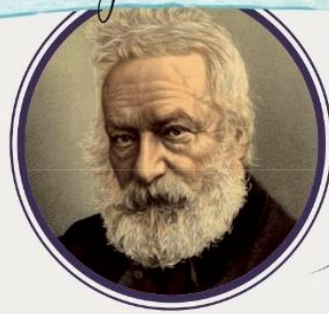
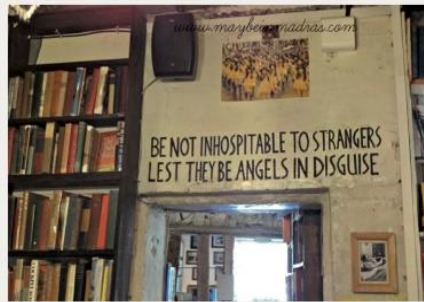


Victor Hugo's wallpaper



Adelaide-based author of *One Boy Missing* and *Datsunland*, **STEPHEN ORR**, on finding the literary corners of Paris and evaluating the décor of Victor Hugo's bedroom.



Paris's Shakespeare and Company

Let's call him Dwight. He was from New York, and worked in construction. I was sitting outside Shakespeare and Co. in the shadow of the crumbling Notre-Dame de Paris when he sat beside me and started showing me pictures of his kids, aged five or six, standing in front of Paris landmarks such as the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre's Sleeping Hermaphroditus and, of course, Shakespeare and Co. He explained he'd taken the photos in the '80s and now (hold on, then they appeared, these 30-something kids) he'd returned to re-take the photos in the same spots, almost like Paris was an exercise in branding, in cultural superiority, or at least authenticity.

This got me thinking. Why was I here? Why had I just trawled Dublin in search of Joyce and Swift, London in search of Dickens? Why? Because, as a writer, I suspect certain cities encourage the Muse, like artistic people,

to care about what they read, watch and hear. I despair for Oz. Although the cultural cringe apparently ended in the 1970s, it seems to me it keeps returning.

It hadn't started well. My wife and I had settled in our room on Boulevard de Magenta. I, of course, immediately reached for the map and tried to find Père Lachaise Cemetery, twilight of gods such as Molière and Oscar Wilde, Apollinaire,



Oscar Wilde's tomb



*Interior of Victor Hugo's house*



Balzac and Proust. Bingo! Only a short walk, I told my wife, the long-suffering lit-tourist (by proxy). She studied the map and said, 'That's miles!' But I soon had her down the stairs, out the door and along the Rue, with its Mach 3 cyclists. Through the Place de la République, on and on, until we arrived at the gates at 6.15 pm, and the sign: OPENING HOURS 8 AM – 6 PM. Said wife looked at me, crossed her arms, and I managed, 'Well, I'm more disappointed than you.' And I mean, seriously, who closes a cemetery at six? It's not like Gertrude Stein or Colette are going anywhere.

The next morning I was full of enthusiasm. I had my list of writerly places, and my wife had her list (boring stuff like *that* tower, the arc de something, the Louvre). After the previous evening's disappointment I was determined to show her what a lit-city really looks like. No Rundle Mall here with its single, struggling bookshop. We tackled the Metro, crossed under the river and got off at Saint-Michel, emerged into the grey light of Paris and stood taking it all in. You know the feeling, like you've spent your life down on the farm, in your own private Kansas (or Adelaide) and here, at last, Paris! (We couldn't find a toilet, and the coffee was nowhere near as good as promised, but the feeling remained.)

A short walk to the world's most famous bookshop, Shakespeare and Co. My wife said she'd prefer to look in the souvenir shops. So be

it! I went in, squeezing past dozens of tourists searching for glimpses of *Ulysses* and *Farwell to Arms*. Finding, instead, half of the United States trying to locate F Scott in a bookshop he'd never entered. Because, as I discovered later, *that* Shakespeare and Co. (at 12 Rue de l'Odeon) had closed in 1941. The original store was opened by Sylvia Beach in 1919 (at another address, 8 Rue Dupuytren) but had closed when, so the story goes, she refused to sell an SS officer a first edition copy of *Ulysses*. Apocryphal, perhaps, but in the meantime, Beach had published Joyce's masterpiece, befriended all of the American expat writers of the 1920s and '30s, including Hemingway and Ford Madox Ford (read *The Good Soldier*, a book every bit as good as Joyce's Greek effort). These, strangely enough, were the people the customers in the new S&C were looking for, having read them through high school, college and beyond. Funny how history never plays along. Funny, too, how American literature is French.

The new shop, which exists today, was opened by American ex-serviceman George Whitman in 1951. He named it Le Mistral, but then reverted to Shakespeare and Co. in honour of Beach. And really, if you close your eyes and imagine, it's still Beach's shop, and Joyce is still there, playing the piano, cuddling cats and reminiscing about a frisky Dublin. I explored the library, bought a copy of Pound's complete *Cantos* in honour of the pre-fascist

## WRITER'S HOUSE

poet, another drop-in disciple of Beach, who spent his days editing and encouraging a generation of soon-to-be-great writers, most notably T S Eliot (Pound edited *The Waste Land*).

I passed under the famous sign 'Be Not Inhospitable to Strangers Lest They Be Angels In Disguise', wondering if it shouldn't be Dante's advice to all writers ('Abandon hope all ye who enter here'). I even heard a poet from Oklahoma ask if they had a bed for the night (thousands have made the store a home-away-from home since Whitman opened his doors).

Then, of course, I went out, took a few photos, sat in the sun and struck up a conversation with Dwight. I was happy.

The next day, I promised my wife – no writers! The Latin Quarter (just a quick visit to Abbey's Bookshop), the Pantheon, a Seine Cruise, a romantic meal just down from Café Procope (where Hemingway used to hang out, although I didn't go in). And the next day, a train to Versailles. Not a writer's house in sight (just a three-hour wait to get in). And the next well ... the promise was too good to last.

Maison de Victor Hugo overlooks Place des Vosges, a neatly trimmed park a short walk from an oversized roundabout known as Place de la Bastille. No heads, except mine perhaps, as we walked up the grand marble stairs, into the entry hall where, between 1832 and 1848, the great man hung his greatcoat, opened a window, took a breath of fetid air and worked on *Ruy Blas*. He must have walked along Rue St-Antoine, Quais des Célestins, along the Seine, past Notre-Dame, imagining his hunchback. These were the days when people *really* loved their writers. Hugo was the French Dickens, known for his poetry collections *Les Contemplations* and *La Légende des siècles* (*Les Mis* came later). Two million people turned out to see his funeral procession from the Arc de Triomphe to the Pantheon. Hard to understand



Exterior of Victor Hugo's house

today. Our writers tend to garner less gratitude. Lawson, Christopher Brennan, laid to rest at the bottom of a bottle.

Hugo's writing was epic, but his interior decorating was kitsch. A room with a nice Berber, the great man's plate collection and some Chinese-inspired wall hangings; a sort of dining room with the family furniture; a green room, where he worked standing up; and a red bedroom where he took his last breath. Like most writers' homes, it was hard to make the connection between

man and wallpaper. Still, I'm not sure what I expected to see, or understand. Writers, history shows, are no gods. We elevate them, later. Maybe their ghosts return and find it amusing, or bemusing, or just pathetic.

The next day I planned to go and see Proust's cork-lined bedroom, but there wasn't time, so I let Marcel rest. Instead, I tried to climb the tower. I got halfway up to the first level and froze – the old vertigo. My wife led me down, thinking, perhaps, I wasn't good for anything except books. I told her to go up alone, but she wouldn't (I couldn't stand for several hours). Maybe our search, and our remembrance of things past, is faulty. Maybe I could never find what I was looking for because it never existed. But I did see Dwight, and his son and daughter. The kids standing in front of the tower, Dwight trying to match the past and present. It made me smile. The living are always more interesting than the dead. **gr**

**Stephen Orr's latest book is This Excellent Machine, Wakefield Press, rrp \$34.95.**

