

## Chapter 5

More than anything else, Jean-Pierre Seurat prided himself on his versatility. At one end of the academic spectrum he had produced a book on mediaeval philosophy so abstruse that even Duns Scotis might have scratched his head in perplexity. At the other end he taught a lower division course in World Lit. with such panache that the auditorium in Wheeler Hall was usually more full for his semi-weekly lectures than for the visiting pianists, string quartets and recorder ensembles which came in the evenings and struggled with its implacable acoustics.

Even the entire first-string football team went away from Seurat's lectures convinced that they finally understood what literature was all about. Perhaps this was the result of Seurat's teaching techniques, which were sometimes reminiscent of their favorite medium of instruction, the TV commercial. Seurat had been known to switch off the auditorium lights without warning and recite Milton's *Sonnet on his Blindness*.

Not content to limit himself to those established classics which had received the scholarly imprimatur, Seurat expanded the set curriculum to include occasionally the modern American authors so dear to the hearts of the French intelligensia. He had lectured wittily, forcibly, convincingly on "The Personification of Landscape in James M. Cain", "Mehitabel as Bitch Goddess", and "Mike Hammer as the Weapon of Thor: the Purification of Violence". Today he had promised to talk about the vigorous upsurge of American idiom in San Francisco which had just been designated Beat Poetry. He was determined that this new race of prophets should not be without honor in their own country.

Paul decided he'd better be there; first, because he was Seurat's teaching assistant and it would be a good idea if he heard at first hand the critical opinions which would later be spewed back in a series of garbled travesties, and second, because he was very curious as to what Seurat would say about Ursula Primrose. And so he was in the auditorium by ten minutes past two, in spite of the fact that Seurat usually didn't arrive until two fifteen.

Today was no exception. The hall was buzzing with half-a-hundred private conversations. The football contingent was packed together at one side like dissident delegates at a political convention, some of them engaged in aerodynamic research, folding paper planes from bluebook pages and launching them high in the air towards the coffered ceiling; you could hear a spacial counterpoint of little cries from here and there as they swooped down on unsuspecting heads. Others who faced midterm exams during the next period were desperately flipping the pages of their textbooks, hoping against hope that the few bits of information that stuck were exactly what

would be required of them. Looking around, Paul noted that one self-conscious intellectual had bought *Scream!*, Mike Sojak's latest collection of poems, and was reading it at arm's length, holding it just high enough so that his neighbors could see the cover.

Seurat arrived late, hurrying down the aisle in a little flurry of air that lifted papers off a few laps and floated them just out of reach. He bounded onto the platform, grinned at the footballers as if challenging them to do better, and launched straight into his lecture.

"Some of you may think that literature is a pile of dead books by dead authors, read by tired old men who have no interest in the present because the present has no interest in them."

Seurat's lectures were full of balanced antitheses which didn't bear close examination. But even if his audience had been inclined to criticise, Seurat never left time for it.

"A poet once wrote," he continued, "that

It was decreed by superior powers  
In a moment of wisdom sidereal  
That those who dwell within ivory towers  
Should have heads of the same material."

Nobody knew what "sidereal" meant but everybody laughed.

"Today I am going to talk about literature which is being written right now, by poets who are unlearned, unlettered, unschooled. They are Americans who look at their country and are angry at what they see. And they have chosen to express their anger in poetry."

That certainly doesn't fit Ursula, Paul thought, but I suppose with these kids you've got to generalize a bit.

"But theirs is not poetry in a conventional literary language, the language of the classroom or the drawing room. These poets speak in the language of the common man—the language of the street, the bar, the brothel. They are creating a new vernacular poetry, as original and revolutionary as that of Chaucer, who rejected the courtly French and scholarly Latin of his day in favor of the vulgar East Midlands dialect of mediaeval England."

Chaucer a revolutionary? Wasn't that distorting history rather more than necessary? Seurat went on to talk about the two principal figures in Beat Poetry: Mike Sojak, author of *Scream!*, an angry and eloquent Jeremiad, and Philip Nobile, whose distinguishing characteristics were lyricism and naivete—the authors of the beat movement's *Songs of Experience* and *Songs of Innocence*.

"Sojak and Nobile," Seurat proclaimed, "are the lion and the lamb of Beat Poetry."

And from what I've heard of their sex life, Paul added to himself, you could carry the analogy straight through to its biblical conclusion.

"The beat poets," continued Seurat, "are obsessed with the reality of American experience. And Ursula Primrose"—Paul became very attentive—"is concerned with the reality of American sex. She leaves nothing to the imagination because the American imagination is diseased, glutted with the imitation sex of Hollywood, of Madison Avenue, of a thousand TV commercials for soaps, deodorants, prophylactic panaceas—all the products which rob sex of its distinctive tastes, odors, sensations. The love poetry of Ursula Primrose is rank, sweaty, obscene, as love itself is obscene. Love is not holding hands; love is the grappling of slippery bodies between damp sweaty sheets."

Well-groomed young ladies shifted uneasily in their seats, while bronzed lettermen leered and winked at each other.

"The beats, I say, have given poetry back to the people, who give it substance. Like Antaeus, who was slain by Hercules, poetry must keep both feet firmly on the ground, or strength goes out from it and it becomes a toy for aesthetes, a party game for those who are too refined, too sophisticated to throw themselves without reservation into the game of life."

Seurat always came back to his favorite theme. Literary history was an endless progression of sexual athletes who humped their way from one great discovery to another, inexhaustible satyrs forever ploughing the secrets of existence out of the wombs of willing virgins. Or sometimes, as in Periclean Athens, they turned upon each other and reamed their corporate intestines in search of enlightenment. It was a philosophy, Paul surmised, which paid ecstatic dividends in Seurat's private consultations with attractive undergraduates, eager to improve their minds and satisfy their libidos in one simple exercise.

Paul envied Seurat his unflappable assurance, his effortless ease, his ability to carry on a tutorial and a seduction at the same time, advancing both his hands and his argument exactly the right distance. What a fool Paul had made of himself with Ursula last night. If only he'd kept to conversation and not thought of anything else, everything would have been all right. And to make matters worse, he didn't even find her attractive! But if Seurat was right, she must really know her way around a bedroom. Then how much more she must think him a complete idiot. Seurat was certainly right about one thing: reading love poetry didn't teach you a goddam thing about how to perform.

Was art, in the last analysis, just an escape? Was the scholar preparing an annotated edition of Rabelais no better than a dirty old man in a dirty old trench coat, waiting outside a flea pit on Market Street for the next showing of *Naked and Unashamed*? What damned pretentious hypocrisy! Here he

was, sucking up to Northcote, selling his tiny soul to the university, and all because he was too fucking refined to live in the twentieth century! If he hadn't gone to college, he'd probably be spending his evenings reading sexy historical novels, and no worse off for it.

But what else was open to him? The universities were the only places in America where you could be interested in art and ideas—or uninterested in baseball—and not be considered some kind of nut. Perhaps it was different in England. He'd read about country squires who squandered their time and money digging up the estate in search of Neolithic pots. The English seemed to have a tolerance of eccentricity which was itself, by American standards, eccentric. Perhaps in London he could even expose himself to the rigors of daily existence outside the academic womb without bruising his antennae.

It might even be different with women. He remembered an English girl he had met in a seminar the year before—slim, elegant, with long straight dark hair that curled up a little just at the-ends. She moved like a princess passing incognito among her people. Paul had had coffee with her after class one afternoon and they had talked about London—its theatre, its music, its architecture.

Or rather, she had talked and he had listened. She spoke with such total assurance that she never seemed to stop and think about anything—like Northcote, only relaxed. No teleprompter for her. She was the real thing; Northcote was an awkward American imitation. In fact, weren't most of the best things in America just imitations of England? Americans always did things so very laboriously that an Englishman did casually, with one hand tied behind his back. Take their literary criticism for example, so informal, relaxed, civilized. Instead of counting adjectives, it insinuated itself into the atmosphere of its subject, as if the author were an old and intimate friend.

Maybe if Paul were to spend a year in England he could absorb some of its easy self-assurance. He felt rather like the hero of a soap opera: Can an impotent intellectual from a small town in central California find consummation and fulfilment in faraway London? It was definitely worth considering.