

The Annual Banquet of

THE GRAVEDIGGERS' GUILD



MATHIAS ÉNARD

Translated by Frank Wynne

ALSO BY MATHIAS ÉNARD

Compass

Tell Them of Battles, Kings & Elephants

THE ANNUAL
BANQUET
OF THE
GRAVEDIGGERS'
GUILD

Mathias Énard

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A NEW DIRECTIONS
PAPERBOOK ORIGINAL

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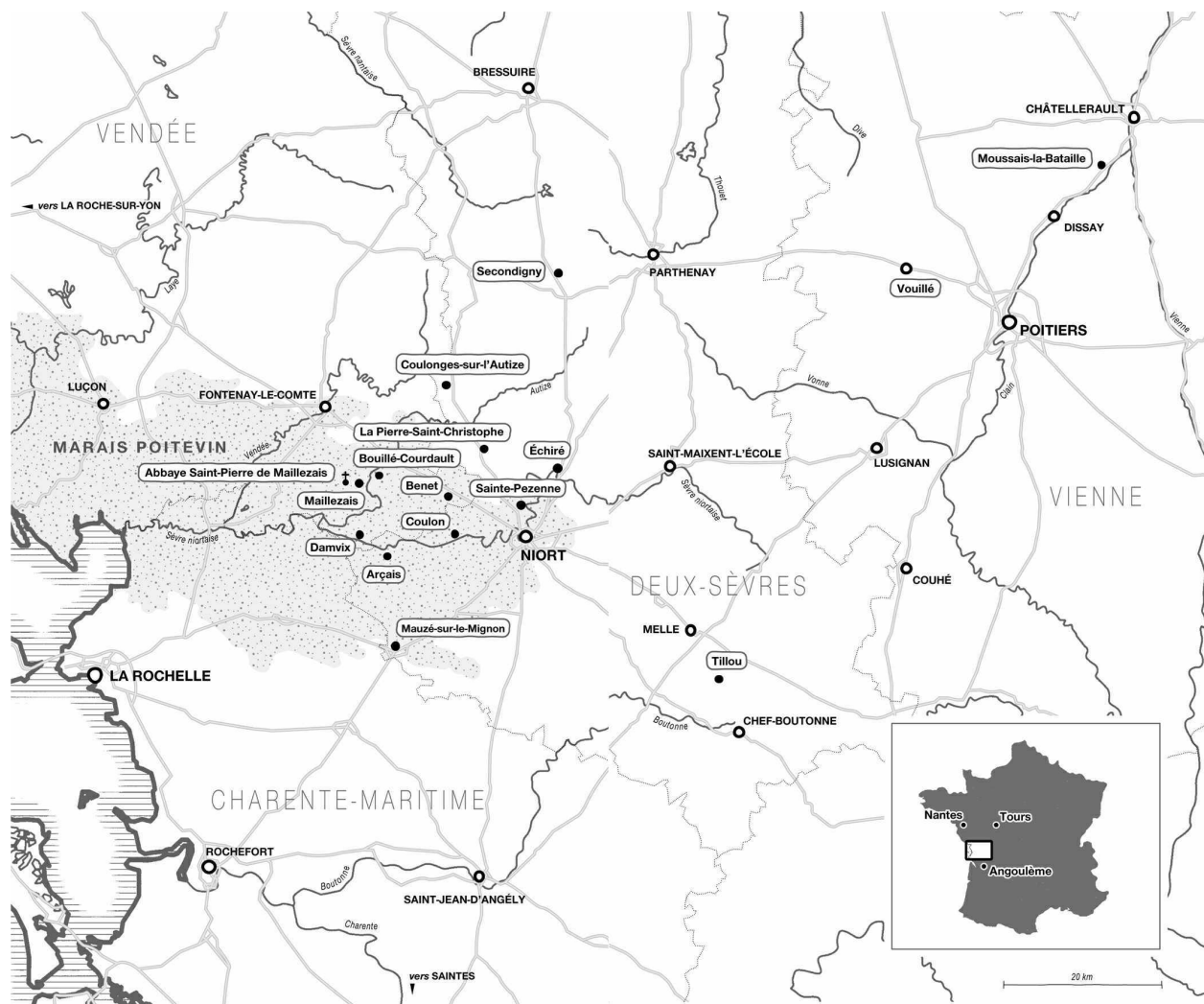
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To the savage thinkers

*“In our former lives, we have all been earth, stone, dew, wind, fire, moss, tree,
insect, fish, turtle, bird and mammal.”*

—Thich Nhat Hanh (quoting the Buddha)



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THE ANNUAL BANQUET OF THE GRAVEDIGGERS' GUILD

I.

THE SAVAGE MIND

“Whichever way a man may turn, his eyes alight upon Libourne.”
—Onésime Reclus, *Le partage du monde*

December 11

Needless to say, I have resolved to name this place the Savage Mind.

I arrived two hours ago. I don't yet know quite what I'm going to write in this journal, except, well, impressions and notes that will make up an important part of my thesis. My ethnographer's diary. My field notebook. I took a taxi from Niort train station (heading north-northwest, fifteen kilometers, a small fortune). To the right of the road, flat open country, boundless fields, no hedgerows, a little cheerless in the gathering dusk. To the left, we were skirting the dark shadows of marshland, or that, at least, is how it seemed to me. The driver had a hell of a time finding the address, even using GPS. (Coordinates for the Savage Mind: 46°25'4"N 0°31'29.3"W.) Eventually, he pulled into a farmyard, a dog began to bark, I was here. The owner (sixty, smiling) is called Mathilde. I took possession of the premises. My house (my apartment?) is, in fact, the rear ground floor area of the main farmhouse. The windows look out over the garden and the kitchen garden. To the right, I have a view of the church; to the left, a field (I don't know what's growing in it—alfalfa? I often assume that all fields of green low-growing crops are alfalfa) and, opposite, rows of what I suspect are radishes or cabbages. A bedroom, a kitchen–living room, a bathroom, that's all, but it's more than enough. My feelings, when Madame Mathilde said, Okay, there you go, this is your place, were mixed. Simultaneously happy to finally be in

the field and a little anxious. I rushed to my laptop to make sure the Wi-Fi worked, using my article for *Studies and Perspectives* as a pretext. I was only fooling myself; there was nothing urgent. I mostly sent some messages and chatted with Lara. I went to bed early, reread a few pages of Malinowski and, in the darkness, was keenly aware of the aural environment. The muffled hum of some contraption in the distance (the boiler?), from time to time an even more distant car. Then I went to sleep on an empty stomach. I really need to sort out the transportation issue and buy some stuff to eat.

December 12

First day acclimatizing to my new terrain. La Pierre-Saint-Christophe marks the center of a triangle whose vertices are Saint-Maxire, Villiers-en-Plaine and Faye-sur-Ardin. So many fantastical names that give substance to my New World. Fifteen kilometers from Niort, ten from Coulonges-sur-l'Autize.

I left the Savage Mind shortly before 10 a.m., having realized that I was not alone in my ethnographer's quarters: there is a plethora of fauna. Doubtless, the toad is drawn by the countless insects and the cats by the toad. In the bathroom, equidistant from the shower and the toilet, is a colony of red worms, or rather living red filaments that look like worms. Quite cute, as long as you don't step on them. They slowly slither toward the door, so you have to spray them down the plughole before taking a shower. I easily managed to overcome my disgust, which is a reassuring sign for my ability to deal with the difficulties of fieldwork. After all, even Malinowski notes that insects and reptiles are the principal obstacles to the work of the ethnologist. (Since no one will read this diary, I might as well admit that I was pretty disgusted at the thought of worms in the bathroom and it was fifteen minutes before I steeled myself to take a shower.) There is also a handsome caravansary of dwarf snails, which is harmless enough. I assume that the humidity, together with being at garden level, are mostly to blame. So anyway, I left the Savage Mind at around ten o'clock and went to see my landlady, Madame Mathilde, to ask if there was some way of getting into town so I could stock up the larder, she looked tremendously surprised, Well, now, I have no idea, she had no idea, she had no idea whether there was bus service to the village. (Today, I discovered that it's possible to take the early morning school bus, but I'd look like a dirty old man and besides, I would

have to wait a good two hours for the supermarket to open, something to note in the *Transportation* chapter.) Mathilde immediately advised me to buy a car: in La Pierre-Saint-Christophe, there is nothing except a café that sells basic essentials, which, around here, means fishhooks, cigarettes and fishing permits. But at least I won't have to fish for my breakfast: Madame Mathilde (or rather her husband, Gary, I'm keen to interview him) was kind enough to lend me an old moped belonging to one of their children (note for the *Transportation* chapter) and an old black helmet with no visor and threadbare padding decorated with a few vintage stickers (a frog sticking its tongue out, an AC/DC logo). As a result, I have a somewhat precarious but efficient means of locomotion. Toward midday, I went to the supermarket in the county town, Coulonges-sur-l'Autize (pretty name), and bought lots of things before it occurred to me that it wouldn't be easy to carry them on a moped: tins of tuna and sardines, frozen pizzas, coffee, a little something sweet (chocolate). The departmental road (number something or other) twists and turns on its way to the town, crossing quite a wide river. (The Autize?) A market, a post office, a church, a small château, two boulangeries, as many pharmacies, a clothing store, three cafés, there's not much to see. I bought a newspaper in order to look nonchalant in the Bar des Sports and drank tea while eavesdropping on conversations, my way of initiating contact with the place. The local dialect (officially Poitevin-Saintongeais—I wouldn't like to offend anyone) is probably dying (but let's not get ahead of ourselves: *Tongues* chapter, lovely title). I hope to have more luck at the market. After tea I headed back to the Savage Mind; thanks to a stray dog, I almost crashed into a low wall and totaled the moped (there's a sentence I never thought I would write) but, by some miracle, I managed to right the bike in time. Then I went over my work schedule. La Pierre-Saint-Christophe has six hundred and forty-nine inhabitants, according to the latest municipal census. Two hundred and eighty hearths, as old-timers would say. The demonym, according to Wikipedia and the mayoral website, is Petrochristophorian. Esteemed Petrochristophorians, ladies and gentlemen, I have decided (chapter: *Questions*) to conduct about a hundred interviews from among your number, choosing interviewees such that, by the end, I will have equal numbers for each gender and age bracket. This seems to me, empirically, a good idea. A year's work subdivided into two six-month campaigns. Great. I feel full of energy. I skimmed through the rough draft of my article for *Living*

Rural Lives and immediately had my first intuition. Evidently, working in the countryside suits me.

December 12 (contd.)

It's two in the morning now, I'm finding the silence and the solitude distressing, can't get to sleep. I hear creepy-crawlies and I'm convinced that they're going to clamber over me in the darkness. Too late to call Lara again (she had a good laugh when I told her that my lodgings would henceforth be called the Savage Mind), and there's no one online, so I can't chat. Worse, the only books I have to read are Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, his *Diary* and Hugo's *Ninety-Three*—not exactly great distractions. (Why did I bring *Ninety-Three*? Probably because I had a vague impression that it's set somewhere around here.) I feel a little cold, tomorrow I'll have to ask Mathilde if she can lend me a heater. What now? Play Tetris, that will take my mind off things.

December 13

Radio: weather report, Christmas approaching, etc., etc. Freezing rain, moped impossible. Buy anorak: important. First sorties into the village. I've discovered that at the far end of the field facing the Savage Mind, behind the trees (poplars?) and slightly downhill, a river flows. My landlady took me to visit the church. The key—at least two kilos of cast iron—is very impressive. The church a little less so. Cheap, rather banal furnishings. Pretty, all the same. Learned something funny: the mayor is also the local undertaker, or vice versa. Read an excellent article online about the inventor of Tetris, a Russian. The guy's a genius. They should award him a Nobel Prize—apparently, he hasn't been given one yet.

Nothing to report.

December 14

Slept well. The cat has left another dead toad outside my door, a friendly offering, yuck. *Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres*, Caesar wrote about Gaul, well the same could be said for this godforsaken place. I've divided the

Ordnance Survey map into three sectors, the café district, the church district and the housing estate. Quite densely populated in the center, farms spaced farther apart around the church, and newly built houses in the estate. It's a safe bet that the residents living in Les Bornes are *rurbanites* who commute to town for work. (Note for the *Toiling* chapter, good title.) I've decided to go back to Paris on the twenty-third for the Christmas holidays, I have ten days of work to do before my sabbatical. First interview, Mathilde, since I have her to hand, so to speak, it makes it easier, she'll help me hone a list of questions that I can later refine. I explained to her why I was here, why I planned to spend a year in the village, she seemed surprised. You're going to study us, is that it? she said. I said, Well, um, no, not just you, which was hardly tactful. So I added, The goal of my thesis is to understand what it means to live in the country nowadays, an abstract I thought rather brilliant (note for the chapter: *Questions*). It just goes to show that it's through concrete contact that we truly formulate our goals. She seemed reassured, I think. In any case, we've arranged to meet again tomorrow morning. Right now I have to run, I have to meet the mayor at the Café-Pêche so he can introduce me to the owner and the regulars. The village potentate takes his responsibilities very serious, apparently. When he found out that I was coming from the Sorbonne (which is sort of true) he insisted on personally acquainting me with the village. His question is "Why us?" "Why here?" I can hardly tell him about the grant I've been given by the Deux-Sèvres regional council, it would be a little embarrassing (nor can I tell him that I found the name of the village amusing and that it's far enough in the ass end of nowhere to be interesting), so I tell him that it was my thesis supervisor, the famous professor Yves Calvet, who chose the location, it sounds more serious, as though the finger of God (or of the Sorbonne, in this case) had singled out their village, that way they feel valued, which is good. I wonder what Calvet would say if he knew. He most likely wouldn't give a fuck. Right, got to go, I'm already running late.

December 14 (contd.)

So it's done, I've been inducted into the key socialization space, the beating heart of the village: le Café-Pêche chez Thomas, which, as it turns out, does sell cigarettes, various items of fishing tackle, tinned food, water and other

fluids, and a handful of newspapers and magazines. Thomas, the owner, is about sixty, and positively portly. Tables of faded red Formica, a bar fashioned from the same material, chairs with metal legs. TV. Pungent smells of wine, anisette and stale tobacco, which makes me think that smoking restrictions are not necessarily respected in public spaces. (First observation: countryfolk are rebellious.) Four men playing cards, two others at the bar, not a single woman. Kir, draft beer, Ricard®. I had a real job refusing a drink, and eventually accepted a bottle of Orangina® so ancient the pulp had congealed at the bottom of the bottle and the cap was rusted, which leads me to think that the people around here don't drink anything fizzy besides lager. I should probably have accepted a Kir or something like that, but I need to keep my wits about me if I'm to get a little work done.

I'm beginning to enjoy writing the journal. It's amusing, it feels like talking to someone. I am conscious of just how much I'm not myself with the people here. I feel like I'm playing a role. That of the observer attempting to subdue a hostile environment. I'm walking on eggshells. Perhaps I am being a little too wary. (*Questions* chapter?) The mayor seems to be a jolly old soul despite his funereal profession. Thomas, the café owner, said: Just park your ass here for a week and you'll meet the whole village.

A week of drinking antediluvian Orangina® and I'd have an ulcer, was my first thought. Just then, as though to prove the owner's point, a young woman came into the bar. A little older than me, about thirty-five I'd say, with a hippie-hick vibe (well, at least *I* know what I mean), and without a smile, without so much as a glance in my direction, she planted herself in front of the bar and started yelling something I didn't quite catch about vegetables and payment. Thomas the owner wasn't going to put up with it: I don't owe you shit, and they started trading insults until the mayor intervened saying, Let's all calm down, let's all calm down now, then the virago stormed out and slammed the door, eliciting a sigh of relief from both the mayor and the café owner, a sigh that was followed by a series of offensive but apparently justified remarks.

"She just gets crazier and crazier."

I casually asked who they were talking about.

"A head case," said Thomas.

"A local farmer," said the mayor, "she grows vegetables."

"Is she from around here?" (I thought my question very apposite.)

“Sort of,” I was told, which left me none the wiser. I knew one thing for certain: the village had at least one female autochthon in the thirty-to-forty age bracket.

And that was the end of the gossip. The nights are going to be very long here, unless I become a barfly at the Café-Pêche. Thankfully, I’ve got Tetris, the internet and Malinowski, fonts of pleasure and wisdom. As soon as dinner is over (as now: an omelet sandwiched between slices of white bread while staring at the screen) I start to get bored. I don’t feel like tackling Victor Hugo. The Savage Mind is not a gloomy place, just a little spartan. I’ll have to bring a few things from Paris, a couple of pictures to hang on the walls, some books, just to brighten the place up. After all, I’ll be spending a year here. When I look at it like that, it’s depressing; my third night in the village and already I’m bored stiff. Luckily, I’ve arranged a video call with Lara in ten minutes.

December 14 (contd.)

Webcams are intensely unsatisfying, in spite (or maybe because) of the powerful erotic tension. Lara was wearing pajamas made of some silky material, I think. Hmm ... that last comment was misjudged. It’s impossible to imagine Lévi-Strauss commenting on lingerie. (Idea for an article: the sexuality of anthropologists while in the field. Discuss Malinowski’s dirty fantasies while under his mosquito net.) The fact remains, I’m frustrated. I’m almost tempted to call it a day and head back to Paris right now, but that would mean twenty kilometers by moped through the icy darkness to get to the train station, then two and a half hours on the TGV, assuming there are even still trains at this hour, which I doubt. So, no go. I’m as isolated as Malinowski in the middle of the Pacific, since isolation simply means not being able to have what you want when you want it: whether civilization is two hours, two days or two months away makes little difference. Right now, at this moment, I’d like to be with Lara, but here I am, alone in the Savage Mind; as alone as Napoleon Chagnon among the Yanomamo people. Come, ye gods of anthropology, ye little gods of Savage peoples, come to my aid and bear me to Perfect Thesis.

Best to think about something else: let’s continue with an account of my afternoon encounters. So, after the fulgurant appearance of the

aforementioned Lucie, ranting about nickel and dime stuff, the mayor took it upon himself to introduce me to the cardplayers, who looked at me as though I were a Martian. In me they saw the mask of the Other, to use the term coined by Levinas. If I'd taken out a bag of glass beads and machetes and made ritual offerings, they would scarcely have reacted any differently. It will take some time before I am accepted. I gave them a smile, I even asked what game they were playing, just to give the impression I was taking an interest, for all the good it did, since they simply stared at me, wide-eyed, *'tis the coinche, what else?*, so, that will teach me. I've just looked it up in the Encyclopédie Le Robert: *coinche*: regionalism, West (so far, so good), a card game similar to belote involving contract bidding, which does little to enlighten me. I discreetly questioned the mayor, the cardplayers are village men who practice various trades, but all are avid hunters and anglers. Since I knew I would run into them again, I didn't bother to jot down their names.

A more stimulating encounter in every sense: Max. Fifty-something, leather jacket, black goatee, moonfaced, broad-shouldered, bit of a paunch, biker's helmet, motorbike parked outside the door, so blunt it almost made me think I was back in Paris—in Montreuil, to be precise. He had just dropped in to buy cigarettes when the mayor called him over and suggested he have a drink with us. Max is an artist; he settled here about a decade ago (in fact, he had lived in Montreuil—an amusing coincidence). From what he said, he now has a large farm just outside the village. He cordially invited me to visit when I have a moment. Max moved out of Paris because he needed more space to work, and because his ex-wife was getting on his ass, as he puts it. I'm keen to hear his thoughts about the locals. He's clearly not one to mince words.

So, a couple of pastis later, the mayor—now on his fourth glass, if I counted correctly—was a little tipsy. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes were bloodshot, and his speech had taken a noticeably local turn. Intelligible, but decidedly local. He was talking about politics with Max and the café owner, complaining that the prefecture had just overturned a municipal edict he'd issued the previous autumn forbidding outsiders from foraging for wild mushrooms in the local woods. This was a serious blow to his pride—but only his pride, joked Max, since no one had ever seen so much as a single *cèpe* in the little woods of Ajasses. There was a lull in the conversation when the local TV news came on, meaning that it was 7 p.m., time for me to head

back to the Savage Mind; I thanked the mayor for his hospitality and his help, told Max (who now seemed in no hurry to leave) that I'd call to arrange a visit, said goodbye to the landlord and set off home. It was a humid night; though starless, it was illuminated by the myriad strings of Christmas lights with which the locals had decorated their houses, like a competition to see who could have the most lights twinkling in the darkness and light-up Santas climbing through their windows. (Look into the origins of this curious custom.) At a normal walking pace, it takes precisely four minutes for me to arrive back at the Savage Mind (prompting angry barking from Gary's dog as I cross the yard—I'm hoping he'll quickly get used to me, it's a little terrifying).

Reading, then lights out.

December 15

Woke up having caught a cold. Subzero temperatures in the bedroom, must remember to ask for an extra heater. The worm colony in the bathroom is thriving (yuck), as are the dwarf snails in the living room—are the two things linked? Quick breakfast. Prepared my questionnaire, checked the digital recorder. Quick hello to Lara on messenger. Just spotted Mathilde crossing the yard, so she's obviously at home. Right, I'm out of here. Time to finally get down to work.

December 15 (contd.)

Two hours' recording and a lunch of rabbit in mustard sauce (couldn't bring myself to tell Mathilde I hate rabbit, so I ate rabbit—turns out it's pretty tasty. I really am acclimatizing quickly). Mathilde is very good-natured and full of surprises. First surprise: after we had coffee in her kitchen, she brought me into what she calls "the office." I need to revise my assumptions: not only does she own a state-of-the-art computer, but there's a printer and a pile of books about accounting and data processing. Mathilde manages the family business. Her career path (can't think of another way to put it) is impressive. The daughter of farmers, Mathilde married young and single-handedly taught herself business management. She "got into computers," as she put it, in the 1990s. Gary takes care of the actual farming, while she manages the business.

Bills, investments, loans—she deals with everything. Not to mention the kitchen garden and the farmyard animals (poultry and rabbits), the farm’s only livestock, raised mostly for domestic consumption. Mathilde recently took up breeding again (having given it up after her mother’s death many years since) because, as she put it, she was sick and tired of eating revolting supermarket chicken. Once again, countryfolk and city folk agree on the subject of food quality. Her children went to the city to study and settled in distant places (suburban Paris, Bordeaux). They don’t have the expertise, much less the desire, to take over the farm, so the issue of retirement is looming. (Mathilde is fifty-seven, Gary sixty-two.) In the past, Mathilde took care of the parish church and also helped the priest with day-to-day matters, until his sudden death (she seemed very moved when she talked about him) almost two years ago. From that I surmise that she’s a practicing Catholic (I haven’t yet drafted a “religious” questionnaire, but I plan on adding a chapter called *Faith*). She says that since the curate’s death (is “curate” the right word? Shit, I don’t know a fucking thing about Catholicism), there’s no longer a village priest, only a locum who pops by for christenings, funerals and weddings. (So, the village has lost something of its centrality, ecclesiastically speaking. Are there any religious minorities here? Protestants, Jews, Muslims? Buddhists, who knows?) Mathilde is quite prudish, especially when it comes to anything to do with intimacy and sexuality (I need to review that section of the interview—my adultery question is absolutely hopeless, I couldn’t bring myself to ask it, I need to come up with a more oblique way of exploring such relationships), and also on the subject of money, when the subject of earnings comes up, she is vague: We manage, there’re good times and tough times, last year was very good. (I can always guesstimate numbers from the price of a ton of wheat.) On the other hand, on the subject of her childhood, I can barely get her to shut up. Her parents’ farm, her sisters, the evenings with friends, the bonfires on the Feast of Saint John (a tradition I thought was chiefly urban, must investigate for the *Celebrations* chapter), roasting chestnuts by the hearth, forest walks, village festivals, the bakery ovens (she claims she can still remember the taste of piping hot bread on which freshly spread butter simply melted), the Saturday-night dances of her adolescence—I must have at least an hour’s worth of tape. And the various people she knew as a child: her father, her mother, her sisters; how she met Gary, who initially wooed her elder sister, Because I was

still little, she said, as though, had she not been, Gary would've immediately taken an interest in her; then the period covering their engagement, their marriage, taking over her in-laws' farm, etc., etc. I think she was happy to have someone listening. Mid-interview, we headed back into the kitchen, where she prepared the rabbit (which, thankfully, emerged gutted and jointed from the fridge). I raised the subject of relationships between neighbors in the village, and once again, she drew mostly on memories: how once upon a time, people had more opportunities to meet up, there were farmyard lunches, the good old days, and so on. More nostalgia. But she was completely unable to relate any recent social gathering she had attended, with the singular exception of the parish priest's funeral. From what she said, she is on friendly terms with her neighbors. Oh, and I also found out that my Savage Mind had been built as a tourist *gîte*, but given the work involved and the few takers, Mathilde found it more financially viable to rent by the year. (Note for *Work* chapter.) Then we sat down to rabbit, Gary joined us for lunch, having been out servicing a tractor. He asked no questions about the interview, just saying, So, how did it go?—as though out of respect for his wife's privacy. Gary has a rather handsome face and piercing blue eyes, he looks young for his age. We chatted over lunch, and it was their turn to ask the questions. They were curious to know how someone goes about becoming an anthropologist and wanted me to explain why an anthropologist would be interested in their village. I decided to tell the truth: the grant from the département, my desire to write the definitive monograph on country life sorely lacking in contemporary ethnology, my sense (based on an in-depth reading of available sources) that the area might be emblematic of the current issues facing rural communities. I told them my previous field of study had been a tiny hamlet in the Ariège, and Gary said, Ah, the South, you'll be missing the weather, I expect, which proves he knows nothing about Ariège, which is almost as waterlogged as here. I thanked them for lunch and especially for the moped, which has literally saved my life, I got Gary to promise he would take me hunting someday, then I left. Back at the Savage Mind, I decided to postpone transcribing the interview (my transcription software has as much difficulty deciphering Mathilde's speech as it did the Ariège accent, I should have expected that, these things are programmed by Parisians for radiologists in Orléans) so I could quickly set down these events in the journal.