

EN ROUTE!

FOR A LONG time, Alexis de Tocqueville was perceived, in my country, as a second-rate author.

For a long time, a very long time, this apostle of freethinking, this prophet of the antitotalitarian trends of the end of the twentieth century, this precursor of Hannah Arendt who—had we known earlier on about his importance—might have saved us precious days and kept us from a fair number of pointless debates, this enlightened envoy, was hardly taught in French universities.

And the fact is that I spent the first half of my life regarding this theoretician, who also happened to be a fine writer, as most of my contemporaries did: as an old-fashioned, hiccuping aristocrat, an adept of lukewarm thinking and happy mediums, a quibbling, overscrupulous dilettante, a moaning sensitive, a sad Narcissus, a boring, reactionary public intellectual, a sententious activist, a man of wit who amused himself by posing as a writer, a failed politician, a pale imitator of Montesquieu, a lightweight version of his uncle Chateaubriand (who seemed to have preempted the entire gamut of attractive roles), the author of a *Recollections* that could be read only as evidence of an era that was by definition perishable and, prior to that, of the long account of a journey that had almost immediately fallen into the oblivion peculiar to topical writing.

Times, of course, would change.

With the collapse of the grand political theories, with the decline of the materialist visions of the world and their implaca-

ble, simple mechanisms, with the need, above all, to reflect on the failure of socialism, on the desirability of the very idea of revolution, and on the possibilities of democratic renewal, French intellectual attitudes would evolve and bring us closer to a form of thinking whose chief merit was to prompt the break of our sterile deadlock with the inheritors of the ideas of Auguste Comte and Karl Marx.

But for a long time indeed, this was the situation.

And, for my generation at least, for someone who came to philosophy near the end of the 1960s, at an ideological moment strongly dominated by radicalism and Marxism, for someone who, like me, was twenty years old in a France where the last word in fashionable thought was Mao Tse-tung and where the new spirit—marked by boldness, intellectual and political prestige, intransigence—combined revolt with structuralism, freedom of thought with theoretical antihumanism, for the witnesses of this structural moment, at once enraged and unyielding, that was the prevailing trend of our youth; for people like us, ignorance of Tocqueville, this moderate spirit straddling the Old World and the New, the Orléans and the Bourbons, resignation to democracy and fear of revolution, was, I'm afraid, commonplace.

All of this is to say that when *The Atlantic Monthly* wrote me to propose the idea of a new journey to America, when this venerable magazine offered to put me, 173 years later, in the footsteps of my illustrious compatriot, I knew much less about him than did Americans of average education and background, who had, for a century, recognized in *Democracy in America* not just a monument, not just a manual or handbook, but a kind of mirror where, as in westerns, as in Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, as at Mount Rushmore, they contemplate the anticipated image of their virtues, their vices, the noble or ominous temptations they are confronted with, their providential birth, their destiny.

And this is also to serve as a warning that even if I obviously plunged into his texts right away, even if I took the time, before setting out, to go over my predecessor's itinerary, even if my newfound interest, my wish to make up for lost time, as well as my desire to see this excellent mind at work, all led me to take up not just his book but his notes, his correspondence, his accounts of travels to Algeria, to England, to Switzerland,

as well as the writings of his companion on this venture, Gustave de Beaumont—even so, you must not, alas, expect this book to honor to the letter the worthy and ambitious program proposed by *The Atlantic*: times have changed too much, the country has become too different from what it was when America ended at the shores of the Mississippi, and I myself, once again, am too recent an admirer of Tocqueville for this account, this travelogue, this daily journal, to be read as the reply, the extension, even the continuation or addition, of the prestigious model.

At the very most, whenever it was possible, I repeated some of the stages of his journey—for instance, the investigation into prisons that was the official pretext for Tocqueville and Beaumont's journey and which I set about updating. There are several prisons in this text. Five, to be exact. And a sixth one, Guantánamo, which, as we'll see, is not unconnected to the other five, and whose most revolting and unacceptable characteristics can be quite directly explained by the general regime of detention that I was able to observe elsewhere and that says much, unfortunately, about contemporary America. I know that the idea of interrogating a penal system and expecting it to provide you with answers about the nature of the society that has bred it, the pattern of thought that seeks to expose the secret workings of a society by examining not just what it hides but the way in which it hides it and, once it has hidden it, excludes it—I know that all of this has to do with a typically modern vision of things, one that is based on Foucault, and Nietzsche, and one that doesn't need Tocqueville for its formulation or execution. But in the end I still believe the two are intrinsically related. I don't think I would have lingered for so long in New York's high-security prisons, in the ruins of Alcatraz, or in the corridors of death row in Nevada and Louisiana if I hadn't had in mind the Tocquevillean precedent; I don't think I would have spent so much time, from the Quaker-inspired penitentiary in Pennsylvania to the camps at Guantánamo Bay, exploring the other side of the American scene, without this constraint—a rather formal one, of course, but one that, like all formal constraints, may have served as an effective instrument for seeking truth and meaning.

I also armed myself, whenever I could, with some of Tocqueville's intuitions—so extraordinarily premonitory—which I continued, book

in hand, to see so eagerly and ably validated by American reality. The triumph, which in his time hadn't yet fully played out, of equality over liberty. The tyranny of the majority, which he was the first to point out and which isn't any less fierce than other forms of dictatorship. The "pressure," to phrase it differently (and especially to put it in words that, as I now see, could be those of the identitarian America of today), "of the minds of all on the intelligence of each," of the group or ethnic mentality over citizens' "freedom of action." And, on the other hand, the new upgrades of an "individualism" that—as it reaches its culmination, as it lets people become not intoxicated by their autonomy but drunk on their independence, as it spurs them to sever the ties that bind them to one another and to the body politic, as it reduces them to the "innumerable crowd of men, all alike and equal, turned in upon themselves in a restless search for those petty, vulgar pleasures with which they fill their souls" that the end of *Democracy in America* had glimpsed and that I found again in malls, megachurches, and leagues of virtue—risks turning into a dictatorship whose "immense, protective power," as "absolute" as it is "meticulous," as "ordered" as it is "provident and kindly disposed," "seeks only to keep them in perpetual childhood" and eventually removes from them even the "bother of thinking" and the "troubles of life." In short, it would be absurd for me not to admit how endlessly vivid and present these theories were in my own mind: theories whose almost palpable presence in contemporary America is at times so blinding that you might believe those fictions from which, they say, fact draws its inspiration, not vice versa—all these theories, you might even say these fables or these myths, which you feel didn't so much foretell America as actually form it.

And then, of course, there is a certain kind of style. A way—Tocquevillean once again—of trying to mingle what is seen with what is thought, the visible flesh of facts with their secret code, the obvious text we can glean from institutions with the more arcane principle that forms their structure, as in Aristotle or Montesquieu. A way to relinquish oneself methodically, without, however, renouncing one's own vision of the world. A way, above all, to go from one subject to the next, not to dismiss, a priori, any incident or observation, and to find in a fact

of daily life or in a debate of ideas, in the dreary poetry of a motel or a highway just as in a meeting with a writer or a high-ranking member of the administration or the entertainment industry, the no less fertile substance of reflection. The determination, if you like, to write an undulating, variegated, and, at the same time, obsessive book whose style I do owe to the man who, in a letter to his cousin Comte Molé, described his America as "a forest with a thousand roads" all converging on "one single point" and who, at the very instant he seemed to be wandering, dawdling, or giving way to the good demon of curiosity and chance, didn't stop bending what he saw to the discrete logic of consequence and meaning. Isn't the author of the two volumes of *Democracy in America* the inventor, after all, of this modern form of reportage where attention to detail, the taste for personal encounters and circumstances, did not prevent—quite the contrary, made possible—faithfulness to a fixed idea? Isn't Tocqueville the prototype of those "philosopher-travelers," as Jean-Jacques Rousseau calls them in a famous note in *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, whose entire art consists of drawing valid links between the slightest variations of a journey in an unknown country and the eternal (or new) principles of what was not yet called sociological thought? Was there a better guide to lead me, in America, on the path of this other phenomenological methodology that, as it confronts things, rather than bracketing them, actually examines them, and, from their silent evidence, deduces the generating laws of life in society?

But the questions, for the main part, are my own.

Just as Tocqueville took to the road in the United States to try to answer questions posed by the situation of France in his time; just as he traveled there to discover and explain the "inexplicable vertigo" that was, for his contemporary Benjamin Constant, unique to the Reign of Terror; just as his concern was to go and look in the colonies of New England for the chemically pure form of this "democratic revolution" whose irresistible triumph he felt he was experiencing, in Great Britain but especially in France; and just as, finally, his great concern, once this form was identified, was to distinguish between the two paths liable to lead a people "to slavery or freedom, to enlightenment or barbarism, to

prosperity or wretchedness"—so I went to answer questions that are of my own time, and to learn not just about you, my American friends, but about us all.

First, anti-Americanism. First and foremost, yes, this sinister and ancient French and largely European passion that is known as anti-Americanism and that was, when I undertook this journey, in the process of sweeping through European public opinion as never before. But it's one thing to acknowledge this. It's one thing to denounce the absurdity of a discourse that turns the United States into a figure of speech, a cliché, as well as a scapegoat for the mistakes, insufficiencies, and inconsistencies of other countries. It's one thing to laugh (for you do have to laugh about it, too) at these monomaniacs who, when war is ravaging Darfur, when hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children are dying of hunger in Sri Lanka or Niger, when the neo-Talibans are humiliating the women of their Afghan villages, when the Pakistani Islamic fundamentalists prefer to burn women alive and call it a crime of honor, when the incompetent and corrupt leaders of the poorest countries bleed their own people dry and sacrifice them on the altar of their mediocre interests—it's one thing to laugh at those who, when confronted with all this, can do nothing but repeat, like miniature out-of-control automatons: "Blame it on the United States! Blame it on the United States!" It's one and the same thing to study the origins of a virus, as I have done numerous times, that, before entering the bloodstream (that is to say, the language) of a people, began with a long—very long—operation of ideological distillation, passing in transit through the laboratory of scholars (Buffon linking corruption of souls and bodies in the New World to the excessive humidity of its climate), the writers' cabinet (Drieu La Rochelle, Céline, Bernanos, so many others, denigrators of an "internal America" thriving "inside people's heads," which, from the 1930s to the present, was one of the most frequent commonplaces of the literary right and the extreme right), and the library of philosophers (Heidegger, the great Heidegger, denouncing, just as he is adhering to Nazism, that "emergence" of "monstrosity" in "modern times" which, according to him, was the birth of the United States). It's one thing, in other words, to show that anti-Americanism has always been, in Europe, hand in glove with our baser

instincts and that it is becoming now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the most formidable "attractor of the worst" that is available for all the orphaned theories, all these little dark stars fallen from doctrinaire galaxies, all this scattered debris, these directionless iron filings in search of a new magnet; it's one thing to show that anti-Americanism *has* become the magnet that was missing since the collapse of the totalitarian megatheories and that now, in Europe, in the Arab world, in an entire region of Asia, in Latin America, is remagnetizing chauvinism, hegemonism, the thirst for purity, ethnocentrism, racism, anti-Semitism, and of course fundamentalism. It's altogether *another* thing to go out into the field, to judge on actual evidence; it's another thing to contrast that chimera with the concrete body and face of America today. At times, this face will be rather flattering. At times, it will prove more unfavorable and, for friends of America, disappointing and despairing. But at least it will have the merit of no longer being imaginary. At least it will break, or try to break, with Manichaeanism, essentialism, and the reign of clichés. That, from my point of view, is the main, most honest, and, especially, most effective response to the anti-American phantasmagoria.

Then there is the question of Europe. Not the question of the image of America in Europe, or even of Europe in America, but the question of the role reserved for Europe, for its culture and its values, in contemporary America. We know how determined the Founding Fathers were to detach themselves from Europe. We know—Tocqueville, in the introduction to his book, insists on it—that the whole idea of these pioneers who had failed, in England, then in Holland, to create the city of their dreams was to separate "the democratic from all those other principles it had to contend with in the old communities of Europe," to "transplant" it to the supposedly virgin territories of the "New World" and there, in that laboratory, that greenhouse, that new land untouched by the corruptions of history, to allow it to "grow freely." But we also know that since then, America has never stopped wavering between two poles, two aims, and, at core, two identities. At times: "We are the inventors of a civilization that owes nothing to anyone else and which will be an anti-Europe." At times: "Just as Polybius said that Rome would remain a Hellenic power, we were Europeans, and we know we have no other choice but to remain so." At times even, just after the Second

World War, when the Soviet empire's offensives had to be thwarted: "Europe is what is at stake for America; Europe is an American idea; we Americans of the Marshall Plan era are the true founding fathers of a Europe that has been saved from disaster and abjection." So where do we stand now, today, in this debate that is as old as the United States? What does the country think about its European component now that its immigration has become mostly Hispanic and Asian? Does the idea of the West still have any meaning now that the Cold War is over and now that, faced with new threats, faced with the new war heralded by terrorism, the two allies seem to be standing on separate ground and holding to distinct, sometimes divergent strategies? And what should we think of the anathemas aimed at "old Europe" (a phrase of Hegel's, from a passage of *Reason in History* where he mentions Napoleon's famous quip "this old Europe bores me," as well as "those wearied by the historical bric-a-brac of old Europe") by those "neoconservative" American intellectuals who have taken up so much space in the public debate and in the workings of government—and taken so many places in the French and European political bestiary? When they call, with such senseless rage, for dissociating themselves from a spineless, feminine Europe, immoral and corrupt, daughter of Venus and sister of the most abominable dictatorships, when they call attention to its allegedly dishonest compromises, first with the wardens of Soviet prison camps, then with Saddam Hussein's Baathists, and now with the proconsuls of the Axis of Evil, is it just a matter of ill humor, a convenient quarrel—or is it the manifestation of a more profound rift? For whoever believes in the universality of the European message; for whoever considers Europe as the theater of the most horrific massacres in history as well as the paradoxical wellspring of discourses that have allowed these massacres to be reflected upon and that might, tomorrow, make it possible to avert their repetition; for the upholders of a Europe understood as a faith born, as Husserl wrote, from the idea of reason and the spirit of philosophy, this question is an essential one. It is essential for an America that, had it to turn its back finally or even for a long time on its European source, would lose a portion of its memory, a part of its soul. But it is also essential for Europe, which, if it lost its American resource, if this chance, celebrated by Goethe, of seeing its own history begin again in American

liberty were to fade, if it lost sight of this American model that is, in its moments of doubt, the only tangible proof that its own supranational dream is neither a piece of nonsense nor an unattainable ideal, would lose a little of its reasons for belief and, hence, a little of its motivating force: its famous constitutional patriotism, its aim of adding to everyone's national feeling the liberating allegiance to an Idea—what war-rant do these notions have, in reality, other than the living evidence of America?

Then there is one final question. Perhaps, considering the time chosen for my journey, it is really the main one: What shape is this democracy in, the one Americans (with good cause) are so proud of and which they have always wanted to hold up as an example for the rest of the world? Some voices are being raised in the country to denounce the attacks on constitutional rights brought about by the struggle against terrorism, infringements to which public opinion—drugged on patriotism, stunned by the 9/11 attacks—is increasingly reconciling itself. Other voices—or perhaps the same ones—worry about the series of micro-derangements that, even before 9/11, began to affect the fragile equilibrium of the executive, legislative, and judicial powers (here, an abuse of power . . . there, the excessive zeal of an intelligence organization . . . or else the problematic and suspicious crusade of an independent prosecutor hot on the trail of a libertine president . . .). Still others say they are witnessing the implementation—insidious but relentless—of both immense and minute mechanisms of surveillance, whose triumph, should it come about, would prove Tocqueville right, not to mention Foucault and Nietzsche, who saw in the proliferation of laws transforming any attempted divergence from the collective norm into a criminal offense the sign of either a world without desire or of a deliquescent sovereignty or both. All of this would be nothing, the worst pessimists add, if those people whose profession it is to monitor these tendencies and think critically about them weren't themselves the object of unprecedented disciplinary actions—all of this would be less important if the American press, that model, that beacon, wasn't undergoing a crisis in which it isn't clear which weighs more heavily: acquiescence to the big lobbies, especially the lobby of money; the temptation of self-censorship in the face of government propaganda; the personal risk

journalists take when, protecting their sources, they remain faithful to the rules of their profession; or (when the press too easily becomes the echo of a politics reduced to scandal), assenting to the vilest tendencies of our times. And I am not speaking here about that cancer of poverty that is ravaging so many American cities, which the federal government seems to lack both the means and, especially, the will to cure. And I am not speaking either of that onslaught of moral values, that neopuritan wave, that obsession with belonging and transparency, that could, according to some, be well in the process of becoming a new mode of American citizenship. I am not talking about those right-thinking activists, those militiamen of Virtue and Order, those witch-hunters of a new Salem, extended throughout America who are coming to preach the end not of history but of the world and, in this end-of-the-world perspective, general mobilization, an aligning of minds, and, in sum, an internal holy war. So what about this democracy? What should we think about this debate? Has the model broken down? Is democracy ill? Is America at a new turning point of its history, as it was during the Civil War, the Great Depression, and the New Deal? Is it the tyranny of the majority that threatens? Or of minorities? And aren't they both one and the same thing? The same model, one a miniature? When the latter use the language of the former, when their style, their reproaches, their ways of imposing their canons and constraining the recalcitrant to toe the line, are inspired by the example of the majority and eager to duplicate it, isn't it at bottom the same danger? What of American exceptionalism, in this case? What has happened to the wild but inspiring dream of building a model republic in keeping with the manifest destiny of a people no less admirable? In short, have we returned to the dark days when Sartre, that friend of Huston and Dos Passos, that lover of Manhattan and its skyscrapers, that admirer of the American way of life and its programmatic wrenching away from the evil demon of roots and origins, exclaimed, in the midst of McCarthyism: "*L'Amérique a la rage*" ("America is sick with rabies")? Just as another great writer, Thomas Mann, a few years earlier, in a historical context obviously not comparable, notoriously warned "Europe, beware," should we, today, advise our American friends to watch out for this America that has inspired the world's esteem, fought fascism and

communism, but might be starting to show, by its own admission, signs of weariness? Should we remember—and, if need be, remind our friends—that there is no example yet of a civilization that has survived entering into what Walt Whitman called the "Sahara of the soul"?

These are the questions.

These made up my implicit checklist of topics for a journey that lasted, by chance, almost exactly as long as Tocqueville and Beaumont's own (but with pauses and short journeys back to France).

To which, for the sake of accuracy, it might be useful to add a few other concerns, less American but no less Tocquevillean: the instant distaste, for example, that seemed to affect the idea of and even the word *liberalism* during the very same period in France, in the heated debates over the adoption or rejection of a European constitution. It was a long time in forming, of course. This hatred of liberalism as such, this strange semantic reversal, the transformation into a mark of infamy of this fine word used by the Carbonari and French revolutionaries during Tocqueville's time, is an old, somber story that dates back to the last years of the nineteenth century, at the time of the first wave of French anti-Semitism and fascism. But still . . . Noting the migration of this old, obsessive theme from the extreme right over to the other side, then hearing a good half of the French left take up the cliché, whose despicable undertones you didn't need to be keen of hearing to detect, then seeing this faction of the left shamelessly liquidating in this way the entire wealth of popular, and even revolutionary, memory, from which liberalism—the word and the phenomenon—drew its true substance, thus witnessing once again, just as with anti-Americanism, just as with anti-Semitism, one of those crossovers France is so adept at, was terribly disturbing. And this disarray, seen from America—that is to say, from a country where both the word and the phenomenon have followed their semantic and conceptual career, have been improved, enriched, and, in the end, metamorphosed—was all the more distressing, and yet, in a way, more intelligible.

The method would be as simple as the questions and concerns were complex.

The road, essentially.

Yes, from east to west, from north to south, then from south to south, then north through Texas, Arkansas, the mythic cities of Tennessee, the two Carolinas, Virginia, the states of New England, this road—*hodos* in Greek, which has given us *method*, from *metahodos*, literally “along the road”—which another writer, this time an American, Jack Kerouac, has shown is not the worst method for capturing the reality of the country: provided you travel it as he did; provided you put yourself in the same spiritual and perhaps physical mood as his; provided, for instance, you stay, as he recommends, well to the right of the driver and try to adhere bodily, almost sensually, to the ribbon of miles that unfurls beneath your wheels; provided you devour the miles as the biblical prophets prompted us to devour the Word of God. (Aren’t road and language, after all, siblings in humanity? Isn’t it when both roads and languages are invented that commerce, mediation, civilization, begin?)

Of course I can’t compare a modern journey like mine, supported by a large magazine and monitored, from Washington, D.C., by vigilant assistants, to the presituationist driftings of the celestial tramps, semi-outcasts, and angels of desolation of the beat generation.

And truthfulness obliges me to say that I made some notable exceptions to the rule of the road: a flight over the Mexican border; another over the Nevada deserts; yet another over the Mississippi delta, then over an oil rig out in the gulf of Mexico; a sudden meeting that forced me to retrace my steps or skip a stop; three days in Guantánamo; attending the conventions of an electoral campaign that coincided with this plunge into the American heartland and that, even if the campaign wasn’t in any way my main concern, sometimes imposed its own schedule on me.

But that is essentially how things occurred.

These fifteen thousand miles of slow travel were made by road, through this world of a nation that, like so many Americans, I quickly realized I didn’t know all that well. Roads great and small; mythic roads and forgotten roads; Route 101 from the Oregon border to the Mexican frontier; Route 1, Robert Kramer’s road, but taken backward, toward Florida; Route 49, along the Sierra Nevada; Route 61, from north to

south; Route 66, or at least what’s left of it, west of the Grand Canyon, where the phantoms of *The Grapes of Wrath* still hover; numbered roads; official roads; roads that have been paved, planned, and standardized and roads that, whether they run alongside the Mississippi or the Pacific, whether they cross the hills of Nebraska, the pine forests and gorges of Colorado or the stone gardens, mounds of sculpted granite, and sudden dust storms of the South Dakota plains, all reinvent their landscapes, resketch their borders, and appear once again almost exotic; this endless intermeshing of roads that I sometimes feel, along with the railroad, made the United States, made them united and, at the same time, helped preserve the country’s uncompromising and vigorous diversity. . . .

I mention Kerouac. But I could also have mentioned filmmakers. I could have mentioned Wim Wenders. Or the Hitchcock of *North by Northwest*. Or *Easy Rider*. Or *Vanishing Point*. Or even, but at greater length, Kramer’s film *Route One/USA*. I could, in fact, have mentioned any one of those road movies that, much more than Toccoqueville, much more than any European essayist, have shaped my imagination of America as well, I think, as that of an entire generation born after the Second World War. And I could also have quoted the Thoreau of the “old, meandering, dry, uninhabited roads, which lead away from towns.” Or the Whitman who, “afloat and light-hearted,” takes “to the open road” on this “rude, silent, incomprehensible” earth. Or even Nabokov, claiming that the car is “the only place in America with no noise and no draft,” which is why he so liked to travel by automobile. If I mention Kerouac, then, if I immediately thought of Kerouac when I arrived, for instance, in San Francisco, if *On the Road* was, from one end of my journey to the other, a serviceable and secret guidebook, it’s because proceeding thus, taking the time, like him, to cross this country on the ground, following these four-lane ribbons, these lifelines of the landscape, merging with the tongues of asphalt and sometimes, in the desert, the tongues of fire that are American roads, choosing, in other words, the paths that seem at first the longest, offered an entire range of advantages that, for a writer, soon turned out to be decisive.

It’s the possibility of daydreaming.

It’s an exercise in pace and patience.

It's a way of entering into that trance-like state, that alert and vigilant lethargy that lovers of high speeds know, that makes one all the more receptive to the sudden appearance of the unexpected.

While flying in an airplane abolishes time and distance, while it puts you in immediate touch with a point of arrival that is never really fore-shadowed, while the train itself is, in Proust's words, a "magical" vehicle that transports you as though by enchantment, with almost no effort or gradation, from Paris to Florence and elsewhere, this journey, this long, enduring journey by car, this ground-level journey that spares you nothing of the tectonics of space and hence of time, allows the traveler to experience a mode of the finite that alone can allow him to come to terms with the finitude of landscapes and faces.

Or rather: by yielding that sense of distance and gravity of places back to the traveler; by adding to that a sense of immensity, previously inconceivable; by pursuing a frontier that seems to keep hiding, growing ever more distant as he approaches it; by a continuous alternation of deserts, mountains, plains inhabited and deserted, huge cities and makeshift villages, more deserts, Indian reservations, parks; finally, by playing remorselessly on this yearning for freedom that, in most modern modes of travel, lingers only as an improbable memory, this kind of journey has the additional merit of offering a reminiscence, a kind of condensation, of the great founding myths of the American nation: land promised and refused, lines of escape, shimmering horizons, the wall of the Pacific, the American dream—the last chance, in this world, to have even a whiff of that rite-of-passage experience that for centuries was the discovery, by each individual, of America.

And then, finally, choosing asphalt rather than flight and the thoughts that go with flight, riding "the white line in the holy road" (Kerouac again) "to a nonexistent destination," rolling along, not letting yourself be discouraged either by those supermarkets of sleep that the motels of the past have become or by those Potemkin villages that, from time to time, between two franchised feeding machines, are meant to reinject a little actual humanity into a space that tends to neutral impersonality, riding on, always riding—isn't that form of travel the only one suitable for a writer: wandering along, dallying, going somewhere and nowhere

at the same time, hesitating, testing the wind, letting chance flirt with you, improvising?

For actually there wasn't much logistical preparation for this journey.

Aside from a general itinerary glanced at before leaving, which I'm not even sure I kept to all that scrupulously, there wasn't much organization; little premeditation; not too many preordained appointments, organized well in advance from afar; or, if there were, they were a beginning, not an end; a point of entrance, never of completion; a trick to tame the place and, afterward, lose yourself in it.

One day, the shock of an anonymous face.

Another, the "devouring haste" of a suburbanized urban landscape.

Another, an incident; an accident at first stripped of meaning; a Tocquevillean policeman demonstrating that the American road has also, alas, become a place of choice for the insane injunction to "keep moving"; the disturbing strangeness of a cliché; a scene of daily life, seemingly ordinary or, rather, extraordinary—a poor, laughable country fair in what Gustave Flaubert called "the litter of the everyday."

Still another, a meeting with an anti-Semitic Indian chief; a childlike archdemagogue who happens to be president; a would-be future president; a Hollywood star talking away like a politician; a writer mistaking himself for an Indian; a clarinet-playing filmmaker; a waitress at a bar singing, in a low voice, the black sun of her cursed existence; a tycoon; a poor white man in New Orleans; a Louisiana journalist predicting an imminent flood; an evangelical zealot of God; a severe, enlightened higher-up in the Mormon Church—all of them leading roles in the prodigious human comedy that is also America; the color-studded, larger-than-life characters of the great permanent performance it has always offered—a show that seems less likely than ever to shut down.

And then yet another: nothing; a sensation; an impression; the vision, like a lamp floating in a pink sky, of the tip of Seattle's first skyscraper; the friendly spirits of Savannah; the dreamy sensuality of a young girl in San Diego; the new, endless light of the Los Angeles freeway; a conversation in a countryside brothel on the edge of Death Valley; the ghost of a gold prospector; the impalpable, almost unfindable, but all the more

tragic traces of Fitzgerald and Hemingway; a jazz tune in New Orleans; a storm in Florida; the good, cheerful presence of a lifelong companion; a minister in Birmingham crying as he remembered the civil-rights struggles; the tumult of song rising to the rafters of another church, in Memphis; a sentence left unfinished; a sign not necessarily decoded; all these miraculous or malicious nothings, sometimes those moments of happiness that I have tried to capture in words and that form the other prize, in my eyes, of this journey.

Is it the route that creates the traffic or vice versa, asks Leopold Bloom in Joyce's *Ulysses*. It's the road, in any case, that made this book. The road has made the method that in turn inspired this impossible portrait of America.

LE VOYAGE EN AMÉRIQUE