Frogs and Fouquet

by Theodore Dalrymple (May 2022)

The Frogs and the Well, Arthur Rackham, 1912

Spring sunshine is just the weather for a walk in a cemetery, and when I am in Paris I stay only a few hundred yards from the entrance to Père Lachaise, probably the most famous cemetery in the world and certainly, with 3 million visitors a year, the most visited – though, I hasten to add, it is large enough never to be overcrowded, which is more than can be said for most of the tourist attractions on this overpopulated planet of ours. At any rate, the sunshine drew me, like Siren-song, into the cemetery wherein Chopin, Balzac, Proust, Corot and Wilde (among others) are laid.

But it is not the famed who draw me in, it is the ordinary, the anonymous, the forgotten. Death, of course, is the only true democrat and egalitarian. 'One man, one vote, once' was the derogatory cry of embittered colonialist settlers in Africa who did not believe that decolonisation would result in democratic regimes in which freedom would flourish; but 'One man, one death, once' is indisputably true.

The now-defunct British Sunday newspaper, famous or infamous for its vulgarity and scandal-mongering, the *News of the World*, had an advertising slogan during my childhood that I have never forgotten: *All human life is there*. The same might be said of Père Lachaise, though perhaps in the past tense, 'All human life *was* there': for interred in the great cemetery are terrorists, the victims of terrorists, politicians, pork butchers, painters and sculptors, journalists, scientists, doctors, lawyers, mayors, musicians, actors, engineers, exiles from dictatorships, diplomats, inventors, criminals killed while robbing banks, policemen, mystics, philosophers, historians, poets, mathematicians, generals and soldiers of lower rank, grocers, merchants, admirals, revolutionaries, pharmacists, Chinese, Iranians, Romanians, Vietnamese, Palestinian, Indians, and those (far more numerous) memorialised simply as the husband, wife, son or daughter of someone else.

Many– most– of the tombs are neglected, sanctity to the memory being of short-lived duration. ‘Eternal regrets’ are not eternal at all: they last at most two generations and often not even that. But we need forms of words that disguise the harsh realities of our existence from us and flatter our self-importance.

There is nothing like a cemetery, of course, for recalling to oneself the tragic dimension of life, the dimension that our constant busyness and pursuit of distraction is designed to veil from us, and that is largely successful: except that the tragic dimension will sooner or later take its revenge on our attempted insouciance.

A single grave may give us pause. On my latest walk in Père Lachaise, I stopped before the tomb of a young man called Antoine Fouquet, who was born in 1983 and who died 2005. He, at least, is still remembered, for on his tomb is a live geranium plant, a live hyacinth and pansy, as well as bouquets of artificial roses and other flowers, that are are also well-tended, for such artificial flowers soon look grimy and grubby if not attended to– and these looked clean and fresh.

On the tomb, somewhat overloaded with them in fact, were various stone plaques with inscriptions. My first thought on seeing them, I confess a little shamefacedly, was that they were not in the best of taste, but what is doubtful taste to set against real tragedy? A heart-shaped plaque with a pre-moulded and one suspects mass-produced metal relief of an adolescent boy, angelic but not an angel, holding a dove bears a couplet that rhymes in French: A child is a precious being/ There is no consolation on losing him. These lines are clearly those of a post-religious age; literary criticism in the face of such an expression of grief would be not merely redundant but callow.

I assume that this plaque was placed by Antoine Fouquet’s mother, for below it was placed another, with the gilded

outline of a heart in which was enclosed an oval picture of him. ‘You will always be present for us,’ said the inscription, ‘no day passes without us thinking of you. Your Dad who loves you forever.’

Although the plaque refers to ‘us’, it does not refer to who *we* are: and I rather suspect that these two plaques indicate that the parents were separated when Antoine Fouquet died. At any rate, he seems to have been a much-loved young man, for a grandparent and a godparent, an aunt or uncle, and a brother added their plaques.

He was obviously a very modern young man, for on the oval photograph attached to the headstone he is broadly smiling, wearing a kind of bandanna and a narrow gold chain rounds his neck. There is a further plaque on the tomb that says ‘Antoine, we will never forget you’ above a large engraved guitar. From all this, I conclude that he was a young man of ordinary youthful tastes of the kind with which I do not much sympathise: but again, what is this to set against so early and therefore tragic a death? (Death at his age seems to me more tragic than that of a baby, insofar as he had had time to develop a personality and life ambitions of his own.)

From what, or of what, did he die? Accident, illness, perhaps even suicide? Drugs (I prefer to think not)? Death at such an age is unusual in our times of unprecedented safety. And was he an aspiring rock star as the tomb might suggest? (So many young people dream of becoming one, in my view a disastrous social development.)

I had my telephone with me, and perhaps the internet might have enlightened me. I entered his name, not by any means an unusual or remarkable one.

About *my* Antoine Fouquet I found out nothing; he died without leaving a trace on the internet, or at least on the first two pages of *Google*, which I am reliably informed is what counts,

since some enormous proportion of people never progress further than two pages of *Google* in their internet searches. Not to be on the first two pages is never to have existed, or at least as if one might as well never have existed.

But I did find an Antoine Fouquet on the internet. He had a webpage to himself, which began with the not very encouraging words *me me me*. But it would have been wrong to conclude from this he was some kind of boundless egotist, anxious at any price to draw attention to himself. He was not of class of *influencers*, those nonentities who hope to strike it rich by demonstrating to millions what brand of shampoo they use. On the contrary, he was a man of substance.

His webpage goes on to say (in English, though he is French) that 'I'm a biologist specialized in herpetology [the study of snakes], in fact mostly focusing on frogs.' He goes on to say:

> *Even though I mainly work on neotropical frogs systematics, phylogeography, biogeography and evolution, I'm interested in all aspects of their biology.*

He tells us that he first became interested in amphibians because of the frogs and newts in the ponds around his parents' house in western France. I, too, was fascinated as a child by frogs, toads and newts that were still to be found in the parks of London and found them beautiful. An experience with a toad taught me to trust my own eyes and not necessarily those of my elders and betters. I found a toad, still alive, with maggots eating its head– a lesson that Nature, though beautiful, is not *only* beautiful. I reported what I had seen to my teacher who said no, I must have been imagining it. In those days, I had neither the determination nor the easy means to investigate further, but the teacher was wrong, as I always believed him to be. There is, as I discovered much later, a species of blowfly, *Lucilia bufonivora*, whose larvae parasitise toads (and kill them).

Of course, as important as being able to trust your experience is to be able to doubt it, and to maintain a balance between the two, confidence and humility in unstable equilibrium.

Unlike my case, which was one of superficial fascination, Antoine Fouquet's interest in amphibians only deepened. On his webpage is one of the most beautiful photographs of a frog that I have ever seen, though I know that not everyone is susceptible to the beauty of frogs. Absurd though I know it to be, I cannot help but anthropomorphise frogs and toads, endowing them with a consciousness that I know they cannot possibly have. The large toads in my garden, for example strike me as deeply melancholic in expression, as if their ambition had always been to reach their present size (which only one in a thousand tadpoles could possibly do) and, having fulfilled their ambition, are suspended between self-satisfaction and melancholy at the realisation that the ambition wasn't worth fulfilling anyway. Is there not a lesson there for human beings? If Doctor Johnson had been a toad, his most famous poem would surely have been *The Vanity of Amphibian Wishes* rather than the *The Vanity of Human Wishes*.

Antoine Fouquet turned out to be a prolific author, or part-author, of scientific papers, at least 241, with titles such as *When the tail shakes the snake: phylogenetic affinities and morpohology of Atractus badius (serpentes: Dipsadidae) reveals some current pitfalls in the snakes genomic age.* I was full of admiration for him, for he was not only a very learned man, but an adventurer, who had penetrated the jungles of the Amazon and Costa Rica in his researches, a man therefore both of intellect and action.

I used him as a template for self-examination and found myself wanting by comparison. I tried to take comfort in the fact that it takes all kinds to make a world, but I nevertheless could not shake off the feeling that he was a better man than I, for he was adding to the sum total of humanity's positive knowledge, whereas I had added nothing. And the reason for

this is a defect of character, or several defects of character, for example a lack of the persistence necessary to delve into something that catches my interest. My attention is too soon drawn to something else, and like a butterfly that flits from flower to flower, off I go, never sticking either to my new object of interest. This is not the way to add to the wealth or store of human knowledge.

One thing that is particularly impressive about Antoine Fouquet is that no man goes into the jungle, presumably at some risk of misfortune to himself, to study the taxonomy and other aspects of frogs, from anything other than a love of the subject itself, certainly not from a desire for fame or wealth. If ambition there be, for example to climb an academic ladder, it is ambition on a very reduced scale and cannot possibly account for the years of arduous study entailed in such a career. No, here is real disinterested curiosity and love of knowledge for its own sake. It is reassuring to know that it still exists and that it can find a place in a world seemingly given over to celebrity, the scramble for money and self-promotion.

I found myself envying Antoine Fouquet, no doubt in a pointless way. I wished I could have been more like him: but if I were more like him, I would not have been the person that I am. It is no more sensible for me to desire to have had a nature that would have allowed me to study frogs in minute detail than for me to have wished to be heavyweight boxing champion of the world. And yet at the same time one can mould oneself to a certain extent, and if habit become character, to determine one's own character: for habit is under conscious control.

To wander in a cemetery and to reflect on those interred therein is not a new thing, witness Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, written and published more than a quarter of a millennium ago. The internet, a modern tool, an unprecedented means for reflection– not that it will be much

used in this way.

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Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are *Neither Trumpets nor Violins* (with Kenneth Francis and Samuel Hux) and *Ramses: A Memoir* from New English Review Press.

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