

Chapter 2, pp. 56-9: place de la Concorde (p. 58 is a full-page illustration)
[the Orangerie has since been redesigned]

Close at hand for the favourites of Society was Society's favourite church. Begun in 1764, the ÉGLISE DE LA MADELEINE looks like a suitable edifice for a national museum or a particularly pompous bank (which is what at one stage it nearly became). Though it ended up as a church, consecrated in 1842 after a spell as a Temple de la Gloire in the early years of the century, it is not altogether easy to imagine people going in there to worship anything this side of the classical gods and goddesses. The Madeleine has, however, done useful service for society weddings and funerals, including the funeral of Chopin. Moreover, it enjoys a spectacular situation. From the flight of steps in front of it the eye is drawn along one of the great vistas in this part of Paris: down the rue Royale to the place de la Concorde, and beyond it to the Palais Bourbon and the Invalides.

The Madeleine's rather lifeless dignity is offset by a rich display of flowers in the neighbouring market and an almost equally absorbing array of foodstuffs in the windows of Fauchon, a sort of Parisian Fortnum and Mason which caters in appropriate style for the material needs of the Madeleine's parishioners.

Leading away from the church, the rue Royale has the look of a street that was designed for processions. Wedding parties and funeral cortèges were only one facet of this; it was also along the rue Royale that the tumbrils rolled towards the guillotine in the place de la Concorde. Today it is lined with the expensive shops that are a feature of the area. Just before we reach the bottom, we pass the unostentatious entrance to Maxim's. Like so many good things, it was a product of the 1890s, and it preserves the art nouveau decor of the period. Within a few years it had won popularity among an exotic mixture of the international nobility and the upper reaches of the Parisian demi-monde. Think of the *belle époque* and thoughts of Maxim's will not be far behind.

Standing by its doorway, we are already on the edge of Paris's most majestic square, which was laid out in the eighteenth century under Louis XV. In a perfect world the place de la Concorde would be forbidden ground to cars, vans, lorries, mopeds and fast-moving bicycles, but for the moment those wishing to see the obelisk at close quarters must either walk round to the crossing-point or nerve themselves for the death-run across a wide expanse of road entirely at the mercy of French motorists out to bag slow-footed pedestrians. If the railing around the obelisk chances to be open, you can then position yourself for a particularly satisfying view up the Champs-Élysées. Dusk is the time I prefer, ideally the twilight of a summer evening, when the lights along the Champs challenge a fading glow that spreads from the sky behind the Arc de Triomphe.

The obelisk comes from the same temple in Luxor as Cleopatra's Needle on the Thames embankment and dates from the time of Rameses II, the Pharaoh from whom the Children of Israel escaped under the leadership of Moses. Both of these colossal monuments were sent to Europe by the Viceroy of Egypt, who was attempting to curry favour with the European monarchs. In the case of France this was a long-term business, since the obelisk took four years to get to its destination. By the time it reached the capital in 1833, Charles X, to whom it had been sent, was already dead. An inscription at the base tells us that it was erected on its pedestal by the engineer M. Lebas to the acclamation of a massive crowd on 25 October 1836. Complex, and to me quite incomprehensible, diagrams, also on the base, explain how it was transported. Anyone who wants to know the story might do better to begin with the narrative in the Maritime Museum.

One of the great virtues of an obelisk is its lofty neutrality. Unlike statues of kings, emperors and statesmen, it incites no one to pull it down when the political climate changes. For that reason alone it would be an ideal monument for the centre of Paris; but placed as it is in the middle of the splendid prospect from the Arc de Triomphe to the Louvre, it has a commanding presence which quite outstrips that of its cousin beside the Thames.

Political neutrality is not something that came early to the place de la Concorde. Initially its centre-piece was an unpopular statue of Louis XV, which was duly demolished in 1792 to be replaced by a huge statue representing Liberty. But Liberty was an even more relative concept than usual during the Revolution and before long the statue had a companion piece in the shape of the guillotine. 'Liberty! Liberty! what crimes are committed in thy name,' said Mme Roland, looking at the statue as she set her foot to the scaffold. In the course of three bloody years 1119 people were executed here – the place de la Révolution, as it was then called. Among the victims were some of the most eminent architects of the Revolution as well as its most notable enemies: Danton and Robespierre died here, as did Louis XVI, Marie-Antoinette and Charlotte Corday.

Around the edge of the square are eight pavilions surmounted by statues representing France's principal cities. You might reasonably feel that life is too short to give much time to these, but Pradier's statue of Strasbourg, opposite Lille at the north-east corner, has a subsidiary interest in that its model was Juliette Drouet, the long-serving, long-suffering mistress of Victor Hugo. (She would have every right to feel that the sulky battle-axe Pradier has created does her less than justice.) For almost 50 years, until the end of World War I, this statue was hung with black, Strasbourg having been taken over by Germany after the Franco-Prussian war.

Not far from here people emerge in a continual stream from the Concorde Métro stop. It was the scene in this station that prompted Ezra Pound to compose the most famous of Imagist poems, 'In a Station of the Metro':

*The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
petals on a wet, black bough.*

From our vantage point beside the obelisk we can glance back up the rue Royale towards the Madeleine, which actually looks rather better at this distance. We can also get a clearer view of the two buildings between which we entered the square, on one side the Hôtel Crillon, on the other the Hôtel de la Marine, now the headquarters of the navy. It was at the Crillon that Benjamin Franklin, among others, signed the Treaty of Friendship and Trade between France and America with Louis XVI. Appropriately enough, the American Embassy now stands just opposite, on the other side of the rue Boissy d'Anglas. In 1944 the Hôtel Crillon was the scene of fierce fighting at the end of the German Occupation.

At the south-east corner of the square, beside the Tuileries, is a museum not to be missed. In the days when the neighbouring Jeu de Paume housed the main collection of French Impressionists, the ORANGERIE tended to be noticed chiefly for its temporary exhibitions, but since then it has come into its own. It is an airy gallery with plenty of light which holds a memorable collection of early twentieth-century paintings. Matisse, Renoir, Derain, Utrillo and Douanier Rousseau are all represented. Among its many attractions are Rousseau's doom-laden picture *La Noce* and Marie Laurencin's wistful portrait from 1923 of Mlle Chanel. Downstairs are Monet's *Les Nymphées*, the eight huge paintings inspired by his garden at Giverny, which he offered to the nation '*comme un bouquet de fleurs*'. He supervised their arrangement in the Orangerie, but with the provision that they should not be shown to the public until after his death – perhaps because in a curious way these almost abstract paintings were too personal.

The pont de la Concorde has nothing special to offer the sightseer in the way of structure or view – it leads straight towards the Palais Bourbon, seat of the Assemblée Nationale – but it does have one uncommon feature to recommend it. Since it was being built at the time that the Bastille was demolished, stones from the old fortress were brought here to be used for the upper part of its piers. This was a satisfactory arrangement for reasons both of economy and of symbolism. The ardent revolutionary could now feel that the stones of tyranny were being trampled underfoot forever.

We enter the Champs-Élysées past two celebrated eighteenth-century statues of rearing horses, the '*chevaux de Marly*'. Like the bronze horses of San Marco in Venice, the originals have now been retired to a display room, safe from the corrosive air which the rest of us continue to breathe. Their tough new replicas have been designed to last well into the next millennium. The prospect that stretches ahead of us as we walk past them is at the heart of Paris's mythology, an image that encapsulates its claims to history, vision, fashion and glamour. By the time we have gasped our way up to the Arc de Triomphe, the image is likely to have taken something of a battering. To trudge past rows of fast food outlets, car show rooms, airline offices and ugly cinemas inevitably taxes one's sense of romance; but then by some odd chemistry one wakes up the next morning to find the lustrous image of the Champs-Élysées splendidly intact again, quite untroubled by this brush with reality.