Richard Klein

The Rock *of* Arles

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For Susan, my Rock

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Author's Note

I took as a model for this book *The Memoirs of Hadrian* by Marguerite Yourcenar, in which she imaginatively re-creates the mind and memories of the emperor Hadrian. The exhaustive research that enabled her to write the fiction was so rigorous that her novel has been cited by reputable historians of Rome for its evidence and hypotheses. In this (my much-less-accomplished) case, I have tried to imagine the vast history of Arles through the mind of a rock: the Rock of Arles. It was on this limestone eminence, rising up alongside the river Rhone, that the city was founded 2,600 years ago. The Rock of Arles has witnessed every instant of its rise and fall, and its memory is infallible. The Rock speaks in a voice like that of what the Romans called a *genius loci*, a genius or genie who incarnates—or more exactly, in this case, materializes—the spirit of the place.

The story told by the Rock differs sharply from the official histories; more polemical, philosophical, and dissident, it focuses narrowly on three of the most radical, revolutionary Arlesians whose lives and works have been largely forgotten in Arles and ignored in the wider world. It needs their lessons now more than ever. Each one belongs to a brilliant period in the history of the city. In the second century, Arles was the most important city in Gaul. In the thirteenth century, it was a great center for the earliest translations of ancient Greek texts, which sparked a renaissance of science and philosophy. In the eighteenth century, Arles, with its fierce division of Right and Left, royalists and Jacobins, *chiffonistes* and *monnaidiers*, was seen in Paris as a mirror image in miniature of the revolutionary struggle. Similarly, the story told here by the Rock of Arles can be taken to be a précis, an abridgment of the history

of Europe from the imperial Roman conquest of Gaul to the rise and fall of feudal aristocracy, from the domination of the Church to the present representative democracy.

The work introduces three extraordinary Arlesians: Favorinus, an authentic philosopher and the greatest orator in Greek of his Hellenistic age; Ḳalonymus ben Ḳalonymus, a prolific translator of Arabic translations of Greek and a radical Hebrew poet; and Pierre-Antoine Antonelle, the first mayor of Arles, an aristocrat, a bloody revolutionary, and a great political thinker. They represent a dissident, freethinking current in the history of Arles that contests the reactionary conservative forces of the Church and the nobility that governed the city for fifteen hundred years.

This text is a fiction, which permits the author to make claims and assert opinions that a careful historian would never allow. It also authorizes invention: nothing in the text should be considered reliable. It represents a particular slant, a skewed vision, a jaundiced interpretation of the history of Arles with a view to its possible future—like all histories. As Emerson wrote in 1841, "There is properly no history: only biography." The Rock has a witty, ironic perspective on that history that aims to be erudite, opinionated, and entertaining.

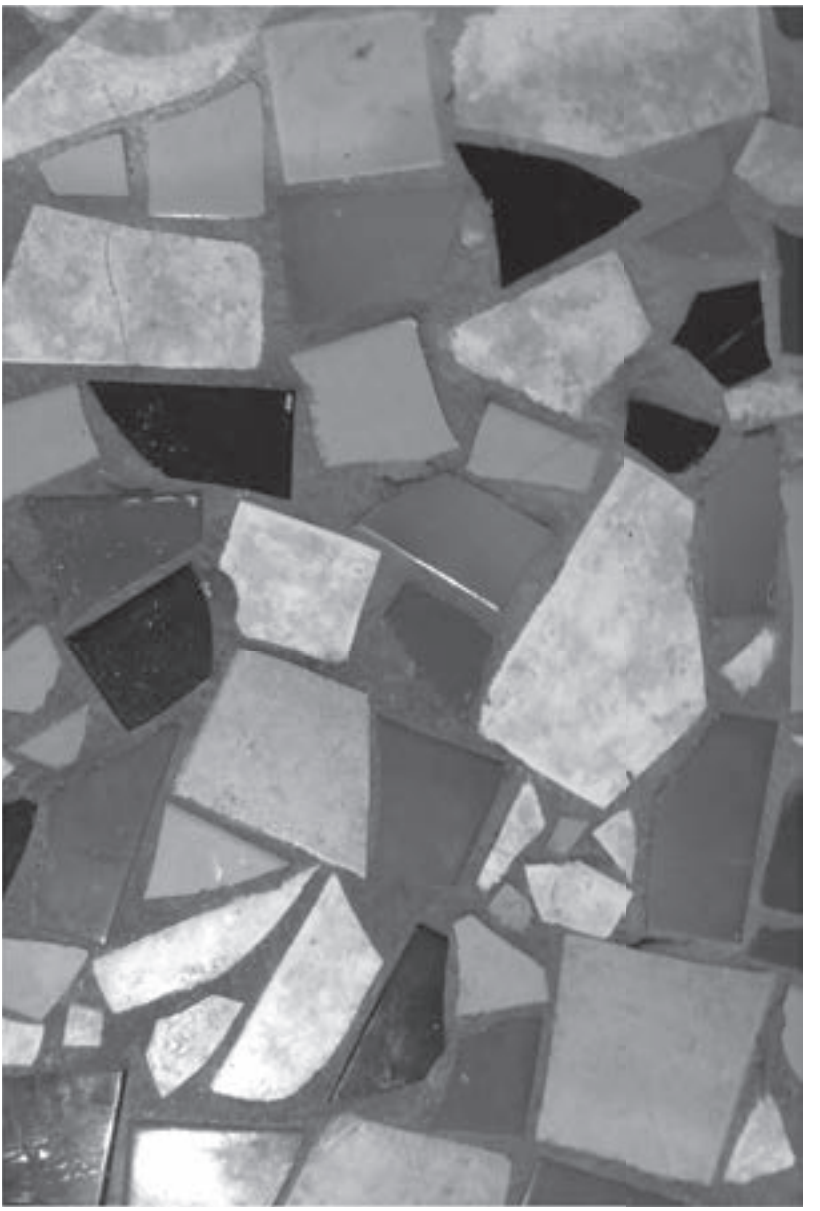
Prologue

Ten years ago, my wife and I bought a house in Arles, at the far end of a street, la rue Porte de Laure, down which heroes of the arena, covered in blood and crowned with laurel wreaths, once were shouldered in triumph out of the city walls. One sweltering noon, not long ago, in the dog days of summer, when the heat of the Midi takes your breath away, I sought escape in the cellar of our house, which rests on ground dug into the Rock of Arles.

My cellar must have once been a place to dance or pray: its floor is randomly tessellated with multicolored pieces of mosaic. In the middle, however, is a circle of bare uneven ground from which the tiles have been removed, and it is there, on that spot, in the coolness of my wine cellar, that I settled my writing table. No sooner had I put down my computer when a drawly voice, muffled at first but more and more distinct, began to speak to me in a low rumbling, a half whisper that seemed to come from beneath my feet.

The voice said it was the Rock of Arles and that it often whispered to those who lived on its side—especially writers and artists—whenever there was some urgency, like now. The city is at a crossroads, it said, and the direction it takes will orient its history for the next hundred years. The Rock has a contrarian view of that history, but it needs a sympathetic amanuensis to convey it to the world, which needs it even more.

In the cool and the darkness, lit only by the light of the screen, I started taking notes as fast as I could. After each session—there were nine—I would rush upstairs and write down in English what I could remember verbatim in French, with the help of my notes. Later it occurred to me that I was doing exactly what Aulus Gellius used to do, after a banquet with Favorinus in Rome, except that



P.1. The tessellated floor of my cave

he had to run home to translate the stenographic notes he had taken of the philosopher's Greek into the equivalent literal Latin. Perhaps it won't then surprise the reader if occasionally the Rock of Arles sounds in English like your humble scribe and translator.

Without commentary or ornament, with only slight editing, I have loyally tried to record the voice I heard coming from below. Fatally, my poor language in English no more matches the Rock's eloquent French than did the pedestrian Latin of Aulus Gellius ascend to the soaring Greek of Favorinus. I sat on that spot, high on the hill, nearly at the top of the Rock of Arles, in the quartier of the city still called by an old, strange term, L'Hauture (or L'Auture), the Heights. From up there, the Rock of Arles has seen everything, and its memory is adamantine. It tells a stony tale, full of ups and downs—an auto-orography, if you like: a lapidarian mountain memoir.