

France
Fin de Siècle

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How They Lived



Space is something that man conceives only imperfectly, especially when his perception of it is slender. The notion of distance is relative: the familiar is closer than the dimly perceived faraway. In 1891, when Thomas Hardy published *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, he commented that, "to persons of limited spheres, miles are as geographical degrees, parishes as counties, counties as provinces and kingdoms." Fourteen years later, in H. G. Wells's *Kipps* (1905), the people of Folkestone still look upon London as a far-off country. The same was then true of France, where an old Norman woman, whose son had died during military service soon after 1900, explained that "he was serving in Beauce," and, remembers Jean Follain, "for her the Beauce was as mysterious as India."¹

From this point of view, despite half a century of railroads, fin de siècle France was still a congeries of idiosyncratic neighborhoods, as far away from each other as mutual ignorance could make them, and even farther from the capital, which many perceived as something out of a fairy tale rather than a modern metropolis of stone and brick and mortar. That was especially true of those rural parishes where two-thirds of the French still lived in 1891. In the last year of the nineteenth century hardly more than 35 percent of the country's population could be found in towns of more than 5,000 inhabitants;² and we shall see how little most of these conformed to our present idea of an urban center. The ones that came closest, great cities like Lyons, Marseilles, and Rouen, were few and, in the old-world optic still obtaining, far apart. Not setting the general temper, not representative of

the national atmosphere, but standing out as exceptions, envied by some, irrelevant to most.

Then there was Paris, which, a country magistrate observed, “throned royally” over the rest. “You cannot imagine,” wrote young Paul Valéry from Montpellier to Pierre Louÿs in Paris, “what a few pages . . . from Paris mean, from Paris, which is alive and intelligent”; Montpellier quite evidently was neither. Paris was a continual feast, an “electrical machine” that instilled nervousness and fire; and it was an emancipation, a dream, two young girls from Limoges reported back. What charmed them specially was “that no one spied upon anyone.”³

The contrast between metropolis and provinces, what the English long called “the country,” went back a long way and was not limited to France. But nowhere else was the contrast as acute, or felt as keenly, as in France. The very term “la province” echoes with negative connotations. True human activity was concentrated in Paris. “Provincials and peasants,” Edmond de Goncourt noted in 1881, were simply “natural history.” That peasants were uncivilized boors went without saying, but few could bear not repeating it. J.-K. Huysmans expressed himself pungently. A cavalry officer billeted in the mining country of the Nord compared it to Africa: “you might think yourself in a black village.” A medical man reporting from the Vendée in 1911 found it still only partly civilized. An urbane magistrate who admired city workers (“frank, generous, vital”) dismissed peasants as savage brutes. Anarchists and Socialists seem to have shared these prejudices, which reflected not class but place of residence.⁴ The war between country and town, the mutual dislike and suspicion townies and countrymen entertained for each other, continued vigorously into the 1950s and, some would argue, continues still.

Less obvious, in some ways less expected, was the contempt big-city folk of every social stripe, especially Parisians, felt for the lesser towns. Amiens, in Huysmans’s *Les Soeurs Vatard* (1879), is as “amusing as a prison gate.” Jacques Chardonnet’s Barbezieux is described as fixed in a stifling gloom. A 1901 guide to over three hundred French garrison towns offers confirming glimpses. At Saint-Dié (Vosges) “diversions are rare. In this respect Saint-Dié is like all small provincial towns.” At Macon the main streets, only the main streets, are paved—but ill paved with shingle from the Saône. Worse, there are so few people to see that one sees the same faces all the time. Roanne “offers nothing of interest.

The society of Roanne has few diversions, parties are rare, social relations slack.” At Belley, where no street is paved, there is a little promenade where the band plays on Sundays; but only market days introduce a little life. At Issoudun, the chief subprefecture of the Indre, a muddy, ill-built town, there are practically no diversions and social relations are nonexistent. The inhabitants appear indifferent or hostile to strangers. The short boulevard is hardly frequented, but there is a pretty little public garden where the band of the 68th Infantry Regiment plays twice a week. When, as at Le Blanc, the place is “quite pleasant and the inhabitants affable,” communications are difficult and butchers offer beef only once a week. In late-nineteenth-century Abbeville (pop. 20,000), a contemporary remembers the compartmentation of social life: nobles, grands bourgeois, professionals, tradesmen, each keeping to themselves, avoiding their neighbors or greeting them in terms of a civility strictly measured to fit their station. “Understandably,” most young people dreamed of getting away.⁵

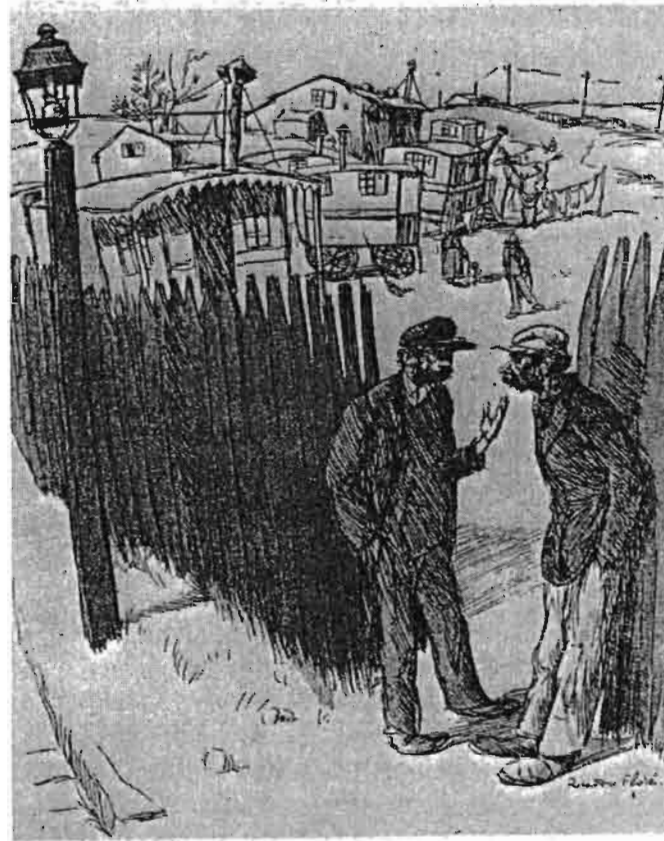
Larger centers shared in the general dreariness. Most reportedly had narrow, winding, awkward streets, so difficult to negotiate that the last sedan chairs did not disappear until the late 1880s. That was when, really about the turn of the century, urban improvements straightened the streets, razed the decrepit old houses and the constricting city walls, put up new buildings, and provided new means of public transport which both pleased and offended: “the victory of Jewish bazaars over old timber dwellings,” grumbles a man from Bourges.⁶ It was not Jewish bazaars but the new municipal passion for clearing out the old—historical monuments and tumbledown hovels alike—that spurred parliament to legislate the preservation of monuments. But many hovels survived. Raymond Abellio, born in 1907 into a modest family only one generation removed from the land, remembers the family home in a suburb of Toulouse: two rooms for his parents and grandparents, two for his father’s sister and her husband. No electricity, no gas, just candles and petrol lamps; no running water, but a public fountain a hundred yards away; no windows, only the door to let in light and air. In their apartment the fire burned in the hearth all year round, as much for light as for cooking. The uncle and aunt had a small charcoal stove, “symbol of comfort, even of luxury.”⁷

Yet these meager boroughs, where during hard winters, like that of 1879, wolves still roamed the streets, were centers of activity, dis-

seminating goods, education, information. They housed not just the market and the courthouse, the post office, telegraph, and sometimes the barracks, but schools, theaters, bookshops, through which the culture, fashions, ideas, and politics of the metropolis reached the rest of France. Seen from the perspective of Paris, provincials were clods indistinguishable from the general ruck that found its place only in natural history. Seen from the grass roots, the little town was the representative of the modern world, urban and urbane; its inhabitants were city folk, who on Sundays went "to drink a glass of milk on some farm . . . far away . . . in the countryside . . . five hundred yards from the little town."⁸ That was where one could find paved streets, though not too many and stretching not too far, and sometimes even a sidewalk. That was where the first street lights were to be admired, though only in the center, for a few hours on moonless nights during the winter months.

The nineteenth century was the age of the conquest of darkness; but many lesser urban centers acceded to light that was better than primitive at the fin de siècle or later. Facilities in the home remained scant. Most houses were badly built, and the wind passed round and under ill-fitting doors and windows. Not everybody enjoyed even candles, let alone lamps. For poor people the hearth was often the only source of heat and light. Even the better-off had little heat. Elizabeth de Clermont-Tonnerre recalls that heating in her father's house was turned off in March.⁹ Poorer people had nothing to turn off. They might buy a pound of coal (six lumps) for 10 centimes (2 sous) and use it while it lasted to warm themselves at the same time as the soup. It is not surprising to find the less well-off wearing as many layers as they could to keep out the cold, which must have been as fierce indoors as in the open. Court records reveal the tendency to multiply shirts, smocks, skirts, anything one could find. A case of attempted fratricide judged in 1884, where the knife was deflected by five layers of clothing, does not appear exceptional.¹⁰ But people seem to have taken cold philosophically. Water was more difficult to do without than heat, and the problems of getting water, then disposing of it, presented a major challenge for every urban center into the twentieth century.

In 1886 the Prefecture of the Seine, which essentially managed the Paris area, forced the owner of a building to install a water conduit. The water of the neighboring well was not safe, the nearest public



In 1907 *L'Assiette au Beurre* celebrated the spread of modern comforts into the suburbs of Paris:

—So you've left Saint-Ouen for Ivry?

—Yes, it's more distinguished round here and, besides, we've got gas lights.

fountain was a long way off, public sanitation called for a standpipe in the building.¹¹ Polluted wells and ill-accessible fountains were nothing new; public sanitation was, as, even more so, were the changes being imposed in its name. "The day will come," an architect had written wistfully only a few years before, "when 'waste' of water will become synonymous with cleanliness and hygiene. [Before this happens, however] hygienic 'waste' will have to become a habit."¹² By the 1890s, though "waste" was still avoided, water consumption had risen. But

the water piped to Paris homes often came directly from the polluted Seine. Given its evil reputation, "the wise housewife sends her maid to bring a provision of water from the fountain." Comfort and hygiene, an article about Paris water declared, were modern notions, scarcely familiar in 1892.¹³

If these conditions obtained in the capital, the situation elsewhere is easy to imagine. The prefect of a Breton department described the contaminated wells and streams from which everyone went on drinking.¹⁴ What else were they to do, when all traditional sources of household and of drinking water were heavily polluted? Rivers that served as sewers also carried the soapy water of washhouses and the industrial waste of the factories along their shores. Wells were tainted by seepage from middens, cesspools, graveyards. Growing awareness of this—not unconnected with the stink that proclaimed some streams to be more of an open sewer than the city streets—turned the fin de siècle into the age of public fountains.¹⁵ Paris was more fortunate than most places. In 1872 the English philanthropist Sir Richard Wallace had endowed it with one hundred fountains that bubbled with drinking water and whose graceful bronze design by Charles Lebourg can still be seen. But many country towns waited years for one. Some never had more than one. And since few houses, even in larger towns, boasted running water on the premises, large numbers of women and maids crowded round the fountain as early as four A.M. to get a bit of the rare commodity it dispensed. They often had to walk three or even five hundred yards with their jars and buckets. A marble plaque in the town hall of Villefranche-de-Rouergue reads: "In grateful homage to the Republican Municipal Council elected in 1884, which brought drinking water to the town. Work began in 1887." That achievement may not be unrelated to the fact that the first Republican to represent an area traditionally "white" in politics would be elected in 1898.¹⁶

The water problem preoccupied every municipal council, whatever its hue. The faster a town grew, the greater its trials. Nice, Marseilles, fell steadily behind the needs of their inhabitants. Saint-Etienne did not get a stable supply until 1949. By the twentieth century half the households in Angers subscribed to the water service, but this did not extend to the suburbs which, like other neighboring communes, got it only after the First World War. In Indre-et-Loire, upriver from Angers, only 8 percent of the communes enjoyed drinking water in 1950,

and fin de siècle Tours was often short of it. Nor were the viaducts and pipes that brought water from afar always safe. Typically, at Besançon, which piped its drinking water from the Arcier River (its own stream, the Doubs, being much too dirty), contaminated waters were probably responsible for typhoid epidemics in 1886, 1893–94, 1901–02. The widespread suspicion of water from tap, fountain, or well would encourage all who could afford it to drink safely bottled mineral water; it would justify another French tradition: the low regard in which H₂O is held.¹⁷

The disposal of used waters presented problems even more obstinate than their obtention. Practically to the end of the century, great cities like Rouen, Bordeaux, or Rennes, as well as lesser ones, saw their household garbage, sewage, and kitchen waste discarded in the gutters, chamberpots emptied in alleyway or street, the contents of cesspits removed in open tipcarts. Sewers and drains, where they existed, emptied into the local stream. In 1892 the national Commission on Public Hygiene commented on conditions in Rodez, Millau, and the Aveyron Valley, hard hit by typhoid fever: "The dirt of the people, of the homes, and of the water has propagated the [typhoid]." It noted the filthy streets, "where many inhabitants empty chamberpots and kitchen waste," the pigs in possession of the center of town, the river a running sewer, the village streets vast heaps of manure, the fountains and wells full of organic matter. No wonder that typhoid fever remained endemic in the noble episcopal city of Rodez!¹⁸

The situation was complicated by the fact that many towns continued partly rural. In 1889 a Pyrenean subprefecture such as Oloron counted 16 percent of its electorate as farmers and farm laborers. But even urban centers like Toulouse retained a strong rural imprint, and everywhere townfolk kept poultry and pigs, goats and cows, close to the house. Beehives were commonplace, despite desultory municipal ordinances.¹⁹ Butchers slaughtered cattle in or outside their shops, so that the gutters ran with blood; offal and even carcasses might be left in the roadway for dogs to despatch.²⁰ Municipal slaughterhouses were slow in coming, even in larger towns like Besançon, and slower in lesser ones like Langres, where one finally opened in 1901. Vivonne, whose council talked about building a slaughterhouse in the 1890s, actually built one in the 1930s. So, while the Paris police sought to prevent dogs from defecating on the sidewalk (it has given up!), many

provincials continued to slaughter their pigs in the backyard and sometimes in the street, where alive they had benefited from the general filth and their remains contributed to it.²¹

The travelers who expressed regret at the passing of medieval streets and structures gave little thought to the conjunction between the pestiferous and the picturesque. Many things were performed in the street, as they had been for centuries, including the natural functions of men and beasts. In Finistère the prefect had to admit that people “satisfied their needs pretty much everywhere.” There and elsewhere dung might well be swept from the street to feed the green plants in the home; but there would be much left over, and sanitation left a lot to be desired. Direct-to-sewer drainage (the famous *tout-à-l’égout*) was much discussed, but little developed until after the First World War, except in Paris. There the prefect of 1884, Eugène Poubelle, had already prohibited the traditional discarding of refuse in the street and required the use of newfangled garbage cans which rag- and bone-pickers, fearful for their trade, maliciously named after him. The name stuck, and French garbage cans are still known as *poubelles*, just as French *pissoires* were long known as *rambuteaux*, after the name of their inventor—also a prefect. But when in 1894 another Prefect of the Seine decided to introduce direct-to-sewer drainage, the bitter legal battle dragged on into the twentieth century.²² By 1903 only one Paris house in ten had been connected to the system.

If one considers the scarceness of water and of facilities for its evacuation, it is not surprising that washing was rare and bathing rarer. Clean linen long remained an exceptional luxury, even among the middle classes.²³ Better-off buildings enjoyed a single pump or tap in the courtyard. Getting water above the ground floors was rare and costly; in Nevers it became available on upper floors in the 1930s. Those who enjoyed it sooner, as in Paris, fared little better. When the Duc de Broglie, one of the richest men in France, bought a luxury mansion in the capital in 1902, the house had no bathroom, no *cabinet de toilette* (“naturally,” the duke’s daughter comments), and one water tap per floor.²⁴ About the same time, a sumptuous home on the avenue de Iéna boasted one bathroom and three lavatories where, toilet paper being unknown, one used “small cloth serviettes folded in four.”²⁵ With water brought up by carrier costing 10 cents the bucket, about 5 francs the cubic meter, it was too precious to use in many water closets.

The number of lavatories in the Iéna mansion was exceptional at a time when two out of every three lodgings in France had no lavatory at all.²⁶

What limited lavatories also put a crimp on washing, and baths especially were reserved for those with enough servants to bring the tub and fill it, then carry away the tub and dirty water. Balzac had referred to the charm of *rich* young women when they came out of their bath. Manuals of civility suggest that this would take place once a month, and it seems that ladies who actually took the plunge might soak for hours: an 1867 painting by Alfred Stevens shows a plump young blonde in a camisole dreaming in her bathtub, equipped with book, flowers, bracelet, and a jeweled watch in the soap-dish.²⁷ Symbols of wealth and conspicuous consumption.

Recourse to home-delivered baths had been imported from Germany under the Restoration, but cost tended to restrict their use. By the fin de siècle, ambulant bathmen, mostly sturdy Auvergnats who could carry a tub and warm water up to an apartment and down again, were familiar figures; giving them false orders was a favorite schoolboy joke.²⁸ Yet see how exceptional and complicated the process still continued to be—and in the highest society. In 1898 Pauline de Broglie, then ten years old, caught the measles. When she had recovered, the doctor prescribed a bath: “It was a terribly complicated business, and it was talked about for several days. Naturally there was no bath tub in the house. No one in my family ever took a bath. We washed in tubs [low round basins recently imported from England, which can be recognized in the drawings of Degas] with 2 inches of water, or else sponged ourselves down, but the idea of plunging into water to the neck struck us as pagan, almost wicked!” So a portable bath was hired, placed before a fireplace in which a fire had been lit (in June), and the tinplate was lined with a sheet; the little girl got into it with her nightshirt on.²⁹

The daughters of a rich provincial family, on the other hand, seem to have had baths “once a month in summer, *never* in winter,” though it is not clear whether the circular tub they used was a bathtub or a basin. They soaped themselves through their bathshirts, “for never would we have allowed ourselves to be naked to wash!” When changing the chemise, they closed their eyes and crossed themselves. “I grew up without ever seeing my navel.” Such reminiscences confirm the experience of Elinor Glyn’s Elizabeth, whose (noble) French godmother was

shocked to hear that she goes down to the *salle de bain* every day ("no one else seemed to use it") and especially distressed "that there never were any wet chemises" and Elizabeth got into the tub *toute nue* . . . "deplorable immodesty." Elizabeth understood: "I suppose a nice big bath is such a rare thing for them that they are obliged to make as much fuss as possible over it."³⁰

This gives us an idea of the situation in the world of the Guermantes (Pauline de Broglie's aunt Elizabeth Greffulhe was Proust's Duchesse de Guermantes), and we might consider another comment of the clear-sighted Elizabeth: "It appears you do not wash much till you are married, it is not considered *bien vu* . . . But it must be a bother picking up a taste for having baths and things afterwards."³¹ At the very time when Pauline had her first bath, Captain Dreyfus was being tried for the second time, in Rennes, a city of 70,000 which boasted thirty tubs and two private homes with bathrooms. In a public lecture course Vacher de Lapouge had affirmed that in France most women die without having once taken a bath. The same could be said of men, except for those exposed to military service.³² No wonder pretty ladies carried posies: everyone smelled and, often, so did they.

Things were going to change slowly, as new products came into general use. Zinc and enameled metal permitted the spread of jugs and basins and tubs and bidets that no longer had to be made of porcelain, which was too expensive for most. Still, washing, in the modern sense, was not a nineteenth-century commonplace: hair, for example, was washed seldom, if ever. The Comtesse de Pange recalls: "At seventeen, I had very long hair which, when loosened, wrapped around me like a mantle. But these beautiful tresses were never washed. They were stiff and filthy. The very word shampoo was ignored. From time to time they rubbed my hair with quinine water."³³ Some women might have their hair washed by the *coiffeuses à domicile*, who came in the morning to perpetrate the edifice that ladies carried around during the day.³⁴ Less exalted creatures carried lice and fleas. Jules Renard's autobiographical Poil de Carotte and his brother came home from boarding school with their heads full of lice.³⁵ In the countryside lice and fleas and scabs were so common that popular wisdom considered them essential to the health of children.

Teeth were seldom brushed and often bad. Only a few people in the 1890s used toothpowder, and toothbrushes were rarer than watches.³⁶

Dentists too were rare: largely an American import, and one of the few such things the French never complained about. Because dentists were few and expensive, one would find lots of caries, with their train of infections and stomach troubles. Between bad teeth and overcharged stomachs, it is likely that most heroes and heroines of nineteenth-century fiction had bad breath, like their real-life models.³⁷

They would smell in a more general way also, because their heavy suits and dresses could not be dry-cleaned, and their underwear (if they wore it) was seldom changed. Jules Renard seems to have been particularly sensitive to smells: at the theater he notes (as I did in my youth), "it doesn't smell of roses"; a sixteen-year-old country girl smells like someone "who never undresses to sleep. A mixture of hay and sweat." His old servant, Ragotte, emits "that odor of scraped leather that comes from people who never wash." The local schoolteacher's wife "smells of dirty underwear, never brushes her teeth."³⁸ Olfactory sensibility had risen out of nothing to become a predisposition particular to the nineteenth century. Flaubert at midcentury, traveling in a public coach, had grumbled at the way his proletarian neighbors stank to high heaven.³⁹ The passages where Huysmans and Zola glory in scents and odors strike me as the opposite extreme of the same sensibility. Awareness of smells seems to have been particularly strong at the turn of the century, as new standards clashed with traditional habits. Even Nietzsche (in *Beyond Good and Evil*) sensed that "what separates two people most profoundly is a different sense and degree of cleanliness." Yet in 1900, when *La Nouvelle Mode* recommended baths for health, for beauty, and even for cleanliness, it had to admit that "few families enjoy the means to have even a broom in their apartments."⁴⁰

The broom, where it existed, was generally wielded by a servant. The multiplicity of household chores—doing the laundry, baking bread, fetching water, coal, or logs, making clothes, mending, darning, taking care of poultry, of horses, let alone of fireplace, floors, and furniture—ensured that everyone who could afford it had a servant, and often more than one. Household servants—maids, butlers, coachmen, cooks—represented 8 percent of the active labor force.⁴¹ The effects of these resident aliens on family life have not begun to be estimated: whether on the manners and behavior patterns of families with limited privacy; or on the language, beliefs, and prejudices of the children they brought up.

Alphonse Daudet has written searing pages on the subject of the “savages” inserted into urban homes, “with their rough voices, their incomprehensible speech, their strong smell of the stable.” However much you wash them or teach them to speak French, “the [country] brute will reappear. Under your roof, at your hearth, she remains the peasant, the enemy.” Hostility of this sort was returned with interest, and one child growing up at the turn of the century has recorded the repressed hatred and malevolence of servants for the rich and the less rich they served. Can you imagine, asked Alphonse Daudet, leaving your child in the hands of such brutes? Brutes or not, many, perhaps most, children of the middle and upper classes were so left. Daudet warned that many survived only as “dreadful monsters . . . with rustic manners . . . speaking barbarian patois.”⁴² The question remains (and deserves) to be asked: from Alfred de Vigny to Jean Giraudoux and Simone de Beauvoir, how much of the cultural baggage of the upper classes was instilled by nurses and by servants? Perhaps quite as much as they got from schools.

The influence working in the other direction is easier to discern. Servants acted as crucial intermediaries between town and country, as between rich and poor. They copied their employers’ dress, manners, mannerisms; they conveyed money, secondhand clothing, printed matter, or novelties back to their village or small town; and news, and general information about urban consumption and life styles. The woman of the village or of the working class who spent some years as maid or cook in a neighboring chateau or hostelry, or in a town household, returned home—generally to marry—with different tastes, standards, and expectations from her neighbors who had missed such an experience. For one thing, she cooked better; for another, she was probably cleaner.⁴³ Around 1900 a Parisian noted that a maid newly arrived in town could not even distinguish between what is dirty and what is not: “For the distinction is not evident for everybody, and it has only started to be made during the last few years.”⁴⁴

Such distinction had grown to a great extent out of the urban realization that overcrowding, congestion, criminality, disease, mortality, were connected and that, although for the most part they affected the lower orders, they also threatened others indirectly. The miasmatic theory of disease suggested that sickness arises from decaying organic matter which creates the miasma that carries disease. If bad smells did

not cause disease, they appeared to be connected with it; and the smells in turn were evidently connected with dirt. Clean streets, clean water, clean air, began to look highly relevant to the welfare of those with the time and energy to worry about such things. And the welfare of those with neither time, energy, or concern was quickly recognized as related. In 1879 a Jules Verne novel described Franceville, a model modern city, where children were trained to “rigorous cleanliness” from the earliest age, and streets never allowed to look as normal streets looked at that time. “Clean up, clean up, unceasingly destroy . . . the miasmas that constantly emanate from an urban center.”⁴⁵

Medicine, and following medicine the public, were beginning to recognize that many maladies were social problems, not just in their effects, but in their origins. Tuberculosis—which dominated the later nineteenth century as cancer does the later twentieth century—was as readily, and as dogmatically, linked to alcoholism as lung cancer is to smoking.⁴⁶ Typhoid fever was more evidently linked to polluted waters. In the 1880s the Minister of War, concerned for the welfare of the conscript army, and after him the Minister of the Interior, moved into action;⁴⁷ municipalities were encouraged to purify and filter local waters, improve drainage, clean up the streets. About the same time, medical and sanitary measures reduced the danger of cholera, whose vibrio was isolated in 1883. The cholera epidemic of the mid-1880s killed only half as many as its predecessor of the 1860s had done; that of 1892, only one-third as many as died six years earlier.⁴⁸ One of the great dreads of earlier times waned with the century.

So did another, less spectacular but more deadly: smallpox. The Franco-Prussian War had triggered a European pandemic that left half a million dead. The German armed forces, like the British, had introduced vaccination against smallpox in the first half of the century, so far more French soldiers died, and more French citizens, than German ones. Drawing their conclusions, the Germans made vaccination compulsory for all in 1874. The French lagged in the name of liberty and went on dying at higher rates than other Europeans, except Russians, Italians, and Iberians. But the army adopted vaccination in 1883, and in 1893 it became compulsory (and free) for children in any town with a population over 5,000.⁴⁹ In 1900 *La Nouvelle Mode*, always alert to the latest fad, reported on a novel fashion: “This is done in parties, as if one was going to the theater . . . one organizes an intimate luncheon;

the doctor arrives at dessert, the vaccine in his pocket . . . It's the last word."⁵⁰

The later nineteenth century was the great age of German medical and chemical breakthroughs. The French had their own hero in this realm: Louis Pasteur, whose discoveries after 1870 would be colored by his patriotic desire to affirm French science against the German. Personal genius or patriotism, Pasteur left his mark on crucial aspects of everyday life. He improved the fermentation and preservation of milk and milk products, wines, vinegars, and beers (requesting that beers brewed according to his formula be called "*bières de la revanche nationale*"), devised a water filter, developed vaccines against anthrax and hog fever, sheep pox, poultry and cattle maladies. Finally, in 1884, Pasteur found the remedy for rabies—a major terror of the countryside. By 1886, of 1,235 French children treated for rabies at his laboratory, only 3 had died—and they had been bitten in the head.⁵¹

Probably more effective than even Pasteur's work in improving public health was the steady amelioration of the average diet. In the last half of the century the quantity of bread, wine, and potatoes annually consumed in France grew 50 percent, that of meat, beer, and cider doubled, that of alcohol tripled, that of sugar and coffee quadrupled. Bread, which had accounted for 20 percent of the average household budget in 1850, counted for only 9 percent in 1900. Even those poor working girls—seamstresses, milliners, shop assistants—known as *midinettes* because their midday meal (*repas de midi*) was no more than a snack, could find 15 sous for a *dinette* consisting of a plate of meat, one of vegetables, cheese, wine, and bread. In 1902 the Vicomte d'Avenel remarked that it had become practically impossible to find black bread (symbol of poverty and backwardness).⁵² Even the poor now ate the white bread that used to be the prerogative of princes. A study of a Breton, hence backward, department at the beginning of the twentieth century dismissed the food as monotonous and badly prepared, but noted the shift from rye bread, oaten porridge, and buckwheat cakes to white bread, potatoes, coffee, and meat at all meals.⁵³

Peasant thrift was and still remains proverbial. Describing conditions in his rural Gascon family home, *after* the First World War, Pierre Gaspar remembers that they lived in the Middle Ages: indifferent to comfort, to hygiene, let alone to any decoration, "with a simplicity close to indigence," the only difference being that, although they

ate frugally, they never went hungry.⁵⁴ Sober country housewives shunned fresh bread because one ate too much of it, preferred rancid butter because the taste was stronger and one used less of it, put salt into coffee because it cost less than sugar, and generally maintained a regime that an English observer described as a continuous fast. The appearance of meat on peasant tables on other than feast days deserves to be regarded as one of the great events of Western history. In 1907, in a Nièvre village less than 150 miles from Paris, Jules Renard recorded an old woman returning from the market proclaiming her surprise: "The world is becoming carnivorous!" There were now five butchers where there had been one, and even the poor were shifting from a herbivorous to a carnivorous diet. Peasants' regular access to butchers' meat reflected a progress so recent that on special occasions roasts and hashes were served without vegetables, because the humble vegetable one ate every day "would show lack of regard [for guests] and lessen the festive atmosphere." Still, townsfolk continued more carnivorous than rurals, and miners or industrial workers just up from the land, eager to stress their difference from the rusticity they had left behind, marked it in the food they consumed, and especially in the quantity of meat they put away.⁵⁵

If food continued to be a problem for rich as for poor, it was henceforth rather by the accentuation of age-old frictions connected with trade, the marketplace, and, increasingly, shops. Everybody cheated on weights and measures, almost everybody on quality. Eggs were hardly ever fresh. Sausage or minced meat contained almost everything but what it was supposed to. Wine, when not watered, was chemically adulterated. Milk, when it was not watered (with polluted water of course) was cut with plaster, lime, chalk, white lead, or dried ground brains. The rich got their wine in barrels or sealed bottles, their milk from goats milked at the kitchen door. One understands better the prevalence of urban stables whence came milk on the hoof, as of poultry yards; and the contemporary return to breast feeding by the baby's mother rather than by a nurse whose own milk might be suspect in the light of modern ideas of hygiene. The poor, however, had little choice and, for them more than for most, shopping was an adversary relationship, every act of buying a potential conflict.⁵⁶

Always short of cash, the poor bought everything in small quantities, and frequently on credit. Inevitably the goods they bought were over-

priced and often of poor quality. Another factor made life difficult for buyer and seller alike. Cash itself was short. Coins were so scarce that, even in Paris into the late 1890s, Roman or medieval coins discovered in some excavation were occasionally accepted as small change.⁵⁷ More often, foreign coins in copper or in silver were used to supplement French ones. The smallest available coin was the 5-cent piece, the sou, hence the long-lasting tendency to speak not of the relatively new-fangled francs, but of 20 sous, 100 sous, or whatever a coin's sou equivalent might be. (Thus, 5 francs would be cent [100] sous.) Hence also the fact that prices necessarily were quoted—and rose—in multiples of 5 cents, no less. Worse, the copper sous in circulation were worn and few. Around 1890–1900 workingmen were paid in badly worn 50-cent coins or rolls of sous that included foreign coppers struck cheap in Greece, Italy, or Argentina.⁵⁸ Naturally the workmen and their wives paid for their purchases with these coins, and traders raised prices to offset their loss. Friction was inevitable.

Between 1900 and 1913 the value of French coins in circulation rose by nearly one-third, from 6.7 to 9 billion francs. But this did not suffice. Unable to provide sufficient currency (no one of modest means willingly accepted paper bills, the smallest of which, anyway, was worth 50 francs), the government oscillated between tacit tolerance and prohibition of the foreign coinage. Banning the latter met with limited success. In 1888 Paris bus conductors were refusing to accept coins from Argentina, Chile, and Peru.⁵⁹ In 1896 a prohibition of foreign sous provoked rioting in Marseilles. The law of 1897 renewing the privileges of the Banque de France required it to sort out small coins and make sure that those circulating in the provinces would henceforth be “as good as those in Paris”—which was not saying much. Guy Thuillier estimates that in 1914 foreign coins still accounted for 15 percent of the small coins in circulation.

Far more than that must have been worn, defaced, abraded, or simply counterfeit; and this held even more true of silver 5-franc coins. Between 1878 and 1909 about one-third of these were of foreign provenance—mostly Belgian, Italian, or Austrian—and the often justified suspicion that such silver evoked led to its depreciation. Speculators in Spain counterfeited 5-franc coins whose silver content cost about 1 franc, sold them in France for 3 francs, and let enterprising speculators offer them at 3.75 francs, for use as New Year tips

(*étrennes*) to domestics, postmen, newsboys, and young relatives.⁶⁰ No wonder that what Thuillier dubs “monetary mistrust” became a long-standing trait of business dealings during the fin de siècle and beyond! Into the 1930s people treated all coins with diffidence, rang them on metal or marble slabs, tested them with their teeth, continually suspecting the tricks of others, continuously driven to tricks of their own. Not the best way to conduct relations, either human or commercial.

*

Nevertheless, the fact that between 1900 and 1913 the total French money supply rose from 16 to 27 billion suggests that there was more money around, some of which trickled through to those who had been least used to handling it. The economic recovery of the opening years of the twentieth century accounts for the Belle Epoque. But even before that, and despite the hard times associated with it, the later nineteenth century is the time when the laboring classes (to use the words of Yves Lequin) graduated from misery to precariousness.⁶¹ There is, by the end of the century, greater employment security, the real value of wages rises, food comes to account for only one-third of an average family's budget, ready-mades toll the knell of the rag merchant and his trade in cast-off clothes; and of course, as buying power grows, so does relative deprivation. The workmen's new Sunday suits were going to be sported more often at socialist meetings than in church. But to the outsider's eye things were clearly improving. In 1893 John Grand-Carteret was impressed by the novelty of relative well-being among the disinherited, and by their *embourgeoisement*. “In our day of perfect equality and of emancipation by money,” the only way of establishing social distinctions would be by looking at people's features, their white skin, the way they wore their clothes. Grand-Carteret was premature but prophetic. He was also typical of the many among the upper classes (a term by which I mean simply above the lower classes) whom “the invasion of the popular masses” made uncomfortable.⁶²

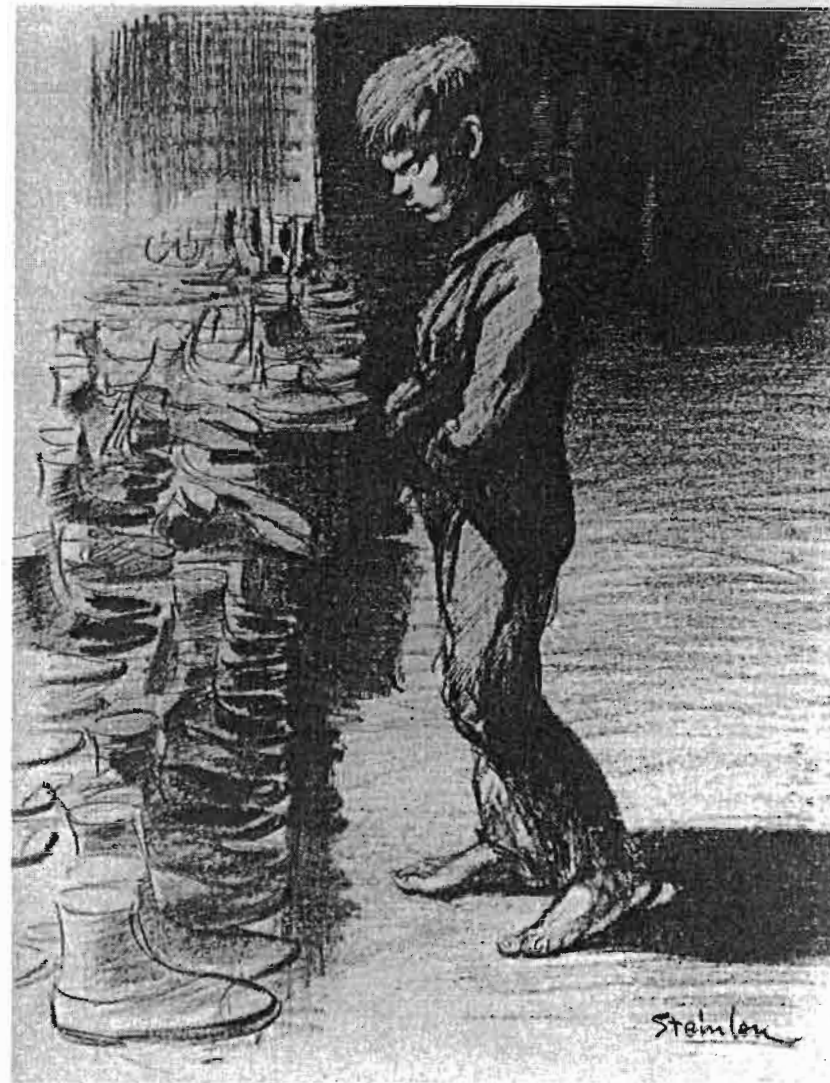
Other aspects of modernity caused uneasiness. In 1888 Albert Robida's *The Nineteenth Century* began by declaring that, “nearly all centuries end badly, ours appears to follow the common law.” According to him, the nineteenth century would breathe its last “in an indigestion of iron and steel and chemical products,” not to mention the

money and the explosives which he considered as destructive as the rest. The present "era of scientific barbarism" was bound to end badly.⁶³ Brilliant draftsman and cartoonist, one of the pioneers of science fiction, Robida was at one in his grumbling not only with the reactionary aristocracy, but with the equally reactionary rustics who attributed bad weather to the wireless telegraph and looked on new means of transport as vehicles of hell. Since such a point of view is not unknown today, a swift glance at some of the novelties that evoked it might not come amiss.

The rhythms of human life had always been set by light and lighting. Farmers and artisans began and ended their day (mostly) in relation to sunrise and sunset. The timetables of great collective institutions—convents and colleges, hospitals, prisons and barracks—were dominated by the need to save light. Government offices ran on the *journée continue*, usually from 9 A.M. to 4 or 5 P.M., until better lighting and public transport at the end of the century made them shift to the more familiar pattern of the lunchtime break. The slow advance of electricity capped a long evolution in which artificial light (oil, gas) artificially stretched time and began to support the tendency to bend time to our convenience, to regulate it, to divide it, and homogenize it.

The French Revolution, which grappled with so many things, had tried to rationalize time, but local usage, different from place to place, outlasted the Revolution. It was only the railways that forced people to accept the notion of standard time. In most places, as at Bayonne in 1865, the city hall clock showed Paris time, the cathedral clock kept its own. Most of the people, who were illiterate, took no account of hours and minutes. Train timetables imposed a precision nobody had bothered about before—the telegraph in the railway station made the precision possible—as well as a degree of homogenization which would have been irrelevant under earlier conditions.* After midcentury the habit of considering not just hours but minutes spread. And in the 1890s sports and sporting contests began to suggest counting in

* In 1891 a respected scientist commented on the law that had just imposed a standard time throughout France: "The railroads have set their timetables and their station clocks by Paris time, to the effect that every town has found itself with two different times of day: local time and station time, the two differing more than a half-hour at Brest." This was denounced as a tyrannous imposition on a defenseless public. C. Wolf (de l'Institut), "Le Temps local et l'heure universelle," *Revue pédagogique*, October 15, 1891.



If life improved for some, not everybody noticed it. This Steinlen drawing translates the traditional image of poor children gazing longingly at a toy store window into something more realistic: a barefoot boy glowering at the footgear that he covets but cannot attain.

seconds as well. Of course the chronometers one can see in people's hands in some of the cycle-racing pictures of Toulouse-Lautrec were very rare; but watches had been almost as rare until the 1860s. Watch-makers were few, sundials many; in a number of provincial towns men set their watch by the sundial, until the railway-station clock provided something more consistent. After the 1860s watch prices began to go down and public clocks multiplied; but in 1914 watches were still a rare and prized possession, passed down from father to son, with members of the lower classes owning one only exceptionally (army substitutes, or children's nurses). How else explain the vogue of a gold watch on retirement?

Trains, which so fascinated Impressionist painters and filled their canvases with steam, are part of the great nineteenth-century revolution in which men grabbed for mastery of space as well as time. We have no historian's history of trains, let alone of their effects in expanding the horizons of our fantasies. But Stephen Kern's *Culture of Time and Space* (1983) tells us how their magic affected the century's view of nature and the world. Of history, too, as in the picture Flaubert's Pellerin painted in 1848: "It represented the Republic, or Progress, or Civilization, in the person of Jesus Christ driving a railway engine."⁶⁴ The triumph of the trains and their general acceptance meant that technological innovations, once regarded as toys or nuisances, were recognized as powerful levers for manipulating both the physical world and life itself.

One clear instance of this can be found in urban transportation, where electrification of street railways begun in the United States in the 1880s spread to Europe in the 1890s, cutting costs, hence fares, by half or better and tripling the number of users within a year of its being introduced. Not only in Paris but in major provincial cities the street-car revolution allowed schoolchildren, housewives, and workmen (the last-named further encouraged by special low fares), who had once walked to ride, permitting families of modest means to take a Sunday outing, introducing the age of "cheap, mass-oriented urban transport."⁶⁵ Then, in 1900, the first Paris Metro line opened and proved phenomenally successful, despite somber warnings against the danger of electrocution, asphyxiation, and pickpockets, which made it known at first as the "Necropolitain." The pickpockets are still with us today. So, once more, are the automatic turnstiles which had to be replaced within the first few months by human controllers to punch tickets and

discourage gate-crashers. The other dire predictions proved false; and, while the number of subway travelers soared (from 15 million in 1900 to 312 million in 1909), that of tram riders held firm, somewhere below the 300 million mark. The more public transport was made available (at reasonable cost), the more the public used it. "Today," the Vicomte d'Avenel rejoiced in 1905, "duchesses and millionaires rub shoulders with cooks and clerks."⁶⁶ Whatever millionaires might choose to do, cooks and clerks were certainly better off.

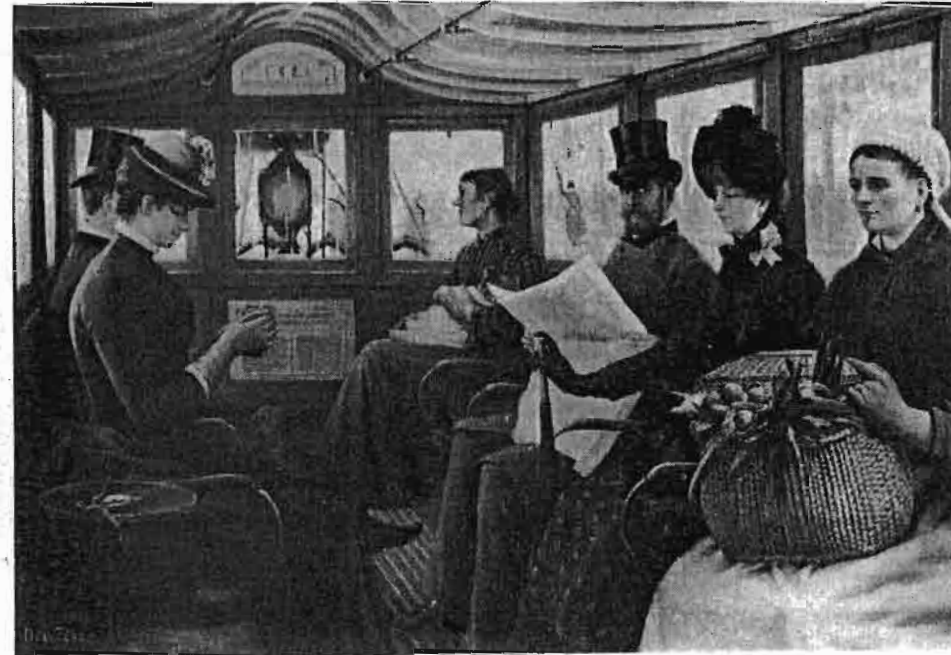
By that time, when most (though certainly not all) provincial clocks marked the hour of Paris, well over ten million telegrams were being sent every year. In 1901, when Marconi's first wireless radio signal went from Brittany to Newfoundland, appropriately opening a new era along with a new century, the wonders of electricity were no longer new. Bell's telephone and Edison's phonograph had been admired at the Paris Exhibition of 1878, along with other marvels, such as Pictet's machine for making artificial ice, and the giant head of Bartholdi's Statue of Liberty about to be shipped off to the United States. As early as 1884 a cab with two electric lamps pulled by a horse with an electric headress was advertising the electrical jewels of Mr. Aboilard.⁶⁷ In 1886 Villiers de l'Isle Adam's *Future Eve* celebrated electricity's glories and those of Mr. Edison. The Exhibition of 1889 was illuminated by gas; but its centerpiece, the Eiffel Tower, depended on electrical elevators. The Exhibition of 1900 took place under the sign of electricity. Camille Saint-Saens wrote a hymn to its glory, and "The Heavenly Fire" was performed by a mass orchestra and chorus in a free concert. The *fée électricité* was as much a presiding figure of the show as the twenty-foot stucco Parisienne that rose over the main gate dressed in the latest fashion by Paquin.

By 1900 Paris boasted nearly 350,000 electric lamps; not terribly many, perhaps, for a city of over two and a half million. And few were to be found in ordinary homes; most were in theaters, hotels, railway stations, department stores, government offices, and expensive shops.⁶⁸ The use of electricity in the home was associated with showy ostentation. When Marcel Proust's Madame Verdurin buys a town house that is to be lit entirely by electricity, "even to the rooms, each of which will have a lamp and a lampshade," this is "evidently a charming luxury." The Broglies' Paris house had no electricity until after the First World War; many homes installed it only in the reception rooms.

We have to remember that for a long time electrical power was not



Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen, "In the Omnibus" (*Gil Blas*, 1894).



Maurice Delondre, "In the Omnibus," 1890 (Musée Carnavalet, Paris).
These pictures illustrate the new democracy of public transport, where elegant ladies and men of the world rubbed shoulders with the lower classes.

very reliable: it worked badly and broke down often. But the problems of electricity were less concerned with production than with distribution. The latter was hampered by the high tax placed on electrical consumption, which discouraged its use, especially in private homes where costs could not be passed on to customers. While outside France the price of power fell with increased consumption, in France the cost per unit remained stable or fell very little, ensuring that electrical light bulbs would be few, weak, and turned on as seldom as possible.

Still, there was a special excitement and prestige attached to electricity that fostered its acceptance. At the very time when city dwellers were becoming concerned about clean air, electrical power seemed to promise a pure, almost sinless source of energy. Gas was associated with coal, fire, dirt, eventually hell; electricity with water, glaciers, and the wonderful *houille blanche* (white coal) of water-power. When the electric chair was introduced in New York State in 1889, electrical

companies protested, arguing that it would make electricity appear too dangerous for public use. French enthusiasts, however, denied the possibility of a lethal electric chair: electricity could not kill.⁶⁹ It was, as a guide to the 1900 Exhibition would describe it, a magic fluid; but its sorcery was white, not black. The magic of electricity fitted the contemporary interest in paranormal phenomena like levitation, turning tables and telepathy. Its therapeutic possibilities, stressed by Roentgen's discovery of X-rays, were nothing less than fascinating. Mechanics and magic had long been studied—and practiced—as parts of the same organic whole. In the eighteenth century Mesmer's magnetism had provided a more "scientific" competitor for occultism. We need not be surprised to encounter fin de siècle magnetic clinics that promised to treat nervous or organic maladies, with no recourse to drugs, by magnetism and electrotherapy; or swindlers brought to court for healing by (electrical) magnetism and by spiritualism all sorts of ills, including paralysis.⁷⁰

The telephone too would offer fresh opportunities to criminals to show their enterprise: the first telephonic swindle appears to have been judged in 1888.⁷¹ Crooks were not the only ones to benefit from the telephone. In 1878 the selection committee of the electrical section of the Universal Exhibition almost refused to accept Alexander Graham Bell's invention, regarding it as a fraud or toy. That very year, however, Jules Ferry was writing to his brother about the new marvel's progress.⁷² Soon afterward music lovers who visited the Electrical Exhibition of 1881 could listen to a whole performance relayed from the Opera, a mile away. The *théatrophone*, by which one could dial a play, recital, or the sittings of the National Assembly, was an instant success among those who could afford it. Its installation immediately doubled the number of telephone subscribers to 2,442, and it continued to delight connoisseurs (Proust discovered *Pelléas et Mélisande* on the theatrophone) until killed by radio in the 1930s. At a more mundane level, the telephone appeared in police stations as part of the fight against crime,⁷³ though it seems to have done so only after its adoption by the criminals.

Polite society proved relatively slow to accept the phone, and President Grévy took a lot of persuading before he allowed one to be installed in the Elysée Palace. Only a few people, like the Comtesse Greffulhe, appreciated "the magic, supernatural life," the telephone



Jules Chéret, *Théatrophone*, 1890. The possibility of listening to the latest play or opera over the telephone was demonstrated as early as 1881. In 1884 the introduction of telephone booths made the service available to nonsubscribers, though evidently only prosperous ones. It continued to be used until radio rendered it out of date in the 1930s.

afforded. "It's odd for a woman to lie in her bed," she told Goncourt, always grouchy about novelties, "and talk to a gentleman who may be in his. And you know, if the husband should walk in, one just throws the thingummy under the bed, and he does not know a thing."

One recent view suggests that the instrument was regarded as an intrusion into private living space; and it is true that the telephone impinged on privacy at a time when formal "calling" was the recognized form of sociability. The informality of the device troubled many; its location was generally inconvenient; and answering it appeared a servile gesture. As Degas told Forain when the latter was called away from the dining table: "Is *that* the telephone? They ring, and you go."⁷⁴ The telephone remained suspect for a while: good for giving orders—to servants, stores, or subordinates, for idle chatter, for amorous or adulterous trysts. This low esteem helps to explain why in 1900 there were only 30,000 telephones in France, when New York City's four largest hotels boasted 20,000 among them.

More likely, the same Malthusian attitude that sapped the swift development of electricity applied to the telephone as well. In 1881, as in 1971, would-be subscribers in France were more numerous than actual installations. In December 1881 one-third of postulants, in December 1882 one-tenth, still awaited a line. Bad organization, poor equipment, the determination to invest little and charge a lot, and the state's eagerness to tax conspired, as they so often do, to give the French a telephone network incomparably worse than any that could be found in comparable lands. In the year 1905 the Paris-Marseilles circuit alone broke down 204 times, and service was interrupted for 123 full days. In 1909 the Telephone Subscribers' Association published a pamphlet denouncing *L'Anarchie téléphonique*. In 1921 some country towns still lacked the half-century-old facility. Even so, the number of subscribers continued to grow and, as it did, the first telephone books appeared (the initial *Bottin* came out in 1889), followed by telephone numbers.⁷⁵ The shift from calling subscribers by name to calling them by number was of course denounced as depersonalizing and demeaning.

That was the trouble with scientific progress: it devalued old wisdom and hoary certainties; it threatened established attitudes and securities; it encouraged new insecurities, which science fiction reflected as clearly as political rhetoric. Most of the late twentieth century's familiar

themes were being proclaimed during the late nineteenth century: science, industry, and machinery poison mankind, crush it, or turn it into a mechanical contraption. The electrical power domesticated by man does not bring freedom but a new kind of bondage. The new appliances, the paraphernalia of modernity, enslave their users. Valuable activities are threatened by new goods. In 1892 Robida published a novel about the twentieth century: *The Electrical Life*. It opens in 1954 with an engagement trip to a national park established in darkest Brittany, where industrial and scientific innovations have been prohibited and where the young lovers, among other things, admire the last postman, preserved as a rare specimen. Since everybody "telephonoscoped" or at least phoned, "only perfect ignorants" still bothered—or knew how to—write.⁷⁶

Robida's mid-twentieth-century world includes test-tube babies and emancipated women, cassettes, electrical typewriters and electrical trains, air travel and helicopters, but also overpopulation, dangerous pollution, every kind of warfare, on land, in the air, on and undersea, and a thriving arms trade in bombs and machine guns, armored vehicles and artillery, not overlooking the possibilities of chemical warfare. We have become used to man's imagination at its most fertile when dealing with possibilities of destruction. To a degree this has always been so, but only to a degree. The possibilities of destruction that were revealed to the fin de siècle fueled a peculiarly pessimistic vision of the future that fitted its glum vision of the present. Thoughtful folk of the late eighteenth century, when they looked forward, tended to see vistas of progress and a glorious dawn. Their 1900 heirs preferred to shade their phantasies in darker hues. When, as the twentieth century opened, the Vicomte d'Avenel set out to describe the mechanisms of modern life, he wondered if one still dared to speak of Progress. Once vaunted, the notion of advancement as something beneficial was now being traduced. Yet the new was no closer to reality than the old had been; it was simply a point of view. Never, added Avenel, has the French people been as well off as it is now, and never has it felt more sorry for itself. "Its grievances have grown along with its well-being; as its circumstances improved, they were judged to deteriorate. The character of this century, favored above all others, is to be displeased with itself." It was a fair assessment of a moment's mood, which would become the pervasive spirit of the new century.⁷⁷



It would be wrong to close this chapter on an equivocal note—even though my book is bound to reflect a degree of indetermination. My view, like Avenel's, is that the fashionable perception misjudged and misrepresented reality. While the experience of progress was not an unqualified success, it involved far more than its detractors were (or are) willing to allow.

Charles Péguy, born in 1873 to a poor widow who earned her living by mending chairs, was to become one of France's national poets. Not long before he died, in the first weeks of the 1914 war, he declared that the world had changed more since he went to school in the 1880s than it had changed since the Romans.⁷⁸ Péguy is a good example of the well-known phenomenon of upward mobility through education. But if we go beyond the familiar stereotypes (no less true for being stereotypes), we can consider some other things that the slow spread of literacy, and the gradual passing of illiteracy, meant for ordinary people.

Illiterate people, like Péguy's grandmother who never went to school, had always been aware that they were at a disadvantage. Jules Renard's maid, Blandine, thirty-seven, who never wrote home to her family in her native village, explained: "It bothers me to have strangers write [my letters]."⁷⁹ Illiteracy placed one at the mercy of others. Strangers could learn one's secrets: the record of loans, the details of wills, one's financial situation. Tenants and sharecroppers found it hard to confirm accounts or agreements. Wills, contracts, deeds of sale, voting bulletins, could not be checked, or shipment manifestos filled in. After the 1880s school-taught reading and writing offered emancipation from a kind of dependency we seldom bother to remember. Writing provided a new level of individual autonomy. As it progressed, migrant workers could write their own letters home, swains could write their own love-letters, and one result was the disappearance of the public letterwriter. A few survived in the Paris of the 1880s, and even into the twentieth century, when their stalls could still be found near prisons or railway stations. They continued to operate in country fairs and in 1913 could commonly be found, at least in western France. But they were going out.⁸⁰

Writing is hard to learn. But a boy with a "good hand" was sure to

get a job. For this reason in the second half of the century more parents sent their children to school—even before the 1880s made elementary education compulsory and free. More children in school meant fewer children in factories (where under-thirteen-year-olds were prohibited by a law in 1892) and fewer beggars on the street: a way of legislating deferred gratification. And so the lower classes learned to write; and some of them also began to learn shorthand, which developed after 1860. Then, in December 1886, Edmond de Goncourt visited an American lawyer on the avenue de l'Opéra to discuss the sale of American rights for one of his plays, and noted that the contract, instead of being written out, "is printed on little pianos."⁸¹ Office equipment never looked back.

We take for granted many things that were rare, or simply not available. We know that they were not available, but most of the time we do not think about it, or about what it implies. Not least, the difference in dress and bearing, as in spoken language, that we observed existed between classes, between regions, between rural and urban populations: a set of differences which educational and material opportunities would slowly whittle down. But there are less momentous instances of the growing availability of goods and facilities affecting the most commonplace aspects of conduct and turning the exceptional into the banal. The problem of keeping food fresh was solved only very recently, and our memory has quickly adjusted to the fact that we no longer have to boil milk as soon as it is bought to keep it from turning. Yet before refrigeration, meat, milk, and fish frequently turned bad in summer, involving both serious waste and risk of poisoning.

When one reads about a character looking at himself or herself in a mirror, it is well to stop and think that until late in the nineteenth century the casual glance or the graceful pose were largely reserved for the better-off. In her Nièvre village Ragotte has only one mirror, the size of her hand. Her daughter, a servant in Paris, would send her a bigger one. In Maupassant's *Bel Ami* (1885) the hero owns only a shaving mirror, and an early scene of the novel depicts the revelation that comes to Georges Duroy when he sees himself in a full-length mirror.⁸² A generation before, the wealthy farmers who attended Madame Bovary's wedding had cut themselves shaving in the bad light.⁸³ A lot of men shaved, a lot of women put up their hair, looking

in a windowpane. What would mirrors do to their self-image? Let alone to their kemptness! A lot of men continued to cut themselves, as in *Madame Bovary*, until American safety razors with exchangeable blades came onto the market in the 1920s, putting an end to a familiar middle-class figure, the barber who shaved one at home, as well as to a familiar instrument of crime and suicide.

The mass production that enemies of modernity vilified meant, among other things, ready-made clothes, cheaper and more accessible linen, more and better underwear. The problems and costs of laundry meant that these were seldom changed. Among the lower classes shirts would not be changed for a week, sometimes two. Even among the better-off, the older generations that died out with the century often made the day shirt do double duty as a nightshirt. Into the 1930s waiters remained just about the only members of the petty bourgeoisie to boast freshly laundered shirts. Others relied on detachable collars and cuffs. The white-collar worker probably wore his *faux-col* over a shirt that was less than pristine. But the opportunity to change even that was offered by celluloid, a plastic developed in 1870 to replace expensive ivory billiard balls, and only later adapted to collars and cuffs—a reorientation that testifies to changing patterns of consumption, aspiration, and propriety.

Can we locate, trace, and evaluate the factors of this change? School, domestic service, military service, greater exigencies of the upper classes from the lower, greater aspirations and expectations of the lower classes themselves, and so on. At any rate, the threshold of shame and disgust—what Norbert Elias describes as civility—had been raised another notch. A whole range of perceptions and discriminations would be adjusted because of that, through the nineteenth century, and after.

Does all that amount to more than a collection of anecdotes and, worse, of trivia? Maupassant did not despise trivia, the “steady stream of small facts from which the overall meaning . . . will emerge.”⁸⁴ A lot of life is about things so trivial that we do not bother to record them—only sometimes to note their absence, as with manners. But the *petite histoire* is made up of details, and it can surely help to make vaster and more important processes clear.

The preceding pages suggest some obvious questions. What, for example, can we tell from dress or cleanliness or sanitary facilities,

about relations and definitions of class, and their evolution in the nineteenth century and beyond? We seem to move from an age when sumptuary and physical class distinctions become less visible, to the point where new and subtler distinctions have to be invented. Shaw's *Pygmalion*, first staged in 1914, called attention to the fact that anyone could be taught to be a lady. A quarter of a century before that, Philip Gilbert Hamilton had remarked on the number of French middle-class women who “spoke quite as well as ladies of rank!” By that time new commercial enterprises, especially the great department stores like Boucicaut's Bon Marché limned in Zola's *Au Bonheur des dames*, had already established that clerks could dress and behave like gentlefolk. Ready-made clothes helped, and soon it became fashionable to claim that it was hard to tell masters and servants apart. Few really believed it. More modest but more promising (or more ominous, according to your point of view), the true change was that differences long taken for granted were perceived as surmountable, not only in the exceptional sense to be found in picaresque situations where servants dress up as their masters, but as a socially significant possibility and, eventually, expectation. Norms of dress, consumption, and bearing, which once differed according to social or physical location, became more alike, tending toward the superficial similarities of the later twentieth century. At least on the material plane, the republican ideal of equality tiptoed toward partial realization.

So did the nineteenth-century ideal of improvement. Shortly before his death, a provincial tinsmith testified to this from the standpoint of one who had lived through the last two-thirds of the century: “Certainly we are advancing rapidly toward a better future. When one sees the great things that have been accomplished during my lifetime, one has to rejoice over those that await us in the future.”⁸⁵ Though written only three months before the outbreak of the 1914 war, Louis Marcelin's words remind us that the perspective of the workingman could well be sharply different from that which sensitive intellectuals have passed down to us.

To stay on the level of the commonplace—quite literally at the grassroots—let us glance back at Péguy's grandmother, and his mother too. All her kind, at least in the countryside, wore clogs, *sabots*, well past the century's end. By 1900 or so most people could also afford a pair of shoes, which they would wear to town, to fair, to fêtes, but the

rest of the time they shuffled and clattered about. Their heavy footwear gave them a particular gait and an easily recognizable carriage. The shambling rustic might wear city clothes and keep his (her?) mouth shut, but he stood out among those not of his own kind.

This was still true when Pierre Jakez Hélias grew up in the 1920s, but it changed in the following decade or two, and perhaps Hélias could claim as much for his lifetime as Péguy for his. At any rate, “today,” Hélias tells us, “the young peasants no longer walk like their fathers. That is because they wear different shoes; the roads are tarred; there are not so many slopes. Nor is their bearing like that of the old peasant. That is because they use different tools. They move faster.”⁸⁶ There is the steady stream of small facts Maupassant had called for. To me, it seems to testify for change. And perhaps for progress.