



WALTER KLOSETT

BY DAVID LOWE

I remember the first time I went to the toilet in France as if it were yesterday. Getting off the ferry in Calais, I found a little cabin marked WC – “Ah, water closet!” The French language wasn’t so difficult after all – restaurant, weekend, champagne, hedge fund, omelette. However it took me years to understand that the Malouines were the Falklands. I searched in vain for the light switch. Nothing on the wall outside or inside. It was urgent so I thought *tant pis*, which is almost a joke in the circumstances. And it was precisely by abandoning the search, then closing and locking the door that the light finally came on. *Saperlipopette!* What a lesson about life and living you get from the French. Close yourself off from the outside world and *vous êtes éclairé*.

I was already on the road to understanding Montaigne. But then, *quelle surprise!* Once the little room was lit up, I saw that there was no toilet, just a small hole in the ground. *Mais bien sûr!* – I was in a republic! I’d learnt at school that thrones had been thrown out at the time of the Revolution by the *sans culottes* – and replaced by Turkish toilets. Was it your hands or your feet that you were supposed to place on those two marks... or both?

Squatting over the void was my first authentic existential experience. I’d read *La Nausée* and *l’Etranger*, but nothing had prepared me for this. Brought up in a sort of Anglo-Saxon empiricism, my bottom had always been in contact with reality, and there I was, exposed to my first “fundamental-meaning-of-being” experience, perched above the nothingness. My road to freedom passed by a seaside privy.

Continental transcendental philosophy is a light breeze that alights on an exposed and rather taut backside. I was almost ready, but not quite, for my first *suppositoire*... I philosophized awhile.

Je suis ce que je ne suis pas, je ne suis pas ce que je suis, Sartre.

I yam what I yam and that’s all what I yam, Popeye.

Je pense donc je suis, the proof that morons don’t exist. Morons exist so Descartes was wrong. As somebody

should have told Camus before he got in the car that fateful day, there’s nothing more existential than a plane tree. His first and last lesson in Anglo-Saxon empiricism.

I studied philosophy at Oxford and during the first year I was encouraged to ask myself if tables really existed? The second year: Does God exist? The third year: Do I exist? You could, of course, take the Wittgenstein linguistic philosophy option where you find out that your questions don’t mean anything anyway. You graduate with a degree but you no longer know who you are, where you are and what you are.

The time came to flush away these idle thoughts. I looked at the strange thing hanging on the wall behind me – the water tank, *la trombe*. It looked like one of Jacques Cousteau’s air cylinders. I’d seen his film *The Silent World*, but there was nothing silent about this hydro-pneumatic flushing system. It flushed the toilet, cleaned my shoes and hosed down the wall with the slightest pressure on that little innocuous looking lever. How chic to wash away excreta with fizzy water, I thought, very French. There was of course no toilet paper. Just that little mailbox-type thing on the wall – quite empty.

The postman hasn’t been today, I muttered to myself, thinking about Jacques Tati’s film *The Big Day* (*Jour de Fête*). I was in a good mood. How happy I was to be in France, despite everything. Anyway, I later learnt that even had there been some paper it wouldn’t have helped. Using cheap bog paper merely spreads the problem about rather than solving it.

