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ABOUT SHAKESPEARE

TO BE OR NOT

I

Is life a tale told by an idiot? That is another question and some people are eager to spend their lifetimes in search of an answer to it, for there's nothing more important than the knowledge of what or who may earn the title of the 'driving force of the universe'. And what if there is no driving force, no force at all – just a momentum someone gathered somewhere so that we have no alternative but to follow the crowd of idiots? If we are created in the image of an idiot – of the creator of the universe – we cannot be otherwise: we have to follow in his (or her or its) footsteps, becoming what we are – idiots, in other words.

Truth seekers sit in their armchairs and say to themselves and probably to others, 'We won't budge an inch until we find out by whom this world of ours was created a long time ago. Apparently this stretch of time is longer than we thought at the beginning of the twentieth century and it grows longer and longer as we probe into the mystery of our life on earth that might have put up with our presence for billions of years. Our Mother is more patient than we used to think, but one hesitates to attribute this patience to her treasure house of wisdom because no one knows for sure – and Hamlet is no exception to this rule – whether it is better to drag one's feet on the threshold of death or plunge into it headlong, flouting tradition and taking no notice of the legendary canon that might destroy anyone before any solution is found to the eternal enigma. Actually one wonders why this canon makes no noise traditionally associated with death and battlefields where humanity wanders from one blackout to another, asking questions and providing answers which turn out to be a series of questions in disguise.

To be or not to be. Perhaps that is no question at all; it may be an answer we have been looking for ever since Shakespeare put a few finishing touches to his tragedy depicting the predicament of a man who cannot make up his mind, as Laurence Olivier put it. Derrida speaks about so-called undecidables and it is rather hard to come to terms with them, given that they fail to make up their minds as to what they really are and how they can be manipulated by a stranger, an outsider like Rosencrantz. Or Guildenstern: in the Kenneth Branagh production of *Hamlet*, the queen confuses Guildenstern with Rosencrantz and vice versa. Or is it the king we should take to task for this unwelcome and malevolent mixture, a harbinger of the disasters to come? Names *are* important and if you don't pay enough attention to them, they are likely to backfire and hurt all those who mishandle them viciously yet unconsciously.

To be or not to be. Try as you may, you are not allowed to squeeze any concession from the deity who presided over the conception and creation of the masterpiece: he or she will not tell you what all this means and why there is an undecidable at the very root of Hamlet's worries, of his eternal predicament and discomfiture. The more they play the masterful piece, the heavier grows the problem of suicide or its absence and the undecidable continues to hang in mid-air as if it was a balloon or even a dirigible: with the passing of the years, it has turned into a dirigible. Or, better still – into a

spacecraft that is about to go into orbit around the earth. How will this immortal (and immoral) undecidable kill time within outer space where there are no Hamlets, let alone Ophelias and Cordelias?

Beep, beep. Beep, beep. This reminds us of the first Sputnik, of its insolent calls that all but triggered off the Third World War. In the wake of its round trip, the Americans began to view their lives in terms of space competition. The programme they finally adopted had a lot in common with Hamlet's soliloquy: 'to beep or not to beep'. 'Not to beep' was tantamount to death, needless to say. The Americans won the competition and their soliloquy sounds thus, 'To beep, to beep, to beep.' And many *other* human beings do all they can to reach the plane of regard where the American beep can be heard and produced. When they do reach it, they shout, 'To beep, to beep, to beep,' rewriting Shakespeare and writing the future of humanity. They are right and others are not; anyway it is better to beep than not to beep at all. The progress of humanity does mean something, even if this progress boils down to two letters, namely 'e' and 'b': 'to beep', instead of 'to be'.

There are readers who, upon seeing Derrida's name anywhere, say out loud, 'He represents an insidious, fashionable strand of "French theory" – whatever that is. The usual philosophical humbug.' Actually they say so many different things one finds it hard to keep track of what Derrida says or does or rather used to do; he is dead after all, after all that has been said and done in his name, in any other name. No one can decide in whose name everything is done unless one is allowed to eavesdrop on the discussions one could be privy to in one of the abodes where the gods or God Himself and His angels look into the possibility of merging two notions: eternity and time. Or immortality and death. They merge and you become immortal, rich, and also Paris loved by Helen of Troy. What else do you need?

You don't need rivals, hatred and jealousy. So you have no wish to become Derrida who used to put up with lots of detractors whose views no one needs to discuss – at least within the framework of *Hamlet* where there are no Derridas, only a number of corpses. Why should you number them? Ask Pythagoras to do it and he would do it all the more artistically and scientifically, since he is likely to connect them to the stars. As a result, microcosm and macrocosm will merge once and for all, and *Hamlet* will be enacted until the very end of the cosmos, even though this end presupposes the disappearance of both playwrights and spectators. They disappear but *Hamlet* remains. Why? What for? *Hamlet* remains but Hamlet disappears; or vice versa. They cannot decide yet who will disappear first. Anyway italics seem to be our means of survival.

The legions of creatures, however, do not accept the formula according to which life hangs by a thread, for the italics related to our survival are even thinner and less reliable than any thread. Even if you say, 'I lost the thread of what I was saying,' you may rely on the words you might remember, provided you take the trouble to rack your brains or ask your friends what you were talking about. But the life that hangs by a thread does not depend on words and memory; the only instrument it might resort to is the italics which do not allow one much room for manoeuvre. Even 'to be or not to be' is much larger than any italics; what is more, within the same line you come across the word 'question' which is in a class of its own. Indeed you can talk about questions for hours and hours without offering

any answer to whatever you say or think. At least Hamlet finds no answer to his soliloquy, even though, for a while, he stays on the surface of the earth – and not amidst the skulls unearthed by the celebrated gravedigger – in order to avenge his father.

So a lot of people reject both italics and undecidables which are unreliable, in their opinion; at least they prefer words, ideas and even hollow promises. They opt for ‘decidables’ and quote the Bible, whenever asked to give a specimen of the notion designed to counteract the pernicious influence of Derrida’s pet hypothesis. According to English philosophers, the French excel in fabricated terms of shifty meaning; no wonder that these meanings shift from one pole to another, from ‘to be’ to ‘not to be’ as if life was limited and indeed bounded by Hamlet’s soliloquy, by the first half of its first line.

‘Everything I have done is dominated by the thought of a virus,’ says Derrida. And he affirms that the virus represents many things and also many threads that we must follow in the hope of understanding both Hamlet and Derrida, his babbling obfuscation. What are we talking about? About Hamlet’s madness; about the deconstruction to which Jacques Derrida devoted the greater part of his earthly existence. Babbling obfuscation. Polonius is eager to talk to Hamlet who, for some time, has been reading a book. Instead of saying, ‘I read about a man who hates humankind,’ or ‘I read about a saint,’ the Prince of Denmark embarks on yet another soliloquy which, however, is less well-known than the one where the question of life and death has been discussed at some length for more than three centuries. ‘Slanders, sir. For the satirical rogue says here that old men have gray beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum, and that they have a plentiful lack of wit together with most weak hams –’

Of course we know for sure that old men are disfigured by wrinkles. There is no point in reading about it: all you have to do is go to an old people’s home. We also know that no traveller returns from the Hereafter. What is Hamlet’s immortal soliloquy? A collection of truisms? Alec Guinness taught a part of it to his parrot. He might have bought a score of parrots; they would have recited the *whole* of the soliloquy.

Suppose Jacques Derrida listens to such a performance day and night, for a week. What is he likely to say at the end of the week? ‘I’m still none the wiser. No wonder I’ve got nowhere. The virus introduces disorder into communication, even in the biological sphere – a derailing of coding and decoding. Actually, a virus is not a microbe. It is neither living nor non-living, neither alive nor dead. The same goes for Hamlet. By the way, have you seen the film entitled *Hamlet Goes Business?*’

Upon hearing this title, one begins to wonder what it means, for Hamlet and business do not seem to have anything in common: like the Buddha, the Prince of Denmark lives in a palace and seldom goes out. And if he does, his itinerary includes neither offices nor other business-oriented places where one might, for instance, make a big profit from selling waste material to textile companies. Incidentally, at the beginning of the play he goes so far as to relinquish the project he had nursed for some time: going back to school in Wittenberg.

Unlike the Buddha, however, Hamlet knows a lot about death, thanks to his father's premature demise; and even though his knowledge of illnesses and their consequences is far less substantial – no supporting actor is seriously ill – his mother's recent marriage is good fodder for his innate melancholy disposition. The Buddha learns a lot about human suffering in the course of his first excursion; Hamlet does not need to go out in search of such knowledge which is indeed useful, for you are laying up trouble for yourself if you ignore the origin of suffering. You fall in love without giving a thought to the customs that govern human minds and destinies, forbidding you to marry a royal prince if you are not a princess yourself – especially if you live in the seventeenth century. And even if your father has a lot of affinities with Polonius, who does all he can to prevent Ophelia from making that grievous mistake, you might go mad in the twinkling of an eye. After all, Ophelia's words are just another poem on the pain of unrequited love. 'The pangs of dispriz'd love,' as Hamlet puts it, thinking about Ophelia, no doubt: in *his* life there is no such thing as unrequited love to cope with, as far as we know. An insignificant event is apt to trigger off the process at the end of which you drown in a nearby lake or land up in a mental institution. And we do not have to watch the denouement of Hamlet's story to attend Ophelia's funeral: the process itself lasts only half-an-hour.

Nietzsche spent more than ten years in a lunatic asylum, for his life did not unfold within the framework of a theatrical play. Of course, even Shakespeare thought that human life was akin to a tragedy or a comedy or both; yet no theatrical play puts our attention span to the test for more than forty years. How long did Nietzsche's mental health go downhill? The process might have lasted several years, if not the whole lifetime of the philosopher to whom many scholars turn only in the hope of finding yet another piece of evidence. They wish to prove that Nietzsche was mad for a long time; one does not have to bother about his philosophy, about our morals and their genealogy.

'What is disagreeable and offends my modesty is that at bottom I am every name in history. With the children I have put into the world too, I consider with some mistrust whether it is not the case that all who come into the kingdom of God also come out of God. This autumn I was blinded as little as possible when I twice witnessed my funeral, first as Conte Robilant (no, that is my son, insofar as I am Carlo Alberto, unfaithful to my nature); but Antonelli I was myself.' 'Thank you for your letter dated January 6, 1889,' wrote Jacob Burckhardt. This is a piece of evidence you may be looking for, if you are Nietzsche's detractor and not his lifelong admirer. But you should keep in mind that the above letter is one of the last samples of Nietzsche's handwriting: early that January, he collapsed on the street in Turin. According to Walter Kaufmann, he fell on the pavement and threw his arms around the neck of a mare that had just been flogged by a coachman. How many days did the process last? Anyway this letter does not prove that Nietzsche was mad for many years.

Nietzsche's confession does not come as a complete surprise to those who know how much he wrote about Dionysus, Christ and other people with whom he seemed to identify at the end of his *conscious* life. His thoughts and ideas were swarming with names, and in the long run your body *may* turn into your thoughts – if you neglect your body and coddle your thoughts. But it is surprising to find

to what extent Ophelia unconsciously identified with Nietzsche in Act Four of Shakespeare's masterpiece: in the course of this act she came to embody the whole of humanity.

Some scholars maintain that Nietzsche was not out of his wits even when he signed his letters thus: 'Dionysus', 'The Crucified'. Churchgoers, on the other hand – practising Catholics, for instance – are likely to affirm that only madness could inspire the following excerpt from *The Antichrist*: 'Ultimately, it is a matter of the end to which one lies. That "holy" ends are lacking in Christianity is my objection to its means. Only *bad* ends: poisoning, slander, negation of life, contempt for the body, the degradation and self-violation of man through the concept of sin – consequently its means too are bad.' The first sentence seems to imply that Christianity is nothing but a tissue of lies. The second is no better than the first: it denies the presence of 'holy ends' within the holy books to which any true Christian owes her very existence. Ophelia, for instance. Doesn't she sing: 'God a mercy on his soul'? Incidentally, this is the last line she utters in the play. Let us not forget that our last words count much more than our first words and any other words we may resort to in the course of our lives. Last words reveal the genealogy of our thoughts, attitudes and manners.

'Only *bad* ends,' says Nietzsche. 'Poisoning, slander, negation of life, contempt for the body –' It is as if he was writing a doctoral thesis on *Hamlet*. A few quotations are sure to substantiate this hypothesis.

Poisoning needs no theoretical support: Hamlet thinks only in terms of poisons, rapiers and daggers. It is little wonder that his mother asks him not to speak to her any longer: 'These words like daggers enter my ears.' Yet she did not overhear the train of thought that Hamlet indulged in on his way to his mother's closet, 'I will speak daggers to her, but use none.'

In the Laurence Olivier production, Hamlet holds a bodkin – a short dagger – and at the end of the soliloquy destiny sends it plummeting down a cliff. The key to success is to be in the right place at the right time, as they say. Obviously the rock is *not* the right place: Claudius never goes there so you have to kill him elsewhere. As for the right time, Hamlet could commit his murders only when the time was ripe; otherwise he would not have succeeded so majestically.

Negation of life. 'How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world! / Fie on't, ah fie, 'tis an unweeded garden / That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely.' Beauty is in the eye of the beholder; so is ugliness. Gogol, for one, saw only monsters in the world; only nature found favour with him. Incidentally, Hamlet would have got on with Gogol: they were on the same wavelength. In the former's soliloquy, the unweeded garden is touched upon metaphorically. 'I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame the earth seems to me a sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours.'

Of course one might experience another onslaught of the will-to-live even when surrounded on all sides by pestilent vapours. Yet the persistent denial of beauty that one encounters almost everywhere is certainly tantamount to what Nietzsche calls 'negation of life'. Of course Christianity is not the only religion one could blame for the defilement of life. The human body is arguably the most beautiful object in the universe: after all, it does its best to reproduce God or at least His image. 'The printing was too faint to reproduce well,' say misanthropes, but the gilded youth of the Clinton era did not listen to them. Be that as it may, Buddhists disparage the human body: 'From the sole of the feet upwards, from the top of the head downwards, in this carcass, bounded by the skin all round, and about six feet in length, although one may search everywhere, one does not see the least trace of anything that is actually pure, in the sense in which pearls, jewels, lapis lazuli, aloe wood, saffron, camphor, or aromatic powders are pure. But all one can see are manifold impurities, which consist of hairs of the head, hairs of the body, etc., and which are extremely malodorous, repulsive and unsightly.' Of course Buddhism is a discipline, not a religion as such, but this detail should not concern a scholar determined to unravel Hamlet's mystery. Incidentally Horatio also makes a contribution to the ritual called 'negation of life'. Doesn't he say in the last scene, 'I am more an antique Roman than a Dane'?

Slander. In *Hamlet Goes Business*, Gertrude says that her late husband was a tyrant. Scholars applaud Shakespeare's decision to remain silent over the issue. Consequently no one is eager to question the following description of his picture:

*See what a grace was seated on this brow,
Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself,
An eye like Mars to threaten and command,
A station like the herald Mercury
New-lighted on a heaven-kissing hill,
A combination and a form indeed
Where every god did seem to set his seal
To give the world assurance of a man.*

Of a superman, rather. Or of a super god in whose features one finds simultaneously Jove, Mars and Mercury. 'Edwin Booth...paused after "man", giving it as if something higher than "king"' (Dowden). In Act One, Hamlet says to Horatio, 'A was a man, take him for all in all: / I shall not look upon his like again.' The word sounds all the more imposingly since Horatio says to Hamlet, 'I saw him once; a was a goodly king.' 'My formula for the greatness of a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different – not forward, not backward, not in all eternity' (Nietzsche). What is more, this human being or overman is supposed not only to *accept* his destiny, but also to *enjoy* the very process of trial and error to which one is subjected throughout one's life. The same goes for overwomen, and

in the light of this conclusion we realise that Ophelia is *not* of their number. Nor does the late King of Denmark belong to the club of overmen, contrary to what Hamlet might think.

His attitude towards his late father is quite ambiguous and one should not draw any conclusions upon hearing him say to the ghost: 'King, father, royal Dane. O answer me.' Indeed, at this point his attitude towards the ghost is more than respectful, given that most actors go on their knees as they listen to the ghost's story. But a few minutes later, the ghost vanishes into thin air and only his voice remains as he says to Hamlet's companions, 'Swear.' The voice comes from under the stage and Hamlet treats him in an offhand manner, 'Ah ha, boy, say'st thou so? Art thou there, truepenny?' Of course he is no longer frightened: a voice is less fearsome than one of the living dead who walks the night and tells his stories. Besides, this voice sounds *under* the stage; one gets the feeling one might trample upon it. But there is more to it than meets the eye.

Hamlet has no inkling of how an overman strides and what he might say during a nocturnal conversation. He may assume the identity of a king, but even a beggar is permitted to become an overman on condition that he *enjoys* 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'. Appearances can be deceptive because neither a beard nor a suit of armour are the signs on which one may rely when tackling the problem of overmanhood. What counts is the peace of mind and the behaviour that Hamlet admires wholeheartedly as he looks at Horatio and analyses his way of life:

*... for thou hast been
As one, in suff'ring all, that suffers nothing,
A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards
Hast ta'en with equal thanks; and blest are those
Whose blood and judgment are so well commeddled
That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger
To sound what stop she please.*

It is as if Hamlet was saying to Fortune and not to Guildenstern: 'Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me. You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery, you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass; and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak.' Alas, Fortune knows how to handle all pipes, all organs, all pianos and all other instruments. Her orchestra – she is a woman, isn't she? – resounds everywhere and even stoics do not always thank her for the buffets that Hamlet brings up as he talks to Horatio before the performance of the play entitled *The Mousetrap*.

Hamlet constantly thinks in terms of poisons, rapiers, daggers and *small rodents*. Goaded by Hamlet's ingenious scheme, Claudius assumes the identity of a mouse, for it is easier to catch a small rodent than to assassinate a king – that is how the Prince of Denmark deliberates on what method to use so as to keep his promise; and he is right, although he does not know that Russian terrorists went

through a lot in order to achieve their objectives: the assassination of Alexander II and the Russian Revolution. So Hamlet catches the mouse, alias the King of Denmark, and begins to torture him before dealing a coup de grâce to his wretched existence: there is a brilliant coup de théâtre at the end of the play.

Polonius hides behind an arras. A minute later he cries, 'What ho! Help!' whereupon Hamlet thrusts his rapier through the arras. He knows that rats never cry 'what ho', not even when the Pied Piper of Hamelin sets about disposing of them. And yet he cries, 'How now? A rat! Dead for a ducat, dead.' It is as if the whole earth was inhabited only by small rodents. 'What piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals – and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?' That is the question. What is the answer? A small rodent. (The paragon of animals?)

Claudius makes no claim on the honorary title of 'overman': judging from his abortive prayer, he does not *enjoy* the foul murder he perpetrated to dispose of the King of Denmark. Yet he does enjoy his crown and his queen which are permanently tainted by his remorse; otherwise he would not have cried at the end of *The Mousetrap*, 'Give me some light.' What for? To whiten his bosom. ('O bosom black as death!') What about the late King of Denmark? Instead of paying tribute to his fate, he takes the trouble to come back to earth, anxious as he is to make his son avenge the foul murder from which he continues to suffer as if the poison was still coursing through the natural gates and alleys of his body. One wonders why he cannot do it himself, like any DIY enthusiast. Why indeed not follow in Banquo's footsteps? It is true that Macbeth did not die upon seeing Banquo's corpse at the dinner table, but Claudius is far less valourous than Macbeth and the late King of Denmark might have taken advantage of his pusillanimity. In the last scene, Claudius does not have the guts to confront Hamlet. (He ought to have picked up Laertes' rapier.) What is more, he implores his friends not to let him die. 'O yet defend me, friends. I am but hurt.' In the Peter Brook production, however, the King does not budge, saying, 'This must be so.'

What about Ophelia? Is she an overwoman? Or a superwoman? Nowadays, when talking about men, one should not forget to touch upon women, if only nonchalantly. It is clear that Ophelia is no candidate for the job: she is not likely to 'go business' in the kingdom of overwomanhood where Lady Macbeth must hold an important post. After all, she can be excused for losing her head and heart at the end of every performance.

What about Hamlet himself? No one has ever said about him: 'The Prince of Denmark is a stoic by nature and found it hard to express his grief when his mother died.' Laurence Olivier weeps rather often in the film that he directed and produced. And if the character he plays so brilliantly does not get his own way, he invariably has temper tantrums which are hardly suitable for the hero one is supposed to embody in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 'The Commander over men,' writes Carlyle in his book dedicated to heroes; 'he to whose will our wills are to be subordinated, and loyally surrender

themselves, and find their welfare in doing so, may be reckoned the most important of Great Men. He is practically the summary for us of *all* the various figures of heroism; Priest, Teacher, whatsoever of earthly or of spiritual dignity we can fancy to reside in a man, embodies itself here, to *command* over us, to furnish us with constant practical teaching, to tell us for the day and hours what we are to *do*. He is called Rex, Regulator, Roi: our own name is still better; King, *Könning*, which means *Can*-ning, Ableman.'

Is Hamlet fit for the job? What kind of practical teaching can he impart to his subjects? Can he command over them? He cannot even make up his own mind, according to Laurence Olivier and many other admirers of the play. Of course there are people who obey his every command: Horatio and Marcellus, for example. He says to them, 'Never make known what you have seen tonight.' And they promise they will never speak about it – not even under torture, presumably. 'Nay, but swear't,' he says as if doubting his ability to impose his will on others without any *substantial* support traditionally associated with the Bible. Don't they swear on the Bible in courts and elsewhere? There is no Bible at the spot where the ghost revealed his secret to Hamlet and therefore the latter uses his sword as a substitute for it. 'Upon my sword,' he says. Marcellus is reluctant to obey this order: 'We have sworn, my lord, already,' he says. 'Indeed, upon my sword, indeed,' says Hamlet. The repetition of the word 'indeed' betrays his incapacity to make people act in accordance with his desire by means of a short command, of one word. You just say to them, 'Swear' and raise your sword. No need to repeat 'indeed'. No need to raise your sword.

What is more, the ghost feels duty bound to come to his son's rescue: he must be aware of the latter's shortcomings, of his anti-Schopenhauerian will. He cries under the stage, 'Swear.' And he adds later on, 'Swear by his sword.' They obey at last. Actually, Hamlet is not blind to his own weakness and he speaks about it at length after meeting a captain from Fortinbras' army, who informs him that the bone of contention is limited to 'a little patch of ground / That hath in it no profit but the name'. Upon the captain's departure, Hamlet embarks upon a soliloquy in which he talks about his 'dull revenge' and Fortinbras 'whose spirit, with divine ambition puff'd –'. Is Hamlet's ambition divine? Fortinbras goes business.

King, *Könning*, Ableman. 'Find in any country the Ablest Man that exists there; raise *him* to the supreme place, and loyally reverence him: you have a perfect government for that country –' Fortinbras is better at the job than Hamlet. 'I cannot live to hear the news from England, / But I do prophesy th'election lights / On Fortinbras,' says Hamlet hoping that the English would follow Carlyle's advice. What about his own country? His father 'smote the sledded Polacks on the ice' and defeated Fortinbras' father, according to Hamlet's uncle who is incidentally the next candidate for overman's job. Alas, poor King. In the shape of the ghost he behaves like Polonius about whom his murderer says, 'Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell.' *Hic et ubique*.

What do we know about Claudius? He poisons his brother and usurps the throne. Max Stirner, for one, affirms that life is the epitome of struggle: you may kill anybody for the sake of your own

survival, provided you are not caught in the act or after it. Everything is permitted in the world where only chaos and various forces reign to the detriment of order and harmony that one can hear only in music. The crime upon which the masterpiece is centred may be qualified as perfect and the intruding fool – the ghost – seems to supply a tangible proof of the skill possessed by his brother: the crime would have remained perfect, but for his ghastly interference. The ghost's selfishness is obvious; he disregards his country's prosperity for the sake of his petty animosity. What would become of Denmark had Hamlet ascended the throne? '... the native hue of resolution / is sickled o'er with the pale cast of thought, / And enterprises of great pitch and moment / With this regard their currents turn awry / And lose the name of action.' And Claudius knows that actions speak louder than words and thoughts.

His fate is somewhat akin to that of Boris Godunov. The Russians know what Pushkin wrote about his reign in a play which, in foreign lands, is mostly known through Mussorgsky's opera. Both Mussorgsky and Pushkin depict the tsar as a murderer whose conscience almost drives him mad as it dwells on the victim and his corpse. 'Before your eyes...the bloody child... / There...over there...what's that? Over there in the corner! / It sways, it grows...Draws near...trembles and groans!... / Away, away!...It was not I!...' And of course music lovers remember the simpleton who refuses to pray for the tsar: 'I can't pray for King Herod!... 'Death to Boris!' sings the crowd. 'Death to Claudius!'

And yet the Encyclopaedia Britannica is lavish in its praise for the tsar's policy and achievements. It is a pity that no information on Claudius' reign can be found in it.

Godunov conducted a war against Sweden (1590-95), by which he gained along the Gulf of Finland ground that had been lost by Ivan IV, repulsed a Tatar raid on Moscow (1591), and generally pursued an anti-Turkish policy. In addition, he promoted foreign trade; built numerous defensive towns and fortresses; recolonised Western Siberia, which had been slipping from Moscow's control; and arranged for the head of the Muscovite Church to be raised from the level of metropolitan to patriarch (1589) [...] Tsar Boris, proving himself to be an intelligent and capable ruler, undertook a series of benevolent policies, reforming the judicial system, sending students to be educated in Western Europe, allowing Lutheran churches to be built in Russia, and, in order to gain power on the Baltic Sea while maintaining peaceful relations with Russia's neighbour's, entering into diplomatic negotiations for the acquisition of Livonia.

Claudius' achievements could not differ much from what the Encyclopaedia Britannica says in relation to Boris Godunov's importance. But it is more exciting to write about a murder and a guilty conscience. What is more, a gross distortion of the facts pays off – at least in the domain of literature. Let us not forget Richard III and *his* literary fate.

II

Hamlet goes business. What kind of business? It was a ghastly business all round, as some American scholar put it. What? The whole play or only the murders? What about his madness, her madness? They go mad; they go business. How do they go about it?

Ophelia's madness has nothing to do with her will and if we are resolved to use the word 'will' when discussing her case, or rather her case history, we had better use the German equivalent of it – *Wille*. This may remind us of Schopenhauer and his doctrine which would certainly have influenced Hamlet, had he lived at the end of the nineteenth century. He did not and whatever happened to him was subservient to his will or to the absence of it.

The *Wille* dominates the play – and all other plays, for that matter – so that even Yorik's skull appears on the stage as if to compete against the late king's ghost. What for? For the honorary title of living dead. Schopenhauer thinks that even stones are driven and pushed around by the *Wille*. Why not skulls? Even Hamlet cannot prevent Schopenhauer's notion from dragging him out of bed and shortly after away from Ophelia's room. But neither Ophelia nor her father is tempted to explain Hamlet's behaviour by saying to each other, 'He's busy. He's in business.' Claudius, on the other hand, is *always* in business, and he knows that the way to be successful in business is *always* to stay one jump ahead of your competitors. And Hamlet *is* a competitor in spite of his chronic sluggishness. After all, his father could abdicate in his favour and thereby deprive Claudius of his rights. So he decides to take matter into his own hands. He goes business, in other words.

So does Hamlet when he says to himself that he should revenge his father. 'I make it my business to kill his murderer,' he says to himself. How does he go about it? Suppose you kill somebody and they put you in prison. You undergo a medical examination and they conclude that you are mad. So, instead of making you spend a few minutes in the electric chair, they send you to a mental hospital. And Hamlet prefers hospitals to the gallows and the guillotine: he is not mad as a hatter. Children often pretend they are dinosaurs; Hamlet pretends that his 'wit's diseased'. In a way, he behaves like a child.

You say to a child, 'You should go to bed.'

'My bed is too small for me,' says the child.

'You're much smaller than your bed,' you say to him.

'No, I'm much bigger. I'm a dinosaur.'

Or you say to your child, 'You should eat this porridge.'

'I won't,' says your child.

'Why not?'

'Because dinosaurs don't eat porridge.'

If you are asked a question, you can tell a lot of lies. Hamlet has seen Polonius for some time and he knows that Ophelia is his daughter. Yet he pretends he knows nothing of the kind. Polonius

asks him, ‘Do you know me, my lord?’ ‘Excellent well. You are a fishmonger,’ answers Hamlet. He knows that Polonius is a councillor of State. But he also knows that, if a fishmonger has a daughter, she has a more than ordinary propensity to breed. So he says upon ‘learning’ that Polonius has a daughter, ‘Let her not walk i’ th’ sun. Conception is a blessing, but as your daughter may conceive – friend, look to’ t.’ That is why Polonius says to himself, ‘Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t.’ And if you have method in your madness, you are not really mad. At least you may hope to recover and land up in a courtyard where the gallows await you at dawn.

So Hamlet must have said to himself, ‘If Polonius questions me about his own identity, I shouldn’t say to him, “You’re a fishmonger” because there’s method in’t. And I should banish both logic and method from my train of thought, from my answers. I’d better say to Polonius, “You’re a butcher.” But if I utter this word in his presence, he *might* think I accuse him of my father’s murder. After all, he *might* have given my uncle a helping hand. He *might* have mixed a few ingredients to create the poison my father was talking about in the course of our conversation. What was it actually? Can’t remember. My father’s memory is far better than mine. So I shouldn’t mention butchers and their daughters – at least not in Polonius’ presence. No method, no method. I’ll say, “You’re a pianist.” In my century no one knew what kind of instrument the piano was. And H. G. Wells invented the time machine in 1895.

Polonius asks Hamlet, ‘Do you know me, my lord?’

‘Of course I do,’ says Hamlet. ‘You’re a pianist.’

‘A pianist, my lord?’

‘Yes, a pianist.’

‘What do you mean, my lord?’

‘I mean that you’re a pianist. Don’t you know anything about the piano?’

‘No, my lord.’

‘What a pity. A wonderful instrument. Much better than the pipes. Can’t you play the piano?’

‘No, my lord.’

‘Do you think I am a musical instrument?’

‘No, my lord.’

‘You don’t know the piano. Nor do you know my ego. Yet you’re eager to “play upon me”, as I say to Guildenstern. Why not say that to you? Are you any better than Guildenstern? Of course not. Birds of a feather, as they say. Please don’t think “there is method in’t”. No, not at all. No method, no method. I am *really* mad, believe me. Don’t you believe me? What could persuade you I am mad? Should I dance for you? All right, I’ll dance for you. Don’t you like my dance? You do? Why? Because “there is method in’t”? A sort of harmony? What do you mean by method, actually? You may know me a little bit. But do I know I like tomatoes? Do you know I grow tomatoes myself? In my garden? Do you want me to show you *how* I grow them? My method of growing tomatoes never fails. It doesn’t mean I’m not mad – even madmen can grow tomatoes, provided they use *my* method of

growing them. The same goes for women. Even Ophelia can grow tomatoes. She can't swim, apparently. Never mind, never mind. You can grow tomatoes on a muddy river-bed, can't you?

'Good my lord,' says Guildenstern, 'Vouchsafe me a word with you.'

'Sir, a whole history,' says Hamlet. What history? His own? The history of Shakespeare's play? Peter Brook, Zeffirelli. Of course this answer is not *quite* normal. But one wonders why Hamlet did not pick up on the word 'word'. He might have answered, 'A word, sir? One word? Say it. Which word do you have in mind? Mother? Father? What of them? Do you wish to utter the word "lord"? You did utter it. So what? Do you mean to say I'm your lord and master? Actually one word doesn't exist on its own – you have to elaborate on your reasons for uttering it. Or you just have to explain its meaning. And don't forget that your explanation will need another explanation. And so on and so forth. That's why when I hear, "Vouchsafe me a word with you," I know I'm bound to regret my generosity, if I agree to listen to what other people have to say in my presence. I know that sooner or later I'll say to myself, "That meeting achieved absolutely nothing – it was a complete waste of time."'

Ay, there's the rub: if you construct a logical argument, no one will believe you are mad. No method, no method. But there is such a thing as a *super*logical argument and that is what Shakespeare counts upon as he writes his play. Polonius continues to speak to Hamlet and finds that sometimes his answers are *pregnant*, as he puts it. And he adds self-deprecatingly: '... a happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of.' Does he imply that only a madman can write a masterpiece? It is not enough to construct a logical argument, saying that life is not a piece of cake. Unfortunately, accidents are part of it and you cannot get rid of them, even if you go to the gym twice a week. A work-out in the gym will exercise all the major muscle groups – everybody knows that. But not everybody goes to the gym twice a week and so many people drop like flies. But you do not, for you are in good health. You do not have to give up drinking for health reasons: you have never drunk alcohol, not even in your boisterous youth. Well, it is a wonderful life. And suddenly you fall like a fly. You do not die; you just fall off a cliff. The accident leaves you paralysed from the waist down. You can no longer go to the gym. What to do? You suffer from impaired vision, from impaired hearing. Nowadays we say someone is 'speech-impaired', not dumb. But you know you are dumb and you say to yourself, day in day out, 'I'm dumb, I'm dumb, I'm dumb. I'm a hearing-impaired adult. I'm a vision-impaired adult.' In the long run, however, you grow weary of these words. You begin to muse on the possibility of starting a new life or taking your old life.

To be or not to be, that is the question.

I wonder what Hamlet would have done in my shoes.

His vision wasn't impaired because he saw

The ghost of his own father.

And even eagle-eyed individuals

Don't always see ghosts.
He also knew a hawk from a handsaw.
He walked about, talking to many people:
To Ophelia, to the actors, to Polonius,
To his mother, to his father.
I can't talk to anyone except myself,
Except myself, except myself.
Why should I suffer the slings and arrows
Of my outrageous fortune?
What's the difference between a corpse
And myself? Don't I already lie in my coffin?
Of course I breathe and eat. Corpses do not.
What do I eat for? To feel my suffering more acutely?
I'd better campaign for the right to euthanasia.
How? What a pity I can't make my quietus
With a revolver. Or anything else, for that matter.
With sleeping pills, for instance.
Apparently deep sleep is identical to death.
No dreams. And what if you do dream in the great Beyond?
What about? Frying pans? Pangs of conscience?
No point in going as far as the Hereafter
To get hold of what you've got in abundance.
The dread of something after death.
Out of the frying pan into the fire.

'Not to be' – the answer given by Tony Nicklinson. Millions saw him outside the high court in his wheelchair. He was distressed at the refusal of the court to give him the assurance he had requested. 'If someone helps me to commit suicide, this person shouldn't be charged with murder.' The high court did all it could to prevent him from putting an end to his life with the help of a doctor. Nicklinson, 58, was paralysed from the neck down. He was able to communicate only by interacting with a computer through blinking and moving his head. But he had one option left – refusing food. This he did. On August 23, 2012, he finally got what he had been dreaming about. Perchance to dream.

How does an *ordinary* citizen reflect on life and death? 'Should I commit suicide or not? I'm neither happy nor unhappy. Of course I suffer from time to time. And I suffer more often than a human being is supposed to suffer in this vale of tears. My joy comes and goes; my suffering stays in my bosom all the time. But life is beautiful, nonetheless. I like the sky and I listen to the birds whenever they deign to sing. Life *is* beautiful to some extent and, all in all, I think it's worth my

attention. I have no idea what awaits me beyond the grave, whereas I'm used to my flat and furniture. I'm also used to my wife whose whims and temper tantrums don't trouble me any more. Besides, I'm not fond of revolvers and skyscrapers. Would I swallow a dozen sleeping pills if I decided to leave this life forever? I don't think so. How difficult it is to commit suicide! It's much easier to take a couple of aspirins if you've got toothache. After all, you must know a good dentist. Why not have all your teeth out? You don't need teeth to drink wine. And any wine is better than coffins and tombstones. Even a gall stone is better than a tombstone. So I will not commit suicide.'

That is how an ordinary citizen is likely to muse on the subject of life and death. You can take off your hat with a flourish. You can just take it off. Shakespeare's speech is full of rhetorical flourishes; one might mistake him for Hamlet who cannot give a wholesome answer to whoever questions him. And even when he talks to himself, he deviates from the norm, and one is tempted to use the word 'orotund' to describe his way of expressing his thoughts. Was Shakespeare mad?

'When we have shuffled off this mortal coil –' Why not just say, 'When I'm dead –'? 'For who would bear the whips and scorns of time –' Why not express it pithily? 'For who would suffer –' No one overhears Hamlet's interior monologue except stage directors, actors and theatre goers. Why can't he limit his musings to a few commonplaces? But talking to oneself is one thing, talking to others is quite another – especially if you are bent on passing yourself off as a lunatic.

Ham. Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?

Pol. By th'mass and 'this – like a camel indeed.

Ham. Methinks it is like a weasel.

Pol. It is backed like a weasel.

Ham. Or like a whale.

Pol. Very like a whale.

Ham. Then I will come to my mother by and by.

Why does Hamlet talk nonsense? Because he wishes to pass himself off as a lunatic. He also probes deep into Polonius' loyalty and mental disposition. Is he prepared to agree with whatever Hamlet says and does? Well and good. But why did Hamlet stop? He might have gone on indefinitely, playing for time. Had he done so, he would not have paid a visit to his mother; nor would he have killed Polonius. He would never have got killed himself. He would never have avenged his father.

Ham. Don't you think this cloud looks like an old man?

Pol. Ay, my lord.

Ham. Why?

Pol. Because it looks like an old man.

Ham. Any old man?

Pol. Ay, my lord.

Ham. You, for instance?

Pol. Why not, my lord?

Ham. Do you remember what I said about you in Act Two?

Pol. No, my lord.

Ham. And yet the King says you're a faithful and honourable man.

Pol. I hope I am, my lord.

Ham. I don't think so.

Pol. I'm sorry to hear that.

Ham. Do you know why I don't think so?

Pol. No, my lord.

Ham. So you don't know my thoughts.

Pol. No, my lord.

Ham. You can't unravel my mystery. So much the better.

Pol. I hope so, my lord.

Ham. You don't remember what I said about you in Act Two. Do you?

Pol. I don't, my lord.

Ham. I said you had a gray beard.

Pol. I remember it now, my lord.

Ham. I still believe you have a gray beard. Am I right?

Pol. You are, my lord.

Ham. And your face is wrinkled, is it not?

Pol. It is, my lord.

Ham. Doesn't yonder cloud look like a face?

Pol. It does, my lord.

Ham. Does it look like a *wrinkled* face?

Pol. My lord, the Queen would speak to you, and presently.

Ham. Does the yonder cloud look like a wrinkled face?

Pol. It does, my lord.

Ham. Your eyes are purging thick amber and plum-tree gum. Aren't they?

Pol. They are, my lord.

Ham. Don't you have a plentiful lack of wit, together with most weak hams?

Pol. I do, my lord.

Ham. And what about yonder cloud?

Pol. I'm sorry, my lord.

Ham. Doesn't it display your characteristics?

Pol. It does, my lord.

Ham. Don't you think it is your mirror?

Pol. I do, my lord.

Ham. Do you often look at yourself?

Pol. I'm sorry, my lord?

Ham. You should, you should. Look at this cloud. That's what you are. If you wish to become what you are, you should look at this cloud.

Pol. I will, my lord.

Ham. Clouds are mirrors, you know. They say that our eyes are the mirrors of our souls. They're mistaken.

Pol. They are, my lord.

Ham. It is clouds that are the mirrors of our souls, not eyes.

Pol. You're right, my lord.

Ham. Don't you think this cloud looks like your immortal soul?

Pol. I do, my lord.

Ham. Is this cloud also immortal?

Pol. Ay, my lord.

Ham. Do you know what happens when the sun shines on a sunny day?

Pol. No, my lord.

Ham. All clouds vanish into thin air. Do you know what that means?

Pol. What, my lord?

Ham. Thin air.

Pol. No, my lord.

Ham. The air which is as thin as a rake. The Americans say that.

Pol. Really, my lord?

Ham. Of course. Do you like nature?

Pol. I do, my lord.

Ham. Do you think that God is inside it?

Pol. Ay, my lord.

Ham. So He is not beyond yonder cloud, is He?

Pol. My lord, the Queen would speak to you, and presently.

Ham. You haven't answered my question.

Pol. I'm afraid theology is completely beyond me.

Ham. Is God beyond you too?

Pol. Perhaps – I am a cloud after all, yonder cloud.

Ham. So God is beyond clouds, isn't He?

Pol. He is everywhere, my lord.

Ham. Is he also inside your body?

Pol. He is, my lord.

Ham. Do you feel Him?

Pol. I do, my lord.

Ham. How do you communicate with Him? Through your heart, your reason or your intuition?

Pol. Through my body and soul, my lord.

Ham. Do you know that intuition is very important?

Pol. I do, my lord.

Ham. It is much more important than the brain, isn't it?

Pol. It is, my lord.

Ham. And my intuition says my father was poisoned in his orchard.

Pol. Really, my lord? You mean he was bitten by a poisonous serpent.

Ham. No.

Pol. What *do* you mean?

Ham. It's time this issue was brought out into the open. Is that what *you* mean?

Pol. Ay, my lord.

Ham. No, you will reveal it.

Pol. Not I, my lord, by heaven.

Ham. What do you think of ghosts?

Pol. There's no such thing as ghosts, my lord.

Ham. And what if they exist? Can they impart bad news?

Pol. Dead men tell no tales. My lord, the Queen would speak to you, and presently.

Ham. Do you think they killed my father because he knew too much?

Pol. I don't think so. Serpents don't care about human secrets.

Ham. Don't they? Do you think they wear crowns? Some of them?

Pol. I don't think so, my lord.

Ham. Are there no kings among serpents?

Pol. No kings, no queens.

Ham. What about bees? Don't they have queens?

Pol. They do, my lord.

Ham. Do they have more affinities with humans than serpents?

Pol. Ay, my lord.

Ham. Are you a conformist?

Pol. How do you mean, my lord?

Ham. In our kingdom, you're required to conform, and there's no place for originality.

Pol. You're a highly original young prince.

Ham. I humbly thank you.

Pol. My lord, the Queen would speak to you, and presently.

Ham. Do you want to play with me?

Pol. To play with you, my lord?

Ham. Why not? I didn't say 'to play *upon* me', did I?

Pol. You didn't, my lord.

Ham. You cannot play upon me, mind you. Is that clear?

Pol. Ay, my lord.

Ham. I'm waiting for an answer.

Pol. A game of cops and robbers?

Ham. Words, words, words.

Pol. I beg your pardon?

Ham. Let us play with words.

Pol. I don't know the rules of this game.

Ham. I say a word and you include it in a sentence. The word is 'business'. Are you ready?

Pol. Ay, my lord.

Ham. A sentence, please.

Pol. I can't play this game, my lord. I have not the skill.

Ham. I'll give you an example. Mind your own business.

Pol. My lord, the Queen would speak to you, and presently.

Ham. Did you hear me? Mind your own business.

Pol. My lord –

Ham. You're an interfering old busybody – who I go out with is none of your business!

Pol. [aside] Still harping on my daughter.

Ham. How I choose to conduct my private life is my own business!

Pol. Of course, my lord.

Ham. Our firm does a lot of business with overseas customers.

Pol. Does it, my lord?

Ham. Otherwise they wouldn't send me to England.

Pol. My lord, the Queen would speak to you, and presently.

Ham. I gave them theatre tickets as a present. Did they like the play?

Pol. My lord, the Queen would speak to you, and presently.

Ham. She speaks very highly of her new husband.

Pol. My lord, the Queen would speak to you, and presently.

Ham. Several alleged drug lords are to be put on trial.

Pol. My lord, the Queen would speak to you, and presently.

Ham. You like to lord it over your children, don't you?

Pol. My lord, the Queen would speak to you, and presently.

Ham. She coiled her hair into a neat bun on top of her head.

Pol. [aside] Still harping on my daughter.

Ham. I am not.

Pol. My lord, the Queen would speak to you, and presently.

Ham. You'd better wipe up that coffee you spilled on the carpet before it sinks in.

Pol. [aside] Still harping on my daughter.

Ham. Careful, you've just slopped coffee all over the carpet!

Pol. [aside] Still harping on my daughter.

Ham. What man dost thou dig it for?

Pol. [aside] Still harping on my daughter.

Ham. I prithee take thy fingers from my throat!

Pol. [aside] Still harping on my daughter.

Ham. Forty thousand brothers –

Pol. [aside] Still harping on my daughter.

Ham. The cat will mew, and dog will have his day.

III

TO CRITICISE CRITICS

What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness. It is the harder because you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it. It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.

Emerson, *Self-Reliance*

Hamlet does not listen to what other people think or say, even if those who dare utter a few words in his presence are his friends. Don't they aspire to preserve his sanity and life? He sees the ghost and, naturally enough, is eager to follow it in order to hear his tale of woe: ghosts do not appear in front of us to tell how happy they were in our company in their lifetimes. Horatio says he should not follow it or him – his father 'doom'd for a certain term to walk the night'. Hamlet answers him:

*Why, what should be the fear?
I do not set my life at a pin's fee,
And for my soul, what can it do to that,
Being a thing immortal as itself?
It waves me forth again. I'll follow it.*

Hamlet is challenged to a duel. He says to Horatio, 'Thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart; but it is no matter. It is but foolery, but it is such a kind of gaingiving as would perhaps trouble a woman.' Horatio answers him, 'If your mind dislike anything, obey it. I will forestall their repair hither and say you are not fit.' But Hamlet relies more on his intuition than on his mind. He says: 'Not a whit. We defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no man, of aught he leaves, knows aught, what is't to leave betimes? Let be.'

Towards all this external evil the man within the breast assumes a warlike attitude, and affirms his ability to cope single-handed with the infinite army of enemies. To this military attitude of the soul we give the name of Heroism. Its rudest form is the contempt for safety and ease, which makes the attractiveness of war. It is a self-trust which slights the restraints of prudence, in the plenitude of its energy and power to repair the harms it may suffer. The hero is a mind of such balance that no disturbances can shake his will, but pleasantly and as it were

merrily he advances to his own music, alike in frightful alarms and in the tipsy mirth of universal dissoluteness.

Emerson, *Heroism*

People say to Hamlet: ‘You’re a royal prince so you must behave accordingly. Didn’t Claudius assure everyone you were “the most immediate to our throne”? He is kind, isn’t he? And he is just because he has no intention of depriving you of the possibility to ascend the throne of Denmark. You think you should have become a king after your father’s premature demise. You’re certainly right, but now it’s too late – you can’t become a king during your uncle’s lifetime. He is wearing the crown, as your father’s ghost put it. And for once the ghost was right. Why should you believe in what ghosts say? You yourself doubt the words you heard on that fateful night. You make a few players perform a tragedy in which your uncle murders your father. And you say to Horatio before the performance starts in the presence of both your mother and your new father:

*“... observe my uncle. If his occulted guilt
Do not itself unkennel in one speech,
It is a damned ghost that we have seen,
And my imaginations are as foul
As Vulcan’s stithy.”*

‘So you do doubt the ghost’s story, don’t you? What you picture to yourself may turn out to be “as foul as Vulcan’s stithy” or rather his smithy – the smithy of the god of blacksmiths, and hence (1) symbolic of blackness, (2) having affinities with hell, whence the “damned ghost” responsible for your “imaginations” will have come. There’s no denying that your uncle behaves strangely as he sees one actor pour the poison your father told you about into another actor’s ear. He says, “Give me some light. Away.” So what? Some people are afraid of darkness. All children are, as a matter of fact. And Tolstoy thinks we should treasure our childhood and the thoughts we nourished in the course of it. In short, our present behaviour should model itself upon our childish pranks and habits. So your uncle is still afraid of darkness – either spontaneously or because he is determined to follow Tolstoy’s advice. He can bear with it for some time. But the play is long – too long, according to W. H. Auden. What’s more, its length and redundancy is wholly due to Shakespeare’s negligence and hastiness. When Auden enumerates *Hamlet*’s flaws, he says among other things: “Why doesn’t Claudius react to the dumb-show, why wait till the play within the play? This suggests that there was an earlier version with a dumb-show and a later one with a play within a play, and that Shakespeare incorporated both without bothering about the rest of the speeches.”’

‘As a playwright,’ says Hamlet, ‘Shakespeare knows that words speak louder than actions and so, logically enough, Claudius is more sensitive to the *sound* of his crime than to its *image*.’

‘All right, all right – your uncle did murder your father. What can you do? It’s too late to protect your father from the poison that, according to the ghost, coursed through the natural gates and alleys of his body before the beginning of the play. What can we know about the events that took place *outside, outdoors*? Well, suppose it is true. So what? Your uncle is much older than you are, which means that he will die very soon, even if you give up the idea of killing him “when he is drunk asleep, or in his rage, / Or in th’incestuous pleasure of his bed, / At game a-swearing, or about some act / That has no relish of salvation in’t”. He dies and you inherit the throne. Nice, isn’t it? You make no effort and everything goes smoothly. You don’t say to yourself, “I must take action to deal with the problem before it spreads to other areas, before the population of our country realises that one may kill a king and get away with it.” You wear the crown and no one says, “The serpent that did sting thy uncle’s life / Now wears his crown.” Don’t you agree with your friends on this issue? You don’t? All right, all right. You’re determined to kill your uncle, to avenge your father. Why don’t you act on the spur of the moment? Why don’t you act at all? Why do you say to yourself, “I know I’ve got to deal with the problem at some point – I’m just procrastinating”?’

I have to choose myself. How can I transcend this self I have accepted, and then forget all about it? I must not leave this choice to fate or circumstances, as a person who plunges into dissipation or uncoordinated action does. I mustn’t say I can’t deal with life because my mother didn’t love me or my mother loved me too much, or whatever it is. Hamlet could either avenge his father promptly or he could say it isn’t my business to judge other people, it is God’s business. He does neither.

Auden, *Lectures on Shakespeare*

Hamlet chooses to transcend his own self which goads him into avenging his father at once, at the earliest opportunity. This opportunity presents itself when Hamlet, on his way to the closet where his mother awaits him, comes across the king who does his utmost to reach God’s forgiveness by means of his prayer. ‘Now might I do it pat, now a is a-praying. / And now I’ll do’t.’ Suppose you go window-shopping, spot a pair of shoes and buy them on impulse. You come home, try them on to see if they fit and realise they do not. ‘Why didn’t I try them on in the shop?’ you ask yourself. ‘I ought to have tried a few pairs on before buying anything.’ That is what Hamlet does. This is the first pair of shoes he comes across in the course of his ritual centred upon the revenge which is supposed to redress the balance between crimes and punishments. Why should he buy them on impulse? Anyway, he relies far more on his intuition, as every self-respecting transcendentalist does. His mind says to him, ‘Now you might do it pat,’ but his intuition thinks otherwise. Hamlet aspires to end his life in a blaze of glory, and killing a man who turns his back to you and takes no notices of your manoeuvres, being wholly concentrated on his prayer, does not exactly cover you with glory. Of course, Hamlet’s

intuition finds another argument as it endeavours to persuade him to suppress the impulse backed up by his mind.

*'And now I'll do't.
 And so a goes to heaven;
 And so am I reveng'd. That would be scann'd:
 A villain kills my father, and for that
 I, his sole son, do this same villain send
 To heaven.
 Why, this is hire and salary, not revenge.'*

Hamlet carefully restrains his train of thought, letting his intuition triumph over his mind. And his intuition knows that this time he will not get away with murder – if he does murder the King.

Prudence is the virtue of the senses. It is the science of appearances. It is the outmost action of the inward life. It is God taking thought for oxen. It moves matter after the laws of matter. It is content to seek health of body by complying with physical conditions, and health of mind by the laws of the intellect. The world of the senses is a world of shows; it does not exist for itself, but has a symbolic character; and a true prudence or law of shows recognises the co-presence of other laws and knows that its own office is subaltern; knows that it is surface and not centre where it works. Prudence is false when detached. It is legitimate when it is the Natural History of the soul incarnate, when it unfolds the beauty of laws within the narrow scope of the senses.

Emerson, *Prudence*

Acting within the framework of transcendentalism, Hamlet also takes care of himself as he continues to build his own personality and destiny. How does he do that? By splitting himself into two halves. Each half is supposed to observe and describe the other.

*Was't Hamlet wrong'd Laertes? Never Hamlet.
 If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,
 And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,
 Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.
 Who does it then? His madness. If't be so,
 Hamlet is of the faction that is wrong'd;
 His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy.*

In his essay on *Hamlet*, T. S. Eliot makes a curious remark about the madness which seems to pervade the whole tragedy, with the exception of Act One and the last scene. ‘The effect of madness,’ he writes, ‘is not to lull but to arouse the king’s suspicion.’ It is true that Polonius speaks about it more often than the king, but the latter *is* influenced by the vicious streak in Hamlet’s nature and so does not fear for his life until the performance of the *Mousetrap*. Madmen are usually innocuous, being locked up in their own world where wild flights of fancy alternate with silence and immobility. Of course a madman may kill you in a fit of anger, but Hamlet seems to focus his attention on Ophelia, not on the throne and its proud possessor.

Suppose Hamlet does not pretend he is mentally ill and goes about his business – whatever it is – without altering the pattern of his behaviour. At least he never talks like a lunatic. After his meeting with the ghost, he can stop brooding, however, but this change for the better *might* arouse the king’s suspicion, especially if Hamlet vouchsafes to produce a few smiles when talking to his mother in the presence of his brand new father. Parents should be alert to *positive* changes in their children’s behaviour, for that is how they usually hide their dark schemes – unless they just hope to obtain money by deception. And this cannot be Hamlet’s goal; Claudius is quite aware of that.

In the Peter Brook production, Polonius looks like a sage; he goes so far as to write a book in Ophelia’s presence, thereby delaying her tale of woe to which he seems to attach a lot of importance. Suppose the king talks to him about Hamlet’s intention to usurp his throne. Polonius is likely to answer thus: ‘Your Majesty don’t take into consideration Hamlet’s sojourn in Wittenberg where he studied Plato’s dialogues most diligently. Recently he said to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: “I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw.” So he isn’t *completely* mad and can therefore reason out the solution to the puzzle of his own destiny. He is aware of his partial madness and so can’t disregard his inability to govern such a country as Denmark – any country, come to think of it. Why, you may ask? Because he read Plato’s *Alcibiades*.’ And Polonius recites an excerpt from the dialogue.

‘Soc. *When an individual or a city with no intelligence is at liberty to do what he or it wants, what do you think the likely result will be? For example, if he’s sick and has the power to do whatever he likes – without any medical insight but with such a dictator’s power that nobody criticises him – what’s going to happen? Isn’t it likely his health will be ruined?*

Alc. *You’re right.*

Soc. *And in a ship, if someone were free to do what he liked, but was completely lacking in insight and skill in navigation, don’t you see what would happen to him and his fellow sailors?*

Alc. *I do indeed; they would all die.’*

Polonius might think that Hamlet cares about his fellow citizens and the state as such. And Claudius believes his tale because he must have gone to Wittenberg himself – or to Paris, like Laertes. And he knows that Hamlet is noble enough not to yield to the temptation and thereby jeopardise his country's affluence.

T. S. Eliot quotes Mr Robertson whose hypothesis he seems to approve of: '[Hamlet's] tone is that of one who has suffered tortures on the score of his mother's degradation...The guilt of a mother is an almost intolerable motive for drama, but it had to be maintained and emphasised to supply a psychological solution, or rather a hint of one.' And T. S. Eliot appends to this his own comment: 'Hamlet is up against the difficulty that his disgust is occasioned by his mother, but that his mother is not an adequate equivalent for it; his disgust envelops and exceeds her. It is thus a feeling which he cannot understand; he cannot objectify it, and it therefore remains to poison life and obstruct action.'

Let us not forget that the ghost manages to obliterate the queen and her presumed sin as he makes his appearance in the midst of the conversation that takes place in the queen's closet. Hamlet no longer takes notice of his mother whose hasty marriage does blacken her image in his mind or rather within his 'mind's eye', to use his own definition of it. The world is his representation and he does not fail to visualise his father who remains invisible within his mother's field of vision. Of course any ghost has pride of place anywhere, not only in a closet or near the battlements of Elsinore. And yet Hamlet's guilty conscience keeps pestering him on account of his 'almost blunted purpose'; in comparison with it, Gertrude's guilt pales into insignificance.

Of course it exerts a strong influence on his relationship with Ophelia: '... the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness [...] Get thee to a nunnery, farewell. Or if thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool; for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them.' Hamlet seems to imply that cuckolds are supposed to grow horns. He must have expatiated on womanhood differently before his mother's marriage; at least he has never sent anyone to a nunnery so far, otherwise Ophelia would not be so upset. 'O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!'

The king reacts to Hamlet's outburst as follows:

*Love? His affections do not that way tend,
Nor what he spake, though it lack'd form a little,
Was not like madness. There's something in his soul
O'er which his melancholy sits on brood –*

His suspicions *are* aroused. Why? Because Hamlet's speech did not sound like the interior of a lunatic asylum: vociferous patients are not allowed to voice their opinions in the open air. Besides, his ideas – 'You jig and amble, and you lisp' – were attuned to what many philosophers thought in those days often regarded as the playground of misogynists.

A man does not arrive at a maturity of his rational faculty and mental powers much before his twenty-eighth year; woman attains it at the age of eighteen. But it is, in consequence, a very meagre and limited faculty of reason. And so throughout their lives women remain children, always see only what is nearest to them, cling to the present, take the appearance of things for the reality, and prefer trivialities to the most important affairs. Thus it is the faculty of reason by virtue whereof man does not, like the animal, live merely in the present, but surveys and considers the past and future; and from all this springs his foresight, wariness, care, anxiety, and frequent uneasiness. In consequence of her weaker faculty of reason, woman shares less in the advantages and disadvantages that this entails. Rather is she an intellectual myope, since her intuitive understanding sees quite clearly what is near, but has a narrow range of vision into which the distant object does not enter. Thus everything that is absent, past, or future has a much feebler effect on women than on men, whence arises the tendency to extravagance which occurs much more frequently in women and occasionally borders on craziness.

Schopenhauer, *On Women*

Hamlet's harangue sounds like an *ordinary* speech which has no affinities with madness. That is why the king's suspicions are aroused.

For just as the female ant after copulation loses her wings which are now superfluous and, as regards breeding, even dangerous, so does the woman generally lose her beauty after one or two confinements, and probably for the same reason.

Hamlet talks to his mother. 'You cannot call it love; for at your age / The heyday in the blood is tame, it's humble, / And waits upon the judgment —' Isn't it the other way round? You experience so-called platonic love mostly in your mature years, whereas youth requires passion and, barring accidents, is believed to relegate impotence to the margin of life. How old is Gertrude? Does she already live in the margin of *anti*-platonic love? Later on in life the sex drive tends to diminish but, with the exception of Hamlet and Claudius, no one knows how old Gertrude is and only Claudius can bear witness to her potential energy. Anyway, most stage and film directors seem to disagree with Hamlet: the king and the queen kiss each other as soon as they are alone. Sometimes they put their arms around each other and hug in front of the courtiers, unable as they are to rein in their sex drive, their youthful ardour.

Hamlet does not love Ophelia, but her body appeals to him to such an extent that he is prepared to pay her a visit only for the sake of her wrist that he holds hard as if resolved to submit himself to a young lady's corporal magnetism. Once again he succumbs to temptation and comes into contact with her body before the performance of *The Mousetrap*: 'No, good mother, here's metal more attractive.'

Ham. *Lady, shall I lie in your lap?*

Oph. *No, my lord.*

Ham. *I mean, my head upon your lap.*

Oph. *Ay, my lord.*

Ophelia is a magnet: she is able both to attract young men and also push them away.

*Rebellious hell,
If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones,
To flaming youth let virtue be as wax
And melt in her own fire; proclaim no shame
When the compulsive ardour gives the charge,
Since frost itself as actively doth burn
And reason panders will.*

Tony Tanner points out that in the play 'there seem to be two of everything': Hamlet has two fathers, there are two sons who have to avenge murdered fathers, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the ghost appears to Hamlet twice, and so on. Oddly enough, he overlooks Hamlet himself – his halves, so to speak: sound mind and unsound mind, sex drive and reason, reason and intuition. What remains in the end is his intuition that guides him towards immortality and death.

And what about the queen?

Queen. *O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain.*

Ham. *O throw away the worser part of it*

And live the purer with the other half.

Emerson and Bergson spoke a lot about intuition. But regrettably intuition itself does not speak – unlike the mind that is in the habit of overrunning our consciousness with questions and answers, with silly ideas. The mind is so garrulous we are unable to get rid of words that flow like a stream: a mountain stream, an underground stream. Hamlet's interior monologues are made up of both; but they cannot be likened to the lovely stream that flows leisurely through the orchard where his father was assassinated.

One may object to the above portrayal of intuition, arguing that Socrates' *daimonion* actually *spoke* to him whenever a danger was in the offing. But was his *daimonion* identical to what Emerson calls 'intuition'? For argument's sake, let us suppose that Hamlet's intuition did talk to him, swelling his stream of consciousness. 'Your instinct and numerous impulses often betray you because they're

too straightforward, too reckless. Why should you act on the spur of the moment? The moment will pass and another moment is bound to replace it sooner or later. Time may become your property on condition that you pay no attention to it. A moment is just a moment, nothing else. You go somewhere and an opportunity seems to present itself. But is it really an opportunity or a failure? You didn't believe you would be condemned to eternal damnation for what you had done. You don't even remember the murders you committed – that of Polonius, for instance. And you're right: no damnation awaits you in the Hereafter. I keep a watchful eye on whatever may happen to you. I thought you had to kill Polonius, inducing Claudius to send you to England in company with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. I suggested you should "unseal their grand commission" where you found your death sentence. But for your murder of Polonius, you would have been unable to get rid of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Your mind wouldn't have tackled the problem appropriately. A problem shared is a problem halved, as the saying goes. But I'm not used to sharing *anything* with your reason which would have made you draw the arras to see who was hiding behind it. You thought the king was playing hide and seek with you and probably with the queen. You wouldn't have killed Polonius and only this murder is compatible with your ultimate triumph.

'At Wittenberg you studied Plato's dialogues. What about the Chinese philosophers? Lao Tzu, for instance.

'The strategists say:

"I dare not take the offensive but I take the defensive;

I dare not advance an inch but I retreat a foot."

'This means:

'To march without formation,

'To stretch one's arm without showing it,

'To confront enemies without seeming to meet them,

'To hold weapons without seeming to have them.'

IV

We're projected onto a screen, assuming that the world is a screen on which everything happens. What kind of project is it? Who is at the head of this commercial enterprise? Are we guided or not? Are we free? To some degree, to some degree. If we accept what comes and happens, the tragedy of our life, we're more or less free because we don't counteract the baleful effects of this predestination. We were to be born, otherwise we wouldn't have seen the light of day. And what is this light or night? Are they identical twins? Pins and needles. You feel pain here and there, almost everywhere and all the time. Time is a manifestation of pain, nothing else. Why should it be anything else? Isn't it enough to feel pain *somewhere*, not *necessarily* everywhere? I feel pain, therefore I am. You are, you are, and you should stop asking this sort of question. What does it matter if you're alive or not? All right, you're alive and feel pain. You also enjoy yourself – to some degree, to some degree. And you never know to what degree you enjoy yourself. And if you do know it, you say to yourself, 'It's not enough – I should enjoy myself much more.' And you do your best to enjoy yourself to the utmost. So you enjoy yourself to the utmost. You're happy, happy, clappy. You're so happy everything is working out for you. And then everything stops, nothing works. You call it destiny or predestination. They're identical twins.

There are so many twins in your life: sound mind and unsound mind, love and hate, joy and sorrow. You go through them all and on your way experience sex drive and impotence, the bitterness of tears, injustice and justice. You look closer at the justice to find out what it is and realise it is injustice in disguise. That's how life goes on and you ask yourself whether it goes or is just rooted to the spot. You look at the spot and see a bloodstain. You wonder where it comes from and begin to wander in order to find out the origin of the blood. On your way, you encounter a ghost who talks nonsense and does his utmost to lead you astray. Descartes mistrusts this monster at first, but on second thoughts he changes his mind and says that God doesn't tell lies because He is benevolent – He can't be otherwise because He is good and magnificent. He is *not* beyond good and evil. In your mind, He is associated with profit, gain and benefit. But you shouldn't trust your mind and it's certainly better to rely on intuition which must come from God. Your *diamonion* tells you, 'Stay at home. There's a brick that may fall on your head. This brick *will* fall on your head if you go out. Don't go out. You'll see your friends next week.'

You stay at home and start quarrelling with someone out of sheer boredom. And if there's no one in the room where you sit and read, you start quarrelling with yourself. You say to yourself that you're a lazy good-for-nothing and should get a job. What job? You're not a royal prince so you should make an honest living. And if you *are* a royal prince, you should kill someone to justify the faith your parents have put in you. Yes, your father's ghost says to you, 'I was murdered. You now face the daunting task of avenging this foul murder, otherwise I'll take you to task over your negligence, laziness and so on and so forth.'

You have to grope your way up the dark stairs. You've no idea where these stairs lead, but you know you should go up because Hell is situated downstairs. You build your own personality, borrowing a few traits from celestial creatures who live beyond the clouds you can see out of your window. You compare these clouds to camels and chimeras – out of sheer boredom, out of sheer boredom. Then your thoughts slowly turn to your guardian angel who is so slack you fear you might get killed at any moment. You talk to your guardian angel and he or she assures you you've nothing to fear. 'You're not a royal prince and you've no intention of killing Polonius. No one's determined to send you to England and only in England are you likely to get killed if you dare put on the play entitled *The Mousetrap*. In short, you're not Hamlet so you've nothing to worry about.'

You don't worry and you go outdoors because no one tells you your body should stay in bed for a while. A car runs you over and someone says, 'I'm afraid we've just run over a rabbit.' So you may become a rabbit in the course of your life. Why does it come as a surprise to you? Are you different from other animals? You are not. And if you are, this difference has nothing to do with your nature and qualities. It's the *quantity* of your genes that counts. You've got more genes than rabbits, so you're a human. You're always complaining! You're either bored to death or disappointed. You're either dead or alive. You're like Schrödinger's cat.

A voice talks to you and you wonder whether this voice wishes you well with your new venture, your old adventure. It says something and adds a few words, 'I'm telling you this for your own good.'

'Are you sure?' you answer. 'Do you know the difference between good and evil?'

'I'm beyond good and evil,' it answers.

'Are you beyond the devil?' you ask.

'I don't know. I don't know *everything*, you know.'

'Why do you talk to me, then?'

'I do everything on the spur of the moment.'

'The moment you choose is always wrong. What you say is wrong too.'

'You're wrong,' says the voice. 'The facts I'm acquainting you with are questionable.'

'I'm fed up with your questions. I am and I am not. Are you satisfied?'

'Are *you* satisfied?'

'I'm not.'

'Sometimes you *are*, otherwise you wouldn't have said, "I am and I am not."'

'These are but wild and whirling words. They whirl, that's all. See how they whirl, see how they whirl.'

'Where, my lord?'

'Our world is a mass of bodies whirling round on the dance floor. Don't you think so?'

'I do, my lord.'

'The King doth wake tonight and takes his rouse. Why don't you say anything? Don't you know the play by heart?'

‘I do, my lord. Keeps wassail, and the swagg’ring upspring reels.’

‘All right. Let’s go on. It’s easier to talk like that. At least this pastime makes sense, doesn’t it?’

‘It does my lord.’

‘Let us go on.’

‘Let us.’

‘And as he drains his draughts of Rhenish down –’

But you’re bored already. Why should you recite the whole play? Of course you don’t know it by heart. Just a few snatches here and there. You ponder over them, but they teach you nothing. They don’t guide you towards the ultimate triumph you’re dreaming about. Perchance to dream, as usual. You’re so used to your dreams you wish to commit suicide in order to get rid of them. You wish to put your own house in order, in other words. So, with the passing of the years, you put your house in order. What’s your house, by the way? An anthology of representations. ‘What do you represent right now?’ they ask you.

‘I represent my grievances to God.’

‘Wait a minute, wait a minute. We’re talking about Schopenhauer, aren’t we?’

‘I didn’t study his works at Wittenberg.’

‘But you said, “There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.” Didn’t you?’

‘I did. So what?’

‘What did you study at Wittenberg? Plato’s dialogues?’

‘Nothing, nothing at all. I’ve never been there.’

‘Where *have* you been?’

‘I don’t remember. My wits are deceased. So is my memory.’

‘Are you deceased yourself?’

‘It depends on the wind and on Hamlet’s words.’

Stirner talks about forces. All right, you can talk about them as well. No one forbids you to talk about forces and failures. Free country, isn’t it? We’re not in Denmark, as far as we know. We all know that Denmark is a prison. Didn’t Hamlet say that? Why should we doubt our royal prince’s words? Kings are always right because they’re appointed as kings by God. So are all royal princes, for they are the offspring of kings.

And let us not forget the forces that Stirner talks about. Other philosophers speak about them too – Bergson, for instance. Or does he speak about *élans*? Never mind, never mind. Something moves through the world and we need to name this phenomenon. Recently you named your dogs ‘Shandy’ and ‘Belle’. Well and good. What about the force we’re talking about? You can’t deny its presence, can you? That’s what we call ‘the driving force behind the scheme’. What scheme? Doesn’t matter. There are only schemes in the world – schemes, scenes and stages. And forces of course.

Last night the force of the wind had brought down a great many trees in the area. The same force brought down Hamlet so that he was driven mad. Madness has to do a lot of driving in her job.

Sometimes she finds herself in prison for drink-driving. Never mind, never mind. She destroys minds, leading them astray. Such and such a mind wants to marry Ophelia, but madness leads it astray. As a result, the mind in question meets Horatio and talks to him in front of an open tomb. Shortly afterwards, the body guided by the mind holds a skull to which it talks, for want of anything better to do. Instead of holding Ophelia's body in its arms, the body holds a skull and talks to it as if the quick could talk only to the dead. Not to the dead, as a matter of fact – to skulls. You can talk to Plato who is dead. And he'll answer all your questions. But why talk to a skull, especially if it's the skull of the King's jester?

Of course you're permitted to utter the words that will resound in the universe for almost two millennia: 'Alas, poor Yorick.' All right, easier said than done. And what do you do? You just hold this skull and talk about destiny, predestination and immortality. You say that it's pointless to kiss a human being because your kisses will be buried and forgotten. And his gibes, his gambols. And what about *her* gambols and whims? You make love to her and she goes mad because someone killed her father. Or just because she feels like it. On the spur of the moment, on the spur of the moment.

Your love is buried and so is your child. Where's your child now? In limbo? Perhaps. Perchance to dream. Does your child dream in your beloved's womb? Can you say to him: 'Neither a borrower nor a lender be, / For loan oft loses both itself and friend, / And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry'? No point in talking to girls: you need a boy who'll succeed to the throne when you die. Of course you've no intention of dying prematurely or even at the age of ninety-nine. But life is what it is and you know you'll die one day, one night, looking at the stars and trying to guess to which star your soul and body will be conveyed before being admitted to Paradise. Alas, poor Yorick.

You struggle for life because there's no other way of dealing with the situation. What situation? You're in the world. One day, out of the blue, your parents announced that you were born. Out of the blue, out of the black. You play with words, but nothing comes of it; nothing comes of anything. You're getting used to this situation or predicament. Call it what you wish: names don't count unless you wish to utter the name of God, which you shouldn't utter. In the first place, you don't know it and even if you do, you shouldn't trust the air with it. In other words, the name of God shouldn't resound in the universe because it is a secret. It is, whatever they say. Whatever is sacred is also secret.

Well, you continue to struggle for life: you've nothing else to do. And if you do have something else to do, you're likely not to be able to do it. Whatever you have to do must be done within this life of ours. And to find yourself within it, inside this life and vale of tears, you should struggle for it, for your survival. If you don't, you'll find yourself outside everything: life, the vale of tears, *Hamlet* and other masterpieces, plants, your favourite dogs. So you struggle for it. You're strong, aren't you? You are. You flex your muscles so that everyone can admire them. And everyone admires them, especially Ophelia. You know that these exercises build muscle and increase stamina. What exercises? You search for a guru, find one and ask him to enlighten you. He enlightens you and Ophelia falls in love

with your body. She also falls in love with your soul because you're a royal prince and your soul came to you from God, not from an ordinary angel.

Why do you struggle for life? Let it be, let be, as Hamlet puts it. Why does he put it like this? You have your own voice, your *diamonion*. Why should you listen to Hamlet and his interior monologues? And his exterior monologues? To his rambling? To his raving?

Your *diamonion* quotes Darwin who is a world authority on the struggle for life:

Two canine animals, in a time of dearth, may be truly said to struggle with each other which shall get food and live. But a plant on the edge of a desert is said to struggle for life against the drought, though more properly it should be said to be dependent on the moisture. A plant which annually produces a thousand seeds, of which only one on an average comes to maturity, may be more truly said to struggle with the plants of the same and other kinds which already clothe the ground. The mistletoe is dependent on the apple and a few other trees, but can only in a far-fetched sense be said to struggle with these trees, for, if too many of these parasites grow on the same tree, it languishes and dies. But several seedling mistletoes, growing close together on the same branch, may more truly be said to struggle with each other. As the mistletoe is disseminated by birds, its existence depends on them; and it may metaphorically be said to struggle with other fruit-bearing plants, in tempting the birds to devour and thus disseminate its seeds.

'Your quotation is so long. You're so long-winded, my dear *diamonion*. Why can't you be short and sweet? Sometimes you're sweet, but you're never short.' Yes, yes. Too many of these parasites grow on the same tree, on my family tree: my uncle, Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

'You don't understand what I say,' says your *diamonion*. 'I'd like to lecture you on your attitude towards life, death, immortality, eternity and whatever lies beyond them. I don't want to limit my speeches to injunctions such as, "Don't go out. Don't kill the king. Don't kill your mother." You were given only rudimentary training in the job. You thought you wouldn't have to work hard, but I soon put you right on that, didn't I?'

'On what, on what? You put me right on what?'

You expand your personality. You mention a few ideas and you expand on them. You used to touch upon this and that, but now you expand on this and that; your guardian angel is delighted. Occasionally you contradict yourself. So what? Life goes on and the river into which you step all the time is not the same: oil spills are common, as is the dumping of toxic industrial wastes. Yesterday the river was as pure as Ophelia, so you said, 'The river is pure, chaste and innocent.' Today the river is dirty and you say, 'Get thee to a nunnery. Why, wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? What else could you breed? Your impure water reminds us of original sin. Cholera is transmitted through contaminated water, so is original sin. Your water is contaminated. Your water is sinful.'

You go back to Darwin. Back to Darwin, you say to yourself. Back to his and your struggle for life. Actually you should never go away from this struggle. When you leave it, if only for a moment, somebody kills you or a multitude of cancer cells begin to multiply and replenish your body. There's a force and you call this force 'A' so as not to confuse it with 'B' and 'C'. The whole alphabet of forces plays in front of you, behind you and so on. You dread to think what they say about you behind your back. You dread to think what they *do* behind your back. Poison, poison, poison, you say to yourself. Dagger, you add in a whisper. And they add insult to injury. They're good at addition; so are you. If you add three and four you get seven. So now you've got seven deadly viruses. Some of them are known, others are not. Chicken pox, herpes, mumps. Once again you're not allowed to choose anything. Had God given you more freedom, you would have chosen a more suitable virus. A chicken pox virus, for instance. You like chickens, don't you? Why not let your body turn into a chicken? Anyway, for some time you've been running round like a headless chicken. So they call you 'chicken' nowadays. 'I'm snowed under with work,' you tell them. 'I have to struggle for life and avenge my father. I have to talk my mother out of going to my uncle's bed. You see, my mother has no virtues. Not a single one, strange as it may appear. So she must assume at least one virtue. Which one? The one that forbids you to sleep with your husband. I'm not sure she'll obey my order. I should exorcise her body, the libido that hides in it. In the Ostermeyer production of *Hamlet*, this ritual is carried out with great panache – an act of sheer bravado. Why should you regard me as intellectually and morally inferior to Ostermeyer?

I've got a few books on the subject. *Bantu Beliefs and Magic, with particular reference to the Kikuyu and Kamba tribes of Kenya Colony; together with some reflections on East Africa after the war*. Judging from the title or rather from its length, there's a lot of information on many subjects in this book – on the subjects related to magic and exorcism. *The Evil Eye*. 'The word *kita* means saliva as well as evil eye. The Swahili synonym is *kijicho*.' I don't need synonyms, do I? Nor do I need names unless they're related to the domain of exorcism. Apparently, people are born with the evil eye, but you don't see at once that the eyes you look into are evil. They look like normal eyes, if you please. But *gradually* it 'dawns upon people' that So-and-So possesses the power, owing to the fact that 'if that person audibly admires a beast belonging to a neighbour the animal shortly after that becomes sick.' My uncle *audibly* admires my mother, doesn't he? 'Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen – .' He seems to have admired her for a long time. So she ends up falling sick. Our new King said he would dedicate himself to protecting the rights of the old, the sick and the homeless. What about my mother? Why doesn't he protect his own wife? He does all he can to *contaminate* her with his eyes. What do you mean when you say 'the evil eye'? Why not use the plural of 'eye'? Be that as it may, my uncle has two eyes and both of them are evil, judging from my mother's state of mind and body.

Back to my exorcism. I'll murder my uncle later on. Cross my heart and *hope* to die. No point in trying to exorcise him: he doesn't deserve it. *Laws of Compensation for Murder*. 'It is a matter of great

importance, from an administrative point of view, that these should be properly understood, as a murder is otherwise likely to create a hereditary feud between the two families, which will eventually lead to fresh crimes.' I can't agree more. What laws, may I ask? Your book should be short and to the point. 'The father of the murderer collected seventy goats and sent them to the father of the murdered man, and a bullock and a male sheep to the mother of the deceased.' What have *I* received, I wonder? No goats, no bullocks. Why? Because I am the *son* of the murdered man? 'The elders adorn themselves with necklets of a grass called *ngoka*, which they wear for eight days, but if at the expiration of this period no moon is visible they cannot take them off till the moon reappears.' This reminds me of something, of someone. What, the fair Ophelia!

*There is a willow grows askant the brook
That shows his hoary leaves in the glassy stream.
Therewith fantastic garlands did she make
Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them.*

Madness. A compensation for her father's murder. An expiation. You hide yourself behind a curtain, bent on overhearing a few meaningless words – there are no other words in the world – and are slain by mistake. You hide in the world, for you think that the nothingness from which you come is even worse than the world. You hide from emptiness, from silence and are slain because there are only murders in the world. What does it matter *how* you're slain! Of course if a human murders you, your murder can be avenged by your relatives. Even if a dog bites you, your corpse can be avenged by your son. Some security guards set their dogs on your body: they think you're an intruder. You are not. You just go for a walk and get bitten by a dog, by many dogs and other animals. There are security guards everywhere. Now they're just guardian angels; now they're official watchdogs. You can't escape from the now, from the here, from the everywhere. Not only Denmark is a prison. Even the Hereafter is one, come to think of it. It's better not to think too much. Many philosophers say so. If you do think all day long, you grow sad because the world *is* sad and there's nothing you can do about it. Try as you may, you won't avenge all your fathers, mothers and brothers. We're all brothers, as they say. They'd better keep silent. Everybody talks: your brothers and sisters, your inner voices, the ghosts you come across during your wanderings. And if you stay at home, resolved to avoid all these encounters, they barge in and start complaining about this and that – mainly about murders. 'I was poisoned,' 'I was stabbed several times in the chest.'

'How many times *were* you stabbed?' you ask.

'I don't remember,' says the ghost.

'They didn't stab you in the memory, did they?'

‘Perhaps, perchance. But you should avenge me.’

‘Who are you? My father? My brother?’

‘I’m your cousin.’

‘What’s your name? Hamlet?’

‘If the *mugiro* ceremonies are not properly carried out, the spirit of the murdered man will go back to his village, cry out in the night like a child, and enter into one of the villagers, who will become as one possessed. The people will call out to him, “Who are you?” and he will reply, “I am So-and-so” (mentioning the deceased). “I have come because I have been abandoned.”’ *Mugiro*. What kind of ceremony is it? Never mind, never mind: we don’t stand on ceremony here.

Am I my father’s spirit? This hypothesis rings a bell. What bell, which bell? There are so many bells inside my head that I go mad whenever they start ringing one by one, all at once. You listen to them and ask yourself, ‘What do they want? Do they want me to remember this or that? Why? To prevent me from going mad? Schopenhauer thinks that our lapses of memory are the cornerstone of madness. We doubt whether such and such an event really took place in the past. We’re tempted to insert it into the future, saying to ourselves that all this boils down to wishful thinking: we hope to live through this event next week or next month. Am I to meet my father’s spirit in the near future? Or did it already happen at the beginning of the play and somewhere in the middle? Double, double, toil and trouble. No, I think it’s just the opposite: you go mad if you remember too much. At least Borges thought so.

Yes, I remember now. There are two bells inside my brain. There are *myriads* of them, but only two bells keep on ringing. On one of them I see the name of Joyce; on the other that of Shakespeare. What do they have in common? Isn’t Joyce traditionally associated with Homer? In *Scylla and Charybdis*, the action takes place in the National Library. Stephen has a theory about *Hamlet* and at some point Shakespeare identifies with the murdered father; there are a lot of cases of mistaken identity throughout the episode. And also through *Hamlet*. Polonius is mistaken for the king; the queen and Ophelia look like a pair of whores – at least in the protagonist’s eyes. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are given a warm welcome – as if they were Hamlet’s intimate friends and not his potential enemies. Some regard Hamlet as a madman; others assert he is of sound mind – just an ordinary prince. He is neither.

Polonius says that he is mad; Hamlet supplies evidence to the contrary, but Polonius continues to speak about his daughter who, according to his calculations, has driven the royal prince mad. ‘He’s mad, he’s lunatic,’ he says.

‘Are you talking about the so-called lunatic fringe?’ says the king.

‘No, I’m talking about a lunatic asylum where a few doctors await him unless you decide at last to send your brand-new son to England where everyone’s mad, as everyone knows.’

‘Do you think our son is mad?’ says the king turning his head towards the queen.

‘It may be; very like,’ says the queen. Polonius has already manufactured her consent.

Do you know how to run this sort of machinery? This question is often asked, although those who ask it do not always use the word ‘machinery’. They may talk of human bodies, souls and moods which they’re determined to control as they strive to dominate the world or at least one country. One country is also a kind of machine and you have to know *how* to run it, otherwise you’re sure to get evicted from governments and clubs. And the only way to run our liberal, democratic society is to manufacture the consent of its members. Of course they’re free and can say at any moment, ‘We disagree, we disagree.’ But you speak gently to them and they realise they’re not slaves, and God still allows them to think for themselves. In other words, our free will is on the agenda in spite of taxes and other measures that we disapprove of as we do our best to remain on top of all forms of machinery and consequently on top of the world.

King. *Have you your father’s leave? What says Polonius?*

Pol. *He hath, my lord, wrung from me my slow leave*

By laboursome petition, and at last

Upon his will I seal’d my hared consent.

Barnardo and Marcellus see a ghost. They decide that the ghost they see is the late king’s ghost. Why? Because a mere labourer doesn’t deserve such an honour: he stays in Hell or in Paradise and isn’t permitted to meddle in other people’s affairs, especially if they’re related to the affairs of this or that state. Denmark is a state and in every state there are many states of affairs; there are many affairs as well, and you don’t need to attend a performance of *Hamlet* to realise how the matter stands in this domain or rather in this kingdom.

So Barnardo and Marcellus see the ghost; or they don’t see him. They speak about this phenomenon to Horatio who decides to manufacture a little consent because the expression ‘truant disposition’ doesn’t depict his nature – at least that’s what Hamlet thinks and says. ‘I wouldn’t hear your enemy say so,’ he says and thinks. So Horatio decides to keep himself busy, for he must stay in Denmark until Hamlet’s death, and can’t return to Wittenberg at once.

He sees the ghost or he doesn’t. What does it matter! Horatio is called upon to manufacture Hamlet’s consent and the latter is eager to take his cue from Horatio because he is weary of his own cues and moods. He needs others because he is a social animal, as they say. And they continue to speak and we have to listen to them from time to time, otherwise we’ll no longer be social animals. What lies in store for us if we refuse the status of social animals? We’ll become *anti*-social animals, immoralists, amoralists and atheists. As a result, we’ll be evicted from the club called ‘society’.

So Horatio speaks to Hamlet about this legendary ghost and willy-nilly manufactures his consent: Hamlet hates his new father and feels he must do something about it. About what? He doesn’t know exactly what he must do and what he should nip in the bud. But he knows that something should be nipped in the bud, otherwise ‘the field will be overgrown with weeds,’ as he says to himself. There

are no more buds around him: his mother is married to his uncle and has no intention of divorcing him. Anyway, neither their relationship nor Hamlet's status are 'in the bud'. But if you murder someone, you don't need to care about the state of affairs that comes to an end in the wake of your murder. And Hamlet is itching to kill Claudius. Why? Only because he still loves his father and consequently cherishes his memory?

Hamlet is a dandy; he prefers the aristocracy to the mob he sees now and then from his window. He venerates the past to the detriment of both the present and the future. In short, he corresponds to what Baudelaire thinks about the peculiar notion defined by the word 'dandy'. You keep away from gregarious instincts that overgrow the world, for there are more people in the crowd than in a royal palace. You don't necessarily wear fancy dress and ties: this is a common definition of the word 'dandy'. Words, words, words, as usual. What could we do without them? What would we do without the word 'fancy', for instance? Without our flights of fancy?

Hamlet is a solitary figure and he keeps at bay not only gregarious instincts, but also kings who often pay tribute to the populace and whatever is associated with this word so as not to get killed by a labourer, a beggar or another member of the crowd. That's why he doesn't act as Laertes does when he learns about his father's murder. Hamlet doesn't threaten the king through the angry mob.

*Save yourself, my lord.
The ocean, overpeering of his list,
Eats not the flats with more impetuous haste
Than young Laertes, in a riotous head,
O'erbears your officers. The rabble call him lord,
And, as the world were now but to begin,
Antiquity forgot, custom not known –
The ratifiers and props of every word –
They cry, 'Choose we! Laertes shall be king.'*

Why not 'Choose we! Hamlet shall be king'? Because Hamlet is a dandy and Laertes is not, apparently. No one knows what he does in Paris. He may buy a fashionable tie as soon as his foot touches French soil, but in Denmark ties aren't taken into consideration to the point of altering the history of the world. And the restaurants he could go to in his native land are of no interest to him because one has to wait either for French emigrants or for the twenty-first century to have an outstanding meal in a restaurant situated within the bounds of Copenhagen – number one on the list that everyone consults before going anywhere. The best restaurant in the world, in other words.

Hamlet fabricates the consent of his own soul or his double. He has never met any ghost apart from the one he doesn't regard as his own doppelgänger. But he is bent on fabricating the consent of others, otherwise he'll never be able to pull out all the stops, as they say. Who say that? The crowd, as

usual. So Hamlet talks about the ghost to his mother who doesn't see anything except her son's madness. He pretends to see the ghost, otherwise his mother might give a warm welcome to his uncle whose itinerary leads him to the incestuous bed, as the king puts it. What king? There were so many kings in those times you don't know which king was singled out of the mob of kings, queens and royal princes who killed other pretenders to the throne and even the kings themselves, for these already sat on those thrones. Or on other thrones: there were many thrones in the world in those days. You were first in line to the Danish throne, to the French throne, to the Russian throne. You were second in line to the same thrones. There were powers behind the thrones. Nowadays there are many powers or forces; there are few thrones.

His mother seems to believe him at the end of their appointment. Whose mother? There's only one mother in the play and her son is Hamlet: you can't talk about *everybody* in the play devoted to as many as seven murders. Or eight, or nine. Our multiplication tables – even our computers – seem outdated when they have to deal with the murders we come across in Shakespeare's plays. Manufacturing consent. The late king was stung by a serpent. All right: he *was* stung by a serpent. What do we care about kings and what's called the 'constitutional monarchy'? They're putting up the tax on cigarettes. Who? The members of the government. And we like smoking, don't we? They say, 'His addiction to cigarettes.' They also say, 'Her addiction to cigarettes.' The king says nothing, provided there's a king who can keep silent. There's a king in Belgium and he *can* keep silent when they speak about smoking. The same goes for Spain and England. The king, the queen – the one whose consent Hamlet is resolved to manufacture in the twinkling of an eye. He manufactures it and goes out or rather *away*: he embarks at Elsinore for London.

But before his departure, he manufactures the queen's consent – not only in the domain of sexual intercourse. He asks her not to reveal their conversation to his uncle. Another double, forsooth! 'Never make known what you have seen tonight. Never make known what you have *heard* tonight. You haven't seen anything, have you? I mean, your husband's ghost. But you've heard my words, haven't you? I can repeat them, just in case.

Ham. *Refrain tonight,
And that shall lend a kind of easiness
To the next abstinence, the next more easy;
For use almost can change the stamp of nature,
And either lodge the devil or throw him out
With wondrous potency.*
Queen. *I'm old, Hamlet. You said so yourself.
I'm given to platonic loves nowadays.
I haven't made love for many years.
After your conception –*

Ham. *The devil, the devil.*

I should exorcise your body.

Queen. *You can't. You don't know*

How to do it.

Ham. *I've got a lot of books.*

Queen. *You should make a practice of it*

Instead of reading your books.

Practice makes perfect.

The king manufactures Rosencrantz's consent; and Guildenstern's consent. He also manufactures the consent of those who execute Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in England. 'Hamlet is mad, you know,' he writes. 'And if a great man goes mad, he murders kings and wreaks havoc on crops. I'm sorry. I just don't know what I'm writing. My head is whirling; so is my mind. Can't you see I'm going mad myself? Reading is not picked up by a process of osmosis, but needs to be taught, as they say. And what about madness? Osmosis, osmosis – that's how it works and proceeds from one thought to another, from one nerve to another. Can't you see I'm poisoned by his madness? Is that his revenge – this poison? Pouring it into my ear, into my *right* ear. What did I write a few minutes ago? Luckily for me, I can read what I've written. We should salute those who created this form of communication. Instead of moaning and groaning, we write epistles nowadays. I said or wrote that Hamlet was wreaking havoc on crops. Well, I was speaking and writing *metaphorically*. He is like a storm that wreaks havoc on crops. He is like a storm that wreaks havoc on Denmark. Don't you feel like helping us get rid of this storm? Don't forget that we are friends and companions in misfortune, considering that life *is* a misfortune, as many philosophers think and say. What's more, we are allies. So let us unite against Hamlet. Let them say and think, "The two countries have united against their common enemy." Denmark is one of England's staunchest allies. We could do a lot of things together. We could conquer Russia, for instance. Off with his head!'

The king also manufactures Laertes' consent:

Now must your conscience my acquittance seal,

And you must put me in your heart for friend,

Sith you have heard, and with a knowing ear,

That he which hath your noble father slain

Pursu'd my life.

The king goes on, 'With a *knowing* ear, do you hear? You don't? Should I pour some poison in this ear of yours? For the moment, I'm pouring a lot of balsam into it. Not balsam shampoo, mind you! Just a sizeable portion of balsam.' The rabble vanishes into thin air.

Polonius manufactures his daughter's consent and, by means of his death, he manufactures her own death. 'You know, my dear daughter, I'm better off strolling in the Garden of Eden.'

'Are you, my dear father?'

'I am, believe me. Why don't you join me in the Elysian fields?'

'What do I have to do?'

'You should go mad and drown.'

'What about my burial?'

'Of course they won't bury you in accordance with the rite of the Church.'

'I know. The priest will say: "She should in ground unsanctified been lodg'd / Till the last trumpet: for charitable prayers / Shards, flints, and pebbles should be thrown on her." I don't like pebbles, Father.'

Laertes doesn't manage to manufacture consent under the circumstances. Everything is done and undone. The mob assails a palace and then retreats as if repulsed by the American army. Mussolini says something that sounds like an aria – a tenor sings in front of the mob. And the mob listens to the tenor and cries 'Bravo'. That's how history is made and probably undone because the law of entropy is always at work, whatever you say or do or quote. And you repeat, 'What does it matter! What does it matter!' And then you die and it's too late to realise you should have taken matters into your own hands, instead of saying, 'That's a matter of opinion. That's a matter of opinion.'

'There seem to be two of everything,' says Tanner. There seem to be *three* of everything. 'Words, words, words.' 'Except my life, except my life, except my life.' Except my life. What kind of trinity is this? Another redemption? Another cross? And what about words? Dante's tercets?

Hamlet manufactures Horatio's consent.

Hor. *Here's yet some liquor left.*

Ham. *As th'art a man*

Give me the cup. Let go, by Heaven I'll ha't.

O God, Horatio, what a wounded name,

Things standing thus unknown, shall I leave behind me.

If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,

Absent thee from felicity awhile,

And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain

To tell my story.

I'm not an innocent bystander, although I didn't get killed at the end of the play. Not every actor disappears at the end because there are many ends in the world and one of them is my story. It would be much easier to lie in the grave, even if a few nightmares bother the dead now and then. I'm not a storyteller and I prefer nightmares to words. Of course, in the Hereafter, nightmares aren't as innocent

as they are in the vale of tears because you're not supposed to wake up and forget everything. Some nightmares are unforgettable, but on the surface of the earth there are psychiatrists who can cure you of any mental disease. Even Hamlet would have been cured, had he agreed to pay a visit to a psychiatrist. He did not. I spoke to him about this solution to his problems several times, but he declined my offer: I had promised to accompany him and even wait for his return from the consulting room.

You wish to know whether Hamlet was mad or not. But where's the frontier between unsound minds and sound ones? Perhaps Hamlet's predicament was akin to that of Doctor Jekyll who, at some point, was unable to resume his job and recover his true identity. If you pass this and other frontiers too often, you lose a part of yourself, one half of your personality. Madness and evil are much stronger than their opposites known as health and good. The former always beat the latter hands down.

'I am thy father's spirit, / Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night –' I'm neither Hamlet's father nor his father's spirit. I don't even know whether I'm a spirit or not. Perhaps I'm just a storyteller who is doomed to tell only one story – forever, eternally. And every time I tell it differently because time didn't stop at the moment of Hamlet's death. Actually he didn't want it to stop: one shouldn't confuse him with Faust. It's my duty to preserve my friend's fortunes and misfortunes for future generations. This play isn't confined to one country, one language, one century. The longer I live, the richer it grows, for every artist of genius and every prominent scientist adds something to it. The whole world makes its contribution to the play to which I devote my time and eternity. One may wonder who the real author of the play is – Shakespeare or I? Well, you don't have to read the play from beginning to end. Just reflect on the following words: 'Absent thee from felicity awhile.' To whom are these words spoken? My friend didn't interfere with Shakespeare's wish to die, did he? Did Shakespeare wish to die? Did he ever consider putting an end to his life? 'Death. The end of sorrow, and beginning of *felicity*.' The dying words of Juliet in Painter's *Palace of Pleasure*. Felicity. Why did Shakespeare use the same word? Why did he write the most famous soliloquy in the history of literature?

Actually I prefer Macbeth's treatment of the subject: it's short and sweet. 'Why should I play the Roman fool, and die / On mine own sword? whiles I see lives, the gashes / Do better upon them.' I also prefer his soliloquy focused on 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'.

*Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.*

(Cf. Ham. II. ii. 254-264: *Ham.* O God, I could be bounded in nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space – were it not that I have bad dreams. *Guild.* Which dreams indeed are ambition; for the very substance of the ambitious is merely the shadow of a dream. *Ham.* A dream itself is but a shadow. *Ros.* Truly, and I hold ambition of so airy and light a quality that it is but a shadow's shadow. *Ham.* Then are our beggars bodies, and our monarchs and outstretched heroes the beggars' shadows.)

Life walks very quickly so you can't *always* catch up with it. And when you do catch it, you realise you hold nothing. Hamlet isn't allowed to embrace his father's unsubstantial ghost. Life is a poor player because it plays the same part over and over again. Life bombards all living creatures – plants included – with disasters. Optimists say there's a wide variety of patterns to choose from. Where are these varieties? Poisons, bombs, bullets, a state of decrepitude. The flesh on your body decays very rapidly and it doesn't really matter if you're dead or alive. Can you choose your means of death? In a way – yes. If you drink too much alcohol, you're sure to die of liver cancer. Free will, they call it.

What's Hamlet today? His own ghost? Hamlet died, Hamlet was buried, Hamlet returneth to dust, the dust is earth, of earth we make loam, and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer-barrel? Or a beer-bottle? A mere cork?

'Hamlet has many faults – it is full of holes both in action and motivation,' writes W. H. Auden. There *are* many holes in it. So what? Every new proposal has several holes in it. The same goes for old proposals, initiatives, projects and masterpieces. Nobody's perfect, as they say. Sometimes they don't say anything, which doesn't mean that somebody or something has achieved some perfection or other. They just don't say anything because they're weary of talking.

In gestalt psychology and gestalt psychotherapy, people's thoughts and emotions are seen as complex wholes. Hegel's heritage? Life is a patchy play and its performance is patchy. That's how we hold the mirror up to nature. There are no wholes; there are only holes. I'm sure my friend would have applauded this wordplay. Is *Hamlet* a *worldplay*?

No one says about Claudius' deed: 'There seemed to be no motive for the murder.' But Hamlet might have murdered Claudius just for the fun of it. The same goes for Polonius. Anyway, everyone is motivated entirely by self-interest. Claudius kills Hamlet's father out of self-interest. Gertrude marries both Hamlet's father and Claudius out of self-interest: the life of a queen is more remarkable than that of a lady-in-waiting. Hamlet mopes because he is fed up with philosophy and no longer intends to devote his life to this discipline. Oddly enough, he is a born man of action and inaction weighs heavily on his mind. 'I'm so bored at home,' he told me once. 'I wish they'd give me something I could really get my teeth into.'

'What my lord?' I asked.

'The Kingdom of Denmark,' he said bursting into laughter and tears. Even his face was prone to contradictions and therefore was often split into two parts. More often than not, his mouth laughed, whereas his eyes were full of tears.

‘And your vocation? Philosophy?’

‘There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,’ he said, ‘than are dreamt of in your philosophy.’

There are philosophers who just walk in the woods, enjoying smells, colours, trees and brooks. They’re at one with nature. They don’t even have to hold a mirror up to it: they *are* this mirror. Ophelia is the best philosopher I’ve ever encountered on earth. Even in Wittenberg there are no philosophers of such a high calibre. They deal with concepts, not with plants. And plants are much closer to the truth than concepts. Every flower is a truth in its own right, which accounts for the multitude of truths you come across in the world.

Philosophers deal with conceptual models; Ophelia picks flowers. Philosophers go to libraries where they gather information about the world; Ophelia gathers blackberries from the hedgerow. I wish I could tell only *her* story or rather its ultimate phase – *her* madness. ‘There’s fennel for you, and columbines. There’s rue for you. And here’s some for me. We may call it herb of grace a Sundays. You must wear your rue with a difference. There’s a daisy. I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died. They say a made a good end.’ Ophelia is *not* motivated by self-interest. In every relationship there has to be some give-and-take. Ophelia gives everything she’s got and takes nothing. I wish I could finish my story thus: ‘These bones are the relics of a seventeenth-century saint.’ I wish I could *sing* it.

V

To be, or not to be...

Contrary to what Hamlet thinks, the Everlasting did *not* fix His canon against self-slaughter. St Augustine did:

And now, by way of exhortation to follow in the path of His own passion, He adds, 'He that loveth his life shall lose it' which may be understood in two ways: 'He that loveth shall lose,' that is, If thou lovest, be ready to lose; if thou wouldst possess life in Christ, be not afraid of death for Christ. Or otherwise, 'He that loveth his life shall lose it.' Do not love for fear of losing; love it not here, let thou lose it in eternity but what I have said last seems better to correspond with the meaning of the Gospel, for there follow the words, 'And he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal.' So that when it is said in the previous clause, 'He that loveth,' there is to be understood in this world he it is that shall lose it. 'But he that hateth,' that is, in this world, is he that shall keep it unto life eternal. Surely a profound and stranger declaration as to the measure of a man's love for his own life that leads to its destruction, and of his hatred to it that secures its preservation! If in a sinful way thou lovest it, then dost thou really hate it; if in a way accordant with what is good thou has hated it, then hast thou really loved it. Happy they who have so hated their life while keeping it, that their love shall not cause them to lose it. But beware of harbouring the notion that thou mayest court self-destruction by any such understanding of thy duty to hate thy life in this world. For on such grounds it is that certain wrong-minded and perverted people, who, with regard to themselves, are murderers of a specially cruel and impious character, commit themselves to the flames, suffocate themselves in water, dash themselves against a precipice, and perish. This was no teaching of Christ's, who, on the other hand, met the devil's suggestion of a precipice with the answer, 'Get thee behind me, Satan; for it is written, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.'

St Augustine, *On the Gospel of St John*

To be or not to be. It would be better to say: 'To be *and* not to be.' You do not turn away from your own destiny and are all the more alert to sudden changes since you cannot part with your destiny and predestination. You accept them instead of struggling for your life with the lives of others, and cheerfully go your way, for there is no other way for you and your progeny. 'Beware / of entrance to the quarrel, but being in, / Bear't that th'opposed may beware of thee.' No one knows whether Laertes followed his father's advice, but Hamlet behaves in such a way that one is tempted to believe he is the son to whom Polonius talks whenever a turning point in their lives is in the offing.

Hamlet's prophetic soul suspects foul play, but he neither attempts to find out more about what happened nor goes to Wittenberg where he might pursue his philosophical career. Then he encounters

the ghost and the half of him that is dedicated to action – *to be*, in other words – gets underway. This half does not *always* moves about; sometimes it gets stuck in a no-man's-land. At least there are no men in it and you cannot avenge your father if no human body makes its appearance within your field of vision – within *striking* distance. It is the other half that gets the upper hand in the struggle for life and you unhurriedly meditate on life and death, on one half, on the other. And you are not always aware of what or whom these halves belong to.

You take your time because you have to kill it, and it is easier to kill something if you hold it tightly, assuming control over it. Tony Tanner says that in the play 'we most often encounter what seems like a compulsive doubling, as though Shakespeare will not use one word when he can think of two.' And he gives a few examples to drive his point home: 'the sensible and true avouch of mine own eyes'; 'the gross and scope of my opinion', and so on. The play is long on account of the doublings and rhetorical flourishes, and only a long play can kill time efficiently. Even the time owned by the audience gets killed when the Royal National Theatre Company performs the play.

*For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
Th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of dispriz'd love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of th'unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin?*

*For who would bear cancers, coughs, insults,
Sexual harassment, stern rebukes,
Other people's riches, other men's beautiful wives,
Headaches, lack of sleep, lack of confidence,
Lack of inspiration, lack of food, lack of interest,
Insomnia, nightmares, genes, diabetes,
Diabetic comas, other comas, other disasters,
Earthquakes, earaches, toothaches, false teeth,
False dawns, false alarms, false moves,
False pretences, bombs, impotence,
The pangs of dispriz'd love –*

And then a messenger comes and speaks about rapiers, daggers and Barbary horses; whereupon your other half swings into action.

And a man's life's no more than to say 'one'.

Another truism. You say 'one' but life goes on; so does the show. You say 'two' and you are still alive in spite of bare bodkins and cancers. So you begin to kill those who happen to live within your reach. They send you to England because the crowd does not like these murders. The crowd thinks that you can also murder the crowd, so the crowd storms the palace where you live and even your relatives will be under threat of arrest, if the mob prevails in this struggle for life, death and eternity. Life is short and you are always short of time, space and everything else – even if you have wine in abundance and get drunk after draining your draughts of Rhenish down.

My grandfather used to say: 'Life is astoundingly short. To me, looking back over it, life seems so foreshortened that I scarcely understand, for instance, how a young man can decide to ride over to the next village without being afraid that – not to mention accidents – even the span of a normal happy life may fall far short of the time needed for such a journey.'

Kafka, *The Next Village*

Just another truism. Life is long, too long. There are many doubles and synonyms in it: disaster, tragedy, ruin, blows, adversity, catastrophe, calamity, failure, misfortune, mess. And what about success? You say 'three' and a woman falls in love with you. Then she dies and you say 'four'. You have lived through four deaths over the last two years: the death of your father, the death of your mother, the death of your uncle, the death of your nephew. You go on counting whatever comes and goes; and you have no idea what triumphs in this struggle for life. And what is victory, by the way? Coming or going? You go and are defeated. You come and are defeated too. And what about triumphs? The eradication of smallpox by vaccination was one of medicine's greatest triumphs. But you are dying of liver cancer and smallpox is none of your concern.

Anyway life is too long. You say 'five', 'six', 'seven' and on the count of 'eight' you turn over a new leaf. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. You realise that your leaf is pretty old.

How if I answer no?

All right, you answer no. It takes all sorts to make a world. Nietzsche says yes and you say no. Your destiny does not say anything; it just enters your room and puts its hand on your shoulder. But you wrench yourself free and say something to the effect that you live in a free country. Then you speak about God who gave you so-called free will. Destiny smiles or frowns – it does not really matter what destiny's face looks like during your rendezvous. The words it may utter do not count either, for destiny speaks rather seldom. And if it does say something, its soliloquy is limited to one word only – 'yes'. You say 'one', 'two', 'three'. Destiny says 'yes' which means 'no'.

Give me your pardon, Sir. I've done you wrong

‘I wish Hamlet had made some other defence,’ writes Samuel Johnson. ‘It is unsuitable to the character of a good or a brave man, to shelter himself in falsehood.’

What are you supposed to say under the circumstances? What *is* suitable to the character of a good or a brave man or both?

Dear Laertes, I hope you realise that the world is the playground of the rich and famous – of the forces, in other words. And sometimes it’s better to be weak than strong. You withdraw from the world and become weak – as weak as the reed about which Pascal speaks so eloquently. Are you a reed or Hercules? I am probably a reed, but I don’t know what size this reed exhibits to the world and I’ve no idea whether it thinks or not. Probably it doesn’t. So what? Let us live or die – all this amounts to the same thing. Do we know this thing or is it a thing in itself? I am a man in myself, I suppose. But my suppositions do not count. So I just live and drift, if you catch my drift. Do you?

They talk about our plot and a gradual build-up of suspense throughout the play. There’s no suspense, believe me. We’re going to die, all of us, with the exception of Horatio who’ll tell our story. He already begins to tell it as if he couldn’t wait until the arrival of death. Actually death is always by your side, by my side. No point in taking sides – you always find yourself in death’s company. Judging by the company you keep, you’ve got both flesh and blood. So much blood has been shed in the course of this play. Never mind, never mind. The play will be over in a few minutes.

Don’t you find it ridiculous? I mean the situations we get involved in unwillingly and willingly. Where’s the frontier between our will and its absence? Let’s not talk about predestination tonight. There are other topics worthy of our attention. Plot, motivation. Whatever I do is done on the spur of the moment. The moment vanishes into thin air and no longer spurs me into action. So I pay homage to what is defined as inaction. What about this definition? Is it correct? Another question: to be correct or to be incorrect? Being incorrect may help you in the world where chaos reigns over cities and countries.

My uncle pours something into my father’s ear. Apparently Shakespeare was fond of ears. And Gogol spoke mostly of noses. Should we speak of our rapiers? Unbated and envenom’d. So what? Another poison, another ear that overhears a conspiracy. And my prophetic soul talks all the time. Do you know what it says? Unbated and envenom’d. I don’t care, my dear. You’ll be justly kill’d with your own treachery. I’ll be justly kill’d with *my* own treachery. What treachery? No idea. They’ll find a motive, as usual. They’ll say I was determined to kill you because you might usurp my throne or that of my uncle, my father, my mother. I no longer know who sits on this throne and my attention span is too short for any investigation, however short and sweet. Besides, I’m weary of all these ridiculous actions that audiences are fond of: plotting, creeping, pouring, peering, killing, rising from the dead. The plot thickens, they think. Let them think whatever they’re capable of. Thick skins, thick skulls.

Auden is more or less right: there are holes in our play, in our lives, in our deaths. Our wounds are also holes, but never mind, I say. I always say ‘never mind’, whatever happens, whatever doesn’t happen. So many things do not happen, but never mind, never mind. Why should you think in terms of

the whole? There are moments and they go away. Do you relish every moment, every single line? What does it matter if it is a cause or an effect? You can break this chain because every moment is life and death – an end in itself. Why can't they enjoy every word I say? I do, by the way. List, list, O list! I don't think you heard this bit – you were in France at the time.

*What's Hecuba to him, or he to her,
That he should weep for her? What would he do
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have? He would drown the stage with tears,
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty and appal the free,
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
The very faculties of eyes and ears.*

An actor performed his part in my presence. He cried when talking about Hecuba, about the woman he wasn't acquainted with. Believe me, I cried whenever my father's ghost paid me a visit. I actually drowned the stage with tears, but that was another stage and no one saw my tears and the flood occasioned by them. Anyway I don't want them to see my tears, otherwise they wouldn't suspend disbelief when listening to the soliloquy you've just heard. As you see, I sacrifice a lot for the play, for Shakespeare.

Don't you like this soliloquy? Don't you envy me? Of course I'm a royal prince and you are not. But my words are more precious than my virtual crown, aren't they? Did you really dream of becoming a king? What for? To be poisoned? To be stabbed in the chest? And what about this mob? 'Laertes shall be king, Laertes king.' Do you know what W. H. Auden says about you? Were you in France when he gave a series of lectures on Shakespeare in the United States? 'When Laertes returns from France the second time, why hasn't someone told him Hamlet killed his father, and when he storms the palace, why is all the excitement over in a few moments?' Why did you return from France? I thought you wished to avenge your father. Never mind, never mind. The angry mob outside the palace was ready to riot – that's what I think about at the moment. Why did the violence subside? Because the mob acts on the spur of the moment – like myself. People think their lives will change for the better if a new prince ascends the throne. That's what the Russians thought before their Revolution – they were waiting for a big-hearted king. And then Stalin came to power. Never mind. What was I talking about?

The mob comes and goes. They shout and withdraw because they're thirsty and only vodka can quench their thirst. Did Auden never taste vodka? Another moment of bliss. You storm a palace and go home after a while. You drink vodka and make love to your wife or daughter. That's what happiness is about, the happiness of the common man.

Let us think about Ophelia. Do you know what Auden says about her? ‘Ophelia is a silly, repressed girl and is obscene and embarrassing when she loses her mind over her father’s death. But though her madness is very shocking and horrible, it is not well motivated. She was not so wild about her meddling Papa, nor was she tremendously *interested* in Papa.’ Shall we murder him? We might do it through sheer momentum. Auden seems to forget that Ophelia’s father was disposed of by the man she loved more than her forty thousand brothers. Besides, she was a frail maiden. Frailty, thy name is maiden. Frailty, thy name is humanity.

Let us leap in her grave together. Fifty thousand brothers, sixty thousand lovers. I am her husband, Laertes. Let us think about her. Let us sing Mozart’s *Requiem* in her memory. ‘*Lux aeterna luceat eis, Domine, cum sanctis tuis in aeternum, quia pius es. Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine, et lux perpetua luceat eis.*’

*There on the pendent boughs her crownet weeds
Clamb’ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up,
Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds,
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and indued
Unto that element. But long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pull’d the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death.*

Is that *how* we are, *what* we are? Our destiny, our lot. An envious sliver broke. What did it envy? To be or not to be. *Not* ‘to be or not to be’. No questions, no flourishes. Just a few snatches. Of what? Of songs, of nonsense. Let them say this doesn’t make sense. Where do they look for their senses? In no-man’s-land? In no-woman’s-land? We lose the name of action. We lose actions and names. What remains is a song and flowers and brooks. And their murmurs, our murmurs. And muddy death. An apposite image for human destiny.

*Tomorrow is Saint Valentine’s day,
All in the morning betime,
And I a maid at your window,
To be your Valentine.
Then up he rose, and donn’d his clo’es,*

*And dupp'd the chamber door,
Let in the maid that out a maid
Never departed more.*

Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's day. Never departed more.

God a mercy on your souls.

VI

I cannot say I do not live and it is all the more pointless (trying to say so) that I eat, drink and use my exercise bike to keep my legs in running order. They do not really run. They do make movements that put strain on their muscles that begin to run and no one can stop them, no one at all. I can stop myself, but sometimes there is nothing to stop: we should rather talk of non-stop: once an old man is under way, nothing can stop him in his ideal world, on his ideal itinerary. It is part of a train of thought, not of that of events, and no thought can last forever, being as fragile as whatever can be found in the mind. So the train stops and I watch an old cassette where Macbeth makes a fool of himself because it is much more difficult to make a wise of yourself. But being wise lasts longer and can thereby propel you into the realm of immortality.

Nothing lasts longer, not even your wounds, and you succumb to them sooner or later. And you should strike 'later' out as you proceed from day to day, from Hamlet to Banquo's offspring. Mind your language – there are ladies present! Mind your language – there are gentlemen present! Mind your language – there are children present! They are present and for their sake something must be done, if only by proxy, out of courtesy and humanism that outdates itself or outruns its run. And those present do overreach themselves, but what they reach does not amount to any riches – only to a few beaches I might have paid visit to in my childhood when my parents spent their holidays on the Black Sea.

I open my eyes and I see whatever they call 'harmony' because even a dumping ground is a piece of harmony or of music, as they used to say in the Sixties. You would throw a tin can, hit the middle of a rubbish bin and they called it 'a piece of concrete music' and sometimes just 'a piece of concrete'. So, whenever my eyes are open, I see a piece of harmony, and if someone says, 'I wish you'd do something about your bedroom – it's a real mess.' 'It's a real harmony,' you answer. 'What do you know about harmony?'

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. Suppose I open my eyes, and this supposition is not wide of the mark because I do open my eyes from time to time, not necessarily at 6 a.m. What do I see with these eyes of mine, wide-or-short open? I see whatever is the case and I cannot say it is a piece of disharmony I have the benefit of before getting out of bed. Creeps in this pretty pace. I wish I could creep up the wall opposite, like a spider. Why? To prey on small flies and other insects? Of just for the sake of webs and nets? Harmonious, aren't they? Tomorrow, perhaps tomorrow.

And when goes hence?

To-morrow, as he purposes.

O! never Shall sun that morrow see!

Morrow has not earned its place in the sun. But *to*-morrow did.

Life Everlasting – based on metre, on rhythm!

PROSPERITY

THE ORIGIN OF THE SPECIES

We are told that what was created first and foremost bore no likeness to the *prima materia*; nor did it look like the material we have to deal with in today's world. According to the Indians, space got ahead of both Time and materials, forestalling the problems linked to the theory of relativity and the Tower of Babel. So, had we been born in those days, we would have seen nothing but space; or the void, in other words. But that void was different from the one around which a sort of spirit was flying before the Big Bang. I have no idea whether we are forced to handle the very last *materia* (the *fine* one) and no idea of mine is related to the Big Crash or the Big *Fin* (*not Fun*, I'm afraid), as the French call the end of the world. And I cannot say I am eager to turn the whole universe with its time upside down to find out if the stones we pick up and throw either at the police or whores and other sinners are identical to the ones our great-great-great grandancestors crunched underfoot. I am no Buddhist but I think the Buddha was right when he said that the arrow we have in the middle of our flesh should be removed before we embark upon our search for the murderer. The point is the arrow in question cannot be removed, at least St Paul thought so; and so we stagger around, thinking about our suffering and the promised deliverance from it.

Neither the origin of the universe nor its end should concern us for the simple reason that we are supposed to devote all our energy, thoughts and words to the present moment which, according to the same Indians, is eternal to some extent or rather to *any* extent. In the light of this doctrine, we assume and maintain that there is no difference between eternity and time, and that somehow space is also involved in this big bear hug inside which all our theories, hopes and despairs meet and dance. All right, at the beginning was space and no one stood in front of it because both space and its creator were on their own and seemed to repel intruders whose only aim in life boils down to destroying standoffs and checkmating stalemates. Gatecrashers remained beyond the gates and so could not see the Almighty literally embedded in space; and no one would ever have told them apart, but for time which turned up unexpectedly and said, 'No world can exist without time.'

There are many inaccuracies in any account of the origin of the universe and the present account is no exception to the rule, for we began by stating that only space was lying on three whales at the time when the Big Bang was expected to resound everywhere like Varèse's *Amerique*. All right, there was no Big Bang at that particular moment; there was silence as if space or God were fast asleep and no bangs dared interfere with their sweet dreams, if any. (Were sweet dreams created alongside space?) At that point God was identical with Himself, and the space in which He was embedded was God-Space, and that is what our pantheists talk to us about when uttering the words *natura naturalis* and *natura naturanta*. But both our pantheists and other philosophers are severely criticised for using arguments that obfuscate the main issue, especially if they allow themselves to resort to the words that denote objects and subjects such as gates, intruders, whales, Dicks, Mobys, and so on. 'Was Moby

Dick created along with space?’ ask scholars. ‘And what about Melville? Was he created before the Moon?’

At some point many theologians spoke about time and its advent which might have coincided with that of the Big Bang as if time had been waiting for this cue in some makeshift wings. Time hears the Big Bang or just a series of bangs and says to itself, ‘It’s high time I got under way.’ And someone – one of God’s emissaries – says to Time, ‘This way please,’ and Time makes its appearance on a candlelit stage. Beside itself with fury, it says to both the Almighty and light, ‘What’s the matter? I enter the universe before anything else. Light can’t break into its luminous song without my participation. Either you say something to this effect – something along the lines of “let it be” – or strike a match to light a candle. And this manoeuvre takes time, you know. And where could you take time in my absence? You look around and see only a sort of naked space. You can’t even have a lunch in this space because I’m not yet at your service.’

‘We’re not fond of lunches, especially if they’re naked,’ answer a few prehistoric monsters. ‘So we’ll skip this lunch of yours for the sake of a 24-piece dinner service.’

‘But you can’t skip anything either. I’m the only substance on which you can count in these matters. If it weren’t for my generosity, no one would ever have played hopscotch in other universes about which Giordano Bruno spoke so eloquently. As for the dinner you touched upon, you won’t even be allowed to swallow a tiny morsel of fish, let alone savour 24 pieces.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you can’t swallow all of them at once. Besides, you’ll give yourself indigestion if you swallow your 24-piece dinner whole. You have to munch your way through all these dishes. One, two, three, four, five. Take your time, if you have any.’

‘You’re a funny creature,’ say the monsters.

‘Funny ha-ha or funny peculiar?’ asks time.

Once upon a time, someone said, ‘New Age thinking seems to be a hotchpotch of old and new ideas,’ and this someone was probably right unless we still belong to the Old Age which is also capable of mixing ideas, the sheep and the goats, for every individual is muddle-headed and this state of affairs depends neither on their age nor on their culture. An old man plays the game of hopscotch with ideas, taking no trouble to sort out the whales from the law of gravity, black holes from white holes, the Big Bang from a little whimper. But as soon as we decide to investigate the enigma of time linked to history and ages among which we are likely to find old, new and middle varieties, we realise that even if we confine ourselves to the Old Age only, we are sure to come across a remarkable zigzagging strata of epochs, customs and so on. We might affirm that Copernicus belongs to the Old Age because we almost automatically exclude him from the group of scientists who hit upon the idea of a bootstrap located at the core of quantum mechanics. And we immediately conclude that he was born much earlier and so knew nothing either of Einstein’s or Heisenberg’s discoveries. We might also jump to an unjustified conclusion that no one today is ignorant, naive and stupid to the point of

believing that the Earth is lying on three backs; and these three backs are related to the three whales one often lights upon in the books devoted to our ancestors who thought that the sun was a butler of the Earth, turning around her in expectation of an order.

Oddly enough, we do come across the people who find the whale-hypothesis charming and stick to it because they prefer a poetic lie to a prosaic truth. Looking at the Earth suspended in space may get us down and make us experience a peculiar feeling of solitude. When you are at home and no one is about to ring your doorbell, you feel lonely to some extent; but no one prevents you from putting on an LP and listening to Alfred Cortot or Bruno Walter. Through music you can enliven your solitude and heighten your awareness of the overall harmony that governs the world even in the absence of God Who often takes advantage of what is defined as ‘compassionate leave’. After all, archangels are not immortal and therefore succumb to celestial diseases rather often – out of compassion perhaps. ‘A problem shared is a problem halved,’ they say looking at humans who shed many tears and tear their clothes upon learning about their deaths and natural catastrophes; whereupon archangels begin to tear their wings off, although they are not sure they thereby halve the problems faced by humans of all kinds. Compassion and pity have nothing to do with analysis, for they invade us spontaneously and settle down in our hearts that often reach breaking point and break into pieces despite the progress of medical science. That is why our doctors often say in confidential tones, ‘Don’t focus your attention on others. You need to be thick-skinned to survive as a human being in the world where thin skins are discarded and disposed of in secret or in broad daylight. Sometimes they’re even dropped into rubbish bins, which demonstrates that many of us do not quite appreciate the delicacy of the situation.’ Be that as it may, a great many doctors begin to work on our bodies and souls by measuring our skins, their thickness or thinness. If your skin is too thin, they talk to you about nerves and bundles, saying you should always have a cigarette to steady your nerves whenever you venture outdoors. ‘Otherwise you’ll end up in a lunatic asylum,’ they point out.

‘And what if I die of lung cancer?’ you ask.

‘Any hospital is better than a lunatic asylum,’ say the doctors.

‘Contrary to cancer patients, lunatics can live for years and years. Take Nijinsky, for instance. Or Nietzsche. They both danced, by the way. Cancer patients do not, as far as I know.’

‘I beg to differ – Nijinsky didn’t dance. He performed one single jump you might have seen on television.’

‘A very beautiful jump at that! Cancer patients don’t jump at all.’

‘Would you live in a lunatic asylum for the sake of one jump only?’

‘Yes, I would.’

‘Don’t forget you’re not Nijinsky and so your jump will be neither beautiful nor high.’

‘Doesn’t matter.’

‘Why do you wish to dance?’ ask the doctors.

‘I’m very fond of ballet. I saw Nureyev many times. And I might have admired Nijinsky even more, had I been born earlier.’

‘In which century would you like to live?’

Our doctors are aware of the soothing effect produced by nonsensical discussions and often we stay in their consulting rooms for hours on end, which explains the astronomical figures one may chance upon while inspecting their bank accounts. And if their patients refuse to commit themselves in the domain of time – or in the space of time – our doctors questions them about their identity crises and revelations. And if their patients are reluctant to reveal their names, the doctors explain to them that they cannot live without first, second, third and other names, otherwise their passports would be as blank as any blank page, which is not tolerated by any authorities, even if we happen to live in the freest country in the world. So you cannot tell a police officer, ‘Freest country, isn’t it?’ if he says you should accompany him to the nearest police station, for unnameable people can be found only in works of fiction – in Samuel Beckett’s works, among other works and masterpieces. And you cannot take a fictional character to a police station, even if you are the chief policeman of the country where the action is set and performed.

So our doctors go back to Nietzsche and say, ‘Why don’t you identify with this philosopher?’

‘Because he was mad,’ we answer.

‘But you don’t have to identify with *him*, you know. You’re allowed to identify with those whose identities he adopted as he sank deeper and deeper into his psychosis, as Hitchcock might have put it. Let’s take Dionysus, for instance. This Greek god was on no account crazy, for all his drinking bouts and the orgies he took part in to teach us how to dance.’

‘We prefer Apollo,’ we answer, whereupon we quote a dozen relevant paragraphs from *The Birth of Tragedy*. But both these paragraphs and our doctors are quite irrelevant within the framework of what is habitually referred to as the origin of the world to which the opening page of this book is devoted. And we cannot exclude the possibility that the closing page of the same book will treat the opposite subject: the end of the world or the Little Whimper, as some poet or other put it. Why not the Little *Whisper*?

Originally our views on how the universe saw the first days and nights was centred upon birds or rather their eggs from which the Earth and other planets sprang as a result of divine or human actions. Sure enough, human beings seem to have been born before light, darkness and even heaven which, according to some commentators, depended on our will and also our needs. Do we need light? We said ‘yes’ or just nodded our heads, and light came into existence so that one might get the feeling the real creation was somehow linked to a sort of candlelit dinner. First our prehistoric ancestors saw a candle and immediately realised how it could be put to good use, wasting no time on this and other similar occasions associated with the first day of our world.

Yet almost everyone knows that humans did not see the light of day or even of a shortest and thinnest candle before the birth of another 'nation'. Whenever asked what nation they have in mind, scientists and commentators read out a catalogue of plants, bugs and liquids of all sorts. They go so far as to point out that water was the primordial element and therefore the candle I touched upon was seen by water or rather reflected by it, which incidentally amounts to the same thing, for water's eyesight is tantamount to reflections. Actually human eyes are believed to see the world in the same way: they just reflect it, enabling our minds to take note of the reflection and, if necessary, study it thoroughly.

As for the eggs related to the birth of all nations, they were mostly manipulated by humans who could not entrust such a task to other species whose inferiority was solemnly proclaimed by the Bible. For instance, no horse, however ingenious and intelligent, can make an omelette, and that makes all the difference, as many scientists point out. When asked the following question, 'What's the difference between animals and humans?' they answer thus, 'Humans can't make an omelette without breaking eggs, but animals can't make an omelette at all.'

'Why?' you ask defiantly, thinking about Swift, Tolstoy and Brigitte Bardot.

'Because to make an omelette you must first beat the eggs,' they answer.

Tagore thinks that whatever happens in the universe is human to the point of being modelled upon our shape, whether this shape concerns our bodies or thoughts. In other words, the universe is Adam Kadmon in every sense of the word or rather of the name: it thinks our thoughts and wages our wars which we call 'Star Wars', logically enough. It would be inappropriate and even stupid to call them 'Bush wars' or something along these lines that always lead to wars and terrorism, needless to say; judging from our bitter-sweet experience. But Tagore did not think about the universe in terms of wars, be they star wars or bush wars; as if there were no other wars in the neighbourhood and elsewhere. In this domain we are spoilt for choice: there are so many good and bad wars around us, up and down, that we can talk about 'Grassroots Wars' or just 'Grass Wars'; or even 'Roots wars'. But Tagore neither talks nor thinks about wars; and if he happens to meditate upon the grass, the images he contemplates within his mind and also in the garden where he utters his mantras day in, day out, paint a great many peaceful solutions to all human and universal problems. Let us not forget that God is nature and the universe is Adam Kadmon, and that is why the universe can justifiably say, 'I am human and whatever is human and even inhuman is mine.'

Philip Glass pays private homage to Tagore in his opera *Satyagraha* that talks, plays and sings mostly about Gandhi. He goes somewhere, surrounded by a few crowds or seats in *his* garden, and utters *his* mantras; and specialists wonder whether his mantras are identical to those of Tagore. As for the latter, he is present throughout Act II of Glass's opera, and his presence has little in common with the garden where he mediates upon the leaves of grass and occasionally upon Walt Whitman who also knows that the universe remains human as long as humanity is symbolised by Walt Whitman in person. As for the former, for Tagore, opera-goers see him in Act II on a truncated pyramid, seated in

his wicker chair with a birdcage, which means that this time he is meditating upon birds and probably on Saint Francis.

From Tagore's point of view, the universe is saturated with humanity – for better or for worse, as they say; and even if no egg can be found within the foundations of what we call 'the universe,' we can rightfully talk about scrambled eggs, among other eggs and omelettes. For instance, we can write an essay on the 'scrambled-egg universe', for this notion emphatically emphasises the preponderance of humans in whatever has happened since the Big Bang. And even if there is such a thing as the *Small* Bang, we can say to each other, 'Rest assured! We're still the centrepiece of space-time and also of whatever lies beyond its borders.' But of course you need to think big if you want to succeed, and that is why we always talk about the *Big* Bang, relegating the *small one* to some distant corner of the subuniverse.

Not everyone is satisfied with the eggs and the role we assign to them in the domain of creations and bangs and also of the gods who should not be excluded from the 'Rite of Spring', as some researchers call the Creation. The same researchers go so far as to banish the notion of '*ab ovo*' from human vocabulary – in the light of what they think about eggs as such. They think that the Rite of Spring deserves a more majestic approach and staging: after all, we are dealing with our origins, our roots, grassroots and starroots. So they declare that the universe or rather its origin stems from a skyscraper that stood in the middle of the void about which the Bible informs us on the very first page of its collection of absolute truths. And when you ask them why they install this skyscraper in the middle of history, they say that any skyscraper represents humanity better than a human or rather an ape that eats forbidden fruit or any other fruit on a tree which, now and then, has nothing to do with the Tree of Knowledge or any other intellectual tree. If you see a skyscraper somewhere, you say in pontifical tones, 'This is the creation of human minds and also of human hands.' That is what they said about the Tower of Babel in the middle of the duration allotted to its construction. And then they repented and spoke so many languages that no linguists can ever learn them, which prevents these linguists deciphering all the manuscripts they find in the Library of Congress.

They find a manuscript and say to each other, 'In this text they speak about the origins of the universe. But we can't read this manuscript despite the unavoidable presence of our computers. These say to us that the world was created by God and they also speak to us about light and its coming; and also about its second and third comings. The point is light and any other illuminations can come to us as many times as they please, provided we capture them and understand their meanings. We do understand them and so write in our diaries, 'We see a light and we know it's a divine light we receive from God Himself. And this light says we are intelligent, wise, immortal and different from whatever is mortal. From stones, for instance. They live longer than we do, given that they can't suffer from debilitating diseases, let alone cancers of all kinds. We suffer from all of them; yet we're immortal in the light of what this light says about life on Earth.'

So there is a skyscraper and we talk about it whenever we focus our thoughts upon the origins of the world or whatever comes to the fore as we think about the world and its ramifications and consequences. Something comes to the fore and we look at it, at the fore and also at the coming, and we think that this is what we should write about, even if we have nothing to write home about. We do not have anything, anyway, but there is *something* and we do not even say there is such a thing as something because it has been said by Leibniz and many other philosophers and peasants. These touch their cows and say, 'My cow is somebody.' Or something, if you wish. But you do not wish it because today *everything* is *everybody*; in other words, there are no somethings. Yes, there are somebodies everywhere and if there is nobody around, we are duty bound to say there are many somebodies about our bodies, meaning that the Earth and also the air are there; and they are human. And there are also a score of human birds that fly in this air of ours, otherwise they would already have died many times: if you see something or rather someone in front of your feet, you trample upon these objects and subjects. And you trample them to death; not to *life*, whatever some philosophers say and think, being carried away by their innate vitalism. No birds, in other words.

In the course of our history we have finally realised that all the species we talk about are *human* species and therefore we should not put animals in our laboratories and torture them until our tests agree to yield a few universal truths. Even the objects we handle and mishandle are not as inanimate as we used to think, for they have souls that we must protect from kicks and pricks. They also have bodies – this goes without saying – and these bodies of theirs feel our pricks all the more understandably and painfully since they are bodies and consequently are not as immortal and invisible as their souls.

At the beginning was Man and in the end will be Woman whose victory over the injustice of history that has always neglected female rights is obvious and irretrievable. 'I agree things look difficult, but the situation is far from irretrievable,' says every man and we can find his words and thoughts in the everywoman library.

But the question we ask ourselves and God Who is supposed to answer all our questions – not only those related to time – brings us back to the souls we cannot harm unless we resort to sins and their wakes; sins' wake, as Joyce might have put it. Yes, we may – but not must – harm and even fatally wound a great many souls, if we show them naked whores and homosexuality addicts. Actually all this drivel is a thing of the past: today we imprison neither the former nor the latter nor the middle ones, whoever they are. And we talk about our new freedoms round the clock; and if we do not, if we cannot boast about our open- and broad-mindedness, we say to ourselves it is not worth our while having all these individuals outside and also inside our bodies.

We might admit that at the beginning was either Logos or Music and, logically enough, any scholar is sure to wonder if all this does not amount to the same thing or rather to the same music, for whatever

one can see or picture to oneself is music, needless to say; but not needless to *play*, at least according to Shakespeare. You play a note either on the piano or any other instrument, and the light they speak of in the Bible comes to the fore, as far as any limelight. You press another key and the Earth comes into play, whereupon you realise you should perform a great many sonatas and symphonies in your endeavour to feed or spoon-feed the newlywed void. So, whenever you listen to Wagner, Mahler or Palestrina, you attend a performance of the tragedy entitled *The Birth of the World*. You also hear all sorts of wills, élans and ordinary impulses; you need them all in order to survive because, in this world of ours, there has always been one problem – that of *survival*. Vival, *vie* and life have no meaning or use unless you append all sorts of ‘surs’ to them; or push another key on the instrument you are allowed to handle as you contemplate a dawn, a twilight, and so on.

Rachmaninoff says that every composer is chained to his native land, its dances, songs and rituals you might forget as you spend your time elsewhere. And what if you hear only the world as such? And its creation, recreation? The world is born and its birth both radiates and irradiates whatever we encounter in the course of our encounters of any kinds and sizes and shapes. Philosophers and theologians (and Plotin) put it differently, ‘A single beam of light radiated from the lighthouse,’ they write and explain that the lighthouse they touch upon is the One Who can be identified with light or music or God. At this point, Shakespeare is likely to interfere, as he always does when music is in the air (an Aeolian harp of sorts):

*If music be the food of love, play on,
Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting,
The appetite may sicken, and so die.*

These lines are so well-known one does not dare call into question their veracity; and so one is not supposed to complain if one hears all the rock and pop music that comes from beyond one’s room with a view or without it. One complains of course but the same one has no alternative but to listen to both the music in question and Shakespeare’s definition of love recited by one’s neighbour. ‘You should love everybody,’ says the neighbour.

‘Should I?’

‘Of course. But you don’t seem inclined to embrace your neighbours and even your next of kin.’

‘Mind your own business.’

These dialogues about music, love and food are too trite for me to take them seriously, even though I often indulge in the Flemish polyphony as I partake of my five-course dinner or my three-course lunch. And I still fall in love from time to time and therefore cannot deny that music does play an important role in my falls and loves because I often listen to Beethoven’s quartets in my girlfriends’ company. But I would not count upon music if my virtual or actual mistresses were not in love with me because no piece of music can replace a kiss or the whole gamut of emotions one is likely to

experience in one's bed, under one's sheets or 'twixt them where, according to Iago's supposition, Othello did his office. Actually music cannot replace anything, be it a chest of drawers or a smile, and so should not be counted upon whenever one lacks either a sentiment or an object. Whatever one may fall in love with happens to be a dark object of desire and music resounds elsewhere; her world is elsewhere, as Coriolanus might have put it. It is all the more bizarre to hear what Orsino, the Duke of Illyria, says whenever his frustration and love for Olivia are at fever pitch.

Music is a double-edged sword on account of its ambiguity and extramundane character which neither nourish you nor carry out any other mission in the world where humans meet and embrace each other; or kill each other, as the case may be. And that is often the case, given that a great many humans feel human only when killing others, even if these others are just animals or plants and not the kings assassinated by evildoers such as Henry IV or Macbeth and his spouse. So you should not say to a pianist or any other instrumentalist: 'Why don't you play a Schubert sonata? I'm not in love with anyone, you know. But I'm a Christian and so must fall in love with my neighbours, distant cousins and Helens of Troy. If you live in the universe love is a must and I count on you to make me experience this sentiment without which I'm likely to die after seeing a black cat cross my path.'

Orsino, on the other hand, is longing for a respite: he has been working hard – love is a variety of hard labour – and therefore needs to take a breather.

*That strain again! It had a dying fall;
O, it came o'er my ear like the sweet sound
That breathes upon a bank of violets,
Stealing and giving odor.*

Is that the breather he has been looking for? He used to enjoy the sentiment of Olivia-impregnated love, but now he has switched to violets and the odour they produce as they continue to adorn a lawn, a field or any other surface of the Earth. One might say the Duke is on the right track because music is much closer to nature than to Man unless this man is Adam Kadmon whose standing has more affinities with the stars than human society. Actually music has been taking care of the spheres ever since the Big Bang's C Major (or Minor) chord resounded in the cosmos and its suburbs, as Giordano Bruno used to put it. For hours and hours he could go on as follows, 'Our world isn't in a class of its own, for there are myriads of classes and worlds. And even when we get to the ultimate border of the last world we're allowed to catch a glimpse of, we realise that our universe has a number of suburbs. As you know, the toll of bankruptcies was rising daily and therefore many companies envisage relocating to these suburbs because the rent is much cheaper.' Let us not forget that Giordano Bruno was endowed with exceptional sight that enabled him to see whatever was going on outside the solar system and beyond the universe. But space never works on its own, being somehow dependent upon time and its stability: space-born quirks and frolics are nicely offset by time's reliability and regularity.

So the Duke seems to move in the right direction, but lovers are often as stubborn as the shrew depicted in another Shakespeare play. Olivia is the Duke's *idée fixe* and no amount of music is capable of unfixing this idea, replacing it either with violets or the cosmos; so that one might be tempted to add the name of Kadmon to the countess' Christian name. Olivia Kadmon. Sounds all right, doesn't it? 'O, when mine eyes did see Olivia Kadmon first / Methought she purg'd the air of pestilence –' Music lovers attribute this purgative power to music and therefore go to concert halls instead of taking the waters in Baden Baden.

Some concert-goers maintain that the Big Bang can be heard in the first movement of Tchaikovsky's *La Pathétique*. It is true that the very first chord of the development is associated in my mind with what may be defined as the end of *la belle époque* – of our pre-world existence, in other words. A great many unborn creatures knelt down – they sensed something was about to happen – and said to the Almighty, 'Please, please, forgive us. You know, we can't help fearing your forthcoming act of Creation. Listen to Tchaikovsky's *Sixth*, to the second theme of the First Movement. Isn't it beautiful? No world, however beautiful, can offer us more beauty than this theme created on the spur of the moment in a world from which time is absent. This is the best possible world, whatever Leibniz might conclude upon staring at leaves and stars. Please send one of your archangels on an errand of mercy. Or just say, "There'll be no light." And God answered them as follows, 'It's no use begging me – I'm about to create the world and that's final. By the way, listen to Mahler's *Sixth*, to the finale.'

What is the right answer to the question, 'Where's our King Lear?' Here it is:

*Contending with the fretful elements;
Bids the wind blow the earth into the sea,
Or swell the curled waters 'bove the main,
That things might change or cease; tears his white hair,
Which the impetuous blasts, with eyeless rage,
Catch in their fury, and make nothing of;
Strives in his little world of man to out-storm
The to-and-fro-conflicting wind and rain.*

Mahler reflects the Big Bang and its dire consequences, not King Lear's sentiments. Of course you are free to imitate this inhuman storm, following in Lear's footsteps that inexorably lead him into the legendary hovel and into no less renowned kingdom of madness. Whatever they say – and they talk a lot on the subject – music reflects neither our loves nor any despair experienced by a human being on the threshold of a nervous breakdown or death. Suppose you follow God's advice and listen to Mahler's *Sixth*, to the Finale of the symphony supposedly entitled *Tragic*. Mahler was in the habit of enlarging upon his life and the blows delivered to it by destiny, but as we listen to this piece we

neither feel his heart's deficiencies nor bend over his daughter's tomb. We might hear the decline and fall of the paradise we left behind in the pre-world world.

You may go mad as a result of your diabetes which is yours now, whatever you say to your solicitor or anybody else: you can't disown diabetes. Whenever they speak of madness, I don't visualise Nietzsche and his last photographs, however much I may admire his works and his way of thinking conveyed to me through my father's genes, I suppose. Through my mother's genes, I'm endowed with diabetes and the awareness of love; my father instilled philosophy into my brain, into my attitude towards whatever lies outdoors.

As usual I remember King Lear, although he has never said to me, 'Remember me,' if I remember rightly. (How could one remember such things wrongly, I wonder?) Why do I remember King Lear and not Schuman, Hölderlin and other famous lunatics? Because they were not old when they went mad, were they? And King Lear says something to the effect that he is old and foolish. I'm not foolish yet, according to my calculations, but I may become foolish and even idiotic as a result of diabetes.

*Where have I been? Where am I? Fair daylight?
I am mightily abus'd. I should e'en die with pity
To see another thus. I know not what to say.
I will not swear these are my hands: let's see;
I feel this pin prick. Would I were assur'd
Of my condition!*

I opened the book to find out if Lear was really mad, as everybody thought at the time of the battle at the end of which almost everybody died with the exception of one duke, one count, one prince, one baron and their daughters who swore never to rob their parents – 'Not a penny,' they said. And what if Lear had Alzheimer's? Have you had any therapy for your depression? If asked this question, Orsino might give us a lecture on music and the love it profusely exudes, provided our court musicians are up to their and our standards. We may nod our agreement, but it would be in order to remind our friend that he should in no way model his attitude towards music therapy on the women who say and repeat, 'Once I start eating chocolate, I cannot stop.' Had Orsino stopped after the 'bank of violets' – or after the second movement of Beethoven's *Pastoral* – he would have stayed in the bosom of nature, reaching with a bit of luck the pre-world paradise where violets and other representatives of flora took pride of place. But he went on and ruined his chances of curing himself of love and other addictions – his addiction to the food of love, to name but one. Had those violets become his *mandala*, he would have forgotten Olivia in due course, especially if he had taken the trouble to add to this *mandala* a *mantra* of sorts: 'O my dear violet, violet, violet / O my dear violet, humans are gone.'

The notion of the ‘pre-world’ may give rise to an unpleasant contradiction based upon our automatic coupling of flora and fauna with the human species as if the former could not enjoy their existence on their own without human crutches. Neither plants nor animals scream their heads off when trying to get in touch with humans without whom, according to scientific hypotheses, they might perish then and there: we must water them, cut their branches off and give a lot of tuna fish to cats. Let us not forget, however, that dinosaurs and trees were able to get on whatever they found in nature – for myriads of years; and the disappearance of dinosaurs has nothing to do with any human absence by their sides. We are so accustomed to thinking about the world in terms of human presence that even if one dares append the letters ‘pre’ to this world of ours, we continue to claim our ownership of this world and no other candidates are supposed to emerge as contestants for the presidency.

Nor does music need our presence, let alone our presidency or monarchy, for it is composed by angels or the Almighty Himself – His Almighty might enable you to compose better than Beethoven – and consequently the violets we hear and fall in love with are utterly deprived of human interference: we enjoy them from afar, from the post-birth world. And any tragic symphony or requiem is related to a sudden premonition of what the future – the Big Bang, in other words – might bring in its wake. Alas, the living-unborn’s forebodings about the future were to prove justified. In *King Lear* Shakespeare first holds his mirror up to the prenatal world and then carries it as far as the Big Bang whereupon, understandably enough, the King goes mad. But music may and should help us experience what poets define as Paradise Regained and therefore the doctor says, ‘Louder the music there!’

For a while, the King hearkens to the piece of music performed by a chamber orchestra and then asks the following questions:

*Where have I been? Where am I? Fair daylight?
I am mightily abus’d. I should e’en die with pity
To see another thus. I know not what to say.
I will not swear these are my hands; let’s see;
I feel this pin prick. Would I were assur’d
Of my condition!*

All arts are said to aspire to the condition of music; and music aspires to the condition of prenatality. What about our so-called Death-Instinct harmoniously described by Freud? Another piece of music? Mozart’s *Requiem*?

Let us admit for the sake of argument that a skyscraper did stand in the middle of the uncreated world, pointing its spire at the sun or at the Almighty. According to some theologians, the building looked like a church and they explain this resemblance by the builders’ dearest wish to avoid any

misunderstanding as to the nature of their intentions and work: on no account did they intend to intrude upon God's privacy. Nor were they resolved to meet Him on equal terms, on an equal footing, saying, 'I shall be you' or 'I am you' or simply 'I, I, I'. They just wanted to build a monument to the Big Bang and the skyscraper was a worthy reminder of this epoch- or eternity-making event on account of its magnitude: you do not commemorate a bang of such importance by means of a cottage with a lean-to garage.

Anyone might say that one does not need a car on BB-Day, a few hours after the greatest explosion in the history of the world. Those who are traumatised by terrorists and their attacks go so far as to affirm that on D-Day Satan blew Himself up, for only His self-immolation could produce such a devastating effect on the peaceful and quiet universe. Their doctrine teaches us that God had no intention of creating anything because, contrary to what some humanists pretend, He needed no company – not human beings anyway; after all, God is self-assertive, self-sufficient and does not really care about our recognition and the laurels we might put on His head at the earliest opportunity. On the contrary, God felt completely at ease and once upon a time resolved to watch any life, however exciting or atrocious, from afar, refraining from any participation in it. As many archaeologists know, our universe can rightfully brag about how many lives it went through without soiling its hands with police work, wars, concentration camps and so on. But a soothsayer – an archangel of sorts – said to it that next time it would not get away with such a set-up. 'Well, I'll try and get used to the new set-up,' said the universe.

'You will not,' answered the archangel.

'Why? I've always stuck to the middle way. I've never failed to find a middle ground between fauna and flora, between water and fire.'

'Next time you won't succeed,' said the archangel.

'Why?' asked the universe.

'Because you'll become human, Adam Kadmon. And humans are criminal by nature.'

'What does "criminal" mean?' asked the universe.

'Are you acquainted with Satan?'

'No.'

'He's a criminal par excellence.'

'I know who you're talking about. My children used to taunt him in the playground because he was fat and wore glasses.'

'He no longer wears glasses. His eyes were operated on, you know.'

'Is he still fat?'

'Once upon a time he said to us, "I'm going on a diet to see if I can shed a few kilos."'

'Are you on speaking terms?'

'We were, once upon time. He was one of our number. And then he fell. Did you hear him fall?'

'I heard a big bang.'

‘That’s right. Be careful. No more origins, no more species.’

Satan overheard this conversation and decided to sacrifice his life for the sake of a brave new world inhabited by humans and humanoids. God got wind of Satan’s determination and did all He could to stop him from creating a ‘world that has already wrought havoc in the universe,’ as a famous historian put it recently. That means that God was unable to put enough spokes in Satan’s wheels: Satan has wheels everywhere.

The universe might have begun many times, judging from the number of former lives that our saints, mystics and Pythagoreans recall without toil and trouble. And if you ask them when all this took place, they write so many zeros on some blackboard or other you lose your ability to count anything, even your own fingers. You get the feeling you have got myriads of them, but instead of rejoicing in your good fortune – you are sure to be acclaimed as the greatest pianist ever – you pay yet another homage to sadness and your friends say to each other, ‘I wish he or she wouldn’t sit brooding in his or her room all day.’

Time was created before the world; and yet time has nothing to do in the world if there are no humans in it, for only they can offer good fodder for minutes and hours. They run in a stadium and we talk about their ability to beat records or their adversaries who beat them in their turn, providing another portion of fodder for time. After all, one adversary cannot really beat his adversary in *no* time at all, even if he beats him hands down. And even beating a woman fair and square requires some time in spite of the hatred you nourish towards this woman. You know she has betrayed you with several Cassios and numerous Othellos, but you are loath to beat her brains out in the very first round, especially if she has no brains.

Of course you must beat something out, something hidden inside her skull – the soul, for instance; otherwise your victory over her treachery would be incomplete. (For the sake of argument, let us suppose that the soul is located in the brain, not in the pineal gland.) No man determined to avenge himself fully and truly should go back to his bed empty-handed – with no blood on his hands, contrary to what Shakespeare shows us in *Macbeth* where the queen goes to the bathroom every two minutes. So our man beats his mistress first fair and then square. And this takes him even more time than beating her just fair and square, which would not be fair, considering the amplitude of her crime. That is why Othello does not strangle Desdemona at once, proceeding in stages, as it were: first fair, then square, then fair again, and so on. That is what Othello means when he accepts Iago’s suggestion (‘strangle her in her bed’): ‘Good, good, the justice of it pleases, very good.’ And then he sets about carrying Iago’s order out:

Not dead? not yet quite dead?

I that am cruel, am yet merciful,

I would not have thee linger in thy pain,...
So, so.

The comma and the suspension points are the signs of time, as semiologists put it today; and we may add, after much soul-searching, that both 'sos' or 'so, so' are also the signs of time, although they belong to a different kind of signs and times. Any line (and time) is made up of points and their number varies in accordance with the length of the line in question which can extend as far as doomsday; sometimes it just comes to the end of the road situated on the threshold of our own house. As for Othello or rather for his victim, she is almost at the end of her road. Yet she lingers as if to prove to the whole world that Othello is both cruel and unmerciful: he could have strangled her three times in a row, had he used all his barbarous, un-European strength. 'O, falsely, falsely murder'd!' she says as Othello continues to prolong her agony. Why doesn't he deal the coup de grace to her half-dead sinews? Does he think his wife should take *English* leave? Or Venetian leave? Even on one's deathbed one is duty bound to recall one's manners, otherwise God might change His mind and substitute a circle of Hell for a grove in Eden.

Nobody, I myself, farewell:
Commend me to my kind lord, O, farewell!

Othello is doubly cruel because he does not need to be reminded of the importance that our subjective, psychological self attaches to time whenever we are precluded from dying on the spot. He wounds Iago and the latter points out, 'I bleed, sir, but not kill'd.' Othello answers thus:

I am not sorry neither, I 'ld have thee live,
For in my sense 'tis happiness to die.

According to Saint Augustine, God is outside both time and our quantum mechanics, whatever their number will be in the distant future. And if God *is* outside, Othello is *inside*. Even if God is inside, Othello is inside too: inside us, inside the world, inside our preoccupations, damnations and origins, for Othello is deeply rooted in the origins of our species. And often we uproot Othello, saying, 'Your dictatorship has been responsible for countless barbarities.' Feminists say that day in, day out, and they might say that *round* the clock, if Kepler did not speak about *ellipses*.

Did time exist before our suffering and the process of trial and error to which we are subjected day and night? We tell *this* piece of land and *that* piece of whatever is called land or piece. Both the piece and the land signify time: they are its signs thanks to which we can feel it alongside space. According to Kant, both are forms of 'intuition' and not concepts, as Aristotle wrongly declared. And what if you have no intuition? After all, you are not a woman and therefore cannot rely on your genes

in these matters, saying, ‘I always leave it to them to tell me where I am and how long I can stay within such and such spot.’ Incidentally, the German word used by Kant and his commentators is ‘*Anschauung*’ which means literally ‘looking at’ or ‘view’. All right, you are not blind, not yet, and it is pointless to evoke three mice on this occasion, for you cannot use their blindness as an argument: *primo*, there are many mice whose eyesight is perfect; *secundo*, there are a lot of blind men and women in our midst and yet their blindness in no way depends on the number three. To cut a long story short, you are not blind and so can see whatever lies or flies around you: a dead sheep covered with swarms of flies, among other objects and subjects. You can also read a recent issue of the *International New York Times*: ‘*Three days after the attacks, which killed 129 people, French and Belgian security services were focused on the role of the alleged mastermind, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, who is among the most prominent Islamic fighters to have come out of Belgium and is linked to a series of previous assaults.*’

You also see a great many men and women who till a huge piece of land as if to measure our space-time: nor do *they* rely on their intuitions; whereupon you say to yourself, ‘We till whatever we see in front of us and also behind our backs. And time goes on, marching towards eternity and our weariness that finally calls it a day. Or life.’

You call it a life, but instead of lying down in a coffin and saying to your relatives, ‘Bury me as quickly as possible,’ you prolong the agony of life in which the dread of death plays the leading role. For once, however, you prefer this dread to death himself and thereby spare your relatives a dozen remarks aimed at making you change your mind, for no death is more atrocious than one awaiting those who are buried alive. Your relatives, therefore, might say to you, ‘We won’t bury you because we saw a film where this problem is discussed at length and in great detail.’

‘I have no idea what film you’re talking about,’ you say to them, shaking your head and sinking into a hot bath at the end of a hard day’s work.

‘Pity, pity,’ they answer. ‘The protagonist does all he can to guard against such a burial.’

‘How does he protect himself? By staying alive?’

‘He builds a house, a sort of mausoleum inside which there are lots of springs that open doors, coffins and other obstacles one may encounter on one’s way to the open air.’

‘What’s wrong with the closed air of the tomb?’ you ask.

‘You might suffocate inside this air. Do you think that only Desdemonas die in this fashion?’

‘In what fashion? Actually I’m not sure Othello strangled her with his bare hands or rather fingers.’

‘He’s believed to have stifled his victim with a pillow,’ says a famous stage director, your younger nephew. You have always had a soft spot for him, according to your recollection.

Yet tonight you are weary of soft spots, of spots, of lands and even of life as such in spite of your reluctance to put your body into a coffin and ultimately into a grave where no one can take advantage either of the open air or of the fresh one – for the simple reason that the dead need neither fresh air nor the health it brings in its wake; unless you chance upon an individual who was buried alive. Such an individual is not likely to hold out much longer under the pressure exercised by death which, once you are buried, prevents you from breathing and moving properly: you cannot even take three breaths to settle your nerves. Of course you can take *one* breath, if you wish, and you do it automatically as if you were on the surface of the Earth – in your garden, for instance. But you hear neither your favourite nightingale nor the leaves that often rustle in the breeze, even if the air does not budge from where it hangs. Nevertheless, the leaves continue to murmur their messages and you used to decipher them, anxious to find out what kind of future was stored for you in the recesses of your garden, in the corridors of time. Now you hear nothing at all except your own breathing which does its best to settle your nerves, for it takes a lot of nerve to be a solitary inhabitant of a coffin, even if this coffin of yours is to be found in a family vault or a mausoleum. Even Lenin, for all his genius and majesty, is cramped for space in his translucent coffin; but his untimely death must have settled his nerves a long time ago and therefore he needs neither sedatives nor a bottle of vodka.

The birth of any nation or revolution is hardly a matter of great concern to you or your acquaintances; yet your nerves are unsettled because the world is swarming with terrorists who unsettle nerves, markets and ordinary human beings. That is why they are worried and even scared out of their wits. Lying in one's grave may have a soothing effect on one's nerves in spite of the shortages one is sure to experience under the circumstances. (Air, space.) On the other hand, there are plenty of worms around any corpse, but one is not tempted to speak about cornucopia with regard to the coffin-imposed life. The dead do not write in their diaries: 'The coffin holds a veritable cornucopia of every kind of worm you could want.' I do not think it would be inappropriate to quote once again Othello's words addressed to Iago whose wound does not seem to be mortal:

*I am not sorry neither, I'd have thee live,
For in my sense 'tis happiness to die.*

Of course Othello's remark does not concern any life, any existence, for there are happy people around us and their number is not limited to those who are supposed to live happily ever after in fairy tales. Even if you live happily throughout this morning, you may thank God and bless the flowers you see somewhere, not necessarily in your garden. And if you happen to dine with your friends or your enemies – they all symbolise our endangered species – you may bless the food before passing it around.

And then you read in *The Daily Mail*: 'Islamic State could kill British citizens by launching cyber-attacks on hospitals and air traffic control.' 'The police are investigating a staggering 600

terrorist plots against Britain.’ ‘In an indication of the “severe” threat facing the UK, it emerged that 3,000 Islamist fanatics are being monitored – with one arrest every day,’ whereupon you realise they will need eight years to defuse the tension, thereby settling our nerves; not once and for all, mind you. It is true that terrorists come in all shapes and sizes and some of them do not limit ‘production’, as they call their barbarous deeds which, incidentally, are much more anti-productive than otherwise, to the surface of the Earth but go so far or down as to violate tombs. ‘The centre of the Earth is the limit,’ as they say, whenever in the mood for boasting about their anti-achievements. In the light of this tendency or fashion, no one is safe and sound in the universe – not even the inhabitants of the Hereafter. The famous song one hears in *Cymbeline* does not seem to take into consideration the whole gamut of the human condition:

*Fear no more the frown o’ th’ great,
Thou art past the tyrant’s stroke*

According to chroniclers, in the course of our history tyrants have succeeded in violating many a tomb, for a real tyrant endures neither his adversaries nor their corpses. And if he finds an opponent in the distant past, he has his body disinterred and allows his dogs – or his own nails – to tear his onetime foe to shreds.

On the other hand, the first stanza of the song quoted above does not miss the mark; not completely anyway:

*Fear no more the heat o’ th’ sun,
Nor the furious winter’s rages*

Of course some corpses may reappear on the surface of the Earth in the aftermath of an earthquake or another calamity of this sort. Sometimes the Earth goes pop and a number of corpses pop up as if to predict a Hamlet-like, out-of-joint tragedy; and we bury them again at the earliest opportunity. (What about Yorick’s skull?) But on the whole, the dead are not afraid of seasons and their pranks: in comparison with humans, they are rather magnanimous, indulgent and humane. What is more, they ‘feelingly persuade me what I am’, as the Duke Senior puts it in *As You Like It*, which might mean that if you shrink with cold when the winter’s wind ‘bites and blows’ upon your body, you are still alive. If you enjoy your shrinking, which reminds one of the movie *The Shrinking Man*, you are a sage incarnated by the banished Duke who, like Pushkin in exile, prefers ‘the penalty of Adam’ to the life of ‘painted pomp’; or of the court, in other words. Whenever in St Petersburg, Pushkin used to attend every single ball, according to his friends and colleagues who, however, silently and sullenly hoped he would spend a few months at his estate somewhat identical to the woods where the Duke Senior had sought asylum a few centuries before. (What about Shakespeare?)

Our religion strives to inculcate into our brains a number of theological principles (the eschatological bias of our mentality) that shed light on the New Jerusalem and the ultimate harmony where even demons might come to rest after their baleful and fearful exertions. Anyway, we are all go-getters and we go or rather march forward, for it is pointless to go backward like Polonius. Indeed what would we get if we went back, towards the origin of our species described so brilliantly and agnostically (or atheistically) by Darwin? Branches and fruit, if I am not mistaken about what our ancestors did and how they spent their time, their pastime and their leisure time. They did not kill time in leisure centres, did they?

I am not in the least curious to find out whether we had tails or not. For all I know, we might have used our arms to swing through trees, but today I am interested in flora and fauna only insofar as they can delight my body and especially my eyes that are keen to feast upon gardens, even if they are not of Japanese origin. Anyway, for nothing in the world would I become a monkey again, even if I spent a dozen of my former lives in a forest, springing from one branch to another, swinging through trees, minutes and years. And talking about those former lives of mine on no account makes me feel nostalgic, although I am acquainted with the people who, being Rousseau's admirers and followers, talk only about apes, monkeys and even goats so that one might think Othello speaks to *them* when uttering these two words: goats and monkeys. At least he might refer to this back-to-nature trend which is still in the news and does not seem to go out of fashion despite the depletion of the ozone layer. Incidentally, a myriad of trees have already been sold to the Chinese and therefore you are no longer tempted by Siberia and its pristine beauty: it is no longer the last refuge of Rousseauists and ecologists. (And what about the Amazonian rain forest?)

Suppose you go to Siberia, determined to spend your holiday in the midst of an immaculate forest – and not in a concentration camp, as some Russians-haters might presume. It is small wonder that Siberia is associated in those minds with labour camps and slave labour as if Stalin were still alive and at the helm, as if he had already popped out of his grave and, after circling for a while over the Kremlin, landed in the Throne Hall. Well, you turn a deaf ear to the well-wishers' advice and go to Siberia, muttering under your breath, 'Come hell or high water.' Upon your arrival you realise that hell is not within your reach and after a while, you express your idea correctly, saying, 'I'm not within Satan's reach.' You take a walk and the fresh air you have been dreaming about for many years seems to reach your nostrils and also your lungs – in spite of our technological progress and environmental pollution. And then you hear a noise that reminds you of hell, although you have never been to hell, contrary to what happened to Jesus Christ. Of course you do not always compare yourself to Jesus because no one says about you, 'The conceit of that man (or that woman) is incredible!' Nor do you suffer torture comparable to that you have seen so often in picture galleries and museums all over the world. Even pagans have such pictures in their museums: they are so fond of culture and art that now and then they disregard their religious beliefs and rituals. When looking at the Cross, they are not tempted to worship the sun and leave their idols high and dry.

Well, you hear a noise that reminds you of both Jesus Christ and Hell, and you say to yourself that you recall Jesus Christ because you are looking for someone who has managed to get away with it – to leave Hell uninjured. Of course you have nothing against a few Popes who are doomed to stay in Hell forever, but you give them no thought because you have no intention of spending your eternity in one of the circles described in great detail by Dante. Be that as it may, your recollections and associations do not really count within the framework of what is about to happen: there is no noise without technology and deconstruction. You see a bulldozer and a gigantic saw that sets about felling the trees you have already fallen in love with on account of the air they provide, on condition that no saw attacks their trunks and the rest of their substances. Your holiday is spoiled and you have no money left to afford another holiday of any kind: you are even prepared to go back to our civilisation and its pollution. What you hate most is a saw that destroys our ecology, our back-to-nature dreams and the noble savage we have in mind whenever our thoughts concentrate upon ideals and ultimate harmony. And then you come up with an amazing scheme related to an advertisement you saw on the eve of your departure for Siberia. ‘You can win a holiday for two in the south of France just by answering three simple questions,’ said the advertisement. You answer the questions and go to the south of France. *The Summer’s Tale*, isn’t it?

So we think a lot about our future and the end of our trials and errors, whatever this end may look and sound like, and give no thought to our past spent mostly on trees which could be found not only in Siberia but also in Germany and many other countries, for China did not import this kind of raw material in those days. One wonders if China imported anything in days of yore, but then one stops both wondering and thinking about China’s imports and exports because, until recently, this remote and densely populated country was more or less cut off from the rest of the world; at least from the Western part of it. And it had enough trees for monkeys and other apes whose habits do not depend on the country they spend their time in: even in China our ancestors were flying from one tree to another and the Chinese might have tried to ape them, becoming Tarzans in their own right. But this aspect of Chinese culture and sociology may concern only those specialists who shut their eyes whenever we speak to them about today’s problems. And they hardly pay attention to terrorists, their bombs and Kalashnikovs unless the buildings where they study Chinese customs and aerial dancers happen to be under threat and are about to be blown up.

Darwin said something to the effect that animals and humans yawn identically, and if you look at an ape whose mouth is wide open, you are likely to mistake it (or him or her) for a man: women usually cover their mouths with their hands when they yawn or cough or both. You also get the same feeling when watching Shakespeare’s *Othello*, as performed by Laurence Olivier and, contrary to what politically correct individuals might assume upon reading this sentence, it does not cater to racism which I abhor in any shape or shade or colour. Nevertheless, one cannot help thinking about monkeys

when watching Laurence Olivier in Desdemona's company. Thanks to these episodes, one can experience the whole gamut of our personal and communal history, for Olivier can be childish, touching, foolish and barbarous within the space of a minute. He is also like a cat on a hot tin roof, especially when Iago resolves to play cat and mouse with him; and every theatregoer knows he does it on a regular basis or whenever an opportunity arises instead of sparing our honest and naive Othello. One might wish that the very word 'opportunity' could disappear from our life; at least until the end of the tragedy which might have turned into a comedy, but for the obtrusive presence of those Satan-inspired opportunities.

As we admire Olivier's performance, we find ourselves in a zoo where we meet a monkey, a goat and even an elephant who cannot forget his wife's betrayals. Actually Iago is also an elephant for he cannot forget the injustice he suffered when Othello decided to opt for Cassio's candidature, leaving aside Iago's friendship, loyalty and experience. But let us focus our attention on monkeys whose presence in the play dominated by Olivier's personality is so obvious one should not devote too much time to other animals; and even plants may be forgotten to some extent despite Othello's tendency to become one when he can no longer vent his fury and collapses driven by a fit of epilepsy or some other pernicious force. We know that at some point he finds himself on the floor, unable to move on account of his disease or the shock he receives whenever hearing Iago speak about Desdemona's unfaithfulness. When lying on the floor, Othello looks like a plant, especially in Olivier's version; or rather, we are reminded of a lonely root in search of a tree, to use Pirandello's terminology. What does Othello search for, whenever lying on the floor? He keeps brooding over his discomfiture and predicament instead of saying to himself, 'Iago isn't honest because he does his best to ensnare me.' Late in the day he does say so to himself and also to Cassio with whom he is no longer on speaking terms:

*Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil
Why he hath thus ensnar'd my soul and body?*

We are reluctant to put such a question either to our enemies or even to our friends because we like our peace of mind and are aware of what any doctor says to you, if you take the trouble to listen to your doctors, 'No negative emotions.' The Japanese are very cautious in this domain and so do not answer your emails if you dare ask the question that calls for a dubious or negative answer, even if the problem you tackle has nothing to do with snares and your soul. Of course any businessman can say that his rivals ensnare his soul – let alone his body and its appetites – whenever he loses a few million dollars. But our subject matter is related to roots, to the origin of our species, and we had better not stray too far from it, otherwise we may lose sight of both Othello and Shakespeare whose authority does not usually inspire businessmen who prefer Hugo and his *Les Misérables*, for instance. (Are there many musicals based on Shakespeare's works? *West Side Story*!) And the starting point for the guided

tour of our origins is situated in *Othello* that let us spy on the protagonist's shameful disease about which Iago speaks as follows:

*My lord is fall'n into an epilepsy,
This is his second fit, he had one yesterday.*

He speaks thus to Cassio who suddenly appears on the stage and enquires about Othello's inappropriate and indecorous posture. (Let us not forget he is lying on the floor like a root deprived of its tree and entelechy about which Aristotle writes with gusto as he enlarges about our goals and their numerous fulfilments.) And Cassio suggests they should rub Othello's temples and probably make him drink a few glasses of cognac. Iago replies:

*No, forbear,
The lethargy must have his quiet course,
If not, he foams at mouth, and by and by
Breaks out to savage madness*

That is what we must have done at the very outset of our history that continues to replenish the Earth with our misery, depravations and remorse. Why didn't God and Satan leave us alone? We were lying on the floor of the Garden of Eden or just on any floor our destiny had come across in the course of its wanderings. Our destiny must have come to the conclusion that this floor would come in handy and it did come in handy, given our inability to adjust to the world we are doomed to live in till doomsday. Anyway, we should not blame our destiny for the mess we are in because Satan rubbed our temples and gave us a few glasses of cognac. So we stirred into existence and the rest is recorded by many chroniclers whose account of our suffering is more or less trustworthy: we are so optimistic by nature that no amount of catastrophes can diminish our joie de vivre.

In our play Iago is God and Cassio Satan, needless to say: one has to re-read Shakespeare's masterpiece to realise what crime was committed right after the Big Bang described in many popular-culture books. One may also realise the extent and even the grandeur of this crime, if one takes the trouble to analyse one's life or rather scrutinise it closely, trying to work out who was lying: Satan or God. God said something to the effect that light should shed light upon the world and its history, its splendour, glory and so on. Cassio encapsulates the story of our evolution and revolution in a single line: 'Rub him about the temples.' So our destiny whose loyalty to God cannot be questioned rubbed whatever could be rubbed, and we saw the light of day and a great many dark hours which shed darkness on our origins; these might have been different, but for Cassio's casual remark. Oddly enough, Iago did what he could to spare us the experience we deplore whenever we open our eyes and face our so-called reality instead of dreaming our dreams that are more or less sweet, to put it mildly.

Whatever way you put it, our dreams are much better than whatever we encounter as we leave our bed behind and embark upon another adventure in the offices, banks and bars where we spend our midsummer nights, trying to forget betrayals, insinuations and fatigue.

*But, masters, remember that I am an ass;
though it be not written down, yet forget not
that I am an ass.*

At the beginning was a root and this root was God or rather His knack of creating everything out of nothing; or out of a root lying peacefully on some floor or other. ‘I always keep a set of tools in the back of my car,’ as the Almighty Himself puts it in an apocryphal story printed in one of those books we are supposed to regard with contempt, if not with horror. We often confuse Satan with God because the Creation and life in general are associated in our minds with light, sunbeams and the Almighty Who replaced all other sources of light on the day when monotheism saw the light of day. But Satan often walks around our sun-drenched beaches and, grossly influenced by some French presidents, shake hands with holidaymakers, whispering into their ears, ‘Make hay while the sun shines.’

If we go back to our roots, we realise we are no longer able to picture to ourselves the primeval root which must differ from what we are acquainted with in this domain. Actually, we mostly pay attention to roots when we happen to trip over them, and our study, if any, is limited in space and time. Our cursory inspection of those evil roots is far from methodical and is often accompanied by curses because we are in the habit of cursing whatever interrupts our journeys and prevents us imposing our will on other people. So we take a glance at the root in question, curse it, rise to our feet and continue our journey towards one of the ends that await us somewhere. We always pursue some goal or other, but traditionally goals have a tendency to bifurcate and the end of any journey is often located exceedingly far from the point H we had in mind when embarking upon it.

This point H means ‘happiness’, as every philosopher worthy of note declares on almost every page of his treatises, and even those who stigmatise Epicurus cannot help talking about happiness. And some of these happy-go-lucky individuals opt for an ass, not for a monkey whenever we discuss our origins and a series of Big Bangs that might have triggered off our inborn, inherited unhappiness. We feel duty bound to find out from what animal our species sprang in the distant past, otherwise we might be at a loss to know how to behave and what way of life to ape or model our destiny upon. When people vote for an ass, they think about the ignorance praised unconditionally in the Scriptures where a great many saints condemn our sciences and, generally speaking, any lore whatsoever, with the exception of the sacred lore related *in* the Book and *to* the Book – not to *books*, mind you. ‘The ass is preferable to the monkey because the latter doesn’t see the mind of God,’ those people declare pompously. More often than not, they brook no criticism of their affirmations.

‘Don’t you think it’s unfair to blame monkeys for our misfortunes?’ say their opponents. And they go on thus, ‘Aren’t we supposed to imitate Jesus Christ? In this case, we’d better take a few lessons from monkeys whose gift for imitation doesn’t seem to give rise to any controversy, however harmless and insignificant.’

‘But no monkey will ever imitate Jesus Christ.’

‘Are you sure of that? Let’s put a monkey in front of Jesus and we’ll see what happens.’

‘Do you think your monkey will climb the Cross?’

Our opponents (let us call them ‘ass people’; and yet not all of them are pompous asses) do not have to quote the Bible, for our knowledge of the Scriptures knows no bounds – for the simple reason that we do not know anything else. If you read *any other* book, you set up a series of bounds that are sure to deprive you of what we call the ‘boundless knowledge of the will of our Lord’. Let us take the following example. Our opponents cannot resist the above-mentioned urge and quote the Bible either at length or en passant. They recite in pontifical tones: ‘And the ass saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand: and the ass turned aside out of the way, and went into the field: and Balaam smote the ass, to turn her into the way –’ After hearing or reading this excerpt, we might conclude that Balaam is the ass and the latter the former; in other words, the ass is Balaam. Once again we are facing the problem we should tackle to find out whether we are somewhat identical to animals or not. Is there any difference between us? Between an ass and any human, however brilliant and erudite? Montaigne and others maintain that the difference we are talking about concerns only quantity, not quality. Animals are intelligent, contrary to what Descartes thought and probably goes on thinking in the Hereafter, assuming that, once away from the Earth, one might still give a thought to earthly matters. This would be all the more incongruous since, within the bounds of Paradise, animals are as intelligent as humans; so are plants, by the way. Paradise is synonymous with intelligence and bliss. We should no longer try and unravel the problem we are bent upon solving on the surface of the Earth and also in the sky, whenever we happen to fly from, say, New York to Tokyo.

This problem boils down to the following questions: ‘Are we human? And if we are, what distinguishes our brains from those of animals, plants and stones?’ Suppose we belong to the species widely known as ‘the human species’. Do we take pride of place in the universe? According to the Bible – yes. But if we listen to our inner voice, we feel obliged to admit that any animal or plant is wiser than we are because they follow their instincts and live naturally, organically, without destroying the nature that feeds and clothes them. We destroy nature and go to restaurants instead of relying on fruit that grows on trees and even under our feet; strawberries, among other berries. Now and then we might likewise eat a few blades of grass, saying to ourselves that we are no better than cows and donkeys. Look at that little donkey struggling under its heavy burden. Don’t we recognise ourselves? Aren’t we as little as this donkey or ass? Don’t we struggle under our heavy burden? What’s the difference between its burden and ours? Both burdens are called life. So there is only one burden in the

universe. Instead of speaking about the burden of responsibility or a large financial burden, we might just say, ‘Life. That’s life.’

What lesson can we draw from Balaam, his ass and their story told in the Bible and illustrated by Gustav Doré? We should follow our animals – not the crowd made up of senseless and crazy humans. On no account should we smite them, doing our utmost to turn them into the way. What way? What do we know about ways? About the Fourth Way, for instance? How often do we encounter angels? They must have forsaken us a long time ago, and the loneliness we suffer from is more pernicious and fatal than cancers, strokes and suchlike, according to our doctors. They say that loneliness is twice as bad as obesity for killing you early so that being lonely does not just make you miserable. This state of affairs weakens your ability to fight viruses and pushes blood pressure into the danger zone, raising the odds of depression. But if an angel walks in and plants himself on the sofa in front of the television, resolved to keep you company until midnight, your blood pressure goes down, out of the danger zone. Never mind the angel’s sword: acupuncture originated in heaven.

Newborn Christians affirm that loneliness is not the only disease we suffer from when deprived of God’s company; and when we say that even Moses could not contemplate the Almighty at close range, they answer that God mostly appears to us through his emissaries or angels. So they come back to angels, their swords and their absence from our lives, which results in death and the many diseases we read about in newspapers and other sources of information. But these sources, being down-to-earth and estranged from the supernatural, ascribe our suffering to doctors’ and nurses’ negligence. They talk about basic failings in hospital care which, according to them, contribute to thousands of deaths from sepsis every year. And they continue to enlarge on what is known as the ‘silent killer’ in such a manner that every Christian, be she new or old, says to herself that this point of view cuts God’s envoys out of the picture altogether. And if she tentatively ventures the opinion that both the nurses and doctors are not responsible for the crisis, she hears the following tirade of abuse: ‘You’re a priggish ass, a holier-than-thou hag. Don’t you know that early signs of sepsis – which usually occurs when a bacterial infection sparks a violent immune response – include fever, inflammation and blood clotting?’ ‘Why?’ asks the woman, our middle-age-born Christian.

‘Why what?’ ask her opponents.

‘Why fever? Why blood clotting? After all, the bacterial infection you’re talking about sparks a violent *immune* response.’

‘Because in the course of this response the body attacks its own organs.’

‘A kind of suicide, isn’t it?’

‘It is. These warnings are often missed by doctors and, if not recognised quickly, can lead to failure of the heart, liver, kidneys or lungs. Got it, you, self-righteous prig? You priggish ass, you.’

This dialogue brings us back to asses and monkeys – not to sheep, contrary to what the French say and think.

‘Many millions of years ago, our ancestors climbed out of the primeval ooze onto dry land.’ We are used to this sentence that permanently crops up in the books devoted to our roots, origins and even to the nostalgic feelings we suffer from. These books speak of our unconscious and its dearest wish to plunge headlong into the primeval ooze we departed from many millennia ago, and we go to the nearest river, hoping that at the mouth of the river is a large area of marsh where we could spend a few hours to the benefit of our health as a whole. And yet we cannot escape from monkeys, goats and asses whose behaviour bears several striking similarities to our way of life and thinking. A disconcerting aspect of the monkey’s nature is what Schuon calls its ‘random consciousness’ and upon reading his verdict we are painfully driven to admit that our consciousness is random to the utmost. When we are asked, ‘What might be the underlying significance of these supposedly random acts of violence?’ we are at a loss for words. Of course if we read that just eight days before Ibrahim Abdeslam blew himself up in Paris as part of an elaborate terror operation that killed 129 people, we say that these acts of violence are linked to a misinterpretation of the Koran; and we may point out that they are not random, not at all. But there are acts of violence for which no explanation can be found either in our history or in the speeches of our prophets. So we have no alternative but to fall back on monkeys and their random consciousness that has pestered us throughout our personal and social histories. Guided by this consciousness we destroy all the natures we come across in the course of our wanderings around the Earth: our nature, that of fauna and flora, that of ozone, and so on. Under the influence of our deeds and needs, the universe has already become unnatural, if not unruly, obeying no rules, no laws, which induces our physicists to postulate that there are no laws whatsoever.

Li-tzu classifies the monkey as a stupid and ill-tempered animal, which does not jar with the opinions we have heard expressed elsewhere – specifically in the lectures devoted and dedicated to humans. Some time ago, we dissected Othello’s conduct to show to what extent he looks and sounds like an animal, especially when on the brink of a collapse attributed to epilepsy: ‘Pish, pish, pish, pish! Noses, ears and lips. Pish, pish, pish, pish! Noses, ears and tits. Zounds!’ As for human *stupidity*, we encounter it everywhere – even in Desdemona’s attitude towards what is going on under her very nose; or under her ears and lips. For instance, in the scene during which Othello’s murder is perpetrated, Desdemona says to her murderer, ‘If you say so, I hope you will not kill me.’ What did Othello say? ‘Amen, with all my heart!’ Does this mean he has no intention of killing his lawful, unfaithful wife? It is true that his ‘amen’ is related to Desdemona’s utterance, ‘Then heaven have mercy on me!’ And Othello replies, ‘Amen, with all my heart!’ which means that heaven can do whatever it likes, showing pity, mercy, understanding, and what not; Othello, however, is adamantly opposed to mercy and, generally speaking, to any decree or entreaty of heaven. Of course, to some extent, every human being is Adam Kadmon and we should not discard or deride the engravings that show us our shoulders and heads amidst the stars and all the Milky Ways one comes across in the course of interstellar journeys. But no one, not even the Almighty, can prevent us from bending down

and strangling an unfaithful creature, be she our wife or just our brother's whore. So we withdraw our Kadmon-inherited body from the starry vault and bend over the woman lying on her deathbed, resolved either to strangle or kiss her; after the strangulation.

Anyway, we are said to kill the things we love, otherwise we might stray away from the pattern imputed to us by Oscar Wilde and other misanthropes whose participation in life is limited to the disappearance of love – at all cost, as they eagerly add while looking defiantly at whoever happens to sit in front of them. Of course I might say I have killed nobody, but then someone will stand up and, pointing their accusatory finger at my heart, declare solemnly, 'Oscar Wilde says we're all killers and we mainly kill all those we love. And if you say you haven't killed anyone, you implicitly recognise you're incapable of falling in love. And that's even worse than killing the thing you love.' All right, I am human and do fall in love from time to time; not every day, though. Whenever I *am* head over heels, however, the object of my desire or the thing I love requires a few proofs of what I tell her because she does not believe in languages. According to her, languages were born for the sole purpose of lying and leading astray both men and women, which means that animals and plants are excluded from this picture of hypocrisy and smartness. But there are all sorts of languages and our bodies – our hands, among other members – often stroke cats and dogs as if to convey the impression we love them dearly. And then we abandon them in the middle of nowhere or in the jungle; or we drown a few kittens after stroking their heads for almost 20 minutes. On the other hand, this drowning by number oscarwildendly demonstrates that we love all these kittens and even their mother whom we poisoned on the eve of our drive to the nearest lake.

So the thing of love points out that my love is just a pack of lies designed to turn her into my servant, into a domestic animal whose only purpose in life is to fawn upon her master by bringing him coffee, scones and strawberry jam every morning. 'I need other proofs of your love,' she says defiantly. I point out that her offensive remark is a pointless act of defiance against my feelings, my heart, my soul and the fire I feel in my head. 'What kind of proof do you need?' I ask.

'You can kill me, for instance,' she answers taking my samuraian sword down.

'I'm loath to make love to corpses,' I object.

'You don't have to make love to *my* corpse,' she objects.

'All right,' I say. 'There are other solutions to our problem, however. You must know Wilde's poem by heart.'

'I don't,' she answers.

By way of an answer, I recite a stanza from this gargantuan or pantagruelian poem:

And all men kill the thing they love,

By all let this be heard,

Some do it with a bitter look,

Some with a flattering word,

*The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword!*

‘Did you hear the stanza?’ I ask her.

‘I did,’ she answers without a smile.

‘What do you think about my look?’ I ask.

‘It’s no longer sweet,’ she says. ‘But it’s not bitter enough.’

‘Don’t you fear me?’ I ask her. ‘Can’t you see my eyes?’

‘I can.’

‘Don’t you know I am fatal when my eyes roll so? Winter rolls, tempest rolls, you know.’ For a few seconds, I talk to myself thus, ‘I should increase the quantity of bitterness in my heart and mind. How? By recalling one of my discomfitures about which I felt very bitter. I was full of bitterness after I lost my job. I also felt very bitter about her unwillingness to undress in my presence, in front of my largest mirror. I just have to put these two bitternesses together and kill her in accordance with Oscar Wilde’s Rite of Winter.

I look at her and she says, ‘It’s better, but it’s not really bitter. It’s rather bittersweet, you know.’ So I switch my brain and my Gurdjieff-stigmatised machine to flattery mode, hoping to kill her after a few sentences such as, ‘You’re the most beautiful woman in the world. And the most intelligent one at that.’ And if she does not collapse and die of a heart attack, I might add the following statement, ‘Last night you killed me with your kindness.’ And what if she gives me a lie, saying, ‘You’re still alive and kicking’? Then I shall kill her with my samurainesque sword, which is the easiest and sweetest way out of the situation, it seems to me and to Oscar Wilde. Of course I might kill her with a kiss, but before dying she is bound to accuse me of treachery, recalling Judas’ kiss and his subsequent self-hanging. ‘If you don’t promise me to hang yourself, I won’t die.’ That is what she is likely to say if I kiss her instead of piercing her body with my Durendal.

[Kisses her.]

*A balmy breath, that doth almost persuade
Justice herself to break her sword; once more;
Be thus, when thou art dead, and I will kill thee,
And love thee after: once more, and this the last,
So sweet was ne’er so fatal: I must weep*

Unluckily for her, Desdemona takes notice neither of Othello’s flattering word, nor of his kiss, otherwise she would have died then and there without waiting for the strangulation-ritual, which is far more painful than a flattering word, let alone a kiss – especially if we recall the way the moor did it, killing the thing he loved in stages.

No Durendal; no promises of hanging gardens, as it were. (In these gardens, on every tree there swings a fellow.) Of course there are other versions of the same ritual, of every part of the ritual, to be exact, for life is inexhaustible and that is why it is almost eternal – as eternal as Paradise and Hell. For instance, you try and kiss your beloved, but she makes you realise you do not kiss her sincerely and passionately. You do your best to explain to her that you do so on purpose, wisely and advisedly; otherwise you might kill her outright. But she says she prefers a quick demise to a slow one and therefore you might conclude that in these matters she sides with Julius Caesar. On the other hand, you do not take her by surprise; at least this was not your intention when you came up to her and, after laying your hands on her temples, kissed her on the mouth. Had you approached her body from behind with a view to pressing your hands against her eyelids and asking the ritual question, she might have died on the spot and rather quickly; in other words, she might have given up the ghost in your arms. But you are reluctant to have a corpse either in your arms or on your hands; or even in your room, for no police officer would ever accept the explanation suggested by Oscar Wilde and his wild poem. If you say to this police officer or an inspector, ‘You know, I’ve just kissed her,’ he might reply, ‘Quite a joker, aren’t you? It’s all right, don’t say any more – I get the picture. She was writhing in agony on the floor and you were pissing yourself!’

So one does not really know how to speak to a woman, and it is little wonder one usually adopts the method renowned all over Buddhist countries and their citizens who may go so far as to walk in the middle of a thoroughfare because of their unflinching adherence to the doctrine of the Middle Way. (At least in India one could see a lot of such individuals only two decades ago.) One says to oneself, ‘I shouldn’t flatter this woman, otherwise I might have a serious problem with her lawyer, let alone with her husband and doctor. What if she dies on the spot or near the spot? As a result of my flattery? And even if she doesn’t die in my arms, I may be sued for damages and compensation. The lack of evidence doesn’t always mean that the case is unlikely to go to court.’

So you just talk about weather forecasts and forecasters; and also about economic forecasters. ‘According to Jones,’ you might say, ‘the world is due for a downturn.’ ‘Global recessions occur every eight years, on average, when GDP growth drops below 2%.’ And what if, upon hearing this piece of information, the lady you are talking to drops dead? Actually, some time ago, I thought one might model one’s behaviour upon Falstaff whose words and actions are situated between a word and a non-word, between an action and its denial. He talks a lot, but one wonders if he really says anything because if one listens to him at all, one does so with a view to treating with scorn and ridicule whatever he says and does. He lies all the time, but his lies sound like sounds, nothing else; and sounds, mere sounds do not harm anyone unless one listens to a piece of music. Moreover, Falstaff’s attitude towards words is even more radical than that of Hamlet who limits his condemnation of languages to a curt remark, ‘Words, words, words.’ That is not enough, whatever our scholars might say on the subject as they endeavour to remind us that silence is much more eloquent than any number of words. Of course this statement has nothing to do with a stupid saying which does all it can to

convince us that silence is golden; and one is tempted to enquire why the mute are not the richest individuals in the world. It is mainly our film directors I have in mind: they show us a man sitting on a slope and we have to endure his presence on the screen for more than two minutes. He does not say anything; nor does he move, which renders the picture rather monotonous, whatever our critics say in this respect. Only the sea sends us a few signs of life by means of its water and this water's ripples; and one cloud floats through the sky as if to induce us to compare it either to a camel or a whale or just a wall. And we end up saying to each other, 'I was just passing the time of day with a cloud, you know. And with a few ripples.'

The soliloquy our middle-way hero recites in honour of honour is so famous that both Arrigo Boito and Verdi inserted it in their *Falstaff*: 'Honour pricks me on. Yea, but how if honour prick me off when I come on, how then? Can honour set to a leg? No. Or an arm? No. Or take away the grief of a wound? No. Honour hath no skill in surgery then? No. What is honour? A word. What is in that word honour? What is that honour? Air. A trim reckoning! Who hath it? He that died a-Wednesday. Doth he feel it? No. Doth he hear it? No. 'Tis insensible, then? Yea, to the dead. But will it not live with the living? No. Why? Detraction will not suffer it.'

What kind of detraction does Falstaff have in mind? Any kind, to tell the truth, for there are only detractions and destructions in this world of ours. Suppose you go to a tavern and utter a sentence one always hears in taverns, restaurants and even in Hyde Park: 'Now, if you'd all please raise your glasses, I'd like to propose a toast to the bride and groom.' You seize the opportunity of a free drink with both hands – actually one hand is quite enough – and drink your wine down to the dregs. What next? Eager to drink yet another glass of wine, you propose a toast to the bride's virginity and beauty. Then you propose a toast to the bridegroom's honour: in the battle to retake the village, over 150 soldiers were killed, but he survived and got a medal.

You continue to drink every glass to the dregs and slowly but surely both honour and the word devoted to it disappear as if obliterated by the fog. What fog? What honour? 'The charity will go under unless a generous donor can be found within the next few months,' says someone. What donor? A kidney donor? It does not really matter as long as you go on drinking and drinking and falling under the table:

'Here's to a prosperous future then.'

'I'll drink to that!'

'Here's to the bridegroom's smile.'

'I'll drink to that!'

'Here's to the bride's teeth.'

'I'll drink to that!'

Honour is no longer a puff of smoke, contrary to what John Falstaff seems to suggest in the above excerpt from *Henry IV*. Actually, he speaks of 'air' which might vanish into thin air, if we adopt Buddhist methods and concentrate on the word 'air', saying to ourselves, 'There's no such word. Nor

is there anything such a word can denote in what they call “everyday life”. Even at night neither the air nor this word mean anything, even though we go on breathing and saying to ourselves as we inhale and exhale the same fresh or unfresh air, “I exhale the air that doesn’t exist,” “I inhale the air that doesn’t exist,” “My self doesn’t exist either,” “I exhale my self,” “I’m no longer myself,” “I exhale both self and my and also my, my, my,” “No self, no honour”, “No honour, no self,” “No self, no reputation,” “No reputation, no self,” “I’ve lost no reputation at all unless I repute myself such a loser,” “I do not repute myself such a loser,” “Once upon a time I inhaled this word and suffered the consequences,” “This morning I exhaled this word and attained nirvana.” Even Iago is closer to Absolute Truth than any ‘positive’ character, any goody we may come across when re-reading Shakespeare’s plays. (Henry V, Hamlet’s father and his ghost.)

Thirsting for gain, and loving the world, the people fail to renounce it.

But the wise can discard this love, reflecting as follows:

Through stillness joined to insight true,

His passions are annihilated.

Stillness must first of all be found.

That springs from disregarding worldly satisfactions.

Falstaff does not even have to *look for* stillness as if making the most of a few lessons given by Picasso who used to find everything before starting to look for anything. Sir John’s first appearance has more in common with any disappearance than with what the French define as *crever l’écran*, ‘bursting of the screen’: in spite of his world-renowned corpulence, he does not burst anything, not even the bed in which he is lying. As the Prince talks to him, we realise that he is both conspicuous and inconspicuous by his absence. At least he is conspicuously absent from the realm of Time, judging from the question he puts to the Prince: ‘Now, Hal, what time of day is it, lad?’ We might also conclude that, like every self-respecting nirvanist, he is inconspicuous by the presence he seems to exhale, whenever he talks or takes part in a military action. One cannot say he shuns battle and takes refuge in the country somewhere – in a county club, for instance – whenever a rebellion and its crushing are discussed in palaces and even in huts. But once again he adopts a weak-arm tactic and let the pricks he enlarges upon with regard to honour come and go. In a way, he inhales and exhales them as if saying out loud, ‘Welcome the prick. I’ll be promoted to the rank of marshal in recognition of my valour during the battle. Now you can leave me alone, my dear prick – I don’t care about honours and suchlike. Thank you for your visit.’

At some point he counterfeits dying for the sake of the vale of tears where he intends to stay despite his old age and impotency ridiculed by the Prince. (‘Is it not strange that desire should so many years outlive performance?’) ‘I am no counterfeit: to die is to be a counterfeit, for he is but the counterfeit of a man, who hath not the life of man: but to counterfeit dying, when a man thereby liveth,

is to be no counterfeit, but the true and perfect image of life indeed. The better part of valour is discretion, in the which better part I have saved my life.' Just another example of the middle-way conduct carelessly discounted by Antony whose valour could be likened to a one-piece swimsuit. These two men might be thought to represent the opposite poles of life-or-death-oriented ideology: Antony and his Self are the most un-Buddhists elements in the whole corpus of Shakespeare's contribution to our culture.

*His legs bestrid the ocean, his rear'd arm
Crested the world: his voice was propertied
As all the tuned spheres, and that to friends:
But when he meant to quail, and shake the orb,
He was as rattling thunder. For his bounty,
There was no winter in't: an autumn 'twas
That grew the more by reaping: his delights
Were dolphin-like, they show'd his back above
The element they lived in: in his livery
Walk'd crowns and crownets: realms and islands were
As plates dropp'd from his pocket.*

Somehow Falstaff reminds me of Samuel Johnson who thinks we should not 'fortify our minds for the approach of death' because it does not really matter how a man dies. What counts is his way of living and so those who tell us we can go to Purgatory if we repent on the threshold of the Hereafter are dismally and ludicrously wrong. A priest is performing a religious ceremony called 'the last rites' and you realise you are on your deathbed and it is therefore wiser not to pin your hopes on yet another rite of spring; even on the *last* rite of spring. (Or on the last five-mile bike ride.) In a last-ditch attempt to save your life, you ask the priest, 'Is your performance called "The Rite of Spring"?'

'No,' says the priest.

'Is it "The Rite of Autumn" then?'

'No,' says the priest. 'What we're both supposed to do is called "the last rites".'

'Is it the first last rite?'

'No – it's the last last rite. It's the last opportunity you've got to confess your sins.'

'Samuel Johnson says it doesn't matter what you do on the threshold of the Hereafter.'

'Do you know that God disagrees with Samuel Johnson?'

'I know that I know nothing.'

And you go to Hell; at least Falstaff must head for Hell, if we agree with Hal who, instead of showering his friend with honours upon ascending the throne of England, has been pouring scorn on him throughout the plays devoted to his father. But before going either to Hell or somewhere else,

provided this somewhere is situated in the Hereafter, you are supposed to die, and neither Falstaff nor Samuel Johnson hold dear this supposition. Doll Tearsheet says to the former he should 'leave fighting a-days, and foining a-night, and begin to patch up thine old body for heaven'. 'Peace, good Doll,' he answers, 'do not speak like a death's-head, do not bid me remember mine end.'

As for the latter, he says to James Boswell, quoting Epicurus: 'The act of dying is not of importance, it lasts so short a time. A man knows it must be so, and submits. It will do him no good to whine.' Boswell did all he could to induce his friend or rather guru to continue the conversation, but the latter was 'so provoked, that he said, "Give us no more of this;" and was thrown into such a state of agitation, that he expressed himself in a way that alarmed and distressed me; shewed an impatience that I should leave him, and when I was going away, called to me sternly, "Don't let us meet to-morrow."'

LADY MACBETH

Come, you Spirits

That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,

And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full

Of direst cruelty!

As soon as this lady begins her discourse on unsexing procedures and their results, she becomes a symbol of cruelty because even Origen, let alone Abelard, cannot compete with her resolution aimed at a murder, not at God or love. Her male predecessors did all they could to get rid of unnecessary emotions which seemed to preclude them from contemplating God at close quarters or to labour at the court of Cleopatra. Our Iron Lady might think that men are bolder, more determined and have no scruples when they unsheathe their swords and murder their kings, even if the former enjoy a series of sweet dreams and are consequently unable to protect themselves. (Unfair play.) The effect of this unscrupulousness looks even more disastrous on the stage where *Macbeth* is being performed, for Duncan's two chamberlains are drugged to the eyeballs and all other members and parts of their bodies.

Today, women have replaced their male counterparts in many domains and we do not have to buy a newspaper to visualise Merkel's face, shoulders and arms. One cannot help wondering if this world order did not get under way on the night when Lady Macbeth uttered a number of words to the effect that her husband was too weak to accomplish an *authentic* deed of valour. You can kill as many enemies as you wish – on a battlefield where your fellow officers perform the same task, though less successfully. But what about murdering your king? Not on a battlefield, mind you; not even in the course of a banquet where only drunkards sleep sound, their heads lying peacefully beside their plates.

No, you are supposed to assassinate a monarch in his sleep that is defined as nature's soft nurse; unless we are facing a 'murderous slumber'.

Macbeth talks about Duncan's meekness, whereupon his wife realises she should *not* have her body and soul unsexed: it is her husband who needs to undergo such a metamorphosis. But it is too late to call in a surgeon and therefore his wife has no alternative but to rely on speech therapy. It is true that many scholars whose addiction to Freud's theories is no longer open to doubt affirm that Lady Macbeth yearns for a sort of sublimation. According to *them*, her real soliloquy sounds thus, 'If I could only channel all that libido into something useful. And nothing is more useful than the throne of Scotland and the magnificent crown one wears when sitting upon it. Actually a king can also wear this crown elsewhere. What's more, he can sleep with it. After all, Henry IV set a good example to other monarchs when he said, "Set me the crown upon my pillow here."'"

*Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murth'ring ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on Nature's mischief!*

Oddly enough, Macbeth does not seem to know much about his wife's soliloquies because, at the end of Act I, he asks her to 'bring forth men-children only'. But how can a woman bring forth anyone, be it a son or a mouse, if her breasts and probably the rest of her substance are filled with gall? (Even Shakespeare would not have dared replace 'gall' with 'Gaul', for all his dependence on puns and quibbles.) Of course you can always call in a wet nurse; and yet the presence of gall in your entire body is bound to affect your children's outlooks and instincts. Of course, if you are resolved to produce only Jack the Rippers and John the Misanthropes, you may go so far as to swallow some cyanide on a regular basis – as Rasputin did. As for Lady Macbeth, she did not go so far – within the framework of the play; nor did she give birth to any children as if she had been hand in glove with Banquo and his offspring.

We are aware that many opposites hit it off to the point of yearning to meet and embrace within one Tristan chord or a sort of universal harmony of sorts. Lady Macbeth and Hildegard of Bingen are poles apart because an evil queen and a saint cannot have anything in common with the exception of their human origin and divine protection. And yet Hildegard's writings do not differ much from what Lady Macbeth – her female opponent – endeavours to impart to her husband either through words or vibes as she stands by his side, making her stare and intentions engulf his immortal soul. Says Hildegard:

The will is like a fire baking every action in an oven. Bread is baked in order to feed people and strengthen them so that they can live. The will is the force behind the whole of the action; it

grinds the action in a mill, it adds yeast and kneads it firmly and thus carefully prepares the action, like a loaf of bread which the will bakes to perfection in the heat of its zeal. In so doing it provides human beings with a better food than bread for the activities they do. For while food is taken into the human body and used up, the action of the will endures within the human being until the separation of the soul from the body. And although the action will vary greatly in childhood, in youth, in maturity and in the declining years, nevertheless the will directs it stage by stage and brings it to perfection.

Saints and gurus are believed to speak mostly about the abolition of the will that always gets in the way, putting spokes in our wheels. It is the other way round, frankly speaking: the will provides a number of wheels that enable us to travel from an impulse to its fulfilment in our material world. So many individuals utter the following saying, ‘Where there’s a will there’s a wheel,’ or a number of wheels, if you wish: as usual, the quantity depends on the vivacity of the impulse. A guru says to us, ‘Do you want anything?’

‘I want to abolish my will,’ you answer.

‘All right, you seem to have learnt last week’s lesson by heart. But don’t you think your will should participate in the abolition of your will? If it doesn’t, your will will never be abolished. Nevertheless, you should abolish your will designed for the abolition of your will.’

‘And what about the main will of mine? Am I likely to abolish it unaided?’

‘Your main will should starve to death. Don’t eat anything either today or tomorrow.’

‘What else?’

‘You should think neither about men nor women.’

‘But I must *will* myself to forget them, otherwise I’ll always think about their bodies.’

‘You have to unwill yourself. Let me put “un” into your mouth. It is your new mantra and mandala.’ The guru picks up a piece of chalk and writes on a blackboard, ‘UN.’

‘I thought I should meditate upon AUM,’ says the disciple.

‘You can have too much of a good thing. From now on, you’ll meditate upon UN.’

‘The United Nations?’

Be that as it may, you do not have to hobnob with Buddhists or ascetics to realise to what extent our human will can be a nuisance: it is an elephant in the ointment, a dinosaur. It is all the more astonishing to find such praise of human will – not just of the will introduced by Schopenhauer – in the mouth and also in the mind of a reputed saint to whom one might turn for advice and solace. Macbeth, for one, is in need of help as he ruminates for hours about whether to kill the monarch or not. Suppose he comes across Hildegard of Bingen and utters the following question, ‘What should I do?’

‘The will is like a fire baking every action in an oven.’

‘If Chance will have me King, why, Chance may crown me, / Without my stir.’

‘The will is the force behind the whole of the action; it grinds the action in a mill, it adds yeast and kneads it firmly and thus carefully prepares the action, like a loaf of bread which the will bakes to perfection in the heat of its zeal.’

‘Come what may, Time and the hour runs through the roughest day.’

‘In so doing it provides human beings with a better food than bread for the activities they do.’

Is our Lady Macbeth a more persuasive speaker? Macbeth is in two minds whether or not to assassinate His Majesty whose meekness seems to put an additional spoke in his wheel. Actually, he might be in three or even four minds, for all we know, given the magnitude of his hesitation, but his spouse sees through his excuse at once and answers thus:

*Was the hope drunk,
Wherein you dress'd yourself? Hath it slept since?
And wakes it now, to look so green and pale
At what it did so freely?*

Lady Macbeth's supposition sounds like a hermetically sealed poem destined to obfuscate not only the main issue, but all other issues as well. I am very fond of Paul Celan's poetry, which does not prevent me recalling a maxim followed by all reasonable, down-to-earth individuals: The key to success is to be in the right place at the right time. And if you hear one of his poems at the wrong place, you might fail in your attempt to understand one of the world's enigmas on which your happiness relies for good advice and spectacular fulfilment. The above quote is all the more abstruse since, shortly afterwards, our Lady talks about Duncan's two chamberlains whom she firmly intends to drink under the table. So Macbeth is utterly at sea with the drunkards among whom there is also his hope that either falls asleep or lies wide awake, doing nothing. We are all aware of the fragility and unreliability of our hopes that can successfully struggle for life only on condition that we hope against hope – and against all odds, into the bargain. Instead of saying, ‘Where's your will to live?’ or better still ‘Where's your will to power?’ Lady Macbeth describes the invisible and unsubstantial hope, painting it green and depriving it of any other colour so that it looks rather pale and colourless to some extent. From this point of view, Hildegard of Bingen's exhortation is in the right place, let alone time: we are on the threshold of Macbeth's castle where Duncan ‘has almost supp'd’. So the conspirators do not have much time on their hands – or none at all, frankly speaking – and one wonders why Lady Macbeth indulges in figures of style and other superfluous ornaments instead of speaking to the point and thereby hitting the mark (and Duncan on his head).

In Hildegard's book we also stumble upon an argument the lack of which bothers an uncommon theatre-goer and even a common reader: Lady Macbeth's sermon on the importance of ‘taking steps’ does not so much as touch upon time and her husband's relative youth.

The soul reveals her capabilities according to the capabilities of the body, so that in childhood she brings forth simplicity, in youth strength, and in the fullness of age, when all the veins of the human being are full, she brings forth her greatest strength in wisdom. In the same way a tree in its first growth brings forth tender shoots, goes on then to bear fruit and finally ripens that fruit to the fullness of utility. But afterwards in old age when a human being's bones and veins incline to weakness, then the soul reveals gentler strengths, as though tired of human knowledge. In the same way, at the onset of wintertime, the sap of the tree withdraws from the leaves and branches as the tree begins to incline towards old age.

Willy-nilly one goes on wondering why our Iron or Brass Lady did not remind her husband of his age which still allowed him to have enough energy for any killing, however audacious and problematic. Of course you can assassinate a king even on your deathbed, provided you have a gun and the king stands close to your pillow, prepared to bend over it and your face at any moment, driven by compassion and probably a sort of gratitude. After all, Macbeth is his monarch's cousin and if fatally wounded, he could count upon his presence by his side during his last and foremost agony. But such talk and analysis are beside the point because neither Macbeth nor Duncan are fatally wounded; not yet, as far as the latter's destiny goes. The latter (the late King) must be finishing the dessert and emptying his Sauternes-filled cup to the dregs and so a word of caution might not go amiss: both Macbeth and his spouse must act quickly and resolutely. Our Lady – be she made of iron or bronze or silver – should talk to her husband about his age and the maturity he has reached in the domain of psychology, let alone that related to the physical power he displayed in the course of the battle 'lost and won'.

She should say something along these lines, 'In a few years' time you'll be old and you know what old age means and how one lives within its bounds. You'll cough all the time and no one will say about you, "His back is still as straight as a ramrod." Even now you feel dizzy and your legs are trembling. So are your hands and I wonder if you'll be able to hold your dagger and pierce Duncan's heart. Of course we can give you drugs to help control the trembling, but it's too late now because Duncan's just finished his desert and his cup is as empty as a poverty-stricken proletarian's stomach. In a few years' time you won't even have enough energy to commit suicide, but don't worry your pretty little head – I'll be by your side. Tonight you're a tree of life and death, and your fruit has already ripened to the fullness of utility, as Hildegard of Bingen put it. Come on, Big Mack, move it!'

Duncan is as fast asleep as his chamberlains; and yet he did not drink much at dinner, being a well-known and reputed teetotaler. In Polanski's version of the tragedy he even wakes up upon feeling someone's presence, and we should not probe deep into this episode to find out whether it is his sixth sense we must thank for his awareness of Macbeth and his murderous looks. Anyway, whatever the version we have come across in the course of our wonderings through the kingdom depicted by Shakespeare, time is running out; and according to Lady Macbeth, it is out already. If asked, 'Have you got time for a quick drink before the assassination?' the murderer should answer,

‘No – I never drink on duty. I’m supposed to do the deed at once, on the spot. There are no other spots for that murder because my victim is in bed, and I hope he won’t escape from it and my dagger, even if we have to deal with Polanski’s version of the masterpiece. Yes, you’ll die, our dear, meek, spineless king. What did you say this afternoon? “I have begun to plant thee, and will labour / To make thee full of growing.” Ha-ha. Too late, my dear. My tree of death has grown to its full height and one of its fruits is about to fall on your head – for Newton’s sake, in a way. A murderous fruit falls faster, whatever Galileo might say on the subject and on this object. On the apple, in other words. So you’ll die like a dog or a rat, my dearest chuck or Duncan. Well, whiles I threat, he lives: / Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives.’

In short, Macbeth now faces the daunting task of restructuring the entire kingdom and it is no longer high time to beguile the common time, as his spouse put it some time ago:

*Your face, my Thane, is as a book, where men
May read strange matters. To beguile the time,
Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye,
Your hand, your tongue: look like th’innocent flower,
But be the serpent under ’t.*

Lady Macbeth seems to insinuate that time never threatens anybody, looking neutral as if to prove once and for all there is only one time – the one shown by our watches and not by our consciousness, unconscious, memory and other parts of our ego. Whatever our projects may be in everyday life and outside it – in the distant future – they have nothing to do with the time one watches as one looks at one’s watch, forgetting about one’s heart of hearts, mind of minds, and so on. How can one look like time whose neutrality does not even square with the life of a saint, for one should take into consideration the ecstasies that punctuate any saint’s pastime; otherwise it is pointless to withdraw from our society and hide in a desert, eating stones, grains of sand and serpents. A saint enjoys a revelation and contemplates an image where not only the stigmata but also the rest of the most renowned torture appear so clearly one cannot help recalling these lines related to Banquo or rather his ghost:

*Pr’ythee, see there!
Behold! look! lo! how say you?
Why, what care I? If thou canst nod, speak too. –
If charnel-houses and our graves must send
Those that we bury, back, our monuments
Shall be the maws of kites.*

At least four stage directors took advantage of this scene to draw a parallel between Christ and any other victim of traitors, sadists, tyrants and ordinary murderers. And saints are believed to contemplate mostly the Cross and Christ's wounds that continue to haunt them even if they have already received a few stigmata located not only all along their arms but also on their chests, stomachs and legs. These moments of intense suffering and participation do not belong to the time brought forth by Lady Macbeth, for she speaks of the time perturbed exclusively by the ticking of our watches. No revelations, no blood, no gory locks shaken at the wrong moment, at the point when Macbeth is determined to enjoy the commonplace time identical to the one experienced by his guests on the night when Duncan was murdered in his sleep. That is what Lady Macbeth endeavours to convey to her husband when talking about the time one should beguile, especially if this one's mind harbours audacious schemes.

Suppose Duncan is still alive; he sits just opposite Macbeth whose train of thought is almost identical to the dinner ceremony. One dish follows another; so do words and bursts of laughter. Suddenly the train derails and Macbeth sees his dagger twisting in one of Duncan's wounds; and this vision is so vivid the Thane of Cawdor can hardly restrain himself. This time he succeeds, however, and no one hears the description of this dagger's behaviour in Duncan's wounds on which it goes on wreaking havoc as if not satisfied with one definitive version of death.

Actually one might think the whole play could be reduced to one image only: a dagger twisting in a wound or in a number of wounds, as the case may be, especially if our stage director decides to bring in Jesus Christ's torments which are sure to impart a universal, cosmic, mythological dimension to the play. And then a scholar might point out this image represents the time upon which our Iron Lady touches as she makes a speech about how a murderer must behave before unsheathing his sword or touching his victim's body with a dagger. 'You look like the innocent flower that speaks to us about springtime, love, tenderness, universal brotherhood, peace signs and peace pipes.'

'But flowers don't murder kings,' says Macbeth.

'Of course not,' says his lady and dearest chuck.

'I'd better behave like an innocent-looking poisonous mushroom. I know that Duncan is crazy about cream of mushroom soup. So he'll pick me up and hand me over to his cook.'

'And what if the cook says, "Unfortunately some poisonous mushrooms look like edible mushrooms"?''

'What would you suggest?'

'Well, you should look like that innocent flower. But be the serpent under it.'

'And what if Duncan spots my body under the flower? What if his bodyguard kills me?'

'You should bite the bodyguard's leg and rush towards the monarch's shins.'

'And what if Duncan flies?'

'Don't confuse Duncan with good Fleance who is sure to fly in Act III.'

‘If he does fly away, once again I’ll be cabin’d, cribb’d, confin’d bound in / to saucy doubts and fears. No point in killing Duncan for the sake of Banquo’s offspring.’

‘You should think in terms of commonplace time. No past, no future. Tick, tick, tick, tick. No murderous intentions in your looks, no floating daggers. Otherwise they’ll realise what makes you tick. In the courtyard, when you’re on your own, you may indulge in a few fancies for a while – not to the detriment of our stratagem, though. But now you should speak of red Burgundy, not of blood. Or about your horse, as the Dauphin does in *Henry V*: “I will not change my horse with any that treads but on four pasterns. Ça, ha! He bounds from the earth as if his entrails were hairs; le cheval volant, the Pegasus, chez les narines de feu! When I bestride him, I soar, I am a hawk: he trots the air; the earth sings when he touches it; the basest horn of his hoof is more musical than the pipe of Hermes.”’

According to *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, ‘to beguile’ might refer to the following intention: ‘To divert attention in some pleasant way from; to wile away.’ You divert your guests’ attention from the murder you are about to commit by speaking of your horse or the bouquet of the wine you are drinking, after proposing a toast to the King. But what about time? Can you divert it from its course by speaking of your horse? Of course every discriminating palate knows that wine can be either short or long, and this aspect of wine-drinking has a lot of affinities with *uncommon* time that enables us to enjoy Our Mother Earth’s gifts to the utmost. The matter stands differently with common time: however eloquent and logical, our speeches always fail to sway this variety of time into supporting our plans, even if they have nothing to do with murders and suchlike, being virtuous in the extreme. In *Henry V* the Dauphin says to himself and his brothers-in-arms, ‘Will it never be day?’ because he ‘longs to eat the English’; and, to all outward appearances, he longs to partake of their bodies at breakfast, otherwise he would be more patient, holding back any manifestation of his appetite. In spite of the Dauphin’s outspoken impatience, time does not budge or rather it carries on in its own sweet way that leads us from one suffering to another, as any pessimist knows and declares.

‘To deprive of by fraud, to cheat out of.’ Of what could you deprive time? Of seconds, of rights, of freedom? Suppose you deprive it of basic human rights, but time is not human, being rather on the inhuman side, for it takes no notice of our wishes and carries on with its work as if depriving us of our human rights and freedom. If you deprive a child of affection, they can become very withdrawn, and you might think that, left to its own devices or ditched, in other words, time would retire and live in a desert or in a mansion somewhere, far from our civilisation and preoccupations. Whatever we embark upon, however, time cheats our intention and follows in our footsteps as if determined to spoil our enjoyment of life, if any – if any life and any enjoyment – and deprive us even of our animal rights, of what is situated in the nether part of our brains. So one continues to wonder what our Silver Lady – the proverbial silver spoon is still in her mouth – might mean when giving to her husband a piece of advice over which one feels like pondering for ever and ever – just another victory of time.

If you are not weary of reading newspapers that are bound to bring you up to speed with the latest episodes related to human history, you may chance upon the following item of news, ‘As a

racing driver, he was involved in many serious crashes and had cheated death on several occasions.’ Macbeth cheated death on the fairest and foulest day that salutes us at the beginning of the play, but even he is unable to cheat time, for all his military and human experience. He cheated death even when ‘the Norweayn Lord, surveying vantage, / With furbish’d arms, and new supplies of men, / Began a fresh assault’; yet cheating death is another kettle of fish and so one wonders whether our Lady does not confuse time and death, as so many people do whenever they take the trouble to muse about what they call ‘our human condition’. At least they draw many parallels between time and death, which all but unite them in reality, in our everyday life where opposites might meet from time to time – according to Nicolas of Cusa, among other philosophers. Whatever they do, we should not overlook the fact that they are poles apart and that time habitually stops whenever we give up the ghost unless the Hereafter is more than a fairy tale and therefore patiently awaits us beyond the horizon. Of course eternity is much closer to death than time – at least inside the realm of our abstract thinking that is so abstract one must think twice before applying its categories to our daily routine. Alas, whatever we think about is also abstract – nothing doing; nothing thinking.

How could you cheat eternity? By rising from your grave? Don’t you rather cheat death through this act of defiance or mercy? What or whom does Banquo cheat when he (does) rise from his grave, if only partially?

*...but now, they rise again,
With twenty mortal murders on their crowns,
And push us from our stools.*

I wish the dead *could* push the living from their stools, making the state of affairs we are stuck in swim against the current that invariably favours the living – especially youngsters – to the detriment of the minds of the past. According to the former, the latter are mostly wrong and even the living old often fail to attract attention to what they advise, suppose and teach: youngsters are the centrepiece of the world and their thrones cannot be overthrown either by wisdom or authority. So they say to the dead, ‘Sleep on, sleep sound,’ and they go so far as to sing a lullaby in which they extol the virtues of eternity. This illustrious adversary of time might help us remove all traces of lust and ambition from our bodies, assuming that we are *not* deprived of them in the Hereafter, contrary to what our dear Origen heretically assumed.

*Fear no more the dirt of days,
The lust of nights and so on.
You’re no longer envious, greedy
And dishonest: you left your impurities
Behind, in our rotten world where*

*You failed to eradicate both corruption
 And diseases. Luckily for you,
 Death is apt to accomplish such a feat.
 Now you're free from hatred
 And are called respectable.
 What's more, you're above good and evil,
 Being as chaste and pure as Desdemona.
 You're neither foolish nor ignorant.
 You know nothing, for there's nothing to know
 Except eternity that may be likened
 To a bath or a bathtub, if you're an American.
 Don't you just adore lying in a hot bath?
 Within the realm of time you can't enjoy
 Your bath-ritual thoroughly:
 Whenever you get into the bath
 The phone rings. Besides, your charwoman
 Used to scrub the bath clean; yet
 It never looked as good as new.
 Your eternal bathtub is better than new.
 It is eternal, you know. Do you know
 The difference between a piece of news
 And the status quo? No dirt, no violence –
 That's the difference that makes
 All the difference.*

*So you forsook both pride and anger.
 What's more, you overcame all bondage.
 No suffering befalls the man
 Who isn't attached to name and form.*

*No one recalls your name on Earth,
 And your form has disintegrated into lots of bones.
 No longer do you call anything your own.
 You don't even own your own tomb.
 Your niece is allowed to remove your tombstone
 And sell it at auction.*

They're holding an auction of tombstones on Sunday.

I wish William Shakespeare could push all contemporary writers from their chairs and armchairs, making things easier for the uncommon reader whose feet are already prepared to trample upon the Nobel prize-winners; and others. Let Will – his shape should suffice – displace the mirth and break all literary ceremonials.

*Approach thou like the rugged Russian bear,
The arm'd rhinoceros, or th'Hyrean tiger;
Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves
Shall never tremble*

A French translator resolved to help his reader through the maze of the amazements one comes across when reading Shakespeare, and thanks to him we realise that, instead of beguiling time or dealing with it in any other way, our Metallic Lady seems to focus her attention on the world which, according to our books, is only part of time: after the next world-conflagration, time is sure to tick-tack its way towards another Big Bang. So the French translation says, 'To beguile the world, look like the world' and then the translator passes on to the innocent flower upon which Macbeth is supposed to model his looks and even his behaviour. Of course no one is likely to ask him to sing a song of innocence before breaking into a hymn to experience or murder, but all this is wrong on account of the narrow-mindedness of the translator who was determined to *explain* Shakespeare. Of course Macbeth should not give the game away; after all, not telling the whole truth is one of the games that people play on a regular basis, and under the circumstances it is better not to reveal any particle of truth, however infinitesimal and cheerful. If you look and behave like the world, you drink a lot and speak of the weather and peacocks' feathers: Macbeth might have had a few peacocks in his park. (Not the real Macbeth, because he was an 11th century Scottish king and the peacock was unknown in Great Britain before about 1300. The unreal Macbeth.) And what if the weather is not beautiful and therefore you cannot affirm as you glance at Banquo's son, 'The weather is expected to remain clear for the next few days'?

*The night has been unruly: where we lay,
Our chimneys were blown down; and, as they say,
Lamentings heard i'th'air; strange screams of death,
And, prophesying with accents terrible*

*Of dire combustion, and confus'd events,
New hatch'd to th'woeful time*

So you had better not say anything along the lines of, 'Beautiful night, isn't it?' for, whatever party we might take part in, we are sure to encounter an individual accustomed to studying the men's faces carefully, trying to work out who is lying or hiding a number of murderous intentions under a flower-like exterior. So he might say to your guests, 'Don't trust our host – he's lying.'

'I'm not,' you say to everyone.

'Haven't you heard the strange screams of death?'

'No. Isn't our Mother Nature full of the joys of spring?'

'Can't you hear the woeful time?'

'If any time dares to be woeful, let us beguile it into cheerfulness.'

In French, '*le temps*' means both 'time' and 'weather', and French translators do their utmost to avoid any misunderstanding inherently linked to this linguistic quirk. Suppose Lady Macbeth talks to her husband in French – as many European kings and queens did at their courts in the distant past. In this case, Macbeth might behave like *le temps* described by Lennox who emphasises dire combustions and confus'd events to the detriment of any glimmer of hope, however flimsy and ludicrous.

Pasternak comes up with yet another version of the same predicament. He says our Thane and King should look like the common man: to all intents and purposes, looking like others is the best way of ingratiating yourself with them. Someone winks and gives you a smile; not to be outdone, you wink back and send a dozen smiles to whoever smiles in your presence, looking at your face and your eyes. And what if the same person frowns? Then you say to this person, 'Don't frown so – it spoils your pretty face.'

'I can't help it – I suspect foul play.'

'What kind of foul play do you suspect?'

'I think our King will be murdered tonight.'

'By whom?'

'By you.'

'Why do you accuse me of murderous intentions? Don't I bear welcome in my eye?'

'You do. What's more, you also bear welcome in your hand, tongue and ear. Aren't you listening to my tale of woe?'

'I am.'

'But I'm afraid you don't look like the time.'

'I can't. The time we're speaking of doesn't look like anything. In other words, it doesn't look at all, if you see what I mean. It has no meaning, no looks, no manners. Try as I may, I can't adhere very strictly to the original text and have no alternative but to use translations. That's why I look like others – like you, among the other guests I've already welcomed in my abode.'

‘You don’t look like me – you don’t frown.’

Some flowers may look innocent, provided they relinquish their custom of grabbing and swallowing insects whose very innocence pushes them towards the black holes where they are bound to disappear forever. By means of daggers and hypocritical smiles, Macbeth is now ensconced on the throne of Scotland, and a chronicler is duty bound to note the following piece of news, ‘Thane of Glamis turned king has already launched a new series of assassinations.’ A number of guests do their utmost to alleviate his numerous burdens related chiefly to his state of mind, and once again Macbeth should look like others, like the innocent flowers sitting at his royal table. One might compare this room of state to the Garden of Eden where, however, there are serpents not only under every flower, but also in the middle of the largest bush.

Macbeth is tired of his innocent looks, of the cheerful exterior behind which lurks an incurable assassin. His wife says to him, ‘My royal Lord, / You do not give the cheer: the feast is sold, / That is not often vouch’d, while ‘tis a-making, / ‘Tis given with welcome –’ You may try and look like an innocent flower on condition that you neither talk nor go somewhere – even if you just head for your own chair or the one reserved for you. A flower can sit somewhere, not necessarily on its own chair, and drink either rain or wine: if you emptied a glass of wine over your favourite flower, it would not dislike your libation unless the glass you are holding is filled with vodka. And I am told some flowers are capable of flying in search of more fertile soil and juicier insects. Alas, Macbeth was not of their number and so could only remain where he was, rooted to the throne, to his castle from where he was reluctant to fly in the footsteps of other thanes.

Beguiling time, looking like time. What do these notions mean, supposing they are notions and not just two figments of Shakespeare’s imagination? Actually our bard and author might mean exactly what his translators seem to impose upon the reader – a portion of time, for Macbeth is supposed to beguile *the* time and look like *the* time as if to the detriment of what may be defined as ‘global time’ (another version of our ‘global village’.) Neither the French nor the Russians deal with articles in the way they are used and misused by English authors and Shakespeare himself who, in *All’s Well That Ends Well* speaks about ‘the inaudible and noiseless foot of Time’. Even in this instance related to the whole of Time, to its very substance, a French translator would be obliged to use an article instead of leaving Time to its own devices. As for the Russians, they never use articles, even if requested to single out this or that object for special treatment.

Odd as it may seem, a number of English scholars join this misapprehension club as they point out that ‘beguile the time’ is synonymous with ‘deceive the world,’ or ‘delude all observers’. ‘The time,’ they go on, ‘often means “the present age, i.e. men and things generally”’. The example they provide on the spur of the moment does not seem to hit the mark, ‘Away, and mock the time with fairest show.’ Don’t we constantly mock Universal, Clock-Indicated Time with our shows? It is true that, from time to time, we say to each other and our friends, ‘We would dearly love to sell our flat and move to the country.’

‘Why? Are you weary of London?’

‘We don’t love the hustle and bustle of the marketplace.’

So you sell your London flat, alias your castle, and buy a house in the country, making sure that the marketplace you are so allergic to is in the back of beyond. Actually it is the other way round: it is you who live in some village in the back of beyond, whereas the London stock exchange is the centrepiece of the world. Never mind, never mind – your house is miles from anywhere and that is what counts; at least your interior monologues reflect this point of view. You smile rather often and whenever you happen to look at yourself in a mirror, you realise that your smile reflects Cosmic Harmony. And your voice sounds like the Music of the Spheres. And then you come across a fair maiden doing a flower arrangement for the village *show*. And she informs you that there is a *show* of local painters’ work in the village hall. And there is an exhibition of sheep shearing at the county *show*.

So both translators and scholars reduce the size of Universal Time to a particular occasion designated by an event or the human species. Lady Macbeth might have spoken thus, ‘To beguile those who can be found in your castle on the eve of Duncan’s demise brought about by your valour and go-getting high-powered spirit, you should look and behave like them. You should drink, sing and dance to the beat of the drums and to the knocking at your castle’s gates.’ She might as well have taught him an appropriate song:

*Come, thou monarch of the vine,
Plumpy Bacchus with pink eyne!
In thy fats our cares be drown’d,
With thy grapes our hairs be crown’d*

It is hardly an appropriate song: Macbeth would have taken his wife’s words at face value, restraining his ambitions to a crown made of grapes; not even to a laurel wreath, mind you. Moreover, any orgy or rather bacchanalia may result in a sort of universal reconciliation and the brotherhood known all over Russia through the image that our glossy magazines publish in the wake of celebrations and oligarch-organised dinners: a dance floor covered with drunken bodies. During these so-called cocktail parties or balls an unbiased observer might witness a number of threesomes or foursomes; and even fivesomes should not be excluded from the list of enjoyments printed half-an-hour before the inauguration ceremony of such a leisure activity. And even if a murder is on the agenda, it may slide into oblivion in the course of a dance or after a few bottles of champagne living cheek by jowl with vodka and cognac. In *Antony and Cleopatra* we go through the procedure with our author step by step, and we are hardly surprised when Pompey refuses to murder all his rivals in one fell swoop, saying to his own Lady Macbeth, alias Menas, ‘Desist and drink.’

You may look like time, even if you have no intention of beguiling it, which incidentally is no easy task, for no one can beguile or manipulate a substance reflected only by the dials of our clocks and partly through the beating of our hearts. But our hearts are capricious to the point of changing their rhythms as often as they please, taking no notice of dials and our agendas, which accounts for our failures, our prostrations and the duration emphasised by Bergson. At the end of the play, Lady Macbeth lives within the bounds of a duration centred upon the murders, and she is not permitted to cross the boundary beyond which another time and world might await her. Bullied by the king, her doctor applied for the visa on the off chance, but he did not seriously expect her to get it; she did not.

Here is an ideal image of duration supplied by Lady Macbeth the Sleepwalker, and one cannot fail to realise that movement as such is confined only to our Lady's body, not to her mind which remains in the clutches of duration. 'Out, damned spot! out, I say! – One; two: why, then 'tis time to do't. – Hell is murky. – Fie, my Lord, fie! a soldier, and afeard? – What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to accompt? – Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?' Actually, we come across yet another instance of movement: Duncan's blood continues to trickle from his wounds. Trickle, trickle little blood / How I wonder what thou art. The remains of Time.

We often ask each other, 'What is Time?' And what about Duration or *La Durée*? It was born at the end of the 19th century, the bastard daughter of Time and Eternity. What does Lady Macbeth look like? Like Time? Like Eternity? According to her hypothesis, Hell is murky, and I suppose she was aware of its eternity that excludes any number of hopes, however intense and heaven-oriented. Too late, too late. I recall a dialogue I heard in my youth, 'They had a narrow escape when their car crashed.'

'What crash are you talking about? A girl was killed yesterday in a crash involving a stolen car.'

'No. I'm talking about another crash. No one got killed.'

'Why did their car crash? And how?'

'They crashed into the Rock of Gibraltar.'

'Why didn't the driver apply his brakes?'

'The car was operated by a woman. Anyway, it was too late to brake.'

'It's never too late to brake.'

The same goes for Macbeth who might have stopped many times before reaching Duncan's deathbed, dagger at the ready. He says to his wife, 'We will proceed no further in this business,' after considering a few manoeuvres directed against time's multiplicity, duplicity and consequences: not only do we have a number of parallel and perpendicular times to reckon with, but no deed, however modest in size and importance, just shifts for itself, being as it is prepared, announced and crowned, among other crowns, by an Oscar-winning performance. (Orson Welles's *Othello* was crowned at the Cannes Festival.) Macbeth proceeds thus, 'If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well / It were done quickly: if th'assassination / Could trammel up the consequence, and catch / With his surcease

success –’ In other words, he isolates Time from both the past and the future as if Duncan were our sovereign and human being only within his castles’ walls, not elsewhere. He would be satisfied if there were no ill-consequences in this life and since his train of thought does not go fast enough to reach the Hereafter in no time at all, Macbeth says to himself that he has no time for an in-depth study of the Hereafter – or any after, for that matter. The here invades his brain to the point of excluding any other geographical point from the world as he listens to what his wife imparts to him in the course of their first meeting on the stage:

Macb. *My dearest love,*
 Duncan comes here to-night
 Lady M. *And when goes hence?*
 Macb. *To-morrow, as he purposes.*
 Lady M. *O! never*
 Shall sun that morrow see!

Of course Duncan would have asked for a few torches upon leaving the Thane of Cawdor’s castle, had he been alive and kicking: even in those dark ages, the lack of light did not prevent anyone from travelling all over Europe. (Let us not forget that Claudius asks for light in the middle of *Hamlet*. And in Act V Lady Macbeth turns up in public with a taper.) There is no denying that humanity needs both the sun and its beams without which no beaches and suntans would be available for the glossy magazines I touched upon in connection with one of the royal couples that can be found in every glossy worthy of its name. But we might hold out without either those beams or the sun itself for quite a while, devoting our time to the festivities depicted in *Hamlet* and other tragedies: these and other festivities are the perfect foil for the murders we are to witness in Act Five and even in Act Four, as the case may be.

Be that as it may, Macbeth does his best to shorten time as if modelling his behaviour on the translators and scholars I upbraided a few hours ago as I analysed the importance of dealing with the whole of time instead of cutting it into pieces. Suppose our Lady suggests her husband should just kill time as many of his peers do, when divorced from wars and battlefields. In this context, to beguile time may mean, ‘You should *kill* time, otherwise you may die of boredom before committing the murder you’re bound to commit if you remain in your right mind. There are wrong minds, you know, and I’m afraid of them. Never mind. But let’s get back to the subject or rather to the obscure object of our desire – Duncan himself. Kierkegaard speaks of the “sickness-unto-death”, if I remember rightly. Do I remember wrongly?’

‘I’ve no idea, my dearest chuck.’

‘Never mind, never reason. Let us speak of the “love-unto-death”.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Don’t you love Duncan?’

‘I do. He hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been so clear in his great office, that his virtues will plead like angels –’

‘They will not.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘We’ll cut these angels off along with the rest. Only his head will remain within our space-time. Don’t forget you should kill two substances: Duncan and Time. To beguile Time, kill Time. Otherwise you might collapse. To beguile Duncan, kill Duncan.’

‘How to beguile him?’

‘He thinks you’re a peerless kinsman. Besides, your dagger would give the lie to his belief that the air of your estate recommends itself unto his gentle senses – nimbly and sweetly. *Sourly*, not *sweetly*.

‘He’s here in double trust: / First, as I am his kinsman and his subject, / Strong both against the deed; then, as his host –’

At this point, our Lady must have realised she had no alternative but to *beguile* her husband *into* killing his guest. So she speaks to him thus: ‘Are you allergic to blood?’

‘To *his* blood – yes.’

‘Because his blood is royal?’

‘Yes.’

‘Haven’t you always dreamed of becoming a Buddhist?’

‘Yes, I have.’

‘Don’t you know that a true Brâhmana goes scatheless, though he has killed father and mother, and two valiant Kings?’

‘*Two* Kings?’

‘Two valiant *kinsmen*.’

‘Scatheless?’

‘Haven’t you reached the highest Sambodhi?’

‘Have I?’

‘Haven’t you met the Weird Sisters?’

‘I have. Banquo has seen them too.’

‘That’s why you should murder him.’

‘Why?’

‘There’s no room for two Kings on Earth.’

‘Am I a King?’

‘You’re no longer yourself.’

‘Am I not?’

‘You’re outside the domain of good and bad.’

‘Am I?’

‘You’re also beyond the reach of guilt. The Arhat *cannot* commit a serious sin.’

‘Am I the Arhat tonight?’

‘Anyway, they’re just symbols or signs. Why not murder a few symbols?’

‘What symbols?’

‘Mother is lust and father pride.’

‘What about the Kings?’

‘The two valiant Kings are heretical systems.’

‘Is Time a heretical system too?’

‘Of course it is. That’s why you should kill it.’

From this point of view, time should be treated impartially and not partially, as many pseudo-scholars seem to suggest. Suppose you kill a particle of time by drinking with one of your cousins as he talks to you about his wife, daughter and dogs. As you perform this murder-oriented ritual you say to yourself, ‘Time must have been decomposing for several weeks. There are only particles of time around me – the times. One time, another time. And I’m supposed to kill all of them. Isn’t it better to kill them all in one fell swoop?’

that but this blow

Might be the be-all and the end-all – here,

But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,

We’d jump the life to come.

Macbeth alludes to what modern physicists call a ‘frame of reference’, and he wishes that the time-space spot where he finds himself could be eternal and individual – personalised in the extreme. Within the framework of his wishful thinking, the murder he commits is thereby wholly independent of many other frames, the most momentous of which is linked to Hell and the punishments depicted by Dante, among other travellers and prophets. Yet another frame of reference is associated with Birnam Wood that does not move in relation to Macbeth’s first crime; let alone to his later crimes. In other words, it does not move at all.

Time, thou anticipat’st my dread exploits:

The flighty purpose never is o’ertook

Unless the deed go with it. From this moment,

The very firstlings of my heart shall be

The firstlings of my hand.

Macbeth deplores his incapacity to catch up with time that, according to journalists and ordinary people, moves faster and faster – partly on account of information overload. He fails to murder Macduff who flees the country as if taking his cue from good Fleance. In a way, he fails to catch up with both Macduff and time. In a fit of pique and delirium, he decides therefore to overtake our commonplace time. Once again, he seems to agree with our modern physicists who postulate that all the different phenomena in the world do not march to a single time. (Paul Dirac, Arthur Milne.) Indeed there are two or more ‘times’ – one for gravity, one for electromagnetism, one for the nuclear strong force, one for Lady Macbeth, one for her madness, one for her death, one for her life. Upon learning that the Queen is dead, the King launches into a verbal attack on idiots and tomorrows:

*She should have died hereafter:
There would have been a time for such a word.*

Such diversity and discrepancy, however, might spoil any hope of an eventually unified physics where all of these phenomena are unified at some deep level.

*Thy letters have transported me beyond
This ignorant present, and I feel now
The future in the instant.*

Did our Lady look like the future? ‘Here’s the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.’ Did she look like the past? Like repentance? Apparently she was not attuned to Spinoza’s teachings. ‘Wash your hands, put on your night-gown; look not so pale. – I tell you yet again, Banquo’s buried: he cannot come out on’s grave. To bed, to bed: there’s knocking at the gate. Come, come, come, come, give me your hand. What’s done cannot be undone. To bed, to bed, to bed.’

Lady Macbeth died by violence – no doubt about it, given that somebody speaks of her suicide and somebody is always right, providing this somebody or any other body speaks in a Shakespeare play. But did she repent?

*Horrible were my sins; but the infinite
Goodness hath arms so wide in their embrace
That it accepts that which turns back to it.
Dante, Purgatory*

Lady Macbeth sends a letter to God: ‘My dear Almighty, I married in haste and I repent at leisure, as you might see it from where Thee art sitting in Thee celestial abode. I married Macbeth because he

was a promising son and a thane, but I was disappointed in him and it is pointless to quote some relevant verses from Shakespeare's tragedies Thee knowest by heart because it is Thee who writ them; or something of the kind. Orthography is not my forte, The knowest. It is not even my piano. Actually there's a Christian priest in Orson Welles's version of our tragedy.'

Lady Macbeth scrubbed at the marks on her hands and other parts of her body for ages, but they would not come off. At some point she thought they had come off and she even said to herself, 'They had come off, which means that the old men don't have too much blood in their veins because their veins are narrow and consequently can't hold much blood. Old men are narrow-veined. What about Thee, my dear God and Guide? Doesn't Thee have pleasure in my Death? I turn from Thy way and Their ways because they think they shouldn't kill Banquo and rob banks. And where does our money come from, pray? This money, blood and the old man's heart are upon me, on me and in the palms of my hands of Macbeth fame. Aren't they famous? You can show them on TV, if you wish. In the twinkling of a screen they'll become stars and even stripes.'

Did Churchill look like the time in the Thirties? In the early Forties? The V-sign.

THE KOREANS

After such a long digression, we resume our personal history which might be found in Shakespeare's plays because everything and everybody are in there, as the same scholars affirm. But there is something quite personal in our biography and, for all our affinities with Hamlet and Macbeth, we are in a class of our own and this class is only spasmodically invaded, if not usurped, by Shakespeare's heroes and heroines. It is true that, at some point, we are prepared to kill our fathers, our uncles, our wives and even innocent bystanders, but the main thread of anybody's life must lie elsewhere, otherwise our lives have no meaning: you can dispose of us, saying to yourselves that Shakespeare's works encompass everything from music, theatre and ballet to literature, cinema and the visual arts; let alone our lives. There is no denying that Shakespeare lifts our petty beings to a quasi-mystical plane; and yet we are likely to grow weary of greatness, of bombastic soliloquies and, taking our cue from Odysseus or Ulysses, as depicted by Virgil, aspire to identify with peasants or run-of-the-mill employees. After all, laws exist to stop companies exploiting their charwomen and chimney sweeps.

We are not obliged to believe in Adam Kadmon, declaring that the universe is created in the image of man and not vice versa, for in the beginning was the man we are talking about, and this man was with God; and he was God. Sometimes we have an urge to embrace the stars and hold them in our embrace for half an hour at least – like Antony did, according to Cleopatra. And she thinks he was holding the vault of heaven throughout his life, with the exception of the last hours when he lost two battles and everything, but not everybody: Cleopatra was still by his side. Well, neither Julius Caesar nor Antony fit the bill whenever we crave both intimacy and privacy, not excitement and shouts of acclamation. But even in those moments we are reluctant to break diplomatic or psychological ties with humanity which can fraternise with our gregarious instinct much easier and more enthusiastically

than the black, velvety sky studded with tiny, twinkling stars. However, to feel our global village and universal citizenship, we had better not choose our fellow countrymen and therefore go to distant countries and cultures that are apt to make us feel estranged from ourselves, from our clichés and pernicious habits. Besides, we are always in need of expanding our horizons, otherwise we might unconsciously and unwillingly pay tribute to the sectarianism we reject on the grounds of its narrow-mindedness or just narrowness.

So we choose a representative of a distant country about which we know next to nothing or just nothing, for not many people can afford the time off work to go on long-distance or merely long journeys. After working hours, they are allowed to scoff a big Mac and watch a film in a local cinema; but flying to South Korea blows the whole thing out of proportion, all the more so as you do not have enough money to buy an air ticket, even if you condescend to fly economy class. Well, you can identify with any Korean within your own walls, relying on the help of your computer and other sources of information. After all, modern computers can hold huge amounts of data; the same goes for human heads, provided they are modern enough to amass the information offered by both our computers and our era.

So you undertake what is defined as information retrieval and find out that lonely deaths are on the rise, as far as Korea is concerned. This phenomenon concerns you too, for you are on your own tonight and no one is about to pay you a visit; and yet, several years ago, you made your position crystal clear by saying to your potential visitors that they should not bring anything to your house: neither wine, nor flowers, nor cakes. 'I'm not a woman,' you said with a hospitable smile, 'and so can live without flowers and chocolate. Even without Belgian chocolate, you know.' Tonight you are not sure you used the right words in your speech addressed to your half-friends and colleagues, for there were some women among them. They might have taken you for a misogynist, which is not strictly true because you depend upon women for the satisfaction of your sexual requirements. But, for some obscure reason, a number of women regard you as a homosexual and the reason that might explain this judgement of theirs is not as obscure as appears at first glance: you have never harassed them either sexually or otherwise. Most women believe they are beautiful and if you make no attempt to take advantage of their physical and psychic qualities, they despise you for the way you treat their charms and reach the conclusion that you are both a misogynist and a homosexual. They also accuse you of following Shakespeare's advice and warnings to the letter, although you have never said the English bard's plays are as important as the Bible and should keep one company in every hotel. According to them, this bard of yours and ours was a misogynist to the core. They go so far as to quote a few verses relevant to the subject under examination: 'Women are as roses, whose fair flower, / Being once displayed, doth fall that very hour.' 'To suckle fools and chronicle small beer.' (Iago's summary of woman's work. The last phrase refers to keeping account of food supplies. Incidentally, only Belgian beer is worthy of being chronicled.)

Be that as it may, we are on our own tonight and we wonder what we can do so as not to suffer from the diseases that are two times worse than what we experience in the aftermath of our gargantuan meals. We are lonely and we learn that the Koreans sharing with us this predicament or discomfiture are not buried properly or not buried at all – a tragedy that competes on equal footing with *King Lear*; yet, contrary to the unfortunate Koreans, our King is not unduly worried about his burial. The point is in a culture where we chiefly come across funerals – they are often lavish three-day affairs with hundreds of guests – the way we are buried or left to our own non-existent devices can be neither underestimated nor overlooked.

So you die and your body is left to its own devices and therefore has no alternative but to decompose indefinitely and even forever, which it actually does, if someone does not interfere, offering you a makeshift funeral: the other kinds of funerals are out of the question. A growing number of South Koreans are dying alone, with no relatives eager to claim their remains, let alone perform a ritual that is vital for the deceased's long-awaited journey to the Hereafter.

We know very little about the culture we are talking about, but the influence of Christian martyrs and Shakespeare on our mentality is so awe-inspiring we automatically assume that death is far better than life; anyway, on no account should we dread it or him.

Reason thus with life:

*If I do lose thee, I do lose a thing
That none but fools would keep. A breath thou art,
Servile to all the skyey influences
That dost this habitation where thou keep'st
Hourly afflict. Merely, thou art Death's fool;
For him thou labour'st by thy flight to shun,
And yet run'st toward him still. Thou art not noble;
For all th'accommodations that thou bear'st
Are nurs'd by baseness. Thou'rt by no means valiant;
For thou dost fear the soft and tender fork
Of a poor worm.*

The tender fork to which the duke refers in his monologue belongs to snakes, rather than worms: the forked tongue of a snake, in other words. But what does it matter to whom or what this fork belongs: we are afraid of any fork, even of that we find on a dinner table. And any pitchfork scares earthlings out of their wits as if it were a harbinger of death, acting as a sword instead of moving and removing straw and hay. Well, no matter how often we re-read this monologue, we continue to cling to life and stick to our guns, even if promised a villa in Paradise and a bench inside the rose described by Dante in the last cantos of his masterpiece. But sooner or later we are to die, even if no one offers us a

cottage in heaven, and that is why we should reflect upon the destiny of those who cannot be buried properly on account of their economic situation. Though South Koreans have mostly benefited from a strong economy in recent decades, families have come under strain from economic and demographic upheaval and therefore we stumble upon a great many corpses lying unattended either in huts or in the streets. In this day and age our so-called progress moves forward by leaps and bounds, and sometimes it takes a flying leap, landing on the other side of the world, of *our* world. So we realise we have been left behind, even though we did our best not to *fall* behind because we are aware that those falling behind get increasingly lonely. (The same goes for those being *left* behind. Or *felt* behind.) Unlike the poor of the old days, the South Koreans see their communities destroyed for urban redevelopment. (And what about the North Koreans?) The poor and old have nowhere to go: they cannot take a flying leap and have no other means of transport, for all the technological progress they witness from some hilltop or other. So they remain where they are and die peacefully – too peacefully perhaps, for no one disturbs their sinews and loins after their deaths, even if their souls fly through the Hereafter, under its ceiling.

As usual we think in terms of endings – in eschatological terms, in other words; but we are bound to realise that, no matter what terms or words we resort to when attempting to describe our predicaments, we are dying like Antony prostrated at Cleopatra's feet. Actually we would not mind dying if Cleopatra were within our reach, but she is not and it is pointless to repeat, 'I'm dying, Egypt,' for neither Egypt nor Cleopatra hears our voice. Why? Because we neither live nor die in the days of the Caesars; besides, we happen to die in Korea where a family's standing in the community is measured and flaunted during a loved one's funeral, by how many guests of honour honour the invitation and how long they stay. In this particular case, they never outstay their welcome, even if they drink all the bottles you have in your cellar and also in your attic where, from time to time, you stage your drinking bouts. But Cleopatra is not in your midst, and even if you had lived in the days of Antony and signified your desire to die in Egypt, she would not have flown to your rescue, saying:

Noblest of men, woo't die?

Hast thou no care of me, shall I abide

In this dull world, which in thy absence is

No better than a sty?

Had she said so to your half-corpse and half-soul – your soul's one foot is already in heaven – you might have answered as follows:

Yes, you should stay in this sty.

Why? Why? Why?

Because you've always stayed in it;

*So have I. The whole universe is a sty,
 Not a mirror of the sky.
 Actually, if you hold a mirror up to the sky
 You'll see this sty of ours.*

But, oddly enough, we are in Korea and so cannot even catch a glimpse of the Nile to visualise Cleopatra's body as depicted by Enobarbus:

*For her own person,
 It beggar'd all description: she did lie
 In her pavilion – cloth of gold, of tissue –
 O'er-picturing that Venus where we see
 The fancy outwork nature.*

But why should we visualise either Cleopatra or anybody else, either in Egypt or in the Far East where people wait for their funerals? Waiting for a funeral, in other words, in other plays and days that come and go; and we have no idea what to do with them. At least an ordinary Korean knows he has to arrange his own funeral, and he does not add 'her' for the simple reason that his wife died a few years ago, leaving him behind, high and dry, and so on. On that occasion, hundred of relatives, friends and former colleagues showed up at a funeral hall, bowing before the deceased's portrait, nestled in a bed of freshly cut white chrysanthemums. This wife's husband keeps these chrysanthemums for his own funeral so his wife might have told him, had she been alive, 'Rest assured, my darling. At least these flowers will attend your funeral.' But his wife no longer talks to him or anybody else, their former guests included, and all day long her husband sits in the middle of the drawing room, looking at the unfreshly cut or limp flowers and saying to himself, 'I should get in touch with Namum & Namum, whatever it is, otherwise I'll sit in this posture until doomsday, propped up by pillows.'

Of course there is no point in visualising all these individuals some of whom are described by Shakespeare, Dante and their peers. We see only our own bodies, whether they are propped up by pillows or just lie supine on the floor, and a part of our dwelling place. No amount of descriptions, however realistic or fantastic, will enable us to identify, if only for a second, with the Koreans or even Europeans whom we know better than other representatives of the human race. At least we know they might own guardian angels and therefore do not really have to agonise about their funerals or agonies or flowers. And if they air too many grievances, their neighbours can console them thus, 'Okay, I'll send an SMS to my guardian angel – just stop piling on the agony. I don't need him at this precise moment in time. So he'll help you to the best of his abilities.' And if they ask their magnanimous neighbour, 'Can we confidently rely on him to get the job done?' the neighbour nods his head several times in a row.

Even in this day and age, in our mature and judicious times, we may come across some men who maintain they are from Mars, which seems to prove almost categorically that women have come down from Venus; otherwise it would be hard to explain their presence in our midst, let alone in our beds. Indeed if we are Martians, we find ourselves on the Earth only on account of its advantages, for Mars is a beautiful planet and one is likely to wonder why one may be tempted to leave it. But there are no women on Mars and one should not discard the hypothesis according to which a number of men are not homosexual and so cannot lie on other men; or under them, as Iago and Othello might put it.

As everybody knows, originally women lived on Venus and that is why such a name was bestowed upon this planet. So the Martians asked the Venusians to come to Mars, leaving everything behind; but women are sentimental by nature and they love their mother planet to distraction. So they said, 'No. You should come to us because every genuine Martian is the embodiment of the English gentleman. It's the mark of a gentleman to stand up when someone enters the room. And if no one enters it, a true gentleman goes and seeks the person who was expected to enter the room. And he does so promptly, for the person in question is a woman.' But the Martians had little in common with English gentlemen and so they said to the Venusians, 'Let us adopt the doctrine of the Middle Way.'

'How do you mean?' asked the Venusians.

'Let us choose a third planet.'

'What do you mean?'

'You don't seem to be overeager to come and settle on our planet.'

'We don't like wars and Mars is the embodiment of wars.'

'What about Venus? Is it the embodiment of peace?'

'Of love,' answered the Venusians as they began to undress in front of the Martians who could follow their dances of the seven veils by means of their powerful, made-in-USA telescopes. Yet, in those days, the Martians were so Bible-fearing they said to the women, 'We're your masters and masters never go to their slaves unless the latter adopt Hegel's point of view and become masters in their turn. But you're not masters, not yet. Do you know what Shakespeare said? He said, "Frailty, thy name is woman." He said so in *Hamlet* and also in *Twelfth Night*.'

'Where shall we meet then?' said a woman. Her voice was soft, gentle and low.

'On Earth.'

'Why on Earth?'

'Because only Earth will enable us to stage *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.'

'What is it? This night? This dream?'

'Our idea of Paradise is to take part in this comedy.'

Nowadays this episode is regarded as a thing of the past because it seems we all come from the same planet – from Earth, in other words; although we are more inclined to stage *King Lear* and

Macbeth than *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Scientists say it is wrong to think men have one type of brain and women another. Israeli scientists carried out a fascinating research into our sexuality, transsexuality, and their relationship with our brains. Professor Joel, of the School of Psychological Sciences at Tel Aviv University, said: 'There was extensive overlap for all brain regions and connections assessed, irrespective of the type of sample, measure or analysis. This extensive overlap undermines any attempt to distinguish between a "male" and a "female" form for specific brain structures.' One is tempted to surmise that Shakespeare was put in the picture about this research, for one cannot attribute his infatuation with transsexuality exclusively to *Commedia del arte*'s omnipresent influence.

TIME-AND-MOTION STUDY

Time may be likened to a doorway that is so low you have to stoop to go through it and reach another day where other doorways of this kind await you. You get the feeling you bow and scrape to bosses, princes and even their servants because you are likely to die on the spot if you do not fawn upon him and her and their children; and also upon time which continues to get in your way. You go your way and both you and this way seem to be situated in the kingdom of eternity because only eternity – alongside infinity – deserves a place in a kingdom, not just somewhere, in some republic or other. But time interferes with your carelessness to remind you that you have a few appointments and obligations you cannot shirk for fear of being deprived even of your meagre salary and diet. Everything is meagre and mean in your life and so you go on stooping to conquer or be defeated, and a few sages do their best to convince you that defeats are better than victories and anyway everything amounts to the same thing, deed and fact.

At some point Shakespeare says, 'Maturity is all,' and I am looking for this point right now because I cannot succeed in placing it in my recollection, for my recollection or a series of recollections – a kingdom of recollections – is so huge I am often incapable of placing anything either inside or outside it. ('Men must endure their going hence, even as their coming hither: Ripeness is all.') I know that someone touches upon maturity in *King Lear*, if I am not mistaken, but I remember neither his name nor the chapter and verse where this wise saying or wisecrack can be found on condition that you search for it carefully: your very life depends on it. Of course your life depends on anything and even anywhere because anything can happen anywhere – even in your own house you seem to trust absolutely and unconditionally. At least one of Mussorgsky's characters thinks he is on the safe side as long as he stays at home and does not budge an inch from where his castle stands, rooted to the spot. And then a murderer comes and what you come across may be defined as 'a news blackout', for there is no news after death.

Lear. *Make no noise, make no noise; draw the curtains: so, so. We'll go to supper i'th'morning.*
 Fool. *And I'll go to bed at noon.*

This is Shakespeare's way of life, as they say: you just take your time or rather you take and pick any portion of it that suits your needs much better than other portions. You make use of the same procedure when dealing with space and other material problems, saying to yourselves, 'I'll go to bed at noon because I can't live without my afternoon sleep. And I'll go to death after all the tomorrows I can find either in my way or any other way; or in any other morrows and morons.' But suppose there are others – and there are many of them, alas – who say this afternoon is nothing but this afternoon and nine o'clock is what it is and so this 'is' has nothing to do with what your imagination and its figments can picture to themselves (and yourself) as they endeavour to reach the empire of free will where you can exercise your democratic rights by having supper in the morning.

One of these others is the fool about whom we hear as Jacques speaks of this fool's attitude towards time and our life in general which wholly depends on time, sometimes to the detriment of space (you can die in a palace):

*And then he (the fool) drew a dial from his poke,
 And looking on it, with lack-lustre eye
 Says, very wisely, 'It is ten o'clock.
 Thus we may see,' quoth he, 'how the world wags:
 'Tis but an hour ago since it was nine,
 And after one hour more 'twill be eleven;
 And so from hour to hour, we ripe, and ripe,
 And then from hour to hour, we rot, and rot,
 And thereby hangs a tale.'*

Thereby hangs a lengthy and compelling family saga; or one of those old Hollywood epics with a cast of thousands; or just an interior monologue that ends in a death rattle or in the rattle of machine-gun fire, which often amounts to the same thing; or to the same death; or to death. And what is this tale we are talking about at such length without pausing to get our breath back? After much soul-searching, we resolved to carry on with our description of the world, its ways, nays and yeas.

The Taming of the Shrew. In this play the heroine is put through her paces by means of time that she handles in accordance with the dials she finds either on her bedside cabinet or on the wall of her villa. And then her husband says, 'It's nine o'clock,' and she bows her head as if in prayer, forgetting her clocks that her husband blatantly mocks.

We are told that whole communities starve to death during long droughts, and some members of these communities go mad, for not only kings do so when ill-treated by their daughters and one of their husbands. On the threshold of madness, the victims recite the following excerpt from *Henry IV*: ‘What a devil hast thou to do with the time of the day? Unless hours were cups of sack, and minutes capons –’ Of course our humanists rush to the victims’ rescue and say, ‘The United Nations is sending humanitarian aid to the areas worst affected by the drought.’ They also point out that ‘the Vatican has agreed to donate \$80 000 in humanitarian aid to countries affected by the struggle for life.’ And they report daily on the humanitarian crisis in the region, sending emails and telegrams to all newspapers, magazines and TV stations. And other humanists watch whatever is called car-crash TV/telly. And the victims go on reciting the Prince of Wales’ monologue: ‘Unless hours were cups of champagne, and minutes caviar, and clocks Bentleys and Ferraris, and the blessed sun himself a beauty queen in flame-coloured taffeta –’

Ugliness is not ugly or rather it is immortal because you do not grow old, however long your life can endure its own course and the vicissitudes to which it is constantly exposed. You are ugly as a young man about whom no one will ever say, ‘Here goes a handsome young man,’ unless this person is subjected to torture and has to repeat ‘Here goes a handsome young man’, for fear of being executed on the spot. So you do not notice your age, whoever you are and thus avoid a great deal of suffering related to your daily examination of your face.

Actually time is neutral and we are supposed to be acquainted with this truth, although there are many truths we have no idea of, which means we do not know *everything*, even if we say we know nothing. And whoever is confronted with time – saints and geniuses are not, apparently – just sits down on the top of a hill and says to himself, as usual:

*O God! methinks it were a happy life
To be no better than a homely swain;
To sit upon a hill, as I do now,
To carve out dials quaintly, point by point,
Thereby to see the minutes how they run*

You watch the minutes, saying to yourself that sooner or later they will not run, even if you do not pay homage to Bergson’s duration; sometimes they do not run, period or full stop. They stop either fully or not, and you realise they no longer run, although they should run or walk at least, otherwise one might surmise they are not minutes, let alone hours and centuries. They may also crawl and a French philosopher, a Bergson follower, testifies to this particular custom of theirs in the following remark, ‘The injured crawled to safety or rather to eternity which is the only haven from the noise and bustle of the world; and from time.’

THE TOWER OF BABEL

*Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be
What thou art promis'd.*

The 'homely swain' takes us back to animals, and once again we wonder whether we are animals or not. And if we are not, we go on wondering if the animals should be regarded as lying or wallowing in the Big Bang of our species despite its shortness; if they are really our ancestors whose importance and earnestness should be venerated in our rituals, Christmases and so on. Of course a 'swain' is just a young man who is in love and not a swine, although he may sound like an absolute swine; and he also may look like one or even two swines put together. Be that as it may, nothing and no one forbid us to speak of animals either with regard to the origin of the species, which is more or less a thing of the past, or with disregard for any origins, any opinions, any past or future. The monkey is still on the agenda, though, because it is not less important and exciting than any Korean or any European, if you wish. And you might wish it because there are still a lot of individuals who recall the way the Russians treated the Japanese at the beginning of the 20th century. The Russians said to each other, 'If our motherland goes to war we'll have to face the fact that many people will die. Let's face this fact all the more lucidly since the war with Japan is unavoidable – everyone's aware of this aspect of determinism. But we shouldn't overlook one aspect of this problem because this aspect is a guarantee of military success – monkeys can't kill humans.' What they had in mind boils down to this, 'Koreans, Japanese, Chinese and other individuals whose lives and deaths are rooted to the spots that are removed from culture, art and winter palaces are doomed because all other human beings own a higher plane of regard.'

But let us take a closer look at the monkey and also at his or her brother whose name is ass or donkey, for we should not neglect and discard what we optimistically and harmoniously call 'brotherhood'. In a way, all animals are brothers and sisters, even if they do not kiss each other whenever crossing each other's bodies in the streets and fields; even if they never go to churches where priests enlarge upon brothers and sisters and nephews and nieces and orphans and the stillborn. Nor should we forget that in Far Eastern art monkeys are often depicted in attitudes denoting wisdom and detachment from worldly things, perhaps by way of satirising human pretensions to wisdom. That accounts for the outcome of the war the Japanese waged against the Russians at the beginning of the 20th century. The Japanese warriors were detached from worldly things, whereas the generals on whom the destiny of the Russian army wholly depended drank vodka and devoured caviar.

In Ancient Egyptian symbolism the role allotted to the monkey was in broad outlines the one which it would play in Central America. Taking the shape of a great white dog-faced baboon, the god Thoth – who also took the form of an ibis – was patron of the wise and the men of letters. Suppose the Tower of Babel is the spitting image of our evolution related to both our brains and bodies that walk on two legs instead of crawling on all fours. The ground floor of our tower thus corresponds either to

the monkey or to the donkey or rather to the ass whose relationship with God's emissary helped us avoid something like the plague. But there are people who say whenever you touch upon asses in their presence, 'An ass is always an ass,' and you realise it is hard to talk to ignorant louts and non-avid readers of the Book.

These non-readers think the donkey symbolises obstinate stupidity; and yet this is only a special and subsidiary aspect of a much more general concept which almost universally makes the ass the emblem of darkness and even of devilish propensities; whereas the ass is on the contrary the emblem of lightness and of angelic propensities and qualities. In India the ass is the steed of gods, but these are exclusively death-gods, especially Nairrita, warden of the land of the dead. Of course when our brothers and sisters hear us talk of death-gods, they say at once, 'Yes, we know that the ass is a death-god and we don't want to die.' Of course they will die as a matter of course, whether they want to or not, and all these fruitless discussions can be found on the ground floor of our Tower of Babel which teaches us a lesson about the beginning of wisdom and immortality: any death-god is a life-god and vice versa, and so it is better to be an ass than a human being who is certainly not god, for all the images he claims as she expatiates upon the origin of the species: 'We're made in the image of God, in that of the ass, in that of the donkey, in that of the monkey and in that of the so on.'

Anyway, in Ancient Egypt the 'red ass' was one of the most dangerous beings that the soul encountered on its voyage to the Otherworld. Our brothers and sisters, who are incidentally not ours at all, maintain that the 'red ass' is just a communist as if this colour could not be associated with other representatives of human species such as Red Indians, for instance. But the latter are now called 'Native Americans' and these individuals who are partly ours have no colours at all: they are colourless, so to speak. We define this attitude as 'colourfully correct', which denotes our treatment of the world in general: we strive for an overall harmony where all colours are mixed to such an extent that no colours remain on the surface. Coloursness or callousness is the most harmonious harmony we can hope for within our world where whatever sticks out a mile can be spotted from Mars, providing the Martian you rely upon has a powerful telescope in its tool shed. It looks at the Earth and says, 'It's not harmonious.'

'Why do you say so?' you ask it.

'Because I see something that sticks out a million miles.'

'But this is just a church steeple,' you say to it.

'Is it?' he asks.

'It is,' you say. 'And our church is dedicated to the most harmonious being in the universe – the Almighty.'

Nevertheless, we are still on Earth, if our eyes and ears are to be trusted in the chapter devoted to the construction and conclusion of the Tower of Babel. Indeed we must be on the ground floor in the light of what we hear and see; and we see the sea and so wonder if there are any seas in heaven where only clouds and stars can be spotted as we look up in our endeavour to pierce the mystery of

God and His emissaries. We pierce nothing and therefore remain on Earth, looking at our own feet around which there grows a great deal of grass and flowers; and we hear now the sea and now a number of nightingales that compete with each other for attention, which is a perversion to some extent: one can always hear only one nightingale as if only the winners of their internal competitions were allowed to sing for humanity and animals. We do not attend their competitions which, for reasons best known to themselves, are held in camera; but we do enjoy the concerts given at the end of these competitions and so we hear only laureates, not other candidates.

I seldom attend such concerts, and when I do, I hear only one nightingale, one song, and I say to myself that Roman soldiers and Caesar himself must have heard the same song performed by the same singer. But my analysis and theory do not mean anything because, either tomorrow or the day after, we might come across two or three nightingales singing at the same time, in the same place. And we can never be absolutely sure we are listening to the winners of the above-mentioned competitions, if any, and therefore we are just reduced to the role of listeners who do not understand the first thing about the nightingales' art. Perhaps they all sing out of tune in spite of the honours bestowed upon them by their peers, colleagues or fellow students. They certainly sing out of harmony and we cannot help wondering if, in the remotest corners of the heavens, their songs are sung by the choirs of birds whose polyphony sounds like that of Dufay and Okeghem.

Be that as it may, for the moment we are stuck with Caliban and therefore should devote more time to the Earth than to heavenly choirs that might have been joined by Ariel upon his departure from the island governed by Prospero and his other stooges. Prospero summons him thus (we are still dwelling upon Caliban and his origin): 'Thou poisonous slave, got by the devil himself / Upon thy wicked dam, come forth!' According to Prospero and Shakespeare's scholars, Caliban's birth was inhuman and one cannot help wondering whether his death will also be inhuman – Calibanesque, in other words. In the course of evolution to which, thanks to Darwin, we have been accustomed for almost two centuries, every creature of this kind – to some extent, Caliban looks like a monkey – should become human, otherwise no evolution will ever make sense, making only a lot of nonsense. (And we are already fed up with nonsense and therefore do not need another portion of it, however innocuous and minuscule.) He was the product of sexual union between a witch and an incubus – a male evil spirit, supposed in the past to have sex with a sleeping woman – and consequently the difference between a wholly human being and Caliban comes down to the problem of sleep. We are usually conceived by a woman who is wide- or even *wild*-awake unless she happens to be in the clutches of a 'soft' or 'mild' rapist who never forgets to have his victims swallow a few sleeping pills – before daring to penetrate the treasure trove of their bodies. And the witches of Macbeth fame are always hovering above us or below our bodies, and we often see them standing in front of us on a battlefield or in our offices where evil spirits take pride of place.

Caliban's mother is a practitioner of 'natural' magic, a goetist who exploits the universal sympathies, but whose power is limited by the fact that she could command, as a rule, only devils and

the lowest orders of spirits. Her imprisonment of Ariel in the cloven pine is typically cruel and destructive, 'a torment...which Sycorax could not again undo'. Prospero is a theurgist. His magic is not simply more powerful than that of Sycorax; it is stronger because of its radically different nature. His Art is aimed at achieving supremacy over the natural world by *holy* magic thanks to which, according to Agrippa, we are permitted to 'ascend by the same degrees through each world to the same very original World itself, the Maker of all things, and First Cause, from whence all things are, and proceed...' If we go on with our analysis and do not attempt to deviate from the course of our reasoning inspired and supported by ancient magicians, we reach the conclusion that shows us the following piece of information: all things can be found in all, be they situated in the original and exemplary World or in this corporeal world. Witches are thus intermingled with deities and one cannot know for sure by whom or what one is conceived and brought to light; nor does one have any idea which light bathes the world where many (ones) walk, sleep and jump with a view to landing on the top rung of the social ladder. Actually the white night, which is quite different from the nights appreciated by the Petersburg inhabitants and tourists, is enlarged upon in the greatest Sufi treatises. It is little wonder that the top of *their* Tower of Babel is suffused with light and the ecstasy known only to those who have seen God once or twice.

The Elements about which mystics and Mendeleev talk with gusto and skill reside in inferior bodies such as Caliban and amoebas; and also in the Heavens, in Stars, in Devils, in Angels and lastly in God. 'Now in the inferior bodies the Elements are accompanied with much gross matter; but in the Heavens the Elements are with their natures and virtues, viz., after a celestial and more excellent manner than in sublunary things.' Upon spotting Trinculo and Stephano – two humans who live on the bottom rung of our ladder – Caliban says, 'These be fine things, an if they be not sprites. That's a brave god, and bears celestial liquor: I will kneel to him.' Caliban does not believe in spirits; or rather he does believe in them and that is why he hates them, thinking that any other being is better and finer than them. In a way, he believes in human flesh and probably even in the way of this flesh, and this may mean he is a thoroughgoing materialist or communist for whom spirits, whoever and wherever they are, are far inferior to humans and even animals. Let us not forget that the latter are as material as our communists themselves, for they have no soul. In short, this material one can use for one's play or novel is sheer nonsense; but even nonsense makes sense within the framework of a play like *The Tempest* or *Cymbeline* because we are mostly made up of nonsense; of water and nonsense. At least our spirits, moods and other psychic phenomena are made up of nonsense. As for our bodies, especially if they are of Russian origin, they consist of water and vodka and also of some animal flesh.

Of course Caliban is one of these happy few who think that whatever they see is everything and there is no subtlety and delicacy either above or beyond the horizon; whereas a lot of the unhappy few go on splitting hair and also atoms as they try to figure out the answer to the question asked about gross and emaciated matters and their relations to inferior and superior bodies. Actually theologians maintain that all bodies are superior, but democrats wag their index fingers, saying all bodies are

rather inferior because equality can be achieved only through common denominators and whatever is common must necessarily be inferior in quality; otherwise it would be *uncommon*. (The common cold would become the uncommon cold, and so on.) This kind of discussion is pretty lowbrow, but what can you expect in a play like *The Tempest* where you encounter a spirit, Ariel, and Caliban who is neither a human being nor a spirit nor a worm? Ariel's atomic structure must have a lot in common – and not in uncommon – with fine, thin, slender and weightless particles that enable him to rise gently (or ungently) into the air. He is consequently not on the ground floor of the Tower of Babel.

Prospero speaks to Ariel and the latter answers the former: 'Before you can say, "come," and "go," / And breathe twice, and cry, "so, so" –' Once again all this is sheer nonsense and this nonsense remains sheer even if there are other nonsenses around us; and some of them are sheerer than others, as usually happens in the world where everything is in a class of its own, as Leibniz used to say.

Well, you are perhaps not Prospero, not quite; yet every human being whose status is far superior to any other being, let alone non-being, is entitled to a servant, if not a slave. All right, all right – we no longer live in the days of Aristotle and other philosophers who approved of slavery and not of Hegel's doctrine that coerces all slaves into mastering their masters. Nevertheless, we are allowed to say to our assistants, 'Come.' We can also say to them, 'Go,' provided we add 'please' whenever we say anything to them; and we do not mind saying 'please' after shouting, 'Fly,' 'Swine,' 'Get a billion,' 'Get a billiard,' 'Go and get a few beauty queens.'

According to the sages of Islam, the First Being imparts to others the necessity of being, although the latter know pretty well that, even if they do appear on the stage of the world, as Shakespeare puts it, they will be of the second order, not of the first. Some of these beings hanker after being to such an extent they agree to be even of the third order, as the case may be; or of the fifth order, as Christians say over and over again. They say, 'If you're of the tenth order down here, you'll be of the first order in heaven or in the Hereafter.' But it is better to be a being than not to be at all and therefore non-beings say to each other, after listening to the Fathers of the Church, 'They have kindled expectations that we must now strive to live up to.' So they are all beings now and we do not know what to do with all these beings that we call migrants, for want of a more scientific term. They come from the kingdom of non-being and we feel duty bound to make beings out of them as if we were the First Being or the Almighty Who feels it incumbent upon Him to produce beings, whatever their order or disorder. They come to the fore, wreak havoc and the show goes on, even if the show in question has nothing in common or uncommon with Shakespeare.

Says Trinculo: 'This is a very shallow monster; I afeard of him? A very weak monster! The man i' th' moon! A most poor credulous monster! Well drawn, monster, in good sooth!' To some extent, however, Caliban is a necessary creature without whom neither Shakespeare's work nor our Tower of Babel would have seen anything, let alone the light of day. Upon your birth you see whatever comes to you as your mother screams in the midst of midwives and relatives. You are not likely to see your mother, but the world is either your oyster or just the world you must come to terms with, otherwise

you might not ever leave your cradle. When some people say, 'The world is your cradle,' they mean you are unable to cope with all the problems we come across in this world of ours. You just give up and they say about you, 'He's just given up the ghost.'

We all attach a lot of importance to personal possessions, and freedom of everything is one of them, otherwise no one would ever say anything along the lines of, 'Free country, isn't it?' Everybody says so all the time and we must admit there are a great many humans unprepared to give up the ghost either for a good cause or for a bad one. 'My ghost is mine,' they point out, 'and consequently you just go to Hell.' In the aftermath of this discussion, you go to Paradise and others either stay on Earth, which is not the best solution one may find to the problem of Being, or go to Hell; not to Hal, as Falstaff might have put it.

All happens all the time and whatever does not happen happens too, for the universe, whether it belongs to Aristotle or any other motion-oriented philosopher, must shift for itself and also for the Almighty. So the universe goes on or forth or back, and we are its travelling companions who suffer everything in the its and God's stead. We say to ourselves, 'Such is our lot,' and if someone asks us, 'Are you happy with your lot?' we answer almost in unison, 'We are not.'

For all that, we are still on the ground floor because we are supposed to decide whether we are non-necessary beings or yes-necessary ones. We opt for yea-important beings and become an overnight success grandiloquently symbolised by the first floor or level of the Tower of Babel we are concerned with as we progress on our pilgrim's way. But scholars say to us, 'You don't know yet what to do with donkeys and monkeys, and so your ascension is as phoney as your minds in general.' We do not mind devoting another couple of hours to asses and baboons whose large teeth seem to be appropriate for the struggle for life we are getting ready for in the course of our stay underground; in wine cellars chiefly: not only Stephano and Trinculo – *trinquer* means to clink glasses – are allowed to drink to their heart's content. And in this domain Falstaff is not in a class of his own either.

The monkey symbolism of the Aztecs and Mayas was to some degree Apollonian. Those born under the sign of the monkey – monkeys were patrons of one of the calendar days – were adepts in the arts, singers, orators, writers and sculptors, or at least hardworking and gifted craftsmen, blacksmiths, porters and so on. But neither monkeys nor their descendants can be found in today's world where there are only bankers, politicians, sportsmen-women-children-foetuses and pop-culture representatives; or pop-corn ones. We are either on the second or third floor of Creation or somewhere near the very bottom of everything where no monkey, no donkey can be found, for all our or their efforts. We might also be nowhere, which is not excluded from what is called the 'round of things' or the 'roundabout of things' or even swings *tout court*, as the French say. (All short.) All right, we are nowhere and after soul-searching and a lot of it we might say it is probably better to be nowhere than where and any map would testify to the truth of our statement and sentiment. Where would it be better to be than be nowhere? (This sounds very Russian but I am Russian after all and no Russian can change their spots.) Anyway it is better to be a bee than a human – every bee adheres to the doctrine of

BE – even if that means you have to be as busy as Hell all the time instead of relaxing: even bankers and politicians relax from time to time.

Let us suppose we belong to the army of unnecessary beings and apparently our status has something to do with our decision to remain unnecessary or expandable: we fear life and consequently do not yearn for critical approval or Hegelian recognition. Nor do we long for higher planes and regards which await us at the top of the Tower of Babel, in the restaurant where God's emissaries offer you a wonderful panoramic view of the countryside. They draw the curtains and your glance takes in a hazel coppice, a willow coppice and you begin to wonder where you can find the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil that might enable you to go back to the wine cellar where you already spent a lot of time as a member of the unnecessary club. Of course you can drink port, wine and beer in the restaurant where you continue to avail yourself of the panoramic view, but you are not allowed to drink all these bottles to your *heart's content*. There lies the difference between Paradise and the limbo of the stateless person where you are allowed to drink to your stomach's content. Besides, on the gate that gives you admission to this limbo and its taverns, there hangs the following inscription: 'There will be games and prizes galore.'

O Charmian!

Where think'st thou he is now? Stands he, or sits he?

Or does he walk? or is he on his horse?

O happy horse to bear the weight of Antony!

Hero: *My heart is exceedingly heavy.*

Margaret: *'Twill be heavier soon, by the weight of a man.*

The problem of our weight or rather that related to our bodies is always on the agenda, even if this agenda no longer speaks of our earthly appointments and email addresses. Painfully and much against our wishes we realise that in the Hereafter our bodies lose a lot of weight, which has serious repercussions for our moods and mental equilibrium.

A good actress shows what Cleopatra feels and how she behaves upon thinking about Antony's body whose weight has not yet been subjected to the hardship of the journey to the Hereafter. At first you do not seem to lose much weight as they put you into a coffin and nail the lid on it as if to deprive you of the sun and the moon on purpose. Why can't your corpse enjoy the panorama of heaven and even that of the Earth, of the area where you have just happened to give up the ghost? Because they might surmise that the ghost you have just given up will see all the intricacies and beauties of heaven *face to face, twig to twig, fruit to fruit* and so on.

For some reason, they are convinced the apostles are right: we are endowed with a far better pair of eyes up above than down below. And they nail the lids on our coffins to make us forget about our earthly short-sightedness and overall stupidity, narrow-mindedness and lunacy. Falstaff might have inquired into the matter thus, ‘We’re called lunatics on Earth. Yet we see the moon much better in heaven. Why does no one call those saints lunatics?’

Anyway, even in Paradise or Hell Falstaff must own as much flesh as Orson Welles who plays his part in his own film. Of course neither of them has ever been neurotic about his weight; at least Falstaff was not in the habit of weighing himself three times a day and two times a night. There is a lot of interest in carrying out experiments in the weightless conditions which are experienced aboard space stations. And one of those experiments might feature either Orson Welles or Falstaff or both – in spite of the objections voiced by many scientists who think it is pointless to waste one’s time on foregone conclusions and results. They say to each other and also to journalists: ‘In any weightless condition Falstaff will weigh the same number of pounds.’

‘And what about his skeleton?’ ask other scientists.

‘Even his skeleton is bound to keep the same weight.’

‘And if Shylock removes a pound of flesh from Falstaff’s corpse?’

‘Even in this case Falstaff will stick to his guns or rather to his weight.’

But we are neither Falstaffs nor Orson Welleses: upon dying, we might lose some weight, as any cancer patient does. His friends shake their heads and weep most piteously, saying, ‘He looks like a skeleton. Skin and bone, skin and bone.’

‘Skeletons have no skins,’ some other friends point out, meaning one should not give up hope when looking at such a patient. Generally speaking, one should wait until the crucial moment when our patient gives up the ghost, giving the green light to lamentation such as, ‘Now we’re allowed to give up hope.’

‘But we’d better not give up the ghost. Don’t underestimate the power of words. If you utter a word, it’s likely to drag in all sorts of forms, associations and tropes.’

‘By the way, did you hear a crack?’

‘No. Did you?’

‘Is he really dead?’

‘Of course the breaking of so great a thing should make a crack.’

‘A *great* crack into the bargain. The round world should have shook lions into civil streets –’

‘Let’s look out of the window. Do you see any lions?’

‘No. Do you?’

Anyway, if you wish to lose weight, you have either to go on a healthy/balanced/varied diet or to die; or take the lift situated in the middle of the Tower of Babel whose top is known for its detailed knowledge of Paradise and its topography. Of course neither this top nor the lift know anything about the forbidden fruit and so if Satan puts this fruit in the lift, both will plummet down; and so will the

tower itself. That is what might have happened to it in days of yore when a great many languages were born along with Shakespeare, Dante, Falstaff and Virgil. But today the lift is available and no notice warns us it is out of order and therefore cannot be used either by saints or devils. So these categories of creatures go up and down, losing and putting weight in the process – in accordance with the laws of physics. They go up and grow thinner and thinner; at least they lose weight in their eagerness to become weightless. In their minds, sanctity and spiritual pleasures are associated with the state investigated by many cosmonauts and astronauts. In the Soviet Union, many women yearned to marry a cosmonaut and they often voiced their longings in public, whereupon a handsome young man would shout at the top of his voice, ‘Ukhty, akhty, we’re are all cosmonauts, all of us.’

Be that as it may, at some point we become weightless – up there, amidst the stars that, however, may use their gravitational pulls, if in a nasty mood. Cleopatra might solicit their assistance (or their moodiness, starriness) to make her Antony recover both his weight and sexual drive which he is sure to lose on account of St Augustine’s doctrine inspired by St Paul and his interpretation of Christ’s teaching. Of course the latter is not mistaken when he says he is carnal – in sharp contrast to the law that is spiritual, if I am not mistaken; if both St Augustine and St Paul are not mistaken. (Yet I have no idea whether to err is only human or also angelic, saintly and beatific.) And St Paul adds, ‘It is sown a natural body, it shall be raised a spiritual body,’ speaking of his body and politely disregarding all the unnatural bodies one is likely to come across if one take the trouble to walk up and down the same street for an hour or so. Surely Mark Antony’s body was quite unnatural in the light of what he (and it) did in the course of the second half of his life devoted mostly to debauchery, orgies and Cleopatra’s whims and warmth.

So St Paul also speaks about the harvest that results in the creation of what he calls the ‘spiritual body’ that is more akin to spirits than to the weight our Cleopatra enlarges upon as she recalls the nights she spent in Antony’s company. Actually one is not sure she really remembers Antony as such – his face and voice, for instance – for she seems to be infatuated only with his weight, not with his charm or the smoothness of his skin. So one cannot help wondering if any weight would have been enough to satisfy Cleopatra’s libido, her carnal longings. What if we just put a suitcase on such a woman’s body, on her breasts and nipples? A suitcase stuffed with pious books or lewd and bawdy pictures? After all, what counts is its weight, not its contents.

Cleopatra watches the contortions of Charmian’s body and says to herself: ‘Dead. Yes, she’s dead like a doornail. If she first meet the curled and cursed Antony, he’ll make demand of her, and spend that kiss which is my heaven to have. He used to kiss my servants all the time and I still wonder whether he slept with them or not. I should dispatch Cleopatra at once, which means I must kill myself on the spot, without further ado, without much ado about nothing.’

You are a spiritual body now and you realise with horror that your sinews are almost transparent and consequently you can see a cluster of galaxies if you look through your ribs, lungs and intestines. Suppose you are longing to kiss another spiritual body whose lips are as delicious as any meal

devoured by Antony in Cleopatra's presence. You walk or fly towards these lips and pass through them, for they are as spiritual as spirits or the witches one meets in *Macbeth*: 'The earth hath bubbles, as the water has, / And these are of them.' Your daughter is blowing bubbles in the garden and you find these bubbles so beautiful you decide to kiss one of them. Or let us take another example that lies closer to Cleopatra's and Antony's pastime, assuming they could enjoy champagne in Egypt; in the days of those merciless and senseless wars. 'The bubbles from the champagne went up my nose and made me sneeze,' says Antony as he plants yet another kiss on Cleopatra's lips. This kiss may go up his palate, down his throat and lungs, but it does not make him sneeze – such is the difference between lips and bubbles.

'The bodies of the saints,' writes St Augustine, 'shall rise again free from every defect, from every blemish, as from all corruption, weight, and impediment.' Cleopatra would not tolerate St Augustine's *Book of the Dead* in her Library of Alexandria for the simple reason that she needs Antony's weight and even his corruption without which she will never be happy again, as one of our songs has it. 'Hence,' St Augustine goes on, 'as far as regards the corruption which now weighs down the soul, and the vices which urge the flesh to lust against the spirit, it shall not then be flesh, but body; for there are bodies which are called celestial.' Cleopatra does not bother about definitions and she would not object to the label 'celestial', if she could feel Antony's weight not only in her bed, but also everywhere, even when he just takes her by the hand and leads her to the end of the world, as all male lovers are to do, provided they love their mistresses in earnest. Actually Cleopatra would forget about heaven, sanctity, St Augustine and his treatises, if she could stay on the surface of the Earth till doomsday, her head lying on one of Antony's shoulders. In this case, it is his body that would feel another body's weight, for weight as such counts a lot in the domain of love which pays homage to the law of gravity whenever it is given an opportunity to do so at ease. From this point of view, it is better to call bodies, kisses and other implements of love 'terrestrial', for the heavens are associated in our narrow-minded minds with weightlessness, transparency and anti-erotic (and anti-heroic) dances performed by our saints – sometimes in Dante's *Commedia*.

O Antony,

Antony, Antony! Help, Charmian, help, Iras, help:

Help, friends below, let's draw him hither.

In one of the films I saw, Cleopatra is lying on her proverbial, legendary and so on bed; and Antony is somewhere below – on the floor of the bedroom no doubt. Antony is dying, if one believes what he says to Cleopatra to whom he declares point-blank, 'I am dying, Egypt, dying.' Actually one has no alternative but to believe him, for he dies a few minutes later unless the staging is done by Robert Wilson. Suppose we attend the play in which Mark Antony is shown on the threshold of the Hereafter where someone – not necessarily St Peter – welcomes him. If questioned about this episode of his life,

Antony would not say, 'I scrabbled for a handhold and hoisted myself up,' because he did not: Charmian and Iras and probably someone else did the job and hoisted him up. In the film I saw they even said, 'Heave ho, heave ho,' – several times in a row, panting and covered in sweat. Anyway, the episode we are talking about emphasises the importance of being heavy – even on the threshold of the Hereafter; especially if the body in question is not far from Cleopatra's body.

Suppose you have a *celestial* body at your disposal – or rather to your indisposal, to put it mildly; at least Mark Antony might have put it thus on his deathbed or in other circumstances. What would you do with this body? Of course you might say to St Peter or his emissary, 'I must be a saint, otherwise I wouldn't be in Paradise, would I?'

'You would not,' says the emissary.

'Could I please swap my body for flesh? I wouldn't mind having anybody's flesh, provided it is a bulk of flesh I'll avail myself of and not a mere body.'

'What do you need this flesh for? Don't you know the saying, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak"?''

In Shakespeare's works, there are lots of dialogues which might have been written by scholastic philosophers chiefly known for their infatuation with the method defined as 'splitting hairs'. His characters often talk about words and notions, discarding the real world as if it was beneath their notice, which is partly true since Shakespeare's works and his inspiration are much more exciting than reality as such, whatever that means. One can picture to oneself a scene in which two gentlemen of Verona or Voronezh tackle the problem of the Tower of Babel reduced in their minds to the antonymous words 'ascent' and 'descent.' We should constantly look for new angles on the situations we come across as our bodies and souls *do* squeeze – as Shakespeare might have put it – through the crowd of days and nights; otherwise we may die of boredom. A lot can be said about the Tower we are talking about because we can and probably should accuse the builders of craving to rub shoulders with God. Suppose one of our colleagues or friends often has her picture in the papers and magazines, hobnobbing with the rich and famous. Upon looking at one of these pictures, we are likely to shake our heads or shrug our shoulders, while saying to each other, 'Next time she comes we'll give her the cold shoulder.' And what if we light upon a picture in the middle of which the same fair lady stands by the Almighty's side or cries on *His* shoulder? Of course we might say, 'The conceit of this woman is incredible!' but is that enough?

Anyway that was not our intention on the day when we resolved to build the Tower of Babel, for only astronomy and curiosity drove us to investigate the enigma of the sky. After all, we knew that Ptolemy's doctrine did not suit us on account of its inaccuracies: one wonders why we had to wait for Copernicus to put our poor Earth in a corner of the universe instead of letting it stand in the middle of it. Of course there was a Greek whose name was Aristarchus or something along these lines, if I remember rightly, but no one took him seriously, although he was absolutely right: it is the Earth that flies around the Sun and not the other way round.

Well, we were curious and science-thirsty to the point of getting as many bricks and bricklayers as we could lay our hands on. As for the latter, at first they refused to accept our proposition and we felt obliged to lay our hands and *chains* on them, otherwise the Tower would never have been built and destroyed: there would have been nothing to destroy. In those days, God was just an astral body or a planet we had to discover or discard forever so as not to encumber our brains with useless, not to say nonsensical notions. We never thought about our virtual encounter in terms of photographs printed in glossy magazines such as *Paris Match* on the pages of which you can see both stars and stardust. And most of the stars you admire and envy are nothing but dust you had better blow off the magazine you are holding so enthusiastically.

We were resolved to find out how many planets we had to deal with as long as we remained within the bounds of the solar system: we always wished to get away from it, plunging headlong into the sea of other galaxies. And of course we were concerned about our plane of regard which, according to our calculations and suppositions, had to be perched much higher to allow us to take in the whole of the Milky Way and even its suburbs. And our body did not lie far from our thoughts and preoccupations, for the body is as important as planes and minds, and therefore should be taken into consideration, whenever we intend to travel from one point to another, especially if the points in questions are situated on a vertical line.

Indeed at some point our body may refuse to breathe, which can and must happen somewhere, not far from the tops of our mountains. Anyway, our philosophers warned us against going to the moon because it was so full of American and even Russian tourists. They also said that only the dead were allowed to explore the higher regions of the sky and once again we heard the word ‘weight’ that we understand and accept wholeheartedly only in the context of the Antony-Cleopatra relationship. Of course this kind of relationship concerns all of us with the exception of eunuchs and impotent old men like Sophocles who speaks of his powerlessness in *The Republic*, if I am not mistaken. And one of the eunuchs touches upon the same matter in Shakespeare’s work where Cleopatra triggers off a wave of protests on his part by uttering the word ‘indeed’:

*Not in deed, madam, for I can do nothing
But what indeed is honest to be done:
Yet have I fierce affections, and think
What Venus did with Mars.*

Thus spoke John Falstaff *cavaliere*: ‘A good sherri-sack hath a twofold operation in it. It ascends me into the brain, dries me there all the foolish and dull and crudy vapours which environ it, makes it apprehensive, quick, forgetive, full of nimble, fiery, and delectable shapes, which delivered o’er to the voice, the tongue, which is the birth, becomes excellent wit. The second property of your excellent sherries is the warming of the blood, which before, cold and settled, left the liver white and pale,

which is the badge of pusillanimity and cowardice; but the sherries warms it, and makes it course from the inwards to the parts' extremes.' In this excerpt Falstaff treats our subject within the bounds of the body so that no stars get involved in the process thanks to which our minds and souls attain the purity traditionally associated with saints and the wise.

The Russians think that one should not speak about horizontal space: they are fed up with their steppes and forests, their Baikals, seas and so on, and consequently do their utmost to concentrate on their inner worlds which are far more important, according to a great many philosophers and gurus of all kinds. If you ask an inhabitant of Moscow, 'Have you ever been to Siberia?' he answers, 'Siberia is part of my body. Anyway, it doesn't count.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Our lives should be vertical; otherwise they're not lives but a number of deaths.'

'What about Siberia? Omsk, for instance?'

'I go up and don't care about trains, motorcars, motorcycles and my feet. I've got a pair of wings, you know.'

'Do you think your soul is separated from your mind?'

'It is.'

'Alain Turing kept wondering whether they didn't create the same unity.'

'In the West, you often speak about the Russian soul. You never say, "Here goes a Russian body."'

Falstaff, on the other hand, speaks of the extremes, meaning perhaps these extremes might go as far as Siberian forests; in other words, he touches upon – or touches in every sense of the term – the horizontality shun by Russian mystics; these are bent on verticality and its boons. What Falstaff says boils down to his willingness to go from one tavern to another – in spite of his corpulence, strange as it may appear. In one tavern he says, 'Give me plenty of sack,' and they comply with his wishes because they correspond to what the owners of these taverns are used to: everyone drinks like a fish and there are plenty more fish in the sea; or in the world, in other words. (After all, the world is the sea of trouble.) And then he enjoins them to give him another jug of sack and they say, 'You've already drunk three jugs of sack. Why don't you pay for them?'

'Because I don't want to.'

'But you have to, otherwise we won't give you another portion of sack.'

So Falstaff goes to another tavern and covers a few miles in the process. The world we live in is either a micro- or a macro-processor: either we go to another city or just take a bus that brings us to the suburbs of our own city such as Paris or London. There are only processes and processions in this world that we call ours, although it belongs to no one except God Whom we cannot know, according to some sceptics. In the meantime – or rather in the meanspace – Falstaff reaches yet another tavern and drinks two jugs of sack or Burgundy. He cannot fly off and even if there was a lift in the neighbourhood of his body, he would not take it because every Falstaff knows that, whatever a lift's

capacity, it is likely to plummet down as soon as any Falstaff puts his foot on its floor. Nor can Falstaff *walk* up, for it is much easier to walk *on* than *up*. After all, Newton's apples fall down instead of flying in the direction of Siberia.

Muslims make a major contribution to the problem we are engrossed in when they speak about the 'Night of nights' in the course of which the heavens descend upon Earth and also upon our souls to which they convey their destinies (our *souls'* destinies). Our destinies do not come from Siberia, whatever Russian jailers and Stalin say to us and our offspring; they are born up there and come down here in the dead of night to bestow the real or living life upon our bodies. Human beings look at the emails they get in the course of this night and say, 'My destiny is linked to heaven,' or 'My destiny stays on the Earth and gets a lot of money.' Other destinies talk about beautiful women and harems one might have within one's reach, even if this one – or any other one, for that matter – is not a sultan, Saladin.

And what about Time? We always face this problem and whenever a philosopher says from a rostrum, 'I've resolved everything,' another St Augustine might voice his disagreement because Time remains an enigma after many centuries devoted to the investigation of seconds and minutes, let alone centuries and millennia. The Tower of Babel is believed to be inclining towards Time to the detriment of Space which is often associated with useless territories where Russian rulers hold their sway for the sake of holding something, be it a sway or a few inches. We know what happened yesterday; our prophets put the future on their operating tables and dissect them to find out what lurks in the shadows, so to speak. They sit down, eat a few roots of some unknown plant and say, 'This is what happened last time.' Many people ask them what that time was like and they utter a few names such as Edward because in any time, be it behind or in front of anything, there are Edwards, Johns and even Cleopatra whose memory is so tantalising that many individuals give this name to their daughters and even their sons. (Cleopatrium.)

Whatever has any length or even existence can be likened to Time, and the Tower of Babel is a good example showing everyone what can be done in the domain of extension (or duration). You build this tower, saying to yourself, 'This is the time allotted to all human beings. The higher this edifice grows as a result of our efforts, the longer we'll trample on the flowerbeds one can spot in the residential areas of our planet.' But then a number of prophets barge in and contradict you as they remind everyone of the olden days that warned us against pursuing our conquests or any other matter; or even spirit, for any matter or body is coupled with spirit. They say, 'A dozen stars fell on our waters. As many planets fell on our planet and destroyed it.' That is how our history is written by prophets whose prophecies (do) always prophecy our doom because they do not know that with exports rising and unemployment falling, the merchants of gloom are having to revise their opinions of the economy.

The human body is another Tower of Babel and whenever this body dies, this tower of Babel – the one related to this particular body – collapses and we hear a choir where a lot of languages take

part and endeavour to disentangle their own meanings. The more they disentangle their meanings and words, the further their minds get entangled in controversies and the verses composed by a playwright who is working on the play entitled *The End of the Tower of Babel*. Yet another version of this proverbial end – everything is proverbial in our lives, given the number of proverbs we resort to every minute – can be found in *Henry V* where the story of Falstaff's death is told in great detail. 'I knew there was but one way; for his nose was as sharp as a pen, and a' babbled of green fields. "How now, Sir John?" quoth I: "what, man! be o' good cheer." So a' cried out "God, God, God!" three or four times: now I, to comfort him, bid him a' should not think of God, I hop'd there was no need to trouble himself with any such thoughts yet. So a' bade me lay more clothes on his feet: I put my hand into the bed and felt them, and they were as cold as any stone; then I felt to his knees, and so upward, and upward, and all was as cold as any stone.'

If I remember rightly, Socrates' end was almost identical to that of Falstaff, for all the disparity between their characters, lives and opinions. I think that Socrates' tongue remained in the vale of tears (or words) to the very end of the state-imposed suicide; at least the renowned guru continued to bombard his disciples with specimens of his wit and wisdom – despite the poison's fatal advance which might be described as follows (by Shakespeare's disciples): 'The fire advanced steadily through the forest of nerves and tendons, burning them mercilessly.' Sure enough, this Tower of Babel was burnt to the ground in *King Henry V* and what remains of it amounts to no more than a handful of ashes or rather a heap of words.

In our minds, Falstaff is more associated with Man than with God. And yet, upon the threshold of a new world – a brave world or a happy one? – he uttered the word God three or four times. Of course one cannot help wondering where he is at present: in Hell or in Paradise. To solve this problem, we are obliged to bring in both Pythagoreans and Cabbalists whose knowledge of numbers enables them to tip the scales either in favour of Falstaff or against him. The account of his death is given by the hostess of a tavern in Eastcheap, formerly Mistress Quickly; she is currently married to Pistol. Of course we could hold forth about the words or rather notions 'quickly' and 'pistol' – 'pistol-proof', 'quick / slow of the mark' – and we are not likely to disregard the word 'mark' either, taking all these words in our stride. But for once – or for always perhaps; for eternity – numbers are more important than words because Falstaff's destiny, being entrusted to the Kingdom of Eternity, must know whither it is flying, crawling or jumping. Well, this destiny's destination chiefly depends on the number of times our hostess heard the word 'God' as she bent over Falstaff's feet and other parts of his body. Three times? Four times? Theologians say, 'Hopefully he stopped before uttering the name of the Almighty once again. Number "three" is illumined by the Holy Trinity and it is pointless to go any further, as Shakespeare put it in *As You Like It*.'

'Number "four" is also crucial,' many Cabbalists point out. We cast a few glances at our computers and see the following schema:

0. *The Negative – the Infinite – the Circle, or the Point.*
1. *The Unity – the Positive – the Finite – the Line, derived from 0 by extension. The divine Being.*
2. *The Dryad – the Superficies, derived from 1 by reflection 1 / 1, or by revolution of the line around its end. The Demiurge. The divine Will.*
3. *The Triad, the Solid, derived from 1 and 2 by addition. Matter. The divine Intelligence.*
4. *The Quaternary, the solid existing in Time, matter as we know it. Derived from 2 by multiplication. The divine Repose.*

Of course you may argue that the importance of being ‘fourth’ is overvalued because it is just matter that is bound to be far inferior to any spirit, however lame and fragile. But Cabbalists are likely to remind you that number ‘four’ can be found in the Apocalypse where it is attached to the four animals and also to *five* colours, which is hardly astonishing since ‘God doeth all things in *number*, and *measure* and *weight*’. And whatever Shakespeare’s scholars might say on the subject, it is not time for us or anybody, be it Henry V or Bardolph, to drag in Falstaff whose body is not the only yardstick of number (cups of sac), measure and weight that are *enlarged* upon whenever someone feels like making some derogatory comment about Sir John’s appearance. Actually a recent staging of *Henry V* offers us a good opportunity to discuss once more the place of the human body in the cosmos where it takes pride of place to the exclusion of celestial bodies. Once the omnipresence of this body is agreed upon – alongside its omnipotence – we may come back down to Earth, saying to ourselves, ‘The realisation of how little work we had done for our earthly life brought us abruptly back down to Earth.’ Indeed, our everyday life must come first, even if such an operation is carried out to the detriment of Adam Kadmon or John Falstaff whose body is vast enough to include all the Milky Ways our astronauts are likely to light upon, provided some light is shed on these ways and milks.

Whatever our project and its magnitude, we need a stage – almost as much as Shakespeare did when writing down his revelations exclusively focused upon humans, not upon the gods or the Almighty. Even his fairies are human, judging from the experience that teaches to Falstaff the following truth: whatever we stumble upon during our pilgrim’s or swaggerer’s progress is human and even all-too-human. ‘And these are not fairies?’ he inquires. ‘I was three or four times in the thought they were not fairies; and yet the guiltiness of my mind, the sudden surprise of my powers, drove the grossness of the foppery into a received belief, in despite of the teeth of all rhyme and reason, that they were fairies.’ In his turn, Caliban mistakes a drunken butler, Stephano, for a brave god. Prospero is not a god either.

*...can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France? or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques*

*That did affright the air at Agincourt?
 O, pardon! since a crooked figure may
 Attest in little place a million;
 And let us, ciphers to this great accompt,
 On your imaginary forces work.*

As Meyerhold mused about the possibility of staging *Othello*, he singled out the handkerchief picked up by Emilia, which was to become a starting point of the whole plot, although not *every* shred of Iago's evidence revolves around the handkerchief. It is true that these shreds or threads revolve around Othello's body, creating a mummy-like figure that can neither move nor think, being half-smothered, half-dead. (Our tragedy features two strangulations instead of one.) A handkerchief lies in the middle of the stage for everyone to see and one might even liken this piece of evidence to God; at least Desdemona is duty bound to worship it. 'Make it a darling, like your precious eye, / To lose, or give 't away, were such perdition / As nothing else could match.' (Losing God amounts to the same perdition, whatever Othello says or thinks.) Iago comes onto the stage, bends over the handkerchief and sets about undoing it with a view to ensnaring Othello. He twists the thread around his little finger and then performs the same manoeuvre with the Moor's mind.

The Moor comes onto the stage. Desdemona picks up the handkerchief and hands it over to him. After a cursory examination, the Moor gives it to his wife as a token of his gratitude.

And what if we just put Falstaff on the stage? Suppose within the girdle of these walls / Is now confin'd John Falstaff's belly...

PART TWO

LOOKING LIKE TIME

THE CHIMES

I am old, I am old, I am old, I am old.

Dead, dead, dead, dead, dead, dead, dead.

You look somewhere, even if you are blind, but your eyes are open in expectation of a sign that might explain a lot to your brain. Even if you are as blind as a bat, your eyes are open and they might look like time and, according to some scientists or nonscientists, you do look like time when you cannot see anything, not even your fingers. Nonscientists maintain that time cannot see anything either: it just goes straight on and every stenographer knows that if they begin paying attention to the sense of words, they cannot work properly; and if they do not, they are dismissed from their jobs for nonsensitist. Actually they do not usually say our time sees everything and can therefore punish both culprits and the innocent because if no one is ever punished, crimes grow like mushrooms and vice versa. You go mushrooming and pick up a number of crimes that haunt and pursue you throughout your life to the point of not leaving you in peace even if you change your ways and turn a hundred pages somewhere, probably in the wrong book.

You might think about death in those moments of turning and twisting, even though it is easier to think about him and *memento* all the *mori* you can lay your hands on when you neither turn too many things nor twist a ring around your finger. Death, Macbeth. You are killed not only by your kinsmen or terrorists, but also by weirdness and any sister who seems to come to your rescue, saying, 'Batablan, Banata, Banana, Tototo, Sososo.' You believe in her Sososo as you repeat it now and then, trying to decipher its meaning, and you do succeed in your undertaking, saying to your wife, 'I'll be So. At least the Weird Sisters promised me the throne and a sauna.' Let us recall the dialogue devoted to betrayals; and usually crimes are not left in peace by punishments that do not always follow hard on the heels of the former: not every cuckold is so reckless and quick on the uptake as our Moor.

Desdemona asks Emilia if there are women whose lives are punctuated by such betrayals. The question is so naive one gets an irresistible urge to accuse Desdemona of nauseating hypocrisy: even Emilia is amazed at the hypocrisy of her mistress. Of course she answers, 'They're legion,' whereupon Desdemona asks her lady-in-waiting, 'Wouldst thou do such a thing for all the world?' Once again, Emilia answers, 'Of course.' Desdemona is surprised beyond all measure and also beyond belief. (Even Cassio would not believe her.) 'I'm sure you're not capable of such a sin,' she says. 'I think thou wouldst not,' she adds. Emilia answers thus: 'By my troth, I think I should, and undo 't when I had done it; marry, I would not do such a thing for a joint-ring; or for measures of lawn, nor for gowns, or petticoats, nor caps, nor any such exhibition; but, for the whole world? 'ud's pity, who would not make her husband a cuckold, to make him a monarch? I should venture purgatory for it.'

If Desdemona is a woman – and she is a woman until further notice – she must betray Othello; and even if she were a travesty, she might betray him because everybody betrays everyone, according to the analogy announced and confirmed by Hume who spoke of the sun and its appearance scheduled

for tomorrow morning. This morning comes and the sun is slightly above the horizon; and so Desdemona betrayed yet another Othello last night and many other nights, provided there are enough nights around her. And every night can offer us as many Othellos as we wish, if we are still alive and willing to accomplish a lot in a relatively short space of time. Freud killed our primordial father; and our mother into the bargain, according to some documents we know nothing about. So the Buddha killed his father and mother; so did I, and it is no use looking for documents, weapons or the hands that strangle everybody as soon as this everybody turns up somewhere. Everybody kills their parents, otherwise nobody would ever survive anything and anybody.

Do I look like a short space of time? Do I look at all? What are our looks, if any? Did Stalin look like the time? Like Time? Does *this* look like Time? May read.

PROSPERISM

You are not worried about inflation biting into your savings and investments. Yet you cannot say you do not lose anything – for the simple reason that even now you are losing every second, every thought; they will never come again, even if you beg them to come back and go so far as to kneel down to provide your request with a ritualistic gesture one may count upon, when addressing God or just an inferior deity. Or a woman one is in love with – to no avail because this woman loves someone else or loves no one in particular or in general, for she is incapable of loving anybody: she does not even love her dog. She keeps a dog because of the fear she feels whenever she thinks about thieves and rapists who harass and often murder the women they come across, even if they just stay at home, looking out of one of their windows. They therefore go nowhere; they just stay there, at home and survey the street where they live and where she lives – the woman they are about to rape and murder. She comes along and they jump out of the window, aiming at her shoulders because they know that if they land on her shoulders, she is sure to fall down, becoming their victim almost automatically. They have no intention of riding this home-made or rather street-made horse, this hobby-horse of sorts; all they have in mind is a rape and sometimes a murder. And then they rape the woman then and there, often in the midst of the crowd that pays no attention to the two bodies and their doings, for even crowds are reluctant to get involved in a crime, let alone individuals. If you call the police, they might note down your email address, your phone number, for this procedure usually enables them to ask you all sorts of questions such as, ‘What did you see?’ ‘When did you see it?’ ‘Was she really raped?’ ‘Was she unreally, surrealistically raped?’ If you answer, ‘Yes,’ they go on asking other questions and there is no end to their curiosity or duty to which they are bound, hand and foot; and head.

Anyway, one lives on an island from which there is no escape unless one has an opportunity to capture a ship and use this ship for what they usually call ‘homecoming’, although no one really comes back, not even the prodigal son who goes on yet another spree and capers around until he drops and forgets completely about his father and uncles and sisters. He may also die, if his destiny is death-oriented on that day, at that moment, and consequently thinks in terms of death and its train of thought instead of looking at the sun, ‘I’ll let him enjoy life for another three years. Life is so wonderful and I’m generous to a fault, as they do *not* say, ungrateful folk. I could have destroyed them a long time ago, all of them together with their children, past, present and future. A woman is pregnant, but I destroy both her pregnancy and child. That’s what I might have done many times, for years and years. I do that sometimes; not very often, though. I let them live because I live myself, for all their threats such as, “Death, you’re dead” or something along these lines. I like neither these lines nor the idea itself because that’s not true at all, in spite of their artificial organs, original cells, diets, hopes and religions. Anyway, if it weren’t for me, they would have no arts, no loves, no lives. How could one live eternally? No landmarks, no borders, just a no-man’s land. Death is your last home and in this case “homecoming” does not sound bizarre, as it does in other circumstances. There’s only one home and you may call it what you wish: “Old people’s home, young people’s home, animals’ home,

microbes' home." The proverbial father meets his son whose prodigality is renowned all over the world. The father is dead; the son finds himself on the threshold of death and the only ritual he can still carry out features his shoulders and his father's hands. A couple of devils hold his father's body erect as they manipulate his hands. They can put them up as a sign that just another dead surrenders to Satan and His power.'

They already have done that, paying homage to Hell and its king and master – upon the father's arrival. Nor can *he* ever leave it, according to Dante and his commentators. Even if a ship happens to move in the neighbourhood of the father's tomb, he will not be able to stop it, let alone sink it. In other words, he is not Prospero. But his son has come back and the father's hands are about to be put on the shoulders he cannot see, for not all the dead are endowed with the sense of sight. If the father had eyes and were able to see his son's face, he would realise it is covered with microbes, bugs and viruses. And he might come to the conclusion that his own body displays the same pitiful sight, which means that, though dead and buried, human bodies are still hospitable to the organisms they are unable to see with the naked eye. But the father has lost his brains completely: no thoughts, no trains reside, move and bifurcate within his skull.

Only prophets listen to death on a regular basis, whereas others show a clean pair of heels upon hearing the word 'death' or its derivatives such as 'hospitalisation', 'arrest', 'tumour'. Aristotle left Athens because he had no wish to share Socrates' fate, which would have placed a large burden on his accusers' consciences and even on those of the Greeks in general. The death of Socrates took so much room in everyone's conscience that one could hardly welcome or stomach any other trial of this kind, any other death of this scope. Anyway, it is better to live on a bare or desert island where you can say whatever you wish and even accuse all the gods of adultery and cruelty, adopting Homer's point of view. In addition to this undeniable gain, you can devote your time to the figments of your imagination; and let us not forget that on a desert island no one is likely to say to you that what you see and talk to is nothing but a figment of your imagination, your delirium, your private Alzheimer. You create a beautiful woman and call her Findita or Trouverita because you have found her in your imagination, be it clinically insane or sane to the point of providing you with a most enjoyable entertainment. You talk to your daughter day in day out, and she matures under your very eyes, and often overnight as if you did not have much patience with time and its pedantry. Why should one minute follow another? Why can't you skip a few years, playing hopscotch with time and Einstein? After all, you are a storyteller and keep skipping from one subject to another so it is difficult to follow what you are saying; or what you are thinking. You are on a desert island and no one can hear you, apart from your own creations, the figments of your mild and beneficial delirium. As long as it benefits your health, you let it follow its course; and it does, skipping and flying as far as the Moon or Pluto which has been in the news over several weeks.

Even if you are not on a desert island, you might have visions and revelations. And you speak to the dead without touching or turning anything; your table does not move, contrary to what you read in

ghost stories where you are supposed to turn something if you wish your late father pay you a visit in your terrestrial abode. Sometimes you turn whatever can be handled in this way, but no one and nothing appears except your disappointment and sadness. They come and say that all this is out of the question: you cannot communicate with the dead because they are dead and all you have around you amounts to three-dimensional reality, to the world deprived of miracles and everlasting joys. All of a sudden, your father comes out of the blue; and yet you have not turned anything except a hair. You talk to your father for a while, asking him all sorts of questions about the Hereafter and hearing a commonplace report, 'Sinners will not enjoy a week-long stay in luxury accommodations in the Garden of Eden.' You wonder if what you see has any affinities with dreams and nightmares, for our life is surrounded with dreams and suchlike, according to Shakespeare and his characters who impose their wills upon some other characters. That is why we enjoy *The Tempest*, among other creations of the playwright of genius, as they call him in schools and elsewhere: if Prospero were alone on the stage, we might get bored to death, in spite of the actor's magnificence and voice. Suppose John Gielgud is playing the part in our presence, but we can see neither his daughter, nor Ariel, nor Caliban. All this is a dream, a play, a fairy-tale – with the exception of Gielgud and his voice that speaks to us about the suspension of disbelief and then, almost imperceptibly, switches to belief and we are no longer asked to suspend anything.

This voice speaks about weird things and their inexplicable presence experienced by computers that break down for some obscure reason and their going down is accompanied by strange smells and noises; and complaints of constant headaches. And we begin to put aside our deep scepticism about life beyond the here and now. If that life were non-existent or just beyond their ken, we would not have these splitting headaches which spoil our sports and lives; and even our wives complain about our moroseness and unwillingness to take part in social life and its champagne-permeated pastime.

Some time passes; two or three minutes perhaps. And this time would be unbearable, but for a glass of champagne you empty as you bring it level with your mouth and open this mouth of yours to let the liquid penetrate your body. That is how humans struggle for life and vanquish their fears of deaths, which are numerous, given that death awaits them everywhere, not only beyond and behind a few corners they know by heart. They think, 'This is the corner beyond which death is bound to wait for me,' and they skirt around the city where the corner in question seems to wait for them; and where death must lurk, according to their musings and calculations. They are wrong because there are other corners; yet death is the same beyond every corner and everything, beyond whatever adorns your way to your deathbed or deathchair or deathstreet; let alone your deathsheet or shroud. Beyond, around.

You fear ghosts, although you have never seen one or two, which means you have only *felt* their presence at the end of a corridor or even at the beginning of it. You see a corridor and also a ghost who seems to bar your way without barring it: you can go through any ghost, unharmed and unhampered. Instead, you stop at the beginning of the corridor because you think this ghost is an angel holding a sword in his or her hand. Besides, this ghost (or host) of yours seems to brandish this sword as if to

make you realise you will not pass – *no passaram*, so to speak. Or *not passarram*, if you wish. Or *not passaramus*. So you stop and describe this experience as being a ‘bit creepy’. Perhaps it is ‘*awfully* creepy’ or ‘*creepy-crawly*’ or ‘*creepy-folly*’, otherwise you would have reached the end of the corridor in no time at all. And this episode says there are other worlds where the dead are alive and vice versa; and in these worlds or dimensions or the-morning-star zones you are dead and even buried, which comes as a surprise to you and your friends and relatives who might have thought you would keep them company till doomsday.

I am watching *The Tempest* arranged and completely distorted by Peter Greenaway whose intentions are clear enough, for many people have adapted Shakespeare’s plays for small or huge screens, for stages and parks of all kinds. Only one actor speaks in this film and his voice is often distorted beyond recognition. In a way, John Gielgud plays all the parts; at least his voice does, and in everyday life we are often guided by voices which may come from ghosts or just the dead we have not forgotten in spite of our memory’s proverbial fragility. As a matter of fact, it is our own voice we always hear and obey – or that of God – whatever it says or does; and one might say and maintain we have no choice, no alternative – nothing except this voice. But even if it is God whose voice you hear from time to time, you are bored to death and therefore wish to hear other voices coming either from the inside or from the outside. Of course all the voices you might hear and do hear come from the inside, for there is no such thing as the outside; yet sometimes you get the feeling something is beyond you or beside your body and mind. To survive to tell the tale, you have to find out what it is, and whenever you embark upon an investigation of this kind, you realise there is nothing but unreality, a series of un, un, un. You are tempted to provide a definition for these uns and come up with an idea made up of ghosts, which means there are only ghosts and their symphonies in your life. Both the dead and the quick are ghosts and you have to live with them, otherwise you will not live at all. And if you managed to live without them, somehow and somewhere, your life would amount to nothing substantial; not to a human life anyway.

John Gielgud or Prospero gives his emotions and imagination free rein as he looks around him and sees only the bare island on which there are no trees, no animals; and only a few blades of grass adorn the Earth, the bare and barren ground. He realises he must create this island out of nothing – or next to nothing – otherwise he is likely to starve to death. Or he will eat only the bare minimum that might enable him to stay alive. Of course he does not really miss our society populated by humans who fawn upon other humans and beings in the hope of getting higher on what is defined as ‘social ladder’. But he needs a few beings vaguely looking and acting like humans and therefore lights upon Ariel who spends his time either in the sky or on the surface of the Earth where he obeys John Gielgud’s commands in expectation of some long-awaited freedom. One never knows what freedom one has in mind when broaching this intricate subject that gets one nowhere, even if one manages to draw a few conclusions and make the same number of decisions. Suppose you are Ariel, which means you spend a lot of time in the midst of clouds and on the sun where you feel more at home than in the

woods populated by wolves and other unpleasant animals. You carry out a few orders and are given the freedom upon which both Ariel and Caliban enlarge in the course of the play – either in Gielgud's presence or in his absence: they often talk to themselves. You get the above-mentioned freedom and fly away as if flying and migrating to a warmer climate were the goals one must pursue to become happy at long last. But this happiness is as imaginary as the island on which both Gielgud and Prospero while away their eternity; anyway, contrary to any eternity, this happiness does not last. It is part of a train of thought, not of that of events, and no thought can last forever, being as fragile as whatever linked it to the mind. We think, therefore we are; and then we are no longer there or anywhere, and consequently there are no trains in our brains. The same goes for freedom which is as volatile as human tempers. Prospero, for one, often dwells upon the subject as he recalls his dukedom, Milan and the man who deprived him of both.

Whether you find yourself on a bare or a barren island, you face a huge quantity of solitude and a kind of void that can be filled by ghosts, among other things and beings. There are no churches on the island, and even if there were one, this church would remain empty because you do not seem to believe in God. And even if you did believe in Him and His Son, you would remain on the seashore, reading the Bible, saying your prayers to the wind employed by Christians and Muslims alike because of its reputed skill in dealing with heaven. The wind is an excellent go-between and therefore you had better wait for a windy day to say your prayers and ask God's forgiveness; otherwise your requests and complaints will be scattered to the four winds. You need one wind only and a true believer knows and feels when this particular wind comes and offers its services to virtuous sufferers. Anyway, you do not believe in God, not yet; but you do believe in ghosts who descend upon you at night or even in broad daylight so you can see them face to face: no fogs, no bogs, no obstacles of any kind. And if they do not, you might take lessons from the duke of Milan who flirts with ghosts on a regular basis, which is all the more logical and understandable since his daughter is in the habit of coaching people on how to reach out to spirits.

One does not know who first hit upon the idea of hobnobbing with ghosts and also with goblins, but today it is of no importance, given that both the duke and his daughter are utterly engrossed in what they are doing and also in the books that recite to them the history of ghosts – the history of humankind, in other words. God is out, but spirits and ghosts are filling the vacuum, as someone put it; and one should not forget that one confronts this vacuum not only on desert islands, but also at home, in the midst of one's guests. Small talks are fond of vacuums to such a point they create them prolifically, in no time at all. Your guests begin to talk and you feel the presence of a vacuum that you cannot ward off unless you resolve to throw them out, which means you prefer to deal with ghosts. It is true that, to some extent, all humans are ghosts, but there are better ghosts on the market, as they say, and you are addicted to the ghosts described in books, in ghost stories and histories.

The ghosts you are so fond of defy all physical laws and you smile whenever they accomplish this ritual: you cannot bear physical laws. They constantly get in the way, putting spokes in your wheels, even if you have no wheels in your house or even in your tool shed. But ghosts come across wheels everywhere and they do not mind using ghost wheels because their stratagems always work despite the fact that their spokes are also ghost-like: invisible, intangible. But you are fond of both their spokes and wheels; at least you prefer them to human wheels – the ones you see in the streets where cars, bicycles and motorcycles make your life hell. Of course, from time to time, Caliban makes a nuisance of himself, but you are supposed to control his actions, if not his words. Actually you do not really care about his words, and he takes advantage of your negligence, cursing you day in day out – in the presence of foreign ghosts. You do not mind as long as you are able to control and manipulate him. After all, he is just a machine and in that respect does not differ from any human, with the exception of Orson Wells, among other artists. Actually, in my opinion, both Shakespeare and Prospero made a mistake when they decided to teach Caliban language. Of course Shakespeare was eager to make him talk – for the sake of the play which one can hardly call a ‘pantomime’ or a ‘dumb show’. But Prospero might have proceeded otherwise: it is unpleasant to hear curses, even if they do not divert your attention from books and their precepts.

*You taught me language; and my profit on't
Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
For learning me your language!*

Generally speaking, languages should neither be taught nor learnt and if you happen to be born, which happens rather often, according to statistics, you should shun languages in every shape or form. Every word and even letters have forms, and forms and shapes beguile us into believing they have contents, whereas they have none, none whatsoever. There is such a thing as a shape and we call this shape a letter; and we do not have to worry our pretty little heads, if we pigheadedly remain at this stage of evolution, rooted to the spot, as it were. But if we venture any further, as Cabbalists do, a world comes into being and we get involved in all sorts of combinations and ambiguities. If the world does not leave its own womb and sees no light of day, we may die peacefully in our beds. We may even *live* in our beds, doing nothing or next to nothing.

But the world is in front of us and we may regard this object or thing in itself as an affront to our dignity. Indeed there is nothing more dignified than lying in a coffin, for any movement is like a letter: you are projected into the world and get entangled in it. (Or dumped on it; imprisoned in it.) And the world is swarming with Calibans because nothing can stop *them* from multiplying and haunting our imagination and its figments, filaments. Of course Shakespeare did all he could to guard against this multiplication table, judging from what his Caliban says to this effect in one of his monologues:

*O ho, O ho! would't had been done!
 Thou didst prevent me; I had peopled else
 This isle with Calibans.*

Shakespeare, Prospero and Gielgud did not allow Caliban to violate Prospero's daughter, but they are all dead now and we realise there are many Calibans around us; and they do not need Prospero's daughter to replenish the Earth. Prospero and his colleagues reflected upon how the world might prosper and they eventually found the answer by a process of elimination: they eliminated Calibans and Caliban himself. But their successors – we can hardly call them 'successors' – did just the opposite: they thought they had found the answer by a process of multiplication. And they multiplied neither Prospero nor Shakespeare, for only Calibans saunter around the world and even in our midst – a brave new world, as Miranda put it as she looked at a group of human beings. What is freedom? What is bravery? If you have words in your head and even in front of you, you must answer their questions, at the risk of suffering the consequences. A multitude of Calibans: this is the only answer to the problem related to freedom and its ramifications or synonyms such as liberty, chaos, free verse, a brave new world; or just a new world. And what about bravery? He or she was mugged in broad daylight.

Well, you cannot be mugged either in broad daylight or anywhere else within what they call space-time: you are on a desert island, on a barren island. (Virtually you can be mugged anywhere as long as you have a computer.) Actually you have no idea where you are because it is one of the questions you encounter as you peruse a lot of books and newspapers that speak to you and tell you nothing. They are also supposed to shed light on your identity, but you are *not* what you are, according to Iago; and you know what you know. And you know there is a legion of Calibans in your midst and within any mist you come across as you go towards your goal, as Aristotle might have put it. But you make your way, going or flying or floating in some direction or other and, as you look at landscapes and cityscapes, you realise you are on a desert island except that there are skyscrapers instead of trees and at this point you do not know what you prefer in this world and how one is supposed to behave in it. All is one and one is all, and you are weary of these Chinese or homespun truths because it is not true, in the first place: if you see a skyscraper, you should not say to yourself it is a eucalyptus. Of course your mind contains the whole world, although it may remain a possibility as long as you do not wish to think about anything, however attractive, appealing and pleasurable.

In this mind of yours there is a kind of energy which may or may not push you into action; and the action you might consider as you lie dying or sleeping in your bed, must take place *somewhere else*, for Aristotle calls it 'movement'. Anyway, activity and movement are somehow associated in his philosophy, and peripatetics picked this notion up where their teacher had left it off. But if you leave your bed and go somewhere, walking past your bathroom and garden, which means you are determined to venture into the streets and probably out of the city where you have lived and suffered

for some time – and you are reluctant either to count this time or to recall it – you are sure to find yourself on a series of waves, at least according to Shakespeare whose last pieces talk to you mainly about disasters and miraculous escapes. First you embark at Liverpool for New York and then you witness a tempest about which you are likely to say you have never seen anything like that in your life. And you add that the waves you saw and felt and touched unwittingly scratched the sky far more successfully than any skyscraper, past, present or future. And you affirm you can see a number of scratches on the sky and even on the clouds that continue to move and alter their shapes so as not to disappoint both Hamlet and Polonius.

Amazingly, Shakespeare's heroes and heroines survive all these tempests and shipwrecks without a scratch as if less vulnerable, more protected than heaven. What is more, at the end of his life, Shakespeare was bent on raising from the dead all those who were about to drown forever, once and for all. Actually, there is no such thing as 'once and for all' in his last works; in the long run, we are likely to conclude that all those corpses are not really dead and may come back to life at any moment, provided Shakespeare supplies theatre-goers with a physician who, upon seeing the corpse of a queen, speaks thus:

*Make a fire within;
Fetch hither all my boxes in my closet.
Death may usurp on nature many hours,
And yet the fire of life kindle again
The o'erpress'd spirits. I heard of an Egyptian
That had nine hours lien dead,
Who was by good appliance recovered.*

Oddly enough, all this doctors or sorcerers resort to music that is part of what they optimistically call 'good appliance', alongside laser rays and so on. 'The still and woeful music that we have.' One might think of Purcell whose music is often both still and woeful, which suits the ingredients we are dealing with: a corpse, a good appliance, another resurrection. By the way, this resurrection is under way. However, the queen does not speak yet; nor does she look around her with amazement, her eyes glittering and almost shining. One might compare them to a diamond necklace conscientiously put under the spotlights in some gallery or other; or in some coffin, as it comes to pass in *Pericles*. ('I op'd the coffin, / Found there rich jewels –') Not yet, not yet: increasing the number of queens in the world is a slow process. That is why a woeful piece of music is recommended for such operations during which a surgeon does not put a multitude of artificial organs into the body of a deceased: he resorts to music instead. Play on, play on.

If you believe this fairy-tale rigmarole, you may become a happy-go-lucky person taking no notice of dangers that, most of the time, lie ahead of you; and even the ones which seem to crouch *behind* your body and mind are likely to return (eternal recurrence) and pester you again for quite a while or once and for all. (And in this case no music will ever save us from the Hereafter.) So, whenever you are between the devil and the deep black sea, you should on no account recall either *Pericles* or *The Tempest*, for fate is not as kind as Prospero; and it is not fond of music. In other words, you had better not regard the deep red sea as a sequel to the time you spend on a beach under the sunbeams that do their best to change your skin's tints and colours without covering it with sunburns.

All right: let us assume that the beach on which you are lying is a prelude to a sea-fugue, but even if you are aware of this metaphor, you will be lulled into a false sense of security by music, by Bach's preludes and fugues that may resound in your mind as an involuntary response to the words 'prelude' and 'fugue'. After a while, you get up and go towards the sea – I think Robert Frost speaks of this phenomenon – without putting an end to the concert you listen to as your memory continues to reproduce its Bach-oriented treasures. And then you drown because music can both save and destroy you, as many musicologists affirm, quoting doctors, sheep breeders and so on. Apparently sheep cannot bear twelve-tone music and may die even in the middle of such a concert; in the middle of a field. Upon hearing such music, they bleat and baa at first so you might think they enjoy both Schoenberg and Webern. After a while, however, the sheep begin to stumble and fall as if Morpheus had bid them good morning with open arms. We are reminded of Romeo and Juliet – the other way round, as it were: Romeo believes that Juliet is dead and drinks the poison he has found somewhere. Or is it a dagger he uses? After reading Shakespeare for a week or two, one might confuse not only sleep with death, but also daggers with poisons, men with women. And it is easy to confuse his plays because he tends to enlarge upon the same Grand Narratives: betrayal, resurrection, madness, music.

Well, one should not trust the deep blue sea, even if there are a few doctors around and an appropriate piece of music resounds everywhere – just in case, as they point out. And what about the devil? He is certainly a figment of Prospero's imagination that walks around on four legs – as Caliban does. ('Have we devils here? I have not scap'd drowning, to be afeard now of your four legs –') And he is supposed to melt into thin air at the end of the play. Alas, there is a world elsewhere – beyond the play; and also beyond a tempest, one tempest. There are a few more tempests in store for you. (*Pericles*.) One might say you go from one tempest to another, separated by a day or two you spend on a rocky beach, naked and ravenous; no sunbathing, this time. One wonders if one might not compare every disaster to a tempest as one comes across the following sentence in Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*: 'Like a tempest, death carried away your bridegroom.' Why not? You go bankrupt after investing an enormous amount on a product that failed to sell. 'Like a tempest, this failure carried away all my money.' And then you hear an actor say, 'Without the help of a generous investor, my theatre company would have gone bankrupt. Instead, we're putting on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.'

You may probably devote your whole life to Shakespeare and one might think it is better than devoting your life to yourself – or to Joyce, for that matter – because you are far inferior to Shakespeare. Of course your own life reflects your character and other aspects of your personality more realistically than a play in which Prospero chides Caliban and even Ariel who keeps on talking about freedom as if he knew what it is all about. Freedom is not limited to walking or flying about, around, up and down because even birds are social animals and therefore have to *behave* in the presence of other birds or animals in general. And you have no idea where you can fly except that you should neither get too close to the sun – you scorch your skin and brain if you do – nor are you advised to fall in love with the Earth to the point of yearning to fall on it once and for all; to fall under it, trying to reach its core, like Jules Verne’s characters. In other words, your journey is not supposed to lead you into fear; nor is it allowed to put you into the prison of death. At any cost should you avoid Icarus’ fate which enabled him to measure the distance between the sun and the Earth in the space of a few seconds, according to our mythologies. Such space and speed amount to the same phenomenon called ‘death’ both in scientific books and in common parlance. Sure enough, Icarus melted into thin air, to use Prospero’s favourite expression, and no doctor, no music will ever attempt to bring him back to life as if any queen created by Shakespeare were more important than the emblematic figures of Greek mythology. (Not *any* queen: not Lady Macbeth, not Cleopatra.)

There are people who think nothing of death and its rituals: of spending eternity in a coffin, among other things; or being eaten by worms, day and night. They say they are used to death on account of the time they spend in the kingdom of Morpheus; and they quote a few poems where death is favourably compared with sleep. ‘At least you don’t need sleeping pills.’ (Anyway, such pills work only on condition that you take them once in a while, not every day.) Besides, death does not pester you to take part in a number of nightmares you actively witness almost every night – even if you drink a bottle of vodka, hoping to find a stretch of deep sleep in it.

You may speak to them (to those optimists) about the torture our Ariel endured before the arrival of Prospero whose art and mind are always attuned to human and animal suffering. You quote *The Tempest* – not to be outdone by the poems they bombard you with to illustrate their point:

...*she did confine thee,*
By help of her more potent ministers,
And in her most unmitigable rage,
Into a cloven pine; within which rift
Imprison’d thou didst painfully remain
A dozen years

‘Such an imprisonment is a foretaste of death,’ you point out after the performance.

‘Do you mean to say your Ariel was cramped for space?’

‘Of course.’

‘Are you drawing a parallel between this rift in the pine and an ordinary coffin?’

‘That’s right.’

‘But in the kingdom of death you suffer neither from narrow spaces nor lack of food. Nor do the worms lack it, provided there are enough corpses within their reach. No one and nothing starve to death in the Hereafter.’

‘And what about Hell and its inhabitants? What about Midas, for instance?’

One of the chief problems we constantly encounter in Shakespeare’s works and even in everyday life concerns the state of people we are dealing with either on a regular basis or haphazardly, once in a blue moon. Are they alive or not? Sometimes we regard them as living creatures; then we draw the opposite conclusion as we continue to look at them and observe their movements or their absence. If they stand in a shop window, we may jump to a conclusion they are mannequins, but even mannequins have to put on new clothes to attract more people to the windows where they are exposed. So a real woman comes and strips their old clothes off; for a few minutes, they appear in front of our naked eyes in their primeval state – as their mothers delivered them, according to the Russians. You contemplate their nakedness and say, ‘These toys are made from tough plastic.’ But the woman whose duty is related to the clothes shamelessly exhibited in the window is alive, whatever we might think about her mechanical, tedious job. Of course all human beings are supposed to be active and this woman’s activity directs her towards the dummies that are quite helpless without her hands and skill, if any. Well, she is not a lady-in-waiting and so does not undress a queen or a duchess, which is a far more elegant activity, judging from what we read about the courts of Renaissance Europe, for instance; among many other courts and renaissances. But this woman’s lot has nothing in common with those courts and queens, although some democrat might affirm all royalties are dummies, especially in our times when they just cut ribbons and take no part in their countries’ epoch-making affairs. Yet you cannot say those queens and kings are dead, for their ladies-in-waiting undress or dress them in the morning, in the evening and even in the afternoon – before a ride in the nearby woods.

Sometimes we are far from shops and their windows, and so the people we come across as we walk up and down the streets of Paris do not belong in the kingdom of Hades; otherwise they would not walk so gaily, brandishing their fists and shouting a few slogans. But suppose we disagree with their slogans and their barbarous behaviour, and this disagreement or our opposition to what they think and do may lead us to the following conclusion, ‘Communism is a thing of the past and these people don’t seem to be aware of it.’ Often, upon seeing a crowd outside our windows, we recall either communism or trade unions which are not a thing of the past, not yet. Anyway, a partisan of free enterprise may think all these people are dead, although they do not seem to be buried. But there is such a thing as death without burial and our memory immediately shows us a battlefield adorned with corpses of all kinds.

Sometimes, when determined to be less categorical, we say about our opponents or a group of stupid jerks, 'They're neither dead nor alive. They're not a bunch of living-dead either.' So what *are* they? If you try to argue they are alive and *not* alive at the same time, within the same space, you are not talking about a kind of magical wonderworld somewhat akin to what you see in *The Tempest*. According to Aristotle, you are not saying anything at all as if half-dead already; or half-alive. (The sounds you make are meaningless.) At least your mouth and lungs seem to be paralysed. They are *not* because you are *making* meaningless sounds. And even if your mouth is paralysed, you are still able to produce a few sounds, provided your lungs are strong enough to push a portion of the inner air towards the outside air, as it were. So your friends and relatives hear a series of moans and conclude you are hurt or even dying, which is never out of the question, judging from our statistics. Well, you cannot say, 'She's alive and dead'; and yet you are allowed to maintain she belongs in the country of the living-dead or dead-living, which amounts to the same country. According to Aristotle, this is just another piece of sheer nonsense and so we go back to our dilemma, to one creature that is either dead or alive. At least one of these creatures is true (the Principle of Excluded Middle), and it is up to you or us or Shakespeare's characters to decide who is who and who is not.

We are used to Schrödinger's test during which a cat constantly shuttles between life and death. Of course one might affirm that, from this point of view, humans are not far removed from cats and even from Schrödinger and his skill: they also shuttle between life and death, between a heart attack and a winter holiday in Courchevel. Or between exaltations and despairs, suicidal moods and restoration ones. (Or resurrection ones.) That is why rather often we can make up our minds as we look at a human creature standing before us either naked or fully dressed. We wait for him or her or it to utter a few words because we think we can distinguish between a feline language and English, Russian and so on. But humans imitate and even ape (other) animals all the time – not only in their nuptial beds or during all-in-all wrestling. Some women think they are likely to be adulated, provided they behave and sound like cats or rather kittens: a number of men adore cat-women or even tigresses, panthers.

Shakespeare does not go so far, for his dead queens cannot be mistaken for panthers, even if they behave like ones. Actually they are rather meek; and if they do look and sound like tigresses, they go mad and die as they throw themselves from a cliff or an imaginary Tower of Babel. The Virgin-Mary-like queens are traditionally mal-treated either by their husbands or tempests, and both the former and the latter repent in the long run. The poor queens have no alternative but to come back to life for the sake of their children and also their husbands whom they forgive with all their hearts. Before forgiving and forgetting, however, such a queen makes the culprit endure an unusual life-or-death torture: she does her best to pass herself off as a statue. Vasari talks a lot about such statues and paintings, pointing out that one might have taken them for creatures of flesh and blood and thoughts and feelings and what not. No one will ever take a Giacometti statue for a living creature and so we

come to another hasty conclusion: contemporary art deals chiefly with the dead and produces death on a regular basis. And what about hyperrealism?

*O, thus she stood,
Even with such life of majesty, warm life,
As now it coldly stands, when first I woo'd her!
I am asham'd: does not the stone rebuke me
For being more stone than it?*

Leontes contemplates the statue exhibited for his sake by one Paulina – in compensation for his long-drawn feat of repentance. Both the statue and the monarch keep shuttling between a stone and a flesh – to such an extent that the monarch admits he is more stone-like than any statue one can come across in the Louvre and elsewhere. ‘I’m more statue than any statue,’ he might have said while looking at his arguably dead queen who, according to his train of thought, is not chiding him for his abortive crime. And what about the test itself? What about his mind and its turmoil? The stone does rebuke him for being cruel, suspicious, jealous, unreliable, blasphemous, and so on and so forth.

*No longer shall you gaze on't, lest your fancy
May think anon it moves.*

Leontes does think it and she or Hermione moves:

*Would I were dead, but that methinks already –
What was he that did make it? – See, my lord,
Would you not deem it breath'd? and that those veins
Did verily bear blood?*

You are often asked, ‘How long can you hold your breath under water?’ This question pertains to the situation we endeavour to analyse in terms of life and death, stones and human bodies. How long did Hermione hold her breath? Did she hold it at all? Did she breathe during the whole session? Anyway, she could not prevent her veins from bearing a great deal of blood from one vessel to another. From her heart to her half-paralysed husband’s heart and soul.

At this point the Principle of Excluded Middle comes to the fore and the king makes up his mind: he should embrace and kiss Hermione because she is dead alive.

Of course you can just sit there or anywhere and twiddle your thumbs to your heart's content, knowing that, whenever in this mood, your heart is not likely to stop by itself. So you go on twiddling your thumbs, for you are resolved to do nothing and firmly believe you have done everything, and what remains amounts to very little indeed: you do not even have to count the number of times you twiddle one thumb and the other. One might say they twiddle by themselves while you gaze at the moon or rather at the sky: you cannot see the moon round the clock and you need to gaze at something absentmindedly, otherwise you may attach too much importance to one thought or another, going to the length of probing *deep* into this thought, not just *peeping* into it. As a result, you often embark upon another adventure, either spiritual or utilitarian, and you suffer in the process because any adventure, be it shallow or metaphysical, requires a lot of thoughts, actions and the energy one invariably attributes to our glamorous, death-darkened will. In other words, the taste of death, its unavoidable ghost, begins to haunt you once again as if you could not live happily on your desert island where no social animals will ever keep you company unless you create them out of nothing. But up to now you have not yet succumbed to this temptation; nor have you got rid of it and so it is still within your body and mind, tickling your fancy and sinews which, however, can live without either temptations or adventures or foretastes of any kind. That is why you twiddle your thumbs, doing your best to keep away from thoughts and modes of thinking that always lead you astray – either towards death or eternal recurrence or some mock paradise.

On the other hand, you are aware you cannot live on a barren island for many years on your own, for time is linked not only to space, but also to society, shows and gourmet food, if not to gourmet restaurants. All you actually need comes down to such a restaurant where no other gourmets will ever partake of any meal whatsoever, being barred from this enjoyment by your longing for solitude and your aversion to betrayals. But there is no denying your thumbs continue to twiddle and eventually you realise it is an action that speaks louder than both words and thoughts. You are active and your energy flows into the world where it turns into objects and subjects among whom there are Calibans, Ariels and many other servants of yours; and the longer you twiddle them (your thumbs, Calibans and Ariels) the more servants will come to your rescue and become your playthings, playbeings. The world might have been created *en passant*, if only in the domain of languages such as English and French, which does not seem illogical, given that letters, lines and especially what lies between them did take part in the creation of the universe. You do not even have to *write* between these lines as if they were filling in all intermediate spaces on their own, anxious to broaden the scope of Creation for the sake of poets, problems, prophets and so on.

Actually, twiddling one's thumbs is the first exercise you are taught by shamans and run-of-the-mill magicians who may ask you to draw a rabbit out of a hat. But you should not forget you are still on a desert island and so do not even have a hat one may buy in many shops, on condition that there are shops nearby or in the suburbs of the city where you live either happily or unhappily. The point is you do not live in any town, not even in a one-horse one so you first have to create a hat out of which,

on a later occasion, you may produce a rabbit or a cat or a horse: you are not supposed to stick to *every* rule of this magic ritual. At this point you begin to regret your neglectful will that did not prompt you to put a hat in your suitcase: you do have a top hat in one of your bedroom closets. Well, you have no alternative but to twiddle your thumbs a little longer, for your tutor says you should not *concentrate* or *meditate* upon either the hat or the rabbit you might use for your experiment. ‘You just twiddle your thumbs,’ he says, a wry smile adorning his face from hair to chin.

‘Don’t I have to eliminate my thoughts?’

‘You’re not a yogi, are you?’

‘How fast should I twiddle them?’

‘Any speed will do. What counts is the process itself.’

‘Is there no right way of doing it?’

‘The right way is the process itself. And your thumbs.’

There are other methods of course; or rather other schools that mostly rely on mandalas and mantras, on ‘krim-kram-krim-krim-krim-kram-gram’ and other pieces of nonsense or nursery rhymes. And some gurus talk to you about Plato and Aristotle, saying you should study them with a view to understanding how all this works: creation, decreation, construction and reconstruction. And when you ask them to expose the doctrines in question – after all, it is not for nothing that you pay all these people – they speak to you of how one should look at the world: from what angle, in what mood, at which hour and minute. They might point out that Plato only *looked* at the world, instead of moulding it into another, not necessarily a better world: one should not confuse Plato with Marx. In other words, Plato did not so much as touch the world, for the simple reason that he never joined the club whose members are called ‘touchy-feely’; nor was he in the habit of putting his hand on Aristotle’s arm, whenever he deigned to talk to him. And yet Aristotle often put his hand on Plato’s arms and shoulders – even if he had nothing to say either to him or any other representative of the Academia.

At some point you realise that, if you wish to survive on your island, you cannot remain a Platonist to the core, reducing your participation in the games of the world to a mere ‘distant glance’. You can also refer to it as ‘contemplation’ or ‘daydreaming’ or ‘having your head in the clouds’, which does not mean you are closer to heaven than those who spend their time and space studying other people’s shoes. And you will never enjoy the sight of the Milky Way – let alone that of comets and other fugitives for which our heaven is justly renowned – should your head remain in the clouds for the rest of your life. In this case, you will see nothing but the clouds, their colours, shapes and forms; nor will you talk about anything else, for our speech and Shakespearian monologues heavily rely on our perception of reality.

Like any self-respecting magician, Prospero talks about whatever can be found under the sun: castles, cattle, humans, tempests, books, old cramps, bones. It is true that even in the clouds you might occasionally see a few things listed above such as castles, pilots, their passengers and probably even their bones, provided you are equipped with a telescope and an X-ray apparatus. But one wonders why

you need to see these bones, and on this occasion one is absolutely right: the Milky Way and comets are much more thrilling. Let us not forget that Prospero shows a utilitarian bias when talking about bones:

*If thou neglect'st, or dost unwillingly
What I command, I'll rack thee with old cramps,
Fill all thy bones with aches, make thee roar,
That beasts shall tremble at thy din.*

Prospero thus speaks to Caliban whom he might have created out of nothing, had he not found him ready-made inside a rock ('deservedly confin'd into this rock'). But for the moment you see no bones and so cannot fill them either with aches or any other substance designed for culprits, wrongdoers and Caliban-like creatures. Within your reach there are no beasts, no rocks, no whisky on the rocks – nothing at all, in other words. So you twiddle your thumbs in expectation of a miracle, of a tempest the fury of which might enable you to meet a few fellow creatures you will put in your books for no purpose at all, given that books serve no purpose and are destined to drown at the end of the road or at the end of your tether. Are you sure you have reached neither of these ends? Aren't you already enjoying their Socrates-eulogized spiritual harmony?

But on the brink of a cosmic collapse you decide to write another book as if your library had in any way been inferior to that of Alexandria. What could you have added to the latter? Your new book about which both ancient and future scholars know nothing; nor do they wish to get acquainted with it, convinced as they are that no books of fiction are any longer needed on Earth and other planets of the solar system. 'There are too many books of this kind already,' they point out to intimate they will never be able to read them from beginning to end and from end to beginning, for you need to read any serious book from one end to another, from its upper part to the bottom, otherwise you are not likely to probe deep into its mystery.

Well, you remember that all living things are, in a greater or lesser degree, aware of God, which means you are also aware of Him, otherwise you would be neither living nor a thing. Only God consists of form without matter, which leads you to the following conclusion: 'Whatever I create should have a modicum of matter in it so as not to vanish into thin air too soon, before I could say Jack Robinson. And I have to utter many other names: Prospero, Ariel, Miranda, Alonso, Sebastian, Antonio, Ferdinand, Trinculo, Stephano, Juno, Ceres, Iris.'

There is a great deal of matter around you, but this matter is not as diverse as whatever we come across in other parts of the Earth where there are parks and corners, humans and dogs, trees and forbidden fruit. You are a realist by nature and so do your best to follow the itinerary of your perception that, being confined to this bare island, speaks only about sand and rocks. 'Rocks, rocks, rocks, rocks, water, water, water, water, water,' it says as it stares at two rocks sticking out of water on

the surface of which there are no ships, no yachts, no swimmers of any kind. As you get up and begin to walk along the beach your perception says in a husky voice, 'A crab scuttled away under a rock as we passed.' Your book is already underway, evolving towards a greater degree of form, becoming progressively more like God; so are you, by the way.

But for this activity of yours, you would be neither a thing nor living, and even if you *are* at the end of your tether, you must do all you can to stretch this tether across the horizon. The whole world has been stored inside you from time immemorial and you need to look at this world from the outside, otherwise it may remain what it is: a bulk of dead matter, a lump of base metal, a long tube through which food travels from the stomach and out of the body. And then you come back; a prodigal son greets himself as he crosses the threshold of his castle, for he is his own father and mother; his own brother.

*I, thus neglecting worldly ends, all dedicated
To closeness and the bettering of my mind
With that which, but by being so retir'd,
O'er-priz'd all popular rate, in my false brother awak'd an evil nature; and my trust,
Like a good parent, did beget of him a falsehood in its contrary, as great
As my trust was; which had indeed no limit.*

You are your own brother and consequently betray yourself once in a while as you shuttle between the world and the solitude you love and hate, praise and endeavour to extirpate from your existence. You read and write books, study the liberal Arts and neglect all aspects of social life one badly needs to evolve to a greater degree of form. Some monkeys have a very complex social hierarchy; so do humans who get promotions and medals, nominations and dollars. For a while, you become a go-getter but you get nothing or next to nothing, wherever you direct your steps and however fast you walk, run, ride and fly. Anyway, whatever you do, you betray yourself or rather a part of yourself; and you have no idea which part you betray as you shuttle between society and your writing desk, Russian balls and semi-colons. And even a storm (or a tempest) in a teacup can put an end to your wretched existence.

*The direful spectacle of the wrack, which touch'd
The very virtue of compassion in thee,
I have with such provision in mine Art
So safely ordered, that there is no soul –
No, not so much perdition as an hair
Betid to any creature in the vessel
Which thou heard'st cry, which thou saw'st sink.*

You are Prospero and Miranda, Ariel and Caliban, Dante and Shakespeare – not because you *read* them, mind you; whatever Borges' views on the matter. You *write* them.

THE AFTERWORD

Jean-Claude Juncker, president of the European Commission, said a solution was urgently needed or thousands of refugees facing winter temperatures on the hillsides and freezing river banks of Eastern Europe would die. 'Every day counts,' he said.

The Telegraph, October 28 – November 3, 2015

*What I have been I have forgot to know;
But what I am, want teaches me to think on:
A man throng'd up with cold. My veins are chill,
And have no more of life than may suffice
To give my tongue that heat to ask your help*

Any text is an afterword to nature, even if it holds no mirrors up to it, knowing that everything is a mirror; and it does not really matter how you hold it. You may drop it, for all I know and pick up another mirror – out of the air, as it were. As for human mythology, it mirrors only grand narratives, whereas the small ones melt 'from the smallness of a gnat to air'. Tempests usually come under 'grand narratives' in human existence, and it is small wonder that people either drown or starve to death in the aftermath of such sea-rebellions. Actually you need no tempest to drown in the sea or even in a tiny river, in a teacup.

The charity Médecins Sans Frontières warned of frostbite and said there was an urgent need for hot food, warm shelters and washing facilities at major transit points. The UN has announced plans to distribute thousands of raincoats, tarpaulins and socks to migrants exposed in south-eastern Europe.

The Telegraph, October 28 – November 3, 2015

*A man whom both the waters and the wind,
In that vast tennis-court, hath made the ball
For them to play upon, entreats you pity him;
He asks of you, that never us'd to beg.*

Human or animal suffering is immeasurable, but even if you happen to spend your private eternity on a desert island, deprived of *The Telegraph* and other papers, you can try and measure it by

reading Shakespeare and Dante. Of course you have no means of communication with sufferers and therefore cannot even offer them your moral support: they will not hear your soothing words or the tune of your lullaby. You are not Prospero, not yet; and there is no guarantee you will become one with the passing of the years that often pass without turning anyone into a magician or a sage prepared to forgive everyone down to his mortal and moral enemies. So you might be staying on this island for nothing, and just looking at a picture of the sea is guaranteed to make you feel sick in spite or because of your close acquaintance with sea voyages. You look either at the sea or at a grain of sand which may stand for the world, for all you know; but you no longer care about the world or any grain of sand, however meaningful and manifold. All you care about is what they call 'peace of mind' as if there were such a thing as peace or mind: the presence of the body does not mean there is also the mind somewhere, not far from that body. And what if there is no mind in the neighbourhood of this body of yours or someone else's? No mind, no soul, no unconscious, no ego?

You may not know anything about life on Earth, in the world you left some time ago upon embarking on the sea voyage that brought you to this desert island – through no fault of yours. You do not recall exactly whose fault it was and it is probably better not to recall anything, putting everything down to the pressure you were under at work or just to the zeal of destiny. It is better not to attribute to anyone the origin of this voyage, otherwise you are likely to expose yourself to the torments about which Prospero speaks at some point as if his wisdom could not liberate him from such a train of thought, from such a strain on his heart:

*Though with their high wrongs I am struck to th' quick,
Yet with my nobler reason 'gainst my fury
Do I take part: the rarer action is
In virtue than in vengeance: they being penitent,
The sole drift of my purpose doth extend
Not a frown further.*

Many are struck and even if they neither perish on land or drown in the sea or in their own blood, they suffer and therefore cannot be discarded out of hand just because they do not flee from Syria or any other country afflicted by civil war. But Prospero is in a class of his own and not every sufferer is authorized to create tempests and shipwrecks, even if such creations have a great many precedents; you should not say they all come 'out of nothing'. I, for one, am powerless for many reasons, and my enemies will never be punished because I am *not* on a desert island and my books do *not* teach me the art I need to master in order to put on my version of *The Tempest*. Besides, I have lost no dukedom and have no daughter. I do have a cat and therefore need not create one either out of nothing or from something: he is downstairs and I am sure he will look at me if I stop writing my book

and go down to greet him before turning in. And I am not about to drown my book; or to turn in. I wish I could turn *out* for a while.

What does it matter whether you drown your book or not? As long as you do not drown yourself. As Iago puts it: ‘Come, be a man; drown thyself? drown cats and blind puppies.’ Actually any book takes care of itself; or readers do it and all this amounts to a sort of drowning, either literal or spiritual. Once again you find yourself on a desert island, for you cannot experience death otherwise: you are always alone in his presence in spite of your friends who might drink champagne with you from time to time. And the first time goes on or back; and the second time waits on you for an instant, but then you realise you are to die, whatever happens and wherever it happens or does not. You are just not and whoever surrounds you or seeks refuge in your castle-home is also not, to put it mildly; everybody is far less than not. What does it matter? As long as you do not drown yourself.

*And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve*

You are on your own and no paper informs you of what is going on somewhere else, beyond the horizon or just beyond, which may impart to you it is just beyond your ken. People suffer in the world where you used to exchange commonplaces about suffering and joys – over cups of tea and glasses of Belgian beer. You are no longer within the world and your afterword or whatever passes for such is situated beyond it, and therefore you no longer deal with humans in any shape or form. Anyway, you are no realist, for your book is not located in an afterword; it is an afterworld you have to think about when talking, thinking or dreaming about your book that is the subject matter of your life, if any, if some, if many, and so on.

Or you do deal with humans that come in all shapes and sizes, according to Prospero and whoever tackles the problem of Shakespeare’s last play. Once again, you and your readers are brought to the desert island and none of you knows what to undertake so as not to die of boredom that exists mostly on desert islands and suchlike, as it were. (Even your bed may become a desert island in its own right; or of sorts.) Caliban is human to some extent, for he speaks English and we become humans as soon as we vouchsafe to pay homage to languages that put an impassable barrier between us and animals and plants; at least neither plants nor animals speak English. Animals produce a few sounds and communicate through them, according to our scientists and also to our common sense and our senses: after all, we hear animals either in the woods or in our gardens. These animals produce many sounds and struggle for life before our very eyes and ears, and their sounds mean, ‘You’re a

bastard and I'll kill you in a few seconds, whatever you do.' But these sounds, shouts and screams have nothing in common with Shakespeare's native tongue or any other language known to humanity to which we belong, wherever we find ourselves; whatever we think about languages, humanity, wars, peaces and the paces we are put through.

If we are on a desert island – and we *are* on a desert island – we eat whatever we come across as we wander around this particular island in search for food. At first we do not really look for other humans who might keep us company, which is another remedy against boredom and death. Food comes first or rather first and foremost, otherwise life may get extinguished as easily as any light you can either switch on or off by merely pushing a button. You do not get everything you need at the push of a button – it goes without saying or doing – but lights and suchlike (or suchlights, searchlights) are an exception to the rule; at least within the framework of the situation we are dealing with as we continue to go through trials and errors on the proverbial and legendary desert island of *The Tempest* fame. You go through one trial and realise the creature you trust is eager to murder you because you are not good enough and that is the main reason guiding this enemy of yours or any other enemy of humankind: you are not good and these enemies are good and always right. But on a desert island you do not perish overnight unless you eat a poisonous mushroom or encounter a monster whose strength exceeds your strength and also your will-to-live.

O, beware jealousy;

It is the green-eyed monster

At least this life on the desert island frees you from jealousy, even though many women have betrayed you on the other side of the world, of the coin, as they slept under male bodies and by their sides. They also slept on them now and then, from time to time, and every time lasted so long you could not help putting yet another death on the heap of deaths you had already created, determined to avenge yourself. That is what Shakespeare's characters say in such moments and situations, 'If he had a thousand lives, I would plant in his body two thousand deaths. Just in case, you know. Two thousand trees of death, in other words. Our Lord is all-merciful and He might raise him from the dead a thousand times. But not two thousand, not two thousand.'

And what about utopias? No desert island will ever free anyone from crazy ideas which crop up as soon as your train of thought reverts to your former life debased and spoiled by a swarm of humans you used to compare to locusts. It is true that humans do not *fly* in large groups; nor do they *walk* in large groups unless they are eager to topple a statue or a dictatorship. Both are toppled and now you see only one human walking up and down the street, which does not bode well for the future of this street and humanity in general. This human topples whatever he comes across and he also destroys music, literature and philosophy that tumble and crumble as he continues his triumphant march – euphemistically called progress – through the world; not through the *afterworld*, though.

*I' th' commonwealth I would by contraries
 Execute all things; for no kind of traffic
 Would I admit; no name of magistrate;
 Letters should not be known; riches, poverty,
 And use of service, none; contract, succession,
 Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none;
 No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil;
 No occupation; all men idle, all;
 And women too, but innocent and pure;
 No sovereignty*

Shakespeare is bent on building up a brave new world by means of contraries, which is a nice idea, our world being just the opposite of what the best of possible worlds should be, according to Leibniz. In our world there are swarms of humans who fly, walk, crawl, dig their own graves and those of others, needless to say; and we can no longer tolerate this nonsense, even if we are on a desert island. Our thoughts still revert to the other world inhabited by locusts, monsters, pranksters and prosecutors; and, try as we may, we cannot help getting bogged down in the details. And these details are related to betrayals and swindles because we still have our computer in one of the suitcases and so learn that fraud-squad officers are investigating a £5.6 million swindle. Do we really need to study this piece of news on the island far removed from the wear and tear one is submitted to in the world where statues tumble and are trampled upon as another crowd goes through the streets, bound for an unknown destination? Yes, in the other world one is exposed to a lot of wear and tear – like seat covers on trains, among other things and beings that grow decrepit and spend their times in deathbeds, in lifebeds, in lifeboats. (Or rather in deathboats, as *The Telegraph* points out.) According to Bergson, there are many times in the world, and some of these times run perpendicular to other times or times-spaces, which is responsible for the state of utter chaos we are stuck in; or for the havoc described by Chekov in *The Cherry Orchard*, ‘The storm wreaked havoc in the garden, uprooting trees and blowing a fence down.’ That is why some Russian actors perform this piece and *The Tempest* in the course of the same midsummer night.

And what about our commonwealth or rather commonpoverty? No humans. By no means should they populate our island and move inland to populate the river valleys, among other valleys and rivers. If we let them populate an island or a land, they will never stay where they are permitted to stay and have children, uncles and so on. They are sure to move elsewhere and therefore a great many valleys, rivers, mountains and oceans will catch all sorts of diseases; and every disease of this kind makes you decay in no time at all. Well, sometimes it does take some time and you do not see an object or a subject wither before your very eyes. Yes, it might take some time and some creatures take

their time as they pester their fellow or enemy-creatures for cigarettes, money, whisky, love, copulation and so on.

But Gonzalo admits no kind of traffic, probably because he is not very kind – whatever Prospero’s view on the issue – given that no human or even inhuman society can live without traffic. Of course you can cut down the traffic in drugs; I, for one, am not addicted to drugs, being more physically and psychologically attracted to wines. Thanks to *The Telegraph* and my computer, I know that police are looking for ways of curbing the traffic in guns, which does not concern me either: I am no hunter and therefore would not go a-hunting, even if there were dozens of shotguns in my garden and tool shed. But I am acquainted with a few hunters whom I respect to the point of allowing them to use their shotguns in the woods where hares, pheasants and peasants moon around, waiting for food, mushrooms, preys or fairies. Some peasants get shot inadvertently because last week you fired six shots at the target, but your aim was terrible and you missed all of them. You fire the gun and a peasant or a pheasant falls down; and for a while you have no idea who or what was killed in the aftermath of your shot. You remain uncertain about the upshot of your adventure until your dog brings you a pheasant in his teeth; if he does not, you realise you have killed a peasant.

We do not need magistrates, provided we are protected by islands from the many-faceted intrusion of criminals who are in the habit of lying in wait for us, even if we have no wish to leave our castle or garden or both. Criminals crouch behind our armchairs and divans, and we trip over them as we moon around our castle, looking neither for trouble nor anything or anybody else. All of a sudden we stumble upon a criminal who does not even need to enjoin us to raise our arms and hands: he shoots to kill and fulfils his expectations. A newspaper says to its readers, ‘A poet was shot dead in the city centre last night.’ And next day you read in the same newspaper the following item of news, ‘We are sorry. What we said about the late poet is not true to some extent. Here is the whole truth and nothing but the whole truth, “A poet was shot dead in his ivory tower centre last night.”’ And a magistrate repeats this sentence, pointing out that poets often get killed either in their Towers of Babel or in some brothel or other. So it does not really matter where and why a poet gets killed because, judging from Russian poets’ lives and fates, rhymesters *are* killed anyway and anyhow; and if they are not, they die of their own accord.

What else does our or Shakespeare’s Gonzalo say on the subject or on the subject matter? He says letters should not be known, meaning probably that any love letter may give rise to an unexpected surge in electrical power – that is how women in love call their feelings; so do men, by the way. Both groups of humans speak of an electrical fuse/circuit/fault, whenever they venture into the linguistic analysis of the kingdom of love. Of course they never say, ‘There is a 25% discount on all electrical goods until the end of the week,’ because real lovers never think in terms of discounts and goods and chattels. But even real lovers say now and then, ‘An unexpected surge in electrical power caused the computer to crash.’ Othello might have said that, had he been acquainted with computers.

Riches, poverty, / And use of service, none. What kind of service is meant in this line, within this framework? There are other frameworks, and even some workless frames can divert our attention from the issue we are dealing with so as not to remain idle in our lifebed, lifeboat, lifecradle, lifesaddle. You have a life and also a saddle that goes with it, with your life, and you have no alternative but to sit down on this saddle and ride somewhere, using either a horse or a bicycle or a motorcycle. You use all of them as you take advantage of life's generosity and come somewhere, where there are creatures you know nothing about. Only a few hours ago you thought you knew everything about the world and also about how everything and everybody work; even outside working hours. Now you say to yourself you do not know anything, not even what you do know and can repeat day and night if asked to do so by a magician or Ariel. Ariel says, 'Can you fly?'

'I cannot.'

'Are you a human?'

'I'm nothing. I've got a pair of legs so let me walk out of your sight and mind.'

'You can walk out of my sight, but my mind will follow you till doomsday, as far as Hell.'

That is what awaits you if you intend to strike up a conversation with a complete stranger who tells you he is Ariel and asks you if you know what a flying saucer means. You say you do know what it means, whereupon he says he is not a flying saucer but a flying individual who is half-man, half-angel, half-Prospero. 'Which part of Prospero?' you ask him.

'The one that doesn't deal with Caliban,' he answers flying off, up, away and through something or other.

ADRIAN: 'Widow Dido' said you? you make me study of that: she was of Carthage, not of Tunis.

GONZALO: This Tunis, sir, was Carthage.

ADRIAN: Carthage?

GONZALO: I assure you, Carthage.

ANTONIO: His word is more than the miraculous harp.

SEBASTIAN: He hath rais'd the wall, and houses too.

ANTONIO: What impossible matter will he make easy next?

SEBASTIAN: I think he will carry this island home in his pocket, and give it his son for an apple.

ANTONIO: And, sowing the kernels of it in the sea, bring forth more islands.

GONZALO: Ay.

ANTONIO: Why, in good time.

En passant.

