

Non-Denial of Death

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (August 2021)



Nocturne, Georges Rouault, 1915

There are two entrances whose invitations to enter I find it difficult to resist: those to bookshops and those to cemeteries.

No doubt there are some who might think that an attraction to cemeteries is morbid, but I would argue precisely the opposite: rather, that he who avoids cemeteries, and never visits them, is the one who is morbid, in that he

thereby tries to flee consciousness of, and the need to reflect on, his own mortality.

Cemeteries tend, of course, tend to be places of calm and quiet. During a four-week stay in Nottingham, a city in England made peculiarly hideous to the view by modernist architecture and town planning, I used to take refuge on my daily walks in its rather beautiful municipal cemetery. I met a gardener there who was tending the grounds with great care, the kind of care that people show only when they love their work.

‘You like working here?’ I said to him.

‘Yes,’ he replied. ‘The residents are well-behaved.’

It is unlikely that he would have replied thus anywhere else in Nottingham.

Of course, there has been throughout history a fear that the dead and buried will *not* remain well-behaved, but will rise up in some form or other, material or immaterial, to interfere maliciously in the lives of the still-living. And even though few people are inclined to believe such things nowadays, I think equally few would care to spend a night in a cemetery, even those who wouldn’t mind spending a night in an open field.

I am fortunate, considering my taste for cemeteries, to have the most famous cemetery in the world, Père Lachaise, on my doorstep in Paris. It is my favourite place to walk, I find it inexhaustible. A near neighbour of ours, Madame Jacqueline, who is eighty-eight, goes there every day to feed the cats despite her almost crippled state. She is admirable in her devotion. She used to walk her little black mongrel, Julie, who is now seventeen years old, round the block, but she let her daughter, who lives in the suburbs, take her because she could offer her a better life with a garden. Anyone who has grown to love a dog, as Madame Jacqueline

undoubtedly loved Julie, will appreciate what a selfless act this was on Madame Jacqueline's part. She put her dog's welfare above her own.

Yesterday, I took my afternoon walk in Père Lachaise. Often I read a little as I go, and yesterday I took with me a book with me by Karl Hans Strobl, translated from German into French, that contained a story, *My Stay in Père Lachaise*.

Strobl was born in Bohemia in 1877 and died in Vienna in 1946. As far as I am able to tell, he is completely unknown in English-speaking countries, and very little known in French. The fact that he was an enthusiastic Nazi has probably inhibited the spread of his reputation beyond the German-speaking world; he died in the utmost poverty in post-war Vienna after his house was taken over by the Soviets.

He was a writer of horror stories and published *My Stay in Père Lachaise* in 1913, before Nazism was ever thought of. In this story, a young man, a student of the natural sciences who believes himself capable of discovering totally new forces in nature, undertakes to live for a year night and day, in the tomb of a Russian exile in Paris, Anna Fedodorovna Vassiliska, in exchange for 200,000 francs. Under the terms of Vassiliska's will, he will be fed during their period by her chef and her servant, but he is neither to leave the tomb or divulge anything that he sees or experiences to the public. By agreeing to these terms, he hopes to put an end to his grinding poverty one and for all.

To cut a short story even shorter, Anna Feodorovna Vassiliska turns out to be a vampire. In a state of delirium induced by her progressive exsanguination of him, he mistakes his beloved fiancée who visits him at the tomb for the vampire who has been attacking him at night and strangles her. Whether this is supposed symbolically to mean that love is a vampire that sucks the blood of intellectual ambition I cannot say, but Strobl is certainly capable of creating an atmosphere of

supernatural mystery and menace.

These days, tombs are more likely to be used as places of assignation, particularly by homosexuals, than to be the haunt of vampires. Not long ago, I fell into conversation with a man who seemed particularly outraged by this: I think he would have preferred vampires. But I was told by someone else that Père Lachaise has long since been a place of assignation, and in 1891 Maupassant wrote a story, *Les Tombales*, about a woman who poses as a young widow and cries at the tomb of her supposed husband and who uses this role to attract and ensnare rich old men. Admittedly, the story is cited in the cemetery of Montmartre rather than in that of Père Lachaise, but there is no reason why it should not have taken place in the latter. The narrator of the story says that, like me, he has always been fond of cemeteries:

I like cemeteries myself, it rests me and makes me melancholy: I need that.

Nowadays also, Père Lachaise seems to be mined for marble plaques and other funerary accoutrements, though how they are removed by the thieves (unless with the co-operation of the staff) remains a mystery.

But what are the attractions of—I almost said *of a good*—cemetery, apart from the tranquillity that they offer even in the busiest of cities?

In Père Lachaise it is not at all difficult to find the tombs of the famous—Oscar Wilde, Balzac, Proust, Delacroix and so forth—but of course most people buried there are unknown, probably even to their descendants. Neglect of tombs in a cemetery, especially those that are pompous or grandiose, naturally gives rise to reflection on the transience of life, its glories and its tribulations: as Thomas Gray says in his *Elegy*, the most celebrated of all cemetery poems in English, the paths of glory lead but to the grave. Within three

generations at the most, all memory that one has ever existed is extinguished, and no flowers will ever adorn one's tomb again, though weeds may grow in the cracks, unless someone of a later generation is buried there.

The inscriptions on the tombstones give rise to melancholy thoughts, melancholy being by no means an entirely unpleasant state of mind. For example, often one finds a tombstone of a husband and his widow (usually, though not always, it is the man who dies first), the widow having survived her husband by forty or more years without, apparently, having remarried. Was she simply unable to find another husband, as must often have been the case in France of women widowed at early age in the First World War, the entire generation of men of their husbands' age having been decimated during that catastrophic conflagration? Or were the widows so faithful to their husbands' memories that they felt it would have been a betrayal to remarry? In some cases, no doubt, the experience of marriage must have been so painful—it is not only good people who die young—that, in accordance with Doctor Johnson's dictum that a second marriage was the triumph of hope over experience, they let experience triumph over hope.

Whenever I see a tombstone recording so long a widowhood, I think of my uncle M___ and aunt S___. My uncle died young of a heart attack, though of course he did not seem young to me at the time—no adult did. I have rarely known a man who exuded enjoyment of life to such an extent. He is forever trapped in the amber of my memory as smiling, his black but thinning hair brilliantined over his scalp, his prominent eyes expressing perpetual amusement. He treated life as a joke, not in any cynical sense, but as if the world were funny. I remember at the party for his wife's fortieth birthday he made a speech in which he said that he had considered trading her in for two twenty-year-olds. I couldn't have been more than twelve at the time, but I have never forgotten the joke, or the good nature with which he made it.

In fact, he was the most uxorious of husbands, and so perfectly happy had been their marriage that my aunt lived on the memory of it for the rest of her life, between forty and fifty years, though not at all in the spirit of Miss Havisham, for she was still capable of enjoyment, though no doubt incomplete. But to have married again would have been like adding a modern extension, say by the architect Libeskind, to the Château of Chenonceau.

A cemetery such as Père Lachaise contains a thousand stimuli to reverie. Paris is a city *par excellence* of exile: one stumbles across the tomb of a princess of the Qajar dynasty (the Persian dynasty before that of the last Shah), that of a Russian Grand Duke, of an aristocrat of the defunct Brazilian empire, of an Indian rajah or rani, of an American painter. There are also Palestinian terrorists, Iranian communists, French generals, admirals, revolutionaries, anarchists, historians, economists, inventors, explorers, entomologists, merchants, doctors, painters, sculptors, composers, conductors, singers, actors, playwrights, engineers, sportsmen, bandits, politicians, film producers, bankers, grocers, industrialists, poets, philosophers, surgeons, sociologists, botanists, critics, priests, archaeologists and presidents of professional associations, for example of purveyors of charcuterie—all forgotten, except perhaps by specialists or scholars, but overall a lesson in the breadth and depth of our civilisation, a testimony to the sheer effort that has gone into what we so casually take for granted.

Among ordinary graves, one suddenly comes across something startling, for example the tomb of a worker for Brink's *lancement assassiné*, cowardly murdered. Of course, the grave of a man who has been murdered—whose death was dramatic in a way that ordinary soldiers' deaths in war were not, because they were collective rather than individual—arrests one's attention, but in addition the word *cowardly* pulled me

up short.

The man was in his forties, probably with children approaching adolescence. Their shock and grief, and that of his widow, who survived him by forty years, can all too easily be imagined, her subsequent life almost defined by a single wicked act. What became of his children? Were they affected for the rest of their lives? How much or often was the memory in their mind fifty years later? Did they go to the bad as a result? Or did the murder stiffen their resolve to make something of their lives?

Compared with the crime itself, objection to the misuse of a word, *cowardly*, might seem pedantic. And yet it seems to me not entirely unimportant. The fact is that, for most people, murder is not a cowardly act: on the contrary, it is one of conspicuous courage, even if it is arranged in such a fashion that the victim is unlikely to be able to fight back. In this case, even if the murderer merely shot the policeman in the back, he faced the death penalty if caught—as the statistics show that a murderer is likely to be. No: to murder, even in ‘cowardly’ fashion, takes courage.

The danger of using the word *cowardly* in connection with murder is that it conduces to moral confusion about what is wrong with killing another human being, at least without lawful excuse. If I say ‘It was a cowardly murder,’ the wrongness of the murder is diluted by the vice of cowardice. No one would say, ‘It was a brave murder,’ for the absurdity of doing so would be immediately apparent. Does the bravery of a murder mitigate in any way its wrongness, or its cowardice add to it? Is a strangulation committed by a person little stronger than his victim any less heinous than one committed by someone much stronger than his victim? Politicians have a tendency to call terrorists cowardly, when in fact they are very courageous. Courage is no virtue if it is misapplied, and from the purely practical point of view is not at all preferable to cowardice, rather the reverse.

The tragic dimension, if not nature, of human existence, is everywhere evident in cemeteries and churchyards. It is all too common to find, in the cemeteries of Britain and France, and no doubt in Germany too, graves commemorating the deaths of two, or even three, sons of the same parents killed in the Great War. The only way, I imagine, that the parents could even half accommodate their grief was by believing that their sons had died in a noble cause.

Cemeteries are like the *News of the World*, a British scandal sheet published on Sundays that used to advertise itself with the slogan *All human life is there*.

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Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are [The Terror of Existence: From Ecclesiastes to Theatre of the Absurd](#) (with Kenneth Francis) and [@NERIconoclast](#)