

Dear Friends,

I know many of you have been asking yourselves why I have not written a travelogue in the past few months. Well, one or two of you, anyway. Do I no longer care?¹

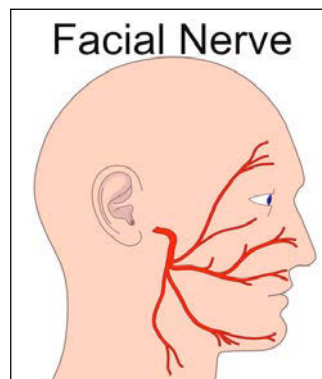
It is not as if I have been at home all this time. I went to New York in April, but I didn't find a lot to write about – mostly it was meetings with family and friends, and visits to the same museums and libraries I always go to, and the same bagels and whitefish salad I always have there, and shivering in the chilly drizzle.

I went to Los Angeles, too, for a few days, and again it was mostly meetings and delicatessen, and scenic but uneventful drives through the endless street grid as I stubbornly avoided the freeways. I even went to Dixie, where I finished off the last 18 counties in Mississippi (state #32 completed) and a strategic chunk of southwestern Alabama too (teeing up Alabama to finish in one more pass). I spent some gloomy hours among the vacant lots and deserted



avenues of shattered Meridian, and visited the house where Medgar Evers was killed; in Jackson I toured the more cheerful house of that superbly lucid writer Eudora Welty (right: her writing room). But the trip only took about a week, and when it was over I didn't feel it was eventful enough to write about.

Then at the end of May I went to Paris and Prague. But the trip was made under an unlucky star. A couple of days before leaving I developed a sudden paralysis on the right side of my face. My mouth drooped low and open, one eye would not close properly, or



blink, one nostril collapsed so I could not breathe through it. Eating and drinking were difficult; speech became fuzzy and indistinct as my tongue and lips refused to respond. I looked like I'd had a stroke.

But I didn't *feel* like I'd had a stroke – I felt like I had Bell's Palsy, a paralysis of half the face brought on by a viral infection that swells a nerve (Cranial Nerve No. 7, the facial nerve). When the swollen nerve passes through narrow channels in the bone, it gets rubbed raw and that induces temporary paralysis. Usually temporary, anyway. Should I go to the doctor? My plane was leaving in 24 hours – any doctor would tell me not to go, because who wants the responsibility of approving a trip when something weird is going on? But staying home wouldn't help Bell's Palsy heal any faster, so I gritted my teeth (or would have if my mouth had been working properly)

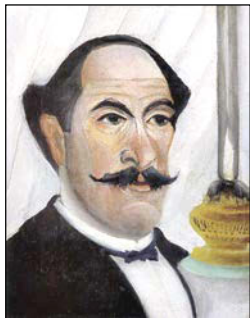
¹ He never writes, he never calls...

and got on the plane anyway. I would straighten all this out at the American Hospital in Paris.



So I arrived in Paris, in a cold and steady rain, and checked into my hotel by the Place Maubert. The rain, it turned out, was not some spring shower, but the wettest May on record in Paris since they started keeping score in 1873. It rained so hard the Seine overflowed (left), and the Orsay and Louvre Museums had to shut down so they could rescue the art from their basement vaults.

The embankments flooded, and traffic was halted in places along the river. And cold, did I mention cold? And wet, as rain so often is.



I trudged around Paris in the rain anyway, doing what I like to do there. I bought heraldry books at Librairie Gaston Saffroy, one of the few surviving heraldic bookstores in Europe. I went twice to the Marché aux Timbres, an open-air stamp market that operates even in the rain (in plastic tents) to buy philatelic envelopes (called *covers*) with heraldic designs, to increase my already extensive collection of this material with items (especially from Francophone Africa) not available in America. I ate rich *pâtés* and *terrines*, and strong cheeses, and Tunisian dates, and incomparable fresh French bread, from the parade of shops lined up on the square next to my hotel. And I went to the Orsay Museum to see their show about Henri Rousseau (1844-1910, left), called *le Douanier* because he worked as an officer collecting the *octroi* (the importation tax on goods entering Paris).²

Rousseau is remembered today mainly for his strange paintings set in jungles, and there were many of those, but there was also a lot of work by other artists that resonated with his, of which my favorite was *Equality in Death* (1848) by William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905). I had just left the Rousseau show when the announcement came over the loudspeaker that the museum was closing early because of the flood. So I trudged back through the rain until I could find a taxi to bring me back home.



² Shown: *Self-Portrait: The Artist with a Lamp* (1903).

Meanwhile I had gone to the American Hospital in Paris (which sounds a lot more glamorous than it was) had had myself checked out. Yes, it was Bell's Palsy. Yes, it was caused by a viral infection, and they gave me Acyclovir to kill it off. They stuck a lot of pins in my face and told me it showed I had a mild case and it would go away eventually.



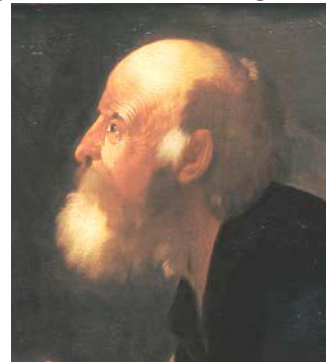
They gave me vials of saline spiked with boric acid to bathe my eyes in case it was a particularly bad kind of virus, which it wasn't. They gave me lightly weighted tape to stick on my eyelid so it would close at night and my cornea wouldn't dry out (those French, they think of everything!). They gave me an MRI just to be sure everything really was OK between my ears (the doctor told me my brain was normal, which was the first time *anyone* ever said *that*.) And then they sent me back out into the rain.

Things looked up at the weekend, when I went with my cousin Will to his country house on Oléron Island in the Atlantic. It was the second time I had been there, and it was just as much fun as the first time, with great company and fabulous food. Will won the 2015 Best Son in the World

Award for packing up his then 95-year-old mother (my cousin Evelyn whom I remembered well from childhood family visits) and moving her, along with dozens of familiar items from the walls of her old house in a New York suburb, and who knows how many trunks of clothes, and her little dog Moe, and much much else, all the way to France. She turned 96 not long ago, and appears to be having a good time admiring the



handsome young men who are the subjects of Will's paintings and photographs (there she is, above left). Left is a photograph Will made of me at Oléron, looking a lot like St. Peter; right: *The Repentant Peter* (detail), by Hendrick Terbrugghen (1616). Separated at birth? I think we should be told.



After the weekend I went back to Paris and prepared to leave for Prague. The plan was to spend nearly two weeks doing tourism there, and then head out in a car for Ústí nad Orlicí, a town 90 miles or so to the east, to attend a conference of flag scholars. I had never been to Prague; it was said to be one of the most beautiful cities in Europe, and indeed I found it (at least in the older quarters) to be packed with redolent and exuberant architecture. There was the great castle, of course, looming with its gloomy church from its high point above the city. There were unbroken lines of noble buildings lining the river that runs through the center of town. And in the



four old precincts (Old Town, New Town, Lesser Town and Castle) there were baroque and rococo, Beaux Arts and Art Deco, and especially Art Nouveau, a movement of which Prague (arms at left, supported by double-tailed Bohemian lions) was one of the dynamic centers. There were also some surviving medieval structures, blackened and hulking. In the old sections almost every building had an entrance decorated with sculpture – caryatids, or nymphs in flowing drapery, or wild men with clubs, or enormous *putti* lolling over the lintels. There were mosaics in the Art Nouveau style, floral wreaths and sprays of linden in stone and plaster, and enough ornament to satisfy even me, reactionary that I am. It made Vienna look like Levittown, New Jersey.



So I did some Prague tourism, gamely, on a tour bus and an excursion boat and in many taxis, and bought some Czech heraldic books and more philatelic covers, and watched the changing of the guard at the Castle, and ate a pig's knee basted in beer, and sat at café

tables looking like a total rube drinking the famous Bohemian beer through a straw (palsied, I still could not drink either from a glass or from a bottle).

But I was bone tired. The palsy (and the accompanying viral infection, and the relentless rain) had worn me down, and eroded my already much compromised mobility to the point where I hardly had the energy to walk the picturesque streets I had come all this way to see. The prospect of another week in Prague, followed by a car trip, delightful as it seemed when I was planning it (and delightful as it is beginning to seem now that I have mostly recovered from the palsy and have had some rest), felt at that moment like more than I could manage. So I decided to pull the plug and come home. Unfortunately my ticket home was on Air France, and the Air France pilots picked that moment to strike for repeal of a new French labor law they did not like. I would have repealed the law for them in order to fly (liberals have no backbone!) but, awkwardly, I did not have a majority in the French parliament. It turned out, though, that Air France is now part of the Air France-KLM Group, and the very reasonable Dutch pilots were happy to fly me home without my making any changes to *their* labor law. So that's what I did.

I'm glad to be home, and to rest, and have time to work on writing projects. I have been traveling too much recently – trying to see as much as I could of the great world before it got too strenuous to keep doing. I may be approaching that point now, as I get further into my 70s, but I have had a good run. And I'm not quite finished yet. I have two more trips planned for this year, which I cannot cancel and wouldn't if I could – they are shorter than I have been used to, and I will be in a car a lot of the time, and not always by myself, all of which should make it easier. Could it be that moderation offers a solution? How very boring that would be.

David

July 2016



Arms of Bohemia, by Peter Parler, from the 14th century tomb of King Ottokar II in St. Vitus' Cathedral, Prague