

The Incident At *Modane*: What Have We Learned?

**Paul O’Kane, June 2010
(4,700 words)**

At dawn on April 20th 2010, a rather outmoded sleeper train, packed with anxious holiday-makers trying to return to North Europe and destinations beyond, stood motionless in the dark, just on the French side of the French-Italian border. To be more precise, the train stood on the tracks of the mainline from Turin to Lyon at a station named *Modane*. As a passenger on that train I was unaware at that time of any incident of great historical significance associated with *Modane*, but its position on the alpine borders suggested it might well have been involved in territorial negotiations throughout centuries of shifting European Geopolitics. Hannibal or Napoleon might have passed this way, ghosts of Vichy France possibly haunt its sidings.

On the date in question, rather than anything worthy of historical record, *Modane* seemed to be playing host to a non-event. When I say ‘dawn’ I mean it stopped at precisely 4.45 a.m. and, after minutes expanded into hours, showed no sign of wanting to continue its journey. The train had rumbled and clunked to a halt here in pitch darkness following a midnight rush out of Milan, through Turin and across North West Italy with a momentum that had revitalised its previously despondent cargo. It had then lumbered more ponderously up a series of steep Alpine tunnels before coming to rest as soon as it was in France. The fact that the train’s destination was Paris -still 5 or 6 hours distant - with an

E.T.A. of 9 a.m., made the prolonged hesitation frustrating for the occupants, who had been gratefully relieved to have this special service laid-on to rescue them from a desperate situation.

For the past 2-3 days their leisurely holidays had been disrupted by the eruption of a volcano in faraway Iceland. They had endured anxiety bordering on panic, suffered repeated frustrating setbacks, negotiated compound obstacles and put-up with ignominious discomfort. Their privileged status as 1st world tourists had turned turtle, casting them instead as refugees deprived the power of consumerist choice and denied compliant, affordable services.

Unexpected changes to travel plans meant that holidays originally made excusable and triumphantly celebrated as ‘bargains’ had now morphed into full-price equivalents, costing sums many of these travellers would not regard as within their means. What had been thrifty escapes and cheap city-breaks now took on the magnitude of a far *grandeur* tourism as the truly aristocratic aspirations of their adventures ate alarmingly into their *petit-bourgeois* building society accounts.

The fact that this train, which had promised deliverance from a havoc of blocks and obstacles, now succumbed in its turn to a pestilential inertia did not provoke the uproar one might expect. Most of the passengers were physically exhausted, spiritually resigned and coated with an ironic patina of the kind one acquires when things that have gone wrong have only got worse, and worse, despite every rational and irrational attempt to

improve them. They had railed against injustice, become first theological then scatological in their invocations, and having exhausted their mainstay expletive “unbelievable”, finally acclimatised to an unfamiliar reality for which they really had no words.

Thwarted and silenced, the travellers accepted the futility of their indignation in response to a sublimely indifferent force issuing from the inaccessible depths of a volcano -of all things. A thoroughly unreasonable, undemocratic and un-modern volcano which, though geographically distant, nevertheless confronted them at every turn, extending its reach to all points of the globe, animistically taking the form of closed airports, enormous queues, shrugging consulates, multiplying hotel and transport bills, missed appointments, small spaces shared with strangers, fear, uncertainty, powerlessness, and most infuriating of all, call-centres whose inanely spooled *muzak* glued mobile phones to enraged ears as pricey talk-time oozed off into the ether.

The specially provided and extremely crowded train had been a magnet for desperate returnees at various stages of a wide variety of homeward routes so that a couple mildly ashamed of the difficulty in returning merely from Venice to London literally rubbed shoulders with suntanned Thailand-trekkers who tried to ignore and sleep-off their rude awakening from paradise behind airline masks decorated with logos of companies who, on hearing of the European cloud, had dumped them back in Asia leaving them with an almighty problem. And so a rare collection of global and continental adventurers now sat

stuck, gently snoring or silently seething, in *Modane*, a place to which none had ever planned to journey during their natural life.

Peering out of windows, where Italian fields, pylons and moonlight had recently flashed Futuristically past, all we could now make-out was a glum unchanging scene. It was as if an action movie had resolved itself into an unusually grim Sunday painting. A few empty platforms and uninspiring buildings vaguely asserted their forms in the dim, while the station's name - 'M O D A N E' - provided the signature for this all-too-fixed image in letters barely brighter than their background. Much as one might wish for the scene to change and for trains to do what trains should do and *move!* for the time being this world refused to comply with our desires.

Our post-industrial age of largely mouse-bound virtual skills makes it unlikely that any of the passengers were experts in the mechanics of train locomotion, and this blissful ignorance ensured that, though curious about our uneventful drama we were wholly unaware that the Italian engine driver who had heroically pulled us up from Milan, had, without any announcement, separated his engine from the train immediately after arriving in *Modane* and powered off back towards Turin and a comfortable Italian bed.

The passengers were also unaware that, on April 20th 2010 *all* train drivers on the French side of the border who might have been expected to liaise with and replace the Italian driver were, very much, on strike.

As the small hours of April 20th stretched themselves across the slow coming dawn, barely anyone stirred on the un-stirring train, but after almost two hours of this strange waiting, some confused and jaded creatures, blearily encountering each-other on the way to crude and inadequate toilet facilities, broke the cool distance and privacy code one adopts when travelling in style and began to share observations and information, more like grumpy guests of a disappointingly cramped hotel.

Shelving their longer tales of woe they compared immediate distress and confusion regarding the excessive halt, in particular objecting to the complete lack of information given by any employee of the train company. One nervy young American, acutely aware of our rights, pointed out the lack of drinking water on a train presently restraining what he estimated to be 800 people within its heavy steel carcass behind centrally locked doors. This observation momentarily raised the level of collective alarm from bleary-eyed anxiety to paranoid probing and potentially embroiled us in a historically infamous tragedy that, along with numerous other spin-offs from the main volcano story, might feature in tomorrow's newspapers.

But this was *not* to be an event of historical magnitude, it would not merit a Twitter trend nor even a flash on Yahoo, nevertheless I am retelling it here and suspect it was significant enough to all those who directly experienced it to brand its way into their memories. Though local and particular, this story probably *did* re-emerge, all over Northern Europe and in destinations beyond Paris to which passengers were travelling

on, retold perhaps, up to 800 times as a feature of after-dinner tales or an episode in an odyssey broadcast by telephone from numerous sofas.

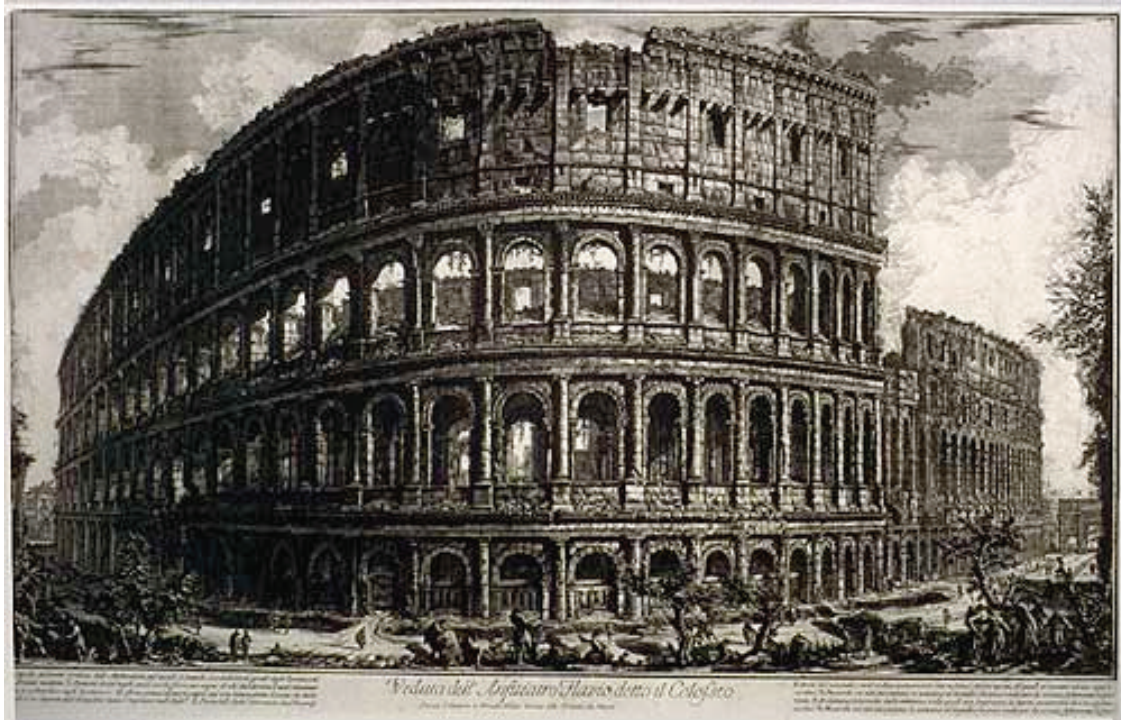
My partner and I had been forced to find alternative routes from Rome to London and had reluctantly abbreviated our trip to the ‘eternal city’, fulcrum of the original Grand Tourist tradition that we now clumsily simulated in our pathetically post-modern plight. A few days in to our well-deserved break we had been riding into Rome’s centre from our cheap accommodation on the periphery, when, on a crowded morning metro, we were suddenly confronted with a hundred volcanoes, paraded as front-page news by seemingly choreographed commuters seated opposite, brandishing identical giveaway morning papers. The headline and accompanying full-page picture spoke reasonably clearly; smoke spewed from a mountain, overlaid with two enormous words ‘VOLCANO EUROPA!’

Perhaps because of our deep-felt desire not to spoil a longed-for trip; or due to an over-educated degree of hermeneutic sophistication, we nevertheless managed to brush aside this emphatic omen, interpreting it as a crass tabloid’s editorial device that merely invoked the *image* of a volcano as a *metaphor*, referring perhaps to imminent economic ‘eruptions’ between Europe’s member states. Anxious to maintain the vacationer’s bubble of unreality, and saturated in the pleasure principle that intoxicates all hope filled tourists we simply couldn’t link this grim announcement to any *real*, ruinous volcano, partly because –we rapidly theorised- no *actual* volcano could ever be described as ‘European’ either in size or according to any precise location. And though we had

considered visiting Pompeii, the word 'Vesuvius' flitted only briefly across our minds at this point before we blithely turned our attention back to the day's plans.

It is testament to the enthusiasm with which Rome grips a first-time visitor that for several days we did manage to avoid being sucked into those concerns by which the workaday world is relentlessly oppressed by media and its insatiable thirst for attention. And as we gradually came to accept that we had become embroiled within the headlines it seemed odd that a natural disaster so far from this dreamy city could reach out and exert its influence over us. But Rome is a city where the miraculous appears on every blessed corner and no place to focus on banal pragmatics, and so, even as we begrudgingly allowed our rich sensory environment to be tainted by bad news we insisted on exploring the city in the way we had long intended.

And so we looked out at sunset from the grounds of the gorgeous Villa Medici, home of the French Academy and historic haven for artists, sharing the haughty overview of Rome once enjoyed by the Napoleon who had once resided there and protected the academy from revolutionary forces. At the Trevi Fountain and Colosseum we ducked and twisted to avoid being caught in a cross-fire of iPhone operatives making movies of themselves amid a stampede of tourist trainers treading in the genteel footsteps of 18th Century gentry who, prior to the invention of digital film and photography bought prints by Piranesi, Fuselli and Clerrisseau as equivalent proof of their visit.



Piranesi

More professional and academic 18th Century specialists had tended to take home chips and lumps and casts of almost everything they witnessed, providing the rapidly growing taxonomic institutions of their North European homelands with a cornucopia of haptic ghosts and textured traces of the great, lost Mediterranean civilisations against which they increasingly compared themselves with extreme deference. To illustrate this condition, one drawing by Fuselli shows an overwhelmed artist or architect, dwarfed and perhaps weeping at the scale and skill of the ancients, while Henry Parke, a contemporary, shows a tentatively ascending toff gripping an inadequate looking ruler as he climbs an enormous capital, like a low form of life in the land of the giants.



Fuselli



Henry Parke

Classicism, knowledge and culture; discovery, adventure and exploration; along with the expanded mind, broadened taste and seasoned character of the traveller are all condensed within the image of the Enlightened 18th Century Grand Tourist, on whom -we might suggest- so much of the bourgeois-centric gaze still depends today. What separates and defines the empowered middle classes of Northern Europe has always been their ability to *acquire* and evaluate; more specifically to acquire and evaluate culture, capital and commodities.

On the long, evolutionary ascent of Western man to realise the pinnacle of its achievement in the form of post-modern, city-breaking tourists, some form of Neo-Classicism has repeatedly provided a kind of 'fuelling station' or plateau at which to regain orientation and self-belief by means of reverential reference to the past. At crucial

intersections on the road to consumerist supremacy the past and learning became inextricably linked and simultaneously enshrined as virtuous. Indeed, history itself, as popularly consumed, is invariably valued as a fusion of 'learning' with 'the past'.

Notwithstanding its obvious metaphysicality the past is habitually invoked as a kind of ballast used to balance the shaky trajectory of an inherently progressive modernity while associated with values of education and wisdom. The past's lessons can and must be learned, wisdom can and must be gained by encountering and considering the past - if possible close to-hand enough to absorb it directly into one's flesh or to breathe it in. The original document in the archive, the displayed relic, and its humble cousin the souvenir, all fetishise our link with the value of the past even while such over-determination of accessible material objects suspiciously suggests an attempt to compensate for the unacceptable inaccessibility of the past itself for a culture which is, as we have said, above all acquisitive.

But to apply another Freudian term here, 'screen memories' might provide an appropriate model for the way in which the demands of the present necessarily and imperceptibly distort the truth of the past, thus making our ability to 'learn' or 'gain' from the past a matter of mere delusion. The great loss and evaporation that is the past itself, and which, more than anything, determines experience and shapes life, is unfortunately *not* accounted for amid the serial secular revolutions that supplanted primitive, irrational worldviews with the sacred and superior spirit of bourgeois desire (an eternal flame now burning at the heart of every power-broking institution).

If the past, unlike its material relics, does not, by definition, exist, how and why should or can we learn from it? True, its images and evidence may steer us away from repeating its mistakes; we place coals in the fire fully expecting them to burn and our hands in the same *unsafe* in the knowledge that pain will be our only gain, yet all too often we avoid one mistake only to make others. Despite his magnificent hubris, modern man, it seems, can only avoid error by means of modest and prolonged procrastination, but this too can prove fatal, merely providing a further illusion that we are in any control whatever of temporal forces acting upon us and which may well have wills of their own.

The figure of Walter Benjamin and his Frankfurt School colleague Siegfried Kracauer perhaps inevitably appear at this point, dubiously privileged as they were to be all-too aware of the errors into which men could lead themselves and might soon lead themselves again. Visiting Italy, Benjamin chose Naples, not Rome to write home about, just as he always insisted on gifting the secondary, overlooked, marginal and accidental with all the dignity normally afforded to the presumptuously primary and supposedly magnificent. Benjamin applied this method in search of the true, underappreciated lesson that history is in fact never more or less than a thoughtful snapshot of the present, a reverie envisaged and interpreted (to invoke Freud once again) both subjectively and fleetingly in the constant dawning of the now.

Against the grain of that more awe-struck form of history coined by 18th Century academics and the *aristos* trailing in their wake, Benjamin, like his contemporary Proust,

productively enriched the academic, accepted, and established relationship between past and present by making it far less clear to what extent we *could* expect to gain or learn anything of dependable value from history. It might be our greatest folly to trust in the past as our guide and perhaps wiser to attend forensically and critically to examining our *current approach* to the past as just one more aspect of all that is new, emerging, empirical, and current, meanwhile accepting and asserting that *this*, and only this, can honestly be what we today refer to as ‘history’.

As long as we measure cave paintings in millimetres or weigh pharaohs in kilos we must accept that anachronism and incongruity rule the so-called science of history, and only then can we proceed, safe at least in the knowledge that, while we learn little we nevertheless create much. And surely this, possibly Nietzschean (perhaps equally Freudian thought) seeks to protect us from the enthusiastic hubris of a dubious Enlightenment as well as any headless, headlong modernism.

Under the influence of the particular kind of history that produced and encouraged what we know today as tourism, all that is considered of importance becomes self-consciously so. The originally dynamic emphasis on ‘discovery’ is countered by the equally archaeological emphasis on ‘site’ which encourages a kind of importance that becomes itself immobile and compounded; ‘important’ in that some particular phenomenon is repeatedly wrapped in layers of a particular valuation that increasingly renders its worth invisible by its very familiarity or uninteresting precisely because of the increasingly unimaginative interest taken in it. Meanwhile, the apparently insignificant and

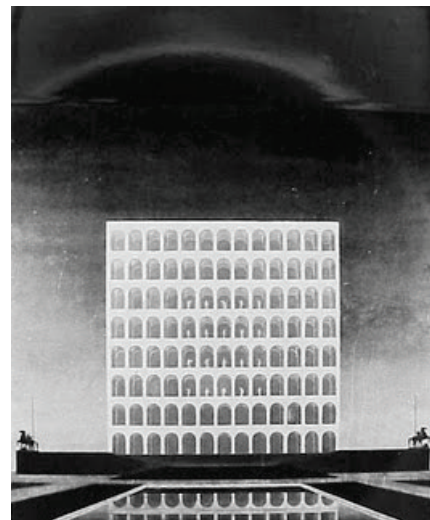
overlooked might well retain and reveal unexpected secrets that cast the past in today's light, exposing the qualities and motivations of today's perspectives. Thus, given the opportunity, the past reveals the present in a charming and essential symbiosis.

But still we shouldn't call this 'education' as any discovery *by* the self is simultaneously discovery *of* the self and the *least* grand of tourisms - i.e. our everyday *flaneurie* – is most likely to teach, inform and place us in communication with something true about the past -that iconic monuments only disguise or deny – precisely because didacticism is *avoided* in any process of self-discovery. Thus, it may be that Rome's Colosseum is the most important of the city's attractions - proving as it does the ancient Roman's theatrical fascination with spectacular combat and contest - but for an unapologetic Benjaminian like myself the past lurches-up unexpectedly in multi-dimensional sound and colour all around these colourless husks that we feel obliged to dutifully admire. E.g. the fact that, just around the corner from the Colosseum I stumble across a tiny and bizarre emporium, making and selling only comically outsize men's shoes in every fashionable style, opens my imagination to think in unexpected ways about where I am (particularly offering an oblique perspective on the scale and masculinity of my ancient surroundings).

Meanwhile, the comprehensive didactic packaging of the Colosseum's all-too-obvious self-importance seems to have drained it of any inspiration that it may have provided for Rome's original tourists or indeed the ancient Romans themselves.

To give another example, concerning a more modern historical interest, at an early stage of our complex protestations and enquiries regarding our cancelled flights home, my

partner and I found ourselves pressing the brushed aluminium buzzer of the city's only British Airways office, located remotely in an almost suburban area of Rome which I gradually came to recognise as the fascistic proto-utopia named 'EUR', commissioned in Mussolini's heyday and used as the discomfoting setting for Antonioni's classic 1962 movie *'L'Eclisse*. Here, far from the huddling, colourfully washed walls of the classical city, unmediated sunlight and the failure of our mission soon beat us into dejection as we pounded dusty verges of wide roads, lacking all shelter, in a De-Chirico-like zone with the inhuman atmosphere that pervades all 20th century developments built primarily for the automobile.



***L'Eclisse* and EUR**

But what Benjamin, his colleague Kracauer, and their contemporary Proust surely sought, was precisely such unexpected, personal, political and historical profundity latent within the banalities of the present, that we pass-by a thousand times until, in some privileged

moment unexpectedly unearthing their value for history *in the sense that we have attempted to determine it above* i.e. the maintenance of a vigilant and prophetic perspective upon all possible consequences of present phenomena. According to this scenario, far from the *end of history* proclaimed by certain right-thinking theorists of post-modernity and Neoliberalism, we today inhabit *nothing but* history; history is immanent, our default environment, from which we escape only temporarily on brief holidays from history enjoying the delusion of deliverance from time itself.

It is noteworthy that, while we can readily associate Benjamin, Kracauer and Proust with early modern, urban environments, we simultaneously distance them somewhat (as they seem to have done themselves) from academia. To learn *per se* might fall outside the undirected structures and elusive forms evolved and evoked by these creative thinkers. For these thinkers -influenced as much by Bergson as by Hegel - intuition, fragmentation, passage and becoming are all more credible than any debatable, standard educational presumption that we should gain or learn in any measurable, progressive or reliable way from the past.

In a scene from Peter Bogdanovich's 1971 movie 'The Last Picture Show' that the above thinkers might appreciate, a teenage boy, restless in a summer classroom, is unable to concentrate on a teacher who strives to inspire him with 'great' English literature. Bogdanovich uses angles and cuts to show that the boy's attention is taken by dogs; seen through the classroom window rutting in the school grounds. In this moment, cinema makes us aware of the overwhelming eruption of 20th Century subjectivity, displacing the

assumed authority of the objective and classical, while perhaps defining the modern itself as a kind of distracted, searching, desirous adolescence which no-longer appends the value of the present to that of the past.

To take these thinkers one at a time, Kracauer's tone (important to distinguish from Benjamin's) is biting; necessarily reliant upon a healthy scepticism and suspicion towards the all-too-knowing mechanics of modernity which, in 1920s Germany, are gearing up to produce the machinery of 20th Century nationhood, monopolising and carving-up modern power between economic engines and the state apparatus. We could argue that Kracauer's Swift-ian satirical distance insists that, far from assuming we *learn from* the past and its mistakes, it is better to acknowledge the ways in which we revel blindly in them to such a degree that man's folly -if not armed at least with such a sufficiently vigilant and sceptical facility- is to ignorantly exchange error for error while intoxicated by delusions of right, righteousness and progress.

The form and effects of Proust's most famous literary experiment offer us little chance of gaining in any way practically from the past, as the past's lessons and gifts surrender themselves only at the least expected and perhaps least useful moments. Even if time can, by Proustian means, be somewhat 'regained' (the ultimate dream of a bourgeoisie affronted by any denial of its voracious acquisitiveness) its *unavailability* to 'use' is precisely what renders such memory primarily aesthetic. Regained time is beautiful precisely in that it cannot be pressed into any service other than the sensual. Meanwhile,

we might store-up acute and beautiful observations if only so that the tragedy of our ailing futures might be decorated or denied within folds of sensual memory.

Walter Benjamin's 'Angel of History', who necessarily 'progresses' facing backwards, marks itself so strongly on our image of Benjamin's cavernous thought because it thwarts a simplistic popular notion of progress (fostered by our habitual perambulation) that we come to suspect by appreciating the real complexity of experience. Benjamin's clumsy Angel seems for us to be a more responsible messenger than any forward-thinking personality cultist confidently leading a people into an imaginary future about which they claim privileged information. While such 'leaders' pretend to see into the future we must look instead directly *at* our world, *as* history, and there and therefore (sic) see with more reliability and responsibility, our very own glimpse of glinting prophesy.

But to turn now towards a conclusion, the traumatic disruption and unexpected return journey from Rome usurped the city's intended historical and aesthetic glories, and of the hoard of memories I brought back it was that mundane and uncomfortable non-event of waiting patiently in the liminal non-place of *Modane* that shook its way to the top.

However, as I prepared this writing, whatever consumerist indignation and airport blues that myself, my partner and many others may have experienced there and then, were put into perspective when I discovered that a certain eerie hunch I had felt was correct:

Modane is indeed the site of a significant and very well-known historical event; the worst train crash in history.

On 12th December 1917 a pig-headed attempt to ferry war-weary troops back to France via Turin for Christmas, using dangerously overloaded trains and an inadequate engine, led to the deaths of 800 young men, half of whom couldn't be identified due to the severity of the crash and an ensuing fire. On the insistence of a belligerent officer, and under threat of military discipline, an unwilling civilian driver had been forced to haul excessively loaded carriages, on precisely the same route we had taken, across Italy and up through the alpine tunnels to the height of *Modane*, at which point we might imagine the returning soldiers might have cheered and revelled to be on home soil, soon to be free of professional restraints. But on the long and steep descent into welcoming France, the engine's brakes were unable to control the train's excessive weight and consequent downhill speed; they glowed white-hot and caught a fire which spread along the train's undercarriage before the carriages piled off the tracks and into one another, slamming young lives temporarily reprieved from war into the unforgiving rocks of the beautiful alpine landscape. The whole then rapidly erupted into an uncontrollable inferno.

When I learned *this* I learned, and learned again, of the eerie palimpsests of history, where diverse events of relative fame or infamy are overlaid on and in places whose names remain unchanged by the events that take place within them. Why not believe in ghosts, and even 'witching hours', when every day we unknowingly walk in dead men's shoes and, doing so, add trails of our own which those in future times will innocently blur or compound in their turn.

At 7.45 a.m. on Wednesday April 20th 2010, with the sun glinting brightly on mountaintops just beyond *Modane*'s buildings and yards, we finally heard the central locking of our train's thick doors click open and the public address system cough into action. A French man's voice spoke hesitatingly in broken English to the battered and confused passengers:

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am the driver. We will continue to Paris. Depart 20 minutes. Now, I will be standing on the platform with a bottle of water."

The last statement had clearly and comically lost its plurality in translation. A single bottle of water would, after all, be of little use to 800 passengers eager to quench their thirst, freshen-up and stretch their legs, so that I momentarily feared for the driver's safety, imagining him inundated with furious demands, questions and complaints.

We later learned that it had not been possible for French strikers to predict and account for this specially provided train and that, when it arrived before dawn at a driver-less *Modane* some panic had ensued among managers who wanted to be seen internationally to be doing their best for Europe's stranded tourists. They had in fact made numerous nocturnal enquiries and even journeys into the dark in search of a driver willing to work on this day of protest. And eventually this driver had been dragged unexpectedly from his bed to save the honour of France and of all consumerist Europe, perhaps with a strike-braking promise of some extra financial reward.

After a further half an hour, during which our hearts and hopes were lifted by the sound of a throbbing engine, the train suddenly and effortlessly eased itself into motion like a young bird overcoming fear of flight, and almost immediately our faith and patience were rewarded by a long and steep downhill train-ride through a glorious alpine landscape, bright with dew under a crisp new sun, with reflections of the sky's crystal blue subtly tinting snow on rugged crags and peaks, above which eagles dramatically hunted breakfast.

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