

thorities from presenting his scientific work to professionals in his field. As a result he has forgotten his science. Now, after the breakdown of communism, he has been rehabilitated, and for the first time he can participate in an international conference in his field.

In the lobby of the building where the conference is to take place, the secretary of the meeting is trying to find the Czech scientist's name on the list of participants. This turns out to be difficult. His name is Ceĉhořipsky. Can anyone in France pronounce such a name—or write it, with two upside-down circumflex accents that are not to be found on any French computer keyboard? And so the professor must allow himself to be called Tchécochipi, Sechoripi, Chenipiqui, Chipiqui, or, if he is lucky, Cêchôripsky, the latter form still having two French-style circumflexes but in the wrong places. It is important to Ceĉhořipsky to be called by his own, proper name, however, and he wants it to be correctly pronounced and written in accord with the spelling introduced by the fifteenth-century religious reformer Jan Hus. His name has already been forgotten long enough.

The conference begins. At the appointed time, the chair calls on Ceĉhořipsky to deliver his paper. He mounts the podium and begins by saying how happy he is now to be able to speak before an international audience of competent scholars in his field—after so many years of not having the freedom to do so. Thunderous applause surrounds the Czech scholar after he has uttered these moving words. Ceĉhořipsky is himself moved by this applause, by this overpowering expression of sympathetic support. And he leaves the podium, having entirely forgotten to give his talk.

An embarrassing situation. This sort of thing has never happened before. Here and there suppressed laughter is heard in the auditorium. For a moment the chair is annoyed, and then he quickly calls on the next presenter. A conference has to proceed smoothly. One does not laugh at a conference.

4. REPORTS ON THE "CHEWER" OF PARIS (VICTORIEN SARDOU)

On the fifth day of Thermidor (in the Revolutionary calendar; 23 July in the bourgeois calendar) in 1794 the aristocrat Alexandre de Beauharnais maintained his dignity as he mounted the scaffold. In a dungeon not far from the place of execution his wife Josephine awaited the same fate at the hands of the revolutionary reign of terror. Robespierre's fall on 9 Thermidor saved her. A few weeks later she was released from prison and soon became acquainted with General Bonaparte of the artillery, who at once

took a passionate interest in the beautiful and temperamental Creole. What happened to them later is history.¹

How did it happen that Josephine escaped the guillotine by the skin of her teeth? Was it an accident? Or was it because in prison she had contracted a serious illness, which a sympathetic doctor had diagnosed as being fatal in any case? The best documented hypothesis is that Josephine, together with many other prisoners, was saved through the courageous action of an actor named Charles Labussière. This man, about the rest of whose life we know practically nothing other than that he was a middling actor in the smaller theaters, had gotten himself hired as a court clerk at the time of the revolution in Paris, and under the Terror he worked as a registrar in the office of the Committee of Public Safety. In this institution the various threads of Robespierre's power apparatus came together, and the files relating to all charges, which generally ended in death sentences, passed through this office. The indictments of Alexandre and Josephine Beauharnais must have also gone through this office and probably through Labussière's hands as well. Labussière later plausibly asserted that he had saved Josephine, by finding a way to make her criminal file disappear.

It is in fact virtually certain that the actor and scribe Charles Labussière saved a large number (was it really twelve hundred, as he claimed?) of accused and indicted people from death by organizing forgetting within this control center of judicial terror, probably at first only in the cases of a few fellow actors but then on a larger scale for many more. At this point legend presumably plays a role, reporting that since Labussière could not simply make off with the dangerous files he destroyed them by chewing them up, page by page, masticating them until they were mixed with saliva and then swallowing them. As a result, when the Reign of Terror was over he was called, with admiration, the "chewer" (*le mâcheur*).

To make a dangerous report written on paper forgotten by swallowing it is one of the oldest strategies of secrecy. Ambassadors and spies on risky missions have always resorted, when they were captured, to this method. Life or death depended on being able to make the compromising document disappear into the digestive tract. So it is understandable that when the files of the accused represented the relentless memory of a criminal system of justice, this method should also have been rediscovered and perfected within the judicial process: an effective technique of forgetting directed against the tyranny of Robespierre, the man who never forgot anything. Whether a series of organized rescues should be attributed to the courageous "chewer" we shall not attempt to decide here.

However, so far as Josephine is concerned, it seems that she was firmly convinced that she owed her miraculous escape from death on the scaf-

fold to no one other than Labussière. For when late in his life he fell into need and his fellow actors put on a benefit for him at the Parisian Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin, Josephine and the consul Bonaparte participated in this event and paid an unusually high price for their seats in a loge.



We will encounter this theater again when we now examine the literary monument erected to the courageous actor by the French dramatist Victorien Sardou (1831–1908). I refer to the play *Thermidor*, which Sardou put on the stage in 1891, a hundred years after the pivotal year of the French revolution.²

The first scene of this play takes place on the banks of the Seine early in the morning. Among the early risers is an angler with a creel. He is busy fishing and seems not to notice when the contents of his creel fall into the river—damp balls of gray paper, which are quickly swept away by the waters of the Seine. A few other people, who seem to be annoying trouble-makers, are engaged in idle conversation. In this way we learn the apparent angler's name, Charles Labussière.

Then a love story is woven into the action. It involves a friend of Labussière, a good-hearted revolutionary soldier with the warlike name Martial, and a young woman named Fabienne Lecoulteux, who up until the revolution had been raised by nuns. Martial saves Fabienne from a perilous fate as a refugee and falls in love with her. He is already thinking of marrying her.

But first we learn more about Labussière. His real profession—as we can already imagine—is acting, but he is currently—a few days before 9 Thermidor 1794—working as a registrar in the office of the Committee of Public Safety, where he is responsible for the files of the accused, who are sure to die on the scaffold. His own name is already on the list of candidates for execution. Labussière has discovered this by chance and has taken advantage of a fortunate opportunity to take this “horrible job” within the “demon’s den” in order to strike his own name off the list and thus to make himself, as he puts it, “forgotten” (*pour se faire oublier*). Next he rescues a fellow actor, using the same tactic of making his criminal file impossible to find. In order to avoid having to give too many explanations for this “disorder” in his office’s files he stutters, and hence he is called “Charles the stutterer” (*Charles le bégayeur*).

How does Labussière get rid of the files? Sardou seems to have found it implausible to regard chewing them up as a technique of forgetting that would not arouse suspicion. So he has his protagonist first burn the files; this may be believable for the first few, but when hundreds of files are involved, as in Sardou's play about the file-destroyer, it has to seem too risky

and therefore implausible. So Sardou imagines the following procedure, which seems feasible even on a larger scale: Labussière puts the files in a wash basin, drenches them with water, tears the damp paper into little pieces, and then kneads them into a sort of gray dough, which he can carry out of the office in the convenient form of little balls. But the last step of this strategy remains to be completed in the early morning hours, on the banks of the Seine, where an innocent-looking angler lets the contents of his creel fall into the river. Then the names of the accused are forgotten for the bloody masters of revolutionary justice. Here again we may recognize in the waters of the Seine, whose waters carry away the last remains of the criminal files to be destroyed, the river of forgetting, the Lethe.

Sardou's *Thermidor* leads, however, to still another tragic climax. Although Robespierre falls in the third act of the play, at first "the wheels of this terrible machine of death" keep turning. Thus a new victim appears on the list of those to be promptly executed, whom the chief of police personally pursues: Fabienne. Labussière, through whose hands her file passes, is begged by his friend Martial to save this young woman as well by means of the already-proven technique of forgetting: "She is forgotten, and it's over" (*On l'oublie et c'est fait*). However, the stutterer, who suddenly stopped stuttering after Robespierre's fall, has aroused suspicions. He can strike the prominent name of Fabienne Lecoulteux from the list only if at the same time he puts another name on the list, and this means that the person will die.

Can one do such a thing? Does any person have the right to save a criminal victim who is close to him by finding another more or less unknown person on the list of the accused and sending that person to certain death?³ For example, a twenty-eight-year-old man with the similar sounding name "Alexandre le Couteux"? Or rather, because her sex is more appropriate, the forty-two-year-old Jeanne-Octavie Lecoulteux, who has two children? Or finally, Marie-Clotilde Lecoulteux, who like Fabienne is twenty-six years old and has a family name similar to hers and who led a turbulent life as a *fille galante* before the revolution and was a general's mistress?

Confronted with this fateful dilemma, the play (Act 3, scene 9) becomes an instrument of moral edification. Martial, the soldier, has no scruples about exchanging his beloved for such an alien "creature" [Lecoulteux] "Take her then, that one, you'll forget her" (*Prends-la donc, celle-là, tu l'oublies*). On the other hand, Labussière has serious doubts, for this person is also a *créature humaine*. But he finally agrees to let his friend have his way: "Let's kill her, then!" (*tuons-la, donc!*).

I shall not describe in detail the play's subsequent development in its dramatically rather weak fourth act but rather will say only that the attempt to save Fabienne fails in extremis, chiefly because she refuses to let herself

be saved. In the meantime she has made an eternal vow to the bishop secretly meeting with her, and she is going joyfully to meet her martyrdom. To this extent she, the nun, is ultimately the most tragic (or melodramatic) heroine of the play, and the only truly dramatic (and moral) hero, Charles Labussière, comes away empty-handed.

On 24 January of the memorial year 1891 the respected dramatist Victorien Sardou's play *Thermidor* was staged for the first time by the actors of the Comédie-Française.⁴ Part of the audience saw the performance as an "antirepublican" provocation and whistled in disapproval. Among the defenders of national and republican values, the writer Maurice Barrès and the politician Georges Clémenceau were particularly prominent in attacking the play. The scandal in the theater had a political epilogue in the legislature. The interior minister quickly appeared with an order forbidding the play: a national theater did not have the right to abuse the nation and its great revolution. A few years later, however, a private theater put *Thermidor* on its program; it was the already-mentioned Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin, where in 1803 the benefit performance for Charles Labussière had taken place. The play was also performed with great success on many other stages throughout Europe.