Farewell, My Queen

CHANTAL THOMAS

Translated by Moishe Black

PHOENIX

Prologue

Vienna, 12 February 1810

My name is Agathe-Sidonie Laborde, a name rarely spoken, almost a secret. I live in the émigré quarter of Vienna, in an apartment on Grashof Street. Its windows open above a paved inner courtyard surrounded at ground level by a number of shops: a second-hand bookshop, a wig maker's, a small print-shop, a violin maker's. There is also a spice seller's stall, just at the foot of my apartment building. A lively neighbourhood, but not too noisy. In the summertime, along with Eastern aromas, there are always notes of music floating in the air. The rose bushes winding their way up the building fronts add a garden charm to this little corner of Vienna. But in the dead of winter, which is what we have at present, the rose bushes have ceased to bloom and the sounds of life from the shops no longer reach me. But for me, the sounds of life are well and truly stilled whatever the season. It's as though the terrible winter around me, this unending snow and the feeling it gives of being buried, were a symptom of my advanced age, the outward sign of that deeper, permanent winter creeping over me.

Today, 12 February 1810, I celebrated my sixty-fifth birthday. 'Celebrate' is not an apt term for the mood of those assembled in my room, a few French exiles of my own vintage, fellow survivors from the collapse of that world commonly called 'the Ancien Régime'. The snow never stops. When my faithful friends arrived, they were wet through, for (I regret to say) when one requires a cane in order to walk, one cannot then use an umbrella. If only old age held no greater misfortune! I set their sodden garments to dry before the fire. The ladies fixed their hair and redid their faces, and then my guests offered me their presents: flowers of wild silk, a fan, and a tiny oval-shaped box that I was asked not to open until after the others had left. I

ate pastries. As usual, and like the whole of Europe, we talked about Napoleon – with hatred, naturally, only ours was restrained, not the genuinely raging hatred that inspires a large segment of Viennese society. We saw the conqueror's triumphant arrival here last July, after the battles of Essling and Wagram. We endured the bombardments, the pestilence of blood, death, heaped-up bodies, the horror of those thousands of wounded to be encountered in virtually every part of the city, their death rattles and cries of pain forming a backdrop of sound to our regular daily lives. We also endured the spying and plundering, the violence that is the lot of an occupied city. But this army had come from France and was difficult for us to hate. Though exposed to the arrogance of its soldiers, we could not consider them as enemies. At the same time, we found these young men – who spoke our language and might have been our children's sons – foreign, painfully foreign. It was not just their attitude of hostility towards us, it was their deportment. 'They walk like him,' someone had pointed out to me. And it was true: they all walked too fast. Stiffly upright, heels striking the ground, they looked like so many automata. Napoleon's officers copy his manner of walking, and his manner of speaking, too, his abrupt way of addressing people (the only thing no one has so far attempted to imitate is his accent). With no preamble, the Emperor will suddenly ask the bluntest question. He does not converse; he fires at point-blank range. Our conversational ideal was the dialogue of the polite salon, with its sense of allusion and innuendo, its ability to place the speaker in a brilliant light, never making a vulgar show of knowledge, playing delicately with trifles, and, for the space of a verbal encounter, drawing out from those trifles pearls of intelligence and felicitous expression. Napoleon's model of discourse, by contrast, is the police interrogation. I expect he has the most delightful memory of his 'conversation' with Friedrich Staps, the student armed with a kitchen knife who tried to kill him at Schönbrunn last October.

'Do you regret your action?'

'Would you do it again?'

'Yes.'

Had he not been obliged to condemn Staps to death, he would gladly have pursued this conversation a little longer. The young man was very like him, as Charlotte Corday was like Marat. Terrorists attract terrorists . . . A civilisation based on the dagger, the bayonet, and the cannon. In former times a man prided himself on being the perfect embodiment of polite behaviour. When he had occasion to make war or engage in military activities, he did not boast of it. Thus, for instance, no soldier would ever have presented himself in uniform at court. First he would change his raiment, even if he had news of a victory to bring, and a flag wrested from the enemy to lay at the King's feet. Similarly, given the choice of wearing the blue cordon of knighthood in the Order of the Holy Spirit and the red cordon of the Order of Saint-Louis, honouring a military exploit, what well-born man would have hesitated? The blue was undoubtedly a source of greater pride.

During my birthday celebration, even as we warmed ourselves at the flames of a generous fire and listened to the satisfying sound of the logs crackling between the andirons, we lamented the Emperor's latest plans, which, pacific though they were, did not lessen the already colossal list of his crimes. Some said that he proposed to live for a month every summer in the palace of Versailles, though he found it small and misshapen, 'a horrible aberration', and an aberration, what's more, that cost him a fortune to keep up. He had decided to stay there occasionally, after having the impudence to declare: 'The Revolution destroyed so much; why did it not demolish Versailles?' But other reports claimed that Napoleon planned to cut down the trees, take away the statues, and replace them all with monuments commemorating his victories . . .

We had another serving of cake – absolutely delicious – and continued our lamentations . . . Monuments to his victories . . . It is not enough for him to contemplate marriage with Queen

Marie-Antoinette's great-niece Marie-Louise – *the Austrian woman*, as he so elegantly calls her – he must needs take over the palace as well. And he puts his 'N' everywhere: this man, who cannot tell the difference between hunting to hounds and hunting rabbits, has commanded that all Louis XVI's hunting guns be engraved with his initial. 'You cannot hunt stags when you are hounding kings,' as the Prince de Ligne mockingly observes . . . In the event that he fails to get the Tsar's sister, I wonder whether Vienna will tolerate such an abomination, whether Metternich will hand the poor archduchess over to her country's oppressor. In all this hellish warfare, with its threat of armed gangs and looting, its reduction of rape and murder to commonplace events, Napoleon's pretensions to legitimacy are very nearly the thing I find most offensive. I say very nearly, for what really offends me, what saddens and distresses me, is something that is not to be found in our professions of indignation; nor is it part of those choruses of loathing in which we habitually join. No, the thing that appals me derives rather from what we do *not* say, from our hypocritical acceptance of the rule that Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette are never to be mentioned. The prohibition applies at all foreign courts, but the place where it is most strictly observed is certainly here, in Vienna. To pronounce those forbidden names in defiance of the interdict causes fearful embarrassment. If it involves Louis XVI, the social blunder, though serious, can be overcome; but to name Marie-Antoinette is unforgivable. Her memory is suppressed more viciously in her own home, family, and city than anywhere else. For this, her second death, Napoleon cannot be held accountable. If anything, the reverse is true . . . And we, with our noisy jeremiads, contribute to the work of obliteration. Noisy? I much overstate the case. I only wish we were still capable of making noise.

Around the fire, earlier today, our chairs so close together that we were almost elbow to elbow, we were saying how wretched it is to survive in the midst of ruins. 'If you survive, it means you're alive,' said one of my friends, but she uttered these words

so inaudibly that it was hard to put much faith in them . . . Though the afternoon had barely ended, darkness was falling. It was time for my guests to make their way home. And just then, a group of schoolchildren came into the courtyard to sing. Their voices were extraordinarily clear, rising up with the same strength and joy that they put into their running, their ice-skating . . .

Alone once more, I opened my last present. It was wrapped in so many layers that at first I thought there was nothing else: just coloured papers laid one on top of the other. But when I came to the little silver box, it opened up to reveal a marvel. I had been given a miracle: a pendant set in enamel, on which was painted in miniature an eye of blue: blazing blue, almost turquoise, of gem-like brilliance, the pupil seemingly bedewed with the merest hint of moistness. I closed the palm of my hand over the treasure, and let the blue of her eyes bring back the Queen's entire face, her face as I knew it . . .

This ban on names is one of the pacts binding our society of survivors, and when I am with others I respect the pact. But when I am alone with myself, why should I be afraid of words, or of the ghosts they summon up, or of the unknown with which they sometimes bring us face to face? True, in my case the ghosts fill the entire stage, during my waking life as they do in my dreams, whether these be changing or recurrent. Thus, for example, what I call my 'Dream of the Grand Staircase'. It has variations – in particular, sometimes the faces are farther away than at other times – but for the most part, it's always the same dream: stationed at intervals, on broad steps, stand various members of the royal court. Their magnificent apparel has a kind of still quality that hampers movement. Some are leaning on canes, others not. There are no groups. Each individual is isolated, set slightly apart from the next. All, however, are outlined with perfect clarity. They stand there, on the rim of nothing. 'The Dream of the Grand Staircase' haunts me. I feel

as though the people in the dream are waiting for me; mute, invisible, never very far away – that *they* are my truth, whereas the handful of survivors with whom I associate are merely illusion. Under their scrutiny I become uncomfortable. I seek distractions: embroidery work, writing letters, reading newspapers, books, every sort of publication in French that comes my way, but they will not loosen their vice-like grip. They press down upon me with all the weight of their non-being. I have become accustomed to 'the Dream of the Grand Staircase', but the dissatisfied feeling that it brings with it remains unappeased, for the faces in the dream, while recognisable, are not completely so. I am quite sure that I have known them but am unable to put names to them.