain hours, however, what a temptation to identify oneself with those stones, to melt into that burning and impassive universe that defies history and its ferments! That is doubtless futile. But there is in every man a profound instinct which is neither that of destruction nor that of creation. It is merely a matter of resembling nothing. In the shadow of the warm walls of Oran, on its dusty asphalt, that invitation is sometimes heard."

In the lights of the domes of Labrouste, Camus's invitation opens up its mosaic floors, bringing the desert to your interior.

Paris, a desert.



