

The Knight Who Fell Asleep in the Snow

*To Madame Judith Gautier*¹

I didn't know my father, he said to me, one evening. Someone else took care of me in my childhood, but the first years of my youth were spent in the château that he inhabited and where he lived to old age, mad and hypochondriac, occupied with architectural and hydraulic schemes, the imagination of gardens, summer-houses and fountains. He ruined himself with the structures in question, and when he died, I came to establish myself in this room, which I have scarcely ever left since then. It's there, he added, that a man lived who had no adventures for having been too much a contemporary of a non-existent époque. Hence my solitude, and the appearance of being disdainful of the dictates of fate.

The baseness of its offerings justifies the abstention in which I reserve my condescension. I rapidly limited my desire to certain objects that are more symbolic than material. I arrange flowers here and there. They have no other meaning than themselves, and I like them better for it. I also have a few items of crystalline and prophetic glassware on pedestals. One vase is not sufficient to evoke all the springs from which one has not drunk, although I can see through the windows the icy arabesque designs of shores on which I have not landed and forests in which I have not been lost.

I also have this portrait on the wall. It is, behind an emblematic and dreamlike appearance, the face of a Destiny. It is in him that I see most profoundly into myself. He is the one who alerted me to myself and it is from the eloquence of his sadness that I have learned the lesson of my solitude. His voice has animated its silence; his hands have locked its doors with invisible keys. They are under the safeguard of his armed gesture and his peremptory eyes. Look at him as I have looked at him, and perhaps he will speak to you as he spoke to me. He is taciturn but he is not mute, for portraits speak, and if they do not express themselves by means of their painted lips, one hears them nonetheless. They are, in a mirror fashioned by the frame around their reflective glass, the almost-supernatural duration of someone who is behind us when we gaze at his appearance, who is perhaps within us, pale and a flower of dreams!

For a long time I have scrutinized that bleak and naked face, that dolorous face with the sad eyes. The slightly-inflated lips are swollen by a grave sulkiness. A meditative face of desire and mortification, in accord with those hands, gripping their lassitude in the crucial hilt of the long sword. The feeble, melancholy hands will never lift it again. Their gesture of exhaustion has renounced twisting the torpid flash of metal that runs gently along the ridge of the triangular blade.

There is no justification for the warrior costume whose breastplate stiffens that sickly torso. The shiny gleam of the polished armor seems to melt into long white tears, and beneath that bellicose clothing, beneath all that false appearance of continued strength, from the depths of being, life and destiny, one senses the suffocating moisture of a sob rising to that naked face, so much so that the hands on that superfluous sword manifest an attitude that is resigned not to persist in handling the useless burden any longer, heavier than strength and taller than the stature of the man who is measuring himself against it and succumbing thereto.

For a long time I have thought about that face and that body, which is only still rigid because of its inflexible accoutrement of armor, only upright because of the sword on which it is leaning. Even his helmet, which lies beside him, demonstrates that at least he did not want to die behind the mask of its visor, giving passers-by the illusion, by means of his bearing, that he was what he seemed to be; that he did not want to die in that rigorous posture of iron, the lie of which he would have cast down

¹ Judith Gautier (1845-1917) was the daughter of Théophile Gautier, the great propagandist of "art for art's sake" and pioneer of "Decadent style;" her own works mostly display a lapidary Orientalism; Régnier refers to her as "Madame" because she was married (unhappily) to Catulle Mendès, although she retained her maiden name as a signature.

had he not been too late in breaking its irreparable spell; that he did not want to die without revealing himself to everyone by means of the veridical nudity of his face!

What was he, in his time, that authentic human being whose emblem survives in the appearance of what he had been? The old Chronicles cite his name and record his history: that of his deeds, which it is sufficient to interpret to have a sense of his soul. He lived in a century of violence and guile. He acted by means of speech and the sword. He sullied himself simply with all human actions, without being more avaricious or less brutal than those he robbed or vanquished. If defrauded or deceived, he altered the weight of the false balance. He employed himself in that which life demands of any man, to that which is called living, and the narrators of his deeds say, after having described and evaluated the epoch, that he died in consequence of languor for having, one cold night, in the mountains into which he had led his soldiers, lain down in the open air in the snow...

O my brother of the olden days and the present, it is that night of your life on which I shall meditate forever, that night when you were the man who slept in the snow. It was then that you understood the meaning of your past, the ignominy of your desires and the opprobrium of your sad days.

You have the face of someone who has looked himself in the face. The pure, cold and chaste snow taught you the regenerative lesson of its whiteness. It infiltrated the steel joints of your pride; it brought tears to the iron visage of your pride; it buried within you, beneath its shroud, the primitive and rugged mass of your faults as it leveled around you with its slow fall the facial cracks of old stones and the sharp blades of sterile grass.

Woe to the man who gambles his life on his desires. There are sometimes mysterious encounters in destiny; there are mirroring spaces beneath our footsteps in which we see ourselves entirely, instead of the dull disturbed marshes that were the color of our eyes; there are within us snowflakes of purity and dream, which extinguish the lukewarm ashes of the fires at which we warm our chilly and scabrous hands.

Alas, pure knight, at the dawn of the night of redemption, you were unable to bear the intimate bounty, and before the all-white landscape, tranquil and purified, you shivered forever at your past; you trembled in the wan fever of that which you were, and felt growing within you, as on a supernatural tomb, the internal and funeral lily, whose evangelical sap your being could no longer nourish and whose stem extended its blossoming flower, visibly, outside your armor, in the morbid and desperate grace of your visage: its flower with the cold petals of your naked hands.

It was then that, brought down again from the snow of the mortal summits and returning to the dead cities of your ancient dreams and the deserted palaces of your old desires, among the luxuries and vainglories of your former ideas, you languished for days in the slow death-throes compounded of the shame of that which you were no longer and regret for that which you could not be.

Your pernicious past survived too well in you for any contrary future not to perish by the contagion of its contact, and you suffered thus, ensheathed by the base of brutal substance of your self, overcoming it nevertheless by means of the pure visage of your sadness.

You were suffering thus when the painter represented on his anonymous canvas the emblem that you had become. It is that portrait which ornaments the wall of my room. It has alerted me to myself; it has spoken to my solitude the entire doctrine of its sadness. It is that which has instructed me not to adventure outside oneself—for all footsteps march over the snow, and are effaced there so quickly by the slightest wind that one cannot return to one's point of departure.

So, when evening comes beyond the icy windows, in the arborescence of forests and the arabesques of imaginary shores, and an imperceptible regret saddens me, never to have landed there and never to have slept there, I gaze, while delicately handling the prophetic and empty glassware in which my dreams of thirst and philters amuse themselves, I gaze, at the wall above the flowers on the sideboard, at the taciturn antique portrait, upright in the icy arms of his frame of tortoiseshell and ebony, with his pale face and his sword, of the knight who went to sleep in the snow.