

Camille Debans: *The Conqueror of Death*

(1895)

In the early days of January 1999 the *Chicago Tribune* elected to celebrate solemnly the centenary of a discovery that had turned the world upside-down and produced ineradicable benefits, after having nearly brought about the most frightful catastrophes. The article in the American newspaper succinctly recalled the facts. Let us limit ourselves to reproducing the essential details.

You shall see, by virtue of the events that are recalled therein, and especially by virtue of the surprising conclusion, that it is worth the trouble.

The entire world, the *Tribune* said, ought to honor magnificently the man who, having dreamed of substituting himself for God in order to govern at his whim the rain, storms and fine weather, had the glory of finding the formula of his dream and putting it into practice. If statues are raised to the heroes of official massacres, what should be done for a man who endowed humankind with such a fecund prodigy?

It was on 24 June 1899, at four o'clock in the afternoon, that W. Benjamin Smithson created, in a plain on the Mexican frontier where no drop of rain had ever fallen, veritable cataracts in a serene sky, and became by virtue of that fact the dispenser of the abundance of harvests and the regulator of the Earth's wealth.

The enclosure in which the inventor of genius had to operate was in the middle of a plain, at the very place where a considerable city now stands: Smithstown, so named for the glory of Sir Benjamin. In those days, the country was desolate in its aridity. The immense crowd of people that had come to witness the meteorological phenomenon was primarily composed of local inhabitants for whom it represented sudden fortune, and had never grown any grain at all.

A cannon shot announced the beginning of the experiment. There were as many mockers as believers, and more. Two balloons with a capacity of about 6,000 cubic meters, one filled with oxygen and the other with hydrogen, rose slowly into the air, retained by powerful cables that only allowed them to rise up to a height of eight hundred meters. Beneath each aerostat there was a large gondola as voluminous as the balloon itself, oblong in shape and containing heaped-up bladders full to bursting, also containing hydrogen and oxygen, collected from the clouds of Illinois.

The two taffeta globs were linked together by a metallic device forming part of the apparatus, the principal wire of which unwound as the balloons drew away from the ground and maintained them in communication with a powerful electric pile installed in a vast cavern constructed for the purpose.

Floating with a serene majesty in the placid atmosphere—the sky was an implacable blue—the two aerial monsters rose up slowly. An embryonic sentiment of anxiety gripped bosoms many lightly. Five minutes before, the quips had been raining.

“That's all that'll rain!” said one ferocious joker.

Now, that skepticism had evaporated. The imposing allure of the apparatus was intimidating the majority of the spectators.

Suddenly, the balloons stopped rising. The quadruple black mass stood out, bizarrely, against the intense azure of the sky. The chronometers marked four eleven and forty-three seconds—that historic detail in indisputable. W. Benjamin Smithson disappeared into the cavern from which he denouement would depart. There, he took hold of a little wheel, which he subjected to a dozen rapid turns, and then ran out to watch the aerostats. Two seconds went by; an enormous spark flashed, zigzagging between the ripping balloons, and a veritable clap of thunder was heard. Smithson maneuvered a little lever, and the nacelles burst in their turn.

Cruel black vapors formed, in the midst of which electricity raged. Lightning fell on a group of carriages and killed three people. Too bad! Then the cloud that had just formed by virtue of the condensation of the gas thickened so furiously and extended so rapidly toward all the points of the

horizon that a fearful panic took hold of the crowd. People started fleeing in all directions, uttering screams of terror and desperate clamors.

“That man is the Devil himself!” howled the most terrorized.

Soon, large raindrops began to moisten the earth. The local inhabitants, ignorant of the use of umbrellas, ran away more rapidly than ever. Only a few fearless Yankees remained, mouths open, looking upwards, marveling at the miracle they were witnessing. And the miracle was completed, for within a few minutes, the rainfall had taken on the proportions of a tropical downpour.

And while the plain drank those benevolent sheets of water, Benjamin Smithson, opening a trap-door contrived in the vault of his cellar, sent into the air, to vertiginous heights, a series of bladders similar to the ones in the nacelles, propelled by powerful helices, which carried them up to the clouds, where they burst in their turn. The rumble of thunder was heard, and the rain increased in intensity.

The sensation that Sir Benjamin’s success caused is easily imaginable. In a matter of hours, the entire world had heard the amazing news. Old Europe thought at first that it was a gigantic hoax, but explanatory details and extracts from newspapers were arriving by the minute, and it was necessary to yield to the evidence.

All these things are, of course, familiar to us today, and appear so simple, that it is as if they always existed. We regulate the weather in accordance with the general interest. The sky has no more caprices, and, in consequence, nor has the earth; its fecundity is regulated. At any rate, America went mad for a week. All the most improbable things one can imagine were done from New York to San Francisco and from the St. Lawrence to the Mississippi in honor of Smithson, but still fell short of what that sublime genius deserved. European governments heaped him with honors. The inventor was celebrated in music, painting, sculpture, verse and prose.

Then, there was a sudden urgent alarm. In all the countries that had employed the Smithson method, conflicts of interest, and even of fantasy, were produced. Some people wanted rain and other wanted fine weather for the same day, some having need of water and others of sunshine. Civil wars broke out in weakly-governed countries. But those are no longer anything but memories. A long time ago, the executive powers to charge of the direction of the weather, and there are very few countries in which that management does not function to general satisfaction.

Sir Benjamin Smithson is, therefore, for all humankind, without distinction of races, a unique, incomparable benefactor. We would like the United States to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of his discovery in a fashion that will dazzle the world, and we are expressing the wish that the festivals that we are proposing will be the occasion for new benefits a hundred times more extraordinary, which W. Benjamin Smithson doubtless has in reserve for us after a hundred years.

For W. Benjamin Smithson—this might perhaps stupefy centuries to come or appear to be the most natural thing in the world, according to circumstances—is now a hundred and thirty-one years old. Everyone in the world knows that, but only those of his compatriots who know him personally know that he does not have the appearance of an old man, and that Mrs. Smithson, who became his wife thirty-nine years ago, appears today to be just as youthful, beautiful and as obviously young as on her wedding day.

We therefore dare to say, out loud, what has been repeated for forty years in American drawing rooms. W. Benjamin Smithson, after having discovered fifty secrets that have profited his fellow men, must have found, a long time ago, a means of conquering death and of maintaining himself in a state of eternal youth and virility. It is not longer permissible to doubt it. His worthy companion has, thanks to him, conserved the delightful figure and mental vigor that she had at twenty. Evidently, he knows the great secret. We affirm that with a profound conviction, with an emotion that makes all our muscles quiver and our souls float in the serene regions of a enormous hope. He knows the great secret!

But as he does not have the right to keep it for himself alone, we are convinced that the prodigious scientist wanted to wait for the moment of the centenary to which we have summoned all peoples in order to cause a frisson in human life that will endow it permanently with the most precious gift of all.

It is, therefore, on 24 June 1999 that America will have the immense pride of inaugurating, by virtue of the genius of its most illustrious son, the new era in which people will be able to say: “I shall no longer die.”

Needless to say, this article was translated into all languages and commented on in every country. As with the power of making rain or good weather at will, a hundred years before, some people remained skeptical; others, secretly animated by a regrettable desire not to restore their souls to the Creator, did not hesitate to believe the promises of the American journalist.

The centenary, therefore, was awaited with a furious impatience. As the psychological moment approached, the Earth, from pole to pole, was gripped by a divine shiver—for no one was any longer incredulous.

On the eve of the great day, however, at the moment when humankind had nothing more to do than reach out a hand to see the supreme conquest fall into it, the joy, instead of turning to delirium, became anxiety, anguish and fever. What if, at the last moment, the certainty was acquired that the American newspapers were joking at the expense of the two worlds?

But no—W. Benjamin Smithson really was a hundred and thirty-one years old. He had been seen, in person, in Paris and London in 1992. He looked forty-five. His wife was a sexagenarian; nothing was more certain—but ladies who had been her childhood friends, already wrinkled and decrepit, affirmed that Mrs. Smithson had not changed since the third year of her marriage. Thus, the great secret had been found.

“Hosannah!” sang the most convinced. “We shall be immortal!”

But the centenary celebrations, although worthy of the American people and the man they wanted to honor, went by without Sir Benjamin having spoken. Over the entire surface of the globe there was a disappointment that took on all the characteristics of despair.

In Europe, the disillusionment was so rude that the American journalists were held accountable for it; there was talk of making them expiate, by revolutionary means, the fraud of which they appeared to be the impudent inventors. But they defended themselves energetically. The *Chicago Tribune* even took the lead—as they say on racecourses—in crying more loudly than the rest and putting all the blame for what had happened on W. Benjamin Smithson himself. So when, all over the world, it was known that the American was refusing to prolong the lives of his fellows, sheltering his conduct under the pretext of philosophical scruples, an immense clamor of protest rose up from summits and abysses.

“What scandal! What infamy!” came the cry, from all directions. “What! Here’s a man who holds our immortality in his hands, and he has the right to dispose of it as he wishes, even to deprive us of it if such is his pleasure? A thousand times no! It’s necessary to force him, if you please. Let him be seized. A deep dungeon and, if necessary, torture in his honor, until he talks.”

The most illustrious scientists wrote to Benjamin Smithson to demonstrate to him the meanness of his conduct. Some spoke of his duty, others of his glory, some of the rights of humankind, others of the will of God that had chosen him, Smithson, to bring the supreme news to his fellows...

A few, seeing that the objurgations were having absolutely no effect, went as far as insult, and finally, between the two extremes, there were vulgar reasoners who claimed that Smithson, driven by an extravagant ambition, wanted to be alone, with his wife, in possessing eternal youth, in order to hold the nations in a moral domination a hundred times worse than the most ferocious despotism.

In brief, people competed in irrationality. The entire world had lost its head, and yet, in sum, no one even knew whether the American scientist really possessed the talisman of long life.

The majority of European newspapers organized a conference in order to clarify that vital question. In the very first session, someone came forward to observe that a newspaper article is not an article of faith—even if the newspaper was from Chicago. No specific fact proved that Smithson was in possession of the secret that was attributed to him—in consequence of which, the conference ought to address itself to Smithson himself, in order to ask him whether there was any truth in the public rumor.

A letter was drafted in that same session, and three members of the conference were delegated to leave for America.

Smithson received them in the palace by means of which grateful agriculturalists had paid tribute to him a hundred years earlier, which was known as the Red House.

“Gentlemen,” he said to them, without the slightest prevarication, “it’s true. So, the time has come when it’s necessary for me to explain myself. Yes, I have discovered the art of conserving youth—or, to put it better, of arresting the physical disorders produced by time on the human organism and, up to a point, of giving to those who employ my procedure an unalterable health. I was forty-eight years old when I made the discovery, and you can see that I haven’t aged since. Mrs. Smithson is over sixty; I shall have the honor of introducing you to her, and you will take her for a young woman. But don’t entertain any irrational illusions. I don’t boast of having conquered death. In a brawl, in a battle, in consequence of a fall, people can die as before if they fracture their skulls, if they receive a rifle-bullet or a dagger in the heart...”

Smithson was interrupted by one of the three delegates.

“We shall not be so indiscreet as to ask for more details,” he said. “Without judging your discovery *a priori*, we assume that it has not modified the economy of the human organism.”

“Indeed; it only consolidates it.”

“How long do you think that an individual might live by faithfully following your method and prescriptions?”

“I don’t know—but I wouldn’t be surprised if he could live for ten centuries, if not forever.”

A smile slid over the lips of the three delegates, reflecting their interior joy. They had no doubt, after the prodigious Yankee’s first declaration, that they would be returning to Europe with the secret of eternal youth.

“Well, Monsieur,” said the most eloquent of the three, “we have come respectfully, in the names of the conference assembled in Paris, and, in consequence, on behalf of the City of Light in its entirety—in a word, on behalf of the whole world—to ask you to put the seal on your immense glory by finally unveiling the marvelous secret that will render us the terrestrial paradise...”

Benjamin Smithson replied, very gravely: “I’m flattered, Messieurs, that you have crossed the ocean to take that step, and I’ve given instructions that your stay should be made as agreeable as poor Americans can contrive—but with regard to my secret, I shall profit from our embassy to inform the world that I have decided never to reveal it.”

As the three Frenchmen remained mute with stupefaction, Smithson went on: “After profound meditation, I have acquired the conviction that the indefinite prolongation of human existence would bring about, in a short time, an incomparable disaster more deadly than the benefit would be profitable. I shall therefore say nothing. Not because I want to keep the joy of living for myself alone—for, on the contrary, I have decided to suspend, at a given time, the measures to which I owe my incomparable old age. Whatever his genius might be, a human cannot encroach without folly on the attributions of God.”

“What!” cried Pierre Seigreval, the most eminent of the three delegates. “You refuse...!”

“Believe that I’m very sorry—but you’ll admit that, during my long life, when I have not lost the slightest fraction of my intellectual faculties, I have acquired an experience double that of other humans.”

“So?”

“What I stands out most clearly from what I have learned,” Smithson continued, “is that progress, whatever it might be, does not bring in its development any element of true happiness for humankind. The causes of human happiness: the passions, egotism, vices—in a word, moral maladies—have not changed.”

“Oh!” said Seigreval, scandalized. “What you are saying is blasphemy.”

“No,” the old man replied, smiling. “How can you not see that truth? Evil people would have hundreds of years to wreak harm with the same fury. The good would be subject to their evildoing indefinitely. I tell you that it would be the triumph of malefactors and ingrates.”

Having said that, Smithson made the gesture of someone who will not consent to hear further argument; he bowed gently, opening his arms in the fashion of Anglican pastors.

The three journalists protested in vain; he insisted on the unshakability of his resolution. No argument succeeded in influencing him, in making him soften the rigor of his sentence. Soon, he even changed the subject and invited his visitors to dinner.

It was as they were taking their places at the table that he introduced his wife to the delegates. Mrs. Smithson was a petite blonde woman with an amiable face. Her lips were incredibly fresh, her eyes extraordinarily limpid; one might have thought that she was eighteen.

Pierre Seigreval wondered whether he and his companions might be being taken for a ride. Anyone would have been able to believe, like him, that it was all an act, a comedy played for the simple objective of deception. During the meal, however, Mr. and Mrs. Smithson described events that they had witnessed with their own eyes fifty years earlier, and in a tone so sincere that their good faith could not be doubted.

Before leaving to return to France, the delegates made one last attempt.

“At least give us another reason,” they said. “Just one.”

“Gladly,” said Smithson. “Suppose, then, that I deliver my secret to humankind. From that moment on, people no longer die, do they? Now, everyone knows that millions of people are born every year. A simple arithmetical calculation will then suffice to identify the precise moment at which the terrestrial globe would be too small to contain its immortal people. Then what will happen? The strong will do what they can to preserve their place; the weak will band together to defend themselves; there will be war—a universal, internecine war. People will kill one another, and my secret will no longer have any value. All the more reason to renounce it immediately.”

What Smithson said was wisdom itself, but it did not succeed in convincing the delegates. They belonged to the species of deaf individuals who do not want to hear. Beside which, all their faculties were concentrated on one unique objective: to extract the divine secret from the American scientist. After that, they would see...

So, when they left the Red House to return to New York, the French journalists were more determined than ever not to abandon the game. At the railway station, a crowd was waiting for them, avid to know the results of their mission. Needless to say, they were all in accord in deploring Sir Benjamin’s culpable obstinacy.

“He’ll give in eventually, though,” said the director of the American *Times*.

“He won’t give in,” replied Seigreval.

“Well, he has to give in,” said a third person, with singular conviction.

There really never was such a burning question for the entire world. Since people had begun to hope for that almost complete attenuation of death, there had been no other topic of conversation, from one end of the Earth to the other. Old people, middle-aged people and the sick could not contain their impatience. They waited hour by hour for the news to arrive. Those who felt themselves close to falling into the great darkness of the tomb, those of whom it was said “He won’t last the week,” gripped by anguish, sought news incessantly of the state of the negotiations. More than one mother, leaning over the cradle of her doomed child, demanded the miracle of which Smithson was capable—and who can tell whether it might not have been obtained from him by sending five or six desperate mothers as delegates?

When it was learned that Smithson was determinedly refusing to reveal his secret, there was a perfectly comprehensible explosion of anger. Meetings were organized everywhere; millions of indignant protesters condemned the conduct of the famous inventor without reserve.

It did not take long for them to be driven to extremes. What! There is a man who can prevent us from dying, and who is refusing to give us the supreme gift of unscathed life? But he does not have the right to rob us of that part of our heritage! It is necessary to force him, even if we have to inflict torture upon him to do so.

The most furious proposed locking Smithson up until he had responded to the world’s demand.

But nothing prevailed against the obstinacy of the Yankee, to such an extent that the nations, in accordance with the customary course of events, became used to that disappointment, which was transformed into a vague hope. People continued to die. Disasters and wars occurred. People occupied themselves with other things, and the years went by, slow and exquisite for the young, rapid and ingrate for the mature and the old.

Smithson was still alive, and his wife too. Neither of them fell into decrepitude. Even better, the perpetual scientist, as he was now called, employed his genius—the greatest that had ever honored the human race—in performing new miracles, inventing improbably machines or processes.

Thanks to him, aerial transport became commonplace. For the old balloons, which no one had ever succeeded in steering, he substituted gigantic aeroplanes in the form of birds, to which electric piles of enormous power but small volume gave movement and life. To those who preferred something more rapid to that still rather slow means of locomotion—it took eight hours to go from Paris to New York—he offered a submarine tunnel, in which the trains traveled at the vertiginous speed of postal communications in pneumatic tubes. In fifteen minutes, passengers embarked at a station in New York were disembarking in the capital of France, on what was once the site of Les Halles.

Humankind, weary of so many marvels, no longer admired them. The means of production were so powerful that the workers, once so hasty to complain through the mouths of orators at public meetings, only worked for two hours a day. Work had become a distraction, a need, which caused Smithson to reflect, who remembered the noisy demands of old, the excessive programs now fallen into profound forgetfulness.

In the year 2073, he departed in a submarine, as a philosopher desirous of clarifying the mystery of the oceans, those of the land being almost entirely known. He admired the vegetation and the fauna of the submarine depths, and, after a few pauses in the most interesting locations, he landed in the vicinity of Bordeaux, where he was welcomed with all the demonstrations of crazed enthusiasm.

But the man was blasé with regard to honors. On the other hand, there was in that triumph, contrived by a slightly intoxicated crowd, something other than recognition. The cunning were trying to daze Smithson, to cover him with garlands, to conquer him so completely, in fact, that he would finally consent to release the secret of long life.

No man was ever subjected to such a diet of flattery and courteous temptation. For more than three months he was not allowed any rest. The Head of State visited him with great ostentation, as if he were the most powerful sovereign in the world. The Académie des Sciences offered him its homage in an extraordinary session, held outside the Institut in the old Galerie des Machines¹ on the Champ-de-Mars, which proved to be too small to contain a crowd avid to learn how death might be defeated. Smithson was proclaimed by acclamation the honorary president of all the scientific societies in the world. He was carried in triumph to his armchair. Then the most eloquent voice in Paris made a speech in which, after having heard himself compared to a god, he was invited to put an end to mortal anguish by revealing the mystery of his life.

He smiled impenetrably.

The orator, doubtless unfamiliar with that smile, which the delegates of the 1999 conference had seen flourish on the Yankee's lips, imagined that he had just caused conviction to enter into the softened spirit of the old man. He thought that by accumulating victorious arguments, he might strike the decisive blow, and launched forth into an admirable oration. Nothing more splendidly persuasive had ever been heard, anywhere, at any time. No one in the audience doubted that the advocate had won humankind's case.

Smithson rose to his feet. A tremor ran through the immense hall like a strange breeze. It was the fever of joy. People held their breath.

The scientist opened his mouth. There was an incredible silence, as if there were not a single one among the forty thousand people there who was not already counting on their relative eternity.

"Messieurs et Mesdames," he said, in excellent French, "I thank you for the welcome that you have given me, which far surpasses my humble merit..."

And, continuing in that fashion, he responded to the compliments and flatteries that had been lavished upon him. He was eloquent, gracious and exquisite in his turn—but about his secret, there was not a word. The session ended without his having made any promise. Anger and disappointment might

¹ The Galerie des Machines, a huge pavilion made of iron, steel and glass, was originally constructed as the Palais des Machines for the 1889 Exposition Universelle. When the exhibition ended, however, it was allowed to remain in place; it was used again for the 1900 Exposition, and then became a velodrome, but was eventually demolished in 1910.

perhaps have been about to provoke some regrettable manifestation, and disquieting murmurs were already rumbling among certain groups.

Fortunately, skillful clamors of the lower orders circulated the suggestion that Smithson could not decently explain the affair to such an audience. Who could tell how long it might take him? Besides which, it was probably one of the most arduous problems of esoteric science, and no one would understand it. It was necessary to wait.

They did not, however, renounce the quest to make him confess. And as all the maneuvers had proved vain, they took advantage of a further celebration of which he was the hero to put him brutally in the necessity of replying. This time, he consented to do so.

“What you are asking,” he said, “would be a hundred times worse than the death from which you want to be liberated. Take the trouble to look around you. By prolonging life you would be perpetuating vice, moral suffering, nameless unhappiness. Believe me, since I am the only man in a position to enlighten you on the matter, indefinite life—which is almost good as it is—would be a cruel torture. I won’t tell you that a person would become blasé about everything and would become, after two or three hundred years, a stranger in the midst of younger generations, as old people between ninety and a hundred already are in many cases. That is obvious. But think about what one would become in the midst of unforgiving hatreds. Imagine what ingratitude alone would make of the unfortunate. If I could speak, you would now that I am a frightful example of that—but let’s pass on

“Can you see drunkards, gamblers and malefactors renewing their crimes and infamies incessantly, sowing dolor and despair around them for centuries? Imagine certain spouses bound together forever—what am I saying, forever? Where are those who could live together for a hundred and fifty years? Once again, God has made things well. If I had not been frightened by what I foresaw, do you think that I would have hesitated for a moment to make my fellows happy, for whom I have toiled with such courage and obstinacy? Interrogate all those who are listening to me and ask them whether they would be delighted if three-quarters of their friends were immortal, and listen to their reply. And their relatives—that would be something else entirely.

“Oh, you can be sure that I’ve been on the point of saying everything a hundred times over, for the sake of a little peace—but a hundred times over, too, a secret voice had encouraged me to silence, and I have persisted in it. War, theft, pillage, and internecine massacres are formidable evils. It would not require two centuries, I repeat—and this is perhaps the hundredth time—for humankind, overcrowded, to arrive at those extremities, for want of room on this little round ball that is narrower than perhaps you believe.”

He spoke thus for another hour, and concluded by saying: “If I gave in, Messieurs, in a very short time, there would no maledictions that would not be heaped upon my name and my person.”

This time, there was an explosion of fury. The sage Yankee was insulted publicly. Newspapers published abominable diatribes against him. His caricature could be seen at every street-corner, accompanied by wounding captions.

“It’s a practical joke,” said the most earnest individuals, “and he hasn’t lived for as long as people say. The Americans have deceived us in order to poke fun at Europe. If he had the power of which he boasts, would he hesitate? We ought to expel him shamefully.”

And they provoked one another to lose their heads. It would not have taken much to pass from insults to acts of violence. Oh, if they had known how near the man, shaken in his resistance, had come to revealing everything! But when he saw that overflow of rage, he contented himself with shrugging his shoulders and murmuring; “There couldn’t be any better justification of my resistance.”

Before leaving Paris, he had the generosity to make a further gift to humankind, in the form of an inoffensive substance that suppressed almost all pain in all cases of physical suffering. After which he set off for America, and returned to his fatherland, where he was received almost as an enemy.

There, objurgations degenerated into insults. He and his wife were obliged to go into hiding, so to speak. Their dear children and their adorable grandchildren were subjected to base persecution.

Poor Smithson, desolate, sometimes said to his wife: “Who knows whether I might not be wrong. I have a strong temptation to give them what they want, and so much the worse for them.”

One day, he saw one of his great-grand-daughters arrive at the Red House, carrying her only son in her arms, devoured by fever. She threw herself down at his knees, in tears, begging him, imploring him to save her child. Eventually she lay down at his feet, affirming that she would not get up again unless he rendered life to the suffering child.

How could he resist such a plea? He gave in. Smithson made the child drink a few drops of a golden liquid—and the mother, mad with joy, saw the fruit of her loins returned to life...

TO BE CONTINUED IN BOOK...