

**ULRICH TUKUR**  
**The Origin of the World**

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Sample translation available

This isn't Paul Goulet's world any more. A lover of old books and pictures, beauty, dreams and imagination, the German finds himself living in an age of chaos. He flees to Paris, but France too has become a surveillance state.

Then, on one of his walks through the city, Goulet makes an astonishing find – an old album containing photos of him surrounded by elegant ladies and gentleman in the 1920s. Intrigued, he sets out on his doppelgänger's trail, which leads him to the south of France. Haunted by disturbing visions and fantasies, he keeps moving through time and metamorphosing into the man in the photo album. And more and more clues suggest that this man has a terrible secret.

Sample translated by Simon Pare  
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Dreams and real-life impressions are closely intertwined. Dream is not an esoteric spectre, but the truest form of reality. Quietly it envelops our lives, and we sink back into it, utterly, when we die.

Given the rapid destruction of those places where poetry thrives, in mysterious forests, light-lost plains and shadowy valleys, the enchantment of dream is, I think, more necessary than ever.



*There are people who have a mission in life that they were born to fulfil. Some recoil before this task, others do not even see it, and a few face it head on.*

Goulet woke up before the alarm rang.

A little light fell through the shutters of his hotel room. For a while he stared out into the dimly lit room, then his eyes, still veiled with tiredness, roamed aimlessly over the stuccoed ceiling until they came to an old-fashioned brass chandelier. He studied it for a moment and thought it beautiful. Turning to look at the clock, he saw that it was shortly before eight.

The soft sound of passing traffic outside drifted up to him on the third floor. Cars driving through puddles. It was apparently raining.

Goulet got up, went into the bathroom and dressed. Before leaving his room he quickly checked his moustache in the mirror next to the door. He had only recently let it grow.

Shortly afterwards he was sitting in the hotel breakfast room, which was in a small vaulted part of the basement. He was the only guest and a young North African waitress served him. He chatted to her a little. He felt sorry for her because he knew how hard life was for people like her right now. He ate a fresh, still warm baguette with salted Normandy butter and goat's cheese. The coffee was as terrible as it always was in France. It tasted bitter, slightly acidic. He took a few sips and left the rest.

He borrowed an umbrella from the reception and stepped out into Rue Saint-Séverin, turned left into Rue du Petit-Pont and walked down it to Quai de Montebello. He stopped at the crossroads and spotted the mighty cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris to his right and the Seine flowing grey and indifferent under the stone bridges. He caught sight of a bench between a Morris column and a dripping rhododendron bush a few yards away. He walked over, wiped the raindrops from the seat and sat down on it for a moment.

He had been in Paris for two days now. He'd come here because he didn't know the city and regarded having never been as a shortcoming, and also because he wanted to see a painting of which he'd found a print in one of his grandfather's cupboards many years earlier and hadn't been able to stop thinking about it ever since. Most of all, though, he wanted to get away from home.



Life in his country had changed beyond all recognition. Unrest and rioting were a daily occurrence, and the situation had been particularly bad in the cities recently; there was a toxic climate of hysteria and hatred which, as someone who tended to drift through life inconspicuously and watchfully, confused him and filled him with dread. Even before the conflict between the Baltic states and the Russians, the collapse of Turkey and the civil war triggered by the murder of the Turkish president, his country had become a magnet for masses of desperate immigrants from all over the world, for whom there was little prospect of integration in the current circumstances. After years of arguing and hopeless attempts by helpless politicians to cope with the situation, the country had given up and collapsed into a state of exhaustion and fatalism that gave political opportunists and extremists their chance to destroy the last remnants of social cohesion.

Four years earlier a nationalist coalition had seized power in France, and from a crisis-ridden land governed by corrupt elites and oppressed by religious fanatics, they had forged a state in which the police, the armed forces and the intelligence services seemed to be completely in control, and an eerie calmness prevailed. Normal life went on as if nothing had happened. Museums, theatres, cinemas and department stores were open and people went out to cafés and restaurants. For the first time in a long while, Goulet felt that the streets were once more fairly safe and nothing would happen to him. It was ridiculous, but a hundred years ago the state of the two countries had been the exact reverse. This was no comfort, however, and the world around him seemed even less real than usual. The tranquillity was an illusion; underneath it, something bloody and dangerous was brewing.

Two days ago, the high-speed train on which he was travelling to Paris had stopped just after the border and French security forces had searched it. About a dozen passengers, most of them North African in appearance, had been forced to disembark and herded onto the platform, where they clustered together in terror. Goulet watched them being led away by armed men until they vanished into the fog at the end of the platform. When he looked around at his fellow travellers, no one would meet his eye. They gazed at the floor or pretended to be immersed in their cyberworlds.

The whole thing was repeated near Rheims not two hours later. This time, he was checked by a young soldier, who verified Goulet's passport details with his invisible

headquarters and eyed him sceptically for a long time before returning his papers with a nod. Everything was in order.

Nothing was in order. Goulet, whose first name was Paul, although people always referred to him by his surname, could make less and less sense of the world. He closed his umbrella, wedged it between the bench's wooden slats and turned up the collar of his coat. It was cold, but the rain had almost ceased and the weather forecast displayed at the hotel had even promised sunny intervals later in the day. Maybe he would go to the Louvre today and find three or four pictures to daydream over. He found it liberating to slip into a fantasy world, to break through a painting's magical stillness and set it in motion for his pleasure. Discovering a secret life in a picture, being swept away by fabulous stories that continued until all the weight had been stripped from his soul and he was filled with a feeling that came closest to what people called happiness.

But he could also visit the Musée d'Orsay, he thought, to see the picture that had brought him to Paris. Gustave Courbet had painted it in 1886 and named it 'The Origin of the World'. It showed a woman's naked torso and, in the centre, her vagina.

Paul Goulet had grown up in Stuttgart as an only child of a respected family who looked back proudly on their Huguenot ancestry. Following the death of his father Richard, a bony emeritus professor of mathematics at Tübingen University and a wonderful pianist with whom he never really managed to strike up a close relationship, Paul had come into a handsome inheritance. He remembered his mother only dimly and with difficulty; she had died before his seventh birthday.

It had taken him a long time to understand why she was no longer there. The void her death had left in his young heart was like an enormous uninhabited room he was doomed to walk through without ever truly being able to escape. He hadn't forgotten her body, though – her white stomach, her smooth skin and her warm, milky fragrance. He had slept in her bed until the day she died, and her body was omnipresent, fine and firm, and later he often dreamed of it at night. But his memory had erased her face, and although he tried his best to retrieve even a faint impression of it, it seemed lost forever. It was not sorrow he felt but anger.



While going through the assets, records and files after his father's funeral he came across an official document from which he learned that he had been adopted from an unnamed person at the age of three months. He wasn't especially shocked to discover that he wasn't his parents' biological son and thus belonged to no one; it merely confirmed his longstanding suspicion. Goulet didn't resemble his parents in either appearance or spirit. Dark-skinned like a southern Italian, he had fine, narrow features, an elegantly curved nose and almost unnaturally black hair.

His Mediterranean looks and dark, slightly hooded eyes suggested inner passion tinged with melancholia and were squarely at odds with the mild temperament instilled by his Swabian bourgeois upbringing.

It puzzled him that he felt no real urge to obtain greater clarity regarding his origins. His father was dead, he had never said anything, and that was that.

Goulet sensed a strange detachment in himself and an obvious incapacity to derive any distinct and unambiguous emotion from his experiences; this surprised and occasionally pained him, but since it seemed to be an aspect of his personality, he eventually accepted it and came to live with it. It was not as if he didn't feel anything: he was capable of enjoyment and exuberance. He could also feel things like anger and compassion, but there was always a certain distance between him and his inner feelings, as if some kind of filter sifted out anything that might overwhelm his soul or cause him any hint of emotional turmoil.

He couldn't say when exactly he had lost touch with the heart of things, the core of sensation. It must have been a creeping process that began soon after his mother's death and had carried him imperceptibly outwards to a cool, dispassionate periphery and on to a place from where he somewhat indifferently and aloofly surveyed what ordinarily consumes us: living.

Life struck him as a boisterous commotion on the other side of a glass wall – interesting and curious, without sense or substance, a play in which gaudily painted actors moronically contorted themselves in a performance he had no wish to watch.

People appeared either desperately sad to him or abysmally ridiculous, and he considered himself no exception. Yet this coolness was skilfully disguised by an appealing amiability, occasionally riven by a surprising crack or inconsistency, as if the centre were merely a façade whose innermost layer concealed an incomprehensible or even non-existent core.

The clouds were still hanging low and leaden over the city, but the rain had stopped. Goulet stood up, crossed the road and walked right, upriver, along Quai de Montebello. Very few people were out and about, save for occasional security patrols or police cars screeching over the gleaming wet cobbled streets. It was Sunday, and the weather was not particularly conducive to a stroll.

He was wondering whether to turn back and go to the Musée d'Orsay when he passed one of the few open *bouquinistes* – booksellers who had been trading on the Seine's embankments for centuries.

An elderly man with strands of long hair hanging down under a beige peaked cap, a bushy moustache and an unlit pipe in his mouth was just opening the last of his blue-green wooden boxes. When he had finished, he sat down on a small stool and smoothed his damp, crumpled loden coat.

As Goulet approached the stall, the man looked straight at him, scrutinising him as if to ascertain whether this early-morning customer, who happened to be his first on this grey, rainy day, was deserving of his bibliophilic treasures.

*Such sadness in his eyes, thought Goulet. One of those obstinate, maverick lovers of old books whose magic is accessible only to them and a few other people, and which barely sell now because no one appreciates them any more. He probably doesn't even want anyone to take them off his hands, but he has to make a living somehow.*

Goulet said hello and in return received a flicker of a smile and a few sullen words he couldn't make out. He smiled back tentatively and ran his eyes over the many books arranged lovingly on the shelves inside the *boîtes*: old editions with the names of famous authors such as Balzac, Lamartine, Musset, Zola, Hugo and others he'd never heard of embossed on their spines in black and gold. Displayed alongside them were art books, calendars, historical newspapers and postcards by long-forgotten figures of the Paris stage and French film. He rummaged in a crate of graphic works in plastic sleeves and pulled out a coloured ink drawing by Pascin of nocturnal revelries in a late nineteenth-century Parisian café, then an etching by Daumier (he wondered if these were originals or mere copies) and suddenly came across a prettily decorated photo album bound in russet leather that had somehow found its way into

this august company of sheets and prints. Stamped in the top right-hand corner were two gold letters: PG. His own initials.

Carefully he picked up the album and opened it.

On the very first page was the black-and-white photograph of a man in a round-topped card frame. He was wearing a boater, a gentleman's straw hat fashionable in the early twentieth century, with an immaculate, elegant suit, and was leaning casually against a wooden railing. His eyes were fixed on a distant point somewhere behind and to the left of the photographer.

Goulet stared at the faded portrait in disbelief and fascination. When he grasped that it wasn't an illusion, an unnamed terror overcame him and his heart began to race. The man posing for an unknown photographer over a century ago was, without the shadow of a doubt, himself: Paul Goulet, PG.

He leafed frantically through the pages and found himself each time in a new stance or position: standing alone on a bridge, playing billiards, reclining in a meadow surrounded by people he didn't recognise, in front of buildings and automobiles and in landscapes he couldn't identify.

Despite the morning chill he began to sweat. He lowered the red album and looked up. He could not see the cathedral before him, its stone façade glowing against the grey sky; he gazed into his own inner world and sensed that the cocoon in which he had lived for years, encased in total seclusion, was suddenly cracking open.

The album cost thirty francs (France had gone back to its former currency three years earlier). Goulet paid without any attempt to haggle the price down. He forgot his plan to go to the Musée d'Orsay and went straight back to his hotel; he was far too flustered to do anything else. His stay in Paris had suddenly acquired a meaning that promised to turn his life upside down. The album seemed to him to be a sign of fate, and he sensed a determination to obey its call that astonished him and filled him with pride. For thirty-five years he had had no idea what to do with himself, and this seemed to be a turning point.

Goulet put down the album on the small desk in his hotel room and went into the bathroom. He studied himself in the mirror for a long time until suddenly he thought he was gazing into the face of someone who looked just like him. If he – Goulet – had tilted his head to one side, the man staring unwaveringly out of the mirror at him might well have stayed rooted in his original position. He was so scared that this was

exactly what would happen that he didn't even attempt it. He felt strangely faint and had to hold on to the edge of the washbasin. He shut his eyes, leaned forward, groped for the tap and turned it on. With a splutter, the water began to flow. He splashed his flushed face and, without glancing up again, went back into the bedroom. There, he removed the photographs from their frames in search of clues on the reverse, but he found nothing. No one had bothered to note who was in the picture or where it had been taken. He was on the point of giving up when he spotted a tiny, barely legible date in the top right-hand corner of the back of the photo that showed PG playing billiards: 24.03.1928.

He rang the hotel porter and asked him to bring up a magnifying glass, then subjected all the pictures to closer inspection. The back of a second photograph of PG perched on some steps was marked 'Banyuls', but he had no idea where that was. Somewhere in the south of France, he supposed.