

And Death Shall Have His Dominion

by Theodore Dalrymple (March 2015)

There are many ways of dividing humanity into two other than those who divide humanity into two and those who don't. For example, there are those who are attracted to cemeteries and those who are repelled by them. I am of the former moiety: cemeteries are for me like bookshops; I find it difficult to resist the temptation to enter them and linger awhile.

I have been like this ever since my adolescence and I do not think I am morbid. On the contrary, I find it strange that some hurry past cemeteries either without a second look or even with a shudder. Meditation on the transience of life, intermittent rather than continuous and rejuvenating rather than paralysing, is important for achieving equanimity. And there is no better aid to such meditation, I find, than a good graveyard.

When I am in Paris I stay within a stone's throw of Père-Lachaise, perhaps the most famous cemetery in the world. Certainly it has more very celebrated people buried in it than any other cemetery that I know: you turn a corner and there is Balzac, with Delacroix not very far away. Most visitors go in search of the buried eminent, and indeed I have a guide that will take you straight to them, though I never use it. I prefer the tombs of the never-heard-of, but also of the once-heard-of-but-now-forgotten. They seem to me a greater stimulus to the imagination than the tombs of those everyone has heard of; and it seems almost a cliché to make straight for Oscar Wilde, as so many visitors do, who is perhaps the most famous inhabitant of the cemetery. The fact is that Sir Jacob Epstein's tomb is an aesthetic abomination, his most famous and at the same time his worst work. My guide, which is French, delights to point out that an Englishwoman, outraged by the sight of the carved figure's genitals, destroyed them with a hammer, thus confirming the French view of the English as a nation of hypocritical and unsophisticated prudes and puritans. The tomb is now protected by screens of what looks like bullet-proof glass, a case of closing the stable door after (if I may be allowed a mixed metaphor) the prude has hammered. It, the glass, is smothered in the red lipstick of those who have kissed it, and the last time I walked past someone had managed to insinuate one of those shiny plastic Chinese teddy-bears with a mechanical waving arm (in this case the battery had run out and the arm waved no longer), of the kind that one sometimes finds at the entrance to cheaper Chinese restaurants, into the space between the tomb and its protective glass. This led me to the melancholy reflection that prudes are probably preferable

to sentimentalists, though perhaps not by a wide margin.

I prefer to wander at random among the 65,000 graves than seek out anyone in particular. When I was a child, the advertising slogan of the vulgar British Sunday newspaper, the *News of the World* (though of course it was not in those days nearly as vulgar as it was to become under the ownership of Mr Murdoch) was 'All human life is there,' and the same might be said, figuratively speaking, of Père-Lachaise. So inexhaustible is it, the cemetery I mean, that it would almost be a pleasure to reside there permanently were it not for the rather stringent residence qualifications. At the least it must be some slight consolation for the dying to know that they are to be buried there.

Although I do not seek out the famous, it is pleasant to stumble across them from time to time. For example I went inland, as it were, from a tomb adjacent to one of the main intersecting thoroughfares of the cemetery, the tomb of 'our dear son, Albert Rapilly, lieutenant, 1893 – 1918, Died on the field of honour, 29 July, 1918.' This tomb had a metal bas-relief, of the young man in his uniform, killed only three months before the end of the war. The simple inscription still conveys the pain of the parents, more eloquently indeed than a more florid one would have done.

A couple of tombs behind that of Rapilly I chanced upon that of Marcel Proust, a simple black stone slab with his name and dates of birth and death, and a Maltese cross. There were a few single roses lying across it and a torn-out page of a notebook, looking somewhat bedraggled as it had rained not long before. I picked up the paper out of curiosity to know what the person had written. It was in Spanish, but I couldn't make out the name:

Thank you for having opened new horizons to me, for having made me see that everything in life, everything, everything, everything, is literature.

Was the writer of this himself an aspiring, or perhaps even a successful, writer? The pedant in me protested that not everything in life *is* literature: rather everything in life is potentially the *subject* of literature, which is not quite the same thing. Or was such literal-mindedness to destroy the poetry of what Proust's admirer had written, I think with real sincerity?

Père-Lachaise, perhaps any cemetery, is an antidote to pride and self-importance. There was a vogue for a time in Paris, between about 1870 and 1900, for metal busts of the deceased to be placed atop the columns or obelisks of their tombs. Naturally, these people were of some prominence in their time, for such funerary monuments could not have been cheap, nor could they have been mass-produced. They are now covered in verdigris, and personally I find them

rather splendid, though they also make me smile. In general the men – they are always men – commemorated in this way look like good Victorians, at least with flourishing moustaches or mutton-chop whiskers. They were evidently important in their time, Laurent Monnet, for example, *Négotiant*, merchant, who died in his 50s, strangled (as it seems) by his shirt collar that wasn't large enough for his bon-vivant double chin. Though a resident of Paris, he died in Vichy in 1899, one imagines of a heart attack after or even during a too-copious and self-indulgent dinner of the kind in which he indulged just once too often. Monnet was almost certainly a prominent man in his time, or at least in his circle, but he is now at one with Nineveh and Tyre (as we shall all soon be ourselves): or, to change the poetic metaphor, the paths of profit lead but to the grave.

Père-Lachaise is, as everyone knows, the last resting-place of many men (fewer women) of world fame: but for every such person there are ten, twenty, foot-soldiers in the armies of achievement. They too were prominent in their day, but are now forgotten, except perhaps by super-specialists. The verdigris-busted tombs are often those of artists, *Chevaliers* or even *Officiers* of the *Légion d'Honneur*, directors or administrators of the *École des Beaux-Arts*, though the only thing that should matter for an artist's reputation, his art, is now forgotten. Jean-Joseph Weerts (1846 – 1927), for example, is there, an academic painter of Belgian origin who was clearly a man of considerable ability and yet whose pictures now horrify us by their kitschiness, their literal realism but emotional preposterousness, in short their bad taste. Was it Weerts' fault that, despite his gifts and technical accomplishments, he painted so badly? If he had been born, for example, in the Dutch Golden Age (whose very sudden decline, within the space of a few years only, seems to me a puzzle of art history), he would no doubt have earned himself an honourable, if minor, niche in history as, say, a painter of herrings on pewter plates, or of bouquets of flowers with symbolic insects, caterpillars, moths etc. He had not the penetration to see, though gifted in other ways. Since one may suppose that raw artistic ability is distributed evenly throughout the ages, *taste* becomes a distinguishing feature of the great artist. But taste is a collective as well as an individual matter, and it was easier to become a good artist in seventeenth century Delft or Haarlem than in twenty-first century Akron or Limoges.

There are many unheard-of scribblers as well in Père-Lachaise, at least unheard of by me. Almost every time I enter the cemetery I pass the tomb of Vertanes Assadourian (1907 – 2000), an Armenian writer who used the name Serovpe Mkhitarion. He was born in Van, in Ottoman Turkey, and (I surmise) escaped the genocide in 1915. But his writings, whatever they were, have left little trace: I have found only a book published in 1968 in Paris, in Spanish, by him, with the title *The Armenian Question*. How arbitrary are, or can be, our destinies: to be

born in such a place at such a time!

You could walk through Père-Lachaise and find a thread of political torment running through it – if you so wished. Near the entrance which I always use is a double tomb, that of Jeanne and Monique Lacraze, aged 74 and 3 respectively, ‘victims of the bombing [of Paris] on 13 August, 1944.’ Very near to theirs is the tomb of Ebrahim Zaker, ‘Modjehad du peuple et héro de la résistance iranienne,’ though without making it quite clear to the layman such as I who or what the deceased had resisted, the Shah, the Ayatollah or both: there is always so much to resist.

And not far is the tomb of Mahmoud Al Hamchari, born in Um Khaled, Palestine, on 29 August 1939, killed in Paris 9 February 1973 while ‘representing the PLO.’ He was blown up by an Israeli bomb in his Parisian flat: the Israelis believed he was the head of Black September in France and had participated in the planning of the attack on the Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics.

One of the more curious political tombs is that of Masih Rasti Mobarake (1946 – 2004). ‘Communism,’ says the inscription, ‘is humanity’s resurrection,’ a rather curious choice of words, when you come to think of it, of militant atheists.

Below his is inscribed the name of Azar Derakhshan (1959 – 2012), without any explanation of the connection, if any other than political, of the two. Derakhshan left ‘luminous traces on the shore of life’ (I don’t think this is meant as damnation with faint praise), and she was ‘a combatant communist and militant of the women’s movement.’ An Iranian refugee in France, she was a member of the anti-lapidation committee: a good cause, though I did briefly wonder, with shamefaced irreverence, whether there existed a *pro*-lapidation committee, and whether indeed its existence would be permitted.

It seems that communist opinions are almost an hereditary condition, for on the tomb was also a ceramicised photograph of an old lady, Mahmonir Sanjari (1923 – 2003), taken, I should guess, when she was in her late sixties, with a hammer and sickle in the background, probably at some dismal meeting in a cold, unheated, obscure hall somewhere, possibly in the suburbs of Paris, where all the participants believed that, notwithstanding the evidence to the contrary, they were constructing a glorious future. She might have been the matriarch of the others on the tomb (there were two others): or maybe it is just that birds of a feather are buried together. Much as I do not admire the political choices of these people, and believe that if they had been successful in their plans they would have instituted a different kind of tyranny, I could not help but find something noble in their devotion to what they thought

would bring freedom and happiness. There is nobility in failure, especially when it persists for a lifetime; and as individuals I would probably have found these people much more congenial than many successful persons with whose views I agree.

But most of the tombs in Père-Lachaise, as in every other cemetery, are of people who led ordinary lives. I liked the words of the wife of Émile Huron (1883 – 1949) inscribed on his tomb, not orthodox but surely deeply felt:

Your memory is my religion

This tomb is my homeland.

You... my love.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is