Celebrity and Immortality

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CELEBRITY AND IMMORTALITY

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“LOUIS QUATORZE EST MORT EN . . . EN . . . EN . . .”

“OUI! OUI! OUI! OUI!, SAYS THE OLD MAN’S FRIEND QUICKLY, HOPING TO FORESTALL A LECTURE.”

IT IS MY LAST DAY IN PARIS, AND I DON’T YET KNOW THAT PRINCES DIANA WILL DIE TONIGHT, SO AS I CONTINUE UP THE RUE DES ABBESS TOWARD THE MONTMARTRE CEMETERY I DON’T THINK ABOUT HER, BUT ABOUT THE SUN KING.


IN THE SEVENTH OF THE SERIES, FOR INSTANCE, THE KING SPORTS HIGH-HEELED BOOTS WITH SATIN BOWS. COURTiers STAND AMAZED, MOUTHS OPEN. ONE OF THEM ADJUSTS A 17TH-CENTURY PAIR OF GLASSES TO SEE THE KING IN ALL HIS GLORY.

IN ANOTHER SECTION OF THE LOUVRE, I AGAIN FIND LOUIS IN HIGH HEELS (RED HEELS AND RED BOWS), THIS TIME IN RIGAUD’S NEAR-LIFE-SIZED PORTRAIT DONE IN 1701. REVEALED AND FRAMED BY A
DRAWN-BACK ERMINE CAPE, MUSCULAR LEGS RISE UP FROM THE SHOES, ENCASED IN WHITE STOCKINGS, POWERFUL COLUMNS THAT ANNOUNCE THIS KING'S STEADFASTNESS, HIS ONGOING VICTORY OVER THE ENTROPY THAT FINALLY LAYS US ALL LOW.

THAT MAY BE WHAT WE REQUIRE OF A CELEBRITY: THE PROMISE OF IMMEDIATE AND FUTURE IMMORTALITY. EVEN AFTER DEATH.

I SIT DOWN IN A LITTLE PARK AND PULL OUT SAM LEVIN'S PHOTO OF BRIGITTE BARDOT, BOUGHT FROM A RACK NEAR SACRE COEUR. BARDOT, ALSO STANDING ON HIGH HEELS, HAS LIFTED HER SKIRT TO REVEAL LEGS AS BRILLIANT AS THE SUN KING'S. HERE TOO THE ARTIST DEPICTS A STYLISH VERTICALITY, AN ENDURING YOUTHFUL UPRIGHTNESS, CELEBRITY IN ALL ITS SEDUCTIVE POWER.

BUT DESPITE ITS PROMISE OF IMMORTALITY, CELEBRITY IS FLEETING. A YEAR FROM NOW SHAWN SELG WILL WRITE IN USA TODAY THAT DIANA'S (NOT BRIGITTE'S) WAS "THE MOST FAMOUS FACE IN THE WORLD. . . . NO ONE HAS REACHED THIS LEVEL OF FAME."

SOMEONE WHO MIGHT COME CLOSE, THE POPE, WAS IN PARIS LAST WEEK. THE RELIGIOUS CELEBRITY PAR EXCELLENCE. "300,000 YOUNG PEOPLE," A SIGN HANGING FROM THE CATHEDRAL OF THE SACRE COEUR SAYS, "FROM 140 COUNTRIES. THE POPE AND YOU!"

A MAN APPROACHES THE BENCH WHERE I AM SITTING. "I KNOW YOU," HE SAYS. "I KNOW YOU." "NO YOU DON'T," I SAY. "YES," HE INSISTS, "I KNOW YOU." "WHERE ARE YOU FROM?" I ASK. "FROM SRI LANKA." "I KNOW MICHAEL ONDAATJJE'S BOOK ABOUT GROWING UP IN SRI LANKA," I SAY. "I DON'T KNOW HIM," HE SAYS. "YOU LIKE ME," HE STATES. "YOU LIKE ME, I'M TAMIL, FROM COLUMBO. I HAVE A PROBLEM WITH THE POLICE. I NEED A VISAM." THEY NO LIKE ME. YOU LIKE ME. YOU HELP ME." HE SHOWS ME SOME WELL CREASED PAPERS. "I NEED MONEY -- A PHOTO," HE EXPLAINS, "A VISA PHOTO. YOU HELP ME." "NO," I SAY. "I SAY NO SEVERAL TIMES. NOBODY LIKE ME," HE SAYS, DISGUSTED, AND MOVES ON.
A CELEBRITY PHOTOGRAPHER LIKE SAM LEVIN COULD HELP YOU, I THINK. OR RIGAUD. THEIR PORTRAITS, THEIR "HISTOIRES D'UN TAMIL," WOULD BE FINE CONFIDENCE (MAN) BUILDERS.

"SHE'S ACTING AS IF SOMETHING WERE WRONG WITH HER BO-W-EL," SAYS ONE THICK-LEGGED WOMAN TO ANOTHER AS THEY PASS MY BENCH. I DECIDE IT'S TIME FOR ME TO MOVE ON.


AS I WALK THROUGH THE GATE INTO THE CEMETERY, IT BEGINS TO RAIN LIGHTLY. A MAP HANGS BEHIND GLASS WITH A TABLE OF CELEBRITIES. PASTED OVER ONE FULL QUARTER OF THE MAP IS A HAND-WRITTEN SIGN: FOR “JIM MORRISON” GO TO THE CEMETERY “PER LACHAIS.”

WHY THE QUOTATION MARKS? DOES THE NAME STAND FOR THE CELEBRITY AND NOT FOR THE PERSON? IT WOULD MAKE ME NERVOUS TO SEE MY NAME IN QUOTES. “PRINCESS DI,” HOWEVER, SEEMS OKAY.


“WHO WAS JIM MORRISON?” ASKS A WOMAN BEHIND ME. “A ROCK STAR,” ANSWERS AN UNINTERESTED MAN.

MY LIST COMPLETE, I SET OUT TO VISIT THIS CEMETERY’S FAMOUS INHABITANTS.
Heinrich Heine is first, that romantic and revolutionary German poet who wrote a workers' poem so strong in its three-fold curse of those eternally recurring celebrities “God, King, and Fatherland” that simply possessing the poem was grounds for arrest in Prussia.

Heinrich Heine, the stone says, without quotation marks, and under the poet’s name: Frau Heine. What a way to be remembered. And Herr Heine is not much better off: A sappy bust on top of a square column, head reverently declined, eyes half-lidded; a cheesy harp with roses; and a sweet little poem about where will I be buried when I die: In Paris or Berlin? In the mountains or on a beach? Buried by strangers or friends? No matter, the stars will still shine over me. I'd prefer the three-fold curse.

If monumental burial is intended to lend immortality, why are Herr and Frau Heine stretched out horizontally? Why not bury them upright in the square column. “Bury me standing,” the gypsy says, “I’ve spent my life on my knees.” Because, perhaps, after a lifetime of struggle we like the idea of resting, finally, in peace: Ici repose . . .

Ici repose Hector Berlioz under a shiny black marble slab and a flamboyant bas-relief bust, buried with both Harriet Smithson and Marie Recio.

Ici repose Vaslav Nijinsky. Not much room in this stone box for a dancer. In a painted wooden frame, leaned soggily against the headstone, are two photos: One of Nijinsky as a young man in coat and tie, hair parted severely in the center, the other of the dancer with a white-painted face and the hat and ruffles of a clown.

Ici repose François Truffaut. Flat black marble with no headstone for the elegant filmmaker.
A gaudy grave for Èmile Zola and Mme Alexandrine Èmile Zola, sweeping curves of red marble framing a noble bust. But the activist author of “J’accuse” has been separated from Mme Alexandrine, a sign says, and now lies with other immortals in the Pantheon.

Ici repose Alexandre Dumas Fils. The novelist gets a marble bed with recumbent statue complete with poet’s laurels and a heavy roof held up by four columns. Someone, however, has made off with most of his left big toe and much of his nose. Even stone can’t ultimately withstand the ravages of time (and the impious).

Charles Fourier, fantastic prophet of harmony and early 19th-century socialism (‘magnificent denunciations of exploitation and sham in family, society, church, and state’), is memorialized by a slanting stone that acts as the final page of his book: “Les attractions sont proportionnelles aux destinees.” Whatever that means.


The rain has let up. I decide to walk across town to the “Per Lachais.” If I could foresee Diana’s last words, “My God, what’s happened!” I would make this pilgrimage more seriously. Two superstars cut down in their relative youth. But I can’t, so I am simply curious about the man who urged me, as a high-school student, to “break on through to the other side.”

This cemetery is too large to get any kind of quick overview. The signs listing celebrity graves, touched by too many reverent fingers, are blank where the name “Jim Morrison” and the site address ought to be. (Not so Oscar Wilde, Gertrude Stein, et al.)
It's late in the day. I'm tired. Diana, we will learn later, is worrying about what to say when Dodi Fayed asks her to marry him tonight. I wander among monuments and empty little crypts. The rain begins again.

"Jim" is scratched onto the mossy side of a crypt. I walk that direction, guided by an increasing flood of colorful graffiti: "Jim Morrison ist unser Gott" -- is our god; "Jim, je t'aime"; "The Doors"; "The 27 Club."

Suddenly, in the middle of the path ahead of me, stands a big man in uniform. He signals with his arm. He blows a whistle. He shouts "C'est fermé!" Closed. It's 6 p.m.

So I see Jim Morrison's much decorated grave only on the postcards for sale outside the gate. A year later I will hear on NPR that "his" lease is up and that even this cemetery famous for and proud of its celebrities has its limits. "Unser Gott" will have to find a new home.

By noon tomorrow I'll be in Cologne, Germany, where my friends Darko and Anne will tell me the news about the Princess. But by then, after today, it will be an old story.