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A BIOGRAPHY

If I were simply to say that I had had an overview of the dialectical structure of the whole of my work as an author from the very beginning,...that would be denial and dishonesty with respect to God....No. I must truly say that I cannot understand the entire affair, precisely because I can understand the entire affair down to the most insignificant little detail—but what I cannot understand is that I can understand it now, though I most definitely do not dare to say that I understood it so clearly in the beginning. And yet I was of course the person who did it, reflecting every step along the way.

Kierkegaard, *The Role of Governance in my Writings*

'Premise-authors are the opposite of the essential authors, for the latter has his own perspective, he constantly comes behind himself in his individual productions; he strives forward indeed, but within the totality, not after it; he never raises more doubt than he can explain; his A is always greater than his B; he never makes a move on an uncertainty. For he has a definite world-view and life-view which he follows, and with this he is in advance of his individual literary productions, as the whole is always before the parts (Kierkegaard, *The Book on Adler*).'¹ I have no idea in what area I strive forward, for there is no doubt that I do so rather impulsively, otherwise I would not have begun to write this text. But I am not sure I strive forward within the totality that presupposes an awareness of what should happen not only at the outset, but also in the middle and even at the end of one's undertaking. Far be it from me to imply that I am enigma to myself: I have lived long enough on this earth to know the ins and outs of my nature. Of course there are many nooks and crannies in my unconscious—and even in my consciousness—of which I am unaware, but at least I should have in mind an image or a plan of the work I have embarked upon. Well, I have no blueprint of the work I am writing now; and yet I have been thinking about it for some time. I do know that this work is devoted to Kierkegaard (1813-1855), his way of thinking, his predicament and quarrels, but for the life of me I can visualise neither the middle nor the end of it. Even this sentence kept me in the dark about its contents until I began to write it; and now I realise it has no contents apart from my hesitancy and the vagueness of my purpose. And they are not worthy subjects for an essay on Kierkegaard's life and death.

Walter Benjamin says that a writer should be modest, coming to the fore only occasionally so as to remain mostly in the margin of his works—a figure in the margin, to paraphrase Henry James. I can only speak of myself in relation to this work devoted to Kierkegaard's philosophical output: he spoke mostly of himself and his enemies who were part of himself. I have no idea whether I have enemies or not because only a human being whose life is an open book, at least to some extent, can boast about having aroused interest in the society to which he belongs. His life is open-ended, as it were, and some people are prepared to supply a few ends to it—a few ends, a few versions of what has already come to

pass, and even a few beginnings: they embroider upon his origins. It is not enough to walk along the streets to attract everybody's attention; in our overpopulated world no one takes notice of you unless you are a well-known public figure exposed to boundless admiration or severe criticism. For all his monastic life, Kierkegaard was open enough to become the laughing stock of his fellow citizens who missed no opportunity to deride his gait, clothes and way of thinking. The editor of a famous magazine, *The Corsair*, took the trouble to voice his disgust in print, which unavoidably entailed spending a lot of time in his office, at a writing desk of sorts, away from his family and numerous children. Actually I have no idea whether he had any children or indeed a wife: I am not eager to explore this editor's life in addition to all the lives I might come to be dealing with in the course of the present work. What counts is Kierkegaard's and my reactions to the number of abuses impertinently published in the magazine whose ends and origins I will not discuss at any length.

*Penalty for dogs fouling the footway—
£50. I've no dog. I may become rich, provided
I don't have anything.*

*Those people fouled nothing except
My life.*

*No one will pay for it, I'm afraid.
No penalty.*

*Why should I name them? They deserve
No homage.*

*I'd better talk about the trees
I saw this afternoon, about the chestnuts
Pattering to the ground.*

*The sunset was beautiful. My companion witty
And charming.*

*No dog will ever foul
This day.*

'Every butcher boy believes that he is almost entitled to insult me on orders issued by *The Corsair*; the young university students grin and giggle and are happy that a prominent person is trampled down; the professors are envious and secretly sympathise with the attacks, repeating them, though of course they add that it is a shame. The least thing I do, even if I merely pay a visit to someone, is mendaciously distorted and repeated everywhere....They have poisoned the atmosphere for me. With my melancholia and my enormous burden of work, what I needed in order to relax was to be alone in the crowd....I can no longer have this. Inquisitiveness surrounds me everywhere....I take a long walk on quiet paths, lost in thought, and then suddenly encounter three or four louts out there, where I am quite alone, and these fellows take to calling me names. It has an enormously powerful effect on my physical well-being.'

But, according to a journal entry from June 1848, the whole affair was a blessing in disguise. 'Truly, I would never have succeeded in illuminating Christianity in the way that has been granted me, had all this not happened to me.' Nothing happens in *my* life so that the only reactions I might have today or tomorrow are invariably linked to what I read or watch on television: I do not react to the way pedestrians behave as I walk past them in the streets or in our woods. Nor do *they* give any thought to how I am dressed—the point at which Kierkegaard's opponents used to aim their venomous swords. Of course his opponents did not care about the clothes I would wear more than a century after their battles. But there are people in this day and age who do care about how Kierkegaard dressed in 1850, as if to substantiate the claim he made in his journal: 'The day will come when not only my writings, but precisely my life—the intriguing secret of all the machinery—will be studied and studied.' Well, even his clothes are under their scrutiny: the biography written by Joakim Garff eloquently testifies to this undying inquisitiveness. In this biography, which is no exception to the attitude adopted by Kierkegaard's scholars in general, the link between his philosophy and everyday life is emphasised to the detriment of both: after all, he *could* have a walk in the woods without thinking of God or a text where he might describe this particular walk in minute detail. Now and then he was bound to follow Montaigne's prescription that forbids one to ponder on alien subjects during a walk in the woods. Didn't Kierkegaard just enjoy walking amidst the trees in those moments? Alas, I *always* listen to literary texts as I wander in the neighbourhood of my apartment where so many books await my return as if anxious to yield their treasures to my incurable *graphomania*. The biography I am engrossed in now is one of these books. And here is the passage I was thinking about during my recent walk in the woods situated far from my flat and library—in Touraine, near Chenonceaux: 'In no time at all Kierkegaard, who had previously been a natural part of the urban scene, became a walking caricature in the city. Now he was no longer seen as the thinker whose very eccentricity managed to compel the respect of the multitude, but on the contrary, he became a ludicrous advertisement for *The Corsair*, a mad icon. People who had once looked up to him, perhaps without really understanding what it was

they were looking up to, now spent lots of time looking down on him—down, in fact, at his trousers to see if they really were as uneven as *The Corsair* had depicted....Things even got to the point that Kierkegaard's tailor, C. M. Küntzer of Vimmelskaftet, informed Kierkegaard in desperation that all the talk about the trousers, which had been his handiwork, could damage the reputation of his business.'

Even I do not look at my trousers because I am unworthy of my own gaze that is used to more respectful sights, but I would not mind feasting my eyes upon Kierkegaard's trousers, shirts and handkerchiefs. Actually I might exchange any mirror for the caricature on which Joakim Garff enlarges in the passage quoted above. That is why I have not yet written an autobiography in spite of what a friend (or an enemy) said to me last year: 'You'd better write an autobiography instead of wasting your time on novels and poems—your trials and tribulations are bound to strike a sympathetic chord among women.' But I seem to prefer great people's caricatures to my undistorted, untroubled reality, to my past, to my future. So it is better to write yet another biography of Kierkegaard, disregarding the market saturated with his caricatures: five books on him were published in 2005 alone. And in each of these books you are sure to come across his uneven trousers, his thunderous rejoinders, love, solitude and posthumous fame. My trousers, on the other hand, are nowhere to be seen as if I were going around half-naked like a character from my nightmares that often feature my poor self exposed to the ridicule of the crowd. In my nightmares I do share Kierkegaard's predicament. Yet he did not have to strip his trousers off in order to arouse everyone's curiosity: a pair of uneven trousers would do the trick. And what about my love, my solitude? In my recent nightmare a man rushed over to me and pumped my hand as though I were an old acquaintance; but even he was reluctant to listen to my tales of woe and, doffing his hat, he resumed his walk down the street.

'The premise-author feels no *need to communicate himself*, for essentially he has nothing to communicate: he lacks precisely the essential thing, the conclusion, the meaning in relation to the premises. He does not feel the need to communicate himself, he is a *needy person*—' The point is I do need to communicate myself, otherwise I would watch TV all day long especially as the Olympic Games are not over yet. What do I have to communicate? The same old chorus—nothing to write about, nothing to write with. It is the other way round, actually: I write about Kierkegaard, I have got my computer. But I lack the conclusion, the meaning in relation to the premises. What is the conclusion of this work? I believe in God and I do not believe in Him. A double conclusion, the same old chorus. My work in progress doffs its hat to Russian literary traditions—to Ivan Karamazov, his quest for the Absolute, his love, his solitude, his murder. Adolph Peter Adler, clergyman and *Magister* in theology, received Christ in person and spoke to him; Ivan Karamazov received the Devil in person and spoke to him. I wish I could welcome either in my room where a kitten I purchased at a Moscow bazaar might have been rambling this morning, had she been cured by local vets. Only dying kittens are sold in Russia.

However afraid people would be of me if they found out, however strange it would seem to them, it is certain that what has occupied me in recent times has been whether God in fact wants me to stake everything on bringing about a catastrophe, on getting arrested, convicted—executed if possible. And in my soul I am concerned that if I refrained from doing so I would regret it eternally.
Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals*

Actually I am far more interested in my personal immortality than in Kierkegaard or any other philosopher because none of them can bring about the metamorphosis I need so badly: Time must become Eternity at all cost, otherwise I have lived for nothing. 'How to become immortal?' is a key-question to which I have not found the answer yet, although I know for sure I will not commit suicide—the problem regarded as crucial by Camus and his followers. Well, the beginning of this novel is not up to scratch, given the daunting task I set myself as I relinquished the idea of writing on Kierkegaard, on his ins and outs, on his ups and downs. So I have to start again from scratch and twist and rotate the words until they yield what may be called the 'meaning of my life' that does not mean anything without my personal immortality, without my worldwide eternity. Let others write Kierkegaard's biography; I have had my share of damp squibs. But there is no denying that some philosophers might assist me in my task: Spinoza, for one, was preoccupied with Eternity, with the way it must be kept in proper repair throughout one's existence. How *can* one take care of Eternity which is even more elusive than Time because it might be closer to Space, for all I know: aren't they both quiescent? 'We term clear insight only that insight which is gained not by rational conviction, but by feeling and intuition of things themselves: this is far superior to the others,' says Spinoza. So I must address myself to the right side of my brain where imagination and intuition are believed to lodge, according to the books I have in my library. How to dislodge all my thoughts from the left side of my brain and transfer them to the right side where they are likely to receive an appropriate piece of information? Try as I may, some of my thoughts and a certain amount of energy I need for this transfer are reluctant to budge from where they wallow in the luxury of indolence, musing on topics of no importance; at least their musings do not further my cause. I denounce the knowledge they supply me with as 'idle and pointless speculation'. Don't they know that only intuitive knowledge (*scientia intuitiva*) attains an adequate knowledge of the essence of things? They must have pondered over Spinoza's *On the Improvement of the Understanding*, judging from my acquaintance with the treatise. On the other hand, Spinoza points out that 'there are many things which we can never attain by imagination but only with intellect'. Substance, Eternity and metaphysical concepts are not subject to imagination; they are not imaginable objects. So, if I understand rightly, imagination is not on an equal footing with intuition and therefore I should not call on the former in my endeavour to further the

cause of my personal immortality. And where, pray, does intuition lodge? Moreover, Spinoza guards his followers against confusing intellect (*intellectus*) and reason (*ratio*), the latter acquiring knowledge indirectly, through inferences. Intellect, on the other hand, is granted immediate knowledge. Please grant me *some* knowledge, however superfluous and inadequate—something to start with, a springboard of sorts.

But any search for a way out of our precarious human condition is bound to proceed by fits and starts, and whatever has been mapped out with utmost accuracy—Spinoza's *Ethics* is a good example—must be scrutinised once more from a multitude of angles. As you grope along the road leading out or nowhere you had better misconstrue whatever you come across because mistakes and blunders are often far more beneficial than hard-and-fast conclusions. If we knew for sure that the Hereafter exists somewhere we would never experience angst and other existential feelings that turn our life into a Hitchcock cliffhanger. And we may light upon God only because we have advanced so many ludicrous hypotheses about Him and His Kingdom.

The practice of removing a few words from their context for argument's sake is justifiably frowned upon, and yet such surgical extraction often yields amazing results. We take notice of the *illegal* aspect of the text, so to speak, plunging headlong into its unconscious. Indeed, no text is aware of the distortions showered upon it by unscrupulous scholars or zealous truth seekers who, unsatisfied with logical explanations, investigate a misprint, a mistranslation, a coincidence, a chance encounter. And, according to Kierkegaard, a subjective mistake is more propitious for our ego's evolution than a distant objective truth which may concern some Olympian deity and not a mortal, despair-petrified individual. My personal mistakes, therefore, are closer to my body than whatever I may read about, and it is my body that should survive and vanquish the second law of thermodynamics, entropy, etc: there are so many things I am supposed to overcome on my way to Eternity, Immortality—call it what you wish, providing you do not stray too far from my subject matter. 'What would it profit me if I discovered a so-called objective truth; if I worked my way through the systems of the philosophers and was able to parade them forth on demand; if I was able to demonstrate the inconsistencies within each individual circle?' writes Kierkegaard. 'What would it profit me if I were able to expound the significance of Christianity, able to explain many individual points, if it held no deeper significance for *me* and for my *life*?'

I do not *parade* my knowledge of philosophical lore when I quote Kierkegaard and his peers because they all contribute to my mistakes from which the truth might emerge in the near future—before I pass away, leaving no imprint on the canvas of the world. A minuscule splodge would be enough. I have nothing against splodges, although I am not keen on tachisme; nor am I a fervent admirer of Jackson Pollock. But if I could sign one of his paintings exposed in the universal and *eternal* museum, I would do so without the slightest hesitation. I mean, I would not mind painting like

him—for two or three days at the utmost—on condition that this subterfuge ensures my place in the future history of the world.

What does Kierkegaard write about the truth in his journal? I shall quote him all the more abundantly since I am not writing his biography. 'What would it profit me if the truth stood before me, cold and naked, not caring whether I acknowledged it or not, calling forth an anguished shudder rather than confident submission? I will certainly not deny that I still believe in the validity of an imperative of knowledge that has an influence upon men, *but it nonetheless must become a living part of me—*'

This 'living part' might come out of the blue and I hope I am receptive enough to welcome it into my ego, superego, or whatever you call it, when in analytical mood. I am prepared to *submit* to my mistakes—confidently, with no shudder of apprehension or misgiving. And *dead* parts are everywhere, I'm afraid, so that I must do my utmost to ward them off as if we were engaged in a fencing tournament. The point is you wear no protective mask when you fence with dead parts, the second law of thermodynamics, disintegration and extinction.

And what about Spinoza's essential parts or 'essences' as he calls them? They are *living* parts, I presume, otherwise he would not have assigned them to the highest category of knowledge, to the topmost condition of the human race. I might accept this human condition (*condition humaine*) if it were confined to the highest rung of our ladder that may become Jacob's ladder with the passing of the years. Let these years pass as quickly as possible; I would not mind shortening my sentences for the sake of Time's speed.

God is the essence that Spinoza ponders about, I suppose. I might be mistaken, but I welcome this glaring error with confidence, hoping that my confidence will be rewarded sooner or later: it is better to be confident than otherwise. Didn't God put trust in me when He decided I should be born? Did *He* make this decision? I *was* born and if this event of no consequence took place during God's leave of absence, I am an ill-starred creature. And what if there are no stars, either malevolent or profitable? Nothing is profitable in this world except profit. Such maxims are misleading and pernicious—another mistake of mine, which I cannot correct for the simple reason that I do not know the right answer to anything. But in the equation $3x-3=15$, $X = 6$. I am not sure I know that either: my schooldays are as distant as the objective truth.

But I do know I must leave an imprint of my moods here and there, otherwise my life will amount to nothing more than a drop in the ocean or rather to nothing at all because the ocean is made up of drops; so is human history (drops, splodges). And if my life vanishes into thin air—one of my favourite idioms—it cannot be regarded as a drop, as a harbinger of the forthcoming rain. My corpse will disintegrate and become the grass or even a drop of rain, but I am concerned with my mind and not my body whose tissues and sinews have been grown for fodder, in a manner of speaking—for worms, for farm animals, wild animals. I wish I could become good fodder for scholars, highbrows, middlebrows, lowbrows. 'His books are recommended literary fodder for schoolchildren.'

*I live, I write not for the sake of praise;
 but I'd have liked, meseems,
 to glorify my woeful lot,
 so that, like a true friend, remindful
 of me would be, at least, one sound.
 And somebody's heart it will move;
 and kept by fate,
 perhaps in Lethe will not drown
 the strophe I compose*

(Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, Chapter Two, trans. by Nabokov)

One sound is probably enough, providing the reader *hears* my poetic and prosaic works: the human condition is music. So are all other conditions and whatever one may think of: Lethe, thin air, pollution, the Apocalypse, Immortality, Eternity, love, a woman you have been dreaming about for thirty years. She comes to your place and displays her charms while drinking an old wine, an old champagne—a vestige of the *Belle Epoque*. She is the *Belle Epoque*, the *Belle Hélène*, the *Belle au bois dormant*. Sleeping Beauty, Wakeful Beauty. I hear her sound in the twenty-fourth century; so I am immortal.

3

During the latter part of 1851 she encountered me every day. It was during the period that I would walk home by way of Langelinie at ten o'clock in the morning. The timing was exact and the place merely shifted further and further up the road in the direction of the lime kiln. She came walking as if from the lime kiln. I never went one step out of my way and always turned off at the Citadel Road, even when one day she happened to be a few steps further along on the Lime Kiln Road, and I would therefore have encountered her if I hadn't turned aside. That was how it went, day after day....So I had to make a change. And I did so. On January 1, 1852 I changed my route and went home by way of Norreport. Then there was a period when we did not see each other. One morning she encountered me on the path by the lake that had now become my usual route. And the next day I also went my customary way. She wasn't there. Still, for safety's sake I changed my route from then on, walking along Farimagsvej, and finally I gave up having any fixed route for my walk home....But what happened? After some time had passed she

encountered me at eight o'clock in the morning on the avenue outside Osterport, the way I walk into Copenhagen every morning. The next day she wasn't there, however. I continued to walk my regular route into town, which I cannot easily alter. She has often encountered me there, sometimes also on the ramparts, along which I walk on my way into town. Perhaps these are coincidences—perhaps. I cannot understand why she would want to walk that route at that hour of the day. But since I notice everything, I noticed that she was especially likely to walk that route when there was an east wind. So, of course, it might be because she cannot bear the east wind on Langelinie—though she also came when there was a west wind.

Kierkegaard, Papers and Journals

It is too late to become immortal through the agency of children to whom, in my golden age, I paid little attention as I courted beautiful women and even suggested we might get married—for the sake of my physical and aesthetic delights. I breathed no word about these delights of mine, but somehow they knew I had no thought for children—for traditional family life which, in those days, remained outside my preoccupations. Those days are gone and at present I am living through what may be termed my 'age of bronze', especially since my hair looks neither like lead nor like silver: for some reason I am not a white-haired poet yet. Physically I am capable of causing turmoil not only in a woman's mind but also in her body, which might lead to the birth of a gene carrier on whose co-operation a traditional family man relies as he projects his hopes into a distant future. I pin my hopes only on my pen; and yet I have not been writing in longhand for many years, with the exception of the essays I knock off in Russian. How quickly I write in my mother tongue!

I would rather hold Time back as I embark upon a new paragraph that must reflect Eternity and not the fleeting nature of days and minutes. A lot of second-rate compositions reflect this fleeting essence with which I struggle as I endeavour to discover what is eternal in a figure of speech, in a stroke of the pen, in an outburst of inspiration (or anger), in a mood, in a thought.

I am not writing a biography of Kierkegaard or Nietzsche—another project of mine that is unlikely to come to fruition. Would an autobiography ensure my admittance to the Kingdom of Eternity? After a few rebellious feats I must work my passage back to the affections of God on Whom the future and Immortality depend, as far as I know. Do they? Anyway, I am back to Kierkegaard and his musings on which I was planning to build this novel whose purpose lies beyond any work of art, any biography or autobiography. This novel is my thought carrier, my body carrier—otherwise I would not speak of women who often participate in my life through my body; and yet my mind, especially in such cases, is always connected to my body.

But my body was not born yesterday and the spiritual contortions it went through in my childhood should be taken into account because that is how I have matured and become what I am: my mind continues to heed my body. I call them 'spiritual contortions' with regard to the multitude of so-called truths I received gift-wrapped as if they were nothing but objects one might unwrap and use afterwards without so much as looking at them critically; after all, you are not supposed to look a gift horse in the mouth. Well, I did not allow these horses to gallop through my life, and even in my childhood and teenage years I did look in their mouths whenever I could—often to the detriment of my notoriety. 'Soren Sock was absolutely no wunderkind,' says Joakim Garff whose biography of Kierkegaard I shall quote throughout this book. "No one knew anything about his *unusual* talents," wrote P. E. Lind. "His responses in Bible class were like those of many other students, and his Danish compositions were no better (though probably more detailed) than those of other good students." Certainly he was capable, always the second- or-third-best in the class, but never first.' Nor was I the best in the class—on account of this propensity for questioning I cannot get rid of even now; and yet all the questions have been answered save that of the Hereafter and of the passage from the mortal state to the immortal one. The shadow of Cartesian doubt pursued whatever I learnt in my school years, my mind casting the shadow—my mind supported and encouraged by my body. So I was the second- or-third-best in the class because I did not learn my lessons by *heart*; I learnt them by *mind* and by *body*. And my body continues to stir up open rebellion among the thoughts I engender and mature within my mind, unless it is the other way round: am I at my mind's beck and call? Or at my body's, for that matter?

Doesn't Spinoza pay a similar homage to the body which is called upon to operate one's transfer to the Kingdom of Essences? Isn't the mind a mere plaything in the hands (and legs and teeth) of the body?

'I do not recall that his language was ever genuinely witty or cutting, but it was annoying and provocative, and he was aware that it had this effect even though he was often the one who had to pay for it. These outbursts of his passion for teasing seemed to be absolutely unconnected with the rest of his otherwise silent and unspeaking existence among us, with the withdrawn and introverted character he displayed the rest of the time.' My language *was* annoying and provocative—to the point of making the girl I had a crush on grimace whenever she got my letters conveyed to her by my schoolmates whose patience had originated in our teachers' incapacity to hold our attention for more than ten minutes; and our lessons lasted forty-five minutes, if I remember rightly.

'During these outbursts his most remarkable talent was the ability to make his target appear ridiculous, and it was especially the big, tall and powerfully built boys he chose as the objects of his derision.' Fearful of their reprisals, I did not choose *those* boys as the objects of my derision: I was rather timorous. In this respect my personality has endured no metamorphosis, but now I can plead my age, hoping that someone—a saviour who turns up in Bunuel's *Tristana*—will protect me against a

bully. A friend of mine opposed such a bully in our school grounds and withstood his attacks for five minutes at least.

Do I have to begin this book with my childhood, my school years? Philosophers depend on the way they live and prosper—on their bodies, loves and insignificant details of which the common reader takes no notice, quietly living his or her life. But these insignificant details do count: I would not be what I am if I ignored the beauty of the girl who shared the same desk with my spiritual enemy—the most brilliant pupil in our class. Another schoolmate of mine encountered her several years afterwards in a clinic where he hoped to cure his incurable disease. 'She's grown so fat that nobody, not even you, would yearn for her.' She was married to a diplomat at the time. Is it so hard to make a woman shed a few kilos for the sake of love, romanticism and the troubadours' ideals?

Haven't I loved the same woman throughout my life, my search for the truth? She must be the truth I have been looking for ever since my childhood; but I continue to doubt whatever I hear or say and therefore I am not likely to rest on my laurels. Besides, there are no laurels to speak of; and no rest.

I fell in love only once, at the age of twenty-six; that woman is unique, irreplaceable, even though I have come to bracket her with the heroines of novels and philosophical treatises. Doesn't Kierkegaard write about Regine over and over again in the hope of making her listen to his explanations, excuses and sorrow? A short biography I read in my forest labels Regine as a middle-class woman of no interest—unlikely to kindle the fire in the bosom of a highbrow, distinguished man. The philosopher first saw her on a spring day in 1837, at the age of twenty-three. However, let us postpone elaborating on his lifelong ardour: I have not dealt with *my* childhood and teenage years.

4

On a day when the winter weather is so intimidating that you do not want to go out—and then, when an entire life like that lies before you, and the question is whether to go out into it!

Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals*

Childhood, Boyhood, Youth. I read Tolstoy's partial autobiography at the age of fifty-five when I was already far from my own discovery of the world, of its quirks and foibles. But, oddly enough, I was quite near to what Tolstoy had disclosed when submitting his memory to a merciless interrogation—as if I was his brother or sister. As if I was Tolstoy himself. Why not write *his* biography? 'I did all the hard work of putting my memories in order,' he might have demurred, 'and now everyone wants to get in on the act.' Of course it is easier to adjust one's life to a known and certified pattern than to leap into a chasm whenever a new step is to be taken. And new steps or rather stages punctuate our lives to the point of making them look like golf courses where holes have pride of place: they are so large that your ball falls into them on its own, without being pushed or otherwise manipulated. And you can

hardly walk over the course, let alone play a sophisticated game; more often than not you yourself fall into the holes that seem to have been tailor-made for you, for your wretched life. You realise that what you have got involved in is a game, nonetheless—the game played by someone. And you must resort to a Kierkegaardian leap to turn this abstract 'someone' into God or at least into the Absolute. But I have once more overtaken the chronological time to whose ponderous step a biographer is supposed to adjust his inspiration—his leaps and bounds, so to speak. I had better therefore leap back and come into step with Time. The point is I am dealing with several times as I proceed with this novel, biography or autobiography. (It is a *Buildungsroman* that narrates maturing through education and experience.) One of these times is based upon Kierkegaard's life that did not begin at the end and so differs radically from the *salto mortale* executed by Nabokov in his book on Nikolay Gogol: we encounter the latter's corpse on the very first page.

A second time concerns my own life, which does not mean that this time or any other time is *concerned* with my life and whatever I do within its bounds or even outside them. Strange as it may seem, now and then I overstep the bounds of my life, striving to overtake myself on the road to death—or immortality, as the case may be. I have no idea what awaits me at the end of the road, but it is the end of the road I am interested in; no other odds and ends can satisfy my insatiable curiosity. It goes without saying that beyond a momentary halt there is another and yet another stage on life's way, as Kierkegaard puts it; the road has no end, in other words. Yet Time lets me down as I proceed along the road so that either I have no time to complete what I have undertaken or I have time on my hands and therefore content myself with counting minutes, hours, days and years. What have I done since I left Russia in 1974? Thirty-two years—that is all I have done, apparently.

A third time also concerns my 'trials and tribulations', but I cannot recall what this time is in charge of, in bureaucratic parlance. During my last walk I suddenly hit upon an idea which seemed to shed light on a particular aspect (or stage) of my existence. The idea was crystal clear and I thought I had no need to jot it down because 'nobody is likely to forget such an idea', I told myself. When I got back to my friend's house, however, I realised I had clean forgotten it, and no amount of Proustian exertions could help me unearth or rather unbody the 'hallmark of time'. What is it doing inside my body, I wonder? Where is its hiding place? In my heart of hearts, in my bowels, in my toes? It is not in my mind—I am pretty sure of that: even an amnesiac would recall such an idea if it were merely crouching in a corner of his mind. But my memory has no influence over my toes in the stockrooms of which a great many ideas, feelings and gut feelings might have been deposited without my knowing it. Is that where our unconscious resides? Jung would throw a tantrum if someone uttered the word 'subconscious' in his presence because, as he persistently pointed out, the unconscious is not inferior to consciousness. But how should we call it if its headquarters are located in our toes and not in our heads or hearts, as might have been presumed? Be that as it may, our unconscious does not hang or

float above our heads like a halo, for all Jung's endeavours: no archetypes will ever get the upper hand in their struggle with Freudian filth.

The lapse of memory I complained about in the previous paragraph has already given rise to so many ideas that I no longer regret the disappearance of what would have amounted to three or four sentences at most. Sometimes it is better to lose a thought or even a novel, foregoing the services rendered by hard discs, CDs and Xeroxes. Last December I took a taxi in Moscow, my hand clutching a plastic bag in which a theatrical piece I was to perform shortly afterwards was lying along with a CD player. Absorbed in the driver's talk—his ideas were more extravagant than mine—I unconsciously dropped the bag; this time my unconscious was located in my fingers. Another lapse of memory did all it could to prevent me from realising I no longer was holding the plastic bag and consequently the CD player and my theatrical piece. More than ten minutes had elapsed before I rushed to the cloakroom, recovered my coat, put it on and began to run in the hope of catching up with the garrulous driver and his *Moskvich*. I had no alternative but to re-write the play, which I did in a sort of creative trance all the while rehearsing my gesticulations in front of a mirror. The result was far superior to its lost prototype that must have been disposed of rather quickly, I suppose, being overshadowed by the other lost item.

And what about the time running parallel to the present work? Is there any? This time must include my back-and-forth switches and Tolstoy's childhood which I would readily compare to mine if I had time on my hands. There are so many childhoods at my disposal that I procrastinate on the threshold of a life I am not entitled to in legal terms. Like my fellow citizens I am not allowed to usurp someone else's identity and face *my* problems under false pretences, if only within the bounds of a literary work. But I have always been outgrowing myself in order to reach the unreachable, leaving behind whatever hampers my progress along the road that leads nowhere: we have knowledge only of finite things, not of the infinite. Nowhere do we reach it, however far we may advance in the finite. 'No man, even the most learned in his discipline, can progress farther along the road to perfection than the point where he is found most knowing in the very ignorance that characterises him; and he will be the more learned, the more he comes to know himself for ignorant,' writes Nicholas of Cusa. This learned ignorance (*docta ignorantia*) is nothing more than a lost manuscript, metaphorically speaking. You scramble into a cab, talk to the driver, leave your manuscript on the back seat and light-heartedly join your friends in a café or a restaurant. Your progress along the road to perfection depends on the number of words you will remember when re-writing your lost piece. The more your memory goes blank, the better.

And what if there is no manuscript to speak of? You have never written anything, not even a letter or a Christmas card. You feel an irresistible urge to write something *now*, but you don't even have a writing desk at home. So you acquire a writing desk and sit down in front of it and hastily pick up a sheet of paper and a fountain pen with a view to writing down the very first idea that comes into

your head. But nothing comes into your head and for a while you stare at the empty wall opposite, which is not adorned with books of any kind. 'A book might become a fount of ideas, provided you read it thoroughly,' you say to yourself. You take a cab, drive over to the nearest bookshop and buy as many books as you need to quench your temporary thirst for knowledge. Once at home you pile the books up on your writing desk and begin to consult them one by one. With the passing of time the information input grows so overwhelming that the fountain pen guided by your agile fingers has no time to follow your stream of consciousness. So you take another cab, drive over to the nearest electronics shop and buy a computer with the aid of which you manage to immortalise half of your ideas. The mortal ideas continue to pester you in the alcoves of your unconscious, but soon their drone subsides completely and, leaning back in your armchair, you enjoy at last the result of your toil. You picture to yourself the way your readers will react to your work. 'With this book, he's going against the flow.' 'There's a fatal flaw in his argument.' 'And it's not the only fly in the ointment.'

Of course you should not be swayed by *their* comments, however unbiased and well-meant. The point is you are driven to analyse your own work and there are no flies on you: you cannot deceive yourself. You know where your ideas come from and, whatever their intrinsic value, you are not satisfied with the way they intertwine and interact within your book. So you erase it from your computer's hard disc and from your memory which goes blank once more: you hardly remember who you are. Why should you remember who you are? Isn't it better to become somebody else in view of your spiritual impotence? Or should you stick to your guns?

You have another go at it and produce a masterpiece saluted by your consciousness, unconscious and even by the imaginary reader. But, after a short period of euphoria, you condemn the whole venture—everything down to punctuation marks—and once again resort to your computer's destructive power. What you are left with amounts to very little indeed; you know you are just a conceited ignoramus. Is that what you have been striving for all these years?

Like a serpent you shed your skin; you go one better and get rid of your unconscious, memory, discursive reason. No longer do you remember who you are, but you have come nearer to God or rather to the finest image of God, which remains separated from the original by an unbridgeable gulf. To bridge this gulf, we are obliged to leap back to Kierkegaard's leap.

Of the many ludicrous things in these foolish times, perhaps the most ludicrous is the utterance I have often enough read, where it is labelled "wisdom", and have heard spoken of admiringly as "fitting": that in our times a person cannot even become a martyr, that our times do not even possess the energy to put someone to death. Sie irren sich! It is not the times that must have the energy to put someone to death or make a martyr of him; it is the

*martyr, the martyr-to-be, who must have the
energy to give the times the passion, in this case
the passion of indignation, to put him to death.*
Kierkegaard, *Two Ethical-Religious Essays*

'You don't exist if the market ignores you,' says one of my Moscow friends. I do not exist, but Kierkegaard does. 'It is frightful,' he writes, 'to see the thoughtlessness, indifference, and self-confidence with which children are brought up. And yet every person is essentially what he will become by the time he is ten years old. And yet you will find that almost all bear damage from their childhood that they cannot overcome even when they attain the age of seventy. And every unfortunate idiosyncrasy tends to stem from some erroneous impression received in childhood.'

It takes quite a leap of the imagination to believe that in my childhood I displayed, if only timidly, the character traits which make me suffer on the eve of my sixtieth birthday. At the age of ten I was just the opposite of what I am now, judging from my aversion to foreign languages, which prevented me from learning English, a task imposed by my father. Nietzsche says that the knowledge of foreign languages might cramp your literary style if you continue to use your mother tongue as a vehicle for your ideas and gut feelings. He thought it was superfluous and even harmful to learn them, but I did not read his writings at this tender age—for many reasons. In the first place, they were not obtainable in Russia either in the original or in translation. Besides, even at the age of twenty I was not keen on philosophy and went so far as to affirm I would never read any philosophical book. My father hired an English teacher who, after three ineffective lessons, gave up and bade us farewell, discouraged by my unwillingness to memorise a few rudimentary rules. German fared no better in our household despite my father's infatuation with Goethe whom he read in the original. Neither my mother nor yours truly understood my father in this domain and consequently I could only *count* in German, adding from time to time, '*Ich bin ein guter Knabe.*' Sure enough, I was a good boy and no harbinger of my rebellious self was detectable either at the age of ten, or two years afterwards when I was sent to a pioneer camp on my parents' initiative. Did they wish me to rub shoulders with children of my age? Private education is often regarded as socially divisive but, unlike Tolstoy, I went to a state school and was ill-treated by boys and girls alike from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Why extend this torture beyond those classrooms and corridors? I put this question neither to my mother nor to my father because at the age of twelve I was a good obedient boy who, however, refused to learn German and English. I had a smattering of French spoken fluently by my mother.

The pioneer camp. For the first time I fully realised I could not get on with my fellow creatures; in our classrooms they busied themselves with facts and figures, annoying me only during the fifteen-minute breaks. In the camp they harassed me all the time: I had to tell them stories at night, I was their favourite target whenever a war was declared. 'We'll use other weapons at the last battle,' said our 'third captain' as he scornfully threw away a cushion without taking his eyes off me. So I went on a hunger strike. Actually I began the strike with a hole in my trousers, which I refused to mend. Nor

would I wear another pair of trousers despite my parents' entreaties: they regularly called on me to make sure my playmates were not leading me astray. In vain did I implore them to put an end to my torture which was written off as a necessary evil. 'You should have experience of it to become a reputable member of society,' my father pointed out. Only my hunger strike, which alarmed the authorities of the camp, made them modify their attitude towards my obstinate refusal to cooperate with whoever bullied me in one way or another.

My first rebellion was hailed as a triumph by my consciousness which hastened to assure me that every outburst of this nature would help me assert myself to the utmost. Alas, no other rebellion of mine has succeeded in pushing me up the social or any other ladder so that even my unconscious no longer prompts me to interfere with a treadmill of literary prizes, reading habits, young prodigies, born-again Christians. But I cannot keep silent in spite of the warnings issued by my consciousness, my body and my friends. 'You'd better not run down Pasternak, otherwise you'll be ostracised by the Russians and the elite in Europe.' This friend of mine has no liking for Pasternak either, but he does not follow in Tolstoy's footsteps: my favourite aristocrat used to voice his opinions on a regular basis.

Recently I was interviewed by a Russian lady who, at the outset, admitted she knew nothing about my career as a pianist or a writer. And all of a sudden she asked me, 'Why don't you like Pasternak?'

'I like his late poetry,' I answered, 'but I'm in two minds about *Doctor Zhivago*. Actually I prefer the film where one can admire the beauty of Julie Christie and the snow-covered Siberian hut. And I abhor his translations. How many Russians beat their wives up because of his inability to render "Frailty, thy name is woman"? His ignorance turned "frailty" into "perfidy". A perfidious attack on scholarship.'

'Wasn't he just a misogynist?' asked the lady.

'The Second Part of Goethe's *Faust* makes me smile when I read it in the original. But I burst into laughter—.' At this point the lady interrupted me, saying I was too hard on Pasternak and Goethe. 'Kierkegaard wasn't keen on the Second Part either,' I went on brazenly. 'He said something to the effect that Goethe sinned against the idea of Faust by letting him be converted. Both Goethe and his hero were felled by human weakness, he thought. The conversion dragged them down to the more commonplace stage. The medieval Faust is genuine, while Goethe's lowers the stakes, bearing the imprint of pantheism.'

In my youth I was stunned by the Second Part of *Faust* to the point of neglecting the First Part and all the operas based on it. And I preferred Dostoevsky to Tolstoy; yet the former seems to echo the First Part and the latter the Second: its all-embracing pageantry and overall harmony, the conversion. Now I set Tolstoy far above Dostoevsky. So I leap in the dark whenever my desire to catch up with the past obliterates my attachment to the present, to its all-forgiving generosity; at once Dostoevskian shadows begin to whirl around me as if to prove that three-dimensional creatures can and must be

reduced to a *danse macabre*. Dostoevsky bestowed so many honours on shadows that flesh-and-blood humans did their best to lose their flesh and their blood as soon as they ventured into his works. He might have thought it would be easier for them to become immortal after losing one dimension, as if Eternity were a closed door under which only a sheet of paper could be slipped. His heroes and heroines are of literary origin and do not exist in everyday life for the simple reason that everyday life is synonymous with everyday death. But their Beyond seems to have been borrowed from Origen's doctrine that does not permit us to recover our bodies after death so that only shadows dance in a small room, in Raskolnikov's attic, instead of performing a waltz in a ballroom—the privilege enjoyed by Tolstoy's characters. These widen the space allotted to them as if moving through Dante's circles to the centre of the earth from where they are to embark on their journey to Purgatory and Paradise.

'Keep in mind,' writes Cusanus to a young monk, 'that in this world we walk in the ways of metaphors and enigmatic images because the spirit of truth is not of this world and can be grasped by us only in so far as metaphors and symbols which we recognise as such carry us onward to that which is not known.' My metaphors and enigmatic images must be replaced by others symbols of truth if I am to *progress* along the road of which I have already spoken so many times. For the moment it is flanked on both sides by literary and philosophical texts, but the Hereafter, God and even the Devil are not to be found on the spot where I am standing now, whereas books keep me company and serve as a guide to my destination. So here is another metaphor related to Dostoevsky's works. He imprisons his characters in cages which do not remain where they are, contrary to what I seemed to insinuate in the previous paragraph. But instead of moving through Dante's circles and spheres they are hauled up now and then as if the author wished to show their occupants to *other* onlookers—to those who live in distant countries. This space concerns our world where we struggle for recognition, for fame, for laurels. 'Metaphors should serve only to point the way: they have to be transcended, their sensory meaning must be dropped if we are to ascend to simple intellectual knowledge,' writes Cusanus. What do my metaphors point to? I might be imprisoned in a cage that no one proposes to haul up; and I cannot do it on my own because I am *inside* this cage. Even if there were a rope by my side I would not make a journey in the air and I am loath to hang myself like Stavrogin in whose cage the author obligingly deposited a rope and a hook. Actually I would not mind wasting my eternity in a cage on condition that someone looks at the cage from the earth, from this world of ours. But let us transcend the metaphor of which I am tired already; as if it were not a mere metaphor but a real cage with bars and straws. Let us clutch at straws!

When Claude François was asked why he sang the same repertoire over and over again he answered that the audience seemed to like it. 'And why should I change what the audience likes? You don't change the team that wins.' A television screen is just another cage, a two-dimensional one. (Another metaphor which does not really transcend what I have written before.) And there are people who look at this cage and its occupant, defying death and the closed door of the Hereafter. Would I be

happy to while my eternity away in this set-up? Just a few years. Never mind—a few years are better than nothing; anything is better than nothing.

6

What do I need to know about the afferent and efferent nerve impulses, about the circulation of blood, about the microscopic condition of a human being in the uterus? The ethical has tasks enough for me. Do I need to know about how the digestive processes work in order to be able to eat? Or about the processes of the nervous system—in order to believe in God and love humanity?

Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*

'Naturally, every person wants to be active in the world in accordance with his abilities, but this in turn implies that he wants to develop his abilities in a particular direction, namely in that which is best suited to his particular personality. But which direction is that? Here I am confronted with a great question mark. Here I stand like Hercules, but not at a crossroads. No, here there are a great many more roads, and it is thus all the more difficult to choose the right one. Perhaps it is precisely my life's misfortune to be interested in far too many things, but not decisively in any one thing. My interests are not all subordinated under one heading, but are all coordinated.' Kierkegaard was not living in a cage; neither did I at the age of ten, at the age of twelve. I had my fingers in many pies: mathematics, physics, literature, astronomy. But, for all my mother's efforts, I was indifferent to music associated in my mind with REPETITION—one of Kierkegaard's keywords. But, needless to say, at the time I had no inkling of what the Danish philosopher thought about during his life on earth: my awareness of Denmark was limited to Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales. I was in love with the legendary mermaid who, however, did not bar my way to other loves—to other metaphors of God. For the sake of decency, I will not use the idiom 'to have one's fingers in many pies' when describing my love adventures; and yet, at some point, I was in love with three girls at once. Amidst those numerous cages I walked as a free man, regularly changing my repertoire so as not to repeat myself, my ecstasies, my feelings, my failures. I was not yet masochistic enough to persist with my ambitious projects for which no one really cares, not even yours truly: at least my unconscious rejects it unconditionally. But, in this particular case, I pay heed to my consciousness, to my body, to that part of my being which draws an indescribable pleasure from writing novels and poems. The rest is none of my concern: let my unconscious tussle with it.

I was so carried away by mathematics that viewing the world in terms of figures seemed natural to me; I became an adept of Pythagoras without reading anything about his *Weltanschauung*. And I took part in the so-called '*olympiadi*' that were organised by the State and not by talent spotters: the Soviet Union sought yet another proof of its superiority in the domain of science. I lost the most

difficult of those Olympiads, which took place at Moscow University where I hoped to spend five years, studying mathematics, physics and biology. The defeat made me realise what a poor figure I cut among the talents discovered at the University contest; the distress I experienced put a premature end to my obsession with exact sciences. As I pointed out earlier, in those days I was no masochist. Of course I can grasp the beauty of the following statements found by Karl Jaspers in Cusanus's works: 'Without number there would be no distinction, order, proportion, harmony, or even the multiplicity of things in general,' 'What does not fall under quantity or magnitude can be neither conceived nor visualised,' 'Number constitutes the method of cognition itself,' 'Number is the archetype of all our intellectual concepts.' But even a rudimentary mathematical formula is beyond my ken now.

A similar misfortune befell me two or three years afterwards when I decided to test my abilities as a composer. In our auditorium I was faced with a bunch of teenagers who, self-confident and bursting with energy, needed no endorsement from our teacher: they had their fingers in one pie only. They all looked down on me; worse still, I never doubted the superiority of their music. I had to face the music, as it were. Turning a deaf ear to our teacher's suggestion, I did not abandon my doomed project at once because it is vital to know not only the 'outs' but also the 'ins' of music. 'It's high time I found out how all these notes come together,' I said to him. Actually the way he made his suggestion was most delicate. One day he chanced upon a poem I had noted down in the margin of my *étude*. 'That's what you might turn your attention to,' he said after perusing the poem.

I am not sure my inner knowledge of music has ever assisted me in my endeavour to fathom God's unfathomable ways. It is true that I believed in God almost ecstatically during the period of my studies at the Music Academy. What seems strange, however, is the indifference to Christianity I displayed at the peak of my mathematical exploits. And yet, according to Cusanus, the whole process of mathematical cognition is a copy of divine cognition, for in mathematics we know exactly what our reason produces. After all, we ourselves have brought it forth. Thus mathematical reasoning is the most appropriate symbol for the divine mind that does exactly the same. God recognises His offspring among which there are stars, stones, dogs and bogs.

Of course I was rather young in those days, but you can believe in God at the age of five, provided your mother or grandmother takes you to church every week. My grandmother did, but I proved to be insensitive and even hostile to the beauty of Orthodox rituals, fidgeting and talking all the time. One Sunday a priest put a host into my mouth and, after holding it for a while between my teeth, I spat it out so ostentatiously that my grandmother screamed in horror. We left in a hurry while her scream continued to reverberate throughout the Church and the whole of Christendom. In his boyhood Kierkegaard's father cursed God as he stood atop a hill, hungry and shivering with cold. Even at the age of eighty-two he still recalled his offence. I have not forgotten mine. Didn't I curse God by spitting the host out? Kierkegaard was burdened, almost crushed to death by his father's curse—as if his father had cursed *him* on the moors of Jutland. I gave no thought to my offence for many years; and yet I

cursed *myself* that Sunday morning. No point in studying mathematics or music. No point in writing this biography.

7

Writing an autobiography is no easy task for various reasons upon which I might already have touched in this book. I am too modest to write anything about myself because my life is not so precious as to deserve anybody's notice: my next-of-kin have died and cannot profit from my memories, my memoirs. (Derrida dissects these terms in his book on Paul de Man.) And my friends know my life in minute detail thanks to my volubility, my eagerness to tell stories about myself. (Derrida complains about his inability to tell stories.) However, I did not talk to them about my curse, compared to which Rigoletto's fate is too theatrical, too obvious: to lose a child is worse than to lose yourself. It is not true, in my opinion. By losing yourself you lose your children, their lives, their mathematics and music, their biographies and autobiographies. And you lose the world, you *wound* the world.

I did not lose my life and so went to a primary school where I was not greeted by the cheers of my fellow-*sufferers*: they proclaimed unanimously that the lessons we had to attend were a punishment of God. And yet they knew nothing about God. In Russia you mention God all the time without having the slightest idea what you are talking about. Well, they did not like me, those fellow-sufferers; at least I was never elected 'chairman' of the class.

Our teachers liked me because I was studious and gifted. (I set my sights on being top of the class.) I was not gifted enough to win that University Olympiad, but I did not put them in the picture about my failure. So they believed in my future, as they told my mother who was determined to create a genius out of her own creation: it was not enough to have given a birth to a human being. And my father surveyed my marks. 'What marks did you get in the biology exam? I'm not really concerned for biology, you know. It's the discipline of your mind I care about. Studying a foreign language is a good discipline for the mind. But let us drop the subject—you don't wish to study foreign languages because you play the piano four hours a day. You won't fail to meet the requirements of your piano teacher, will you? Anyway you could have got a higher mark if you'd worked harder. You should score full marks—' And so on, and so forth.

'It seemed to me,' writes Kierkegaard, 'that heaven and earth would collapse if I didn't do my homework, and at the same time it seemed to me that even if heaven and earth collapsed, that catastrophe would in no way exempt me from what I had been assigned to do—my homework.' His father's obsession with what amounted to no more than the discipline of the mind made such an impact on Kierkegaard that 'even if I owed him nothing else, this would be enough to make me eternally indebted to him. This is what matters in raising a child, not that the child learns one or another specific thing, but that the spirit is matured, that energy is aroused.' Should I be indebted to my father for the

structure of my thoughts, for their pattern? Is he responsible for my failures? Kierkegaard's father created a genius through his curse and his insistence on top marks.

I was so carried away with literature that whatever could not be found in books was foreign to me to such an extent that life itself became distant, shrouded in fog, in darkness; whenever I had to tear myself away from my books I took a leap in the dark without being aware of Kierkegaard's leaps. You need not study Kierkegaard to leap in the dark upon awakening.

I was supposed to practice scales and arpeggios four hours a day. Of course I played Bach's inventions and other pieces, but all this music was reduced to scales and arpeggios in my mind and in my body of which my fingers were a minuscule part. My mother kept a fairly watchful eye on my body which was supposed to sit at the piano whenever I yearned for a game of football or chess. Resigned and subservient, my body sat at the piano, but my eyes were fixed on the pages of a book leaning against the music rest. I read H. G. Wells or Jules Verne while my fingers ran from one side of the keyboard to the other.

Many years ago an old lady—my second mother—told me I was bound to write about myself, whatever the subject matter of my work. I laughed and said I would never touch upon my life because there was nothing more obnoxious in literature than a description of a night '*encore chaude*'. 'These hot nights sell like hot cakes but contemporary writers should rediscover the rules of perspective, in my opinion, notwithstanding the commercial success of their works. What does this perspective consist of? Someone else's biography, for instance.'

After a lecture I gave in Brussels a young lady asked me how many slices of my life I had put in my novels. 'Just one cufflink,' I answered.

'But there are no cufflinks in your novels.' She looked perplexed.

'This raincoat,' I said, pointing to someone else's raincoat.

A bit of wishful thinking on my part: nobody has ever asked me such a question. And even I cannot remember if there are cufflinks in my novels.

'As one travels along comfortably in a train one reads in a guidebook that "here is the frightful Wolf Pit where one plunges 70,000 fathoms under the earth". While one sits smoking one's cigar in a cosy dining car, one reads in the guidebook, "here is the den of a gang of bandits who attack and abuse the traveller." Here there is—that is, here there *was*, because now it is amusing to imagine how things used to be—no Wolf Pit, but a railroad, and no gang of bandits, but a cosy dining car.' Contemporary writers neither plunge 70,000 fathoms under the earth nor explore my golf course and its gigantic holes inside which a great many downward perspectives open up. They read (and write) about such pits in a cosy dining car, a cigar in their hand, in their mouth. A vicious kind of perspective.

It is too late to discard Kierkegaard's biography from which I culled the above excerpt: I am not magnanimous enough to sacrifice the material I gathered during my holiday in Switzerland. Sylvia Plath never used her wastepaper basket; I am not even sure she had one. Tolstoy on the other hand did

not hesitate to relinquish the idea of writing a novel about the Decembrists. He had begun to think of those losers as a workable theme for a novel back in 1856; he returned to the project in 1860-61. But nothing came of it, of them, of those losers—they lost once again.

I am so attached to Kierkegaard, his philosophy and biography, that my reaction to the books on him I have been driven to consult reminds me of what spectators at Greek tragedies were supposed to feel as they witnessed the impact of Fate on the hero's life. In the *Phaedrus* Plato makes a distinction between good and bad madness, the former variety being frequent among theatre-goers. These would forsake their bodies and souls to identify with actors who, in their turn, modelled their new existence upon the characters they were called upon to play. 'Here self-forgetfulness is anything but a private condition,' writes Gadamer, 'for it arises from devoting one's full attention to the matter at hand, and this is the spectator's own positive accomplishment....The spectator recognises himself and his own finiteness in the face of the power of fate. What happens to the great ones of the earth has an exemplary significance. Tragic pensiveness does not affirm the tragic course of events as such, or the justice of the fate that overtakes the hero, but rather a metaphysical order of being that is true for all. To see that "this is how it is" is a kind of self-knowledge for the spectator who emerges with new insight from the illusions in which he, like everyone else, lives.'

The same goes for the reader, I suppose. But our proverbial reader—our modern reader—does not recognise his illusions that he mistakes for reality. Nor does he recognise reality because it is reality and nothing else. Why should you recognise yourself in a mirror? It is you, if you are not mistaken. And you are not mistaken, you are never mistaken. How can you ever be mistaken if what you have before your very eyes is just reality and nothing else? So you do not recognise yourself—your metaphysical self, rather—because you think there is no need to recognise yourself or anybody else; or anything else. Everything is just real and you know it like the back of your hand. You recognise the back of your hand, don't you? Is it someone else's hand, by any chance? It is not. It is your hand—the hand you were born with many years ago or several years ago. Don't you see this little scar? Your cat scratched you while you were playing with her last week. You got rid of your cat after this incident—or accident, as you called it. You put your cat in your car and drove a few miles from where you live to reach a disreputable area known as the 'pet cemetery'. In that area domestic animals are killed in their thousands. So you left your cat in that area and returned home. Did you recognise yourself in the mirror, in your largest mirror?

Our modern reader does not recognise himself because he has got rid of fate and its power, replacing them with modern technology that pushes human life beyond the deadline assigned to it by Greek playwrights, by art in general. Today we recognise only *our* power in the face of which even fate cringes back in terror as if we were going to hit it on the skull. (We have created fate in our own image.) Mercifully we leave it alone. Wreathed in smiles, we wag our index fingers, 'Be careful! Next time we won't forgive and forget.'

'I'm sorry,' fate answers. 'I often fail to keep up with the times. It's so hard, you know, considering the importance they attached to me in days of yore.'

'We don't have this atavistic fear of the dark,' we explain. 'You're not dark, are you? You come at the appointed hour and knock on our door. Beethoven was good at depicting your arrival. What he overlooked, however, is the fact that we may not open the door if you come at an ungodly hour. Besides, we don't have to appoint *you* as our judge. Today we ourselves choose the hour of our death and not even *you* are allowed to question our choice.'

'What about your finiteness?' fate inquires timidly.

'We don't think in these terms. In the following sentence "been" is non-finite: "How many times have you been to the cinema?" Well, we've been to the cinema many, many times. And we watch TV every day. And our mayor assured us that the planes are taking infinite care to avoid flying over residential areas.'

'I know you're taking infinite care of your health,' fate answers with an ingratiating smile. 'But even this infinite care can't conquer the finitude of your existence.'

'Didn't we tell you we'd been to the cinema an infinite number of times? And TV? And DVD? And computers? Can't we feed *anything* into them? Don't they know the word "immortality"?'

'The aesthetic myth of imagination and the invention of genius is still an exaggeration that does not stand up to reality,' writes Gadamer. 'Now as before, the choice of material and the forming of it still do not proceed from the free discretion of the artist and are not the mere expression of his inner life. Rather, the artist addresses people whose minds are prepared and chooses what promises to have an effect on them. He himself stands in the same tradition as the public he is addressing and which he gathers around him.'

Their minds are *not* prepared for the books I write because I have never sought to choose what may have an effect on their brains, souls, hearts and spines. I am acquainted with the literature that sends them into transports of delight, but a long time ago I drew the line at writing such nonsense and this line is *infinite*. Didn't Anselm liken God's supreme truth to an infinite straight line?

We do not stand in the same tradition.

The whole of my constitution, all the habits of my physical life, are diametrically opposed to the madness of travelling during the dog days, when the temperature is 84° (F), when I hardly even dare to take a carriage ride at noon. What is the sense of travelling at this time of year to a sandy desert where the heat of the sun is intolerable? What is the sense of trifling with one's sleep, for I never sleep while on board and am therefore very exhausted the next day? And in foreign

*surroundings, which always make the temperature
20° hotter?*

Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals*

Proust owned up to having no imagination at his disposal, but all he had to do was leave his room and go outdoors where his friends and their friends seemed to await his curiosity and scrutiny. They stood in the same tradition and might have fitted into the passage I have quoted above, but for Proust's unofficial status. He was a *genius* and the people he gathered around him agreed on this point because they lived in a world where there was such a status, deprived of which they would have felt impoverished, finite, mortal. Anyway the choice of material proceeded from Proust. The same goes for Kierkegaard.

I discovered him rather early—extremely early we might say, providing we are prepared to make allowances for the backward disposition of the Soviet regime which displayed itself most impudently in the domains of art and philosophy. At the age of twenty-four I read a book on Kierkegaard where he was depicted as a Christian philosopher and also as someone who emphasised our anguish, our despair, our death in life. At the time my faith needed no examination to *shine* in the dark where the Soviet Union had been stranded ever since the Russian Revolution. Now I realise that my self-assurance was on a par with the ignorance of Soviet officials who had no idea of what lay in store for them after their deaths: they cared about Eternity only in terms of slogans and manifestos. My faith was too straightforward and therefore quite unworthy of Kierkegaard's yardstick.

There was a party during which I would mention Kierkegaard at the drop of a hat—for instance, when Danish pastry was touched upon: the amount of vodka we had drunk was not yet superior to our capacity to remember something outside Russia where we availed ourselves of whatever the Soviet regime was in a position to offer us. (Vodka, smoked sprats, herrings, gherkins.) I shouted, 'Sören Kierkegaard' and the whole assembly stood up to acclaim my performance, although no one had ever heard this name.

His books were not obtainable in Russia so I did all I could to wrest as much information as possible from the short biography I had acquired on Gorky Street. And I would embroider upon the text to appropriate his ideas, to make them mine: I felt I might become a better man if I did so with assiduity. One day a middle-aged woman sold me a French translation of *The Sickness unto Death* which, for some esoteric reason, bore a different title—*Traité du désespoir*. What emerges chiefly from that period of my life, however, has little in common with despair, angst and suchlike: my memory focuses willy-nilly on those parties and the hopes linked to them. There were so many beautiful girls around me that the only works I really craved for—*Either / Or, Stages on Life's Way*—dealt precisely with love, seduction and betrayals. Don Juan is one of the figures dissected by Kierkegaard with the aid of Mozart's music. 'He desires. This desire, in turn, has a seductive effect. To that extent he seduces.'

My desire was so insubordinate to my will that I could not keep it 'inside', whatever this word might be applied to in the ever-changing context of my youth: my body, my room, a flat where we drank vodka on New Year's Eve, back streets, boulevards. So I relied on the extravert nature of my desire which was used to reaching its tentacles out as soon as a gorgeous woman turned up within my field of vision. Within my reach, within reach of conquering, reaching over, reaching across. My desire seemed to repeat the same word as if to conjure up the magic force of mantras and I would take my cue from it as I concentrated my train of thought on the following sentence: 'My experience and energy are a winning combination in the domain of donjuanism.' Though unaided by Kierkegaard's analysis of *Don Giovanni*, I often resorted to the winning combination of words and music, playing a recording of Mozart's opera as I talked to this or that woman who therefore was unable to ascertain where the seductive effect had originated. 'His passion sets in motion the passions of the others. His passion resounds everywhere. It resounds in and lends support to the gravity of the Commendatore, the rage of Elvira, the hatred of Anna, the pomposity of Ottavio, the anxiety of Zerlina, the indignation of Masetto, the confusion of Leporello....There is an anxiety in him, but this anxiety is his energy.'

And what about despair? Was I in the clutches of despair when courting those innumerable beauties? One of them was a source of considerable anxiety that I felt not only during our candlelit dinners but also in her absence—while waiting for her telephone calls, for instance. Needless to say I was anxious to overcome her resistance, but neither this anxiety nor the preceding one appears in Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Dread* where a parallel is drawn between angst—a feeling that has no definitive object—and terror whose rise and fall are linked to an objective threat.

ANGST

*I've never been maligned
In the gossip columns
Of our newspapers.*

*So far none of your phone calls
Has pricked my conscience.*

*Am I being judged?
I don't think so.
The weather is awful,
But it doesn't judge me.
Nor does midnight,
Though full of ghosts:
I just take three breaths*

To settle the nerves.

Yet I'm being judged.

TERROR

Nietzsche was right: it is important

To die at the right moment.

Can one be born

At the right moment?

Actually you cannot draw a parallel between two things that differ so radically, but they did have some affinities as far as I was concerned. What did I experience in the presence (and absence) of that woman?

There was something beyond our relationship, beyond the feeling of terror I would succumb to when confronted with her ruthless glance. Perhaps I realised, however indistinctly, that I was on the wrong track altogether, confining my thoughts and emotions to an aesthetic plane—one of Kierkegaard's favourite topics. Is that why I eventually immersed myself in *The Sickness unto Death*, disregarding the sensual allure of the works where love, sex and Eros are discussed. Anyway they could not be purchased in Russia.

In spite of the woman's resistance I was not really in love with her, thereby contradicting the well-known formula: the more recalcitrant the object of your desire the fiercer your passion. And I must have been waiting for something or somebody else whenever my steps directed me towards the telephone that might announce her visit or a cancellation of her visit—a more frequent occurrence. A space unfolded within my daily routine and, try as I might, I could not fill it, not even with another woman or God. I began to write poetry as if the sheets of paper covered with my handwriting could be deposited in that space and partly eradicate it. Melancholia never thrives in cramped conditions; an empty palace might be an ideal dwelling place for it. Ludwig II of Bavaria would have subscribed to my view.

'I must now remain quiet, by no means work too strenuously, indeed, hardly strenuously at all, not begin any new book but try to come to myself and *truly think the idea of my melancholia together with God, right here and now*. In this way my melancholia may be abolished and *Christianity may come closer to me*. Until now I have protected myself against my melancholia with intellectual labour that keeps it at bay. Now I must try to...forget it myself, though not through distraction, not by distancing myself from it, but in God.' Now I can distance myself from melancholia through my literary labours—through this work in progress, among other things. But in the days of my Russian

melancholia I wrote only short poems and played the piano whose sounds would reinforce my feelings instead of abolishing them. And, for all their diversity, my feelings might be summed up by the word 'melancholia'. Happy is a man who can think together with God, 'right here and now'—as if God indeed was standing by Kierkegaard's side. This is how this famous entry in his *Journal* begins: 'I must get a better grip on my melancholia. Until now it has reposed in the profoundest depths, and it has been kept down there with the help of enormous intellectual effort. It is certainly clear that I have benefited others with my work and that God has approved of it and has helped me in every way. I thank him again and again for having done infinitely more for me than I had expected.' It is clear that I have benefited no one with my work, not even myself. Does God approve of such a waste of time and intellectual potency? Should I curse God instead of thanking Him from the bottom of my heart? I need not climb a hill or even a ladder to curse God with gusto—much more efficiently than Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard. How I envy his son who made the most of his father's misdeed and, through his luminous works, bestowed a sort of blessing on humanity. So many years have elapsed since I set about nourishing melancholia in my heart, in my mind, in my soul. Now I do my best to keep it out of my life, but it is too late and its absence will not help me unless a messenger of God decides to intervene on my behalf. Didn't Heidegger say something to the effect that only God could help us? Only God can help me, providing I do not voice my blasphemous ideas too often.

No writings of any importance, no wife, no children, no concerts. What is the point of being a pianist if you play no concerts and make no recordings? Why did I practice arpeggios and scales in my youth instead of playing soccer? Why am I writing this book? Of course I should not play soccer at my age, but there are other occupations to which I might do ample justice if I were not so obstinate. Why don't I leave Kierkegaard in peace? At least his works should be left in peace, I suppose. Of course I disagree with the sentence I quoted this afternoon while sitting in the woods with my laptop. I do not mind quoting it once again, 'It is certainly clear that I have benefited others with my work and that God has approved of it and has helped me in every way.' Wasn't Kierkegaard led into temptation like Adolph Peter Adler who received Christ in person? This famous entry dates from the period of *The Sickness unto Death*. Was this act of bravado the only cure for the sickness described in the book?

I still do not know what had brought about the sickness from which I suffered during the last year of my Moscow life. It was a sickness unto death I suffered from and probably the *title* of Kierkegaard's book had something to do with it: my command of French was not sufficient to grasp the intricacies of his thought. Or was it the other way round? Did I appreciate the book—mostly the word 'despair' repeated over and over again—because my melancholia had paved the way for it? The space I talked about earlier grew to such an extent that infinity could be envisaged as a goal to which I was to direct my thoughts and hopes. Actually my state of mind (and the state of affairs in general) was much more down-to-earth than my description of it seems to imply. It was down-to-earth in a literal sense: my space odyssey was related not to heaven, as might have been presumed, but to the

surface of our globe where, in my opinion, one could find a suitable country to live. Let us not forget that I was a Soviet citizen at the time. So Kierkegaard's variety of despair anchored in infinitude where one is likely to lose oneself did not square with my predicament, the roots of which were situated right under my feet—in the country submitted to the rigours of a totalitarian regime. 'My finitude, if any, is wholly due to the restrictions imposed on the inhabitants of the Soviet Union and not to my own inadequacy,' I thought as I ploughed through Kierkegaard's book. The space I produced by looking far ahead was not the Heideggerian void—the famous *Nichts*—but the expanse of land between Moscow and any Western country: Sweden, England, France, Belgium. So the despair provoked by finitude and the lack of infinitude was traceable to the same predicament, to the same roots of which Westerners talked so enthusiastically when giving a once-over to my voluntary exile: 'Your roots are in Russia,' 'A tree dies without roots'.

I hoped to *find* myself in the infinitude guaranteed by any democratic constitution, and freedom of movement—a possibility not only to act but also to travel *spontaneously*—was apt to obliterate the despair I might experience with regard to so-called uprooting. (Kierkegaard also studied the despair arising from virtual worlds and the lack of necessity: 'all is possible' does not spare you embarrassment, trouble and worry.) 'Besides,' I told myself, 'freedom of action may assist you in the search for yourself—if you do search for yourself and wish to be yourself, come hell or high water.'

I wish I had not found myself. There is no denying that I am confronted with yet another kind of despair that seeks to deprive you of yourself, of your habits and trains of thought, of your failures and disgust. Why not adopt this despair like a child? The last ten years have seen a dramatic fall in the number of adoptions—in real life and in the kingdom of despair. (And in the kingdom of God.) Anyway it is too late to carry out such a project in real life because I shall not live long enough to see my child as a mature man, as an embodiment of my ideals. But there are no deadlines for adopting a gracious, cosy despair and raising it like a child on whom you are eager to lavish time, effort and huge sums of money. What does it matter if this child of yours whines and screams from time to time! After all, dummies can be bought everywhere. You might also use a handkerchief—two handkerchiefs, if need be. What does it matter if this child of yours chokes to death! You will find another one shortly: the number of *your* despairs has mushroomed in recent years. One of them is lying in your bed at this very moment and this moment is perfidious in terms of grammar. 'Lying' is a present participle that shows continuous action. I used it to form the present continuous so that the present or rather this present moment, will be lying on the bed as long as the statement lasts. And I am loath to remove it from the text. No wonder I suffer from insomnia.

He abandoned the faith of his fathers, and thus the people to whom he belonged, the land of his birth, whose love binds with the strongest bonds.

Because now he no longer belonged to any people, he belonged only to the Lord Jesus....In love of Christ or in hatred of the world he left everything, his station in life, his livelihood, family, friends, human language, love of mother and father, love of fatherland.

Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*

Aphrodite was born from the sea; an ideal woman cannot be born from a puddle. The sea is a breeding ground for women and metaphors. 'The sea is despair' sounds logical, given the size of the sea and its propensity for being rough. (The sea is also God—St Augustine's simile.) Half way through my boat journey the sea began getting choppy and I started to feel ill. Actually I had been taken ill well before reaching Dante's turning point—thirty-five years of age. I was twenty-five when I made the acquaintance of my faithful mistress who is all the more faithful now on account of her absence from this world. People are often reluctant to utter the word 'death', especially when this word or event concerns their next-of-kin, dearest friends or faithful mistresses. But it is my style that should be blamed for my omitting this word from the sentence where I speak about the unnatural loyalty of the woman whom I loved for more than twenty years. (I was mainly preoccupied with the rhythm of the ending.) I still nourish this sentiment in the profoundest folds of my being despite its object's 'untimely disappearance'; a frequent use of clichés must point to yet another despair that might surface as I proceed with my narrative. 'You must know that you consider it your good fortune never to have loved anyone but her, that you will stake your honour on never loving another....and I loved her much, she was light as a bird, old as an idea; I let her climb higher and higher. I reached out my hand and she stood upon it and fluttered her wings, and she called down to me: It's wonderful up here.' That is how Kierkegaard speaks about his unfaithful mistress who married another man and was so faithful to her husband that even after the philosopher's death—her husband was no philosopher—she refused to have a posthumous relationship with him by means of his heritage. But it is too early to broach the subject of their post-marriage encounters on which I shall enlarge in due course. My faithful mistress married twice, but she remained faithful to me—within the sphere of her declarations and vows—to her dying day. I am pretty certain she would have asked me with her last breath not to betray our love, had I been near her deathbed, well within earshot.

Her successor—another faithful mistress of mine—cannot bear irony even when it is directed against the people she is not fond of. She would object to my treatment of her dead rival if I showed her this text and let her cope with it on her own. And what would I say in vindication of my style if given an opportunity to comment upon its shades and nuances? 'I have recounted the story so often, with such profusion of metaphors, that I've no alternative but to transcend my own writings even at the risk of becoming ironical. We must transcend all figures of speech and they're infinite in number. And among them we're bound to come across some ironical figures.'

'You have a nice turn of phrase—'

'It's just another turn of the screw, my darling. Artists are enslaved by the medium they make use of on their way to the Absolute.'

'All this beautiful talk is no excuse—'

'Languages lead us astray. These problems may be a thing of the past—they were mostly dealt with in the first half of the twentieth century—but we go on speaking to others and also to ourselves. And postmodernism didn't turn our languages upside down. Perhaps we *should* turn them upside down to transcend all finite things. Cusanus thought it might be achieved through the coincidence of opposites—*coincidentia oppositorum*. Indeed if we turn Russian and English upside down, their heads will coincide with their feet and vice versa.'

Let us skip my former fiancée's beauty and melancholia on which she would model her behaviour as soon as the inexhaustible store of her whims and pranks began to tail off. 'Inexhaustible' and 'empty'—just another instance of *coincidentia oppositorum* which was one of her major characteristics. So many opposites coincided in her character, ideas and, generally speaking, in her life that I was tempted to emulate this performance by uniting two of Kierkegaard's opposites: 'either' and 'or'. From the book I acquired in my thirst for inaccessible values—Moscow, 1972—I learnt that the title *Either / Or* referred to the alternatives of an aesthetic or an ethical (or ethico-religious) view of life. The alternative I faced in the company of my faithful mistress was no less crucial, for it concerned my whole future and perhaps my immortality; in other words, it was a question of life and death. Only later did I realise that all questions, however unimportant, could be lifted to this intoxicating plane of regard.

To leave or not to leave—that was my alternative which, given the political situation, might be likened to Hamlet's cliché-ridden monologue. 'If I stay in Russia I'll kill myself. If I settle abroad I might get killed.' My interior monologue was cliché-ridden too, but for once I did not mind being platitudinous. But had I any right to leave the country of my birth on the grounds that no one could tell me, 'Do feel free to travel as much as necessary for your music studies'? Recently I was asked the question I had put to myself so many times after my departure from Russia, 'Why did you settle abroad?' Under the circumstances I prefer to address myself in the second person as if someone else had done the deed. 'You know, I don't like reading at night, especially if I'm supposed to part with the book I'm engrossed in—the ritual we often performed in the days of *samizdat*. So many people were involved in the ritual on both sides—readers and printers. The job required a lot of enthusiasm, dedication and self-sacrifice. The people who translated and typed all those books we needed so badly—I can't help admiring them. I'm even prepared to overlook the inadequacy of their speedy translations. Besides, some of the enthusiasts had only a smattering of English, French or German. A lot of enthusiasm was also required on the part of readers. So I dreamt of a huge library—similar to the one described by Borges in his fairy tale. The library I have at home doesn't seem to be as large as that

of Babylon, but it is certainly not inferior to what Tolstoy could avail himself of at Yasnya Polyana—as far as numbers of books go. And it is far superior in quality.'

In one of *his* interviews Jorge Luis Borges pointed out that even a voracious reader was unable to explore more than a hundred books in his lifetime. 'And further, by these, my son, be admonished: of making many books *there is* no end; and much study *is* a weariness of the flesh,' says Ecclesiastes. I quote from these books to my heart's content, but my heart is far from content and my flesh is weary. Have I been called upon to illustrate The Holy Bible? A luxury edition? 'A discontented office-bearer....wants to be something extraordinary—and at the same time discontented. A sorry, immoral confusion! If he is discontented, if he has something new from God to bring us—then, out of the ranks! "with a halter about his neck"; and then let him speak out, for then the situation is such as a true *extraordinarius* needs and must demand in order to be able to gesticulate and start up the music. But if he hasn't anything new from God to bring us, it shall by no means be to his advantage that he is discontented....What makes this difference between the ordinary individual and the special individual is the *starting-point*' (*The Book on Adler*).

My starting-point or rather the point of no return. I was on the point of leaving my motherland which would have repudiated her prodigal son had he changed his mind and returned to her after spending a few months abroad. When it comes to the point, there is no point, beside the point, getting back to the point. How would our *samizdat* enthusiasts translate these sentences into Russian? In my motherland self-publishing is a thing of the past: too many books come out every day and some bookshops are open at night. 'A boom time for literature,' say those publishers who favour quantity, influenced as they are by financial success. The Russians no longer prefer dollars to roubles so it is the *amount* of money you own that counts. Money without qualities, as it were.

But I should get down to the nitty-gritty—to the freezing point that was to melt down on June 11, 1974. (Alas, a freezing point does not melt down.) Shakespeare was often criticised for his addiction to wordplays, but even now I have no wish to engage in this passive activity, letting words disport themselves at the expense of my despair. Or do they translate my despair into English with care and devotion? Do they have the know-how to get the job done right? My native Russian would be more appropriate for the unenviable task I have given myself to keep my despair and melancholia at bay. After all, the English set Turgenev above Tolstoy and Dostoevsky—according to W. H. Auden. 'Man does *not* strive for pleasure; only the Englishman does,' says Nietzsche in *Twilight of the Idols*.

So the word 'point' should be interpreted with flat-footed literalness. There was a point in time and space which was to remain a point for a limited number of hours; and this number decreased as the fatal day neared the present, advancing towards me from the foreseeable future. I still did not know whether I would have to commit suicide or let myself be killed by a KGB agent, but the date of departure had been fixed a long time before. 'He departed from this world'—is that how they would have recounted my suicide? I might have swallowed a dozen sleeping pills *under a pseudonym*: never

in my life have I been in a suicidal mood. Besides, Kierkegaard was reputed for his skilful handling of pseudonyms.

To come back to the point. I was aware that in the near future this point might be extended to become a line: a straight line, a curve, a circle. But even a vicious circle is better than just a point, I thought. And an infinite circle in which arc and chord coincide is a straight line; within infinitude they meet and unite. 'Within infinitude' was a contradiction in terms, but I thought that *coincidentia oppositorum* would deal with this paradox as well. Anyway I was convinced that infinitude could be found only in the West. Of course I did not reason in these terms, being ignorant of Cusanus and *coincidentia oppositorum*, but let us put this description down to my learned ignorance: I knew what I did not know.

Back to my starting point. What can it be? Just freedom, nothing else? Is that enough? A straight line, a circle. Moving around our globe—in search of what? Am I not likely to come back to the same point after my world tour? I was longing for books, for theatrical performances, for concerts (mine and other performers'), for food and wine. 'Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry: for that shall abide with him of his labour the days of his life, which God giveth him under the sun.' I was not ignorant of Ecclesiastes, but his advice is angled at an *ordinary* individual who 'hasn't anything new from God to bring us'. And I am a genuine *extraordinarius*; at least I used to be one in those days when my leap forward (my flight across Europe) was on the agenda. This escape alone was so extraordinary I had no need to bring any news from God to deserve the status of *extraordinarius*. And it was a relatively new starting point: only two musicians had requested political asylum before I did. What news did *they* bring us apart from the media reports? To tell the truth, in those days I thought I did have something new to offer humankind—the gift bestowed upon me by the Almighty. Alas, it was an old starting point—as old as the hills from whose tops so many poets, painters and composers have given thanks to God for their creative powers.

Last night I wrote a poem which once and for all answers the question about what acted as a springboard for my departure from Moscow, from my flat where Tatiana stayed with me in January and February 1974.

*Your decision to leave the country of your birth
Seems to have been motivated by selfishness.
You had nothing to lose except Tatiana, her love.
But what is love compared with money and safety?
A mere word, a mere feeling confined to the heart.
And safety concerns the whole body. In the West
You found freedom, comfort and peace of mind.*

'A cowardly refusal to face marital problems.'
Is that what your guilty conscience tells you?
Just raise your voice to silence it. Why on earth
Should one suffer? It's a Wonderful Life.
Human memory can be shortened at will.
The back muscles shorten as your leg lifts.
What's memory? A muscle, a brain muscle.
All you have to do is raise your eyebrows.
Happiness and love are just around the corner
And there are many corners in democratic countries.
There are only corners in your motherland—
The corners of prisons and lunatic asylums.
You can't go round those corners, can you?
Only nonentities suffer from homesickness—
Nonentities, losers and quivering wrecks.
What's homesickness? Just a sickness,
And those who suffer from it do not qualify
For sickness benefit. No holiday, no sick pay.
What do you need it for? Enjoy yourself!
Come on, get yourself a drink!

Kierkegaard wrote an article entitled *On the Concept of Irony* (1835) where he states that irony never permits itself to be subsumed under its concept in orderly fashion. Expanding beyond all boundaries, it suddenly disappears like that old witch who decided 'to devour everything and then to devour herself as well'. An appropriate *final* point.

'The true extraordinary individual....be unconditionally recognised for the fact that he is willing to make sacrifices. And for this he must be willing *for his own sake* and *for the sake of the universal* (*The Book on Adler*).' All this nonsense is so far away I have no urge to speak of the sacrifices I was about to make as I stood there, rooted to the spot or rather to the point from which I was unwilling to budge. Nietzsche sang praises to idleness and I was idle in those days, although no psychology was born from this state of mind and body: 'Idleness is the beginning of all psychology' (*Twilight of the Idols*). It was not born *on the spot*, but Nietzsche drops no hint as to *when* the birth of psychology must occur in relation to idleness. Perhaps it is also linked to the birth of tragedy that I was to enact 'on the point', partly against my will. So tragedy outstripped psychology; ever since my departure the latter has done all it could to catch up with the former. In the early nineties tragedy came under the sway of psychology and was gradually overwhelmed by it to the point of disappearing altogether—a

disappearance point. Now I have no tragedies at my disposal with the exception of the memories on which psychology works day and night in order to find out what actually happened thirty-two years ago.

What was the starting point of the whole adventure born in my adventurous spirit? ('Adventure' is the right word.) So many things were born in those years; so many things passed away. Was I sure I would offer humanity a new revelation, a new apocalypse? You can play a Schubert sonata in such a way that the audience get the feeling of *beholding* the end of the world. And yet, if such an event does happen, there will be no *idle* onlookers around. Of course you are allowed to escape from a concert hall where a great many buildings are being reduced to rubble—your potential tombstones. Out of courtesy to fellow-listeners, however, most people do *not* escape from concert halls, staying there even if the programme includes a Schubert late sonata. They are rooted to the spot with horror which is all the more inescapable since they cannot protect themselves from it. No point in covering your face; no point in stopping your ears: you are bound to hear *some* notes. You cannot choose but hear! The matter stands differently with books that you open at random or not at all; it is as easy as ABC to shut a book and throw it into a rubbish shut. The same goes for long-playing records, CDs and DVDs. But you cannot take a pianist to a rubbish dump—the domain where a concert hall scores over privacy.

Did I intend to murder anybody with Schubert's sonatas and Brahms' intermezzi? Or was I bent on preaching a new gospel? Do you have to receive Christ in order to leave the country of your birth or death? Would I have consulted *Him* on the matter? It is beside the point. The point is I must find out—by means of psychology or otherwise—whether I had *something* to transmit through my art after settling down in a democratic country. What does this 'something' amount to? What kind of revelation lay in store for humanity?

'And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.' Was I born for that? Do I know only Jesus Christ on the Cross? And what about my excellency of speech? And my wisdom?

I opted for the status of genius that was subservient to celebrity status. At the same time I wished to maintain the status quo—no wordplay intended; I wished to live with Tatiana in Moscow, in my flat, away from ambitions and revelations. Just another lie: I *was* thinking in terms of my contribution to the annals of humankind. 'A genius and an apostle are qualitatively distinct, they are categories which belong each of them to their own qualitative spheres: that of immanence and that of transcendence' (*The Book on Adler*). Is it worth my living in this world—or any other world, for that matter—if I am not an apostle?

Immanence and transcendence. Shall I lower these notions to the plane on which I found myself in June 1974? Shall I deposit them on the spot to which I was rooted in those days? Staying at home was a variety of imminence associated—in Kierkegaard's mind—with the genius whose ideas and

works could not cross the borders assigned to them by God Who, on the other hand, was in the habit of giving the green light to His apostles, those transcendent messengers. Was it enough to cross *some* borders and, gaining momentum, transcend whatever might hamper my progress towards the point where all opposites meet and embrace fraternally? (The meeting point.) Does the genius always vanish when one broaches the subject of Eternity? Plato's books have pride of place in my library where they eclipse even Deleuze and other French philosophers of recent years; they are more eternal than the eternity adumbrated in Spinoza's writings. Yet Plato was no apostle and consequently brought no news from God of Whom he was as ignorant as the other occupants of the *nobile castello*.

'The apostle has paradoxically something new to contribute, the newness of which, precisely because it is paradoxical and not an anticipation of what may eventually be developed in the race, remains constant—' Aren't all my works paradoxical to some extent? They would have been understood and paid tribute to a long time ago had they been more attuned to the tradition on which Gadamer touches in *Truth and Method*. And my departure from Moscow? I could have married a woman I loved; we could have lived happily after my return from the tour in Belgium where I requested political asylum on June 17, 1974. Would we have lived happily *ever* after?

10

Why am I so boring?

'What about shadow ministers? Are they composed of tangible photons?'

'Tangible photons are the ones we can see or detect with instruments whereas the shadow photons are intangible (invisible)—detectable only indirectly through their interference effects on the tangible photons.'

'What for? To find out if I am a tangible human?'

'Let us assume you are a tangible human—for the time being. What we have inferred so far is only that each tangible photon has an accompanying retinue of shadow photons.'

'A game of follow-my-leader—'

'Not quite. You see, they constructed an apparatus with four slits in it and fired a single photon from another apparatus. The upshot of the experiment was:

'when one photon passes through one of the slits, something interferes with it, deflecting it in a way that depends on what other slits are open;

'the interfering entities have passed through some of the other slits;

'the interfering entities behave exactly like photons except that they cannot be seen.

'Do you follow me?'

'Follow-my-leader—'

'When a photon passes through one of our four slits, some shadow photons pass through the other three slits. There are many more shadow photons than tangible ones. There are many more shadow humans than tangible ones – in the vale of tears.'

'Am I a shadow? The name and not the thing?'

'You think, therefore you are. You can perceive yourself, touch your own body and even commit suicide, becoming a shadow human in the vale of tears and a tangible one in the great Beyond. But before you indulge in this pagan ritual your body and mind engender all sorts of humans scattered around a number of parallel universes. Your body passes through the apparatus of earthly existence—'

'Are there any slits in it? Can one really pass through it, getting somewhere?'

'Tangible particles interact with each other and thereby they are directly detectable by instruments and sense organs made of other tangible particles. At least you can get as far as those instruments and sense organs.'

'Her sense organs?'

'Thanks to the phenomenon of interference you are not wholly partitioned off from the rest of reality—that is, from the shadow particles. If you were, you should never have discovered that there is more to reality than tangible particles.'

'Why doesn't she interfere—?'

'Tatiana? Shadow photons do not interact with tangible atoms.'

'You said that photons might be deflected—'

'Another leap? The reason why interference effects are usually so weak and hard to detect can be found in the quantum-mechanical laws that govern them. Two particular implications of the laws are relevant. First, every subatomic particle has counterparts in other universes, and is interfered with only by those counterparts. It is not directly affected by any other particles in the universes. Interference is therefore observed only in special situations where the paths of a particle and its shadow counterparts separate and then reconverge—'

'Why don't our paths reconverge?'

I don't know the first thing about quantum mechanics and leaps. Why do I write this nonsense? Just a load of claptrap. Do I have to write something so as not to die of boredom? What I write is so boring I expose myself to death and ridicule. 'You're the laughing stock of your colleagues,' said my last mistress. Speaking to the Devil, following in Ivan Karamazov's footsteps. Always following in someone's footsteps. I left the Soviet Union; Tatiana died and I have no idea what she said on her deathbed. 'Life's a bitch and then you die'? Kierkegaard walked around Copenhagen, around the city walls. His first and last mistress, Regina, was likewise in the habit of walking in the neighbourhood of the house where she lived with her husband and other members of her family. She was not dead.

Actually she outlived both Kierkegaard and her usefulness: her husband never wrote anything about her or anybody else, come to think of it.

Liszt was already in his seventies when a young woman approached him, eager to become 'your Beatrice', as she put it. 'But Beatrice died at the age of eighteen,' he said, deducting six years from her life. You died at the age of forty-four. How many years did I deduct from your life?

A castle, partly in ruins, stood on a crag. You pointed it out to me. On our journeys we used to point out lovely places along the way, along the path. But that castle had something malevolent about it. We are the victims of its malevolence. We are the victims of all the landscapes we admired along the way. We are the victims of the time we spent together.

'Could you do me a favour? Send me a ring, a wedding ring. I shall wear it all my life. And I shall also send you a ring, another wedding ring. Promise me to wear it! Let us respect the symbol that means nothing to others.' Her first letter. The sociologist Marcel Mauss elaborated the idea that society is constituted and held together by a perpetual cycle of exchange of gifts both within and between generations.

'I can't live away from you. I wish you'd killed me.' Her second letter. Actually she must have written, 'I wish you'd eaten me.' If you love somebody, you aspire to incorporate the object of your love—to 'embody' it, so to speak. The embodiment of love. In a neurosis this sort of logic may take on the form of a symptom: feeling very heavy or plagued by stomach ache.

'If the Hereafter exists, I shall look for you there.' Her fourth letter.

In October 1986 she came to Paris and I invited her to a posh restaurant near the Arc de Triomphe. There was no hint of triumphalism in our conversation: her attempts to come to terms with the present were crippled by the past, and I found her awkward, unpolished, unprepared for the life in the West. In bed she showed me how she would talk to her husband on her return from Paris. 'Mityushen'ka, my darling! I love you dearly! But in Paris I met an old friend of mine, my old flame. My first love, you know. And I promised him to divorce you. And I always keep my promises, don't I? Besides, Paris is so wonderful!' And while uttering these uncharitable words she covered my

naked body with kisses and bites, her lips and teeth working like some electric appliance.

11

What is joy, or what is it to be joyful? It is truly to be present to oneself. But truly to be present to oneself is this today, this to be today, truly to be today. And the more true it is that you are today, the more you are entirely present to yourself in being today, the less the sorrows of tomorrow exist for you. Joy is the present time, with the entire emphasis upon: the present time. Therefore God is blessed, He who says eternally: Today; He who is eternally and infinitely present to himself in being today.

Kierkegaard, *Three Godly Discourses*

I have recounted this human-interest story so often that even my cat would have learnt it by heart had she not died in Moscow last spring. Let me just quote two excerpts from *my* journal:

In Russia there are fortune tellers who follow raindrops on windowpanes, their trajectories, the traces they leave. Telltale raindrops. The pattern of your destiny is all over your window. My Tatiana was also a fortune teller, a misfortune teller. An amateur of course. Russian women throw their shoes somewhere, beyond some gate or other. She just left her shoe on the landing, on the eve of Epiphany. But she never looked at the palms of my hands.

The doctor prescribed her a palliative that eased the pain but prolonged the illness—beyond the deadline. Beyond the deathline. Though fatally ill, she was still in the land of the living. Feeling no pain, relishing the prospect of a long, painless life. Of course every drug has side effects which are the other side of drugs, of medicine in general. So I would give her a placebo instead, not a real drug. And she claimed she got better—that's the placebo effect. What about its side effects? Are there any?

I described her death in my novel *Tristan on Earth*, but the episode did not come off and I re-wrote it: I let her live for the sake of the plot, the structure and the texture. Not for *her* sake, mind you. So I removed the following episode from my novel:

On the Next World. *A work of this name is listed among the ethical writings of Democritus in the catalogue of Thrasyllus. Athenaeus (168 b, DK, fr. o c), telling the story of how Democritus escaped prosecution by reading his own writings, says that the writings in question were this one and the Great World-System. Proclus (In Remp. 2.113 Kroll, DK, fr. 1) again cites the work as authority for giving credit to stories of the resuscitation of the apparently dead. 'According to this book,' he says, 'death is not the extinction of all life whatsoever in the body. It is weakened, perhaps, by some blow or wound, but the bonds of the soul remain rooted in the marrow and the heart retains the spark of life buried in the depths. So long as these remain, the body is fit for animation and recovers the life that has been quenched.'*

Why let her live in the book where Isolda is also alive? Another paradox. Am I an apostle after all? And my defection from the Soviet Union? Didn't I pay a magnificent tribute to common sense? Why marry a dying woman? And I *would* have married her if I had chosen to stay in Russia forever.

Last night I saw a documentary from which I learnt that, acting upon his wife's suggestion, Rex Harrison *had* married a dying woman. We might have shot a film on our transient happiness: I had a camera at home (*kinoapparat*). Rex Harrison divorced his wife and married a dying woman after whose death he was unable to resume his former domestic routine. So he married that woman at great personal sacrifice. I did not have to sacrifice anything except the peace of mind which I did sacrifice in the long run, judging from the contents of this book. I ought to have sacrificed it then and there—on the spot. 'When the individual is the true *extraordinarius*, when he understands his life's pressing difficulty in the *discrimen* between the universal and the individually *extra ordinem*, he must be unconditionally recognised for the fact that he is willing to make sacrifices.' When I won the Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels I moved a few rungs up the carrier ladder and would have continued to climb had I not been diverted from this goal by literature, by the mission to which I am unable to assign any name, however inadequate. Ever since that dubious victory I have been moving *down* this ladder; I am at the very bottom of it now and shall never budge from *this* spot: there are no flights on my agenda. To tell the truth, I have no agenda to speak of, except this work in progress—or in regress, as the case may be. But there is no point in looking back over a brilliant career I might have offered to my mother.

I talk about my victories and defeats without going into details—as if everybody had been put in the picture about my life by newspapers, television and the Internet. Here is the biography I send to managers, conductors and other people on whom depends my journey up and down the career ladder:

Valery Afanassiev was born in Moscow in 1947 and studied at the Moscow Conservatory under Jacob Zak and subsequently Emil Gilels. He has won two international competitions: the Bach Competition in Leipzig (1968) and the Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels (1972).

In 1974 he requested political asylum in Belgium and currently lives in Versailles. Since his defection to the West, he has given concerts throughout Europe, Japan and the United States.

Valery Afanassiev has recorded around twenty CDs for Denon, the booklets for which he writes himself. The aim is to give the listener a total picture of his insight into the composer's mind—a guided tour through his alchemical laboratory where poetry, philosophy, painting, the Kabbalah and even wine, as much as musical notation, may be taken as points of reference.

Valery Afanassiev has written ten novels, eight in English and two in French. Four novels have been published in France; one in Germany; two in Russia. He has also written fourteen books of poetry, a book of long stories, a book of short stories, a long commentary on the Divine Comedy, nine lectures on music, a book on music and two theatrical pieces inspired by The Pictures at an Exhibition and Kreisleriana, in both of which he performs as pianist and actor (in four languages).

For several years, Valery Afanassiev has also conducted a variety of international orchestras. He endeavours to approach the sound quality and polyphony of his favourite conductors: Furtwängler, Toscanini, Mengelberg, Bruno Walter, Knappertsbusch and Klemperer.

I hope my posthumous works will be published under my pseudonym where the word 'alive' seems to be present somehow—like a note played by the clarinet in a Mahler symphony. Valery Aleff.

Whatever I do is a paradox; my whole life is a sacrifice. I am not St Paul; I am just a poet, St Poet. No divinity has authorised me to write this book where I do not reveal anything apart from my lassitude, solitude and dissatisfaction with the world; where I ask *big* questions such as, Where am I? What does that mean, 'the world'? What does this word mean? Who has tricked me into the entire affair and now leaves me standing here? Who am I? How did I come into the world? Why wasn't I consulted? I was not made acquainted with the customs and rules, but instead thrust into the ranks, as though shanghaied by a military recruiter. How did I acquire a share in the great enterprise they call reality? Why must I have a share in it? Isn't it a matter of free choice? I have something to say. Is there no manager? To whom shall I direct my complaint? Existence is a debate after all.

These questions are voiced by a character in Kierkegaard's *Repetition*. And Schubert asks the same questions as he listens to Beethoven's *Quartet in C-Sharp-Minor*, Opus 131—in a BBC production I heard on the radio last June. I wish I could hear these questions everywhere: without them life is just a doll we are holding in our lap. Not a kitten, mind you! Just a doll, a plastic doll.

REPETITION is the only ritual I perform in my room and elsewhere; at least I am allowed to perform a few episodes from my past. Not on the piano, needless to say: nobody would listen to my past if I sought to resurrect it in a concert hall or even on a DVD. I wish I could perform my past in a concert hall, in the Hall of the World, in the Hall of the Present, in the Hall of the Future.

Democritus, so far from allowing that there were any certain symptoms of approaching death, declared that there were no completely certain indications by which medical men could satisfy themselves of the actual cessation of life. Erwin Schrödinger, who invented the wave theory of quantum mechanics, called attention to a curiosity that has become known as the cat paradox. A live-dead cat dichotomy, you know. One wave corresponds to 'live-cat', the other to 'dead-cat'. But these waves are both present. What is more, they interfere (minutely) with one another. The state of the cat after one minute cannot be either 'alive' or 'dead' because of this overlap. Actually its life and death depend exclusively on the person who makes the experiment. Being a biased observer I would have kept Tatiana alive had I stayed with her. A cat girl.

REPETITION is a good thing after all—a second chance to choose something or someone you repent having lost; even if the woman in question died many years ago. You write about her and your past settles *down* in the present which is bound to become your future if you continue to reflect upon the subject, upon the object of your nostalgia. Of course it is easy to be nostalgic and believe that things were always better in the past, on its grassy slopes. Nor is it difficult to pin your hopes on the future where *anything* can happen: you might marry a princess from a fairy tale, from a myth. Both are common strategies that ordinary individuals resort to as they avoid being 'present to themselves' because it would entail their participation in the present where they live in a constant state of melancholy and compunction. So REPETITION *is* a good thing: it reinforces the idea that it is best to live in the present and not in some imaginary elsewhere to which Coriolanus did justice when he was on the point of leaving Rome forever. Hope is a charming maiden who slips through the fingers; recollection is a beautiful old woman whom one does not long to meet in private. REPETITION is a beloved wife of whom one never grows weary. 'The compulsion to repeat,' says Freud, 'is an instinctual regressive principle which aims to get back to a condition totally devoid of all energy—death.' How to marry a dead woman?

12

Why do I write so badly? Like Conrad, I began to learn English at the age of twenty. (But, unlike Conrad, I have never lived in an English-speaking country.) Not all those who began to learn English at the age of twenty can write like Conrad, let alone like Joyce: he learnt English in his cradle or in his mother's womb. I only have a limited knowledge of Joyce's mother tongue; my friends and enemies alike keep wondering why I don't content using it for emails and suchlike. In the late thirties, in France, Nabokov's wife rang up the English Embassy to ask if somebody could correct her husband's novel. 'Would you mind working with H. G. Wells?' said a voice.

Dear A.,

I hope you're well.

I'm sure you don't remember my essay on Mozart in which I said that time had come to a standstill. As a proof, I touched upon the journey to Mars which had been called off. In your commentary you brought me up to speed with the news in the domain of space odysseys, saying the Americans would go to Mars in the not-too-distant future. Well, my dear, this project was likewise called off. Of course it's too late to ask you, 'What do you bet?'

*I've written a lot in English of late. At some point I said to myself that, without your help, it was pointless to struggle with this magnificent language that I don't master yet, for all my perseverance and patience. But it's hard to give up this linguistic tool, and once again I yielded to the temptation. Actually I've written several essays and two novels—a short one and a big one. I've just finished the big novel. I don't think it's great, but it might turn out to be my greatest novel. In *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon says to Vladimir, 'To whom should I tell my private dreams?' And Vladimir answers, 'Let them remain private.' As usual, I have a dream or rather a number of dreams. One of them is focused upon my attitude towards the novel I've just finished. Another dream concerns your help. And I hope it will not remain private.*

In one of my last emails I told you I couldn't afford your help. Actually it is true, if only in part. But I can't live and work without it either. I recalled one of your messages in which you said your fee was ranging from 60 to 90 euros per hour. You said you would demand 60 euros. Now you say it is 90 euros. Of course your fee must have gone up over the last 5 or 6 years, but I was wondering if you could exceptionally apply the principle known to the French (and other nations) as 'prix d'ami'. In other words, I wonder if you could knock 30 euros off the fee you mentioned in one of your last emails. I'm not conceited enough to hope that some day you'll read my works for pleasure. That's another dream of mine. Anyway I don't think my latest novel is far worse than whatever is written and published in English nowadays—or in any other language, for that matter. I used to think about how much time you were wasting on the worthless stuff you had to teach at the British Institute.

I'm sending you my latest effort in the hope that you won't turn you down—after all, you're neither a publisher nor an agent. If you do refuse to deal with it, please drop me a line. I haven't removed from it the quotations from various newspapers and magazines because I'd like to know your opinion on the book. Needless to say, I didn't alter the original orthography when quoting American sources. Please don't pay any attention to dashes and other typographical nuances. Of course these remarks make no sense if you do turn my manuscript down. Actually I'm planning to get it published at my own expense. What's the best way of going about this?

I'm looking forward to hearing from you.

Had I stayed in Moscow, I would have written some novels and essays in Russian. Or none at all. I might have devoted my life to piano-playing.

13

My work as an author, that enormous productivity, the intensity of which, it seems to me, could move stones, the individual segments of which (not to mention the totality) not one living writer can compete with: This writing is regarded as a sort of hobby, like fishing and that sort of thing.

Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals*

'He was born, he lived, he died,' said Heidegger at the outset of his lectures on Aristotle. I was born, I have lived almost sixty years; nobody lectures on my life, on my works. Shall I lecture on the novels I have written after my irrevocable departure from Moscow? In 1848 Kierkegaard comes up with the idea of giving a series of lectures on his own contribution to philosophy and even drafts a sort of invitation to potential subscribers. Among other things he warns them that 'these lectures will in no way be an enjoyment, but will consist rather of work, and therefore I do not wish to entice anyone. And—as I believe is inevitably the case with every sort of deeper understanding—this work will at times, when regarded from the viewpoint of the moment and of impatience, seem to be simply boring, and in this connection I caution everyone against participating. If I am successfully understood, my listener will have acquired the benefit that his life will have been made significantly more difficult for him than ever before, and therefore I will not urge anyone to accept this invitation.' A leap in the dark. A quantum leap? A death-defying leap. The would-be host did not feel like detecting the signs of boredom on his listeners' faces. So he composed *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* and thereby turned the potential members of his audience into invisible readers.

I compose synopses and send them to literary agents who never accept unsolicited manuscripts. Nor do they care about much-vaunted suspense, expecting that you reveal all key points down to the coup de grâce. They sacrifice their delights for the sake of the reader who does care about this low-brow variety of suspense.

My first novel, Disappearance, views one situation from different angles. Carried away by my juvenile élan, I tried to put everything in that novel—even the Moon, outstripping thereby the protagonist of a Borges poem, who overlooked this blatantly obvious item in his own all-inclusive novel.

My second novel, Susanna Domini, tackles the problem of stupidity. (At the time I thought every writer had to devote at least one of his or her works to this enticing

subject.) *As a counterpoint to stupidity and hypocrisy, a dying man tells the story of his life and illness which, among other things, metamorphoses humans into apes—anti-Darwinian evolution.*

The fragility of our identity, 'murder is easy', the fear of death, the fear of immortality, the variety of incest favoured by Chateaubriand, Musil and Nabokov, Time, eternal recurrence, memory—that is what my third novel (Hall of Mirrors) is about. Actually the ten novels I have written since 1974 share the same subject: human mythology.

Sound Letters is the title of my fourth novel—a sort of one-man play which consists of cassettes sent from Moscow to Paris during the so-called Period of Stagnation. As I am not very fond of 'periods' and on-the-spot reports, the novel is just about friendship and loneliness. The latter will never go out of fashion, at least in the literary milieu.

The action of my fifth novel, Zarina, is set in Versailles. In the early fifties the scion of an old French family makes his debut as a lover. His parents being reticent about the thorny subject of sex, he resorts to the help of his fellow students who demonstrate various types of lovemaking, often breaking their glasses in the process. He also imitates film stars when courting girls in his lycée and outside it—the trick used by Buster Keaton and Woody Allen. No wonder he fails pitifully. He does not mind his defeats, however, until the day he takes an interest in a girl called Zarina who both encourages and resists his advances. Even in the parc de Versailles, which was full of trees in those days, she does not allow him to kiss her. And when he finally decoys her into letting him spend a night in her flat, she treats him to a half-hearted, unfinished striptease. And she lectures him on virginity, abundantly quoting the Fathers of the Church. But unexpectedly she promises to come to his flat on Thursday—five days later. He does not have the slightest inkling of what is in store for him. A confidence trick, a nasty, dirty trick. He falls for her ruse despite his hope of being taken for a seasoned lover. From then onwards numbers become the main feature of his life, alongside moral philosophy and sacred books. Even thirty years later he is haunted by the events of that 'wedding night'; and by the 'farewell ceremony' during which Zarina told him everything, answering the questions he had not asked. Of course she betrayed him many times, but he is much more bothered by her betrayal of human history and symbols. Actually, he did not care about virginity and so-called chastity in his teenage years. And his sexual tutors maintained that a stubborn refusal to indulge in the ecstasies of love invariably led to a nervous breakdown. 'Beware of virgins' was their motto. Now he thinks that making a mockery of sacred books denotes

a dangerous streak in the human mind. What is more, he sees Zarina's blood everywhere. She belongs to the human species so anybody can do it. That deleterious seed has been planted in human nature. The Tree of Death is growing, blooming in the universal soul. Indeed if he were Doctor Strangelove, he might trigger an atomic war by pressing buttons in the Pentagon. And he might 'bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh', if he were the Almighty. Oddly enough, he would save only Zarina from his Flood: her monstrous callousness has made other women uninteresting, insipid. Why did she fake virginity? Why was she so eager to play this old-fashioned, mythical part? Perhaps she aspired to be accepted by his parents whose dignified silhouettes she saw in church every Sunday. Besides, in addition to the title of prince, her awkward, unfledged lover was to inherit a large fortune. Their liaison lasted two years. She left him for the sake of a multimillionaire. Thirty years have elapsed since their wedding night. To commemorate the sinister anniversary he invites her to his place with a view to purifying humanity—a ritual blood bath. In his opinion, symbols need updating from time to time. And he films the purifying ritual in order to give humanity a lesson. But now and then he switches the camera off, and the members of the jury wonder what happened during those blackouts. At the end of the film, in slow motion, he kills/deflowers Zarina with a kitchen knife. In passing, he also murders four innocent intruders. The counsel for the defence presents the whole affair as a belated crime passionnel. The defendant is given a life sentence. In prison, using a razor blade, he commits suicide, proving that, on some occasions, men shed more blood than women. Numbers plague him until the very end, especially 111 which is priceless because of its 37 x 3 symbolism and its import in secret lore, where the Unity may be found in 'Thick darkness' and in 'Sudden death', showing Samadhi and the Destruction of the Ego as gates of final victory.

The protagonist of my sixth novel, Going Home, is an old Russian émigré living in Paris—a survivor of Bolshevik wrath. He is irremediably lonely: even in such a fickle city as Paris, where moods and modes change almost hourly, loneliness will never go out of fashion. But he is not a confirmed loner. He thinks about women and pursues some of them through his dreams and around the 16th arrondissement. Upon hearing the full unabridged version of his name (Konstantin Alexeevich Belozerkalsky), the prospective victims of his old-style harassment raise their eyebrows in embarrassment and wonder. Their lips and arms are paralysed by his awesome patronymic. They remain silent for a long time, their tongues entangled in the jungle-like opulence of his surname which, incidentally, denotes a very simple, rather trivial object: 'white mirror'. (His non-Russian friends call him acrostically: 'KAB'.)

His life is devoid of events which are the punctuation marks or, more aptly, the words of Time, so I often skip two or three months in the course of my narrative. (The novel is 166 pages in length.) But I devote five chapters to the last event in my hero's life. This event lasts almost four hours and takes place in the maid's room where an estate agent makes love to a German lady, his client. KAB is also his client. A double transgression. Does the agent use it as a sort of aphrodisiac? What else goes into this psychological love-potion? The cramped conditions of the maid's room? The risk of KAB's interference? Is it worth trying the agent-concocted aphrodisiac?

But first the agent should be punished. KAB borrows a revolver from his friend, a former duellist, and pursues his quarry around the 16th arrondissement and, of course, through his dreams. Even in his nightmares he fails to murder him. And two mastiffs prevent him entering the suburban abode of some contract killers.

The agent's aphrodisiac fails too. KAB invites his one-time mistress, Tatusia, to the maid's room. He also invites an old friend, Fedia Paduchev, who ends up spending two hours downstairs, waiting for the host. KAB and Tatusia are sitting in the maid's room, on the bed. But nothing happens except that the rain sets in and the champagne gets warmer and warmer.

*On the other hand, the beauty of English poetry does not fail Belozerkalsky. Indeed the whole novel is punctuated, illumined, shielded, sheltered—blessed by lines and strophes from English poems. They guide the hero through Paris and his sleepless nights; they nurse his dread of death and help him forgive and forget human cruelty. A few excerpts from Henry King's *The Exequy* lead him inexorably towards his dead mistress—the only woman he had ever loved. Thus there are parallel plots in the novel and these plots, hovering and humming in the background, are made up of English poems.*

Nor does the beauty of Paris let Belozerkalsky down. In the last chapter he drives in a taxi to the place de Furstenberg where death looks less unbearable than elsewhere. At last his memories, English poetry, people walking around him, the dead and the quick coalesce into one undivided substance—himself. The past becomes the present and the future. And his own poem resounds forever alongside the poetic masterpieces of English and Russian literature.

Given the current enthusiasm for travelling butlers (at least two butlers are mentioned in the novel, and at some point the protagonist takes a long ride in a taxi—as far as the Soviet Union), for pastiches of Victorian England (there is a mock tsarist dinner in chapter 7) and for the so-called first wave of Russian emigration (the incredible success of Berberova), this novel might appeal to a few native English readers.

I understand that you do not accept unsolicited manuscripts, so I am sending you an excerpt from this novel. And yet no sample chapter can give the remotest idea of how the poetical and structural motives progressively converge towards the final harmony—a gradual build-up of high-brow suspense—which is somewhat akin to the ending of Beethoven's Piano Sonata in C Minor, op. 111.

*Myriads of sample chapters are sent
To agents and publishers. Poor invalids!
One-armed, one-eyed characters
Roam across steppes and deserts.
They're homeless: only a few bricks
Are strewn around them.
And bric-a-brac.
Sometimes a solitary column
Appears from nowhere.
But what can they use that column for?
Even the shadow it casts isn't wide enough
To protect them from the sun.*

*Luckily for them it's a half-sun
They're confronted with.
And how can they fall in love
With only half-hearts at their disposal?*

*Some of those sample chapters are sent back.
Others vanish into thin air.
The air is thick with manuscripts.
The air is the biggest library in the world.
Whom is it destined for? Ariel, the angels?*

*Only God knows all works of literature:
Published and unpublished, written and unwritten.
I wonder who His favourite writers are.*

The scene of my seventh novel, The Last Days of Eternity, is set in the Hereafter. Hell plays a prominent part in this Dantean journey during which the travellers—Lenin and the fallen archangel, Andrey Petrovich—meet a lot of philosophers, politicians and ordinary citizens, both dead and alive. Apparently Lenin's soul can still be saved—through love, for instance. The Hereafter seems to be built in accordance with Swedenborg's doctrine: it is a gruesome and eternal continuation of our lives. This time Lenin does not succeed. Yet he buys himself a new tie—in the sixtieth century world of cosmic lotteries and commercials. To my knowledge, it is the only work where the temporary decline (and fall) of communism is dealt with on a large, universal scale.

The subject-matter of my eighth novel, Chasey Saves the World, is rather fashionable, I presume. A solitary man lives in an endless series of virtual worlds inspired by a TV set and later on by a computer that becomes a man or a woman (or God) in the process. The series is truly endless: even after the protagonist's death the computer continues to create his worlds, alongside its own. In a way, this novel is about immortality, which may account for its imposing length—almost 700 pages of typescript.

As the protagonist writes his own gospel—after all, he is a saviour of humanity—the computer develops its own ideas, talks to the Internet and the ultimate Supercomputer, comments on his master's commands, deviates from them, describes his master's death and madness, organises a state funeral and even introduces two mystery plots for, unlike its master, the computer has a vested interest in the commercial side of the undertaking.

The protagonist talks to his mother and other dead people, teaches history to his unborn daughter, re-writes history, removes axes from it to spare Raskolnikov's victims, transfers the Hanging Gardens to his room. Actually he has got his own Hanging Gardens—video cassettes—which often fall and cover his body with layers of images. One wonders why the computer does not resort to their help when facing the problem of his master's burial.

My ninth novel, Tristan on Earth, is a companion piece to the eighth—the Vita Nuova, in other words. T.S. Eliot thought that the Vita Nuova should be read after the Divine Comedy.

The Flying Dutchman might have been forgotten, but for Wagner's opera and the movie where James Mason and Ava Gardner enact a blood-and-gore version of the myth. The protagonist of the novel cannot recall all the details of the past and therefore thinks that his wife's murder might have been fabricated in a Hollywood studio. For argument's sake, he marries several women and makes them betray him with the males he picks up in

the streets. He can murder neither his wives nor their lovers, let alone an unruly little boy whose prototype, according to Thomas's Gospel, is put to death by Jesus Christ. (The Dutchman quotes the relevant verses as he speaks to the scientists who aspire to send him to the year zero so that he might alter the history of Christianity.) Nor is he capable of raping a little girl whom he wrests from a paedophile's clutches in the parc de Versailles. Enthralled by her likeness to Leonardo da Vinci's Madonna Litta, he lives with her in the Swiss mountains, trying to protect her from paedophiles and the contemporary world in general. His Litta, however, has a lot in common with Lolita and he ends up pandering to her sexual appetites without exposing his own body to her caresses. Though still full of masculine vigour, he is tired of women and when Litta eventually falls in love with his three-century-old personality and manifests her desire to die for him, he does not use her as an instrument of redemption. Anyway, he is no longer the Flying Dutchman who talked to Spinoza in the streets of Amsterdam. His ship was destroyed during the Napoleonic Wars: the Emperor counted on his immortality to conquer Russia and the whole of Asia. As if to justify his nickname, now and then he flies over Europe, which enables him to visit St Petersburg in 1942—at the peak of Hitler's blockade—and save the lives of those who agree to partake of his body. Actually he is used to watching his body's destruction and resurrection: whenever he is mistaken for Jesus Christ, the crowd does not restrict its passion for keepsakes to his clothes. His generosity might be at the root of his final salvation: in the middle of the twenty-first century he cries as he listens to Bruckner's Te Deum at Carnegie Hall. And yet, being a great admirer of Furtwängler and Bruno Walter, he is not likely to enjoy the quality of the performance.

My last novel. Why do I write such good books? Why does nobody read them? Because they are boring?

'In the age of reason, "ridicule" is the most feared danger of all; in our times a person can more easily bear anything else but being made a laughingstock, not to mention being exposed to daily ridicule—people shrink more from this danger than from the most torture-filled death.' In the age of unreason one fears the danger of *not* being ridiculed: they take no notice of you. I wish they would mock my gait, my dirty trousers, the spots of ink I display to prove I am a poet. I could murder them with these spots of ink.

And I will give children to be their princes, and babes shall rule over them. And the people shall be oppressed, every one by another, and every one by

*his neighbour; the child shall behave himself
proudly against the ancient, and the base against
the honourable.*

Isaiah

'One certainly cannot require that every literary work be of the sort that can be published in a monthly magazine for children or have the appeal of Andersen's fairy tales.' Our world is a *daily* magazine for children and if you cannot contribute to it you find yourself outside the market; in other words, you do not exist. 'Martin loves Helen, but Helen is unfaithful to Martin. Besides, there are a few contract killers who try to kill Helen and Martin. So Martin and Helen go to California in order to shake their pursuers off. But the pursuers go to California as well. Martin and Helen go to New York where they meet Martin's girlfriend who tries to kill Helen *and* her former lover. But the latter discovers an old manuscript that may shed light on the history of humanity. So his girlfriend does not kill him because she is eager to get the manuscript. And when she does get it her faith in the Christian God wavers—' Is it too involved for children?

'He has nothing at all to do with the concern whether he will now barely be victorious. No, from this concern he is entirely exempted; but on the other hand he has the terrible responsibility of the special individual for every step he takes, whether he now is following his order accurately in the smallest details, whether definitely, alone, and obediently he has heard God's voice—the dreadful responsibility in case he heard or had heard amiss. Precisely for this reason must he wish for himself all possible opposition from without, wish that the established order might have power to make his life a *tentamen rigorosum*, for this trial and its pain is yet nothing compared with the terror of responsibility, if he were or had been in error!' (*The Book on Adler*) I am not sure I have ever longed for the opposition I encounter, but readers and concert goers would anyway have taken no notice of my moods; their indifference is perfectly organic and does not need an external stimulus. Actually my first novel was turned down by *one* publishing house, which elicited an ill-omened, unfortunate declaration from a facetious journalist, 'Doesn't look respectable, does it? Beckett's trilogy was spurned by *seven* publishers!'

I have lost count of the publishers who seem to prefer whatever flourishes on the market—otherwise, all these books would not be obtainable. At times I browse through some of them as I walk around a bookshop in Moscow or in Paris: one page is enough to give you an idea of how its author treats the dreadful responsibility that Kierkegaard highlights in *The Book on Adler*. In the early seventies, Gilels bought a complete set of Haydn's sonatas performed by some lady. 'I've listened to one movement only,' he said, 'and I'm under the impression I've heard all the sonatas.' Why do they write so many pages? Why do they print so many pages? Why do they translate so many pages? Why don't they agree to publish a single page of mine? One page would be enough. One paragraph would be enough—this paragraph, for instance. (You do not have to include the quote from *The Book on Adler*.) And you will not say, after reading this paragraph, 'I know all his books.' Even if you take the

trouble to read all the synopses of my novels you will know *nothing* about them because *every* sentence is a plot in its own right. Do I need one plot for a book where the reader is allowed to relish so many plots: parallel, perpendicular, triangular? Well, there is *one* triangle in *The Philosopher's Way*, a huge triangle: the aristocrat, his former mistress, her husband. And one of these characters is sadistically murdered—the word 'bloodbath' would not be out of place, although only *one* person dies as a result of a devilish ritual. So what we are left with amounts to an angle. But let us begin from the beginning. As we are told at primary school, the sum of three angles of a triangle is equal to two right angles. But if we make one of the angles progressively greater, so that it approaches in magnitude the sum of two right angles, the apex of the triangle will move ever closer to the base and finally the sides of the triangle will coincide with the base—an infinite straight line. In the final analysis, all my works consist of infinite straight lines and some of them are parallel.

So, by putting two and two together, one may reach the conclusion that I belong to the elect who must have heard the voice of God or at least felt an impulse powerful enough to make them believe in its divine origin. The point is I do not encounter any *violent* opposition which would have made my life a *tentamen rigorosum* had it not been replaced by indifference, by a few words typed on a logo-adorned sheet of paper: 'Thank you for contacting EF. However, our lists are now full and we are no longer accepting new submissions.' And here is a more baroque rejection slip: 'Thank you for your submission. We read it with interest but we did not feel that it was suitable for our list. Unfortunately, due to the high volume of submissions we receive and the relatively small size of our office staff, we are unable to give individual consultation on manuscripts. We wish you every success in finding an agent and a publisher for your work and we thank you for thinking of CWL.' Was it written by the same man or woman? This representative of a power behind the throne might have realised that his refusal needed much greater elaboration to be clear, let alone convincing. EF, CWL. One can work for two agencies at the same time. Perhaps there is only one individual behind the throne—a character from a Russian story who, when asked what kind of literature he is keen on, says bluntly, 'I'm not a reader. I'm a writer.' So he writes rejection slips behind an empty throne. That is why no novels have been published for almost twenty years.

Does my predicament square with the following excerpt from *The Book on Adler*: 'A true *extraordinarius* who stood alone, forsaken, pointed out in the pillory of the special individual, a true *extraordinarius* who was recognisable by the fact that he was executed—.' Was I *executed*? Or is it another kind of execution—a portable cross you carry in your pocket, not on your back?

Once I lent the manuscript of *Tristan on Earth* to a young Australian lady who figures on *The Times* list of the most promising writers—the literary elite of the twenty-first century. She phoned me a few days later to ask when and where I could fetch the manuscript for which there was no room in her tiny little flat. An example of violent opposition?

The Last Days of Eternity. Last week I realised I no longer had the manuscript in my chest of

drawers. Was it misplaced or disposed of in the course of an ill-starred and fruitless attempt at spring-cleaning? I asked myself. I called a publisher whom I had entrusted with two copies of the novel in the hope that she would publish it by the end of this year. I knew she had turned it down and therefore counted only on the second (unprinted) copy she was supposed to keep in her archives, protecting it from her charwoman's unbridled zeal.

'Do you still have the second CD?' I asked. 'When we met last winter I brought you two CDs—for safety.'

'Did you?'

'What about the computer into which you fed my novel?'

'We erase the works we haven't taken on at once. Our computers are littered with all sorts of—'

'Could we meet and talk about your likes and dislikes? I'm curious to know what you disliked so intensely in my book. Does my style—'

'We can't publish such a long piece—an intellectual one into the bargain. Besides, you don't seem to keep up with the times—nobody cares about what was going on in the early nineties when we *would* have published your novel. Didn't you write it in 1992?'

'In those days you might have told me, "Your book contains much of topical interest."'

'Exactly! I was disappointed to find no up-to-date or topical content.'

'Kierkegaard touched on the problem in *Prefaces*. The right subject matter, the right time, the right quantity. And the wrong quality. Suppose I wrote about Louis XIV?'

'That would be a historic novel, an episode from a distant past. People don't care about what they can remember or wish to forget. Why remind them of food shortages?'

'Why not write about the collapse of communism? *The Lenin Code*. Lots of murders.'

'Too many! Hand-made murders are more commercial than mass-produced ones.'

'*Je veux rendre ses titres de noblesse à la littérature*,' I pointed out before hanging up on my would-be publisher and benefactor. I am not sure she understands the language of Proust who was always behind the times.

Several years ago, in Italy, I struck up a conversation with a wine dealer who declared that Italian was the most poetical language in the world. 'English is better suited to commerce, to science. The business of America is business!' 'What about Shakespeare?' I asked.

Literary History of England (edited by Albert C Baugh) seems, however, to uphold the wine dealer's view. 'James Joyce (1882-1941) is reported to have declared that to understand him the reader must devote his life to the study of his books. The readjustment of values that is sure to come will spare future lovers of literature this self-immolation....Joyce's contemporary renown was in part due to factors extraneous to literary excellence.' I think the last sentence should be applied to contemporary writers: their English (and French, and Italian, and Russian) *is* better suited to commerce. As for the readjustment of values, I am waiting for it. Will it ever come? The last days of Time. I am waiting for

2x2=9, for the days when poetic, lapidary, metaphysical works may turn out to be real money-spinners after all.

'Whether the true *extraordinarius* prevails today or tomorrow or in a thousand years is a matter of no concern, for he *has conquered*, his relationship to God is his victory; yea, though what he has to proclaim were never to prevail in the world, to this he might reply, "All the worse for the world." Where is my victory? And what is my relationship to God? Did I have the right to leave Tatiana behind in the hope of gaining a contest for which I was not prepared? In one of his books Solzhenitsyn wrote that in a democracy talents compete with each other, untroubled by party officials. Is he aware today of how many party officials can be found among agents, managers and other people in charge? They all belong to different parties: political, commercial, sexual and, last but not least, to the rejuvenation party. Teenagers waive the rules, so to speak; and old masters are their slaves. All the worse for the world! Unfortunately it is not a reply, as Kierkegaard seems to suggest: no one has spoken to me. It is just a sentence lost in a manuscript which will not be read even in a thousand years.

In these times one is busy solely and only about being victorious, one seems to live in the vain conceit that if only one can manage barely to conquer, it makes no difference about the means—as if the means were of no importance, whereas when there is any question of the situation in the world of spirit they are the determinant factor, or, more precisely expressed, the means and the victory are one and the same. Of course, in relation to money, titles, horses and carriages, torchlight processions and Hurrah boys, and other such like indecencies, it is true that the means are of no account, that the means of acquisition are not the same as possession. So one can really come into possession of money—in many shabby ways; one can really get a torchlight procession in one's honour and have attained it in many shabby ways. But in relation to spirit there are no such outward, palpable, indecent realities. The profound and elegant thing in relation to spirit is the fact that the mode of acquisition and the possession are one. Hence he who is not aware of this fact in the spiritual sphere, but is blissful in the vain conceit of being victorious, in spite of the fact that the means were thoroughly paltry, does not notice with what elegance the profundity of the spirit makes sport of him for the fact that he has not really conquered but has written a satire upon himself.

The Book on Adler

To conquer in the name of style, by means of a style.

Leonid Andreyev—a Tolstoy for the poor, as the Russians dubbed him—wrote about a soldier who had lost his legs in World War One and dreamt of becoming a writer because this vocation does not require the use of the body and its members with the exception of one arm. Even the arm might have been replaced by a typist, but he had given no thought to this possibility until he realised his right

arm was no longer under his control: it seemed to perform a St Vitus's dance on a sheet of paper where he was about to immortalise his thoughts. He also realised he was losing his memory and, as if to make up for this irrevocable loss, he launched into an interminable attack on the dreariness of life, his trump cards being songs and flowers. 'One thought succeeds another, no sooner do I think it and want to write it down, than a new one comes—hold on to it, grasp it—madness, insanity!' For hours and hours his fingers danced on sheets of paper, leaving no traces on them: there was no ink in his fountain pen. When given a pencil he doodled something on *other* sheets of paper; he was determined to write a *huge* masterpiece.

This work will be short—a drunkard's promise, as they say in France. This work *is* short: I have already finished the first draft. But I always add a few odds and ends to my finished—or rather unfinished—manuscripts. This is one of the additions. Am I writing a biography of Andrejev's protagonist? Am I *writing* like him? He was sure his masterpiece would be read by future generations—even after Doomsday. So did Nietzsche. Who am I? Shouldn't one *also* become an enigma to oneself? At least I do not write about songs and flowers.

15

My life has been brought to its uttermost point. I am disgusted with existence, it has no savour and is without salt or meaning. Even if I were hungrier than Pierrot, I still would not eat of the explanation offered by men. One sticks a finger in the ground in order to tell by the smell what country one is in. I stick my finger into existence, it smells of nothing. Where am I? What does that mean, 'the world'? What does that word mean? Who has tricked me into this entire affair and now leaves me standing here? Who am I? How did I come into the world? Why wasn't I consulted? Why was I not made acquainted with the customs and rules, but instead thrust into the ranks, as though I had been shanghaied by a military recruiter? How did I acquire a share in the great enterprise they call reality? Why do I have to have a share in it? Isn't it a matter of free choice?

Kierkegaard, *Repetition*

When I return to Moscow I do not feel like settling there again because a taxi driver may ask me where I learnt 'their' language and how I manage to speak it so perfectly. And once I was obliged to point at the building where I had spent twenty years to prove I had something in common with other Muscovites. It is not my country any more and the people I come across in Moscow or St Petersburg seem to model their attitude on the English agents: they do not accept new submissions. Having lost my apartment, I stay at hotels or make the most of my friends' hospitality which never fails to remind

me of how inhospitable I have been throughout my life: I cling to my loneliness with the ardour of an unfledged Shropshire lad. And I am an old master after all.

So a great leap backward would not serve the purpose of restoring my youth or even the stage where I acted my Russian part: Moscow is a different city today. Did I expect it to wait indefatigably for my return? And Tatiana will not come and fetch me at the airport, her hand drawing a handkerchief out of her sleeve. 'You often hear people say that someone is a Don Juan or a Faust, but not often that he is the Wandering Jew,' writes Kierkegaard in his *Journal*. Well, I am the Wandering Jew. I am no longer Don Juan and I would not implore Mephistopheles to bring Tatiana back to life—instead of Helen of Troy. Wouldn't I?

'You can start a fire by rubbing two dry pieces of wood together until you produce a spark. And wood is an inanimate substance. How much easier to produce a spark in a living creature, even if this creature is dead. All you have to do is rub her arms together. They must be dry by now.'

'I'm not a body snatcher.'

'Then you can rub your own arms together. Or just your hands. And think about her during the process. Thought transference, spark transference. Suppose death were a black hole. After all, the black hole might be a metaphor, nothing but a metaphor for death. Weapons of mass destruction, nuclear annihilation, nuclear winter. A midwinter nightmare. What happens to an astronaut who falls into a black hole? The difference between the gravitational force on his head and his feet tears him apart. Even the particles that make up his body cannot survive the shock, suffering a lot of wear and tear in a split second. Their histories in real time come to an end at a singularity. A sticky end. But the histories of the particles in imaginary time continue to spin their yarns as if nothing had happened. They pass into the baby universe and re-emerge as the particles emitted by another black hole. Thus, in a sense, the astronaut is transported to another region of the universe. However, these particles don't look like the astronaut.'

'Is it too late to clone her now?'

'Isn't it time you laid the ghost of that experience to rest?'

'Do they use only living cells, living genes? When do our genes die? At the moment of our death? They might survive us, our brain, our consciousness—like nails, like beards. How about cutting her nails for our reproductive purpose?'

'Cloning contravenes basic notions of personhood such as freedom, the sanctity of life and the image of God.'

'Do you really care about the image of God? Give the Devil his due!'

'Cloning is tainted by the sin of pride or hubris and also by the sin of self-creation. Do you aspire to become a "man-God"? Do you think every creative artist is a "man-God"?''

'I'm much more interested in a "woman-God", in my goddess and creator. Do you think she wouldn't be my Tatiana if we deducted leukaemia from her genes? Would she be the same without her disease, without her "everyday death"?''

'The belief that genes alone determine all aspects of an individual is called *genetic determinism*. But each individual is the result of a complex interaction between his or her genes and the environment within which they develop, beginning at the time of fertilisation and continuing throughout life.'

'All my successive Tatanas will live right here, indoors.'

'Why not live with all of them? At the same time? Why not set up a harem in your flat? Don't you worry—your numerous wives wouldn't envy each other. How can one envy oneself? But they might exchange tips about your likes and dislikes. *Wiederholungszwang*. The same woman walking through the valley of the shadow of death.'

'I wouldn't take her seriously. Her agony I mean. A clone, a clown.'

'An actress, a wonderful actress. Wasn't she always an actress—Sarah Bernhardt, as one of your friends dubbed her? And she might act even better in the years to come, provided her elder sisters teach her how to die with great panache and elegance. Of course she could be given an education to match her theatre-oriented genes so instead of wasting her time in that office—'

'What we lived through was hardly a game, my dear—not even the game of love and death. A ritual, rather. A funeral rite.'

'A *Trauerspiel*?''

'The same caresses...the same quarrels...'

'Monogamy has other drawbacks as well. But what's the use of being polygamous if you don't set up your own harem?'

'Tatiana's clones will know too much about their prototype, about their original, about their original's sins.'

'Don't confuse copies (and corpses) with clones!'

'Their fate will be determined.'

'By leukaemia.'

'And by our sleepless nights, by our ecstasies. In the end they might commit suicide to escape the tyrannical rule of the past.'

'The past is always tyrannical because there are too many clones in the present.'

'Will they betray me like their foremother?'

'Not if you keep them indoors. And after your death they'll indulge in queer cloning, contributing to an even more pronounced lesbian baby boom. I can tell you a Russian story, if you wish. A story about a Russian superman. His name was Potok-Mikhailo-Ivanovich. Do you know that the wife of a pagan Slav would voluntarily follow her husband to death? The Russian superman fell in

love with a Russian woman and resolved to marry her. They took a solemn oath that whichever survived the other should commit suicide. Potok's wife turned out to suffer from a fatal disease and half a year after the wedding she died. Potok dug a grave for his former wife and put her into a coffin. He buried her and descended himself into the tomb, fully dressed. Overhead was a ceiling in oak and yellow sand; room had been left only for a rope that he had attached to the bell in the cathedral. No one was permitted to touch the bell except Potok. There was a monster in the underworld and that monster visited the grave at midnight. He entered the tomb, burning with a flame of fire. Potok unsheathed his sword and swished the Serpent's head off. And he anointed his wife with the Serpent's head, bringing her back to life. Presently he pulled the rope and the cathedral bell burst into triumphant song.'

I am the Wandering Jew; and yet I do not travel much nowadays.

16

'He knows that it is beautiful to be born as the individual who has the universal as his home, his friendly abiding-place, which at once welcomes him with open arms when he would tarry in it. But he knows also that higher than this there winds a solitary path, narrow and steep; he knows that it is terrible to be born outside the universal, to walk without meeting a single traveller. He knows very well where he is and how he is related to men. Humanly speaking, he is crazy and cannot make himself intelligible to anyone. And yet it is the mildest expression, to say that he is crazy. If he is not supposed to be that, then he is a hypocrite, and the higher he climbs on this path, the more dreadful a hypocrite he is' (*Fear and Trembling*). In these terms Kierkegaard speaks about the knight of faith who is superior to both an artist and a hero. But I suppose there are *other* individuals who are born outside the universal—out of wedlock, in a sense. Indeed no legal 'universal' marriage can bring about the birth of such an individual whose steep and narrow path winds its way towards a mountain top where only Zarathustra is likely to meet him and understand his 'twaddle'. Would my mother have used this word in relation to my poems had we spoken English? Drivel, gibberish, nonsense, full of inanities. '*Chepukha*,' she announced disdainfully as I finished the recitation of my first book of poetry. 'You'd better devote your whole life to music—you're not *utterly* devoid of musical talent. As a poet you sound pretentious and ridiculous. Don't ever try and read your poetry to anybody—you would make yourself a laughing stock!' At the time I did not know how Nabokov's mother had greeted his first poetical effort, otherwise I might have cursed the Almighty from the top of our skyscraper, from the terrace of the thirtieth floor located right under a monumental star. 'As my memory hesitated for a moment on the threshold of the last stanza, where so many opening words had been tried that the finally selected one was now somewhat camouflaged by an array of false entrances, I heard my mother sniff. Presently I finished reciting and looked up at her. She was smiling ecstatically through the tears that streamed down her face. "How wonderful, how beautiful," she said—' (Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*)

Neglectful of her own prescription, my mother made me recite two poems in the presence of a cousin who did not dare say anything while my mother repeated her former verdict. My father, on the other hand, got so bored that he merely left the room while a recording I had made so as not to perform my opuses live went on speaking to him rather confidentially. Did God enjoin my parents to sacrifice their only son? 'It was early in the morning, Abraham arose betimes, he had the asses saddled, left his tent, and Isaac with him, but Sarah looked out of the window after them until they had passed down the valley and she could see them no more' (*Fear and Trembling*). What would my father have done if God had vouchsafed to order him about? He might have acted like the English agents, saying to Him in quiescent tones, 'I heard you with interest but I didn't feel that what you'd imparted to me was suitable for my agenda. Unfortunately, I'm snowed under with work and have no time for the demands like yours. I wish you every success in finding a man prepared to do your bidding.' Oh, my father would never have gone so far as to curse the Almighty; he just did not notice Him. Nor was he a belligerent atheist and so did not qualify for the post of a *cold* individual—the privilege bestowed on Feodor Pavlovich Karamazov. For a lot of people, baptisms, weddings and funerals are the only time they go to church. In the Soviet Union religious rites, as well as the rights of believers, were kept to a minimum, which did not prevent my grandmother from having me baptised in the church where I unconsciously spat the host out. My mother might have gone to our church on the sly so as not to jeopardise my father's career, but I saw her there only once—during my grandmother's funeral. Fourteen years later her coffin also stood in our church: this time I had followed her injunction to the letter. She was neither cold nor hot; she was not lukewarm either. She was like a candle you could light in a dinner room, in a church, in a concert hall during a baroque recital.

Kierkegaard's father was both hot and cold. He was cold when, perched upon a hill, he cursed God; he was hot during the rest of his life because he firmly believed God would punish him by finishing off his children, all of whom were to die before they reached the age of thirty-four—another imitation of Christ. Kierkegaard knew his father was harbouring a terrible secret and this awareness shaped his boyhood, his mentality. One day his father came into the open; he also confessed to pre-marital sexual relations with his second wife. 'Guilt rests upon the whole family,' he said. 'It must disappear, be stricken out by God's all-powerful hand. Our very name will be blotted out.' Is it better to have such a feverish father? I wish *my* father had inculcated me with fear and trembling, dread and despair. In these matters I am a self-taught person except that Tatiana gave me a few lessons during the last weeks of my Russian life.

My engagement to her and the breaking of our engagement are actually my relationship to God; they are, I dare say, religiously understood, my engagement to God.

Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals*

'If I had had faith I would have stayed with Regine. Thank God I have now seen that. I have been on the point of losing my mind these days. Humanly speaking, I have been fair to her; perhaps I should never have become engaged, but from that moment I treated her honestly. In an aesthetic and chivalrous sense, I loved her far more than she loved me, for otherwise she would neither have shown me pride nor alarmed me later with her shrieking.'

I did have faith, but I left Tatiana behind in spite of our engagement which had already been broken, frankly speaking. On the day of our would-be marriage she did her best to talk me into signing the contract at a dreadful bureau called ZAGS. She even began to run in the direction of the street where a taxi could be easily found, now and then glancing back to make sure I was following in her footsteps. I was not, needless to say, as if to distance myself not only from her running figure but also from Kierkegaard's *Journal* where he unambiguously boasts about his post-engagement attitude towards his disconsolate bride. In the light of this newly-born discrepancy I had better renounce the method I chose at the outset of this book—drawing parallels between the Danish philosopher and myself. I do hope my straight line is as infinite as his, but I must admit it does not run parallel either to his life or his works. There is no denying, however, that our infinite lines come together at some points, here and there, without making an attempt to intertwine like laurels in a crown. So far I have interlaced his *Journal* and other works with my own childhood memories only to find they do not match up properly. Why should my life be a perfect match to his literary heritage? Because he was my favourite philosopher on that memorable day when King Baudouin asked me what I was interested in apart from music.

As is stated in my biography, I won the Queen Elisabeth Competition in 1972. After that victory I returned to the Soviet Union and was kept inside the country for more than a year, having become an item on our black list which was probably blacker than other lists of this kind: there are such lists even in democratic lands. Then, in January 1974, I was allowed to play three concerts in Belgium. To underline their support—I was the victim of a tyrannical regime—the King and the Queen honoured my first recital with their presence. In the intermission I was conducted to their box or rather to a spacious room behind the Royal box, where we exchanged a few words, my left hand holding at an angle a glass of orange juice. 'I'm rather keen on philosophy,' I replied to the King.

'And who is your favourite philosopher?' he asked.

'Kierkegaard, Sire.'

'Who is Kierkegaard?'

I am not likely to forget the majesty of his question; even now I do not always own up to my ignorance, especially in the domain of philosophy—despite the wonderful lesson I was given more than thirty years ago.

This short dialogue was instrumental in setting Kierkegaard apart from other philosophers – not only within the bounds of my life. He got beyond these bounds as if to beckon me from the space I had to conquer in order to join him and also to turn over a new leaf, as the saying goes. His infinity proved to be so contagious that I started to develop the symptoms of the diseases he had described and to some extent advocated throughout his mature years. Oddly enough, the disease I caught almost at once had nothing to do with the sickness unto death but could rather be defined as the sickness unto life—unto someone else's life. 'Next to taking all my clothes off, owning nothing in the world, not the least thing, and then throwing myself into the water, I find most pleasure in speaking a foreign language, preferably a living one, in order to become *entfremdet* from myself.' The estrangement of which my request for political asylum is just a consequence first revealed itself through my obsession with French, English and German—the languages I had refused to study in my boyhood. So my Russian leap forward is retrospectively reduced to crawling, i.e. to a smooth transition from one state to another, from one self to another. 'Nothing happens all at once,' says Leibniz, 'and it is one of my great maxims, and among the most completely verified, that nature never makes leaps: which I called the Law of Continuity....But the beauty of nature, which desires distinguished perceptions, demands the appearance of leaps....No transition happens by a leap....This holds, I think, not only of transitions from place to place, but also of those from form to form, or from state to state.'

Crawling from one state to another, from one form to another, from boyhood to youth, from youth to maturity, from one woman to another. All the women I have seduced after your death are your clones. You are as like as forty peas in a pod, *comme quarante gouttes d'eau*. 'When I deny that there are two drops of water perfectly alike, or any two other bodies perfectly indiscernible from each other; I don't say, 'tis absolutely impossible to suppose (*poser*) them; but that 'tis a thing contrary to the divine wisdom, and which consequently does not exist.' Leibniz is right: you are unique, in a class of your own, in a world of your own. You are the world. You are Eternity.

18

No age can halt the scepticism of levelling, nor can the present age....It can only be halted if the individual, in the separateness of his individuality, acquires the fearlessness of religion.

Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals*

Actually it is a woman I did not conquer that comes to my mind as I follow Kierkegaard through what Leibniz calls 'the labyrinth of the continuum'. (How infinitely small points can come together to constitute a line?) I met her in Siberia during my hazardous journey through the towns to which many Russian aristocrats were banished in the early nineteenth-century—the aftermath of their rebellion against the tsarist rule. She did not descend from those aristocrats; her beauty was dubious and not *aesthetically* proven, but I had time on my hands and on other members of my body, I might point out,

were I in the mood for playing with words. As a journalist, she attended an interview I gave to local glitterati and I cast a few glances at her profile to gauge the temperature of her sensuality. After the interview I waylaid her near the cloakroom and we talked for a while about Chinese medicine that was widespread in their region situated in the vicinity of Manchuria. We went to the nearest chemist's above which, for some obscure reason, a genuine motorcar was suspended. 'This building used to be a garage,' she said.

'Why don't they remove the car?' I asked naively.

'It's beautiful, isn't it? One of our famous sights.'

I found no Chinese medicine at the chemist's who was surprised to hear that something Chinese was available in the area and we went back to the cloakroom where we had stood half-an-hour before. 'I wish I had bought the toothpaste I always use in Moscow,' I said and obediently she retraced her steps to guide me once again across a snow-covered square around which two cars kept moving in circles as if to enact some technological ritual. 'Do you think the Volkswagen is making love to the Renault?' What a pity this expression is used only in literal sense now, but we were talking Russian and the ambiguity on which an inveterate seducer would have pounced without hesitation escaped her notice.

'One of the drivers has just lost his way,' she retorted with a non-committal chuckle.

The chemist had never heard about this toothpaste either and when I told him it was sold in every Moscow *apteka* he exclaimed, 'I wish you wouldn't keep springing surprises on me!'

'Would my invitation to dinner come as a surprise?' I asked her as we left the former garage to the chemist's relief.

'Nothing surprises me any more,' she said. 'Surprises have gone out of my life. Everything is certain, predictable, eternal.' She spoke about Eternity with such nonchalance one might assume it was a common denominator in Siberia—something like my toothpaste sold all over Moscow.

'Do you share this eternity with many people or is it your property, your speciality?'

'Shall I come to your hotel tonight? I'll give you an interview on Eternity. After all, you were considerate enough to answer *my* questions this afternoon.'

A glass of Russian champagne in my hand, I stood in the doorway of my room as she was strolling towards me along an interminable corridor: her visit had been announced by our receptionist. 'Don't greet me over the doorstep!' she said reproachfully. 'Have you forgotten the Russian custom?'

'You mean—nothing should be done over a doorstep? Don't they kiss in doorways sometimes? In Soviet films? A man comes back after the Second World War—'

She was already in my room and I could hand her the glass of champagne without doing prejudice to any custom, either Russian or foreign. She put it on a small round table that remained between us through our talk, for all my efforts to get it out of the way.

'Is it your example, your demonstration of how Eternity works?' I said at last. 'I want to remove something from where it stands, but the object in question can't be uprooted because it is rooted to the spot. I was also rooted to the spot once upon a time, but I was uprooted, I flew away. Likewise I'm capable of rising up and covering the distance that separates me from your hands, your neck, your lips—'

'Are you making love to me?' she might have asked in the first half of the twentieth century—in London, on the Titanic. She spoke to me about God instead.

'God is the centre of my life. There are people who allow Him to sit in some corner. They don't even sleep with Him in the same bed. Their pets sleep with them every night, but God sits in the corner as if punished for a misdemeanour. They may give Him the remains of their meals—out of generosity. But they don't let Him occupy the centre of their lives.'

'But *your* life expands beyond its centre, I suppose. So there must be room for other things in it—for friendship, for love.'

'I love God.'

'But love is an infinite sentiment.'

'God is infinite too.' The plainness of her answers was sickening: the truth may irritate us beyond measure when uttered by the *wrong* person.

'Why do you say then He occupies the *centre* of your existence? And what about the corners where He does *not* crouch? Or does your life resemble an infinite sphere whose centre is everywhere and circumference nowhere?'

'He is everywhere.'

'Let us forget about Infinity and Eternity for a while. Why not limit our conversation to this room, to thirty hours? I'm leaving the day after tomorrow. Why not spend these hours in my double room? There's enough room for two people in it. And for God, for *our* God. I also believe in God, you know.'

'I'd stay with you in this room if I didn't believe in God. Other women would certainly stay with you in your room because their gods live in their handbags. They have plenty of gods. And I have one God only.'

'Look, I'm also a Christian. And, along with Judaism and Islam, Christianity is a monotheistic religion—no doubt about that. Let us set the problem of the Trinity aside, for the time being. We may return to it tomorrow afternoon, if you don't mind. For the moment I'm solely preoccupied with the God of the Old Testament. And with the God of the New Testament. The one and only God we are praying to this night. And we'll pray to the same God tomorrow—take my word for it. But this God is invisible and inaudible. What do I see when I walk in my woods? Trees and bushes. And I hear birds and aeroplanes. And helicopters. So I can't help feeling there are only trees in the woods. And bushes, and birds. And there are only aeroplanes above it. And helicopters. There's nothing *beyond* them,

nothing whatsoever. And without this despair there's no God. If you catch sight of God whenever you shift your gaze towards the centre of your life, you don't believe in Him. Sometimes He *is* in the centre of your life and indeed in its darkest nooks and crannies, sometimes He is *not*. You may even curse Him for not being at your beck and call, contrary to His obligations. Isn't He omnipresent after all? Omnipresent and omniscient? Why does He forget you so often? You would be delighted to welcome Him in your abode twenty-four hours a day. What's more, you insist on His staying in your room forever. But He's away on a business trip. A skiing holiday, rather. Do you know this story about the Trinity? God the Father says to His companions in misfortune, "We've worked too hard for many centuries. I, for one, am utterly exhausted." "So am I," says God the Son. "So am I," says the Holy Spirit. "I'll spend a few weeks in the Bahamas," says God the Father. "And I'll go to Switzerland," says God the Son. "And I'll spend my holiday in Russia," says the Holy Spirit. "Are you mad? What's got into you?" God the Father and God the Son are surprised at the Holy Spirit's intentions. "You see, I've never been to Russia," says the Holy Spirit. But it's God the Father you put in the centre of your life, not the Holy Spirit. So you've nothing to worry about. Actually you *should* worry about a lot of things—your self-assurance is appalling. Angst should usurp God's position in your life. Without angst there's no God. Without trees there's no God. Nature isn't beautiful unless you see something or somebody beyond it. A robber standing behind a tree. And you don't see the robber, do you?"

'Aren't *you* a robber?' she said.

'Am I stealing your time? In comparison with the speeches that make up *In Vino Veritas* my monologue is short of the mark, I can assure you. The first part of Kierkegaard's *Stages on Life's Way*. Actually Nietzsche thought there was nothing beyond the trees in his wood. And there were no aeroplanes above it. You can come to God only through the absence of God. Do you love Him as you love yourself? I don't love myself. I *respect* myself, but that's different. And I don't offer the *other* cheek to my enemies. I've no enemies *because* I'm unwilling to turn my head whenever they're within my reach. Whenever *I* am within their reach. God must become your enemy, first. These commandments are of no use to ordinary individuals. They would have destroyed the world if the *ordinarius* had paid attention to them. I do turn the other cheek to God. And I would gladly sacrifice my son to God if I had one—if I had a son, I mean. Or a daughter. What a pity you refuse to spend these hours in my company. We might have children in spite of my age. I've nothing against family life. I'm a virtual family man, to tell the truth. You're keen on the truth, aren't you?"

'It's rather late,' she pointed out, looking at her watch.

'Is it? Tolstoy rewrote the Gospels. He uprooted the trees that stood in his way. Everyone should rewrite the Gospels or carry out their orders to the letter, to the comma, to the semicolon. You follow the letter of the law or you do not. Either you sacrifice your son to God or you give birth to a daughter instead of a son.'

She put her glass down and left the room.

Should I rewrite the Gospels or stick to the text? I am a pianist, a performer. I *interpret* the pieces I play in a concert hall, in a recording studio. I tell my own story at the expense of the composer whom I obliterate—in accordance with Nietzsche's advice. He thought a performer should take centre stage and recount the story of his life, setting the composer aside—until further notice. I have cited this excerpt from *Human, all too Human* two times already (in my book on music). REPETITION.

'I do not regret the time that Cordelia costs me, although it is considerable. Every meeting requires, often, long preparation. With her I am witnessing the birth of her love. I am myself as though present invisibly when sitting visibly by her side. As when a dance which should really be danced by two is only danced by one, that's how my relation is to her. For I am the other dancer, but invisible.... She moves in the melody of her own soul, I am only the occasion for her moving. I am not amorous, that would only awaken her; I am flexible, yielding, impersonal, almost like a mood' (*The Seducer's Diary*). Once, in a St Petersburg hotel, I encountered a woman whose sexual allure owed a lot to the linguistic bond between the English and French word 'allure'—bearing, style, elegance. She was not strikingly beautiful, but her queenly bearing did not fail to produce a magic effect on my libido which, I might say en passant, never lies dormant in Russian hotels. Her job allowed her to spend a considerable amount of time with those clients who proved as sensitive to her aristocratic charms as I was so that, to all intents and purposes, our adventure must have been on the list of her duties. She was in charge of the floor I stayed on and, after midnight, only drunkards and foreign tourists returned to the hotel; and there were few foreign tourists in it. So we had plenty of time to discuss our projects which, contrary to what had befallen me in Siberia, were rigorously limited to the duration of my stay.

Accordingly, two days later, I took her to the best restaurant in St Petersburg, where I drank some vodka to demonstrate how enamoured I was with my motherland despite all the years I had spent abroad. Not to be outdone, she made such a show of patriotism that I was unable to prevent her from falling asleep upon our return to the hotel. I went out and phoned a young lady I had come across on Nevsky Avenue the day before—after making arrangements with the sleeping beauty. Trusting the restorative power of sleep, I did not hurry to bring this second date to a close; when I opened the door of my room—it was almost dinner time—I was greeted by a reproachful look and a beautiful pair of legs. Voluptuously, with infinite care and curiosity, I put a few finishing touches to the picture I had dreamt of ever since our encounter and shortly afterwards her naked body began to dance under my direction. It is easy to put a woman through her paces if she is willing to do so for the sake of a pleasure lying in store for her or in gratitude for the one she had been offered already. I have no idea whether she believed in God or disregarded Him: we did not touch upon the subject. Yet her last monologue, punctuated by my calls for reason and calm, seemed to draw on Abraham's dilemma. 'Why don't you want to take me with you? It's not Paris I'm interested in. Do you think I'd have come to your room if I hadn't fallen for you from the very start? Are you afraid of my daughter? Let her perish in Russia—I'm sure she won't survive here on her own. Well, I'm ready to sacrifice my daughter

for your sake, for the sake of my love. I love my daughter too, but it's not a matter of life and death. I can *live* without her, without twenty daughters. I'll dance for you every day. I wish I could dance with you forever.' Her monologue also had some bearing on the subject of Eternity.

Throughout my life I have been an invisible dancer; and yet I cannot dance at all. Moreover, I am not keen to seduce a woman stage by stage because, in my opinion, such a long-term courtship fits into none of 'the stages on life's way'. In other words, I *would* regret the time that such and such a woman might cost me. Kierkegaard did not waste his time on Regine; he just let his imagination run away with him. He would not have composed his masterpieces had he continually spied on her moods and movements—in a Proustian search of material. *The Seducer's Diary* bears testimony to the vigour of his imagination that would not have stood the test of time, if confronted with a *real* woman. 'First her femininity is neutralised by prosaic common sense and ridicule, not directly but indirectly, together with what is absolutely neutral: spirit. She comes close to losing the sense of her femininity, but in this condition she cannot stand alone; she throws herself into my arms, not as if I were a lover, no, still quite neutrally. Then her femininity awakens, one coaxes it to its greatest resilience, one lets her come up against something effectively real, she goes beyond it, her femininity attains almost supernatural heights, she belongs to me with a worldly passion.'

Tatiana belonged to me with a worldly passion, with an otherworldly passion, her femininity lazing around the supernatural heights to which I had not shoved her *consciously*: she kept adjusting to my ways and thoughts without further ado. We danced together and I was not an invisible dancer. 'She was hidden from herself inside herself, she rose up from out of herself, she had a self-contained pride, like the daring flight of the spruce, even though it is fastened to the earth. A sadness poured over her like the cooing of the wood-pigeon, a deep longing that had no want. She was a riddle, who mysteriously possessed her own solution, a secret, and what are all diplomats' secrets compared with this, an enigma, and what in all the world is so beautiful as the word that solves it?' (*The Seducer's Diary*) At this point our infinite lines—Kierkegaard's and mine—do come together and intertwine.

19

What about *my* enigma? 'One should be an enigma not just to others but to oneself too.' Who am I? A knight of faith or a knight of loneliness? I am no longer a seducer whose diary teems with projects and adventures like the ones depicted by Kierkegaard in *Either / Or*. The protagonist even has recourse to the services of an awkward young man who is supposed to induce in Cordelia a veritable abhorrence for conventional forms of love. I had to rely solely upon myself as I educated a young divorcee who staunchly believed in the virtues of marriage. I told her that marriage was just a means by which a man could *legally* shirk his masculine duties whenever he was overworked or in love with somebody else. And I did not fail to underline the social aspect of legal unions. 'He shows his wife to his friends who admire her beauty and conclude that her husband isn't so mediocre after all—beautiful women are said

to fall in love with men of genius. And the husband's chief concern is that his status as a skilled specialist should be recognised and respected. His wife's beauty gives him unexpected celebrity status that he isn't worthy of, needless to say. In a way she becomes his status symbol—not an enviable part to play in our human comedy. Did Balzac allocate it to some local beauty in his monstrous fresco? Husbands usually prefer Balzac to Flaubert—not only because of Emma Bovary's inconsiderate conduct. These "legal" men don't know the first thing about style like the writers who toss off best-sellers. The point is they don't write for themselves. Nor do people marry for themselves—it's our society they bother about or their respective and respectable families. Any legalisation might have a prejudicial effect on love, on the erotic. If our instincts and feelings happen to fall into the clutches of the law, they choke to death. An engagement ring is enough. A fearful strangler. Besides, as a pianist I can't wear it—my fingers are as free as birds. Liszt said that a pianist's hands should *fly* over the keys. "What as a rule do engaged couples talk about? As far as I know, they are busily occupied in getting themselves mutually enmeshed in the tiresome connections of their respective families. No wonder the erotic disappears. Unless one can make the erotic the absolute in comparison with which all other history vanishes, one should never get mixed up with loving, even if one marries ten times. If I have an aunt called Mariane, an uncle called Christopher, a father who is a major, etc., all such public knowledge is irrelevant to the mysteries of love. Yes, even one's own past life is nothing. " At the end of my diatribe against conventional forms of love I permitted myself to quote *The Seducer's Diary* which used to come to my rescue in the last stages of my donjuanism: I could no longer rely on my *erotic* bravado. Now I am at the bottom of the heap in every respect; no point in quoting Kierkegaard.

In my recent speeches I even stooped to waving a sort of magic wand that worked wonders during the dates I had with my former compatriots at the beginning of the new area dominated by so-called New Russians. At the time, however, I did not really wave it; I would just draw it from my pocket to show its tip to my spellbound listeners. Let us get rid of this metaphor which turned up in this text only because of my reluctance to acknowledge my base manoeuvres. I speak to those provincial—mostly Siberian—girls about Paris, about my wine collection, about my antique furniture and library. I say I have written ten novels which have been translated into *nine* languages—a misplaced homage to Dante and his Beatrice. In Moscow they would laugh in my face and point at the nearest Mercedes or BMW: we are no longer in the early nineties. But in poor Siberian provinces there are few foreign cars and Paris is so far away that even an old pianist may hope to overcome a maiden's resistance thanks to his address and a few French words he casually utters in the course of a conversation. And I mostly play in *poor* Siberian provinces, far from oil wells—a financial sacrifice of no importance. Love is dearer than money, as the Russians say in jest. In desperation I may stoop even lower by pointing out that they have every reason to accept my offer because their lives are miserable.

'Suppose you went home now. What would you do at home? Suppose a real man is waiting for you there, a provincial youngster. Don't you prefer a mature man from Paris? This youngster can't

teach you anything except a few tricks in the domain of lovemaking. I'm also an expert in this domain, believe it or not. Actually I wasn't so adroit and vigorous in my prime. Middle age can be the prime of life if you have the right attitude. Can you doubt the quality of *my* attitude? It's not for nothing that I own one of the biggest private libraries in the world. Of course anything can happen and there's no guarantee I'll be as vigorous tomorrow as I am today. But what do we care about tomorrow? I'll be far away from Siberia and your charms. Why don't you seize this unparalleled opportunity that won't arise in the near future? Foreign pianists don't come to your *trou*, as we say in France. Don't you think your town looks like a hole? And I must have a hole in my head to travel so far and play for a bunch of morons! Don't you wish to get away from here? Of course you won't be able to leave with me tomorrow—you need a French visa. But I know the ambassador personally so you'll get your visa in no time. But not first thing tomorrow morning, I'm afraid. And what about tonight? We can't go to Paris straightaway so let us enjoy ourselves in this room. Won't you regret your defiance tomorrow—first thing tomorrow morning? And I'll be far away. The point of no return. And I'll never return to your cultural wasteland. Actually it's just a wasteland, a dumping ground. The predicate "cultural" can't be applied to it even for argument's sake. Well, our *rendez-vous* has become an emotional wasteland, to all outward appearances. There are no inward appearances, I'm afraid. Won't you regret the whole thing in a month, in two years? You'll be mature by then and probably more intelligent, more pragmatic—hard-nosed. But don't forget the point of no return which concerns every aspect of this situation. I'm willing to have an affair with you at the present moment. But the present can't be relied upon because it's just a moment, nothing else. I may change my mind tomorrow morning—if I sleep badly, for instance. Or if I sleep soundly. In this case, nothing would make me revert to my present state of mind and body—neither your apologies nor the charisma of your nudity. And forget about love and lifelong marital fidelity. A change of heart, you know. It's a slippery slope once you start holding off people of my calibre. We are few and far between and most of us have died already. You can't go to France with a dead man, can you?'

A month ago, during my summer holiday, I saw an attractive lady in the shop where I would purchase wine and the muesli made by a firm with a melodious name. After putting the change in her purse, the lady went out and I regretted having removed three bottles of wine from a shelf on which they might have remained in peace, allowing me to pursue the lady I had already chosen as my target. On second thoughts, however, I renounced my Casanovian project which might have embroiled me in a delicate and unpleasant situation. I was sure the young lady would not tell me a few home truths such as, 'You're too old to pick up girls in the streets.' But was she lenient enough to conceal her contempt for a bald, wrinkled womaniser who, on top of everything, had only a smattering of her native tongue. (My *reading* knowledge of German is beyond dispute.) I recall with some satisfaction a foolhardy experiment upon a lady of distinguished family. For some time I had been sneaking around her secretly looking for an interesting form of contact, but in vain; then one day I met her on the street.

I was certain she didn't know me or know I belonged here in town. She was walking alone. I slipped past her so that I could meet her face to face. I stepped aside for her; she kept to the flagstones. Just then I cast a sorrowful glance at her, I think I almost had tears in my eyes. I took off my hat. She paused. In an agitated voice and with a dreamy look, I said, "Do not be angry, gracious lady; the resemblance between you and someone I love with all my soul, but who lives far away from me, is so striking that you must forgive my strange behaviour." She thought me an extravagant dreamer, and a young girl can well put up with a little extravagance, especially when she also feels her superiority and dares to smile at one. Just so, she smiled, which became her indescribably. With aristocratic condescension she bowed to me, and smiled. She resumed her walk. I walked a few steps by her side. Some days later I met her; I presumed to greet her. She laughed at me...Patience is a precious virtue, and he who laughs last laughs best' (*The Seducer's Diary*).

Young people might and must have patience: their time is not running out. The lady I pursued in the streets of Davos would have laughed last and best, had I given her an opportunity to ridicule my uncouth and unsuited advances: she was in her early twenties. Besides, the protagonist of the *Diary* spoke Danish and so encountered no linguistic problems with the ladies he would set his heart upon. I might have addressed her in English or in French which, after all, furthers the cause of communication in a large part of Switzerland; but, in spite of my literary gift, for once I was at a complete loss as to how I could engage in chit-chat. Moreover, I had given her a two-minute start so that when I finally left the shop I saw her walking far ahead. Pinning the blame on my gourmandise, I quickened my pace and was about to break into a run as she turned into a side street where no boutiques could attract her notice. Actually it was a cul-de-sac from which she might escape only by getting back to the pavement where I was trotting with self-assurance. As if following my train of thought, she reappeared right in front of me—a few paces away. Was she waiting for me? I asked myself, giving a boost to my confidence: I could find no other explanation for her incongruous visit to the cul-de-sac. I caught up with her and, walking by her side, I continued to cast about for an appropriate introductory phrase. 'You resemble somebody I was in love with in my youth,' sounds like a veiled declaration of love, but it puts an emphasis on the difference in age between the speaker and the object of his wooing. Anyway she could not help noticing this difference whenever she happened to glance at me, which was no indication of her curiosity or interest: we were walking side by side. Isn't it better to come into the open and play on the feelings that might be aroused by an elderly gentleman in the grip of nostalgia and melancholia? The sentiment of pity is so powerful that even an ugly septuagenarian can rely on it as he talks about the past in front of a young protégée. And motherly instinct awakens very early in the company of dolls which show to future mothers how to handle unprotected, helpless creatures.

I consider it improper to walk by a young lady's side without exchanging a few words with her; once more I quickened my pace and overtook her, heading for the apartment I shared with my former mistress. I did not dare look back to find out if she was following in my footsteps: I feared I would

have to '*prendre mes responsabilités*', as a French seducer might have said under the circumstances. And I was loath to *face up* to my responsibilities. But I knew she was following in my footsteps because she had found me pitiful or enticing. Or did she live in the neighbourhood? At some point I lost her—another point of no return. I retraced my steps, but I could not determine her whereabouts; and ringing all the doorbells in the area would have been a daring enterprise undertaken by a coxcomb in some Soviet film. In search of a lost woman.

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The human race is shrewd. It has compelled existence to reveal its secret. It has got wind of the fact that if one wants to have life made easy (and that is exactly what we want), it can be easily done. All one needs to do is to make oneself and make being a human being more and more insignificant—then life becomes easier and easier. Be nonsense, and you will see, all difficulties will disappear!

Kierkegaard, *The Instant*

Am I a knight of faith? (Or a mediaeval knight who would salute his lady-love from a distance?) 'If I knew where there was such a knight of faith, I would make a pilgrimage to him on foot, for this prodigy interests me absolutely....The moment I set eyes on him I instantly push him from me, I myself leap backwards, I clasp my hands and say half aloud, "Good Lord, is this the man? Is it really he? Why, he looks like a tax-collector!" However, it is the man after all. I draw closer to him, watching his least movements to see whether there might not be visible a little heterogeneous fractional telegraphic message from the infinite, a glance, a look, a gesture, a note of sadness, a smile, which betrayed the infinite in its heterogeneity with the finite....No! He is solid through and through....He belongs entirely to the world, no Philistine more so....He takes delight in everything, and whenever one sees him taking part in a particular pleasure, he does it with the persistence which is the mark of the earthly man whose soul is absorbed in such things.'

George W. Bush impersonates the knight of faith to perfection. During his visit to the Kremlin he admired what he saw around him and, upon taking a seat in the room where the Russians usually hold conferences, he removed some chewing gum from his mouth and stuck it under the table. Doesn't this chewing gum match Kierkegaard's outlook? 'He lounges at an open window and looks out on the square on which he lives; he is interested in everything that goes on, in a rat which slips under the curb, in the children's play, and this with the nonchalance of a girl of sixteen. And yet he is no genius, for in vain I have sought in him the incommensurability of genius.'

George W. Bush was asked by a group of Evangelical Christians, 'How would you convince the Lord to allow you to get into heaven?' 'I know we're all sinners,' he answered, 'but I've accepted Jesus Christ as my personal saviour. I know what it means to be right with God.' The *personal* saviour might

have delighted Kierkegaard who set subjectivity above Hegel's doctrine that viewed the universe from a distance. 'He is not a poet, and I have sought in vain to detect in him the poetic incommensurability.' I am a poet. I have written over a thousand poems and I am not prepared to repudiate them. Why should I?

*Am I a knight or a knife? It's so easy to cut:
 Friendship, love, life. What to do
 With armour? I might protect somebody
 In a castle, standing in a corner. Am I
 An exhibit? I'm a doll, whatever you say.
 What do you say? I don't know her name,
 As Hermann sings in The Pique Dame
 (Tchaikovsky's opera). I wish
 I'd gone with you—a cul-de-sac
 Is an ideal castle.*

21

I think that trying to restrain one's times in straightforward fashion is like when a passenger in a carriage holds onto the seat ahead of him in order to stop the carriage....No, the only thing to do is to get out of the carriage oneself and restrain oneself.

Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript

Here is a fax I sent to a European manager on the eve of my fiftieth birthday:

I have a very nice memory of our meeting, of our talk after my recital in April. I have seen very few managers over the last five years, devoting most of my time to literature. I suppose my creative fever has something in common with what Tchaikovsky experienced throughout his life—he feared death and the lack of inspiration. I also used to fear I might not finish the work I was engrossed in. Perhaps many creative artists have this fever and the fears that accompany it. As a result, I played fewer concerts than I should have played, being a professional pianist and a passionate music lover.

Last February I completed my ninth novel. I don't think I shall write more novels in the future. In a way, every novel of mine is a symphony, and not many symphonic composers got beyond this figure. I think that, from now on, I shall limit my literary output to poems and essays. In

other words, I shall have a lot of time on my hands. As I am still truly and madly in love with music, I should like to play more concerts.

And here is another fax I sent him seven years afterwards:

I ought to have written to you before but, to tell the truth, I just had to finish my commentary the last part of which had completely usurped my brain for several months. I finished it yesterday. The whole book has got around 750 pages. I am very relieved and partly unhappy because this is the last long-term project I embarked upon three years ago. I don't write novels any more and essays as well as poems are not tiring. Besides, they are not likely to take up much time.

Actually I wrote something along these lines to you seven years ago. Frankly, I think that had I been obliged to play many concerts I would not have written this work on the Divina Commedia. So my relative absence from concert halls might be a blessing in disguise. But this time I really think I should return to music once again because, apart from other considerations, being cooped up in my flat with books and a computer as the only company is detrimental even to my well-being. Creative artists are certainly far more important and 'greater' than performing ones, but I have written so much during these last years that I think it is high time I kept away from time- and health-consuming literary genres in the future.

Three months later I finished *The Flying Dutchman*—my last novel to date. And what about *this* work? 'By making autobiography into a genre,' writes Paul de Man, 'one elevates it above the literary status of mere reportage, chronicle, or memoir and gives it a place, albeit a modest one, among the canonical hierarchies of the major literary genres. This does not go without some embarrassment, since compared to tragedy, or epic or lyric poetry, autobiography always looks slightly disreputable and self-indulgent in a way that may be symptomatic of its incompatibility with the monumental dignity of aesthetic values. Whatever the reason may be, autobiography makes matters worse by responding poorly to this elevation in status.'

Why have I written such a good autobiography? Because it is neither a reportage, nor a chronicle, nor a memoir, but rather a poem akin to Gogol's masterpiece, all the more so since there are many dead souls in it. Moreover, my work is wholly compatible with the dignity of aesthetic values – sometimes to the detriment of ethical ones. All this depends on the number of lies you tell to guard

against being induced into the trap of a chronicle or a memoir. On the other hand a poem never lies because it tells its own story remotely related to what might have triggered it off. '[Autobiography] may contain lots of phantasms and dreams, but these deviations from reality remain rooted in a single subject whose identity is defined by the uncontested readability of his proper name: the narrator of Rousseau's *Confessions* seems to be defined by the name and by the signature of Rousseau in a more universal manner than is the case, by Rousseau's own avowal, for *Julie*' (Paul de Man, *Autobiography as De-Facement*). Needless to say my autobiography is not rooted in a single subject; even my signature is open-ended. Aleff or Afanassiev? Even if I forego my pen name for the sake of the real one, this signature will not ensure the authenticity of the text which is as frivolous as another autobiography of mine entitled *Tristan on Earth*. I am Valery and Tristan. I am Isolda too. And Chasey who saves the world in my version of the *Divina Commedia*, in my eighth novel. (Not to be confused with a commentary I wrote on the *Commedia*.) And the Flying Dutchman. And the Wandering Jew.

Afanassiev. Mispronunciation can be a serious obstacle to making yourself understood in a foreign language—any businessman or tourist is aware of that. But what happens if people mispronounce (or misunderstand) your *name* in the streets, on the phone, in their offices? You understand they are talking to you because even a garbled version of your name does not sound like 'Smith' or 'Dupont'. You take notice of the efforts they make to utter your name correctly and these efforts alone assure you that their words are angled at your ears, your brain and your heart. But do *they* understand what you are trying to convey through your words, your writings, your autobiography? After all, whatever you say is autobiographical. Whatever you write is autobiographical too.

Let us take the following text I have chanced upon in this file: 'He can easily foresee his fate in an age when passion has been obliterated in favour of learning, in an age when an author who wants to have readers must take care to write in such a way that the book can easily be perused during the afternoon nap—' Am I the author of this unfinished sentence? It is relevant and autobiographical, otherwise I would not have taken the trouble to insert it into this book; its authorship is of no consequence. Actually I am not sure our age is so keen on learning. A typing error? '—in an age when passion has been obliterated in favour of *earning*—' seems more attuned to the third millennium. What is more, football arouses a good deal of *passion* among its supporters—as if to cast a further doubt on my authorship of the excerpt under scrutiny. Am I de-facing my autobiography?

'The sectaries deafen one another by their noise and racket, hold the dread off by their shrieks, and such a hallooing company of sportsmen think they are storming heaven and are on the same path as the knight of faith who in the solitude of the universe never hears any human voice but walks alone with his dreadful responsibility.' I would have couched the same idea in other words had I resolved to describe my loneliness in this confession. (Cf my novels *Anti-Darwin*, *Sound Letters*, *Tristan on Earth*, *The Philosopher's Way*, *Chasey Saves the World*, *Going Home* and *Disappearance*.)

'Words are too awful an instrument for good and evil to be trifled with: they hold above all other external powers a dominion over thoughts. If words be not....an incarnation of the thought but only a clothing for it, then surely they will prove an ill gift; such a one as those poisoned vestments, read of in the stories of superstitious times, which had power to consume and to alienate from his right mind the victim who put them on.' I write differently about linguistic alienation—one of my favourite themes. (Cf my novels *Anti-Darwin*, *The Philosopher's Way*, *Tristan on Earth*, *Chasey Saves the World* and *The Flying Dutchman*.)

'My favourite themes are eternal and consequently inexhaustible: identity (there are many doppelgängers in my novels), Time, loneliness (this theme shall not go out of fashion), the problem of language, etc. There are quotations from Shakespeare and the Fathers of the Church in almost every novel of mine. Or should I call them "poems"? After all, I began my literary carrier (or adventure) as a Russian poet educated in a society where poetry was recited on public squares and during social gatherings; and also in communal flats—until the break of dawn. Even in Moscow one could hear the dawn chorus, especially after a midsummer, poetry-permeated night. Like sonnets and elegies my novels have no plots, properly speaking, although some threads do come to their logical conclusions. Various masks may merge at last into one hunched up figure, half mad, half dead. And Time often comes to a standstill, after being manhandled and distorted by my numerous time-machines.'

Obviously I am the author of this excerpt because not many Russian poets dare to voice their nostalgia for the Soviet regime denigrated by democracies, by their spokes-people. I miss those nights when a poet might recite his verses until the break of dawn, a glass of cognac in his hand. In the heat of the moment he might spill a few drops of the nectar, but in no time the glass was refilled by the cooperative hostess who would fulfil her obligations without losing a single rhyme or caesura. These underground poets needed no literary agents: our intelligentsia was the best publisher in the history of humankind. I do need a literary agent because English and American publishers do not accept unsolicited manuscripts.

'Of all forms of government, the monarchical is the best; more than any other form, it favours and protects the tranquil imaginings and the innocent follies of private individuals. Only democracy, the most tyrannical form of government, obligates everyone to active participation, something one is reminded of frequently enough by the associations and general assemblies of our time. Is it tyranny when one person wants to rule, leaving the rest of us others out? No, but it is tyranny when all want to rule.' In *Chasey Saves the World* I advocate a monarchical system only because it is so hard to find twenty philosophers inclined to exchange their writing desks and libraries for parliamentary seats; whereas one politically-minded philosopher (or artist) *could* be singled out to occupy the throne. What people sometimes forget about King George IV is that he was a patron of the arts. Monarchy is a breeding ground for such patrons without whom an artist must spend a lot of time networking and building up contacts. And I have no time for these internets in which one gets entangled so easily, so

irrevocably. Patrons of the arts used to spare an artist any effort in this perilous (electromagnetic) field so that Haydn, for one, could devote his whole life to symphonies and quartets. Nowadays even talent spotters are a thing of the past and top people will not help you unless you can glorify their names on the market without which you do not exist. And their secretaries rule non-existent artists with an iron fist as they refuse to connect them to 'the boss' who is either abroad or in conference. And all these 'monarchs' turn your entreaties and manuscripts down even if you alter your name.

Weary of getting rejection slips, I began to sign my sample chapters 'Jackson' or 'Johnson', hoping that my false pretences might allow me to settle within the British Empire if not in flesh, at least in my capacity as a novelist. But fooling literary agents is no easy task: they do not care about *your* codes as they look for the universal appeal of 'Da Vinci' fame. I read an article on this novel in a Russian newspaper, where the decline of the West was pronounced once more on the grounds that trifling with the gods had spelt ruin for Ancient Greece. (But Homer too trifled with the gods.) 'Dan Brown needed an illustrious individual,' said the journalist, 'and even Leonardo da Vinci, it seemed to him, could not guarantee a world-wide success for his book. So he chose the most illustrious person in human history—Jesus Christ.' Should I talk about the decline of journalistic standards in the popular press? Why didn't he scrutinise the *quality* of the book? Agatha Christie's first novel is entitled *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*. A mysterious affair of styles—that is what literature is about. According to Nietzsche, a genuine book makes one forget all other books. What about *The Da Vinci Code*? Does it make you forget all other books? If it does, you have been forgotten yourself—by God. (And not on account of its 'blasphemous' contents, mind you.) Anyway my sample chapters would have been turned down had I signed them 'Leonardo da Vinci'.

Aleff (Aleph). The first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The title of a story where Borges describes a sphere inside which the whole universe is enclosed. At some point Gogol would sign his manuscripts 'Alov'. Aleff. An illustrious pseudonym where all names are enclosed. 'A receptacle without bounds and dimensions;—nothing less than infinity' (Wordsworth, *Essays upon Epitaphs*). But Wordsworth lays particular stress on the opposition between the name and the nameless: it is the latter that has no bounds. Well, Aleff is a nameless name. How could I run out of inspiration in the boundless realm of infinity?

Besides, I could glide through a vista of identities bound by a fictitious name, if not by an overriding authorial voice. But none of my doppelgängers will ever reconcile himself or herself to the 'modern age'.

Why is it, then, that no contemporary age can get along with witnesses to the truth—but as soon as a man is dead everyone can get along with him so wonderfully? This is because, as long as he is alive...they feel the sting of his existence; he

compels them to make more difficult decisions. But when he is dead, people can be good friends with him and admire him.

Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals*

The marketing strategy for my products was not limited to Johnson or to names in general; I went so far as to alter my *age*, becoming a young, promising novelist. Nowadays youngsters have pride of place and I stooped to swapping Space and Eternity for their prospects—for great expectations on which agents and publishers stake their bank accounts. What could they expect from an individual who, on the eve of his sixtieth birthday, does his best to find a literary agent in an English-speaking country?

So I became a twenty-four-year old writer of English extraction, whose mother lived in Versailles for some obscure reason. It was his mother who wrote to a number of London agents to complain about her son's timidity that did not permit him to address them personally. 'I'm writing on his behalf. He works on his novels and poems all day long, but doesn't seem to be interested in the fate of his books. I'm sending you—' This strategy did not work—or rather, this stage on my life's way was not the right one; I had to skip it. My next letter ran as follows, 'My son is extremely ambitious and intends to become a bestselling author in the near future. He's got a lot of ambition so he is bound to be successful. He is the sort of ambitious young writer that any publishing house would be glad to take care of. His business trip to the United States prevents him from writing to you. He asked me to act on his behalf. Please find enclosed—' Then I grew younger, overtaking Dorian Grey on the road to Immortality or Eternity; in fact I out-Gray Dorian Gray whose looks maintained the status quo. 'My son is eighteen-years old. It's his first novel in which there's a lost manuscript, a lost treasure, a code, many pursuits, three murders and one love. He is already working on his second novel because he can't live without literature and success.'

'I must probably make an excuse for the way in which I use "I" in these lectures....To my way of thinking it is my weakness and imperfection...that I do not venture more daringly to use my "I". One of the unfortunate aspects of modern times is precisely that "the I", the personal I, has been abolished. And for this very reason it is as though genuine ethical-religious communication has disappeared from the world. For ethical-religious truth is related essentially to the personality and can only be communicated by an I to an I. As soon as the communication becomes objective, truth becomes untruth.' So I wrote *my* letter to several agents and publishers:

Do you realise what you are doing? You are dragging our name through the mire. Humanity has a name, you know. In the books you publish and publicise humanity has no name; it is nameless, so to speak. I don't mean humanity portrayed in your books is infinite and partakes of Eternity. On the contrary—it amounts to nothing. Or is it reduced to nothing? Anyway it is not Heidegger's Nichts. Just nothing, nothing at all. Have you ever given a thought to the nobility of

the arts, to the dignity of Man? The better the book is, the fewer readers it will have—Kierkegaard was aware of this truth. So were his admirers. But you claim that the book is a masterpiece because it appeals to the multitude. Do you think that Kierkegaard's works are behind the times? But the times do not change in the domain of literature, contrary to what you may presume; in the Kingdom of Art in general. But you don't care about Eternity, do you? It is very short-sighted not to invest in long-range, eternal works. Such an investment pays off, you know.

No point in writing letters to dead people.

The number of books I am quoting in this *Bildungsroman* is limited because one text cannot explore more than a dozen texts. One of these books is Paul de Man's *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*—I am a hopeless romantic after all—where eternal authors undergo a sort of autopsy that brings them back to life once again. (How to deconstruct your death, my Tatiana?) 'In explicating *The Rhine*, the interpreters have been helped by a note in Hölderlin's own hand, miraculously preserved in the margin of the manuscript, in which he indicates the "law" regulating the structure of the poem. By using this note and by checking cross-references between recurrent terms in the poem, the interpreters have been able to construct a very convincing interpretation of the poem's first part.' Contemporary works need no interpretation: they are *crystal* clear and for once I wish to play the game of deconstruction, paying homage to Derrida who died almost two years ago. The last great philosopher. He said he was the last eschatologist. The one before last, to be exact.

Contemporary writers are as clear as day, but a genuine writer should be as clear as night where one can assume a different personality and hide something in the air. Only cats or cat-people are allowed to read such authors. But let us not forget the crystal I used as I attempted to define my renowned colleagues—my crystal ball. Their works are crystal clear but they have no crystal balls at their disposal, otherwise they would not have written all this nonsense that will not survive their funerals. In *other words*, they have no gift for crystal-gazing. And what are these *other words*? To gaze. Last autumn I paid a visit to a *real* Dutchman in whose castle I saw a painting that reverberated through my past: he has got an impressive collection of Russian paintings, furniture, manuscripts, etc. Every day for a week I would sit gazing at the paintings in order to remember one of my former lives and my ancestors. Could you *gaze* at contemporary novels? Could you sit gazing at them for a week? Of course you read them in trains, planes and hotels where you substitute their rigmarole for sleeping pills; and your consumption of these products might take a week, two weeks. But could you sit gazing at *one* of their paragraphs for a week? Could you construct a 'convincing interpretation' of the work you are engrossed in? You have no wish to interpret it, have you? Besides, there is nothing to interpret, is there? Anyway you are *convinced* that a few delightful hours you have spent in the company of the author will do you a lot of good. Do *you* have a crystal ball at your disposal? How do

you know this prose will work wonders in your case? Won't you instead be reduced to the status of a backward pig whose inability to search for truffles drives its breeder to despair?

Do these people have the powers of telepathy and *clairvoyance*? They have no idea of God's mindset.

'Like several of the English Romantics' major works *The Triumph of Life*, Shelley's last poem, is, as is well-known, a fragment that has been unearthed, edited, reconstructed, and much discussed. All this archaeological labour can be considered a response to the questions that articulate one of the text's main structures—' Will they unearth the fragments of *my* unfinished poems? I lost a manuscript in Moscow—the Russian version of *Anti-Darwin* that bore the title *The Fall of Babylon* when it came out in France and Germany. The novel did not come out in Russia. My translator erased it because there was no room for my novels on his computer's hard disc; my admirers may unearth it in the twenty-fourth century.

'[Yeats's] avowed opinions and convictions, as well as his public conception of his role as a poet, remain remarkably stable, but his poetry keeps varying in texture and in tone until the very last poems. These changes are not primarily thematic, even though they sometimes seem to be: Yeats's themes are in fact much less varied than his styles, and it is not always possible to establish a correlation between thematic and stylistic shifts. A strong feeling exists among commentators that if it were possible to account for the changes in manner, true insight would be gained in Yeats's fundamental hopes and preoccupations.' One of my favourite poets, one of the *last* poets. My themes are likewise less varied than my styles, but no one will probe into my styles' tone and texture; no one will ever take notice of my themes that *are* remarkably stable, of my bid for Eternity. Anyway, that is how I hear the music of Eternity: accounting for the changes in manner, for pseudonyms; establishing a correlation between thematic and stylistic shifts; unearthing and reconstructing a lost manuscript—archaeological labours. Checking cross-references. My idea of Eternity; that is what Eternity is about.

They publish all those pretty novels—the pretty woman in disguise; Greta Garbo, Ava Gardner and Marlene Dietrich watch from the sidelines as best-selling authors build up a successful business empire. 'It has been said that in our times a person cannot succeed in being persecuted. Now we will see. But I am sure that if I succeed, people will say "it is his own fault"—and they will be the same people who fault the times, saying that one cannot even be persecuted. O, human stupidity, how inhuman you are!' Even in this respect I have failed most piteously: a score of rejection slips do not deserve the name of persecution. And the lack of comprehension I am faced with in concert halls is just a phenomenon that Kierkegaard enlarges upon in his late writings where 'the crowd' or 'the public' replaces spectators and listeners. A public is neither a nation, nor a generation, nor a community, nor a society, nothing concrete, no real commitment. A renowned festival, a woman who has made name for herself as an outstanding pianist. What kind of name is it? Doesn't she perform under false pretences? They acclaim her as if she were Mary Magdalene or Da Vinci's wife. She has been a name to conjure

with for more than fifteen years. Composers are persecuted and massacred during her recitals. But I am not persecuted. Or am I? Am I not a knight of the arts? Should I take arms and fight this insolence? A sea of troubles.

'The knight of faith knows that to give up oneself for the universal inspires enthusiasm, and that it requires courage, but he also knows that security is to be found in this, precisely because it is for the universal. He knows that it is glorious to be understood by every noble mind, so glorious that the beholder is ennobled by it, and he feels as if he were bound; he could wish it were this task that had been allotted to him.' Noble minds. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

23

Why has nature been so stingy with human beings that it did not allow them to shine—one more, one less, each according to the plenitude of his own light? Why are great human beings not as beautifully visible in their rise and setting as the sun? How much more unambiguous that would make all life among men!

Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

The Italians won the World Cup this year and even a most ardent supporter of our football team is bound to recognise the *fact*. Going back to the point of no return, he may venture a hypothesis according to which the French would have become the world champions, had Zidane renounced defending his family's honour; but under no circumstances will he dare affirm they actually did become the world champions. (Zidane's eternity is far longer than mine so I shall not speak about what happened in the last minutes of the match.) In a way, footballers—and other sportspeople—are 'beautifully visible in their rise and setting' because, with a few exceptions, their performances can be judged, if not appreciated, with mathematical exactitude: $2 \times 2 = 4$. Composers, writers and painters are also judged in mathematical terms which, however, are not directly related to victories and defeats: a bestselling author may be a loser in the domain of style. And performing artists are just imposed on the audience which, by putting two and two together, eventually comes round to *their* point of view. Who are *they*? All those who suffer from the star-is-born mania: conductors, critics, record companies, oil tycoons. They are *star* spotters. (Not to be confused with *talent* spotters.) Actually they take no trouble to *spot* a star. Why should they? It is much easier to *fabricate* one. In this modern age everyone has an opinion, usually not their own, based on information that is anonymous and derivative—Kierkegaard's verdict.

'Her honesty and sincerity shine out of her.'

'No, it's her talent, her genius—she's a wonderful writer.'

'What makes you think her novels are beautiful? Do you know what colour is associated with

greatness?'

'Green.'

'Blue.'

'Red.'

'The green hills of Ireland.'

'Red sky at night, shepherd's delight.'

'It's just her face or rather her eyes which shine with excitement and happiness.'

'Her body shines too.'

'Yes, her body shines with sweat.'

'She's a writer of genius, I tell you.'

'I beg to differ. I prefer Moller. *He* is a writer of the century. Did you notice how *he* shines?'

'I just saw his reflection in the water, shimmering in the moonlight. Nothing to write home about.'

'Why should you write anything? Are *you* a writer of the century?'

'Hasn't he carried off most of the glittering prizes for literature?'

'His eyes glistened as he told me of his mother's death. He's much more humane than his colleagues.'

'The humane way of dealing with a suffering animal is to kill it quickly. And he hasn't killed his dog yet.'

'What does his dog suffer from? Cancer?'

'The sparkle went out of Joan Reynolds when her husband died.'

'What did he suffer from? Diabetes?'

'What colour was her sparkle?'

'Blue.'

'Green.'

'Pink.'

""Last autumn my husband passed away," she said with a cunning glint in her eye.""

'I wonder how she gets that wonderful shine on her furniture.'

Let me take another leap and get away from 'the public'. My luminosity, my luminescence. Help me, William! 'And dying eyes gleam'd forth their ashy lights.' 'And that shall be the day, when e'er it lights.'

Must I not serve a long apprenticeship

To foreign passages, and in the end,

Having my freedom, boast of nothing else

But that I was a journeyman to grief?

A few words about Zidane. A hero of our time, he might have remained an outstanding footballer, ending his career as a world champion. Instead, he chose to join the ranks of ancient heroes as he stood up to a bully who had insulted his sister and mother on a football pitch. By doing so he sacrificed neither his son nor his daughter; he sacrificed his team mates—the title they might have won, but for his heroic deed. The French were shocked at first: a sportsman must be capable of holding his tongue and horses for the sake of victory, especially during a World Cup. Two days later they forgave him; he is still the most popular man in France and probably in continental Europe. 'When Agamemnon, Jephtha, Brutus at the decisive moment heroically overcome their pain, have heroically lost the beloved and have merely to accomplish the outward sacrifice, then there never will be a noble soul in the world who will not shed tears of compassion for their pain and of admiration for their exploit' (*Fear and Trembling*). Actually his fans did not judge this act in Kierkegaardian terms; they were grateful to him for the years of happiness he had offered them through his dribbles. '*Il nous a fait rêver pendant une décennie.*'

'The difference between the tragic hero and Abraham is clearly evident. The tragic hero still remains within the ethical. He lets one expression of the ethical find its *telos* in a higher expression of the ethical; the ethical relation between father and son, or daughter and father, he reduces to a sentiment which has its dialectic in its relation to the idea of morality. Here there can be no question of a teleological suspension of the ethical itself.' In other words, he may sacrifice his son or daughter for the sake of his fellow citizens who thereby offer him an opportunity to raise his ethical standards. Agamemnon wants to spare his daughter's life, but he gives up this wish to accomplish his duty—a higher expression of morals. I'm afraid I should suspend my narrative at this point to explain the meaning of the word '*telos*' to the common reader—to the *ordinarius*. It is my duty, I suppose; it is not my wish. 'Here we have wish and duty face to face with one another. The fortunate chance in life is that the two correspond, that my wish is my duty and vice versa, and the task of most men in life is precisely to remain within their duty and by their enthusiasm to transform it into their wish. The tragic hero gives up his wish in order to accomplish his duty' (*Fear and Trembling*). I am prepared to enlighten the *ordinarius* about this or that term, but for nothing in the world will I make concessions to the 'public' by adjusting my poetry to their taste and needs. *Telos*—end, purpose, ultimate object or aim.

'With Abraham the situation was different. By his act he overstepped the ethical entirely and possessed a higher *telos* outside of it, in relation to which he suspended the former.' What about Zidane? Didn't he overstep the ethical as he forsook his team at the crucial moment—right before the penalty shoot-out? 'What a bloody fool!' said our former Minister of Culture when the incident was shown on a gigantic screen installed in the middle of the Champs-Élysées. Suddenly, amongst the fans screaming around him, he spotted a famous press reporter and so hastened to qualify his remark. And

he rounded off by asking a question that was on everybody's lips, 'Why did he do it?' 'He could have avenged his mother in the changing room,' said many people after listening to Zidane's interview three days later. 'This is the paradox which keeps him upon the sheer edge and which he cannot make clear to any other man, for the paradox is that he as the individual puts himself in an absolute relation to the absolute. Is he justified in doing this? His justification is once more the paradox; for if he is justified, it is not by virtue of anything universal, but by virtue of being the particular individual' (*Fear and Trembling*).

One of Dostoevsky's heroes aspires to a tailor-made happiness for the sake of which he is prepared to destroy the equation $2 \times 2 = 4$. Rather, he disagrees with '4' that pops out whenever one scribbles or says '2x2', hoping to demonstrate the absolute truth of a hypothesis. And the equation 'money x money=happiness' falls short of mathematical accuracy; so does 'fame x money' or 'money x longevity'—these are just hypotheses. Dostoevsky's hero who watches the world from his mousehole prefers '5' to '4' as a result of '2x2': a particular state of mind is better than stock happiness. I ought to have written, 'In other words, a particular state of mind—'. 'In other figures' or 'in other numbers' would have been out place. Anyway, within the framework of my life this equation looks as follows: $2 \times 2 = 9$; otherwise I would not have written a huge commentary on Dante's *Commedia*.

Freud repudiated this equation as he made his historic forays into our unconscious—the enemy-occupied territory where $2 \times 2 = 5, 6, 7, 8, 13$. His theory knocked the bottom out of storybook romances and rags-to-riches reveries. But even he would fall down on $2 \times 2 = 4$ when producing his equations: a box = the uterus, a key = the penis, and so on.

What I have been doing for more than forty years is not a paradox, far from it; and yet I cannot make it clear to most of my friends and colleagues. 'Do you continue to write?' they ask me now and then. What a bloody fool! *Quel connard! Kakoy idiot!*

A knight of faith?

24

The dead Socrates brought the vortex to a halt, which the living Socrates had been unable to do; but the living Socrates had understood intellectually that only a dead man could win—a sacrifice—and he understood ethically that he must stake his entire life on becoming just that.

Kierkegaard, *A Letter to Kolderup-Rosenvinge*

'Am I not a genius?' exclaims Salieri at the end of Pushkin's piece that *Amadeus* rendered so popular: after being poisoned, Mozart says to him that a genius and an evil deed are incompatible. Am I not a genius? A genius and a knight of faith are incompatible. Are they? St Augustine was a genius, wasn't he? I am an artist. A detached spectator of the world, a shrewd observer of human beings, a patient witness of interior monologues. Why not sell my imagination? I do not have much respect for the

advertising industry, but apparently it is the only literary genre where wording still counts; so I might have a go at it after all.

When it comes to texture nothing really compares with my novels. You might be thinking that style is all very well but what about an intricate plot or breathtaking suspense? Don't you worry! Just relax in your armchair, a pipe sticking out of your mouth. I am sorry! What a terrible blunder! My books should be read everywhere and there are lots of no-smoking areas in today's world. Besides, very few women smoke pipes. I promise to be more careful in the future. Let me resume this advertisement. Every sentence of mine is an intricate plot where words and thoughts pursue each other, killing a comma as they engage in a gun-fight. So instead of one book you get the library of Babylon. The finger of suspicion for the unauthorised disclosure of the Michelangelo code points to a dash and not to a hyphen, as some investigators seem to insinuate. Are you waiting in suspense to hear what will happen next? What kind of cliff-hanger—But I shall go no further so as not to rob you of the pleasures lying in store for all my readers: men and women, philistines and aesthetes—

Enslaved by social and economic environment, the philistine is much inferior to the aesthete who might set a *shining* example for his fellow creatures, provided the latter do not linger for long at this stage of life. A prey to his natural instincts and feelings, the aesthete does not extend his life beyond a series of repetitive occurrences that gradually lose their allure, undermined as they are by a sense of the eternal. The self-indulgent life of an aesthete is unable to respond to this in-built alliance with God.

I am a patient witness of interior monologues, of memories, of lost opportunities. Given a free rein, my instincts and feelings come into their own only to yield once again to despair which is an unavoidable feature of the aesthetic life—whether those concerned are aware of it or not. So I am an aesthete, to all outward appearances. I dabble endlessly with different art forms, but what remains is a fleeting image, a lady I follow in the streets and lose forever because I cannot overcome the fear of being repulsed, scoffed at, humiliated. And, on top of everything, I have no idea who I am: an aesthete, a knight of faith, an ethical individual. On some points I agree with Judge Wilhelm—another character from *Either / Or*—who says that everybody 'must live life by choosing a set of moral principles and finding a place in the social order'. But only a machine can combat the disorder I am confronted with in my life and in the realm of so-called social order—an ideal logical brain conceived by Leibniz. Is that how one should interpret the following text I have chanced upon in my files?

How could I possibly make myself at home in such a mess? Look at your history! Look at it closely! And you have no idea what real history looks like. No idea at all, neither virtual nor actual. Your hangovers prevent you from seeing my world, from feeling it, from living in it. You

live outside my world, although you crawl towards it day and night. But do not get too close to me: your presence would mess up the whole analysis. You are supposed to stop as soon as you get within my hearing distance. Why do you continue to crawl in my direction? Let us sing the drunken song together. I can sing it as often as I please: machines do not get drunk. Your houses are razed before they grow old and mature; and laden with memories. Why do you raze them, I wonder? Are you ashamed of your memories? Do you have guilty consciences?

When did I write this paragraph? Did *I* write it? Another fleeting image. Machines hold a gruesome fascination for humans who are capable of crawling towards a screen where yet another game is being played. Which one? The game of history, the game of love, the game of betrayals, the game of style, the game of autobiography? Anyway, why *interpret* all these texts? You render them even more abstruse as you endow their contents with your meaning and set of values, which partly erase what has been written, assuming that something *has* been written at all. Don't you write this work yourself, usurping the Author's throne from the heights of which he would have sentenced you to death had you allowed Him to settle on it?

I am a writer and the only reader of my works. They would have withdrawn from my presence had I not *married* them through the agency of my computer, my friar Laurence; they would have disappeared, faded away from my consciousness, from my unreliable memory. Marriage is not a repetitive dead end but a precious alternative to short-lived passions followed by despair and disillusion. Allowing one to escape from the 'immediate', it is a commitment to the future and, strange as it may appear, an offshoot of the eternal.

I am also married to the following excerpt:

I see a beautiful lady walking towards me. 'I'm the kindest person you can possibly meet in the whole universe,' I tell her. 'Do you think there's life on other planets, in other galaxies? Never mind. I will take on any ET, if necessary. Anyway you're not likely to moon around Mars in the near future.' She listens to my soliloquy and then departs without saying a word. And I trip over stones. Is she Mary Magdalene? I wish I could warm her frostbitten body in the flames of the fire burning within my volcano-like bosom.

It is more logical to get married to this text than to the lady whom it features because these words, commas and question marks will not forsake me even if I betray them with other words, commas and question marks; even if I betray these question marks with some exclamation marks. They are immortal and faithful.

Married life is believed to prepare one for an even higher stage of existence—the religious life. But I am still in two minds about the present state of affairs that I adumbrated earlier in my endeavour

to cope with the situation I am constantly thrown into without any effort on my part. Am I an aesthete, an ethical individual or a knight of faith? I am in three minds, rather. The ethical individual gains an overview of life, a greater sense of self, which is liable to change his conception of time. Life no longer boils down to a series of strategies conceived for the sole purpose of escaping boredom and despair; it is something related to the eternal. But a man who lives outside the social order—a knight of loneliness—has no opportunity to reinforce his credentials as an ethical individual. It is only by being part of a community that one can become fully realised as a human being—a statement I can look at as if it was reflected in a mirror. And there is nothing else within the mirror so I am forced to deal with this statement, not with my fellow creatures who are wilful and trapped in time, incidentally. So it is better to deal with my statements and with the cat that a friend of mine lent me for a week. At the moment she is hiding somewhere, but whenever I succeed in catching her—she is bent on playing hide-and-seek—I stroke her body and find what I invariably lose when tracking down my thoughts and accosting young ladies in the streets. I *know* she is within my reach, even if I have to spend half-an-hour trying to locate her. And she will not leave me stranded anywhere, not even in a foreign country, not even on the Moon.

'It does not trouble you that you have not become a millionaire, and if the chance of that were offered, you would no doubt reply, "Yes, it might have been really interesting to be that and one could well spend a month on it." Were it possible to offer you the love of the most beautiful girl you would still reply, "Yes, for half a year that would be really fine." I shall not join the plaintive cry often directed at you, that you are insatiable. I will say rather: in a sense you are right, for nothing finite, even the whole world, can satisfy the soul of one who feels a need for the eternal' (*Either / Or*). How would my cat react to this part of Judge Wilhelm's monologue? It is no good crying over spilt milk. All is in the past and anyway money would not quench my thirst for the eternal on which I have been working ever since I drafted my first book.

'To kill Eternity, I used to analyse my wife's behaviour in such a way as to absolve myself from the abominable crime I had committed in a fit of rage. I saw my wife lying in our connubial bed from which I had withdrawn for a while to obey a call of duty or just to play another game in the company of my fellow officers. Why had I neglected my matrimonial duty?'

I took this paragraph from my last novel *The Flying Dutchman*; a cancelled paragraph. Is it another book in spite of the word 'Eternity' used in the very first sentence? The protagonist does his best to *kill* Eternity; I am doing just the opposite. But opposites are supposed to meet, aren't they? The subject of marriage is also touched upon by the Dutchman who seems to fly from one book to another, from Time to Eternity and vice versa.

He looked at his wife whose naked body would have appealed to anyone's senses if anybody had been admitted to the Dutchman's palace at such an ungodly hour. But this body lay alone in

their connubial bed and, as if in a discreet homage to Othello, the Dutchman resolved to deprive it of life. After all, somebody had lain with her, on her. Zounds, that's fulsome!

'Trial by jury is a fundamental right,' he wrote. 'But humanity has already been tried and condemned. I shall just read the verdict in my court.' Just another idea he did not carry out. His brain looked like a writing desk on which many books and sheets of paper were lying in untidy piles, and he rummaged through them day in day out as he prepared his murder. Out of sheer desperation, he would try to burn some of them but in vain: they were incombustible. There is an enigmatic short entry in his diary, 'Wild dogs scavenge through rotting piles of rubbish.' Did he allude to his brain, to his eternal thoughts? Did they rot or was it just a wishful thinking on his part?

A detached spectator of the world, a shrewd observer of human beings. Humanity *has* been tried and condemned. But why read the verdict out? As usual no one would hear anything. And God has heard everything.

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In order to recover eternity, blood will once again be required, but blood of another sort, not the blood of thousands of slaughtered victims, no, the more costly blood, that of the individuals—that of the martyrs, those mighty dead who can do what no living person, who has people cut down by the thousands, can do; who can do what those mighty dead themselves were unable to do when they were alive but were able to do only when dead: compel a raging mob into obedience, precisely because this raging mob has been permitted, in disobedience, to put the martyr to death.

Kierkegaard, *A Letter to Kolderup-Rosenvinge*

'Since we meet the artwork in the world and encounter a world in the individual artwork,' writes Gadamer, 'the work of art is not some alien universe into which we are magically transported for a time. Rather, we learn to understand ourselves in and through it, and this means that we sublimate (*aufheben*) the discontinuity and atomism of isolated experiences in the continuity of our own existence. For this reason, we must adopt a standpoint in relation to art and the beautiful that does not pretend to immediacy but corresponds to the historical nature of the human condition. The appeal to immediacy, to the instantaneous flash of genius, to the significance of "experiences" (*Erlebnisse*), cannot withstand the claim of human existence to continuity and unity of self-understanding. The binding quality of the experience (*Erfahrung*) of art must not be disintegrated by aesthetic consciousness.' But how to find continuity in these rotting piles of rubbish?

*Why don't you look at the Grail?
 Your hair may turn grey
 Within its sight. What do I care
 About the colour of your hair!*

*People thought
 You were a natural blonde
 But actually your hair was dyed.
 So you'll dye your hair grey
 This time. Look at the Grail
 And your looks will not fade.
 Nor will you die.*

Where does this poem come from, I wonder? And what about the heroine's identity? Tatiana *was* a natural blonde, but she did give up the ghost—the event to which the last line seems to allude. Did I bestow her death upon another female? For the sake of style? Did I dye Tatiana's hair for the sake of a dubious rhyme? Dyed-die. Where to fit this despicable poem? Would its presence in this book endow the latter with much-vaunted continuity? Or would my biography disintegrate into lots of autonomous episodes—on account of this poem, of its utter irrelevancy?

What Gadamer speaks about, however, is the eternal which holds any number of episodes together because in Eternity there are no heterogeneous substances: even opposites meet there. And it is this kind of knowledge he accentuates as he points out that 'art is knowledge and experiencing an artwork means sharing in the knowledge'. But how can a slice of life, an innocent fragment integrate into what is pompously defined as the spiritual? (My English companion says she uses this noun only in the plural.) 'Many people approach Tolstoy with mixed feelings,' says Nabokov. 'They love the artist in him and are intensely bored by the preacher; but at the same time it is rather difficult to separate Tolstoy the preacher from Tolstoy the artist—it is the same deep slow voice, the same robust shoulder pushing up a cloud of visions or a load of ideas. What one would like to do, would be to kick the glorified soapbox from under his sandalled feet and then lock him up in a stone house on a desert island with gallons of ink and reams of paper—far away from the things, ethical and pedagogical, that diverted his attention from observing the way the dark hair curled above Anna's white neck. But the thing cannot be done....this struggle was still confined within the same man. Whether painting or preaching, Tolstoy was striving, in spite of all obstacles, to get at the truth.' Eternity can accommodate a lot of individuals within one mortal man. Does Nabokov realise that Anna's dark hair would not have

been dark had Tolstoy the preacher given up his unrelenting search for truth? In fact Nabokov the artist is loath to admit the coincidence of opposites and so does not refrain from criticising Tolstoy for his obsession with 'Old Russian Truth': 'What obsessed Tolstoy, what obscured his genius, what now distresses the good reader, was that, somehow, the process of seeking the Truth seemed more important to him than the easy, vivid, brilliant discovery of the illusion of truth through the medium of his artistic genius. Old Russian Truth was never a comfortable companion; it had a violent temper and a heavy tread.' But Truth is not a comfortable companion, whatever its origin or whereabouts. And why should it be light and nice?

'Wasn't it nice of her to invite us?' Truth (*istina*) is feminine in Russian.

'Of course. I wonder what she'll be wearing.'

'A trouser suit, I bet. She *has* taste, I'll give her that.'

'Every present I've ever received from her has been in perfect taste.'

'She's famous for her elegance and wit.'

'I adore the way she walks—like a cat, so lightly.'

'And she doesn't prefer her own society.'

'She's hospitable to anyone who comes to our city.'

'Last night I saw her photograph in—'

'I know—one of those glossy magazines with endless pictures of minor celebrities and socialites attending balls.'

'After all, she's a society hostess.'

'And she doesn't use long words that no one can understand.'

'And she always says, "What can I do for you?"'

'She said to me this morning, "If you want some help preparing for the party I can be at your disposal all day." What's more, I don't dare to invite her. I'm having a bad taste party on Saturday so you've got to come along in the worst clothes you can find.'

No, Truth is just the opposite of all that and these opposites will *not* coincide. Truth is not likely to send you an invitation for a cocktail party. And if you angle for an invitation by calling her every other day you will be told that Lady Truth is out. Even if you kneel down on her threshold, imploring the butler to let you in, you will not gain admittance to her room. Only if you crawl all the way to her house can you hope to catch a glimpse of her ladyship on condition that your entire body is covered in bumps and bruises.

As a young soldier, Tolstoy profusely indulged in the sins of the flesh and the masochistic pleasures of war. Later on, as a literary man, he hankered after money and glory, enjoying the didactic role thrust upon the Russian writer. In those days, however, he had nothing to teach: he was not yet on intimate terms with Lady Truth. And he would never have become one of her protégés had he not reserved a place for her in his heart of hearts—even when making the most of his insatiable flesh. At

the next stage he got married—the first leap—and did his best not to shirk his marital duties which, along with the hollow existence in upper-class society, nearly drove him to suicide. In *A Confession* he likens his destiny to a boat careering down a fast river and does not seem to notice how perfectly his metaphor coincides with the picture valued by lots of holidaymakers. What counts for him is not a metaphor as such but his desire to escape from it by rowing against the stream: he *knows* that the bank is God. 'My particular life of senseless indulgence of desires was senseless and evil.' And then he jumps into the religious life which is far more exacting than the ethical one. 'In making a choice,' writes Kierkegaard, 'it is not so much a question of choosing the right, as of the energy, the earnestness and the pathos with which one chooses.'

In *The Concept of the Dread* he points out that freedom cannot be proved philosophically because any proof would imply a logical necessity—the opposite of freedom. And these opposites are also doomed never to embrace fraternally: even the finale of Beethoven's *Ninth* is not likely to induce them to such an exploit. So the discussion of freedom does not belong to the sphere of logic but to that of psychology: we must probe into the state of mind propitious to the birth of freedom whose ideal breeding ground is angst, as we learn from the book. Through angst one leaps from innocence to sin, from guilt to faith; angst is a guarantor of Eternity. Tolstoy's biography is illustrative in this respect. In his boat he must have experienced angst because he had no idea where the boat was heading. He jumped to a conclusion—the wrong leap—that it *was* heading somewhere and, exhilarated by its velocity, for a while he was rowing *with* the stream as he kept muttering under his breath, 'It's easier to go with the stream than against it.' Like other officers he drank rather heavily and might have contracted gonorrhoea as a result of his love performances. And then he realised there was nothing ahead of him except death and nothingness. 'With infinite resignation he has drained the cup of life's profound sadness, he knows the bliss of the infinite, he senses the pain of renouncing everything, the dearest things he possesses in the world—' Tolstoy was a knight of faith. His departure from Yasnaya Polyana was the last leap he took—the biggest leap of all. 'And yet, and yet the whole earthly form he exhibits is a new creation by virtue of the absurd. He resigned everything infinitely, and then he grasped everything again by virtue of the absurd' (*Either / Or*).

My biography is not as transparent as Tolstoy's for, up to now, no one has undertaken to write it: biographers always explain everything and impose a clear-cut pattern upon your existence. But, for fear of boring their readership, they would not count the number of leaps I have taken ever since I grew conscious of myself. At the age of eleven I said to my mother I would marry a beautiful girl as soon as I was legally allowed to do so with perfect impunity. At some point, however, I must have turned a somersault because I am still a bachelor—a confirmed bachelor no doubt. I spat out the host and fifteen years later started to display such a devotion to the Almighty that even old women glanced at me disapprovingly as my forehead almost touched the floor in our church. My Western life estranged me from Him rather quickly and to such an extent that once I permitted myself to say half-

jokingly, 'Freedom is the best cure for the sickness unto God.' When did I take a leap back? *Did* I leap to faith once more? I envy those born-again Christians who can tell you exactly when they stumbled upon Christ and in what circumstances. A young lesbian described and quoted by Barbara Victor in the book *The Last Crusade* apparently owned up to having 'hung out in gay bars, done drugs and drink, and broke every commandment that God put down, and even some He probably hadn't even thought of'. On D-day she woke up in a motel with a two-inch slash across one arm and all her clothes missing. Naked and deprived of her ID and money, she called the police and 'God was right there, forcing me to make a choice between a life of sin or a free ticket into heaven.' Ever since she has not touched drugs, drink or women and, holding down a respectable secretarial job, she makes her way to heaven as she engages in her only leisure activities: church, prayer and Bible study. I have other leisure activities, I'm afraid; worse still, God has never been *right there*, in front of me—not even when I submissively bowed to Him in our church.

Conversion, revelation. Did anything like that occur in Kierkegaard's life? Here is a journal entry from the spring of 1838: "Rejoice, and again I say, rejoice" (Philippians 4:4). This is not joy about one or another thing but is the full-throated shout of the soul "with tongue and mouth from the bottom of the heart": "I rejoice for my joy—from, with, by, upon, for and with my joy"—a heavenly refrain that suddenly interrupts all our other songs, as it were; a joy that cools and refreshes like a breath of wind, a gust from the trade wind that blows from the grove of Mamre to the eternal dwelling places. May, 10.30 a.m.'

Did anything like that occur in *my* life? Could I at least find a similar entry in my journal? I started one only six months ago and there are no entries of this kind in what I have already written. But my biographer may light upon two or three enigmatic texts when poring over my notes.

I might be looking out of the wrong windows. Anyway all windows, all curtains are wrong. Only front doors are the right things that grant you access to the right places.

I have locked up for the night. And for the day. I have barricaded myself in. People walk and exchange their views beyond my walls. And I hear their footsteps. And I sneak the food up to my secret abode. Or I just sneak along a corridor. Everything happens along these corridors of mine. My room is also a corridor. Leading to another life, I hope. To another incarnation.

*If you leave your door wide-open
No enemy will pass through it.
But as soon as you shut your door
A man appears on your landing.*

He is holding a machine gun.
Do you know this man?
Hardly. But he knows you.
And his bullets will know your body.
That is enough to fulfil your destiny—
The destiny of the locked door.
How thick is the front door? No matter.
Its thickness turns into a sheet of paper
Whenever your destiny is accomplished.
Whenever you glance at weapons
Your body prepares itself for death.
There is a castle of death in your body now,
A spacious castle, halls and corridors.
And death roams inside it.
And death carouses in it.

I must have reached the angst-stage at some point—there is no denying it; but this angst does not seem to lead me anywhere. Try as I may, I find nothing beyond my doors and windows, along my corridors. Not a word about revelations and conversions.

Shall I write something *relevant*? Of course I can quote the Bible for a change, 'Rejoice, and again I say, rejoice!' Or something along these lines, 'This *is* the day *which* the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it' (Psalms 118;24). Shall I date this entry to make things easier for my biographers? August 31, 2006.

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In his letters Kierkegaard speaks of Eternity and the way it may be recovered through those mighty dead who used to expand eternal themes traditionally called 'grand narratives' as they wrote poems, novels and letters—to Kolderup-Rosenvinge, among other highbrow individuals. The people I work with keep sending me letters in which they discuss my contribution to the middlebrow music market that is conspicuous by its absence, as far as I am concerned. And I have no alternative but to answer them so as not to die of hunger and terror: those managers should do *something* to improve the lot of poets. Three years ago I was exceptionally asked to recite my poems during a concert I gave in Kyoto, but usually I play the piano and so my programmes include neither my essays, nor my poems, nor excerpts from my novels.

Here is a letter I wrote to my former Japanese manager:

Dear Mr S.,

I wish you a Happy New Year—better late than never.

When a new year comes, I always think about the past, trying to remember what was wonderful and beautiful in my life. Our relationship has certainly been wonderful and beautiful—from every point of view. You have organised a series of memorable concerts for me. At least they will always remain in my memory. I am particularly grateful to you for the concerts at which I had an opportunity to conduct remarkable Japanese orchestras. This memory is also tangible—some of these concerts were recorded and I listen to them from time to time. And, thanks to you, I also drank a few excellent bottles of wine, which I appreciate to the utmost. And all our meals were really perfect. This counts a lot in my life of a pianist because I don't like to travel and if I do travel, I do my best to enjoy myself. In your company I've always felt at home. Even at home I'm seldom as happy as I was with you in Tokyo and Paris.

But the times have changed. You have other artists and I might have other projects. So I think my next tour in Japan will be our last tour. This doesn't mean that we shall never meet after this friendly separation. Whenever you happen to be in Paris, I shall be delighted to welcome you at my place to drink another bottle with you. And of course I shall always be available for you in Tokyo and elsewhere.

I am extremely grateful to you for what you have done for me during these ten years.

This manager was attentive to my needs and even attended my concerts when they took place in the neighbourhood of his Tokyo apartment. He used to invite me to top restaurants and I still recall the bottles of wine I drank in his company during the eight years of our *fruitful* collaboration (2001-2009). Then a blind pianist joined our club and once again I realised the importance of sight in the domain of music: audiences do not use their ears because they give their undivided attention to what actually *happens* on the stage. In our child-centred universe people love being taken to the circus.

Several years ago I received a book from the United States; the book was devoted to Bach, but my name appeared at the end of it in relation to a Schubert sonata I have played so often I wonder if I am not its author, its real father. I say to my cat, 'My little boy' and yet I am not his father, far from it. Why not? I bet he has never seen his father or indeed his mother – after the weaning; he must have forgotten her. And he will never forget his new father unless he dies prematurely, before putting his literary output in order.

I sent an email to California and got a reply by mail. I sent a second email to California:

Dear Mr L.,

Thank you very much for your letter. I am sorry I'm using a 'demotic' way of communicating with you because I would like to send you some of my essays on music. One of them is dedicated to you because I am extremely impressed by your book on Bach, in which you discuss, among other things, the instruments on which his music can be played. Up to now I have been unable to realise to what extent music—not only Bach's works, I suppose—is influenced by the instruments one uses in concert halls and elsewhere. All my life I have thought that only the Aeolian harp can be heard in the universe. (Or the spheres, for that matter.) So thank you again for making me change my mind.

Do I speak of Eternity in this email? What are its components, if any? The Aeolian harp, the spheres? Can we also *hear* Eternity?

Two years ago I recorded *Schubert's Sonata* in D Major, DV 850 for an arguably best record company where perfection is not just the keyword; it is also the key action. The sound engineer asked me if I had brought the scores to the studio. I said, 'Yes.' What else could I have said? 'I'd like to Xerox them,' he said, whereupon I realised he did not know the pieces I was about to record so that it was pointless to rely on him for good advice. As I touched the keyboard of the piano I had found on the improvised stage Eternity receded into the distance until finally it grew invisible or rather inaudible.

Several weeks later I received the first edit of our recording; I listened to it and made as many as seventy-nine corrections. The sound engineer was not in the habit of using his ears and for a while I wondered whether he had really Xeroxed my scores. Was I dealing with a blind sound engineer?

Several weeks later I received the second edit and made fifty-six corrections for the sake of which I had bought another score—the third one. Several weeks later I received the third edit and made only nine (*nove*) corrections. Another homage to Dante. Several weeks later I received the fourth edit.

Dear P.,

Thank you very much for the fourth edit. I am listening to it now. You mention two faults that presumably cannot be corrected. The first one—second movement, bar 49—is not really a fault. I think the piano sounded like that. Anyway it can stand. Well, it would be fun to find a suitable recording—that of L., for instance—and take this particular chord from it. It's a half-joke of course. But I know that such a thing can be done. In the famous recording of Tristan and Isolde (Furtwängler, Flagstad), Schwarzkopf sang one note which was inserted into the recording. Of course I know I should have made another take and this is a good lesson I am not likely to forget. Anyway, please do your best to replace this bloody chord.

Thanking you in anticipation

Did *he* draw a lesson from this incident? A deaf sound engineer? Why didn't he say anything in the studio? Why didn't he notice this chord himself? Wasting my time, my eternity.

Several days later I received an email from the president of the company.

Dear Valery,

Just read your notes to P. regarding the third edit. This instructions sounds like a very good liner note for an album 'I love to steal notes from others'.

Once I met Carlos Kleiber in the studio in Hannover where we started to talk about music and recordings that we don't like. In fact this was the day when a colleague of mine, and so-called Tonmeister as well, got fired from the job at Deutsche Grammophon because he copied a sequence out of another recording by Abbado and inserted it into a recording of Sinopoli. But these transfers did not meet the same group of blood, and the resistance and the outcries were so shrill that the poor man had to leave his office right away without completing the editing.

Anyway, the talks with Carlos Kleiber continued in long taxi drives in Hannover and since then we exchanged thoughts, until he finally died.

I believe P. also should try everything he can. However, I am not sure whether he ever listened to L. yet. In fact, I would like to have a L. note. This would justify even more so the missing link. It could also be that we go to a piano shop in Versailles, tune the piano to the same frequency and hit the chord we need.

Several days later I received the fifth edit and immediately wrote to the president of the company:

Dear M.,

I hope you are well.

The editing process was long, but I think it was worth it. I regard this CD as my best studio effort, and I thank you again for your help and the opportunity you gave me to record this unique sonata. Actually I think it is the most difficult sonata for piano.

The chord about which you wrote to me—thank you for your email, by the way—is perfect now. Of course I was half-joking when I suggested we should borrow it from another recording. You are absolutely right—this kind of thing should not be done. On the other hand, we were dealing with one 'easy' chord. If you borrow a difficult passage—the coda of the second movement of Schumann's Fantasy, for instance—it is a different story. Anyway I don't think they would have put us in prison if we had borrowed this chord from another pianist.

I hope to see you somewhere—in Paris, in Germany, on the Moon. I think they are planning to fly to Mars in ten years' time, but I cannot wait till then. Please, let me know if you come to Paris in the near future.

Thank you again.

I am looking forward to seeing you soon.

It is *not* my best studio recording.

27

Whatever the one generation may learn from the other, that which is genuinely human no generation learns from the foregoing. In this respect every generation begins primitively, has no different task from that of every previous generation, nor does it get further, except in so far as the preceding generation shirked its task and deluded itself. This authentically human factor is passion, in which also the one generation perfectly understands the other and understands itself. Thus no generation has learnt from another to love, no generation begins at any other point than at the beginning, no generation has a shorter task assigned to it than had the preceding generation, and if here one is not willing like the previous generations to stop with love but would go further, this is but idle and foolish talk.

Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*

I might fare better with the aid of despair: it is such a pleasant, helpful concept. But should I first have another go at 'leaps'? I have not finished with them yet, according to my notes. I went to church, perhaps seeking divine inspiration. No, I did not go to church in search of inspiration, either divine or human. But inspiration *is* a leap, isn't it? 'The quality of the light produced an inspiration for this entry.' A nice journal entry, isn't it? There are so many leaps everywhere. A telephone call is a leap; a journey is a leap; a book is a leap, whether you are a reader or a writer. And Regine looking at him in a church. She was already married and Kierkegaard stood near her during a mass. Not too far. And she looked at him, which gave rise to another leap of the imagination—of *his* imagination. The chapter devoted to this occurrence in Garff's biography is entitled *Regine's Nod*. 'At the Church of Our Lady during vespers on Easter Sunday (during Mynster's sermon) she nodded to me. I don't know whether it was beseechingly or in forgiveness, but in any case so affectionately. I had sat in an out-of-the-way place, but she discovered me. Would to God she hadn't. Now a year and a half's sufferings are wasted, all my enormous effort. She doesn't believe that I was a deceiver after all, she has faith in me. What ordeals now await her! The farther up we go, the more terrible it will be. That a person with my inwardness, my religiosity, could behave in such a manner?' Another example of wishful thinking, another leap forward. Perhaps she just *looked* at him. Her nod was a sign of courtesy, nothing more. You might get better with your former mistresses if you showed them some courtesy. Did I show

Tatiana *some* courtesy?

'To make it easier for her I'll do what I can to make her believe I was a plain deceiver, a frivolous person, if possible get her to hate me; for I believe it will always be even harder for her if she suspected it was melancholy—but how much melancholy and frivolity resemble each other!' I did *not* make Tatiana believe I was a plain deceiver. I just flew away—a smooth, Leibnizian transition: she suspected I would not return from my concert tour in Belgium.

But I was not sure she had made up her mind to punish my crimes or extort from me a promise, a token of love or esteem. She had merely sunk into that armchair and realised she would not move until dawn. And she made no attempt to leave it, for she knew it was quite impossible, out of the question. She did not desire anything. She desired neither to die nor to live nor to stay with me in my flat. She stayed with me because she had nothing else to do. Everything was useless. And ridiculous.

My engagement to God. A knight of faith.

28

When the children on a holiday have already got through playing all their games before the clock strikes twelve and say impatiently, 'Is there nobody can think of a new game?' does this prove that these children are more developed and more advanced than the children of the same generation or of a previous one who could stretch out the familiar games, to last the whole day long? Or does it not prove rather that these children lack what I would call the lovable seriousness which belongs essentially to play?

Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*

A knight of angst. Let us go back to despair. But I need not *go back* to it because I am rooted to the spot. Actually it *is* a turning point, judging from the way everything turns like a weathercock. And I am at a loss to ascertain if it is despair that turns or myself—my soul exposed to various kinds of despair. At some point I must have uncovered my soul and it took advantage of my negligence, turning into *His* favourite target: Kierkegaard deserves a capital letter, especially when it comes to despair and angst. How many arrows of despair have wounded my soul without killing it? (There is no call for a comparison with St Sebastian.) How many despairs have wounded my soul *and* my body? I put my hypertension down to despairs. To which despair in particular? You cannot always have the despair of your choice, can you? But in a democracy people *should* have freedom of choice in these and other matters. 1) Despair under the aspect of finitude / infinitude. 2) Infinitude's despair is to lack

finitude. 3) Finitude's despair is to lack infinitude. 4) Despair viewed under the aspect of possibility / necessity. No, no, no, no. My count is wrong already. These despairs continue to inflict their tortures even on this text of mine. (I don't mean it is tortuous.) A text is not responsible for the author's sins! I would have written this chapter differently, but for their intervention. May I ask you to leave this book alone? I allow you to maltreat my body, my personality, my career, my forthcoming recital in the course of which I am to perform a few pieces by Silvestrov and Schubert's impromptus. Leave this text alone, I beg of you! 'Is despair a merit or a defect? Purely dialectically it is both. If one were to think of despair only in the abstract, without reference to some particular despairer, one would have to say it is an enormous merit. The possibility of this sickness is man's advantage over the beast, and it is an advantage which characterises him quite otherwise than the upright posture, for it bespeaks the infinite erectness or loftiness of his being spirit.' Yes, I agree with you, my dear friend and mentor. I despise the upright posture that people adopt to show they are fine—or just to show off. But don't you think the beast scores over man *because* it is immune to despair? (Anyway domestic animals are superior to humans.) All right. Despair is a merit so I have nothing to complain about. Is that what my biographers think at this stage of my narrative? But my biographers are well-read and know Kierkegaard's masterpiece almost by heart, otherwise they would not have undertaken to write *my* biography. So they are aware of what follows the positive appraisal of despair: 'And yet not only is it the greatest misfortune and misery actually to be in despair; no, it is ruin.' It *is* ruin. Why do I write long sentences? Everyone will understand this short verdict: it is ruin. I can embroider upon it, if you wish. From the very start my passion for literature meant the ruin of all my hopes. I might have spent my holidays in a villa with a swimming pool—like the one I saw on TV; a programme called *Sagas*. Where do I spend my holidays? In my woods where I read, write and play with a cat that stays with me only when her owner is away. Or in Switzerland, in cheap hotels. Did I ever hope to live like a multimillionaire? At some point I must have opted for Eternity; Time is going down the drain.

'Thus when the power-crazed person whose motto is "Caesar or nothing" doesn't become Caesar, he despairs over that. But this indicates something else: that he cannot stand being himself precisely because he failed to become Caesar. So really he is in despair not over not becoming Caesar, but over himself for not having become Caesar.' I don't mind being Caesar or Dante; I *have* failed to become either—no doubt about that. I would already have died in both cases: let us not forget that I am almost fifty-nine. Anyway I cannot stand being myself, otherwise I would not have embarked upon Kierkegaard's biography. What do I care about his life! Actually I do not care about anybody save the cat who is sleeping now in one of my closets. I went with her to the woods yesterday in the hope she might revert to the halcyon days of her youth when she had gambolled among trees and bushes. She was not pleased and the road we had to traverse on our way to the Garden of Eden frightened her to death or despair. Obviously she could not stand being herself as she saw all those cars zoom along without taking notice of domestic animals. She thought it was a pity she could not own a car and drive

up the same road and many other roads that cut off houses from woods. She could not stand being herself because she had failed to become a human in her mother's womb or in the realm where unborn creatures loiter before showing up in our midst. 'It's better to be a beast,' I told her. 'Humans are no beauties. Would you care to learn what I wrote about you in my journal? "She is one of those lucky creatures who always seem to get what they want." I wish somebody could hold me in their arms. What's more, I'm *carrying* you from the woods to my flat where a copious meal awaits you on the dinner table. You refuse to partake of your meals elsewhere, don't you? I failed to become a dog in the limbo where we linger before coming to earth. Or do we go there *after* our stay on earth? Anyway, I'm not a dog and you're a cat. We wouldn't argue even if I was a dog, I can assure you. I would carry you in my arms—or in my paws—all the way from the woods to my house. Of course you're not Caesar or Dante, but you're a cat I'm holding in my arms. You are *the* cat, as far as I'm concerned. You are my Beatrice. "A young girl despairs of love, she despairs over losing the loved one, because he died or became unfaithful." You've nothing to worry about—I'm neither unfaithful nor dead.'

'If there were nothing eternal in a man, he would simply be unable to despair. But if despair were able to consume his self, then it couldn't really have been despair in the first place.' And what about my genes? Don't they consume my self? My father died at the age of sixty-six; my mother died at the age of sixty-nine. Ten years to live? Will my despairs help me? God might get me to despair over a hundred-year period.

My cat is sleeping in one of my closets. I wish I could sleep like her. I wish I was a cat. A cat-man.

What is *eternal* inside my body, my soul, my writings? Despair. What kind of despair?

'The self is the conscious synthesis of infinitude and finitude, which relates to itself, whose task is to become itself, which can only be done in the relationship to God. To become oneself, however, is to become something concrete. But to become something concrete is neither to become finite nor to become infinite, for that which is to become concrete is indeed a synthesis.' This work in progress proves that I have become something concrete. Aren't these words concrete? What kind of synthesis is it? Not the foggiest idea. But I have done it in the relationship to God—whatever I have done.

'The fantastic is generally speaking what carries a person into the infinite in such a way that it only leads him away from himself and thus prevents him from coming back to himself.' Have I already lost myself on my way to the infinite about which I talk day in day out? But is it enough to *talk* about it? Most individuals give it no thought and yet, according to St Augustine, they might belong to the elect who are offered free tickets into heaven—after their death and not in some motel where you risk being sexually abused and robbed. Well, I have lost *her* on my way to the infinite or whatever you call it in your theological, philosophical language. I don't even have that armchair any more—the armchair in which she used to spend her sleepless nights, my sleepless nights. Our silent vigils. And the curtains she fingered and studied inch by inch, for hours on end, during those sleepless nights. Nor do *I* have

those curtains. Nothing reminds me of her former self except my memory; nobody is setting fire to it. I wish I could burn it with a candle, by holding a candle close to...to my temples, I suppose. The only snag is I might singe my hair instead of burning my library of Babylon.

Well, I opted for God. Shall I put it down to Kierkegaard's influence? Regine said something to this effect as she strove to account for her fiasco, 'My fiancé married God.' But the bride does *not* marry God in The Song of Solomon; she seems to dawdle at the inferior stage. A. R. Faussett maintains that Solomon's personality is 'hid under that of Christ, the true Solomon (equivalent to *Prince of Peace*). The earthly Solomon is not introduced, which would break the consistency of the allegory. Though the bride bears the chief part, the Song throughout is not hers, but that of her "Solomon". He animates her.' And I animate Tatiana.

She was to come next day, around three in the afternoon. She was not in my room at half past three. She was not in my room at half past four. I was lying on my bed, fearing she would not come. She might have been hurt, offended. I'll apologise, I thought.

Another ephemeral image. But I am fitting it into a larger context, into the continuity required by Gadamer and any self-respecting stylist. She is the bride whose interior monologue we hear in The Song of Solomon; she is Beatrice, Isolda, Juliet and Marguerite Gautier. I shall always stick to 'grand narratives', to eternal themes without which a man is not a man: identity, memory, turning points, searching for the Grail, angst, despair, harmony. (The game of postmodernism will never wipe them out.) Left to their own devices, our senses would introduce us to chaos and confusion—to despair. Understanding seems to insinuate that the world is a puzzle; and reason endeavours to create unity through ideas. According to Jaspers, Kant's *Vernunft* corresponds to what Spinoza might have called *Verstand*, had he been writing in German: on the one hand, *ratio* (reason), on the other, *intellectus* (intellect). The reason obtains knowledge indirectly, through inferences; the intellect has immediate knowledge. Only when a number of notes become an overall harmony do we hear a piece of music. Reason merely points the way; the goal is attained in immediate intuition which has nothing to do with Space and Time: it is not psychic, emotional experience. It is an asensory, luminous intuition in timeless presence.

'It is true that he brought the disease upon himself, but he did that only once; the perseverance of the sickness is a simple consequence of the fact that that is what he once did.' 'That that' is terrifying. Hitting the nail on the head. Yes, I did it only once and now I just repeat the despair I gave birth to on the day of my departure from Moscow. REPETITION.

In the interview conducted by Robert Faggen (1994) I chanced upon a *relevant* piece of information: Milosz talks about his meeting with Einstein in the course of which he consulted the Nobel Prize winner—at the time Milosz was not a recipient of this prize—on how he should behave with regard to the communist regime in Poland. Einstein was an émigré himself, but he strongly opposed Milosz's desire to leave his fatherland. 'You can't break with your country,' he said. 'A poet

should live where he was born.' He thought the regime would collapse; he was right. But Milosz decided otherwise and did not regret his decision, judging from the book of his interviews I bought last month. Would he have been awarded the 1980 Nobel Prize for Literature had he stayed in Poland? Wislawa Szymborska was living in Poland when *she* got the Nobel Prize.

'Yet despair is the sickness unto death in another and still more definite sense. For there is not the remotest possibility of dying of this sickness in the straightforward sense, or of this sickness ending in physical death. On the contrary, the torment of despair is precisely the inability to die. In this it has much in common with the condition of the mortally ill person who is in the throes of death but cannot die. Thus to be sick unto death is to be unable to die, yet not as though there were hope of life. No, the hopelessness is that even the last hope, death, is gone. When death is the greatest danger, one hopes for life. But when one learns to know the even more horrifying danger, one hopes for death.' I think I am perfectly capable of dying as I please, letting my genes grow weary of my life. (Suicide is not my cup of tea.) Do genes feel anything, I wonder? So many times I have been on the brink of death and I escaped it somehow as if determined to stay alive at all costs. A car crash does not ask you whether you feel like walking around this planet for another thirty years. Generally speaking, Death is not fond of putting questions to His clients who may be inclined to answer *any* question under the circumstances. But this is not a question-and-answer session, is it?

'A person in despair wants despairingly to be himself. But surely if he wants despairingly to be himself, he cannot want to be rid of himself. Yes, or so it seems. But closer observation reveals the contradiction—' The translator of the work, Alastair Hannay, says in his introduction to *The Sickness unto Death*, 'Kierkegaard takes his reader in at the deep end. The first three paragraphs are a concentrate of the book's philosophical vocabulary. Indeed, if one reads these paragraphs as a sample of what to expect in the body of the discussion, it is quite likely the book would be back on the shelf in no time.' The *last* three paragraphs would not elicit a different reaction from the reader one speaks of nowadays. I will not quote *those* paragraphs lest I alienate the reader.

Should an interpreter be personal at all? Or does he need to *embody* the composer he plays? How can he do it? How can he be faithful to the text? By being extremely personal, I think. By *living* the piece he performs to keep it alive—better still, to give it another birth. Not only his hands but every part of his body down to his ankles and toes should be involved in the process of music-making. In the long run he may thus become an approximate version of himself. Tonight I am performing *The Sickness unto Death* and whatever wrong notes I might play are part of this performance. Perhaps I misunderstand this work centred upon despair and its consequences from which I cannot suffer because it is not despair I experience. What *do* I experience? Joy? Was I filled with joy when I awoke at 4 a.m.? Insomnia is closer to despair than to joy, if I am not mistaken.

Every pianist is supposed to play Bach's preludes and fugues in his childhood, in his youth: they are a permanent, almost unavoidable feature of exams and competitions. And neither exams nor

competitions afford one the delights of carefree, disinterested music-making. Often, in a student's mind, *The Well-Tempered Clavier* comes to be associated with the oppressive scholarly atmosphere of the Academy. No wonder some pianists grow allergic to it and relegate both volumes to their dust-covered library once the period of apprenticeship is over. My case was far more desperate. Even before entering the Moscow Conservatory I was able to play the whole of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* by heart: a worthy substitute for scales and etudes, it had been part of my daily exercise for years. Goaded by my professor, Jacob Zak, and by our mutual ambitions, I resolved to prepare the cycle for the Bach Competition in Leipzig; at the time I had no inkling of what superhuman, or rather superstudent, efforts such an undertaking might require. Competitions can hardly be compared to a daily exercise in one's own flat. As a result, once the competition was over, I put away *The Well-Tempered Clavier* and did not 'touch' it for twenty-seven years. The same goes for my attitude to Kierkegaard whom I worshiped in my youth: I did not touch him for twenty years at least, allergic as I was to *his* despairs. 'The sin of despairing over one's sin.' 'The sin of despairing of the forgiveness of sins (offence).' 'The sin of abandoning Christianity *modo ponendo* [positively], of declaring it to be untruth.' I have always had a sufficient number of despairs at my disposal. Why should I borrow some from a Dane who forsook his fiancée in 1841?

'What feelings, understanding and will a person has depends in the last resort upon what imagination he has—how he represents himself to himself, that is, upon imagination. Imagination is the infinitising reflection—' In other words, imagination leads you to the infinite and forsakes you there instead of helping you find your way in the realm where no landmarks salute a defiant visitor. Your intuition does not help you either so you realise it is not asensory and luminous after all; it is another form of despair in disguise. What makes up this despair is precisely the mask it is wearing—that of an asensory, luminous intuition in timeless presence, in spaceless confusion. But there is also a 'flat' despair confined to the two-dimensional world. Why can't I read other people's minds? Only surfaces are accessible to me. You don't have to look far to encounter the tensions beneath the surface, I am told. I look ahead of me and draw a great many curtains apart. There are windows beyond the curtains. I look out of the windows. Surfaces, surfaces, nothing but surfaces. And I see no tensions beneath them. No tensions, no malicious intentions. Glossy, sleek, varnished surfaces. Screens. 'But while one kind of despair steers blindly in the infinite and loses itself, another kind of despair allows itself to be, so to speak, cheated of its self by "the others". By seeing the multitude of people around it, by being busied with all sorts of worldly affairs, by being wise to the ways of the world, such a person forgets himself, in a divine sense forgets his own name, dares not believe in himself, finds being himself too risky, finds it much easier and safer to be like the others, to become a copy, a number, along with the crowd....And finitude's despair is just so.' It is *not*. I am not cheated of my self by the others because I do not *see* them; the screens I do see when I venture outdoors are not the others with whom I might do business or just cooperate on a regular basis. How can you cooperate with invisible

men and women? Something may appear on those screens as I scrutinise them: a few words, a diagram, a picture. But they are masks and nothing else. And I am certainly not wise to the ways of the world which is not a screen I could manipulate by pressing buttons and getting a score of mice to circulate around its glossy surface. It is a screen all right—a screen without a keyboard. A world without music.

He must have spoken about *them*, about *their* finitude. But there is no tension beneath their surfaces, no despair. 'The biggest danger, that of losing oneself, can pass off in the world as quietly as if it were nothing; every other loss, an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc. is bound to be noticed.' There is nothing to lose.

Art is the exact opposite of those screens—a living organism that often develops in an unpredictable way, puzzling those who are too accustomed to order and regularity in everyday life. But, on closer inspection, every new work, however revolutionary and unique, appears to have *something* in common with its predecessors. (And what do my fellow creatures have in common with their forebears?) Schoenberg said he had done nothing new, being largely influenced by Bach and other masters of counterpoint. Oddly enough, the more revolutionary an artist the deeper he is immersed in the perspective of the past that endows his works with richness and ambiguity. Art is not simple, as many people seem to believe; its complexity should not, however, become too eccentric, too abstruse. A work of art should not be complex for the sake of complexity. The artists who try to break with the past, pretending to invent an altogether new pattern, unknown to their predecessors, either delude themselves or deprive their works of the massive background provided by the history of art. Paradoxically, Shakespeare's and Beethoven's masterpieces contain not only the past but also the future. They encompass everybody and everything, going far beyond manifestos, ideologies and technical innovations. They are living substances the life of which differs from ours only in duration.

And what about my grand narratives, my eternal themes? Kierkegaard compares history to a 'process of filtration': 'The idea is stated—and then it goes into the process of history. But this does not consist of purifying the idea (what a ridiculous assumption!) which is never purer than at its beginning. No, it consists in the continually increasing process of botching the idea, making rubbish of it, turning it into nonsense.' Is Beatrice a piece of nonsense? What kind of despair is this? 'In despair not wanting to be oneself. The despair of weakness.' Is she unwilling to perpetuate her image throughout centuries? She is more than an image, far more than a screen where an image is reproduced. There *is* a tension beneath her surface—a body that loves and suffers. 'The despair of wanting in despair to be oneself—defiance.' This suits her much better. She wants to be herself, defying history, fashions and filtration—even wines are filtered nowadays.

It is hard to tell someone you love them without sounding trite. But why did I send her a wedding ring? A long-distance wedding indeed! And why do I write letters to a dead woman? Just a dead loss. The project was a dead duck right from the start. What is the difference between a dead

woman, a dead leaf and a dead duck? There is no difference, none whatever. The dead are all alike. The dead letters I write almost every day. A pathetic touch, isn't it? This book is another dead letter. Did Kierkegaard write anything else? Every work of his was a letter to Regine—a dead letter, to be sure. But she was alive.

'In order to want in despair to be oneself, there must be consciousness of an infinite self. However, this infinite self is really only the most abstract form of the self, the most abstract possibility of the self. And it is this self the despairer wants to be, severing the self from any relation to the power which has established it, or severing it from the conception that there is such a power. By means of this infinite form, the self wants in despair to rule over himself, or create himself, make this self the self he wants to be, determine what he will have and what he will not have in his concrete self.' Did I sever myself from God? At what point? When I escaped from the Soviet Union and my Beatrice? Yes, with the help of God I wished to create myself—all sorts of tension beneath my surface. And I keep unfolding my capacities as if to follow Aristotle's notion of bliss to the letter. To the dead letter. All letters are dead now. But there is no such thing as dead sounds, is there?

Are animals inferior to humans? 'Being a Christian in the New Testament sense is just as different, in the upward direction, from being human, as being an animal is different from being human in the downward direction,' writes Kierkegaard. But don't animals know God through their intuition, their *intellectus*? A cat is right whatever it does: a sitting cat is right, a standing cat is right, a running cat is right. Even a *grinning* cat is right, as Lewis Carroll believed. Humans are mostly wrong.

How should *The Sickness unto Death* be performed? It is a matter of *personal* taste and choice. 'One test of the great masters, of whom Shakespeare is one, is that the appreciation of their poetry is a lifetime's task, because at every stage of maturing—and that should be one's whole life—you are able to understand them better,' writes T.S. Eliot in his essay *What Dante Means to Me*. What must be preserved at all cost, however, is the enigma—the infinity of the work. And that can be achieved only through the utmost personal involvement amounting almost to self-sacrifice. By 'self-sacrifice' I do not mean a sacrifice of one's personality—I *want* to be myself!

I do not agree with those for whom the 'authenticity' of a musical interpretation boils down to clear-cut structures, neutral sonority, non-interference, non-involvement—a sin of omission, in *my* terminology. In the twenties and thirties Willem Mengelberg regularly performed the *Matthäus Passion* in Amsterdam; every time the audience was moved to tears. His interpretation may sound bizarre and old-fashioned. But who cries nowadays in concert halls? I wish you would cry when listening to my performance of *The Sickness unto Death*. 'The determinist, the fatalist, is in despair, and in despair he has lost his self because for him everything is necessity....Personhood is a synthesis of possibility and necessity. Its manner of being is therefore like breathing (respiration), which is aspiration and expiration. The determinist's self cannot breathe because it is impossible to breathe necessity alone, which on its own suffocates the human self. The fatalist is in despair, he has lost God

and thereby his self; for a person who has no God has no self either. But the fatalist has no God, or, what is the same, his God is necessity. Since for God everything is possible, then God is that everything is possible. The fatalist's worship of God is therefore at most an interjection, and really it is muteness, mute submission, he is unable to pray.' I first came across the word 'fatalist' in Lermontov's *A Hero of our Time* where the protagonist disarms a criminal while exposing his precarious life to danger. Well, to put it in a nutshell, a bullet will make a hole in your body if it is written on high. I thought it was rather stupid to expose your body to bullets if you could help it: nobody had asked Pechorin to overpower the criminal. I still am not prepared to run any risk but, *après une lecture de Kierkegaard*, death does not seem to be the worst solution to your problems on account of despair that hunts you down and disarms you as if you were a wanted man. Even if I wrote *Hamlet* it would not be staged because I am bound to put *my* signature at the bottom of the manuscript. (The whole manuscript would be my signature, my accursed name.) I do not submit *mutely* to this fate of mine and the present work is an eloquent proof of my ability to talk for hours and hours, but these words are mute, estranged as they are from the reader. This *Lieder ohne Worte* is beautiful, though; it is a prayer. You can pray to God without words, can't you? You can pray to God by means of music.

Let me just point out that the present interpretation of *The Sickness unto Death* displays hardly any characteristics of what I read into this ominous expression 'definitive version'. In the first place there are some wrong notes in it, which can be explained, if not vindicated, by the fact that we are dealing here with a *live* performance. (And only a live performance can do justice to a work by Kierkegaard.) In the second place it is not 'objective' and has much more in common with an old-fashioned brand of inspiration, with the expression 'on the spur of the moment' than with the 'golden mean', however dear the latter may have been to Aristotle and, for different reasons, to Buddha. There is no denying that the golden mean can assure one widespread recognition, long-term success: our epoch is prone to confuse commonplaces with authenticity and a common-sense attitude with artistry.

I have no liking for the expression 'definitive version', even when it happens to be applied to Furtwängler's recordings: its agoraphobic connotations do not square with my ideas on musical masterpieces. But I am quite aware that, within the framework of a book, one version must be given preference to all others. The aforementioned expression, which might have been coined by some embalmer, is acceptable to me only in this context.

Every prayer is different, and yet it is a re-creation of Abraham's prayer, of *Fear and Trembling*, of *The Sickness unto Death*. Would I pray to God if I was not sick unto death? Would I play the piano if I was unable to pray? What do I play? Songs without music? Where do I stand? In the Kingdom of Silence? My name x my prayer=4? Should I shield my prayer from my life, from my name, from my guilty conscience, from my incurable sickness? Should others pray for me? No one will ever pray for me.

'The decisive thing is: for God everything is possible. This is eternally true and therefore true every moment. People no doubt say this in the ordinary way of things, and this is how one ordinarily puts it, but the decisive moment only comes when man is brought to the utmost extremity, where in human terms there is no possibility. Then the question is whether he will believe that for God everything is possible, that is, whether he will *have faith*.' How could I interpret this piece of music? *Should* I interpret it? I believe that for God everything is possible. I have faith. A definitive version?

29

From the Christian viewpoint, every poet-existence (all aesthetics notwithstanding) is sin, the sin of writing instead of being, the sin of relating oneself in imagination to the good and true instead of being it, or rather, of striving existentially to be it. The poet-existence here referred to differs from despair in that it has the conception of God, or is before God. But it is immensely dialectical and an impenetrable dialectical tangle as far as the extent of its obscure consciousness of being sin is concerned.

Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*

*I'm afraid of thunder, of thunderbolts,
Of gods who may hurt me
Physically; of God Who hurts me
Spiritually. And
Physically. I'm afraid
Of myself: I do not know
Who I am or what. I'm afraid of my own
Thoughts.*

*No objective truths,
No frills and furbelows; only
This fear and trembling. Eternity
Crumbles between my fingers.*

30

And yet he continues to relate himself to God, and that is his only salvation; it would be for him the greatest of horrors to be without God, 'it would drive him to despair'; and yet in fact, perhaps unconsciously, he allows himself poetically to falsify God just a little, rather more in the guise of

the fond father who all too indulgently humours the child's 'only' wish. As a person who becomes unhappy in love turns into a poet and then blissfully extols the joys of love, that is how he became the poet of religiousness.

Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*

For the 'natural' man death is the end of life. For a Christian death is an event of less significance, of no significance at all—another stage towards an eternal life. How many stages do I have to go through before I reach the *last* stage? I wish I could play Dante's part on this stage. And afterwards.

Kierkegaard repeats a line he had used against Andersen: 'Like a thunderstorm, the genius goes against the wind.' I *am* going against the wind. What does that prove? It is a windy night. 'The tragic hero gives up the certain for the still more certain, and the eye of the beholder rests upon him confidently. But he who gives up the universal in order to grasp something still higher which is not the universal—what is he doing? (*Fear and Trembling*)' What *am* I doing? A knight of faith, a *knife* of faith. 'The person of spirit is different from people like us because he is able to endure isolation, and his rank as a person of spirit is proportionate to the fortitude with which he can endure isolation, while people such as us always need "the others", the herd; we despair and die unless we are reassured by being in the herd, by having the same opinions as the herd, etc. But the Christianity of the New Testament is precisely designed for relating itself to this isolation of a person of spirit. In the New Testament, Christianity means to love God in hatred of humankind, in hatred of oneself and thus of all other people, hating father, mother, one's own child, spouse, et cetera—the most powerful expression of the most painful isolation.' Kierkegaard alludes to Luke 14:26 where a 'striking doctrine [is] taught about the absolute duty toward God: "If any man cometh unto me and hateth not his own father and mother and wife and children and brethren and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple." This is a hard saying, who can bear to hear it? For this reason it is heard very seldom. This silence, however, is only an evasion which is of no avail.' Kierkegaard also grows evasive when confronted with the striking doctrine: he just comments on it without putting himself to test. Why doesn't he question his own attitude towards his next-of-kin? He had no children and therefore could not really experience the fear for which he lauds Abraham so eloquently, but at least he might have evinced a certain amount of hatred towards his father whose proverbial curse might have killed him and his brother Peter before they reached the age of thirty-four. Of course God was not expected to say to him, 'Take Michael, thine only father, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah, and offer him there for a burnt offering upon the mountain which I will show thee.' And what about his *daimonion*? Did he have one? What if his *daimonion* tempted him instead of warding off the dangers to which his master would have been exposed, but for its timely interference? No leap of imagination could help me describe their exchange of views. And I have to take a long leap to imagine how *I* would talk to my tempter (or God) on the subject. Well, I leap so often as I proceed with my self-

imposed task that one supplementary exercise would not be prejudicial to my health. Shall we dub it 'metaphysical aerobics'?

'Why don't you murder your father? I need this sacrifice to find out if you believe in me or not. I spoke to you about the hatred you should nourish towards your next-of-kin. And your hatred is sterile unless you put it into practice.'

'Who *put* such an idea into your pretty little head? I do *not* hate my father and mother.'

'Do you love them dearly? And "pretty little head" comes from Oscar Wilde, doesn't it? The head of God is neither pretty nor little, you know.'

'You're not God.'

'Are you afraid of sharing Adler's predicament? I did *not* speak to him—Kierkegaard was right. "He is a very serious proof that Christianity is a power which is not to be jested with. But, on the other hand, rather than being an elect, he is a soul whirled about, flung aloft as a warning of dread, like the terrified bird which with anxious beating of its wings rushes out ahead of the storm which is about to follow, though as yet one hears only the hissing of it; and his thoughts are like the confused flocks of birds which flee helter-skelter before the storm."'

'It's easy to quote a book.'

'I dictated it to Kierkegaard.'

'You did nothing of the sort. A fruit of my imagination, as we say in Russia.'

'In your teenage years Dostoevsky was your god, wasn't he? I'm not the creature Ivan welcomes in his room. I am God.'

'How can you prove it?'

'Kierkegaard writes that all proofs of this sort are ludicrous—either you believe in God or you do not. You do believe in me, don't you?'

'I don't believe in *you*.'

'Anyway you can't be one of my knights unless you hate and murder your parents. Abraham hated his son because he thought another man might have stained his sheets.'

'Don't talk nonsense!'

'Aren't you Kierkegaard's knight? You like wallowing in absurdity, don't you? Your private luxury.'

'Absurdity isn't synonymous with nonsense.'

'Wouldn't you kill your father? Or shall we do it in stages? *Stages on Death's Way*. Suppose you had a son or rather an embryo. A future invalid.'

'A sacrifice?'

'An abortion.'

'I wouldn't kill him myself.'

'Would you allow *them* to kill him?'

'I don't have a son.'

'Let us pass on to your father. You'll inherit a lot of money on the day of his funeral. And you'll live alone with your mother whom you adore. Are you prepared to wait till he dies from cancer or a heart attack?'

'You must know when—'

'I will not tell you. Why should I tell you everything? I've told you enough already.'

'What *have* you told me?'

'I am God.'

'And you want me to sacrifice my father? You won't inherit anything, will you? Anyway you don't need my father's roubles.'

'I need your priceless sacrifice.'

'What for? I'm not Abraham.'

'You're a human. I test my Creation from time to time. Actually you could murder your father by proxy, if you wish. I *may* provide a poison that leaves no traces, but if you can't stand up to your guilty conscience—'

'By proxy? Like Ivan?'

'There are contract killers everywhere. You would kill two birds—your inheritance and your salvation.'

I did not murder my father who died of a heart attack in 1970. Anyway I adored him too. The sheets of paper I saw around me as I walked into his study are my literary precursors: the same piles decorate my study and even a terrace where I keep my manuscripts. He wrote twenty-five books some of which were published in the United States, Germany and China. And he could spin a yarn out of nothing, out of *one* word I would utter to avail myself of another leap of his imagination. And the hours I spent with him on riverbanks, on lakeshores, a fishing rod in my hand. And our games of chess and the books he offered me when I resolved to become a world champion. One of them was devoted to Alekhin's legendary combinations—three hundred games of his were printed in that book. And then I lost three games to a village boy who had not read a single line about debuts, gambits and sacrifices; and I realised I would not become a world champion. When, many years afterwards, my father was operated on, I stood in front of the door beyond which he was lying; I stood there for three hours, unable to sit down or to move. Rooted to the spot.

'One became great by expecting the possible, another by expecting the eternal, but he who expected the impossible became greater than all. Everyone shall be remembered, but each was great in proportion to the greatness of that with which he strove. For he who strove with the world became great by overcoming himself, but he who strove with God became greater than all' (*Fear and Trembling*). I still expect the impossible in the domain of literature—a belated recognition, a sort of eternity. But one does not strive with God in the domain of literature.

'You may strive with me in your daily routine—your mother is alive. Isn't she jealous? She doesn't allow you to bring *any* girlfriend of yours to her place. The flat you're living in is *her* place, isn't it? Your telephone has been tapped, but you don't mind the K G B, do you? Your mother listens to the conversations you have with whoever calls you, and you do mind her listening to these calls. Aren't you longing to do away with the only witness for prosecution?'

'What about you?'

'I am a judge, not a witness.'

'I adore my mother—you said so yourself.'

'Humans always kill those whom they adore. They kill everybody, as a matter of fact. I wonder why there are so many humans left on earth. But your mother is alive, isn't she? Your youth is transient and you'll never enjoy yourself so fully as during this period—before you reach the age of thirty-four.'

'My mother died a long time ago.'

'Last week you invited her Paris, didn't you? She took a flight from Moscow this afternoon. You'd better go and fetch her at the airport. And you'll invite your girlfriends to Brussels, to another flat of yours.'

'I had a dream like that—I remember now. But I didn't murder my mother, not even in that dream or any other dream. Contrary to Freud's hypothesis, dreams are so irrelevant sometimes, so out of place and tune. Once I dreamt about two Soviet dancers one of whom stood on a balcony, prepared to take a leap in the dark. And the other gripped his elbows to cut short this show of despair. Presently they both fell down and spattered their blood all over the courtyard. Absurd, isn't it?'

'Dancers are used to leaping up and down, forward and back.'

'Both of them are still alive—hale and hearty, full of beans. Even in such a surrealistic nightmare I wouldn't have killed my mother. You know that, don't you?'

'I'm delighted to realise you take me seriously, otherwise you wouldn't say I know anything.'

'My mother died on December 2, 1973.'

'She abhorred your poetry.'

'She died in a hospital. I had a recital that day.'

'Only a murderer can play on the day of his mother's demise. You knew she would die, didn't you?'

'I phoned the Mosconcert to say my mother was seriously ill.'

'"You'll never perform in Moscow again unless you disregard your mother's disease," your manager told you.'

'My mother insisted I should play.'

'And you performed Schubert's *Doppelgänger*, didn't you? And you repeated it as an encore. Why? Because one of your selves murdered your mother and the other did not?'

'A sort of premonition. I was looking at my past, at my doppelgänger who might have lived happily ever after—at least with himself. One of my friends understood what I had experienced during that recital, a part of my feelings. "You played the encore for your mother," he said as we finished a bottle of cognac in his dining room. "She *was* my doppelgänger," I answered.'

'Your piece *Kreisleriana* is partly based on a story recounted by a vivid character whose future was destroyed by the Oedipal interference of his parents in his private life.'

'My parents thought they had every right to poke their noses into my love adventures. When I was twenty, they still kept me on a short lead. We were staying at a ski resort in the suburbs of Moscow—three hours' drive from our flat. In wintertime our roads are more suitable for cross-country skiers than for motorcars. We were supposed to spend ten days at that *pansionat* but I had a date with my girlfriend who, technically speaking, wasn't my girlfriend yet. I pinned all my hopes on that rendezvous and on the eve of D-day I told my parents I had to pick up a few books to prepare my exams properly. I said that the books could only be got from the International Library. On M-morning my father drove me to the station where I took a train that was due to arrive in Moscow an hour-and-a-half later, around 1 p.m. She came at 3 p.m. and I drew the curtains up. We drank a bottle of Soviet champagne and I touched her. I might have stripped her clothes off at once, but I knew we had plenty of time and amorous games are slow on the uptake—I mean, elegant, Proustian *jeux de l'amour*. We drank another bottle of champagne and I kissed her hands, both of them, trying to avoid passionate lip-contact. Even a tentative kiss would have been out of place.'

'To cut a long story short, your parents interrupted the ritual around 10 p.m. By that time she was half-naked and had to dress rather quickly to leave the flat through the back door before the arrival of the police.'

'Three hours' drive along those snowy, muddy roads. I never saw the girl again. I just spoke to her on the phone and realised she wouldn't forgive me for this incident and my lack of courage. I should have introduced her to my parents. But I was afraid of my mother, of the attitude she might have taken towards the girl.'

In 1972 I took part in the Queen Elisabeth Competition. I could have stayed in Brussels, in Western Europe. I did not. I returned to Moscow because my mother was still alive. She would have survived without my assistance: our charwoman was an outstanding nurse. And the money my father had bequeathed us would have allowed her to reach her hundredth birthday.

I returned to the Soviet Union and thereby jeopardised my career.

Whereas from his central standpoint the brilliant Martensen sheds light upon the entire sphere of existence and upon all the phenomena of life, Søren Kierkegaard stands on his isolated pillar like a Simeon Stylites, his gaze fixed uninterruptedly on

a single point. He places his microscope over this point, carefully investigating the tiniest atoms, the most fleeting motions, the innermost alterations. And it is about this that he speaks and writes endless folios. For him, everything is to be found at this point. But this point is—the human heart. And—because he unceasingly has this changeable heart reflect itself in the Eternal and Unchangeable;...because in the course of his exhausting dialectical wanderings he says divine things—he has gained a not inconsiderable audience in happy, pleasant Copenhagen, particularly among ladies. The philosophy of the heart must be of importance to them.

Kierkegaard, Papers and Journals

The dead are closer to us than the quick because their absence depends on their former presence of which we think in the following terms: they used to be part of our life. No stages separate us from the quick on whom we can call if our computer and telephone have broken down; we can neither ring the dead up nor visit them in their tombs unless we do not mind violating the rules of hospitality. Actually they are not closer to us even if their tombs are situated right under our windows; they are *more* to us, although they are no more.

I put no photographs of my parents into the suitcases I was packing on the eve of my departure from the Soviet Union; I feared I would not be able to cope with the determinism of the camera, with its one-dimensional truth. The truth I conjure up as I focus my thoughts on them is so multi-faceted I spend hours and hours selecting the right image, the right word, which might have turned out to be quite wrong, had I been given an opportunity to compare them with reality. When, during one of my stays in Russia, I chanced upon my parents' photographs in a family album I was surprised at how wide of the mark I had been on my way through the stages of memory and Time. Well, one cannot 'calculate on the basis of uncertainties', but for once I am disposed to sacrifice the beauty of numbers for the sake of another infinity that I shall not venture to define. Anyway how to define Infinity, Eternity and Immortality by means of finite, mortal words? (Thus speaks the hero in Andreyev's *The Journal of Satan*.)

So the dead lord it over the living through their multifarious lives that we bestow on them when putting together a few snatches of dialogues, a few snapshots and a great many memories, most of them second-hand and unreliable. An innocent snapshot is liable to multiply and replenish our consciousness as we turn it this way and that in our unrelenting search for truth; it reminds us of so-called reality which leads to yet another reality or unreality. And the reality we must stand up to has been reduced to a blur. A few years ago my eyes were operated on and I got rid of all the blurs I had seen around me without my glasses. Today there is only one blur left—the world destroyed by the past and my industrious imagination. Oddly enough, I seem to have grown more short-sighted than ever.

Milosz said that realism had fallen prey to the 'growing subjectivity of literature or, more precisely, to the inability to take an objective approach to the world. Look at what is most popular: subjective narratives in the first person, not the objective presentation of the world. This is all connected probably with what is called the crisis of the novel.' The interview dates back to 1982 when a writer could still afford to present his admirers with a Kierkegaardian mirror where objective truth—whatever that means—was distorted by subjective leaps of all sorts. ('The fundamental failing of the modern age is that it makes everything objective, so is it also the fundamental misfortune of the modern age that it lacks primitivity.') What happens now has more affinities with Hegel's approach that subordinates the individual to the family unit, the family to society and society to the State. (I typed 'to the States'. A meaningful slip of the key?) In other words individual choice (or style) is illusory and irrelevant as long as you tell a nice, captivating and slightly surrealistic story. Today much more effort goes into the wording for advertisements: stories become international bestsellers on the strength of *what* they recount. And this does not amount to much, their authors being entertainers, not even enchanters, let alone witnesses who get you to realise you are faced with a number of fears, desires, thoughts, dispositions, neuroses and commitments among which you should make your choice. No witness can tell you exactly what to do, but at least he or she may open your eyes, your minds, your hearts and put your fingers in many pies; some of these pies are to be rejected in favour of others. (And some of them are no pies at all.) But these triumphant authors are subordinated to their families who crave for money—royalties in professional parlance; and royalties depend on society whose members may or may not buy a book. Gliding from one stage to another, we finally reach the global village or rather the market where the villagers unite in order to buy and sell their respective goods. And this market has nothing in common with the one I go to whenever I happen to sojourn in Touraine—the region renowned for its castles (châteaux de la Loire) and goat cheeses. Thereby hangs a tale. At a dinner given in Bill Gates' honour a friend of mine was sitting next to his chief adviser who suddenly owned up to having discovered goat cheeses. He must be in his late thirties; a nice opportunity for a retrospective despair. And what about Bill Gates himself? Did he savour Madame Bouland's Mareuil?

Hegel pinned his hopes on the United States where, according to him, the process of 'dialectic meditation' was to reach the absolute truth about everything: human history, society, psychology, politics and religion. I am spending the weekend near Montrichard where one can easily find the *Herald Tribune*. So I interrupt my narrative at this point in order not to shower the reader with the odds and ends of my deep-seated, stylish untruth.

If only they had given me my due as an author in the beginning, then I would have had an opportunity to speak about myself in a different

fashion. People would easily have seen how far I am from being haughty.

Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals*

In former times man envied birds or rather their capacity to fly, which enables them to leave the earth and get closer to heaven. Did our ancestors think in terms of velocity? Our ancestors saw the immobile starry sky overhead and believed the earth was a fixed star on which they could walk and journey in their wheeled contraptions without constantly losing their balance and falling down. My colleagues have overtaken me on the path that leads to the Goal: glory, money, family life. The flat where I am living was bought in 1980. It is the only flat I own—a short sentence. No villas, no castles. My life writes short sentences as if to contradict my style. In short, my life is not my style. And yet it *is* my style. 'The highest feeling of power and sureness finds expression in a grand style. The power which no longer needs any proof, which spurns pleasing, which does not answer lightly, which feels no witness near, which lives oblivious of all opposition to it, which reposes within itself, fatalistically, a law among laws—that speaks of itself as a grand style' (Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*). So I am a fixed star where a multitude of points have been stored ever since my childhood: points of no return, points of eternal recurrence, suspension points, saturation points, boiling points, starting points, viewpoints and even pointless points. But what I mostly yearn for tonight is a finishing point—the end of this book that has no end. I may die before I am granted a favour to conclude it: though unfinished, *The Trial* has got a final chapter. So I am a shooting star tonight. Allow me to bring at least one of my trials to a close!

33

I should account as the foremost musician one who knew only the sadness of the most profound happiness, and no other sadness at all; but such a musician has never existed yet.

Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

'His conflict is really this: Has he really had a call? Is the thorn in the flesh the sign that he is to be used for the extraordinary? Before God, is it entirely in order for him to be the extraordinary one he has become? Or is the thorn in the flesh what he must humbly accept in order to attain the universally human condition?' There is a thorn in my flesh. What kind of thorn is it? A treacherous instrument in my hand, unbated and envenom'd. No call. No human condition either: I have not attained the universally human condition. Then, venom, to thy work.

'Invoking a curious sort of freemasonry, I can make these words of the poet into a motto for a portion of my life's sufferings: "*Infandum me jubes Regina renovare dolorem.*" 'You command, Tatiana, that I must renew an unspeakable suffering.' Kierkegaard quotes Virgil; I quote Kierkegaard.

Passing the torch of language in which love is enshrined. I am quoting myself (*Tristan on Earth*). Another grand narrative. *Infandum me jubes Beatrice renovare dolorem*.

Our last meeting in Paris. I told her I would have to go on a concert tour: in those days I was infatuated with a Romanian girl who was to come to Paris before Tatiana's departure. And then I called Tatiana from a telephone box to say I was in New York where the snow crunched under my shoes like *les neiges d'antan*. As she launched into a lengthy description of *her* walks along the Moscow boulevards I kissed my Romanian mistress and made her realise I was bored to death with my old friend's verbosity.

Our last meeting in Moscow. A restaurant of sorts, a walk along one of my favourite streets. 'Let's go to my hotel,' I said.

'I have to go home first, but I'll join you very soon. And we can go to my nanny's—she's been taken to hospital.'

'We could stay at my hotel.'

'I don't like hotels.'

'What about your husband? Is *he* in a hospital somewhere?'

'On a business trip, as usual.'

'Why do you have to go home?'

'I've forgotten my pills.'

'I'm your magic pill.'

'Don't laugh. I'll die very soon.'

'Before you join me at the hotel?'

The other day I had a talk about love with my former girlfriend. She said a woman in love was unable to cause pain to anyone, not only her lover. Even her rival would be spared by this altruistic emotion. 'Love is beyond meetings and kisses,' I said. 'It's a law. You know, I was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment *in absentia*—I stayed abroad without permission. Though free and happy, I did experience the spirit and might of the Law.'

I was praying to God that she would not come to my hotel room: I was sleepy and I had to perform on the following day. (Mozart's *Concerto in C Minor*, K 491) She did not come; the Almighty heard my prayers. Our last meeting.

Regine was busy packing up because her husband had been appointed governor of the Danish West Indies where the couple would spend five years. On the day of their departure she went for a walk in the hope of meeting her former fiancé; presently she caught sight of his broad-brimmed hat. 'God bless you—may all go well with you!' she said to him. He tipped his hat and saluted her. Their last meeting.

My last phone call. I told her I was in love with another woman—'the most beautiful woman in Moscow.'

'I must have missed this beauty contest,' she said.

'She's twelve years your junior.'

'But she's bound to die. So are you, my Don Juan. No, you're just a boy eaten by mothballs. No! What did I say?' She broke into laughter. 'I meant, a boy eaten by balls. No—by moths!' She continued to laugh and hardly said anything after that manifold joke. Our last talk. Laughter is not the best medicine.

'Outside the church door she turned and saw me. She stood in the curve of the path to the left of the church. I turned to the right as always, because I like to walk through the arcade. My head naturally inclines somewhat to the right. So I turned, I bowed my head perhaps a little more markedly than usual. Then I went my way and she went hers. Afterwards I really reproached myself, or rather I worried that she might have noticed this movement and interpreted it as a nod indicating that she should walk with me. Probably she did not notice it at all, and in any case I would have had to leave up to her whether she wanted to speak to me—and in that case my first question would have been whether she had Schlegel's [her husband's] permission.' I took no notice of Tatiana's husband.

A bow and arrow. Cupid. The thorn in the flesh.

My love story is much inferior to Kierkegaard's; even in this respect I am not a knight. Just a second-rate poet.

Her husband was not a new Russian, one of the nouveaux-riches. Just a scientist, a new poor. Scientists earned much more money in the Soviet Union. She was not living off the fat of the land.

'Where does this turtle neck come from?' I asked her once.

'My husband bought it in Italy.'

'From a rag-and-bone man, no doubt. You should be ashamed of yourself. Look at these well-turned-out ladies.'

'My husband isn't a nouveau-Russian. He has to work for his living, you know. And he works wonderfully, he works wonders. He just wrote one equation on the blackboard and was awarded—'

'The Nobel Prize? I must have overlooked it.'

At some point I yearned to become a Roman Catholic and, kneeling down in front of Dante's tomb in Ravenna, I made the sign of the cross, *their* sign of the cross: the last point I touched on my chest did not correspond to my heart. Russian fingers always probe the heart at the end of this ritual. I am the last eschatologist and write exclusively about the human heart. No landscapes, no faces, no bodies—just the heart, the naked heart. As a Roman Catholic, I might have confessed my sins to a priest; now I confess them to myself and to you, whoever you are. How many insults have I added to injuries? $2 \times 2 = 1001$. My Arabian nights, my Russian days. My Russian roulette.

'The person who has truly experienced and continues to experience belief in the forgiveness of his sins has indeed become another person. Everything is forgotten. And yet his situation is not like that of a child who, after having been forgiven, once again becomes essentially the same child. No, he

has become an eternity older. For now he has become spirit: the whole of immediacy and its selfishness, its selfish clinging to the world and to itself, has been lost. Now he is old, extremely old, humanly speaking, but eternally speaking he is young' (*Papers and Journals*).

This work deals with Kierkegaard's life upon which the author models his whimsical and inaccurate autobiography. Inspired by his model's jibes and judgements, he pokes fun at his colleagues and the literary establishment in general, deploring, for instance, the impossibility of sending an entire novel to prospective agents none of whom accept unsolicited manuscripts. In short, he is waiting for the days when poetic, lapidary, metaphysical works may turn out to be real money-spinners—a discreet homage to Beckett's epoch-making masterpiece. This would-be autobiography is dominated by a woman who plays the part of Regine—Kierkegaard's lifelong virtual companion. Unfortunately, she dies instead of outliving her lover for almost half-a-century—Regine died in 1904—so that, in the final analysis, she has more affinities with Dante's Beatrice. But the Kierkegaard code gets the upper hand in the struggle for the so-called plot idolised by the common reader and those critics whom T. S. Eliot might have criticised. As a result, various kinds of despair come to the fore as the author endeavours to find out from what he has been suffering for thirty-two years: the sickness unto death, the sickness unto life or the sickness unto love. He knows he will not be cured from the sickness unto fame because, as long as he is alive, 'they feel the sting of his existence; he compels them to make more difficult decisions. But when he is dead, people can be good friends with him and admire him.' Well, he is alive and kicking: suicidal mania is not his cup of tea. So he indulges in the remembrance of things past, sings a hymn to the English language, poetry and realises he will never return to Moscow where he was born, brought up and educated. He is a pianist and his performance of Kierkegaard's—and his own—life may be full of wrong notes. But it is melodious and, after all, his model was a musician himself who, in Nietzsche's words, knew 'only the sadness of the most profound happiness'.

'Why don't you go and visit my tomb? And very sweet it is to know you're warm, though I'm cold. Why not join me in the Hereafter? Let your body grow cold—except your blood, heart, feet, eyes and shoulders.'

'Why except my feet, eyes—?

'Because I don't want you to get cold feet whenever you touch my body. And I don't want you to give me a cold-eyed stare whenever I talk to you about love. Is my allusion to "cold-shouldering" clear now?'

Poor stuff—as poor as our telephone talks. A long-distance call. Shall I go to Jerusalem? If you phone the Hereafter from there, it is a short-distance call you avail yourself of.

Here is a letter I sent her on the eve of my irrevocable departure from Moscow:

*The past has no counterpart in the future.
 A long time ago, the present moment
 Broke a number of ties and appointments
 With the moment to come. Calculations are futile.*

*The number 'ten' is seldom followed
 By the number 'eleven'. For all our agreements,
 We shall not meet on Herzen Street
 In a fortnight. Something will interfere.*

*What? When? Where? No idea. A broken leg,
 A fallen brick, some bric-a-brac, a fallen angel so
 Winsome as to trick your heart into a change of rhythm.*

Michelangelo

*Made a marble replica of my sorrow:
 He knew what would happen tomorrow.*

'So as not to have to rehearse yet again something which must, in the end, be done; something which, when it has been done, will surely give the strength that is needed; let it be done, then. Above all, forget the person who writes this; forgive a person who, whatever he might have been capable of, was incapable of making a girl happy. In the Orient, to send a silk cord was a death sentence for the recipient; here, to send a ring will likely be a death sentence for the person who sends it.' His farewell letter.

Sometimes she spoke to her disease. 'Do you feel you're making progress?' she would ask.

'Yes.'

'Are you taking pride in your work?'

'If you don't take pride in your work, you're probably in the wrong body. And I am in the right body. The right thing in the right place.'

Another figment of my imagination.

'We'll travel around the world, artistically, poetically. You'll write poems every day. And I'll listen to them, every night. Isn't it beautiful, the idea itself?'

Another figment of my imagination:

'Why can't we get married today?'

'Because we are married already.'

'Really?'

'Hope is a charming woman. Recollection is a beautiful old woman. REPETITION is a beloved wife. The ending of *Tristan on Earth* has a lot in common with what I'm writing at the break of dawn. A new aurora, an old aurora. Hurrah!'

'What are you driving at?'

'I repeat myself for your sake, for the sake of our past and future. And we *are* in the present, aren't we?'

'Why can't we go to the ZAGS and get married at 11 o'clock? Except for the sick, deformed, crippled, the emotionally warped and mentally defective, almost everyone has an opportunity and, by clear implication, a duty to marry.'

Another figment of His imagination: 'On the way to Aarhus I saw a very amusing sight. Two cows harnessed together cantered past us. One was frisking about with a smart swing to her tail; the other was, as it seemed, more prosaic and in sheer distress at having to participate in these same movements.—Aren't most marriages organised in this manner?'

Another figment of my imagination:

Like Prince Albert I visited her tomb last night. Giselle, my Giselle. She was in the company of spirits. We danced together. Love is a dance, an eternal dance.

Another figment of His imagination:

'She was standing there. She was not walking, she was standing there, apparently waiting for someone, whoever it was. There was no one there. I looked at her. Then she went towards the side door through which I was about to go. There was something strange about this encounter, so indiscreet. As she passed by me and turned to go through the door, I moved bodily in a motion that could have been merely a stepping aside to make room, but it also could have been a half greeting. She turned about quickly and made a motion. But now, if she had wanted to speak, she had no further opportunity, because I was already inside the church. So I went to my usual place. But it did not escape me that even though she sat far away, she incessantly looked at me. Perhaps she had been waiting in the corridor for someone else, perhaps for me, perhaps that little gift was from her (Kierkegaard occasionally got letters with gifts from anonymous female admirers), perhaps she had wanted me to speak to her, perhaps, perhaps.' I also got a few fan letters from women.

Another figment of my imagination:

She opened the door and fixed me with a stare of disapproval.

'I've been given permission to call on you,' I said.

'I know,' she said. 'Let me inform you, however, that I disapprove of my husband's liberality.'

'I've already read this disapproval in your eyes,' I said.

She let me in. 'Would you like a cup of coffee?' she said.

'Thank you, yes.' She went out and, a few minutes later, brought in a cup of coffee. 'Won't you join me?' I asked.

'I've already had my cup of coffee.'

'Do you drink only one cup of coffee a day?'

Another figment of His imagination:

'I cannot quite say that my work as an author is a sacrifice. It is certainly true that I have been unspeakably unhappy ever since I was a child, but nonetheless, in this connection I must confess that the avenue of escape God provided for me in permitting me to become an author has been rich, rich in enjoyment. So I have surely been sacrificed, but my work as an author is not a sacrifice—it is indeed what I would absolutely most like to continue doing. Thus I cannot be entirely truthful here either, because I cannot talk about my torments and my misery like this in print—and then what is really most prominent becomes the enjoyment' (*The Point of View for my Work as an Author*).

