

AMONG ALL GAZES

*To Ennemond Faye*¹

Are you a prince among Sages? Have you been able to become the majestic solitary individual whose luminous will shelters him from the respiration of the crowd? Have you forged, for your bosom steeped seven times in the Absolute, the adamantine armor against which the daggers of destiny break? Do you remain devoid of weakness, faithful to the quadruple oath of being able to abstain, to suffer, to die and to forgive? If you have marched so far on the superhuman path, Master, I salute you; intercede in the Invisible for your belated brother!

For my life is not yet liberated from ambient influences. The effluvia of beings, living, dead or virtual, assail my breast with their authority. Sometimes I have sensed their tenacious virtue in gazes cast toward my shadow. Yes, by means of the eyes, above all, those dehiscences of his most real power, a man shines upon the destiny of his neighbor. The people, instinctive guardians, watching over the treasure of the most profound notions, express their trouble in gazes of hatred. "Oh, if those eyes were pistols, I'd not longer be standing!" Certain pupils of conscious jettaturas can launch death like those of the basilisk and catoblepas. Passer-by, you receive a sideways glance without peril if your heart is pure or your soul is valiant. Reverberated, it will strike its author more murderously. Do you think that gazes of tenderness or amour have not tamed death? If you are coming from the arms of a sincere lover, you can run disdainfully toward the menace of swords, for the gaze that her soul exhaled toward you, at the moment of your departure, armors you efficaciously.

Among all the gazes that meet me, I still see several whose temporary projection enveloped my bosom with a permanent net. Sometimes, on the road where I am accomplishing the pilgrimage of the tomb, I am enabled to sense around me the presence of one of those vivacious gazes of old. Apparently, the beings who poured from their pupils in that fashion a respiration of their souls only brushed my life as casual passers-by. No contact, no speech, links them to my memory.

They were women whose kiss I did not know, men whose hands I have not shaken or whose swords I have not parried, children whose preordained foreheads I have not caressed, surge forth from a corner of my route and disappear. Doubtless I shall not encounter them again. And yet, at certain moments of annoying lucidity, their memory rises in my mind like morning mist in a meadow. Gazes of passers-by, you have the melancholy attraction of destinies without accomplishment...

Certainly, that evening, I had no intention of going to the Opéra ball. A succession of incidents brought me to pass in front of the monument at about one o'clock in the morning, in a dinner jacket. Was it the joyful rush toward the doors of sparkling dominos or the gracious chatter of shrill feminine voices behind the masks that induced me to go in? I have not identified the obscure force that advised me at the time.

For half an hour I wandered through the ball without anything having penetrated me from that drunken multitude. The joy of crowds ordinarily acts upon the individual in one of two different and opposite ways. Either it submerges his personality and rolls it in its powerful waves as a river in flood ferries wreckage, or, if it encounters a seed of sadness in him, it develops it by means of a force of reaction, with the result that a man never emerges from a crowd without carrying away either the interior echo of an excitement, if he has abandoned himself to the collective sentiment, or, if he has resisted it, a

¹ Unlike most of the dedicatees of Michelet's stories, Ennemond Faye (1862-1913) was not a writer but a businessman who promoted tram systems in several cities in the Midi.

durable depression. That evening, however, I did not feel, between my solitary soul and that of the delirious crowd, either a communion or a contest.

It seemed that a mysterious sword had traced a magic circle around my feet uncrossable by exterior influences. Only my eyes rejoiced in the dazzling aspect of the scene, although it was made to seduce a young man whom no imperious passion wounded. In the hall, I had followed for a long time, through the atmosphere gilded by disk, the sparkling tournament of costumes, embellished by the enchantment of the lighting.

It amused me to see, on the florid balconies of the boxes, pretty feminine silhouettes offering to desires, beneath the lace of a mask, the expansion of their cleavages, their breasts surging from the bodice in the ardor of the moment, and their naked arms bombarding black coats with bunches of violets, hyacinths and camellias, which riposted smiling.

At the exit from the foyer, where the rustling queue of bright dominoes flowed with the grace of a marvelous serpent, cutting through the air, heavy with breath and perfumes, with merry screeches and laughter muffled by satin-lined hoods or mantillas, I went to lean on one of the corbelled balustrades that overlooked the celebrated staircase. I had only been there for a moment when the sentiment of a presence close by obliged me to turn round.

Then I perceived, rising within me, the pallor that death and great commotions of amour cause. A young woman was there, whose gaze had summoned mine mysteriously, and we both lived a minute of extraordinary life.

While the couple who accompanied her at the masked ball—a sister, I thought, for the two women resembled one another in attitudes and costume, and a gracious young man—leaned over the balustrade to watch the sprightly ascent of arrivals, she held back a little, prey to the unknown force that linked us together by the beam of our gazes. Under the Bruges mantilla that veiled her face rigorously, leaving nothing uncovered, like the Muslims, except her somber eyes, from which fire seemed to spring, I divined her own pallor, and the oppressed movement of her breasts. Later, I reconstituted all the details of her person, which were perhaps penetrated then by a duplicated fraction of my mind, for as long as her apparition lasted, I was uniquely possessed by her.

Her cream satin dress, while accompanying the supple beauty of her body with an elegance, did not constitute, with the accessories of her costume, the perfectly harmonious ensemble that reveals the supreme Parisienne. Certain notes in the arrangement, excluding the eccentricity devoid of tradition of the foreigner and the redundancy of the provincial, indicated the classic and timorous elegance of the Parisienne of the left bank.

In any case, in that solemn minute, nothing of that woman was hidden from me. The abnormal glimmer of her eyes illuminated for me all the darkness of her life before the indifferent. Through the lace, the slender oval of her face appeared to me, as her noble body did through the fabrics, as a solitary passes his heart through the veils of time: a moment of plenitude in which our two individualities were fused as harmoniously as in the surge of the most intimate embrace.

“Are you coming?” her companion, thus far attentive to the entrance of the fête, said to the young woman.

And the one who had opened to me the horizon of her gaze passed her arm beneath that of her sister, and departed with the gracious couple. I took a step to follow in her tracks—for were we not linked forever?—and she turned toward me, but the speech of her eyes stopped me,

“Don’t come!” sang her profound pupils. “You must not. What joy of kisses could equal the intensity of the moment we have just lived? The orbits of our two destinies intersected at the unique point in space and time that was assigned to them. Neither you nor I will ever forget that moment. We will carry the secret charm in an indelible envelope. Let us each go toward our end. To other men, my loins will devolve; other women will shiver in your arms. Accept me for what I am: the annunciatrix of the promise of amour.”

I allowed her to disappear.

I arrived, at the nascent dawn, in the old Spanish town, a feudal sentinel of pink granite raising its marvelous archaic silhouette on the edge of the ocean. Scarcely had I dismounted from my bicycle in order to climb the steep street that led to the medieval tower than the powerful architectures had penetrated me with their occult spirits.

In the morning and evening twilights, towns, before their awakening or their slumber, meditate in a more profound consciousness of their own life. At those hours, when their diurnal grace or their nocturnal beauty is about to become precise, while the aromas rise more forcefully from their surrounding countryside, cities respire their mysterious breath more abundantly. The solitary and concentrated soul of that Spanish citadel took possession of its guest of a morning.

Its grim history, of which I had been unaware as I crossed the threshold of the postern, imposed itself on my memory with an increasing authority. The absolute harmony of that rude nature, those men and that human endeavor, had effaced all distance between the ancient town and the passing stranger. That fortress perched like an age's nest between the mountains and the sea, poured into me violently the intuition of its tragic past, and persuaded me that I had lived for a long time in the narrow circle of its ramparts, amid its august memories, against the friction of its inhabitants with closed faces. And, alone in the auroral silence, the guttural chant of a little rope-maker unwinding his wheel at the foot of the enclosing wall seemed to me to be a familiar song.

A series of violent impressions was reserved for me in that corner of the earth. At the summit of the tower I had received the emotion of a solemn beauty: an impetuous kiss of the ocean to the mountain under the benediction of the roseate sky, before the taciturn crown of the ancient town. Then, in the courtyard of the ruined castle, between the high fuliginous walls, a secular odor of crimes, tortures and lust oppressed my breast, and the heavy and certain breath of very ancient phantoms weighed upon my shoulder. The revived evocation of ferocious amours and the indestructible memory of blood gripped me. I found myself outside with a sigh of relief.

In the *calle mayor*, women were going down toward the church for a mass in commemoration of a dead man. Their slow and grave silhouettes, of which the face alone protruded from the uniform black veil falling from the cranium to the kidneys, glided along the walls with the majesty of antique bas-reliefs. I entered behind them into the church overloaded with shadows, light and guilt, a tenebrous temple stared by candle flames and golden flowers, stifling, like a vast tomb in which the convulsions of vehement amours and desperate sensualities vibrated beyond death. Toward what tragic and jealous god did prayers fly here?

The black troop of women were praying, kneeling down, with a placidity revealing the fact that death, the companion of ancient lusts, created an atmosphere agreeable to their bosoms. Next to each one, a long twisted candle burned at both ends, illuminating their curbed black backs with russet gleams.

At the exit from that somber mass, a young woman in hooded mourning-dress, who was walking in front of me, turned round on the parvis to offer me holy water. The brief friction of our fingers stirred us with a frisson. An accumulation of anterior desires with which we were both charged encountered its fulgurant expansion. Via our intersecting gazes, the magnetic exchange ran through our immobilized bodies.

She was not twenty years old, that ardent daughter of ancient races, but the passions emanating from that sky, that soil and that town, magnetized her voluptuous beauty. I remember her heavy pupils, bronzed like those warm nights that carry around the world the pollen of flowers and pubescent sighs. Certainly, that was not the banal appeal of a beautiful girl to fleeting desire. The charm that she radiated led to the threshold of the alliance of lust and death, and the kiss of her arched mouth, a bright flower in the mat flesh, evoked disastrous joys.

Why did the gaze of that young woman, among all others, translate to me with such force the twin mystery of amour and death? It was not chance. Like those of the elements, the encounters of beings are irrevocable.

The schooner glided in the grip of the gentle breeze that sustained its canvas so lightly, outside everything, that the hull almost furrowed, almost without pitching, the abrupt waves murmuring in the

night. For several hours we had been skirting the coast in order to admire its languid grace in the moonlight. Leaning over the side, I gazed at the Mediterranean panorama. The terrain, staged in very precise planes in the stellar light, rose slowly toward the distant horizon, covered here and there by broad sheets of somber vegetation. Then, at intervals, overflowing toward the shore, villages of fishermen, of small houses, the vivid Italian colors of which flourished vaguely in the silvery light: a beautiful landscape of peace, silence and security.

“Oh!” pronounced a woman’s voice on the deck. “Oh, captain, land there!”

That pretty caprice of a passenger seduced by the beauty of the hour was quickly satisfied.

A yawl disembarked us in a narrow cove bordered with chalky cliffs, bright under the pale limpidity of the air. We proposed to reach the summit of the hills, shaped in an amphitheater, which had immediately charmed us.

The heady odor of the Italian coast, a mixture of oranges, myrtles, resin and salt, entered our lungs delightfully. Our little caravan of individuals born in various climes had laid down all burden of personal thought in order to invest itself with the prestige of that lunar excursion, which bore us toward the extreme limits of the domain of sensation, on the edge of the world where human sentiment receives the kiss of the soul of the earth.

We traversed a dense wood of pines in which the breeze sang, and I remember that in the faithful silence, the voice of a sailor shouted: “Hey, where are we, then?”

Then a few paces further away, another profound and young voice said in Italian: “Joy is dead!”

The shiver of that remark broke the harmony that linked me to my companions, and, under the weight of confused impressions, I slowed my pace, with the result that half an hour later, I found myself alone in a star of the wood. I lay down on the ground. The night was mourning the lost suns in the branches. Did I go to sleep or did I stay awake? I no longer know. My body remained beneath the pines but I departed elsewhere—to what point in space, in what era of time?

Many a time, since that night of dream, it has imposed itself on my memory, that indelible vision of my mind’s eyes, stronger and more sensitive than those of my flesh. In a lamentable shelter, a wooden carcass clad in ragged sackcloth, a kind of leprous Moor was nestled, enveloped in blue cloth. In front of him, on a table of planks, a metal tray displayed a few coins extracted from the pity of passers-by.

Was it a man, that formless monster, that hideous work of an unhinged demiurge? Through the holes in his rags sprang fuliginous lumps, once flesh. The shiny, swollen stumps, like crabs’ pincers, that had once been hands, were crossed over a chaplet. Human hands, the sublime instrument of all labor, of creation and caresses, florid with gestures, the heroic palms of the strong, the pale fingers of lovers, so dear to kiss, those things once resembled you! And that was a face, that chaos of bony caverns and brown blisters, that mask of an empusa framed by rags! Yes, for even that horror radiated a memory of beauty.

“*Ave Maria!*” clamored the harsh voice of the Moor. “*Ave Maria!*”

And his eyes gazed at me, as beautiful as light. Like the spirits of the sun contained in coal, a power of glory was revealed by those great dark eyes, intact and flamboyant, strong with a strange juvenility. I had penetrated into that gaze as into an abyss of anguish, and its vertigo still reached me. It bore me away to the mystery of human suffering, to the world of tears and despairs, to the heart of Erebus. It initiated me into the arcana of a supreme emotion. After that gaze, I had known the secrets of Hell, and I cannot forget them. Yes, all the serenity of my thought remains wounded by them. Like a bullet lodged in generous flesh, the gaze of the demonic Moor is stuck in my soul, in my soul. cleansed nevertheless of doubt, and so proud of its renaissance in the certain life...

Will other eyes look at me one day: divinely pure eyes?