

THE FRENCH ART  
OF NOT TRYING  
TOO HARD

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## Introduction

This book came about as the result of a conversation with my publisher and friend, Elsa Lafon. It's important to specify 'friend' because we weren't working at the time, we were just having dinner. It wasn't a professional discussion; I wasn't there to outline a project or negotiate a contract. It was just a conversation for conversation's sake, over a simple family meal and a good bottle of wine. In fact, I can't even remember what we were talking about – maybe about the children, who were still running around and should have been in bed. What effort we expended – to no avail – trying to get them to do what we wanted! Maybe it would have been best just to ignore them and wait for them to tire themselves out. Sooner or later they'd go to sleep. After all, that night was slightly special: there was no school the next day. What greater pleasure, for a child, than to end up falling asleep on the sofa, lulled by the adults' conversation? Late to bed, happy to bed – it makes for sweet memories. 'How right you are,' Elsa said. 'Why struggle? Let's have another glass of wine.'

A few minutes later the children were gently sleeping, through no effort on our part, without our even noticing. 'In the end it was easy,' Elsa said. And I think that's when we started talking about it. Ease – what a marvellous subject. We always think we have to make a huge effort in order to get

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good results, that we have to suffer to be beautiful and must work hard for everything, whether it's seducing someone, or learning to play the piano, or tennis, or to speak a foreign language. Even therapists talk about 'working on yourself', because we are taught at a very young age that everything must be earned, that effort brings just rewards, and that nothing comes from nothing. But I am convinced that the opposite is true. In certain cases, making an effort is not just useless, it's actually counterproductive. No one ever became more beautiful by suffering, for example. Unless they love suffering for its own sake. Beauty rests rather on serenity, on tranquillity, on being at peace with oneself. I'm not saying there's no point making any effort at all, but rather that there are some goals that can only be reached indirectly. By sincerely abandoning any attempt to attain them. Without aiming for them. In other words, *easily*. Seduction, for example: what could be less seductive than someone who's trying to seduce you? It's too direct – there's no room for naturalness, or imagination. If you try, you're bound to fail. In fact, you've failed before you've even started. It's obvious: when you're trying to get someone to like you, you become clumsy, precisely because you're trying not to be. But the reverse is also true – what could be more seductive than someone who isn't making a play for you, who's happy just to *be*, and do their own thing? Seduction is the art of succeeding without trying, without taking aim. It's a question of charm, really. In essence, it's a foregone conclusion. And we know it. Either there's a magnetism between two people or there isn't. So why bother being shy, or paralysed by your goal? There is no goal, no target to be hit, no mountain to be climbed.

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Take cooking, for example. Think of the times you've been chatting away to a friend, enjoying yourself, and forgot to turn down the gas on the hob. Oh well, those onions will be nicely caramelised now. It even holds true for washing up: when you burn a pan the best thing is to let it soak, rather than to scrub at it like a maniac. I'm not saying you should never scrub, but that you need to know when there's no point scrubbing. Letting time do its work doesn't mean you'll never do any yourself. It just means working more efficiently.

I love airport books, the kind you buy just before you get on a plane, that you read while looking out the window. Books you read out of the corner of your eye, but which imperceptibly change your way of seeing and behaving. Not quite philosophy, not quite journalism, nor personal development; more like a journalism of ideas, along the lines of Malcom Gladwell. He gets interested in an idea, investigates it to see how it has changed people's lives and then writes an article or a book on it. If I had to write an airport book, I'd write one about ease.

Elsa put down her glass. 'So when do we publish?'

This book was born that day, out of a conversation that was going nowhere in particular, over a dinner between friends. It too was born out of the corner of someone's eye, in keeping with its subject: *easily*. It wasn't a project, there was no effort to make, no prior intention, no one to convince, no negotiation. It was just perfectly obvious. It's the book you're reading right now. I hope it will fulfil its purpose in the same way as it came into being: without trying. And that you will find in the pages that follow the natural flow of the conversation that inspired it.

# 1

## Continue

*It's like it hasn't really started*

Alberto Giacometti

The hardest part is knowing where to begin. How to approach things? In what order? When you're talking to someone with a drink in your hand, these kind of questions don't come up. You say what you have to say, in any old order. The conversation has always already started, and you just have to keep it going. But with writing, the moment you start, problems arise. I'll be honest – I've rewritten this opening countless times. And each time I've crossed it out and tried again. Everyone knows the story of Orpheus, the musician who goes down into the Underworld to rescue his wife, Eurydice. Like Orpheus with Eurydice, instead of moving forward, every time I started I'd look back, and lose the very thing I'd just snatched from the void. And yet in Orpheus's case, Hades, the god of the Underworld, had been quite clear: 'Orpheus, just this once, since you play the flute so nicely, I will let you bring your wife back from the kingdom of the dead, but on one condition, and one condition only: you must not turn round to look at her, not even once, till you are back in the light of day. Agreed?' He

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couldn't have been any clearer. The contract included no small print. Everything was spelled out, even if the condition imposed was a bit strange. Why forbid Orpheus to look at his wife? Surely that's the kind of rule that cries out to be broken? Well indeed. But Greek myths are not just stories; they are infused with wisdom. And in this case the recommendation is clear: if you want to reach your goal, think of nothing else. Keep going, and don't look back.

Why? You know why. Because otherwise doubt sets in and soon you're going backwards. You get lost in your thoughts instead of acting, and you lose your instinct. If you doubt, you fall. This is equally true for the bashful lover who falters, for the tightrope walker with his toe on the rope, or for the waiter carrying his tray aloft. The tightrope walker first follows the line of his gaze, looking straight ahead, never down or back, not even up. His gaze becomes the line that supports him. The waiter, less perilously, keeps his balance by moving forward, with his shout of 'coming through!', as if magically clearing a path for his tray laden with fragile things and drinks about to spill. This is how Moses must have proceeded as he crossed the Red Sea. Fortune favours the brave. Don't look back, keep going.

\*

So today it's settled, I've been preparing long enough and now I'm off, and I won't be looking back. Why? To see if it works. To see if this book might – not write itself, that would be too much to ask – but perhaps give birth to itself, by the very method it recommends. If it could prove by example that its advice works. Where does this advice come

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from? Not from me, I can assure you. But I have tested it all for myself. These are practical tips gathered from encounters, personal and literary, that I use so often I no longer realise I'm doing so. I've borrowed from philosophers and artists and athletes as well as from fictional characters. I've brought in men and women of action, as well as thinkers – and sometimes they're one and the same: Descartes, Montaigne, Bergson, Bachelard, Pascal, Cyrano de Bergerac, Rodin, Gérard Depardieu, Napoleon, Yannick Noah, Zinedine Zidane, Stendhal, Françoise Sagan, the philosopher Alain, the chef Alain Passard, the tightrope walker Philippe Petit, the psychoanalyst François Roustang, the diver Jacques Mayol, the pianist Hélène Grimaud, and many others. You'll meet them as we go along. In short, I've used the people and names that came to hand.

You will have noticed that what came to hand was essentially French. This is not by chance. Of course, I am French, and you have to start from what you know, hoping that through the particular you might connect with the universal. But there *is* also a typically French notion of facility. We will examine it carefully, without falling into the trap of intellectual nationalism. To be French is to be attached linguistically and mentally to a place, not a race. An idea is French only if it can be universalised. The French mindset is open to all comers – this is its strength, its beauty, its nobility. Descartes may well have been 'in the history of thought, the French cavalryman who set the pace', as the essayist Charles Péguy described him, but unlike Péguy, who served and died as a lieutenant in the First World War, Descartes became a soldier not out of patriotism but because he longed to travel and to see the world. The influential Péguy suggested that

Descartes' style and ideas were irreducibly French, but the method Descartes invented to make thinking seem as easy as being belongs to no one; the obviousness of his 'I think therefore I am' is universal, which is why a philosopher as German as Hegel could say of Descartes that he was the hero of modern philosophy and not just the hero of French philosophy. Ideas belong to those who understand them, and methods to those who use them.

When we say 'France', France itself is no more than an idea – 'une certaine idée' – which exists in the collective imagination in its condensed form of 'Paris', the international symbol of all forms of freedom, the dream of thinkers and artists. This Paris is evoked in the alluringly titled *Le Rendez-vous des étrangers* (Where Strangers Meet) by Elsa Triolet, Louis Aragon's muse – a Paris in which the Spanish Picasso, Russian Chagall and Italian Giacometti all felt at home, and with good reason:

The people who gathered in Montparnasse formed a sort of foreign legion, though the only crime they had on their conscience was that of being far from home, far from their own milieu ... Paris had handed over this small corner to us ... This place for the displaced was as Parisian as Notre-Dame and the Eiffel Tower. And when, like a firework, genius erupted out of this small crowd, it was still the Parisian sky that received its reflected glory.

When the Chinese painter Zao Wou-Ki first set foot in Paris in 1948, he knew only one word of French, one open-sesame which he gave to the taxi driver: 'Montparnasse'. He didn't mean the train station, he meant the mythical place that all

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aspiring painters dream of. He spent the rest of his life there in a studio very close to Giacometti's. Chinese by chance, but French by the dictate of his heart.

By now you'll have got the point: you don't have to be French by birth to be attracted to the French way of life. But what, exactly, does it consist of? If you try to define it too closely you miss its essential quality, which is the ability to protect its mystery, and thereby retain its attraction. In the seventeenth century, that of Louis XIV (known as Louis le Grand or Louis the Great), refined thinkers defined good taste with the aristocratic phrase 'je ne sais quoi', or 'presque rien', an elusive something or almost nothing, which could signify all the difference between an artistic masterpiece and the rest. Success was not linked to the amount of work put in, but, on the contrary, to the absence of apparent effort – the naturalness, the palpable ease with which the artist had achieved his or her aims. Clearly an artist does work, but like a crafty magician or a person of good manners, he or she must not show it. So the idea of a French art of effortless which scorns hard work dates back to the Grand Siècle (the seventeenth century) and the spirit of the royal court. The bourgeois society that came after, born out of the Revolution, logically enough took the opposite approach, vehemently affirming equality and the value of work. If you wanted to stand out you must do so through merit, not birth. So: 'to work, citizens!' But curiously enough the idea of ease, an eminently royal notion, survived, as though the Revolution, far from wiping out royalty, extended it to everyone, transforming every citizen into a monarch. Dead is He, long live Me! Perhaps the reason why the French are so ill-disciplined, capricious and

prone to complaining is because in each of them exists a monarchic streak, concerned only with their own pleasure. Add to that gastronomy, an exaggerated sense of personal freedom, a taste for beauty and the desire always to be right, and you will arrive at an approximate but precise formula for the 'je ne sais quoi' which gives the French soul its characteristic bite. A mixture of noble arrogance and popular insolence, seriousness in things light-hearted and lightness at moments of great seriousness; in short, a desire for effortlessness synonymous with both elegance and pleasure. The extremity of this effortlessness is 'studied neglect': elegance which took hours of preparation, but which acts like it just got out of bed. The deliberate 'dishevelled look': I've come straight from the hairdresser's, but it mustn't show. I spent hours in front of the mirror and in the bathroom making sure I looked spontaneously natural. I've been working on this page for months, but I want you to think I improvised it in five seconds flat. True chic always looks completely natural. Make no mistake: achieving effortlessness is quite an art, maybe even the height of art. It's the hardest thing in the world. Except perhaps for one thing, which is even finer, and even more difficult: refusing to be satisfied with the appearance of effortlessness, but instead feeling it within, experiencing it, living it. Not in outbursts, brief moments of grace, but continuously, assuredly, definitively. 'Pleasure is effortless and easy, but you must learn to be happy,' as Gaston Bachelard said. Passing from pleasure to happiness – now there's a challenge. Bachelard was a professor at the Sorbonne, with a long white beard which made him look like Merlin, a malicious eye and a greedy appetite for imagination, for friendship and for poetry, which for him

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were the ingredients of happiness. In this book I will introduce you to his method, along with others – for there is not just one but many paths to happiness, some of which overlap – and it is my intention, in the time we are to spend together, to point out to you those which seem to me to be worth pursuing, in all senses of the word.

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I began this book by saying that nothing was harder than starting. And this law is ironically doubly true for a book devoted to effortlessness. When you write, you spend your time trying to avoid starting, getting lost in preparation, waiting for inspiration. Deep down, one is never ready, and never will be. This is not due to lack of courage or will. It's just the way it is. It's the only way it can be. To begin, you have to be a god, capable of starting from nothing to create everything, drawing it out of your own inner substance. There's no point getting upset about so-called writer's block, the famous terror of the blank page, or the fear of committing yourself – starting is quite simply impossible. And let's not even talk about finishing. Take Giacometti: he was incapable of finishing anything. You literally had to go into his studio and grab the sculptures off him to send them to the foundry before an exhibition. When people asked him why, he calmly explained that he couldn't finish what hadn't been started: 'I make sculpture to be rid of it, so I can stop sculpting as soon as possible.' 'And yet,' you will reply, 'you always start again.' Giacometti: 'Well, yes, because I never manage to start.' Logical. 'So far, I've never actually started ... But if I ever did manage to start it would practically be

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finished, I think.’ It is clear that finishing and starting are both equally impossible. There is however a way round this, since Giacometti did work, and his work does exist, even if for him it doesn’t: ‘I wonder if behind the pretence of work there isn’t simply a kind of obsession, among other obsessions, with fiddling around with clay without actually getting very far.’

The way out, the miracle solution, does exist. It is sublimely simple, and can be summed up in two chapters – actually in two words. If I tell you what they are right now you can close this book and immediately put them into effect, and you won’t have wasted your time. I’ll go on writing the book anyway out of respect for your idea of what makes a book, and for the job of the writer, but please don’t hesitate to leave me right here to go and put your new-found knowledge to use and reap its benefits as quickly as possible. Out of everything I’ve ever read or heard, I’ve found nothing more useful, in every sphere of life. It fits into two lines, taken from a book by the philosopher Alain, who was a teacher, a writer and a soldier. OK, that’s enough suspense. Here they are: ‘The whole doctrine of action can be expressed in two chapters, each of which contains a single word. Chapter one, continue. Chapter two, start. The order, which people find surprising, expresses almost the whole idea.’ Two words: continue, start. In this order: one idea. You just have to continue, rather than start. Thank you. Nice knowing you – short but sweet. Goodbye. Try to be happy.

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For those who have decided to stick around a bit for further enlightenment, I have a confession to make. The first thing I read by Alain was his *Propos sur le bonheur* (On Happiness), which I borrowed from the municipal library in Hyères-les-Palmiers, the summer before my last year of school. I was hoping for abstractions and big ideas. I was disappointed. It consisted merely of platitudes, life guidance, barely concrete examples. It was several years before I was able to revise my preconceived ideas and properly appreciate the subtlety of his thinking, which some people considered too well written to be profound. ‘No effort you make to be happy is ever wasted.’ You have to have lived a little to appreciate that kind of aphorism, don’t you think? Happiness is easy, it’s within your grasp, Alain tells us. This is not an obvious idea: our experience is, in fact, usually the opposite. We all know that nothing is easy. Don’t we all dream of ease precisely because it is impossible? Feeling weak, no flair, no inspiration? Lacking the energy required to take decisions? Run out of ideas on how to solve a particular problem, or more generally just don’t know what to do with your life? Living and acting are easier than you think. And this is from a man who likes to work. Alain is no dilettante, no slacker. He’s a man of action as well as a philosopher. He is not telling us to stop trying, he just explains where to direct our efforts. It’s quite simple: ‘Everything’s already started, we just have to continue. Just accept yourself where you are now, with whatever you are about to do next. All resolutions for the future are imaginary. Keep on doing what you’re doing, just do it better.’

To be alive is to be part of the narrative of experience, to be engaged with the world. We are always caught up in the

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action. So we don't have to begin, we just have to continue. No need for big decisions. To explain what he meant, Alain took the example he knew best – writing. He quoted Stendhal who, by his own admission, wasted ten years of his life waiting for inspiration:

Even in 1806, I was waiting for the moment of genius to strike before starting writing ... If I had talked about my writing plans in 1795, some reasonable man might have said to me: 'Write every day for an hour or two. Genius or not.' With this piece of advice I could have put ten years of my life to good use, instead of foolishly waiting for the stroke of genius.

In other words, if you want to learn to write, the content doesn't really matter, what matters is writing. The more you write, the better you write. Don't look back over what you've written. Just keep going. 'I noticed here,' comments Alain, 'one of the secrets to the art of writing. Don't cross out, keep going; a sentence begun is better than nothing. If the sentence is clumsy and uneven, that will teach you something.' It's better to keep on writing than to alter what you've written – that's how you make progress.

The writer and resistance fighter Jean Prévost, who was one of Alain's pupils, also drew lessons from Stendhal: 'For the writer who corrects as he goes along, the big effort comes after the first draft, but for the writer who improvises, the effort occurs before the moment of writing ... We will never catch Stendhal as he sets out; he is always either resuming or continuing.' For writing to be easy, the key is doing the hard part before you start. Or rather, to let other people do the

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hard part. To avoid having to begin, Stendhal happily copies out, translates, goes back to an early draft, to a page in his diary, or describes another work of art. Anything rather than be the one who starts: ‘My mind,’ he admits, ‘is a lazy fellow, who is only too happy to latch onto something easier than composition.’ Thus it is his laziness that gets him to work, but the work is made infinitely easier by this method.

What can we learn from Stendhal’s example? Not everyone wants to become a writer. But ‘never make fun of the art of writing,’ Alain says,

it is a skill necessary for any profession, and a lot of time is wasted in trying to delete and start again. Crossing-out is no way to avoid future crossings-out – quite the contrary – for you can get into the habit of writing any old thing, telling yourself you can change it later. The draft spoils the finished copy. Try the other method; save your errors.

Saving your errors means carrying on, instead of going back to correct the sentence you’ve written. You can save the sentence that isn’t quite right and put it with the sentence that comes after, which might start with ‘or rather’, or ‘to put it better’. Writing isn’t about producing one perfect sentence after another, but about correcting your first, imperfect sentence in the one that follows, and so on. What really matters when you’re building a wall isn’t the first stone, but the ones that follow, which interlock, as far as possible, and end up between them forming a wall along with that first stone. Continue. Keep moving forward, don’t look back. The exercise of writing without crossing out seems difficult until you

try it. You don't believe you're entitled to make mistakes; you think you'll be paralysed by the idea that you can't go back. In fact the opposite happens as soon as you accept that you don't have to be perfect. You just have to lean on the imperfection of your first sentence to make the next one emerge. You're freed from the anxiety of always having the possibility of retracing your steps. There is something liberating about the irrevocable. Don't get me wrong. No one's asking you to be perfect – just to act as though you are. To suspend judgement on what you've done and to free yourself from it by moving forward. Then the rule against turning back ceases to be like the threat made by Hades and becomes the most beautiful promise you can make to yourself. It becomes a gift, for in eliminating the possibility of going back to undo what you've already done, you allow yourself the possibility of inventing something by carrying on. We learn to write by writing, not by deleting. And this method creates its own momentum. Since we have no choice but to go straight ahead, we suddenly find we are launched. This characteristically French habit of writing without crossing out, of improvising as you go and not looking back, is cavalier in all senses of the term: it drives the sentence on, like a spirited horse, granting it the right to overthrow the rules. Imperfection ceases to be a problem, and instead becomes a launching pad. Try it, just for yourself. Don't show anyone. Write without looking back. In black ink, no rubbing out, no crossing out. Let me know how you get on.

If you don't like writing, think of it as an exercise in mental muscle-building. Force yourself, if need be, and once you've experienced the freedom of not rereading your own words, you'll be in a position to do something similar in your

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life. Your whole existence will start to feel like it's happily and comfortably improvised, rather than straining for a paralysing degree of perfection or giving in to the feeling that it's 'too late'. We feel able to make anything because we know we will always be able to remake ourselves, and that true action lies in continuation rather than in rupture; a flowing stream as opposed to a radically new beginning. Big changes often happen indirectly, through the accumulation of tiny decisions. Continue what you're doing, just do it better, rather than starting afresh every other day: the end result will be both more spectacular *and* sustainable. Don't make a clean sweep, don't wipe all your pieces off the board. Of course, it's tempting. But surprise yourself, and keep the game going, instead of turning your back on it. You can always start again once it's finished. For the time being, ask yourself what move is possible – even if it's only a tiny one – in order to enjoy the game and make it interesting.

The main error is to wait around doing nothing, holding your pen, or with your life on hold. Patience is a virtue, but there is a negative form of expectation, namely expecting too much of yourself. Nothing grows through that kind of waiting. If you don't know how you can get out of this kind of stagnation do what Stendhal did: borrow your first sentence or your first action from someone else, and continue it. Continuing allows you to ride on other people's momentum instead of having to use your own. In cycling they talk about 'drafting', or more commonly, 'slipstreaming'. In life, as in writing, you first need to get into the wake of someone or something else. We start off learning a language by imitating others, learning by rote. Bit by bit, without realising it, we end up creating our own slipstream and speaking the

language. We write, we pedal, we gallop. We're off! We never actually had to start and now that all we have to do is keep on going, it's a whole lot easier. A sculptor needs clay or stone to model or sculpt; he can't do it out of thin air, from nothing, *ex nihilo*. Perhaps when Giacometti gives himself over to what he calls an obsession, content just to fiddle around with clay without actually achieving anything, he hasn't really begun yet, but that doesn't stop him from carrying on. He may always feel he's failed to do what he was trying to, but his work gives him great pleasure. Here, in an interview given at one of his exhibitions to the insightful documentary maker Jean-Marie Drot, he has the final word:

'Giacometti, when we last met in Paris, you were making sculptures. And now in Zurich you're a bit like a shepherd surveying his flock. They're everywhere. How does that make you feel?'

'Yesterday, when I saw the exhibition, I thought it looked great. For a moment, anyway. Too good, actually. That does worry me a bit.'

'Why's that?'

'Because if I went on feeling as satisfied as I was yesterday, that would mean – in contradiction to what I generally think, wouldn't you say? – that either I've lost my critical faculty or I've now come to a point where there's nothing left for me to do.'

'Even so, it's a bit like seeing your whole life in one room.'

'I suppose so, but it's ... well, in a sense, it's like it hasn't really started.'