

The Second Life

*Sic postquam fata peregit,
Stat vultu moestus tacito, mortemque reposit.*
Lucan.¹

I

Since we are dead now and we no longer have anything better to do until the day of resurrection but tell one another stories until we are sated, O my dead neighbor, do as I do: sit down unceremoniously on your tomb and listen to my account of my adventures in the world of the living.

It will not amuse you very much, I fear, the first time, will bore you the second, and send you to sleep the third, but as I am menaced on your part by the same procedure, I beg you in our common interest to be patient. Know, too, that I have died twice, which gives me a definite advantage over you.

It is a beautiful night, although cool, and we no longer need dread catching a chill...

So, while our colleagues hold a conference up there on the hill, around the chapel, or lament the memory of their past amours and lost riches behind the yew-trees, listen, my dead neighbor, to how I drowned myself, the first time out of despair, and how, having returned to Earth conditionally, I came to return by the same route after a short interval, to occupy the tomb next to yours, where I find myself so ill at ease between sunrise and moonrise.

My name, on Earth was ***. I was the issue of an aristocratic family, rich rather than comfortably off. I was young, since my definitive act of mortality gave me no more than 24 years of age. I was handsome, I was rich, and yet I was not happy...

You find that sentence commonplace, neighbor, I can see; have patience nevertheless, I beg you, for I intend to prove to you that, if my statement is vulgar, my woes were not.

Young, handsome and rich, it might seem that, in order to be happy, I had only to follow the ready-made pathways of life. Besides which, that triple advantage of youth, beauty and wealth had the particularity, in my case, of corresponding to the three principal vices of my nature: I was lazy, and was thus able to do nothing; I was vain, and was thus able obtain vanity from my appearance; and finally, I loved living, considering the sunlight and idling in the woods and the streets with no particular purpose, and I had long years before me to devote to that penchant.

I do not know, my neighbor, whether in the course of your existence you have ever reflected—that doubt, of course, cannot be an insult on my part, for it has not yet been demonstrated to me that a man who thinks is worth more than one who conserved the virginity of his rational faculties—but at any rate, if you have done, have you not been struck by the utility of misfortune in human life?

The sage who first said that life is a battle was profound. There is in the life of every human being—have you not noticed it—between adolescence and the age of virility, a period of malaise and inertia, during which the faculties remain as if in suspension: belief being fixed and development accomplished, numbed thought evaporates is vague and sterile reveries.

It is, so to speak, a time of stasis, during which a man assures himself internally of his strength and seeks to anticipate the direction from which the enemy will come. Sometimes, he marches to intercept him; as soon as he perceived him, he runs toward him; the struggle commences, and life with it. Until then, he has only been vegetating, arming himself for the battle.

The inert bliss of Paradise was not a tolerable life—a human life, that is—and so our first father could not maintain it. To escape that stupid Eden he only had a hole as broad as a hand, still completely obstructed by menaces and maledictions, but he hurled himself into it, so natural was it for him to prefer a life of misfortune to that lethargic felicity.

¹ The quoted lines are from book six of the *Pharsalia*. An approximate translation is: “After he has thus revealed the Fates, he stands there glumly, saying nothing.”

If I did not fear scandalizing you, I would add that, in acting thus, he was only obeying the will of the Creator without knowing it. If the fall of humankind had not been intended by God, why did He not charitably attach the fatal fruit to the top of an oak-tree, instead of suspending it from the branches of a paltry apple-tree? But no! He wanted to give humans knowledge, and, moreover, the merit of collecting it themselves. Thus, in the Mystery of Paradise Lost, the serpent was merely an accomplice.

Be sure, by way of conclusion, that if all the evils of the world went back every year into Pandora's Box on the feast of Saint Sylvester,² it would be broken again, without fail, on the first of January.

But let us close the parentheses and resume my story.

Whence might misfortune come for me, surrounded as I was by all the external forms of happiness? I had but one resource, and that was to find it within myself.

At this point, my dear neighbor, permit me to interrupt myself and mark with an epic pause that solemn hour when life, true life, commenced for me.

You were, you have told me, a Parisian like myself; you must, therefore, have a memory of those pale young faces suspended on curved spines that you have often glimpsed passing slowly through galleries and along sidewalks. The laborer who brushes past them only sees their black coats, which are more expensive than his own, and which he envies. He is offended by the sterile fatigue of those mechanisms rotating in the void, and calls them: happy!

Oh, you are a thousand times happier than they are, who, at least, only have to struggle against visible and tangible objects—you, for whom every blow of the hammer is a conquest, and who goes to sleep every night with your forehead bathed in the salutary sweat of labor!

Pale faces! Black coats! The livery of despair and impotence—oh, how well I know you! How many times have I exchanged a sympathetic glance with you! How many times has my elbow made contact with your fraternal sleeves! Our fathers have wearied us with accounts of Moscow and the Berezina; they have exploited the glory thereof usuriously. But no brush will ever retrace the frightful retreat from Russia, the frightful descent from Courtille, executed by a generation of scarecrows, casualties of thought: Prometheuses in dirty underwear, Sisyphuses in threadbare clothing. But what rock would not seem easy to roll to those poor souls, crushed for an entire lifetime between those two terrible cylinders, ambition and impotence?

I don't know, my friend, whether you have understood me fully; I doubt it. But in sum, I was one of them! I too had to hide the fox beneath my tunic, interrogate the walls with dull eyes, and demand an explanation from God of the inequality of my strength and my desires.

My clothes were perhaps less dilapidated, because I had the money to renew them, but what did that matter?

One friendship, one love, one hatred; that is the triple complement of every life. I had a mistress, a friend and an enemy: my good friend, my blond Schmidt, the painter; my mistress, Baronne Lydie, a coquette; my enemy, the pianist Gatien, an undistinguished and malevolent animal.

If, after that, you expect a love story, especially of ordinary love, you're mistaken. Among us, love only really has a place in life by virtue of the contingent sentiments it develops. For me, from the day when I fell in love with Lydie, it gave me for a rival and enemy the musician Gatien.

I shall do myself justice, neighbor, this being neither the time nor the place for coquetry. In truth, I was incomparably more handsome than that Gatien. He had a face like a kestrel, the eyes of a lobster, and the hands of an ox. Mine, incessantly rubbed with fine almond paste, were as white and smooth as those of a duchess; the oval of my visage was perfect, my hair abundant, my neatly separated eyes drowning in the line of my artistically-designed eyebrows.

Let us say, to complete the portrait of Gatien, that, according to the custom of his colleagues, he had in his fingertips the intelligence that honest men usually have in their heads. Personally, I dressed artistically, and had many things beneath my scalp that were not in Gatien's fingers. How many times, how many times, I said to myself: *If I were a Baronne, a pretty woman, and an intelligent one, well, I would want me for a lover!*

And in fact, by taking me, she would not have been too unhappy.

She wanted to be. I don't know what fatality caused her to be seized by the strangest caprice for that wind-up mechanism, that cylindrical bird-organ who dressed in the evening in a blue coat with

² i.e., New Year's Eve.

gilded buttons and alternated the variations of Thalberg and Moscheles³—an inexplicable whim! Very often, during our morning walks, along the flowering avenues of lilac, I saw her soften at my words; her languid gaze seemed to say to me: “You’re wittier than Gatien!”

But in the evening...oh, the evenings were fatal to me. The cylinder began to rotate and draw into its sphere of activity, as a mill-wheel draws a swimmer, the heart and thoughts of the Baronne.

One night I dreamed: I saw myself in a magnificently-illuminated drawing room, in the midst of a numerous company. Gatien and the Baronne were there. I was sitting beside Lydie and was playing, while talking to her, with the extremity of her sash.

Suddenly, there was a great stir in the crowd; Gatien was sitting down at the piano.

The Baronne swiftly withdrew her sash; *he* had looked at her!

My enemy spent some time over the preliminaries. His stupid face was blooming at the idea of the success he was about to reap.

He began—but from the very first measures a singular malaise took hold of the audience; everyone exclaimed; the most timid looked at one another. The instrument was not resonating!

Every key struck by Gatien rendered beneath his finger the dry and dull sound of a piece of wood struck by a hammer.

The bewildered musician tried in vain to struggle against that resistance: his fingers were clenched and splayed, his face contorted; but nothing! The most savant and most complicated scales only reproduced the strident noise of a craftsman at work.

Standing at the back of the room, I saw the heads of the audience swaying in a uniform and rhythmic motion, in a sign of discontent. The mistress of the house, a charming young woman with her hair bound in silken nets, went from one to another as if to stifle the murmurs.

Soon, the keyboard, still resistant, began to rise up, lifting the hands of the player to the level of his chin; a rumble like that of distant thunder emerged from the case of the instrument.

The swaying of heads became furious, and above that sea of moving skulls the gracious visage of Madame C*** floated, smiling and agitating her silken nets.

Gatien was still struggling. His face passed from the expression of the most vivid terror to the most grotesque grimaces. The least of them projected his nose and jaw forward, rounded his eyes and made two long hairy ears stick out beneath his temples, between which Madame C***’s head, still floating, came to settle, saying with a smile that showed off her mother-of-pearl teeth: “A donkey! It’s a donkey!”

At that moment, I don’t know what supernatural force transported me to the corner of the piano. Gatien had disappeared, and in his place I saw a stranger with a peculiar appearance, who said to me in bad German: “I’m at your orders.”

Indeed, without my being able to explain how, there was a violin in my left hand and a bow in my right.

“*Geh!*” cried my accompanist—meaning “Go!”

I applied the bow to the strings. I played.

I played, Monsieur! Or rather, I sang, I spoke—for it seemed to me that the sound departed from my lungs to pass through the instrument. Soon, there was no longer any violin or bow; my right arm, passing over my left, executed scales and arpeggios. Remember that what I was playing was not music; I was speaking! The Baronne, Gatien, my love, my jealousy and my hatred could all be inferred from the impetuosity of the passion, the facility of the discourse.

Sometimes, I addressed tender reproaches to Lydie, reminding her about our pleasant walks in the garden of her house; sometimes I humiliated her, mocking her insensate liking for an animal of the vilest species; then I overwhelmed her by drawing myself up to my full height, and then I intoned, in the most elevated style, the hymn of heroic passion. And Lydie subjected successively to the empire of the sentiments that I expressed, sometimes smiled at me tenderly, sometimes sank down in humiliation, and sometimes implored me with tears.

I continued thus for a long time; in the end, succumbing to the very violence of my emotion, intoxicated and delirious, I stopped and went back to my place, in the midst of frantic applause.

Lydie was waiting for me, delighted, tamed and suppliant. “Oh!” she said to me. “Love me; I love you; let me love you.”

³ The composer/pianists Sigismund Thalberg (1812-1871) and Ignaz Moscheles (1774-1870).

She loved me.

How can I describe the thoughts that assailed me when I awoke? Was that dream a premonition, a revelation? Or was it merely a bitter mockery of hazard?

I wanted to put my mind at rest on that score, and, in the days that followed, I devoured all the treatises on oneiromancy that I could find.

I paused at this passage from the *Symbolism* of Pernetius⁴:

“During sleep, the soul quits the body it inhabits and goes where it pleases. What we call dreaming is merely the vague and incomplete memory of that other life. It is thus that we glimpse, in sleep, countries that we have never visited. It is for the same reason that we remember having done, while dreaming, things that we know we have not done, but would doubtless be able to repeat tomorrow, if our memories were less incomplete and more precise.”

Thus, if I could only render to my fingers the memory of what they had done the previous night, I would become in reality the virtuoso of my dream?

That idea never left me.

I told Schmidt about it one day, while he was sketching a charming landscape that I can still see.

It was, I recall, a beautiful day in April. A fresh and cheerful light inundated the studio; a bouquet of lilacs, set on the window-sill, was stirring in the wind, sending us a gust of perfume at every quiver.

Schmidt was working enthusiastically, his eyes ardent, his forehead damp and his lips moist. His hand was flying over the canvas, boldly and without hesitation.

“Schmidt,” I asked him, “is what you are doing now very difficult?”

The question did not merit a reply.

“Do you think,” I added, “that I could do as much?”

He smiled.

I explained the theory of Pernetius to him then, and tried to prove to him that if, during the night, my soul had gone to inhabit the body of a painter, and had kept until the next day the memory of what it had been able to do, I would have found myself, on waking up, as skillful as he was.

Schmidt, as illiterate as the landscape painter and as positive as the dogged worker that he was, considered Pernetius to be a visionary and raised the objection of his ten years of labor, which, according to him, had not been a dream.

“But,” I persisted, “although it took ten years to learn what you know, can you not imagine that, by concentrating the effort of those ten years into an instant, you would have been able to learn it instantaneously? How long would it take a mediocre individual to arrive at an understanding that Michelangelo realized in a moment? It is said that genius is patience, without taking into account that patience is merely what brings it into the range of the stubborn and the stupid. Genius is concentrated will.”

I unraveled the metaphysical skein at such length that Schmidt, German as he was, ended up begging me either to change the subject or go away.

I went away.

But that conversation had changed the direction of my thoughts; it was no longer a matter of dreaming, or peregrinations of the soul, or of gasping a confused memory. Equilibrating the power of will, combining in a single supreme leap the effort of ten years, that was the problem henceforth.

And in fact, I thought, is it not ridiculous to believe that men, more divine for us than the gods themselves, such as Raphael, Columbus, Milton and Galileo could have found a corner of the universe into which their penetrating intelligence would not have been able to expand? What! Raphael, holding a bow and a violin in his hands, would not have been able to make use of them, when the meanest guttersnipe in Rome, after six months of study, could extract satisfactory chords therefrom!

Perhaps you will think that, from then on, there was only one thing for me to do: to buy a violin and use it to help my try out my theory? Oh, how wrong you are! The proof would doubtless have been easy, but it would have been decisive, and I was afraid.

I often caught myself, in solitude, taking the pulse—so to speak—of my will; and if in those moments I happened to find a certain degree of forcefulness, then, I’m ashamed to say, I got up, bent my left arm, extended the right, and performed in the void. A violin! But my love, my happiness, my

⁴ This author is fictitious; the thesis supposedly appropriated from him is presumably Asselineau’s own invention.

vengeance, my entire life had passed henceforth into the violin; it had become the motive for my hopes and fears. Thus, I had the sentiment of superstitious distance therefrom that the negroes of Guinea have for their fetishes; the sound of one made my hair stand on end; the mere sight of an instrument in its case gave me vertigo; its rounded hips, its mocking waist and its cambered sternum moved me more violently than the Venus de Milo, posing before me alive and naked, would have done.

On the other hand, the Baronne, increasingly infatuated with her pianist, treated me more unkindly with every passing day.

And, as is logical, every day I loved her more.

One day, I received an invitation to an imminent soirée. As I had some reason to suppose that Lydie would be there, I decided to go.

But the note bore a postscript: *There will be music.* Gatien! Always Gatien!

By dint of reflection, I believed that I could see, in the fatality that incessantly brought us together, a provocation: a challenge that destiny was throwing down before me, to force me to put an end to it.

What was I risking, in fact? Had not the measure of my unhappiness reached its peak? I could not live without Lydie's love, and, in order to be loved by her, I had but one resource: to destroy in her mind the false superiority of my rival. The means to which I had recourse was terrible, and, in case of failure, there was nothing beyond it but death.

But what was living, save prolonging the nightmare against which I had battled for so long? Who could tell, in any case, whether the gazes of the crowd, the dread of mortal ridicule, in the presence of my mistress and my rival, were not so many obstacles necessary to exalt my will? I would therefore make the trial, before their eyes, before her, in public; there was the supreme peril; there, perhaps also, the supreme triumph.

Once the resolution was made, I entered into the state of sinister calm that precedes great coups. I watched myself living. I observed my most trivial actions with the interest that the final gestures of a dying man acquire. When the day came, I dressed myself with solemn slowness: the costume of the condemned! During the journey, I was astonished not to hear the noise of cavalry around my carriage, so strongly did it seem that I was marching to an execution!

When I arrived, the reception rooms were already full.

I searched for my Baronne with my eyes; a place was vacant beside her; I ran to it. When I sat down, it was as if I were thunderstruck by a singular revelation: the room in which I found myself seemed to be identical to the one of which I had dreamed some time before; everything, including the accidents of the lighting and the distribution of the groups, coincided with my memories. I even recognized certain faces that I was sure I had never encountered anywhere but in my dream. Finally, the place I occupied next to Lydie, and her costume, were the one that I had occupied and the one I had seen her wearing that night.

Did someone or something will it thus?

One last circumstance remained for me to verify before taking a decision: was Gatien here? Would he come? Would he try to play, and would his pretention turn to shame? Such were the thoughts that were preoccupying me while my neighbor, astonished by the state in which she found me, and even more surprised not to obtain any reply to the remarks she probably addressed to me, considered me with a kind of dread.

Gatien appeared. I don't know whether it was the effect of my preoccupation, but it seemed to me that his face was pale, his countenance embarrassed. Nevertheless, he sat down and ran his fingers over the keys. Silence fell. Two or three times, my rival turned his gaze in Lydie's direction, and encountered my gaze every time, which caused him to lower his own.

It is certain that, from the beginning, he seemed out of sorts. Suddenly, as if abruptly taken ill, he interrupted himself and leaned over in his seat, murmuring a few words of excuse.

I stood up. An army general giving the signal to attack could not have been more emotional than I was; I too was about to deliver battle. I took three steps forward; everyone in front of me stepped back, as if I had the head of Medusa on my shoulders. The conjuration of hazard lasted until the end; the first object I perceived on approaching the piano was a violin deposited on its stand.

I seized it; I placed it on my breast. At that moment, I felt all gazes fix upon me. The emotion caused by Gatien's fainting fit calmed down.

I attacked, vigorously.

A cry of fright burst forth in the audience. I dared to continue—but this time the rumor was such that the instrument escaped from my hands and fell to the floor, rebounding with a groan.

At the same moment, an arm slid under mine, and, yielding to a strange impulsion, I headed toward the door.

Women fled in terror as I passed by. One of them, young and pretty, watched me leave with an expression of compassion, and I heard her say: “Poor young man! He’s mad...what a pity!”