Translations from ALLADA and EXPERIENCE D'EDWARD LEE,
VERSAILLES by Gérard Gavarry

Gérard Gavarry

Katina Rogers
CUNY Graduate Center

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_pubs/629
Discover additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).
Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu
Translator’s Note: At the heart of Gérard Gavarry’s writing are the questions of what power language holds, and what remains beyond the reach of expression. I first came to his writing through Hop là ! un deux trois (P.O.L, 2001; Hoppla! 1 2 3, Dalkey Archive Press, 2009), which so captivated me that it eventually became a central part of my dissertation work. One of many intriguing aspects of that novel, a triptych retelling of the story of Judith set in the Parisian banlieue, was Gavarry’s use of opaque technical jargon as a means of conveying a sense of defamiliarization within one’s own language, rendering the characters who used slang completely unintelligible and foreign to those around them. Though these tough kids had no standing within the official structures of French society, they wielded informal power over those around them by instilling a sense of fear and discomfort, largely through the way they spoke.

It is this kind of inventive reflection on the nature of language, identity, and power that, woven into the fabric of the novel, makes Gavarry’s work some of the most compelling fiction coming out of France today. The two translations included here, excerpts from Allada and Expérience d’Edward Lee, Versailles (both P.O.L) share little with each other or with Hop là in terms of setting or structure, but explore some of the same questions of the role and limits of language in relation to defamiliarization, power, and fear.

Allada takes place in the West African country of Benin (a former French colony), where a mid-level government official is receiving a haircut in the yard outside his home. Images both mundane and unexpected (the
barber preparing his materials; the apprentice, somewhat incongruently, flipping through old literary magazines) intertwine as the scene unfolds slowly, quietly depicting relationships of relative power, muted suggestions of violence, and underlying currents of fear and pride. Though the setting is completely different, the invisible but powerful social structures that Gavarry explores are not unlike the low-level power dynamics of Hoppla's suburban Paris. In both cases, the immediate daily realities of the gradations of power that surround the characters are far more important than the systemic structures that create the conditions for that environment, and yet they are undeniably actors in (and often victims of) those broader systems.

By contrast, Expérience d'Edward Lee, Versailles takes as its starting point Edouard Levé's Amérique, a series of photographs of US towns that bear the names of other global cities (e.g., Florence, Berlin, Oxford). Gavarry's work—not exactly a novel—is composed of clusters of fragments organized into chapters and sections that bear the names of Levé's photographs. Much in the way that the photographs provide viewers with visual clues to decipher without the aid of movement or sound that create a story, the fragments of text in Edward Lee draw the reader into a decontextualized narrative, a series of moments in time stripped of the connective tissue that helps to suggest meaning. Gavarry does with language what Levé does with images: He reveals a moment, but goes no further, with the promise of significance hovering just out of reach. The result is richly evocative, but also feels incomplete, leaving the reader to reflect not only on the miniature snatches of portraits and landscapes, but also on the power of what has been omitted.

I began translating both of these works out of personal interest; so little of Gavarry's writing has been published in English, and his works build on one another in ways that I find fascinating, challenging, and deeply enjoyable. Though these two books have not yet been published in English, I hope that both projects will resurface in the future.
A cette époque, il est Monsieur l'Ordonnateur. Il habite un logement de fonction en bordure de la lagune, près du terrain sur lequel chaque année, lors des fêtes de la Tabaski, les bergers musulmans venus du Nord campent parmi les odeurs de suint et les bêlements de moutons. Depuis la maison, du moins depuis la chambre de l'ordonnateur située à l'étage, on peut observer hommes et bêtes commodément, du rez-de-chaussée les entendre à défaut de les voir et sentir aussi, pourvu que le vent souffle de l'Atlantique, le fumet des viandes qui rôtissent mêlé tantôt à celui du teck ou de l'eucalyptus réduits en braise, tantôt à la puanteur éœurante des eaux vaseuses.

ALLADA

At present, he's Mr. Administrator. He lives in government employee housing along the edge of the lagoon, near the field where every year, during the festival of Tabaski, the Muslim shepherds from the north camp amid the odor of suint and the bleating of sheep. From the house, or at least from the administrator's second-floor bedroom, one can comfortably observe both men and beasts; from the ground floor hear them even if not see them, and also, as long as the wind is blowing from the Atlantic, smell the aroma of roasting meats, mixed at times with that of teak or eucalyptus reduced to charcoal, at other times with the nauseating stench of murky waters.

The boulevard that runs alongside the house has never been paved. It's furrowed by ravines, full of potholes. In a few weeks, all these hollows will overflow with rain, forming insuperable pools in some places. And even after four months of dry season, the topography of the roadway alone was enough to slow cars, constrained no less than bicycles, scooters, or motorcycles, to tortuous and groping trajectories.

"Would you look at this road!" the barber said to his apprentice.

The man and the child were arriving on the same bike, the latter sitting side-saddle on the horizontal bar between the seat and the front fork, gripping the handlebars tightly with one hand and clutching against his stomach, with
his remaining free hand, the briefcase containing the materials that the former would need.

A moment later, they're standing side by side at the entry to the yard. The apprentice has placed the briefcase flat on his head while the boss holds his bike by the handlebars, one hand on each side. They remain stopped, forbidding themselves to advance further despite the lack of a gate and even though there's no change in the nature of the ground before them suggesting a boundary not to be crossed, not even a mark of separation between public passage and private terrain. At the most a cement balustrade prevented the road from stretching all the way to the foundations of the house—too low of a barrier, letting in too much daylight to really constitute an enclosure, besides which it was widely interrupted in the spot where the two visitors were standing and, on their right, prematurely ended several meters before the brushy edges of the yard.

With his neck at once supple and strong under the barely-moving briefcase, the apprentice claps his hands to signal their arrival. Laughter, bursts of voices are emanating from the cottage where the caretaker lives, but he does not appear.

“Anybody?” shouts the barber.

Silence immediately follows.

The caretaker is undoubtedly at home. He's having family over, friends from the village who are passing through town, or colleagues from nearby. But as all of them ceased speaking when the barber called out, it seems that the yard itself has hushed, that it is even more empty and immobile than before, a space that nothing human can cross, neither body nor voice, nothing living at all—to the point that a lizard threading his way under the gutter or scaling the papaya tree seems incongruous—from now on just like those malefic places at whose edges the passersby quiet down and hurry up, rigid despite themselves, frightened, cowering, their viscera trembling and their consciousness saturated by too many concomitant alerts.

“Caretaker!”

Once again the barber calls out and this time the caretaker reacts, running up while still buttoning his shirt to make himself presentable.
"Ah! barber, it's you, sir... Welcome!"

The caretaker is a frail young man. His voice trembles when he addresses the newcomer. Plus he contorts himself, tilts his head to the left, to the right, to the left again and even takes his hands one in the other without managing to stop himself in a position that he judges adequate. The barber, unlike the caretaker, is tall and sturdy. As a man conscious of his importance, he holds himself straight, his head high, his elbows away from his sides to make the white boubou he is wearing appear more ample and majestic.

"Well then!" he says. "So that's how you welcome guests?... Aren't we here on the appointed day? Doesn't my watch indicate the precise hour?... Or maybe I scare you. You were hiding. You thought that if I saw you I would seize you and slit your throat like the shepherds over there do to their sheep."

He speaks quickly and violently, in gusts. There is no way to know to what degree he is joking or not. So the other forces himself to smile at random all while shifting from one foot to the other and wringing his hands.

"Oh! barber," he softly protests.

Stifled and sounding as though it had escaped him with difficulty, his voice seems to have sensed the hesitation that the rest of his physique also demonstrates—his hands that are constantly trading roles, his torso and his legs that keep moving without actually taking him anywhere, and his gaze, which always comes back to that of the barber but never dares to meet it directly. He's clearly disoriented, doubtlessly filled with contradictory drives and incapable of obeying any of them, struck by this same stupidity in which our own difficulty dissolves—run away screaming? come closer for a better view?—before the spectacle of Death that dances in the forest, at night, by the light of flames, when the palms or the mallets of the fetish musicians bounce upon the stretched hides of the tambourines.

The caretaker has backpedaled by three steps.

"I'll go find him," he said, without naming his employer with any greater precision.

The barber stops him. Does the caretaker really think that things can be accomplished so easily, so quickly, while neither the linens nor the hairdressing
tools have been unwrapped and while, on the rear rack of the bike, the chair where the head of the household will sit is still stashed with its feet in the air?!

The caretaker apologizes. He helps untie the chair and install it in the middle of the yard. Then at the barber’s request, he goes into the kitchen to find a tray on which scissors, shears, and metallic combs will be doused with rubbing alcohol and sterilized by fire before use.

A stack of newspapers inside the cottage is set right on the ground. Except for a few copies in Arabic or in English, they are all French-language publications, samples of the local press or newspapers from Paris, periodicals, weeklies, magazines, some of which were several years old and had accumulated in the caretaker’s home as they were abandoned there one by one by relatives and acquaintances. The caretaker never opens these papers. Even if one supposes that he couldn’t read, he could nevertheless flip through them, looking for pictures of women or of landscapes, but no, he’s happy enough to preserve them there, keeping them at the disposition of some curious potential visitor.

The moment will come when, having no more immediate ways of helping his boss, the apprentice would ask:

“Do you still have your newspapers? Could you lend me one?”

The child, in order to read, crouches not far from the chair on which the administrator is enthroned and leans forward, armpits against knees, neck extended toward the periodical that he has set on the ground. Upright on the doorstep of the cottage, the caretaker sings quietly to himself in a head voice. It seems to be a prayer, some ritual song whose purpose was to praise fate. At the same time he observes the apprentice attentively, admiringly perhaps because the latter knows how to read, or fascinated to see that he has enough audacity to venture off into the images of the world as he is now doing.

On the cover of the paper that the child has chosen from the pile appears a title as well as a volume number and a double date: The Literary Journal, n° 1, September 15–November 15, 1987. Several other details are also present, such
as the price of the copy accompanied by the clarification "launch price," and also the names of the authors, the titles of the articles or stories and, inserted into this summary, three images, representing first Ernest Hemingway beside an elephant, then James Joyce seated at an angle, and third a young boy with brown skin holding a rooster by its two wings, with which he has playfully framed his face, as with a living bearded necklace. The apprentice considers the letters and images for a long time. Then as he takes a risk and turns the pages he discovers, reproduced in a format that at least for one of them verges on the real dimensions of the model, nine shots by the German photographer Rudolf Schäfer.

***

The administrator, yes, "Mr. Administrator." He arrived a few moments earlier. Appearing first at the top of the staircase that, like the gangway ladder alongside a ship, descends against the façade of the house toward the red earth of the garden, he paused for a moment on the portico, inhaling from this promontory the powerful odor of sheep and observing that the animals were more numerous today than yesterday, or perhaps wanting to contemplate anew the familiar panorama, the lagoon with its pirogues, the disorderly vegetation of the opposite shore, or even forcing the horizon further and bringing the gaze in line with the filao trees, the coconut palms, the brown algae of the coastline or even beyond, toward the memories of high sea and Southern hemisphere. This eye looking far and wide, like these two arms stretched symmetrically to take support from the parapet—however straight this body, firm on its legs, the neck carrying the head high—it was the first vision of him: a man not on the scale of a piece of land, of a single town or of a single country but of the five continents and of all the oceans of the globe. Thus when, before taking his place on the seat installed on his behalf, he descends the cement steps and advances to meet the barber and the two others in order to greet them, it will be as though he had decided to mark a pause in his life, to grant himself a respite just as a traveler halts, drinking, eating along with his chance companions, chatting.
with them as they attest their admiration of the fact that he may be one of them for the moment, yet his past and his near future remain associated with people, places, or activities that remain completely unknown to them, granting their tablemate a surplus of existence and almost the gift of ubiquity.

Worried about being surpassed by anyone in his role of maintaining protocol, the caretaker immediately threw himself before the master of the house. But despite his haste, instead of crossing the garden in a straight line he proceeded in a curving motion, too wide for the cautious avoidance of the chair to be his only goal, and which seemed to indicate the fear of passing near the barber.

"Sir," he announced, "the barber is here."

As for the apprentice, occupied at that time by lining up brushes, various bottles, and leather to be shined on the briefcase that had been upended to act as a dresser, he now interrupted his work. Like a lesson learned by heart, separating each syllable and accentuating each one, he intoned with a sing-song voice, "good morning, Mr. Administrator." The barber, immobile after having turned toward his host, seemed surprised that the latter, whose apparition he had nonetheless expected, had actually shown himself. One might have said that the barber dashed toward him through pure thought, eliminating at once all that was not their face-to-face encounter, in particular casting into insignificance the presence of the caretaker as well as that of the apprentice and reducing to nothing the landscape around them. It was as if, from having his client in mind so often during the past four weeks in which he had not requested his services, from having imagined his silhouette, his face or some expression that he had known for ages, and from having recreated in his own ear the timbre of the voice, in his own nostrils the scent of the skull or the slightly tobacco-scented breath of the administrator. But it wasn't that anymore. A living being was there, whose reality rendered even more visceral what one felt upon seeing him. And doubtless the barber's surprise came from this transformation inside himself, where feeling revolutionized the organism without the consciousness having seen
anything coming or the will having taken what was happening for anything more than an external event.

“So, barber, how are you?”

As the barber responded he shook the hand that was extended to him and bowed slightly.

“My dear administrator,” he said, “I’m fine.”

The wives? The children?

Wives and children of the barber were well—and here, how was the family of the administrator?

Turned toward the tumultuous campground from which they were separated by the boulevard and by barely a hundred meters, the two men brought up the festival of Tabaski, the parades that had taken place, the speeches or the homilies that were pronounced on this occasion as well as the games, the songs and the dances for which each person in town prepared for several weeks ahead of time. Then suddenly making up his mind, the administrator approached the chair that awaited him and he sat down. He had not shaved this morning. Nor yesterday. On this particular occasion he would therefore need a shave in addition to the usual haircut.

So the barber spread out the large linen that the apprentice had just passed to him. He covered his client from the base of the neck down to his feet, gathering it, fashioning folds, other folds forming involuntarily, finally taking care to tuck the fabric tightly between the skin and the collar of the shirt. He asked him if he wanted a shampoo.

“A shampoo, my administrator?”

Combined with the sound of a tongue that twice in a row and very quickly retracts itself after having been pressed against the upper teeth, an infinitesimal shake of the head right left right responded negatively. Unexpected start from a face whose eyes remained closed. Bizarre animation, mechanical and unsettling of a body with no arms, no shoulders as also with no stomach or thighs since it had been entirely draped in white.
“And your eye—what does your eye stand on?
On the almond your eye stands.
Your eye, on Nothing it stands.”
—Paul Celan
(“Mandorla,” from The Noonerosse, trans. Pierre Joris)

FLORENCE
ENTRYWAY OF FLORENCE

which the anonymity of the surrounding countryside would be enough to render strange if not immediately alarming, as if, rather than proposing to the newcomer the comfort of an authentic place name, the monumental blue letters warned him that here individuality, quality and identity of all things would be subjected to caution, while unanimously disappeared by which we ourselves would become more aerial. But how, if I cannot lift my eyes toward the white smudges of cirrus nor can my gaze follow the supple and continuous handwriting of the cables, will I still feel the meter, the determination, the momentum? All that is too high—and invisible, in any case, behind me as I am forcibly maintained among absence, situated on the side with the yellow daisies, withered vegetation and other images of am

which at the same time makes me suspicious: such as the cars on the road, why no visible passengers or driver? and the flowers, the water, the sky, or right in the fallow this knoll, why daisies or others in this detritus, stagnant, empty of birds, planted with the starred banner (nonetheless infinitesimal banner at the foot of the knoll, and not at all unfurled or otherwise drawing attention)? . . . Later, I will read in FLORENCE my own name; in the knoll with the US flag hardly identifiable, the reflection too

PRIEST OF FLORENCE

who vows to us as well as to this other self no longer to be in any place,
garden, church or presbytery, nowhere and not even in a real town with a name and a past well

that the drainlike attraction vacuumed up the world around the portrait-sitter, leaving the latter emptied and fixed like a sign of entry into a town, or like a tomb, or like a prefabricated house under construction, or like another prefabricated house under construction, or like a house already

on the background of which the priest of Florence appears suffering and Christlike despite, or because of the incongruity of the white surplice now in the completely profane context of the outdoors, of leprous grass and of athletic shoes—flanked by two thieves' windows plus, supported on either side, the neat trunk of a tree, as if referring to the Piero frescoes of

UNDERTAKER OF FLORENCE

whose golden flanges, kitsch in the real décor and failing there to manifest anything sacred, in the photo, by contrast, discreetly rhythm the space, in the closed interior of which, as a sort of vertical recumbent, the tie-clad man lets hang

against which then, chin lifted and knees bent like every time, he came to place his eye. "Parfait," he thought—or out loud, perhaps, to the man who was posing: "Perfect." Everything down to the least detail in the visual field occupied the exact middle between sign and non-sign, making the meaning undecidable, the value unappreciable. He therefore rejoiced, probably laughed in petto because it was comical, although he also felt consternation and knew that as far as his own future was concerned

who vows to us as well as to this other self no longer to be in any place, funeral or office or funeral parlor, nowhere and not even in a real town with
whom even a few minutes ago he could see converging in great number near the stairs or passing in front of the school on foot, by car, bustling about with some kind of merchandise or lingering for a moment of conversation among neighbors of the area. But now students and teachers, women and men passing by, and even animals, both wild and domestic, have all disappeared. And he, not knowing whether in his innermost being relief or anguish prevails, nor if he should take it for a credible sign or fallacious premonition

where the dead tree is, precisely. So that the two large conifers that frame it, but also the mast of the U.S. flag, or the long façade of Oxford Central School and its four colossal pilasters, seem to have no other function than to underscore how much

thanks to which we can say that there is something here and another there, and below the earth, and above the sky . . . So that we inscribe on the ground of our towns such a quantity of straight lines and in the air we hang cables, we erect masts, trees, pillars, walls. And after we, out of our thirst for appeasement, have identified ourselves in the geometry thus obtained, out of a greater thirst we aspire toward that which nothing

in which we recognize this or that object not as a particular traffic sign or a particular hat, screw, or match, but as the traffic sign, the hat, the screw, the match—and same with the bicycle, the basin, the computer, the light bulb, the screwdriver, the string . . . It remains that in the present case, if our man is effectively seen outside of action, outside of circumstance and outside of location like he can be on a page of a primer, on the other hand, with his glasses and beard of a wise old Chinese man, he does not at all correspond
that reduces the décor to so little that you can hardly feel that you are still in a place, and that the firefighter, hardly plausible himself—too frail, too old, too myopic for a firefighter, who moreover seems to be resigned in advance to that which destiny

whose sirens, this time, had continued to approach my stupefied ear—then the urgency of carrying men down the narrow curve of the stairway, and the syringe, the tubes, the oxygen, and later the words that I pronounced in a muted voice, not knowing whether I still addressed them to someone or only to the white of the cinderblocks, only to the red

FACTORY WORKER OF OXFORD

that shadow carried away or holes left in the wall are signs of disappearance, while tattoos on the forearm and proper names sewn onto the construction jacket seem to struggle against anonymity and oblivion, as if already

which in contrast to filthy construction clothing and worn-out shoes he makes appear neat, new, simple, geometric—but even more the shadow that the model projects, immaculate black silhouette by which, one might say, the soul or some

in the center of which he discovered himself to be higher, heavier, more immobile than himself, body perfectly vertical, in the exact extension of the joints between the two yellow signs. And having in this manner short-circuited the continuation of his own gestures and of his days, he found himself to be the witness of a future

DELHI
COURT OF JUSTICE OF DELHI

that neither kelp nor wrecks, garbage, oil slicks, nor footprints mar; also the snow when nobody has walked on it; freshly ironed laundry; the smooth
base coat on the wall, and the even and monochromatic paint on the base coat. These things draw us in. They may well be signs of non-use, and consequently of non-life

in front of which the impeccable alignment of wooden crosses, all equally orthogonal, white, naked, light and more than civil tombs

where something is off, like a lute with a broken string or here the brightly lit strands of lights, while the courtroom is empty; a rich quarto open to a torn page or here the inscription TOWN OF DELHI repeated dozens of times, while Delhi is far, and the utterly functional layout of the local furniture renders the place anonymous—or also the frames on the walls, numerous but empty, and without

**POLICE OFFICER OF DELHI**

in whom poise, presence, even humanity were in short supply. Also, from the cap to the handcuffs by way of the walkie-talkie and the pistol, he had been covered with the most garish insignia. And the tattoo on his forearm, like the emblem on the side of a service vehicle

where even before having been completely drawn his shadow was going to be lost, as if, fooled by too new of an appearance, it had fled its own source and searched in the blackness shared by the night and by the tire

that one perceives even better in its entirety as the flashing lights and sirens inscribe their intermittently moving fault lines on it. And that day there is indeed a strong impression of a homogenous space where collective life takes place around us, while insulated together inside the emergency vehicle—you in the coma, me uselessly watching over your coma, both of us enveloped by flashes and spasmodic moaning
ROME
CHURCH OF SAINT PETER OF ROME

which leaves us internally leveled and deserted, with no corner where any new emotion can sprout, and feeling even memories like a petrified contents, insignificant and heavy. Nothing else in us

that the gaze would have traveled over for a long time, flying, lifting, gliding under the clouds, searching for at least a bird executing similar aerial movements. Then in the same way it would have reviewed the tree branches, the cornices, the gutters, the rooftop apexes and all other possible perches. In vain. And as for beings more subject to weightiness, neither streetside, nor grassy side, and no more than these the windows of the presbytery

that from now on he wouldn’t know how to constitute in thought, as if, operating from the interior, the drainlike attraction had first impeded the words from crossing the threshold of the lips, then had restrained them at the back of the throat before eliminating outright, upstream of any lexicon

WOMAN OF ROME

that did not seem to inconvenience or even to reach the half-sweet half-sharp hints of medicated sweat, no more than the stench of certain linens imbibed for ages with urine. And as if by automatism the body had reproduced the indeterminate floating of consciences, all strolling aimlessly in the polyvalent room—this latter unadorned, and empty too of anything with a sharp edge or point or susceptible

whose rigidity forbid him any twisting of the neck. In his visual field, nothing could therefore enter besides invariable fragments—of a lizardy wall, of wormy boards, of a door panel converted into a guard rail, so many wrecks, one would have said, on which had been hung until no more strength
toward which I advanced, quickening my step to the degree that I felt the reception area distance itself behind me. Now the courtyard that remained for me to cross to meet you in the emergency room, as I had done an hour earlier, this courtyard seemed to get longer, larger ... But while it would have soon attained improbable dimensions, and as if for me the walls would have lost their opacity, I could discern in the distance the metallic bed, the oxygen mask, the vials, the tubes, the whole lot backing up in slow motion toward the horizon and surrounded by emptiness, with you masked on the bed, under the vials, at the end of the tubes, minuscule in the heart of this installation and continuing

BAGDAD

DIRECTION BAGDAD

which resembles all the other beautiful days of the half-season, much like with its exit ramp, its white hatch marks printed on the asphalt and its poles lined up in a row, the stretch of road with two times two lanes could be found in almost any country. However, the total absence of living beings in this banal and peaceful frame and, moreover, the centrality of the sign BAGDAD

toward which they were pushed or sucked irresistibly. As for him, he was surprised by their tranquility, and that neither revolt nor pain engendered any more cries, any more

that together, and even in sleep, we would have perceived as the same darkness and the same silence that envelop us ordinarily. But alone, I opened my eyes on the night without recognizing it at all, and missing yours I heard my own heart: never if of hypothesis nor sustain like those that the doctor, three hours earlier on the phone

FISHERMAN OF BAGDAD

which no one can access, unless the watchman in his SEPTEMBER 11 t-shirt consents and moves, at the same time as his enormous body, the apocalyptic image of the twin towers crumbling into smoke and flames. But
everything, in the attitude of the obese man, testifies to his intention of not moving: the powerful hands resolutely placed on his hips, the solid support of his feet spread on the boards of the pontoon, the tough attitude, especially, those shaved temples and black gaze

toward which his memory turned once again. Thus, in the throbbing regret of the towns, in the absence of any beast big enough to watch it live and activate, he searched for heat in the stones of the riverbank or in the contact of this or that twig brought by the wind, of this or that clump of daisies. And frozen himself plus

who doubtless left traces, but ephemeral, and by now already too erased to enable anyone to deduce much of anything—a dark stain on the wood, there where perhaps bodies had moistened it; on the stone a blush of pink, or something like mica a

Translated by Katina Rogers