Naked Lunch in Tangier No. 2 – Meeting Brion Gysin at the Rembrandt Hotel

HE LOOKED VERY OCCIDENTAL

Although many accounts mention it, I've always wanted to know more about the first encounter between William Burroughs and Brion Gysin. Like the first time Burroughs met Paul Bowles, in retrospect this is a story of a failed connection, of a missed meeting of minds, and therefore of what *didn't happen* in relation to the writing of *Naked Lunch*. But the view in retrospect—especially in retrospective anecdotes—is not enough to go on; it's hard to gauge the significance of their meeting without being able to picture it, which means having more details about the Rembrandt Hotel where they met and about the exhibition of Gysin's that was showing there.

A stylish, six-story building, the Rembrandt stands at the far end of the Boulevard Pasteur, the main avenue that runs West to East through the *nouvelle ville* of Tanger (as the French spelled it). Pasteur itself is not an especially long or broad avenue—you can almost see the Rembrandt from the Place de France at the Western end of the Boulevard—but in the 1950s it was the smart and modern main drag of the European city, lined with expensive boutiques, banks, department stores such as a branch of Galeries Lafayette, and cultural centres including the American Bookshop, which is almost directly opposite the hotel. While not the most fashionable hotel in town—it was no competition for the Minzah, just down from the Place de France—the Rembrandt attracted top rank writers as well as mid-range tourists: Tennessee Williams was a regular guest, for example, staying in October 1953 and again in May 1954, while Jane Bowles also stayed there in early 1954.

Gysin's exhibition was a one-man show entitled *Carnet de Voyage au Sahara*, and featured small pictures from a trip to the desert made during the winter of 1951/52. In all the accounts I've ever come across, the only other information given is that Burroughs went to the show in January 1954, shortly after he had arrived (from Rome via Gibraltar on the 4th of the month). Gysin's own retrospective account is vivid (if, in its dates at least, inaccurate):

"Hamri and I had first met him [Burroughs] in the hired gallery of the Rembrandt Hotel in Tangier in 1953, when he wheeled into our exhibition, arms and legs flailing, talking a mile a minute. We found he looked very Occidental, more Private Eye and Inspector Lee: he trailed long vines of *Bannisteria Caapi* from the Upper Amazon after him and old Mexican bullfight posters fluttered out from under his long trench coat instead of a shirt. An odd blue light often flashed around under the brim of his hat." (*Brion Gysin Let the Mice In*, p.8)

MEKTOUB

For more factual details, the best source of information I've been able to discover is the same source that would probably have attracted Burroughs' attention in the first place: the local English-language weekly paper, the *Tangier Gazette*.

The *Gazette* previewed Gysin's show on 22nd January: "Mr Brion Gysin, American painter and writer, will present an exhibit of his paintings of the Sahara, at the Hotel Rembrandt, beginning Saturday, January 30th. Most of the paintings are of the distant Hoggar, an area which Mr Gysin knows particularly well." A week later, the paper featured a full review that specified the number of works on show—42—and identified several of them by name—"Hammada," "Vers Arak," and "Moisson des pâturages." The review also commented on Gysin's technique, the way his pictures used gouache for large masses and ink for shadow or detail. Although the paper noted that Gysin's show was only due to run until Wednesday, February 3rd, in the next edition it reported that the show had been extended until Saturday the 6th—presumably in response to interest. On the 19th, the *Gazette* announced that Gysin's show had moved on to Marrakech, where it ran at Librairie de la Koutoubia until the end of the month, and then, at the end of April, Gysin's Saharan pictures returned to Tangier in an open-air show on the Rue de Statut just below the Minzah Hotel.

So the likelihood is that Burroughs went to the Rembrandt Hotel on January 30th for the opening and, had he read the review in the *Tangier Gazette*, would almost certainly have come across a piece later on in the paper written by Gysin about the friend he mentions, Mohammed Hamri (*le peintre du maroc* as he later styled himself). After a glowing comparison of Hamri's work to that of Cezanne, Renoir, and Picasso, Gysin concluded his piece with a resonant phrase that Burroughs would have surely noticed: "Hamri has become a painter against such astronomic odds that, indeed; Mektoub, It Was Written." Even so, while Burroughs and Gysin failed to connect that night in the gallery of the Rembrandt Hotel, it could be said that their eventual rendezvous—in Paris, four years later, at the point when *Naked Lunch* was at last heading for publication—was also written…

Rembrandt – figure 1 = Front of the Hotel (photograph by Oliver Harris)

Rembrandt – figure 2 =
This is the view from the front steps of the Rembrandt, which occupies a corner block, looking down the length of Boulevard Pasteur towards the Place de France. Hotel Rembrandt is just out of shot in the right foreground. Incidentally—in a coincidence that would certainly not have been lost on Gysin—most of the streets radiating off the Boulevard at this point take their names from European painters: before Rue Rembrandt, there's Rue Goya, Rue Delacroix, and Rue Velasquez, and so on. (photograph by Oliver Harris)

Figures 3 and 4 =
Two interior shots, showing the elegance of the Hotel Rembrandt. (photographs by Oliver Harris)

Figure 5 =
Postcard of Boulevard Pasteur in the 1940s, looking towards the Rembrandt, with Rue Velasquez running down on the left side of the picture.

Figure 6 =
Postcard of Boulevard Pasteur in the 1950s, looking towards the Place de France.