

THE SECOND LIFE

Dreams and Reveries. Visions and Nightmares

Dreaming is still living.

Error and Truth

Error and truth, how to recognize you?
You contrast in everything today, but tomorrow,
 Perhaps I shall encounter you
With the same features, on the same road,
Passing by like two sisters, holding hands.

The things of life and the things of dream
 Act by turns, leading us astray
Amid the eddies of their dual current;
What is the sun that rises during our nights?

To whom, for certainty, can I have recourse,
Verity, which everyone pursues and fears?
Our sages, whose study has filled long days,
What have they left us to light the route?
Theories, words, what do I know? Doubt!
So many objects have stuck our gaze and mind
 Which the memory wipes out!
So many other memories take their place,
And which, perhaps, hatched out in mists,
Are residues of dreams! One finds their trace,
One mingles them with life, and, close to amity,
 In intimate company, one recalls
Some event of which they were the fraction;
One talks about it, with astonishment and irritation
At finding it forgetful and incredulous, and suddenly
Doubt seizes you: Was it only a vain dream?

Error and truth, how to recognize you?
You contrast in everything today, but tomorrow,
 Perhaps I shall encounter you
With the same features, on the same road,
Walking like two sisters, holding hands.

Man thinks he knows everything and does not know himself,
Science deceives him, and amour even more!
Circling our horizon with deceptive beacons,

Each of which, through shadows and vapors,
At the whim of winds and waves, pushes and pulls us
Over a double ocean into a double arena;
The woman one loved, the day we had her,
Did we dream them, or have they fled us?

Dream! Oh, how dominant that word is in life!
How much room it takes up! Awake, we dream;
In the midst of our woes, while dreaming, we can
Create a happiness that no one envies us;
And who among us would want to erase from his days,
Those sweet moments, so full and so brief,
When thought launches far away to vagabond,
Lifting before our steps the barriers of a world,
And there, surrounding us with pleasant visions,
Houris with pure faces, glories and trophies,
Replace in our hand the magician's wand
In the land of illusions!

Well, if, intermittently
Eyes closed, or eyes open,
We possess within us that double existence,
O my soul, rightly or wrongly.
Go forth into that other universe,
The unlimited world of the Second Life!
To the possible, to the real, you are not enslaved;
Realms by you discovered,
Hands full of facts, come back and tell me
Your crazy visions, your various dreams
And whether in prose or in verse
I will take faithful account of them
For the distraction of minds in confusion.

The Golden Gnat

I had just read the work in which the powerful dialectician Proudhon, supporting himself on the philosopher Hegel, the learned Ancillon,¹ a minister of the Holy Gospel, and the wise Portalis,² the eminent jurist, and many others no less respectable, glorifies war in all its aspects, and declares it an inspiration of God indispensable to the dignity, the glory and even the happiness of humankind. In spite of the vigorous logic of the apostle, I separated from him not completely convinced.³

In order to rest from Proudhon, I had taken, somewhat at random, from a friendly bookshelf, *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*. The title seemed to promise me something fairly relaxing, as did the name of the author, Maistre. I thought it was the work of Xavier le Maistre, the charming author of *Voyage autour de ma chambre*, but it was his terrible brother Joseph whom I was about to encounter.⁴

On opening the volume, almost at random, as I had taken it, I perceived my mistake easily, I read this:

“In the vast domain of living nature, a manifest violence reigns, a kind of prescribed rage, which arms all beings *in mutua funera*... Already, in the vegetable realm, one begins to sense the law; from the immense catalpa to the most humble grass, how many plants die, how many are killed? But as soon as you enter the animal kingdom, the law suddenly takes on a frightful evidence... There are insects of prey, reptiles of prey, birds of prey, fish of prey and quadrupeds of prey. There is not an instant of duration in which a living being is not being devoured by another. Above those numerous races of animals is placed man, whose destructive hand spares nothing that lives; he kills in order to nourish himself, he kills in order to dress himself, he kills in order to adorn himself, he kills in order to attack, in order to defend himself, in order to educate himself and in order to amuse himself, and he kills for the sake of killing.”

So well indoctrinated by one blow after another, I interrupted myself to say: “I don’t have the habit of struggling against something stronger than me.”

Until that day, I had had the stupid mania of playing Don Quixote to birds, and even insects—all animals in general. Many a time I had had occasion to intervene in quarrels between dogs and cats and get myself bitten or scratched; in fights between two cocks, two rams, and even two humans, and receiving thrusts of a spur, a horn or a fist. I would not get involved again; since beasts and humans are destined to devour one another, since magpies eat warblers, warblers eat beetles and beetles eat the good God’s creatures too, what does it have to do with me?

Half-lying on a bench in my garden, still holding Joseph le Maistre’s volume in my hand, I was arguing with myself in that fashion when I sensed my eyes closing—but not completely, for I saw then, on a branch of a maple that was hanging over me, a spider completing the spinning of its web. Having terminated its network of fine mesh, it had scarcely begun to lie in wait in its little tunnel when a pretty fly with brilliant reflections came recklessly to run into it. First I saw it take a few tottering steps on the edge of the artfully-woven trap, and flutter its wings in order to resume its flight, but its feet were already retained by the sticky threads, and the spider, sensing its web vibrate, attentive to what was happening outside its hiding-place, put its head out of the window.

¹ The German pastor, historian and philosopher Friedrich Ancillon (1767-1837), the descendant of a notable French Huguenot family, he was the professor of history at the Military Academy of Berlin for many years.

² The jurist Jean-Étienne-Marie Portalis (1746-1907) was one of the lawyers commissioned by Napoléon to draw up the new Civil Code.

³ This is a surprisingly selective judgment of the philosophical position of the anti-militarist anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865), and is surely a trifle tongue-in-cheek.

⁴ The Savoyard philosopher Joseph le Maistre (1753-1821), was a central figure of the “Counter-Enlightenment,” a staunch monarchist who blamed rationalist opposition to religion for causing the horrors of the 1789 Revolution. He was an ambassador in Russia for many years, and published the title cited in 1821. His brother Xavier (1763-1852) was a soldier, but took time out while temporarily under arrest to dramatize his experience in the parody of travel literature *Voyage autour ma chambre* [Voyage Around my Room] (1794).

That pretty fly, I would have been able to save. But according to what I had just read, would that not have been trying to oppose the decrees of fatality itself? In any case, movement, the necessity of getting up from my bench and taking a few steps, would infallibly have troubled and annihilated the gentle slumber that was overtaking me. I therefore let things follow their course.

Soon, there was a muted hum around me, and something like a golden spangle vibrated before my gaze. After a gesture to chase it away, I resumed my pose as a sleeper, but every time slumber closed my eyelids, the gnat—for it could only be a gnat—sounded its fanfare again, with enough force to become entirely importunate to a man who, emerging from lunch, only wanted to take his siesta peacefully.

I half-opened an eye. The golden gnat had taken on larger proportions and appeared to me to be entirely similar to the pretty fly with the metallic reflections that had fallen into the spider's trap.

"Good," I said to myself. "It's got out of it on its own; it's surely the same one."

But I heard a murmur in my ear: "No, villain, it's not her. I wish to Heaven that I had died in her place, for she was about to be a mother; the cradle of her children was already prepared, coated with gum and furnished with appropriate aliments; we had disposed it under the bark of a willow, sheltered from all attack; the most precious moments of our existence had been devoted to that holy labor imposed on each of us by the great providential law, to which we submit without understanding it and without contenting it. Now my companion is no more, and neither of us will have accomplished our task down here. Curse you! Curse you!"

He interrupted himself for a few seconds; I thought he had gone. Suddenly, the buzzing recommenced, and, as if it were responding to the thought that was traversing my brain at that moment, it resumed forcefully: "No, it isn't that hideous spider that I'm accusing, it's you, you alone! The spider has obeyed the law of her nature, her instincts and its needs. Perhaps she too has children to nourish, who are crying out with hunger, and a victim was needed to be shared among them. But you were only obeying a sentiment of cowardly egotism; in order not to change position, in order not to give yourself the trouble of taking three steps forward, you allowed an innocent and inoffensive creature to perish, who, like you members of a superior race, perhaps better than you, appreciated the joys of life, amour and duty. You let her perish, and her posterity with her. Curse you! Curse you!"

"Curse you! As well as the destructive law of nature with which your authors have indoctrinated you, there is the law of God that wards off the excessively disastrous effects of the other: the law of pity and protection that confides the weak to the guard of the strong. Don't you know that one? If you don't know it, you're not a man; if you do know it, curse you! Curse you!"

The intense, strident buzz resounded like a trumpet then, and the golden gnat went on, in a tone of challenge: "Yes, is it not true that struggle is divine in essence? To hinder its effects is to quarrel with the sage plans of nature; the right of might makes all other rights fall silent! But where does it reside, that right? Don't you also know that the creature most infimal in appearance is sometimes sufficiently well-armed to cast down man himself and throw him as pasture to the worms? There are certain terrible substances, of which we are the depositaries; aliments for us, they can turn against you into devastations, into poisons. You wanted it—well, then, it's war! War! Defend yourself, I'm a coal-black fly!"⁵

And I felt a profoundly piercing beneath the eye. I uttered a cry and, greatly alarmed, ran into the house calling for help. But no trace could be found of the bite.

No matter: I have remembered the lesson. Since that day, above the pitiless law of nature I put that of God, and above the magnificent but desolate argument of Joseph de Maistre that of my golden gnat.

⁵ *Charbonneuse* [coal-black] can also mean "like anthrax" in French, so the statement is more sinister than it seems. It is probably not irrelevant, either, that Saintine had lived through the era when the Italian *Carbonari* had inspired Revolutionary groups all over Europe.

The Venetian Mirror

Having arrived in the evening at the country house of one of my friends, Monsieur N***, after a long walk taken under the direction of the owner, during which I had to visit his woods, his fishing-lake, his dairy farms and even his fields of beets, I returned to my room and threw myself on my bed, intending to rest for an hour or two.

My sleep was agitated. Not that my fatigue went as far as curvature, and, in consequence, as far as fever...no, I didn't have a fever; my pulse remained calm and regular—but I don't have the habit of sleeping in broad daylight: that was the entire mystery of my agitation.

During one of my bouts of slumber, a domestic had come in to close the shutter of my window, on which the sun was shining directly. On waking up, I thought I saw a figure designed in front of me; then other figures came in its wake: the figures of women, pretty women, so far as I could judge from a rapid inspection, for they only appeared and disappeared.

There was a round opening in the upper part of the shutter. I thought at first that it was through that gap that my curious visitors were coming, in turn, to watch me sleep.

But who could those charming individuals be? Nothing in their physiognomy recalled the ladies in whose company I had found myself that morning in N***'s house at breakfast.

Then I perceived that I had turned my back to the window and the shutter, and from the depths of the gap behind the bed I saw new apparitions rising, still feminine apparitions. This time, it was not only faces or profiles; each of my visitors showed herself in her gracious ensemble, her neck disengaged, her shoulders bare, and so close to me that I could surely have seized them in passing.

Lying under my coverlet, I played dead for a while, but with my eyes alert; I waited for one of my charmers to return to the scene; when that happened—without any evil intention, I swear—I extended my hand abruptly in her direction...with the sole result that I bruised my fingers against a mirror.

A Venetian glass with beveled edges, framed with finely-carved modern scrollwork, the existence of which I had not suspected until that moment, was placed at the back of the alcove I occupied. It was in that mirror that the pleasant mirage was reproduced, brought by a ray of sunlight coming through the circular opening in the shutter—at least, that was what I thought.

Certain henceforth of only dealing with reflections, I examined my beautiful ladies at my leisure and with the appropriate calmness.

Some of them were completely unknown to me, but as for the majority of them, I had surely encountered them elsewhere—where? I could not recall, and I strove in vain to understand by what fortuitous circumstance they were assembled in my friend N***'s house, and holding their decameron in the part of the garden located outside my window. What was equally singular was that almost all of them, apparently, were wearing theatrical costumes, the robes and coiffures of another era; there were even a few whose hair disappeared under powder.

Was our hostess preparing a dramatic surprise for the evening? That seemed probable.

And my beautiful actresses filed before me. One was displaying an Henri III ruff, another the weighty high collar of the Medicis, some of them silky elastic corkscrew curls, crepes and arrangements of hair in stages, or wigs surmounted with pouffes from the reigns of Louis XIII, XIV and XV.

In truth, I could hardly comprehend how such various adornments could figure in the same play, when all of a sudden, without hesitation, I recognized the models of two famous portraits by Larillière and Latour: Madame de Montespan and Madame de Pompadour had just appeared in my mirror.

Once on the track, the names of my other characters came to memory easily. They were nothing less than the favorites of our old kings, Valois and Bourbons: Diane de Poitiers, Gabrielle d'Estrées, Mademoiselles de La Fayette, d'Hautefort, de Fontanges and de la Vallière. Madame de Maintenon, clad in black with a Book of Hours in hand, was leading the mourning for one reign; Madame Dubarry, costumed as a bacchante, was closing the march of another.

But how had so many beautiful ladies come to find me in my alcove, through the hole in my shutter? I searched for the cause of the phenomenon, and thought I had found it when my friend N*** came into my room. He opened my window, toward which I launched myself, casting a fearful glance outside. Everything had disappeared.

“You have a fine collection of portraits,” I told him. “Is it to give them a breath of air that you’re exposing them in your garden?”

And I told him the story of my visitors, and how I had every reason to suppose that those portraits, placed outside the house, thanks to the reflection of solar rays, doubtless by a procedure identical to that of the *camera obscura*, had come to be reflected in the mirror in my alcove.

He smiled.

“I know what it is,” he told me, “and I regret having neglected to warn you. It’s not a matter of any *camera obscura* effect; it’s the mirror itself, the mirror alone that has the gift of reproducing images that were once reflected in it.”

And as I opened my eyes wide with incredulity, he went on: “That Venetian glass, bought by my grandfather, came from the pillage of Versailles in 1792. Brought to France by Catherine de’ Médici, it initially decorated the Hôtel Saint-Pol and the Louvre; it passed from there to Fontainebleau, the Tuileries and Versailles, always ornamenting the private cabinet of the reigning king. As all the beauties in question habitually frequented that cabinet, their image, by virtue of being reflected there thousands of times, has, so to speak, become encrusted therein. From time to time, especially in dim light, by virtue of an effect of optics or catoptrics, for which I’m not sufficiently learned to give you a valid reason, by emission or luminous vibration, the image appears spontaneously on its surface. You see,” he added, “that there’s no question of a *camera obscura* here, nor of a collection of portraits, and the phenomenon that seems, at first sight, to be somewhat marvelous, is, in sum, quite simple.”

I was convinced by that, only raising a single objection: “Why aren’t the images of the men conserved as well as those of the women?”

“That’s self-explanatory, of course!” he replied, laughing. “Women look at themselves in a mirror more often than men.”

I know that since then, for a reason I don’t seek to understand, my friend N*** has denied ever having had that conversation with me, but I affirm that that is exactly the explanation he gave me regarding the singular properties of his Venetian looking-glass.