Old Europe: Seasons and Places

1. *Autum, Saône-et-Loire*

November air is grey with dusk and rain—
Or snowclouds; leaves are acrid in the lane,
Quietly crunch; in trees they’re tarnished gold.
I walk here, sniffing this distinguished cold.
As I am many persons through reading books,
So is this place not merely how it looks
To eyes that shopping-centers train to see,
It’s a palimpsest—*was, is, and will be;*
Like low tones spreading from that medieval tower,
Whose bells are ringing yet another hour.

2. *Old Houses in Autumn*

i The Eighteenth Century House

What lantern and fan-light most illuminate
Is how I’d choose to be. It’s always late,
In the day, the year; slow time of thoughtfulness,
With ice to glaze the flagstone slates, for less
Rushing about.—This oldness is like weather;
It shapes what I might do—and how, and whether—
Toward worthiness like these chairs of oak and leather.
ii Château de La Brède

The eighteenth century is best recalled, Imagined; we’d be chronically appalled, Being there, at the look of all the dead Turning on gibbets. But we have La Brède— Still here, the home of Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu. No tra-la-la À la Versailles, just somber looming presence Closed by a moat; and yet how briskly pleasant. We see him, back from November hunting, cold, Bound for his fire, roast, and wine.—Now hold That image, as of your youth when you are old.

iii Wytham Abbey

Still, in a chilly lateness of November, The sober park decrescendoes in splendor. Like Purcell turned to tinted leaves descending.

iv Chissey-les-Mâcon, Chez Chanay

This avenue, autumnal lindens spaced To touch each other’s twigs, but with good taste, Is like the echo of a tally-ho, Or post-horn, from two hundred years ago— Translated into trees exactly placed To lead from wishdreams to a real château.

3. Chambord

This largest of the Loire châteaux, Small mountain’s worth of weight in stone, Distinguished corpse from France’s past, Cosmetically tricked out to pass For quasi-living, comes alive— Only, but extremely—in lines Of wobbly brief memorial,
Incised in stone, like “St Michel 1699,” “Donat 1772,” “Legras 1834.” I hear them,
Scratching their little lines and fearing
The lightness of their lives will make
No mark on time’s adamant page.
It is their mark, and mine, I trace.

4. *Celebrating St. Nicholas Day*

One tree announces like a ducal pennant
That Lord Autumnus is still in residence.
Though brilliant enough to flare in cold impending
Dusk, in the spareness of its opulence—
The thinning of its gold-leaf—it evokes
Restraint festivity, like drinking clear
Old armagnac while savoring soft strokes
Of church-bells.

Celebration is austere,
Like frost on mullioned panes, this time of year.

5. *Approaching the Domain*

Stone wall that crumbles, young with ivy, guards
A still December forest. Ice in shards,
On puddles, crackles clean under foot
The length of the avenue, on which they’ve put
Just patchy gravel; more a country lane,
But straight, deliberate. This is the Domain
That I approach, glimpsing, through quiet snow,
Gables and chimneys of the small château.
Its very air is rich and private, scented
With slow, thick oak in a fireplace . . . Contented,
I dwell here in my self-beguiling mind,
With dreams that arise like twists of smoke entwined
With snow above that roof. The wished-for land,
Always within, imagined, at my command.


September, 1969

The monks ride light on life; they use, don’t own.
Tasteful simplicity of wood and stone,
The handcut tables, chairs, and limestone walls,
Enhance the light as evening softly falls.
And Frère Éric presides—or celebrates—
With wine, and bread and cheese on stoneware plates;
His French is like the claret, dry and clear,
As if Rameau were playing his clavier
To set the scene to music. All of this,
For such as me, provides a scent of bliss
Made from this place like scent from an apple tree.
Supper here is another liturgy;
As in their church, it points beyond the cross,
But here it mutes even the thought of loss.