



## Autobiographer versus Biographer: How Factual is Gottschalk?\*

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LOUIS MOREAU Gottschalk's first extant letter from Europe was written to his parents as an impressionable pre-teen early in the 1840s. This letter's accounts of family and acquaintances in Paris are of profound significance, but several details of the letter are of even greater use in solving a problem in the chronology of Gottschalk's life.<sup>1</sup> [The four-page letter, translated, is appended.]

The letter is dated at the beginning "8 June 1842." John Doyle, first to mention it, points out the problem which 1842, the year of Gottschalk's supposed sailing for Europe, poses for biographers.

The implication of this letter is that Gottschalk could scarcely have accomplished all the events mentioned in the space of time between his sailing from New Orleans and his arrival in Paris. Either he has dated this letter incorrectly—he is known to be vague about dates in *Notes*

*of a Pianist*—or else, he sailed earlier than is generally supposed.<sup>2</sup>

But which of these alternatives is true?

Gottschalk's 1857–1868 autobiography, *Notes of a Pianist*, is the most reliable means of answering the question. Here we find Gottschalk, born May 8, 1829, admitting "in 1853, I returned to the United States, which I had left eleven years before," which would place the correct departure year at 1842.<sup>3</sup> This year would fix his age at twelve or thirteen by the time of departure. But the editor of his *Notes*, his sister Clara, enters parenthetically "at eleven years of age." Her brother does indeed reckon the year of his

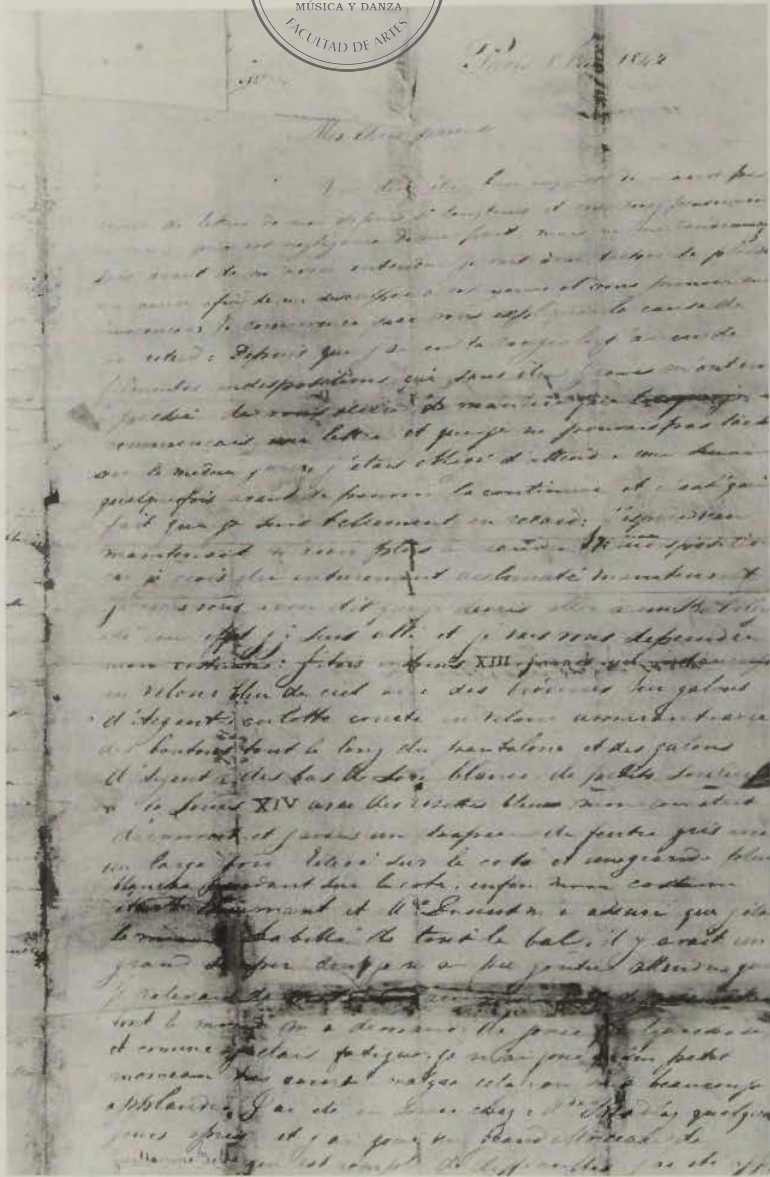
indicated by brackets which also enclose my estimates of correct readings and interpretations where needed. Data of the June 1842 letter that are peripheral to the present subject, but inform on Gottschalk's early years in Paris are discussed by S. Frederick Starr in his recent and detailed biography, *Bamboula! The Life and Times of Louis Moreau Gottschalk* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). These include the closeness of the Dussert Family, Gottschalk's solo performance of his excerpts from *William Tell*, his audition for Thalberg, his disappointment with the aristocratic elite, represented by "Aunt" Lagrange, and his introduction to Charles Hallé and his New Orleanian wife (47–48 and 465, notes 10, 11, 22). Of interest also is the history of period correspondence between the boy and his parents discussed in Starr's book (cf. 464, 465, notes 5, 12–17).

<sup>2</sup> John Doyle, *Louis Moreau Gottschalk* (Detroit: Information Coordinators for the College Music Society, 1983), 188.

<sup>3</sup> Louis Moreau Gottschalk, *Notes of a Pianist*, ed. Clara G. Peterson, trans. Robert Peterson (Philadelphia: Lippencott, 1881), 124; see also the edition of Jeanne Behrend (New York: Knopf, 1964), 46.

\*This article is reissued from the author's publication of the same title in *The Sonneck Society Bulletin*, Vol. XIX, No. 3 (Fall 1993). For permission to publish the article I express thanks to The Society for American Music. The subject concerns events in the life of the pianist-composer Louis Moreau Gottschalk pre-saging his brief career in Spain. The article is dedicated to Ismael Fernández de la Cuesta in gratitude for his abiding interest in my researches in 1963 at the Abbey of Santo Domingo de Silos, Spain. I continue to be grateful for his good offices in arranging for the performance of Gottschalk's unedited four-hand *Infanta Doña Josefa Waltz* in Madrid at the XV Congress of the International Musicological Society, 1992 (referenced in the *Actas*: "The Madrilene and Vallisolan Compositions of L.M. Gottschalk," *Revista de Musicología* XIV/6 [1993], 3554–3567.

<sup>1</sup> New Orleans, Louisiana, The Historic New Orleans Collection, Kemper and Leila Williams Foundation, ms. 245/1 (4 pp.). In the translation from Gottschalk's French, illegible material is



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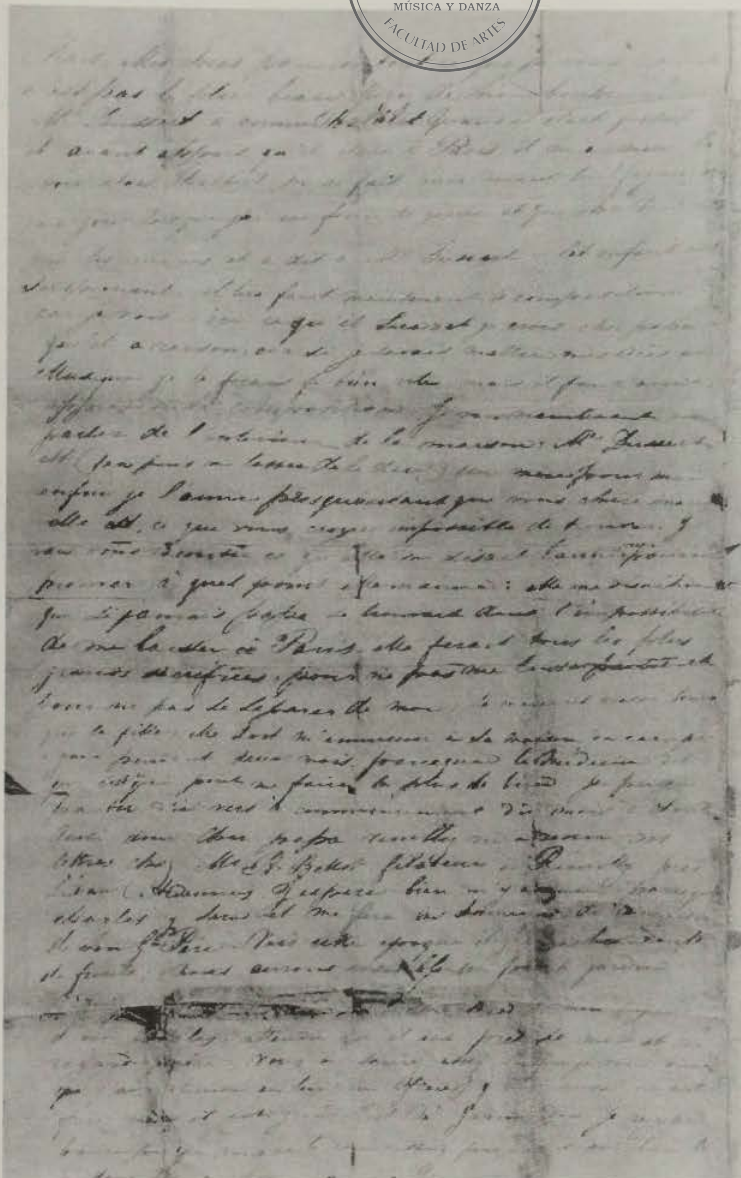
introduction to the director of the Paris Conservatory, Pierre Zimmermann, as 1841.<sup>4</sup> So certain of this year is our diarist, in fact, that once uttered in his *Notes*, he repeats it twice in his *Atlantic Monthly* installments of 1865, copied by his devoted pupil Octavia Hensel.<sup>5</sup> Since the actual year, 1841, is more specific

<sup>4</sup>Gottschalk, *Notes* (1881), 130; (1964), 52.

<sup>5</sup>Octavia Hensel, pseud. Mary Alice Ives Seymour, *Life and Letters of Louis Moreau Gottschalk* (Boston: Oliver Ditson, 1870), 98.

than the comparative one, eleven years before 1853, and Gottschalk repeats it, this named year gains credence. Three of his interviewing biographers, in fact, agree with the earlier year.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Paul Arpin, *Biographie de L.M. Gottschalk, Pianiste américain* (New York: Courier des États-Unis, 1853), 11; H[enry] D[idimus]. pseud. Edward Henry Durell, *Biography of Louis Moreau Gottschalk, the American Pianist and Composer* (Philadelphia: Deacon and Peterson, 1853), 6; Luis Ricardo Fors, *Gottschalk* (Havana: Propaganda Literaria, 1880), 53. Fors adds to this year "hardly twelve years old."



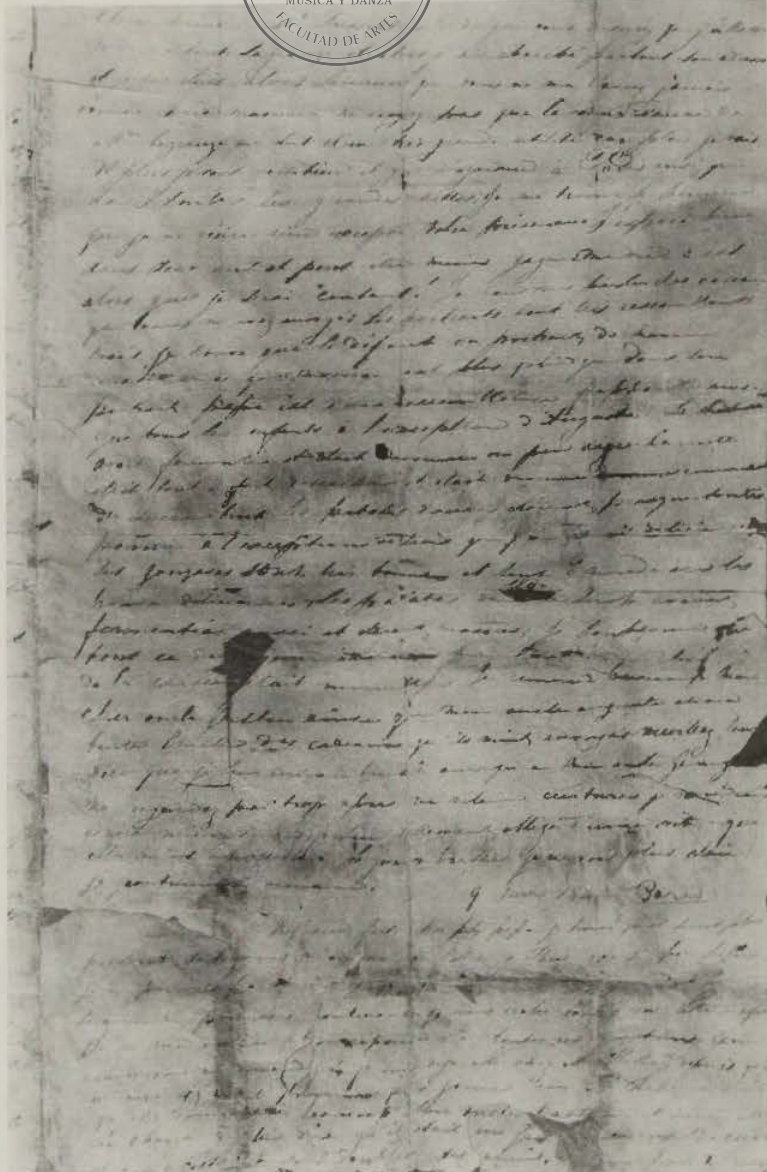
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If 1841 is so much highlighted as a year of residence in Paris, how have we come to regard it as an American year? The first signs of a tendency to re-date Gottschalk's sailing arise from Paul Arpin's apparent confusion. That early interviewer also transmits 1841 as year of departure, but when Gottschalk had not "finished his twelfth year" which year had been continuing ever since the second week of May. This may have caused Hensel to change the year of his departure to 1842, when the New Orleanian was

"just twelve years old, his birthday having occurred on the ship."<sup>7</sup> Clara Gottschalk Peterson, who used Hensel's data, actually compounds her discrepancy by stating that it was decided that the boy would separate from his family "when he should attain the age of twelve years," i.e., before he left.<sup>8</sup> This meant

<sup>7</sup>Hensel, *Life and Letters*, 41.

<sup>8</sup>Clara Gottschalk Peterson, "Biographical Sketch," introduction to her cited edition of *Notes of a Pianist*, 30, 31.

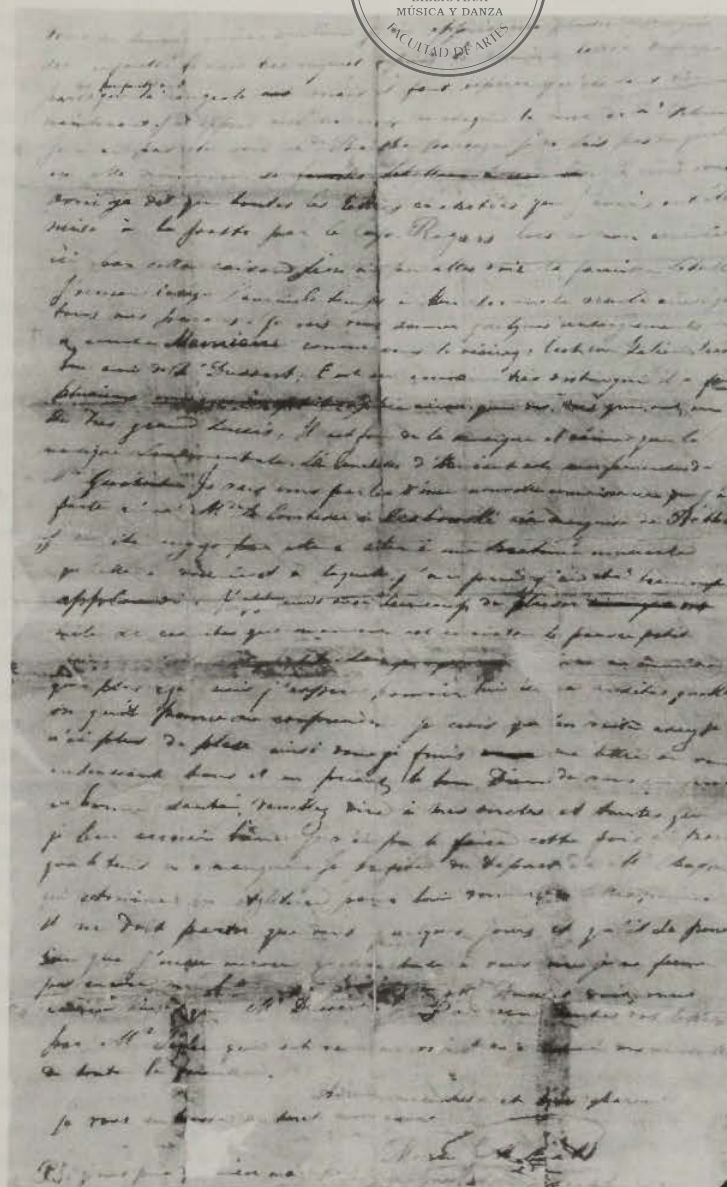


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he must have left in May 1842. Perhaps Clara was more reliant on Hensel's inference than on her own memory and was assuming that her brother would have turned thirteen on the ship. Hensel also had had the benefit of personal contact and had received her teacher's word that he celebrated a birthday aboard. Surely he would not easily forget such an experience.

In a substantial biography Vernon Loggins relies on Hensel's and Peterson's year.<sup>9</sup> Jeanne Behrend in turn relies wholly and without attribution on all three prior re-revised estimates. She revises Clara's "eleven years of age" by adding a footnote

<sup>9</sup>Vernon Loggins, *Where the Word Ends* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1958), 44, 46.



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"Gottschalk actually was thirteen when he left New Orleans for Paris." She even adds another footnote to Gottschalk's year 1841, "The year 1842, not 1841."<sup>10</sup> Through the 1980s estimates adhered to, transmitted, and indeed, etched the year 1842 in stone.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Gottschalk, *Notes* (1964), 46, 52.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Offergeld, *The Centennial Catalogue of the Published and Unpublished Compositions of Louis Moreau Gottschalk* (New York: Ziff Davis, 1970), 4, 33; Irving Lowens, "Gottschalk, Louis Moreau," *The New Grove Dictionary of*

Lacking both proof and unambiguous reports, it would have been just as possible to estimate 1841 as 1842. Yet, on the contrary, a chronology that claims that Edward Gottschalk ordered his family one early 1842 afternoon never to mention Moreau's impending separation is warped; and further projections compound the inaccuracies. "The boy, past twelve

*American Music* (London: MacMillan, 1986), v.2, 262; Gilbert Chase, *America's Music: From the Pilgrims to the Present* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 289.



now, felt little disappointment. Confident that his father was not going to let him down, he continued dreaming his dreams of Paris and engaged in his usual activities."<sup>12</sup>

This scenario clears the way for assuming that Gottschalk tarried at home after his public debut on April 23, 1841 until William Vincent Wallace, Gottschalk's *adulthood* colleague, appeared in New Orleans, by projecting that the boy accompanied that famous violinist (occasionally pianist) and composer.<sup>13</sup> And as Loggins hypothesizes, this activity could only follow Wallace's arrival, which Loggins alleges occurred on New Year's Day 1842.<sup>14</sup>

A skewed sense engenders skewed facts. Wallace did not actually arrive in the Crescent City until just before May 2, 1842, after which an announcement reads that he "has arrived in this city and intends shortly giving a concert, where he will perform on the violin and piano forte."<sup>15</sup> After June 16, no notice of Wallace is read. Nor, more significantly, is there any hint whatsoever of Gottschalk's participation or need for it at any event, public or private.

So influential was this unintended biographical deception that Behrend adds in a footnote to her edition of the *Notes* that Wallace "had known Gottschalk in 1842, before the boy's departure for Paris."<sup>16</sup> Behrend, as if to marshall confirmation, directs her readers to *The Adventures of Vincent Wallace in New Zealand* in the final pages of Berlioz's *Soirées de l'orchestre*. But in no edition of these reputable memoirs is there mention of Gottschalk, much less some early association that he may have had with Wallace. Other writers have uncritically accepted this imaginary version that has led even a specialist in our extraordinary American's music and travels to declare Wallace to be "Gottschalk's boyhood friend and mentor in New Orleans."<sup>17</sup> Not only these external ephemera but also internal evidence, Gottschalk's letter, give us ample reason to jettison all claims of some postponement of his sailing from his homeland.

Appearing on page four of the letter is Gottschalk's acknowledgment of his mother's pregnancy. Since baby sister Augusta is mentioned on page three

from a portrait accompanying an earlier letter from home, that new sibling-to-be would have to be Blanche, next to be born; her birth date was August 2, 1842.<sup>18</sup> But Gottschalk's receipt of notification of Aimée's pregnancy could hardly have been prior to late February, nor subsequent to early September 1842, after the birth, allowing the normal six weeks it took for news to cross the Atlantic. Nor can Gottschalk's affirmative answers, on page three, to his mother's query whether he has been to see his first teacher, Charles Hallé after Hallé's marriage, narrow the time interval.<sup>19</sup>

Also on page four of the letter, its author names a "Capt." Rogers who, he says, has mailed all the letters he had to send. This Rogers was the veteran master of the sailing ship *Taglioni*, the boy's transport to Le Havre. Loggins proposed May 17, 1842 as *Taglioni's* sailing date. Its actual date of departure from New Orleans was May 12, 1842. *Taglioni* did not arrive at Le Havre on that crossing before June 24, well after the June 8 and 9 date of the letter. The previous round trip began December 1841 under the supervision of a Captain Simpson. By January 28, 1842, *Taglioni* was loading at Le Havre to set sail by February 14 under Captain Rogers. It returned to New Orleans after a long crossing of fifty-one days, "causing serious worries" on April 9.<sup>20</sup>

Upon review of *Taglioni's* crossings, the only trip aboard this vessel under Captain Rogers that Gottschalk could have taken after his debut in New Orleans fell on the following Saturday, May 1, 1841.<sup>21</sup> For it, as for the other departures, we have no

<sup>18</sup> Claimed out of family tradition by Lawrence B. Glover, Blanche's great-grandson in a letter to the author dated September 23, 1989. There is no civil record of birth (New Orleans Board of Health official response dated November 30, 1989). A record of baptism, which might or might not indicate birth date, has been unobtainable from the Archdiocese of New Orleans.

<sup>19</sup> Hallé married in 1841. Michael Kennedy, "Hallé," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music* (London: MacMillan, 2000), 10, 704. It seems improbable that Aimée Gottschalk would have inquired about Hallé if Moreau had not still been his pupil. By the end of 1842, news that the teenager had met Mme. Hallé would have been stale. And by late 1842, Gottschalk and everyone in his circle should have seen the Hallés, probably several times, suggesting that Moreau had been in Paris for many months by the time he met Mme. Hallé.

<sup>20</sup> *Bee*, No. 103, Vol. IV, May 12, 1842.

<sup>21</sup> *Daily Picayune*, No. 82, Vol. V; *Bee*, No. 95, Vol. III, May 1, 1841. This is indeed the definitive date and circumstance as more recently reported by S. Frederick Starr, "Gottschalk, Louis Moreau," *The New Grove* (2000), 10, 199, correcting Irving Lowens' 17 May 1842 estimate in *The New Grove* (1980) 7, 571.

<sup>12</sup> Loggins, *Where the Word Ends*, 41.

<sup>13</sup> Loggins, *Where the Word Ends*, 44.

<sup>14</sup> Loggins, *Where the Word Ends*, 42.

<sup>15</sup> *The New Orleans Bee*, No. 94, Vol. IV, 2, col. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Gottschalk, *Notes* (1964), 46, note 2.

<sup>17</sup> Offergeld, *Centennial Catalogue*, 10.

passenger list. But we may be certain that among the voyagers to board was the eleven-year-old Moreau Gottschalk. Thus, the birthday that he remembered in his interview with Hensel as taking place while he was at sea would have been his twelfth birthday, which he celebrated on May 8, 1841. His application to the Paris Conservatoire was indeed made in 1841.

The twelve-year-old disembarked at Le Havre on June 19, but, again, we must rely on "Marine Intelligence" in New Orleans newspapers, not on an immigrating passenger list.<sup>22</sup> That Captain Rogers escorted the child to Paris is reasonably certain. In view of mail delivery announcements in the New Orleans press, we may be fairly sure that Moreau would have arrived in Paris within four days after stepping upon European soil, on or before June 23, 1841.

This consideration of the date of Gottschalk's sailing suggests a wider conclusion: that Gottschalk's own writings may be, in general, a more trustworthy source for the dates of his life than previously thought. Going further, certain interviewers, notably Didimus, Arpin and Fors, are in their turn not totally unreliable and in fact, may not have been accorded the credence they deserve. Their discussions, furthermore, might be due for reassessment with a critical eye adjusted to discern and analyze which *parts* of their content, rather than their whole, are right, which wrong. The process by which we have analyzed the facts itself shows unequivocally that we cannot trust all apocryphal scenarios without first seriously examining the word and in reporting from the source himself.

New Orleans

Paris 8 June 1842

My dear parents

You must be very anxious at not having received any letters received from me for such a long time, and you must think (rightly) that it is negligence on my part, but do not condemn me before having heard me. Thus I am going to try to plead my case in order to exonerate myself in your eyes and prove my innocence to you. I begin by explaining to you the cause of this delay. Ever since I had measles I have had frequent periods of illness which, without being serious, have hindered my writing you, with the result that when I would begin a letter and could not finish it the same day, I would be obliged to wait a week sometimes before being able to continue it, and this is

<sup>22</sup> *Bee*, No. 158, Vol. III, July 28, 1841, "list of Vessels—Foreign Ports." I am grateful to the late John Doyle for apprising me in a letter that names of minors are not given in published passenger lists.

what makes me so late. Now I greatly hope not to have more to write about sickness for I believe I am completely acclimated now.

I believe I have told you that I was to go to a masked ball; well, I have been, and I am going to depict my costume: I was in Louis XIII costume. I had a jerkin of sky blue velvet embroidered with silver stripes, short knee-breeches of dark purple velvet with buttons all the way down the pants leg and silver stripes, white silk buttons, little shoes *à la* Louis XIV with blue bows. My neck was bare and I wore a gray felt hat with a wide brim turned up on the side and a large white plume draping on the side. In sum, my costume was lovely, and Mrs. Dussert assured me that I was the best dressed of the whole ball. There was a grand supper which I could not have a taste of, since I had just recovered from an upset stomach. [I adjusted miserably] Everyone asked me to play something, and as I was tired I did not play but one little piece, very short. Despite that, they applauded me a great deal.

I was at a soirée at Mrs. Bradley's several days later, and I played a large piece from *Guillaume Tell*, which is filled with difficulties. I was applauded more than you can imagine. In short, I have been very pleased with myself ... [illegible line] [page 2] But, my dear parents, all that I have told you is not the greatest. Imagine my good fortune! Mr. Dussert met Thalbert [*sic*] when he [Thalberg] was quite young and, having learned that he was in Paris, took me to see him. At that time Thalbert had me play before him! Imagine my joy when I finished playing and Thalbert took my hands and said to Mr. Dussert "This child is amazing. He must take composition now, for I see what he will become from this." And I believe, dear Papa, that he is right. For if I knew how to put my ideas into music, I would do it quite fast, but I must learn composition beforehand.

Now I am going to tell you about the inside of my house: Mrs. Dussert is (I do not think[?] I tire of saying it) a mother to me, but I love her only almost as much as you, dear Mama. She is someone you would believe impossible to find. I am going to tell you what she told me the other day to prove the extent to which she loves me: She told me that if Papa ever found it impossible to let me stay in Paris, she would make all the plans[?] I would have to sacrifice [an immediate stardom] not to let my name appear and not to spoil myself. The [Mrs. Dussert's] mother is as good as the daughter. She is to take me into her country home for two months, because the doctor says that is what can make me [my health] better. I think I leave here toward the beginning of the month of August. So, dear Papa, please address your letters to me at Mr. R. Behot, spinner, at Rémyilly near Sedan (Ardennes). I greatly hope to [enjoy] myself there, because Charles will be there and will provide me with the hot baths of his grandfather's house. Around that time there will be a lot of fruit. We shall all have a little garden together. I cannot



tell you anything about the character of my friend, Charles, seeing that he is next to me and watches me write. You will know enough of him when I tell you that I have recognized him as a brother. I also have another brother, but he is grown. He is Mr. Garm[en]din(?). I regret very much that you do not know him, for he is easily the best fellow that I have ever known. [page 3]

Dear Mama, Mrs. Dussert told me that you would like me to have gone [before now] to see my Aunt Lagrange, and so I have looked everywhere for her address and then remembered that you never gave it to me. Dear Mama, do not believe that the acquaintance of Mrs. Lagrange is of very great use to me, for the more I do and the more I see how much egoism there is in Paris as well as in all big cities, the happier I am desiring nothing but your presence. I hope very much in two years and maybe less to be earning my living. It is then that I shall be content!

I am going to tell you about the presents that you have sent me: The portraits are very good likenesses, but I find that the fault in the portrait of Mama lies in that Mama is prettier than in her portrait; Papa is a striking resemblance, as well as all the children with the exception of Augusta. Her brush strokes had bubbled and had become a bit grated. The color had completely dried out and had become like unrefined [flaky?] sugar. The sweet potatoes were almost all spoiled with the exception of three, which I found delicious. The guavas are very good and everyone here finds them delicious. The candied sweet potatoes had also fermented and were like putty. I suspect that all this [four or five letters illegible] was [rest of line illegible] from [?] the case was damp. I thank my dear Uncle Gaston very much as well as Uncle August and Aunt Emilie for the gifts that they have sent me. Please tell them that I shall soon write them as well as Uncle George. Do not be too concerned about my unsightly handwriting. I would like to write better but I feel so obliged to write quickly that that is impossible for me.

The day is falling; I can no longer see clearly; I shall continue tomorrow.

June 184[worn off] Paris

Having reflected, dear Papa, I find that it would be more prudent [for you still to] address your letters to me in Paris, for if by chance I may not have left... [they] would be lost[?]. Now I am going to reread all your letters in order to omit nothing and to answer all your questions. Dear Mama, you ask me if I have yet gone to Mr. Hallé's since he got married. I have been there [illegible word or two] not to play, for Mrs. Hallé told me that she knew my Uncle [G?]ast[on] very well and [?]. She even charged me to tell him that he was [?] Criole and that he [?] his

friends[?] that it appears [that] my uncle [?] to return. [page 4]

You would not believe how much I have learned[?] with pleasure of the progress of the children. I have been quite worried since the last letter from Papa because the children have the measles, but one has to hope that they are well now. I learned with great distress of the death of Mr. Fehrman. I have not been to see Mrs. Barthe because I do not know exactly where she lives [five or six words deleted]. I believe I have already told you that all the sealed letters that I had have been mailed by Capt. Rogers at the time of my arrival here. By that [illegible word] I have not been able to go to see the Letellier Family. When I have time I shall write my dear Uncle Arnold as well as all my relatives.

I am going to give you several bits of information on Count Mamiani as you want. He is an Italian, a very good friend of Mr. [Mrs.?] Dussert. He is a very distinguished writer. He has done several works of philosophy as well as verses, which have very great success. He is wild about music and sentimental music [illegible word]. The Countess of Garscaut[?] is a relative of Mrs. Guibert.

[I] am going to speak to you of a new acquaintance I have made. She is the Countess, Lady [K?]rabowski, née Marchioness Bréhisée[?] I have been engaged [?] by her to go to a matinee musicale which she gave and at which I played. I was much applauded.

I learned with great pleasure [as well as ?] mixed with fears, that Mama is pregnant. Poor little brother [or sister ?] will only know me [when I am] older[?], but I hope to be able to write him as soon as she or he can understand me.

I believe that this is enough of that; I have no more room. So thus I finish my letter embracing you all and praying the good Lord to keep you in good health. Please tell my uncles and aunts that I shall certainly write them. I haven't been able to do it this time because I have not had the time.

I am taking advantage of the departure of Mr. Chapman, who is returning to England, to give him my letter, as he is not to leave for several days, and it might well be that I have something else to tell you. I do not close yet [knowing] that Mrs. Dussert is to write you as is Mr. Dussert. I have received all your letters through Mr. Tyler who has come to see me. He has given me news of all the family.

Good bye my dear and [good?] parents. I embrace you with all my heart.

Moreau Gottschalk

P.S. I beg you [forgive] my[?] haughty signature [with its] flourishes, etc.



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