

La Nostalgie du Possible

~We passed so close that something of the experience remains~

by Mark Goodall, 2023

Cimetière du Père-Lachaise, Paris, 2015. Having noticed a gathering downhill to my left, I had stepped off the lane, wending through the tombs. A woman who had likely been among that group was striding up toward me. We were dressed for the grey chill of December Paris.

She was tall and trim, wearing a flattering knee length dark wool coat, smart slacks and heeled boots. Her hair was dark, or maybe red, and bobbed. I don't think she was French, probably Irish. She may have been wearing a hat, but not a cloche. It could have been a fedora with the brim snapped down on one side.

As we met, I nodded toward the gathering below and asked, "Morrison?" She responded, "Yes... Van." I suggested she was very funny and received a self-satisfied smile as we passed. I am not sure if either of us looked back.

And this is where *la nostalgie du possible* comes in. You see, I never saw her again. But I might have said, "You must be as playful as you are attractive," or is that too much like an opening gambit at a bar? Maybe something quite candid, "Do you have time for coffee or a cocktail," or, "Have you eaten?" I might have added, "Morrison isn't going anywhere." Nah.

We would have been comfortable sitting outside at the nearby café *Le Pere Lachaise* where she may have shrugged out of her coat, leaving it draped over her shoulders, revealing an Aran sweater. Joe Cocker's "You Can Leave Your Hat On" may have come to mind. Having finished our kir royale, we could have shuffled inside for a bit more warmth, and dinner with a bottle of wine, where we would indiscreetly share details of the relationships with our lovers. Her lipstick was red of course but tending to the coral.

The Temptations song, "Just My Imagination," describes a similar situation. Our narrator watches a woman as she passes. While he clearly enjoys the enhancements to the memory provided by *la nostalgie du possible*, he

suggests that the bits added, the possibilities - marriage, family, cozy home - are just a runaway imagination. The term *just* seems a minimization, a rationalization, instead of simple acknowledgement of the pleasure of a recurring association, enhanced by languorous possibility, and preserved in memory.

On the other hand, our narrator is true to *la nostalgie du possible* in that there is no hint of regret. The lyrics, and the tone of the song itself, are upbeat. This may be a nuance, a key nuance, in understanding the concept. There is no “I should have ...” or “I will always regret that ...” when experiencing *la nostalgie du possible*.

Bobby Darin’s *Beyond the Sea* provides a more obscure take on the basis for the associated possibilities, yet remains hopeful or positive in tone, no regret. In my case, the initiating association is a chance encounter at *Père-Lachaise*. In *Just My Imagination*, the basis is a view from an apartment window of a woman walking by. Darin’s premise is not shared, but they did kiss – or did they?

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Citations:

Laurain, Antoine, *The Red Notebook*, pp. 123-125

Tabucchi, Antonio, *La Nostalgie du Possible*

Notes:

The subtitle “*We passed so close that something of the experience remains*” is taken from Laurain, page 125

The sentence “Her lipstick was red of course but tending to the coral” is from Laurain, page 73