We’ll Always Have Paris:
On the Enduring Appeal
of Ex-Pat Lit

Elliott Holt Revisits Alison Lurie's Pulitzer Prize-Winning Novel, 
*Foreign Affairs*

By Elliott Holt

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In Paris recently, I went for a drink at the Bar Hemingway at the Hotel Ritz. The Bar Hemingway has a clubby, intimate vibe; it’s the kind of place where strangers strike up conversations. And inevitably, given the bar’s association with the legendary American writer, many of the patrons are American tourists. So it was on the Sunday evening I was there: the couple beside me was from Dallas. They were staying elsewhere, they told me, but had come to the Hemingway for its famous cocktails. (I had come for the air conditioning, since Paris was sweating through a canicule.) The husband’s Texas twang and friendly, aw-shucks manner reminded me of Chuck Mumpson, a character in Alison Lurie’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Foreign Affairs*.

Lurie’s comic novel was published in 1984; revisiting the book 35 years later suggests that experience of Americans abroad hasn’t changed much. I’ve spent nearly eight years of my life living in Europe, but I loved novels about American expatriates long before I became one myself. Expatriate fiction, after all, is principally about identity, and the way that a place can shape one’s sense of self. I often think of the narrator in Mavis Gallant’s story, “When We Nearly Young,” who says, “I thought that if I set myself against a background into which I could not possibly merge that some outline would present itself.” I can relate to that motivation abroad: the farther you are from home, the easier it is to define yourself.

Consider the two American protagonists of *Foreign Affairs*: 54-year-old Virginia Miner, a tenured professor of children’s literature, and Fred Turner, her much younger colleague in the English department of the fictional Corinth College (clearly based on Cornell), who is also on sabbatical in London.

Vinnie Miner is a “small, plain, unmarried” woman, “the sort of person that no one ever notices.” She often imagines being followed by a white dog named Fido, representing self-pity. In previous trips abroad, she has managed to leave this conjured canine behind, but as she boards her flight to London, where she will spend six months researching British nursery rhymes, she knows it will be there. Vinnie is despondent because she’s just read an essay in *The Atlantic* dismissing her books, which are published under the gender-neutral “V.A. Miner,” have been better received in England, and Vinnie’s mood brightens when she concludes that in London, no one reads *The Atlantic*: “English intellectuals, she has noticed, have little respect for American critical op
Vinnie identifies with those English intellectuals, so she’s flattered when the American nerd on the plane mistakes her for one of them: “Ignorant as the man is, in a sense he is on something, like those of her British friends who sometimes remark that she isn’t much like American . . . she has often thought that, having been born and raised in what they call ‘the States,’ she is an anomaly; that both psychologically and intellectually she is essentially English.

An Anglophile since childhood, Vinnie sees her trip to England as a sabbatical from more teaching; it’s a break from the pitiful person she is at home.

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For Fred Turner, on the other hand, London is initially “dim, flat, and flavorless.” Recently estranged from his wife, Roo, back in the States, Fred is lonely and unmoored. He longs for the “authentic” experience of England and attributes his failure to “tourist disorientation”:

The main problem is, he thinks, that visitors to a foreign country are allowed the use of only two of their five senses. Sight is permitted—hence the term ‘sightseeing.’ The sense of taste is also encouraged, and even takes on a weird, almost sexual importance: consumption of the native food and drink becomes a highly charged proof that you were ‘really there.’

But hearing in the full sense is blocked . . . Even in Britain, accent, intonation, vocabulary are often unfamiliar; tourists do not recognize many of the noises that and they speak mostly to functionaries. The sense of smell still operates; but it is frustrated; visible or invisible KEEP OFF signs appear on almost everything and everyone.

Fred’s attitude changes when he meets the glamorous Rosemary Radley at a party at Vinn. She is “graceful, melodious,” the opposite of his American wife, who is “clumsy and loud—fact, coarse.” While Fred gallivants around London with Rosemary, Vinnie becomes rom
involved with Chuck Mumpson, the Oklahoman she initially dismissed as a rube on the p
Vinnie views Chuck as a stereotypical American: a bumbling philistine in cowboy boots,
traveling on a package tour. Chuck isn’t cultured, but he is kind, so while Fred is seduced l
England as embodied by Rosemary, Vinnie becomes newly attracted to America.

The tension between innocent Americans and sophisticated Europeans recalls the novels o
Henry James, and Lurie puts her work directly in conversation with James by having Fred
repeatedly reference the Master’s work:

James again, Fred thinks; a Jamesian phrase, a Jamesian situation. But in the no
scandals and secrets of high life are portrayed as more elegant; the people are be
mannered. Maybe because it was a century earlier; or maybe because the manne
elegance of James’ prose obfuscates the crude context. Because, after all, isn’t Ro
the classic James heroine: beautiful, fine, delicate, fatally impulsive? . . . Well isn’t
what he’s here for, the sterling young American champion James himself might
provided? For the second time that day Fred has the giddy sense of having got i
novel, and again it is dizzying, exhilarating.

And Vinnie also sees herself as a character in a book, albeit a children’s one:

For a quarter of a century she visited it in her mind where it had been slowly an
lovingly shaped and furnished out of her favorite books, from Beatrix Potter to
Anthony Powell. When at last she saw it she felt like the children in John Mase
The Box of Delights who discover that they can climb into the picture on their sit
room wall. The landscape of her interior vision had become life-size and three-
dimensional; she could literally walk into the country of her mind. From the firs
England seemed dear and familiar to her; London, especially, was almost an exq
of déjà vu.

Vinnie is loath to give up her romantic ideas about England. The thesis of her research is
British nursery rhymes are more literary and less crude than American ones, but when she
primary school in Camden Town, in one of the novel’s most memorable scenes, she’s expc
rhymes far more vulgar than anything she’s heard in the States. Rather than acknowledge
England is not always the cultured place of her imagination, she leaves the school and dec
forget what she’s just heard.
Vinnie and Fred are English professors, so it’s not surprising that they view the world through the lens of literature, but their tendency to romanticize their surroundings is indicative of inability to understand England as anything more than a setting. London is never entirely either of them, and one suspects it’s not entirely real to Lurie, either.

Are the cultural differences between Americans and Europeans as pronounced as they were?

My own experience of London, where I lived for two years, was rooted in the reality of a job at an advertising agency. In the mornings, even in the rain, I walked from my apartment in Primrose Hill (very close to Vinnie’s fictional flat), through Regent’s Park to my office in Great Portland Street. I say “in Great Portland Street” because that’s what the English say, “in the street,” and I learned to adapt. Movie theaters became cinemas and pants became trousers, elevators became lifts and I became a more confident version of myself. I also had two foreign affairs (one English man, one German) that were, in hindsight, doomed from the start.

Anyone who has read Henry James knows that things rarely turn out well for Americans, and one senses early in Lurie’s novel that neither of these foreign affairs will last. Fred faces the fact that Rosemary isn’t exactly who he thought she was, while Vinnie recognizes that she is American than she wants to admit. It dawns on her that Chuck’s archetypal American quxtrace his English ancestry isn’t any more pretentious than her own aspirations: “Is there so awful parallel between Chuck’s fantasy of being an English lord and hers of being—in a n subtle and metaphysical sense, of course—an English lady?”

Lurie’s novel may share themes with those of James, but many of her scenes have more in common with an Oscar Wilde farce. It’s fitting that Rosemary is an actress, since Lurie’s novel is concerned with the roles people play. The disillusioned Fred and Vinnie will both eventually return to upstate New York and the petty dramas of academia. London, in the end, is not but a stage.
A blurb, from John Fowles, on the first edition of the novel, says, “I am convinced that Al Lurie’s fiction will long outlast that of many currently more fashionable names. *Foreign Affairs* earns the same shelf as Henry James and Edith Wharton.” Yet in 2019, Lurie’s name is rarely mentioned in the same breath as Henry James. Why is *Foreign Affairs* is less enduring than Fowles predicted?

Going abroad helps her recognize that her wanting isn’t pathetic, but profoundly human.

Alison Lurie’s novel remains deeply insightful about the psychology of foreign travel, but plotting is schematic. And the comedy, which is often very broad, doesn’t hold up as well: sophisticated wit of say, Diane Johnson’s Parisian novels (*Le Divorce*, *Le Mariage*, and *L’A*) which were published two decades later. *Foreign Affairs* is apolitical; other than one glancing reference to Ronald Reagan, and the fact that airplanes have smoking sections, you might know the novel is set in the 1980s. Chuck Mumpson, a red-state resident, is a type still ripe for contemporary East Coast satire. But as representatives of their respective nations, Chuck and Rosemary are dated archetypes, who lack the depth and complexity of James’s characters.

In 2019, is the quintessential American still a white man in cowboy boots? Nowadays isn’t “innocent” American abroad as likely to look like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez or Ilhan Omar or Isabel Archer or Fred Turner? And now that people all over the globe are binging on the same shows and following each other on the same social networks, are the cultural differences between Americans and Europeans as pronounced as they were?

In one respect, though, *Foreign Affairs* still feels relevant, and even radical: the depiction of female desire. Lurie is at her best when she subverts the conventional notion that older women are no longer sexual beings. Vinnie may “remind almost everyone she meets of a teacher they once” but “at fifty-four she still had erotic impulses and indulged them with such abandon that it] seemed to her almost shameful.”
Vinnie would never allow herself to sleep with someone like Chuck at home, but there’s something freeing about foreign affairs. Far from preconceived notions about who you are can explore without shame. Fred Turner thinks that tourists only use two senses, but I’ve enough exploring to know that foreign affairs have a way of unlocking the other three. Accent and intonation and vocabulary become newly comprehensible, and you’re suddenly in on jokes. The nose acclimates, and picks up the notes it missed. Those KEEP OFF signs vanish and everything feels alive to touch. Instead of the tourist’s disorientation, you experience the local compass: a newfound certainty and sense of direction.

Like so many women, Vinnie has been taught to be ashamed of what she wants. Going away helps her recognize that her wanting isn’t pathetic, but profoundly human. And in celebration of her desire, Alison Lurie has written a novel that is still worth reading.

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