

Letter to the reader

United Kingdom – London – Chelsea, Spring 1973

I could hear moans coming from the guest room. My friend Jean-Pierre had arrived from France to see some operas here. Instead of going to theatres he had to spend his time in bed: some bug he caught on the plane. I peeped through the door: 'Are you in pain?'

'No, Laurent! It's this novel, it's agonising.'

'Then put the book down!'

'I can't, Laurent, I can't. It's riveting!'

'What is it?'

'*Les Loukoums* by Yves Navarre.' I shrugged my shoulders. 'Never heard of him!'

I was to hear from the horse's mouth that he (Yves) wrote eighteen novels before he could be taken seriously by a publisher. *Les Loukoums* was his third published novel.

I had been living in Chelsea for 16 years by then, reporting on the theatre in Britain for a French Swiss paper so French culture was no more my first option. When Donald Watson, specialist on Modern French Drama at Bristol University came to Chelsea [We met in Paris in 1953.] I told him to read *Les Loukoums*. 'Jean-Pierre left it behind. You know how little I care for novels. Well! I couldn't put this one down.'

Don took it to Bristol. He was not a translator of novels but of plays, mainly Eugène Ionesco. He had had a go with novels when translating in the mid 60's *The Inquisitory* written by a friend of ours, Robert Pinget. He phoned from Bristol. He wanted to translate Yves' novel. Through Jean-Pierre who knew Yves Navarre, Don got in touch with him.

Don used to call me "his walking dictionary". With Navarre's very personal style there were questions I could not answer. Yves invited Don to stay with him in Paris. This would be the easiest way to have his queries answered. Don came back with a present from Yves for me. We had never met, not even spoken on the phone. The present was an overcoat, a model designed by a famous Paris couturier for one of his shows Yves had attended. The coat fitted me perfectly. So I heard Yves' voice when I phoned to thank him.

Needless to say, for the next translator's session with his new author, Don did not travel alone. I must confess that if it had been during my days as a drama student in Paris that I had met Yves as he looked when we actually met, I would have fallen in love with him. Rather of the husky type, with a moustache (very *in* at the time) his body was very well proportioned. The proof that I am saying the truth in the matter is easy to give. When Yves heard I was a qualified masseur, he asked for practical evidence of my ability. I was pleased to have found a way to show my gratitude for his hospitality.

Generous Yves certainly was. He then lived in a very smart apartment along the Seine, in Paris IV. He let us stay in the flat, even when he was away. The caretakers, with whom he was very generous too (He took them to the opera several times.) were there to look after us.

Yves was also drawn to writing for the stage, which pleased Don – and Yves too of course. When he heard we would be unable to attend the First Night of his first play [We discovered this the eve of our return to England.], he organised, in a couple of hours, an improvised *First* for us, in the large kitchen of the director of the play, a two-hander called *Histoire d'Amour*. The two actors freed themselves of their evening obligations to act it specially for us. We were their first – and the new playwright's – public: a moving experience!

Don tried to promote Yves' plays in English speaking countries. A particularly entertaining one has covered some ground: *Swimming Pools at War* [*La Guerre des Piscines*], published in USA by Ubu Repertory Theater. It had its first reading in English in December 10, 1982 in New York where the two bilingual actresses read in English the parts they had created in Paris. Don passed the script to an ex-student of his. She runs her own English theatre company in Copenhagen. She liked the play so much, it was translated into Danish and Yves was invited to attend this new First.

Is the title of his first play not revealing? Even if I had still been this young drama student when I met Yves, my youthful appearance would not have been of any use to seduce him. His heart was already taken by Tiffauges. I must admit, there was no way I could have competed with him.

Tiffauges could be so cuddly, always in good spirits and so mischievous. When you least expected it, he would grip your shoulder. You would roll with him on the sofa, tickled him for his delight. Suddenly he would slip from your arms. If you could catch one of his limbs, as he never wore any clothes it would usually be his tail. This made him happy. Yves would swing him, holding him by the tail. Tiffauges would love it.

Don, who disliked cats, lost his heart to Tiffauges. Tiffauges had a female companion, Tiffany. Contrary to her lover, she would not allow anybody to touch her. This did not stop them to chase each other in our bedroom and hide in the springs of our beds.

Yves was born in the South West of France in 1940. Aged 40 he was awarded the Prix Goncourt for *Le Jardin d'Acclimatation*, a very autobiographical book he forbade me to read (See below). Being born in a family belonging to the high French bourgeoisie was (perhaps still is?) a privilege hard to pay. Don did his best to try and help him to keep his two legged relationships steady as he certainly suffered from loneliness. He did not succeed. Yves had great admiration and respect for Don, who had as much charm as ability as a translator but a side of Yves could not cope with the duration of relationships. Yves carried on keeping cats after Tiffauges disappeared but the relationship could not be the same. Tiffauges had been unique. He even wrote his own biography [*Une vie de chat – A Cat's Life*] in which he admits he is the only cat in the world to have read Sartre's *L'être et le néant* from cover to cover. When Yves lived in Canada, he rang Don once to tell him he was reading aloud to himself Don's translation of *Une Vie de Chat*. He thought the English text was better than the French one. What higher compliment could a translator get from his author?

Yves was taking his work very professionally. Sometimes he would jump for a scrap of paper and pencil to jot down what he himself had said or someone in his entourage. As soon as he had finished a novel, he would start the next one. It was compulsive; a way for him to hide the pain personal events had marked him with. He used to send to Chelsea each new work as it appeared, usually with a handwritten dedication to Don. Once or twice in Paris he said to me: 'Laurent! I forbid you to read this one.' I would obey. Otherwise I would open the new comer. If I was not seduced after thirty pages, I would put the book down. If I was, I would devour it and become the first person to congratulate him about his latest. He was very appreciative.

We were less so when we discovered that, without asking for our consent, he had made some characters live in Chelsea. He even included our own address! The male character was a clergyman. He got this from me as I was born in a vicarage. It was a sort of Tiffauges' mischievous gesture from him. There is another novel – I forgot which one – in which he disguised us as a heterosexual couple reproducing exactly the conversation we once had at his table.

Yves' style became more coded with the years. It is the best qualifying adjective to apply here. His close friend, the couturier Ungaro wanted to have a written appreciation of his creations. Who could do it better than Yves Navarre? The elegant bound booklet would be published in several languages at the same time: French, English, German, Italian, etc. The text was not long, about a dozen typed pages. Nonetheless it took Don about two weeks to create a rendering which would satisfy him. As you can realise, by this time Don had acquired a fairly intimate knowledge of the reasons which made Yves use specific words or ways to express his thoughts, that is what was going on in his psyche, as much as it was possible to decipher it. At the time Don could not go to Paris nor could Yves come to England to discuss particular points. Finally, after numerous lengthy phone calls (e-mail did not exist then!), the text passed their mutual verdict. Ungaro and his team were satisfied too. The publication, which was going to be printed in Italy, was delayed because neither Ungaro nor his secretary would accept the Italian translation. It did not make sense. Eventually the publisher found the solution: to have Don's text translated into Italian. At last the Italian version did Yves' text justice. What better professional compliment could Don have received for his talent?

Yves, like his Tiffauges, had this teasing tendency. He often showed it on the telephone by altering his voice or speaking in English to confuse the listener. One evening I unhooked the receiver. 'Could I speak to Mr Watson, please?' I had to decide quickly how much I should play the game.

'Sorry, Sir! Mr Watson is not here at the moment. Can I leave him a message?'

'Will you tell him I'm at the Ritz?'

'In London?'

'Yes!'

'I can give you Mr Watson's number at his residence in Bristol if you wish to speak to him personally.' There was a slight pause. This was the moment for another decision: Was Yves telling the truth or was he in Paris, in a rather despondent state which only a friend like Don, one of the few he admired, could alleviate?

'Bon, Yves, t'es où, chez toi ou à Londres?'

'I told you, at the Ritz in London?' I still could not sense whether he was joking or being serious. Why was he insisting in carrying on in English? 'So what are you doing at the Ritz?'

'I've just put my dinner jacket on and I'm trying to knot this blessed bow tie.'

'I can't come to help you but I'm sure some of the servants from the hotel would only be too delighted to tie your bow. Anyhow, what exciting place are you making for?'

'Buckingham Palace!'

'Oh yes!' I had to play the game as he obviously was taking the micky out of me: 'Give my best wishes to the Queen, will you?' In a dead pan tone he answered: 'I'm invited to have dinner with the Queen so if she speaks to me I will.' At last the penny dropped: The President of France, François Mitterand, was in London on an official visit. As the custom requires, the Queen was inviting the Head of State with his entourage to dinner.

This type of events is organised by high civil servants around 10 Downing Street. The Prime Minister at the time was a woman. When the civil servant in charge suggested to her: 'It might be a good idea to invite also some intellectuals?' she was reported to have answered seriously: 'Oh! Do they have any?' The story might have reached the French President's office. François Mitterand arrived, surrounded with twenty intellectuals. Yves Navarre was one of them.

Enjoy Yves' novel!

With best wishes,
Laurent Lourson