

A PLACE TO CHANGE TRAINS

EDDIE WOODS *reflects on George Whitman and his notoriously wonderful Left Bank bookshop Shakespeare & Co.*

I first met George, and his shop, in the winter of 1978. My then-wife (and still close friend) Jane Harvey and I had just split Amsterdam. We'd done three issues of *Ins & Outs* magazine and thought 'finito, we're leaving for good.' Vicissitudes proved us wrong, but that's another story. We were in Paris and once more hitting the road. Our first night was passed at the Rue St. Denis flat of a French photographer acquaintance. Yet one night was all she and her boyfriend could handle as far as visitors were concerned. So, come morning, Jane and I grabbed our gear and started wandering about the city. We had both seen Paris, years before we met one another; but neither of us could say we really *knew* the place. I can't say that now, though I've been many times. I mean, even for a native New Yorker it's big.

We supposed that, sometime near evening, we would use part of what little money we possessed to catch a train south. After which (as eventually was the case) we'd continue our journey, to wherever!, by hitchhiking. Till then we'd simply stroll around. One of our stops was Shakespeare & Co. We had the address because we'd been mailing copies of the magazine there. And doubtless never getting paid for them. No big deal; for however many they'd sold, I later accepted payment in books, with or without telling George. We found it easily enough. And then George found us. Not only found, but captured, for three days and nights. Someone we knew was there. A friend from London. And we had mutual contacts, among whom his bosom buddy Lawrence Ferlinghetti. But what most interested George was that I was a writer. Who, until recently, had been editing a literary magazine.

"You can stay here," he said. "Sleep upstairs. There are sofas, big chairs. And the floor. No sleeping bags?"

No, but we each had blanket shawls.

"We'll see about daytimes. Most people help out. But, hmm, you're a writer, so..."

Yes, so. And there we were. Not bad for a midday stroll.

We didn't help out, it wasn't required. We watched others do that. And more. Like trotting off with George to a late-night flea market somewhere. (Don't ask, I haven't a clue, I didn't go along. It's what I was told by those who did.) Although he mainly went to buy books, George would now & then send his helpers on the most bizarre errands. Such as: "Go find me a pair of shoes. Leather; brown or black, doesn't matter; laces. And cheap!"

"What size, George? Won't you have to try them on?"

"Size? Look at my feet. Something that'll fit those. *Shoo!* And don't take all night."

One bloke was told to score him a pair of eyeglasses.

"Huh?"

"Just look around. Not too thick. Probably what you would wear. Stop making life so complicated!"

They don't call him eccentric for nothing. You have to be a touch odd to actually believe you're the illegitimate great-grandson of Walt Whitman. Or maybe he is. We know Walt was homosexual ('the good gay poet'), there's no record of his having had offspring. But hey, anything's possible. Whereas if George isn't, then he ought to be!

We read, we talked to people, we explored the bookshelves and parts of the *Quartier Latin* beyond them. I even vaguely discussed with George the possibility of me doing a reading in the shop, 'sometime in the future.' Then, on the fourth day, we announced that we were moving on.

"Why?" asked George. "Where else is there to be?"

"We've got to go, other towns and cities are beckoning."

"I see. So for you Paris is just a place to change trains."

With which he turned and started speaking with a customer.

Never mind the details of in between; how we caught a train to Marseilles, then a week or so later thumbed our way around the Côte d'Azur, in due course making it to Barcelona--where we hung out for several weeks before returning (first me, a month or so afterwards Jane) to Amsterdam. Reviving the magazine. And starting Ins & Outs Press. Which also meant sending stuff to George again, and dropping him lines. Not that he ever wrote back, that wasn't his style. But I knew what we mailed, or couriered with people heading that way, was getting through. Copies of the magazine, books, postcards. The time or two I broke free of the house arrest that goes with being an editor and visited Paris, I stopped by and checked.

"Ah, it's you," George would say. "Changing trains again?"

Then my poems book *Sale or Return* was released and I sent that on. And followed up with a phone call.

"Who? Oh you, right. Yes, I got it. You should do a reading. Be here on..., Lawrence Durrell will be gone by then. I'll put you up, you can be our poet-in-residence for a week." *Click.*

Come the appointed date, I packed a small bag, stuffed in 20+ copies of my little tome, and hot-footed it to Paris. By train, of course. And that was a trip. Not getting there, but being there. Left my initial sojourn at George's temple of books and incredible characters way in the shade.

George gave me a room of my own. It was above the shop, one landing below where his apartment was situated. Bed, table, a couple of chairs, window overlooking whatever, a tiny kitchen of sorts, *no books*, and a lavatory. There were also no heating facilities (and being wintertime, it was cold), but George kindly laid on an electric bar fire. One problem with the loo, however: the plumbing was fucked; ergo, you couldn't flush or even pour water down. So in place of the non-functioning toilet, he brought me a bucket to pee in. For otherwise relieving myself, as well as to bathe, I'd have to use his flat. Which is where I took my piss pail once a day. Up one flight, knock on the door, lady answers: "Here," I'd say, handing her my latest urine samples. "Thank you," she'd reply, clearly used to this routine. Apparently it would be a while till a plumber was summoned.

The reading itself went very well. Pretty much a full house. To my delight, more than half the audience was female. Youngish female, and attractive. And dead keen on poetry. I held forth for about an hour, then circulated, chatted, and flogged a few books (the proceeds from which George wanted nothing; frequently gruff, even cantankerous, he did have a generous streak). My Rue St. Denis photographer friend came and took pictures (which have since strangely vanished). Unfortunately, the video taping that another friend was meant to organize failed to materialize. But I slept well that night, my dreams fortified by a goodly intake of dry *vin rouge*.

The following morning began with a tapping at the door and then the door opening. It was one of the lovely ladies from the previous night. I remember her name, could never forget it. S, that's what I'll call her. American girl, living in Paris for years, single mother with a couple of kids and an apartment she couldn't afford about five minutes walk from the shop. Been to India (like me), been a Rajneesh neo-sanyassin (I hadn't but knew many), and was nice. She bore gifts, two warm croissants and a ziplock bag filled with strong grass.

"I thought you might like waking up to a joint," she said, smiling coyly. Not what I'd had in mind but I went for it anyway. I jumped up, made a dash for my piss pot, put on some coffee (there *was* running water), dressed, and started getting stoned with S. That evening I went to her place for dinner and stayed overnight. A year later she showed up in Amsterdam.

"This bed is exuding all manner of sexual odors," she remarked whilst slipping under the covers. Indeed it was.

Apart from his transient helpers, George also had staff, people he paid to work in the shop. Not a lot (either workers or the money) but nonetheless. One of these, a young Englishman, I bumped into on the landing of an afternoon. We exchanged hellos and then he asked if I had a minute.

"Sure, what's up?"

"I was at your reading."

"Ah, it was quite crowded. And I must admit, I was mainly aware of the women."

He shrugged that off and proceeded to tell me what he thought of my poems. They weren't to his liking. Well presented, he said, but the themes, the style...not his cup of tea. He went on at some length. And while I couldn't have agreed with him less, he did put forward a fairly cogent argument, carefully thought out. Intelligent chap. I was impressed.

So impressed that I made a point of telling George. It meant something to me to know how attentively I was being listened to. It was also intended as a compliment; a way of saying, "Bright assistant you have there." Tja!

Later that day the same young fellow buttonholes me in a panic.

"What did you say to George?"

"Regarding?"

"About me, our conversation," he replied. "He just fired me!"

"Huh? You're joking."

"The hell I am. He yelled at me: 'How dare you insult my guest, our poet-in-residence. Get out, go!'"

"I'll take care of this," I assured him. And quick like a bunny went to find George.

"He didn't insult me, man. He told me what he thought, and I respect that. Who are you to write in stone that people *have to* like my work? Listen, either you rehire that lad or I'm leaving."

Within the hour the kid had his job back. Yes! And not another word was spoken of the affair.

I stayed at Shakespeare & Co. for 10 days in all. Some of that time I spent with S. For the rest I went to one of Jim Haynes' legendary Sunday dinners, visited Brion Gysin (his flat across from the Centre Pompidou and not far from where my lady photographer friend lived); did this, that and the other. I was anything but bored.

Brion Gysin. Who accidentally rediscovered the cut-up technique--more or less picking up where Tristan Tzara left off (after spontaneously creating a poem at a Dada rally, in the 1920s, by randomly pulling words from a hat)--and developed it further. He then turned others on to the method, most notably William Burroughs. Did this at the famous Beat Hotel, 9 Rue Gît-le-Cœur, a stone's throw from George's literary emporium on the Rue de la Bûcherie. After a time, Brion--together with Burroughs, Gregory Corso (who participated 'under protest'), and the South African writer Sinclair Beiles--produced *the* seminal book of cut-up writings, *Minutes to Go*. Subsequently republished eight years on by Beach Books, San Francisco, it initially appeared in Paris, in 1960, as a Twin Cities Edition. It was just such a copy (first printing, mint condition) that I purchased from George during my spell of poetic residency. For 10 francs. *Bubkes*, in other words. But that's hardly the half of it.

I must have visited Brion before buying the book, otherwise he would have signed it for me straightaway. But he did that on another occasion, in Amsterdam, at Ins & Outs, my erstwhile 'empire building.' Upon seeing that Burroughs' and Corso's signatures already adorned the flyleaf, he looked up rather admiringly and said, "You've got something valuable here." True. But true no more.

In 1992, after once again going broke (an annoyingly persistent art form with me), I sold said book for the Dutch guilder equivalent of 45 euros, or roughly 30 times what I'd paid for it. Barry Klinger (may he rest in peace), who bought it for his second-hand shop The Book Exchange, sold it on the next day for twice as much. Within no time flat we both realized what bum deals we'd made. Good thing Barry's not here to see what signed copies are going for at the moment. (*Fuck Books/I Want Money*, read a sign behind the counter where he sat. His wry sense of humor. Barry was a book lover.) With only Burroughs' signature, we're talking ca. \$400. Burroughs and Gysin, \$1800. Burroughs, Gysin and Beiles: \$32,500 via abebooks.com, baby! Stands to reason; all the signatories are well in their graves. Nothing like death to give prices a boost! There seem to be none on the market with the three signatures I had. Could be there are none, period. Other than the copy

that was once mine, with a little round, red-inked Shakespeare & Co. stamp in it for good measure. I wonder who's caressing her now, eh?

The night prior to my departure, George had me up for a meal. There were a number of guests. I don't recall the menu, but know it didn't include the pancakes he reputedly serves on Sundays (and of which I never partook, or saw for that matter). What does stick in my memory is George loudly harassing someone who was preparing food for the dog.

"Put this in. No, not that. This! Oh, hell, dump it and start again. Yes, right. Okay, add some water. Not so much, pour a little out! And stir. Good, keep stirring, I'll tell you when to stop. Stop!"

"And now?" asked the thoroughly confused helper. "Where's the dog?"

"The dog? What dog? He's out for a walk. *You eat it!* Hahaha."

Could be I'll get down to Paris one of these days. It's going on quarter of a century since I was last there. If and when, I shall definitely pay a visit to Shakespeare & Co. I like to think George will be on hand for me to greet. He's got to be. He's one of the Immortals.

How will I go? By train, what else!

Eddie did make it to Paris again. In July 2009, to participate in the William Burroughs conference Naked Lunch@50. Alas, George was ill in bed, and so the two friends didn't manage to see one another. But Eddie did finally get to meet George's lovely daughter Sylvia, who is now running the bookstore.

George Whitman died on December 14th 2011, two days after his 98th birthday.

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