

The Salt of the Earth (Part I)

The Transit Café
25th August 2006

A Story of Port Shelby, Phuket and old friends told in three parts by Transit Café's guest author, Pierre-Edmond Robert.

Pierre-Edmond Robert is a Professeur of French Literature at the Sorbonne, in Paris, and head of the French as a Foreign Language School. He is the author of critical studies and editions of Marcel Proust's Remembrance of Things Past, of translations from the English of short stories by the Canadian writer Mavis Gallant and the American Rick Bass. He has published short stories himself and three novels,

*the last one in 2005: Pleure pas mon cœur
(Bernard Pascuito éd.).*

I started to write *Port Shelby*, a story of small town life in the United States, in the winter and the early spring of 1980. Writing during those long and dark evenings in Michigan, I was of course hoping that it would be published some day.

And it was, ten years later, in 1990, by a respectable, long-established, French publishing house: Flammarion, which was later bought by an Italian media conglomerate.

In fact, the Flammarion's headquarters are no longer located on rue Racine—the name of the street, a stone's throw from the Odéon theater, doubling up as that of one of the house's literary collections, precisely the one which included my novel.

Its offices have been moved to the farthest reaches of the 13th district of Paris, in some former industrial neighborhood, supposedly being renovated with apart-

ment high-rises, university extensions and supermarkets.

They are now located on quai Panhard & Levassor, named after two pioneers of the automotive industry, whose factory used to be near by. That company folded many years ago; it used to build durable, outmoded looking cars. Does it make for a more propitious editorial address?

I would not know. I have not been to the new offices: the previous literary editor, an older woman, died fairly recently from relentless drinking and her assistant, with whom I had worked on my book, was fired some time prior to that. I have been told that he is now in charge of a line of large print paperbacks in a lesser known publishing house. *Port Shelby* did not sell, although it received some critical attention. Most of the reviewers stressed that the novel was an indictment of the American way of life, a denunciation of the American social system, which it was not.

Others noted as an original trait that it portrayed factory workers, small entrepre-

neurs and diner's waitresses. Modern French novelists now rarely deal with blue-collar types and those who have written about life in the United States, even less so. Journalists, academics and assorted intellectuals are their preferred characters; New York's East side and California's common addresses their favorite places. As a result, my novel was viewed as a perilous act well performed.

It was simpler than that: I lived close enough to my characters to know them well. Our paths crossed several times a day, at the convenience store, the gas station, the lunch counter as well as at the university's cafeteria, in and around evening classes. I had named the novel after the next dot on the map: Port Shelby, a small outlet opening on Lake Michigan.

In the eyes of its settlers, Port Shelby was destined to greatness, along with other natural harbors of the region: Saugatuck, Benton Harbor, further South. Logging was to make them into vibrant shipping centers. They developed into summer

resorts, seasonal fishing harbors, not much more.

Port Shelby did not develop at all: a narrow channel, made shallow by sand bars, with a ring of summer cottages around it and, on the road side, a log cabin restaurant which serves a perch dinner on week ends, hot dogs and hamburgers the rest of the time, with some Mexican standards such as chili con carne and burritos, coffee by the pot and beer by the pint.

On the other hand, book reviewers, too absorbed by what they perceived as the social background of the story, neglected the main character: Mike Russ, the young man. I have a soft spot in my heart for all the Mike Russes of the world; they are the salt of the Earth.

A recent survey published in the media contrasts the different tastes in novels between men and women. Men, so it seems, like stories of estrangement and loneliness, rooted in their adolescent years: *The Stranger* by Camus, of course, *The Catcher in the Rye*, by Salinger, and others.

I had *An American Tragedy* by Theodore Dreiser in mind, with the young outsider, Clyde Griffiths, trying to break through the social barriers, trying to move to the inside by shrewd observation of the codes, eventually failing in criminal fashion. In the 1951 film adaptation by George Stevens, Montgomery Clift, moody, looking tortured at times, was Clyde, Elizabeth Taylor the industrialist's daughter, Shelley Winters the simple girl.

My own Mike Russ was not ambitious to that extent, although opportunist, he held moral values which would have prevented him from applying all means to his ends. He had that patient determination to do better, to be better. He did not expect anything for nothing. Hard working, quiet, temperate—those are the words which come to my mind, even though the writer may not be the most qualified person to describe his characters.

Characters are mere signs on paper, you say, the product of tired old conventions, as goes the current literary wisdom?

Nonetheless, Mike Russ had taken a life of his own and I discovered that, after all, I had not sealed his fate in my novel.

Salt of The Earth (Part 2)

1st September 2006

In this second of a three-part story by Pierre-Edmond Robert, we move to Patong Beach, on Phuket Island, on Thailand's West coast. Sixteen months after the tidal wave which devastated the area, there are square signs bolted high on posts...

Part 2: The scene moves to Patong Beach, Phuket

Now the scene is at Patong Beach, on Phuket Island, on Thailand's West coast. Sixteen months after the tidal wave which devastated the area, there are square signs bolted high on posts, with painted blue letters, all along the waterfront boulevard,

pointing towards an improbable tsunami escape route.

It is Easter Sunday and the hotel management has put out an information notice for the guests who wish to attend church services, as well as an offer of a bonus for those who will make dinner reservations early: a free dessert to be chosen from the restaurant's menu, although limited to one person and contingent upon the purchase of an entrée and a main meal per person also, as it is specified in smaller print. As for churches, there is a choice of locations and of languages: Thai, English, Italian, à la carte. The time and the location of the Italian mass are clearly the most convenient.

The church of the Sacred Heart is located on Soi Keb Sup, says the hotel's leaflet. Asking for the best way to get there, I read the address to the girls at the desk, saying soup for sup. They are so amused that they start laughing out loudly, repeating soup the way I said it, with side comments of their own in Thai. The

correct pronunciation is sap, and such is also the spelling on the town's map they give me out of commiseration. I should take a "tuk tuk", they say, for fear that I would lose my way.

One of those small utility vehicles, Japanese-made, converted into a minibus, takes me to an alley. The driver gestures: this is the alley I am looking for. There is no church in sight: clothing shops, eating places, massage parlors, but nothing looking like a church.

A policeman, busy with removing a moth trapped inside his cap, tells me that the church is in the next alley. He warns me: I cannot reach it from the back, where we are. I must return to the waterfront boulevard, go left and enter the first alley I encounter. I thank him; the moth finally flies away. I retrace my steps, watched by the shopkeepers, as they are opening their stands, rolling up their iron curtains, sweeping the pavement with wide brooms.

The next alley is difficult to find as its entrance is partially blocked by a store,

leaving only a narrow lane on either side. There is no church in it either. Soon it comes to a fork, winding upstream like a river's tributary. A man and a woman are eating bowls of noodles in a booth—the front of a tourist's "Information center", offering all day boat rides to some other islands.

"Do you want a shirt?" retorts the man when I wonder where the church might be. He adds, "Too early: not open."

He means the shops, of course. Merchants around us are barely starting to stir; some are emptying cartons of colorful sweatshirts onto their stalls. I answer, showing the man my watch. "No, not too early, I am just on time for the service."

He catches on: a church, not a shirt! He turns to the woman who is still eating her bowl of noodles, unfazed by the questions, and he answers to both of us, "Yes."

He shows the lesser of the two lanes, the small tributary.

By now, I have become more demanding about directions: "Is it on the right side or

the left side of that street?” The man hesitates; then he shows me his left forearm. He nods: left, indeed.

And yes, here it is, on the left side of the narrow street. It is no church by any stretch of the imagination, but rather one of the ground floor stores turned into a chapel and furnished like one: on both sides of a central aisle, eight rows of pews where forty to fifty people are already sitting. There is an altar with a plywood lectern on the right side and further back an electric organ with a curving keyboard. On the walls there are rows of color prints of New Testament scenes, the size of commercial calendars. The tabernacle, at the far end, gilded, overwrought, appears influenced by Buddhist styles. In fact, it looks exactly like the one which the hotel’s help set up near the pool’s bar for the “Songkran” festival, three days ago, on Thursday morning.

“Songkran” is another New Year celebration—not the calendar year, already more than a quarter gone, nor the Chinese Lunar year, which took place a good two

months ago, but a Thai version where people throw water at each other: good wishes, good luck, good shower.

Some young girls do it the old fashioned way with pans of water; most have a *Star Wars* look alike plastic gun squirting water up to a distance of several steps. They aim them at people on their way to dinner. In the Christian calendar, this week's Thursday is the day of the Last Supper, painted among others by Leonardo Da Vinci, as Dan Brown, the author of *The Da Vinci Code*, discovered recently to the amazement of many people.

"Don't you dare!" I say to a thin girl who trains her gun on my freshly pressed shirt, as I step into the street side restaurant. She lowers her weapon towards my ankles: just a drop for good measure.

On the morning of that Thursday, an old man sitting behind a table on the hotel's patio presented what looked like a large necklace of white flowers to the faithful and to many of the guests as well. They in turn poured water on it. I found that necklace

some time later; it is called a “pung ma lei”, I was told by the cocktail waitress on duty at the patio. It had been abandoned near the pool, still wet, its charm exhausted perhaps.

One of the tourists, a German from Munich, told me that the old man was 91 years of age. That German fellow is keen on birthdays as he explained to me that he was 48, and so was his friend and/or colleague perhaps (I did not grasp every word of his heavily accented speech), sitting next to him, smiling and approving: another graying, pot bellied man. This trip, which they took together as usual, was in anticipation of their dreaded 50th birthday, two years down the line. In the meantime, they were to celebrate Bavarian style with a bottle of beer in hand. That day, it was a Thai beer, a Singha, in its matching hand cooler. Heineken was available also, as well as some Chinese makes, their respective merits to be debated, although all clearly inferior to Munich’s best, according to the believers.

Today, at the chapel of the Sacred Heart, the Italian priest who is going to officiate is probably as old as his Buddhist counterpart. He is short and frail; his sparse white hair is carefully combed over the top of his head—not that it makes any difference. He announces *mezzo voce* the program of the day in familiar asides, and here we go.

He has a local helper, a young man in beach clothes, barefooted. The priest has sandals on, not the traditional leather-strapped European model, severe and monastic looking, but rather the Chinese made, all purpose type with colorful labels on one side. Lighting of the Easter tall candle, blessing of the water, of the people: we follow the liturgy with missals in different languages which we swap among each other. I exchange tips with a middle aged couple sitting next to me: they are from Perth, Australia.

Time to give each other's peace; the priest shakes hands with each parishioner. In turn, I say: "*Bonjour mon père, je suis français.*"

With the familiar gesture of the hard of

hearing, he bends towards me to grasp the meaning of my words. I repeat: “*Sono francese, no italiano.*”

He smiles, waves his arms in symmetric fashion: French and Italians are almost the same. He places both of his hands on mine, in a gesture of affection. John Paul II used to do the same when he was working the crowds on Saint Peter’s square, in Rome. Benedict XVI, his Bavarian successor, shows the same ecclesiastic mannerisms as I will notice later on during the Italian television Easter broadcast. It must be something that they pick up early on at the seminary, perhaps even before the end of the first year. The service goes on to its conclusion: *La messa e finita.*

Salt of The Earth (Part 3)

8th September 2006

In this third of our three-part story by Pierre-Edmond Robert, we meet the enigmatic Mr Mike Russ—resident of Burns Harbor Indiana, and visitor to Phuket.

Salt of The Earth, Part 3 We meet again, Mike Russ

As we leave, I say hello to a tall athletic American who had sat on the other side of the aisle. We introduce each other. He does not have to tell me his name; I know him: he is Mike Russ, and here we meet again in Patong Beach, of all places, on Phuket Island.

He is six feet tall, almost exactly, square

shouldered and lean, with a trimmed waistline. He sports straight-fitting summer slacks and a well-worn short sleeve shirt—an intricate white patterned check with a hint of an elegant intent, suitable for a Sunday. Two gold chains, a wide one and a thin one, show at his open collar. He stands erect, legs slightly apart, feet firmly planted—he wears plain black loafers. His dark blond hair is graying slightly, slicked back on top, cut rather short on the sides. He looks at me through his horn-rimmed glasses. He is a throwback to another era. He does not need to give me his age, as he will, a moment later, while we drink a cup of coffee at a hotel's terrace: he is 50. Of course, I knew: he was 25 in 1980.

He lives in Indiana, Burns Harbor to be precise—between Gary and Chicago—the rust of the rust belt. A die and cast technician, a welder at times, as I also knew, he had to retrain, retool as steel mills have closed and jobs been moved to places where labor is cheaper. Huge restructuring is going on in the industry; companies are

bought and sold wholesale. There is the current takeover bid by the Indian Mittal over the French and European Arcelor. Mittal is offering its own stock in exchange for Arcelor's. Who would accept such an offer, instead of hard cash, we wonder. Not us, we decide as if we had tall orders to wire to our stockbrokers, right at this minute.

As a matter of fact, Mike found himself US\$150,000 short of capital to be able to start his own specialty workshop, although he had already some of the best machine tools available. Instead, he has gone into air conditioning. His company sent him back to school: he enrolled into an engineering program at Indiana University. There is a future in air conditioning, plenty of room for more efficient, more environment conscious systems. He lists the various areas of expertise needed for configuration of today's technology, particularly electronics, and the services to be provided to maintain the equipment: recovering the spent fluids, recycling and reclaiming them.

Now, wait a minute, I think. Mike would

not talk as much; he would not offer his opinion as freely, let alone mention his future plans. He would remain silent as others stated their beliefs, outlined their projects, bantering and laughing and bragging good naturedly. But he was 24-25, then. The years have added a layer of self confidence, a quiet sense of his own worth. Not that he has become rich, but he can afford an Easter vacation here in Thailand, using his discretionary money. As for the gas station attendants, the car mechanics he started his life with, they are nowhere to be seen.

The affluent crowd he later mixed with in Port Shelby has disappeared for the most part. I do not ask Mike whether he still thinks of the late D. Dulles, the owner of the Machine Tool Company, who had hired him then as a 285 dollars a week welder. Having left Michigan's Upper Peninsula some time earlier, Mike was driving South on US 31, going from town to town, looking for a job in the depressed economy of the 1970's. He had reached

Port Shelby as he was nearing the end of his luck, down to his last dollars. Yes, remember D. Dulles who had turned him into his protégé, had made him his assistant in his project of designing and building a light low cost transport plane and whose daughter, Eva, he might have married. I am certain that Mike thinks of D. Dulles everyday as he has not forgotten his set phrases, bits of wisdom from an era going back to World War II and the Navy contracts which made his company and his fortune.

He remembers also the late evenings at D. Dulles' cottage, as he was watching him play bridge with his cronies: the four old men on the back porch, around a card table, with their hats still on, sipping bourbon and water, the women on the front part of the house, a distant chatter. A red line reflected in the windows was all that was left of the sunset. One could hear the waves leaping onto the beach, smell the drying pine needles on the sandy banks. Twenty five years from now, I may be one

of the few people able to say how things were on those summer evenings. Mike is younger, of course: he might keep the record somewhat longer, if he wishes.

The Machine Tool Company has long ceased to exist, its buildings leveled to make room for a condominium complex with a view over Lake Michigan. D. Dulles' country club friends survived him for a while but they have died by now except some of the women: they are neither seen nor heard in their sterile, climate controlled nursing homes.

As for Mike's own generation, Eva, whom he did not marry, is still around. She was not a heiress after all; her father had remained a free spender at a time when his company's profits had dwindled and his aeronautic venture had more than dented his assets. Eva's long time escort, Phil, the philosopher, as D. Dulles used to call him, who, I am sure also, did not marry her either, is probably teaching in a conflict fraught two bit state university where the people from the Chicano awareness forum,

the black caucus, the gay and lesbian center, the women's studies do not like each other very much. Just as he did when he was dating Eva, he is still juggling concepts for an audience. I would not bet a dime on either of them.

Mike has no regrets. Just like Dorothy, the Kansas farm girl at the end of *The Wizard of Oz*, he has long discovered that everybody has a brain, everybody has a heart, everybody has courage. Just like everybody also, he has seen the 1939 MGM musical with Judy Garland playing Dorothy, as it is shown so often on television that it is impossible to have missed it over the years.

He may not know, however, that the story was written by L. Frank Baum in the next town, just south of Port Shelby, another summer resort where his family had a cottage. Baum imagined his fairy tale on those hot August afternoons as he sat on another back porch, dreaming as if stoned from marijuana smoke, the way his characters are overcome by the powerful scent of

the poppy field they were walking through, his eyes fixed on the yellow brick road which curlicues around the cottages of that owner's association.

Mike did not marry Dorothy, "Dottie", the waitress, who had a heart but no brain, nor did he marry Eva, a brain and no heart. In fact, he never married at all, he says. He mentions that his girlfriend is waiting for him at their hotel. Is she an American, but then neither a Catholic nor a churchgoer, or a local girl, a "joiner" in local parlance, providing her comforting company to lonely western visitors? I do not ask. There are things which need to be kept quiet, even among the most intimate friends. I prefer to go on watching Mike, sitting straight in the rattan armchair, his face in the shade of the table's umbrella. We are finishing our cup of coffee: weak, somewhat bitter, truly American in taste.

I do not ask him either how he survived the airplane crash I sent him to for an ending to my story. After D. Dulles' early death from heart failure, Mike, having left

Port Shelby and moving again from odd job to odd job, had found his way to Florida. In Miami, he had worked briefly as a mechanic in an aviation maintenance service and he was asked to go along on a Miami to Caracas flight—an aging Super Constellation with a cargo of packed Christmas trees—which crashed on take-off.

The records concerning that old cargo plane were so imprecise, so poorly kept, that neither its ownership nor its crew were properly identified. How many people were actually on board that day? Mike had worked on the worn out piston engines of that Super Constellation the day before and this is only the least questionable fact of the whole episode. Did Mike escape the fiery crash, walking away unscathed, or did he just not board that fateful flight? Either way he survived.

Now, the tropical sun is beating on the tiles of the hotel's terrace, on the narrow, brick like concrete blocks of the sidewalk. The air is heavy, humid from the early

morning's rain. The day is in full swing. "Tuk tuks" move up and down the boulevard, honking at every potential client; tourists are going about their business. Young men in groups of two or three are heading for the beach, older couples are checking menus in front of open air restaurants, the women clinging to their ancient husbands, while looking askance at the young Thai girls, in shorts or tight skirts, "joiners" leading their aging "farangs" by the hand.

"It has been a pleasure," I say to Mike.

"For me too, really."

I stand up; I have to break it up.

He stands up also; he smiles:

— And Happy Easter!

— Yes, of course, Happy Easter!

© Pierre-Edmond Robert