



I WANNA BE LIKE YOU

OH, OOBEE DOO
I WANNA BE LIKE YOU
I WANNA WALK LIKE YOU
TALK LIKE YOU, TOO (KING LOUIE, *THE JUNGLE BOOK*).
BY DAVID LOWE

I'm a foreigner, an outsider, an exile. Even though I have been brought up to understand that to possess a British passport means that I have won first prize in the lottery of life, I sometimes just want to merge into the French state of mind, to be fully integrated. To get rid of my accent and to think and act like a Frenchman and finally come to peace with my adopted country.

I'd like to be able to say *Moruroa* without it sounding like *mort aux rats*. To be able to go into a chemist and say *mal au cou* without ambiguity. I'd like to be able to spell *Vercingétorix*. I'd like not to not like *andouillette* – ahhh! But how can an Englishman “think French”? Many times I say something which I consider to be quite serious, but which my French interlocutor just takes to be a joke: “Ah, Eengleesh ‘umour. You Eengleesh are so fernnee!”

The English mind works by association of ideas, which contrasts with the French Cartesian system of thinking in straight lines. We are educated to be different; you are educated to fit a Republican mould. Take French and English gardens, for example. On the one hand, geometrical patterns entirely composed of linear paths and, on the other, a joyous pandemonium of ordered chaos. Another example, when I'm driving through a town and I see the traffic sign *Toutes directions* pointing in only one direction, my English mind cannot reconcile the arrow pointing out a single way and the written promise of ubiquity. My mind explodes into 360° fragments. Such a Gallic non-sequitur leaves me inclined to take the opposite direction – the route that is not allowed by the French traffic authorities. The English brain works a bit like a dodgem car, or *auto-tamponneuse*. Running into a wall isn't regarded as a failure, but rather as an opportunity to experience a new impulse to start off in a new line of thought. This is the root of British empiricism.

During the first year of a British university philoso-

phy course, we are invited to ask whether chairs exist – the importance of the question is only heightened by the fact that we seem to be sitting on one. During the second year, we tackle the question of whether God exists – in a constitutional monarchy where the queen rules by divine right, this is of the utmost importance. *Dieu et mon droit*, so a denial of God is almost treason. In the third year, we move onto the equally vital question of whether we actually exist. We modestly put ourselves in a queue behind household furniture and the deity. Generally, in order to put an end to all this questioning, we choose the Wittgenstein linguistic philosophy option in our final year and finish the philosophy course by proving that the questions themselves were meaningless. You end up with a philosophy degree, but you don't know who you are, what you are, if you are, or whether, for that matter, you even understood the question in the first place. The continental mind revels in this transcendental dilemma; the English mind falls to the ground with a bump.

I think this explains why Benny Hill was such a Francophile. A portly, ugly man being chased by a hoard of pretty young English ladies in bikinis, all set to a rather ridiculous but catchy saxophone tune, expresses a fundamental frustration with Britishness. Benny Hill had no friends, lived with his mother, didn't own a house or a car, never married and had two proposals of marriage to two different women refused. He was found dead, sitting in front of his television set, quite a time after his actual demise. The television was still on. Once you know this, the ridiculous chase at the end of each Benny Hill Show becomes profoundly poignant and meaningful. Fred Scuttle, the character invented by Benny Hill, is as much at odds with life and its meaning as Camus' Meursault in *L'Étranger*. The meaning of the chase (life) is the chase (life) itself, and, just to back up my argument, Gilles Deleuze was a particular fan of Benny Hill.