THE EAGLE AND THE COCKEREL

THE EAGLE AND THE COCKEREL

Alan Rhode

First published in the UK in 2023 by
Zinfandel Publishing, in partnership with whitefox publishing

www.wearewhitefox.com

ISBN 9781915635167
Also available as an ebook and an audiobook
ISBN 9781915635174 and 9781915635181

Edited by Emily Randle and Gemma Wain
Designed and typeset by seagulls.net
Cover design by Nathan Burton
Project management by whitefox
Printed and bound in Suffolk by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

This story is based on true historical facts that
They don't want people to know.

I

A Brand in Himself

'*Boulevard Auguste-Blanqui au croisement avec la Rue Vulpian.*'

Gliding away in silence, the self-driven Cabeille shared a notification from ROME, the ubiquitous social network of Europe.

Eleven days to the vote that will change history.

A prolonged glance in the mirror pleased Vincent d'Amont. No tell-tale sign of ageing yet. And if somebody had hinted at the traditional pride of a French politician past his prime, he would have responded that rear-view mirrors on driverless taxis could be of no other use than self-admiration. In truth, he had acquired a secret habit of searching for everlasting youth in all reflective surfaces.

Vincent d'Amont wasn't missing the rude manners of Parisian taxi drivers, their open frustration at short journeys, or the loud phone calls in disregard of passengers. Fortunately, riding in a taxi in Paris was much more enjoyable now, after he had ensured that every arrondissement included self-driving routes.

Shortly after entering Avenue Trudaine, Vincent lifted his head towards the white shape of the Basilique du Sacré-Coeur, nestled at the top of the Montmartre hill, sharp and glittering under the high sun of that spring morning.

Vincent had presided over many an official ceremony at the Sacré-Coeur. On each occasion, the then mayor of Paris had repeated his meticulously rehearsed script: that the Basilique, a symbol of national penance after France caused the doomed war with Prussia under Napoleon III, epitomised the atavistic passion and polarisation of French politics. Why had the Church of Paris selected the site of Montmartre, cradle of the revolutionary Commune, if not to chastise the Republicans? It had then taken four decades of predictable wrangling before the Sacré-Coeur was completed.

Yet whenever Vincent saw the imperious contour of the Basilique standing proud against the skies above Montmartre, his memory would draw him back less to stately functions and more to that midsummer-night incident when the Sacré-Coeur almost cost him the mayorship.

The night when his office had rung the Archdiocese of Paris at two a.m. to arrange an immediate visit to the Sacré-Coeur, the awkward time justified with a Mozambican dignitary wishing to visit the Basilique before his early departure. Within two hours, and with all the highest echelons of the Archdiocese up in a frenzy, the mayoral visit had taken place.

Was this a diplomatic visit or a date? Did Vincent d'Amont lie to the Church?

Amanda Arnaud, the doyenne of the French sensationalist press, had based her enquiry on poor images of a blurred lady entering the Basilique next to Vincent. The Mayor's Office had hastened to communicate that she was a member of the Mozambican delegation, but Arnaud's requests for comment from Maputo had yielded no response.

Despite the wide publicity, and the unavoidable petition for the mayor's resignation, the political brouhaha had quickly petered out. The episode had instead sparked further gossip about the persona of Vincent. His well-groomed appearance, impeccable attire and documented appreciation of the fairer sex hadn't gone unnoticed in national coverage of the Sacré-Coeur case.

Will the people vote to unify France and Germany? the Cabeille's news ticker kept scrolling.

Vincent had arrived. He was about to meet Amanda Arnaud for the first time. To his dismay, as a location for their interview Arnaud had chosen a lofty café very dear to a mature Parisian clientele – an age group that Vincent tried to elude, lest they infect him with their stiff elderliness.

When, once inside the café, he walked towards her, Arnaud had already taken her seat in a room reserved for the two of them. Her eyes lit up. She was sporting a bright orange suit, and heavy make-up covered her tanned face, topped off by voluminous, streaked blonde hair. He had always suspected that her bouffant owed a debt to some unidentified anchor-woman of a distant past.

'I'm glad you've agreed to meet me,' Arnaud said after quite a stilted handshake.

'This – and much more – for the last printed tabloid of France,' he replied.

'Bygones are bygones?'

'I'm here, no?'

As a rule, Vincent tried to preserve every relationship regardless of what might have gone on with the other person. He had never liked to burn bridges and, when he was tempted

to do so, an adage always resonated with him: *A broken clock is right twice a day*.

Amanda Arnaud looked at Vincent with a blend of curiosity and amusement. Not only did he appear to lack any kind of rancour, he had even singled her out to concede a rare interview. Vincent d'Amont preferred to interact directly with people through live broadcasts on ROME rather than answering to journalists, probably because most media disliked him. Yet the man at the centre of European politics was now giving a tabloid interview to a female gossip columnist, to the chagrin – no doubt – of all male political commentators.

Arnaud glanced outside of their private room, which now seemed unnecessary. The sparse grey-haired customers of the spacious café, outnumbered by white-jacketed waiters, were obviously disinterested in their surroundings. The glacial ambience of the chic patisserie mirrored the rearward vibe permeating Paris, superbly nostalgic and suspended in time. Perhaps this lofty decadence was fertile ground for the next revolution.

'April the eighth will be a crucial day for Europe,' Arnaud began. 'No fewer than one hundred million netizens will vote on ROME to decide whether France and Germany should merge to create Charlemagny and leave the European Union.'

She paused, as if to stress the solemnity of her introduction, then resumed.

'Commentators raise concerns about the poll's reliability, suggesting that a social media vote is never safe from malfunctions or rigging. Aren't they right?'

'The referendum will run on blockchain, a safe technology used for e-voting in many countries.' Vincent addressed the expected question with no hesitation. 'Blockchain is

trustworthy and hack-proof. People raising these doubts are ignorant, or manoeuvred by the old political establishment, spreading fake news for fear of losing power. But we are all tired of seeing the same elite making the decisions. People should be allowed to determine their own future, finally.'

Unimpressed by him deploying his populist ethos so early in the interview, Arnaud made a technical remark. 'Another concern is legal. Even if voters decide that France and Germany should unify, this will happen through a social media poll, not a binding referendum.'

Vincent nimbly retorted: 'Again, the fear of seeing politics changing makes some misinterpret reality. ROME is trusted in Europe more than political institutions are. Whatever decision the people take, the governments will not ignore it.'

'Assuming the new super-country you envisage comes to pass: why should Charlemagny abandon the European Union?'

'Because the Union is destined to break. And Charlemagny doesn't belong to a collapsing Europe.'

Aware that her readers were less interested in politics than in Vincent's controversial figure, Arnaud changed her angle. 'What's the role of Vincent d'Amont in this unprecedented campaign?'

'I'm representing the natural right of people to determine their independence in a free manner – nothing more.' A personal touch of his followed: 'I was born and bred in Alsace, a land that was pushed and pulled between France and Germany five times in the last two centuries. They trampled on the local people's dignity. Dreadful.'

Consummate in eye-contact strategies, Vincent looked straight at Arnaud.

'The European Community was created to appease France and Germany. We can say that Europe has served its purpose: the bond between France and Germany is now stronger than ever. So, there's no time like the present for moving to the next step: unification.'

'Do you see yourself as the first president of Charlemagny?' she asked.

'It's unimportant. Before anything else, we must focus on achieving Charlemagny. There are so many ways in which each of us can serve Charlemagny. Let's leave the gentlemen in Brussels to obsess about titles and roles.'

Arnaud was disappointed. Not in the least spontaneous, Vincent's prefabricated answers were falling flat, perhaps on purpose. This rare interview represented a great opportunity for her, and she wanted to wring a story out of it at all costs. Maybe an unsettling remark would help to crack his phlegmatic armour.

'You're accused of being narcissistic … of dragging Europe into deep waters for your own reasons but not to admitting your own mistakes …'

'That's bitchy. There's no need to make it so personal. The future of Europe and possibly of the entire world is at stake here. That's much more important than any considerations of my persona.'

For all he had just said, Vincent liked talking about himself and, at times, he referred to his dream of Charlemagny in such terms as to imply that the entire project represented, in the end, a facet of his own person.

'You're currently the celebrity with the highest number of ROME followers in all of Europe. Millions and millions. One

year ago, you were barely ranked among the hundred thousand most-followed people. What's the secret behind your success?'

Arnaud's question reflected the incredulity within the social media industry at Vincent's impressive feat on ROME. His surge in the last year seemed to defy all algorithms. Too good to be true, whispered – perhaps out of envy – more than one SEO expert. Just as a financial miracle often hides a Ponzi scheme, this unprecedented popularity had to conceal some chicanery.

'I must have explained well why Europe failed. People aren't stupid,' was his dismissive answer.

'Miss Cliché would argue that you're playing on the people's worst feelings …'

Vincent tensed. A most popular investigative vlogger, and deeply in love with Europe, Miss Cliché had relentlessly teased him from the start of the whole Charlemagny idea. But what irked Vincent was less her vlog's antagonism than the incessant, methodical fact-checking Miss Cliché always carried out on every syllable he uttered. She wouldn't let anything less-than-true slide with him: a cumbersome task, given the range of inaccuracies that followed Vincent's quoting of historical facts or statistical data to his advantage. Recently, he had come out with a theory whereby Charlemagne had been born in Alsace, his homeland, but without much evidence to substantiate it. A son of the post-truth age, after all.

Resourceful as he was, Vincent had proudly devised a faultless solution to address the frequent cases where Miss Cliché unveiled one of his imprecisions: he would throw another untruth on top of the first to make his opponent's work even tougher, or change topic altogether. Like former lovers bearing mutual rancour, they constantly poked and provoked each

other in over-the-top tones on social media, their friction appearing genuinely harsh, not some acted pantomime.

Arnaud had on purpose made that annoying reference to Miss Cliché's criticism of Vincent, hoping that by lashing his ego she would prompt some spicy answer on his part. Her public deserved more than ready-made assertions.

'I should file a complaint against Miss Cliché for stalking,' he said, the irony barely covering his irritation. 'She spends all her time talking about me. Doesn't she have a life of her own?'

'Miss Cliché accuses you of minding your own interests more than those of Europeans …'

'Listen – I've received death threats for my views on Europe. If I was as selfish as she claims, I would've stayed silent instead of putting my life at risk.'

'Miss Cliché says you're all sizzle and no steak …'

'Miss Cliché is a vegan; she doesn't know what she's talking about …'

Arnaud chuckled at the soft pun. Considered Miss Cliché's greatest competitor, here she was now, waving her rival's remarks to goad Vincent into an unguarded response.

'And let me add one thing, Amanda: she pontificates about Europe, but Miss Cliché left Italy for the United Kingdom. That's not very patriotic. She keeps slandering me, and there's one reason why I've not brought her before a judge: I dislike dealing with lawyers. I sent her a text last week: *Let's have a public face-to-face on ROME – you and me – instead of chasing each other through the media.* She hasn't even come back to me. Miss Cliché is all bluff and bluster.'

'Do you know each other personally? That's news to me,' asked Arnaud, glimpsing the embryo of a possible story.

'Yes – Miss Cliché worked in Brussels as the assistant of a fellow MEP when I was at the European Parliament.'

'Ah.'

'You should write that: I openly challenge Miss Cliché to a debate on ROME. There's still some time before the vote. We'll talk, and the people will ultimately decide who's right and who's wrong. What does she fear?'

* * *

Late afternoon had arrived by the time Vincent left the café. The Cabeille was waiting outside. Next stop: a small community outside of Paris, in one of those frequent never-ending days. The car smoothly accelerated along Rue Vergnaud, turned right onto Place Pierre-Riboulet and passed close by Parc Kellermann, a wide expanse of lawns and playgrounds that bordered Boulevard Périphérique, the large ring road enveloping the city. '*Quel plaisir, Marquis de Sade*,' he whispered as the Cabeille sped past the Bicêtre Hospital.

Will Charlemagny ever see the light? the news ticker added.

The Cabeille was entering the large highway connecting Paris to Lyon when Vincent received a call.

'How did it go?' the other asked.

'She tried to make it personal, to distract me from the referendum, but I managed to bring the discussion back to Charlemagny. I also said that I want to face Miss Cliché on ROME.'

'Mm,' said the caller, unconvinced. 'I already told you that it's not a good idea. We're ahead in most polls – why invite her to challenge us?'

'I'm not someone who shies away from a debate,' replied Vincent, piqued at being questioned. The call didn't last long.

After traversing suburban Moissy-Cramayel, the Cabeille entered a nondescript industrial park, replete with predictable rows of warehouses, parking lots and wide patches of brownfield. Clusters of tower blocks, with their neutral lights, dotted the dark hills around.

Vincent left the Cabeille at the first empty spot, and walked through the gloomy compound. Worrying that his coat might drag in the dirt, he moved quickly, but not enough to prevent a swirl of grit from dusting his outfit.

Large trucks were parked by most units, but no human action could be seen. Vincent wandered clueless for five minutes in search of his destination, then spotted a weathered wooden gate. After pressing the grey button on an unlabelled intercom, a squeaking voice said: 'Please come up, second floor, we're on-air!'

The flaking gate opened with a soft vibration. Surprised by the place's shabbiness, Vincent climbed three sets of stairs to reach a doorway, where a steel metal sign stood high.

RADIO GALLIQUE

A girl with a bright floral jacket – which Vincent identified as cheap on the spot – welcomed him into a minuscule lounge. Flustered, she kept darting glances at him. They stood there alone, apparently waiting for someone. He smiled, then looked in other directions.

After operating in sizeable obscurity for years, Radio Gallique had recently grown into an unexpected French media phenomenon. This underground digital channel allowed anyone to call and have their once-in-a-lifetime experience as a guest of a wild show without protocol.

The founder – a burly man known as Dijon – had started broadcasting music from his own living room many years earlier. To this day, Dijon was the main host, spending day and night on the waves, to the point – they said – that he even slept in a cramped room next to the studio.

Music now played a very minor part in the programmes of Radio Gallique. Calling them 'programmes' wasn't entirely accurate, as the schedule lacked any kind of separation between shows. A renowned French media critic had once written: *The broadcast of Radio Gallique mostly consists of a constant, endless stream of statements, rants, irrational and utopistic ideas bounced back and forth. People just talk and talk: it's anarchy on the airwaves.*

The ideological *trait d'union* linking the motley audience of Radio Gallique was a thunderous, although patchy, idea of patriotism. The mantra of French self-defence had established itself so deeply among Dijon's followers that it now prevailed over any other value.

'Monsieur d'Amont! Have you come here all by yourself?' Dijon welcomed the most popular guest ever to grace that grubby floor. 'I'd expected to see a squad of bodyguards after all those death threats!'

'The honour is mine. I'm followed all day long, in one way or the other. It doesn't hurt to be all by myself, sometimes.'

'We've thousands of messages for you. Honestly, I didn't believe you would accept our invitation. And so close to Charlemagny day – you must be so busy, right?' asked Dijon, who had a tic, that of tilting his neck to the right, whose frequency was apparently linked to his state of mind.

'I wouldn't have missed this invitation for any reason. What you've done all these years – rekindling radio – deserves recognition. You know, when I was twenty, I adored playing at the discos around Colmar.'

'I didn't know you were a DJ,' replied Dijon, delighted.

'Yes. After skiing, I'd meet up with my friends and mix some records. Music has always been an important part of my life. Music gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, a charm to sadness, and life to everything – as Plato said.'

'You had a classical education, I recall!'

'Yes. It's a shame that now all schools, even primary schools, are fixated on computer programming and engineering. They neglect classical studies, which build the brain and give order to pupils. This is a period of time when we need order.'

Dijon's colleague was still staring at Vincent.

'This is my colleague Marguerite,' said Dijon. 'She's my assistant.' 'Marguerite, nice to make your acquaintance,' Vincent said with a penetrating glance. Marguerite blushed and smiled up at him.

'Listen, Vincent. I can call you Vincent, right?' asked Dijon, with hesitance and excitement blended in his voice. 'We're about to go live. As you know, our shows are audio only. This is our strict policy; even if it costs us money and visibility – because ROME penalises us for not posting videos – we've always stuck to it.'

He paused, then added in a guilty tone: 'ROME … she can be dictatorial … please don't report me, I know you're close to ROME. Mind you, at least Marlene Gäch has broken the American monopoly on communication.'

Vincent nodded, a little uncomfortable with Dijon's blunt comments about ROME laying down the law. Comments that he couldn't challenge, though.

Radio Gallique allowed listeners to submit audio messages with a maximum length of thirty seconds. Dijon called these messages 'droplets'. A monthly cap of a single droplet for each listener applied. A limit that was easily enforced, given that a user could only send droplets to Radio Gallique through their ROME account. There was scarcely any need for human filtering of the droplets; an algorithm was constantly at work. Dijon had never disclosed the criteria by which droplets were prioritised.

Vincent was just sitting down when Dijon began his show.

'Today's guest is the most discussed man in Europe! He who understood well before others that France and Germany are better than all other European countries … and so we need to act … you will soon be able to vote on uniting these two wonderful countries and leave the European Union.'

The stance of Radio Gallique on Charlemagny was unequivocal.

Vincent was still expressing his gratitude for the warm introduction when Dijon interrupted: 'Droplet!'

'I've been a carpenter all my life,' the first dropleter said. 'But getting decent work has become impossible. How can we compete with Poles and Bulgarians selling their families off for a bowl of soup? *Merde.* Charlemagny must protect us!'

Vincent, who experienced a dense adrenaline rush every time he was live on radio, looked at Dijon. The latter gave him the go-ahead.

'Immigration is Europe's biggest issue. But let's say it – nobody has the balls to stop it. Years ago, a German Chancellor

even opened the gates to more than half a million refugees, but she regretted that idea when they flooded the country. The moral is: you cannot bypass your people to open the gates of your land; you need to hear first what your country wants. Charlemagny will be different. We'll close the borders to empty-handed foreigners – I'm sorry to all the politically correct.'

Deafening artificial applause erupted in the studio. Vincent was adding a few words, but Dijon cut him off.

'Droplet!'

'I don't see why we keep paying money to those poor countries in Eastern Europe,' another began. 'We can barely take care of ourselves – why help countries that waste our money?'

'Very true,' Vincent observed. 'France and Germany together contribute more than half of the European budget. Absurd—'

'Droplet!'

'We French work hard and pay taxes here. We should be preferred over immigrants … if things stay the way they are … people will kick the shit out of politicians … just a matter of time.'

Vincent was poised to address the droplet, but Dijon, putting his microphone on mute, leaned over and whispered: 'Please let me send another droplet … we've a great rhythm going … what a shame it'd be to spoil it.'

'We're being played by bureaucrats in Brussels,' began the fourth dropleter, more articulate than the previous ones. 'I want to talk to and understand the politicians who make decisions about my life. Some of these people in Brussels don't even speak French. Should I accept being ruled by a Lithuanian politician? At best, they speak English, the language of the country that first decided to leave Europe. Are we protecting the French

language? It is considered one of the noblest languages on earth, but we are not doing enough to protect it—'

The droplet ended. The thirty-second allowance had elapsed. The open principle of Radio Gallique was clear: say less, so that everybody may have their say, regardless of how well spoken they are.

As Dijon glanced over at him with anxiety, worried perhaps that he might do something not entirely in tune with the draconian policies of their set-up, Vincent found room to speak.

'The language of a nation is a large part of its identity. Our language represents so much of our people's history, culture, feelings. It's like a musical instrument – and I love music – it says a lot about the player. French is a wonderful language, and Frenchmen used to call it an *affaire d'État*—'

'Another droplet!' Dijon shouted, twisting his neck to the right. The intensity of his spasms was increasing. The thirty-second rule applied to Vincent d'Amont, too. This time the studio hadn't resounded with enthusiastic applause.

A sequence of droplets followed.

'… If you've lived an entire life in an African hut, you'll never know how to live in a modern city …'

'… The US and China are threatening Europe. Let's fight back … !'

'… What's this "non-binary" bullshit … ?'

'… Spaniards don't respect rules. It's their nature …'

'… Why're you allowing that Italian bitch to mock you, Vincent … ?'

Droplet, droplet, droplet!

Gradually, as if in a musical crescendo, the harshness of the words, the chaos of the concepts, the manifestations of self-pity

all grew in parallel. To the ears of the rational listener, these messages blended into a cacophony, a chorus of whining voices, each one boosting the other and all making the same point. With his constant, frenetic pressing of buttons to play droplets or activate bursts of applause, Dijon, whose sweat-soaked neck now regularly swung left and right like a pendulum, was akin to a demonic pianist. An algorithm directed the orchestra.

Vincent knew how, at times, the united voice of people could act barbarically, difficult to tame and deaf to any reasoning. He had learned to nod when it happened, to listen, to accommodate the enraged speakers in the same way a child, lost in the wild, would seek safety from an approaching bear by playing dead.

When, in his thirty precious seconds, a caller contested that Germany wasn't a good fit for France – for it was Germany that had made life impossible in Europe – Vincent began to craft a response, explaining that France and Germany had been the closest allies in Europe for a long period. So if the Union had failed to deliver what was expected, that was due to other countries.

This was when Dijon ad-libbed: 'I hope we don't end up being German subjects …'

Vincent frowned. He hadn't expected the founder of Radio Gallique to contradict him in public. As his quivering lips struggled to find an incisive rejoinder, Dijon called forth the next droplet.

'France needs to leave the European Union … but merging with Germany can be very dangerous … there are more of them than us, their economy is stronger … are you sure you are leading us in the right direction … ?'

Vincent was enraged. What unsettled him was not so much the fact that any comment against Germany, at this stage, might threaten Charlemagny's unity, but rather the heretical idea that he was being questioned on Radio Gallique, a supposed anti-European stronghold from which he would have expected unequivocal support.

Not that Vincent wasn't equipped to be challenged. In fact, he liked engaging in fierce arguments with his opponents. It had recently happened at a conference with the European Central Bank, a most notorious lion's den for any Eurosceptic, and Vincent had enjoyed the praise of the media for his courage. He fed on confrontation. What was harder to tolerate was to receive friendly fire.

Vincent found it increasingly difficult to address the incessant whirlwind of droplets. Expected as a triumphant appearance centred around him – the mastermind of Charlemagny – the show was instead proving to be an act dominated by Dijon, who now looked less a friend than a rival. Vincent knew that his eloquence was failing him this evening, and attributed his dazed performance to the anarchy reigning at Radio Gallique. He strangely missed the gossipy but, ultimately, more elevated atmosphere of his earlier vis-à-vis with Amanda Arnaud.

With Charlemagny approaching so fast, poor approval ratings weren't allowed. A lacklustre performance at Radio Gallique wouldn't go unnoticed. Miss Cliché would for sure highlight it, with all the other vloggers following. He had lost his touch, people would say, or they would claim that he was unable to deliver Charlemagny. It was like one of those doomed poker games, he thought, recalling the many all-night games

he had played while still in Colmar. He was loath to surrender, though. He asked himself what the young Vincent would have done to make a derailing poker night a success. He would have bluffed, was the answer. So when someone expressed in his droplet a less-than-expected enthusiasm for Charlemagny, Vincent reacted.

'Your hesitation does you no honour,' he chided the dropleter. 'You're clueless. I'm not going to give up. You must trust me. A strong man makes a strong country. I'm talking to all of you who are listening: I want you to get mad. I want you to protest. You must get mad. So, get up now, all of you get up from your chairs, go outside and … paint!'

Dijon looked at him, puzzled.

Vincent quieted, his eyes still expressing anger. He now seemed a very different person from the man who had chatted amicably in the lobby earlier on. Standing up under Dijon's mesmerised stare, he yelled: 'You need to graffiti Charlemagny on the walls of your house, on the side of a bridge, on top of a roof – wherever you want. Let the world know how much Charlemagny means to you. Do it now! Don't waste any more time!'

Marguerite, biting her upper lip, gazed at him from behind the glass screen of the studio. From his stool, Dijon looked up at Vincent. He couldn't work out where his celebrity guest was heading. But no further droplets for the day.

'Words, words – people are tired of them. Talk is cheap. What you *see* is what matters. So, we need to give a face, a shape, to Charlemagny. Only then will the people of France and Germany take Charlemagny seriously. Get out and paint! Graffiti is art!'

During his shows, Dijon's eyes occasionally fell on the dashboard to check the audience's live reaction. On average, the approval rating stood between 50 and 70 per cent. It seldom went higher. After Vincent, a staggering 95 per cent pulsed on the dashboard – nobody had ever achieved something like that.

There was no longer any sign of confusion on Dijon's face. He finally understood. More effective than thousands of droplets, Vincent d'Amont had stolen the show. Dijon knew he had to set aside his own ego, this time, for the great cause of Charlemagny. People would absolutely get behind Vincent's appeal. Charlemagny was ever closer.

'Go out and paint! Go out and paint!' Dijon shouted too.