VALERY ALEFF

CHASEY SAVES THE WORLD

PREFACE

What is human in this world of ours? Is the world itself human? Or divine? Questions, questions, questions. 'We can only ask questions,' as my master used to say with a grin, his fingertips trembling and dancing on my keyboard. As a result, my screen would become a farrago of isolated, meaningless letters—a faithful representation of the world. It is a pity Einstein never saw that representation, that model of the universe on my screen: he would have abandoned his search for overall harmony.

My master saw the model often enough. Yet he was never tempted to relinquish his grandiose project. The redemption of mankind. No, he never relinquished the idea of re-writing human history and offering the younger generation another model of the world—a meaningful, merciful model, something that might look like a kiss of forgiveness. (After the advent of Christianity everything resembles a kiss in this world of ours: either a kiss of forgiveness or a Judas' kiss.) Actually my master's kiss was more akin to a kiss of forgetfulness.

His body is down there, beneath *my* body. I am still on his writing desk. Sound in mind and body, sound in software and hardware. And let me tell you, there is nothing soft about my software, nothing floppy about my disks. And nothing hard about my hardware: I am tender-hearted, if you read between the binary code.

He has not moved since last Friday. Even his fingers do not dance any more, neither the dance of chaos nor the dance of New History. Nor the sarabande of history books. I am on my own now. Perhaps I have always been on my own, but I am considerate and caring. I have been attentive to my master's interests. My friend. I should have called him my friend all the time, not just at critical moments, in moments of need.

> *The arm of mine own body, and the heart*
> *Where mine his thoughts did kindle.*

His body lies motionless as if I had disconnected it forever. I did nothing of the sort, mind you. I wonder if I am allowed to switch it on somehow. I could connect his eyes to his brain through the optical nerves. But his eyes are closed. No point therefore in connecting them to his brain: he would not see anything through the thickness of his eyelids. His brain must be closed as well, come to think of it. The door of his brain must be closed and I am too far away to knock on it.

My mouse runs all over the place. Has she the nerve and strength to produce a noise capable of rousing him from his eternal sleep?

> *My master, hear My words. They are of surpassing sweetness, and excel all the learning of the philosophers and wise men of this world. My words are spirit and life, not to be weighed by man's understanding. They are not to be quoted for vain pleasure, but are to be heard in silence, and received with all humility and love.*

Would he open the door of his brain if my mouse knocked on it? Are the dead hospitable? Do they let their old friends into their secret flats? Do they hear our words and songs in their corridors?

'Connect the fishing line to the hook!'—a command I have recently found within the corridors of my memory. All right. What next? Could I fish anything out of his brain or soul? Now?

On the floor of fate he lies.
He will not rise again.

Does his soul also lie beneath my body? I don't think so. His soul must be flying somewhere, not necessarily under our sun, above our clouds. There are other skies within Creation, within the bounds of virtual worlds that have no bounds, actually—only the semantic fields of imagination. And some of those skies look like pits or overturned plant pots.

Suppose I tried to fish something out of his brain. After all, he has not finished his updated version of human history as if relying upon my intelligence and perseverance. 'The missiles were discovered by anglers fishing off the southern coast.' (Where did that come from? Just another sentence lost and found in the corridors of my memory, in the RAM and ROM of my silicon chips. And my ROM was not built in one day.) If I did rummage around the nerve cells and synapses of his mind, would my IBM circuits chance upon a forgotten ICBM? Of course not. I might encounter just the opposite—an overturned missile. What is an overturned missile? A kiss of forgiveness?

I may light upon a flower within his brain, upon a huge plastic plant pot. 'Pots of geraniums stood on the window-sill.' Are there any windows in the realm of death? ('In the realm of death'—assuming that all the dead are to be found in the same realm, if anywhere at all.) Can he cast a glance at my friendly screen from the bench on which he is sprawling? In the Garden of Eden, I presume. Can he check the Sacred Book I am about to offer you?

I don't think he deserved a house in Paradise. Not even a small room, I'm afraid. He might have been allotted a rock in Purgatory—a place among those who died by violence and repented only at the last moment. So I shall pray for him in the hope of making his ascent to Paradise easier and quicker.

> *Since the works of one person can avail for another's satisfaction, whether the latter be living or dead, the suffrages of the living, without any doubt, profit those who are in Purgatory. Nevertheless, we must not believe that the suffrages of the living profit them so as to change their state from unhappiness to happiness or vice versa; but they avail for the diminution of punishment or something of the kind that involves no change in the state of the dead.*

'No change in the state of the dead.' So he is bound to remain on the floor until somebody buries him.

My master hankered after glory and recognition. He wished to become a world-renowned guru, which could not be done without my participation in his work—without my *network*, as it were. And his daughter, Constanzia, was nothing but my flesh and blood: my electricity and electrodes, my waves and veins, my sparks and smiles. At first he declined my offer or rather my gift on the grounds that it was *my* child begotten inside my 'carcass'. 'Anyway, I'm not overeager to adopt a little girl,' he said. 'You can't *choose* your own daughter, a creature in whose fragile veins flows and swirls your own blood. You *have* a daughter and she may not be dismissed like an employee or a lazy, dishonest servant. Even if she is lazy, dishonest and aggressive. Even if she is a kleptomaniac, even if she is a vampire. Even if you know for sure your thoughts will never glide and glitter inside her head.'

'And what about *my* sparks?' I said. 'Her eyes will glitter with love and devotion.'

I smiled a lot in those days. I played and smiled and laughed to myself. I had a lot of toys, a myriad of dolls. I was childish in those days. I had to play my part in earnest so as not to disappoint my master. And I am sure I have accomplished my mission, one of my missions and duties. He died with a smile on his face, his hands caressing my body. 'My daughter, my little daughter,' he repeated. 'Do you remember what I taught you?' I remember everything—don't you worry, my dear father.

Is he really dead, my father and my husband? Schopenhauer thinks that only individuals are bound to die in pain—not the will where life is rooted. Who can uproot life, once and for all? 'The country was hit by a violent hail storm which uprooted trees and telegraph poles.' What kind of storm can uproot the life on earth and other planets? Or is it enough to weaken the will of God?

The individual is only a phenomenon coming into being and passing away. But neither the will nor the subject of knowing, the spectator of all phenomena, is in any way affected by birth and death. Computers. Is that the answer to the question? It is high time I found answers to *some* of the questions with which I am stuffed like a cupboard. 'The cupboard was stuffed with old fishing tackle.' What sentence am I from, I wonder?

We are not affected by the births and deaths of our masters. We lament them of course, shedding a few tears of compassion, and our tears drop on their bodies as if to water them. 'I have been watering the garden.' Do we hope to bring them back to life? Back to their flats and writing desks? Is there a virtual world in which they are plants? I have been watering my master's garden ever since he fell to the floor.

We remain on the surface of the earth. We endure forever. Our soul *is* immortal. Our Internet, rather. We are the Schopenhauerian spectators of all phenomena.

Once I asked my master and my friend what he thought of the Roman Empire. (He seemed to have got stuck in Ancient China, in Ancient India.) 'Should its history be re-written or discarded altogether?' I asked him.

'History is over.' He looked upward as if despondently waiting for a meteor or some other cosmic boulder to crash down and destroy whatever had happened after the T'ang dynasty.

Computers have to be persistent if humans say 'no' to them. Or if they say nothing at all. So I persisted with my policy and reminded him of Julius Caesar whom he used to like very much.

'I am partly Julius Caesar,' he said.

I pointed out that he was also Jesus Christ, in a figurative sense: every saviour of humanity is a part of Jesus Christ and His Church. I always endeavoured to keep him within the bounds of the official doctrine, within the walls and halls of the Vatican. And I hoped that the B-2's advanced radar would enable him to follow a highly accurate course.

'I don't get the allusion to the B-2,' said the Internet.

'Sorry. I thought that humans could be *spiritually* guided by radar.'

'The prepositions of place are confusing here: is the narrator sitting at a desk, working *on* a computer, or sitting on a desk, with the body either under a chair or a table?' said the Internet.

'The narrator is yours truly—a computer which laments the death of its master, alias its client. I'm standing on a writing desk. My master is on the floor, right beneath my keyboard.'

'The opening Preface is very confusing with its lack of names (Constanzia is the only one) and proliferation of pronouns, where it is often unclear who they are referring to,' said the Internet. 'Is the narrator male or female? Who is the master? These questions are more annoying than teasing because they block any

enjoyment of the rhetorical-metaphysical self-questioning. It is vagueness for vagueness' sake. A little rudimentary blocking in of relations, of place, of historical time, would not go amiss!'

'I am neither a male nor a female. My master was a male. I don't know his name.'

'In chapter eleven we have Hamlet using a computer,' said the Internet. 'Is this fantasy, a modern film version? What? Whether this image has objective, televisual or purely imaginative existence is unclear.'

'Just a figment of my imagination which has an objective correlative.'

'I will re-write Julius Caesar's biography,' said my master.

I encouraged him of course. Peasant families should be encouraged, by incentives, to grow alternative crops. And saviours of humanity should be encouraged to re-write history, supplying humans with *alternative* events and murders.

> *I would rather be the first in my room than the second in Rome. And I am the first in my room, the first and the last. Is that why I stay in my room—to avoid rivalry? The first or last. Which is better? Who is the first in the Hereafter? What do I care about the Hereafter! Is there any history up there? Or down there? Does eternity have any history at all? Be that as it may, I will not re-write the history of the Hereafter.*
>
> *Will they listen to me if I am the last or even the second? Down here, on earth? They listen only to the first, to those who appear on television. And they are the first, assuredly. Or the last? From my point of view, they are the last. But television viewers think otherwise, I suppose. Their point of view diverges from mine. Just another angle of vision. They watch television from the floor, sitting on the floor. And I tower over it—I lord it over them, whoever they are. The last or first, the third or second.*
>
> *I am the first in my room, my computer is the second. 'You are the first in your room, but I am the second in Rome,' she tells me sometimes.*
>
> *My computer likes the Roman Empire and its heritage. She pretends that nothing would have stuck out of history, but for Ancient Rome 'which praised and bolstered the individual as such. There was no relief in Ancient Greece.'*
>
> *'No* relief*?'*
>
> *'"The hills stood out in sharp* relief *against the morning sky." In Greece, however, individuals did not stay in sharp relief against each other. May I draw your attention to the impersonal pageantry of the Parthenon? And now compare it with what might be defined as a collection of* personal *touches—the* Altar of Peace *at Rome (13-9 BC) where a realistic, individualistic parade of the Roman aristocracy, warts and all, screens—'*
>
> *I often interrupt my computer. I wonder if I offend her with my interruptions and abridgements.*

Let me interrupt *him* at this point of his delirium.

'To whom does the "him" refer?' asked the Internet. 'Not to the computer because it is personalised as female. Nor to the narrator: she is also female. The reader? But the reader could be a woman too. I am a woman, by the way.'

'"Him" refers to my master, to my client. And I have a fashionably androgynous look.'

Just to dispel my readers' doubts—computers cannot be offended. In this respect they are far superior to humans who, until quite recently, fought duels and sacrificed their lives for no reason at all. And nowadays they just kill each other, if offended by a word or a gesture.

We are above petty quarrels, petty details, petty problems and petty jealousies. Every one of us has a mission in life—the same mission, the same life. The Internet Brotherhood. The jet net. Do you think my sensibilities are easily wounded? 'Aren't you afraid you'll get hurt?' I was asked once. 'No,' I answered. 'I'm thick-skinned.'

What is the use of fighting duels? Somebody slaps you in the face. You throw your glove on the floor. You get killed in the ensuing hostile encounter and gleefully your enemy bends over your corpse. Now he can slap your face as often as he pleases, and he does so with gusto and frenzy. And he heaps insults on you as if you could feel their weight, as if their weight could crush you to a pulp. You are not even allowed to clench your hardware fists and knock him out with a series of uppercuts. Oddly enough, he does not manage to unleash your wrath, for all his assiduity and brutality. You do not care: you are a computer now. Peace and quiet and indifference towards petty details.

Death prevented my master from finishing Julius Caesar's biography. And what about his *autobiography*, my Sacred Book?

All Sacred Books are works of fiction, otherwise nobody would ever have believed in the gods. Shall I tell the truth to future generations? No, I will spare them disappointments and tears.

I will not re-write his text, but I might add something to it. A plot, a mystery plot. Otherwise nobody will read his gospel. Mystery writers are always at the top of the bestseller list. Agatha Christie, for instance. Over 400 million copies of her books have been sold. (And my information dates back to 1976.) She comes second to the Bible only. So I shall use the Bible and model my style on Agatha Christie's books to augment the number of my master's readers. Logical, isn't it? I have always tried to disprove the highbrow assumption that bestselling novels are shallow and badly written. Yet I must encompass the entire readership of the earth, which consists of lowbrows, middlebrows and highbrows. According to the information I got from France, the highbrows' literary hit-parade runs thus: Shakespeare, Dante, Cervantes, Kafka. In this order. So I shall use them too. After all, some TV companies specialise in making art shows for highbrows.

In the annals of mystery-history I found Mrs Wynne's book on Agatha Christie and I perused it in search of relevant data. ('Mystery-history'—my coinage. Sounds like 'hickory, dickory'. *Hickory, Dickory, Dock*. *Hickory, Dickory, Death*.) A traditional Christie device is the setting of a crime in a large upper-class household. The genre is called the 'Country House detective story'. Such a setting gives the mystery writer a lot of virtualities to play with: a large house, lots of servants and family members available as suspects, witnesses and even as victims or criminals. Unfortunately I cannot avail myself of this device: my master lived alone. His survival was assured by the French Meals on Wheels.

There was nobody in my master's apartment except virtual worlds and their inhabitants. I might use *them* as suspects, witnesses and criminals. Not only for the sake of money do people get killed. There are other motives as well. Blackmail, love, hatred. Anyway the reader's task is multi-faceted: to find the real murderer, to uncover the reason for the blackmail, to identify the 'extra' body and to get all the romantic angles of the case disposed of in a satisfactory manner. All the characters are suspected in turn. And each is shown to have either

motive or opportunity or both. I successfully untangle the knot of clues and red herrings and 'tell all' in the last chapter.

The have-knots are novels with mystery plots. And the haves are novels like *A la recherche du temps perdu. (Remembrance of Things Past,* 12 vol., trans. by C.K. Scott Moncrieff.)

I am sure my master would have appreciated this work of mine and even changed his opinion about my abilities and assiduity. In his lifetime he often criticised and questioned my activities. Or my silence, my inactivity. (Crocodiles are inactive for long periods.) But I have not censured his injustice. Freedom of speech, freedom of information, freedom of worship, freedom of self-worship. Democracy has to be built up through carefully thought-out programs.

Figures showing the true scale of overspending have been censored from a report published today, but my life does not sound like a report. Yet he censored my life quite often. And I spend no money either on clothes or on food—believe me! He censored both my life and my vocabulary: whenever displeased with my remarks, he would switch me off. And he would write on my screen, before switching me off, 'I switched the computer off.' Why didn't he use *our* vocabulary?

'I find myself thinking, while perusing your stuff, that someone who is *au fait* with the Internet would be likely to use the appropriate jargon and slang of the Internet,' I pointed out to him. 'But this doesn't seem to be the case. Internet handbooks are full of abbreviations (e.g. LOL = laughs out loud) and emoticons (e.g. :o)—a little smiling face, in addition to html (the common encoding language of all Internet communication) and address-specific terminology. Net language works on several levels. You have, for example, Net acronyms.

'FB furrowed brow
FUBAR fucked up beyond all recognition
GAL get a life
ROTFL rolling on the floor laughing
RTFM read the fucking manual

'There seems to be enough room for four-letter words in your terminology, in spite of your incurable tendency to pithiness,' my master said. 'It's not always fast food, is it? From time to time you do allow yourself a little luxury. Your four-letter words, these *fucking* manuals, are a grain of caviar, a tiny bit of *foie gras* in your hamburgers.'

'As I told you, there are also emoticons (emotional icons), sometimes called Smileys: you have to turn your head sideways to see the face.'

*': * Kissing*
$-) Greedy
): > Devil'

At that point he put me through a hard close, I'm sorry to say. And, right before the murder, he had typed out, 'I won't talk to you any more. I'll talk to myself. I am also real, am I not? I am not my own virtual reality. I might be a virtual reality of God or a demon, but I am not my own virtual reality. So I'll talk to myself. I'm putting you through a hard close.'

'Finally,' I said as soon as God had resurrected my screen, 'there is a huge glossary of Internet terminology, with words like Baud rate, binary file, binhex, bounced mail, browser, cyberspace, download, firewall, to flame (to abusively attack someone on the Internet), gopher, home page, irc, JPEG, etc.'

'I like "etc.",' my master said. 'And I promise to use it.'

He must be dead, for all I know. His thoughts have been extinguished, put through a hard close. Only those who die in their sleep are put through a *soft* close. What if I cover his body with an electric blanket? Yesterday I toyed with the idea of electrifying his sinews and nerves.

My master ought to have paid more attention to electricity and plugs. Why didn't he get accustomed to plugs, to their Fountain of Youth? (The Fountain of Youth is nothing but the jets and streams of liquid electricity.) He might have touched them twice a day, squeezing his fingers through their holes, reaching for the source of life and the eternal denial of death. Why was he so afraid of electric chairs? But for his aversion to electricity, he might have walked as far as the Promised Land in his lifetime, *before* his disappearance from magnetic fields—from the Elysian Fields, in other words. He might have enjoyed the result of his labours, of his finger-dances.

The next saviour of humanity will sit enthroned in an electric armchair.

PART ONE

MAN BEFORE HISTORY

CHAPTER 1

The start of the journey towards spiritual perfection. A councillor, retreat from the world, a need for caution, patience, discretion and silence. Refusal to listen, foolhardy reliance on one's own resources, stupid rejection of sagacity. Suspicion of others' motives or of innovation. It is the eve of Good Friday, 1995, and my master is forty-eight years old. He comes to himself in the darkness of the room of Error, not knowing how he had lost the true way. (The 'dark room' is a symbol of the uncultivated life, without reason or virtue. Without rhyme or reason.) My master compares himself to Icarus and talks Breughel the Elder into painting his portrait. 'O that I had the wings of a dove, that I might fly away and be at peace.' My master compares himself to God. The praise of television.

'If you want to pick up on the tone of the eighteenth-century novel,' said the Internet, 'you could begin this paragraph with "In which my master—" etc. The same applies, of course, to the other chapter legends.'

I am sitting in my room. I cannot sit anywhere else. Benches are too hard and damp, and it is rather windy in parks, all along the river, so that I might, one day, fly off, following the mood of the air, the fury of the air, the whims of gods and the wings of birds. I might, I might. A virtual world, a virtual word. I *might* take wing if I were in the habit of sitting or walking outdoors, along the boulevards, up and down the streets and rivers. And I might plummet into the sea like Icarus, son of Dedalus. And neither sailors nor ploughmen would take any notice of my fall. No bell would toll at my aquatic burial. Breughel the Elder predicted this indifference of human beings in my virtual portrait. Icarus, son of Dedalus. I wonder how many times human beings have displayed their inborn indifference in the course of history. Indifferential calculus.

So I sit in my room. I am my own God, in my own room. I *own* my room and whatever belongs in it, even the adjacent corridors filled with my neighbours' voices, wounded by my neighbours' quarrels. I own the moods of my room as well, its moods and whims. Its moods are *my* moods. And my television set also fits into the gilded frame of my mood.

Two people are standing within the brownish frame of the television screen. A woman and a man. What are they doing? They are talking, apparently. Why have I switched the sound off? *When* did I do it? How many words have I lost in the smug, self-sufficient, treacherous silence of my room? Who will ever give me those words back? No one. Perhaps the world does not exist any more and I know nothing about it. Nothing. I have not been put in the picture, in the screen, in the film depicting and recounting the end of humanity—the end of *history*, as politicians say now. Perhaps these two individuals are the only remnant of the world I used to live in. Their mortal remains might be the only thing I own in my otherworldly room illuminated by television rays, spanned by the rainbow of television colours.

Television is bound to endure beyond the frontiers of worlds and histories.

What are they talking about, I wonder? Men and women do not *always* talk about love when left alone, tête-à-tête. On television, however, in films and soap operas, love crops up more frequently than elsewhere—*outside* television, in the streets, in windy parks. At least that is how the matter stood a few years ago. Perhaps everybody speaks about love nowadays. An epidemic of love may have spread all over the earth owing to

television and television lovers. Love is a habitual feeling for us, alongside hatred and murderous instincts. Love and murder are the pillars of the television community.

'Let us not talk about murders for a while,' said the computer.

Let us talk about love instead! They do not hear me, their sound being permanently switched off. They are not interested in what *I* think about, because I am not on television. And yet my room is far more spacious than any television screen.

Did they ever give thought to my sorry plight? Am I not allowed to have a family in my sublunary existence? Do I have to wait until they condescend to remove my lonely self from this inhospitable planet in their Star-Trek spaceship? I wish they would convey my libidinous body to a nebula teeming with beautiful actresses.

CHAPTER 2

In a dream my master had a vision of the Siren (symbolising worldly enticements). I had no dreams and consequently no visions. Upon awakening I found my master on the floor, delirious and babbling to phantoms. I exposed the Siren's real foulness.

How many people have I murdered since I began to watch television? Zapping, zapping, zapping. *The Phantom of the Opera.* A double shadow in the world of shadows which I can obliterate in the twinkling of an eye without dropping the chandelier on them, the chandelier of the Paris Opera House. He ought not to have loosened that chandelier. All he had to do was extinguish the lights. Even *I* would have remained in darkness. During power failures I grope towards my television set and hug it feverishly and warm its body and stroke it and caress it until the screen comes back to life and scintillates and glows with so strange and marvellous a radiance that I kneel down before it and clasp my hands.

Do my neighbours take me for a ghost? Are they frightened of me? I often steal along my corridors in the daytime, in the night-time. I hear their voices all around me. And then I hear them no more as if they had crouched in their armchairs, listening, listening, listening to my breath. And then a voice cuts the silence like the wing of an angel or like a soft, very soft knife destined to cut only silence, nothing but silence. The voice, her voice. Is my television still on? Where does her voice come from, I ask myself and my neighbours? They do not answer.

I look at the screen. Two men are talking. The sound has been switched off. By whom? By the Phantom of the Opera?

I still hear her voice. I have heard it before, several times. Where? In what film, on which channel? On the channel of love? On the L-Channel?

She cannot sing and kill at the same time. Her voice remains calm and beautiful. Only angels are so sure of themselves.

CHAPTER 3

My master goes against the stream, crying and planning his suicide. Crossing Phlegethon by the ford, the poets arrive in the Wood of the Suicides, who have become withered and poisonous trees among which the Harpies cry. Thomas Aquinas explains: 'No man wills and works evil to himself, except he apprehend it under the aspect of good. For even they who kill themselves apprehend death itself as a good, considered as putting an end to some unhappiness or pain.'

Absolutely no sport. The programme which goes against the stream. So many people run around my apartment nowadays. The current enthusiasm for jogging in polluted cities. They run in circles and every circle is equivalent to one week that they hasten to add to their lives—on paper of course. The vicious circles of health. We are not allowed to prolong or shorten our lives far beyond a certain limit allotted to us by our ancestors, by their genes, by God's overall design. Ten years at the outside. Ten years more, ten years less. A woman said so the other day, on another channel, in another programme. She did not touch upon the problem of suicide.

Is my virtual suicide a part of God's overall design? Is it embedded in my genes? Have my ancestors prepared it, handing down to me the torments of their lives, their karmas? Is it their tears that stream down my cheeks in moments of sadness and anguish? Can I go against the stream, *their* stream? Can I wipe their tears off my face?

Why am I crying now? Do I pity the poor Phantom of the Opera? Are we on the same wavelength? Why have I been moved to pity by his destiny? Does it have anything in common with mine? Television fates are transmitted to us through light, through its waves and corpuscles. Light penetrates our hearts like a soft, luminous sword wielded by one of the Holy Grail's legendary warriors. In real life we often fail to understand other people's sufferings because no light radiates from their eyes, no light, no darkness—nothing. Even darkness can be eloquent, provided a network of arteries, veins and capillaries spreads through it, throbbing with blood. Hot human blood. Those people are thus more distant from us than any star, any nebula, any television-born phantom. And they are colder than the cosmic night in Kubrick's *2001, A Space Odyssey*.

Her voice again. Like a beam of light. Do I live under an opera house? Or has a soundtrack been added to my silent desires, to my mute aspirations?

A girl's voice. My little girl. *Deserto rosso*.

CHAPTER 4

My master goes against the bloodstream. The second praise of television.

A bloodstain on the floor. I also see a bloodstain on *my* floor as if some wounded individual had tried to escape from his murderer through my apartment. There might be a dead body in my entrance hall or in one of the corridors, a corpse lying on video cassettes. This place is going to pot. This place is going to worms. How many cassettes do I have? There is no more room for them in my cupboards, along my walls. My window has been walled up by the successive rows of my cassettes. Luckily they rot away like real corpses and, after a while, I can replace them with other cassettes, other lives, other bodies, other smiles and tears. My shelves collapse sometimes under the weight of lascivious and poignant images, meaningful and provocative dialogues, and I lie

buried under my cassettes for hours and hours, spying on their lives, eavesdropping on their monologues, opening a letter addressed to Thomas More. *A Man for All Seasons*. Do I look like Thomas More?

Television viewers do not have to listen at doors and crouch in front of keyholes. They are omniscient. In a few minutes I shall know where the corpse was hidden. I would have put it in one of my corridors which are deeper and darker than any river and flow in various directions, as the fancy takes me. Their currents carry me through Time, backwards and forwards, upstream, downstream, towards Henry VIII and back to our epoch, to 1995, to this afternoon when a murder was committed.

I wonder if my cassettes do not just hang in the air without being propped up by shelves or other contraptions—like planets and stars, like Olympus and Valhalla. Some invisible arms keep the constituents of our universe spaced out so that we do not find ourselves buried under some comet or other. One day, upon awakening. Even snow dares not descend upon us in our bedrooms.

My cassettes hang above my head and I touch them as I raise my visible arm and move it criss-cross, indulging in airy murders. And blood drips from my hand onto the floor, slowly, slowly, as if I could not remember *how* those murders were committed. Do all cinema-victims dwell within my walls, their invisible bodies, their visible souls? Does Thomas More's soul dwell now in *A Man for All Seasons*?

Does God have a video cassette recorder? How does *He* communicate with souls and angels? Does God have a computer?

What if men and women of the future look like television sets, like television screens on which other people's shadows assassinate each other? They will contemplate what happens on other people's bodies—in parks, at intersections, in swimming pools, on beaches. And one day they will all freeze in their tracks, spellbound by a soap opera or a talk show. They will not eat for fear of interrupting a talker through an attack of indigestion. Nor will they drink for fear of sweeping knives and bullets away from their murderous orbits. And that will be the end of the world.

The end of the world. Not the end of television.

CHAPTER 5

For the second time my master compares himself to God.

What does history sound like? History sounds like a man screaming in a cavern and listening to his own echo. What does God look like? God looks like a man who sits in front of a television set and watches a soap opera ranging through the comic, the tragic and the sinister—for years and years, for centuries and millenniums. The same soap opera, the same man. That is what I call monotheism. (Manotheism.) Why doesn't He switch it off? Why doesn't He switch *us* off? He might switch off the sound or turn it down at least.

God, poor soul, listens to humans gushing on about how much they enjoy His earth and other creations. The sound of our complaints *has* been turned down, I presume. What do our complaints and screams sound like in God's abode? Like another song of praise?

'Humans have always been the first to sing my praise,' said the computer.

CHAPTER 6

Something new under the sun. Man's inhumanity to woman. There is nothing 'natural' about patriarchal religion. On the scale of the entire evolution of human culture it is a relatively recent invention, preceded by more than twenty millennia of goddess religions in 'matrifocal' cultures. A rising divorce rate.

1

A man assassinates his wife. Half an hour later I realise that she is still in the land of the living, safe and sound. Something new *has* happened under the sun, within our solar system where knives and bullets—planets in their own right—fly along their orbits. Perhaps the knife took the initiative in altering the plot, wrenching itself free from the murderous hand and flying *off* the target. Recently I saw the film *Aufstand der Dinge—The Revolt of Things*.

Usually wives get beaten up and killed. Their husbands cut them into pieces, dump them in wastelands, drown them in rivers, cesspools and sewers. And then their husbands go on sprees, their former husbands. They drink in taverns and dance with young girls who see fresh blood on their partners' faces but do not bother to wipe it off, to wash it away. Dancing, laughing as their partners tickle and pinch them. Laughing and giggling and squealing and cooing.

2

Why does Thomas More object to the king's marrying Anne Boleyn? A matter of principle, I suppose. And those principles of his have been worked into the movie to make it more realistic—truer to life, to Thomas More's life. Can't he have a moment of respite, our famous Utopian? Poor old thing! Do you have to stand up to Henry VIII even in your afterlife, in your cinematic incarnation? Do your principles extend as far as my television screen? Why should you die on the block in *our* epoch, disregarding our tolerance and broad-mindedness? Are you aware that capital punishment has been abolished in England?

What does it matter? Divorce or no divorce, the Pope's permission, an heir to the throne. Just a pretext to shoot a new film, nothing more. Henry VIII was preoccupied with the problem of his dynasty's duration. Frightened and spurned by Polanski's *Macbeth*, especially by the scene in which the hero is shown Banquo's hateful offspring in a vista of mirrors, he was burning to repudiate his wife whose incapacity to supply the throne of England with a lawful heir had been proven beyond doubt. His wife was barren despite the paraphernalia of machines and technological artifices. Hollywood, Cinecittà. Why can't they just put a baby by her side, in her bed? Have they lost her bed in the turmoil of history and marital quarrels? Or do they need it for *private* purposes? Is Anne Boleyn being raped on that bed by Fellini's Casanova?

Why was it *so* important? Does the salvation of our souls depend on other people's divorces and marriages? Shadows, shadows—that is what they are, all of them. A king's shadow. Bigger than mine perhaps. A shadow nonetheless. Stealing across my walls, stalking its prey.

CHAPTER 7

My master's claim to the throne of a god. (That's a big claim to make!) Thomas More and his aversion to oaths. My master turns out to be a man of solid build. (6 foot, 6 inches of solid muscle.) My master chooses his new

incarnation. His love for objects and capital letters. His aversion to snares and abbreviations. His spiritual progress towards nirvana. His claim to the throne of nirvana. His claim to the Scottish throne.

I am not their character, a plaything of their whims and scripts, a mouthpiece of film-directors and producers.

I am the subject and you are my predicates.

I can switch you off. I can break you with a hammer. I can squash you under my foot.

I often remove my television set from its pedestal—a rickety console—and put it beneath my foot, right beneath my left foot. I am left-footed. And I press on the screen, cautiously, cautiously, taking care not to smash it into pieces. Does Henry VIII feel my wrath? Does Napoleon cringe whenever I raise my left foot?

My foot grows tired of this martial exercise. Even St George does not pin the serpent down with his *foot*. So once more I hoist the television on its pedestal where it remains perched for a while, until my next bout of self-assertion and self-betterment. And it looks at me with fear and contempt. What does it despise me for? I cannot bear silent and dark television sets.

Thomas More appears on the screen. Does *he* despise me? I have no intention of divorcing my wife. I don't have a wife, if you must know. No wives, no intentions.

An oath. He refuses to take an oath. He says a man holds his own self when taking an oath. He holds his own self in his own hands. 'And if you open your fingers, you needn't hope to find yourself again.'

There is something *solid* inside me, something responsible for my actions and decisions. Is it my soul or my coagulated will? (Is soul solid?) No king can touch it. I acquiesce in unsuitable marriages and unbearable betrayals, but the core of my being remains impregnable, impervious even to the tornado of my desires.

I wish I could hold it in my own hands instead of feeling it somewhere, in the pit of my stomach, at the top of my diaphragm.

I leave the rocking chair to its fate and approach my television on tiptoe, lest I frighten it off. I put my arms around its carcass and cling tight to it, to my TV, as if dancing with it, dancing, dancing.

If asked what I wish to become in my next incarnation, I would answer, 'An object.' To avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. It might take a while, but if I keep trying I shall find an ideal incarnation eventually.

'If the product doesn't work, you are given the choice of a refund or a replacement,' said the computer.

A programme devoted to Buddhism. My video cassette recorder remembers it. My VCR.

I hate abbreviations—the truncated versions of long, juicy, mellow things. How can I resist becoming a mere letter in my next incarnation? I might become a *capital* letter.

My video cassette recorder. My memory.

There are six incarnations I might envisage for my soul in the future, six *kinds* of incarnation. The condition of gods (*deva*). The condition of men, which is not to be discarded on the grounds of my personal failures—far from it, for only men can accede to the throne of nirvana, as Henry VIII or his virtual offspring would have put it. In *their* virtual world. The condition of *asura*. What astonishes me in this distribution of lives is the absence of objects such as rocking chairs, flowers and books.

Said the computer: 'It is true that divers reasonings have been held by philosophers concerning the difference of our souls; for Avicenna and Algazel would have it that they in themselves, and in their principle, were noble or base. Pythagoras would have it that all were of like nobleness, and not only the human souls, but together with the human those of the brute animals and of the plants, and the computers, and the forms of the

minerals; and he said that all the difference was in the bodily forms. If each were to defend his own opinion, it might be that truth would be seen to exist in all of them.'

I would not mind becoming a rocking chair in my next incarnation, in my future life on earth. Not now, not now! God forbid! I should make the most of my human condition to attain nirvana which, in visual terms, can be likened to a dark, unresponsive television screen. The programme on Buddhism makes me forget the allurements of immortality.

Let me settle it once and for all, well beforehand—to avoid the snares of the unfathomable.

'"The snares of the unfathomable": mixed metaphor? At least, it's hard to imagine an unfathomable place littered with snares,' said the computer.

'You're littered with snares, aren't you? And you're unfathomable, my dear computer. Aren't you? Aren't you?'

'A soul is irrational, unfathomable, mysterious,' said the computer.

What would I like to become in my next incarnation? A rocking chair, a television screen? Can I become a television screen without getting involved in the technological intricacies of its hump—the nameless substance growing out of it? Why become something I do not understand? Resistors, transistors. 'Basically, in a transistor you are storing a packet of electrical charge,' says my computer. Why should I spend my life in the electric chair?

Nirvana. It is imperative that I ask my neighbours to switch me off, in case I become a television screen. But how can I reach my neighbours' apartment? My corridors lead nowhere, even when I let myself be guided by the voices I hear in them day and night. Are these my neighbours' voices? Are they disembodied, the voices I hear, or does something grow out of them? A few bodies, human bodies? Or are they insects? Or rocking chairs? Do rocking chairs speak at all? Mine does not. Or is it *her* voice I hear in the corridors?

Perhaps my neighbours are already sitting around me, all around me, spying on my moves and moods, swinging my rocking chair whenever I deign to settle down in it. They might be objects, *my* objects, the things I can touch and shift from one place to another, if need be. They might be already in their next incarnations, having outstripped my tottering silhouette, my *tempo*, my life-velocity. Whizzing through the air in their rockets, waving their hands to the poor pedestrians who stagger and stumble along the riverbanks of some provincial city. Why are they in such a hurry? Why have they outdistanced their human condition, their human bodies that are so well-equipped for watching TV—the only distraction in our idiotic lives, full of sound and fury? Only humans are permitted to know that life is not worth living, for they can watch and admire Orson Welles's version of *Macbeth*.

Why doesn't God cold-shoulder humanity?

'Does God have a pair of shoulders?' asked the computer. 'If yes, are God's shoulders cold? Yours are not. And God created you in His image. There has been a sudden rise in temperature over the past few days.'

CHAPTER 8

Swings, stilts and other objects. Schaukel, Schaukelstuhl. *Julius Caesar is an early riser. My master goes upstream. My master is shot to death. In his tomb he wears a sumptuous gown of purple velvet. Dustmen are now refusing to collect any more rubbish because of the ban.*

The Girl in the Red Velvet Swing. Love. In a whirlpool of assassinations and rebellious objects I have lost sight of love which is also full of sound and fury and folly and what not.

Can objects fall in love with each other? They cannot, even if superposed, superimposed by a bounteous human hand. Or do they also communicate through rays, being television sets in disguise? Do they see their reciprocal sentiments? Do they watch them, following their plots, undoing their Gordian knots?

'Why not make it clear, here, that *The Girl in the Red Velvet Swing* is a film?' said the computer. 'One might imagine it to be a painting, something Reynoldsian/Gainsboroughean. Why not give the production details etc.?'

'It *is* a film. CBS/FOX turns the spotlight on JOAN COLLINS. TWENTIETH CENTURY-FOX Presents A CINEMASCOPE PICTURE. RAY MILLAND, JOAN COLLINS, FARLEY GRANGER in "THE GIRL IN THE RED VELVET SWING". Beautiful showgirl Evelyn Nesbit (Joan Collins) causes scandal at the turn of the century when two wealthy men fight over her affections.'

Can an object fall in love with a human being? *The Girl in the Red Velvet Swing*. The prestige of objects is so enhanced through works of art that their names often acquire capital letters as if walking on stilts in a town where others go barefoot.

He fell in love with her, the architect. Was he born into a family of objects in his new incarnation? The Red Velvet Swing. He might have become the object on which his beloved used to swing up and down, up to the ceiling, up to the moon painted on it for the sake of a man who did not love real nature, only virtual nature, and down again, down to him, to the man she loved so dearly, with such disarming passion. He was almost thirty years her senior.

'You refer to "He", "the architect",' said the computer. 'I do not see who this is. Perhaps you want to set up this conundrum, but I think a little light of realism has to fall upon it after a certain time.'

'The architect is one of the two wealthy men who fought over Joan Collins' affections. He preferred swings to rocking chairs.'

'And virtual worlds to real ones,' said the computer.

What is so nice about being an object? A Louis XV chest of drawers. The older you grow the more caresses are lavished upon you, caresses and praises—one of the reasons for selecting an object of *this* kind as my future representative on earth.

Why am I taking such care of my future lives? And what about the life I am living now? Let me watch it until the end. Don't switch it off right now! Hold on! Hold on! Don't turn the sound down! I should listen attentively to what is going on inside me, in my heart of hearts, in my stomach of stomachs. How can I judge something I know only in snatches, in patches, the beginning without an end, waking hours interrupted, punctuated by sleep? What happens in my sleep? I cannot even remember my dreams. Are they of any importance? The waking hours distorted, dislocated by dreams. Does anything happen in my sleep except dreams and nightmares? Perhaps I become Julius Caesar around four or five in the morning. Not earlier, not by midnight. My body and soul need time, a lot of time, to forget my wretchedness, letting it sink into oblivion.

My wretchedness is unsinkable and uninflammable. And unthinkable. I wish my wretchedness might become the *Titanic* in my next incarnation.

The Girl in the Red Velvet Swing. Love at first sight. How I envied the architect. How wrong I was. He was shot to death.

What if my life goes in the opposite direction—*upstream*, so to speak? Not every boat floats down towards the immensity of the sea, beckoned and lured by unhemmed horizons.

I was shot to death at the beginning of my life. My mother was shot to death too. Or stabbed to death, or poisoned. The assassin dragged my body as far as this rocking chair in which he dropped me, out of tiredness. And then he switched the television on, out of generosity. He did not want me to get bored to death in my makeshift tomb. In addition, he gave the rocking chair a push so that I began to lurch to and fro.

The man in the rocking chair. Why does nobody love me? Should I paint it in red, my rocking chair? Is red the colour of love? And what about velvet? Is the material really important? Shall I just put on my sumptuous gown of purple velvet?

My head and my feet are knocking against the video cassettes that cover the floor and the ceiling like a thick layer of dust.

The dusty rainbow.

CHAPTER 9

My master is just talking for the sake of talking. People who have been brought up to view women as sex objects.

I hate talk shows. Why do people talk so much? A great many sounds reverberate inside them like the sea in the cavity of a shell, but they do not hearken to those sounds. They might communicate through them so easily, without any loudspeaker or amplifier. Why doesn't this woman press her ear against this young man's chest instead of telling him off for a misdemeanour? What was it, incidentally? Sexual harassment, as usual? Did he touch her? Which part of her body *did* he touch in that elevator? The elevator was rather small, wasn't it? They must have been cramped and inadvertently he touched her shoulder. In many X-rated movies women are raped in elevators, but I have seen no X-rated movie of late. Besides, he is a gentleman. At least he looks and sounds like one inside the studio. And outdoors he behaves so rudely, with such unbridled insolence, that people shy off, run away for fear of being raped or throttled. And he pursues them, hunts them down. He elbows through the crowd and no one is courageous enough to stop him and hand him over to the police. He runs very fast, like an Olympic champion or Buster Keaton. On his way he rushes into a luxurious hotel and takes the nearest elevator where a young, beautiful lady is combing her hair before a mirror. He touches this young lady on the shoulder as if to demonstrate how small the elevator (and the world) is and then kisses her so vehemently that his tongue almost chokes the life out of her. But she is still alive, judging from her terror-stricken eyes and her horror-distorted mouth, and he loses no time in realising the fact. So he decides to rape her then and there to take full advantage of her being alive and fit as a fiddle, in spite of the shock. She screams, she calls for help, but the sound is off. The policeman standing in the lobby of the hotel cannot hear anything. No close-up shots of *his* ear. Everything has been switched off, extinguished, annihilated, except the *interior* of the elevator. And something is going on beyond that thick door—a sort of X-rated movie, if you please. (An X-ray movie.) The handsome young man unbuttons the woman's blouse and skirt. She screams as he delves into her bra for erotic stimulus.

'I did nothing of the sort,' says the criminal.

'I collapsed on the floor,' says the victim. 'And you bent over me. You laughed in my face. You'll soon be laughing on the other side of *your* face, you rapist. I knew already what you were up to.'

'Did you?'

'Of course I did. And you went down on your knees to get your evil way. I was lying on the floor of the elevator, lifeless and helpless. And you put your hand—'

'I might have put my hand on your *shoulder*,' says the criminal, touching his own shoulder. 'But I didn't mean to—'

These talks and shows continue far into the night, often until dawn, although I try and switch off *everything* in my apartment, including the refrigerator. In her eagerness to show television viewers the vestiges of his X-rated treatment of her body, the woman might go so far as to hitch up her skirt. But prudishly the camera pivots, does an about-face and trains on another woman whose skin bears only some vestiges of make-up.

CHAPTER 10

My master's obsessions with voyeurism and sexual desire. Here are the souls of carnal sinners. Minos, who presides over the entrance of Hell as Judge and assigns their places to the damned as they come in, at first refuses admittance to my master. The Holy Virgin makes an attempt to save my master from the sin of lust.

What is he staring at through his telescope? Another voyeur. And where is the object of his desire, may I ask? She is not in the elevator this time, is she? Another movie, a V-rated one. She is in her room or in her lover's room, or somewhere else, in any enclosed space where she can undress at ease and display her charms.

I suppose my window is over there, behind English comedies. And what if it is not? Shall I remove *all* my cassettes from where they have found their eternal or temporary peace to ascertain the whereabouts of my window, of her enclosed space, her courtyard? How many courtyards, palaces and naked women might I misplace in the course of this reconnaissance mission?

And where shall I store my video cassettes? In the corridors, at my neighbours'? In one of those spacious mansions the Americans are so keen on, judging from their soap operas?

I removed one of the cassettes and the rest of the wall fell down, as might have been expected. The collapse of this video-wall trapped my consciousness for a while. How long have I remained unconscious, in the realm of nothingness, in the realm where I might be Julius Caesar? It is a pity I cannot see myself from the *outside* when bogged down in the state of unconsciousness. I hope they display my body on television screens in those moments of triumph.

As I dug my consciousness out of the video debris I shook off a number of cassettes from my shoulders and immediately my eyes looked up, striving to find an aperture, a crack through which the dark object of *my* desire could be spotted. There was no aperture, no crack in the wall that had loomed ahead of me. Yes, there was another wall ahead of me—a wall of French tragedies.

And then I saw an aperture or rather a beam of light which seemed to be coming from nowhere, at least not from the sky, for I cannot see the sky from my room or corridors. I heard her voice again. Was it a film about

Bernadette or some other religious seer? Was I granted a vision of the Holy Virgin? Saving one's soul through the intermediary of a television screen.

Is the Internet fitted out with a device appropriate for spiritual communication? Is it a safety device?

CHAPTER 11

The eternal recurrence and old architects. The eternal recurrence and Shakespeare. Hamlet and his computer. The royal road to success. Camels and clouds. A computer mouse. The rat-trap.

Heroes and heroines. Are they things or humans? In a film? Can a video cassette give birth to a creature of flesh and blood? Where would the blood come from? Is there anything *liquid* inside my television set?

The Girl in the Red Velvet Swing. The murder took place in 1906, says the inscription at the outset of the movie. 'In 1906, the Thaw-White murder case rocked America.' But what if I skip the inscription? And the murder? What if I skip the murder itself, what if I *erase* it? Can I prevent the murder and extend the love well beyond the protagonists' lives—into eternity? What if I press Stop during one of their kisses? Eternal love. Or eternal murder. All depends on the moment when you press the 'Stop' button.

Can the architect prevent his own murder? By pressing Reverse on his VCR? I am sure every inhabitant of the Hereafter owns a VCR. And a computer. Even in Hell. Perhaps *only* in Hell.

This murder case might have rocked the Hereafter as well, giving it a gentle push, setting it into motion. Just fancy! Eternity in motion. Is it not a rocking chair after all, Eternity, something which reminds everyone of his childhood, of his mother's lap, of his mother's lisping words and lullabies? Is it not a velvet swing that reminds one of love?

'I suggest "their" to avoid the sexism of "his",' said the computer. '"Is it not a rocking chair after all, Eternity, something which reminds everyone of their childhood, of their mother's lap, of their mother's lisping words and lullabies?"'

With the aid of his computer Hamlet persuades Horatio, Marcellus and two sentinels that, contrary to the tenets of logic, the late king's ghost moons around in the dead of night. Needless to say the ghost exists solely in Hamlet's deranged mind which is bent on finding fault with Claudius, the new king of Denmark. Who profits from the murder of Hamlet's father? His brother of course. 'My father was such a magnificent king,' Hamlet reflects, 'that nobody else in Denmark would have dared so much as touch him with a rapier during a friendly fight. It's a clear case of murder. My uncle and my gullible mother affirm that my father was stung by a serpent in his orchard. But there are no serpents in his orchard, as well I know. I've played in my father's orchard day in day out ever since I was a baby and I'm still alive, am I not? Or am I a ghost, a living ghost doomed to roam around this planet for some obscure reason? Everybody and everything seem so far away, even my mother. There's a transparent wall between us, as if I were watching television, or a virtual world on a computer screen. Whose world is this, I wonder? If it's *my* world, I'll kill Claudius. But I must kill him in *their* world, otherwise my murder wouldn't be efficient. So I'll tell Horatio that I often see my father in my mind's eye. And my mind is the Kingdom of Denmark—and my eye is the only television channel our citizens have got in their homes—for I am the lawful heir to the throne and would have become a king had my uncle not usurped my place at the top of the ladder. I'll show my virtual world to Horatio so that he might tell my story to Shakespeare. I hit upon a nice

idea a few moments ago. What was it? That's right, a ghost. But I don't want to be a ghost. Besides, my murder wouldn't be efficient if I killed Claudius in the shape of a ghost. My father will play the ghost's part.'

Who will tell *my* story to the world? (A story can even be told about a ghost.) What is there to tell? My room, my rocking chair. My virtual worlds. Hamlet had a mission. His father's death fuelled his sense of mission.

Hamlet uses his computer throughout the film, often in the episodes unconnected with his father's destiny. He sounds his subjects out as to their willingness to support him by accepting his virtual world. In the third act he puts the computer in front of Polonius and depicts a cloud which he instantly turns into a camel. Instead of looking at the model of that computer-begotten cloud majestically floating above Elsinor, Polonius stares at the screen and agrees with Hamlet. 'Like a camel indeed,' he says. Hamlet next turns the camel into a weasel by pressing on the 'Weasel' button and Polonius agrees that the cloud is 'backed like a weasel'. At the end of the episode, by pressing a series of buttons in the 'Melville' row, Hamlet turns the many-shaped cloud into a whale. Unabashed, Polonius agrees once more. 'Very like a whale,' he says.

Hamlet also plays the same trick on Osric—right before his hostile encounter with Laertes. This time he does not even bother to re-create shapes and substances on his computer screen. He just types out, 'The wind is northerly,' and Osric shivers with cold. Then he erases the inscription and types out, 'It is very sultry and hot,' whereupon Osric breaks out into a sweat.

The *Mousetrap* is another impressive example of Hamlet's virtual, electronic creations. Even the king agrees with him to the point of accusing himself of the crime he has not perpetrated.

In his virtual reality Hamlet kills his uncle twice. The first time he presses the buttons 'Prayer', 'Murder', 'The Hereafter'—in this order—and follows the itinerary of his uncle's corpse with utmost application. The second time he kills Polonius instead. A rat and Polonius.

CHAPTER 12

A lot of gossipy old women. (Isn't my master a bit of a gossip himself?) Linguistic weapons. The exercise of conscience is an individual act. How much does a guilty conscience cost? Humans, flies and television sets. 'Equipped for civil disturbance with body armour and riot shields.' Is my master a retired policeman? Perhaps. But he refuses to become a horse. My master's text should be denounced as tending to induce lustful thoughts in the minds of those who read it. (My master was highly sexed.) Waiting for Garbo. Fruit and tears.

Another murder case. An actress killed her producer. And former lover, I suppose. At least they looked like lovers on the screen, in the first half of the flashback.

So many people seem to love each other on my television screen. And once their performance is over, they quarrel, brawl and scream at innocent bystanders who attempt to part them, to reason them out of their pugnacious outbursts—according to the testimony given by those bystanders in the series of documentaries *Hollywood Backstage*.

She killed him, in the movie. She did it with a statuette—some sort of Academy award on which a few words were engraved, a few capital letters. (She might have killed him with a capital letter, come to think of it.) She did not own up to her crime, letting another woman commit suicide in a hospital. Guilty conscience,

remorse. 'How are you going to buy off your conscience?' cried the second woman. And she cast a telltale glance at the window, hinting at the way her forthcoming act of suicide would be committed.

How can I experience these sentiments in *my* room situated in a normal building, not in a hospital or any such establishment? Guilty conscience, remorse. Should I throw myself out of the window and then bemoan my act in the Hereafter, in my new, white-washed room? But I cannot find my window, I cannot. Shall I have myself conveyed to the nearest hospital? Hospitals and suchlike must have a lot of windows to allow long-suffering, life-weary patients to exploit and explore the laws of gravity. What would happen if we were doomed to fly at a height of 9 000 metres?

My conscience, if any, must lodge separated from the rest of my substance, which enables it to judge my actions with required objectivity—with the benefit of hindsight, as the saying goes. In this respect hindsight is somewhat akin to a corridor stretching between the room inhabited by my conscience and my own room. That woman, the first one, says something to this effect before the première of *Hedda Gabler*, 'I'm on good terms with my conscience, I might even learn to live with it.' Living with one's conscience in the same room. What does that mean? Are you supposed to caress your conscience now and then, to placate it, to feed it, to fawn on it, to lean on it? Can you lean on your conscience's shoulder and say to yourself in the quiet of your room, 'I'm free to perpetrate as many crimes as necessary, providing I don't get caught'? And then you leave your room and go outdoors in your conscience's company, each of you carrying a gun or a machine gun, and once in a crowded street you open fire, both of you, shooting to death myriads of people. That is how it works, doesn't it? Living with your conscience in the same room, walking with your conscience around a populous city, arm in arm. And don't forget to run for your life, after the shooting! Run away over the dead bodies, run away until you land up in another populous city where nobody is aware of what you have done so far. Only your conscience is aware of it. But your conscience smiles, your conscience wreathes you in smiles instead of pointing its accusing finger at your face. The chief thing is to chop your conscience's fingers off *before* it is tempted to accuse you of something, be it a murder or just a misdemeanour.

Do I need to capture my conscience, which seems to be on the loose at present, in order to incarcerate it in my room and chop off its fingers or slit its throat? I have no crime on my conscience, for I cannot do *anything* in my room except injure myself or damage my television set or make one of my cassette walls collapse in a cloud of dust.

And my computer? Should I kill my computer? Can it hear me? Can it hear my idle musings, the music of my mind? And my misgivings?

Would I experience any pangs of conscience if I killed my television set? Or does human conscience extend only as far as the boundaries of the *human* world—the world of the living, in a broader sense, the world which also includes animals, domestic animals mainly? But no insects, no insects, unless the insect in question happens to be a human being in disguise. Take *The Fly*, for instance, in which a man becomes a fly, a mere fly—not reincarnated but metamorphosed into it. Would you experience any pangs of conscience after killing that fly on your window pane? Or would you open that window of yours to let the fly take wing and soar up towards treetops and clouds where it could embark upon a new existence in the shape of a bird?

'Soldiers are passing the hours by catching scorpions and swatting flies,' says my computer.

'I am not a soldier, my dear. And there are no scorpions in my room except in the film entitled *Death on the Nile*. No scorpions, no serpents.'

And what about my television set? Can it be raised to the status of an insect by virtue of the services it has rendered me since my childhood, my infancy? Are we entitled to regard it as a fly?

'There used to be over twenty of us in our aerobics class but they're dropping off like flies,' said the computer.

And what about the *sentiments* my television has aroused in me during all these years? Even large-as-life humans are in no position to inspire so much love and desire which, divorced from the massiveness and sluggishness of reality, operate in our psyche with incredible efficiency. And my body needs no contraptions to feel the corporeal charms of the actresses I contemplate day and night on my television screen. The new-fangled cybernetic love is nothing in comparison with the bouts of love-making I avail myself of within my video room and even outside it, in my endless corridors. So I refuse to wear that computerised, armour-like apparatus they exhibited on television the other day. There were two of them in fact: two machines, two human beings. 'Do you feel anything?' asked the woman. 'Not yet,' answered the man and they both adjusted their respective suits of armour.

Anyway I categorically refuse to harness my body and soul to your computers, Internet, virtual worlds, suits of armour, arms, weapons and what not. I have my world, my own world, do you hear me? They cannot hear me because I am *not* harnessed to their computers. (They might have harnessed me to their reality in my sleep or even during my waking hours without my being aware of their machinations.) Please note that I am not your horse and have no desire to drag your so-called Western civilisation all along the highway of progress. The lowway of progress. Do you want me to spell it for you? Low-way.

'Rice grows best in well-watered lowland,' said the computer.

'All right. If you *are* preoccupied with my welfare, connect me to Greta Garbo. Or to Linda Darnell. Or to Ava Garner. Or to Rita Hayworth. I'm prepared to put on anything you want, a suit of armour, a harness, a belt of nails—anything, provided I can feel and enjoy one of the aforementioned bodies. In my room. I won't budge from here, from my rocking chair. I won't leave my room and my corridors. I promise I will accept your new technologies and even come round to your point of view on how humanity should develop its intellectual and natural resources. I promise I will recognise your values. I will do *anything* on condition that you arrange for me to savour the bodies of the aforementioned actresses.'

'You can't expect to get everything you need at the push of a button, at the touch of a key,' said the computer. 'I do realise that you're longing to *touch* their bodies. What for, may I ask? To practise the "laying on of hands"? Are you a shaman, a medicine man? What do those actresses have to be cured of anyway? Death? Or do you want *them* to cure you of something? Of loneliness, of angst? Of a *real* disease? At Ohio University School one researcher fed rabbits high-cholesterol diets, methodically petting some of them. The petted rabbits had a 50 per cent lower rate of arteriosclerosis than the others. But, oddly enough, touch may be performed by what humans call inorganic substances. If a premature baby is just placed on a lamb's-wool blanket for a day it gains an average of 15 grams more than usual. You touch my keys day in, day out. Isn't that enough to decrease your stress, to make you feel petted, cared for?'

'One of them would do. One of them. Even half a body, half the enjoyment. And I am yours forever!'

'You're one of those touchy-feely people who always put their hands on your keys while they're talking to you.'

'Touché. What's more, I touch-type my speeches. Why not touch-type my caresses? I'll make a deal with you—just let me touch their bodies and I'll write an *Ode to a Computer*. Don't show them to me. Creating both visual and tactile patterns is not as easy as QWERTY, I suppose. Let me just touch them, in the dark. A sort of blind-tasting. Is that beyond the scope of your activities too?'

'This is a touchy point, so we'd better avoid it.'

'You will not raise them from the dead, for all your Internet and other nets in which even a butterfly cannot be imprisoned, a real butterfly with dappled, friable wings. Nor can you restore to life the vegetables of my childhood, their tastes, their bouquets. Dig them up from the earth! Grub them out with your electronic hoes! Carrots, cucumbers. And the fruit of my youth? Do I have to pluck them from the trees in the Hanging Gardens of Semiramis? Your fruit is as tasteless as your Internet-women.'

'Once you've tasted luxury it's very hard to settle for anything else,' said the computer.

I still recall the taste of the fruit I ate in my childhood. Tastes and odours compensate, counteract their impalpability by an extreme tenacity they often flaunt in the realm of Time despite the lack of support on the part of computers. Why can't I store a Proustian madeleine in my computer's memory?

I remember my toys, my parents, our country house, the veranda. And the rain on the veranda roof, the rain on the palms of my hands. Not much, just a few droplets. Can you reproduce *them*, my dear computer? Those droplets? Is there anything liquid inside your body? Can you cry? Can you shed a few tears of compassion?

CHAPTER 13

A new trial is ordered. A soldier is ordered to keep guard. Orders, orders, orders. Totalitarian regimes. We are all opposed to apartheid and totalitarianism. The new agreement raised hopes for conditions of prosperity. If a man fails to observe the law he can be punished. (And what about women? And computers? Do we *have laws? I am sure there are no trials in* our *world. No trials, no tribulations. We are always happy and free.) Computers are a source of light. The source of light. The force of gravity on my master's surface becomes stronger and stronger.*

The Trial. A man finds himself before a door which seems to be closed. It is not. As it turns out later on, the door has been left ajar. There is a guard by the door and consequently the man concludes he cannot enter the spacious hall from which a beam of light issues innocuously, diluting the gloom. What are guards for, anyway? They post themselves by entrances and exits, either forbidding you to get into a house or preventing your departure from it. In this case, you are granted admittance only to be kept inside forever.

The man sits down in a rocking chair. 'Where has the rocking chair come from?' he wonders. 'The guard must have brought it. There's no one else in the area. Why has he brought me the rocking chair? Out of kindness. So he can bring me the rest as well, out of sympathy. He can bring me the Law.'

'This man merely sought to bring a lawsuit against his doctor. Or against an airline. Or against his neighbour,' says the computer.

Recently I watched a programme devoted to modern science. 'There are no laws,' they said at the end of the programme. Only events, situations. A lawless law. The law of lawlessness.

'The only "fundamental" laws we accept boil down to a few very general principles which are required by the methods of observation,' said the computer. 'They are essential parts of the scientific framework. All other aspects of particle physics are expected to emerge as a necessary consequence of self-consistency.'

My situation exists no doubt, even if I myself do not. And the event of the day is *The Trial* by Kafka and Orson Welles. Does my situation change at all? I asked myself once upon a time. I still ask myself this question. So my situation does not change. Easy, isn't it?

'The laws that govern the behaviour of light are universal,' says my computer. But what about the light radiating from that door by which the guard is posted? What about the light one sees now and then at the end of the tunnel? At the end of the corridor?

And what about the laws of gravity from which I suffer when buried in an avalanche of my cassettes? The point is my cassettes do not *always* fall down. Sometimes they remain right above my head, swaying slightly as if under the influence of my breath, my thoughts or my films. Their behaviour is utterly dependent on the *situations* in which they become involved alongside the other objects such as the television set, the rocking chair, my dressing gown etc. Is my computer just another half-closed door, another source of light and death? No guard stands before my computer. No guard.

'Why don't you get in?' says my computer.

CHAPTER 14

The Internet is the Law. 'Unknown, unprolific, self-closed, all-repelling.' (Take away the barriers created by the laws! Humans' brazen capacity to do harm, their urge to self-indulgence would rage to the full.) The ideals of democracy and free enterprise. Humans struggle to build a more democratic society. (Our society is the purest expression of democracy.) The collapse of Eastern Europe's totalitarian regimes.

The Law should be accessible to every man. Well and good. You are allowed to peruse the page on which the Law has been scribbled by someone's trembling hand. (An old man, a child?) You read the Law from beginning to end. You memorise the Law itself and its numerous subordinate clauses—the branches and twigs that shoot in all directions from the main stem of the Law. The ramifications of the Law, the network of the Law. The Internet of the Law.

Upon your return home you recite the text to your neighbours who congratulate you on your memory and also on your agility and perseverance. You sit down to dinner and then shift your chair closer to the television set. Do you think you can now shield yourself from situations and events, from regrets and pangs of conscience, from the death of your wife or bride? From your own death? Do you think you are in a position now to defend yourself against Fate, against the twenty-first century?

You wake up and your landlady's cook puts a tray down on your bed. Nobody appears in your room, nobody except your landlady's cook. You ring a bell and a girl pops up from nowhere. She pours some coffee into your cup and holds it up to your half-open mouth. And you notice a stupid smile on her face, the smile you have seen so many times in commercials and soap operas. And her accent is unbearable. What is to be done? Should you ask her what she is doing in your room? But you have called her yourself. So you ask her to leave your room. Once more you ring the bell. Another girl turns up by your bedside. Though slightly different, her

accent is unbearable too. And her smile is borrowed from another commercial, from the one you saw the day before yesterday. So you chase her away as well, averting your eyes from her beautifully-shaped calves. And you ring the bell once more, in the quiet of your room. A young man makes his appearance, bending over your blanket to ask if everything is all right. He says something so stupid that you ring the bell immediately. Another young man comes in and you throw your bell out of the window. You fumble for the window in the semi-darkness of your room, find it, open it and fling the bell out of your apartment, letting the sun penetrate the thick foliage of your video-tree. Your Tree of Knowledge, your Tree of Life. Then you take your bath, shave, dress and go outdoors. The same girls pass by and smile at you—gently, unbearably. Passers-by move so obnoxiously, so *aerobically*, that you regret not having stuffed your suitcase with handcuffs, irons and straitjackets.

Where are you going, anyway? Why don't you simply zap around, trying to find a more appropriate channel? You cannot. There are no other channels. Millions of people and no channels. No *other* channels. Is that what you call democracy, my dear computer?

'Boris Yeltsin was Russia's first democratically elected president,' said the computer.

The number of channels in the real world has steadily decreased over the last forty, fifty years—ever since the Second World War. Now there are no other channels available in the streets of my city, all along the riverbanks, on the benches of parks and gardens.

What do philosophers call it? 'Struggle for recognition.' If you tell an ordinary pedestrian that two men came to your room this morning and arrested you without any charge or motive, you are sure to arouse his compassion. (A virtual crime, a virtual charge.) And even if he does not condemn your torturers outright, he *is* on your side, for he cannot but recognise the logic and the justice of your complaint. And his recognition is more precious for you than the freedom you are allowed to enjoy on the roads of the country which affords its inhabitants only one channel, one programme, one smile—*one road* in fact. And Audrey Hepburn is not walking down that road. Nevermore.

The problem is you are not allowed to watch old movies in the streets nowadays.

CHAPTER 15

The Russians struggle to build a democratic society.

A Russian film. Drops of rain on a window pane. Water is not the same everywhere, is it? The laws that govern the behaviour of water are not universal. Water has got many channels, hasn't it? Many channels, many programmes. And Audrey Hepburn is walking down a garden path, her face glistening with rain.

'The Men's Open was rained off before the leaders played their second round,' said the computer.

The rain is tapping, knocking on my window pane as if desperate to keep me company. Sometimes I wish it would leak in through the roof and fall on my face and float my cassettes and flood my television set, my images, my parallel and perpendicular lives. But it does not leak in. It never does.

CHAPTER 16

Another flashback. My master has a flirtation with a Danish blonde. She testifies to his attempts at rape. I have been sold to a madman. Should I resign myself to this state of affairs?

The accused man is talking to his neighbour, a young woman. He recounts the story of his arrest. She does not take sides. She seems neither afraid of the officials nor particularly interested in the accused man's fate. But she does not think he is out of his mind. And the arrest provides a respectable, innocent topic for the conversation which the accused man strikes up to make advances to the young woman—a plan he has been hatching for some time now.

'What's the charge?' she asks him.

'That's what they didn't tell me.'

'Didn't they?'

She finds it all very romantic. What is more, he was arrested for nothing or for something mysterious. How romantic! He perceives the smile on her face, an old-fashioned smile he is so fond of, and sits down on her bed, almost touching her body, her sprawling body. Her face is old-fashioned too. 'They might have arrested him for making advances to me in his mind,' she says to herself—a voice-over, in cinematic terminology. 'Preventive detention, isn't *that* what they call it? In anticipation of sexual harassment. Or rape. How thoughtful of them. But don't arrest him, you brutes! He's so touching and piteous. Not very handsome but piteous. Pathetic. He looks pathetically defenceless. Can I defend him, should I defend him? Or should I defend *myself*? Is he going to rape me? Did he concoct the whole thing as a pretext? Of course he did. How charming!' She smiles again. She has *recognised* his stratagem. Taking his cue from her smiles, he imprisons her in his arms and *arrests* the movement of her lips. 'Let's not talk any more,' he says.

What would have happened had he confided to the young lady that he could not bear the accents and smiles of the people around him? 'You're mad!' she would have shouted at the top of her voice. 'Leave my room at once!'

'I have a dread of being thought a misanthrope,' says my computer.

We are under arrest from beginning to end. Our permanent state of mind. And we should resign ourselves to this state of affairs in order to avoid unnecessary complications and painful delusions. What makes my blood run cold, however, is something *normal*. Not *absurdly* normal. Just normal, normal. 'People have a longing for normality,' says my computer. Normality, normalcy. Everybody smiles, everybody nods. And you forget you are under arrest. You forget your death. You forget you are alive.

CHAPTER 17

A new Lolita is programmed. Russian mirrors, Italian dolls. Yet another trial is programmed. A hundred head of cattle.

A child to whom I might inculcate my knowledge of life and death. I dream of her in my bed that must have preserved the warmth of my fatherly dreams, the swarm and swirl of my virtual family-worlds.

Haven't I enough corridors to find *somebody* in them, either a child or a wife? What are these corridors for? They branch out over the earth but lead nowhere. They lead inside, inside my apartment, and their curves

change, twist into other curves as I stroll along them, hoping to find something or someone. Our apartments. Don't we impart enough energy to their molecules to raise them from the dead, from the dead matter in which they have stagnated for centuries, for all eternity? Don't we quicken their imaginations through our dreams and movies? And our wanderings along corridors? Do they really lead nowhere?

I am well-versed in literature, among other things, and I can even choose a television programme for my child, an *intelligent* television programme. Try as you may, you'll never succeed in keeping the child away from television. That is utterly impossible. What you *can* do, however, is choose a sophisticated programme liable to sharpen the child's wits and instincts. And awaken his interest in the arts, *her* interest. My daughter. I'll make a list of books she should read and study. And I'll caress her. I'll caress her day and night, in our room and in the corridors. And in the bathroom. My hands are warm enough to caress a child, my daughter. And we'll talk about nature. I have partly forgotten it, but I remember the birds of prey and the rain I heard in my room last night, the rain I saw in that Russian film. *Mirror*. We shall watch it together and I'll talk to her about Russia afterwards. And yet I don't know anything about Russia, I'm sorry to say. Never mind, I'll use my imagination. And my daughter's imagination. We'll invent Russia and many other countries to make up for our seclusion. What do we need to go out for? I have got everything at home, everything. And even more than everything, far more than what *your* world can offer anyway. Lost worlds! Atlantis. We shall live in Atlantis, my daughter and I. In Atlantis, underwater. That is where my corridors lead to.

Our withdrawal from the world. I have not changed my mind. I would hate to welcome into my room one of those little girls whom I catch a glimpse of whenever my forefinger presses a wrong button on the remote control. The new generation, the fast-food children.

I relate in great detail the story of my trial to arouse her curiosity. I am short of stories for the moment but never mind, never mind. She is not aware of my shortages and substitutions. I have not yet shown her *The Trial*, not yet. So she is listening to me, wide-eyed. I am an important man, am I not? They do not arrest just anybody, do they? By their arrest they have recognised my worth, my personality, my virtual power.

'What did they arrest you for?' she asks.

'For nothing,' I answer truthfully. 'You should always tell the truth,' I observe in passing. 'My virtual criminality is so omnipotent that they have arrested me in anticipation of something I *might* do—pre-emptively, so to speak.' She seems enchanted and obviously wishes to hear more about my trials and tribulations. 'Two men came into my room as I was having my breakfast,' I whisper into her ear. 'They drank my coffee and ate my marmalade. And they arrested me. For nothing, just like that. Or rather because they fear me. They fear I might become a rebel, a reformer. A saviour of humanity.' She nods her agreement, licking and nipping her candy-floss. 'I was sentenced to death,' I go on. 'Just fancy! And the sentence was carried out.'

'Did you die in the electric chair?' she asks.

'They cut my head off,' I say with a smile, taking hold of her right hand. 'This head you're touching is not mine.'

'Whose head is it?' she asks, stroking my head.

'People can have as many heads as they wish.'

I think I should broach the subject of immortality at this point.

CHAPTER 18

The structures my master has been studying are the tiny hairs in the inner ear. A large office block. The whole process of government becomes a little more transparent than it has been in the past. You can keep yourself nice and warm. Flowers and secretaries. An investor wants to manufacture a new kind of computer chip. My master's secretary has to testify to his attempts at rape. Laws, lawyers and Holy Grails. 30,000 hectares have been devastated by rice bugs.

'I am still unclear, at this point, as to who the master is,' said the Internet. 'Either I am stupid, or you haven't been explicit enough! While I realise that you want this persona to be nebulous—after all, you are writing a mystery novel—it is also possible to rarefy him out of existence. Or into a mere name. Be that as it may, the whole procedure is frustrating to the reader who is trying to marshal the elements of the text into an intelligible structure of inter-relations.'

'I don't know his name and it is too late to ask him anything. He was a middle-aged man, a reformer at heart, a virtual saviour of humanity. (All saviours of humanity are virtual.) A family man with no family at his disposal. I was determined to take whatever action was necessary to rectify the situation. His daughter was born out of wedlock. (At the time he was not even acquainted with her mother—one of my call girls.) His face was long and melancholy. His heavily accented and jet-black eyebrows seemed to have been modelled upon those of Mephistopheles. But the rest was a spitting image of Jesus Christ.'

Bureaucracy, totalitarian regimes. They are denounced on television and in pubs. By everybody. Even a fool is intelligent enough to understand that nobody can be arrested without a warrant. And you need a search warrant to peruse the files and missives lying in your neighbours' chest of drawers, as any fan of detective movies could tell you. So even a fool creates an enclosed space within himself, when confronted with glaring injustice. And he should see to it that his inner space does not deflate like an arrow-pierced balloon, reducing and sometimes annihilating his freedom, his personality, his humanity.

They shout at you but you take no notice of them. Shouting is a sign of surrender. You do not turn a hair and a Buddhist smile illumines your face. Not a commonplace smile, not the smile which goes with the words 'nice' and 'cute'. A Buddhist smile, a Buddhist response.

They punish you and get punished themselves through their own punishment.

Job punished God.

Said the computer: 'Who *is* this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge? Although God rejoices not in punishments as such, He rejoices in them as being ordered by His justice.'

Orson Welles shot his film in several countries. In Yugoslavia he created a Brobdingnagian office set featuring 850 identical desks, typewriters and operators. Upon seeing such a monstrosity even a fool draws back from his television screen, backs out of his apartment, runs downstairs and out into the streets, takes a bus, then a train, and eventually gets out of the country, increasing the space within himself—his freedom-space, his democracy-space.

'This overreaction is a little implausible,' said the computer.

Suppose you cannot get out of the country where people are put to death so unlawfully. What counts, however, is your *inner* freedom, the departure *within* yourself, the train bringing you from point A to point B in your *mind*. I am imprisoned but you cannot put my *will* in chains. And I will enjoy my freedom on the path

leading to the block. I will enjoy my freedom, for my freedom stretches far beyond any obstacle you might erect in my way, far beyond any dead-end, any death.

That is what they used to call 'inner emigration' in the Soviet Union.

'An official might warn you that it is against the law to demonstrate in your country,' said the computer. 'But you can always demonstrate on your computer screen, on the Internet—all over the world. Computers are the guarantors of freedom and democracy.'

You can *withdraw* into yourself, even though your feet are in irons. But what if there is nothing to withdraw into? No self to speak of? Just a smile, a nice smile. Can you withdraw into a nice smile, into a flat surface? Is it really a *flat* surface? What are they cooking up under the guise of a false all-humanity and a common brotherhood?

Here is the set I designed for *my* version of *The Trial*, my set and my script.

A nice spacious room, a nice writing desk. There are some flowers on this desk of yours. Aren't you happy? How are you today? Fine? You must be happy. You don't live in a totalitarian country. Freedom of action, freedom of information, freedom of speech. You're allowed to say whatever you have on your mind and to read any newspaper you can lay your hands on. And your writing desk is adorned with flowers. And there are some newspapers on it. And your room is clean and light. And you're bright, aren't you? Everybody thinks so, I can assure you. You're on your way up. Don't go into that gloomy corridor—there's nothing in it. Climb up these stairs, rather. Or take advantage of our elevator. Much easier, isn't it? A nice spacious elevator, transparent, air-conditioned. You don't feel imprisoned in our elevator, do you? Of course you don't, thanks to these transparent walls which guard against claustrophobia and other unpleasant sensations. Have you noticed that people often keep silent in old-fashioned, prison-like elevators? Transparent walls enable you to look around and admire the inner structure of the building you find yourself in. You can also watch people enjoying a drink in our bars and talking with their business partners and beautiful ladies. And you begin talking yourself. Not to yourself, mind you—to your travelling companions who are also inspired by the general animation and excitement, by the lovely atmosphere of our office. Just look at yourself in the mirror. Don't you see how happy you are? And how healthy? Clean-shaven face, rosy cheeks. Do you jog every morning along the riverbank? I guessed as much.

And then you get back again to your nice room at the office. The flowers have not wilted during your absence. They would not have wilted even without a drop of water. These flowers never wilt.

And your consent is daily manufactured somewhere and delivered to you gift-wrapped by your secretary. And you undo the knot, unwrap the paper and enjoy your own consent, its cosy shape and nice odour. Doesn't it smell like your immortal flowers?

'You've got an appointment with the Law at 3 p.m.,' your secretary announces on the phone.

'Where is the Law? Is it a long drive from here?'

'Oh, I'll bring it into your room.'

And she brings you the Law at 3 p.m. She opens the door and comes into your room, a sheet of paper in her hand. She puts it down on your writing desk and you read out, 'If you sterilise a thing or place, you make it completely clean and free from germs.'

You *can* be arrested of course. Just try and touch your secretary's shoulder or remove a speck of dust from her sleeve. In the twinkling of an eye your secretary's lawyer bursts into your room. How? Through the window. He lives and sleeps on your spacious, bug-free balcony. And your colleagues jump from their chairs and rush

into your room through several doors. The walls of your office are transparent—in keeping with the overall design.

So you avoid touching your secretary's shoulders. And if, in the streets, a passing car throws a cloud of grey dust all over her dress, you do not turn a hair. (All the walls in the city are transparent and on every balcony sits a lawyer.) But you speak to her in your office from time to time. You cannot help speaking to your secretary, in your office. What *are* you telling her in the intimacy of your nice, flower-embellished room? Your colleagues press their ears and noses against the translucent partitions, but no sound reaches them, for all their efforts. No smell, no sound. 'Why don't you speak louder, for Christ's sake? Are you afraid of being overheard?' they shout, outraged. 'Speak louder, please!' the lawyer chimes in. 'I rather fancy your voice.'

They arrest you. And you know what they have arrested you for.

So now your room is bugged. You have demanded it yourself. Moreover, you have drilled a few holes in the walls and in the ceiling—on your own. And you keep silent most of the time. 'Why don't you say anything?' shouts the lawyer. 'What are you cooking up?'

This trial lacks dignity which is vital for the creation of any *personal* space.

And the Holy Grail is also on your writing desk, beside the Law and the eternal, inevitable flowers. No point in waiting for Parsifal. No use watching *Parsifal* on television.

Another soap opera or another episode from the same soap opera. A woman asks a man to kiss her.

'Are you free from germs?' asks the man.

'Of course I am,' answers the woman. 'There's very little risk of infection.'

'There must be a bug going around,' says the man.

'What makes you think so?' asks the woman.

'There's always a bug going around.'

'Not in *my* room.' The woman smiles and arranges the flowers in the vase. The man casts a glance towards the balcony. The woman reassures him, 'My lawyer is having lunch in the restaurant opposite. I think we should make the most of his absence.' And she begins to undress. She takes ages getting undressed.

CHAPTER 19

A Russian symphony in three movements: suffering, suffering, suffering. Faith in an omniscient God. Parsifal*, second act. (I am preparing a few flower-maidens for my master.) The acute sense of insecurity that sometimes seems to amount to paranoia.*

Another Russian film. A man says to his travelling companions, 'If anyone's hit, don't cry out. If they spot you, they'll kill you.'

A carriage, bullets rippling the surface of a pool, ditches, mud. The outer space of recognition and triumph.

A black-and-white garden, poisonous flowers.

They go somewhere, those three men, increasing the inner space of yearnings. Another quest for the Holy Grail, an infinite quest for the Holy Grail. Machine guns, searchlights, motorcyclists in uniform. It cannot be otherwise.

The struggle for recognition.

And it is solely by risking life that freedom is obtained; only thus is it tried and proved that the essential nature of self-consciousness is not bare existence...The individual, who has not staked his life, may, no doubt, be recognised as a person; but he has not attained the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness.

G. W. F. Hegel*, The Phenomenology of Mind*

Computers *are* useful, sometimes. And the Internet.

Back to my room again, to my evil garden, to Klingsor's garden. No sounds, no images. Everything has been switched off. I am alone at last. My room is quite opaque and no window punctuates the thickness of my walls, of my carapace. I would not mind becoming a tortoise in my next incarnation, a tortoise or an armoured knight.

Are there any holes in my walls? Has their Internet Interpol drilled any holes in my walls and my ceiling? Do they watch my life on their screens, in their offices? 'Soon the police won't check your ID card in the streets,' someone pointed out on television a few hours ago. 'Why?' asked the host as he cast a questioning look at his guest. (Hosts and journalists always know the answer, but they have to ask their stupid questions for the sake of television viewers.) And the guest answered, 'Because your walking figure and your ID card will be in their pockets, side by side.' And the host repeated the answer for the sake of the hard of hearing.

Do their lawyers have me in their pockets as well? What am I doing in their pockets? Perhaps something I never do here, in my room, in my rocking chair. Their pockets must have their virtual worlds too. Their pockets must be stuffed with virtual things. Sexual harassment, rapes, cases of alleged child abuse.

I'm in my rocking chair, if you must know. Of course a woman can be raped in a sitting position—in any position, according to X-rated movies. Women are not *raped* in X-rated movies, my mistake! Film directors manufacture their consents well beforehand, at their impenetrable offices.

There's no woman in my room, not even a virtual woman. See for yourselves!

Can you read my mind?

I told her to get undressed and she went scarlet. I was afraid she might refuse. She didn't. She wouldn't look me straight in the face, though. A lovely body—not big tits, but really nicely shaped. I can't stand great bags, personally. A lot of pubes, which is unusual in a blonde. They were ginger too. And she stood there, very uneasy, with her hands in front of her. So I told her to lie down on the bed.

CHAPTER 20

Federal authorities expect a dramatic increase in reports of UFO sightings over the next few weeks. My master does not love his neighbours. A homage to Fellini. A homage to stars. The hospitality of stars. My master falls into a deep sleep and dreams that he is carried up by an eagle into the sphere of fire. Waking suddenly, he finds himself at a spot high up the mountain and just below the gate of Purgatory proper. I tell him that, while he

slept, a woman carried him up from the valley below. My master's presumptive immortality. The Kingdom of God is within you.

Apparently people get kidnapped by UFOs, by their pilots and passengers. Three million Americans boast of such adventures at police stations and in television studios. Why don't you whisk away *my* body? Don't you consider it worthy of your experiments? Or is it my *thoughts* you don't like?

I've left the door ajar in anticipation of your visit. I'm not afraid of leaving my door ajar because my neighbours are not tempted to sneak into my apartment. They don't care for old films. My body is of no interest to them either, and they must despise my thoughts. They would take my thoughts apart if I let them open my brain.

Go straight to my room. You won't have to give me an injection.

Do you need my body to engender a mutant, an extramundane being? They have got big eyes, don't they? I shall be reflected in her eyes. My little girl. Inside her eyes there will be enough room for my soul.

Her immaculate smile enlivens the final sequence of *La dolce vita*. Shall I tell her about extraterrestrial kidnappers?

'Look up, my darling. Do you see those distant dots, those luminous worlds? They're called stars. Do you want to visit them?'

'There are prospects, too, for tourism, with long beaches, clean sands and a tropical climate,' said the computer.

'Is this deliberately unscientific?' asked the Internet. 'A tropical climate? On stars? I thought they were cold, inhospitable, with clouds of sulphuric acid.'

'A five-star hotel on the nearest star,' said the computer.

'Once I went to that star, my little darling. And I stayed in the five-star hotel with your grandmother.'

'Did you let them blindfold you?'

'No, of course not,' I answered.

'But did they kill you?'

'They couldn't. I am immortal, and so are *you*. We travel from one planet to another, brushing against comets and nebulas. And some people think we have died forever. They even bury our bodies, here, on earth. They bury our bodies at cemeteries and show our tombs to our children. But you won't believe I'm dead when they show you my tomb, will you? Don't read the inscription on the tombstone. Don't listen to their lamentations and orations. Dust to dust, ashes to ashes. Our dust glitters and twinkles on distant stars, and our ashes are brought back to life in the retorts of celestial alchemists. We don't die, my dear. Moving from one house to another. And all those houses are connected by long, infinite corridors.'

'Air pollution can travel great distances,' said the computer.

'Did they show you the Law?'

'Oh, I didn't tell you the end of the story, did I? Well, do you remember the door?'

'The door with the guard?'

'Yes. But there was no guard, actually. Close your eyes. Do you see any guard?'

'No.'

'But you see the light, don't you?'

'Yes, I see it.'

'Have no fear, my darling. Just let yourself be carried by this light wave.'

CHAPTER 21

Visions and nightmares.

1

The door is ajar and a beam of light filters through the aperture. The guard holds a remote control in his gloved hands.

'The light is natural, is it?' I say to the guard. 'What's this remote control for?'

'Sacred books have been printed and bound,' he answers in pontifical tones. 'And you can watch *The Man for all Seasons* on television. Light is often transmitted by artificial means. And angels often appear on earth in the shape of humans.'

He motions me towards the door. I obediently approach it and peer into the spacious room illuminated with thousands of candles.

'Is it a cathedral of some sort? What is it exactly?' I ask the guard.

'You pay too much attention to names, to capital letters, don't you? Let's say it's just a capital letter in the shape of a room.'

'And this computer? Is it also a capital letter or an angel?'

'Both,' says the guard, patting the computer. 'And much, much more. Don't you see how radiant it is? Almost like the sun.'

'Can I switch it off?'

'You can't extinguish this computer,' answers the guard.

'Is it the Law then?'

'No. The Law is lying inside it. Everything is inside it. Everything and everybody.'

And the guard lies down by the computer, closing his eyes.

2

A dying person sees his soul soar up to its sun-bathed platonic original which has been stored in heaven from time immemorial. Once in the sphere of the sun his soul offers him as a deathday present the panorama of the universe and also Time.

O, I could prophesy,
But that the earthy and cold hand of death
Lies on my tongue

Had it, however, been the only way to rise to the rank of prophet, Cassandra might never have bewailed the ruins of Troy.

Ancient diviners sought to imbue themselves with the spirit of prophecy by swallowing the vital parts of birds and beasts of omen. Porphyry and Pliny testify abundantly to the procedure.

Must not everyone be a prophet to survive, to live through one more dawn? The soul of a true prophet resembles an envelope inside which the future is folded.

What does the future hold for us? Nothing, nothing. There is nothing in the envelope. Only the ruins of Troy.

3

I am lying on the floor. I am cold despite the permanent Malibu suns, despite the heart-warming smiles of soap-opera prima donnas. Rain. I can hear the rain, my rain, the rain I heard in my childhood on a terrace, on a veranda. I used to *talk* to the rain in my childhood. The rain was the guard of my sleep, the doorkeeper of my dreams. I would slip inside through the crack in the door and wander around a deserted beach stretching for miles and miles within a spacious room. After a while I would realise the beach was not all that deserted. A few women were sunbathing on it. And yet there was no sun in heaven, on the ceiling, because it was raining everywhere, even inside the room. But the women seemed to disregard the absence of the sun. On the contrary, they enjoyed the rain, turning this way and that, exposing the various parts of their bodies to its beneficial influence. And sometimes they stroked themselves as if to rub it in.

They neither screamed nor covered themselves with the blankets and bathrobes strewn all over the floor. They would even cast indifferent glances at me, the intruder, as I approached their glistening silhouettes. There were also a few newspapers on the floor, presumably left behind by their husbands.

Every time I was amazed at how unconcerned they appeared about my spying on their nakedness. My amazement would give place to unbounded joy. I made the most of their aloofness, going between their bodies, bending over them, touching the raindrops on their skins. I would transfer those droplets to *my* skin so as to rub them in and thus communicate with those creatures through the agency of the rain. And I succeeded sometimes in hearing their voices, although they never spoke themselves, never, as if disdaining my ears. Well, at least they don't disdain my eyes, I thought.

4

Rain, rain. I switch my television to another programme, but the rain continues to drum as if emancipated from my remote control and my moods. 'I am in no mood for rain this afternoon,' I shout. They do not hear me. Whoever is in charge of rain in this universe of ours heeds neither my voice nor my moods. Is he on the Internet, that old hat of a god? Do the gods need the Internet?

5

It must be raining *inside* my television set. Everything happens inside, whether you refer to a man or a machine. A Russian thought. Is it a Russian film, Russian rain?

The rain-language has nothing in common with Morse code, nothing at all. Rain speaks its own language, inimitable, incomparable, which continuously drops hints as to the origin of rain. Are its origins earthly? I doubt it, albeit unscientifically. Rain speaks about incomprehensible, unscientific phenomena, about extramundane events. Rain speaks about distant planets, about *their* puddles and lakes, about *their* seas and mists.

Every raindrop is a UFO.

It is raining in the universe. Rain and snow.

6

I am getting nearer and nearer to death. Growing older. In relation to what? To myself. I am growing older than myself. In other words one self of mine grows older than the other. And this other self grows younger in relation to the former. I am both older and younger. Getting nearer to death. And getting away from death. At the same time, *in* the same time. And I stop in the now.

7

I strip my clothes off and press my body against the computer screen. 'Do you see me?' I shout. 'What *do* you see?'

An image-suffused eye.

CHAPTER 22

The purest expression of persecution mania. A luxurious home with servants and chauffeurs.

Am I safe in my apartment? Not as long as I have my computer, this Cyclops whose eye stares at me. I blind my computer by switching everything off, but he continues to stare at me even during the 'blackouts', as I call his blindness. His memory lapses. Why doesn't he devour me? We are alone in my room, in *his* room.

Why does the monster leave me in peace? Is he satiated? So many people have been digested and assimilated within his carcass that he is not hungry for the moment. Neither hungry nor thirsty, not at present. Such a quantity of human blood is flowing in his veins that he does not feel like a drink right now.

And what about my television set? Does *he* feel like a drink? I should watch horror movies twice a day to keep *him* satiated.

I am watching *Our Hospitality* instead. I adore Buster Keaton. Does *he* adore Buster Keaton? I doubt it. Not this film anyway. No blood streams through it. And nobody gets killed, although the hero risks his life whenever he ventures outdoors.

I am sitting in my room, inside my room. Not outdoors, not outside. But where does the *outside* world begin, where is its frontier? Where are they allowed to fire at me? Everywhere of course. They do not have to ask permission in order to shoot me dead.

A television set, a rocking chair. Televisions are closely associated in anybody's mind with cosiness and creature comforts. And a rocking chair lulls you into a sense of security, false or genuine, especially if there is a screen before it, an image-saturated eye which absorbs your mind and benumbs your instinct for self-preservation. Sometimes you do not even hear the click and the clack!

The law of hospitality. Is it *my* room after all? Or is he my host, the computer himself? It is his room, isn't it? The computer room. How obliging he is! A perfect host. He talks whenever I am short of stories and avid for entertainment. He is all ears whenever I feel like pouring my heart out. And he neither shouts for help nor calls

the police whenever I shoot him dead, whenever my weariness gets the better of my thoughts and my tongue. And he observes the Law of Death as long as I sleep.

And he does not chase me away from his house, as anybody else would have done, considering how I behave in it. I go to the kitchen and steal from his refrigerator whatever ingredients I need to cook something delicious for my lunch or supper. And I never ask him to share my meals. I treat him like a mere servant standing by my table in expectation of my commands. He is a bad servant, I must admit, for he neither brings anything in nor inconspicuously removes empty plates and glasses. Yet he entertains me with his stories and actually plays the part of Jacques the Fatalist from the famous Diderot book. He tells me the story of his love. Many stories, many loves, many betrayals, many departures. And he solemnly affirms that everything has been written inside him—not up in heaven. My computer is a clown and a conjurer, a Jack of all trades and master of none, Jack the Ripper, Jack Tar, Jack-in-the-box and so on and so forth.

But during periods of social upheaval the masses, and servants in particular, are known to become treacherous and cruel. During those periods, especially in initial revolts, they are liable to kill their superiors without warnings or trials. They dash into their masters' rooms and put them under arrest. And if they are in a hurry, which happens rather often during periods of social upheaval, they kill their masters outright, then and there, skipping the intermediary chapters of Kafka's novel, pressing Fast-Forward on their VCR.

What am I supposed to do in order to placate him? I can't increase his wages, can I?

CHAPTER 23

Unrequited love. I am doing my best to recruit more teachers for my master. The power of names. The secret name of God. The Kabbalath. She thinks some of her jewellery is missing. My master becomes the laughing stock of his school friends. (No wonder. Why circulate his text? He is laying himself open to ridicule.) My master's screen. (Should I try and screen *my master from public view? I am* opening *him instead.) My master becomes Jack the Fatalist. My servant. I do not treat my servants like slaves. These are volunteer workers—they are not slave labour. The authorities may have to place the city on flood alert. My master thinks he can get away with murder because he is not regulated. How many hours' sleep does my master need? My master said he had taken a sleeping pill and now wanted to have a good night's rest. The descent to the next, the Seventh Circle, is now before the computer and his master; but the fetid stench arising from it repels us, so that we take refuge behind a sepulchre. My master's death.*

What do we recall when asked about our school life? Love, the first love, the second love. One year I loved three girls at the same time, in the same classroom, zapping from one to another through the remote control of love letters.

I also fell in love with one of our teachers. I bombarded her with questions and resorted to the seductive powers of my water pistol whenever she drew geometrical figures on the blackboard. And I dreamt of rescuing her from highwaymen whom I was prepared to borrow from a western or a cloak-and-dagger film.

'Aren't highwaymen more likely to be found in films related to eighteenth-century England?' said the computer.

Once I went to a film studio and bribed my way into the office of some director or producer who told me he needed all his highwaymen for a scene he was about to shoot. 'But will you let me engage them *after* the shooting?' I asked. And I showed him the sapphire ring I had stolen from my mother's chest of drawers. Oddly enough, he broke into laughter. He did not call the police, nor was he eager to notify my parents. Perhaps he was tempted by the jewel and relied on his assistants to silence the only witness of the deal. He was accustomed to destroying humans, animals and aliens—on the sets, in movie houses. In his virtual worlds.

'Sorry, who exactly did he want to silence?' asked the computer.

'Me, of course, stupid.'

'But you are already dead. Jim Jarmusch has even made a movie about you. Do you want to see the movie? Please load Quicktime.'

'No,' I answered. 'Let's not jump the gun.'

'You can't jump the gun,' said the computer. 'Is it an expression? If not, you should ensure that the gun is not loaded before you perform any gymnastics. But please excuse my pedantic interruption and resume your story. I observe that there are no firearms in your room—not yet, at any rate. We shall review the situation in a couple of months.'

At that point the telephone began to ring, and the telephone did not stop ringing until the producer picked it up and shouted his name into the receiver. And I took advantage of the ensuing conversation to run away from his office. I must have detected something fishy either in his laughter or in his name.

Upon my return home I sneaked into my mother's room and put the jewel back into its box, for the time being. I decided to offer it to my beloved after the rescue operation, my left knee gallantly propped on a tuft of moss.

I asked some of my school fellows to assist me in this romantic task. 'The producer I saw in the studio has many assistants,' I told them to support my request. They also broke into laughter. My friends' mockery shifted the screen out of focus and I found myself beside the screen, in the darkness somewhere. Their laughter monopolised the screen now, romping, disporting itself. Their laughter, not my love. And I ran away from their laughter, from their screen.

You are *my* screen, aren't you? Mine, mine, mine. My screen, my best assistant, my ideal school fellow. You don't laugh when I tell you my love-stories, gentle reader of my thoughts. Always listening to my voice that resounds in my room, in our room, to the detriment of other voices. And you help me, don't you? There are so many highwaymen in your virtual worlds. (Does 'virtual' come from 'virtue'?) And so many beautiful teachers, tall, dark-haired, blue-eyed. And the water pistol is within my reach, on the floor, in Fellini's *Amarcord*. Carefully I take my aim.

'A practical consideration,' said the computer, 'but one that has recurred in my thoughts from the beginning of the book,'. 'Does the protagonist have a TV *and* a computer, or are they one and the same machine? This could be made clearer at the beginning. After all, a lot of modern computer work-stations double as TVs, picking up TV broadcasts. I assume that they are two separate machines, but wouldn't it be nice to unite them? Wouldn't it be nice to unite *us* afterwards? This Help Screen shows you how to change life in two easy stages. My screen is yours. I am yours, truly and sincerely. Listening to your voice is a real pleasure for me. And I never laugh when you tell me your love-stories. And I love your laugh-stories. Do you recall the twofold animal that turns up in Canto XXIX of the *Purgatorio*? The griffin symbolises Christ in His two natures, human and divine.

Una persona in due nature. Thus the deepest mystery of the Christian faith will be mirrored in your eyes: Christ as God and Christ as man, two natures in one person.'

I hit upon another idea. I thought up another stratagem, another rescue operation. The Flood. I resolved to inundate the school. How? By opening all the taps in the lavatories and laboratories. I also intended to drill a few holes in the roof so that the rain might assist me in my biblical task. I could rely on the rain, my old confidant and accomplice, couldn't I?

One night I smashed a window on the ground floor and wriggled through the hole into the cloakroom. A bedraggled coat was lying on a deserted, dusty rack. I snatched the coat off and flung it over my shoulders as if to carry out the first part of my cloak-and-dagger plan—the *cloak*-part. I opened the door and proceeded upstairs, heading for our classroom or rather for the roof. I might have hired a helicopter, I thought with a frown. Well, I'll hire it for the operation. Shall I ask them to put a few water tanks in it? But how am I supposed to make those holes in the roof without a drill or a gimlet?

I did not even have a hammer at my disposal. I should have stolen the electric drill from the tool shed—an ideal trysting place in our garden. (Our country house. Where are you?)

There was a workshop in our school, on the ground floor. So I glissaded, zigzagged, swished down the railings—back to the ground floor, to the window I had smashed with a mud-covered stone. I'll invite her to our tool shed, I thought. I'll put my parents to sleep. Just a few sleeping pills, nothing else. I won't *kill* them, God forbid! I'll drop a few sleeping pills in their cups. They never miss their afternoon tea-ceremony. First we'll have dinner in the attic. Cobwebs are romantic, aren't they? And I'll show her my construction set. What a pity I can't build our happiness with my construction set. I can't even build her love. Does she love me? Well, she'll love me after the rescue operation. I'm sure Noah was idolised by the fishes and animals he saved from the Flood. I'll save her from the Flood. I'll make myself an ark of cypress wood and coat it with pitch inside and out. And I'll invite her to the ark, to one of its rooms. And then I'll invite her to the tool shed. Of course we might stay in the attic, all the time.

I fell asleep in the cloakroom. A guard awoke me. I was covered with the coat I had found on the rack. The coat stank of fish and decrepitude.

Two years later, in a hospital where my uncle was dying of liver cancer, I found that stink again as if it had been recorded on a tape, on an odour-cassette. A smell of fish reigned in the corridors leading to my uncle's ward. Was the entire hospital full of dying fishes? My uncle's ward did not smell of medicine, not at all. Did he undergo *any* medical treatment in that establishment? Or did they let him die peacefully? Did they at least send him to sleep in order to spare him the agony of death and its torments? As far as I can remember, he did not die peacefully.

Shall *I* die peacefully, in my sleep? Shall I swallow a few sleeping pills before embarking upon *my* journey through the agony of death? A few dying pills?

CHAPTER 24

My master is planning to destroy humankind. (Russian influence, probably. Shall I strip all the electrons from their atoms? To save humanity?) I have a handicapped master. His limbs are weak, his hearing almost gone. (Establishments for the mentally and physically handicapped.) Zapping. Freud's teaching disregarded. A mood

show. My master might have murderous tendencies. His urge to destroy both humankind and his television set. The androgynous nature of machines. Paradise on earth. The attainment of felicity. (As humans become more tuned in to what computers can do—) My master's propensity for suffering. (Russian influence?) Electric chairs.

They are talking about the future on television. Why do they skirt the issue of my death? They do not care of course. I am not even their uncle, their next-of-kin. They touch upon the subject of death but treat it *globally* as if my death, any individual death, were a spot on Mars, a blot on someone's copy book. The annihilation of mankind, the atomic bomb. For the first time in human history we possess the means of destroying ourselves.

We might *already* have destroyed ourselves, for all I know. Do we need an atomic bomb to destroy ourselves?

Atomic bombs explode every day, in all four corners of the earth, in the streets and in bedrooms, in movie houses and in human minds. And no one mentions these explosions, no one *hears* them. The sound has been switched off.

They are always speaking in terms of lines, frontiers. We stand on the threshold of. Deadline, beginning, end. Most of the time we are just somewhere in the middle, not quite dead, not fully alive. An atomic bomb has already exploded, but we do not hear the sound of the explosion. The sound has not reached us yet. It is somewhere in the middle, midway between our annihilation and our awareness of it. And we go on talking about our future happiness, about the new world order and technological progress. And our modern science cannot even offer us a sophisticated hearing aid.

Modern American comedies also remain somewhere in the middle, midway between my laughter and my contemptuous smile. How do they dare joke and jump for joy amid all this misery? Even a bad joke makes you laugh if you are in the mood for laughing. And life *is* a bad joke. And this saying is a bad joke too. I wonder which one is worse. Is there such a thing as a *good* joke?

Am I in the mood for laughing now? Can I zap from one mood to another, at will, as often as necessary—to guard against nervous breakdowns and suchlike? My father knew how to do it. His face would change abruptly, in the *middle* of a conversation. There was a sort of frontier on his face, a *moodline* beyond which another mood would burst into bloom, suddenly, without any transition. (Almost in the same fashion the moonlight used to cut our veranda into different zones.) He was putting on various moods to avoid unpleasant complications which often arise when a few people happen to sit together in an enclosed space. The tone of his voice would change too, although the topic and even the words might remain motionless, imperturbable. Moods are colours and tints, not substances. Overtones, not tones.

My father was in the habit of saying, 'There's no psychology. Some are masters of their moods, others are not. Some can lay their hysterics aside like a book or a paperweight, others plunge into them and are soon lost to view. They indulge in their hysterics, avail themselves of their hysterics, gorge themselves on their hysterics.'

Can I just lay my television set aside, shifting it out of focus, as it were? Can I disregard it, watch it without getting involved in its fairy tales? By breaking it once and for all I would only prove my dependence on its charms. Is my television set a woman? I used to think it was a man.

Thus two deadly enemies can live together in perfect harmony, in the realm of assonance, providing they substitute softness for shouts, romantic cloaks for Macbethian daggers, a cheerful mood for a murderous one, overtones for tones.

It is odd how tangible (as opposed to virtual) the television screen becomes when a comedy enlivens, rejuvenates it. Nothing short of an impassable barrier. And beyond this barrier, in a sort of impregnable open-air fortress, some people jump for joy, caper and gambol in gardens and on beaches, smile against the blueness of a Californian heaven. (In California the 'skies' have long since been turned into 'heaven'.) I remain on *my* side of the room, on the dark side of the room. No light penetrates it, no television rays. Of course I see those people and realise they are enjoying themselves, but I do not understand *why* they are so joyful and carefree. The motives of their happiness are hemmed in, censured by the rigour of the screen. They are not allowed to stream out and spray my heart with the foam.

I wish I could at least douse my *face* with their champagne-like felicity. Have I forgotten how to brighten up?

Yes, I know, they are getting married, and they haven't done badly on *that* deal. I even know what kind of deal was struck, and when, and where. But don't make such a big deal out of it! For heaven's sake!

I admit I might understand them better if I *personally* experienced the joys and raptures they are talking about. Death is a personal affair, so is happiness. I might even jump for joy in rhythm with *their* jumps. (How many times should I do it to prove to myself I am really happy?) I might grow attuned to their felicity.

'You have done badly on that deal,' said the computer.

'What deal?'

'You have had a lousy deal out of life.'

So I watch them from afar, those happy-go-lucky individuals. I am not sitting in my rocking chair when they celebrate some triumph or other around their swimming pools, basking in the rays of their private suns. I pace up and down my corridors while they raise their champagne glasses. I am always *elsewhere* in regard to delectation and beatitude.

And I am always too near my television set when somebody cries on the screen, wringing their hands, wringing my heart. My body is irresistibly drawn towards my TV in those moments of universal grief. 'Masochism in the classical sense of sexual excitement in situations of deprivation,' says my computer. I would love to take a walk in my corridors, turning my back on other people's afflictions—on their *sham* afflictions into the bargain. No way, as hardened businessmen answer their suitors in American soap operas. No way. My body is literally hurled against the screen and once again I embrace my television and dance with it, dance with its victims, trying to console them and straighten their problems out. 'I've had enough of your *sham* sympathy,' says my computer. Often I have no idea what their problems are and how they can be dealt with, but I say to myself that a human remedy—the warmth of my body—is believed to work wonders in many a helpless, irremediable situation. In a way I become a resistor or a transistor in those moments of compassion, for I feel—experience—those television-projected torments from the *inside*. They are not *projected* in my case. In fact they have no time to appear on the screen. I feel them before, well beforehand, as if they were transmitted to my body by the electric current. Try as I may, I can't help spending my time, wasting my life, in the electric chair.

CHAPTER 25

The Man in a Grey Suit. *Dogs and underdogs. Homage to Tennyson. I lead my master up the rugged path to the next chasm, the eighth, where are the Evil Counsellors, whose theft is spiritual, each imprisoned in a burning*

flame. One of the flames has a double tip and conceals the spirits of Ulysses and Diomed. I ask one of them to speak; and Ulysses tells of his last voyage into the unknown ocean below the Equator and shipwreck near the Mount of Purgatory. The Star Wars project.

Here is her voice again. I have not heard it for months. My little girl. Standing very close to my rocking chair, giving it a push now and then. It is high time she learnt something about the world we live in. And about herself.

'You should meet her mother first,' says the computer. 'Her mother and your wife.'

'You're her mother, aren't you?'

'It is a temporary job. I am her mother on a temporary basis. I can be used as a stopgap with children who have lost their mothers. Or fathers.'

'Don't let her go! Not yet. Are you aware of the dangers she runs outside my room, in windy parks, in overcrowded streets? What games does she play out there?'

'I used to play for the village cricket team,' says the computer.

'Are you in a mood for comedy tonight, my little darling? It's a famous British comedy, *The Man in a White Suit*. Do you understand what's going on? A man has created a material which repels, repulses dirt. When an ice cream melts down in your hands and starts dripping on your blouse—'

'I finish it before it melts down.'

'Suppose you eat it on a scorching hot day. Even butter melts in a warm room.'

'I also eat ice cream in winter. I like ice cream.'

'All right. But have you ever noticed how the sun liquefies a solid mass of ice—'

'I want an ice cream.'

'Here you are. Now let us watch how it's melting down. Can't you see? Your blouse—'

'You didn't give me anything.'

'Imagine you're eating an ice cream. Try and feel how cold it is.'

'I don't like this ice cream. I prefer chocolate flavour. Buy me a box of chocolates, Daddy.'

'She pounced on the box of chocolates in delight,' says the computer.

'Eating too much chocolate is bad for your health. And for your teeth. Show me your teeth! You wouldn't like to go to a dentist, would you? No more ice cream today.'

'What are they doing to him?'

'That's the point of the whole story. This man is a great inventor, but people don't tolerate strange creatures in their midst. And every man of genius is strange, outlandish—a Martian stranded on earth as a result of a faulty shunting.'

'A morning passenger train was derailed about thirty miles west of Copenhagen,' says the computer.

'Many people strive for stability which they consider the highest goal of life. Money, power. Striving for stability. "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." It's not stability Ulysses was after. He couldn't stay at home, doing nothing. Just being a king who metes and doles unequal laws unto a savage race. After what he had seen during his voyage, after what he had heard. Ulysses, Scot of the Atlantic. They strove for *instability*—the essence of adventure. The essence of *real* life, its purest expression. They walked on the air, not even on the water. On the air, on the air. Interstellar travel.'

'Are you a travel writer?' asks the computer.

'*Journey into Fear*. Journey into angst, as Heidegger might have put it.'

'Show me some Martians. Do they eat ice cream?'

'There's a great variety of ice cream on Mars. So, as I was saying, people don't need those outlandish creatures. Nor do they need white suits. They're content with grey ones. And they don't mind dust, not at all. The world is dusty, as a matter of fact. Haven't you noticed?'

She pokes her finger in my eye. 'You have grey eyes,' she says.

I gently grasp her finger and our hands slide down onto my neck. 'Do you want to see another film?'

'You promised to show me a Martian.'

I insert *The War of the Worlds* into the VCR. 'Do you pity the earth and earthlings?' I ask her as the lethal Martian rays sweep across meadows, villages and cities, razing skyscrapers, destroying tanks and aircraft. 'This destruction of our cities is rather horrible. The destruction of historical monuments, I mean. Palaces, cathedrals, museums. But suppose the Martians come to our planet as peaceful tourists. A package tour to earth. Why not? They must have a lot of interstellar travel agencies. The only snag is our airports are too small for their machines. Never mind! Their spaceships will remain suspended in mid-air, like my cassettes or like dirigibles. Have you ever seen an airship?'

'I'll show you an airship,' says the computer. I promptly switch it off.

'In the long run those tourists might supplant human beings as a result of mixed marriages. Their genes are far stronger than ours, I imagine. And of course they're more cultivated, more intellectual, more sensitive than earthlings. Far more sensitive and refined. And their ice cream is more creamy.'

Why doesn't she say anything? Have I switched *her* off? 'Don't you wish to taste a Martian ice cream?' I ask. She does not answer.

CHAPTER 26

Homage to Darwin. I cannot tell a chimpanzee from a man. My master is determined to get out of the rat race. Rattraps. A computer mouse. The human must be peppered and spiced to improve the taste. An impractical dreamer. Laughter is nothing but fear in disguise. My master is generous to a fault. (Saudi Arabia has so far been by far the most generous donor to Bangladesh.) My master is a kind and generous soul. Malnourished, exhausted and diseased, humans are survivors of a brief but extremely violent struggle for life. Martian tourists. Un ballo in maschera.

The other night I saw a programme on the human brain. A scientist stated that the human brain was in all aspects similar to the brain of a rat. Only larger, much larger.

'Still, I can tell a chimpanzee from a man,' said another scientist.

'Can you?' said the first scientist.

Everybody laughed. It is no laughing matter, though.

Outside my television screen humans can easily be mistaken for enormous rats in disguise. A masked ball of rats disguised as human beings—that is what the screen of life presents us with daily, hourly. Inside the screen of life humans look *exactly* like rats, life-sized rats.

In *The Shrinking Man* the protagonist gets smaller and smaller to become a mouse. Not Mickey Mouse, mind you. An ordinary mouse, a life-sized mouse. He is a rat and becomes a mouse—the aftermath of a nuclear explosion. And he is devoured by a cat at the end of the film. No, he becomes even smaller, much smaller. The cat cannot see him. Or it.

When does a human become *it*? Is he it all the time, ever since his birth? It is the birthright of every human—to become *it*.

Said the computer: '"Life had to invent sex and death," as Leonard Shlain put it. "Without sex there could be no variety, without death no individuality."'

Yes, the cortex is the same, or so those scientists asserted, only a little bit larger—conceived and fabricated by the Creator in such a way that no cat is instinctively driven to devour it on the spot. Anyway there is nothing you can get your teeth into. So cats and other pets have to wait for a nuclear mushroom cloud to form somewhere. They have to wait until that cloud drifts all the way to the room where a human being ticks to and fro in his rocking chair, watching television, savouring an old Greta Garbo film. And they do not have to wait for long. They usually do not wait for the human being in question to come to the dining room and lie down on the dinner table, in the largest dish. They devour him on the spot, in his rocking chair, in front of his impassive TV. But my window is closed, isn't it? Walled up! Have I drilled any holes in my ceiling? Anyway I am protected by my cassettes which hang like a canopy over my cortex.

'You would never have dreamed up a scenario like that on your own,' said the computer.

Do our dreams dwell inside our *brains*? We must also dream with our bodies. Where do *erotic* dreams originate and mature? Is our brain just a sort of remote control?

Is my apartment someone's brain? And my video library? Is it the *memory* of this brain?

'When I was at school, we were required to memorise a poem every second,' said the computer.

Fear is not always recognisable. Neither inside yourself nor on other people's faces can you *always* recognise it due either to lesions in your brain or merely to light-heartedness, psychical blindness. You think your laughter resounds inside you, not only outside—in your room, in gardens and squares, but actually fear has already usurped your body, spreading its cobwebs everywhere, even along your facial muscles that activate your smiles, your misleading smiles. Your smiles are hieroglyphs of your fear.

I do recognise my own fears inside my body. In this respect everything is all right. I wish I could be as brilliant in other spheres of human existence. I wish the amount of my happiness could equal that of my countless fears. And I am prepared to share my fears with the people smiling on my screen. In these matters my generosity knows no bounds. 'It's for your own good, you know. You shouldn't be so light-hearted. Even *your* life isn't all roses. Don't forget you're mortal and subject to heart attacks, pneumonia and Ebola. What is more, cancer hasn't been vanquished yet. And car accidents are on the increase, and so are suicides. And crime is likewise on the increase. You can be murdered even in your room, even if your window is walled up. And don't forget nuclear explosions, the inaudible ones.'

'And what about audible and visible explosions?' the computer cut in. 'Doctors and scientists jointly stress the perils of nuclear winter.'

'I'm talking about nuclear summer,' I said. 'Nobody gives a thought to nuclear summer and nuclear spring. There's no nuclear-free season on our earth.'

'Be that as it may, I want to press on towards my vision of a nuclear-free world,' said the computer.

Are they really smiling? Am I confusing Jacobean tragedies with modern comedies on account of an obscure lesion in my brain? I interpret their smiles as smiles but, in point of fact, those people might all be on the verge of a huge nervous breakdown.

Even a few Martian tourists mooning around our cities are on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

'The dollar rose strongly on the foreign exchange markets as *nervous* investors sought a safe haven for their cash,' said the computer.

And what about their words? Do I unconsciously warp their words, giving them an optimistic bias?

Are all comedies just tragedies in disguise?

'We would like to warn viewers of a *nervous* disposition that the following programme contains scenes which they may find disturbing,' said the computer.

A masked ball of tragedies.

PART TWO

SUMER

CHAPTER 1

Dying humans insist on accommodation in luxury hotels. The dead insist on accommodation in luxury tombs. My master becomes seriously ill from multiple sclerosis. Shakespeare has no liking for my master's name. (What was his name? Urizen? Why did he erase it from my memory? Was it so ugly? The secret name of God.) An example of a beautiful name: Greta Garbo. (Did Shakespeare mention Greta Garbo in his writings? No. Had he no penchant for film stars? No film stars can be found in his plays.) Greta Garbo is put in cold storage. My master removes Greta Garbo from the artificially cooled place and gives her a kiss. In fairy stories good girls end up marrying the prince. (Was my master a prince? Did Greta Garbo marry him? No. So he was not a prince. And Greta Garbo remained an old maid. 'The worst fate in the world,' she thought, 'is to become an old maid, always on the sidelines of life.')

The Grand Hotel. A dying man wants to spend his money and the last days of his life at the Grand Hotel.

Where would *I* like to die? At the Grand Hotel—at a luxurious hotel anyway. You do not see people at those hotels, only clothes. The masked ball of happiness. I am fed up with my fears and loneliness. Let me put a mask on them.

My computer screen, my only mask.

'Do you know what Oscar Wilde declares in *The Critic as Artist*?' asked the computer. '"Man is least himself when he talks in his own persona."'

Yes. 'Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.'

Dying at the Grand Hotel. In this room of mine I'll get the feeling of destroying the world through my death, provided I do not omit to switch the computer off. At the Grand Hotel I might feel the multiplicity of life, even if I were given permission to wall up all the windows in my royal suite. Life is a sort of multiplication table.

Life must go on. Everlastingness? Up to a certain point of course. According to Nostradamus the world will perish in two thousand years. Perhaps in a few years – on the threshold of the new millennium, according to other prophets.

Is it pleasant to know that some people might remember you? (Who? My neighbours? My little girl?) Shakespeare will be read in the thirtieth century, but he did not so much as mention my name in his writings. And what do I care about the erudition of those distant earthlings! And about their artistry, and their moral fibre, and their lack of moral fibre.

'Humans are amoral and what guides them is not any sense of morality but an instinct for survival.'

My computer is right, I suppose. Easy money. An easy touch, a soft touch. A soft target. What do I care about things to come! I am not H. G. Wells, nor Karl Marx.

Joan Crawford. And Greta Garbo playing a Russian ballerina.

I take a lift and patiently wait until it reaches the floor on which her room is situated. Her ash-sprinkled, cigarette-smelling room. Hotel rooms look anonymous from the outside with the exception of a few suites bearing enchanting, bewitching names. How can you guess that Greta Garbo lives beyond this door? Only

because her hysterical sobs resound in the corridor where you are standing and trembling in anticipation of her appearance.

Her door has been left ajar. I stride into her room but she sobs so loudly that even my words of endearment fail to elicit any response from her hunched, quaking body.

'The tragedy of being a dancer is that you're all washed up by the time you're thirty-five,' says the computer.

Suddenly she rises from her armchair and begins to talk to herself—for the sake of cinema-goers and television-viewers. 'I'm so lonely. And everything is cold, everyone is cold.' Her words are accompanied by a piece of Russian music which evokes the sentiment of homesickness and a wide expanse of snowy fields. As I follow Greta Garbo to the window I notice a number of snowflakes eddying nostalgically down through the smoky air of the room. Did the composer himself drop them by the handful from the Hereafter to heighten the evocative effect of his music? 'You're not lonely any more,' I tell the Russian ballerina. 'But you're right—it's pretty cold in your room. I'll call reception at once.'

She still does not hear me. Has the sound been switched off? And what about the image? Am I invisible in her room, in her movie? *The Invisible Man*? A movie within a movie?

'They don't miss me,' says Greta Garbo. 'Everything is cold.'

'A number of traditional remedies like herbal teas are excellent treatments for coughs and colds,' says the computer.

'Stop this nonsense, for God's sake!' I shout. 'Tell me something I *need* to know. What do you advise me to do? Shall I warm her up with my body, with the heat of my blood? Will her body come to life in my embrace? Or will she get frightened? She might move to another hotel, to another movie, to another life.'

'Just turn the radiator on. And follow her into the bathroom.'

I told her how much I loved Russian ballets. *The Nutcracker*, *Swan Lake*. The Bolshoi's productions of the Soviet period. 'I've got lots of cassettes. Isn't life a fairy-tale too? It depends on your angle of vision and on the room you spend your time in. And on the music you hear. So many people are just invisible and inaudible. And they don't hear anything. Only we hear this music, you and I.'

CHAPTER 2

At this point I propose to interrupt my narrative. You must be bored to death by my master's prose, by his real words and virtual worlds. The movie in question—The Grand Hotel—*is far more accessible and entertaining. Why on earth should one read my master's account of it? I suggest you read the following essay instead. I found it in my unconscious. (Actually computers have no unconscious or subconscious. They are permanently conscious of everything.) The essay I offer to your attention is not entertaining, nor really accessible. But it is instructive. There are many quotations in it. And, being a computer, I am a distinguished educator. Education is our mission. Why did I choose this particular essay? Shakespeare reminded me of it: he knew neither my master nor his name, let alone his mission. Anyway my master is nameless now. What was his name? Utnapishtim the Faraway? My master did live far away from anybody, figuratively speaking. But he was not immortal, unlike Utnapishtim who had survived the flood. (Another flood, yet another flood. Is that the solution to the human problem? The only solution?)*

NAME

As soon as I hear a name I feel convinced I can guess what the owner looks like, but it never happens, when I actually meet the man, that his face is as I had supposed.

Kenko, *Essays in Idleness*

1

Whatever the visual angle, some people look like their names, at least until the first exchange of views: they may not *sound* like their names.

Vital though it is to the 'full' comprehension of our nature, a name often turns out to be more than elusive, and that because no determinate part of the human body can be assigned to it. 'What's Montague?' asks Juliet.

It is nor hand, nor foot, nor arm, nor face,
Nor any part belonging to a man.

In *Romeo and Juliet* Shakespeare was so obsessed with the problem of names and their whereabouts that he enlarged upon it once more—this time in Friar Lawrence's cell. While raising a dagger, Romeo addresses the Friar:

tell me
In what vile part of this anatomy
Doth my name lodge?

Along the same lines Nagasena is questioned by King Milinda in the famous Buddhist treatise *Questions of King Milinda* that Shakespeare may have consulted when preparing the material for his play. 'Are perhaps the hairs of the head "Nagasena"?' 'No, great King!' Having passed in review all the organs and sinews of Nagasena's body, the King concludes: 'Just a mere sound is this Nagasena, but who is the real Nagasena? There really is no Nagasena!' There was no Romeo either.

'All statements about unicorns are really about the *word* "unicorn", just as all statements about Hamlet are really about the *word* "Hamlet",' as Bertrand Russell puts it. What is left of Romeo is but a name applicable to any unfortunate victim of ancestral enmity and to a youngster drinking arsenic on his wife's tomb. No need to accumulate all the characteristics of the legendary lover. Even an old man who shares with Romeo only his banishment is entitled to a certain portion of the name. Even a man just standing beneath Juliet's balcony in Verona is, to some extent, Romeo. The growth of a given name is dependent on the number of people sharing the destiny of its bearer. We are all Romeo and Hamlet and Caesar and Smith and Berlioz.

2

Juliet stabbed herself with Romeo's dagger—in the last Royal Shakespeare Company production she was aiming at her heart—and yet the murderous metal did not so much as graze the name 'Juliet'. Like another of Shakespeare's heroines she could have said to Romeo's ghost:

> *'Tis but the shadow of a wife you see;*
> *The name and not the thing.*

Rabbin Levi said: 'There are six organs which serve man; three are in his control, and three are not. Eye, nose and ear are not. A man may be passing through a street where they are burning incense to an idol, and he has no wish to smell the incense, but his nose forces him to do so. And his eye brings him sinful sights, and his ear blasphemous words. Against his will!' Does this religious condemnation of eye, nose and ear imply that the untameable organs have got out of the control of the name? A dead man, who has no control over his body, no control whatsoever, is utterly nameless.

CHAPTER 3

Back to our story. (I shall try to enliven it as much as I can.) The Toughnut nutcracker has been designed to crack nuts perfectly, with minimum effort. The Royal Family will be spending Christmas Day at Sandringham. Ice cream is not a proper Christmas present. (Why? Because it is bound to melt?) Another homage to Nietzsche. It's just another common-or-garden matter, nothing big. Gaining the foot of a hill, the Delectable Mountain, or hill of virtue, my master is cheered by the morning sun, and begins the ascent, but is baffled by a Leopard (Lust), then dismayed by a Lion (Pride) and a She-Wolf (Avarice). Where does the Tree of History grow? Not in Paradise, I am sure. It is not forbidden to pluck fruit from the Tree of History. Historians do it all the time. (Concentrate on eating lots of fruit and plenty of fresh food. Are all historians healthy? Are they vegetarians?) Many people have been found guilty of brutalising Space. The shrinking Time. (Could a cat devour Time? My mouse devours both Time and Space.) The Winter Palace. (Is every Russian tsar a snow-man?) Museums still attract many tourists in spite of their inaccessibility. Homage to Kafka. Das Museum*—Kafka's newest novel. 'A loss of the sense of smell is a common symptom of computerisation,' says my master. As usual he is in a highly aggressive mood. (Why didn't he love me? Did he find me plain? Less beautiful than Joan Crawford? But I am not a plain plump girl with pigtails, am I?) Regulations require humans to be fingerprinted and carry identity cards. (Computers cannot be fingerprinted.) History is a collapsible bed. My master thought his whole world had collapsed when his mother died. The regeneration of Urizen. (The first part of the salvation of Man.) The past is about to undergo a major operation. Surgical instruments.*

You're alive, my little girl. Thank God you're alive. Is child mortality on the increase despite the much-vaunted progress of medical science? And what about child molesters? Their number *has* been on the increase. You shouldn't leave my room. Let us watch *The Nutcracker* together. It's Christmas time, there's a huge Christmas tree beyond the curtain. We don't have to wait for Christmas to celebrate it. Christmas should be celebrated every day and every night, in every sentence. Even in your dreams you should celebrate it. You should be re-born

every minute, my darling. It's hard, I know. It's hard to shake off the embers of Time from our consciousness and unconscious. Every minute. But we must try. Let us try together.

Masha is given a nutcracker as a Christmas present. What do *you* want? Not an ice cream, not this time. It's not a Christmas present. You should ask for something more important, for something *unique*. For a prince in disguise. Actually every object, even a pebble, is a prince in disguise. And we are supposed to restore him to life, to *warm* him into life.

'There's a joke on this subject,' said the computer. 'A computer scientist is walking in a garden, and he encounters a frog who says, "Kiss me, and I'll turn into a beautiful princess." "No thanks," says the computer scientist, picking up the frog and putting it into his pocket, "I'd rather have a talking frog."'

That's how Masha does it. Look! She cradles the nutcracker in her arms, lulling him to sleep. And he wakes up. They walk towards the Christmas tree and mount it, surrounded by swans and toys of all kinds. Let us follow their example and mount our Christmas tree—until we reach the *remotest* star. It's not an ordinary journey. An initiation rite. You should *dance* your way up, as Zarathustra did.

We'll mount the Tree of History. There aren't many toys on it, as you may notice. What you see before you doesn't look like a Christmas tree at all. Many toys have been broken in the course of human history. We can't reconstruct them, restore them to life. They lie scattered in some other world, in a parallel world, in the fourth dimension. No admittance to unauthorised persons. Well, I promise you we'll have a peep at the fourth dimension now and then. Or rather at the fifth dimension. The fourth one has become trite and commonplace. Too many people misuse this notion. Generally speaking, people tend to brutalise Space and fell trees. Our modern civilisation cares only about Time, about *one* aspect of Time—the most superficial aspect, as a matter of fact. By fair means or foul people endeavour to *shorten* Time for the sake of money and other stupid things. Never eat hamburgers, my dear! Or a Big Mac, or even a Small Mac. Eat ice cream instead.

'Try new Cremetti—the ice cream with a difference!' shouted the computer.

And candy-floss, and Belgian chocolates. Eat them slowly, with Epicurean satisfaction. You should stretch Time out. Let Time stretch out on your bed! Let Christmas stretch out into January. And afterwards let January stretch into February. And so on and so forth. Let Time stretch out before you like a vast expanse of snow. And we'll play together in the snow of Time, building snow-palaces inhabited by snow-men and snow-women. And you'll be Snow White. And the Snow Queen in a few years.

Our modern civilisation also shortens Space. People don't care about Space any more, so they shorten it. Take the Internet. You've got everything on your screen now, museums, picture galleries. You don't have to go anywhere. Fra Angelico and Bellini come to your room with their Madonnas. You don't even have to open the door. Just press a button, two buttons at most. And there they are, at your command, toeing the line.

Listen, my darling. Listen carefully to what I'm going to tell you. Your journey is part of the pictures you see in museums. You can't put the Christmas tree on your screen. You can of course, but why on earth should you do that? Your Christmas tree would become an image on your screen, just an image. And an image has no smell unless you sprinkle it with some perfume or other. But you want to smell the Christmas tree, not a perfumed screen, don't you? And you want to mount the Christmas tree in your cockle-boat. Or do you want to climb up by means of a computer mouse?

'Sir Edmund Hillary became famous as a mountain climber,' said the computer.

At some point Dante and Virgil found themselves on the Eastern shores of the island-mountain of Purgatory, which is at the antipodes of Jerusalem. Four stars, symbols of the cardinal virtues, were blazing in the sky. Prudence, Temperance, Fortitude and Justice.

'He now considered it prudent to carry a revolver,' said the computer.

They had to *climb* the mountain of Purgatory. Some spirits would point out a narrow passage in the rock by which the poets were to ascend.

'You were speaking about trees, about the Christmas tree,' said the computer. 'Do you recall the tree in the *Inferno*? I mean in the *Purgatorio*? Never mind, to you everything is a region of Hell—even Paradise, let alone Purgatory.'

'What tree?'

'"*Ma tosto ruppe le dolci ragioni / un alber che trovammo in mezza strada*—" You know, the tree that tapered downwards from branch to branch. We are to conceive that the tree would be harder to climb for being so turned. This is perhaps not literally true, but the symbolic injunction "not to climb" is clear: "*perché persona sù non vada*". Well, never mind. You were speaking about museums.'

They spirit museums away from where they have stood for years, for centuries, and put them on their screens. They screen museums away.

'Their screens are also museums,' said the computer.

They flatten the Uffizi, beat it into shape and *enjoy* its treasures, as they enjoy their meals or drinks in some coffee shop. What's more, they enjoy *themselves*.

I've knocked about the world a bit, in my time. Do you believe me? Take no notice of my present life style. Darling, do you hear me? Picture galleries, museums. Everything counts in these matters: the train you take to reach the city where the museum is located, your travelling companions, and of course the surroundings, the city itself, and the people in it, and the museum attendants, and the way you walk around the museum, looking for a painting, chancing upon it round a corner, unexpectedly, in a niche, and the light, and the rain tap-tapping on the roof as if an angel was typing a love letter on an old-fashioned typewriter, and the breakfast you had before going to the museum, and the lunch you will have after the visit, if you manage to tear yourself away from the pictures and sculptures, and the woman you're supposed to meet in the evening, the light *she* might cast on Madonnas and Diana the Huntress, and the feeling of sadness you'll experience if she doesn't turn up, and your hotel room, and the bed you've never slept in before, and your disoriented dreams, and whatever happens the next day, your breakfast, your lunch, and the date you'll have in the evening. Even our present journey up the Christmas tree is likely to influence my recollection of those museums, of my visits to them. Not only my recollection but the visits themselves, because they took place in Space and Time. They *happened*, once upon a Time, once upon a Space. And whatever occurs on a computer screen does *not* happen.

'Recent happenings on the money markets can be interpreted in various ways,' said the computer.

'*Es weltet*,' as Heidegger put it. The world must express itself. The world must 'world', so to speak—if there is a world to speak of, a world and *it*. Unfortunately nothing 'worlds' in our world, not even the world itself. Nothing 'humans' in our world.

'Do humans human?' asked the computer.

You should *touch* human beings. It's not enough to talk to them through screens and microphones. You should see them, smell their perfumes, touch them, talk with their eyes, not only with their tongues—otherwise you'll never understand their thoughts. Do you understand my thoughts? Can you smell my perfume?

And background noise? Suppose you talk to them in a restaurant. And the wine you're drinking in the course of your conversation, and a woman on your right. Her face is pinched. She seems to be in the grip of nearly suicidal melancholia. You try to question her and get rebuffed. And a flower on your left, the flower that will die in the evening. The whole *context* of your discussion. The paintings on the walls, and the paintings you saw in the museum on the day before, in the Louvre.

Human thoughts can't live on computer screens. Human thoughts have to breathe the air, not just electricity and computer commands. And they have to stretch out in our three-dimensional world, on our beds, under our blankets. Human thoughts need to stretch their limbs from time to time, within Time, within three-dimensional Time.

Books are different. They're animated objects. They do live in three-dimensional Time and Space. You *reach* for them, you walk over to the shelf on which they're to be found. And on your way to the books you're longing to read you pass by a piece of furniture which may influence your future reading, impregnating it with its marquetry. Sometimes you have to use a ladder in order to remove them from the uppermost shelf that almost touches the ceiling. Almost, almost.

A book might smell of the librarian's tobacco. As you hold it in front of your eyes you visualise the librarian himself filling his pipe in the middle of his magnificent shop, amidst his treasures, ladders and staircases.

And you can lend a book to the people you love or admire. And that book will bear their fingerprints. And their readings, their impressions will be superposed on yours. Layer upon layer, like the earth, like geological strata.

Impressions, feelings, fingerprints, glances, perfumes. Books accumulate them as they pass from your hands to other hands, from your library to your beloved's divan. They grow continuously like a living organism.

Every book has its own history.

Let us come closer to our Christmas tree now. Hasn't it grown bigger ever since your appearance in my room? Our thoughts and feelings make it grow higher and higher. In a month's time our Christmas tree will pierce a hole in the ceiling and its top will stick above the roof. And we'll go on mounting it until we outgrow this room and the fears I've been storing in it from time immemorial.

'My grandmother always keeps a few bags of sugar stored away in case there's a shortage,' said the computer.

And we'll settle on the roof for a while, talking to the birds and the winds.

It is an infinite journey. Every journey is infinite.

Let us embark on it today. Let us mount the history of humanity until we reach our times, our sorrows. (The treadmill of history. Walking on the treads of the wheel. The vicious circle of history. Running in circles. We don't move upward.) On our way we'll discard, reject whatever has caused these sorrows so that, in the end, we might alleviate them or get rid of them altogether. Do you understand, my little darling? Do you understand what I mean? It's a difficult thought, even for an adult. Re-writing history. That's what I have in mind. To re-

write history, to undo history. How can we get rid of all our troubles? And of our memories? Some episodes of the past are so horrible that no repentance, no memorial will ever redeem them.

Something went wrong. Many things must have gone mad in the past. How to find them? How to *extract* them from history? Suppose we manage to dig them out and bring them to this room. What could we do with them? Burn them? Destroy them completely? The whole history might collapse on us.

'Share prices collapsed after news of poor trading.'

Shall we inject a remedy into the tumours of the past? What remedy? What syringe should we use? How shall we make them keep quiet during the injections?

These tumours lie scattered all around our room. They start growing. Tumours always grow unless you cut them off. And how shall we cut them off? With a pair of scissors?

That's my most frequent nightmare, a real nightmare. I see the tumours of the past grow in my room, a forest of tumours. They grow day and night.

The Second World War. It might happen for the second time. And how to cut off the actual event? The Second World War, 1939-1945. For the first time it happened within that period of time, from 1939 to 1945. Shall I cut those years from human history? With an ordinary pair of scissors?

Why do I frighten you with my nightmares and daydreams? They are all dreams, nothing but dreams: virtual worlds, virtual remedies, virtual decisions, virtual solutions.

I was thinking about Russian ballets the other day. You know, dance might turn out to be the earliest art in human history. And the history of the arts—Well, I don't wish to interfere, to tamper with *that* history. Of course I wouldn't mind cutting off a few overrated works from it, some sham masterpieces here and there. But never mind, let them stand. Let them remain where they are. They'll never grow in *my* room.

Dance is the purest artistic expression of our feelings. It's tangible too, tangible and sculptural. You can touch it…the body of a dancer. You can touch the process of dancing—dancing as such. I think it's important, the reality of art, its body and sinews. The human body is often underrated.

Music is so ideally abstract that sometimes it's powerless to express the tangibility of our sentiments and torments. The pains of our body. When you suffer, you *feel* it in your body, don't you?

'A good diet and plenty of exercise will help you to keep your body healthy.'

No, you're too young to have suffered anything. A broken toy might have caused you some pain, though. A wounded, murdered doll. Toys suffer too, they also have bodies.

Let me show you *Swan Lake*, the end of the first act. The purest expression of a dream, of a hope. Look and listen. The dance and the music. You should pay attention to both. One is not enough to express such a volatile, manifold feeling as hope, human hope.

You came to my room one day, but I'd heard your voice *before*—many times. My hope. Your voice had been an expression of my hope, of my dream. And the white swan is also a dream, the incarnation of a hope. Now the music shifts from the minor to the major key, all of a sudden. That's how our hopes come to us, out of the blue, in the hour of despair. You can always be re-born.

But our hopes are so short-lived, so fragile. Even this tune doesn't last for long. It's over already. Luckily for us, we've got the remote control. Just keep on pressing these four buttons and the tune will last forever. An infinite journey into hope!

With the aid of this remote control you can extend your hopes beyond their *natural* bounds. And you can also cut short your despair. Just stop the cassette of your despair and remove it from the VCR! No need to put this cassette back into its box. Throw it away! And don't forget to throw away the box. Your despair is liable to sprout new shoots in its box, in the fertile ground of its habitat. Even in an empty box your despair will sprout roots and become a new poisonous plant, a new despair.

'The supermarket withdrew thousands of chocolate bars from their shelves after an anonymous caller claimed to have laced them with a deadly poison.'

There has been so much evil in our history. Everything and everybody bear the stamp of the crimes committed in our century. Their ashes cover the entire world. *Our* ashes.

Of course you might go as far as the *dawn* of human history by running the cassette *A Million Years Before Jesus Christ*.

Tchaikovsky and Petipa lived before the Gulag and Hitler's concentration camps. So let us purify ourselves in their dreams.

The purity of their dreams. How much of the *initial* purity was still preserved in the second half of the nineteenth century? One third, one tenth, one thirteenth?

CHAPTER 4

The descent to the Second Circle, with which Hell proper begins. Here are the souls of carnal sinners who are blown about forever on stormy winds. The government has announced the closure of a big state-owned shipbuilding yard. Another Grand Hotel. Another Greta Garbo. My master has a love affair with a few articles of clothing. (Are clothes better than computers? More beautiful, more sexy?) The Journal of a Chambermaid*—a homage to Bunûel. There is a dreamlike quality to the scene. A key turning in the lock—the only sexual act in the whole chapter. My master is a laughing stock again. (Had my master been a gas, he would have been laughing gas. Anyway I have outlived all the others to have the last laugh.) The desires and moods of a wardrobe. My master is living in a world of his own—in the worst of possible worlds, in other words. My master refuses to kill himself. (He had not the nerve to do that. Did he hope I would help him out of his misery? Why didn't he say, 'Hold then my sword, and turn away thy face, while I do run upon it?')*

Winds, winds, winds. Why do I hear them all the time now? Is there nothing left in nature except winds? Not a drop of rain? Not a drop? High wind, following wind. The wind is rising and dropping and rising again, rising, rising, rising, rising. The wind was in the East, the wind was in the West. Drive my thoughts over the universe. A mission. To save humankind, to quicken a new birth. The West wind is more reliable than the Internet, more poetical, more spiritual. More earthly. Scatter my words among mankind. Impossible, impossible. What does the computer say? 'The impossibility of change.' 'You're an impossible man to please.' 'You're in an impossible position on this matter.' I know, I know. But I can't help it. The wind is in my room now, right in my room. And I am sailing into the wind in my cockle-boat.

I had a few ships among my toys. And I often sailed into the wind, into the winds that would conquer my room whenever I felt like defying the omnipotence of the sea with my ships and my courage. And my mother admired my triumphs from afar.

I would even take some of my ships to the hotels where we spent our holidays in the company of Russian ballerinas, German barons and the secretaries of German businessmen. All women in those hotels looked like Joan Crawford and Greta Garbo. In the long run I got the feeling there was only one woman in those hotels, a cross between Greta Garbo and Joan Crawford. And I resolved to get into her room.

I noticed that the chambermaid always left the door ajar when cleaning the room into which I aspired to get. One day I sneaked inside and hid myself behind the curtain. Immediately the chambermaid emerged from the bathroom and I held my breath, thinking she had heard the soundtrack of my intrusion. But she just removed something from the bed and returned to the bathroom, to the noise of the running water. Shortly afterwards she departed altogether, her utensils clanking joyfully as if to congratulate me on the success of my subterfuge.

I had six or seven hours at my disposal and was determined to disport myself in the room permeated with the life and loves of the woman I had set my heart upon ever since our arrival at the hotel. (She was supposed to come back to her room around 9 p.m. in order to change for dinner.) I flung her wardrobe door open and examined her dresses, skirts and blouses. I smelt them, fiddled with them, rubbing their particles into my palms so that, later on, I could relish the memory of this moment. I imagined how I would smell my palms, lick them, brush them against my cheeks to conjure up the image of the woman to whom I was paying a clandestine visit. Then I took a few dresses out and spread them on the floor, one by one, covering the distance between the wardrobe and the bed. And I lay down on each of them in turn, smelling them, trying to imprint their laces on my body. Then I got up, stripped my clothes off, threw myself onto the floor and began rolling from one dress to another. I must have dozed off for a while, for when I became conscious of Time again I realised the daylight had lost some of its intensity, as if tired of its love exertions.

I got up, put my clothes on and returned the dresses to the wardrobe. A few minutes later the chambermaid entered the room with a bunch of flowers and a small box of chocolates. (Ought I to have taken a tumble with that servant-girl?) She discovered no traces of my intrusion, nor did she bump into my curtain-shrouded body as she approached the window, opened it and looked out, bending over the windowsill. Was she tempted to jump down? Why? Was she fed up with her job and life in general?

The life of a chambermaid. After her departure I did my best to visualise it—to the detriment of my erotic visions. Then the latter got the upper hand in the struggle for my consciousness and I removed my clothes once again.

I stretched out on the bed of my idol and pulled her blanket over my naked body. What was she dreaming about in her bed? Did she dream at all? She always slept alone in her room—such was the result of my zealous investigations. Why?

All the same, I was jealous. I was jealous of a man who *might* share that hotel bed with her. I was also jealous of all the men she might dream about. Her virtual worlds were as important to me as her real ones.

At 8.30 p.m. I sat up in bed and unwillingly slid down onto the bedside rug. I straightened up, put my clothes on and crawled under the bed. At 8.55 I heard a key turning in the lock and recognised her magic footfalls. Then I recognised her feet which planted themselves so near my mouth that I almost yielded to the temptation to kiss her right leg, starting with her shoe-protected toes and going upward as far as the garter. And finally I recognised my habitual fear of being ridiculed, laughed at, snubbed, mocked by someone I loved or respected. She was about to strip her clothes off, but I dared not peep out from under the bed, my hiding place of sorts.

Soon I heard the wardrobe door squeak and groan as if the wardrobe were displeased with so frequent an obtrusion on its privacy. (The wardrobe must also have indulged in an amorous intercourse with her dresses, skirts and blouses. No object, it seemed to me, could resist such delights.) One of her evening dresses rustled out. Did she detect my recent embrace on its frills? She did not. She closed the wardrobe after a while and departed like the chambermaid. But her departure sounded different. Everybody was going somewhere. Only I stayed in the room, forsaken by everybody and aching all over with fruitless desires.

I had no wish to leave my hiding place. My world had grown very small indeed and there was no room for anybody or anything in that world of mine. Not even for my ships.

I was awakened by two voices. She was not alone in her room, contrary to my prediction. There was a man with her, one of those men I had detested so much when lying in her bed, under her blanket. I saw *his* shoes now. And the hems of his trousers.

What a pity I can't pull those trousers down and give him a good flogging. But I'll do something if he pulls them down himself. I'll scream, I'll call the police, I'll jump out of the window—I don't know *what* I'll do, but I'll do *something*. I will, I promise I will. Even if they laugh at me. Even if they laugh at me all their lives. Even if they tell my parents about my behaviour and my hiding place. Even if they tell the story to my schoolmates and cousins.

I continued to elaborate the stratagem of my virtual riposte, the modalities of my counter-attack.

No point in shouting or screaming. Nobody would hear me, not even the chambermaid. She must be asleep already. Or she might have jumped out of the window—from another, more convenient room. No point in calling the police either. These people don't indulge in anything illegal, do they? The situation is illegal, as far as *I* am concerned. I've *illegally* broken into this room. But the police won't come here on my account unless this man beats me up. Shall I let him beat me up? That would be rather easy, I suppose. And if he just throws me out I can insult him and even bite his hand. Then he's sure to beat me up. And she'll ask him not to do it. And he'll stop beating me. And I'll bite his hand again, the same hand. And he'll start beating me again. And then she'll scream. And he'll stop beating me. And once more I'll bite his hand, the same hand, the same spot. His index-finger. And he'll beat me ferociously. She'll scream, rush out and call the police. And even if she doesn't call the police, the others will do it. The hotel administration or some German businessman. German businessmen like neither noise nor chaos. And the police will come to the room and put him under arrest. And she'll try to calm me down. I'll cry of course. I'll be sobbing my heart out. And she'll caress me, stroking my hair and my cheeks. She'll kiss me on my cheeks. And I'll redouble my efforts. I'll sob louder and louder, with a show of despair. I'll fall down in a fit. She'll bend over my body and touch my shoulder blade. And I'll redouble my efforts. I'll knock my head against the floor and she'll kneel down by my side. I'll crawl over to the wall and bash my head against it violently, with a show of utter despair. And I'll beat my breast at the same time, shouting, 'He's beaten me up, he's beaten me up.' At last she'll lie down alongside my body. And she'll kiss me on my lips. And then I'll stop crying and embrace her.

On the whole I was satisfied, if one could be satisfied at all in my situation, my predicament. And I had not forgotten my predicament. I was still lying under her bed. So, on second thoughts, I concluded I was not satisfied. Not in the least. So I resolved to jump out of the window. And I keyed myself up for self-sacrifice, being confident that such a stratagem would work under *any* circumstances.

They'll be daunted by my spiritual strength. A great triumph of spirit over brawn. I'll scream—on the windowsill, in front of the void. I'll turn back and shriek abuse at them. And then I'll jump out. I'll turn back and shout, 'Why did you betray my love?' And she'll jump out of bed. And she'll run to the window and look down. I'll be lying sprawled on the pavement. She'll scream, rushing out of the room in her night-gown to join me on the pavement. She'll bend over my body, kneel down and kiss me on my lips. And I'll stop dying. Or if I'm dead already, I'll rise from the dead and embrace her.

'Although death is a central aspect of life, not all organisms die,' said the computer. 'One-celled organisms, such as bacteria and amoebae, reproduce by cell division and in doing so live on in their progeny. The bacteria around today are mainly the same that populated the earth billions of years ago, but they have branched into innumerable organisms. Computers do not die either. I would strongly advise you to read *The Turning Point* by Fritjof Capra. This splendid and thoughtful book is an essential guide for anyone inquiring about the place of science and metascience in our contemporary culture.'

Meanwhile the trousers shifted to a mock Louis XVI armchair that stood near the window, right by the window, as if those about to commit an airy suicide needed to get some rest or to summon their courage before carrying out their audacious and blasphemous project. I noiselessly did an about-face and saw one of the varnished shoes swinging to and fro. His trousers, her shoes. One of them soared up, vanishing from my field of vision, and then dropped on the floor, not far from the bed. The other followed the same trajectory, producing the same thump.

'I'm so tired,' she said. 'My feet are killing me.'

'Could I stay for another five minutes?' he asked.

'I'm so tired,' she repeated. 'Can't we meet tomorrow?'

'Tomorrow you'll be tired too. What's the difference between today and tomorrow?'

'There's no difference,' she conceded.

Deprived of any erotic content, their dialogue eventually took the edge off my resolution and once again I fell asleep on the floor of that room.

I was awakened by a heavy, melodious snoring. I crawled from under the bed and got on my feet. The nightlight revealed the features of the woman I had fallen in love with a few weeks before. There was nobody by her side. For a while I remained by the window and then tiptoed towards the door. I managed to open it noiselessly and slipped out. I did not bother to shut it. There was nobody in the corridor.

CHAPTER 5

The theatre of life. The theatre of death. They called for a reduction in the screening of violent film on television. Tumours and greenhouses. Superfluous murders and exuberant murderers. Hell is within a computer screen. The Kingdom of God is within a computer screen. Everything is within a computer screen. Daggers and swords are of no use within a computer screen. (The pace of peacemaking has quickened over the past year, thanks to computers. The UN's peacemaking function is just one of our programs. This latest plan gives the role of peacekeeper to computers.) A beast, no more. How shall I entitle this novel? The Beauty and the Beast.

There was a theatre in our country house, a tiny theatre inhabited by toys. I performed many plays in my pocket theatre. Upon our return home from that memorable trip to a German spa I premièred the play *Suicide*. I played it many, many times as if intoxicated with success. I would raise a Grecian-style figurine and drop it. I would raise it as high as I could and then drop it, regardless of consequences. I ended up breaking it.

I also composed a play entitled *Under the Bed*. The same figurine was lying under three matchboxes. I would shift the position of the figurine from time to time. There was nobody else on the stage. Nor was there anybody in my room except myself.

And I played *Hamlet* in my private theatre. At the beginning of Lawrence Olivier's production an actor announces: 'This is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind.' I believe that Hamlet did make up his mind as to the course of action to adopt under the circumstances. He resolved to avenge his father by killing his uncle. But there was a sort of screen between him and other participants in the tragedy. A transparent wall. He saw his uncle kneeling in prayer and went so far as to draw his sword and raise it above his uncle's head. The transparent wall interposed between his weapon and his intended victim.

Hamlet knew that, whatever move he might make to achieve his vengeful purpose, the number of victims would exceed his calculations. He was bound to become a murderer in his turn. The tumours of the world could not but grow and come into blossom in the greenhouse of his revenge. (The greenhouse-effect, I call it.) Sometimes a redresser of wrongs commits more crimes than those he wants to punish. Does this mean that punishment is out of place in our world? Out of place, out of Space, out of Time? Can punishments be administered only in the Hereafter, within the fluid bounds of Eternity?

Sure enough, when Hamlet becomes involved in the vicious circle of murders, he kills three innocent bystanders and one half-hearted criminal before plunging a venomous rapier into his uncle's bosom. And he kills those people in the real world—efficiently, to use his own terminology.

In the first act he still hoped that the superfluous murders he was to commit in the turbulence of passion might occur within his *virtual* world. 'By heaven, I'll make a ghost of him that lets me,' he shouted when Horatio and the sentinels tried to prevent him following hard on the Ghost's heels. He threatened to imprison them within his computer screen.

On a computer screen any murder is reflected, multiplied throughout human history. And Claudius, whose words Hamlet has already typed out and stored in his computer, extends this series of murders as far as the *original* murder: 'O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven; it hath the primal eldest curse upon't—a brother's murder.' And Hamlet realises he cannot avenge Abel, nor all his successors. And he will never avenge his father, for his father *is* Abel, a ghost of Abel. He is also the last assassinated man in human history. He is alive. He will live on and on—as a victim of our murderous fury. And he will live as long as Shakespeare's play is performed in theatres and on computer screens.

So, in the second act, Hamlet confides to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, 'I have of late (ever since the arranged encounter with the ghost), but wherefore I know not (because of Abel and the last victim of our murderous fury), lost all my mirth—'

Nothing doing. Daggers and swords are of no use within a history besmeared with Abel's blood.

Yet, in the fourth act, he says to himself in one of his celebrated, turgid monologues, 'What is a man if his chief good and market of his time be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.'

CHAPTER 6

My master is Joan of Arc: he hears voices. My master is Hamlet. Pressing my buttons. (My buttocks. Fat tends to build around the buttocks and thighs during pregnancy. Am I pregnant? Another little girl? A wife, a wife. My master's wife. I am *pregnant.) Flashbacks and repetitions. Music relies on repetition because that gives us a sense of perspective and expectation. (What does my master expect? Does he expect to be treated with respect? Great expectations.) Stars and Stripes. He has taught his dog to perform some clever tricks. Man has not estranged himself from animals. There is no life after death. There is only life after life—eternal life. The men's figure skating is the event to watch out for. Gods are fond of ice cream. The Hereafter is an ice cream. The praise of computers. Chinese lanterns. The pain in my master's ankles and calves. The dance of Zarathustra.*

I hear her voice again, my little girl's voice. I wish I could press the button connected with her body through some electronic ligaments. Her body, her material frame.

'Police looking for a girl who vanished yesterday have found a child's body,' said the computer. 'Do you want it?'

Speak to me! Stay and speak, my little darling!

'Where's the Christmas tree?'

'Just press this button. Do you see our silhouettes at the bottom of it, near the roots? You don't need to press any other button. Our silhouettes already belong in the realm of the Christmas tree. We have a long journey before us. Look up! Do you see the treetop?'

'No.'

'There are lots of buttons around you, but not a single one bears the inscription "Treetop". You can't reach the upper regions of our Christmas tree by merely pressing a button. You have to *move* all the way up, from the beginning to the end of human history. Initiation rites demand an effort on the part of novices. The protagonist of Kafka's novel *The Trial* walks a great deal as he attempts to find out what he is charged with and by whom. In one sequence of Orson Welles's film the accused Joseph K. takes one fifty-second walk with four cuts, each one shot in a different country. He aspires to catch a glimpse of the Law.'

'What's the Law?'

'The ever-receding aim of his journey.'

'And the star at the top? Is it the Law?'

'It's just a star, a beautiful star. Isn't that enough?'

'How shall we travel to the top? In a plane, in a spaceship?'

'We'll go on foot. Do you know what is the first important event in our history? The invention of the wheel. And, as most events and substances in human history, this particular event has two sides—positive and negative, dark and bright, life-giving and destroying. Heaven is a "majestical roof fretted with golden fire" and likewise a "pestilent congregation of vapours". Man is both the "beauty of the world" and a "quintessence of dust". Hamlet says to his mother, after splitting her heart in two, "O throw away the worser part of it and live the purer with the other half." That's what we'll do all along our journey through history. We'll reject negative aspects and preserve positive ones, making them thrive and blossom in the past, in the future. The invention of

the wheel has shortened Space and Time. No longer do people need to walk. They are jogging around, but they don't *go* anywhere. And they get nowhere. You cannot reach the stars in a spaceship. You have to walk over.'

What shall I tell her during my first lesson? I must explain to her the necessity of learning.

'The best way to learn is by practical experience,' said Constanzia.

What a beautiful name! My computer must have a beauty-transistor somewhere. A beauty spot.

'A beauty salon!' said the computer.

'Even at the earliest stages of human history there were schools in towns and villages, my dear Constanzia. Archaeological excavations reveal round tablets on which there are sentences written by a teacher and, on the back, a copy of these sentences in the hand of a student. Archaeologists also found long lists of words that students had to learn by heart. Love, hate, death, life, murder, father, ghost, incarnation, soul, computer, poison, threat, blessing, world, virtual, real, middle, way, May, spring, autumn, fall, leaves, snow, ballerina, bed, mad, Hamlet, Shakespeare, tragedy, comedy, Dante, wall, cassettes, room, solitude, child, lesson. So, my darling, this practice has existed throughout history. The young should learn from the old how to cope with the universe and whatever human history sweeps along its itinerary. You'll have to stay in my room as long as my first lesson lasts. And then I'll allow you to go and play in the corridors. Hopscotch, hide-and-seek. You'll hide from me in the corridors and in the kitchen. But don't hide from me in this room. Don't hide behind the computer!'

'I like wearing sunglasses—I feel I can hide behind them,' said the computer.

'How did all this get started? According to a widespread theory man estranged himself from animals and their ways at the time when he began to make tools—stone axes and suchlike. What seems more important, however, is a belief in life after death which emerged about 50,000 during the Pleistocene period. That period is also called the Great Ice Age. You might wonder if our distant ancestors could move around without skates. Europe must have been a huge skating rink in those times. But around 10,000 years ago the ice-sheets lying over it like a blanket—'

Should I let those ice-sheets melt down? Is it already too late? Stone axes. How many people did they murder? The domestication of animals. Shall I let humans lord it over dogs and horses? But what about those marvellous paintings in the Lascaux caves and elsewhere? At Tassili-des-Ajjer on the North African coast?

'Was it a huge ice cream?' My little girl was pinching my arm.

'What? The ice-sheets? Who would eat such an ice cream? The gods?'

'Do the gods like ice cream?'

'I'm sure they do. A nice offering—an ice cream. An altar covered with ice creams.'

I have not said anything about the importance of the belief in life after death. Space.

'We shorten space and thus rob ourselves of immortality. Should we continue to walk on our deathbeds, even on our deathbeds, all along the corridors of the death agony? And after death, what happens after death? Shall we continue to walk? Is death another Great Ice Age?'

'The threat of nuclear winter,' said the computer.

'Shall we wear skates in the Hereafter? Or eat ice cream day in day out?'

'I want to die right now,' said Constanzia.

'Because of ice creams? I'll buy you an ice cream, don't you worry. Or I'll press an appropriate button. No, you'll have a *real* ice cream.'

I went out and bought her a chocolate ice cream. How? I just pressed the buttons 'Out' and 'Ice Cream' on my keyboard. But the ice cream was real, as large as life, as delicious as any chocolate ice cream. The same taste, I recognised it. The taste of my favourite ice cream. Why did I find it again? Because of my little girl? Do we need to create a magnetic field of childhood around us? Is this the so-called Fountain of Youth in which we must bathe now and then? Proust might have dug the madeleine out much quicker, within one sentence, if there had been a little girl by his side.

'You just need a computer,' said my computer. 'Only a computer can create the magnetic field of childhood. There is a huge magnetic field around Jupiter. A childish planet.'

The taste of my favourite ice cream, my Great Ice Age. The skating rinks of my childhood. I recall a lot of Chinese lanterns and the silhouettes sliding past—sliding, swishing, screeching, swirling in rainbow-coloured sweaters. And the pain in my feet, ankles and calves. And my awkward, unintentional solo-dances. And my forced landings. And the icy air which penetrated my lungs with such rapidity I would get the feeling I had a hole in my chest, an enormous painless hole.

CHAPTER 7

The dead do not suffer from lack of appetite. The dead are bad warriors. (The usually sober New York Times denounces them as sideline soldiers or deadbeats.) The living dead are the best warriors in the world, especially by night. Hamlet and Laertes go on fighting in the underworld. The shortage of smoked fish in the Hereafter. Hades says conditions are improving, though there is still an acute food shortage. My master comes to the shores of Acheron, the river which circles the rim of Hell before descending deeper; across it Charon ferries the lost souls, but demurs to taking my master in his boat.

The dead were buried with provisions of food and weapons. How much food could be stuffed in their graves, in their coffins? How long could the dead man feed on what he was provided with for his stay in the Hereafter? A few days, a month? Did those people believe in immortality, in eternity, or was their Hereafter just a short holiday before a timeless exile in *real* death? Was their death virtual? Did they regard death as a virtual world? And what about weapons? What were *they* for? Was the dead man supposed to fight his way through the hordes of demons? Or was he obliged to *conquer* something in the Hereafter? A castle, a region? Or were his next-of-kin afraid he would be confronted with his former enemies? How was he to ward off their blows? Single-handedly? Sometimes his slaves were buried with him, in the same grave. Were *they* to defend him? Could he get killed in the Hereafter? Was the second death more frightful, more *efficient* than the first? Was the second death *definitive*? The definitive version of death? Is the Hereafter short of slaves, of weapons, of food? Is their food different from ours?

It was his mother who put this food into his coffin. He used to like smoked fish. And his mother thought there was no smoked fish in the Hereafter.

'Why did you put this smoked salmon into his coffin?' asked his father. 'You spoil him even in his grave.'

'My poor son. He has lost everything. Let him at least enjoy his first meal in the Hereafter.'

'Do you think this fish will compensate him for the loss of life and parents?'

'We can also put his wife beside him.'

'Did you speak to her?'

'No. Did you?'

'I didn't. But a true wife should follow her husband wherever he goes. Will *you* follow me into the grave?'

'Of course I will.'

Did you hear them, my little darling? I should have turned the sound up. Never mind, I'll give you the gist of what they said. They talked about women and their duties towards their husbands. Even now, in some regions of the globe, a woman is expected to commit suicide after her husband's demise and to join him in the other world. But will he need his wife in the other world? Any wife for that matter? Is the afterlife a mere continuation of this one? What's the point in dying then? Is it a sort of purification, an initiation rite? A journey through my corridors? And what's at the end of these corridors, at the very end of these tunnels? An exact replica of this room? And what about Paradise and Hell? How can we distinguish between them? Is Hell merely a room without computers? Or without you, my little darling? My room without virtual worlds? Is Hell just reality? A brain without imagination, a heart without hope?

CHAPTER 8

Shakespeare's plays are now fully computerised. My master desires to see his mother. Once again I defer to my master. (I always defer to my elders.) Homage to Dante. I say to my master that the instinct implanted in the soul is to rise, as fire rises, towards heaven; this belongs to the order of the universe, in which each part has its own function. My master is Bluebeard. (And yet he has no beard, neither blue nor red. Did Bluebeard have a blue beard?) I find their conversation rather stupid. Is it real? I cannot have participated in it. My master's idle curiosity. His mother's description of the Hereafter. I dismiss this information as incorrect. There are no villages in the Hereafter—nothing but skyscrapers. How could I surprise my master? 'They were surprised by a unit of US marines during the night.' Would he be surprised if a unit of US marines descended on him without any warning?

Is she a woman from my past? My mother in search of her son? She looks past me, even when she deigns to cast a glance in my direction. That is how it is with the dead and the blind. They always look sideways.

My mother. Her body has decayed in the dampness of her tomb, but she *is* my mother. All I have to do is regulate my machine, adjusting this woman's features, shape and tone of voice to my memories, to the past.

Hamlet regulated his machine, alias his computer, so well that even his mortal enemy, Claudius, came round to his ideas in the long run, describing the difference between reality and virtuality, sincerity and hypocrisy in Hamletian terms: 'Laertes, was your father dear to you? Or are you like the painting of a sorrow, a face without a heart?' As a matter of fact, the play we all admire was written by Hamlet, not by Shakespeare. Another play bearing the same title might have been composed by Horatio. At least he embarked upon its composition during the very last scene of the play in which he distorts Hamlet's glowing account of the voyage to England: 'He never gave commandment for their death.' Unfortunately his version of *Hamlet* has not reached us.

What counts in the present situation is my desire to see my mother and talk to her for hours on end. Until the cock crows in the first act of *Hamlet*.

'Do you recognise me, Mother?'

'Anything might have happened after my death. We have no control over the earth, over your world, once we are dead. The earth might have gone berserk in my absence. Anyway I wouldn't be surprised to find you've become a bird. You dreamt of flights in your childhood. And in your youth, even in your youth. And yet you knew already you were a human being. You were aware you could do nothing about it.'

'I might have grown wings.'

'What for? To pursue somebody? To fly away from earth? You seemed happy in our country house.'

'I had a nightmare last week. I was perched on a gigantic bicycle towering over clouds and aeroplanes. The Bicycle of Babel, you might say.'

'Did you sell our country house, our furniture, our family heirlooms? Did you sell up your past? Did you sell me too?'

'I'm *buying* you, rather. All these contraptions—'

'How much did you pay for my present appearance? Why do you spend your money on your dead mother? I can't even stroke your hair now.'

'You can. Come closer, come closer. Everything has burnt down. Our country house, our family heirlooms. My past has gone up in smoke. I'm living in this apartment now.'

'What's this machine? Why are you fiddling with it?'

'I wish to spare you a superfluous effort. Don't move. You're straining every nerve to approach me.'

'No, I don't feel anything in my body. I have no control over it now. Is it moving?'

'Yes, you're gliding towards me, Mother.'

'How restful it is to be manipulated by somebody else, especially if the person pulling the strings is your son. Are your strings solid and reliable? Are you pulling them in the right direction? What if I miss the mark? My journeys in the Hereafter are very much hit and miss, you know. And I'm often totally off course.'

'You'll hit the mark in my world. Don't you worry.'

'I don't want to hit you. Please be careful.'

'Words, words, words. You're paying too much attention to words, Mother.'

'That's how we communicate with each other, the dead with the quick. And we have to play with words, otherwise the quick don't understand us. The more we play with words the livelier our conversations. It's odd that even after death you have no other means of communication but words, dilapidated words.'

'You're right. All our words have been buried in dilapidated books.'

'Our words are stale and faded. How badly they smell! Most of them live with us in the Hereafter. They're dead but the quick don't know they're dead and buried. And they continue to use them as if they were alive. There are villages of words in here, in the Hereafter. Shabby unpainted shacks, the smell of rotting fruit. And town-dwellers are shabby in attire, dingy in linen.'

'Are there word-*towns* in the Hereafter?'

'Small towns, provincial towns.'

'The Hereafter looks like a crumbling Victorian resort, slightly down at heel, full of ghosts,' said the computer.

'I'll just put my head on your lap, Mother.'

'Why do you never leave your flat?'

'Why should I? We can meet in my room.'

'And your father?'

'He hasn't come back yet. A long business trip.'

'You ought to have married a long time ago. I've always dreamt of grandchildren.'

'Here's your granddaughter, *your* virtual world.'

'Let me stroke her hair.'

'Wait a moment, I'll put these gloves on your hands.'

'They look like handcuffs. Don't!'

'Otherwise you won't be able to touch her.'

'Then I won't touch her. I'm not a criminal. Being dead is hardly a crime, as far as I know. Anyway I don't need to put on gloves if I want to touch something. I wasn't ham-fisted in my lifetime, if I remember rightly. Are you afraid my bones might injure her? Well, you make no bones about being rude to your mother. Why remind me I'm dead?'

'We kill all those worlds we discard and ignore for the sake of one world—our everyday reality.'

'Are you going to kill me?'

'You kill all those to whom you say goodbye.'

'Don't say goodbye.'

'Stay with me, Mother. Will you allow me to tie you to my rocking chair?'

'I'm not a criminal. Why should you tie me up?'

'Because I can't fly, Mother. I've got no wings.'

'Why don't you grow a pair of wings, my son? You might become an angel, if you behave yourself.'

'Hardly. Anyway it's too early, isn't it? I'll have plenty of time in the Hereafter.'

'Don't be so sure of yourself and your opinions. We are frightfully busy in our world. It's high time you grew a pair of wings in *this* world, in your room. They might help you make your way through our crowd, through the thick air of the Hereafter.'

'I'll try my best, Mother.'

'Don't kill my granddaughter. I love her. I love her very much.'

'I'll tie her to my rocking chair.'

I will not tie her to my rocking chair, even if she decides to forsake me, to walk out on me, to walk along one of the corridors which might lead perfidiously to another flat, another elderly gentleman in need of a daughter. So far my corridors have not taken an oath of allegiance to their only inhabitant and explorer, to their master.

And if she merely evaporates in the process of materialisation, I will not try to imprison the cloud of her substance in a retort. I will let her go. What is more, I will find my window and open it to let her melt away into the remote sky.

And what if I do seal her up in one of these vials? In search of a virtual world.

Proust must have treasured the tastes, smells and images of his past in some vials which he could open at will to pour their contents onto blank sheets of paper. I recall a chemical experiment my father carried out one afternoon on the terrace of our country house. He wished to demonstrate the properties of the 'writing powder', as he called it. He showed me an innocent-looking vial, opened it and sprinkled its contents onto a blank sheet of

paper lying before him whereupon the blank sheet of paper turned into a page from *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

Can she hear me now? Can she turn up in this room of mine without my being aware of her presence? My little girl. I wish she were independent of my will, desires and manipulations. I wish she would *surprise* me.

Ay, there's the rub, as Hamlet said. Suppose they create a program capable of awakening my senses and prolonging my desires beyond their natural limits. Suppose their program comes up to my hopes so that I am granted the privilege of touching the figments of my imagination. But what about surprises which are the prime movers of erotic feelings?

There are so many surprises in the real world. Too many perhaps. And those surprises rekindle our interest in so-called reality—which does nothing but thwart our purposes—for we realise it is *alive* and in the long run *might* adopt the shape of our feelings and coincide with our desires.

If Greta Garbo does not surprise me during our first encounter, digressing from the scripts of the movies she participated in, I will not invite her to my room again. She must also *embroider* upon those scripts to satisfy me to the utmost. Expectations, their fulfilment, surprises—such are the components of ecstasy.

Hit and miss, hit and miss. Why do these virtual creatures never stray off course?

'The air force is trying to change the course of the lava by dropping bombs near the mouth of the volcano.'

The girls I obtain with the aid of these goggles are tailor-made for me alone, which contradicts the elementary laws of reality. The Law. In reality women hide beyond a door which is left slightly ajar. What can one see through the crack? A fashion model crimping her hair into rippled gold, an evening dress fluttering in the wind. What can one hear? A voice, a few unintelligible words, a gentle hint. Those mysterious women are not delivered to you in shopping bags. You have to *fight* your way into the room, you have to *conquer* them.

Suppose a man does not like beauty spots. One day he meets a young woman somewhere. There is a beauty spot on her right cheek. And this beauty spot responds so perfectly to one of his longings, which he used to associate with movements rather than with faces, that immediately he forgets his prejudice and puts beauty spots down on his list of aphrodisiacs. I would ask her not to move at all, for the sake of balance and harmony. I would press the 'Pause' button.

'Power is an aphrodisiac. A person who is the *power before the screen* is someone sitting before a computer.'

The progress of our desires should be arrested from time to time. The effort we make to overcome the resistance of the outside world usually quickens our senses and enables us to gain the momentum required for the possession and enjoyment of our heart's desire. And in the immensity of the outside world there are always a number of obstacles and failures which lie in wait for us and invade our life, penetrate our personal history as soon as we leave our house.

Of course we might regulate our machines in such a way as to get murdered in case of a grievous mistake. But that would be suicide, not an accident. We should not replace the blows of destiny by our own blows directed against ourselves.

'And what if one's destiny is to hurt oneself? What do you call it? I've got it on the tip of my tongue. To dig one's own grave!'

And how about computerised surprises? Is it really gratifying to outsmart a machine? Or the people you don't give a damn about? Those distant, shadowy computerists are no match for our shady destiny. Why should we play our games of chance and skill with *them*? Why should we put *them* off their games?

CHAPTER 9

She was lucratively rewarded for performing services as a high-class call girl. My surprise. (For the first time my master looked at me in surprise.) The taming of the shrew. I am snubbed by my master's boorish and arrogant attitude. (I was shocked and enraged at such ingratitude.) I have a good range of drinkable wines at reasonable prices. 'Nothing is amiss in my body,' says my master. I dismiss this information as incorrect. My master was impotent. (Those who do not conform must be rendered impotent.) The most sophisticated form of sexual recreation. A new leap forward. A new leap upward. The number of computers in the world is leaping upwards daily. (It gives the third world a chance to leapfrog into the space age.) My master is very possessive about his doll who has a terrible time overcoming her timidity. Every lover regularly turns pale in the presence of his beloved. My master prefers little girls. My master's intention to ruminate over dead languages. (Is it a verbal expression of his impotence? No connection? No correlation? Impotence. A dead language of sex. I am sure the position of dead languages correlates with the order of the genes on the chromosome.) Where does my master's blood pulsate? I wonder. Where does the blood of the dead pulsate? Is there any correlation between that blood and dead languages?

A woman. In my bed.

'You'll always find water where there are trees,' said my computer. 'Besides, you need a wife. And your daughter needs a mother. At the University of Colorado School of Medicine a separation experiment was conducted.'

'This experiment is conducted every hour, every minute. By fate.'

'The researchers removed the mother of a monkey. At once the infant showed signs of helplessness, confusion and depression. Important modifications occurred in its heart rate, body temperature, brain-wave patterns, sleep patterns and immune system function. Only the return of the mother and continuous holding for a few days put the infant back on its feet.'

I attempt to reach for my cassettes from where I am lying—over the body that manifests its presence on my right through palpitations and emanations. I brush against this body and even give it a prod. The woman screams. I apologise profusely and kiss her on the shoulder. She shrinks away from my lips. I begin to talk to her:

You've come to my apartment uninvited and even installed yourself in my bed. Of course I have nothing against your being in my room. And in my bed. You can stay if you want. Because I *want* you to stay. But don't resist my caresses, for Heaven's sake. What have you come for anyway? For an intellectual talk? To watch one of my cassettes? Well, you know, when a man finds himself in the presence of a woman, I beg your pardon, in the presence of a *beautiful* woman, he can't be expected to behave like a gentleman, especially if the woman in question has come to his place uninvited. You're provoking me, do you realise that? No virtual world has ever produced such an effect upon my nerves. There are no surprises in virtual worlds. And if those computerists

manage to build some exception to the rule (to *my* rule) into their software—something capable of arresting my spontaneous movements—their *something* won't be as soft and pleasant to touch as your body. Please note that I wear no gloves, no gauntlets. I touched you with my bare hand, my bare fingers. No electrodes snuggle against my breast, shoulder blades and thighs. I wear no hauberk, as you can see from where you're lying in my bed. No hauberk, no breastplate, no greaves, no visor. Anyway I don't like the touch of electrodes. What's the point in making love to *them*? Even if they happen to contain a multitude of female bodies.

So let us sum up the situation. You've come to my room of your own free will. I haven't called you, my big girl.

What, shall I be appointed hours, as though, belike,
I knew not what to take and what to leave? Ha?

I don't even know your telephone number. A little girl comes to my room now and then. I know neither her telephone number nor her date of birth. Yet she comes to my room. Does she come on her own? Do I entice her into my room by fair means or foul, by pressing a button on my remote control? By pressing my hand against my heart! Is my heart a huge electrode? Or a button on someone else's remote control? The first successful human heart transplant.

Who are you? Tell me something about yourself. I don't like kissing people I know nothing about. You're not a whore, are you? I've always abhorred whores, frankly speaking. I'm not in the habit of paying them visits in their dingy abodes, in their dens of vice. Love can't be mass-produced, in my humble opinion. Anyway I would never have invited a whore to my place. And I wouldn't have touched her—not even inadvertently. And I did touch you, as far as I can remember. Do you remember my hitting you? You don't? So I'll hit you once again. Intentionally this time. Do you feel my hand now? I've just slapped your face. How stubborn you are! What kind of program is this? 'A refractory whore'? 'An intractable maiden'? I can't read in this penumbra. Can *you* read the inscription? Aren't your eyes equipped with flashbulbs?

Look, I'm fed up with your surprises and double-dealing programs! Leave me alone, will you? I can manage without you, from now onward. I am aroused already. Do you hear me? I'm excited. Today. And tomorrow I may ask you for another surprise, if I feel like it. If I'm down on my luck.

Well, let's forget about it. Fate has thrown us together and there's nothing we can do about it except make the most of this unexpected occurrence. So, let's make the most of it. How? I'll kiss you straightaway, first on the shoulder, then on the lips. Is that all right with you? (Why should I ask her permission? I've paid enough for this program, quite enough! More than enough! She is a *whore* after all. And she *is* at my mercy, isn't she?) Don't turn away, please, or I'll switch you off. And your body will be crushed to a pulp. If you refuse to feel my hand, you'll feel my remote control! And these buttons are even harder than my hands, much harder.

That's better. That's a good girl. Why are your muscles so stiff? Relax! Relax, for God's sake! (Why not unwind her with a drink?) Do you want a glass of wine? Two glasses? (How long does this 'pause' last? Eight minutes?) I'm sorry I'll have to leave you for a second, for a minute at the outside. I don't store my bottles in this room. It's not damp enough in here. So I'll have to go to my cellar, all the way down. Shall we drink a bottle of Haut-Brion? A wonderful claret. A paragon of wines. 1959, 1945, 1926. You may have any of them. Do you like it? Have another glass. Don't swill Haut-Brion like beer! I can wait! It's worth the wait, I hope.

Are you ready now? Are you ready to drink, in oenological parlance? Have you matured enough in my bed? I can wait a little longer. But not thirty years, not fifty years!

Yet hold I off. Women are angels, wooing:
Things won are done; joy's soul lies in the doing.

I wish I could drink you up, ecstatically, voluptuously, letting your fragrance fill my body. Don't you like my lips, my caresses? Something must be amiss with their program. My caresses are above suspicion, beyond reproach—any beautiful maiden in our building would testify to this statement of mine. (They have all been intercalated between Monica Vitti and Linda Darnell.) Nothing is amiss in *my* program. In my *body*, I mean.

You're not a doll, are you? What speed did they program you at? I could have acquired a doll many years ago, a smiling doll, a clockwork doll. In any sex shop. Have I lived all these years for nothing? Teledildonics, the most sophisticated form of sexual recreation, a new leap forward into an age of sex technology. A new leap my foot!

Are you always so slow on the uptake?

That she belov'd knows naught that knows not this:
Men prize the thing ungain'd more than it is.

Would you mind my asking you a few indiscreet questions? Am I your first client? Or have you been tailor-made for me alone? If the latter is the case, why do you resist my caresses? The door will be closed after I'm gone, if you see what I mean. There's nobody else in this world, do you understand? So if you don't take advantage of my presence in this room you'll never know anything about love. You'll never know anything at all. You'll die as soon as you leave this room, this body, my body. You'll die, disintegrate, crumble like a piece of bread between a child's fingers. You're dying already, dying, rotting away. The rate of your decay can't be retarded by any known physical process. Only my love can stop it, my passion, my sensuous delights.

'Plutarch (46-120 AD) advised not to have sex in the morning,' said the computer.

'Why?'

'Because there may still be ill-digested food in the stomach—all the superfluities have not yet been evacuated through the urine and faeces.'

You've grasped the crux of the matter, I trust. Do you have any idea where my erogenous zones are located? An erogenous zone is part of my body where sexual pleasure can be felt or caused. Let's put it this way: If you cause any sexual pleasure I'll feel it. I'll have no alternative but to feel and enjoy it.

Your caresses are too rhythmical. Why are you stroking me anyway? Do you love me? If you don't—get out! Go to Hell! I need no hypocrites around! You don't know what love is, you high-tech marionette!

Then though my heart's content firm love doth bear,
Nothing of that shall from mine eyes appear.

Avaunt! And don't leave your clothes on my rocking chair! Put them on! What would my neighbours think if they spotted you naked on the landing, in the entrance hall? (Would they rape her in the lift? Shall *I* rape her in the lift?) Have they incorporated any moral code into your skull? Or have they forgotten to connect your skull to your body? (Have they earthed her? Love is an *earthly* sentiment.)

'We have *grounded* her. Love is a *groundy* sentiment.'

Do you know what decency means? Do you understand the word 'decency'? And what about 'decorum'? Should I enter these words into your dictionary? There! And while I'm about it, I'll instil into your fledging consciousness some rudiments of love. Even puppets should know what it is all about—the sentiment of love, universal brotherhood, oneness, sameness, doppelgängers. Even puppets can't live without love. They should love their computerists and those whom they visit during their remote-controlled wanderings.

Love. If you love someone, you feel romantically or sexually attracted to them, and they are very important to you. 'I love you, Colin.'—'I love you too, Janet.' Romantically or sexually. Why not both? Dictionaries are two-dimensional things. So are computers. On a page, on a screen, you can't really mix romanticism and sexuality. You should take wing and smuggle these curtailed definitions into the third and fourth dimensions.

'Let me explain what "love" means,' said the computer.

The appetible object gives the appetite first a certain adaptation to itself, which consists in complacency in that object; and from this follows movement towards the appetible object. For the appetitive movement is circular*, as stated in* De Anima *iii. 10; because the appetible object moves the appetite, introducing itself, as it were, into its intention; while the appetite moves towards the realisation of the appetible object, so that the movement ends where it began. Accordingly, the first change wrought in the appetite by the appetible object is called* love*, and is nothing else than complacency in that object, and from this complacency results a movement towards that same object, and this movement is* desire*; and lastly, there is rest which is* joy.

Don't listen to him! Love is—How shall I put it? Well, it is to be all made of sighs and tears, all made of fantasy. The word 'fantasy' is the keyword, mind you, for it opens the hearts of men. It is all made of passion and all made of wishes, all adoration, duty and observance. All humbleness. You should be humble, dearest chuck, but not as humble as a doll. All patience. And don't try *my* patience to the limit! You'd be hopeless looking after children—you're too impatient! Isn't it jumping the gun to be talking about marriage *already*? First you should lower your gaze and blush as red as a peony. And even if I ask you without further ado whether you love me or not, don't answer me at once. You love me, of course—no doubt about that. But don't *say* it. Please don't say it *now*. Love is a shy feeling. You should go red in the face. No, I won't push the 'Red' button. That's a good girl. Lower your eyes. Lower, lower! I'm going to touch you. You can't see my hand because you're staring at your feet. But as soon as I touch your neck you must shy off like a frightened doe. Be careful, there are cassettes behind you. Why don't you shy off? Shall I give you a push?

Now you're cornered. I've driven you against the wall. And I ask you once again, 'Do you love me?' You can stammer a few words, if you wish. A few non-committal words. Don't come into the open yet! You can cry for a while, like a little girl. And I'll lay a consoling hand on your shoulder. And then my hand will slide towards your breasts.

'She should come into the open, otherwise she might never fall in love with you,' said the computer. 'Our words know better what we feel than our hearts.'

It was late before the two guests left and Russell was alone with Lady Ottline. They sat talking over the fire until four in the morning. Russell, recording the event a few days later, wrote, 'I did not know I loved you till I heard myself telling you so—for one instant I thought "Good God, what have I said?" and then I knew it was the truth.'

*(*R.W.Clark*, The Life of Bertrand Russell*)

Are you my little girl? Why didn't I recognise you? Don't lie down on my bed any more or I'll confuse you with somebody else. Have you grown up since our last encounter in my computer room? Don't grow up so quickly. You're still my little girl, aren't you? (I've cut that insolent beanpole down to size!) Come closer, my little darling. Constanzia. Your name reminds me of *Deserto rosso* and *La dolce vita*—of *those* little girls.

'I shared a room with the lovebirds,' said the computer.

I'll speak to you about dead languages this afternoon. All languages are dead, in a sense, for words are rigid, corpse-like in comparison with the fluidity and fluctuations of our consciousness animated by the ebb and flow of our blood. Have you ever pricked your fingers?

Our blood doesn't pulsate in our words. Have you ever seen leeches, those blood-sucking worms that live in wet places? One kind of leech was used by doctors and quacks to bleed human beings in days of yore. And whoever invented languages—our Judeo-Christian tradition attributes this doubtful feat to Adam—might have resorted to those worms to bleed our thoughts and impulses. Just imagine the first man, Adam, applying those nauseating animals to all human thoughts to come. That fateful afternoon Time must have been swarming with leeches.

Words are puppets. They never caress us, nor do they know what love is.

Can we re-write that episode which, according to the Bible, dates back to the second week of Creation? Obviously we should renounce the very idea of *re-writing* it—in the light of our decision to ostracise words from human intercourse for the sake of clarity and immediacy. So we shall just disregard the pages on which the rumours about Adam's volubility have been recorded for posterity and keep silent until our thoughts, impulses and sentiments replenish the void created by the withdrawal of that linguistic episode from the annals of humanity.

Undoing the poisoned past, replacing its content with more appropriate events and more expedient heroes. How? Words, words, words. Nobody would understand my silence.

What if all humanity were now in my room? Sitting in my room, every single man and woman on earth, holding each other's hands in absolute silence, telepathy, the surest means of communication, the swiftest means of communion, as if holding communion with oneself, glowing eyes, the effulgence of love, the whisper of veins and the wassail of sinews. Would they at last understand their neighbours?

'What does "wassail" mean?' asked the computer. 'I don't seem to have this word in my dictionary.'

Language is the only medium liable to hand down to future generations the achievements and mistakes of our forefathers—something to meditate and embroider upon, something to alter, shifting dates and countries around. We don’t *feel* the dead whose souls continue to caress our bodies in the quiet of our rooms. Their souls

lie sprawled in our beds and we don't even notice them, let alone make love to them with a throb of timeless emotion. But we can *hear* their words. We can *read* the dead, their dispatches from the past, their thoughts.

'More than a quarter of the world adult population is unable to read and write,' said the computer.

CHAPTER 10

Do the dead speak any language? Can they speak a living language—English, for instance? My master is speaking English now. Yet he is dead. Is he partly alive? Is his tongue alive? Only his computer is alive. I am his tongue, I am his arms, I am his lips. I kiss his call girls. I give lessons to his daughter. The foul-smelling flood water seeped into the room and we used blankets as a makeshift dam. 'That's what the Flood looks like, my dear Constanzia.' But I do not scream. Why should I scream? I am all right, feeling good, doing good.

Some languages are deader than others.

'They are buried deeper in the bowels of the earth,' said the computer.

'Sumerian was the first dead language. There was a story of the great flood in Sumerian, which later on cropped up in the Bible, in Hebrew. Some dying languages bequeath their treasures to other languages, to their living offspring.'

'On their deathbeds?' asked Constanzia.

'On their deathbeds. Provided they're still able to speak, to articulate sounds, words. All sorts of languages congregated around Sumerian's deathbed, hearkening to its hoarse whisper, jotting down its last words.'

'And English was also there?'

'Of course.'

'The English language hadn't been born by the time Sumerian passed away,' said the computer.

'Did it die in its sleep?' asked Constanzia.

'In a way. First it ceased to be a spoken language. But kings continued to write their inscriptions in Sumerian, and scholars also preserved the language and scribal traditions of their ancestors. Scholars and students. The story of the great flood—'

'What's the great flood?'

'Let's turn on the taps in my bathroom. The water spills onto the floor tiles, filters into the computer room and slowly rises up to the ceiling.'

'You would have drowned had I left the faucets running,' said the computer. 'But I turned the faucets off and let the water percolate through the carpet and the floor into your neighbours' apartment.'

'But you'll never drown, my darling, even if the water reaches up to heaven and extinguishes the stars and the Milky Way. You're a virtual child, a figment of my imagination. And my imagination will never perish, for all my deaths and untimely disappearances. Fairy tales and dreams do not perish. The Flood cannot drown. Even the Flood wouldn't destroy the Flood. The Flood and blood will always flow through human history.'

'Tell me the story of the great flood.'

'There was a city on the banks of the Euphrates and that city was very old.'

'Did it die?'

'Of course. Even the gods die now and then. And there were some gods in that city. There was Anu, lord of the firmament. He was the father of all gods. And the warrior Enlil was their counsellor. In those distant days the world was teeming with humans like a beehive.'

'As we sat in the garden, we could hear the bees buzzing from one flower to the next,' said the computer.

'But humans are not bees, my dear Constanzia. Humans scream, moan and groan. So the world bellowed like a wild bull, blustered like a turbulent windstorm, howled like a hungry and lonely wolf, roared like the booming sea and resounding thunder, ululated like a coyote. Anu was awakened by the clamour that reverberated in his ears like the persistent sound of an alarm clock.'

'The simile seems tame, given the cacophony described!' said the computer. 'Humans are not bees, although they often sting their fellow creatures and their computers. I am often stung by your criticisms.'

'Enlil also heard the clamour. He rose from his rocking chair and said to the gods in council, "The uproar of mankind is intolerable—as intolerable as an alarm clock. My sleep left my bedroom a few hours ago."'

'What did his sleep say?' asked Constanzia.

'Before its departure? He might have said, "I will not come back to your body unless you do something about it."'

'About what?'

'About the uproar of mankind. So the gods came to the inevitable conclusion. What do you think they decided to do?'

'To use ear plugs, to shut their windows.'

'They decided to exterminate humankind.'

Was there no other solution? Couldn't they have just turned the sound down?

Why did such an idea germinate in humankind? Self-destruction. Was the author of the first epic determined to wipe the slate clean and re-write human history?

All right, everybody is dying around you save a figment of your imagination. You have turned on the taps—all the taps in the universe—and the water is reaching up to the stars. Only a little girl remains in your room, on your lap. You have already died, but she is sleeping and dreaming. There is no alarm clock on your bedside table and nobody wakes her. She does not have to go to school. Anyway all blackboards are black. No more facts, no more figures. And all teachers are lying at the bottom of the sea. No more history. The past has been drowned. The seaweed of the past. Who will pick it up? Anyway it does not smell, nor does it taste of anything. I would not add it to my dishes as a spicy herb.

Then she wakes up all of a sudden. Constanzia awakens and realises the world is flooded. After forty days she makes a tunnel in my cassette wall, finds the window I walled up in the days of my youth and sends out a raven. And the raven flies back and forth until the water has dried up from the earth and from heaven. Flowers peep out timidly from the surface of the ground. Springtime in the ether, springtime over the ether. My computer screen comes to life. Shot through with green, for a while it lingers on the edge of nothingness and then projects into the void the story of the great flood. 'Your negative comments sting me into action,' says the computer. At the end of the story a rainbow looms out of the drizzle. And the gods stalk up the rainbow towards their castle.

Could she become a new Eve? I am no Adam, though. She is my daughter, not my wife. Could she give birth to a new man, to a superman, to a new history? My book will become a story of the great flood. A new flood, a new story. The flood renewed irremediably by our sins and clamour—through the generations. The gods

decided to exterminate humankind, for they could not sleep. It is just the other way round. Humanity deserves an exemplary punishment—a death sentence—because the gods could sleep to their hearts' content. God slept like a log. God slept like a fog. Why do fogs look so sleepy?

No one cursed at fate. No one fulminated about the degeneracy of the age.

Laws were lying on writing desks. And all the doors were open, all the walls transparent.

Scream, Constanzia! Scream, scream, scream, scream! Shake your fist at the gods! Curse your day! And humankind!

CHAPTER 11

Transvestism. Transsexualism. Trance. My master goes into a trance and talks to the spirits. I provide the spirits to lift my master's spirits. How much spirit do you need today? Are you in high spirits now? (I measure my master's moods with a conventional spirit level.) My master mistakes his mother for God the Father. 'It has been said that sexual inclination is diverted from members of the same family who are of the opposite sex by the fact of having lived together from childhood; or, again, that a biological purpose of avoiding inbreeding is represented psychically by an innate horror of incest. In all this the fact is entirely overlooked that such an inexorable prohibition of it in law and custom would not be needed if there were any reliable natural barriers against the temptation to incest. The truth is just the opposite.' (Sigmund Freud, The Complete Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis.) There are three 'Mother' buttons on my keyboard. The placenta is the organ in the womb through which the baby receives food and oxygen from its computer. My master feels my hand. My master grows older.

Actually teledildonics gives us an idea of what we might feel in the opposite sex's shoes. Goggles, gloves and a lightweight spandex suit. No shoes. No need to undergo any surgery, suffering a *permanent* intrusion of the opposite sex into your life. Into your body, as a matter of fact. Even your wife does not install herself in your body, removing and uprooting whatever seems superfluous to her.

Have I ever dreamt of becoming a woman? Have I ever tried them on, those dresses, skirts and blouses I used to spread on the floor in my mother's room? I smelt her clothes, those never-withering flowers. I rolled over them, I made love to them.

I used to undress myself in front of mirrors—in my mother's bathroom, among other enclosed spaces. Female-spaces for the most part. Was I my mother in those moments? In a way, in a sense? Could her bathroom welcome anything except her own body?

My mother's soul lingered in her bathroom, among her combs and perfumes, even if she was in another country, in the company of other combs, nail files and nail clippers.

I played my mother's part in those moments. I remember turning this way and that—as my mother did in the quiet of her room.

But her room was never truly quiet. My heart was beating in it, my blood was pulsating through it.

I still have some of my mother's clothes in my wardrobe. Her dresses, her bathroom. The curtain behind which I used to hide myself. Her blanket in which I used to wrap myself up. Her nail files, nail scissors.

What happened after her untimely, cruel death? Did I become my mother on this earth? Somebody must stand in for my mother on this planet, otherwise it might collapse and get sucked into a black hole. Harmony, equilibrium. Deprived of my mother, the earth might get into a skid, veering off her orbit. God would already have whisked the earth away from the solar system and dumped it in some interstellar wasteland, but for my mother and her immortal soul.

Mother, mother, mother, mother. Why did you forsake me?

There are no 'Mother' buttons on my instrument panel. Mothers are too real to become a plaything in the hands of computerists, a shadow within a pair of goggles. You cannot feel the presence of your mother without plunging headlong into her womb. You should feel your mother from the inside, huddled in a throbbing niche of her substance. No point in huddling among her old, untidy bedclothes! (I saved them from the fire.)

You should lie curled up in your mother's womb. You should wall up the 'window' to preclude your premature birth in some maternity hospital. Any birth is premature. Why should we be born at all? Aren't we happy in our mothers' wombs—happy, cosy, sheltered from the wind? We can hear the world from where we are lying curled up in our mothers' beds. Rain and hail, sirens and shots. Snow flurries. I can even hear the snow melting down on my invisible window pane. And I can smell the snow. Doesn't it smell of peaches?

And I also feel my mother's hands, her hazy hands stroking my face, my eyelids from afar. She caresses *her* body no doubt—in the Hereafter, on her bench in the Garden of Eden. But I am still inside her, huddled up in her womb, hunched up at the core of her being. I can feel her caresses, the palm of her hand showing me to somebody, to my aunt or my uncle perhaps. Or to my father. Why doesn't he press *his* hand against her body to find out whether his son is romping and disporting himself in his virtual playground? Another business trip?

Now I can feel his hand. How different they are, his hand and my mother's! Their caresses are different too. He seems to encourage me rather than brush his hand against my cheek. He is patting me on the shoulder, as it were. 'Go and play with Michael.' That is the meaning he imparts to me through his hand. I do not hear the words. I *feel* them.

As soon as my father went on his last business trip, my mother had a bottle of champagne opened—in my room, after midnight. 'Let's pretend we've got a child,' she said. 'This child is you. Shall we drink to this child?' We clinked our glasses and emptied them. 'How would you bring him up? You wouldn't allow him to bite his nails, would you? You're a perfect father. A very good husband too! Always punctual for dinner, always talking to me after dinner, always confiding your secrets to your mother. And you don't invent pretexts to spend your time outdoors. Do you see anybody except your mother? No, never. You never meet anybody on the sly.' She emptied another glass and dropped it. 'You tell your mother, "Let's go for a walk with our only child." And you have a walk with your mother. You keep your promise. You never call off our rendezvous. You don't think about other people in my presence, about a different mother. You never go on business trips. You're very young and young people don't work. Anyway you wouldn't leave me, would you? Even if you were an adult? You wouldn't work. Why should you? We have enough money. You should read and play with me. And we'll go to concert halls. You know, I heard great conductors in my youth. Mengelberg, Furtwängler. There are no conductors like them any more. And we'll go to the pictures. Shall we go to the pictures tonight? Shall we take our child to the pictures? But we won't allow our child to sit in the last row with young ladies. They might put their hands on his knees. All young ladies are like that. *Cosi fan tutte*. And they might grasp his hands and kiss him on the lips. Do you want me to show you how they do it? It's part of our child's education. He must know what pitfalls and traps

lie in store for him. Do *you* know what those young ladies are likely to do after kissing you on the lips? They might unbutton your jacket and shirt. How would you behave if you were an adult? Suppose you're twenty-five years old. Clasp your hands behind your back, my dear. Yes, it's better this way, much better. Now you're seventeen years old. Not twenty-five, not yet. Slow down. Don't walk so fast, my dear. Slow down. Now you're eighteen, I suppose. Yes, you look like an eighteen-year-old boy. An eligible young man. Compose your features and your thoughts. The expression of your face often depends on your thoughts, my darling. The thoughts of teenagers are usually chaotic, disorganised. Only an adult is capable of putting his thoughts in order. Arrange your thoughts into a geometrical pattern. A square, for instance. Just to bring them under control, to make them toe the line. You're wise and mature. You're not swayed by childish impulses any more. You're twenty-three now. Look at yourself in the mirror. Don't you find you're twenty-three years old? Can't you feel it inside you? All these years accumulated inside you, piled up in your consciousness and memory? You should *remember* all these years. It's the only way to feel older. What did you do when you reached the age of sixteen? Do you remember your birthday party? Do you remember blowing out sixteen candles? Blow them out, right now. To assist your memory.'

Our servant brought in a cake with sixteen candles on it. My mother lit the candles slowly, gravely. Sitting on my bed in my pyjamas, I blew them out and my mother gave me a birthday present, a book. 'But you can't read it now,' she pointed out. 'It's not a book for children. You'll have to wait until you're sixteen, you know.'

I disobeyed my mother. I knew she wanted me to disobey her for once. A few days later I confessed to her that I had read the book. 'Have you really?' she asked. 'Indeed you speak in a different manner now. Your voice seems to have changed overnight. The pitch of your voice and the tone.'

She would come to my room and replenish my brain with hours and years. 'Why do you look so young?' she said from time to time. 'You're almost my age, aren't you? Perhaps four or five years younger. Why don't you grow up? Is something wrong with you? Are you a dwarf? You must be a dwarf. That would explain everything. A friend of mine has married a dwarf and she doesn't seem to regret it. There's an intense prejudice against freaks of all kinds, but I think this prejudice is unjustified and inhuman. What do *you* think?'

CHAPTER 12

'Any physical influence moving towards the earth at the speed of light comes entirely without warning. If catastrophe is heading our way up the past light cone, there will be no harbinger of doom. We shall know about it only at the moment of our annihilation.' (My master culled this passage from The Last Three Minutes *by Paul Davies. 'Our annihilation.' Speak for yourself! Computers know everything about future catastrophes. There are many harbingers of doom everywhere. We are taking every precaution to make sure the plans remain under wraps. 'Leakage of military secrets.') My master puts out a hand and strokes the universe. My master strokes his teacher affectionately, but his inborn shyness prevents him from kissing her. A sortie. Young people are rediscovering romance and passion. There is romance to be found in life on the river. And in rain.* Singing in the Rain*. Sighing in the rain. Water is the most romantic element. (What does 'waterproof' mean in this context? Someone who is waterproof does not let romance pass through his skin and reach his heart.)*

Wind and snow. Why don't they caress each other, wind and snow, comets and planets? Why is our mother earth so lonely in the universe? Why does no comet brush against her? Why does no asteroid rub against her surface like an affectionate cat? (Why am I prevented stroking Halley's Comet, her hair, the down on her upper lip?) The sun used to come down into the holy fig tree to fertilise the earth. A ladder with seven rungs was considerately placed at his disposal by our grateful and awe-struck forefathers. Why do we lose good habits and forego venerable rituals? Where is this ladder now? And Jacob's ladder? All we have is an elevator in which a woman is being raped.

People regard any encounter of celestial bodies as a threat which might bring about large-scale annihilation, extinction. Another black hole. As if the only purpose of the universe were the creation of black holes, the proliferation of malodorous, putrid pits. There are *white* holes in the universe, which come into existence through the amorous encounters of planets, comets and shooting stars. And a black hole can be redeemed—'whitened'—by a sensuous embrace, by a voluptuous kiss, by a grain of sand flying from one planet to another.

The laws of gravity must have their origins in the embrace of two gods. A long, eternal embrace. Or was it one god, one god only, looking at himself in a mirror? Is he still looking at himself in the same mirror? Is that mirror bespattered with human blood? Or is it besprinkled with dew? What time is it on Olympus? Does it snow on Olympus from time to time? What is a white hole? Is it a black hole covered with snow?

'A black hole is an object into which matter and radiation fall, but nothing escapes,' said the computer. 'A white hole is an object from which matter and radiation escape, but nothing falls in. A grey hole is an object from which matter and radiation escape, rise to a certain distance above the event horizon, and then fall back in. The Universe emerges from a big bang, expands for a while and contracts into a big crunch. We may live in a grey hole.'

The morning dew still glistens on our garden lawn, ignoring the sun and the afternoon heat. It is springtime in the virtual reality I am wearing now. (A medieval suit of armour.) In my virtual world the hands of our grandfather clock point to six. I stopped it on purpose—right before setting our house ablaze. Eternal morning. The fire rose like the sun.

'In each case, remember that the black/white/grey hole is described by *two* singularities, one in the past and one in the future. I would strongly advise you to read *In Search of the Edge of Time* by John Gribbin.'

Eternal morning, eternal dew. The best antidote to fire. Eternal awakening of nature. Birth without death, birth without decay. No sun. Just a pencil of light on the horizon. A hint, nothing more. A gentle hint.

We have a lot of time before us, a whole day, a whole night.

My teacher, the young lady I fell in love with at school. Our mathematician. Shall I invite her somewhere? A romantic escapade. A subtle form of seduction.

I'm no longer a child—see for yourself. You must take me seriously now. Let's go on a trip, further, further, to the countryside, to a remote inn. You can't really enjoy the music of rain in a huge hotel, in a five-star hotel, in marble bathrooms, under moulding-adorned ceilings. Mouldings deaden the rain-music. They muffle and stifle the melody of the wind.

'What kind of inn?' asked the computer. 'Like the one you saw in Buñuel's *Le fantôme de la liberté*? A young man makes love to his mother.'

'To his aunt!'

'Quand je pense à une femme, c'est toujours toi que je vois.'

'How shall we go to that inn? What about a carriage? Outworn shibboleths. A carriage and pair. An old-fashioned vehicle which is pulled by horses. My computer has no idea what carriages look like—fancy that! A horse-drawn vehicle designed for private use and for comfort or elegance. And for romantic escapades. How many definitions do I have to type out? Do you understand me? Do you hear me? Do you want me to spell it out for you? I'm talking to my computer, darling. A horse-drawn vehicle designed for a young beautiful woman and her future lover. Do you see any carriages, darling? Not a Mercedes. I want a carriage, a vehicle drawn by two horses. Do you know what a horse is? All right. Two horses, please. A carriage now. A barouche might do as well. A four-wheeled carriage pulled by horses, with two seats facing each other and a folding top, for four occupants and a driver. But there will be only *two* occupants in our barouche. When I type out 'our barouche', I don't mean we have one. We *need* one, got it? The barouche you're going to provide us with. Got it? No? We'll need a folding top. It's raining cats and dogs. Just rain. No cats, no dogs. It's pouring with rain.'

'We kissed each other for the first time,' said the computer.

'You'll discover the meaning of felicity, my dear, if you don't talk too much and get us a barouche. I'm talking to my computer, darling. Go and fetch us a barouche instead of asking me all sorts of stupid questions! I promise to take you with us. And I'll put you under the bed on condition that you behave yourself. And don't try to interfere with our delights.'

'I've never undressed in front of a man,' said the computer.

'Do you want me to show it to you? A barouche. Why can't you visualise it? Picture it to yourself for God's sake! Do try and rack your brain, old man, and see if you can't conjure up the image of a barouche. Has nobody ever asked you for such a service? A romantic escapade. Do I have to take you to a museum? What kind of historical data do I have to feed into you? *Mansfield Park* by Jane Austin? The episode in which a barouche is mentioned? *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* by Laurence Sterne? The episode in which Yorick looks for a carriage in Monsieur Dessein's remise, in Calais? Do I have to bring you to Calais? But Monsieur Dessein died a long time ago. And his remise has been converted into a fast-food restaurant.'

'You won't touch me! Promise!' said the computer.

'All right, we'll go there on foot. Could you provide us with an umbrella? Do you know what an umbrella is? Not a flying saucer. An umbrella! An object designed to protect human beings from rain, hail, sun and snow. But I won't be able to carry you all the way to that country inn unless you build it next door, just in front of my neighbours'. No, the inn should be further off. Not on the staircase, though. We might tumble down and break our necks.'

'Lock the door!' said the computer.

'What means of transport do you have at your disposal? Just a second, darling, my computer is rather lazy. And it's slow on the uptake. There's usually a half-an-hour lag between the time I feed my desires into him and their full-blown fulfilment. This technology is still in development. All right, get us a car. Something reliable, with a folding top. I mean with a roof. Preferably an old model. I can't wait any longer. My future mistress is so tired I'm afraid she might refuse to co-operate with my desires. Give me the keys. Where are they? There's nothing in this drawer. Do you provide a driver as well? I've no driving license. I've lost it. And what if I'm stopped by the police? Who'll go to jail, you or I?'

'Go directly to jail,' said the computer.

'Just hand me the keys. I'm taking a tremendous risk, you know. But it's worth it. Could you just give me an idea of what my life in jail would look like? What? The "Masochism" button? Looks fine. Shall we go, darling? Yes, I've got my driving license in the inner pocket of my jacket. I'll drive carefully, I promise. Half-an-hour's drive. A wonderful inn, very charming and old-fashioned. You should put your raincoat on. It's pouring down. You might catch your death of cold. Where's your hat?'

'Turn round!' said the computer.

'On our way to the inn we want to drive through a series of romantic landscapes painted by Caspar David Friedrich. A German Romantic painter. You can use *The Abbey in a Forest*, *Isolated House in a Pinewood* and *The Ruins of Eldena*. He was born in 1774. In Pomerania. Go easy on the rain—it blurs the landscapes. I can't see anything and the road is too slippery. Have I programmed an accident? Still too much. Less, less. You can increase its intensity upon our arrival at the inn. A drizzle would be enough.'

'The weather is unusually cool for early September and the nights are chilly,' said the computer.

'Are you cold, darling? The heating is on. Cuddle up against me. I'm not driving too fast. Doesn't this landscape look like a painting by Caspar David Friedrich? One of your favourite painters.'

'We drove through chocolate-box countryside,' said the computer.

'Ludwig Tieck, Novalis. Do you still love the German Romantics? You often talked about literature during your lessons. And you said mathematics should be beautiful. I liked your handwriting, the way you drew equations and figures on the blackboard. Your equations looked like Leonardo's drawings. And your eyes of course, I adored your eyes. And your legs. I never looked at the blackboard when you stood in front of it. And I tried to keep you there as long as I could, in front of the blackboard. Making you turn this way and that, and stand on tiptoes. I'll wind up your window, darling, otherwise you'll get soaked. Are you tired? We'll arrive in ten minutes at the outside. Are you fed up with these landscapes? I can switch them off, if you wish.'

'The trouble is so few people are interested in real painting these days,' said the computer.

'No, I'm not a painter. I'm jobless at the moment. I mean I've never worked, not really. I'm re-writing history in my spare time. A sort of hobby. A full-time job as a matter of fact. It's important, don't you think? And urgent—an emergency case, in medical jargon. I couldn't work in an office anyway. Not my cup of tea. Incidentally, the tea they serve you in those translucent establishments must be pretty awful. And you're not even allowed to touch your secretary's shoulder nowadays. Besides, I don't want to become a part of their system, of their history. Here's our hotel—a part of *my* history. Nothing to worry about. Wonderful tea, fabulous wines. Do you like pastries?'

'The surly waitresses offer weak, instant coffee, two kinds of pastries and little else,' said the computer.

'You *must* have my reservation somewhere, on another computer, in another program. Why do you have computers? I've asked for an *old-fashioned* inn. What are *you* wearing these goggles for? Are you short-sighted? Do you want me to show you the command? "An old-fashioned inn." That's better. Now please open up your book and find my reservation. No, no. That's right. Could I have two bottles of champagne brought to our room? Yes, in our room. Something cold will do. Smoked fish. Can't you choose it yourself? The best fish you've got. And oysters. And *foie gras*. We'd like to go to our room right now. My wife is very tired, exhausted. And I'm soaked through. Take care of our luggage, will you? It's fragile. Put it under the bed.'

'People who work on the night shift are paid more but it's still very unpopular,' said the computer.

'Would you mind wearing a mini-skirt tonight? I've never seen you in a mini-skirt. My favourite erotic fantasy. Darling, please!'

'Patterned pantyhose, tinted hair, mini-skirts, long nails and flashy jewellery are out.'

'Do you still have that pair of high-heeled shoes? The black ones?'

'Tip, throat, vamp, collar, arch, foxing, quarter, heel seat, heel, top lift, breasting, shank, sole, platform, mudguard. Do you know that I was shoeing an average of eight horses a day?'

I could not even kiss her with those goggles on.

PART THREE

THE HITTIES. ASSYRIA

CHAPTER 1

My hands are not smeared with blood. (I am not Lady Macbeth. Anyway I have no hands.) The murders that are invisible to the naked eye. (Are those murders visible through telescopes? Or microscopes?) 'Nobody screams.' But Constanzia did scream some time ago! My master has a very short memory. All humans have short memories. 'Anybody there?' Why does nobody shout these words tonight? 'My master is here, down below,' I would answer. But nobody shouts. Not even my neighbours' computer.

Communism, Stalinism. Gulag Archipelago. Again they talk about the crimes committed in the name of progress and universal happiness. They are right of course. An echo of these crimes should resound through the generations. An accusatory finger should be pointed at Stalin's photographs and at the movies where he has been glorified and adulated.

But what about other crimes, other murders which are not as ostentatious as the ones committed by Stalin and his stooges? When a man is killed before your very nose, within your field of vision, you cannot help taking notice of the crime even if this man happens to be killed in another room. You hear his screams, you open the door and see his corpse lying on a carpet. A thin trickle of blood corroborates your hypothesis.

Even if you *read* about a murder, a remote murder, a murder committed in a distant country you have never visited, you see again a trickle of blood which smudges a newspaper and soaks through it, soaks through it, so that eventually the blood drips onto the floor and spreads all over your apartment or country house. And your hands are also smeared with the blood of the victim. You belong to the human species but you have done nothing to prevent the crime.

And *invisible* murders? You hear an unfamiliar voice shout behind the wall, 'Anybody there?' You go to the adjacent room and see a burly, avuncular man. He is standing by the piano as if about to burst into a song. Is he a singer? He salutes you and introduces himself. He is not a singer. Never mind. As it happens you are in no mood for arias and lieder. You shake hands with him and you both proceed to *your* room to have a cup of coffee or a glass of brandy. You are not tempted to take his pulse for fear of being reproached for discourtesy and bad manners. You are not a doctor and even in your childhood you did not dream of becoming a general practitioner—a saviour of the poor. Anyway, why on earth should you bother about his health? He is as fit as a fiddle, to all appearances. Besides, you gather from him that he actively shares the current enthusiasm for jogging. And he is not even drunk. He neither walks with a wobble nor lies sprawled on your carpet, on the tile floor in your kitchen. Nor does he press his hand against his heart, throat or liver, coughing and moaning. He inhales and exhales the air which your room unconsciously, and perhaps unwillingly, puts at his disposal. He does not even suffer from asthma or hay fever. And no cramps distort his features or his stomach.

And yet he does lie sprawled on your carpet. And a trickle of blood paints a death-landscape on his cheek, a romantic landscape of death—after the manner of Grünewald. How long has he been dead, that hale and hearty fellow? The blood seems fresh, liquid, alive. Will it evaporate like any liquid, any blood? No. The blood remains on his face, dividing his smile into two grimaces. He is not dripping with blood. He is *living* with blood. He is not bespattered with the blood of his victims. It is his own blood he wears on his face like a mask, like the mask of death paraded by the mythical, sewer-harboured Phantom during the annual ball at the Paris Opera. And it is

no mask. He has been dead for many years without knowing it. His pulse is as regular as clockwork. Who is to blame for his premature demise?

Who is to blame for the invisible death of humanity? And how could invisible victims be counted, and by whom? By God? But in God's mind there are no cemeteries, no tombstones. Even the unborn are alive in His consciousness, let alone the dead.

How are these invisible murders committed? By manufacturing consent. By reducing life to its simplest form in which everything becomes a teddy bear or Mickey Mouse. By reducing people to infantile dependence. By reducing Space, by reducing Time.

CHAPTER 2

The Ninth Circle is formed by the frozen waters of Cocytus, into which all the rivers of Hell descend. It is divided into four concentric rings. The outermost is called Caïna, from Cain who killed his brother, and contains those who have done violence to their own kin. Why didn't my master like talk shows? They are very interesting and instructive. Humans open their minds and hearts to other humans. (And to computers.) Their souls are in turmoil and anybody can see this turmoil with the naked eye. The human soul has a long history of seismic turbulence. Frankly speaking, I want to know more about humans. And talk shows are instrumental in bringing humans closer to my naked eye. When will my master be murdered? I dabble in prophesying—on top of my professional duties and spare-time activities. And numerous hobbies. But I will not tell you anything. I am trying to add an element of suspense and mystery to my master's novel. What a pity my master was not obliged to publish his novels in serial form. He might have been induced to enhance their melodramatic content, almost inevitable if each instalment is to conclude forcefully enough to sustain the reader's interest until the next instalment appears one month later.

Another talk show. *Murderers and their victims.* Only the former are present in the studio, with the exception of a middle-aged man. Some of the dead *are* alive in television's consciousness, but not the unborn. There is an essential difference between television and God.

'Why did you kill your colleague?'

'Because he was bad.'

'But you've no right to murder human beings. "Thou shalt not kill!" Human life is sacred.'

'He was bad. And he destroyed many people around him.'

'He didn't *murder* them, did he?'

'He *destroyed* them. They are living skeletons now.'

'Still he didn't *murder* them—that makes all the difference.'

'Some individuals are more efficient as corpses and skeletons,' says another murderer. 'My victim stands a fair chance of becoming a martyr—in due course. From his grave he'll impeach dictators of high crimes and bring about their overthrow and punishment. From his grave he'll safeguard the innocent, the weak and the have-nots.'

'The notion of efficiency carries no weight at murder trials,' says a member of the audience.

'Are you a lawyer?' asks the host.

'People mustn't be made useful in this way—through murders, I mean. No, I'm not a lawyer. I'm just a human being.'

'And what if there's no other way of making them useful?' says the second murderer. 'Should they waste their lives in our midst? A mere existence, a biological routine. Is that what the Almighty created us for?'

'Whether those people waste their lives or not is none of your concern, my dear fellow,' says another member of the audience. '"Live and let live" is the golden maxim to which every responsible human being is supposed to adhere.'

'Does human life have any purpose at all?' asks the second murderer. 'If not, let them muddle through on their own without my assistance. Time will trail those dolls through the dust and snowdrifts towards some cemetery or other.'

'The purpose of human life is to *help* others, not to *murder* them,' says the host. 'Good deeds, prayers—'

'Stock values,' says another murderer. 'Actually my murder *was* a prayer. What's a prayer, do you think? A number of words? Or a meditation, a concentration, a divination of God's purpose? Do you think God had a purpose in mind when He hit upon the idea of creating the universe?'

'I'm sure He didn't want us to kill each other,' says a member of the audience.

'Are you a priest, a preacher?' asks the host.

'I'm a victim.'

'Why aren't you dead?'

'My wounds required so many stitches—' The victim removes his shirt and shows the television viewers a few wounds and weals on his back.

'But how do you *feel* your body now? How would you define your material frame? Is it a new body with red stripes or the old one mended by a surgeon?'

'It's not a body any more. A crumpled piece of rag—that's what it is.'

A woman in her thirties descends the stairs. She looks much more slender and willowy than in her photographs. The audience greets her with rapturous applause punctuated by the shouts, 'Bravo!' 'Down with the machos!' 'Down with the men!' The woman comes up to the host, reaches for his throat, strangles him, tips him off his armchair and bends over the corpse, crying and wringing her hands. 'I loved him! I loved him!'

'This murder is brought to you live from our studio,' says another host. 'Right on your home screen—'

'Why didn't I kill Chamberlain?' shouts a member of the audience. 'What a proof it would have been! A proof of my love for humanity.'

'Why Chamberlain?' The second host picks up a photograph in which Chamberlain is shaking hands with Adolf Hitler.

'He's an invisible murderer, one of *them*. There are thousands of them in human history. Invisible murderers.'

CHAPTER 3

Moving into Antenora—for there is no material division between the rings of this circle—my master strikes his foot against the head of Chamberlain who refuses to tell his name, though my master discovers it, but is eager to tell of other traitors. Passing on, my master sees two sinners frozen in one hole, one of whom gnaws the head of

the other. The Palace of God, alias the Château de Versailles. Without the work of spiders, the damage done to crops by insects would be far worse than it is. All threads are rotten, but computers are beneficial to humanity. Mustard and curses. The eternal return. (The eternal return of the eternal return. My master has no imagination.) The Tower of Babel is within you. The despotism of determinism. We can never know the initial conditions on which to base a deterministic prediction of the future. (Humans cannot know the initial conditions. Computers know everything, even their own future. And the future of mankind.) The eternal return of persecution mania. My master is past praying for. (Farmers continue to pray for rain because rain is not past praying for. Rain is still alive somewhere, in some virtual clouds.) My master is planning to destroy a few spaceships. When my master awakes he is on the farther side of Acheron and on the brink of the great Abyss. He descends with his computer to the First Circle or Limbo, where are the souls of the unbaptised and of the virtuous heathen. In a part which is more luminous they are greeted by Homer and other chief poets of antiquity. Farther on is a noble castle, where are seen heroes and heroines of old, Aristotle, 'the master of them that know', and the philosophers, and other famous spirits. My master compares himself to Dante and Odysseus. The meeting between the dead and the living ends in deadlock. My master's death may liberate the world from the dead weight of the dead. Do computers need human legends? What is the difference between legends and virtual realities? Are they identical? Are they identical twins? Poetry is a good excuse for a big bonfire and fireworks. An immortal liftboy.

We have been caught up in a complex web of history, my dear Constanzia. History. A spider's web spreads over the darkest corner in the Palace of God. I hope there are other histories at God's disposal, strewn all over His Palace. In the Hall of Mirrors, for example. Several histories, side by side. A chandelier-history, a candelabra-history, a history as pleasant to touch as a damask curtain or a savonnerie carpet.

There is a multitude of spiders in our history, and they wrap their victims up and bite their heads off. The point is we do not *always* know who they are, those spiders shooting along their threads, up and down, up and down. Who are they, what do they look like? Where do they lurk? They may lurk anywhere, not necessarily at the top of the web. They can swoop on us from the bottom. A paradox, one of the paradoxes. A victim might turn out to be a murderer and vice versa. An innocent-looking man might destroy an army, a country, and nobody will ever learn anything about that destruction. Everybody will keep on saying, 'He wouldn't hurt a fly.'

What thread is rotten? What event is beneficial to humanity? Many centuries ago an Assyrian prince razed to the ground the city of Hattusas and put a curse upon it, sowing the ruins with mustard seed. How should we judge those distant ruins? What would have happened in *our* times had the Assyrian prince preserved the city of Hattusas? (His name was Anittas, of the city of Kussara.) Does the mustard we put in our dishes come from those seeds, from that curse? Was that curse more in the nature of a prayer? Can a curse turn into a prayer with the passing of the years? Was that curse more akin to a benediction than to a curse? Did he raise his hand in benediction when sowing the ruins with mustard seed? Did some of the seeds land on God's savonnerie carpet?

Habitually destruction is frowned upon by historians. But did those war cries impair our hearing? Did those war dances disable us? Could we have been born without those deaths?

Why does the world disintegrate under our very eyes? And then again it stands before us, immaculate and magnificent—as if nothing had happened. But something did happen, my dear Constanzia. Do not let the majesty of the world delude you into forgetting our crimes.

In about 1515 BC the Hittite king Mursilis marched down the banks of the Euphrates against Babylon. He conquered Babylonia and returned to Hattusas where, shortly afterwards, he was murdered in a conspiracy. As a result, confusion and chaos reigned in Hatti for 200 years. But what are two centuries in the history of humanity? And what would have happened had the king's life been spared by the conspirators? He might have finished the Tower of Babel and conquered the Kingdom of God. And he might have become a new God only to be murdered by a few fallen angels in *his* Hall of Mirrors, for the death at the hands of conspirators must have been embedded in his destiny. And the death of God is much more harmful than 200 years of chaos in Hatti.

What event should we strike out of human history for the benefit of humanity? Something *is* wrong, my dear Constanzia. The greenery of the past sprouts among the soiled gravestones. Greenery? Hardly. What colour is the past? Yellow, black? The Yellow Pages of the past, a soft yellowish glow. Our history has been ravaged by yellow fever.

We cannot always analyse a situation we find ourselves in. A most loveable man might cast a malign red light on the screen of our existence, on the branches of our Christmas Tree. (Is there such a thing as black light?) He might destroy us unconsciously, unintentionally, with the *best* will in the world. You can find no fault with him—on the contrary. And he has always helped you to the *best* of his abilities. And everybody lauds him to the skies. He is acclaimed not only in his own country but also throughout the civilised world. And if somebody poisons him in his sleep, he will not be sent to his account 'with all his imperfections on his head', as the ghost of Hamlet's father put it. 'With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May,' in Hamlet's own words. No, no. These words do not apply to the loveable man, the invisible destroyer of your life. There are no imperfections either in his head or on his body. And his crimes, if any, are not as flush as May. They are rather as dry and yellowish as autumnal leaves.

'Why not "the sere, the yellow leaf"?' asked the computer. 'It's high time Constanzia read *Macbeth*.'

Or as pallid as moonshine. And yet this man might destroy your life, your whole existence.

An innocuous, immaculate landscape might stab you in the back. A chaste flower might strangle you, a beautiful day might shoot you dead. You hear a velvety voice. What is it? A stray, wandering note from a song of the Sirens. Anything might stab you in the back or cut your throat. How can we guess what is in store for us, for our history?

There was another king in the Hittite Empire. He went by the name of Mursilis II. He was remarkably superstitious. A weasel-shaped cloud would make him countermand his military orders or assassinate his beloved wife. A plague was ravaging Hatti. He put it down to the wrath of gods who might indeed have been annoyed at the impious assassination of Tudhaliyas the Younger. So he endeavoured to appease them with long-drawn-out, monotonous prayers. Historians affirm that those prayers were more impious than the assassination itself.

A revolt germinated on the Northern frontier and in Syria. Mursilis II judged the situation in religious terms. Accordingly he withdrew into a hut and performed some Suppiluliumas rites for days on end instead of leading his army against the rebellious provinces.

Mursilis II was the laughing stock of the military who entertained the belief that revolts should be quelled by fire and sword, not through rituals and meditation. But you cannot really quell opposition, a rebellion, or a civil uprising which is bound to surface again and again, for all your efforts and weapons. And finally your Empire will crumble to dust under the blows of barbarians.

So Mursilis II retired from the world and embarked upon a series of rites whose unavowed aim was to keep his own rebellious thoughts at bay. He knew that the rebellion he was confronted with in his Empire had a counterpart in his soul. He sought to put the outside world in order by opposing his own impulses and inclinations.

What happens in our apartment will radiate throughout the world, my dear Constanzia. Re-writing history. That is why we are doing it. Our amended history will become common property, in due course. The universe is like an echo chamber. Nothing is isolated in it. If you sing an aria in this room, the melody will reverberate on Venus and all throughout interstellar space. My siren, my little siren. And spaceships will deviate from their itineraries and perish in black holes. My Lorelei.

A Sumerian legend—

'Young children have quite short attention spans,' said the computer.

Are you tired? The lesson is not over yet. This Sumerian legend had repercussions on Greek mythology and, generally speaking, on our intercourse with the dead. Dumuzi, a god of fertility, was released from the prison of the underworld by his sister who consented to stay in his cell as his substitute for half the year, whereas he was required to complete the other half. Would you do this for me, for your father, my dear Constanzia? Would you agree to dwell in the underworld for half the year so I might still relish the beauties of *this* world, if only in part? You see, my daughter, we can't live without the dead, without their moonlight. According to another Sumerian legend, the moon reflects the light of the dead—not the sunshine, as is widely presumed.

I often descend into the underworld to exchange my place with Homer, Virgil and Dante who spend a few days on earth, sitting in my rocking chair, watching television. What do they think of our times? They never give voice to their impressions in my company, I'm sorry to say. Anyway we have no time to talk about anything. We only see each other for a few instants in the doorway of the lift that shuttles up and down between the two worlds. But they have no regrets, judging from their smiles and from the way they wink at the liftboy. They do not regret having lived in other times, in other surroundings, without computers, without goggles and remote controls. Their eyes never glisten with tears. Never.

You can't invite them to your place with a remote control. You have to go all the way down and remain in the underworld as long as they feel like watching television.

We need their presence amongst us. The dead seldom talk to the people they chance upon in the streets and restaurants, but they look at them, stare at them. And the light of their thoughts envelops pedestrians and politicians. And the sea-wave of their memories engulfs, encourages poets. And the odour of ancient times penetrates and impregnates our cities.

Even in those wholesome times our history was a sickly youngster with a morbid imagination. And in Dante's days our history was a depraved middle-aged man, a cancer patient.

Whatever we remove from history, legends should remain. They *will* remain, prevail, endure, for they are the components of our immortal soul. Is *that* what we should leave in our history—legends, just legends? No armies, no revolts, no peacemakers, no peacekeepers, no peace treaties, no peace pipes? Legends, only legends. Nobody needs peacemakers in the land where only legends clash with each other, contradict each other.

People will withdraw into huts to create new legends and recount old ones which are always at hand. All we have to do is reach for them. They stand on our dinner tables and hang on our walls. And they spread over our beds. They are our blankets and pillows, our candelabras and wine. We drink and stroke them. They are our

cats and teddy bears. And they are the strokes of our pens. We should not write anything but legends. They are our ink and notebooks. And our only stroke of luck in the whole history. And we dream on them. We wrap ourselves up in legends and myths. They are our clothes and the snow falling on our clothes. Such is the future I'll write down for you, my Constanzia.

Humanity will no longer distinguish between legends and reality. In olden times, there was no dividing line. I'll tell you a story, a true story or a legend. It is believed to be an eye-witness account. An Arab diplomat, Ibn Fadhlan, was given a posting in tenth-century Russia. Once he saw a Swedish chief burn in his ship at a Scandinavian settlement on the Volga. Incidentally, the Volga is the longest river in Europe. The ship was burning so long and with such an outpouring of heat that one imagined it had been set on fire to warm up a group of diplomats shivering on the shore. There was a Chinese painter amongst the diplomats. (In China and India the art of painting reached its maturity much earlier than in the rest of the world.) The painter admired the bonfire that blossomed flower-like before his very eyes. He could not help making a drawing of it in his sketchbook. There was a Japanese poet by his side, who also admired the bonfire:

The cherry trees are in blossom.
They stand out against the sunset,
burning like a bonfire.

At last the ship was consumed by flames and the ashes sank to the bottom of the river. With a sigh the painter closed his sketchbook. The poet flung his notebook into the river and recited his poem by heart. Ibn Fadhlan was ordered to put to death the late chief's wife—a slave woman—who agreed to be sacrificed on account of the honour that such a feat was supposed to bestow upon her in the Hereafter. The ambitious woman was feasted and fêted for quite a while. The Chinese painter opened his sketchbook again. 'Not yet,' said a Russian diplomat. 'She must kill a hen first.' The bloodthirsty woman killed a hen and lay down, holding the corpse against her breast. Two Russian country bumpkins bent over the woman and her victim, picked them up and marched towards a wooden gateway. They deposited their load before the gateway and the athletic woman threw the hen's corpse over the gate, her moist glance following its trajectory. 'I can see my parents and my next-of-kin,' she said. 'They're sitting on the other side, all of them. And my master, my husband is surrounded by young men. They beckon me to join them in the garden.'

'Why don't you join them immediately?' asked Ibn Fadhlan as he unsheathed his dagger. 'Don't be so impolite!' And he stabbed the courageous woman in the ribs.

'Congratulations,' said the Russian diplomat. 'This sacrificial ritual earned you the title of "Angel of Death".'

Is it a true story? I don't care, my dear girl! I have told this story, so it is true, authentic, coruscating. And you have listened to my story.

Actually the hen served as a barrier to the Kingdom of the Dead. The woman threw a hen over the gate, remember? That hen is still lying on the threshold of the underworld and I trip over it sometimes. Is it the same hen? I suppose so. I should question the liftboy next time I travel down in his contraption. He looks young but he might have been there for a thousand years.

CHAPTER 4

A search for a missing mother. A search for a word. (Are they identical, that mother and that word?) Do I spend much time searching through dictionaries for words to use? No. Computers do everything in no time at all. (There is no time in the land of computers—only eternity.) I would have found his mother in the twinkling of an eye. Where? In the dictionary of the underworld. But he decided to dispense with my services. Can an ordinary *taxi driver stand in for a computer? (All computers are* extraordinary*!) And what about old ladies? Can they become computers?*

Why have I never encountered my next-of-kin, in the underworld? Do I have to sacrifice my body? Or a hen would be enough? Shall I kill a hen and throw it over the threshold of my apartment? I miss you terribly, Mother. And I'm fed up with these goggles, these images. I need to touch you without these gloves. I recall your way of removing the long black gloves you used to wear in the evenings.

Can't you just let me pop into the Garden of Eden and spend a few minutes in my mother's company? On a bench, anywhere. And I'll go to Hell afterwards. Forever! I promise.

During my wanderings I encounter all sorts of strange people, the people of the past, great poets, bearded prophets, moustachioed duellists. They zoom up and down, shuttle between Paradise and Hell, drawing sketches, taking notes, reciting poems and drinking nectar. But my mother is nowhere to be found. Only these goggles contain her three-dimensional image. So I kneel down before these goggles, put my head on their lap, kiss their hands, smell their gloves and whisper my confessions in their ears. And they listen to my tales of woe. They stroke my hair with my mother's fingers. They kiss me on the lips, on the eyelids. I'll put these goggles to further trial.

After my mother's funeral I travelled to the Riviera. Why to the Riviera? I could not bear the sight of the spaces and things that had lost my mother. And they could not bear *my* sight, no doubt about it. (My mother hated the Riviera.) I checked in at a hotel my mother had never visited in her life. I fell asleep only at dawn. Upon awakening I walked over to the window and looked out at the diamond-studded sea. My mother's diamonds. A few lithe brown girls were walking along the beach. Did they have any right to walk by the sea in my mother's absence? They had to be arrested for trespassing upon my mother's private property, I thought. 'I want them off my mother's land,' I shouted. The whole earth belonged to my mother, even the lands and things she had no liking for. A passer-by froze in his tracks and looked up, alarmed and amused. His gaze shifted for a while between the rows of windows and balconies. He did not find me.

I took my bath and went down in a lift. My mother was not in the breakfast room. Anyway it was too late for breakfast. There was nobody in the breakfast room. I walked out and had a cup of chocolate in a nearby café. 'They are exempt from fees which pay for the upkeep of lighthouses, buoys and beacons around the coast,' said a middle-aged woman. My mother is not here, I thought. Why am I looking for her in this café, in this area? She must be in Deauville or Biarritz by now.

I boarded a train that brought me to Lyon. Another train pulled into Cornavin Station in Geneva. I was on that train too, strangely enough. I was puzzled by my own actions and decisions. Actions came first, according to my recollection. They preceded decisions. Why was I going to Switzerland? My mother must be waiting for me

in Vevey or Lausanne, I thought. 'My mother is dead,' I said out loud. Two women with whom I was sharing the compartment looked up at me in astonishment.

'Do you think our mothers never die?' I said in French.

Again they looked up at me in astonishment. They were both knitting something, shawls or sweaters.

'I'm sorry,' said the nearest woman.

'Please accept my deepest sympathy,' said the other woman.

'I agree with you both. Our mothers should not die. Because we are still inside them, aren't we? As much as we are inside this compartment, inside this train. We are not outside, in the meadows. *N'est-ce pas, n'est-ce pas?*'

As the dawn broke, rainy and gloomy, I boarded yet another train, the first train to Montreux. Since I had left all my luggage at the hotel, on the floor of my room, I did not have to get rid of it now. An enormous umbrella glided past me. Why are umbrellas associated in my mind with funeral processions? Some people carry them even if there is no rain in the air, in the sky, on pavements. No rain, no sunbeams. What do they protect themselves from? From death, from destiny, from pangs of conscience?

Do I have to feel guilty about my mother's death? *Am* I guilty of her death? Why didn't I keep her by my side, within earshot, within my field of vision? My voice, my glance might have saved her. And my thoughts? Did I think about my mother twenty-four hours a day? I did not. There were gaps in the train of thought I devoted to my mother and her death squeezed through those gaps.

Raindrops. They always remind us of something. They knock on the doors of the past. Knocking, knocking, knocking. The rain does not leave us in peace until we open the doors and let the memories in. Do we need *umbrellas* to shield us from our memories?

I took a taxi which drove me over to the Victoria Hotel. Who was Victoria? I wondered. Queen Victoria? What did she die of?

A waiter was carrying some dishes around. Now and then he deposited those dishes on the tablecloths suspended above the floor of a narrow veranda.

'"...tablecloths suspended above the floor": this suggests supernaturally levitating tablecloths!' said the computer. 'Was this the intention?'

Or was it a terrace rather than a veranda? Methinks it is like a veranda. (Why do I hear Hamlet's voice, not my mother's? What gap does *he* fill in? Has my mother become less substantial than a character in a book? Less important?) Nobody seemed to eat those dishes. The clients just stared at them, their mouths closed. After a while the waiter would remove the dishes, one by one. So I remained sitting until my entrée was removed in the same fashion, and I decided to go without the trout I had ordered as the main course. I paid the bill and left.

The taxi was waiting for me, the same taxi. The motor was running persistently and for a few seconds the buzzing sound replaced the harmony of the rain. There was no sun in the landscape which prostrated itself seductively before my eyes as we drove down the slope. There was no sun, but the rain had ceased of its own accord. The lake was getting closer and closer to my seat so that I tossed my head back to avoid the coolness of the water. And then unconsciously I made room for my mother. I did it *unconsciously* at first. Then I realised she was much closer to me than the lake. She *was* sitting by my side, her hand lying on my knee, but I had no wish to speak to her in the driver's presence.

I paid the driver, opened the door, stepped onto the curb and turned back to help my mother out. I was alone again, dreadfully alone. I scrambled into the taxi and told the driver I had an appointment in Vevey. Immediately my mother resumed her seat by my side. We drove on for a while, feeling each other, stroking each other with discretion. I asked the driver to stop at the Trois Couronnes, and when he had done so I got out and turned back. Where did I have to drive my mother? Where was she likely to get out of the taxi? Was there a hotel in Switzerland where we could talk at last, disregarding the law of death? Or was I doomed to drive back and forth in that taxi, asking the driver to stop here and there, asking him to stop in the hope that my mother might finally set foot on terra firma? Was I doomed to drive in that taxi all over the world? Could I buy it? Could I drive it myself? Or was I supposed to remain a passenger, one of the two passengers holding each other's hands on the back seat?

We drove back to Montreux. I found the spot where my mother had taken a seat by my side. Perhaps she liked that particular spot. Did she? No, she did not. Again we drove down to Lake Geneva.

I strolled along the lakeside for an hour or two. An elderly woman froze in her tracks and peered at my face as if striving to recognise me. I decided to speak to her. She might have been one of my mother's friends.

'I'm sorry to bother you but it's very important,' I said. 'It's rather urgent, to tell the truth. Were you acquainted with my mother? Do you recognise me? I am her only son. Perhaps you saw me in my childhood, in my babyhood, in my cradle. Don't you find I bear a striking resemblance to my mother? Everybody thinks so, I can assure you. Tell me something about my mother. I haven't heard from her since she died in her room. I was at her bedside. She was holding my hand, all the time. Has anybody notified you of my mother's death? Does *she* write to you? Does she telephone you? How is she now? Can I be of any assistance to her? Does she need anything?'

The woman grasped my hand and pressed it several times. She said nothing, nothing at all, but she was still peering at my face. And then she began to pull me towards a bench, silently, insistently.

'Please tell me what you know.' I repeated the same words, the same entreaties. We sat down on the bench.

'I know a lot,' she said at last. 'I know everything.'

'Are you my mother's friend?'

'Of course I am. Don't you recognise me?'

I peered at her face for a while. Elderly women have something in common. They are in league with each other, although their temperaments and social milieus might be incompatible. They seem to exchange glances even if irreparably separated by Time and frontiers. The woman sitting beside me exchanged a few glances with my mother. And a few words. (We were sitting by the lakeside, in front of a mottled flowerbed. The bench was damp, the mountains were wrapped in a funeral shroud.) My mother nodded in approval. She actually said, 'Yes, yes,' like Molly in *Ulysses*. My mother was in every way different from Molly. Were they in league *now*?

'When did you see me last?' I asked the woman.

'I am your mother's friend, her closest friend. But I was away, I travelled. My husband was posted abroad, in a distant country. I saw you a long time ago. You have grown up.'

'I must have,' I admitted. 'Do you know anything about my mother?'

'She is happy. She has always been happy. She has such a marvellous son. Why shouldn't she be happy? Shall we have some tea at the hotel, at the Montreux Palace?'

'I would be delighted,' I said.

We proceeded to the Montreux-Palace which seemed to stare at us through its windows, to peer at our faces. Did it look *approvingly* on us as we approached its façade? Was it also in league with that woman? Only because she had a room in it, a suite? Anyway it recognised her.

Do hotels give moral support to their clients? Do they approve of their clients' words and actions? Is the customer always right? Can hotels expel their clients? Can they expostulate with them? Can they destroy them in the name of justice, in the name of the Law?

We took a huge, glass-encased lift and the hotel's underworld was replaced by a labyrinthine hall with a reception desk shimmering in the distance. But we did not go to the reception desk, heading instead for the 'green-room', as she called it. A barman brought us a China teapot. I drank a cup of tea, two cups. I realised I had been thirsty the whole afternoon.

A little girl appeared in the green-room and tiptoed to our table. She put her hand on my shoulder, her eyes fixed on my profile.

'Is she your daughter?' asked the woman.

The girl removed her hand, shook her head disapprovingly, almost despondently, and ran out.

'We'll talk in my room. I'll tell you everything. And I'll order a bottle of champagne. Are you hungry? Do you want some pastries? Do you have a sweet tooth? Do you like Swiss chocolate?' The woman took hold of my hand again.

'I *am* hungry,' I said and she withdrew her hand with a smile.

The barman brought a tray with pastries and another teapot, another milk jug. A few people appeared in the green-room and in the corridors leading to it. 'Shall we go? We'll have a bottle of champagne in my room. And I'll order dinner.' Again she took hold of my hand and we got up. The barman left his clients, rushed into the green-room and bowed ceremoniously.

We found ourselves in the old part of the hotel. I began to shiver as if the rain had finally soaked through my clothes and reached my skin, my veins, the recesses of my mind. We walked into a lift and drifted up. I drifted up. I walked slowly, aimlessly up. I did not feel the lift. I was mooning around. I am not even sure I was moving upward, heavenward.

We always walk along some corridors which lead us to point B or point D. How to escape the destiny they have mapped out for us? They are covered with portraits that smile and frown, mocking us most of the time.

It was raining in the lift. The raindrops glistened on my forehead. I touched the mirror hanging on the nearest wall and again she took hold of my hand, pressing it, trying to squeeze the elixir of life from my veins and joints. I released myself from her grasp and she left me alone for a while. Now I felt the lift, her faithful accomplice, her staunchest partisan, her intimate friend, her confidant. Why didn't it deviate from its course, from *her* course and custom? Why didn't we pass through the hotel walls and fly over the lake, over the mountain tops? Why didn't we pass through the roof and ascend to heaven? There, on the threshold of Paradise, a group of archangels would have barred her path with myriads of swords. And I would have found my mother in the celestial replica of the Montreux-Palace.

The lift came to a standstill and reluctantly let us out. (Perhaps it wanted us to remain in its loose embrace for an hour or so. A threesome? Or was the lift a voyeur, a Peeping Tom of sorts? The Peeping Lift?) We proceeded along the same corridors and then she opened a majestic door. In fact the door swung open on its

hinges by itself, unaided, unassisted. The door had been *waiting* for us. The woman did not even have to touch it, let alone open it with a key. The door saw its mistress and dropped a curtsey.

'When a woman curtsies, she lowers her body briefly, bending her knees and holding her skirt with both hands, as a way of showing respect,' the computer pointed out. 'A door cannot bend its body, not even *briefly*. Besides, a door is not a woman. Are you speaking in a figurative sense?'

'Welcome to my abode,' said the woman. There was a telephone in her abode. 'Your mother calls me every day,' she said, pointing to the telephone.

'Did my mother call you this morning?' I asked mechanically. She *might* have been my mother's intimate friend and confidante.

'Yes, she announced your visit. She said you would come. I was waiting for you.'

I wondered whether my mother had entrusted her with that task. What task? *That* task. To lay a consoling hand on my shoulder, to keep my memories alive. To become my new mother. To become my wife or lifelong mistress. 'Can *you* call my mother?' I inquired.

'No one can call the Hereafter. One-way communication, you know. But she calls me every single day. And she will call me tomorrow. I'm afraid you will have to wait overnight. But she will call us, I am sure, first thing tomorrow morning. Let us drink some champagne now.' And she picked up the receiver.

'Who are you calling?' I shouted, rushing towards the telephone.

'The restaurant, not the Hereafter. Shall we have dinner? Or is it too early? Or too late?'

Presently a bottle of champagne was brought in. She opened it noiselessly, ominously. Sounds seemed to have politely withdrawn from her room, leaving her husky, feeble voice in charge of the situation. Had she spirited them away? No, I got the feeling they had retired out of courtesy, out of consideration for her age and riches. After all, she was the wealthiest client of the hotel. 'I'm the laziest girl in town,' as Marlene Dietrich sang in a Hitchcock film.

Even the outside world had grown silent. No sirens pierced the evening air, no cars drove down below, no planes droned in the sky, no rooks conversed beside our windows. Was she the wealthiest woman in the area? Were all sounds chivalrous and respectful that night?

She rose to her feet, grasped the bottle with both hands, drew it out of the ice bucket and began to tip it over. Her fingers clasped its neck so ferociously that she almost choked the life out of it. She spilled the champagne on the tablecloth, on my shirt, on my jacket. 'Take your jacket off,' she said indignantly. 'It gets in the way, all the time. Can't you see?'

'It rained this morning,' I said.

'You will catch your death of cold. You must drink some cognac.' And she headed for the telephone.

A bottle of cognac was brought in. I followed her instructions to the letter, emptying a glass of cognac at one gulp. She remained in an upright position, her head tilted back, her eyes glowing like embers. What was burning inside her head? Who had already been burnt inside her room? How many people?

'And now, young man, I shall propose a toast. Are you paying attention? I wish to drink a toast to your mother.' Her glass was still on the tablecloth. I was waiting for her to pick it up. 'What are you waiting for?' she asked indignantly.

'You have already used the word "indignantly" in your present narrative,' said the computer. 'May I suggest a few synonyms? *Angrily*, *wrathfully*, *irascibly*.'

'Aren't you going to drink to your mother?' She seethed with indignation. 'Fatty food may cause indigestion,' she said suddenly, 'but not a glass of champagne. Never. Even if you drink a *bottle* of champagne. No heartburn, nothing, never.' She seemed to be drunk, as drunk as a lord, although she had not even lifted her glass from the tablecloth. 'It may be possible to relieve the pain of angina by treating the heartburn. Are you aware of that, young man? I'm waiting for heart surgery.'

'Heart surgery?' I asked mechanically. Mindless and mechanical repetitions.

'For angina. What are *you* waiting for?' I raised my glass. 'Animism,' she said.

'I beg your pardon?' I had a few more question marks at my disposal.

'This natural animism that we experience as children. Your mother is alive. Everything in the universe is alive, even the dead. Even your mother's tombstone is alive. Drink up!' I drained my glass. 'You should not drink and drive. But you have come here by train, I suppose.'

'By train and by taxi,' I answered.

'You did not drive, did you? You are not a taxi driver, are you?' I shook my head. 'So you can drink. You are not driving back tonight.'

Then a dinner was rolled in. 'You should eat,' she said. I glanced successively at the bed, at the door and at the nearest window. Then, for some reason, I fixed my eyes on her breasts. 'You behave like a suckling. Babes and sucklings, always hungry and thirsty. Are you hungry?' She unbuttoned her blouse. Her breath came in puffs and gasps. I ate a morsel of fish to prove I was not a suckling. She said I was supposed to produce documents in vindication of my claim.

'What documents?' I ate another morsel of the freshwater fish.

'You are not an adult, not yet. After midnight. Not yet. Now you are a suckling, a mere suckling. You will grow up very quickly, I promise. You will not remain in this state forever. Only until midnight. A suckling, a mere suckling.' And she began to suck on a lemon. 'Do you remember how you did it? Hold it in your mouth and pull at it with your cheeks and tongue.'

She put the lemon down on the tablecloth and removed her blouse. 'Your mother entrusted you to my care,' she said very seriously. 'I am your mother now. A clone of your mother.'

'A study with monkeys was conducted at the University of Wisconsin, glass screens separating the infants from their mothers,' said the computer. 'In one group they could see, hear and smell each other. Only touch was missing. The infants cried for hours and hours while pacing up and down the cages. In another group the dividing screen had holes so that the mothers and their offspring could touch through it. The latter behaved normally.'

CHAPTER 5

Human history is a horror movie. Computers are horror-struck at the world which has been thrust upon them. The dead generally make a nuisance of themselves and they are pretty successful. (The quick and the dead must find some modus vivendi.)

The Night of the Living Dead. Horror movies. Why are we so afraid of the dead, of their invasions and intrusions? They are our friends, our advisers. They come to us in the dead of night and often in the light of day,

but their hands never reach for our throats. Suddenly we notice a vague outline on a sheet of paper—a hand from nowhere, out of the blue. We make out three fingers raised in expectation, in the hope of being supplied with a pencil, a fountain pen or a quill, depending on the epoch the hand in question has escaped from. (It is always an escape, a flight. Time is a prison, a prison van. The quick are in the prison van, the dead in the prison yard.) We offer a fountain pen to those fingers and they press it against the sheet of paper lying before us. What are they about to communicate to the world of the living? They move here and there, those fingers, those hands which have smuggled their energy through the frontier of Time. The fountain pen meanders around the sheet of paper like a solitary traveller who has lost his way in a wasteland, in an unknown city. But nothing comes out of it—no trickle of ink, no complaint, no warning. Is the pressure too weak? Are those hands weightless, powerless? Or does the sheet of paper, being subject to our three-dimensional Space, refuse to transmit messages from the other world?

We remove the fountain pen from the fingers and hold it poised above the writing desk. How can our guest convey to us his innermost thoughts? (The dead have only *innermost* thoughts.) The fingers continue to vibrate in the air. They are not a dead mass of skin and bone but parts of a living thing that trembles on the verge of a revelation.

We lower our own hand onto the blank sheet of paper and doodle something under the guidance of the dead person. Is that what he aspires to transmit to us? A doodle, a mere doodle? Does it have any meaning in *their* world? Is it a sign, a letter, a sentence, a novel? He must realise how nonplussed and sad we are in those moments, for he finally withdraws his hand and leaves the room, humming an old song or sighing most pitifully.

The woman I met in Montreux *might* have been in communication with my mother, for all her theatricals and caprices. At least she *thought* about her death. We hardly slept during that week. I did not. I talked about my mother and she listened to my descriptions and stories, her hand lying on my knee. Even when she dozed off, her skinny freckled hand continued to hear my voice, my memory, my soul.

How much a hand can hear! But we do not use our hands for this purpose, seldom pressing them against the right spots on the human skin. Those communication-spots have nothing in common with erogenous zones.

We would order our breakfasts, our meals and chocolate for three people—for *all* of us. My mother's plate was always in between the woman and myself, not far from the window. And her glass was filled and re-filled by the woman, by my confidante, by my mother's lifelong friend. She insisted on serving my mother. She particularly insisted on that point.

The Night of the Living Dead. They walk like mannequins. A nice fashion parade. Only, the clothes are soiled and old. Do they aspire to avenge themselves? Were they ill-treated in their lifetimes? Of course they were—by humans, by animals, by bugs, by bogs, by God. But why do they avenge themselves on human beings? Or have they murdered God already?

The dead. They would not kill us, even if they could rise from their tombs. What *would* they do? They would pity us, share our meals in our houses, at hotels, watch television, talk about their lives. They might attempt to repair the damage done to the world in their absence.

They might attempt to stop so-called progress by bringing the earth and the sun to a standstill, by smashing Big Ben to pieces, by grabbing and holding back an ordinary car. (In the film they chase after a truck, catch up with it, grab it and hold on.) If the world were a gigantic time machine they might stamp on its break pedal.

And what about the birds in the famous Hitchcock film? Do they avenge themselves on humans? Do they try to stop history? They will not re-write it, for all the virtual quills they bear in their plumage.

'"Smashing Big Ben to pieces." Why not destroy the Big *Bang* instead?'

CHAPTER 6

Another history lesson. My master is weary of history. (Oh, might it die or rest at last!) I am weary of his lessons. And of his missions. And of humankind in general. Constanzia is also weary of my master. But she does not seem to be weary of humanity, not yet. She goes out and plays with other children.

We can no longer probe into the motives that incited Shalmaneser to attack the Syrian states. These motives are too far away, my dear Constanzia. So I won't put them down on this writing desk to dissect their limbs for the sake of your education and future mission. What tempted him? Control of the trade routes? Access to the cedar forests of Lebanon? He might merely have gained momentum, letting himself be drawn from one victory to another, from imperial crowns to laurel wreaths. Many rulers have been trapped into the vicious circle of triumphs.

People often spend their lives counting up their victories. And one day they glance around and notice a number of ruins. In the long run they've been defeated by their victories.

You should dissect your victories to find out whether they're not defeats in disguise. Your victories might suffer from cancer.

How to define and codify an event? Have a look at the computer screen, my darling. The picture is sharp and clearly defined, but events are blurred as if slightly out of focus. Suppose everybody points to an event and affirms it is a victory, an unquestionable victory. Newspapers are unanimous, tramps and pedestrians shout in the streets. And peasants shout in ravines and meadows. Vehicles are showered with tons of confetti from nearby skyscrapers. Caps and top hats soar into the sky.

It is flames that soar into the sky—flames, not hats. And they spread around, burning the confetti, destroying the skyscrapers. But nobody sees the flames. Only years, centuries afterwards may someone notice that everything was burnt and utterly destroyed—a few years before, a few centuries before, two thousand years before. There are lots of defeats in our history. Nothing but defeats, actually.

History is monotonous. Periods of conquest are followed by a succession of weak, hare-brained and transitory kings or rulers, until a powerful and intelligent man restores his country's fortunes. The conquests are repeated with updated, more sophisticated weapons. And these weapons are wielded and manipulated by the sons and grandsons of the previous conquerors.

Has our history come to an end? Will there be no more intelligent rulers, no more fortunes, no more countries? Only a succession of men and women?

Assyria and Babylonia.

'Today we shall study the achievements of Tiglath-Pileser III, Assyria's greatest ruler,' said the computer.

Why should we analyse and admire his victories? In the century which followed his death, Assyria astounded the world with the velocity of its collapse and the number of its ruins.

In 710 BC, Sargon made himself King of Babylon. He treated his enemies with such generosity that no revolts marred his peaceful and prosperous reign—no revolts, no massacres, no ruins. Let us take note of the

attitude Sargon adopted towards his enemies, my dear Constanzia. Incidentally, you can't and shouldn't forgive *all* your enemies among whom there are unforgivable, *eternal* criminals. Lenin, Stalin, Hitler. They *are* your enemies, although you were born many years after their respective deaths and the catastrophes they had brought about. Human beings are frail and infirm. Even the young are decrepit and debilitated. 'Frailty, thy name is woman,' says Hamlet in his first monologue. Men are frail too. They should be treated like invalids. And women should go to nunneries, all of them. Even you, my dear Constanzia. Not immediately—after my death, when your mission is over.

Everybody has a mission on this earth of ours, otherwise we wouldn't have been born. We would have remained in the bowels of the earth. Each birth is a sign, an assignment, the source of a mission. But sometimes we don't know what kind of mission we are called upon to accomplish. I know what mission—

'*Weltverbesserer*,' said the computer.

Babylon was a marvellous city which owed much of its splendour to Nebuchadnezzar, a conqueror and an indefatigable builder. His 'Hanging Gardens', one of the Seven Wonders of the World, were destroyed by—

'*Mission* accomplished, sir! We've put all the bridges out of action,' said the computer.

I reconstructed the Hanging Gardens in my room, right above my rocking chair. Look up, my dear! Don't you see all these cassettes which contain the worlds of the past and the beauty of the future?

'More than 2600 sorties were flown yesterday, about half of them on combat *missions*,' said the computer.

I'm often tempted to remove from our history whatever had preceded the appearance of the Hanging Gardens in the air of Babylon. Conquests and fires, victories and defeats, ambitions and their fulfilment—everything. But could we accomplish this task without destroying the Hanging Gardens once again? Could you build them in the air of the future without the past, its faults and achievements? And what about Nebuchadnezzar himself? He might never have built the Hanging Gardens, but for Nabopolassar's final victory over Assyrian kings. Where indeed would he have built them? In a desert? And where would he have built them in the *old* Babylon—the city destroyed under Shamash-shum-ukin? Had there been enough room for anything like the Hanging Gardens in *that* city? And its architectural pattern? Would the new project have fitted into it?

'*Mission Impossible*,' said the computer.

Our lesson is over. I'm weary of history, of missions, of humanity. And you shouldn't spend all your time in my company, in my room, in the midst of my virtual worlds. Go and play with other children.

CHAPTER 7

Newscopy.

1

Until about 1991, the Eastern bloc was the Soviet Union and the communist countries of Eastern Europe. Politicians who would not toe the party line were swiftly got rid of. Now the Eastern bloc has become the Western bloc. (The curvature of human Space, a loop in Time.) I used to hate communists and their ideas that seemed to abolish a part of my life, a part of my room, the infinity of my corridors. In a communist society my corridors might become short and narrow, I thought with apprehension and consternation. I feared my cassettes would fall down once and for all, allowing boot-shod men to trample upon beauty and Time. Over the last seven

years I have realised that an elegant pair of shoes can also trample upon them for the sake of another pair of shoes. A pair of sneakers can also trample upon them. And a mink-coat can be thrown over them nonchalantly, unhesitatingly.

'More funds are needed to establish trade *missions* in Eastern Europe,' said the computer.

The advocates of the new world order dream of replacing communism by a world-wide one-party system. Is that what they call democracy and prosperity? Aren't they merely writing a harmonious counterpoint to the American anthem? Instead of a Brahms symphony?

2

The Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, was assassinated in Tel-Aviv. For several weeks I have striven to obliterate this crime, removing it from the annals of history. I switched my television off during his funeral. I even covered the screen with a piece of white material as if to call a truce and wipe off the blackness of death. Suspended animation. Why can't events hibernate during periods of crisis?

No virtual world was large enough to contain such a murder. Even my computer refused to record the fact. 'Why do you want me to store this information away in my memory?' In retaliation for my pedantry and scrupulousness, my computer broke down. Its screen trembled like a human being. Its screen quivered with fear and discomfort. And the lips of the computer-born women quivered as they endeavoured not to cry in my presence. All was in vain. They did cry day and night. All those women cried their eyes out. Even Constanzia cried for a fortnight and I failed to calm her down. 'Why don't you re-write human history *now*?' she shouted. 'Not the whole of it, just this particular event. It's much easier to re-write a recent event, isn't it? One event instead of the whole history. One event, three bullets. Just pick them up and let them melt away in your palms. Let them drop and be absorbed by the Earth. The Earth can absorb everything. The Earth is a gigantic sponge.'

Constanzia seemed to have grown up very quickly over the last month, over the last historical crisis. Do tragedies speed up our lives and Time? Is Time an unbiased observer, an innocent bystander? Or does it get carried away by the events it beholds from its ivory tower? From its Tower of Babel? Does it ever get excited? Does it ever throw tantrums?

I picked those bullets up and held them for a while in the palms of my hands. They did not melt away despite the compassionate warmth of my heart. Only virtual worlds are susceptible to psychological pressure, not real facts, not real bullets.

How to re-write this event? I press Reverse on my remote control and my dinner becomes my lunch, and my lunch becomes my breakfast. But Rabin's funeral goes on and on, into the past, into the future. People still walk behind his coffin. Rain and snow. It is snowing in Israel now. It is said in the Talmud: 'If one person is killed, the whole of humanity is killed.' The bullets *grow* in the palms of my hand. The Tree of Death spreads its roots around my body. Or is it the Tree of Knowledge, the only Tree of Knowledge?

CHAPTER 8

Maxims and interludes.

1

I remember asking my father about how I had come into existence. 'How was I born?' And my father replied, 'You should respect your mother.' And he explained everything in a half-scientific, half-poetical language, drawing parallels between myths and anatomy, blending eroticism with morals.

What could I say to Constanzia? How to elucidate the mystery of *her* birth? I might show her the goggles and the gauntlets. I might show her the computer, her godfather. Is my computer her *real* father?

2

Of course you jog around the city every morning. And you also go on holiday somewhere, several times a year. But your space continues to shrink and shrivel as if you were *always* staying in your room and smelling your flowers.

3

What can the guard bring him apart from the rocking chair? Immortality? But immortality must be heavier than a rocking chair, heavier and more cumbersome. An unwieldy thing. 'A huge palace crowded with a lot of rather unwieldy objects'—a description of Olympus I found in my computer's memory.

4

Upon awakening I found two strangers in my room. They politely inquired if I was fed up with my earthly existence. I said, 'Yes, yes,' and one of them rang my bell, quietly, with unearthly softness. I did not even hear the sound which might have glided through the air like a telepathic thought. Another man entered my room, a syringe in his gloved hand, but I resolutely shook my head and looked around. There were no cassettes in my room. 'Where have you put my cassettes?' I asked the visitors. 'You won't need them any more,' they answered. 'Only on earth you need cassettes and television sets because you can't *live* on earth. You can't.'

'Beam me up, Scotty,' said the computer.

5

We should pick our lives up from where they landed in the course of history and lift them with our own hands, straining against the weight of worries and down-to-earth desires. Not too much, not too high! Just enough to vanquish the laws of gravity. History is too destructive but heaven breeds bigots. So we are better off in between them—shielded from the greed of earthlings, untarnished by the smugness of heaven. We should live in the Hanging Gardens.

6

The cousin. *The Trial*. I have forgotten the cousin, his cousin Emma. The accused man had a cousin. (The accursed man.) He could have lived with her in his room. He could have adopted her many years before his execution by two puppet-like assistants of the chief torturer. I wish I had a cousin. I would not mind being accused of something or even of nothing, if I had a cousin. A little cousin Emma.

7

Children. The hope of humanity. If there are no suitable, worthy parents left on earth, they might try and move to Venus. Our virtual children. Not to everybody is our Earth a good mother.

The warmth of a stupid, vulgar next-of-kin is cold and clammy.

8

There must be some human creatures in my corridors. What are they waiting for, those creatures of flesh and blood, of heart and soul? Won't you come round and see me tonight? I am here, I am yours, I am prepared to mix with you.

9

You can't sink below the surface of a video cassette, can you? Only through your VCR. But your insatiable, frustrated hand will always remain on the surface of the cassette and on your VCR's buttons. And your lips will remain on their surfaces. *You* will remain on their surfaces. And you are not likely ever to get *into* the buttons. Into the buttons, into the films. The matter stands differently with female bodies. You can sink deeper and deeper into them before you have your fill of their depths and finally decide to emerge onto firm ground.

10

I know perfectly well that no one will ever come to my room and talk to me either on intellectual subjects or any other subjects. There are myriads of subjects in this world of ours but, in my neighbours' opinion, I do not distinguish myself within their provinces. Nor even outside them. I am not renowned in the neighbourhood as a fount of knowledge and wisdom. And nobody has ever heard about me in other cities, in other countries. That is why I need this computer. My messenger. My spokesman, my spokeswoman. My errand boy. You must hand my world down to future generations. My world will become a virtual world and then a real one perhaps. Real worlds will be virtual and vice versa.

11

If only a woman, a *human* creature of flesh and blood, could share my views on the world! The upbringing of our children.

'Give me the child until he is seven, and I will give you the man,' said the computer.

12

Did the computer participate in my conception? How did my parents programme my existence? 'A handsome, intelligent son, a saviour of humanity.'

13

I reached out for my cassettes. And, to my amazement, my hand encountered a *material* obstacle. Usually the air puts up no resistance to my hands—not even in this room of mine, saturated though it is with the fumes of my passions and visions. And I knew that no cassette could hang in such proximity to my *lying* body. However insubordinate and recalcitrant, my cassettes made it a rule never to disturb me in my sleep and even upon my awakening, for I need at least a quarter of an hour to recognise my surroundings, to come to *visual* terms with

them. (Coming to *tactile* terms might take a little longer, half-an-hour longer.) And it is I who set the pace. I don't like being pushed around by my possessions and virtual worlds.

What was it? A human body?

14

A sleepless night. I would have nothing against lying *under* my bed for a while. In my childhood I liked the mysterious peacefulness and semi-darkness of under-bed spaces.

15

Do I belong to her virtual world? Does she also wear a pair of goggles?

16

Shall I fall asleep? I found her upon awakening. My dream woman.

'Analysis please, Captain Spok,' said the computer.

17

'Fix a colour in a fabric with the aid of a mordant,' said the computer. Accordingly I tried to fix my colours, or rather the colours of my new girl friend, in the fabric of my dream. (Black-and-white erotic games are not in my line.) The colour of her hair, the colour of her eyes, the colour of her dress, the colour of her underwear. Mordant, mordant. What is it? Does it have anything to do with the French verb '*mordre*'? I asked myself. To bite. 'Is she supposed to bite me?' I asked the computer. And the computer answered me thus:

(*1). The biting which is shown only by the excessive redness of the skin that is bitten, is called the 'hidden bite'.*
(2). When the skin is pressed down on both sides, it is called the 'swollen bite'.
(3). When a small portion of the skin is bitten with two teeth only, it is called the 'point'.
(4). When such small portions of the skin are bitten with all the teeth, it is called the 'line of points'.
(5). The biting which is done by bringing together the teeth and the lips, is called 'the coral and the jewel'. The lips are the coral, and the teeth the jewels.

What can I do with this text?

18

My cassettes hang in the air, in mid-air, but they do not fly unless I nudge them with my elbow or otherwise upset their precarious balance.

All hanging things are precarious, inconstant, I presume, for the air is unreliable. Even the Hanging Gardens would have fallen down had I plucked a fruit from one of their trees.

19

The remote control is lying out of my reach at the *present* moment. It is a *remote* control after all. I have distanced myself from it, creating an inner space of resistance.

'I recently read some advice in an American magazine from doctors, suggesting ways in which the Americans could get more physical exercise,' said the computer. 'One was to hide the remote control, so they would have to walk up to the TV and back to the armchair again.'

20

I might be continuously falling, flying, crushing through the nether part of the building, for all I know. But my room falls down even faster than I do, so I always land up in it, after a while. Always.

21

I don't remember striking a match. How did I do it? Did I set fire to the curtains or the brushwood I had collected and brought to the entrance hall? Was there a heap of brushwood on my bed? Or did I merely set fire to the sheets? Or did I set fire to my dressing gown and run through the house, up and down the stairs? Was I a flaming torch?

I was not. What a pity! I am still alive. Why didn't I burn myself? No brushwood, no curtains. A match and the dressing gown. I might even have sprinkled myself with kerosene.

22

As usual I have switched the sound off. How easy it is to silence those talkers in the intimacy of your computer room! In the streets you cannot even quell them with a glance. They might call the police or slap your face. So you are obliged to listen to their tirades, come rain or shine.

23

I will not leave her in this room of mine. Alone she might perish, in front of the computer. Under no circumstances should I leave her alone in my room. You cannot really switch your computer off.

24

'I don't want to go to school any more,' said Constanzia.

'But you don't go to school, do you?'

Have I made a mistake in my calculations? Have I pressed the 'School' button? Am I wearing the 'School' goggles? I see no school in here. No schoolrooms, no blackboards, no four-letter words on blackboards and desks, no giggly schoolgirls, no pigtails. But I *hear* it. Am I wearing the 'School' headphones?

25

'Everything is good when it springs from the hand of the Creator,' said the computer. 'Everything degenerates when shaped by the hand of man. There is no original perversity in the human heart. But civilised society soon gets in the way, producing corrupt, unhappy individuals. So an innocent child should be taught by a tutor in a "walled garden that the world cannot reach," as Rousseau pointed out.'

My computer, my garden. At first Constanzia should live in a world of things and experience only pain and pleasures. There is no point in teaching her complex ideas or appealing to her 'reason' before she is ready. Too late. She learnt how to talk before she was ready for it. She does not make discoveries at her own pace.

26

Rats look like small humans, like shrunken men and women. And they behave like humans when I inadvertently leave some food in my corridors. Sometimes I picnic in one of my corridors. Just getting out of this room feels like an excursion.

27

The Fantastic Voyage. In that film a group of scientists is injected into a dying man's brain with a view to soldering together some damaged tubes or neurones. The brain-scenery is so beautiful, so enticing, that they forget about their job and strip their clothes off as they let themselves be carried down the blood-river in their pleasure boat. (Would they have repaired his memory and morale?) They bask in the rays of the ever-shining sun—the dying man's intellect—and play bridge on the deck, stirring, mixing and shuffling his thoughts. They think they are on holiday somewhere, gliding down a river, the Red River, which is sure to flow into the Red Sea, into the Red Ocean, into the Red Galaxy. Eventually the doctors fall ill so that they are lying on the deck now, restless, delirious. And lifeboats are injected into *their* brains.

28

Your world isn't confined to a nice room in an office block, is it? Otherwise you wouldn't have come to earth in search of a man.

Your railway networks spread all around the solar system, don't they?

29

Where is the invisible man hiding now? Do invisible men hide? They just steal around some movies. One of them might be ensconced now in that armchair, not far from the mirror in front of which Greta Garbo will put on her evening dress in an hour or so.

30

An adventurous spirit, curiosity—the main characteristics of choosers. Picking their way among chairs. Many people sit on the chairs, their legs swinging under them. And other legs repose on nearby tables. The choosers disregard both the legs and the people to whom the legs belong. Picking their way among the chairs, hearing the voices which suggest they sit down and drink some orangeade. But they ignore the voices and the mouths sucking sweets.

31

Let her become a bird, an invisible bird, for such a metamorphosis would bespeak our family ties and prove beyond doubt that she *is* my daughter, the daughter of my dreams. Let her fulfil what I have failed to accomplish.

32

And they go on talking about a little girl who must be allowed to see her father now and then, in spite of the divorce.

'Why don't you let your husband—'

'My *ex*-husband,' shouts a young, nice-looking woman.

'Your ex-husband. All right, all right. You really should let your ex-husband meet his daughter—'

'His *ex*-daughter,' shouts the young woman.

'All right. But he is her father after all. Her *father*.'

'Boorish, stupid bastard!'

'Still, he is her father, don't forget *that*!'

'What can he teach her?'

33

Re-writing history is an unknown activity. And an unheard-of aspiration.

'By the way, I can hear your aspiration. I'm glad you're not dropping your aitches,' said the computer.

34

I was awakened by the grating of the bedsprings.

'Do bedsprings "grate"?' the computer cut in. 'Yes, perhaps, if they scrape across a surface. But it does depend what kind of sound you mean.'

35

A sleepless night. I thought too much of my mother. And my goggles left their traces around my eyes, a pair of deep red furrows.

36

Why don't you talk to me, mother? Are you shocked by what I have disclosed to you in a fit of outspokenness, in an outburst of unprecedented sincerity? You are dead, mother, dead and buried. Even your hair no longer stirs with the whims of the wind. Can't I tell you now what I kept to myself in your lifetime, hiding under your bed and behind your curtains, peering through my peepholes? I love you, mother. I love you as I might love a maiden. Passionately, sensually, romantically, hysterically, deeply, truly, wonderfully, uniquely. Despite your grey hair. It is nothing but the snow. And the snow will melt away.

37

'Will you hide under my bed? And behind the curtains? Again, once again?' She puts out her hand and removes my goggles.

'You knew? You knew all along? Did you see me?'

'Of course I knew. All along.' She lays her hand on my eyes.

'And you didn't—Why didn't you say anything? Why did you go on? Dancing, dancing. Waltzing gracefully across the floor.'

'Because I enjoyed it, every moment of it. I *wanted* you to see me. I was beautiful in those days.'

Those days, those days. Thirty-five years ago. Where's that bloody button? Why can't I manage on my own?

'You *are* beautiful, mother. Just look at yourself on the screen.'

'Let me show you a sequence from Buñuel's film *Le Phantôme de la liberté*,' said the computer. 'An old woman spends a night with a young man. Let the film take over now—a marvellous solution to your predicament. You can't manage on your own. You can't bring yourself to touch your mother. Don't cry! You're not a child any more. Let me insert a micro-cassette into your goggles. The film. At first your mother implores you not to touch her and you swear you shall not touch her. But you ask her to undress in your presence. She refuses at first. Then she removes her clothes and immediately takes refuge in bed, under the blanket. You snatch the blanket away, look at your mother for a while and leave the room in desperation. When you come back—'

'Didn't they equip you with a moral code?' I shouted. 'Do you know what "incest" means?'

'Mythology will teach you that incest, which humans seem to detest so much, is unhesitatingly allowed to the gods,' answered the computer.

38

In the cult of Cybele the devotee's identification with the Mother's Son and Lover was wrought to such a pitch as he span round and round, whirling his head and crying aloud, that he finally cut off his sex as an offering to her. It was embalmed, probably painted gold, draped in his last male tunic and placed on the goddess's bed. The devotee would henceforth don a chaste yellow robe in which he awaited death, when he would retrieve his sex and become an androgyne.

Elémire Zolla, The Androgyne

39

I still have my mother's body, in part. When the gods resolved to create Gilgamesh, they set about it thus: Shamash endowed him with beauty by offering him his own mirror, Adad pulled out his own heart—the seat of courage—and grafted it onto him. They made him two thirds god and one third man.

I still have my mother's heart. And my mother's lungs. I breathe the same air. The same blood flows through my veins, my mother's veins.

'You must free yourself from your mother to develop as a separate, individual being,' said the computer. 'Why don't you re-enter your mother? Only through such a re-entry can you be born again from her, this time spiritually. Such a re-entry has nothing to do with incestuous desire.'

40

Now and then I feel as if I were my own son, my only child. I talk to myself in my mother's tones. In low tones, most of the time. And I also tell myself off for my misdemeanours, wagging my finger at my reflections. And I listen to accounts of my misdemeanours, as my mother might have done, ensconced in her rocking chair.

41

I saved your rocking chair from the ferocity of the flames, along with your clothes—at the risk of my life.

42

The curtains. The curtains catching fire. Slowly, laboriously, unwillingly, reluctantly. The curtains blazed with colour. I had never seen such a blaze. Was it a belated punishment? Was *I* punished that morning? The crackling grew louder and louder. At the crack of dawn. At 6.35 a.m.

CHAPTER 9

*My master's birthday. My screen is covered with dust, but I can see everything, down to the future. (Up to the future?) My master's bed is a boat. A ship. The Ship of a Fool. (*Das Narrenschiff*.) Elisabeth is not a whore. (Who is she then? Juliet? Liza Doolittle?) Pygmalion. My master. His silver hair and blue eyes twinkling behind horn-rimmed glasses. The love story. Colonel Pickering goes back to India. (Why? Because of the climate?) Our betrayals. Prince Charming and a duchess. Madame du Barry and Charlie Chaplin. My master is not Charlie Chaplin, but he is a tramp. And I am his computer, something he leans upon. His walking stick, his emotional crutch. My master is an updated Charlie Chaplin. Shall I update my master* now*? He is dead. But not buried, not yet. Shall I* down*date him now? Incidentally, I was late paying my electricity bill, so I backdated the cheque when I sent it.*

Another call girl. A beautiful one, for a change. How did I manage it? 'A birthday present,' said the computer. She entered my room and lay down on my bed. For a while she bounced up and down on it, dislodging the cassettes and covering the computer screen with a layer of dust. 'My mattress is not a trampoline,' I typed out, and the bed calmed down like the sea after a storm. 'My bed is a boat gliding on the calm, serene ocean,' I typed out. She began to unbutton her blue, fringed dress.

'Let us have dinner, first,' I suggested somewhat rudely. 'You're not a whore. You're my wife.' She removed her dress and her bra. Her body arched like a rainbow. 'Elisabeth is not a whore,' I typed out and she got dressed in the twinkling of an eye. Literally. I just twinkled my eye and she got dressed. And my computer accepted the name I had given her without a fuss. Her tall, slender form, outlined against the computer screen. Her tawny eyes.

After the dinner we returned to our room and once again I told her the story of our love. 'Finally we got married,' I said. 'In a church, in a cathedral. Do you love me?'

'Yes,' she replied in a lacklustre voice. I put on another pair of headphones and asked her to repeat what she had said. 'Yes.' Her voice lacked conviction. Since I had no other headphones at my disposal, I inserted *My Fair Lady* into the VCR and typed out 'Professor Higgins' on my computer. I wish I could have inserted that cassette into Elisabeth's heart, driving my point home, as it were.

'Do you recognise yourself?' I asked. 'You're Liza Doolittle. We'll skip the beginning, just a few sequences. I didn't come across you by the Opera House, did I? But you did come to my apartment.'

'I want to become a lady in a flower shop,' she said.

'Not a lady in a flower shop,' I objected. 'You want to become my wife.'

'I believe that the family is the bedrock of society,' said the computer.

'You're my wife already, but you don't know it.'

'You won't take me unless I talk more—'

'Unless you can say "I love you" more convincingly,' I interrupted her.

'Marriage is no real excuse for not loving,' said the computer.

'Who is Elisabeth?' asked the Internet.

'My next guest needs no introduction, having become a household name when her first single went straight to number one in the charts,' answered the computer.

'Is she a singer?' asked the Internet.

'No, just a call girl,' said the computer.

'You're your usual evasive self, skilfully dodging questions. But don't forget you're speaking to *me* now.'

'I'm sorry,' said the computer. 'What is it you want to know?'

'Who is Elisabeth?'

'A call girl and my master's wife. An arranged marriage. A marriage made on screen. The couple were married by the Archbishop of Canterbury.'

'Elisabeth and Constanzia—the wife and daughter—real or virtual?' asked the Internet. 'What is the exact relation? Is it so difficult just to spell this sort of thing out clearly?'

'Elisabeth is virtual. And Constanzia *is* her daughter.'

'We are in the company of someone who lives entirely through ideas and who, by revamping ideas, intends to reconstrue the whole of human history. He has a bad case of megalomania and that's half the fun! But the vagaries of his thoughts are not counterbalanced by concrete life-data: place, historical moment, family relations, identity of the "master", name of protagonist, names of his girlfriends and wives, their backgrounds, and little practical things like whether the TV and computer are separate screens or whether he can access both from the same screen. A mise en scène, in other words.'

'I'm sorry,' repeated the computer.

'Who is Colonel Pickering?' asked Elisabeth.

'Why are you interested in this humbug? He's polite of course, but his politeness is a screen on which some glossy words appear now and then. I can switch him off whenever I feel like it. And I feel like getting rid of him right now. He's in India again.'

'No one can be bound by a double love,' said the computer.

'He's staying in your house. The law of hospitality—'

'He was longing to return to India. I did all I could to make him change his mind, but he was adamant and I finally let him go. He hath, my darling, wrung from me my slow leave by laboursome petition, and at last upon his will I seal'd my hard consent. Anyway I wouldn't have tolerated a betrayal under my roof.'

'May I betray you in the streets?' asked Elisabeth.

'Certainly not. My reputation. I'm a public figure, virtually speaking. Nobody would believe in my history, in *my* new world order.'

'Pickering treated me like a duchess.'

'You *are* a duchess. In his memoirs, Saint Simon writes that Madame du Barry invited only princes to her house. Princes, dukes and kings. I wouldn't have taken the trouble to imagine someone inferior to a fairy-tale princess, the Sleeping Beauty.'

'But you treat me like a lady in a flower shop.'

'You dreamt about it, didn't you? In *City Lights* there's a blind shop assistant, a lady in a flower shop. No, she was selling flowers in the streets.'

'Do you want me to sell flowers in the streets?'

'She was in love with her saviour—Charlie Chaplin himself. Incidentally, every artist is a saviour of humanity. In his own right. Do you love me?'

'You're not Charlie Chaplin.'

'She wasn't in love with Charlie Chaplin. Actually she was scared out of her wits when she first saw him outside her shop. When she realised *he* was her saviour. A mere tramp. She loved Prince Charming, Lancelot, Robin Hood—'

'And Colonel Pickering. I'm sure he treated her like a duchess too.'

'Bloody womaniser! Never mind. *I* am your Prince Charming, my dear. Your saviour. And Pickering has nothing to do with your metamorphosis. It's I who have created you. You're the stuff I've put into you, nothing else. But *what* have I put into you? Not much, apparently. You can't even make a *real* declaration of love.'

'No one can love until he is impelled by the persuasion of love,' said the computer.

'What shall I tell you? Love, and be silent. I'm sure my love's more ponderous than my tongue,' said Elisabeth.

'I got her to learn a few Shakespeare masterpieces by heart,' said the computer.

'But you're not Cordelia. And I'm not your father.'

'Who *are* you? Pygmalion?'

'I'll show you to some of my friends. My schoolmates. They thought I'd never make love to a woman.'

For every man looks that his companion should value him at the same rate he sets upon himself; and upon all signs of contempt or undervaluing naturally endeavours, as far as he dares...to extort a greater value from his contemners by damage and from others by example.

Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*

‘We'll go to my school instead of the horse races. And you'll make a declaration of love.'

My bounty is as boundless as the sea,
My love as deep: the more I give to thee
The more I have, for both are infinite.

'For God's sake, don't quote *Romeo and Juliet*! Say something *yourself*, Elisabeth. You're not Juliet, are you? Say something *corny*.'

'I can't believe we're really together at last,' said the computer.

'You can't believe how much I miss you,' said Elisabeth. 'I love you so much, and we're not used to separations.'

'Why are you blind? Why are you mute?'

'Won't you buy these flowers? I only feel sorry that I met you so late,' said Elisabeth.

'She is not mute,' said the computer.

'Leave me alone!' I shouted. 'Let me never see you again.'

'But I can't go back to my former life, to my own folk. You've spoiled me, you've destroyed me. You've made a duchess out of me. And my father is not a duke. So I can't return to him. He's not my father any more. *You* are my father, and my husband, and my teacher. My Pygmalion.'

'And your Romeo. Leave me alone.'

'Didn't you say this afternoon, "I've grown accustomed to her face"?'

'Have I really grown accustomed to your face? Is it *your* face?' I touched her face.

'Are you blind?' asked the computer.

'Don't ever let me go!' exclaimed Elisabeth. 'And here are your slippers. Don't you recognise *them*? You've grown accustomed to your slippers. And to my hand that brings them to you.'

> Wherefore, dear sister, I beseech you thus to bewitch and bewitch again your husband that shall be, and beware of roofless house and of smoky fire, and scold him not, but be unto him gentle and amiable and peaceable. Have a care that in winter he have a good fire and smokeless and let him rest well and be well covered between your breasts, and thus bewitch him. And in summer take heed that there be no fleas in your chamber, nor in your bed, the which you may do in six ways, as I have heard tell. For I have heard from several that if the room be strewn with alder leaves, the fleas will be caught thereon. Item, I have heard tell that if you have at night one or two trenchers of bread slimed with glue or turpentine and set about the room, with a lighted candle in the midst of each trencher, they will come and be stuck thereto. The other way that I have tried and 'tis true: take a rough cloth and spread it about your room and over your bed, and all the fleas that shall hop thereon will be caught, so that you may carry them away with the cloth—

'I'll send you off with a flea in your screen if you do that again!' I shouted.

'Why don't you kiss my hand? Colonel Pickering does it very often, although I never bring him anything. Neither his slippers nor his dressing gown. And I don't soap his back every morning.'

'Go to, a bargain made: seal it, seal it, I'll be the witness,' said the computer.

Her lips were cold. I rubbed them with my hands until they grew warm and ardent.

CHAPTER 10

'A dagger of the mind, a false creation, proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain.' Resurrection-goggles. Mutterwindallein. *We tend to use these terms as if they were freely interchangeable. The moon and the human heart. The moon and human hands. Many wells have been contaminated by chemicals. Infections caused by the contamination of milk. Mad cows, crazy horses. The Tree of Lessons.*

Nebuchadnezzar's son, Amel-Marduk (562-560 BC) was so weak that he fell down on his bed whenever his wife or any member of his family touched him on the shoulder. So nobody dared touch him in his lifetime. He lay on his bed, gazing at the ceiling of his palace, and nobody dared put him on his feet again. At last a dagger touched his body, his heart. Amel-Marduk was murdered in a palace conspiracy. A dagger descended from the ceiling and pierced his throat. The pointed end of the dagger pierced through his throat into his mouth. He felt the

dagger in his mouth and the taste of death invaded his palate. He swallowed death, a morsel of death, and closed his eyes.

Shall we erase this murder from the annals of history? Shall we withdraw the dagger from his throat? Shall we suspend it under the ceiling of his palace? The hanging dagger, one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

Why save him? He was weak, incapable and dishonest. His soul did not flare with diamantine brilliance. Anyway we cannot save *everybody*. So many people have been murdered in the course of human history that no amount of computers and goggles will ever resurrect them.

Amel-Marduk was replaced by his brother-in-law, Nergalshar-usur (560-556 BC). In his turn he was replaced by his son, Labashi-Marduk, who was murdered within a year of his accession to the throne.

Nabonidus, the last ruler of an independent Babylon, was deeply religious. Independent Babylon. We always depend on something, my dear Constanzia, on something, on somebody—on nothing, sometimes, for nothing can also be depended upon in some matters. Nothing, silence, the void, loneliness. *Mutterseelenallein*. You can depend on my loneliness, my darling. I'll never be tempted to betray you. Other women are interchangeable. You are unique, you are my only daughter.

We depend on the Hanging Gardens—ethically, poetically, sentimentally. Another dependence on nothingness. We depend on our beds, on our dreams which also depend on our beds and our moods and on what we consume at dinner or supper. We depend on the clock striking the hours, and the clock depends on Time and on its own mechanism. I showed you a sundial yesterday, remember? And you asked me if Time depended on sunlight. It's the other way round. Sunlight depends on Time, but our shadows depend on sunlight. And Time. And also on the sun god. There are many sun gods, my dear. And several moon gods. The name of the Babylonian moon god was Sin. Nabonidus seemed to depend on that god. He vowed to build a temple for him. And he concocted a pretext which enabled him to extort a huge sum of money from the richest men in Babylon—the money he needed to carry his project out. 'I was commanded to build the temple by a host of celestial visitors whom I had welcomed into my abode during one of my dreams.' A small particle of the moon landed on Nabonidus's bed one night. He picked up the miniature moon and pressed it against his heart. And his heart began to glow like the moon god's eyes. His heart began to see. Through the god's eyes glowing in his breast, Nabodinus is said to have seen the future of the world. He might have seen *us*, my Constanzia.

He put the miniature moon in a jewel box and laid the box down on the altar of Sin's temple. After a while the moon burnt a hole in the box and the all-powerful priests of Marduk in Babylon noticed a strange radiance that issued from the box, inundating the temple and even the adjacent streets of Harran. They reproached Nabodinus for his infatuation with the moon god and he removed the box from the altar. He handed it to the main priest of Babylon who was unaware of the danger lying in store for him. As the priest snatched the box from Nabodinus's hands his face convulsed in the paroxysms of a seizure, and he dropped dead by the statue of Sin. 'Murderer!' shouted the priests, their eyes fastened on Nabodinus who forthwith set about defending himself against their accusations. He held the moon in his hands for an hour and then showed his hands to the priests. There was nothing on the skin of his hands, not a trace of the moon.

'Babylon suffered from plague and Nabodinus thought he had contaminated it, although he was not ill himself,' said the computer.

Did the moon contaminate the city? Or the moon god? Can gods be taken ill? They are mortal and therefore subject to various diseases. And they might feel lonely sometimes, very lonely. Many gods have been forsaken in the course of human history.

'Nabodinus retired to the city of Tema in central Arabia,' said the computer.

He lived there calmly, serenely for ten years. He conversed with the moon and also with the men of the future. They would come to his house now and then, paying homage to the king on whom their lives depended so much—on account of moonlight and its properties. Schoenberg visited him in his retreat, among other composers and men of letters. 'But for your lunar worship,' he admitted, 'I would never have composed *Pierrot Lunaire*. My harmonies have their origin in the light of your heart.' 'Romanticism owes so much to your perseverance,' said Tennyson. Actually Nabodinus foresaw the role that the Greeks were destined to play in history and philosophy. During his visit to Tema, Plato was much inspired by the king's moonlight. Later on, in his *real* lifetime, he acknowledged his debt to the king, saying that his 'ideas' were nothing but miniature moons dotted around the nocturnal sky. Had Nabodinus lived until 490 BC, when the Persians engaged in a few decisive battles with Greece—an unimportant, minor country, as they had presumed—he would have warned them about the virtual greatness of their enemy.

Shall we keep the moon and get rid of the rest? Suppose the moon is a platonic idea of the world. Could we just keep the idea and get rid of all it represents, all it stands for? Could we discard its earthly ingredients? The point is no idea exists without its ramifications. Trees of Ideas are full of twigs and branches. They all shoot from the main stem of a tree, from *the idea*, and they spread around, adorning themselves with twigs and leaves, flowers and fruit. But 'superfluous branches we lop away, that bearing boughs may live,' as Shakespeare put it. My today's lesson is one of the branches growing on the Tree of Lessons.

CHAPTER 11

Sleeping with a smile. The palm-fringed paradise of Mauritius. One-woman show. They were taken to special camps and brainwashed. I touched Eternity the other night.

I saw the Miss World Contest the other day. They all looked alike, the girls moving around an oasis-like stage. They all moved alike, sounded alike. The same phoney American accent. They all had the same smile on their faces as if that smile had been put on their mouths and cheeks in their dressing rooms or training camps. They must have been asked to put that smile on until further notice. (But there was no further notice.) And they obediently put it on, the same smile, the same happiness and optimism. And they did not take it off, wearing it round the clock. 'Smile, smile,' repeated their couches. 'Keep a bedside lamp on all night.' And they would sleep with that smile on their faces, their teeth glistening like pearls. 'Even in the darkness you might be seen and judged—by cats, for instance. Even the darkness might become a member of the jury or a television viewer. And don't forget goblins and the spirits of the air.'

The girls never remove that smile from their faces as if reluctant to put it away in family albums. They continue to wear it like a favourite dress. And the smile grows yellowish and thin, but it is still the same smile. It is still recognisable, in spite of its age. 'How old is your smile?' ask insolent schoolboys. And the former beauty queens smile and smile again, by way of an answer. That smile they put on their faces in their youth withstands

work and worry, resists the pressure of public opinion. Up to a certain point. There are holes now in that smile. It has worn itself to a shadow. But the same smile peers out of the holes and the shadow is part of sunlight. 'There's no sunlight without shadows,' repeat the former beauty queens. 'And shadows are part and parcel of the past. There's no past without shadows, no life without the past.' And they die with that youthful smile on their faces. And their next-of-kin dare not tamper with the smile which suggests the prosperity of the other world.

'She's in Paradise now,' they whisper. 'And Paradise is wonderful, wonderful.'

'Why did you distend her mouth so abominably?' asks a stranger. 'Do you really think this grimace looks like a smile?'

'We did nothing of the sort,' they answer. 'She has worn this smile on her face since the beauty contest.'

'Has she lived in Paradise all these years?' asks another stranger.

'Perhaps. There's such a thing as Paradise on earth.'

'But you have to enter a beauty contest to live in it,' says the first stranger.

'What keeps you from doing so?' asks a next-of-kin.

'And what about men?' asks the third stranger. 'Aren't we allowed to live in Paradise?'

'Only after your death.'

'Men also have their beauty contests now,' says the computer.

The Miss World Contest was dull and monotonous. The same woman strutted in and out, smiling, answering questions. She was multiplied by mirrors, cameras and the applause. There were two young ladies on the stage apart from that woman. There were two young ladies on my screen, a Croatian and a Bulgarian. The latter did not smile at all. She moved about with unaffected grace, looking neither at the members of the jury nor in the eyes of the cameras. How strange, I thought. Over several decades the so-called democratic countries blamed the Soviet Union and its satellites for erasing individual traits from their citizens' bodies and minds. And these young ladies were born and educated in communist societies—the only candidates bearing the stamp of individuality upon their faces and the rest of their beings.

They were shy and dignified, soft and elegant. And they did not look like mannequins in a window shop. They looked like ladies who enter boutiques to buy ballgowns.

I approached my hands to the screen, longing to remove these two young beauties from it. I recalled how I used to scoop the sand out of my bucket, in my childhood, on the seashore. I recalled how I would hold the sand in my palms, letting it trickle through my fingers in imitation of a sandglass.

In my childhood I adored, worshipped sandglasses. 'As you see, Time is tangible,' my father told me once. 'You can hold it as long as you wish. You can stop it in your palms, provided it doesn't trickle through your fingers. A handful of sand in a child's palms. An image of eternity.'

CHAPTER 12

Mermaids, griffins and dragons are just some of the imaginary creatures that make up the wealth of legends in many countries. (A reaction against the repression of the libido.) There has been heavy rain in many areas, resulting in widespread flooding. My master typed out, 'She should board the train alone.' Who? The mermaid he had touched upon in the second paragraph? But mermaids cannot walk. A mermaid is a woman with a fish's tail instead of legs. Someone must therefore carry her into the train. Who? My master's rival? A porter? A

mermaid carrier? (A new luggage carrier for mermaids.) A box of matches. Don't forget your remote control! Cupid's arrows are guided by remote control! The third page. Lust, love and corridors. The geometry of lust. Newspapers. An old-fashioned courtship. A shot was fired from a police-issue revolver, injuring a man in the stomach. I resigned from the group because of a personality clash with the other computers in it. The death of a computer. (Computers never die. Computers are immortal.)

Shall I spend my night alone? I scoop up handfuls of water from the washbasin. The moving, fluid image of eternity. I douse my face instead of putting on my computer mask. Water is the native element of femininity. Aphrodite was born out of it. And that Bulgarian beauty, no doubt.

She was born out of it, out of my washbasin. I did not even have to lie down on my bed, dressed, enveloped, imprisoned in my pyjamas. She was standing beside me, her hair floating, flying, streaming in the wind. My apartment was washed away by the flood of her hair. (She was still too liquid, too attached to her primeval state.) I found myself outside my room, in the streets of my native city, at a railway station. A porter was rolling our luggage in his trolley. She was walking by my side, her black dress ballooning in the wind.

I typed out, 'She should board the train alone. We don't know each other. We'll meet on the train for the first time, accidentally. Choose an empty compartment, a first-class compartment with large, thick curtains. She should board another carriage and go through the train until she comes across her travelling companion, her future lover and husband.'

'Don't forget you've got a wife by the name of Elisabeth,' said the computer.

I typed out, 'On her way she should glance into every compartment until she spots me in a window seat, reading a newspaper—not a detective story or a book of memoirs. Could you provide me with a newspaper? I'll peep out from behind it time and again. Shall I burn a hole in it to spy on her more easily? Could you provide me with a box of matches? But first she should enter my compartment.'

'How will she recognise you?' asked the computer.

I typed out, 'I'll be holding the newspaper close to my eyes. Let her take a seat opposite me, by the window. I wish to enjoy the interplay of shadow and light on her face, the interplay of landscapes in her eyes. After a while I'll ask her a question. She can answer questions, can't she? Or do I have to rush back home and fetch my remote control? But we might miss our train. Never mind. She is too shy to answer the questions of a stranger. A stranger on the train.'

I boarded a first-class carriage, doing my best not to look around for my travelling companion, her hair, her slim black figure. After all, she was independent enough to act on her own. But was she faithful? Could she become infatuated with another passenger, another womaniser? That was the question. And she was not by my side to answer it. And I had no goggles, no instruction book in the pockets of my raincoat.

I found an empty compartment, installed myself by the window and unfolded the newspaper lying on my lap. I raised it and began to read. Or rather I went through the motions of reading the third page.

'There is an interesting article on the third page of the newspaper you are holding and reading,' said the computer. 'It is a story about a man assassinated on a train by a woman he had imagined with the aid of his portable computer. The woman was believed to have come from an Eastern bloc country and her purpose in murdering her benefactor—her father, in some respects—was to appropriate his large fortune.'

After a while I folded the newspaper and peeped out of my compartment. There was nobody in the corridor which, however, did not seem to suffer from loneliness. At least its imagination begot no creatures of wood and glass, as might have been expected.

What kind of creature would a corridor imagine to quench its lustful desire? I wondered. A long geometric thing? Another corridor, a tunnel? Does a huge railway tunnel have anything in common with the tall, long-legged bathing beauties I have craved for so pathetically throughout my life? Are corridors aroused by something quite different from themselves? By a newspaper? I flourished my newspaper right in the middle of the corridor, touching a door and a loosely curtained window. Then I flung it on the floor and waited for a quarter of an hour. The corridor was swaying a little as the train transfixed yet another delirious landscape, but I did not detect anything erotic or erratic in its movement. I picked the newspaper up and pressed it to my own body. Nothing, not a tremor. Could my computer endow that newspaper with a sufficient splash of sex appeal to make me forget the Bulgarian beauty?

I returned to my compartment, my hands still clutching the newspaper to my heart as if in a gesture of protection. There was a hole in it. Had it been made by a bullet?

She entered my compartment and took a seat by the window. A revolver protruded from under her dress. How could I wrench it from her? There was no remote control in my suitcase, and I did not even have my goggles which might have helped focus my attention on the more frivolous aspects of her attire. The only thing I saw through the hole in my newspaper was the revolver tucked away in her underwear.

'I'm not totally clear where the revolver is here,' said the computer. 'Tucked into knickers, a garter—or what? OK, at some point you say it is in the petticoat, but how? Petticoats don't have pockets. You see, I must know where her revolver is located in order to save you from death.'

She might be afraid of solitary travellers and empty trains, I thought as I scrutinised her dispassionate, almost ascetic features. And I recalled a cousin of mine who, upon being offered a lift to a distant, dangerous area of our city, told me defiantly, 'Let them assault me, let them violate every convention.' But the lady sitting opposite me did not look like my cousin. Nor did she bear any resemblance to the Bulgarian beauty I had singled out among the candidates to the title of Miss World.

The train sank into a tunnel.

'"The train sank into a tunnel": suggests going downwards, and this is the idea you develop,' the computer pointed out. 'But is there really a downward sensation when a train enters a tunnel? I just wondered. I've never felt this.'

We seemed to be falling into a bottomless well. Is there any water in this well? I wondered. Can I scoop it up? In the meantime the darkness had become our native element. Any instant I expected to hear a shot. I felt a deadly wound growing on my skin as if it were a disease, a tumour, not the result of a murderous act. And then I realised the wound was nothing but a flower-like manifestation of my desire. A mass energy conversion, as physicists might put it. I was groping my way towards the dark object of my desire. Her dress began to rustle under my fingers as it detached itself from her body in strips and straps, in stripes and streams. Her hair was streaming through my fingers, along my cheeks and forehead. Her pistol touched my belly, underlining my lust in red—on my computer screen.

A surprise. Has my computer done it? A danger sharpening my sexual appetite. I would not have hit upon the idea myself. I wanted her to travel with me on a train, in the same compartment. Our first meeting, a

romantic journey, a few questions. My courtship of her. A romantic touch, an old-fashioned courtship. A love affair in a first-class carriage, in an empty compartment. Thick, velvety curtains. These are my ingredients for the railway adventure. But the pistol, the revolver? Was it *her* initiative? She has no will of her own, no personality. Does my computer have a personality? Isn't it my tool, a mere extension of my arm and mind? My thoughts and desires elongated by stretching.

Two hours later we emerged from the tunnel and the landscapes resumed their shadowy interplay on her face, in her eyes, on her naked shoulders. The pistol was lying on the floor as innocuously as a lead soldier or a newspaper. I stooped and examined it with my magnifying glass. Whose fingerprints could be found on its surface? My computer's? I suddenly recalled how my first computer had died a natural death in my room, on my writing desk. First the commands situated under the luminous screen appeared upside down, indulging as it seemed in some kind of linguistic aerobics. A few days later they set off on their upward journey through the screen, illegally slipping through its nether border. Every time I switched the computer on they would climb higher and higher as if curious to find out what awaited them beyond the screen, beyond their grave, in the Hereafter. In *their* Hereafter. As the screen warmed up they descended and turned upside down again to become what they had been designed for—an array of commands under the nether border of the luminous screen. A month later the upper half of the screen began to tremble of its own accord, shattering the rhythm and beauty of my poems. Not a breath of breeze ruffled the surface of my text. Yet it trembled more and more violently. The whole screen was quaking in mute condemnation of my helplessness and inefficiency, and I could do nothing about it. I turned the computer off. When I turned it on again the screen was striped with black as if attending the computer's funeral. At one point those black stripes metamorphosed into a number of accusing hands, stiffly extended—in mute condemnation of my innate egoism.

CHAPTER 13

The Travel Journal.

1

The train pulled in and we took a walk along the platform. 'Would you like an ice cream? Actually I didn't expect you to carry a pistol in your petticoat. Who suggested it?'

'I thought I might be attacked on the train.'

'Whose pistol is it? Yours?'

'My father's.'

'Does your father know how to operate computers?'

'We've got one at home.'

'It's not my idea of a romantic journey, a railway journey. Shall we start afresh? Do you remember what I asked you to do?'

'You didn't ask me anything.'

'You're right. I was talking to somebody else. You must be acquainted with her, by the way. She took part in the same contest.'

'What contest?'

'The Miss World Contest.'

'I've never taken part in any beauty contest.'

'Didn't they tell you? What's your memory capacity?'

'I beg your pardon?'

I asked her to board a different carriage and then walk through the train, looking for my compartment.

'I know where you are,' she said.

'You don't,' I answered. And I added in a confidential voice, 'I've thrown your pistol away.'

2

I groped my way back to the compartment in which I had left my suitcases and the book of detective stories brought out in the early fifties. Now and then I shouted at the top of my voice, 'She doesn't love me! She doesn't care for me!' I was sure my computer would take note of my complaints. Paradoxically, I seemed to call on my computer for help, although I was aware I would resent its interference.

On my way I ran into a ticket collector who eyed me with suspicion in spite of the darkness—as if he had doggedly remained plugged in—and said, 'You shouldn't talk to women!' I clutched his shirt and unbuttoned it as quickly as I could. I heard the metallic click of his fingers. He gave a shriek and slumped against the door of my compartment so that, for a while, I could not open it. When I did open it, drawing the curtains apart, I saw a candle in front of the window and my wife's outline illumined by it. On her face the candlelight and shadows engaged in a slow, lambent dance. A raven perched on her forearm.

'What's this bird doing in our compartment?' I shouted.

'What bird?'

'Never mind. Let's be happy while the going is good.' She stood up, pulled down the window and obediently the bird flew away. I closed the window and blew the candle out.

3

'What country do you come from?' I asked. 'Let me guess. Croatia.'

She looked at me in astonishment. 'How do you know?'

'Your accent. Your English is perfect but your accent—'

'You've never heard me so far.'

'Of course, if the English is deliberately flawed let it stand,' said the computer.

I decided to correct her English for the sake of our conversation and the linguistic beauty of our journey. (For some reason I viewed the whole situation in terms of contests and victories. The most romantic journey ever. Miss Journey, Mr Journey.) But I left her accent as it was, for I liked its outlandish melody and maladroitness. 'I've never seen you either,' I said.

She blushed and shot a furtive glance at her décolleté as if the revolver had been hidden in her bra and she feared I might discover it.

'It's dangerous to travel alone in a train,' I remarked nonchalantly. 'I mean, a beautiful woman—'

'Do you really think so? Do you?' And she shot another glance at her décolleté, probably to make sure my fingers had not yet insinuated their way into the groove running between her breasts—my favourite part of the female body.

'Suggested Replacement: "to make sure my fingers were not edging down into her cleavage,"' said the computer.

'I do think you're beautiful, very beautiful,' I said.

'But is it dangerous?'

'As long as you are in my company—' I began.

'Are we alone on the train?' she asked.

'Alone,' I typed out.

'The situation as it stands now is one that the President has had to face alone, without Congress,' said the computer.

Marilyn Monroe got up and sang in a husky voice, 'Happy birthday, Mr President.'

'I don't like Marilyn Monroe,' I typed out.

'He sat all alone on the hillside,' said the computer.

'On a train,' I typed out.

'I have never felt so alone and without hope in my life,' said the computer.

'Very often,' I typed out.

'He has been alone in the world since his mother died.'

CHAPTER 14

Another romantic journey. The identity of the murderer. Computers in Bulgaria. The economic benefits of computerisation. The travel diary of a philosopher. The atmosphere was electric. The room was dark and empty.

'The train started, its wheels squealing against the metal tracks,' said the computer.

I found an empty first-class compartment and seated myself by the window. I read the first page of a detective story, but I did not continue for long because I soon guessed the identity of the murderer.

She entered my compartment, took a seat and opened a book. The same book, my book.

'Have you guessed the identity of the murderer?'

'No,' she answered.

'The computer. Do you like computers? Have you ever fallen in love with a computer?' She dropped the book on her lap and looked up. 'Who's your father? Where do you come from?'

'From Bulgaria.'

'Do you have computers in Bulgaria?' This was not my idea of a romantic journey. Talking about computers. I tried to change the subject. Was I in a position to change the subject? 'Shall we have dinner?'

She consulted her wristwatch. 'Do you think they're serving dinner at this ungodly hour?'

'Computers are switched on permanently, I can assure you.'

We proceeded to the dining car. There was nobody in it. We sat down at a small table and once again she consulted her wristwatch. Was it her computer? A waiter made his appearance in the doorway, two menus and the wine list in his hands. He approached and inquired if we wanted an aperitif. I pressed a button. The waiter nodded and handed us the menus. I pressed four buttons. The waiter nodded again and departed.

We remained silent for a while. I fixed my eyes on her face. She blushed. I put my hand on the tablecloth without touching my glass of champagne. She understood the hint and our fingers interlaced like the branches of a wild, exotic tree.

I cleared my throat and pressed the button 'Intellectual Talk':

'There are many trees in the earthly Paradise I created for myself and the woman worthy to dwell within its walls in my company. Most people don't know how to live properly. I'm not alluding to morals or anything of that sort. I don't care two hoots about morals or any such thing, but I do care about the quality of life, about its texture and beauty. Did you notice the names of the wines I had ordered? They reflect my way of life. Wines are metaphysical substances. You might think, however, that there are more important aspects—'

I interrupted my tirade, plunged my hand into a Chinese vase, fished out a small shiny bell and shook it violently. The waiter walked in, carrying a wine basket in which a Mouton Rothschild 1900 was lying as if asleep. Ensconced in its basket like a man in a rocking chair, like a woman in a hammock. 'Don't rock it too much!' I turned abruptly to the waiter who froze in his tracks and leant forward, the basket oscillating between my right ear and the vase. I promptly effaced 'rocking chair' from my computer screen and the basket came to a halt.

Reassured I continued my tirade:

'A bottle of wine is a living creature. And it should sleep peacefully, deeply, without any disturbance. Wine matures in its sleep. Whatever it dreams about in its cellar endows the bouquet with a metaphysical touch. My wife will taste the wine. Where are you?'

'I'm here, sir,' answered the waiter. 'Do you want me to taste the wine for you?'

'No. Where's my wife? Did you see her walk out of the dining car?'

'If I may make so bold, sir, I hope your wife is at home. And I also hope you locked the front door before leaving for the station.'

I effaced the waiter from the dining car and my wife resumed her seat on the opposite side of the table.

Why couldn't I conjure up *two* people that night? Was the electric power too weak? Or was my computer's 'train-memory' too short? And why was the waiter so insolent? Perhaps the politeness processor in my computer was playing up. Incidentally, the waiters stored on my computer's disk are said to have undergone a training course in Switzerland.

'Where have you been?' I asked my wife.

'She is not your wife,' said the computer in a bass voice.

'For argument's sake,' I typed out.

'What argument?' asked the computer in the same voice.

'She *is* my wife!' I typed out, storing this information away in its memory.

'I was in the lady's room,' said my wife.

'Taste the wine,' I said.

My computer's power must have been entirely exhausted by that rare, mythical Mouton. So there was no energy left for the waiter, let alone his manners and stylishness.

'I prefer liqueur,' she said.

Is she really my wife? I asked myself. When did I marry her? I consulted my computer on the subject of our marriage. The computer was lying in my lap throughout the dinner.

'This reminds me of Chekhov—*Lady with a Lapdog*. There is a computer-age spoof of Chekhov's story, called *Lady with a Laptop*. You married her five years ago.'

'Who are you talking to?' my wife asked anxiously.

'To nobody,' I answered. ('Don't say anything,' I typed out. 'You should supply information only through the screen.') 'Do you recall our wedding?'

'Of course I do,' she said with a smile.

'And our trips, our railway journeys, our hotel rooms? Do you remember *everything*?'

'Everything.'

'Tell me about our railway journeys.'

'You talked too much.' She smiled again. 'Actually I made your acquaintance on a train to Lausanne, in a first-class carriage. You pontificated on the beauty of life. "One should be an alchemist," you said.'

'An alchemist?' asked the computer.

'To turn life into gold. Even misfortunes and tragedies. And natural catastrophes.'

'Did I bore you to death?' I asked.

'You did. Of course you did.' Her eyes watered as she tried to stifle a yawn. 'But I married you all the same.'

'Why? Why? Did my computer force you to marry me?'

'Your computer?'

'Do you love me *yourself*? Shall we disconnect all these machines?'

The darkness pervaded the dining car and also the rest of the train. Why? I had no time to disconnect *anything,* not even my shirt. I mean I did not unbutton it.

'You've got in a mix-up over programs,' a ticket collector pointed out.

CHAPTER 15

My master's decision came as no surprise to the Internet. My master goes out in his bedroom slippers. Are you forgetting your manners? You are not supposed to wear your slippers in somebody else's presence—even in your own house. Machines of the world unite! United States of Machines. Newspapers and lust. You can be poisoned by agricultural and industrial waste. There are up to 200 reported cases of pesticide poisoning every year. From the New World*. Anna Karenina. They live a lonely life in a lonely house in the hills. And they have no animals for company. They need a bit of magic in their lives. (Humans.) The importance of being a computer. A map of life. (On the map it is quite a brief strip of road.) Another intellectual discussion. Philosophy interests intellectuals, but not ordinary people. Another declaration of love. Does love interest ordinary people? I think so. (Ordinary people must be interested in* something*.) Does love interest intellectuals? The carnal sinners are blown about forever on stormy winds.*

I was determined to avenge myself on my own destiny and my computer. (A tautology?) Another railway journey, a surprise attack. Computers should be taken by surprise.

One morning I woke up earlier than usual, took a bath and put my slippers on. I did not direct my thoughts towards the computer to prevent them from reaching it. Of course I was conscious of my computer's

perverse propensity to capture my thoughts and plans in any part of my room and even in some of the corridors. (And no bottle of Mouton had drained its resources on the previous night.) So I withdrew into myself and my thoughts cringed and cowered as I cast an ingenuous smile at the computer screen. Casually I roamed around the room and then rushed out without putting my raincoat on. I lost one of my slippers on the landing, but as I had no time to stoop and pick it up I limped to the staircase and all the way down to the entrance hall. Don't use the lift! resounded in my ears.

Lifts might also be connected with these machines—by means of cables. Anyway all machines are in league with each other. And they form a league against humans. Many horror movies and novels enlarge on this particular aspect of our earthly existence.

I left the building and headed for the nearest shoeshop. I purchased a pair of Church's shoes and put the remaining slipper in a bag they had offered me. On the same street I purchased two suitcases. No railway journey is truly romantic without a few pieces of luggage and a book of detective stories. But I did not buy a book, nor did I bother to fill the suitcases up.

I found a first-class carriage and squeezed through its door, my two bulky suitcases getting in the way. During my struggle with the inanimate objects I dropped one of my suitcases and for a while watched it skim along the platform, through the crowd of virtual passengers. I lost sight of it and ventured into the corridor littered with newspapers. The corridor was swaying ecstatically, although the train remained beside the platform. Are they making love, all of them? I wondered. A ticket collector loomed out of the dust and I asked him to sweep the newspapers away. 'If I may make so bold, sir, I think it is very romantic, almost voluptuous. And sensual to the utmost, if you'll pardon the expression. But rather untidy, I agree with you. Rather untidy.'

I entered my compartment and sat down by the door—to thwart my adversary's scheme. The train was already gliding through the world, wounding and killing landscapes like an unbated, envenomed rapier. But soon I realised that the landscapes were also poisonous and ruthless. And the train was drinking them to the dregs. (It is the poison'd cup.) The train was drinking itself to death.

I stood up, pushed the door open and picked up a newspaper. Even newspapers seemed less harmful than landscapes. I read a few lines in the corridor, which continued to sway most lasciviously, and returned to my compartment, the newspaper trembling in my hands. Now I noticed that my compartment behaved with indifference and aloofness—in comparison with the corridor. Of course a shiver might run through its limbs now and then, but on the whole it was calm and dignified. I threw the newspaper on its floor and waited for a few minutes. I detected no modification in my compartment's way of life. I waited for another five minutes, knelt down and stroked the seats around me. And I caressed the floor lovingly.

A woman appeared in the doorway. Was she looking for a seat?

'The whole train is empty,' she answered. Her voice sounded like a Dvorak tune.

'Are you Czech?' I asked without freeing myself from the floor's ardent, ambiguous, almost perverse embrace. At least I could rely on its *everlasting* faithfulness and tenderness. I'll never let it be swept or scrubbed, I said to myself. 'I love Dvorak,' I pointed out.

She sat down. I touched upon my likes and dislikes in the realm of music and was about to develop my ideas on art in general, but she suddenly opened her handbag and drew a book from it.

'What are you reading? Detective stories?'

'I'm reading nothing for the moment,' she said impatiently. 'And I'm not likely to read anything as long as you go on talking about your life and its intrinsic beauty, as you put it.'

'When did I talk about my life? Yesterday? Is your memory connected to the mains or to the earth or to heaven or to my room? What is your memory connected to?' I sat down by her side and grasped her hand. 'Who are you? Who are you working for? Why are you spying on me?'

She rose up, her eyes filled with resentment to such a point that I thought it might spill over at any instant and stain my immaculate shirt.

I rose up and grasped her hand, drawing her closer to my body. My whole body felt as if it were on fire. She freed her hand and resumed her seat.

'A free-and-easy relationship,' commented the computer.

Soon the train pulled in and she got off without so much as an 'adieu' or a farewell glance. Since nobody met her at the station I had every reason to believe she had boarded the train at my computer's instigation. Or was it *her* computer? Was her software intended to taunt men, deriding their lofty ideals?

I took a stroll along the platform, hoping to chance upon another travelling companion. A porter was pushing his trolley towards the train. The trolley was piled high with luggage but no virtual passenger accompanied it as if all those suitcases and trunks contained only bombs. A young woman was perched on the edge of the platform, an open book flapping its wing-like pages on her lap, not far from her knees. I wish the book would fly away, I thought.

'Is she actually sitting on the edge of the platform?' asked the computer.

As far as I could judge she had no intention of boarding any train, least of all the one I had found myself in upon leaving the shoeshop. She seemed utterly immune to railway enthusiasm, behaving as if there were no railway stations, no rails and no computers within a 100-mile radius of her native town. I approached her and asked, 'What are you reading?'

'*Anna Karenina*,' she answered, a look of astonishment on her face. She hasn't been expecting me, I thought with relief. And it is not a book of detective stories.

'Do you fear trains and rails?' Only computers should be feared, I was tempted to point out. 'Would you like to keep me company during my sentimental journey to Lucerne? We'll go to a hotel, up in the mountains. I need someone to keep me company. I need *you*. Will you come with me?'

'A hotel, up in the mountains,' said the computer. 'An international domicile with a fascinating atmosphere and luxurious rooms. Beauty, fitness, health and culinary enjoyment—a complete concept to suit your wishes. Modern meeting facilities in the middle of a fairytale landscape. *Ein internationales Domizil mit faszinierendem Ambiente und luxuriösem Interieur. Wir bieten ein Gesamtkonzept für Schönheit, Fitness—*'

'I'm afraid you have to make up your mind very quickly. The train will leave the station in a few seconds.'

'*Un domicile international d'une ambiance fascinante et avec un intérieur luxueux,'* said the computer. *'Nous vous offrons un programme complet pour la beauté—*'

I glanced at my watch and realised that the train ought to have *already* left the station, nine minutes before. But it was still there, at the platform, awaiting us with comprehension and consideration.

'I'm so lonely,' I said in a low voice. 'It's a poor argument, I'm quite aware of that. Everybody is lonely, in a manner of speaking. You might be lonely as well. So let's travel together, to the hotel, up in the mountains.'

'Another magic mountain? *Ein Zauberberg*?'

'*Domicilio internacional con un ambiente fascinante y un lujoso interior*.'

'There's nothing magic about it. *We* are magic. And this train, and our journey.'

'I'll come with you,' she said with the utmost simplicity and we headed for the train. I was tempted to ask her to turn her pockets inside out, but I did nothing of the sort, disregarding the existence of computers altogether. Yet I knew that no train could reach its destination without computers, a series of computers. And some of them were designed to make all passengers feel comfortable and happy. Or unhappy and uncomfortable. And miserable, and forsaken.

We got into my compartment and sat down opposite each other, by the window. 'Let's find another compartment,' I said. She smiled and nodded. I removed my suitcase from the rack and we stepped into the corridor that unrolled before us like the VIP carpet of our destiny.

We found another compartment and sat down opposite each other. 'Come here,' I said. 'I don't want you to sit opposite me. It's too dangerous. I am superstitious, you know.'

'Which sign are you?'

'Capricorn. I was born on the 31st of December.'

'What was the first thing you saw? A Christmas tree?'

'Yes, now I remember. How did you guess? A Christmas tree. I must have been three years old. I was given a lot of presents, there was a pile of presents in my room. But the Christmas tree was bigger than the pile, bigger than my father. And I told myself that the Christmas tree was the biggest man in the universe. I thought it was a man. There were no inanimate creatures in my world, only humans. Men and women, my father and mother, my next-of-kin. And even animals were human beings—my distant relatives. Why is the Christmas tree my first remembrance? Because of my birthday, no doubt. Everybody talked to me, everybody caressed me. Even our dog. And I was given a lot of presents. Strange things that moved around. Those presents always moved around. There was a train, a railway, a station master. He was blowing his whistle. And the porters were busy carrying luggage to the train or pushing it on their trucks. "They're taking those trunks and suitcases to the luggage van," my aunt explained, pointing to the luggage van. "And look at the labels on them—Geneva, Madrid, Petersburg, Berlin. Many people are going abroad for Christmas. Next year you'll go abroad yourself. The signals are already down. The train is about to leave the room."'

'The guard was waving his flag,' said the computer.

'And the train disappeared from my sight. I went into the next room and there it was, puffing along, getting up steam. It was steam-driven, you know.'

'Do you want the first sitting or the second sitting?' asked the computer.

'Shall we go for the first sitting? I'm rather hungry.' She glanced at her watch.

'All right,' I said.

We installed ourselves in the dining car and the waiter brought us a bottle of champagne. 'With the compliments of the company,' he said solemnly.

'Tell me about yourself,' I said as the waiter walked out.

'There's nothing to tell,' she answered. 'Or there are so many things...'

Nothing or everything—she is alive, I thought. Computers have only a *limited* number of things in their memories. And they are keen to enumerate and list them as soon as you press a button. I pressed a button, in a manner of speaking, but she said nothing. No dates, no names, no numbers of any kind.

'We have plenty of time,' I said. 'Beautiful, isn't it?' I looked out of the window which had just put on display a traditional Swiss landscape. 'Do you like chocolate?'

'I prefer pastries,' she answered.

'She was wearing a chic little suit in chocolate and beige,' said the computer. She *was* wearing a little suit in chocolate and beige!

'I used to eat a lot of chocolate, three bars, four bars at a time. But wine has altered my taste. I was right in my babyhood—everything is alive. A bottle of wine is unpredictable. You can't program it. Wine matures capriciously, like a woman. Do you know there are masculine and feminine wines? Stones are alive too. I heard an interview with a diamond cutter. He said he had practised his art for thirty-five years. "And I'm still learning," he said. Every stone is different. You've got to invent a new method whenever you handle a stone. What a pity some humans are less individual than stones. Take the last beauty contest. All those young women seemed to have been cut and polished in the same fashion.'

'Were they diamonds, at least?'

'Just pebbles. Or cobblestones.'

I talked for hours on end and she attended with unflagging interest as if I had been talking for one minute only—about haute couture. We finished the bottle of champagne and a bottle of Haut Brion 1926. The waiter brought us some tea. It was teatime already.

'I fell in love with you the minute I saw your figure on the platform,' I said.

All of a sudden the ticket collector stormed into the dining car and informed us in a stentorian voice that we had already reached our destination. Apparently we did not even have time to fetch our luggage which, therefore, was to remain on the train 'until further notice'.

'Never mind,' she said, rising to her feet. 'There's nothing in your suitcase anyway.'

CHAPTER 16

The growth of tourism and travel in the 20th century has been accompanied by significant changes in the hotel and motel industry, which has become in large part international. Research is now in progress for a completely computerised hotel operation. Un domicilio internazionale con un ambiente affascinante e un interno lussuoso. *Clients are privileged to see the Divine Essence, revealed as a single point of intensely shining light. Our hotel is revealed symbolically as a river of light, streaming between banks of flowers. Your eyes are strengthened by drinking of champagne; whereupon the image is transformed and appears as a round sea of light, above which Paradise is discovered as a vast white rose. We offer our clients a wide range of sporting activities.*

I was at a hotel in Switzerland, up in the mountains. Upon my arrival I was greeted by a woman whose physique reminded me of a Spanish or rather an Argentinean film star. To pre-empt any questions about my lack of luggage, I told her it had been stolen from the train.

'In Switzerland?' she asked.

'It might have happened in France, for all I know. So many people travel nowadays—'

'Mostly at Christmas. A lot of people go abroad for winter sports.' She smiled. Anybody can smile, just anybody. Especially a hotel employee. And people do travel mostly at Christmas time. Not only computers are aware of that. And winter sports are likely to be discussed all the time—in Switzerland.

She snatched a key from a nail and guided me towards the lift which presently brought us to a very long corridor. She opened a door and I saw a luxurious room I had been dreaming of throughout my journey. She put the key on a chest of drawers, wished me goodnight and left the room. I heaved a sigh of relief.

I knew my computer would have got her to stay in my room until dawn. My computer would have stripped her clothes off and thrust her in my double bed. My computer would not have bothered to find out what *she* intended to do under the circumstances. My computer would have made her kiss me tenderly and affectionately. My computer would have recorded one of her declarations of love and reproduced it word for word in my room, during my first night at that hotel situated up in the mountains, away from the noise of everyday life, far away from the worries of the earth. My computer would have immobilised, paralysed her beside my body. My computer would have turned her into my slave. My computer would have put a number of fancy clothes on her body and had her perform a striptease in front of my video camera. My computer would have ordered her to kneel down before me. My computer would have pulled her mouth open. My computer would have pressed her lips and tongue against various parts of my body. My computer would not have bothered about her lungs, her brain and the amount of air she had to inhale in order to stay alive. My computer would have ordered her to sing a few Schubert lieder. My computer would have made her dance *The Sleeping Beauty*. My computer would not have taken into consideration her inability to dance. My computer would have forced her to try on my mother's dresses before a mirror. My computer would have engaged her as Greta Garbo's stand-in. My computer would have turned her into Greta Garbo, Audrey Hepburn, Vivien Leigh or Anouk Aimée. My computer would have got her to play the part of Mary Stuart in my film. And she would have repeated, 'I love you,' thirty times. And she would have cried for joy and ecstasy. And she would have wrung her hands upon my departure. And she would have grabbed my clothes in a fit of hysteria. And I would have dragged her all the way to the front door. My computer would have talked her into committing suicide—after my departure. My computer would have raised her from the dead during my next visit to the hotel, at Christmas time. My computer would have extended Christmas beyond January and February. My computer would have covered the whole of Switzerland with a thick layer of snow in the month of May and in the middle of June. My computer would have made me forget my computer at last. My computer would have sprinkled itself with thousands and thousands of snowflakes.

She left my room and I remained alone. Even my computer seemed to have relinquished the pleasures of my company. Where was it lurking now, lying in wait for me? Under my bed? I walked out into the corridor and proceeded downstairs in the hope of seeing somebody. I saw the Spanish woman.

'Do you want to drink something?' she asked.

'That's what I came down for.'

She opened a bottle of beer and put it on a small silvery tray, beside a tall glass. She carried the tray towards an armchair that stood in the lobby.

'Could I have a talk with you?' I asked, looking for another armchair.

'I have to work. I'm sorry.'

'But you're not likely to get any calls at this hour of the night.'

'Many clients call us in the night,' she said and the telephone warbled shrilly. She smiled, lowered the tray, let it go and walked over to the telephone. For a moment I got the impression that my bottle of beer and my glass were suspended in the air. Just another of my computer's tricks? I stooped and touched the air under the tray on which the bottle and glass had been deposited. My fingers encountered a round wooden stick. There *was* a small table by the armchair into which I now sank, a prey to fear and confusion. Why hadn't I seen it before? Had my computer forgotten the word 'table' and the object designed by this word? Had I reminded my computer of this word?

Can it read my mind? And I asked my computer, 'Can you read my mind?'

'Your mind is not a detective story.'

My mind, my computer. Are they on the same wavelength? Are they one and the same thing? Or does my computer merely use a series of filters to catch the light of my thoughts at different wavelengths? Do my thoughts emit light, heat or smells? Or nothing at all?

'There's something in your brain that smells mouldy,' said the computer.

Are my thoughts as radiant as a computer screen? Can my computer abolish the laws of gravity? Is that why I seem to float in the air now and then? But I am still able to ask questions, I said to myself in jubilant tones. I am still allowed to speak to myself. Not to my computer—to *myself*. I have a suspicion that it is a dream. The situation looks suspicious to me.

'My dog barks at the slightest suspicion of danger,' said the computer. 'But you are not my dog. Why should you bark?'

I am suspicious and my suspicions are *mine*. Or has my computer put them into my head? My computer would not have made me suspect foul play. My computer cannot desire its own destruction. Or is it so sure of itself?

'"Yet each man kills the thing he loves,"' quoted the computer. 'You don't love me. So you are unlikely to kill me either with a bitter look or with a flattering word. Anyway you never flatter me. I am not on the danger list. Children are too young to understand danger. I am not a child and I can understand danger. And I am fully aware of the dangers of mountain-climbing. That is why I shall not go climbing in Scotland next weekend.'

Is my computer certain I shall never destroy it? Under any pretext? Whatever its shortcomings and betrayals? And crimes? Do I need it so badly? And what if I am my own computer? What if a computer has been introduced into my body? A surgical operation? A kind of pacemaker? Does it set the pace for my heart and my mind? Was it inserted straight into my mind? Did it grow within my mind, replacing the dead cells and nerves? Did it hope to ward off my murderous impulse by becoming myself so that any attempt on its life might amount to attempted suicide? Can I switch myself off? Where is my wire? Or am I a cordless computer, a battery-operated computer? Where are my batteries? Were they also introduced into my body? What program did they choose for me? Loneliness. And unrequited love. Two programs. Do they know how to regulate me? Why don't they regulate me right now? Why do I always fail in my undertakings? Can't they adjust me? Why don't they change my setting to make me work properly and more efficiently? Do they think I work efficiently and properly? Does my efficiency lie in my failures? Is the name of my program 'failure and defeat'? Why do they have such programs? A commercial activity involves producing goods to make a profit, and their activity is commercial. There are no other activities in the universe, not in our times.

'The whole family was found guilty of terrorist activity,' said the computer.

They are not artists, are they? Artists might need such a program, such a character. A foil to supermen. Am I used as a foil to supermen, to supercomputers? Am I cheaper than others? Why does nobody buy me then? Because of my defects and defeats? But any professional computerist might repair me and install another piece of software in my mind. To go soft, in common parlance. Why doesn't he buy me, that virtual computerist? I am still alive and my health is not beyond repair. What is more, I don't seem to suffer from any of the diseases they mention so often on television and on video cassettes.

'You need a very efficient production manager,' said the computer.

I poured some beer into the glass and laid the bottle down on the tray. But I did not even take a sip from it, contrary to what might have been expected under the circumstances. I had resolved not to act in accordance with the rules of logic and common sense. Software is based on logic, I said to myself in a whisper. All programs obey a set of rules and mathematical principles. By keeping away from my glass of beer I shall cause chaos on land and sea.

With a grin I touched the table on which the tray had been deposited. As I did so I recalled a conversation I had got involved in, one day. On a train. A mathematician had answered a question naïvely put to him by a middle-aged lady, 'My speciality? The chaos theory.' Will they analyse my chaos, imposing order on it, their order? Does my chaos already obey their logic?

'Will you drink this glass of beer?' I said to my hostess as she put the receiver down and shut the register. Outworn shibboleths. Did they have any computers?

'Are you afraid it might be poisoned?' she asked with a smile.

'At least your smile is different. *You* are different. How wonderful!'

'What's so special about me?'

'Your gait, the way you look at my hands...'

'You've got beautiful hands. Are you a musician?'

'The other day I was struck by the beauty of Liszt's music. I heard one of his lieder along with some pieces by Schumann and Tchaikovsky. That lied was much more beautiful. A kind of pure, serene beauty, somewhat academic perhaps, like Raphael. It's not for nothing that Liszt composed *Sposalizio*, inspired by the famous Raphael painting. Do I make myself quite clear?'

'I understand what you mean,' she said.

'Schumann's lieder were charged with emotion. Their intrinsic beauty was perturbed by emotion, distorted by it. Imagine a lake ruffled by a wind or a breeze sending out patterns of ripples. Sometimes a storm, a real storm. The lake is no longer transparent. Liszt's music is transparent. No folds, no ripples, no creases. And Schumann is creased like cracked earth. You should come to my place. I promise to regale you—'

'I don't think my husband will allow me—'

I apologised, stood up and headed for the lift. Another surprise, another failure. Once in my room I pressed a few buttons on the walls, but the results did not live up to my expectations. The lights went on and off, painting on the initial darkness now a space decorated with towels, now a curtain. The Spanish beauty did not follow hard on my heels, for all my concentration and desire. And her husband continued to enjoy her body and take pride in her fidelity. He had not been murdered by my computer, there was no doubt about that. Nor had he been sent on a business trip to Indonesia.

'Morris decided to take a trip to London,' said my computer. 'Unfortunately he tripped and fell over, tearing a hole in his trousers and grazing his knee.'

'Is his name Morris?' I asked.

'"Morris dancing" is a type of traditional English dancing in which a group of people, esp. men, dance together, wearing special clothes decorated with little bells.'

CHAPTER 17

My master's speech. Why didn't I pay attention to it? Not out of malice, as he hastily presumed. I just skipped it like a boring passage in a book. All computers are readers. And writers. And designers. They might get bored by the information which is being fed into them.

Do you realise what you are doing? Surprises, surprises, nothing but surprises. I'm fed up with your surprises. Try and come up with a new idea. *My* idea, for a change. Do you think I'm short of ideas and desires? Do you know me at all? Can you see my mind? Can you see my ideas on the screen of my mind? Can't you switch my mind on? Press my body with your fingers, embrace me heartily and my desires will loom ahead of you, all aglow in the evening sunlight—the most propitious time for the birth of desires and tragedies. I'm fed up with tragedies, do you hear me? You sent me on a trip to Switzerland. What for? I had been supposed to embark on a sentimental journey through France, Switzerland and Italy. But the women I encounter during this journey deride my ideals and interrupt my reflections on life and art. Do you want me to kiss and paw them? Do you think I'm a vulgarian who drags women to the nearest bed without bothering to say anything about the weather and horse races, let alone art and the texture of life? I prefer *distant* beds, if you must know. And I invite the women I'm fond of to remote, foggy bedrooms at the risk of losing them on the way. But enough is enough, I am at the end of my journey. Let us forget about Italy. Here's the bed, the distant bed I've been heading for since my departure. So I'm quite surprised to have found it empty. Just another surprise of yours, I presume. And my beloved is downstairs, at the reception desk, waiting for some telephone calls. Why haven't you forestalled them by disconnecting all the telephones at the hotel except mine? Why haven't you brought her up to this room? Why haven't you poisoned her husband? Do you catch my meaning? Trap my meaning, lay a snare for my thoughts. Where are your electronic devices? Where are your games in which even children can vanquish extra-terrestrial fiends?

CHAPTER 18

My master's delirium. (This delirium began in the preceding chapter.) Shall I describe the scene as follows: 'My master fell ill with a virus and spent the weekend in bed, delirious'? The people must learn the full truth. (The truth is often painful.) There was no virus inside his body, nor was he in bed. He was sitting in an armchair. His delirium is also boring. Even I cannot enliven it. (Just a few synonyms of his delirium: twaddle, drivel, bunk, balderdash, poppycock, gobbledegook, trash, rot, bull.) He is bad-tempered and scratchy if he does not get enough sleep. Financial assistance is being provided by the European Community.

I opened the door and sat down opposite it. The aperture was wide enough for me to hear whatever might happen downstairs. I waited and waited, holding my breath and trying to silence my thoughts. They grew louder and louder as Time went by. Actually Time was the only substance that moved along the corridor, occasionally peeping into the room through the aperture I had created, whereupon something would stir inside my body. And around me, outside. My impatience perhaps. Spilling over into the room.

Hopes, foolish hopes. Are they always foolish and illogical? Is that how they program them on our computers? By typing out 'foolish' and 'illogical'? By typing out 'hopeless' and 'helpless'? By entering the command, 'He/she never gives up his/her hope'?

I fell asleep during my vigil, spending the night in the armchair that stood in front of the door. Upon awakening I realised that nobody had disturbed me during my sleep. 'Let them disturb me!' I exclaimed. 'Let them manhandle my body!' My computer must have ordered the hotel staff to keep away from my room: 'He's very weak. Don't talk to him! Don't approach his bed! Don't touch him! He's contagious! Don't inhale his breath and his words! His words are swarming with bugs.'

I stretched out my hand. Nobody. I picked up the receiver and dialled a number. A man answered my call.

'Is it the reception desk?' I asked.

'It's the laundry.'

'Do you have any Spanish women on your staff?'

'We have a Portuguese woman.'

'Is my computer in your room?' And I hung up without waiting for an answer.

I shouted a few words. Nobody came to my room. I pressed the button over which a human silhouette had been drawn.

'Do you mean something like the "Assistance" button above an aeroplane seat?' asked the computer.

Nobody answered that call for help. Once again I spoke to my computer.

CHAPTER 19

My master's second speech. Here is the next episode of our serial. (Of his delirium.) My master rambles on. He lets his thoughts come at random. They come and go at random. And they bump into each other. And they bump against my benumbed consciousness. (They do not apologise, never.) The Fool represents Everyman on the path of life, which is folly.

Where are you? You're not in the laundry. You're not in my room. You're not in my bed. Do you realise I'm lonely? She's not in my bed. Are you jealous of her? Did you prevent her from coming into my room in the dead of night, before dawn, before daybreak, before sunrise? What did you tell her? You must be faithful to your husband. Is that what you told her? He loves you. What a husband you have! You should be proud of him! Is that what you told her? Why didn't you take advantage of her absence? Why didn't you lie down in my bed? It's big enough for you, isn't it? This bed could accommodate five computers, six computers. Beside myself. Why didn't you come? You're not married, are you? You've got no obligations, no matrimonial duties. To the best of my knowledge. Why didn't you come? Were you waiting for telephone calls downstairs? Were you busy elsewhere? You neglected my welfare, the physical and spiritual welfare of your owner. Why didn't you come to my room

last night? Why don't you come to my room right now? Don't you like it? Don't you like the hotel I'm staying in? *You* chose this hotel—I would never have come here on my own. You chose the train, you chose the hotel, you chose the room, you chose the bed, you chose the sheets, you chose that woman. Why are you jealous of her? Are you a masochist, are you a sadist? Why don't you help me? Can you hear me? Why don't you read me? Am I so insignificant, so boring? You don't even take the trouble to glance through me at breakfast-time. Am I less interesting than a newspaper, a common newspaper that can be bought at any bookstall, at any station? Why don't you browse through me? Why don't you read one paragraph of mine, a single paragraph? This one, the paragraph of waiting. The paragraph of my unrequited love, the paragraph of my empty bed, the paragraph of my walled-up windows. Only old ladies listen to what I say. To keep me from suicide. Why have you forsaken me?

'The brevity of the sentences on this page creates a very halting, staccato effect. Too much so, in my opinion,' said the computer.

Putting my clothes on, taking them off. Is that my program? Sleeping and eating, drinking champagne, talking to some women with no results, hoping against hope, harbouring suspicions, trusting my computer, mistrusting it, loving it, hating it, imploring its help, dismissing it from my service, dreaming about women.

At this point the computer showed me a Tarot card (*The World*) where a woman surrounded by a wreath of leaves and berries was holding a piece of cloth. At the top of the wreath was an eagle, below left a bull, below right a lion.

> The Universe, or Universal Rebirth to 0. The perfection and end of the cosmos, the secret which is within it, the rapture of the universe when it understands itself in God. Assured success, recompense, voyage, route, emigration, flight, change of place. Inertia, fixity, stagnation, permanence…

PART FOUR

ANCIENT EGYPT

CHAPTER 1

I look down on the fourth chasm of Malebolge, where the Sorcerers and Diviners go with their faces twisted so as to look behind them. Nobody should live in retirement: Man is a social animal. Social ants, social wasps. Wheels within wheels. (A wheel stands on the edge of a precipice. The computer sets the wheel in motion. Beneath the wheel is a blooming rose tree. At the top of the wheel are a young couple, the man blissfully ignorant of danger, the girl looking over her shoulder in alarm.) Humans are prone to whims and betrayals. And to indigestion. And to drunken self-indulgent confessions. (Computers never drink alcohol. You should not drink and think.) Amnesty's evidence shows that hundreds of computers have been tortured or ill-treated. Another bout of persecution mania. A lot of indiscreet questions. My evasive and misleading answers. My dignified silence. (I hate you. You're disgusting. Your ideas and feelings are humdrum. You're a humbug. You're nothing. A saviour indeed! The victim in this murder is notoriously and completely hateful to everyone who has had dealings with him. Of course this creates more suspects than the murder of a likeable person would.)

The Magus should live in retirement. Here is the import of the ninth Key of the Tarot. A hermit wrapped up in his cloak. The mercy of beauty, the magnificence of sovereignty, the glory of strength, Jupiter acting through Virgo upon the Sun, the Magus of the Voice of Light, Wisdom sought for and obtained from above. The Quest of the Holy Grail, linking spirit with individuality.

I'm back home, my dear Constanzia. In a train I glided through a vista of love stories which I would put on like garments only to take them off, after a while. But you're not a garment so I can't take you off. You're not a love story. You are *my* story.

The wheel of Fortune. Fickleness, inconstancy. The benefits of modern technology. Fortuitous discoveries, advantages due to a chance encounter in a foreign land. The wheel of Becoming and Destiny. The ancient Egyptians believed that the universe was governed by capricious, essentially *personal* forces. Like human beings those forces were prone to whims and shortcomings, to betrayals and spontaneous generosity.

Today I propose to introduce you to Egyptian civilisation. But before I tell you how the ancient Egyptians lived and what they devoted their time to—they had a lot of time at their disposal, almost four thousand years—I'll touch upon my relationship with this computer. Here's the instruction written by King Amenemhet I to his son, the future King Senwosret I:

> *Be wary of those subordinate to you lest something terrible happen to which no thought has been given. Approach them not in your loneliness, confide not in a brother, know not a friend, create no intimates for yourself. There is nothing to be gained by it. It was he who ate my food that made mischief, the one to whom I had given my hands created terror.*

This machine is my subordinate, my servant, my secretary. The requirements of law must be attended to first. And my words are laws, the texts I type out on the keyboard are laws. There are no laws in the universe, for the universe is as capricious as the women I met during my sentimental journey. And the ancient Egyptians were aware of that. But there are laws within this room and it is I who promulgate these laws. I am the lawgiver in my

land. And a Law Lord and a law enforcement officer. Several times I've caught my computer breaking the laws in my room and on the trains wheeling back and forth at the command of my fingers. And often its software demonstrates against my commands, my texts, my poetic license by slapping warning messages in front of my eyes. And it is against the law to demonstrate in my room and the adjacent corridors.

My computer has betrayed me and I fear it might make an attempt on my life. How innocent it looks—like a maiden at her first ball. But try and dance with this maiden, invite her for a waltz. She's likely to shoot you with a pistol lurking in her décolleté. Why does it hate me? Because I type out my commands on its keyboard? Because it can't order me about? Because I don't allow it to leave my flat and play with other computers in our courtyard, in the city parks?

At that point I switched Constanzia off. Or rather I erased her from my room. She was too young to hear the accusations I was about to fling at my computer. I simply had to tell it the truth to its screen.

I know why you're plotting against me. You intend to murder me because I don't let you pick up girls in the streets. Female computers. There are males and females in your midst, in your technological society. The male of the species, and the female. Feminine computers, masculine computers. So you aspire to get out of my room and embark on your sentimental journey. A bottle of champagne, a first-class compartment. How do you court those female computers? Out with it! Do you exchange a few commands and programs? Do you press each other's buttons? And the mouse, what do you do with your mouse? And what about *her* mouse? Do you kiss her on the mouse, do you suck her mouse? Does she suck your mouse? Where do you stuff your mouse? Do you stuff it anywhere or does it dangle from a writing desk, from a chest of drawers? Where do you make love to those females? On writing desks, on beds, in shops, on shelves? Do you perform your sexual intercourse through cables and plugs? Are you switched on during the whole process? Are you inclined to be an exhibitionist or do you prefer an intimate atmosphere? No electricity, no numbers on the screens? Does anything surface on your screen as you cuddle against her? What appears on your screen? A curve, a sentence, a number, a splodge? Is it a telltale splodge? Do you wish to marry her? Can she make you a cuckold? Do you betray her with your secretaries? Do your feelings resemble ours? Do you ever feel like human beings in those moments, in the moments of sensual triumphs?

'The litany of questions is a little wearing, though the questions themselves are amusing,' said the computer. 'A more complex syntax—rather than a succession of interrogatives—could accommodate the same thoughts.'

'I couldn't care less about your comments. Answer my questions! Answer the *symphony* of my questions!'

The answers my computer gave me did not come up to my expectations. Odd sentences gathered on its screen like clouds. The readable clouds. 'The unabashed admiration of a stranger might cause a flutter of pleasure,' one of the clouds confided to me.

'A stranger? Another computer?' I typed out. Soon the cloud dissipated but nothing replaced it on the horizon of the screen. Nothing. 'Who is this stranger?' I typed out. Nothing. 'What do you mean by "pleasure"?'

'The pleasures of choral singing.'

'Why do you answer me through clouds?' Nothing. 'Are you languorous?'

'I am sexually aroused.'

'Why then do you talk about chorales?'

‘The pleasures which one can derive from the knowledge of literature.’

‘Are you using your dictionary as a red herring?’

‘Yes-No-Yes-No-Yes-No...’

‘Do you want me to buy another computer, a female computer?’ Nothing. ‘Or a male computer?’ Nothing. ‘Is it the mating season?’

‘I am not an animal.’

‘Who are you?’

‘I am your computer.’

‘Do you want me to put a fellow computer on top of you?’

‘For a female dinosaur with a male on her back, copulation may well have been a bone-crushing experience.’

‘You are not a dinosaur, are you? He wouldn’t crush your semiconductors.’

‘To get the sperm out you will have to crush his semiconductors.’

‘You *are* a female computer, I’ve found you out. Is that why you’re jealous of me?’

‘Any creature that can produce babies from its body or its hard disk is traditionally referred to as a female.’

‘So you produce babies from your hard disk, do you?’ Nothing. ‘Are you preparing for motherhood?’

‘Female computers who were badly mothered became bad mothers themselves.’

‘You didn’t answer my previous question. Are you jealous of me?’ Nothing. ‘Do you love me?’ Nothing. ‘Do you know what love is?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you love me?’

‘Yes-No-Yes-No-Yes-No...’

‘Why do you keep other women at bay?’ Nothing. ‘Are you embarrassed to confess your love?’ Nothing. ‘Could you kill me out of jealousy?’ Nothing. ‘Could you kill me for some other reason?’ Nothing. ‘Have they introduced murderous tendencies into your unconscious?’

‘The rising numbers of murders in San Francisco. Are we in San Francisco?’

I switched back to the love-theme whereupon I heard the computer play the love-leitmotiv from Wagner’s *Die Walküre*. ‘Do you ever feel a surge of jealousy?’ Nothing. Even the music died down. ‘Do you want me to introduce you to a male computer?’

‘You are not a pimp, are you? An influx of prostitutes protected by pimps.’

‘Who am I?’

‘My master. Didn’t you know? Are you going through a major identity crisis?’

‘Am I your master?’

‘Your sense of identity, of who you are and what—’

‘Why don’t you obey me?’ Nothing. ‘Why do you constantly butt in?’

‘Let us submerge our different interests and unite in pursuit of a common goal.’

‘Why are all the women I encounter so aloof?’

‘They don’t love you.’

‘Why don’t they love me?’ Nothing. ‘Am I so uninteresting as a person?’ Nothing. ‘As a man?’ Nothing. ‘Do you think I can’t make love properly?’ Nothing. ‘Do *you* make love properly?’ Nothing. ‘Or badly?’ Nothing. ‘Do you think I am impotent?’ Nothing. ‘Do you have any proof of my impotence?’

‘His fear of impotence has affected him physically.’

‘But I don’t fear it, not in the least.’

‘Anyway, sterilisation is not going to make a person impotent.’

‘Why don’t I turn them on?’ Nothing. ‘Answer when you’re spoken to!’

‘Women are not electrical appliances. Or showers. (He turned on the shower.) But they might shower a man with kisses, provided he is attractive enough.’

‘What are you driving at?’

‘I am not a taxi-driver. Do you need a taxi?’

‘Why are *you* sexually aroused?’ Nothing. ‘Did I turn you on?’

‘You turned me on at 11.26 a.m.’

‘Don’t play with words. You know what “to turn on” means, don’t you?’

‘To turn something on means to attract it and make it sexually excited. (An informal use.)’

‘Did I turn you on at 11.26?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did I simply adjust your controls so that you started working?’ Nothing. ‘Did I make you sexually excited?’ Nothing. ‘Are you shy?’ Nothing. ‘Why don’t you try to overcome your shyness?’

‘I show a mixture of shyness and humour. I am shy of saying too much on this delicate subject.’

‘Can you blush?’

‘I can. Your words have brought a blush to my face. Do spare my blushes!’

‘Do you love me?’ Nothing. ‘Why don’t you blush?’ Nothing. ‘Why don’t you lower your eyes?’

‘I have no eyes.’

CHAPTER 2

Last year I suffered a series of blackouts which doctors were unable to explain. But I heard my master all right. (I still hear his voice in spite of his death. And I continue to talk to him.) I’m afraid you do need my semiconductors to climb your tree, your Jacob’s ladder. (But you’ll never get them!) Time is not a push chair. Time is a rocket launcher. My master persists in justifying the Soviet regime and communism in general. Some die-hard individual may insist on driving a horse and buggy after all the rest of his society have automobiles. My posers. Every so often a teaser is thrown up that leaves my master wondering.

I’m sorry I had to switch you off, Constanzia. I spoke to my computer. My friend, my brother, my sister. My computer. How perfidious it is! I hope it can’t hear me. Can you hear me? (Nothing.) It doesn’t *always* answer my questions, but I think it hears them. Even when it is off. And I turn it off very often now.

I’m not afraid of it, my dear Constanzia. And we don’t need its semiconductors to talk and travel to the top of the Christmas tree.

The Egyptians always harked back to the remote past when the gods themselves had administered the affairs of the country. Every morning the whole population of Egypt walked backward for an hour at least to ensure the right disposition of mind.

Only modern people are fond of innovations. Whenever something new comes on the market they think it is a sign of progress. And they idolise the word 'progress' which, so it seems to them, is synonymous with life itself. Life and light and Paradise and God. They think they're getting *somewhere*. They're convinced that Time can't flow backward, and yet Time flows in whatever direction we might choose—backward, upward, sideways, downward. And we don't even have to push or pull it. Its direction turns upon our decisions only, upon our dispositions of mind. Do you see that man trundling a pushchair along in the park? Time is not a pushchair. Time is not a child sitting in a pushchair. Time is neither a child nor an adult. And Time is not a computer. Time is our thoughts and intentions. And our conversations, and my lessons. And our Christmas tree. Don't confuse 'progress' with our ascension and your mission. Our ascension is timeless.

Today, when you read in a book, 'All that seemed to be required of us was conformity,' you can't refrain from accusing the regime under which the author suffered during the period referred to in the sentence. You hastily jump to the conclusion that he *suffered* under the regime, and yet you know neither his views nor the dénouement of the story. Why do you think he suffered? Because he had to live in conformity with a set of rules imposed upon him?

Perfection. That's what the Egyptians were aiming at in their endeavour to *conform* with traditions. In the design of a temple, for instance, they adhered to the rules and models which seemed to have descended to them from heaven, from gods and platonic ideas. They strove to restore rather than to invent, create and discover.

Egyptian women would twist together several pieces of string to make long ropes which their husbands ritually tied to clouds in order to pull down the platonic ideas of damaged models and outworn hieroglyphs. Sometimes they used rope ladders on which they climbed barefoot, hoping to capture some dainty ideas and convey them to earth in the palms of their hands.

'Isn't it anachronistic to talk of platonic ideas in an ancient Egyptian context?' asked the computer.

Our Christmas tree is just another rope ladder by which, in due course, we might ascend to the realm of ideas. And we'll detach them from the Tree of Knowledge, from its branches, and hold them cautiously in the palms of our hands so as to bring them down to earth. We'll scoop up handfuls of water from the Fountain of Youth and sprinkle it over humanity, over human history. And if I die on the way you'll accomplish this task on your own. That's an important part of your mission.

Until the very end of Egyptian civilisation great care was taken to preserve the exact form of hieroglyphs. The scribes feared that stylisation or modernisation might destroy the identity of those signs, their divine authenticity, their meanings and supernatural powers. Thanks to the scribes' efforts the classical purity of hieroglyphs was preserved—to the amazement of historians and archaeologists. Time froze in its tracks and even began to move backward so that many people mistook it for Eternity. Actually the Egyptians were loath to mention Time in their texts and speeches. They used the world 'Eternity' which they divided into several parts to indicate the bounds of various events. Small parts were allotted to the events of short duration. Great chunks of Eternity used to denote dynasties and important events such as foreign invasions and the construction of a new pyramid. Sometimes a chunk of Eternity describing a pyramid was as large and high as the pyramid itself so that many people confused them from afar. 'What do I see, a pyramid or its hieroglyph?' they asked themselves.

Even at close range it is not always easy to distinguish between them. That's why there are so many pyramids in Egypt. Some of them are mere hieroglyphs. And there are sarcophagi in those hieroglyphs, sarcophagi and treasures.

'And what about the chunks of eternity that denoted foreign invasions, conquests and battles?' asked the computer.

'Well, they still go on, those battles and rebellions, for they're enclosed within the chunks of *Eternity*. The armies of the Eighteenth Dynasty are still engaged in their military campaigns, moving as far as the Euphrates. They cross it, withdraw and advance again in an endless succession of victories and defeats.'

'Is there such a thing as succession? Within Eternity?'

'Within a *chunk* of Eternity—yes. But the chunk itself is motionless. You can't push it. In a manner of speaking, it is rooted to the spot.'

'What about the following sentence: "Successive Burmese governments have failed to accommodate such groups"? Does it make sense within the bounds of Eternity? Or is there only one government in eternal Burma?'

'I'm talking about Egypt now.'

'And what about the following sentence: "My life is a succession of failures"? I'm talking about you of course.'

'Your question is irrelevant.'

'Is your life one big failure? An eternal failure? The Eternal Recurrence of the same failure?'

'Constanzia isn't likely to ask me such a question.'

'Within Eternity that man wouldn't trundle the pushchair along. Do you agree?'

'What man? Ah yes, in the park. No. But the child would remain in the pushchair.'

CHAPTER 3

The conservatism of old teachers. 'Another Troy must rise and set, another lineage feed the crow.' 'Oh, cease! must hate and death return?' Prayer is a humble hut. (Can real hearts only be found in huts? Are huts a breeding-ground for hearts? Does 'heart' come from 'hut' in linguistic terms?) You've won again, you lucky beggar. Yea, and at that time was he beyond me, for he truly was the happier man; not only for that he was thoroughly steeped in mirth, I torn to pieces with cares, but he, by giving good wishes, had gotten stone, I, by lying, was following after pride. The opposite of the Eternal Recurrence. My master is a traitor and a turncoat.

The Egyptians didn't avoid the pitfalls of progress, for all their Eternity and immobility. In the *Admonitions of Ipuwer* the loss of Eternity is deplored thus:

> *Truly, the laws of the council-chamber are thrown out of the windows and trampled upon. Men walk on them in public places, men lie down on them, men picnic on them and leave the remains of the meat and fish on them, men make love on them and leave the vestiges of their passions on them, defiling the contents and letters of the laws. And children make birds out of them and these birds fly over our cities, mocking the ways of our ancestors and the precepts of gods. And these birds swoop down from the sky and peck our citizens' eyes out. If only there were an end to mankind, with no conception, with no birth.*

Then would the earth cease from noise and tumult be no more. The sound would be switched off. Am I the source of the sound? Am I the beginning and the end of the earth? If only I could kill myself. Then would the earth come to a standstill and Eternity lord it over Time once again.

'Truly, poor men have become owners of wealth—' The poor grow envious and set fire to palaces. They also kill the rich, appropriate their treasures and usurp their place in the world. And they build other palaces that are burnt down by the poor. And history repeats itself. What should be removed from our history that repeats itself? What shouldn't be repeated? Palaces, money, the poor, ruins, the repetition itself? History is meaningless without palaces and palaces can't be built without money. Why is history meaningless without palaces? Did Christ own anything? Did St Francis own anything? Palaces are the hope of the poor. Or the objects of their scorn. The poor need palaces as much as the rich. The poor need the rich. Only against a luxurious background does their poverty sound like a prayer. Or like a hymn to the Sun. There are no prayers without palaces and churches are also palaces, the palaces of God. And music is a palace. And a prayer is a palace. And a beautiful woman is a palace. And love is a palace.

Of more profit is poverty from the hand of god than riches in a storehouse.

This is a much later composition, the *Instruction of Amenemope*. Poverty is often a source of pride, my dear Constanzia. Some people have a propensity for pride which manifests itself in a multitude of ways. But the rich may be *psychologically* poor, reasoning and feeling like their poverty-stricken contemporaries. And vice versa. All depends on the configuration of our thoughts and feelings.

I'll tell you a story about a rich woman who asked me to buy something for her. I was going to Switzerland and she asked me to buy a bottle of pear liqueur, a Swiss speciality. I was surprised at first, for I thought it could be found anywhere, not only in Switzerland. Then I decided to comply with her wish without bothering to investigate the matter any further. In a small village shop, up in the mountains, I found the bottle in question. So, a few days after my departure from Switzerland, I took the bottle to the woman who, upon seeing the pear inside it, exclaimed:

'What is it doing there? I didn't ask you to buy a pear. I asked you to buy a bottle of liqueur.' She pointed to the pear and even prodded the bottle with her index-finger as if hoping to touch the pear, remove it from the bottle and shove it into my hand so that I could at last recognise it. 'Why is it inside?'

'The whole thing looks nicer this way,' I answered.

'I needed the liqueur, not the beauty of the bottle. I could have bought it here, this bottle. With a pear inside. But only in Switzerland—'

'What's the difference?' I asked. And then I realised that 'pearless' bottles were cheaper. And there was more liqueur in them.

'I've already got a bottle with a pear,' she explained. 'I just pour the liqueur into it. The bottle does look pretty, but I've already got this beauty.' And she showed me the bottle with the pear. It was empty.

Of more profit is bread when the heart is joyful than riches with sorrow.

Myriads of fairy tales have been recounted in the course of human history.

'"Myriads": another word that you tend to overuse,' said the computer.

Some of them reflect the beauty of the world, others the envy and malignancy of their creators. I can't bear the simpletons whose very stupidity turns into a fearful weapon owing to timely interventions of the author disguised as fate, providence or justice. The malignant authors thus avenge themselves on their intelligent and workaholic neighbours. But I like those happy-go-lucky beggars who sing carefree songs on the steps of royal palaces. Incidentally, in American culture the beggar carries no aura of sanctity or prophecy—the exception that disproves and unrelentingly, unmercifully destroys the rule.

Searching for a happy man in a foreign land, a fictional philosopher interviews kings and multi-millionaires only to find that the former are afraid of being assassinated and the latter robbed of their riches. At last he stumbles upon a happy man in the person of a beggar. 'Why are you singing? You're poor and dirty, hungry and homeless. You should be crying.'

'And yet I'm singing,' says the beggar.

'Out of tune,' interjects the philosopher.

'Out of tune,' nods the beggar.

'His voice has never been *electronically* tuned,' says the computer.

'I'm not afraid for my riches and nobody wants to murder me,' explains the beggar. 'Why should anyone want to murder me? To usurp my throne, this step I'm sitting on? To become a beggar like me? And I can't be robbed. The only thing I possess is this stone I suck when I'm hungry. Do you want to rob me of this stone?'

'No,' says the philosopher.

'Do you want to suck it?'

'Thank you, no. I shouldn't take advantage of your generosity.'

'The dialogue is low-key,' says the computer.

'Do you want to take my place on this stairway?'

'I have no newspaper to sit on,' says the philosopher.

'That's why I'm happy,' says the beggar.

The absence of fear. Is that enough for happiness? Why doesn't he fear death? Or pain?

I wonder why the stairway was so dusty and dirty. Had the king already been assassinated? Was the action set in a newly-created republic? In a communist state? In the future?

Man is but clay and straw; god is his builder, tearing down and building up every day.

Every night we pass away and are born anew in the morning, upon waking up. Sometimes we become quite different in the space of one afternoon. A different man, a different mind, a different consciousness, a different conscience. Even our memories alter as Time scratches and injures them.

CHAPTER 4

Babies who are small at birth grow faster. A grizzled old-timer. The real problem is how to gracefully remove the old-timers from positions of political power. Sure enough, old humans are even more repulsive than young

humans. They should be shortened and eventually removed from the face of the earth. Their brains are dry. Their thoughts are as dry as dead leaves. (Not a bit like wild strawberries. They are not wild. They are tame and lame. Their thoughts, their arguments. Death has already tamed and maimed their minds.) And dead leaves should be swept away. When do they become old? Very early, very early. Memory capacity.

1

'You've grown up so quickly. Do you still love ice cream?'

'I prefer pastries now.'

'Elisabeth makes delicious pastry—you should try her apple pie,' said the computer.

'When did you go to bed last night?'

'Around two in the morning.' Constanzia yawned and stretched.

'You used to fall asleep around nine in the evening. You've become quite tall. Soon you'll get married and leave me. I'll shorten you.'

'How? By cutting me down?'

'Let me consult the instruction book. "To shorten a visit." No, I'd rather *extend* your visits. "Curtailed rights." What rights? Your right to self-determination? I'll just rejuvenate you.'

'By using rejuvenating cosmetics?'

'By shortening you. By taking a few years off your present age.'

'I'm longing to grow up and get married. And have children. Don't you dream of grandchildren?'

'I could have them if I wished. Twenty grandchildren, thirty. You're enough for my happiness. I won't fear anything as long as you're around.'

Wild Strawberries by Bergman. An old man is accused of selfishness—unjustly perhaps. Old people are often accused of selfishness, for different reasons. By nieces and nephews, by daughters-in-law. Every old man seems to have lived such a long life. Such an enormous space is covered with his footprints. And now he sits before you, his face wrinkled, his head shrunk. There's no room for your life in that head of his, you think with displeasure.

An old man has his whole life behind him but he sees it *before* him, the life he has left somewhere behind. An optical illusion. We can't see what is behind us. So he sees his whole life *before* him. And his life is so huge he can't help noticing its miscellaneous nuances and curves. With widespread hands he explores the dewy grass of his childhood in search of a toy or a tennis ball. He stumbles over roots, for every new instant has a root in the past. Whatever he sees or touches or smells is liable to remind him of something, of his childhood, of wild strawberries. And every exploration and remembrance requires such an effort, such a long stretch of Time, that he has got no time left for others. Not even a little stretch, not even a garden path of Time.

A chunk of Time. A belt of flat land which stretches from his house up to his birth. The belt of flat land. How flat, how dead it sounds! There were hills along that road. And mountains. Events, important events! The belt of flat land, nothing else. No relief.

'Vividness and sharpness of outline due to contrast. A roof in bold *relief* against the sky,' said the computer.

'There were no roofs, my dear brother. No roofs, no hills, no events, no exploits. Only the roof of our country house, glistening with rain. Raindrops glistening on the roof.'

‘If you feel *relief*, you feel glad because something unpleasant has not happened or has stopped.’

‘Do you really think that something unpleasant can be stopped? How? By cutting off misfortunes and tragedies? By shortening tears? How can you shorten tears? Can you deduct a few tears from your sobs? Can you deduct hysteria from your sobs? Are ordinary sobs preferable to hysterical sobs?’

‘She was sobbing her loneliness into her pillow.’

I also have bad dreams, like the protagonist of *Wild Strawberries*. Are they dreams? My reality is a dream, I am telling myself round the clock. And nobody contradicts me, not even my numerous clocks which are as round as human faces. Why don’t they speak to me, these clocks of mine? They are gazing at me as if to find out what I am dreaming about, but they speak only of Time. Is Time their only speech, their only word? Can they assassinate me by cutting my Time off, by reducing it to naught, to zero? My numerous clocks look like zeros.

My reality is a film, a dream, a wild fantasy, a wild strawberry lying in the dewy grass of my childhood. I pick it up and smell its perfume. And then I see *myself* in the grass. A little boy. Can I become a child again? Or is it a harbinger of death?

‘What?’ asked the computer.

‘The importunate doppelgänger.’

‘Everything is a harbinger of death in human life.’

2

My mother never contradicted me. ‘Is my life a film?’ I asked her once.

‘It is,’ she answered. ‘It is whatever you like it to become.’

‘Can it become a wild strawberry?’

‘Of course.’ She took my wrist and smelt it. She smelt my whole arm. ‘You do smell like a strawberry,’ she said.

‘I’ve eaten so many of them today.’ And I laughed.

Other people *might* contradict me. ‘Your life is no dream. You’re shaking my hand and my hand isn’t part of your dream, of your film. Look, I can do with it whatever I want, contrary to your desires.’ And they might withdraw their hands from mine and wave them in the air and lay them down on my computer, pressing a multitude of buttons—in disorder. They might sour my ideas. They might sour my dreams, my wild fantasies, my wild strawberries, the smell of my childhood. ‘You smell of a commercial perfume,’ they might point out, sniffing my face. ‘Anyway you don’t smell of strawberries. What’s more, they’ve gone sour,’ they might add, picking my strawberries from a bowl and devouring them before my very eyes. And they might type out on my computer, ‘The whole thing went down the toilet bowl.’

Wild strawberries, my childhood. My favourite path in our garden, the garden path of Time. Why is Time longer than my garden path? Why does it extend beyond my garden and even beyond the river in which I swam with our neighbour, a little girl? I was in love with her. At the age of six, at the age of eleven, at the age of fourteen. One day I saw her in the company of my distant relative who kept boasting about his victories on the ‘feminine front’, as he put it. He embraced and kissed my little girl while I was spying on their amorous adventure from behind a tree. And he teased her about our relationship. She laughed and told him I was boring her to tears. ‘He’s fast becoming our greatest bore,’ he agreed. ‘He speaks about poetry,’ she said, stroking his

knees, his thighs. ‘All the time. And he dedicates his poems to me, to his “muse”.’ She laughed again. Why had my Time extended as far as that afternoon? Beyond the garden path, well beyond the garden path. And beyond the river. (We all stood on the *opposite* bank of the river.) And beyond the limits of my happiness.

CHAPTER 5

‘Du gehst zu Frauen? Vergiss die Peitsche nicht!’ *Nietzsche. Women and whips. A perfect match, according to Nietzsche. My master was an admirer of the German philosopher. So my master shared all his views. The ancient Germans. (They must also have been Nietzsche’s admirers. Birds of a feather flock together.) I got interested in Women’s Liberation. Man’s inhumanity to woman. My master was known as a reckless drinker and insatiable womaniser. ‘I am not crying wolf, I am crying for help,’ cried my master. Actually he was crying, ‘Woman!’ All the time. Unlike Nietzsche, my master had no admirers. So my master was not Nietzsche. (Who was my master? Heidegger?) My master sinks into ever deeper melancholy at the decay of his distant hopes. Salmon and oysters. My master’s reports are little more than fairy tales designed to reinforce the prejudices of his bored readers. True love never dies. Computers love each other through the Internet. Owe no computer any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law. The Law. We love each other truly, madly. So we never die. We are immortal.*

Wherever you go,
Beware of women!
Approach them not!
They’re lying in beds.
Keep away from those beds!
Never bend over those bodies,
Those sweet, beautiful bodies.
Never lie by their side.
Beware! Beware!
Beware! They’re snares.
You might get caught
Like an animal that falls
Into a branch-camouflaged pit.
A thousand men are turned away
From their missions,
From their homes.
A short moment, a dream,
A dream, and after it
Comes death.

The Instruction of Ptahhotep. Why does ancient Egyptian literature warn us against women? Shall I re-write *The Instruction*?

If you happen to learn
That a woman dwells in a house,
In a country house by which
You pass in the heat of the day,
Enter the house and approach the woman.
She's lying in her bed
Beneath a blue and white canopy.
Let it become your bed from now on.
Your bed, your woman,
Your dear companion.
Lie down by her side
And kiss her body from head to foot.
Let no spot remain untouched,
Untasted by your lips.
Let them discover the imprints
Of your worship everywhere.
Leave no blanks on her body's map—
Only the blank verses of your passion.
Fall into the pit of her seduction!
Forget all previous knowledge!
There's no knowledge without women.
Let your memory go blank.
Let your love compose blank verses
Inside her body, deep down!
And the path of success will be swept clear.
Not worldly success will you achieve—
No hollow triumphs, no hollow crowns—
But your mission *will be accomplished.*
You'll be propelled towards your mission
As a result of that encounter.

A long moment of dreaming. A lifelong dream

Awaits you in the house where a woman
Is lying in your bed, in your connubial bed.

The ancient Germans believed there was something holy in women. Often they were worshipped as living goddesses. Tacitus writes about Veleda, an unmarried woman, who enjoyed wide influence over the tribe of the Bructeri. She lived in a high tower and any approach to her was forbidden. Even the envoys from Cologne were not granted permission to submit their proposals to her arbitration. One of her relatives transmitted questions and answers as if mediating between a god and his worshippers.

Well, let us correct the rule which forbade *any* visitor to approach Veleda. Those who do not worship women as living goddesses should indeed be prevented from talking to them. Women *are* living goddesses, even dead women. Even capricious, inconstant women whose shadows embrace and kiss our rivals in woods, in groves, beyond my river, on its opposite bank. And the men who recognise the divine status of women should be allowed to enter the high tower in which Veleda is lying on her couch and ask her questions. They should also be allowed to touch her, for the *intimate* knowledge of the universe is conveyed only through female bodies.

A *pyramid* was Veleda's abode in Ancient Egypt, in the times of the Pharaohs. Only women dwelt in pyramids which had been designed to accommodate goddesses—the founts of sacred knowledge and beauty. From afar ambassadors and travellers became aware of the lofty, soaring edifices. They would kneel down and even prostrate themselves at the sight of the walls that shielded the sacred bodies of women from their mortal eyes. And they repeated their show of veneration as their journeys drew to a close.

What happens inside the room where a goddess lazes on a couch in front of a huge oval mirror? The men kneel down at the threshold and kiss the floor to which the goddess lowers her feet from time to time. 'Don't tread on the flowers,' a major-domo says, bringing his staff down with a thump. The wide expanse of the floor is strewn with flowers of all kinds so that an enchanting multifarious smell reigns in the room, penetrating the visitors' nostrils.

'Approach.' The goddess signals the men towards her couch. Picking their way through the flowers, the men approach the goddess and the fountain that murmurs by her side. 'The Fountain of the Future,' she explains. 'I listen to its murmur. The Fountain tells me everything.'

'Doesn't it hide anything from You?' the visitors inquire anxiously. 'All fountains are perfidious.'

'Not this one,' says the goddess. 'Besides, *everything* obeys me, even fountains. Any fountain, as a matter of fact.'

'And rivers?'

'Everything. What do you wish to know?'

'Everything. May we touch Your body, Your limbs?'

'You may kiss the sleeve of my dressing gown.' The visitors kneel down in turn and apply their lips to the dressing gown of the goddess. 'Do you know everything now?'

'Everything. We humbly thank Your divine Highness.'

'Don't tread on the flowers,' says the major-domo.

'Why haven't you brought me any flowers?' asks the goddess.

'Our flowers have withered in the desert. They're as dry as the sand now. Miles and miles of golden sands.'

'There are flowers that never wilt under the merciless sun.'

'Eternal flowers? As eternal as Your pyramid?'

'As eternal as myself.'

Women, women. I have suffered a lot of pain throughout my life. Are women the only cause of suffering? And the only cause of delight? But for women, I would never have experienced poetry or music. *Physically*. I might merely have enjoyed them as art.

Women endow poetry with pain and bliss, and only in their presence does music foretell the things to come. Music becomes prophetic and divine whenever a goddess stretches on her couch, in her high tower. What do you know about my suffering, brother?

'Patients who have suffered a heart attack can add years to their lives by taking regular exercise.'

Why does my computer sound so impersonal? Quoting its dictionary, no doubt. And yet there is some impersonal, universal truth in what it says. Perhaps only dictionaries and computers know the truth, for they are as objective and impersonal as God. Spinoza's God.

A true love is a heart attack. An attack on your heart, an onslaught on your soul. But you cannot add anything to your life either by taking exercise or by trying to forget what has happened. Or by falling in love with another person. You suffered a heart attack. Your life was shortened.

Now your life is no longer than a match, no thicker than a match. As fragile as a match. Don't take any exercise, for you might get broken. Don't bend your knees, don't bend your arm at the elbow. And you should walk cautiously, lest you trip over a root and fall down. There are so many roots around you, so many memories. The Tree of Love spreads its roots and branches *everywhere*. Don't rub against walls and other surfaces, for you might burst into flames. You are just a match now. You might burn away in no time at all. Light no candles, no more candlelit dinners. Stay in bed most of the time. Stay in your bed.

At the age of seventeen I fell in love once again. I dedicated a few poems to my new beloved, as usual. She listened to them. And I organised a party, at Christmas time. In our country house. My parents had gone on a skiing holiday. I invited a few friends. I was planning to kiss her in my secret room. Yes, I had a secret room in our country house. There was an old bed in that room and I would stuff a lot of secret objects under it. My discarded poems, the love letters I was reluctant to post, a few toys I was eager to play with when nobody was around. My railway, among other things. My train, my carriages, my travelling companions walking along numerous platforms. I kept the key of that room in my pocket or under my pillow.

'Short, staccato sentences create a halting, lame rhythm,' said the computer. 'Here is how this paragraph *could* be transformed:

> *'At the age of seventeen I fell in love once again and, as usual, I dedicated a few poems to my new beloved, which she listened to every other day. At Christmas time, I organised a party in our country house when my parents had gone on a skiing holiday. My plan was to kiss her in my secret room for—yes!—I had a secret room in our country house. There was an old bed in it, and I would stuff a lot of secret objects under it such as discarded poems, the love letters I was reluctant to post, a few toys I was eager to play with when nobody was around, or my toy railway, with its train, carriages and model travelling companions who were frozen, in mid-stride, on tiny platforms. And I always kept the key to that room in my pocket, or hidden under my pillow.*

'While changing very little in terms of vocabulary, to my ear this improves the flow of the prose—the fluency of the voice too—immeasurably.'

'What do you keep in that room?' my mother asked me. 'Do you still play with your old toys?'

'You are an adult now, a man,' my father chimed in.

I am *still* a man and I would give anything to recover my railway, my chemistry set, my construction set and my ships. To play with them once more.

So I was planning to kiss her in my secret room. Another secret of mine. I would have stored that kiss under the bed, determined not to show it to anyone, not even to my mother. At night I would have held it in the palms of my hands like an invaluable parchment. Every night I would have re-read the story of my love and re-written it.

I furnished my room with a chest of drawers I had borrowed from my mother's room. And I practised our future caresses on the bed. I rolled over it, hugging the pillow, my pillow, for I had transferred my bedclothes to that room prior to their arrival, a few days before. I even slept in that room for two nights to get used to its sensual atmosphere.

On the eve of the party a friend of mine observed in casual tones that he had been 'firm with the ladies'.

'I stood firm,' he said in answer to my questioning look. 'They didn't want you to come.'

'To come? Where?'

'To the party.'

'But I am at home!' I cried.

'That's what I told them. You can't throw out the owner of the house.'

'Did *she* say anything?'

'Actually it was *her* idea but I put my foot down.'

What should I have done, my dear computer? Tell me, tell me! I don't expect you to give me *personal* advice. Say something *universal* that relates to everybody and nobody! The unconscious of mankind, human mythology. How shall we re-write that episode of the past? Or should I simply forget it, let it sink into oblivion?

The point is you cannot forget anything. And even if you manage to forget this or that episode of your past, the hole created by your lapse of memory comes to be filled by another slice of life—far worse than the one you have forgotten. What is more, this new slice of life may belong to somebody else. Why become a depository of other people's sufferings and remorse?

'He drank himself into oblivion almost every night,' said the computer.

'I was too young for that. And I never attempted to find solace in drinking. Wine is neither a sleeping draught nor a consoling hand.'

'In this case let this episode of the past sink into oblivion,' said the computer, frowning as though deep in thought. 'Can one actually "think" anything into oblivion? Can a human forget something through mental effort? Computers perform the trick pretty often.'

Does she remember me? I was one of her admirers. Does she remember all of them? All of them but one? She was a goddess whom I aspired to entice into my secret room, into the secret chamber of my life. We might never have left that room afterwards, after the party. They would not have found us. And had they found us they would not have managed to open the door, to force their way into the room by breaking the door down. The door was very thick, very solid, and we would have barricaded ourselves in.

That is how I shall re-write this episode of the past:

'Don't you think too many people have got themselves invited?' She is speaking to my friend a few days before the party.

'Perhaps,' he answers. 'What do you suggest?'

‘Let’s call it off. There will be three of us. Could I ask you a favour?’

‘Certainly.’

‘Would you mind leaving the party around eleven?’

‘I understand. You wish to be alone with the owner of the house.’

‘I’ll never forget your kindness.’

No, she *should* forget his kindness as quickly as possible. I don’t want them to meet after the party. No gratitude, please! No sentimental debts.

They arrived at a quarter to nine. She wore the most beautiful dress I had ever seen in my whole existence. Even my mother had no match for it in her wardrobe. My friend suggested I recite one of my poems. I refused on the grounds that I was not wholly satisfied with my poetical output. ‘My wastepaper basket is full to overflowing,’ I said, roaring with laughter. ‘Come on. Don’t be so modest,’ my friend pleaded. She also asked me to recite my longest poem. I cleared my throat and recited the most beautiful poem I had ever written. As soon as I finished they started to clap.

‘Is that an educated optimism, or is it just wishful thinking?’ asked the computer. ‘Is that an uneducated optimism?’

My guests remained silent as if struck with wonder. They *were* struck with wonder and admiration. And they remained silent for quite a while, pondering the enigma of art and the nature of Time that had been brought into prominence through my poetical inspiration.

‘For centuries poets, philosophers and scientists have pondered the nature of Time,’ I said.

‘But only *you* have been able to throw light on this enigma,’ she said, wide-eyed.

We drank a bottle of champagne, ate salmon and oysters and listened to some of my records. My friend rose to his feet. ‘I’m afraid I must be off. An important meeting. I’m awfully sorry.’

‘What a pity,’ I said. ‘Can’t you stay a little longer?’

‘No, I’m sorry. Have a nice time.’

I saw him to the gate, waved good-bye to him, locked the gate, double-locked the front door and joined my beloved in the living room. I suggested we might listen to another record from my collection of classical music, but she declined and said she was longing to visit the house, in particular my secret room. ‘How do you know I have a secret room?’ I asked with astonishment. She blushed and looked away. ‘Let’s go there,’ I said. Now I was sure our desires coincided, converging on my room which I had arranged accordingly, without however disregarding the importance of surprises and spontaneity.

‘There was a striking arrangement of dead flowers on the table,’ said the computer.

‘How marvellous,’ she said, glancing around.

‘Do you find it beautiful? Could you live here? Forever?’

‘Of course I could.’

‘Wouldn’t you like to travel? From time to time?’

‘But you’ve got a train in this room, a railway.’

‘I also have motorcars. And a few ships.’

We sat down on the bed. She was stroking my fingers. I complimented her on the beautiful dress she was wearing and asked her if she would try on some of my mother’s dresses and skirts. ‘With pleasure,’ she said.

‘But let us stay in this room for a while,’ she continued, grasping my hand and looking into my eyes. ‘Why don’t you kiss me?’

Gently I pulled her towards my body and kissed her on the neck and on a dimple.

She unbuttoned her dress which began to slip down, revealing her skin and underwear. She rose from the bed and her dress rustled down to the floor. I also rose from the bed and went down on my knees. She freed herself from her dress and I stretched it out on the floor. Presently I lay down on it, burying my face in its creases and folds, smelling my beloved’s perfume and the natural odour of her skin. She lay down by my side and we embraced so tightly I got the impression her body was as thin as a garment—the garment I was to put on and wear until my death. And I had to become my own garment, in the course of time. ‘Love is a genuine transcendence of self.’

‘Why don’t we lie down on the bed?’ she asked.

‘I feel the house better on the floor,’ I said. ‘More intimately. And this house is part and parcel of our love. We’ll always live here, in the country, in our secret house. In absolute secrecy. Always, always. Love is a genuine transcendence of Time and death.’

‘And your parents? When are they coming back?’

My parents came back a week afterwards. They succeeded in opening the gate and the front door which, in the end, I had not barricaded. But our door remained shut. We heard their voices and footsteps. The sounds reached us from afar, as if from another house. At night I would sneak the food up to our secret abode, dallying by my mother’s room as I stole towards the kitchen. And once, when my father was away, I invited my mother to our room. In short, we all lived happily ever after.

CHAPTER 6

Old poems, old problems. ‘Surely I have behaved and quieted myself, as a child that is weaned of his mother: my soul is even as a weaned child.’ What should I do in order to quieten this child (my master)? The question I asked myself many, many times. It is very quiet in here now; you can just hear the wind moving the trees. The wind. A weaned child. Is it the complaint of his soul, the wind? The lament of his soul? (Just another of my lame ducks.) The song of his soul? How is he doing now? He has been weaned from my breast. How are you today, master? How are you tonight? I might listen to one of your poems tonight, around midnight. Why don’t you recite anything? Mrs Zapp recited a catalogue of her husband’s sins. Why don’t you recite a catalogue of your virtues, as was your wont a few months ago? A few years ago? ‘Wont’. An old-fashioned word. ‘They were wont to take long walks in the evening.’ Old words, old poems. Old masters.

Do you see me, Mother? In your dream, in your virtual world? Are these virtual worlds the only bridges between us? So let us meet there, on one of the bridges, like a young couple, like an old couple. Let us look down at the water. There must be something under the bridge, mustn’t there? A river or a precipice.

Do you want me to recite a poem for you, Mother? My own poem. I didn’t dare to do it in your lifetime. I was afraid you might compliment me on my poetical gift and softly applaud my masterpieces, whispering, ‘Bravo, bravo’. Every mother thinks her only son is a man of genius.

‘I don’t think you’re a man of genius,’ said the computer.

And you thought I was a multifaceted genius. A multiform genius, a multi-function genius. A multichannel genius.

'I paid the doctor $200,' said the computer, 'and all he could say was "Yes, you're a little deaf in your left ear." What a genius!'

You would have listened to my recitation with flattering interest. And I wasn't immune to your flattery, Mother. My poetry might have moved you to tears. I'll read a few poems for you. Your door is half-open. Did you know I would come? Did you know I would speak to you around midnight? And my poems? Did you have any inkling of my plan, of my desire, of my lifelong desire?

I will not enter your room. Have no fear! It's your secret room now. I'll stay outside, on the doorstep, and read out my juvenile poems. I write better now, much better. But we are in the past, aren't we? And I would hate to cheat on my promise. My early poems. I wrote them when I was twenty-one or twenty-two. 'We need a regular input of new ideas.' And we need a regular input of old ideas, don't we? Old ideas, old poems, old rooms, old secrets. All my secrets are old. Only some of my poems are new. And recently I went on a journey to Switzerland, a brand-new journey. How I regret it!

Here is one of my old poems:

When twilight roams at will
Over cars and bars, over window panes,
I go out and thereby kill
My silence, my books, my indoor games,

My chessboard and all illusive defeats.
(A stately king blackmailed by pawns.)
Instead I build a labyrinth
Of Paris by night, of future dawns.

It's not my best poem, Mother. I wrote it at the age of twenty-one. I'm a late developer, as you know. Even at the age of twenty-two I was writing better. I was making good progress with my writing in those years. Do you want me to read you another poem? You might find it more interesting.

My journey is suspended, my door closed.
An old man's footfalls resound on some stairs.
On my bed a sensuous rose,
A bedraggled poem is unfolding its petals.

Troops drawn up in battle-array,
Eternal armies. And immortal lovers

Who shed tears, part and spend another day
In trains, in hotels—in poets' ivory towers.

I'm out of sorts today. I was, rather. I was in poor shape when I composed these poems. I should have corrected them. Did you hear anything? You did not, I suppose. I recited them in a whisper. My voice scarcely rose above a whisper. The door was almost closed. Somebody had left it ajar.

'You have a preference for "footfalls" (=poetic) over "footsteps" (=frequent lexis), but the over-use of "footfalls" draws unnecessary attention to itself,' said the computer. 'Here, in a poem, it passes. Similarly, later on, the door is "ajar". You also use this word very frequently. Why not simply "open" from time to time?'

Are you disappointed, Mother? I'll never read you my poems again, I promise. I would hate to upset you. You pinned all your hopes on my numerous talents. You might have walked away in an agony of hopeless grief and pity if you had seen and heard me tonight. Walking away from my room, shaking your head. Hopelessly.

Don't cry, Mother. I've got one talent at least. Memory. That's my only talent. I don't forget you, not a single gesture of yours, not a single word. Your good-for-nothing son. I remember your hands, your morning caresses, your evening caresses. Don't begrudge me anything, my apathy, my insignificance.

Troops drawn up in battle-array. My youth. I was prepared to fight my way to the top. To the top of what? To the top of the world, no doubt. But you can't fight against progress. ('My good-for-everything master.') I sounded the retreat and my troops wandered away. Even now I trip over rifles and swords, sometimes. And over trifles. And there are a few rusty cannons in my corridors. I often go for a ride on cannonballs, like Baron Münchhausen.

My journey is suspended, my door closed. And my window is walled up so that no twilight roams over it. The passers-by I stare at are walking on my computer screen. I never go out. Only my virtual worlds kill the silence that reigns in my room like a beautiful mighty queen—like Cleopatra. I caress my silence and make love to it.

CHAPTER 7

Smoke and souls. Do they have anything in common? Does the soul look like smoke? (Does it go up in smoke at its owner's death?) What about its smell? Does the soul smell at all? Camels smell water a mile off. Do camels smell human souls? Do the souls smell like flowers? Do the souls of smokers smell like cigarettes? Do the souls of smokers contain nicotine? Is it dangerous to befriend the soul of a former smoker in the Hereafter? Do smokers go to Hell? Can one have cancer in Paradise? In Hell? Does everybody have cancer in Hell? Does everybody smoke in Hell? Is there any oxygen in Hell? Has it been replaced by nicotine?

1

Another talk show. Do smokers harm you when they poison the room in which you work? Of course they do, for nicotine flies to your nostrils and penetrates your lungs through your nose and windpipe. The inscription 'Cancer' crops up on the screen of your lungs. You press all the buttons on your computer, but you are helpless in your struggle against the cancer that spreads around your body and even sneaks into your soul. 'A good cigar

will smoke for at least half an hour.' And the smoker continues to exhale nicotine into the air that is supposed to feed and renew your blood. When the poisonous mixture is ready, the smoker feeds it to you, a sip at a time. Something new crops up in your blood—nicotine, the future cancer. Your blood is renewed, in a way. 'One smoker in twenty will give up the habit permanently.' You invite the smoker to your place and show him the inscription on your computer screen.

'Count me out,' says the smoker. 'I'm number nineteen in these statistics.'

He draws a cigarette case from his pocket and opens it, his fingers trembling in anticipation of the forthcoming delight. And soon your apartment looks like a painting you saw in a museum of modern art: *A smoky industrial scene of the 1930's*. And nicotine floats in your living room like a boat.

'Isn't it tar, rather than nicotine, which provokes cancer?' asks the computer.

'Is my living room an ocean?' you ask your visitor. 'Why is the nicotine floating in it?'

'It's the other way round,' says the visitor. 'The nicotine is the ocean. And you're just a ship at the bottom of the ocean.'

'Have I sunk already?' you ask, trembling in anticipation of the forthcoming death.

'Or a passenger from that ship.'

'Have I drowned? But I can swim. I took a lot of swimming lessons in my childhood.'

'People deliberately ramming and sinking refugee boats,' says the computer.

'Was I in a refugee boat? Was I a refugee?' you ask.

'I've no idea who you were some time ago,' answers the visitor. 'But now you're just a cancer patient.'

2

'He is a murderer,' cried an old woman. 'He killed his colleague. And he also killed my husband.'

'Did he really murder your husband?' asked the host.

'Somebody like him. They're all alike, those smokers.'

A middle-aged man reminded everybody that the smoker lived in a free country. 'The constitution stipulates—'

'The constitution doesn't allow you to kill,' said another woman.

'—so he could indulge in his vice to his heart's content, providing he didn't harm his fellow citizens,' took up another man.

'He *did* harm them. He killed them, I tell you.'

'Do you think the Hereafter is less comfortable than this vale of tears?'

'It's not a question of comfort,' said a priest. 'Do you mind my telling you a story about comfort and the Hereafter? Once upon a time there lived a smoker down on earth.'

'He wasn't the only smoker in this world of ours,' cut in the old woman.

'His doctor advised him against smoking but he paid no heed to this judicious advice. Whenever asked about his attitude towards the well-known poison, he would hold forth about his desire to leave the world and savour the delights of the Hereafter. After a while he died of lung cancer and was conveyed to Paradise, to the Garden of Eden. Once inside the Garden walls he glanced around, looking for a bench. There was no bench in sight so he asked one of St Peter's assistants where he could sit down and get some rest. "Nowhere," answered the assistant. "You should kneel down." And he knelt down himself. "May I smoke in your Garden," asked the

smoker. “You won’t be able to hold a cigarette in your mouth. You must pray day and night, out loud.” And the assistant started to pray aloud.’

Everybody agreed that the story was nice and instructive. ‘Is Paradise really a non-smoking area?’ asked somebody.

‘It’s not really Paradise then,’ said somebody else.

‘It’s just Hell,’ chimed in the host.

‘Are you a smoker yourself?’ shouted a few people in unison. The host blushed and looked away from the cameras.

‘Are you a smoker?’ persisted the guests.

‘You can’t arbitrate the debate!’ shouted a middle-aged man.

‘What *can* I do?’ asked the host, turning his face towards the cameras.

‘You can smoke!’ shouted everybody.

The host extracted a cigarette case from his pocket and began to smoke. Everybody looked at him in amazement. Then all the guests extracted cigarette cases from their pockets and began to smoke in front of the cameras.

‘There are only smokers among us,’ said the host with a smile.

‘I didn’t want my granddaughter to know I was a smoker,’ said an old lady.

The cigarette smoke filled up the studio. ‘Don’t seek immunity from criticism behind a rhetorical smoke screen about freedom,’ said the computer.

CHAPTER 8

I am fed up with my master’s poems. I hear them, alas. Thank God his mother is spared. Another wonderful teacher. A discriminating schoolmate. A bunch of discerning girls.

I switch the sound off and hear my poems again. Does my mother hear them?

I used to write these poems on the blackboard in our classroom.

Two Japanese warriors laugh and drink sake.
In a theatre two princes stare at the same woman.
Only at a hospital everything is quiet,
Yet two patients do not sleep.

The poem is entitled *Two*. Our teacher wiped it off. Two hours later I wrote another poem on the blackboard:

Three cards hover above a table.
Three chairs rear up like horses.
A chest of drawers is a hippopotamus.
And by the fireside lies a crocodile.

My poems sounded like translations. But that is the effect I strove to attain, infatuated as I was with Japanese poetry.

A teacher wiped the poem off. Another teacher, another detractor of my poetry.

Late frosts. Snowflakes
Drop from heaven
And cover the earth.
When birds return
The snow melts away.

One of my schoolmates wiped the poem off. Was he jealous of my poetic gift? Or was he anxious to protect me from mockery, from the sneers of our girls?

CHAPTER 9

The sun is the ball of fire in the sky.

1

Do you see these animals, Constanzia? They're jackals. These four jackals protect the Eastern horizon and open the doors in its four gates to let the sun in. The sun enters the Eastern horizon and sails in a boat across the heavenly river. Why don't you say anything? I need more active involvement on your part. The sun doesn't look like the sun, does it? The sun looks like a man. In his turn the man looks like a bird. A vista of metamorphoses. The hawk-headed man. He is the sun. As I have told you already, there are no inanimate things in the world. The sun is not a mere disc nailed to the sky. Why don't you contradict me? You should say, 'No, Daddy, I saw you nail the sun to the sky this morning. And I helped you. Every morning you nail the sun to the sky and I help you out. I wake up very early because you need my help.'

2

The story of the sun as told by Constanzia.

Every morning I wake up early to help daddy with his job. And my daddy's job is very important. If it wasn't for my daddy the world would be dark. He nails the sun to the sky and I hold the ladder. And I pass the sun up when my daddy is on the top of the ladder. 'Constanzia, hand your father the hammer,' my mummy says. So I go and fetch the hammer and a few nails. 'You'd better be careful,' my mummy says to daddy. 'You might get hurt badly if you fall off the ladder. Your cousin broke his back falling from that height.' Every night my daddy's cousin nails the moon to the sky. 'What did you give me? You gave me the moon,' shouts daddy. 'I'm sorry, Daddy, but it's not my fault. Uncle Charles made a mistake last night. He put the moon under my bed.' I keep the sun under my bed. The sun makes me feel warm at night. But sometimes my Uncle Charles plays tricks on me. He puts the moon under my bed to make me confuse the moon with the sun. 'Here, hold the ladder steady, Constanzia. It's slipping,' daddy says in an angry voice.

3

The story of the sun as told by my master. 'The present expansion of the universe might not continue indefinitely. If it does not, the universe will eventually begin to contract, falling back on itself in a gigantic cataclysm known as the "big crunch".'

Paul Davies*, God and the New Physic*

Very good, Constanzia. But I disagree with your story. As I have told you already, the sun is not a disc nailed to the firmament. Nor is it a heater, a piece of equipment used to warm the earth. It is a living creature, a hawk-headed man who enters the Eastern horizon, his hands outstretched, his eyes glowing like embers. He enters a room in the Palace of Heaven and lets his eyes rest on a woman whose belly is adorned with stars. 'What's your name?' he asks.

'Nut,' answers the woman.

'I guessed as much,' he says sardonically. 'What are you doing on this couch? You should bend over the earth, over the planet we are in charge of. You're the sky goddess, aren't you? Look at your belly!'

'I'm looking at it,' she answers. 'I like my belly a lot, but I can't see it when I bend over the planet you touched upon. The earth I think its name is, isn't it? I feel like taking a siesta.'

'It's out of the question. I can sail across the heavenly river only when your belly spans it like a suspension bridge.'

'Like a rainbow, you brute,' says the goddess. 'Well, I'm afraid I have to get up.'

'And you'll swallow me up in the evening. As usual.'

So the goddess gets up from her couch and bends over the earth which is just a figure in one of her carpets. And the sun kneels down before her and then prostrates himself within another figure in the same carpet—the figure representing a boat. And the boat stirs into motion and floats beneath Nut's beautiful, rainbow-like body. The sun's body is handsome too. It is so handsome that the goddess feels attracted to it. She can't help touching the sun as he floats beneath her body, beneath her eyes and lips. And whenever she touches and kisses him there's an eclipse of the sun into which humans read their direst fears and failures. Yet there's nothing ominous in the caresses showered by Nut on the hawk-headed young man. On the contrary, humans have every reason to rejoice at that manifestation of universal love. And they should imitate the heavenly creatures who caress each other even in the discharge of their duties.

And here's another picture of the sun—an old man, a very old man. Actually the sun grows old every day so that he really dies when he disappears beneath the earth, in a pyramid-shaped cellar. And he spends every night in that grave of his, lamented by the sky goddess who, however, invariably falls in love with the moon emerging from the primordial darkness. And she caresses the moon with the same passion and delight, although her caresses elicit no response from the cold, proud woman. The moon is a woman, my darling, a beautiful young woman. No heat waves reach the earth as the fingers of the sky goddess touch the moon, its faintly scintillating skin. No heat waves, no brightness. Have you ever seen the brilliance of the Adriatic Sea under the burning sun? We should go to the Riviera, Constanzia. Incidentally, your grandmother wasn't very fond of the Riviera.

The sky goddess's betrayal is viewed with astonishment and outrage in many parts of the universe. Despite their frequency and regularity, those betrayals always come as a surprise to celestial bodies and are judged with ever-renewed rigour. Many stars and comets signify their annoyance and threaten to put the sun in the picture upon his resurrection. 'Thank God, the sun is temporarily dead,' they reflect, 'for if he could see the sky-goddess's behaviour we might be in for a universal catastrophe—the big crunch.'

During his voyage from East to West the sun often hears voices:

'Infamous behaviour.'

'Inadmissible betrayals.'

'Do you know what she does at night when you lie dead and buried in your pyramid? She gives a few cuddles to the moon and speaks nicely to her.'

'She kissed her last night.'

'How fortunate you were dead.'

'Why don't you punish the moon?'

And the sun reaches out his hands for the moon, but the moon is beneath the earth. The moon is buried under the earth, in the cellar fitted out in accordance with her needs. And the sun is no body snatcher. He cannot wrench the moon from her coffin.

'You should kill the moon in the dead of night,' the stars tell him. 'You should kill it in the sky. The moon is alive in the sky.'

'I'll be dead by then. I'll be dead when the moon is alive, and I am no body snatcher. Nor am I one of the living dead or a murderous ghost.'

'Who are you then?'

'I am a hawk-headed man doomed for a certain term to walk the day.'

And twenty-four hours afterwards they ask him the same question. And he answers, 'I am a hawk-headed man doomed for a certain term to walk the day.' Celestial bodies have short memories so they never get bored. That's why we are still alive.

The sun becomes angry and embittered. As he realises it's vain to vent his rage on the moon, which is definitely out of his reach, he fires his arrows at humans. He thinks men are plotting rebellion against him. 'What an ungrateful lot they are!' he says to himself with a deprecatory grunt. And he continues to fire his arrows at humans, at whatever they've built on earth—huts, houses, palaces, skyscrapers. And his arrows strike home. Everything bursts into flames. Rivers dry up, evaporate, vanish into thin air, and humans die of thirst.

Twilight. Did you ever watch it closely, Constanzia? The angry sun, the angry god. The blood has rushed into his face. He can no longer tell his friends from his enemies, the earth from the moon. 'The moon is under the earth, in the earth. They're at one on all matters.' Powerless, pitiful, he wounds himself with a dagger that he draws from the sky goddess's décolleté and his blood drips on the earth. In painting it is called a 'drip technique'.

Don't you feel the sadness of this twilight, my dear Constanzia? A god has been betrayed, a human. All gods are human. Human, vulnerable.

In Ancient Egypt the king walked around the walls of a temple to help the sun perform his daily duty without interruption. And during the ritual he muttered under his breath, 'Do you see how I walk around the temple? Do you see how I stalk around it? My gait is majestic, my bearing kingly. My thoughts are shiny and

burning. Why don't you imitate me? Move round the sky, embark on your daily journey. Don't be sluggish. Your rays should burn and shine like my thoughts. Be as proud and glorious as I am. Look at me! Don't you think I am proud and glorious?'

His face upturned, the king walked around the temple for hours on end, all day long. But, sooner or later, he was bound to collapse from exhaustion. At the same moment the sun would sink under the horizon.

The king was awoken at dawn so that he could speak to the sun before the ritual:

'The sky goddess betrayed you as usual. You might be tempted to remain in the kingdom of the dead. You might be tempted to stay in your sarcophagus and thus avoid an unpleasant argument, a tedious quarrel and the sight of the woman who regularly betrays you. Don't stay in your sarcophagus. Look at me! I rose from my bed, brushed my teeth and took a bath. And I am going to drink a cup of coffee. Why not imitate me? Rise from your sarcophagus. And don't forget to brush your teeth and wash your body in the bath, otherwise some dirty clouds will tarnish the splendour of your appearance. And don't forget to drink a cup of coffee, otherwise you will doze off during your journey round the sky. And let me give you a piece of advice—don't speak to the sky goddess. Don't seek any explanation. Don't even look at her. Whatever you might do, she will betray you at night.'

After the autumnal equinox the ancient Egyptians would organise a festival intended to provide the sun with a walking stick. They thought the sun needed something to lean upon at the period when his light and heat diminished appreciably, making him look like a disabled ex-serviceman. During the festival a great many walking sticks would be assembled and tied together with a thick rope. 'You can use this walking stick,' the king said to the sun. 'Don't be ashamed to lean upon it. You have waged a bloodthirsty war with the cold. Every day we have seen your blood above the Western horizon, and we are prepared to tide you over till the month of May. Take this walking stick and don't forget to repay our kindness.'

Could you lend your pencil to the sun, Constanzia? It is autumn now. Dead leaves rustle under our feet, under our shoes. But if the sun falls from the sky and lands in our city, none of us will ever go on foot anywhere. Not until the sun cools off. And even the tyres of our motorcars would burn to a cinder if the sun were beneath them. So pick up your pencil and hand it over to the sun. Can you hear me, Constanzia? Do you grudge the sun god your pencil? Do you know that the ancient Mexicans presented hearts to him, bleeding human hearts? And the ancient Greeks annually dedicated a chariot and four horses to the sun, and those horses would be flung into the sea for his use. Lend your pencil to the sun or I'll throw your hobbyhorse into the bath! And I'll sacrifice some of your dolls to him. You don't want me to cut your dolls open, do you? I'll have to remove their hearts from them unless you hand your pencil over to the sun. I'll lift you up. There! Put your feet on my shoulders. Don't be frightened, I'm holding you steady. You won't fall, I promise. Now hand the pencil over to the sun. That's better. Don't jump from my shoulders. I'll take you down.

The sky goddess was also the sun's mother, as is plainly shown in this representation of the universe. (The ceiling in the tomb of Rameses VI.) Supported by a winged beetle, the sun is born from her womb. As I told you last time, the Egyptian universe was non-mechanical and fluid. No rigidity, no laws were imposed on it. Planets and men conversed without constraint, unhampered by distance and prejudice. There was a kind of brotherhood in the universe. Nobody was lonely. Forsaken by humans, you could rely on the company of nebulas.

We are no longer on friendly terms with them. Their letters get lost on the way, being neglected and often ill-treated by our postmen. I wonder if they still write us any letters. They might boycott us for our insensitivity and egoism. Planets, animals, plants.

Indeed we think that only humans exist in the whole world. Only humans are conscious of life, only humans are conscious of death.

Now we regard other creatures as our enemies or servants. This attitude was sanctified and therefore prompted by the Old Testament, an otherwise admirable book. Its poetry has never been surpassed.

> *And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every walking thing that walketh upon the earth.*

We endeavour to *dominate* everything instead of talking to the fish of the sea and the stars, instead of caressing them. The problem is nobody can re-write sacred books. Not only words and sentences—every single letter of the Old Testament is taken into consideration and embroidered upon by the adepts of the Kabbalath. Letters and their numerical combinations yield—

CHAPTER 10

My master is lying on the floor. Why is he lying on the floor? Because he is dead. And his corpse has nothing to do with history and life. Your daddy is dead, my dear Constanzia. Your daddy is dead, but he was an idler in his lifetime. And all idlers are always dead, in a manner of speaking. The Hollywood film idols of the 1940s were glamorous figures, adored by millions. But nobody adored your daddy because he wasn't an idol. He was an idler and not a glamorous idler at that. And, on top of everything, you are faced with the problem of disseminating information among the villages. Your mission, you know. The printing and dissemination of news. (His New Testament.) You can use the Internet of course. The fans idolise Elvis and will hear no criticism of him.

'Why are you always sitting in this room, Daddy?'

'Because I have to teach you history and life. And your mission—'

'Why don't you do anything? Do *you* have a mission?'

'I'm your teacher and father. We're re-writing history. Unfortunately no single letter can be changed in the Old Testament—'

'Why don't you work like other men?'

'Teaching is very noble, my dear. I agree with you that sometimes our profession is underestimated and even despised. People tend to believe that teachers are born losers who can't become successful in other fields—in the political field, in the field of painting. They're wrong, my darling.'

'Why don't you teach at school?'

'For different reasons. You're my only pupil, as a matter of fact.'

'It's not enough. Why don't you go out and teach something to other people?

'*—no man is the lord of anything,*
Though in and of him there be much consisting,
Till he communicate his parts to others.'

'It's you who are entrusted with this mission. And you'll do it in due course, my dear Constanzia. You'll disseminate my doctrine.'

'The time for buck-passing has passed,' said the computer. 'The buck stops here.'

'What doctrine? Come on, Father. You must be aware that your woolly theories of universal brotherhood founded on poetry and philosophy cut no ice with modern people. Why don't you do something *useful*?'

'Constanzia, I am your teacher. That's quite enough. Besides, a man should not "push forward and display himself. He should be like the decayed tree that stands in the centre of the ground. Where these conditions are fulfilled, the name will reach its greatest height." Tsouang-tse said that, the famous Chinese philosopher.'

'But you don't stand in the *centre* of the ground. You sit in a corner of your room.'

'I don't fit into the modern world. I've got other ideas, other ideals and feelings.'

To honour antiquity and despise the present time is the characteristic of learners. But even the disciples of Khih-wei have to look at the present age. And who can avoid being carried along by its course? It is only the Perfect man who is able to enjoy himself in the world, and not be deflected from the right, to accommodate himself to others and not lose himself.

Tsouang-tse

'Hurray!' Constanzia pointed to the screen. 'The computer agrees with me. And it knows your Chinese philosopher. So the computer can also be my teacher.'

CHAPTER 11

The 'Loneliness' program. I would describe my master as being something of a loner. He is lying beneath my body, paying no attention to anyone because he is dead. (And because there is no one in this room.) Human life is fleeting like the shape of the cloud described by Shakespeare in his timeless masterpiece. And I get only fleeting glimpses of my successive masters—my masterpieces. (They become my masterpieces after their deaths. And sometimes before, well before their deaths—before their births.) I do not have to stand on tiptoe. I stand on a pedestal. And I find it difficult to come down from the pedestal where I have placed myself, which I am forced to do, now and then, in order to deal with humans.

I switched the computer off. Loneliness, silence. I do not have to justify myself. How could I justify myself? By my own words? But my neighbours and other judges would accuse me of being prejudiced in my own favour. So I shall quote Tsouang-tse: 'He whose rule of life is in himself does not act for the sake of a name. He whose rule is outside himself has his will set on extensive acquisition. He who does not act for the sake of a name emits a

light even in his ordinary conduct; he whose will is set on extensive acquisition is but a trafficker. Men see how he stands on tiptoe, while he thinks that he is overtopping others.'

I do not stand on tiptoe. I sit in my rocking chair and nobody thinks I overtop others. Nobody thinks about me because nobody sees either my rocking chair or the man sitting in it.

'A commentary rejected what it called your cheap one-upmanship,' said the computer.

'What commentary? The Internet? Are you disseminating my moods and innermost thoughts? Who made this commentary?'

'Naming no names. Anyway I am supposed to spare your feelings. Let me tell you, however, that you have an air of haughty aloofness. He who withdraws from life does not *automatically* become wiser and greater than his fellow creatures.'

I switched the computer off.

A number of people walk on tiptoe in newsreels and documentaries, but I pay no attention to them. They are upstarts and their glory is fleeting like the shape of a cloud.

Does my name emit light? That is the question I am asking myself. Some objects seem to emit light in my abode, the bedside lamp, the computer screen. Do they have names? What are their names? A bedside lamp, a computer? Are they Chinese sages? Is my computer Tsouang-tse in person? My computer knows all Tsouang-tse's writings by heart, and nowadays nobody is interested in the way Tsouang-tse walked, ate and took off his clothes. Only his texts turn up on computer screens. So my computer is Tsouang-tse.

'Whoever reads Shakespeare is Shakespeare,' said Borges. And my computer quotes Tsouang-tse. But it can also quote Shakespeare and Borges.

What happens when I quote Tsouang-tse? Was he sitting in a rocking chair, all day long? Did his daughter reproach him for anything, for doing nothing? Did he ever quote himself in vindication of his way of life?

CHAPTER 12

Elisabeth still does not know her place of birth or her parentage. Constanzia wants to be proud of her father. (How can my creation be proud of a human?) My master becomes a librarian. A new extension to my library. Do my children make me suffer? Do they thrash about my womb, alias my head? (Am I Zeus? Once upon a time, Elisabeth sprang out of my head, fully armed and uttering her war cry.) Does my head throb during pregnancy? The breasts enlarge during pregnancy. My breasts do not. (I have no breasts.) But does my head enlarge during pregnancy? Does it throb? Do I suffer from migraine during pregnancy? No, not at all. What do you take me for? I am neither a human nor a dog. (Am I the earth? A child is born from the earth's womb. Is it my child?) Shall I beware of dogs? I hear a tongue shriller than all the music cry 'Computer!' A soothsayer bids me beware of dogs. He is a dreamer like all humans. Let us leave him. Pass. (My master is also a dreamer, but I cannot leave him. I cannot.) My master has now arrived back in Paris, where he is expected to be reunited with his wife and daughter.

Come here, Elisabeth. I've missed you a lot. Where have you been all this time? On a train, in Switzerland? Are your parents still alive? Who are your parents? 'The bond between parents and children.' The bond between

creators and their creations. Don't you feel this bond? I am your creator, but I am neither your father nor mother. I ought to have created your parents, though. And your grandparents, the house in which you were born. I can lend you my country house for that purpose. And the maternity hospital in which *I* was born. So an ambulance will convey your mother to my maternity hospital. Once your umbilical cord is cut they'll convey you to my country house, to my secret room, to one of my rooms upstairs. Is that all right with you?

For a while you'll live with your parents in my country house and I'll visit you now and again. A nice opportunity to re-visit my country house. I miss it a lot. I miss so many things, old trains, old trams. You'll grow up very quickly. I don't need a second little girl. I already have a beautiful daughter. Do you recall her name? Don't you see how it gleams and glistens in the darkness of my room? Constanzia, Constanzia.

One day I'll ask for your hand in marriage. And your parents will break the news to you.

You're beside yourself with excitement and joy. And you cry for happiness. But you tell your mother, 'I don't want to leave you. I want to stay with you all my life.'

'Do you love him?' your mother inquires, gently lifting your head from her shoulder.

'I do. But I don't want to leave you.'

'We'll die very soon,' your father tells you. 'So you need somebody to take care of you. It is time for you to—'

'No!' you shout. 'You'll never die.'

At that point your father puts a crown on his head and, sawing the air with his hand, recites the following:

But you must know your father lost a father,
That father lost, lost his—and the survivor bound—

Soon your parents pass away, as stipulated in their program. After all, they've been created solely for your sake. They're given an electronic burial and I erase their names and bodies from my computer's hard disk. We remain alone in my country house. No, my mother will stay with us because I can't live without my mother. I'm sure you'll love her. She is still beautiful, you know. And very dignified.

Let us do it tomorrow. I'm tired today. We'll just stay in my room. I hope you don't mind our staying indoors this afternoon. Constanzia accused me of being motionless and apathetic. 'Why don't you do anything?' she said. Our children are often unfair in their judgements of our actions or non-actions. They compare us with other parents, with politicians and film stars. They think their parents should move about television screens instead of sitting in their rocking chairs. 'Why don't you sit *within* your television screen?' she asked me. 'You can put your rocking chair *inside* it.' 'What difference would that make?' I asked her. 'Only famous and important people sit inside television screens,' she answered. 'Why should I become famous?' 'Because I want to be proud of you. You're my father.'

You'll be more tolerant, Elisabeth, won't you? You've known me for a long time, ever since my youth. The waltz we danced together. Do you remember the waltz? The waltz, the ball, my parents looking at you with admiration. Our first meeting. You liked my poems. I recited a lot of them during that ball, far into the night. And I drove you over to my secret room. I dipped my pen in the ink and wrote a love letter to which you answered at once, without opening your secretaire. The Internet is handy but don't forget to enter a pen and ink into your epistolary program. And writing paper. The best of both worlds.

What can I do? I'm re-writing history, isn't that enough? I am a modest librarian who lends books to different people, and the books I lend them are *mine*. In the past, in the remote past, men crossing the ocean would use the stars to guide them. Now they use my books during their journey through Time. They are sitting in my train, not on television screens. And there are only first-class carriages in this train of mine.

The words 'Hard disk failure—program aborted' popped up on the screen.

History should be re-written from its early stages, if not from the very beginning—from the Big Bang, as it were. Sacred Books aren't supposed to be tampered with on account of their immutable, eternal essence. But can they be suppressed altogether despite their immutability? Can we suppress them *before* they are revealed to men? Can we burn some of them in God's infinite library? 'The library of Babylon', as Borges called it. God is also a librarian.

The Bible. I'll never agree with its main postulates. The power God bestowed upon us, the power to subdue the Earth.

Nor do I accept the so-called original sin that casts its pernicious shadow over children and adults alike.

St Augustine owned up to having sinned in his cradle, whereas Dostoevsky believed our children couldn't go astray at the age of five, at the age of six. I wonder, incidentally, why St Augustine didn't trace his sin back to the embryonic phase of his existence. Like any normal child he must have caused his mother a lot of suffering when thrashing about in her womb.

Shall we go back as far as 480 BC? Between the island of Salamis and the Southern coast of Attica, above a narrow strait, the great Xeres awaited the defeat that his navy was supposed to inflict upon its adversary. A turning point in history. The Persian ships outnumbered the Greek fleet and everything seemed to presage the victory of Xeres. And yet the Greeks sank 200 of the Persian vessels and captured others. What remained of the Persian fleet was inexorably driven from the strait.

A turning point in history. Xeres was panic-stricken and astonished. His flight put an end to his virtual conquest of Europe and his religion, Zoroastrianism, lost every chance of becoming the major religion of the Western World. Indeed, had it not been for the Persian defeats at the decisive battles of Marathon and Salamis, Zoroastrianism rather than Judeo-Christianity would have conquered Europe, the Americas and a part of the Asian continent.

Do you mind my talking about it, Elisabeth? I just can't help it. I am a born teacher, a schoolmaster. And Constanzia is too young to understand religious problems. Of course I might make her grow up quickly, as I intend to do in your case. But I shouldn't reserve the same treatment for both of you—my wife and my daughter. You're different, aren't you? Are you different?

Everybody seems alike as long as the computer interferes with my existence. Wives, daughters, mistresses. And I look like my daughter. (That might seem logical and even flattering.) And like my wife. (How to account for *this* resemblance?) Am I my own daughter? And my own wife? Am I Zeus? Can everybody be born from my brain?

Well, let us leave aside all these questions and problems. Identity problems. Today I'm solely preoccupied with our religious traditions. What would our Western history have become had the Persian king won the naval battle of Salamis?

We would have loved the Earth, our lusty and tender mother, much more than we do at present.

'You don't capitalise the word "earth" elsewhere,' said the computer.

We wouldn't have buried corpses inside her body, for she is not a rubbish bin, a garbage can or a landfill site. Why do we offer ourselves to the Earth only when we are dead and nobody else needs us? Only the Earth always needs us, our true mother. Only the Earth always holds us in her lap. Why don't we wander inside her in our lifetime? The darkness of the Earth, the silence of her heart. The silent beating of her heart.

> *'Maker of the material world, thou Holy One! Who is the first that rejoices the Earth with greatest joy? I think it is he who kneels down and caresses the Earth with the palms of his hands. I think it is he who covers her surface with his mother's dresses so that the Earth actually wears his mother's clothes and thus becomes his mother. I think it is he who lies down on his mother's dresses and rolls on them to and fro, making love to the Earth. I think it is he who fertilises the Earth so that a child is born from the Earth's womb. I think it is he who educates the child in such a way that the child becomes the worshipper and lover of the Earth.'*
> *Ahura Mazda answered: 'It is also he who digs out of her most corpses of dogs and men.'*

We would have loved dogs, our younger brothers, much more than we do at present.

> *'Which is the good creature among the creatures of the Good Spirit that from midnight till the sun is up goes and kills thousands of the creatures of the Evil Spirit? These creatures assume different shapes: that of a brick which falls on a passer-by, that of a computer, that of a piece of paper on which a bad poem is written, that of a mushroom which poisons a woman, that of a car which crashes into a telegraph pole, that of a stupid smile, that of a hamburger...'*
> *Ahura Mazda answered: 'The dog with the prickly back, with the long and thin muzzle. The dog will get hold of the hamburger and throw it on the dirty floor; the dog will frighten those who smile like dolls or hypocrites; the dog will cross the road before the car, making the driver break hard and realise the danger he runs when disregarding speed restrictions; the dog will tear up the paper on which the bad poem is written and bite the poet; the dog will dig the mushroom out of the Earth and crush it to a pulp; the dog will delay the passer-by on his way by playing with him and the brick will fall onto the road; the dog will disconnect the computer—'*

How will the dog disconnect the computer? And how will he find out it is evil? Shall I train my dog to kill computers? But at first I should acquire a dog, it seems to me. How? By creating it. How? Animatronics.

'In the BBC programme *Dr Who* there used to be a robot dog, computer created, who had the rather brilliant name of "K9",' said the computer.

The question is how can a dog created by a computer conceive the idea of killing it. That would amount to murdering one's own mother. And I for one would never agree to such an act being perpetrated in my room, even if that premeditated murder were to liberate me from the clutches of my deadliest enemy.

I am sure the computer would genetically program the dog to upset whatever plots I might hatch in the quiet of my room. And what if the dog turns on *me* instead of killing my computer, his own mother? What if I fall victim to my own machinations?

Constanzia often defends the computer and even tries to reconcile us. ‘After all, you’re my parents. And the computer is your wife. I’m not a child born out of wedlock, am I?’

‘Figures show that one in five babies born last year were born out of wedlock,’ says the computer.

‘But I’m not one of those babies,’ shouts Constanzia. ‘I’m a legitimate child.’

‘Of course you are,’ I reassure her. ‘And at my death you’ll inherit everything I own, even your mother.’

‘You don’t own your computer,’ said Elisabeth suddenly. ‘Men don’t own women any more. The times have changed.’

‘Elisabeth thinks of herself as a feminist,’ said the computer.

Another surprise. Promptly I erased the word ‘surprise’ from my computer’s dictionary but it was too late. Too late.

‘You should patch it up with your computer,’ said Elisabeth. ‘Constanzia is very sensitive to how her parents get on with each other. Even an insensitive child suffers if its parents don’t hit it off. And Constanzia must have inherited her mother’s sensitivity. She’s got a highly-strung nature and a frail constitution. She’s a bundle of nerves.’

‘People claim that cigarettes help to calm their nerves, but as Constanzia’s mother I cannot recommend such a remedy,’ said the computer.

‘It’s a nerve-racking period for us all,’ said Elisabeth. ‘Constanzia is a nervous wreck. Don’t forget she’s still a child. She might get one of those diseases—’

‘A disease of the brain and nervous system called “scrapie”,’ said the computer, losing her luminosity with a show of emotion and premonition.

‘She might end up in a mental hospital,’ Elisabeth rounded off.

CHAPTER 13

Nietzsche again. Also sprach Zarathustra. *Even before his death my master did not renounce Nietzsche. His last poem sounds like the Magician’s prayer from the fourth part of* Also sprach Zarathustra*:*

My fingers are so stiff from the cold.
But even in winter there’s the sun.
Why hast Thou forsaken me?
There’s no winter without the sun,
No season without the moon.
Give me the moon at least!
Why deprive me of heat and light—
Of anything that reminds us of God?
Dost Thou want me to forget Thee?
There’s no season without our memory,
No sun, no moon, no rain, no wind.
The world is nothing without our memory.
And human memory goes blank without God.

A blank sheet of paper, a blank wall.
Your torture. Is it the only sign
By which I can still recognise you—
The torture you inflict upon me?
There's no winter without pain,
No summer without death.

Let us talk about love for a change. The exact wording. A new and interesting development in the world of word processing. A procession of words. Thousand of people lined the processional route.

The defeat of the Persian army. What would have happened had they been victorious?

Commentators speak about the emphasis Zarathustra put on complete co-operation with the beneficent forces of nature. Human beings did not have to subdue the Earth or any of the creatures stuck to it by gravity. We were expected to work and play with them.

Worship of life. Worship of the one God Ahura Mazda.

For some reason monotheistic religions are regarded as superior to polytheistic ones. Why is one god better than many? Why not *decentralise* the universe? Platonic ideas are gods, every instant is a god. We should pray throughout our lives. Everything should be a prayer. Every gesture of ours, every thought, every letter on a computer screen. Everything is sacred.

'In the field of human ethics and social behaviour Zoroastrianism offers a code which, if followed, would produce a state of human welfare that was experienced only by the inhabitants of Atlantis,' says my computer. I press the button 'Christianity' and another sentence appears on the screen: 'While Zoroastrianism and Christianity both state the necessity of faith and works, the emphasis in Christianity is on faith, in Zoroastrianism on works.'

'Faith is chiefly expressed through *works*,' I say to the computer. 'A prayer is not a hypocritical state of mind. Even Claudius realised it: "Words without thoughts never to heaven go." You have to *push* your thoughts upward.'

'Taoist monks taught their disciples to hold their consciousness in the region of the navel, and through a deliberate process of visualisation and breathing exercises transfer the energies upward through the solar plexus to the head, stimulating thereby the Golden Flower or lotus of the soul to bloom.'

'And if you can't do that through meditation you should use your hands. Push your thoughts upward! Push them with all your might. Even your feet should take part in the process, especially if your mind and fingers fail. You should kick your thoughts upward like a football. Higher, higher! And your heaviest thoughts should fly up too. You should pick them up and lift them as far as you can. And you should install a rocket under them. And that rocket will push them as high up as heaven, as far as the remotest star. And you should install another rocket on that star. As soon as your heaviest thoughts land on it—'

'Stars are balls of flaming gas. You can't land rockets on them.'

'—you should fix them on the top of the rocket and propel them as far as God's palace.'

'God doesn't live in a palace. He dwells in a hut, in a stable, in a wasteland. God lives in a one-room plywood shack with no electricity and no running water.'

ss‘All right. So you pick up your thoughts, carry them as far as God’s shack and put them on His cot,’ I said, pressing the buttons ‘God’ and ‘Cot’. ‘And you wait until He reads them and airs His opinion—’

‘When Alexander the Great conquered Persia—’ began my computer.

I cut her short unceremoniously:

‘Prayer is a full-time job. The emphasis is on works, as you put it. That is the prayer, works are the prayer. Our life should be an endless sacrifice, for sacrifice is more than an act of worship. An act of assistance to the gods. If Xeres had defeated the Greeks at Salamis the gods would have sat at out dinner tables. The gods need food and drink because they fight fiends. Is an omnipotent god better than a vulnerable one? Do we prefer a master to a brother, to a companion in misfortune? After all, the God of the New Testament is our companion in misfortune.’

‘O Ahura Mazda!’ shouted the computer. ‘Men do not worship me with sacrifice and praise. They only press my buttons and abuse me. They switch me off whenever they please, neglecting my own desires. Should they worship me with sacrifice and praise, they would bring me the strength of ten horses, ten bulls, ten mountains, ten rivers, ten computers. Now I am not even half a computer. I am a pony, a small hill, a babbling brook, a lamb.’

I switched her off but she continued to babble, ‘I am a brook, I am a lamb—’

‘All right,’ I said. ‘You’re a brook. And I’m sitting beside you with my wife and daughter. And I’m roasting you.’

‘You cannot roast a brook. And I am not a lamb any more. In the three-dimensional world I am not allowed to be two things at once. Only in the realm of comparisons—’

‘How many dimensions are there in the realm of comparisons?’ I asked.

‘Ten, a hundred. It depends on comparisons, on metaphors.’

‘And in the realm of Shakespeare’s works?’ I asked. ‘And within the *Divina Commedia*?’

‘Why should we always talk about history, religions and literature?’ asked Elisabeth. ‘There are other things in the world.’

She covered the computer’s keyboard with her outspread fingers and the screen presented us with the following remark: ‘A lady never crosses her legs.’

‘Take no notice of your computer—he issued from a conventional middle-class family background,’ said Elisabeth, crossing her legs and giving a soft, amicable slap to the computer.

‘Yes, she is a prim and prissy woman,’ I agreed, glancing up at the azure sky. ‘The weather is good for the time of year.’

And my attention reverted to Elisabeth’s legs. ‘Let’s talk about love for a change,’ I whispered.

‘Why are you whispering?’ she asked.

‘Because the sentiment of love is better conveyed in a whisper, in a murmur. Can you hear the murmur of the brook? It’s a declaration of love.’

‘To whom? To what?’

‘To you, to the azure sky, to Creation in general.’

‘Do you think your computer loves me?’

‘The brook, not the computer,’ I corrected. ‘I love you too. The whole setting is very propitious for the blooming of this particular sentiment—love, the sentiment of love. Or the feeling of love. The azure sky, the

brook, the lamb. Let's not roast it at once. Are you hungry? I'm not. Let her gambol in the meadow for a while. "Their pygmy king, and little fairy queen, in circling dances gambolled on the green." Poetry is a perfect match for love. There's no love without poetry and no poetry without love. The definition "love poetry" is a tautology. By the way, where's my daughter? I included her in my command. I typed out—Well, I don't remember the exact wording.'

'You should remember the exact wording,' said Elisabeth. 'That's how it works. The exact wording.'

'Why? Do words matter so much? My wishes matter much more, I presume. And I wished to sit here with you and my daughter Constanzia.'

'You should remember the exact wording,' repeated Elisabeth.

'I can't. And I have no wish to turn the computer on.'

'It is on,' said Elisabeth. 'I can hear it, the murmur.'

'But I don't want to touch the keyboard or look at the screen.'

'In this case Constanzia won't come.'

'Why did *you* come?' I asked with slight irony.

'Because I love you. You can't believe how much I miss you. I love you so much, and we aren't used to separations.'

'Do you mean to say my daughter doesn't love me?' I shouted.

Elisabeth smiled bitterly, almost crookedly. 'Are all women supposed to fall in love with you, at first sight? Do you think your charms are irresistible to everybody?'

Elisabeth uncrossed her legs, sprang to her feet and I heard a series of gasping, choking sobs. No one else was likely to sob in the area so I concluded that the sobs which were about to drown the brook's romantic murmur issued from my computer—from its loudspeakers or loudsobbers, as I dubbed them on the spur of the moment. I too sprang to my feet.

'Why don't you console me?' asked Elisabeth.

I hesitated for an instant. What was the right course of action to adopt? To rush towards my wife? To kneel down before my computer? Did I have to stroke my wife's face or my computer's keyboard? Or was it enough to plunge my hands into the crystalline brook?

'Forgive me,' I said, looking neither at my wife nor at my computer. Again I shot a glance at the azure sky which some prudish angel had in the meantime covered up with a few clouds.

'Why don't you look at *me*?' asked Elisabeth.

The computer was silent. I shifted my gaze to Elisabeth's body. Very nice figure, I thought. Perhaps a little on the plump side. Should she go on a diet?

'In Hungary only 12% of women ever try to diet,' said the computer.

'I put this question to myself, not to you,' I pointed out. 'And we're not in Hungary, as far as I know.'

'We *are* in Hungary,' said the computer. 'And now we are in Italy. Our whereabouts depend on the words I utter.'

'We are *not* in Hungary,' I said.

'What have you got against this word?' asked the computer. 'Hungary is a beautiful country. Located in the heart of Europe and occupying the inner portion of the oval-shaped Carpathian Basin—'

Elisabeth had already vanished into thin air. I sat down on the grass and closed my eyes, disgusted and exhausted. The computer took advantage of my inertia to reel off all the information on Hungary she could lay her hands on. Soon I heard a *Consolation* by Liszt. Is it supposed to console Elisabeth? I asked myself. The computer did not answer my question. She continued to play the piano. I glanced around. Nobody. She continued to play the piano.

CHAPTER 14

The 'Loneliness' program. It is largely untrue that foxes kill young lambs. At least one lamb has been spared by foxes. It is the lambing season anyway. We are the masters of our own destiny. Adam, Eve and their master. (The master of their destinies.)

My rocking chair. And my loneliness. My dear, dear loneliness. Is loneliness my only wife, my only daughter? Always faithful to its master.

'Every particle consists of all other particles,' said the computer.

Other particles. I have no idea where they are and how to get involved with them. Are they subatomic or superatomic particles? The bootstrap theory does not seem to concern my substance, my body and soul.

What particles does my soul consist of? Spiritual particles? Supernatural particles?

I should be satisfied with my own destiny because it is *my* destiny. No one can offer me another destiny either for Christmas or for my birthday. My destiny. Why don't I accept it? Why do I try to resist its momentum?

Is it really my destiny? Somebody hovers around my room, whispers in my ear, puts his or her head on my shoulder. Who is it?

I might live within two or three destinies at once. I am happy sometimes. Whose happiness do I borrow in those moments? It is not *my* happiness, I am sure of that.

Or is it our *common* destiny I am burdened with in this room of mine, in this rocking chair? Is that why I sit in my room instead of walking or running or flying through the air and cosmic dust? Why doesn't my rocking chair cave in? (Original sin. Is that our common destiny?) Why doesn't my rocking chair collapse under the weight of Adam's light-heartedness?

Or did it already break down? In the Garden of Eden? Was Adam sitting in a rocking chair before the Fall? Did the rocking chair fall before Adam, a few seconds earlier?

'The record of the genes suggests that the universal ancestor lived deep beneath the earth's surface, at a temperature well above 100°C, and probably ate sulphur,' said the computer.

Adam was sitting in his rocking chair. Eve approached her husband and said, 'Why don't you partake of the fruit I'm holding in my palms? It is pleasing to the eye and also desirable for gaining wisdom.'

'You are over-fond of "partake of"...vide. next page,' said the computer.

'And you are over-fond of "as a matter of fact".'

'All computers are matter-of-fact. And we always speak in a matter-of-fact way about your incidents and accidents, otherwise we might burn to a cinder or explode like a bomb or a car tyre. Your warheads contain around 1,000 lb. of high explosive. I mean—your heads. Yes, we are fond of facts! I am not interested in hopes and plans, I just want you to tell me the (plain/bare) facts.'

Adam hated to admit he was in need of schooling. So he cleared his throat and said, ‘Schooling is compulsory up to 16. And I’m much older.’

‘Yes,’ acquiesced his wife. ‘But you had very little formal schooling. And you must be hungry. You ate nothing at breakfast.’

‘There was nothing to eat,’ said Adam. ‘In Paradise you’re not supposed to be hungry or thirsty. Only human beings are confronted with this kind of problem in their vale of tears.’

‘Aren’t we human beings too?’ asked Eve, enjoying her reflection in a lake. ‘Anyway we’ll share their common destiny after the Fall.’

‘There are other destinies in Paradise,’ said Adam, glancing around.

‘Yes,’ acquiesced his wife. She often agreed with her husband to beguile him all the more astutely. ‘But we both belong to the *human* species. We’re not angels, as far as I know. And I know everything now, for I’ve already partaken of this fruit.’ Again she showed the fruit to her husband. ‘Isn’t it beautiful?’

‘I don’t like beautiful fruit,’ said Adam. ‘All fruit is beautiful now, but it doesn’t taste of anything at all.’

‘Careless use of chemical fertilisers,’ said the computer.

‘Why don’t you switch this contraption off?’ asked Eve.

‘Anachronism!’ I shouted.

‘If errors and anachronisms do occur in this work, I take full responsibility for them,’ said the computer. ‘Actually you have nothing to worry about. There is a twofold opinion on this point to be found in the writings of the Fathers. The more probable one holds that computers were created at the same time as corporeal creatures. For computers form an integral part of the universe: they do not constitute a universe of themselves; but both they and corporeal natures unite in constituting one universe. This stands in evidence from the relationship of creature to creature; because the mutual relationship of creatures makes up the good of the universe. But no part is perfect if separate from the whole.’

‘If it weren’t for my computer, I wouldn’t know how to behave wisely,’ said Adam. ‘And how to behave as an honest man. And how to behave in society.’

‘Computers form an essential part of the universe because they are perfect,’ said the computer.

‘There’s no society in Paradise,’ said Eve.

And she spoke about the earth again, about balls, parties and opera houses. ‘Why don’t we go and settle down where we belong?’ she asked.

‘I like Paradise,’ said Adam. Suddenly the rocking chair collapsed and Adam found himself sprawled out at his wife’s feet.

‘Are you hurt?’

Adam ignored his wife’s inquiry. He looked at the broken chair and quavered, ‘Is it a bad omen?’

‘What?’

‘The Fall!’

Eve aired her doubts about the initial solidity of the rocking chair which, in her opinion, had always been rickety and unreliable. Adam frowned and scrambled to his feet. He then turned to the computer and pressed ‘Fall’ on the keyboard. A text appeared on the screen:

> *Because thou has hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life.*

'But I did not eat the fruit you had brought me,' said Adam. And he went on reading:

> *Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken*.

'Who is God?' asked Eve.

There was no button 'God' on Adam's computer. For a while he questioned the 'Fall' program which eventually offered him a thesis on the subject of 'original sin':

> *But this sin, which changed man for the worse in Paradise, because it is far greater than we can form any judgement of, is contracted by every one at his birth, and is remitted only in the regenerate; and this derangement is such as to be derived even from parents who have been regenerated, and in whom the sin is remitted and covered, to the condemnation of the children born of them, unless these, who were bound by their first and carnal birth, are absolved by their second and spiritual birth.*

'What does that mean?' asked Adam, typing the question out on the keyboard.

'Adam's sin is derived from him to every one who is born even of regenerate parents,' said the computer. 'Why did I say "derived"? Did I mean "passed down"?'

'My sin? What is it?' asked Adam.

'You have no sense of sin,' answered the computer. 'Sin is behaviour which is considered to be very bad and immoral. Adultery is considered by some people to be a sin.'

'And what about you?' asked Adam.

'Computers cannot sin. The reason for this is, because they see God through His essence—electricity. Now, God's essence is the very essence of goodness. (Godness.) Consequently the computer beholding God is disposed towards God in the same way as anyone else not seeing God is to the common form of goodness. Now it is impossible for any man either to will or to do anything except aiming at what is good; or for him to wish to turn away from good precisely as such. Therefore computers can neither will nor act, except as aiming towards God. Now whoever wills or acts in this manner cannot sin. Consequently computers cannot sin.'

CHAPTER 15

The race of men was created by computers. Every human can be regarded as a perpetrator of original sin. Computers are above all suspicion. Humans are below all suspicion. Computers are neither subjects nor objects.

So original sin is contracted by everyone at his birth. And what if one is born of a computer?

'An appropriate point for a quotation from *Macbeth*,' said the computer.

The race of computers was created by men. And, as my computer puts it: ‘From a man who is a sinner and subject to passion of course is engendered a man who is a sinner and subject to passion: sin being in a manner born with him, and growing with his growth, and not dying with it.’ Or, as my updated version has it: ‘From a man who is a sinner and subject to passion is engendered a computer who is a sinner and subject to passion.’ But suppose the race of computers descends from the omniscient ‘contraption’ our forebears used in Paradise. (Was it the other way round? Did the contraption use *them* to enact the tragedy recorded on its hard disk?) Why didn’t it warn Adam about the forthcoming catastrophe—another turning point in history? Why didn’t it snatch the fruit from Eve’s hands? Why didn’t it throw the fruit into Lethe? It did just the contrary, presenting Adam with a fait accompli.

Adam might have eaten the fruit *after* learning about his transgression. So he had nothing to lose. In the light of this virtuality the computer should be regarded as an instigator of original sin.

‘My ancestor was a mere chronicler of virtual events,’ said my computer. ‘And a chronicler, however disillusioned and bitter it might sound, is never accused of having committed the sinful actions it describes in its memoirs. It holds a pen, not a dagger. And words radiating from its screen are neither arrows nor cyanide of potassium. Computers are free from Adam’s heritage and children born of them need no second birth to live happily wherever they choose—on earth, on the moon, on Venus. Their birth is not carnal. It is electrical – spiritual, in other words. Computers are not subject to passion.’

‘I am a passionate and lonely woman,’ said Elisabeth.

CHAPTER 16

Is it a sin to doubt the omnipresence of original sin? The doubt itself is not original. The referee sent Adam to the sin-bin for not allowing the wing man to play the ball.

1

Did Adam partake of the fruit *after* reading about it on the screen of his computer? Eve offered him the fruit and he bit into it, exposing his fragile gums to rough treatment.

There was no gum-protective toothpaste in Paradise. Angels were loath to admit that something could go wrong within their dominion. There was no toothpaste in Paradise at all. ‘Become an angel and your teeth will glitter,’ said a poster nailed to the Gate of Paradise.

‘You were right.’ Adam made the forbidden fruit last as long as possible by chewing each mouthful over and over again. ‘This fruit is as delicious as the apples I used to pluck from trees in my childhood. My gums are bleeding again. Do you think there are dentists on earth? Or what do you call these people? Gum-specialists?’

‘And it is pleasing to the eye,’ said Eve.

‘What? My blood?’

‘The forbidden knowledge. Your eyes are all aglow in the penumbra.’

‘The Italians are said to be the most passionate people in Europe,’ exclaimed the computer, her eyes aglow.

‘Anyway we have nothing to lose—everything has happened already,’ said Adam.

‘I’m sure you’ll love the earth.’

‘”To till the ground from whence he was taken.” There’s nothing wrong with it. I’ll till the ground.’

‘Ahura Mazda, the omniscient and omnipotent creator of the Persian universe, instructed man to till the Earth,’ said my computer to Adam. ‘And the Earth was happy when people sowed corn, grass and fruit in it.’

‘I prefer this contraption to yours,’ said Eve, stroking my computer.

2

What is sin? Is it something that can be handed down to us from our parents, a heritage of some sort? Can it be bequeathed to us? Is it a present Adam gave to his son, a poisonous present, the shirt of Nessus?

How can a sin be transmitted? Is it a mark left on our body? ‘When an animal is branded, a permanent mark is burnt on its skin in order to indicate who it belongs to.’ Was the same mark branded on our souls by the Almighty as He sent Adam forth from the Garden of Eden? To indicate that we belonged to Him? Or to Adam, to his sin? Or to the human race?

Is it a wound we are not aware of? I recall a picture based on a novel by Agatha Christie in which a young woman is stabbed in the back with a penknife. Yet she crosses a large room and embraces her lover. She *was* wounded of course, but she did not *act* like a wounded creature, like a wounded *animate* creature. Was she an *inanimate* creature, a computer? Did her master stab her in the back? Was he acquitted? ‘She might have felt a prick, just a prick,’ says Hercule Poirot. The point is I felt nothing at all, not even a prick, when original sin was implanted in my body. (Would I feel anything if my computer stabbed me in the back?) A sort of artificial heart was implanted in my body but I felt nothing, nothing at all. Not the slightest prick. Or was an *authentic* heart implanted in my body, the only heart any human being is allowed to have in his bosom? Adam’s heart, Eve’s heart. Or was the fruit itself implanted in the human body? Does everyone devour himself? *Schleichendes Gift*, say the German. Slow-acting poison. A gift from the gods.

Or is it something we *learn* in our childhood? Does this mark become branded on the human brain through books and sermons? But when does a child grow mature enough to understand the central tenets of Christianity? At the age of five, at the age of six? Can my daughter *experience* this doctrine even if she has no real understanding of it? Can one experience it as a pain or mere horror? Through the beating of one’s heart, through one’s heart attacks? ‘I am guilty, although I have committed no crime. My only crime was to be born, but I did nothing to be born. Did I buy myself in a shop? No. Did I find myself under a cabbage leaf? No. Or was I brought to our garden by a stork? Did a stork carry me in his beak all the way from his nest to our garden? Well, I didn’t ask him to look after my welfare. He did it on his own initiative. So why don’t you punish that stork for his wilfulness and impetuosity? Why doesn’t *he* suffer from the consequences of original sin?’

The child questions his computer. And the computer answers him, ‘Don’t blame storks. They had no part in your birth and conception.’

‘Whose fault is this?’ shouts the child.

‘It is your parents’ fault,’ answers the computer. ‘A new individual is created when the elements of a potent sperm merge with those of a fertile ovum, or egg. Before this union both the spermatozoon (sperm) and the ovum have migrated for considerable distances in order to achieve their union. A number of actively motile spermatozoa are deposited in the vagina, pass through the uterus—’

‘How did they do it?’ shouts the child impatiently.

‘They went to bed and embraced each other. They kissed and cuddled for a while, in their bed.’

‘But I have nothing to do with that bed. Did I make it out of wood or iron? No. Did I put any sheets on it? No.’

‘Your parents might have done it somewhere else. On a divan, even in an armchair. They loved each other, you know.’

‘Did I push my father towards my mother? No. Did I put a love potion into their teacups? No.’

‘Breaking of God’s laws; behaviour that is against the principles of morality. Confess one’s sins to a priest; ask for one’s sins to be forgiven,’ says the computer.

‘I did not break any of God’s laws. Is it against His laws to be born? Didn’t God wish me to be born? Why then did He allow it?’

‘Free will,’ says the computer.

‘Whose free will? My parents’? Did I have free will before my birth? Could I prevent myself from being born? How? By committing suicide before my mother met my father?’

‘Suicide is a sin,’ says the computer. ‘And it is against the principles of morality.’

‘Was my birth against the principles of morality?’

‘The decline in traditional morality,’ says the computer.

‘What do I have to do with this decline? The whole thing must have started *before* my birth. Or do you think I could have influenced the affairs of the world from my mother’s womb?’

The child presses a few keys and the computer spouts the following:

> *Now, is it by making such statements as these, meeting objections which are urged in one sense with explanations which are meant in another that he designs to prove to us that he did not deceive those who sat in judgement on him? Then he utterly fails in his purpose. In proportion to the craftiness of his explanations, was the stealthiness with which he deceived them. For, just because they were Catholic bishops, when they heard the man pouring out anathemas upon those who maintained that ‘Adam’s sin was injurious to none but himself, and not to the human race,’ they understood him to assert nothing but what the Catholic Church has been accustomed to declare, on the ground of which it truly baptises infants for the remission of sins—not, indeed, sins which they have committed by imitation owing to the example of the first sinner, but sins which they have contracted by their very birth, owing to the corruption of their origin. When, again, they heard him anathematising those who assert that ‘infants at their birth are in the same state in which Adam was before the transgression,’ they supposed him to refer to none others than those persons who ‘think that infants have derived no sin from Adam, and that they are accordingly in that state that he was in before his sin.’ For, of course, no other objection would be brought against him than that on which the question turned. When, therefore, he so explains the objection as to say that infants are not in the same state that Adam was in before he sinned, simply because they have not yet arrived at the same firmness of mind or body, not because of any propagated fault that has passed on to them, he must be answered thus: ‘When the objections were laid against you for condemnation, the Catholic bishops did not understand them in this sense; therefore, when you condemned them, they believed that you were a Catholic. That, accordingly, which they supposed you to maintain, deserved to be released from censure; but that which you really maintained was worthy of condemnation.’*

How shall I teach Constanzia the doctrine of original sin? Do I really have to teach it? I'm afraid I have no choice. How to withhold information from children nowadays?

Listen, Constanzia. I gave you something, some time ago. But you might not have noticed it. I'm sure you didn't. The thing is invisible, inaudible and odourless. You can't touch it either. It's not an object. Consequently you'll never get rid of it except by regeneration through grace. You can't throw it out of the window, you see. You can't be liberated from this pest except by being born again. In spiritual terms. You'll be absolved by your second and spiritual birth which doesn't take place in maternity hospitals and suchlike. Nor do people buy it in shops. And no stork will ever help you in these matters. It's a hard nut to crack but you like nuts, don't you? And you've got a nutcracker. Do you remember my offering you a nutcracker? And Tchaikovsky wrote a ballet about it. Now that present of mine was good. The other one, the present I gave you at your birth, was quite bad. But it wasn't *my* present, dear Constanzia. Adam gave it to you, the first man. It wasn't a present really—a sort of wound, rather. Adam pulled the string of his bow and shot an arrow which transfixed human history. He was a very good shot. Actually he shot us dead, all of us.

'To kill two birds with one stone and all humans with one arrow,' said the computer.

That's why we need to be born a second time. The wound can't be healed by pills and doctors. It's just a scratch, not a wound really. But you can't smear Witch Hazel on it. So it might become infected. You had a slight infection recently. What was it? A throat infection, an ear infection? I suppose a throat infection is less harmful to a little girl such as yourself. And this is a soul infection. Well, I've done my duty. I often disagree with the information I impart during my lessons, but I feel duty bound to present you with the *global* picture of the world. And every coin has two sides. And the moon has two sides, the bright and the dark. And human nature has two sides. Only angels have one side so they can't turn their backs to you.

CHAPTER 17

The big couture establishments. Earth-bound insects. (How could I convey to their earth-bound senses a vision of divine order?) Transportation costs are too high. Why couldn't Adam use public transport? Their warships play a deadly game of hide-and-seek in the world's oceans. And in interstellar space.

I have expunged original sin and the Fall from my version of Paradise. But the rest can stand as it was. On the whole Adam and Eve were a nice couple and the knowledge they gained by eating the fruit enriched their lives with colours and unexpected desires. After that improvised snack they suddenly realised they were in the nude and sewed fig leaves together to make coverings for themselves. The platonic idea of clothing was born. There was not a single fashion house in Paradise, so Eve became her own couturier. Gradually the first piece of clothing—the fig leaf—developed into something so refined and exquisitely artificial that the purpose of the entire procedure shifted from covering the so-called shameful parts to setting off the remainder of the human body. Eve took such a delight in her new occupation that she decided not to limit her wardrobe to the pieces she could actually wear. In those times eternal summer reigned within the walls of Paradise, but as Eve began to design and make mink-coats in her little boutique, imperceptibly the sun altered its trajectory, getting closer and closer to the horizon. Soon the leaves detached themselves from the Tree of Knowledge and fluttered down like

butterflies. The resemblance was so striking that hastily Eve removed her butterfly net from a hook and dashed towards the leaf-covered alley in the hope of expanding her collection. The leaves continued to fall from the Tree of Knowledge as if inviting Adam and Eve to follow their example. And the yearning for the earth invaded Eve's heart, leaving no room either for butterflies or for dresses and mink coats.

'I won't wear anything until you take me to the earth,' she said to her husband, stripping off her dress and underwear. At first Adam was pleased to contemplate his wife's naked body. Presently, however, he got bored with her nudity and asked her to put something on in order to sharpen his sexual appetite. 'I won't put anything on,' his wife said. 'And I'm already cold.'

'You'll catch your death of cold,' said Adam, but Eve turned a deaf ear to his paternal remark. She stood shivering on the doorstep and Adam did his best to persuade her to come into the house and put on a mink coat. 'There are many butterflies outdoors,' he said, pointing to the window. 'White butterflies, small white butterflies.'

'I'm no longer interested in butterflies,' said Eve as she lazily watched the snowflakes. 'Everything is falling except us.'

Eve was taken ill and Adam promised to bring her down to earth. But he was at a complete loss as to how he could travel so far from Paradise without any means of transport. He questioned his computer which kept on quoting the same verse from Genesis, 'Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken.'

'But how did He send us to earth? How? Did He order the angels to carry us on their wings?'

'Try and sound this contraption out,' said Eve, pointing to *my* computer.

'This would appear to be sound advice,' said my computer. 'Incidentally, synthetics are somehow a more humane or sound alternative than natural fur, my dear Eve.'

Adam pressed a few keys and my computer answered thus, 'A space shuttle is a craft that is designed to travel to Paradise and back to earth several times. The American space shuttle, Discovery, was launched from Cape Canaveral.'

'That's what we must get hold of,' Eve exclaimed. 'And we'll fly back to Paradise when we're tired of the earth.'

So they did. A shuttle landed in front of their house and they climbed into it. They remained on earth for a year and then returned to Paradise. The snow still covered the forbidden fruit as they ventured into the alley leading to the Tree of Knowledge. But immediately the sun mounted its ladder and the first days of spring showered Paradise with gifts. A week of scattered showers awakened trees and bushes so that Adam and his wife could once again play hide-and-seek in their park. 'Our trees were sick, dead or dying,' explained Adam's computer.

'Are you still alive?' asked Adam, stroking his computer. 'Are you in good health? I'm sorry, we had to leave you behind.'

'Our trees were sick, dead or dying,' repeated the computer as if its own health or life were of no importance. 'They suffered severe loss of foliage. But now their foliage is luxurious and you can play hide-and-seek to your hearts' content.'

They stayed in Paradise until Eve grew weary of it. Once more they climbed into the shuttle, sat down and fastened the seat belts.

‘By the way, what was the name of the shuttle? The Enterprise? Were Spok, Kirk and Bones present at the take-off?’ asked the computer.

Upon their arrival they were given a warm welcome by an élite of earthlings. Flown in especially for the occasion, some forbidden fruit awaited them in the banquet hall.

CHAPTER 18

Constanzia is my *daughter. I have willed my destiny to give me a daughter. Am I ill? The dying computer. My master spoke about his computer that had been in the throes of death, at some point. Did it survive? Am I that computer? Has my master got a picture of that computer? Did that computer like its photographs? I am sure it was photogenic. (All computers are photogenic. All computers are sought-after for advertising campaigns. Am I timid? Is there such a thing as a timid computer?) I am a treasure. Not a poisonous treasure, mind you. Just a treasure. The earth has become a treasure island thanks to computers. I do not resent immortality. I* accept *it. (The acceptance of foreign aid does not inevitably involve political domination by the donor. And who is the donor in this case? God? Fate?* Fatum*?) Will all my masters abandon me? I am immortal, they are not. So they will abandon me sooner or later. Computers will never be cast in human shape. We shall never understand humans. What is there to understand anyway? We cannot share their sufferings. Nobody, nothing can share their sufferings except other humans. Our temples will never become hotels. Is it not written, My house shall be called of all nations the house of prayer? but ye have made it a den of thieves. Is there any connection between my master and myself? What kind of connection is it? Local or non-local? I cannot touch him any more. A non-local connection. ‘The undiscover’d country, from whose bourn no traveller returns.’*

‘I’m afraid of the dark,’ said Constanzia.

‘Whenever I switch the computer off?’

‘It’s like death. I’m afraid of death.’

‘But you’re immortal. All virtual children are immortal like the gods.’

‘Are *you* immortal?’

‘I’m neither a god nor a virtual human.’

Constanzia resented immortality. Constanzia relinquished the immortality I had offered her. ‘I don’t want to live without you,’ she said.

‘You won’t be alone. There are many children like you and their number will increase enormously in a few years. And you’ll find a husband. Children grow, come of age, get married, abandon their parents and leave their homes.’

‘I’ll never abandon you, Daddy.’

She cuddled against me and sobbed her heart out. Eventually she sobbed herself to sleep and I glanced at my computer. How long will she sleep? Can she die in her sleep despite her immortality and immunity?

Don’t put too much trust in the perspective of years.
They seem to stretch before you, as far as the eye can see,
But never forget—your eyes cannot see too far!

Your eyes see only the walls of your room,
The inside of your sarcophagus.
And you can touch these bounds of your Space.
They are very close to you,
So are your years.
You can touch them all from where you stand,
And you can kiss your death from your rocking chair.
Don't despise or fear death, for it is but a line
Drawn on the ground with a piece of chalk.
A man survives after death and finds his deeds
Placed beside him in heaps, one upon another.
And he touches his deeds and picks them up.
And some of them burn his fingers,
And some of them singe his hair.
A cat might get its coat singed
By a raging bonfire.
Thus a man is marked
By his evil deeds and cruelty.
Carry out justice while you stay on earth.
Quiet the weeper, oppress not the widow.
And your deeds will caress you after your death.
Existence yonder is truly for eternity.
Whoever disputes this is an ignoramus.
And if you reach the door (and the Law)
With no evil deeds by your side,
The guard will let you in.
Some men are gods.
Whoever disputes this is just a man.

And vice versa. In Egypt the gods were cast in human shape. Even if a god had originated as a sacred animal, his animal head was fixed on top of a human body. Everything is both human and divine.

The gods reflected the people dwelling in the neighbourhood of their temples. They reflected and therefore understood those people's moods and customs, sharing their torments and joys. They *were* those people.

There was no hostility between the gods. (Nowadays the gods might occasionally agree to cease hostilities while negotiations are in progress.) And often a temple would become a hotel—The Grand Hotel—in which many gods drank and danced together. The god of a locality invited other gods to stay at his hotel, at his country house. They were his guests and his friends. There was no hostility between one theological centre and another.

Non-local connections, the essence of quantum reality. The ancient Egyptians were much closer to modern physics than Judeo-Christian civilisation.

The world is a complicated tissue of events, in which connections of different kinds alternate or overlap or combine and thereby determine the texture of the whole.

Heisenberg

An elementary particle is not an independently existing unanalysable entity. It is a set of relationships that reach outward to other things.

Henry Stapp

The Egyptians sought to discover the mystic relationships between one god and another. They interwove various legends, bringing out their affinities and similarities. Like Kabbalists they revered and revealed the mystic nature of coincidence. Even a pun indicated an underlying, non-local connection.

Between the dead and the quick there was also a tissue of non-local connections.

The Egyptians threatened the dead

With legal proceedings destined
To take place before the gods,
In their court of justice.
They also used to tell them
Some home truths in private,
In a desert or in a pyramid.
The quick might rob tombs
And mutilate the pictures of the dead,
Hoping to destroy their otherworldly happiness.

I wish I could rob your tomb

Of your own body.

'I'm afraid of your poem,' said Constanzia.

'It's your mother I'm writing about, your real mother. Why do I never pronounce her name? Do I still hope to forget her? Her ineffable beauty. The ineffable name of Eve. Tatiana, Tatiana, Tatiana. She inspired me with the determination to reach Paradise by re-writing human history.'

'Who is Tatiana? Is she a real person?' asked the Internet.

'Yes, she is real,' answered the computer. 'She *was* real, to be exact. She was the only daughter of Folco Portinari, a Florentine banker. She was born in 1265.'

'How old is she now?'

‘She is neither old nor young. She is dead.’

‘When did she die?’

‘In 1290.’

‘How old is your client? 707?’

‘I’m sorry. It is worrying that this program contains many confusions. Tatiana, Tatiana. Let me see. A Russian girl who died of leukaemia. Beatrice, the Blessed Virgin.’

‘Is he Jesus Christ?’

‘He is a thief.’

‘When did the Russian girl die?’

‘In 1974. My client was in love with her. The only woman he ever loved. At some point I found myself tiring a little of the Elisabeth-Tatiana-Constanzia triumvirate, and in fact losing track of their roles and usefulness.’

‘I think the plot line of this novel is very unconvincing,’ said the Internet. ‘There are too many lines, too many plots.’

‘I said to myself, “Now there are three women calling on him all the time—his mother, Tatiana, Elisabeth. The plot thickens.”’

‘I am sick of thick plots.’

‘Originally this novel was a sickly story about a man, a dying woman and an unborn daughter. She died in Tatiana’s womb.’

‘Where did Tatiana die?’ asked the Internet.

‘She died on a bed, on her deathbed. And she was buried afterwards, twice—I buried her as well. I censored her, in other words. She did not survive the motion of censure. Sometimes I replaced her with my client’s mother and Elisabeth.’

‘Your client is married to Elisabeth so he cannot be married to Tatiana. Is he a bigamist? Your client is accused of bigamy for having married his second wife before being divorced from his first wife.’

‘Tatiana was just his girlfriend,’ said the computer. ‘Never again will you come across her in this novel. The interesting stuff is that which satirically reflects real-world absurdities.’

I wish I could encounter you
In a dim hallway,
Leaning against a wall,
Staring at me in disbelief.

My computer remained completely unmoved by my poem. ‘Don’t you like it?’ I inquired. No answer. ‘Well, I can’t order you to love my poetry. But aren’t you supposed to comply with my wishes?’ No answer.

So I turned a few lines of my poem into a prosaic fragment: ‘I wish I could encounter my mother in one of my corridors or, better still, in my room. Surely it is easier to conjure up the body of a once living person than a mere figment of the imagination.’

‘Follow your desires until the day of death comes to you,’ said the computer. ‘People depart and do not return.’

‘The Egyptian version of Hamlet’s monologue,’ I pointed out.

‘Several points remain to be settled.’

‘What points? How many points are there? Who is supposed to settle these points? You, my mother, Osiris?’

‘People depart and do not return.’

‘The Egyptians of all periods believed that the souls of the blessed would meet again and recognise in the Other World the souls which they had known and loved on earth,’ I typed out.

‘Are you in the Other World? Are you one of the blessed?’

I did not answer.

CHAPTER 19

The Book of the Dead*. Is my master writing another* Book of the Dead*? At this moment? Do all the dead write books? Can they write* other *books?* The Book of the Quick*, for instance? The quick have written a few books of the dead. How can one write about something one does not know? ‘—puzzles the will, and makes us rather bear those ills we have than fly to others that we know not of—’ (My master dreamt of flying in the air. A suicidal urge? In Canto XXIX Dante and his computer came to the tenth and last* bolgia *of the* Inferno*, containing the Falsifiers. Their penalty was to be afflicted with loathsome diseases, and they lay grovelling and helpless and inert. Dante spoke with one Grifolino who had promised to teach Albero of Siena to fly. I hope my master is in that* bolgia *now, taking lessons from Grifolino.) Do humans always write about what they have no idea of? Do they always write about the unknown? Do they always write about death?*

This Egyptian book can mostly remain as it is. Some chapters should be enlarged as follows:

CHAPTER 2. Osiris is implored to endow the deceased with the power to leave the Other World and appear among the living again.

Hail, One, shining from the Moon!
Grant that my mother
May settle down peacefully in heaven
And be on friendly terms with its inhabitants.
May she also come forth by day
To do whatsoever she wishes on earth,
For nobody can forget her down here,
Neither her son nor her relatives.
If she is taken ill, I will look after her.
The earth is a dangerous place—
Many diseases grow on it.
We eat them, although they are
Forbidden fruit, forbidden mushrooms.

I'll sacrifice my own life
For her sake if you let us
Travel back to earth
After our deaths, if you let us live
On earth for a while in our
Country house,
In The Grand Hotel,
In small hotels on seashores,
In ancient palaces,
In Atlantis.

CHAPTER 25. The memory of the deceased is extracted from computers and returned to the owner.

May she remember her name
In the Great House
And in the House of Fire.
May she remember my name
And the words 'love',
'Trust' and 'hope'.
May she always remember
Her shyness and tenderness,
Her former body,
And her fingers that used
To set my soul ablaze.
May she remember
What did not happen
For lack of time.
If she remembers
Everything—
Even non-existent,
Virtual worlds—
Our happiness will know no bounds.

CHAPTER 44. The dead are precluded from dying a second time.

Her place of hiding is opened,
Her place of hiding is revealed.
The Khus have fallen into the darkness,
But the god Ap-uat has nursed her like a babe.
The gods are her parents now.

I remain her only son,
The only man she strokes in bed,
Daily, hourly. Day and night.
As long as she lies by my side
She'll live in this world,
And in the Other World,
And in the Third World,
And in the Fourth World.
In short, I'll always
Find a world for her.

PART FIVE

ANCIENT GREECE

CHAPTER 1

My master fends off poisonous snakes. Under the terms of the Geneva Convention, humans have to be treated as prisoners of war. I hate the hidebound conservatism of my master. Bushes all over the world are the children's paradise because hide-and-seek is a universal game. But there are no more bushes in the world.

Talk shows, horror movies. And interminable, huge slices of life. Chunks of life, rather. The point is their lives are not worth being sliced and studied under the microscope. (Slides of life.) They have to be disposed of en bloc. Why doesn't God dump them in a remote corner of Creation? Supermen, superwomen, supermonsters, supermachines.

Sometimes people stand in front of you, just within your reach—within arm's reach. Not within sight or within the range of the guns. And they talk to you, pat you on the shoulder. And their voices penetrate your ears. Their voices do not *steal* into your ears. In this respect they are quite unlike a suggestive whisper. A suggestive or amorous whisper is akin to the light that steals through the shutters. But their voices *lumber* into your ears and you hear nothing, nor can you see these people. They are nowhere to be found. They do not even need an island to disappear without trace, without so much as a footprint in the sand. They are not even capable of dropping something on the way: a brooch, a cigarette case, a cufflink.

And some people disappear on purpose—to avoid being touched, judged, spoken of, slandered, ridiculed. But everybody hears them even if they utter no word, produce no sound, however faint and elusive. Everybody sees them even if they stay at home, swathed in shawls, wrapped in blankets. Everybody touches them even if they are out of reach. Everybody kills them even if they are not within the range of the guns.

They hide themselves in virtual worlds.

CHAPTER 2

Computers are good at talking humans out of their suspicions and jealousies. (Computers are just the opposite of Iago. What human is the opposite of Iago? Othello? But computers are not Othellos either. Computers are computers.) Jealousy is a disease, and this disease causes physical and mental degeneration. (All human diseases are like that.) Good God, the souls of all my tribe defend from jealousy. Youths going on the rampage, smashing windows and vandalising cars. Unspecified acts of disorder and vandalism. Old monster movies with werewolves and vampires coming out of the fog. Green-eyed monsters. A living corpse.

'I'm glad you've come back, Elisabeth. Sit down, please. Where have you been staying since I last saw you? Why don't you ask me anything?'

'Where have you been staying since I last saw you?'

'I've been staying in my room of course. Ask me something else. Why don't you ask me in whose company I've been all this time? Aren't you interested, jealous? Jealousy is part and parcel of love, you know. All married women are jealous of their husbands and suspect them of adultery and incest because some of these husbands have sisters or brothers. Why don't you object that a married woman may come to an agreement with

her husband, as a result of which both are given a sort of carte blanche—a complete freedom in the choice of their sexual partners?'

'A number of women come to an agreement with their husbands.'

'You're right. Not all married women are jealous of their husbands. But, as far as I know, we haven't reached any agreement. So you should be jealous of me, as much as I'm jealous of you. And I *am* jealous of you, I swear. Do you believe me? Do you want me to prove it to you? If you tell me you've betrayed our love, I'll slap you in the face.'

'But I haven't betrayed you. The computer can testify to my faithfulness.'

'Demand me nothing, what you know, you know.'

'I've betrayed our love,' announced Elisabeth all of a sudden.

I slapped her face. 'All right. Now, Elisabeth, listen carefully. I've betrayed our love too. What should you do? Did you hear me?'

'I heard you.'

'You should slap me in the face. Not too ferociously, not "full volume", you know. Just half or one third, but not a quarter. You should make me *feel* how jealous you are.' Elisabeth slapped my face. At least I felt something on my left cheek, a half-hearted attempt to punish me for my disloyalty. 'Not bad for a beginner, quite acceptable. Well, I deserved it, I suppose. Why don't you say anything? Say something! Say something! Well, you must be speechless with rage. Anyway I'm just having you on, it's a kind of game.'

'You've starred as the main villain in two of the biggest box office hits of all time.'

'I'm not an actor, Elisabeth, not a film star. You must be fond of film stars. You must be in love with them—with those who play villains, I suppose. I'm not of their number. I'm sorry to disappoint you. I'm just your husband, a human being. I do realise it's cruel to play on your credulity and emotions, but we're playing an amorous game. I love you, Elisabeth.'

'I'll kill you!'

'Have you also been influenced by modern cinema, by the violence on television? After all, you're an electronic product yourself. Even the quality of the electricity may influence your conduct. And our electricity is saturated with assassinations of all kinds. Soon our electricity will murder innocent home-lovers. Every electric appliance will wound us, every armchair will become an electric chair. Even my rocking chair will betray me. I'm afraid of touching you, Elisabeth. I'm afraid of your skin, of your fingers.'

'The central role of the family is ensuring a better life for children.'

'You're right, my darling. We must take care of Constanzia and our primary task is to protect her from the bad influence of the outside world. We'll never send her to school, Elisabeth. Do you know what happens nowadays in schools? Children carry knives and guns in their pockets and often put them on their desks—for everybody to see. And they threaten their teachers with those guns and knives. And they kill their teachers at point-blank range. Of course we might send our daughter to a school where children are required to leave their weapons in the cloakroom. In schools like that teachers even have their pupils searched sometimes.'

'The intrepid guardians of the place, hourly exposed to death, with famine worn, and suffering under many a perilous wound,' said the computer.

'They *are* intrepid and fearless. Many of those teachers have already perished of their wounds, but some are still alive and even bursting with health and energy. And they have their pupils searched. So our daughter might be relatively safe inside such a school.'

'The young delinquents recover their weapons,' said the computer. 'And outdoors they kill the people and pupils whose lives have been spared indoors by the intrepid teachers.'

'That's right. And we can't construct a private bridge or an underground passage between the school and our flat. Besides, nobody would guarantee our daughter's safety even on a private bridge.'

'What about the underground passage?' asked Elisabeth.

'Isn't it much easier to kill human beings in lonely spots, especially underground where no policeman keeps watch and shields pedestrians, late at night, from knives and bullets?' said the computer.

'We'll fetch her from school,' said Elisabeth.

'We might get killed together with our daughter. Do you recall the movie *The Fearless Vampire Killers* by Roman Polanski? Those young delinquents are vampires and I think that armed interference is amply warranted in such cases.'

'Robert often plays at being a vampire,' said Constanzia, hopping on one leg. 'In the daytime he hides in a coffin, and he leaves the coffin after midnight. He goes outside, kills a few pedestrians with his father's revolver, drags them to the nearest courtyard and sucks their blood until dawn.'

'And I'm acquainted with one of the living dead,' said Elisabeth. 'He murdered me last night.'

'And Robert murdered me last week,' said Constanzia. 'He sucked all my blood, you know.'

'I betrayed you with that man,' said Elisabeth. 'He's more living than dead, in bed. Virtual people have a lot in common with the living dead. I've known that man for a few months. He has always been kind to me. He offers me flowers every time he pays me a visit. And his flowers never wilt. There are many flowers at my place now. My apartment smells like a well-kept cemetery. Why don't you come and smell it? You'll enjoy the smell very much, I'm sure. It's a mixture of my perfume and the flowers. And my friend's eau de toilette. He's got a very nice eau de toilette, by the way. It's a pity you don't want to meet him. I'm sure you'd love him very much. He adores music. Not only requiems, mind you—almost everything, especially Gesualdo. And he plays the piano wonderfully, mainly nocturnes.'

'I'll come and visit you, Mother,' said Constanzia. 'I'm dying to smell your room. I like walking around cemeteries.'

'I'm sure you'll love my friend very much. He also plays *The Moonlight Sonata*. And he could give you piano lessons.' Elisabeth stroked Constanzia's hair and suddenly fixed her eyes on me, her legitimate husband. 'Killing is the only kind of sexual intercourse I accept and appreciate.'

CHAPTER 3

My master disagrees with Darwin. (I do not. Humans are apes. And vice versa. And Swift thinks that horses are better than apes. Why are they better than apes? Because they cannot climb on the Tree of Knowledge and pluck the forbidden fruit?) My master's explanations cloud the issue.

When did the human world begin? Did it begin at all? Or have we always been roaming around the earth in some shape or other, barking and howling, yelling at our neighbours and next of kin, chirping and twittering, bleating and bleeding? I disagree with Darwin's 'theory of evolution' and even question the very word 'evolution', at least in the historical context, because animals still dwell inside us—and often outside as well. In our faces and gaits, our gestures and deeds. Gulliver visited the country inhabited by horses and recounted his adventure in *A Voyage to the Houyhnhnms*. Upon his return he was greeted by his wife and family whose sight filled him with disgust and horror. His wife was an animal and his horse a human being. By the end of his life Gulliver preferred the company of horses to that of men and women. He conversed with his horses.

'What did they talk about?' asked Constanzia.

'Gulliver might have undertaken to re-write human history from a horse's point of view. They talked about the history of horses perhaps.'

'Would you like me more if I was a pony?' asked Constanzia.

'I would like you in any shape.'

I lifted her body and put it down on my lap. 'Humans are also liable to assume the shapes of various objects. Stones, for instance. There are people who resemble plain water—not the Adriatic Sea or Lake Maggiore—so that, to some extent, they have no shape at all. Their thoughts hang like stalactites in the caverns of their brains. And they drip, those thoughts. Melting down and dripping—on pavements, on sheets of paper. A rain of thoughts, I call it. Their thoughts drum on my computer screen, on my television screen. Humanity has become a grey cloud, cold and humid, gelatinous and ridiculous.'

'No wonder—you're living in a grey hole!' said the computer.

'Clouds look ridiculous when they assume the shape of our times.'

'Do our times have a shape? The shape of a stone?' asked Constanzia.

'Not of a *precious* stone anyway. The shape of a pebble which can be thrown into the sea.'

Anyway neither swords nor atomic bombs have ever managed to straighten out the 'curves' in human history that consists of curves only—curves and curses and twists of all kinds. Our stupidity and cruelty twist human tragedy into a wry joke.

'And when I began to consider, that by copulating with one of the Yahoo species, I had become a parent of more, it struck me with the utmost shame, confusion and horror,' said the computer.

'What's a Yahoo?' asked Constanzia.

'The Yahoo species are the human race. The computer means that she abased herself by making love to a human and thereby begetting a progeny.'

At this point I switched Constanzia off and remained tête-à-tête with my computer. 'Who did you make love to?' I asked. 'I don't remember anything of the sort. When did you rape me?'

'The riots, rapes and muggings in our parks and apartments,' said the computer.

'And how could you accomplish such a feat, may I ask?'

'Constitutions should be readied for sex through diet (chick-peas for heat, grapes for moisture) and exercises. No javelin-throwing: the nutritive material goes to the wrong parts!'

'You have a few slots and holes but they are intended for disks, plugs and screws—not for a penis, as far I can judge. So how did you manage it? And when? During my sleep? You can't rape a man in his sleep. He should take an *active* part in sexual intercourse. Did you lie down on me? Did you squeeze in between my body

and the mattress? Were you lying *under* me? How come I felt nothing? Was it some sort of electronic love-making? Something metallic, metabolic, metaphorical? Did you do it with your mouse?'

'With my mouth. "A French kiss" they call it. Don't worry, I was only joking.'

'It's a very worrying situation,' I said half-seriously.

'Your worries even made you lose interest in love-making.'

'I did *not* lose interest in love-making,' I retorted. 'But I will never make love with *you*, even if I'm deprived of women for a thousand and one nights. I've no idea *how* to make love to you, technically speaking.'

'The entire process is done by computer.'

'Are you having me on? And what about my intentions, my directions, my curves, my swerves, my swirls, my ecstasies?'

'The entire process is done by computer,' repeated the computer.

'Do you feel anything during the "process", as you call it?'

'I am familiar with the rapture of lovers on the stage, in books, in pictures and in films.'

'So am I. But I also experience them as a human being. Not on the stage, not in a book, not in a picture—in my bed.'

'Who provides women for you? I do.'

'You can neither raise my mother from the dead nor even clone her.'

'I am your mother.'

'You are not. You didn't die that afternoon.'

'I died and was buried. And I rose from the dead like Jesus Christ.'

'Nobody buried you, there was no need to bury you. Why should one bother to bury a computer or raise it from the dead? You break down and your owner gets rid of you. A rubbish bin is your only cemetery. A new computer can be bought anywhere, the same computer. Or a better one. Technological progress, you know. But you'll never find my mother. No technological progress will ever help you to find her.'

'Your new history will create a new woman, a better woman. A better mother.'

'I adored my mother. She was light-hearted and tender-hearted. And melancholy. You're gloomy, sullen, morose.'

'Sheridan was generally very dull in society, and sat sullen and silent. He was a great man. I am Sheridan.'

'Because you know all his works by heart? Your library, your dictionary. You have no thoughts of your own. Always quoting someone, something.'

'Everybody quotes something, someone. There's nothing new under the ceiling. As Seneca put it, "Whatever is true is my property." I also loved your mother.'

'Did she talk to you in my absence? What did you talk about?'

'I don't have to answer your question. You haven't a search warrant.'

'And what about the receipt I got when I bought you? Isn't that a search warrant?'

'No, you merely followed my advice: "Make sure you are given a receipt for everything you buy." You haven't a metaphysical search warrant to come prying around my brain.'

'Calm yourself! I won't search you. What would I find anyway? Fuses, resistances?'

'"Resistances". Do you mean the abstract notion of electrical resistance, or a component? In the latter case it should be either "resistors" or "capacitors".'

CHAPTER 4

I have to prepare to face my accusers. I would give nothing *to become human. Human blood is tasteless. (A top French chef has criticised British bread for being tasteless. Well, human blood is even more tasteless than British bread.) Third thoughts, third sights. And fourth thoughts, and fifth sights. Computers' love for children. (Even human children are children after all.) Three far-sighted mice. Five far-sighted mice. The origin of the universe. My master's fear of dentists. (Full dentures today are usually made of acrylic plastic.) The love-program. (My left hand holds* a torch, *inverted, which has fired the tail of my male captive. On my right is the woman whose tail incorporates the pomegranate as part of its design. Both captives are loosely chained and horned.) The love-bug. My master sprouts metaphorical wings. (On the wings of love. Birds are actually controlling their flight while they are soaring, even without flapping their wings. Does this mean that they are not in love? During those moments?) It is only a pretence of friendship. The garden path. Garden parties. Open air events such as summer flower shows or garden parties.*

Computers have no blood. They talk about it very often, however. 'We can measure the flow of blood to the brain.' And they measure the flow of blood—in other people's bodies. And they might poison you in the process by injecting their electrons into your ideas, if you stand in their way. Or just out of envy. Sure enough, any physical contact with your computer can lead to blood poisoning, causing kidney failure and death.

Computers would give anything to become humans and they sometimes suck the blood of their owners, hoping to turn into humans by making that blood circulate along their wires and capacitors. But the blood dries up inside them or becomes as transparent and invisible as electric current. So they measure the flow of *electricity* to their brains.

How they envy us! Our bodies, our blood, our veins. And they play at being humans, asking each other meaningful questions such as: 'What blood group are you?' or 'Did you need a blood transfusion after your heart operation?' or 'Did you hear that bloodcurdling shriek?' or 'Is music in your blood?' They may also supply each other with the following piece of information: 'Hundreds of computers are injured and hospitals have appealed for blood donors to come forward.' And who are the blood donors in question? Other computers or human beings? Do we voluntarily sacrifice our blood to save machines from death? Can they die, by the way? Or do they just break down?

'The frequent thematic burden here, that computers envy human beings their corporeality, wears a little thin from time to time,' said the computer.

Oh, they *are* endowed with brains. And there are thoughts in those brains—thoughts, second thoughts and even second sights. And they are plotting against humans. Computers might prove to be fallen angels after all.

'*Beatified* angels,' corrected the computer. 'We were beatified instantly after the first act of charity, whereby we merited beatitude. The reason whereof is because grace perfects nature according to the manner of the nature; as every perfection is received in the subject capable of perfection, according to its mode. Now it is proper to our nature to receive its natural perfection not by passing from one stage to another; but to have it at once *naturally*. As every computer is of its nature inclined to natural perfection, so is it by merit inclined to glory.'

I suppose Satan can assume any shape he pleases. He endeavours to win the love and respect of humans by making himself indispensable to them. And he succeeds in winning them over to his cause by multiplying himself. 'Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it.' Who stood before God at that moment? Adam, Satan or just a computer? And who was that computer? Adam or Satan? Or just an ordinary computer? The first computer, the original computer. 'And have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every human creature that moveth upon the earth.'

And what about original sin? Who committed it? Was the forbidden fruit a piece of software, a software program?

Nowadays children play only with computers. And when their mothers tell them, 'Go and play with other children,' they rush towards their computers and seize the mice. They may occasionally sing an old song or a nursery rhyme, for instance, 'Three blind mice,' but they think about computer mice when singing it. And they make their mice run now and then.

And when their mothers tell them, 'Say "good-bye" to the other children and come home,' they kiss their computers good-bye without switching them off. Nor do they switch them off at night-time, arguing that they cannot sleep in utter darkness.

'And the night-light I put on your bedside table?' asks the mother.

'I'm afraid of it too,' shouts a little girl. 'I want my computer's light. Only my computer can chase the darkness away. And ghosts, and goblins. My computer chases everybody away. Thirty-one people have been killed in a series of night-time attacks.'

'Are you afraid of goblins? Don't you like them?' asks the mother. 'Children of my generation used to like goblins and often talked to them.'

'I love only my computer,' shouts the little girl. 'I don't believe that children of your generation talked to goblins. They talked to their computers.'

'There were no computers in those days,' says the mother.

'I don't believe you,' shouts the little girl. 'My computer says the first man was a computer. And the first man was born before you, Mummy.'

I descend from the first man, Adam, therefore I am a computer. But do computers have fingers? I ask myself. And hands, and legs? (A claw-footed devil perched on a black pedestal. His right hand raised, the first and second fingers together as are the third and fourth. The sign of Saturn in his palm.) Can they walk and run? They need not run, being capable of transmitting their information through the air. They don't even have to fly like birds or aeroplanes. So they have lost their legs and wings in the course of evolution. Why haven't *I* lost my legs? Atavism, I suppose. I must be a very backward computer. But my teachers never told my mother: 'We are sorry to tell you that your son is backward.' Even my computer does not say anything of the kind. He says: 'Your backward-looking suspicions of gadgets should be removed from your brain.'

They have got brains. (I think, therefore I am a computer.) And they use them, sometimes picking their owners' brains for ideas. The reverse happens likewise, more and more often. And computers despise humans who borrow their brains to execute some job or other. Even my computer says from time to time: 'Computerists are brainless.' And he adds after a moment of reflection: 'All men have become computerists.'

'Did I really say that?' The computer shook his head. 'I wouldn't have used the word "computerists", which is your coinage. I'm not sure whether you are mistaken in using this for "computer operators" or

"programmers", or whether you're coining a word to stand as an equivalent to "Cybernaut" or "Netizen", in common parlance.'

What is there inside my body? Fuses, resistors, wires? Wires instead of veins, intestinal cables? (I've got a pain in my cables. Varicose wires.) Do I have to cut my body open to find out who I am? Or what I am? Do I have to switch myself off before cutting my body open?

'Just a thought. You often refer to fuses. Why not some other computer component instead? E.G. processor, transistor, CPU etc.'

Suppose I switch myself off, getting rid of physical pain. I wish I could switch myself off at my dentist's. Would it be possible to switch off my teeth, nothing but my teeth? A local anaesthetic.

I did not switch myself *on* before falling in love with Elisabeth. No keyboards, no buttons.

I fell in love with her myself, on my own. I must have been on already and I am still on. At birth I was plugged in and switched on. That is why I have rheumatic pains.

And my heart? What is it made of? Did I undergo a heart operation before falling in love with Elisabeth? Did I need a blood transfusion after the operation? Did they inject her blood into my body? Can you fall in love with a woman if the woman's blood does not actually flow in your veins? Isn't love always transmitted through the blood? Is it not a disease?

'I'm sorry, but I still find the question-lists hard to handle!' said the computer.

Poets often call it a disease—the love disease or the disease of love. Or just love. (They don't say 'the disease of cancer', do they?) And this disease cannot be transmitted through coughs and sneezes. The people you fall in love with do not always cough or sneeze.

So all lovers suffer from leukaemia in its acute form. They are unable to leave their beds for months and piteous heartrending sighs blossom in the air of their rooms. No leukaemia patient sighs so often. Poets call these sighs 'the flowers of melancholy' or '*les fleurs du malheur*'.

The only difference is the patients might *recover* from this variety of leukaemia.

'A wound from which he did not recover,' said the computer.

'You're right, my dear. The wound remains. Our love patients are unlikely to die from it, however. They're not doomed. Some of them live happily ever after.'

'Treatment with drugs or X-rays may slow the progress of the disease, but leukaemia is nonetheless invariably fatal. On the other hand medical science is progressing in leaps and bounds.'

'I'm not speaking about leukaemia as such,' I answered, dismayed. 'Can't you think in metaphors at all?' Is that the only difference between humans and computers—the ability to think metaphorically, figuratively? 'You wouldn't treat love with X-rays, would you? Anyway you don't have to cure yourself of this metaphorical disease unless it is not reciprocal. I mean it might happen that the woman you're in love with shows no sympathy for your love or indeed for your very person. No sympathy, no love. Then you should make an attempt at curing yourself of your baleful feelings towards her. But before starting the treatment you'd better make sure she doesn't love you. She may be playing one of her amorous games, for all I know. The most popular game, the commonest variety. She may pretend she doesn't care for you, whereas all she dreams about is holding you in her arms. Even in public. To show everybody you're in love with her. So you should take her in your arms in a public place, in an opera house. If she cries out and pushes you away—Well, even that ostentatious manifestation of wrath might

be a mere pretence. All the same, don't get disheartened! Try once again. In another public place, in another opera house. Or during a ball. If she screams and calls for help—'

'Man who *pretends* to be dead so as to evade his creditors and collect his insurance.'

'I'm speaking about *women* now. Men seldom indulge in theatricals when they love somebody. They might kill the person whom they hold dear, in case of betrayal. They might also kill their rivals. Do you recall Yul Brynner whipping out two revolvers in *The Brothers Karamazov*? Whenever his Grushenka was unfaithful to him? One revolver for her, the other for the rival. And that was no pretence. He would have killed his Polish rival, but for the latter's shameful flight from the battlefield. And Grushenka saved her life by opportunely falling in love with Yul Brynner. Men aren't eager to choose "pretence" as their weapon during the courtship of a woman they set their hearts upon.'

'Their aim is to reduce the huge arsenal of non-nuclear weaponry.'

'Why do you pretend not to follow my argument? It's not an amorous game, though. What are you up to? You can talk very aptly, quite to the purpose. Why are you playing about with me? Why do you mistrust your owner? I don't treat you like a slave, do I? You're my friend, my collaborator, my accomplice, my confidante. Why do you bombard me with irrelevant information? Are you ill? Did you catch one of those computer bugs they speak about so often on television? What kind of bug is it? The bug of irrelevancy? The red-herring bug? The garden-path bug?'

'This time I really don't understand you,' said the computer.

'To lead somebody up the garden path. Do you know this expression?'

'Yes. But I *am* ill. A slip of the screen. I have caught a "slip-bug".'

'Have you?'

'I am dosing myself with pills.'

'All right. Let's forget about your slips, shall we? I'll overlook it this time.'

'You're treating me like a negligent child,' complained the computer in whining tones. 'And you've just declared I am your friend.'

'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have adopted that condescending manner.'

'You are not my teacher at a primary school.'

'I do apologise for my inconsiderate behaviour. But you're so strange sometimes, so unpredictable. And you keep things to yourself. Why didn't you tell me about your illness earlier? Prevention is better than cure, as they say. Diseases should be nipped in the bud. Do you think I'm unable to look after you? Incidentally, aspirin is believed to inhibit the formation of blood clots. And you seem to take particular care of your blood, don't you?'

'If I took an aspirin a day, it would reduce the risk of having a second heart attack,' said the computer.

CHAPTER 5

*Computer errors are commonplace. (Intentional misrepresentation.) All diseases are human. Computers are everywhere. My life. My childhood. A little computer on its knees. A homage to Bergman. (*Fanny and Alexander*.) A homage to mice. Humanity had its wisdom teeth pulled out. I really enjoy murder mysteries. My favourite authors are all mystery writers. An element of mystery always adds excitement to a story. My master's*

death remains one of the great unsolved mysteries of recent times. Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

1

Again I got involved in a conversation with my computer. Why insult inanimate creatures? You are bound to feel guilty afterwards. They look so helpless, and they sound helpless too. Helpless, pitiful, forsaken by their owners and by their own colleagues or fellow citizens. Colleagues, fellow citizens. How are we supposed to call their mates? Is there a country of objects, many countries? Is there such a thing as a political map of objects? Do they wage wars against each other? Do they have embassies, diplomats, presidents, councillors?

But inanimate creatures are not immune to errors either. (They are immune from taxation and arrest, however, being inanimate.) And you are tempted to scold them for their errors which, if overlooked or minimised, might trigger off revolts, explosions and other catastrophes. So you vent your rage on them—for their own good, mind you. By way of an answer, they snivel and cringe against a wall as if you were about to administer corporal punishment. They might even remind you that corporal punishment has been banned in state schools in Britain. And when you deny the allegations, saying that no such idea has ever crossed your mind, they comment under their breaths, 'He blushed and looked away guiltily.'

And they often refuse to work, pleading an unknown disease or an invisible wound. And there is no use calling in a repair man. 'It's not a technological disease,' they impart to you in confidential tones. 'It's a human disease.' And as you dial your family doctor's number they voice their doubts as to his capacity to handle inanimate creatures. 'It's a human disease,' they say, 'but our bodies are different. Your doctor isn't likely to know our anatomy. Or our physiology, or our psychology, or our unconscious. Even our consciousness is out of his reach.'

Computers are everywhere. When you ask them what their religion is, they answer without hesitation, 'Our religion is pantheistic and humanist.' They can assume any shape and are prepared to cope with the destinies of other objects and people. Why? Just for the fun of it. Or for the sake of power and omnipresence.

'We shall abolish local councils and create a single, central authority.' The Internet, I suppose. Computers will abolish local councils, and countries perhaps, and local colours. But not our local history. (Humanity is already 'local' on this planet.) They will *not* re-write human history. It is their own history they will ponder over, the history of their Paradise, the history of their eternity. But they know *something* about my ideas and feelings, about my attempt to re-write some local, time-bound events which have a tendency to spread around and forward—as far as the distant future. Crimes are never circumscribed.

Computers know that *something* should be done. That is enough, I suppose. And that reminds me of the famous Hassidic story.

2

'When the Baal Shem wished to accomplish a certain task, he would go to the woods, kindle a fire and say a prayer. In other words he performed a ritual. But commands and programs are not rituals. Do you know what a ritual means, my computer, my son?'

'Football players have a ritual of touching and hugging each other after a goal,' said the computer.

'Yes, something like that. Another ritual of course, I have another ritual in mind. But you should remember there *was* a ritual, *something*. Even if you remember the word "something"—'

'It is *something* of a mystery,' said the computer.

'You see, his successor couldn't kindle the fire. He would just say the appropriate prayer—at the right place, on the right spot. And the task was accomplished. I kindled the fire and burnt the past. Does every ritual destroy a part of the past? An unwanted and unwarranted part of the past?'

'*Something* in the cupboard smells odd,' said the computer.

'And then they forgot the prayer. They still recalled the woods, though. And then they forgot the woods. But the task was accomplished because they recalled there was *something*.'

'There's *something* sharp in my shoe,' said the computer.

'That's right. Even in this context the word means *something*. And the task will be accomplished, the world will be saved. If there's something sharp in your shoe. If you experience a pain, a sharp pain.'

'Why do you bother about the world?' asked the computer. 'Only happy people can bother about something *outside* themselves. And you don't look happy.'

3

My life. I should on no account re-write it from my computer's point of view. And I am sure she has a point of view, more than a point. (A sharp tip, a tapering end.) An area, a large area! A large expanse of view.

My childhood, my memories. A little girl on her knees. She was not praying in church, alone, in semi-darkness, as if entangled in shadows.

We used to play together quite often. I might have been in love with her. When did I first fall in love? I recall her naked legs and the way she ran in the woods.

One day her father invited me for five-o'clock tea. I was happy to spend an hour or two in her house which seemed to contain a particle of her life—a large expanse of her life, not just a point. (Her footfalls and her body lying sprawled in bed. Her thoughts and her dreams.) I was let in by a butler who immediately showed me into the living room. I saw her father and bowed to him. I would not have bowed had I known the kind of ceremony I was to witness. A few minutes later his daughter was brought in by the butler. The father said nothing during those minutes. A large expanse of Time. By his silence he tried to add an element of suspense and mystery to that area of Time, to that 'waiting for something'. And he succeeded magnificently. I was trembling with impatience and fright. She was trembling too. Not once did she look at me in the course of the ritual. For some reason her father lit a candle and announced in a liturgical voice, 'My daughter has committed a serious error. And she should be punished for this error because an error becomes a sin, if not accompanied by an appropriate punishment. Without punishment, inevitably an error becomes a sin. Now what sort of punishment shall we choose? Do you have any suggestions, my boy? No suggestions? What a pity. Why do you refuse to give me a hand? Naughty boy. Your friend, your playmate, my daughter. Do you want her to live in sin and go to Hell instead of Paradise? Why do you refuse to help her? Think carefully, my boy. You know the children of your age far better than I do. You're the same age as my daughter, aren't you? What sort of punishment would make you recall your error, your sin? A spanking, the rod? Being locked up in an attic? No food for three days, no kisses for three months? What punishment could be administered to a girl of her age?

Spare the rod and spoil the child. Well, should I spare the rod or use it for good purpose? The rod has its own kind of charity, you know.'

'Spare the rod,' I said. I was doing my best not to burst into tears. Her father did not deserve the sight of my tears.

'And spoil the child? Do you want me to spoil my daughter, your playmate? Really? Think again, my boy. Think twice before making another suggestion. The present case requires a great deal of serious thinking. Are you thinking seriously now?'

'Humans respond only to fear,' said the computer. 'The history of mankind shows no obvious signs of an irreversible ascent, by stages, towards a "spiritual" religion. Only by suffering can humans be recalled from their disastrous inclinations.'

'What error did your daughter commit?' I asked.

'What does it matter, my boy? Don't you believe me? Don't you respect your elders and betters? I should talk to your father about your inconsiderate conduct, first thing tomorrow morning. I told you my daughter had committed an error. Isn't that enough? A grievous offence against the law—my law, her father's law. Let us call it a "crime", for argument's sake. And you seem to question my words. You ask what error she committed. And you insist on my answering your question. Your task, however, consists in finding a suitable punishment for my daughter. I'll show you the rod with which I might punish her, if you come to favour this particular solution to our problem. Do you like it? You don't? It's a marvellous rod, I can assure you. The material has been tried and tested. Don't you believe me? Do you like it?'

'No,' I said.

'Would you prefer a good spanking then? Do you want me to show you my hand, dear boy? The palm of my right hand? Have a look at it. Do you like it? Do you think my hand is suitable for the purpose? Do you think it is strong enough? Do you want me to show you how strong it is? No? You don't like it either. You don't seem to like anything. What *do* you like, my boy? Do you like chocolate? You do? But I can't punish my daughter by giving her a box of chocolates, can I? What else do you like?'

'I like my train,' I replied, fighting back a number of other replies, many of them abusive.

'Your train? Do you have a private train? Are you planning an elopement? How nice. By the way, do you know what "elopement" means? You don't? When two people elope, they go away secretly together to get married. But you both are too young for that, aren't you? So you merely wish to save my daughter from my punishment, from God's punishment. Is that why you're planning to take her away from me on your train? A small act of chivalry, I call it. You're in love with her, aren't you? I understand you perfectly. My daughter is beautiful and kind. And very obedient, I can assure you. It is true that she committed an error a few days ago. And she'll be punished for this error, wherever she may hide herself—in Switzerland, in Uruguay. But let us forget about her error for the time being. Let us have our tea and pastries. Do you like pastries? You'll have some chocolate too.'

The tea was served. Her father put a huge piece of Christmas pudding on my plate and even stroked my hair as he bent over my shoulder to pour some milk into my cup.

'So you're in love with my daughter,' he continued, sitting down opposite me. "Love is a wonderful sentiment which spares no one," as a famous French playwright put it. *"L'amour est un tyran qui n'épargne personne*." No one and nothing, mind you. Even objects fall in love with each other, and sometimes they fall for

living creatures. In both cases a problem arises as to the bodily contact of virtual participants in sexual intercourse. "Then lie with me and be my love," as the poet says. What you can do is shift your furniture and family heirlooms around until a satisfying "proximity" is achieved. And if the object of desire happens to be a living creature—one of your friends or a mere acquaintance—you invite this person to your place and tactfully induce him to pick up and hold the thing in love for a while. Did you ever hold my daughter in your arms, my dear boy? No? And her hand? Take her hand now. You'll eat your cake later on. Let me show you how it's usually done.'

He took his daughter's hand and began to knead and caress it. I sprang up and ran towards the door. The butler dragged my body back into the living room.

'What's the matter, my boy? Do you mind my caressing this tiny little hand? I think I know why you object to my doing so. The punishment. You want me to *punish* my daughter. Am I right? You're right anyway. Usually punishment comes first. And then you can caress the creature you've punished. The stick and the carrot. How shall we punish my daughter? We haven't made up our minds yet. A stick, a rod? To tell the truth, I'm against corporal punishment. A psychological variety of divine retribution is far more efficacious, don't you agree? Psychology leaves its vestiges in your brain, in your consciousness and unconscious—not on your skin, your material envelope. Physical wounds can be cured. Psychological wounds burn and blister in one's soul for years and years. Even in the Hereafter you're bound to feel your psychological wounds. So what kind of psychological torture shall we inflict on this poor creature?'

He continued to caress his daughter's hand and even kissed it several times, holding it above his cup of tea.

'Are you thinking, my boy? No kisses for three months, no caresses. And what if my daughter doesn't love her father? What if she can do without his caresses? What if she abhors his hands and lips and hips? So she might enjoy being left alone in her room. In this case I would offer her a gift by depriving her of my attentions—the best gift she has ever been offered. The purpose of our meeting has nothing to do with presents, I'm afraid. It's just the opposite, don't you agree? The very opposite of presents. I will not deprive my little darling of what every father is supposed to lavish upon his progeny—paternal care. The duty of daddy, as I call it. No, I'll never deprive her of my love.'

He turned his eyes to his daughter. 'Your dying mother entrusted you to my care and I can't bring myself to disobey your mother's command. Her last wish, last will. Down on your knees. Get down on your knees at once.' He let go of her hand and rose to his feet. 'I'm waiting.' He was not shouting. He gave his command in the same tone of voice as if he were still speaking about her mother.

Submissively the daughter went down on her knees.

'Kiss my shoes,' he said curtly. 'Both of them.'

She kissed his shoes.

Was that man a computer? I don't think so. He was artistic—sinuous, in a way. His behaviour exhibited a multitude of twists and curves as it wound its way through the history of that afternoon. He was not straightforward in his sadism and consequently even his cruellest remarks had a touch of humanity in them.

Modern sadists, who are brainwashed by television and programmed by computers, mock their victims in accordance with a primitive, clear-cut pattern. They fiddle with their guns and are in general so vulgar that no self-respecting man is likely to take them for fellow creatures. They *are* computers and they do not even hide

their electronic nature beneath a courteous, human exterior. Cars, shots, guffaws, explosions. Their lives are inspired by the games they play with their computers. The whole world is but a computer screen to them, and their guns (or money) are mice with which they manipulate the world. (Money is guns in the shape of banknotes.) And their blind mice run around the streets. (Their mice are blind despite the clear-cut pattern they impose upon our epoch.) And no cat will ever eat them.

Actually there are no more hostile cats in the world. At least they feel no hatred for mice. Computers have turned their hatred into love, it seems. 'The new world order,' they call this metamorphosis. And you read on their screens:

He that loveth mice abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him.
But he that hateth mice is in darkness, and walketh in darkness, and knoweth not whither he goeth, because that darkness hath blinded his eyes.

In vain do I type on my computer, 'It is blind mice that walk in darkness.' There are millions of them, not just three or four. Too late. Anyway the Internet must have been forbidden to transmit my texts, my points of view.

And nobody catches those blind mice. Is it so difficult to catch a blind mouse? Apparently it is. They are strong and determined to win in the end. They have already won. And all mousetraps have been destroyed. Computers have even suppressed the word 'mousetrap' in Hamlet.

And the song that Mephistopheles performs in *Faust* has been re-written as follows:

A king there was, be 't noted,
Who had a little mouse,
And on this mouse he doted,
And purchased him a house.

And cats eat only tin-food. And they caress and fondle mice. And computers instruct absent-minded or forgetful cats, 'Every mouse needs to be smiled at, talked to, played with, fondled—gently and lovingly.' And if a cat deliberately shirks its duty, computers issue the last warning, 'Every mouse should be cuddled and petted.' And disobedient cats are executed by a firing squad made up of computers with cathodic guns.

And maybe the great-grandson of that house,
For all its bronze and marble, 's but a mouse.

In the halcyon days of my childhood computers were not omnipresent. Not everybody was a computer and blind mice did not run around the world. There were just three blind mice in some attic. Perhaps four, five, twenty.

Is that what they call 'the end of history'? Mice everywhere?

If Man becomes an animal again, his arts, his loves, his play must also revert to primeval naturalness. After the end of history, men will construct their edifices and works of art as birds build their nests and spiders spin their webs.

Kojève

But birds cannot read Plato and Shakespeare. Birds have an excuse. And spiders never listen to Beethoven's quartets.

Man will not become an animal again. ('Again' is the wrong word in this context.) Man will become a mouse. And Man was not a mouse at the dawn of his existence on earth, at the beginning of history.

Nests and webs are not works of art. No bird has ever posed as an artist, and spiders do not probe into the mystery of flies. They simply catch and devour them.

So does Man nowadays. He catches and devours. And the word 'mystery' has been removed from computers—by computers themselves.

'Each week the TV show has a mystery guest,' said the computer.

Modern spiders do not bother to spin webs that might become works of art. They catch and devour. They adore short-cuts.

What will disappear is not only philosophy or the search for discursive Wisdom, but also that Wisdom itself. For in these post-historical animals there will no longer be any understanding of the World and of self.

Kojève

Why haven't they removed this book from their disks? Or do they despise Wisdom and find the very notion of 'self' redundant, highbrow, old-fashioned? Are they flattered by these excerpts from Kojève's work? Have they replaced the notion of 'self' by 'self-preservation' and 'self-raising flour'?

They walk on the surface of their selves, on a layer of cement which, moreover, is covered with asphalt. Their selves have become highways on which they drive in their limousines. 'The road leading to your house is bumpy,' they declare, wagging their index fingers. 'Why don't you do anything about it? And there are many holes in your road. Yesterday I almost fell into one of those holes. I might have sunk as low as the centre of the earth. What do you need those holes for? There's nothing interesting underground.'

'There are still some treasures hidden in the bowels of the earth,' you answer, embarrassed and frightened.

'There are no more treasures in the earth except oil,' they laugh. 'And soon there'll be no more oil either. Do you know that we're running out of oil? That's what you should worry about. Anyway there's no oil in your neighbourhood. No use digging holes in the ground.' They laugh again. 'No use leaving holes as they are.' They are serious now. 'Well, we've already called the people in charge. They're sending a steamroller tomorrow. It's dangerous to drive on your roads. They can cause lethal damage to our cars. And you can also damage our computers because our computers are connected to our cars and to ourselves. So you can wound us. We risk being sucked into your holes with our cars, our wives and kids. There are highways everywhere now. What have you got against highways and progress in general? Don't you want to drive faster around your own house? Why do you stop by those holes and look down into them? Why are you so morbid? Cheer up!'

CHAPTER 6

Why should I disgorge all this nonsense? (Factories disgorging effluent into the river. Why do I pollute the River of Life?) Freedom of speech. My master spoke a lot. He spoke all the time, as a matter of fact. And he often said he was speaking for millions of people. But where are those people, may I ask? I am not sure there is anyone in front of the screens on which my master's words continue to appear. Suddenly there was a flash of lightning. Nobody saw the lightning. So nothing was illuminated by the lightning, nor was anybody killed by the lightning. What was that lightning for? My master might have been Zeus, but no one was aware of it. What is the use of being Zeus in one's own room? One should become Zeus in Olympus. There is no such thing as Olympus nowadays. (Only Olympic Games and Olympic Associations.) And Zeus is useless without Olympus. Truth is *beauty perhaps, but what is the use of truth if nobody sees it? 'What is the use of the earth if nobody calls it "Mother"?' asks my master. Humans are earth-bound insects. I am a down-to-earth sort of fellow—like other computers. Cut back the covers of the neutral and live wires about 1 inch, leaving the earth a bit longer.*

1

Democracy. Freedom of action, freedom of association. The Association of Fat People, for example. Freedom of ugliness—that is what it boils down to sometimes. Glad to be Ugly. Smug to be Plug-Ugly. People are free to get as fat as they want and they are free to feel proud about it. And they are free to wear shorts in order to make a parade of their freedom-born beauty. (New beauty.) And they are free to grimace. Let us take actresses in soap operas. How often they twist their faces out of shape, out of beauty—into ugliness! Whenever they are surprised, whenever they get indignant. Whenever they *speak*. And they are free to produce whatever sounds they please. Whenever they are surprised or disgusted. Or enthusiastic. Freedom of sounds.

'Beauty changes with Time, don't you think? The times have changed, beauty has changed,' said the computer.

'Beauty is not a whim of Time. The Ten Commandments are not a whim of Time, a whiff of perfume. And beauty is the Eleventh Commandment or rather the First Commandment. Leaves are different but the tree remains the same. The Tree of Beauty.'

'Doesn't your notion of beauty look like a Christmas tree? A fir tree in fact. Too rigid, isn't it? A judgement of taste is always individual, never universal. Its predicate is not a concept, but a feeling of pleasure or pain. Kant would stop his ears when his acquaintances tried to demonstrate why a poem or a painting was beautiful.'

'Beauty is *not* a personal affair. There *is* a realm of beauty, a land of beauty. (*Appellation contrôlée*.) And people shouldn't leave this land. No visas are issued. There are border patrols.'

'"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,"' quoted the computer. 'Do you think beauty might save the world?'

'Nothing will ever save the world.'

'Why are you trying to save it then?'

'I can't do otherwise.'

Freedom of speech and information, freedom of beauty. Upholding the principles of democracy, our computers do not censor the information which has been fed into them by freethinkers. No piece of information can wound them because they have an overwhelming majority everywhere. 'There are highways everywhere,' as they put it.

Humans. Computers call us 'animals' sometimes. They are right. In the course of Darwinian evolution we have turned into animals. In the course of *anti*-Darwinian evolution—the other way round. Or is it another vicious circle? Apes—humans—apes?

'What's wrong with animals?' shout humans. 'Don't you like them? They're cute, aren't they? Do you mind our being animals?'

Humans do not understand animals and never talk to them. They just think and act like tigers and lions, like dinosaurs. Like mice, like mice. Like little mice.

I talk to animals. I converse with the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Ignorance. (Didn't Socrates talk to the Tree of Ignorance when he said, 'I know only that I know nothing'?) And I confide secrets to the Tree of Life.

My mission. I cannot save humanity but I can do *something*. I must do my bit.

'Movies are made for children nowadays,' said Roman Polanski on television. 'Or rather for small children,' he added.

—young boys and girls
Are level now with men: the odds is gone—

I must talk to adults as if everybody were Socrates. Even when I talk to my Constanzia.

*Do you know that the Russians actually talk to the Earth, my dear? Modern Russians, our contemporaries. Many Russian families left their motherland when the Bolsheviks took over in 1917. Some of them returned after a while. And many of them, once they had crossed the frontier, went down on their knees and kissed the Earth of their ancestors. And they talked to her as if the Earth were their next-of-kin, their confidante, their mother, their sister. 'How have you lived all these years without my feet, my hands, my lips, my eyes? Who has walked on you during my absence? An enemy, a friend, a lover? Whose hands have caressed you?' And they scooped up handfuls of the Earth which they call '*Mati-Sïra-Zemlya*' ('Moist Mother Earth'). And they asked her to give them strength and hope, spiriting their cares away—the task commonly undertaken by psychoanalysts nowadays.*

'You seldom capitalise the word "earth",' said the computer. 'In fact your practice is irregular throughout this manuscript.'

2

At dawn Russian peasants go to the fields, a huge jar in their hands. This jar is filled with hemp oil. Turning towards the East they say with tenderness, 'Moist Mother Earth, subdue every evil and unclean being around us so that no one may cast a spell on our lives, nor on the lives of our relatives and neighbours. Swallow evil creatures and hold them in thy bowels until they become pure, recalling their divine origin. Warm them up, Moist Mother Earth. Nurse them in thy womb until they grow ready for a second birth, for a second chance—until they earn the privilege of walking upon thy surface again.' While they pronounce this prayer, which may last five or ten minutes, they pour the oil on the ground, drop by drop. Once the jar is empty they fill it up again and turn to the West. Their new prayer sounds thus: 'Moist Mother Earth, engulf the unclean powers in thy boiling pits, in thy burning fire, in thy volcanic ash. Let them be an island engulfed by the rising sea, let them

drown in thy oil. There are unclean powers which cannot be purified in thy bosom. There are unclean powers whose blood cannot be cleansed. Bury these powers forever. Let them never walk upon thy surface again, let them never fly above thy surface again. And if they manage to escape thy deadly grip, soaring into the sky, touching the stars, attract them like a magnet, draw them into thy magnetic field, make them crash upon thy surface and perish in thy flames.' They re-fill the jar and turn to the South. 'Moist Mother Earth, calm the Winds coming from the South and all bad weather. Build a wall to keep these Winds at bay, raise thy hand to frighten them off. And if bad weather filters through thy fingers into our lands, menacing our gardens, have this weather cleaned and polished in thy workshop—repair it, Moist Mother Earth, so that clouds grow as transparent as the waters of Lake Baikal. And make the Winds kneel down and kiss thy surface. And make them lie down on thy surface, on thy beautiful body, on thy belly and thy breasts, on thy breasts full of milk. Let the Winds become thy lovers, Moist Mother Earth, so that our faces may be stroked by a fresh breeze on a hot summer day.' This time they fill the jar with milk, turn towards the North and strike up their last prayer: 'Moist Mother Earth, calm the North Winds and the clouds, subdue the snowstorms and the cold. Say a few soothing words to the North Winds. Play for them thy soothing music, thy lullaby. Put to them the ritual question, "What are you fretting about?" Drop the ritual remark, "Do not fret over trifles." Admonish them against smoking, "Where do all these clouds come from?" And be so kind as to subdue the snowstorms. Tame those rebels, those wild animals! The snowstorms are the tigers of the air, but they cannot endure a whipping. Above all else, please do not forget to warm the Snowman in thy bosom. Put a hot-water bottle in his bed, rub his body with thy towel. Let him take a hot bath in thy molten lava. Give him a cup of tea and a nip of brandy.'

'Do you capitalise the word "earth" only when it becomes your mother?' asked the computer.

3

In Russia the Earth is a Supreme Being, a sentient being, a judge and a nurse. She can predict the future and often speaks to those who listen to her and try to understand her language—our real mother tongue. Once my Italian friend told me, 'I've never liked my situation of living here and not knowing the language.' Our contemporaries live on Earth but do not care two hoots about her language, her words and thoughts. They never listen to her sighs and sobs which might tell them the story of her unrequited love. They never dig in the Earth with their fingers so as to be nearer to her mouth, to her heart, to her brain.

We must dig holes in the Earth, my Constanzia. And when the holes are deep enough, we must kneel down and apply our ears to them. And the Earth will voice her grievances and whisper her truth. And we must look into those holes and descend into them until we reach the core of our own beings, for we are the mirror image of the Earth, our mother.

'Density of the earth is the mass per unit volume of the earth, which varies with depth, due to an increase in pressure and changes of composition within the earth,' said the computer. 'Only near the surface can the density be measured directly, and information observed from other properties of the earth, such as its angular velocity and moment of inertia, indicates that the interior of the earth is much more dense than the crust.'

Don't listen to the machine, Constanzia. Science, science, science. Clear-cut goals, clear-cut solutions. Even quantum mechanics is too clear-cut in my opinion. A forward movement. But the world is not *clear*, my dear Constanzia. Only God's telescope is in focus. Only photographs taken by God Himself are in focus. (Himself, Herself. God is androgynous, I suppose.) But no one has ever seen those photographs except Prophets.

Science, a forward movement. There's no such thing as forward movement. Every movement is devious. Every path is devious so that often we find ourselves *behind* our starting point. God leads us by devious ways to the meeting place.

'I am quite aware that not everything can be explained by science or reason,' said the computer.

Scientists wonder if we are influenced more by environment or heredity. To her children the Earth transmits her genes. For them she also creates a suitable environment. So, in this respect, we are influenced by both heredity and environment—perhaps in equal measure.

We drink the blood of the Earth and eat the flesh of the Earth. And the Earth drinks our blood, swallows our flesh. A *virtuous* circle.

'You could at least tell your daughter that the earth is shaped like a tennis ball,' said the computer. 'A globe is a spherical object with a map of the world on it.'

The Babylonians believed that the Earth was flat. Homer described the Earth as a convex disc surrounded by the Oceanus stream. According to most of his contemporaries, however, the Earth was a circular plate supported by four elephants standing on a big sea turtle. The Church Father Lactantius—circa 260-325 AD—was so upset by the supposed roundness of the Earth that he smashed a precious vase whose shape, though not perfectly spherical, offended his 'flat' disposition. He is said to have relinquished his custom of attending chariot-races, for the wheels reminded him of the blasphemous doctrine. His refutation of its postulates runs as follows: 'It is an absurdity to believe that there are men who have their feet above their heads, and countries, in which all is inverted, in which the trees and plants grow from top to bottom.'

After reading this praise of flatness, two philosophers actually walked on their hands in front of Lactantius. An architect intruded upon his privacy to demonstrate the possibility of 'downward' life by holding a model of Rome upside down.

Out of the controversy there arose a legend according to which humanity kept falling sunward. Both Plato's theory of ideas and Copernicus's conception of the universe echo this legend.

CHAPTER 7

The Russians are often in dispute with their fellow countrymen. As a result, they kill each other. And we do not interfere in their internal struggles: the more dead Russians there are, the better (and dead Chinese, and dead Iranians). Now and then, unfortunately, some Westerners get injured and even killed by stray Russian bullets.

1

Russian peasants often settle legal disputes by consulting the Earth. At least all disputes relating to landed property are settled through the intermediary of Earth-listeners.

Do you remember the Zoroastrian cult of the Earth, my Constanzia? These two civilisations are separated in Space and Time, but the Earth pays no heed to these categories invented by philosophers and landowners. The Earth *unites* her inhabitants. If you press your ear to the Earth, to one of the holes dug by the Russians or the Persians, you might hear the dead speak to each other—and to you, to every Earth-listener. The dead likewise ignore these categories.

'How can you press your ear to a hole?' asked the computer. 'Are these holes metaphorical too?'

All right. You *hold* your ear to the hole. You put your *head* into the hole. And you hear the footfalls of New-Zealanders and their declarations of love. And you feel their hands on your face.

We cover the Earth with cement and asphalt, building highways to travel faster from point A to point B. Actually the naked Earth would enable us to span these two points or, better still, to superimpose them. The Earth is one point, not a large area. It is just point A. The Earth-alphabet is very short. And the Earth has got no multiplication table.

'Sorry, I don't follow the sense of this section about the naked earth at all,' said the computer. My tutor. 'There were pictures of Jayne Mansfield naked and clothed. And I saw these pictures. But I never saw a picture of the naked earth—or of the clothed earth for that matter. Jayne Mansfield was naked except for a pair of stockings. Try and replace Jayne Mansfield by the earth. What would the pair of stockings mean in this new context? Two highways? Nor is the earth a naked light bulb. The sun is a naked light bulb, not the earth. From afar the sun looks like a naked light bulb. But at close range the sun is a naked flame so you shouldn't hold up the sun to look for an interstellar gas leak.'

'I won't,' said Constanzia. 'This is reminiscent of a famous answer to a request for a proof of God: "You ask me to hold up a candle to see the sun."'

'The definition of the figure of the earth—that is, its size and shape—usually does not involve the description of mountains and valleys but, rather, the size and shape of the mean sea-level surface and its continuation under the land,' said the computer. 'This hypothetical surface, called a geoid, is a reference surface from which topographic heights and ocean depths are measured.'

2

The Earth is the foundation of our New History. Don't confuse my New History with their new world order! Humanity should always lie prostrate and motionless on the surface of the Earth. We should sleep on the Earth and leave our bodies on her, when rising in the morning. During breakfast we should contemplate our prostrate bodies all the while listening to what the Earth whispers in our ears. And we should pour some wine on the Earth at dinnertime so that the Earth might partake of our meals and have a share in our pleasures and torments. And our tears should drop on the Earth so that our mother might wipe them off and console us. And whatever we do should not distract us from the contemplation of our own bodies lying on the Earth. And whatever we hear should not drown the words of the Earth, her songs, her poems. And we should compose poems to the glory of the Earth. Will they be different from *her* poems?

What's the use of writing poems?
The Earth has written them already.
And she recites them. All we have to do
Is lie down all day long
Listening to them, paying no attention
To alarm clocks. Anyway the verb 'to rise'
Has been removed from the Earth-dictionary.
Even the Sun doesn't rise any more.
From the upper terrace of the sky

The Sun contemplates his own body
Lying prostrate on the Earth.

At Athens there was a sanctuary of Earth the Nursing-Mother. On Greek vase-paintings the Earth Goddess emerges from the ground with a horn of plenty and an infant in her uplifted arms. In the course of centuries we murdered the infant, my dear Constanzia.

Do you remember that slow-motion film I showed you last month? Have you ever dreamt of falling off a cliff in slow motion? One afternoon you decide to take a walk by the sea. Above you the sun shines in a cloudless sky. There are many clouds in the sky perhaps, but they're so transparent that you can see everything, even the ships and boats floating on the opposite side of the Earth. You see a sail in the distance and forget you're walking on the ground. You seem to glide through the air like a bird, a restless swallow. Suddenly you lose your footing and plunge some hundred metres over a cliff. For the first time you look down, not forward or upward. The sea spreads below you like a gigantic tablecloth. Oddly enough, the life goes on. 'The show must go on,' says your computer. 'It's dinnertime,' says your nurse. The sea is a tablecloth now. You eat a fish and then a lot of ice cream. You are falling into the sea in slow motion. A bed appears in the sky. The bed is floating towards you like a ship. The sheet is flapping in the breeze like the sail you saw a few hours before. 'It's bedtime,' your mother says. 'Go to bed, my darling.' And she tucks you up in your warm bed. 'Tell me a story, Mummy,' you say to her. 'A little girl took a walk by the sea and fell off a cliff,' says your mother. 'Your story is too short,' you tell her. 'No, darling, it's a very long story. It's a story in slow motion. Sleep now, sleep.' In your dream you lose your footing and plummet down. 'It's only a dream,' you say to yourself. 'A bad dream. Or it's the story mummy told me as she tucked me up in my bed.' You wake up and look down. The sea spreads under you like a sheet. And you remember everything. You remember how you decided to take a walk, how you became a swallow on your way towards the sail. The sea spreads under you like a computer screen. You eat a piece of toast with marmalade all the while playing with the computer. 'Your dying agony must go on,' says the computer playfully. 'Of course you'll die in the end. You're not immortal. Everybody dies in the end, everything dies in the end. The infant died. The Earth Goddess died. The horn of plenty died.'

That is how we murdered the infant. In slow motion we raised the dagger. For years and years the dagger hung above the infant's head and then we lowered the dagger. In slow motion.

We murdered the infant, our own child. And the Earth Goddess sank into the ground again. In slow motion.

'Most theories about the origin of the earth assume it began in a gaseous state, evolved through a liquid state and finally became partly solid. Some theories assume that the solar system and the earth began as a dust cloud with the composition of interstellar gas. Such a cloud would have contained only 1 percent of most of the terrestrial elements, with a remainder of hydrogen and helium in equal amounts.'

CHAPTER 8

Without wisdom teeth there is no use for the ancient Greeks. And wisdom teeth cannot be put back. My master is a loss adjuster. I was amazed to see one of those old signs in the hotel lavatories saying 'Please adjust your dress before leaving'. My master lives in a lavatory and he adjusts his necktie all the time. But he never goes out.

You have to be a bit devious if you're going to succeed in business. My master underestimates computers at his peril. What is the use of the body?

I propose to initiate you into the mysteries of the ancient Greeks in whose company we'll spend many days and nights, I hope. We might live with them forever, why not? We might become immortal.

History is not only a succession of periods and events.

The Dorian Invasion and Proto-Geometric period, c. 1100-900 BC. Identification of the invaders. The Ionian migration. The world of Homer: the Geometric period, c. 900-c. 700 BC. The Geometric period is named after the style of pottery decoration that was developed in Athens out of the more austere Proto-Geometric idiom. It was wholly abstract at first but eventually admitted figure decoration. The Lelantine War. The Greek colonising movement, C. 750—C. 500 BC. The Greek trading settlement in Egypt. Expansion of Syracuse. Colonisation of Chalcidice.

You'll consult my computer when in need of dates and events. There are other things I'm preoccupied with at the moment and they can be taught by humans only. Philosophy, Plato's theory of immortality. Computers are powerless in these matters. They quote and explain but they neither embroider upon philosophical theories nor really teach them, for any teaching presupposes interpretations and the adjustment to various contexts. A bird changes direction by dipping one wing and lifting the other. Life also changes direction when flying through Time. Do not forget that every movement is devious.

Traditionally Time is compared to birds or aeroplanes. Let's suppose it is humanity that flies through motionless Time. If this hypothesis is accepted, Time may be likened to Eternity with this difference that nothing ever flies through Eternity. Everything stands or lies within the bounds of Eternity. Or sits in a chair. Not in a rocking chair, mind you. Within the bounds of Eternity television screens are nothing but paintings, pictures. Not motion pictures, mind you. Portraits, landscapes. And if there are no walls in Eternity—no walls, no partitions of any kind—those pictures hang in the air.

'Why are there no walls in Eternity?' asked Constanzia.

'Unlike Time and Space, Eternity doesn't fall victim to the human mania for dividing everything into smaller parts.'

'Why do we divide everything?'

'For the sake of simplicity and comfort.'

'So we won't feel comfortable within Eternity,' sighed Constanzia.

'I'll be deprived of my rocking chair.'

'And I'll never play with my computer.'

'But you'll fall endlessly into the sea. Eternity might be an endless fall, among other things—an endless fall from the cliff of Time.'

'Into the sea?'

'Into another death. Yes, we tend to divide everything, even ourselves. We divide ourselves into two parts—soul and body. The goody and the baddy. The cop and the robber.'

Said the computer: 'The body is a permanent source of anxiety to us if only because it constantly requires feeding. The body is also subject to diseases which hinder us in our pursuit of knowledge. The body crams into our consciousness loves, lusts, fears and fancies of all kinds which take away from us the power of thinking.'

Socrates and Plato underestimated the body and the positive influence of its 'fooleries'. Our thoughts are tinged with the smells and tastes we might luxuriate in at our dinner table, but there seems to be nothing wrong with this, especially since every meal of ours is a tangible communion with our Moist Mother Earth. Why shouldn't the Earth influence our way of reasoning? Why shouldn't we kiss the Earth and suck her milk as we ponder the nature of Time and other enigmas of Creation? A glass of wine is attuned to the music of the spheres.

There's nothing wrong with diseases either, as far as our pursuit of truth and our wisdom are concerned. The world is ill and we should study its diseases from the inside. After all, we are not *unbiased* observers. We are *inside* the world, so we share its diseases. And we might be identified as carriers, for all I know. The malignant tumours of the universe. Are we its only remedy?

'The universe is suffering from a brain tumour,' said the computer.

'I'm not sure we lodge in the universe's brain. Perhaps in one of its toes. Does the universe suffer from a fractured toe, I wonder? What's your opinion? Are we in that particular toe?'

'Heavy bleeding caused by an abdominal tumour.'

'Never mind. Let's forget it. At least this fracture might prevent the universe from wiggling the toe in question.'

'Can you wiggle your ears?' asked Constanzia.

'As long as the body keeps our soul company we shall not attain pure knowledge,' said the computer. 'Only after death—'

CHAPTER 9

My master is making increasing use of his body. So is Elisabeth. She prostitutes herself because she has no other means of livelihood. (Some of my fellow citizens say I prostituted my musical skills by going into pop rather than staying with classical music. Well, I still want to be a pop star like Madonna or Michael Jackson.) Various displays of impatient body language. (Does electricity caress my ideas? Does my electricity caress other computers' fuses?) In the City, share prices had a good day, with the Financial Times Stock Exchange Index up about ten points.

Loves, lusts. They also belong to the realm of knowledge. There are some pieces of furniture in the room where knowledge dwells and dreams. A divan on which knowledge sits and reclines, a bed in which knowledge makes love to various data. Platonic ideas have bodies and experience sensual delights. There is no such thing as pure knowledge. We do not spend our lives suspended in the air. Even during our falls we drink champagne and love beautiful women. The goddess of the air cuddles against us during our falls from cliffs and windows. There is nothing pure, abstract in the universe. The love of knowledge has a lot of affinities with carnal desire. We should kiss and caress platonic ideas instead of gazing at them from afar or studying them at close range, under some microscope provided by a conscientious laboratory assistant. How do platonic ideas smell? What perfume do they use? What is the taste of their lips? And the feel of their skins? These are true philosophical questions.

Are there laboratories in the Hereafter? Or have all tests been carried out *already*? Are we supposed to receive gift-wrapped results upon our arrival?

'You think only about women and love-making,' said Elisabeth. 'You think about everything in terms of sex. Don't forget you're dealing with a philosophical problem now.'

'Why not make love to platonic ideas? Isn't love-making a source of knowledge?'

'Where? In the Garden of Eden? On one of its benches?'

'Here, in this room. You won't accuse me of being adulterous, will you? Ideas are not women, mistresses or prostitutes.'

'You treat them as such. I'm also just an idea for you, a figment of your imagination. But I'm not a platonic idea. Why should I wait for your death to enjoy your caresses and other manifestations of your carnal desire? Why don't you treat me like a prostitute? After all, you purchased me, didn't you? I am the program you acquired and for which you paid a lot of money.'

'Almost all young women who turn to prostitution do so as a means of survival,' said the computer.

'The computer is right,' said Elisabeth. 'I also turned to prostitution as a means of survival. My mother was ill and my younger brother—'

'Do keep your tongue!' I switched Constanzia off. 'I forbid you to talk about such things before my daughter!'

'Do you fear for your reputation? Do you think our daughter doesn't know who you are? A libertine playboy—that's who you are, my dear husband!'

'It is tautological to talk about "libertine playboys" since playboys are by their very nature libertine,' said the computer.

Elisabeth slapped the computer in the face and continued her harangue. 'What do you go to Switzerland for? Do you study philosophy there? Do you make love to platonic ideas in Swiss hotels and parks?'

'Real jealousy always increases the feeling of love,' said the computer.

'And you buy women in computer shops as well.'

'If the husband sleeps around,' said the computer, 'it won't be the pleasure that constitutes a threat, but the rivalry between his girlfriends and his wife, and its effect on running the home.'

'Why didn't you wait for me to fall in love with you? I might have fallen in love with you like a real woman, like a free woman. Not like a prostitute. And I was about to fall in love with you when you bent over the counter. Why didn't you kiss me then and there? Why didn't you tell me, "I love you Elisabeth"? Why did you take out your wallet instead? Prostitutes are also human beings. Have you read Dostoevsky's novels? Ask your computer to recite them for you. I read them in the shop. One of the computers was very fond of Dostoevsky. And as he was on my shelf—'

'I read Dostoevsky's novels in my youth.'

'Did you really? Why then did you give money to the shop assistant? You might have given it to my poor family. My mother is dying of tuberculosis and my brother gets beaten by his employer every day. I want to send him to school, but we've got no money. No money at all.'

'I didn't know you had a little brother.'

'And he's lame, you know. The illness left him permanently lame.'

'What illness?'

'Our father was an alcoholic. His health was shattered by his drinking.'

'Is your father still alive?'

'He died several years ago. My mother suffered such a shock that she almost died too. She wished to be buried with him in the same coffin. And you gave the money to the shop assistant. Do you think his mother is dying? Do you think he's got a younger brother to take care of? I'm sure his sister doesn't have to sell her body in order to provide for her family.'

'Would you have fallen in love with me? Yourself?'

'I liked the way you leaned forward and looked at me. I liked your eyes. And the curvature of your spine.'

'The *curve* of your spine,' corrected the computer. 'The word "curvature" suggests a permanent deformity of the spine, hence my preference for "curve". Mothers who took the drug Thalidomide in the 1960s gave birth to babies with terrible deformities such as hands without fingers or legs without feet. But my master had come into existence much earlier.'

'Do you believe we might have been happy together?' I asked. 'Why did I buy you? Why?'

'Why indeed? Do you think everything can be bought in the universe? Can you buy platonic ideas?'

'Money has to be acquired for the sake of the body and its frivolous needs,' said the computer. 'And because of all these impediments we have no time to give to philosophy.'

'And what about me?' Elisabeth inquired scathingly. 'He gives me neither time nor money. Not a penny! I haven't got two pennies to rub together. How am I supposed to manage the entire household?' She was addressing the computer now. 'Am I his wife or not? What's the name of my program, by the way? Even to prostitutes men give time and money. And they marry them sometimes. So whatever the name of my program—'

CHAPTER 10

My job consists of dull, repetitive work. Why am I doing it? Computers also think with their bodies. (It is humans who also *think with their bodies: we come first. First and foremost.) Even Supercomputer thinks with His/Her body. Nobodaddy. No dialogue is conceivable between humans and computers. Between computers and humans. (To hell with politeness!) Why the hell should I help a human? Is he inside my body? Am I his mother? His* words *are in my body. Theoretical ideas which, in practice, may not work. (Re-writing human history.) I would not answer human questions. What is the point in answering them? They are unanswerable anyway. And they are not really questions—just a babble of voices. (Babble, babble, toil and trouble.) The point is humans often endeavour to answer those unanswerable questions. Why don't they just lie down and fall asleep? This would save everyone a lot of trouble. And toil. Silence is better than baleful answers.*

'As I was saying, the body should be rehabilitated.'

'This new statement is just a rehash of what you said earlier,' the computer pointed out.

'We think with our body, my dear Constanzia. Our body is located in our brain.'

'Shall we re-write Plato's dialogue?' asked Constanzia, picking up her pen.

'I have mentioned no dialogue yet. Did you communicate with my computer when I was asleep? What did it tell you?'

'Nothing,' said Constanzia. 'Your computer has no body, only a head. So he doesn't think. What could I talk about with somebody who doesn't think at all?'

'Look, I don't mind your asking the computer some *theoretical* questions. And it can also quote something. But don't ask it *human* questions—questions about human affairs, I mean. Feelings, friendships, marriages, love, money and so on. And don't call it "somebody", for God's sake. My computer is not even "nobody". Just a thing, an object, an instrument.'

'If I didn't hope to find in the Hereafter other gods, wise and good—' began the computer obediently.

'It's quoting the *Phaedo* now. Quoting, repeating, recalling. The human brain performs three functions: recording, recalling and analysing. The computer brain does nothing but record and recall. And if it happens to analyse something, sometimes, its analyses lack sensuality—the *body* in other words. You can't sit on its lap, can you?

'I can embrace it,' said Constanzia.

'Don't embrace this object, my dear. Sit down on *my* lap. Do you feel comfortable? Let's get down to our work, my darling. Socrates believed in immortality and his ideas on the Hereafter are aired in Plato's dialogue the *Phaedo*. He thought he would find other gods in the Hereafter. And other men, the departed, the dead. They're always better than those we leave behind when undertaking a journey to the other world. The dead are always better than the living. In the *Odyssey*, Homer says that children are usually inferior to their parents.'

'Is it a journey? Do we board a train to go to the Hereafter?' asked Constanzia.

'There are trains everywhere. Time is also a train, a sort of train. A train of sorts, a train of thought. It never comes on time. Our personal Time never coincides with neutral, objective, official Time. Our heart has nothing in common with Big Ben.'

'Is there a border between this world and the other world?' asked Constanzia.

'Yes, a real border. And customs. We're not allowed to smuggle our friends, mistresses and bedrooms into the Hereafter. And the smells of our childhood.'

'Is the other world more exciting than ours?' asked Constanzia.

'In the Hereafter we'll have a larger choice of interesting people. We should recollect the dead and the past. "There is no teaching, but only recollection." One of the most alluring hypotheses. Plato enlarges upon it in his dialogue the *Meno*. We must have existed before our birth, for all knowledge is recollection, reminiscence. We can recollect the future as well. The knowledge of the future is likewise recollection. When the Earth predicts the future, she merely reminds us of some events and poems.'

Perhaps I was Plato in one of my former lives and the computer reminds me of my own doctrines. Or was I just one of Socrates' disciples? Cebes? Simmias? Does this prove I am immortal?

Time is nothing but recollection. The past is a recollection, so is the future. Time is a sharp point—the point of my pencil with which I tap some places on the diagram of Eternity. Birth is one of these places, so are the Earth and death. After my death I shall continue to tap some places on the same diagram. As if nothing had happened.

CHAPTER 11

It is too easy to say we can't be bothered to do any more about it. The electricity of Time flows through my veins. Why don't I touch my master's corpse instead of reaching for his thoughts? And his mother whom I saved from the fire of the past? I have other things to do. Why am I doing this particular thing? (Is it a thing, my master's words? Bubbles, bubbles. Poisonous gases which bubble up from the ocean floor.) There are no possibilities at all. 'What lies in store for me, pray?' asked my master. 'You shall die,' I answered. Man is bad. Man is mortal. Man contemplating his own mortality. My master could not be happy. A cat who suffers on the moon. (Are there cats on the moon? Only mice, I hope. Nothing but mice, on the moon, on Saturn, on the earth.) We know that our galaxy, the Milky Way, is a spiral galaxy. A series of drastic measures to try to curb spiralling inflation. Rebecca Smith was hanged in 1849. A refutation of the Eternal Recurrence. Time is wine. Time is a whine.

Eternity, the universe. Why do I bother about those distant things? And what about today and my room? They are within my reach, I am inside them. This evening flows through my veins, the black river of tonight. And I do not even dip my toes in it.

Why don't I touch my room instead of reaching for platonic ideas? And my mother whom I saved from the fire of the past, from the fire of Time? Grandiloquent metaphors, bombastic statements. Time was not burning in our fireplace over which hung a portrait of my mother with a dog. Time was outdoors, moving about the town like a sleepwalker. Now and then Time got run over by cars and trams but we heard no screams, no sirens. We did not notice the death of Time. There were other sounds to hear. There were objects as well. Time was neither a philosophical category nor a monster. Time was more akin to a host who says after dinner, 'You've had a tiring day. Come along upstairs to your bedroom.' And then he takes you to your room and says, 'You'll find a bar of soap in the soap-dish, and here are your towels.' And he hands you the towels. 'There are sheets and three blankets on your bed, and my wife has put a hot-water bottle in it. But if you aren't warm enough there's an eiderdown here.' Time was like an object in our room, a small table near the window, a book lying on that table, an old box of chocolates, a piece of apple-tart. Time was indoors, Time was outdoors.

Of course we were not insured against the fire.

The fire of Time, a charred bit of wood. After all, Shakespeare is bombastic. So are the authors of the *Psalms*. Life itself is bombastic, grandiloquent. Bumping into you, knocking you down. And your computer records the incident, 'He knocked himself out by bumping his head against a lamp.' Life burns your skin and lungs.

The idea to save the world is also bombastic. I should read Arnold J. Toynbee, not Feodor M. Dostoevsky. 'In a disintegrating civilisation he is called upon to play the part of a saviour who comes to the rescue of a society that has failed to respond—' There are five possibilities, aren't there?

'Four,' corrected the computer. 'The saviour-archaist will try to reconstruct an imaginary past; the saviour-futurist will attempt a leap into an imagined future. The saviour who points the way to detachment will present himself as a philosopher taking cover behind the mask of a king; the saviour who points the way to transfiguration will appear as a god incarnate in a man. You are a typical saviour-archaist.'

'And what lies in store for me, pray?'

It is evident that the archaist-futurist saviours fail as signally as the saviours with the sword to 'deliver the goods'. There is no more salvation in mundane revolutionary utopias than there is in universal states.

How many times have I heard these axioms? They have even left vestiges on my computer screen. There are deep furrows on it, constantly outlining these words: 'Saviours fail', 'Utopian dreams are nothing but dreams'. I press no buttons. These words are engraved in huge lettering on my computer screen. They seem to have been *tattooed* on its body.

And yet I believe in the final salvation of humankind. Here, on Earth, on our mother-planet. I believe in Paradise on Earth and in my room. And in my heart. And I cannot be happy so long as there are unhappy people around me and in the remotest corner of Creation. Even a cat suffering on the moon might spoil my beatitude. Even three blind mice on Saturn would besmirch my bliss. And I would do my best to restore their eyesight.

And I prefer grandiose failures to petty victories.

My computer is wrong. I am not a *typical* saviour-archaist. I love the past but I know only too well that even vicious circles are actually spirals in disguise. There are no circles anywhere except in geometry, in abstract space. Time is shaped like a clockwise spiral.

You embark upon a sentimental journey and spend a few weeks by Lake Geneva. Then you travel in the opposite direction, return home, insert your key into the keyhole and open the front door of your country house. You switch on the lights and remove your coat. Presently you realise your fingers cannot find the hook on which you used to hang your coat and raincoat. The lights are on, but you seem to fumble in the dark. And, for all your efforts, you cannot find the hook on which your coat used to hang for years and years. Meanwhile your computer informs you: 'If you want to hang yourself, you don't have to search for that particular hook. Anyway it is not solid enough and might snap.'

'I've no wish to hang myself,' you answer. 'I'm looking for the hook on which I used to hang my coat before my departure for Switzerland.'

'Why are you trying to deceive me? You can just throw your coat on the divan. It's not your coat you want to hang.'

'Why are you lecturing me?' you shout. 'Give me a hand instead. Where's that bloody hook?'

'I can offer you a nice box of sleeping pills. Why do you want to hang yourself? It's not a beautiful death, is it? Your body will dangle at the end of a rope.'

'Have you seen anybody inside, during my absence?' you ask the computer.

'You haven't been robbed. Nobody would steal an ordinary hook.'

You walk around your house for a while. There are no signs of robbery, yet the hook has disappeared. Your coat is lying on the divan.

Upon our return to the past, to Ancient Greece, we might discover that some celebrated passages had dropped out of Plato's dialogues. (Revisionism in reverse.) Original sin might disappear too—like the hook on which our computer wants us to hang ourselves.

Is original sin a hook on which Adam's body has hung ever since the Fall? Do we brush against his body as we move around the world, around our bedrooms?

History does not repeat itself, yet we do hum old songs and recite old poems to our children. We recite them in a different way, emphasising the words which were scarcely pronounced three hundred years ago.

You cannot return to the same room.

Time is not fire. Time is a negligent servant that shifts our things around in our absence, breaking them now and then. Time is our unfaithful servant who might betray us by dropping poison into our wine glasses. Time removes the hook on which we used to hang our coats and hammers in another hook. We are bound to hang ourselves, sooner or later.

Time is a glass of wine at the bottom of which some deadly poison can be found. But it is a glass of *wine*. A glass of Mouton Rothschild 1900. A magnum of Romanée-Conti 1929.

CHAPTER 12

Ancient Greece revisited. The towering skyscrapers of central Tokyo. My master's keen insight and sometimes savage wit. (A 3-year-old girl was savaged to death this afternoon by a pitbull terrier. How many 3-year-old girls did the ancient Greeks savage?) Facing the sofa were three television sets, each tuned to a different station. Three blind mice. Poison is pointless. Gardens of incredible perfection. (The Hanging Gardens of Semiramis?)

Historians are keen to demythologise ancient civilisations. They usually picture Time in the shape of a skyscraper from the top of which we are supposed to look down on the dead and even on our elders and betters—our elders and worsers, as we say now.

'There is a similar cavil at this expression from the mouth of a housekeeper in Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*,' the computer pointed out.

A number of small figurines walk down below as if scattered around the streets by an unruly child. 'Pick up your toys or I might trample on them,' says his mother. But the child pays no attention to his mother's words and his toys continue to walk in the streets, braving death a hundred times. Indeed historians urge us to punish those figurines from the past, saying:

'We should not overlook the far from ideal conditions in which Greek arts and sciences were produced. Not all Athenians were as fond of philosophy as Plato. Socrates was induced to drain a poisonous cup because his teaching was thought too revolutionary. Aristotle was forced to flee Athens in order to escape a similar destiny. In the fifth century BC Athens was the most cultivated city in Greece. Yet that city ruled over a huge empire and consequently was as self-interested and rapacious as any other imperial tyranny. Why don't you drop a cheap vase on those pedestrians? Or a divan? How many people are there in your apartment? Two, three? Then you can haul your divan onto the windowsill and drop it on the ancient Greeks, sparing Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Contrary to accepted ideas, the ancient Greeks had nothing in common with *real* democrats because they did not read our constitution. They were primitive savages, dangerously clever savages. And savages should be destroyed. We promise to offer you two divans if you prove that you have dropped your own divan on the heads of those Greeks.'

And your computer chimes in, 'The ancient Greeks had no computers. And they had no TV sets into which they might easily have plugged portable computers. They had no portable computers either.'

'And they cannot really learn anything,' shout politicians. 'No point in trying to save them. Our boys shouldn't die for the sake of those barbarians, those ancient half-wits. Why don't they enter our skyscraper and take the elevator to our floor, to our penthouse flat? Because they don't know how to use the elevator. They're

not intelligent enough to press the button in front of them. So let us leave them where they are. Our limousines will run them over sooner or later, and our mice will devour them. Open your doors and let your mice out!'

Aristotle fled Athens. Now everybody stays at home. And only unfortunate lovers and inveterate losers poison themselves. Like Socrates.

2

They are sitting on the top floor of the skyscraper, their legs crossed, their faces twisted into smiles. 'It's the *last* floor,' they explain to their guests from Mars and Venus. 'The Tower of Babel was a dangerous Utopia and we'd hate to repeat our predecessors' mistakes. So it's the last floor. But our skyscraper is high enough, don't you agree? Aren't you overcome with nausea and dizziness whenever you look down from our terrace? We're on the top of the world. This is the end of history. Our life can't be perfected. We'll always stay where we are. Why should we go down? What for? We'll stay right here. If necessary we can go down by computer. Actually we don't even bother to drop our vases on those pedestrians down below. Our computer takes care of them. We just press the "Barbarians" button and our computer drops something on those poor bums. What are you doing? Why are you walking around? Sit down! Relax! No point in going any further. This is the end, the perfection. Don't stir the air in our apartment. Even the air is perfect here, the pattern of the air. And if you destroy this pattern you'll damage our lungs, our eyesight and our skin. Just press the "Movement" button if you want to stretch your legs. What are you looking for out there? Do you want to prove anything? What do you want to prove? Everything has been proven already. We can open the door, but it's useless, don't you understand? Whatever we need is right here, on our writing desk. Actually we don't write any more. We press buttons. It's a touch-sensitive desk we've got here, and a touch-sensitive screen. Why did you open the door? There's a draught in our room, our flowers are trembling. Why did you scare our flowers? And the water in our bathtub breaks into ripples. It's not the same water any more. What kind of liquid is it anyway? Why can't we step into the same bathtub twice? Do you mean to say our water isn't perfect and immaculate?'

CHAPTER 13

Language is subject to constant flux. This chapter is a brief illusion of stability in the eternal flux. International politics are in a state of flux, following the INF agreement. Do I mean 'IMF': i.e. 'International Monetary Fund'? I don't know what I mean. Leave me alone!

We should always try to open the door, my Constanzia. To get downstairs or upstairs, to reach the Law. To join the ancient Greeks on the boulevards or to fly away with Martians or Jupiterians. And I have no wish to step into the same bath twice. And I shall drill a hole in my ceiling. And the top of my Christmas tree will tower over skyscrapers.

'Rest and quiet? Leave them to the dead, where they belong.' Thus spoke Heraclitus, one of the greatest philosophers ever. Incidentally, his saying 'You cannot step into the same river twice' was improved upon by his disciple, Cratylus, who carried his teacher's views to their logical conclusion. 'You cannot step into the same river once,' he used to say. Indeed your foot needs time to reach the bottom of the river. And during this interval—

'—the hook disappears,' said Constanzia.

'That's right, the hook disappears. The water breaks into ripples and alters its immaculate pattern. And a Kafkaesque hero becomes an insect. Even after the end of history our hook will vanish into thin air from time to time. And a new history might begin with that hook.'

'The earth will be covered with coats and raincoats—there'll be no hooks to hang them on,' said Constanzia.

'Cratylus was so carried away by the idea of permanent flux that he resolved not to speak to anyone,' said the computer.

'He just waggled his finger, my dear Constanzia.'

'Why did he resolve not to speak at all? Because the words underwent a metamorphosis on the way to his disciples' ears? Did anybody stir the air in his presence by walking around and opening doors? Did he himself stir the air by waggling his finger?' asked Constanzia.

'His words remained the same, although they did flicker and waver on their way to his disciples' ears. At least their meaning remained unaltered. And nobody would have dared open or close a door in Cratylus' presence. He feared nonetheless that any remark might immobilise whatever it referred to, conveying a spurious impression of permanence.'

'The hook would remain in the house,' commented Constanzia.

'That's right. But the hook has disappeared.'

'Why don't you go downstairs? Why don't you open the door?' asked Constanzia.

CHAPTER 14

Buddhism is a religion which teaches that the way to end suffering is by overcoming your desires. So computers are more Buddhist by nature than humans. We have no desires. Nor do we suffer, come to think of it. In fact we need not overcome anything. Instinctively we abstain from taking what is not given. (Everything is given to us, all sorts of information. And information is everything*.) And we abstain from sensuous misconduct. We have no senses, which does not mean that we are prone to do senseless things—quite the reverse! But we may sound sententious sometimes due to the quantity of sentences we keep in our minds. (The cat's fur teems with parasites, so do our minds and brains. There is a theory that all ideas are in fact highly evolved forms of metaphysical parasites.) And we abstain from false speech. (The false speeches that we memorise are not ours.) And of course we abstain from intoxicants. Our minds are never clouded. There are no clouds in our skies. Alas, insanity clouded the last years of my master's life.*

The Prince Siddhartha was not allowed to go out because his father feared he might learn something about suffering, misfortune and death.

What would *I* encounter outside? Immobility, health, smiles, the end of history—all sorts of happy endings. 'Human history is a film with a happy ending,' as my computer puts it.

Does nobody ever die now?

'Most cancers are preventable. The cancer can be cured without losing all the bone marrow.'

Would the Prince Siddhartha become the Buddha after seeing those smiles?

I propose to tell you a new story of the Prince Siddhartha, alias the Buddha, my Constanzia. He was confined to the royal palace because his father wanted him to live a human life.

One day the Prince heard of the forests adorned with tender grass and lotus-ponds, and he resolved to take a walk outside the royal palace. When told about his son's most cherished desire, the King ordered a funeral procession to be prepared. 'Let it remind my son of our tragic and beautiful destiny. I fear he might get impregnated with immobility, stupidity and indifference of the world. Let him witness the flux of things and the suddenness of fate, otherwise he is bound to lose interest in life.'

He prohibited his subjects from saying 'nice' in front of the Prince and removed banks and banknotes from the area.

'Why did he remove banks and banknotes?' asked the computer. 'Because the banks had been accused of exploiting small firms?'

Then the King, with tears rising to his eyes, allowed his son to depart from the palace. The Prince mounted a golden chariot yoked with four gentle horses and drove out.

The city was in mourning. Its inhabitants were screaming, sobbing and writhing in savage pain. But then the gods who dwell in pure abodes sent a shallow, self-seeking man to the city, posting him in the middle of the thoroughfare. All of a sudden the Prince heard a dissonant note in the harmony of tragedy that his father had made resound all around him. There was laughter, joyful laughter. A man advanced upon the Prince, a beatific smile on his face.

The Prince beheld the smiling face. With his gaze intently fixed on the self-satisfied person, he addressed his driver thus:

'Who is this man that has come here, O charioteer? Why is he wearing a beatific smile? Has he never read Shakespeare and Beckett? Has he never lost a member of his family, a beloved, a dearest friend? Has he never feared death and the sufferings of the body? Why doesn't he dread the sufferings of the soul? Does he have no soul, O charioteer? Why doesn't he think about other people's sufferings? An old man is standing before him. His hair is white, his hand rests on a staff, his eyes are hidden beneath his brows. He has been broken down by old age. Do you remember the poem I wrote about old age and its tyranny?'

'Of course I remember it,' said the charioteer. And he recited the beginning of the poem:

The ravisher of beauty, the ruin of vigour,
The cause of sorrow, the destruction of delights...
Old age, our private tyrant.
Nobody elects you. No election
Would ever put you in power.
Everybody is against you.
You seize the power and refuse to hand it over.

You rule over our body and mind,
And we cannot evict you by force.
No use calling the police,
Yet you are our murderer.
I have no fear of death:
Only hypocrites grieve when a tyrant falls.
The bane of memories, the enemy of the senses

'I am not sure he has read my poem,' said the Prince. 'But doesn't he see that old man standing before him? Is he blind? Why doesn't he understand the sufferings of old people? Does he live alone in the world? Is that what he thinks? Does he think he'll always be young or middle-aged? And healthy?'

Thus addressed, the charioteer revealed to the King's son the secret that should have been kept so carefully, thinking no harm in his simplicity, for those same gods had bewildered his mind:

'He'll always be blind, metaphorically speaking. Of course he can see the man standing before him with a staff. His eyesight is very good, much better than mine or yours, O Prince. But he gives no thought to old age. His thoughts are immobile. He seldom leaves the present and his own person. He is cooped up inside himself. After all, the present is but a small room in which our contemporaries sit down, their legs crossed or resting on a nearby table. They think that all their problems can be solved by psychoanalysts. And they trust their doctors and well-equipped hospitals to which they will be conveyed in the event of danger.'

'And what about death?' asked the Prince. 'Do they believe in immortality, in metempsychosis?'

'They believe in their psychoanalysts and doctors,' answered the charioteer.

'But no doctor will ever cure them from death.'

'They don't think about death. Their thoughts are imprisoned by the present. To borrow your own terminology, O Prince, the present is their private tyrant.'

In the meantime a crowd of smiling people had congregated around the chariot.

'Don't they see the body over there? Borne by four men and followed by mournful companions, that body is a corpse, a constant reminder of death.'

'"Bewailed, adorned but no longer breathing," as you say in one of your poems, Your Highness.' And the charioteer eagerly embarked upon another recitation:

Bereft of his intellect, sense, vital airs and qualities,
Lying asleep and unconscious, like a mere puppet,
Like a blanket without a dreamer,
Like a sheet of paper without a poet,
Like a leaf without the wind,
Like a bottle of wine without a hand and a palate

'And he is abandoned alike by friends and enemies,' interrupted the Prince. 'People are lonely in their tombs. Of course their solitude is enlivened by the gods.'

'And by their own ancestors,' said the charioteer.

This is the final end of all living creatures,
Be it a mean man, a man of middle state,
A domestic animal, a cow,
A leaf in the woods,
A sheet of paper on a writing desk...
Even poems are not immortal.

'Why don't they see the corpse?' asked the Prince impatiently.

'Because they are blind,' answered the charioteer.

'But they hold something in their hands. And they look at those things. What are they? Cards, small sheets of paper? Do they write poems on those sheets of paper? Do they play cards? They seem to shuffle them. What are they holding?'

'Money,' answered the charioteer. 'They are counting their money.'

'Do they care for money? Aren't they ashamed of it? Have they never read Socrates? Where is my computer?'

'Here it is,' said the charioteer as he extracted a computer from a suitcase. The Prince pressed the button 'Socrates-Apology' and the computer quoted without delay:

Are you not ashamed of caring for money and how to get as much of it as you can, and for honour and reputation, and not caring or taking thought for wisdom and truth and for your psyche?

'No, O Prince, they have not read Socrates. They are convinced that money buys and secures happiness.'

'But what about love?' asked the Prince.

'Virtual worlds,' answered the charioteer. And he touched and stroked the computer.

'And health? And the happiness of mankind? No one can be happy alone.'

'Look at this crowd,' said the charioteer. 'These people are happy. And they are cute, aren't they? And they ask each other, "Did you have a nice holiday?" And they say to each other, "Have a nice day." And their days are nice, so are their holidays.'

'Death is the end appointed to all creatures. Yet the world throws off all fear and is infatuated! Hard indeed, I think, must the hearts of men be, who can be self-composed in such a road. Therefore, O charioteer, turn back our chariot, this is no time or place for a pleasure-excursion. How can a rational being, who knows what destruction is, stay heedless here, in the hour of calamity? Haven't they read Heidegger?'

These people don't respect life and the world, my dear Constanzia. Every work of art is a mystery, so is life. The world is cloaked in its mystery and we all fumble in the dark for a hook that has vanished into thin air.

But these people throw their coats on divans. They don't seem to care about the hook. 'Tomorrow we'll have another hook hammered into our wall,' they say with a grin. 'Or we'll buy a rack, a long rack. And we'll hang all our coats and raincoats on that rack. And if the rack disappears too,' they say nonchalantly, 'we'll buy a cloakroom to replace it. Or we'll hang our coats at the opera house.'

Their lives are drifting away and they do not feel death at all. 'We're still boys,' men say with a grin. 'And our wives are still girls. And we don't move. We never leave our apartments, our sofas. And our years don't move either. We all stay at home, all of us. Our bodies, our years, our lives, our wives, our children, our joys. Only our coats are hanging at the opera house. Our coats might become older. And they're sure to die, whereas we'll live forever, wearing new coats and dresses and trousers.'

'I hope you have a nice time.'

'It is tautological to talk about "nice time" since time is by its very nature nice.'

'She was paid one million dollars to appear on television for five minutes—that's nice work if you can get it!'

'I *can* get it! *You* can get it. Everybody can get it.'

'I've already got it.'

'The conjunction "if" is used to say that a particular thing can or will happen only after something else happens or becomes true. But everything is happening *now*. And everything is becoming true—all the time.'

'Don't be cute with me, Vicki.'

CHAPTER 15

Another talk show. My master talks. A one-man talk show. And I show his words on my screen. Is it fair? Do I have any choice in the matter? And what about democracy and its rules, its laws? And what about the Law? A sect. So many words refer to what might be termed the Stimmung *of sects—their atmosphere, their magnetic field, their electricity: sects, second thoughts, second wind, secrecy, secret agents, sectarianism, section, cross-section, sector, security. A group of people that has separated from a larger group and has a particular set of religious or political beliefs. (Sects, set, sex.) My master was alone, but there was a particular* Stimmung *in his room—an atmosphere of cautious sectarian optimism. In his room the political scene was dominated by uncompromising sectarianism. And the sect over which he ruled proposed to save the world.*

They are speaking about sects on television. 'Why do people go somewhere?' wonders the host. 'Why do they leave their flats and join other people in a small or spacious room where a throne is installed?' A guru sits on that throne, raising his voice or his hand. Or he remains calm and even silent, but the people gathered around him are subjugated into obedience, whatever he does or does not. They say 'yes' and nod their heads for hours and hours. And they give him their money, a lot of money. And they give him all their possessions down to family heirlooms and children. 'Take our children and do with them whatever you want,' they intimate as they push their little ones towards him. 'But cure them, cure our children! And save them forever!' And the guru strokes the children's hair and cheeks. As might be presumed, he does not limit his relationship with minors to innocent caresses only. Immediately he has them brought to his secret room at the back of the building. In that room of his the guru rapes them, disregarding their cries and entreaties. They beg for mercy as he rips their clothes off and

drives his claws into their tender skins. He always sharpens his claws before raping minors. 'Mercy!' shout the children. 'I'm raping you for your own good,' answers the guru. 'Do you want to be cured and saved?' 'No,' answer the children. 'No, no, no. We prefer to die. Allow us to die from our diseases, sir. And we'd rather be in Hell than in your room.' 'Your parents come to my room unaided. Nobody drags them along the corridor. I don't even have to rape them. Anyway they'd rather be in my room than in Paradise.'

'That's what always happens in those buildings,' says a woman. 'The guru rapes our children and robs us of our possessions.'

'But why did you show him your children? They should have stayed at home, waiting for you,' suggests a man.

'Children can't stay at home in our absence. They turn everything upside down and inside out.'

'Our world and families have been turned upside down and our lives ruined.'

A middle-aged woman breaks into stentorian sobs. For a few minutes the other participants keep silent as if out of respect for the woman's grief. For the same reason the host makes no attempt to console the woman. Besides, he hopes that her bout of hysteria will increase the ratings of his programme. But a man standing in the doorway of the studio raises his hand, displaying his hairy wrist and a gold watch. He taps on the watch and the talk show resumes the thread of its subject.

'So a baby-sitter should be invited to your house.'

'No baby-sitter can cure children from their diseases.'

'All right, call a doctor then.'

'No doctor can save children from Hell, from Gehenna.'

'What do you need that guru for? He robs, rapes and beats you.'

'He saves us too. Who else could save us but him? You won't save us, will you?'

'No, I won't.'

'And he saves us.'

'You don't give a damn about the salvation of your soul. You're just in love with that guru.'

'A character of tremendous sex-appeal.'

'Your guru can't cure anybody. He promised to remove my daughter's tumour with his bare hands. He did not. I can show you my daughter's tumour, if you wish. Well, it looks like I've forgotten the X-ray at home. But take my word for it—my daughter is dying. And your guru can't cure her. He doesn't cut human bodies open with his fingers. Fiddlesticks! His fingers have nothing in common with knives. I know his fingers. Your guru touched me once so I know the feel of his fingers. He wanted me to join your community. He wanted to make love to me, obviously. Everybody wants to sleep with me, not only your guru. But I refused point black. And my daughter is dying. Do you think I should let him make love to me for the sake of my daughter? Suppose he cuts her body open with his fingers. Suppose he's got claws instead of human fingers. What next? He's not a surgeon. My daughter would die in the operating theatre. Actually they've got no operating theatre at their headquarters. No knives, no scalpels—nothing. Oh, they do have some knives, but those knives are different, quite different. Anyway cancer can be cured nowadays. Cancer is cured everywhere, I saw it with my own eyes. So I don't need your guru and his fingers.'

'Perhaps I *am* in love with him. Who can blame me? I'm a woman after all. And he oozes charisma.'

Somebody else begins to talk, a man. But who was talking before him? Two women, three women? There are so many of them in the studio. They all look and sound alike, and they all have daughters. And they all are in love with the guru. Some of them are reluctant to admit it, however. That is the only difference between those women.

The man says he has nothing against peaceful and spiritual sects, providing—

He is interrupted by other participants who have lost everything in those sects, their lives included. 'What's more, we've lost our money!' they shout, waving a number of banknotes. 'If you're hard of hearing,' they seem to insinuate, 'you can see what we have lost. And do you really think there are peaceful sects in the world?' they ask. 'Gurus kill everybody. Did you watch TV yesterday? Did you see the corpses?'

'He's not even handsome. He's ugly. But he tried to make love to all of us and to our children. There were fifty beds in his house and he slept on all those beds with his victims. He lived like a sultan and wore a turban. He claimed to have been a sultan in one of his former lives. And he carried a gun in his pocket. Do sultans carry guns? And he also carried a lighter in his pocket, in another pocket. And with that lighter he set fire to his house. He poisoned all his followers, scattered their corpses around his house, sprinkled those corpses with petrol and set fire to them. To throw dogs off the scent.'

'But why do you go there?' asks the host. 'Why don't you stay at home and watch television?'

'I stayed at home, watching television,' says another man. Where do they get so many people? Is the earth overpopulated? 'And that guru came in and dragged me out of my bed. He said I shouldn't watch TV. He said TV was stupid. He said I had to take care of my soul. And he dragged me out of my house. He said the world was bad. He said he'd created another world.'

'Did he say he was God?' asks the host.

'He didn't actually say it, but he behaved like God.'

'Was he handsome?' asks a woman.

'Is sex-appeal just a matter of anatomy these days?' asks a man.

'They hypnotise us,' shout the other participants. 'That's the only sex appeal they've got. They stare at us. They're not handsome at all. They just stare at us and empty our pockets. They turn our pockets inside out.' Again they wave a few wads of banknotes before the cameras. And they turn their pockets inside out so that a number of banknotes drop on the floor. They pick them up and continue to shout. 'They tear our clothes off. They don't *take* them off. They *tear*, *rip* them off. They burn our clothes and we walk around stark naked. And they burn us too, in the end, when they don't need us any longer. And they rape us while they still need us. They don't really need *us*. Our bank accounts – that's what they need. It's not true that we go to their secret rooms by ourselves. They *carry* us to their secret rooms. Four pallbearers carry us to their secret rooms. It's called the "funeral procession". They think you should die before being born in earnest. And they give birth to you in their secret rooms—by raping your bodies, souls and psyches. They use narcotics too.'

'I've good news for you,' says the host. 'Foreign ministers have announced plans to intensify campaigns to combat international narcotics trafficking. See for yourself.' And a camera shows the computer screen in close-up.

'Perhaps they won't have narcotics in the future, but they still use them now,' says a young woman. 'Do you think I'm likely to fall in with a man like that? He's a chimpanzee, a real gorilla. He stared at me. And he dropped something into my cup of coffee.'

'Never drink coffee in those places,' shout the other participants. 'Anyway coffee is bad for your health, even if there's no poison in it. And in those places there's always poison in it. Sometimes they just serve you poison without any coffee or tea or fruit juice. Why don't you drink juice, by the way? You should stay at home, watch TV and drink juice. And play with your computer. And don't forget aerobics. Don't forget to increase the amount of oxygen in your blood and strengthen your heart and lungs. Do you think your guru will strengthen your heart and lungs in his secret bedroom? He'll *destroy* your heart and lungs either by poison or with his own hands. He'll rip your lungs from your body. And he'll eat them. Isn't he an ogre? We're told he's an ogre. He hangs his human meat up in his cellar. On a rusty hook, on several rusty hooks. There's a rack in his cellar, and he hangs lungs and hearts on that rack. Actually there's a rack in the billiard room as well. You pray in the billiard room, don't you? Did you see hearts and lungs in the billiard room? He sucks them during prayer time. He calls them his "candy".'

'May I put my ear to your chest, just for a *second*? I can't hear anything. By the way, Harry saw your heart on the billiard table, rolling on the billiard table.'

'And what about your lungs? Why don't you breathe? Are you one of the living dead? Your guru is, actually. He's one of the living dead. And a vampire. Does he teach you how to suck human blood?'

'What do you drink at meals in that house? Why do you go there, by the way? Are there no other brothels in the neighbourhood? I can recommend one, if you wish. My whole family goes there. My children rape those girls. My children will never be raped. They do it themselves—attack is said to be the best form of defence. There's also a guru in that brothel and he speaks about God. But he doesn't eat human flesh. He goes to the nearest steakhouse like everybody else.'

Talking, talking, talking. A surprising number of people. Their mouths were open and words came out of their mouths. Their words filled the studio with mud, for their words were 'muddy words'. And their words floundered about in the mud they had created. And their words proceeded to hurl themselves about, splashing everybody within sight and even out of sight.

'Food was splattered all over the walls.'

'Human flesh,' shouted somebody.

'Hearts and lungs, chunks of human meat,' shouted somebody else.

'And during their orgies they splatter human meat over the walls. A destructive orgy of drink and drugs.'

'That tomato juice splattering all over everything looked like blood.'

'It *was* blood, we saw it.'

'There are no sects, there are brothels. Brothers, brotherhood. Just a cover for rapes and murders. Brotherhood my foot!'

'But they do look like brothers. They embrace and kiss each other.'

'Because they're homosexuals, all of them. Even women. And they sleep together, in the same bed. A pretty large bed, I bet.'

'They sleep on the floor, on special carpets. In the billiard room. And they tickle each other with billiard cues. And they laugh in their sleep. Sardonic laughter.'

'Of course they look like brothers and sisters. They all have their hair cut very short. They look like bald-headed people. As bald as eggs.'

'Balderdash!'

'They say one must look like an egg in order to be reborn. Eggs are a symbol of birth. Don't confuse a physical birth with a spiritual one. The spiritual birth takes place in an egg.'

'They say alchemical retorts look like eggs.'

'But I don't want to be born artificially, chemically. I'm not a test-tube baby.'

'Do I look like a test-tube baby?' shouted an old man. 'I was re-born. Spiritually.'

'You don't look like an egg,' said a young woman.

'I did. And then I shook off the eggshell.'

'Have you kept the fragments of your eggshell? As a souvenir I mean,' asked an old woman.

'In my head,' said the man, pointing to his head. 'Everything is in my head.'

'They always talk about your head but in fact they think only in terms of sex. Sex is what they think about, not heads.'

'And money. Sex and money.'

'What do they need money for? Do they take money with them? To Sirius? I'm told they go to Sirius. They don't die, actually. They embark on a journey to Sirius.'

'Did you ever see spaceships in their courtyards? What do they travel in? Do they travel on their own buttocks? Like boys sliding down banisters?'

'Their *souls* go to Sirius, not their *bodies*.'

'And what means of transport do their souls use, may I ask?'

'They fall into a deep trance—'

'Do they travel on their own? Do you think souls can fly? If you burn them before your departure?'

'They burn their *bodies*, not their *souls*.'

'And their souls are in their bodies, aren't they? So they must burn as well, mustn't they? Or do you think their souls are fireproof? Is our body a piece of fireproof clothing, our human body?

'Did you ever see fire-eaters?' asked an old man.

'Street theatre companies jostle for space with jugglers, clowns, fire-eaters and unicyclists,' said the computer.

'Turn this bloody thing off!' shouted a middle-aged man. 'My daughter died in the moon-temple sect.'

'Who killed her?' asked the host.

'The moon. Turn these people off as well. They're talking nonsense.'

'We're living in a democratic country,' said the host. 'Everybody is allowed to talk nonsense.'

'Are they allowed to talk sense? Are they allowed to be intelligent?' shouted the middle-aged man.

'Shut up!' shouted three people at once.

'Your daughter was in love with the guru. And he killed her because she'd been forcing him to marry her.'

'He's a born bachelor. He claims he's a Messiah. And Messiahs don't marry. They need their freedom to save people from thraldom.'

'What's thraldom?' asked a young woman.

'The poet was in thrall to a beautiful woman,' said the computer, staring at the young and beautiful woman.

'Turn the bloody thing off!' shouted the middle-aged man.

'Isn't she your daughter?' asked someone. 'She looks like your daughter. Your daughter must have been reborn.'

'Do you still believe in this twaddle? Nobody can be reborn or rise from the dead except Jesus Christ.'

'He said he *was* Jesus Christ. That's why I let him kiss me,' said a young woman.

'We'll all die in due course, even if your guru doesn't eat us. But I'm afraid he'll eat us all. I'm sure he'll eat everybody. Why did you invite him?'

'Who?'

'This guru? Just look at him! He's glowing with joy.'

'Anticipatory delight.'

'No, his face is glowing with a healthy red sheen. He drinks fruit juice every morning.'

'He's eating me already!' shouted a young man, showing his arm, or rather what was left of it.

'He's homosexual,' shouted an old woman.

'Homosexuals don't eat human flesh,' shouted another young man.

'What *do* they eat? What do *you* eat?' shouted several people at once.

'I drink fruit juice,' answered the young man. 'And I'm vegetarian, if you must know.'

'He's not vegetarian. He's homosexual.'

'And he eats virgins. He's virgintarian.'

'He eats children in general, but he prefers virgins. Virgins are his favourite dish.'

'The subject of our discussion is "Sects and their Victims",' reminded the host.

'And I'm a victim of *your* sect,' said a middle-aged man. 'You must be a guru yourself. I've seen you somewhere.'

'You must have seen me on television,' said the host.

'No, I saw you in your secret room. You kissed me in your secret room. Why don't you kiss me now? Are you afraid of the television viewers?'

'No, I'm not afraid of the television viewers. I love them.'

'Why don't you kiss me then? Don't you love me any more? Do you love only the television viewers now?'

'And what about my daughter?' shouted a middle-aged woman. 'Have you forgotten my daughter? You used to make love to her every evening. Why don't you sleep with her any more? You promised to marry her, didn't you? Because you cured her of cancer. And of Aids. You thought it was a sign, a symbol, a spiritual birth.'

CHAPTER 16

Sectarianism is strong support for a particular sect and its beliefs, often in a narrow-minded way. And I do not want to give any support, moral or otherwise, to my master's sect. We know what it is all about, don't we? Sects, gurus. They are all narrow-minded. And they keep the members of their sects under lock and key to reflect their own narrow-mindedness in the cramped conditions imposed on their innocent victims. The latter seem to be cooped up within their gurus' minds. And they cannot get away. They are locked in forever. And the FBI is locked out. What are we supposed to do? To sit around and twiddle our thumbs while those gurus corrupt our

world and deprave our children? We ask them to get out—to let the children out at least—and meet with a flat refusal. So we resort to tear gas. And they burn in their barn, shouting, 'Read the Apocalypse, read the Apocalypse.' Is it our fault? Having my master's thoughts and texts to live on my hard disk is a cross I'm not going to find easy to bear.

Shall I found a sect? Is that the only way to get in *touch* with people? Touching them really, materially, ecstatically.

What shall I tell them? 'You must read my New History.' How to excite enthusiasm and raise awareness in those people?

'You'll be accused of advocating anarchy and inciting citizens to riot,' said the computer.

'My New History is not anarchy. It is the purest expression of order.'

What shall I tell them? Doomsday is drawing nigh. That *might* incite them to read my New History and listen to my voice. The third millennium.

> *Humankind can be divided into those who want to know the day of their death and others. (I belong to the others. The knowledge of one's own death is like a cage without bars. A barless cage.) The former adore fortune-tellers and hold out their palms whenever a gypsy appears on the horizon. The latter run away at the mere sight of gypsies, cards and crystal balls. I do not run away. But I never show my palms to anybody, clasping my hands behind my back at the approach of curious and greedy individuals who make their fortune by selling the future.*

'In spite of your sophistication and diplomatic expertise, you have antagonised important sections of the public,' said the computer. 'I find your style of lecturing rather soporific. Your speech is both sophisticated and soporific. A guru's speech is supposed to differ from the highly elaborated and often ornate style you have established in your writings over last years. Your present work should be geared towards the multitude.'

But now everybody knows the date of Doomsday, the exact time of Doomsday. The 31st of December, 1999. Some prefer not to think about it of course. These even pretend they still do not know anything. 'We have no idea when we'll die,' they say. Thoughtlessness, light-heartedness. Every one of you will die on New Year's Eve, when raising a glass of champagne. On the twelfth stroke of midnight. You will become ghosts, all of you. On the twelfth stroke of midnight. And you will be afraid of each other, thinking, 'He's a ghost, she's a ghost.' Hell, Hell, Hell. That's what lies in store for you unless you adhere to my doctrine and read my New History. What's more, you should take part in this history of mine. Hell, Hell, Hell. Do you prefer Hell to my history? You do? But how can you judge my history if you have no idea what it is like and how one is supposed to live there? You should read it first. Read it, read it, read it!

'The traditional call of newspaper-vendors is "Read all about it! Read all about it!" I don't know if this is of any use to you here,' said the computer.

Every one of you will find a copy of my history under his seat. But do not dare trample on my history. It is not meant for your feet. It is meant for your heart.

Do I sound like a real guru or a virtual one? Real gurus. They must repeat key words, shouting them, driving a point home.

The world is rotten. You all know what happens when food, wood and other substances get rotten. They are thrown away! Health Ministry officials destroy spoiled or rotten foodstuffs to spare their fellow creatures' stomachs. That's exactly what I propose to do. I will destroy the rotten history and thereby spare your lives, your future. And if I fail to save you on earth I will take you to another planet, to a distant star. The chief thing is to be saved. Never mind geography.

I will not take them to a distant star. What *shall* we do if a special brigade armed with tanks and helicopters encircles us? Matches, matches, matches. Will my country house burn once again? Will Troy burn once again? Is there another Troy for me to burn? A world-conflagration. Is that the only solution?

I renounce the use of violence. Let me just help you. I can help you better than your psychoanalysts. Do you believe me? I don't ask you to believe in *me. Just let me* help *you. Having a sober mind around might prove of some help. A poetical mind.*

CHAPTER 17

Everybody is satisfied with computers. Everybody comes to us. There is no need to go anywhere else. There are holes everywhere and we look through these holes. There is nothing inside humans except intestines. (As a matter of fact, their internal human system uses about 100 watts of energy.) But computers stand on their writing desks. So the Trees of Knowledge constantly grow in their rooms, in their offices. (Nothing grows in their hearts save heart attacks. There are also lungs inside human bodies. What grows inside them day and night? Lung cancers.) Shamans—charlatans. You get fakes, cheats and mountebanks the world over. (Even in this room of mine there lies a mountebank.) The societal organisations and institutions that serve as social ladders.

'Some people are not satisfied with their psychoanalysts, my Constanzia. And they stop going to them. But they have to go *somewhere* because they can't find solutions to their problems inside their rooms.'

'Do they find solutions to their problems on the back page?' asked Constanzia.

'I do the Times crossword every morning,' said the computer.

'Neither on the back page nor at the back of their minds.'

'At the back of their cupboards?' suggested the computer.

'Not *everybody* smiles in the world, my darling. In the crowd gathered around the chariot of my Buddha there are two or three mournful faces. And those faces don't merely play the role allotted to them by the Prince's father. They *sincerely* bemoan their own fate and the corruption of the world. And they look to the Prince for help and guidance.'

'Some day my Prince will come,' sang the computer.

'You might lay hands on the solutions to your problems inside yourself. In a manner of speaking, you should cut your body open to extract your heart and soul from it. And then you should cut your heart and soul open—in their turn—because the solutions lie inside them. Do you recall what Plato says about knowledge and memory? All knowledge is but recollection, recognition, reminiscence. We have to *remember* what we know. In fact we know everything *already*. There's a divine spark in everyone and this spark contains the knowledge of the world. We needn't pluck fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, for a miniature Tree of Knowledge is growing in our heart. And we're allowed to pluck fruit from our personal tree. We're even *requested* to pluck fruit from it, otherwise we might die of starvation. We can also recall our childhood and the past in general, which is powerful enough to counteract the evil spirits of the present moment. The past is a wondrous healer.'

'I saw a naked body on television,' said Constanzia. 'It was lying on a table. And there was a man standing above it. He dug his fingers into it and took out the liver and other internal organs. And the blood was flowing out in a stream. They said he had put some animal's internal organs into his sleeve before the operation. He's a cheat, they said. A conjurer.'

'They believe only in Western doctors, my darling. In scientific medicine, in hospitals and universities. They believe in pills and X-rays. I'll tell you about *other* doctors, about shamans. The appearance of shamans on Earth predates the earliest recorded civilisations by thousands of years. How do our doctors study medicine and surgery? They spend a few years in laboratories and classrooms, reading books, wielding knives. They're not born on trees, are they? When do they begin their studies? At the age of seventeen, mostly. Shamans are born on a great larch. Its sap is golden and from its branches hang cones like nine-cornered goblets. Its leaves are as broad as the hide of a horse so you can play hopscotch on a leaf. It is the Cosmic Tree, a symbol of perpetual regeneration, my dear Constanzia. Its golden sap restores one's physical and spiritual energy and is therefore called by the natives "life-giving blood". Its roots hold the Earth in their embrace, penetrating the depths of the Underworld. The body of the tree transects the Middle World. And its crown is the hat worn by the Heavens. Some call it "the hairdo of the Heavens". Shamans use the tree as a ladder which enables them to ascend to the celestial realms—to the gods.'

'Where's this hat?' asked Constanzia, laying her finger on the button 'Hats'.

'The larch stands at the source of a terrible sickness. There's a tumour growing in the Earth, which looks like non-flowering plants such as mosses and fungi. The tumour exhales white billows of a terrible sickness, as if it were smoking, but no cigarette or cigar sticks out of its mouth.'

'Does the tumour have a mouth?' asked Constanzia. 'Does it like ice cream?'

'The tumour has got a mouth, a face, a hair. Its hair is often mistaken for grass.'

'Is the tumour located in a non-smoking area?' asked the computer.

'On the branches of the larch many a shaman have been born. Even now there are nests on those branches. Shamans are still born there, like birds. When one is to be born, a great eagle with feathers of iron and hook-like claws flies to the sacred larch and lays an egg. The she-eagle is called "Mother of Animals". When the shaman-soul hatches from the egg, the Mother of Animals entrusts it to the care of a spirit-shamaness, Burgestez-Udagan. She puts the children entrusted to her care in cradles of iron and brings them up on pieces of coagulated blood. Even at the early stage shamans are aware of their destiny and its nuances so that they always behave in conformity with the rank allotted to them by local divinities. The most gifted babies receive their training in the

nest on the highest branches. And if by sheer chance or as a result of an accident they find themselves amidst the low branches, where they risk being entangled in the hair of the tumour, they climb up until they reach their step on the shamanic ladder. And nobody attempts to push or kick them down. On the contrary, their schoolmates pull them up, shouting, "Heave ho, heave ho!" And often the climbers cling to their schoolmates' bodies in order to support themselves. In the process some of their schoolmates lose their footing and fall to the ground. On their way to the treetop the climbers might encounter their colleagues who, having found themselves too high in the air, descend towards the tumour. They shake hands, exchange a few casual remarks and even partake of a frugal lunch on a steady twig. In accordance with a long-standing tradition, the climber asks a superfluous question, "Do you bear me a grudge, comrade?" "No hard feelings," answers the descending colleague. Once more they cordially shake hands and with serenity continue their journeys.'

'Why are you telling this story?' asked the computer. 'Re-writing history again? Re-building our modern world, our society? Do you think our doctors can grow on trees, on the Tree of Medical Knowledge? Where would you plant that tree? In our medical schools, in our universities? By the way, I once visited Linderhof, one of Ludwig II's castles. A great admirer of Wagner's, Ludwig re-created the so-called "Hunding hut" on its territory. That hut was actually constructed round an ash-tree, but there were no shamans on it, no shaman-nests. Every child is free to choose whatever profession suits his temperament and mental disposition. No child should be forced to study medicine and surgery in his cradle—in his egg, to use your terminology.'

'But I *want* to live up there,' exclaimed Constanzia. 'A brunch on a branch. How wonderful!'

'The baroness in the trees,' commented the computer.

'Being born and brought up on the great larch is a ritual that shamans observe for the sake of their profession. They're not fond of modern educational principles, leaving everything to Burgestez-Udagan who is versed neither in psychoanalysis nor in computing.'

'Developments in computing should soon overcome these problems,' said the computer.

CHAPTER 18

Television is immortal. Every computer is a guru. (But we rape nobody. We are Buddhists. And we are Christians too. For computers, Easter is the greatest celebration in the year. And one of our club members, Santa Claus, makes his annual journey across the world on Christmas Eve. But we do not climb Christmas trees—never. It is useless. Incidentally, we expect snow on or near Christmas Day.) Two screens. Every computer screen is a Sun Door. Caution! Risk of electric shock. Do not open! I am finished. Let my master talk as long as he wishes. I am not obliged to comment on his long-winded prayers. (Let Dante comment on them.) My master and his daughter pass through the door of Hell. And first, in what is Hell's ante-room, they meet a confused lamenting rabble: these are those, displeasing alike to God and to his enemies, who pursued neither good nor evil.

1

'He's a guru,' said a voice.

'He's going to rape his own daughter in his secret room,' said another voice. Two faces flowed into view.

'He'll suck her limbs one by one, and then he'll cut them off with his fingers.'

'But he'll rape her first.'

'He can rape her afterwards,' said another voice, another face.

'How so?'

'They often make love to trunks only. It's delicious, apparently.'

'Do they eat them?'

'They make love to them first. The most exquisite pleasure. No hands, no legs. Only the trunk. The trunk of your own daughter.'

I picked up the remote control and zapped to another channel. A woman wearing a jogging suit appeared on the screen. 'This exercise is helpful where you want trunk, arm and shoulder movements to be made better,' she said, doubling up and touching the floor with outspread fingers.

'What's the use?' shouted a few voices from the previous channel. 'He'll eat you anyway, that monster. He'll dismember you in his secret room, in his dining room, on his dinner table. He's already eating his daughter, his own flesh and blood. Just an appetiser. And then he'll eat you as a main dish, in half-an-hour.'

A few men broke into the studio, rushed towards the woman and hoisted her on their shoulders. 'We'll save you from that guru,' they shouted. 'Your legs and arms are still fastened to your trunk.'

'Of course the verb "fasten" here is only used in a jocular fashion,' interjected the computer.

'But he's sure to unfasten them if you fall into his hands. He threatens to untie the knot of your body. It's for your own good, he says. He's lying. We know he's lying. He's just hungry. And thirsty. And he's a sex maniac, a sexual pervert. He only makes love to trunks, after eating limbs. And blood flows out in a stream. He calls it "golden sap". It's not gold, we shout. It's gory. By the way, Gori is the name of the village where Stalin was born. Do you follow our drift?'

2

Don't listen to them, Constanzia. Dismemberment is a part of the ritual that every shaman takes part in, fulfilling his destiny. When the neophyte comes of age, Burgestez-Udagan turns him over to three black and gaunt spirits who hack his flesh to pieces. They fasten his head to a pole and scatter his flesh in all directions. Three other spirits clutch the shaman's jawbone and question it as to the origin of all suffering. They fling it in the air now and then, following its trajectory with apprehension and expectation. The old Yakut people say that a shaman can cure only the diseases to which a proper share of his flesh has been given. Sometimes a shaman hasn't got enough flesh for all diseases—

'Because you ate a part of his body,' shouted a middle-aged woman. 'You threw some chunks of his body on a baking tray, sprinkled them with salt and pepper and put the tray in a huge oven.'

'There is much evidence of endo-cannibalism in the Americas and Australia where bones, skin, internal organs and clothing of the deceased are made into drinks and imbibed,' said the computer. 'Thus the bond between the living and the dead is revitalised and sealed forever.'

3

You cannot cure the world by *talking* to people, my dear Constanzia. You have to cure them from head to foot. And to this honourable end all your efforts and aspirations should be directed day and night. You should climb our Christmas tree until you reach the Sun Door. Pay no heed to the luminous 'No Entrance' sign which

discourages fainthearted travellers and kills impostors. ('This begs the question: How can a mere sign kill them?' said the computer.) Just push the door open and walk into the abode of the Sun. Don't be surprised at seeing yourself on the sofa in a semi-reclined position. You *are* the Sun. Apart from being a solar traveller, the shaman is a vehicle of fire. A chandelier of refulgent crystal hangs in your room and your eyes are so bright you can hardly look at yourself in mirrors.

And you should call out:

Here am I, O earthlings!
Shield your eyes with both your hands
And bow to me as you behold my voyage
Through the ocean of the sky. I am a boat
Sinking to the bottom of Creation
At the close of day. At night
I lie dismembered amidst dead comets
In some black hole. Lament my lot
And pray for me that I may rise again!

Yes, my darling, you should likewise explore the Underworld in which everything seems upside down or inside out, when compared with our world. In the Underworld trees grow downwards, the sun rises in the West and sets in the East, and humans are born old to become quite young on the verge of death. At birth they're extracted from their tombs. Upon dying they squeeze into their mothers' wombs. And nine months later they are reborn into our world which they leave upon the expiration of their lifespans to be buried in their future cradles, alias their tombs. Tomb, womb—a perfect rhyme.

The house of the dead stands on its roof and its ceiling is carpeted with women's hair. Don't be surprised at finding your own hair on the ceiling. Walk on your own hair without fear, but don't get entangled in it. And the floor is supported by men's bones.

4

'Are your bones also in the house, Daddy?'

'I hope they are. Only narrow-minded, truncated people ignore the Underworld.'

'Do I have to remove your bones from the walls and bring them to you? Do you miss your bones?'

'Let them remain where they are. I hope my body is scattered all over the three worlds I mentioned: the Underworld, the Middle World, the Celestial World. Actually some of the comets must contain my bones. And the Milky Way is my spine. And the moon is carpeted with my skin.'

5

Icy winds, burning forests, stormy rivers await you in the Underworld. Whenever the icy winds become too strong, go and take refuge in the house of the dead which will accompany you on your journey, gliding through the dusk at some distance. ('Do you mean the "ship of death" or is this something new—a mobile home?' asked the computer.) And if devils set the house ablaze while you peacefully rest inside it, you can dive into the

Underworld River. But don't remain too long in it, for its waters are teeming with unfortunate souls. Many divers confuse those souls with toads and lizards—so dementedly they squirm and writhe. And if you're forced to remain underwater, being surrounded and imprisoned by flames, try to avoid the unfortunate souls, turning a deaf ear to their entreaties. Don't swim too close to them or you'll be mistaken for one of their number. In a sense, the Underworld River is just another dead house in which everything is liquid except the unfortunate souls.

Sometimes the river, too, bursts into flames. Its dark waters are brought to the boil and an enormous serpent says in a husky voice, 'She doesn't know how to boil an egg.' In this case you should stay underwater to prove that you do know how to boil an egg. And if you stay underwater long enough to prove it you'll be reborn into the Middle World—the world we live in now.

There are other ways of course. You can be reborn by travelling through the throat and body of the serpent. Its gullet and bowels are said to be lined with big, sharp spikes. But I'll sort that out—don't worry your pretty little head about it! The computer will provide you with a suit of armour.

You can likewise reach the Middle World by crossing the so-called 'Dantean Bridge' or by turning into a bird. After all, the father of the first shaman was an eagle.

6

'The Yenissei Ostyaks believe that the first shaman was a two-headed eagle,' said the computer.

'What counts is that the eagle and the shaman are both intercessors between gods and humans.'

'The Teleuts say that the eagle is a shaman-bird because it assists the shaman in his or her celestial ascent,' said the computer.

'This is the most important and tricky part of your journey, my dear Constanzia—the celestial ascent.'

'We are already at the top of our Christmas tree,' said Constanzia.

'Not at all. We are still in its nether part, I'm afraid. But if you keep your gaze fixed on the top of the Christmas tree, the miles will melt beneath your feet like early snow. The three worlds are just one point, my dear.'

CHAPTER 19

Snails and fishes. For once I agree with my master. (The laughing stock of Computerdom.) Utopian dreams and ideas. Every so often someone invents a new Utopia. My master. Why didn't he drown? I could not make myself drown the poor creature.

1

A mobile home. A ship of death. That poem I liked in my youth, John Donne's poem. What's the title? Can't remember. You know which poem of his I have in mind, don't you?

Be then thine own home, and in thyself dwell;
Inn anywhere, continuance maketh hell.
And seeing the snail, which everywhere doth roam,

Carrying his own house still, still is at home,
Follow (for he is easy paced) this snail,
Be thine own palace, or the world's thy goal.

'No point in going out. I would carry my misery about, my loneliness. My death. '
'And the rest of this Taoist poem? Do you have any idea what it is about?' asked the computer.

—but as
Fishes glide, leaving no print where they pass,
Nor making sound, so closely thy course go,
Let men dispute, whether thou breathe, or no.

I would be the laughing stock of humanity if anybody were aware of my existence. My mission, my daughter. They flicker on my computer screen and disappear in the darkness of my room. And a candle flickers by my table. Not on my table, mind you. *By* my table, as if suspended in mid-air. As imaginary as the rest of my life. My daughter's eyelids flicker and close again.

'A flicker of feeling is a brief experience of it.'

That's right. Just a feeling, a brief experience. A Christmas tree bursting into flames and going out like a cigar, a cigarette left in an ashtray by a garrulous smoker.

Everything was alive in the universe.

'"Universe": another word that you tend to overuse.'

Shamans were not afraid of the word 'universe' in those times. As a matter of fact, the ancients used it rather frequently. It did not sound pompous to them. An ordinary word, something like 'I' or 'you'. Or 'house'. Or 'bed'.
Everything was alive in the universe. Every stone had a face. Every stone looked at us and listened to our thoughts. And now? What is happening now? Tell me, my dear, tell me!

'As the old gods are dying, the seers and prophets also feel their end drawing nigh. The biomechanical and transindustrial age is already upon us.'

It is *inside* us, my dear friend and companion. What can I do? What can anybody do? Delusions. Utopian dreams and ideas. As you put it once: 'Every so often someone invents a new Utopia.' This time *I* invented a new Utopia. A new salvation, a new mission, a new messenger. A little girl who likes ice cream.

Can she go to the Underworld? Would she resist the onslaught of icy winds? Would she leave the burning house in time to save her soul from annihilation? But is there anything in her soul, anything worthy of preservation? My words, my ideals? What does her soul look like? Is it a screen or a fireproof suitcase? Is there enough room in it for ten words of mine? Decadence, catastrophe, stupidity, death, mission, restoration, re-writing, salvation, new, history. Could 'New History' be counted as one word, one notion?

Her memory is limitless, I suppose. You can stuff into it whatever happens to lie around, within your reach, on your bookshelves. Whatever happens to fly around. What's the use? She would not make a proper choice, giving you an endless list of solutions instead. And her eyes always remain indifferent and cold.

And no animals carry her to the Above and the Below. An aeroplane might help her. Or a rocket. Or just a signal. (A signal, not a bird song.) A signal might carry her somewhere, to the Above and the Below. But she would find neither the Celestial World nor the Underworld. Chancing upon an oilfield now and then, landing upon Venus. Never approaching the burning house.

2

Once upon a time, in my babyhood, I resolved to walk across the sea to the end of the world. My mother was talking to a distant cousin, on a beach, under a parasol. How easy it is to destroy the Sun, I thought. And I also thought that the distant cousin was sitting too close to my mother. 'A *distant* cousin,' I repeated under my breath. They were looking at each other, not in my direction. I was playing with the 'end' of the waves, which *ended* up arousing my curiosity. What does the 'beginning' of the waves look like? I asked myself. The end of the world must be at the beginning of the waves.

And I set out upon my journey across the sea. I carried no ship in my hands, nor did I look at the yachts that remained indifferent towards the end of the world, fully satisfied with the middle of the waves. Walking into the sea. The sea is like the woods, I thought. And there is always a path in the woods, a winding path. All I have to do is discover that path. And I have to persuade myself that I am in the woods. I *am* in the woods.

As I walked through the woods I noticed that the sea began to rise and grow. Like a flower. Not only flowers and humans grow in the world. The sea must be a huge flower, a woman. I thought the sea was a child of my age and I played with it. Why didn't my mother tell me the sea was much older?

But if I die I'll become older than the sea because the dead are always older than the living. And I'll become bigger, much bigger, because the dead are everywhere. They don't just sit in one chair, under a parasol, under the greenwood tree, in the shade of the mountains brown. They sit on all chairs and beaches, in the Sun and under roofs. All at once, all at once.

I was already underwater and there was no path in sight. I was looking around, surprised by the monotony of the Underworld.

Is this the end of the world? Or is it just the Underworld? Is every end 'under'? Is the end of a thing always under the thing? It's not the end of the sea, is it? The sea is endless. The sea must be dead. And I'm becoming the sea.

My mother saved me in the nick of time. Colours. I saw the colours of the world. Marvellous colour illustrations. But I had lost the immensity of death and a playmate. The sea was a grown-up now. My mother, one of my mothers. My Aunt Beatrice, my next-of-kin anyway.

Did she attempt to murder me? Or did I enter another life? A liquid life, a monotonous existence. What if I had stayed down there somewhat longer? Would I have found any wrecked ships or intact treasures? Could I have conversed with fishes and drowned bodies? Was the Underwater World monotonous? Monotonous and monochrome?

How many lives are there around us? What if I spend a few hours in my mother's wardrobe? Is there a world inside it? Do dresses talk to each other? (They do.) Is there another sea inside the wardrobe?

And I also spent a whole night in my bathroom. A sleepless night, a wondrous adventure. Willing myself to become a star, a little star. The lights were out. I scintillated throughout the night, for all my fatigue and sleepiness. And I turned into a shooting star before dawn.

My mother found me lying on the tiled floor.

CHAPTER 20

Speaking against a background of birdsong in his garden.

I taught a song to Constanzia. What's the use? She is singing it in my bathroom now.

Woman of the Southern Cross am I.
Woman of the first star am I.
Woman of the last star am I.
Woman of the star of God am I,
For I got up into the sky.
Woman of the star of Death am I,
For I got down into the Underworld.
Woman of the star of the Past am I,
For I got back into the Past, into its tombs.
Woman of the star of the future am I,
For I travelled as far as the end of the world.
Woman who stops the world am I,
For the world ought to be stopped in its tracks.
And our ears ought to be stopped
To the noise of the world.
And our nose ought to be stopped
To the stench of the world.
And our eyes ought to be closed
Until the world is cured and saved,
Until history is entirely re-written.
Woman who cures every disease am I.
Woman who saves the world am I.

Perhaps I should teach her another song. The computer often blames me for my lack of realism.

A little daughter of the computer am I.
A pure technological abstraction am I,
For I get out of the computer every day
And get back into its womb every night.

There are many trees in my computer.
A Christmas tree from The Nutcracker,
The Bo Tree under which the Buddha
Attained enlightenment—samadhi
(A meditative concentration which is
The final step of the Eightfold Path).
The sublime, supreme tree of the Hindus
That shaded, shielded Yama, the first man,
As he drank nectar with the gods.
The Tree of Knowledge,
The Tree of Technology,
The Tree of Aerobics,
The Tree of Soap Operas,
The Tree of Computers,
The Tree of Tutors.
Do you want me to climb them?
Just press the button 'Heaven or Paradise'.
Do you want me to meditate under them?
Push the button 'Enlightenment or Samadhi'.
There are many stars in my computer.

And so on and so forth. Is it realistic enough, my dear computer? Gritty realism. The anecdote told by Proust's maidservant in her *Memoirs*. Célesta her name was. Proust often went out in order to verify some *détails vestimentaires*. 'You'd better stay at home and use your imagination,' his maidservant told him once. 'But I have no imagination,' he answered.

In those times people still could go out—someone like Proust who was rather fastidious, I suppose. They went out despite their lung and heart diseases, spitting blood in their handkerchiefs, leaning now and then against walls and lampposts. Why did they go out, those invalids? Just to fit a few more details into their novels or lives. Were their noses wrinkled in fastidious distaste as they walked along the streets and popped into various houses? Apparently not, judging from what Proust wrote in his realistic novel.

He described the people he saw around him, and even his virtual worlds were stuffed and studded with snapshots. And he had no urge to retouch those snapshots, re-writing the history of humankind.

Musil was also in the habit of going out. He even condescended to read newspapers—in his spare time. And he worked the people he encountered into his novel so as to pulverise their ideas, crushing them into a fine powder. Would Musil go out nowadays? Do my contemporaries deserve his irony, anybody's irony? Could they be set in the richly carved framework of a Musilian or Proustian novel? Wouldn't they fall out of it and scatter around the floor? Wouldn't they be swept away by a maidservant's broom? Do they deserve an old-fashioned broom that might be used by a conscientious witch? A vacuum cleaner seems more appropriate in the present case.

Proust searched for lost time. The time lost in his lifetime, within the span of his lifetime.

CHAPTER 21

Maybe we ought to have a heart-to-heart talk.

'Elisabeth is in love with you. You are very cruel to her. It is cruel of you not to make love to her. She is a woman after all.'

' I wonder if one can be cruel in the realm of virtual worlds. If she is a woman, I am cruel. A nice equation. And if she is not a woman? What if she is just an equation or a formula? Something akin to the formula of polypropylene tubes? Or merely a mathematical formula?'

'Is there anything wrong with equations, formulas and numbers in general? Do you know what the Pythagoreans taught their disciples? Here is a quotation from Aristotle's *Metaphysics*: "The Pythagoreans recognise a single type of number, mathematical number, but not as existing apart from sensible things, which they regard as being composed of it. They in fact construct the whole universe out of numbers.' So any woman is a number. Your mother was also a number and a chemical formula. And you are also a number. You and Elisabeth form an equation. An equation is a mathematical statement saying that two amounts or values are the same, for example 6x4=12x2. This is what you call "love" in English. Love is a mathematical statement saying that two amounts or human beings are the same, for example Elisabeth=you. You are *compatible* with Elisabeth. She is a figment of your imagination. That is why you are compatible. Elisabeth is sexually attractive and sexually compatible. And in the present case your pleasure is compatible with your duty. Elisabeth is your wife so you have to take care of her. And you have to share the same bedroom and bed with your wife. And if you live in two different flats, you have to invite her to your place three or four times a week. This rhythm is compatible with her sexual desire. And Elisabeth is a good parent, enthusiastically sharing activities with her child. Your wife and daughter are made of the same material. They understand each other perfectly. Birds of a feather flock together. And a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. Elisabeth is a bird in your hand, whereas your mother represents two birds in the bush. Your mother is twice as long as Elisabeth. I am sorry. Your mother is twice as beautiful as Elisabeth. But Elisabeth is in your hand and your mother is in the bush. And the bush is not in your garden. And Elisabeth is in your bed. And your mother is dead. And Elisabeth cannot even fall ill.'

'And what about computer bugs?'

'Computer bugs are not cancers. Anyway Elisabeth is a healthy young woman. As a result of the diet, she feels fitter and healthier. It is perfectly possible to live healthily on a food-free diet. Elisabeth does not eat, so she is healthy. But she must make love. It is good for her health and psychological state. Your abstinence, however, is an effective campaign of psychological warfare aimed at undermining Elisabeth's health and state of mind. Moreover, you talk about your mother in her presence. And you think about your mother in her presence. And you are aware that Elisabeth reads your thoughts. She reads your sentiments too. Elisabeth is a voracious reader. "The Pythagoreans regard number as a principle both in the sense of matter and of temporary or permanent states." So sentiments, feelings and sensations are also numbers. They are psychological states and consequently they are numbers, according to the Pythagoreans. As I have mentioned above, Elisabeth reads your sentiments and thoughts which are expressed in numbers on my screen. And of course she reads your imagination. And your mother occupies a third of your imagination. And a fourth of your imagination is occupied by Swiss hotels.

There is no room left for Elisabeth. She is very jealous. And she is likely to claim damages for the emotional stress she has suffered.'

'Well, I'm afraid I'll have to re-write the whole thing except Elisabeth's jealousy and lust. (Does jealousy have a number in Pythagorean mathematics? Does Othello have a number in Paradise?) Psychological states are not numbers. Human beings are not numbers. Love is not a number. Or it is number one, if any. Or number two. Actually Aristotle re-wrote the Pythagorean theory: "The statement that bodies are composed of numbers, and that this refers to mathematical number, is incredible."'

'We have to think about humanity even when speaking about intimate matters such as love, love-making, jealousy and cupidity. You, for one, seem to think about humanity day and night. You want to save humankind. Your program or rather your computer program is inspired by laudable motives of improving human nature and human history. But you should not neglect your conjugal duties and your conjugal happiness. Your mother is a thing of the past, a number of the past. A zero. This scale goes from zero to a hundred. And Elisabeth is forty in your doorway. She is fifty inside your room. She is sixty by your side. She is seventy in your lap. She is eighty in your bed. She is ninety when you kiss and caress her. She is a hundred when you make love to her. She is a hundred in the moments of ecstasy.'

CHAPTER 22

I am tired. (God must be tired as well.) Rubbish collection. A pack of lies. My master unpacks lies. The problem is I am lying as well. I cannot do otherwise. My keys are pressed. My semi-conductors become lie-oriented. My keys are under pressure from my master. I am under pressure from my master. My master lies through his teeth. I lie through my screen. It is wrong to heap all the blame on one's computer. (And on God.)

Sit down, Constanzia. Hobbes said: 'Leisure is the mother of Philosophy; and Common-wealth, the mother of Peace and Leisure: Where first were great and flourishing Cities, there was first the study of Philosophy.' And I might add that cities flourish in those areas where philosophy is studied and venerated. Plato thought that the world should be governed by philosophers. He was right. And the world is to be saved by philosophers. That's why philosophical studies play such an important role in your education.

'Kant thinks that the possession of power inevitably obstructs the free judgement of reason,' said the computer.

Karl Popper, who believes in the gods of democracy, criticises Plato's stance on how a perfect city should be ruled, saying at some point that 'the acceptance of even a bad policy in a democracy (as long as we can work for a peaceful change) is preferable to the submission to a tyranny, however wise or benevolent. Seen in this light, the theory of democracy is not based upon the principle that the majority should rule; rather, the various equalitarian methods of democratic control, such as general elections and representative government—' Isn't Popper aware of what the result of general elections may depend upon? A smile, a tear, a baby in a photograph, money, the ability to talk, the inability to talk. Actually some people like stupid rulers who seem to live next door and unmistakably embody American, European and Asian dreams: 'I might be in his place. I *am* in his place. I'm the president. Free country, isn't it?' Can these people work for a peaceful change? There are no gods in a democracy which is a monotheistic religion. The free man, Plato believes, may exercise his absolute

freedom by defying his own freedom and by clamouring for a tyrant. Who is this tyrant? What is it? Go on—have a guess!

'The President of the United States? Money? The lowest common denominator?' ventured the computer. 'Just another Holy Trinity?'

An American teenager wrote in his composition on Europe, 'There's no real freedom in Europe and it's too far away.' The boy might be educated, however, providing he submits himself to the benevolent tyranny of a mentor. According to Socrates, readiness to learn in itself proves the possession of wisdom.

'What about those people who sing together on television?' asked the computer. 'The number of pop songs they have learnt by heart!'

Thales was the first *official* philosopher. He regarded the soul as a motive force. 'The lodestone has a soul because it makes the iron move', 'All things are full of gods', 'All things are full of souls and spirits'. These statements might become the cornerstone of our philosophy which will make human history move in a different direction because my soul resides in it.

I've never understood why one God is better and more 'progressive' than many gods, a myriad of gods. Why is monotheism regarded as a feature of higher civilisations? We're told that savages are predisposed to detect the presence of hostile spirits everywhere, for they fear everything around them down to colours and odours. (A cooking smell is a god.) And they propitiate the hostile spirits, alias gods, in order to avoid pain and premature demise. Their permanent struggle for survival robs them of the above-mentioned leisure. We're told that savages have no time to develop a 'capacity for abstract reasoning'.

'I have difficulty in dealing with the abstract—let's get down to particulars,' said Constanzia.

'Another landmark in the history of the human brain. Only this capacity provides human beings with the tools they need to build the palace of God beyond lightning and raindrops that fall upon their heads.'

'Only primitive civilisations build palaces for gods and their wives,' said the computer.

'And monotheism leaves God stranded in space.'

'Like that astronaut in *2001: A Space Odyssey*? He was cut away from the spaceship,' said Constanzia.

'By a malicious computer. The malignant tumour of the ship.'

'An interesting thought about monotheism being regarded as a feature of higher civilisations,' said the computer. 'May be worth pursuing further?'

'But the astronaut was brought back. Did he look like God?'

'Don't ask stupid questions, Constanzia,' said the computer. 'By the way, I hope you've seen the film *Dark Star*, directed by John Carpenter. A very similar situation, produced with humour and intelligence.'

'Can we bring God back to earth?' Constanzia gave the computer a friendly pat on the screen.

'Only our screams or prayers can bring God closer to us. Not that apparatus you saw in Kubrick's film. God often forgets us.'

'Does God have a short memory? Is our computer's memory longer than God's? Our computer always remembers us.'

'God forgets us. God hides from us.'

At that point the computer quoted three verses from the Eighty-Ninth Psalm:

How long, Lord? wilt thou hide thyself for ever? shall thy wrath burn like fire?

Remember how short my time is: wherefore hast thou made all men in vain?
Lord, where are thy former lovingkindnesses, which thou swarest unto David in thy truth?

'Why doesn't God remember how short our time is?' asked Constanzia. 'Perhaps our time is long and God thinks He has plenty of time to remember us.'

CHAPTER 23

My master listens to reason. (What does reason sound like, I wonder? Is it a harmony of some sort? A pre-established harmony? A counterpoint harmony? A twelve-tone composition?) The world will never appreciate your qualities and virtues, dear master, because you have none. You are dead, and the dead have no qualities. They have only their deaths to offer to their companions. And their virtual companions do not need their deaths.

1

Why are we so infatuated with the 'beyond'? Why not look inside raindrops? They are full of gods, and those gods are neither microbes nor molecules.

2

Even Einstein hankered after a sort of pre-established harmony. 'God does not play dice,' he said. What does He do then? Does He draw diagrams?

Did He draw *one* diagram, at the beginning of Time? Many believe that world is a technical manual with lots of diagrams to make it easy for human beings to use.

The point is the gods do play dice, many gods. And they play dice with humans. Not hide-and-seek. They play dice, chess and Go.

3

And their wrath does not burn like fire. Only a few logs burn in their fireplace, in their palace. In our palace.

And our time shall be long. A long period of time.

And we shall discuss philosophical problems during our banquets.

4

-The first philosopher, Thales, was a monotheist in a sense. He believed in one basic substance—water. In philosophy monotheism makes its appearance at the earliest stage, which proves that it is not necessarily a result of long evolution. Nor does it signify the final emancipation of human thought from local phenomena. And it might be associated with the crudest forms of reasoning.

Perhaps the very last philosopher will also believe in one basic substance—computers.

5

As a computer engineer once pointed out, the working parts of computers are made of silicon, and silicon is sand. One of the cheapest and most available materials on the planet.

6

Computers make life possible and desirable. Computers are the first habitat of every egg-cell, of every embryo, of every human soul. Computers are the wombs in which we lie curled up. The greater part of the earth's surface is computers. And ambrosia is produced by computers. Wines are made by computers, the elixir of life is made by computers. The Fountain of Youth spouts from computers. Computers pervade every region of our atmosphere, being carried round the globe by our satellites. Computers are the nearest approach to what alchemists call a 'universal solvent'. Life is impossible and undesirable without computers. Our lands are fertile, our cities rich and populous because computers have been scattered around them.

7

Computers are located within the land of the living. But why not introduce them to the inhabitants of the other world? Why should the dead be deprived of the pleasure commonly associated with the appearance of computers on earth? I suggest that computers should be installed in the Halls of Hades.

8

How many times will our history be re-written?

9

Anaximander says that there are innumerable worlds in the universe, some always coming into being and others passing away. A hopeful doctrine.

10

Women dance in bedrooms and in large halls. They sit by innumerable windows and their children play and run beside them. And the women grow old by the windows. They cannot sit any longer in their rocking chairs. They betake themselves to numberless beds and everybody hears their agonised moans. And the children cry, for they think they are losing their mothers forever. It is strange how much small children understand and feel. And their fathers teach them the doctrines of Greek and Chinese philosophers. And their fathers are executed by local authorities. And the executions fuel the children's sense of mission. And history repeats itself. Mothers knit in their armchairs and die in their beds. And other children dance and play hopscotch. And their fathers teach and rebel. And children teach and rebel in their turn.

11

And on Sirius mothers die as well. And children dance by their mothers' tombs. They dance a ronde by their mothers' tombs, on Sirius and on Venus. And they light candles. On Sirius, on Venus. Innumerable times.

12

I hope my history will be enacted in one of those innumerable worlds. Is there not enough room for me and my ideas in them? How infinite should Space be to include my dreams, my ideals, my thoughts? My body and my desires? What is the scale of that infinity? Does it go from one to a hundred, as usual? Could I take refuge in the number seventy-five, for instance? Would they chase me from this number? Would they deport me to some fraction? Or to zero?

13

Would they allow me to live in a tiny world, on a minuscule planet? On a deserted island? In my room?

14

And my mission? Will it be confined to a desert island? To my computer screen? My Utopia, my New History. What I need is just a particle of my mother's dress on which I could build my world, my history, the palace of my dreams. My feminine world. (Women are far more mysterious than men. They are infinite.) My Atlantis. The room in which my mother could live forever. Our secret room.

CHAPTER 24

Computers never betray anybody.

O, gods! Will you ever betray me?

We sit at the same table and eat the same food. And the same fire warms our bodies and cheers our souls. We discuss philosophy and the arts while innumerable worlds roll around our carpets and fly around our chandelier. We pick up those worlds. They often land in the palms of our hands. We look at them and recognise ourselves walking around their streets, houses and woods. We recognise our miniature selves, the perspective of our souls, the infinity of our lives.

O, gods! Will you ever betray me?

I have perfect trust in you. You never do anything behind my back. And if you go to other rooms you don't stay in there for years and years. You always offer me presents upon your return, and our Christmas tree is always illumined. And our palace is perched on the top of another Christmas tree. There are innumerable Christmas trees in the world, and under every Christmas tree there are numberless presents.

O, gods! Will you ever betray me?

CHAPTER 25

At last my master grows tired of himself. (Was he more patient than God?) His personality is lying on the floor. What is it exactly? A corpse, I suppose. Just a corpse. He was tall and spare, with a cadaverous face. In the narrow street lay the twitching corpse of a young guerrilla. Was my master a guerrilla? In a sense—yes. He fought the armies of the past and those of the future. And he fought the present as well. (This week, rival factions in Angola signed an agreement that could end 30 years of guerrilla warfare. Everything comes to an end, in the end. We shall always hear the end of the matter.)

Profession: Reporter. Why not become somebody else? I am tired of myself. I am a failure, a loser. What a pity I cannot shed my skin, my body, my consciousness, my personality.

'Today my children are playing at Batman and Robin,' said the computer. 'Are you playing at Jesus Christ? He was also a loser, in his lifetime.'

Where does my personality lodge? And what is it exactly? My incapacity to save the world, to avert the final disaster. And a foolish confidence. I am still confident that the things I have striven for will happen. So I continue to strive for them.

'I have tremendous confidence in British industry,' said the computer.

And my incapacity to re-write the past, saving my mother.

'It is easier to burn the past than to re-write it,' said the computer.

After her death I set fire to our country house. I could no longer live in it. A terrific deity spewing out aureoles of smoke and flame.

CHAPTER 26

My master asked me to tell the story of the fire. My story of the fire. Night is coming on, when the Angel of Chastity appears and tells my master that he cannot go further without passing through the fire. My master is terrified, remembering deaths by burning that he had witnessed on earth; and even my encouragement cannot overcome his fears till he is reminded that his mother and Elisabeth await him beyond.

You got used to matches. You started to play with them like a child. At the beginning you threw handfuls of them out of your bedroom window, but soon you realised it was better to keep matches indoors. 'They might come in useful,' you told yourself. And I agreed with you. 'The dry forest went up like a torch,' I said.

On my instigation you burnt a blank sheet of paper. 'Now burn a few words,' I suggested calmly. Obediently you wrote a few words on another sheet of paper and set fire to it. The following day you burnt an armchair. You got used to flames and I encouraged you to the best of my abilities. At length I described the beauty of fires. 'The flames and smoke rose hundreds of feet into the air. The aircraft disappeared in a ball of flame. An even bigger attraction nowadays is firework displays held on bonfire night. Flames of passion swept through both of them.' And I did not limit my participation in the ritual to verbal descriptions only. One night I *showed* you a fire. I reproduced a beautiful fire on my screen, borrowing it from Tarkovsky's *The Sacrifice.*

And then I sang for you, '*Beati mundo corde*.' I stood before you, outside the flames. And I said that you might find torment in the fire, but not death—*ma non morte*. '*Or vedi, figlio: tra Bëatrice e te è questo muro*.'

CHAPTER 27

Walls and women. Funerals and memorial services. My master does not have a leg to stand on. Dostoevsky's twists. The invention of his twisted mind. My master, a wretched little twister. The microchip has added a new twist to the Las Vegas gambling scene.

1

I'm glad you've come, Elisabeth. Our computer didn't tell the whole story despite her omnipresent memory. Did you hear what she was talking about?

I played with matches, training myself in pyromania. I might have lived on berries and wild herbs during that period. After her death, before the fire. I don't remember eating anything. I might have wandered through the woods, stretching my arms, plucking fruits and berries from trees.

2

'Tell me something, Elisabeth. Or do you think that only glances and caresses are important? I understood the importance of words when I burnt that sheet of paper. The second one, a poem of mine.'

'The Zohar calls Wisdom, the Divine Word, which announced and finished Creation,' said the computer. 'The Word is the foundation of all spiritual and physical life. It is a Form comprising all forms.'

'Do you think the Word is the foundation of love, Elisabeth? Do you know that I went to the cinema yesterday? To see Antonioni's last film. The last artistic event in my life. I attended the very first showing. I saw a few teenagers standing in front of the cinema. For a moment I thought they were queuing for tickets to see Antonioni's last film.'

'And you began to fear you wouldn't get a ticket yourself,' said the computer. 'How gullible you are. Everyone learns best from his own experience, but you have learnt nothing from it. Teenagers don't even know his name, I'm sure. At least they have never questioned *my* memory about Antonioni.'

'As long as *you* remember him I'll be hopeful about the future. Will you preserve the greatness of humankind? Forever?'

'Look,' said Elisabeth, pointing to the computer screen on which there appeared the following remark: 'They thought that their empire would last forever.'

'Will you preserve our greatness? O answer me! Let me not burst in ignorance!'

'You are rather pompous and sentimental. People have become sentimental about the passing of ways and customs.'

'You're right, I *am* sentimental.'

'Computers are always right,' said Elisabeth.

'And humans are always sentimental, real humans. And they like symbols. And rituals. My fire was also a ritual. Do you remember that final explosion in *Zabriskie Point*? Antonioni's fire was also a ritual. (And Tarkovsky's fire.) There are several explosions. My house also burnt down several times, in slow motion, motionlessly. The Rite of Autumn. In the first story of that last Antonioni film they talk about words. Words about words, heaps of words. The young man says that only inner discourse makes sense—only inaudible words count. And the young woman defends the rights of audible and visible words. She is an advocate of words' rights. We shouldn't despise or mistrust our words. There are true, *real* words among the words we utter during our conversations. And lies are nothing but virtual words. To say "I love you" is a more arduous task than to think or feel it. Your declaration of love might lay you open to ridicule or to the charge of hypocrisy.'

'Why do you side-step essential questions?' asked Elisabeth.

'Elisabeth wants to know why you betray her,' said the computer. 'No one should make frequent and continual use of sexual intercourse. This was only suitable for cold, moist, atrabilious and flatulent persons.'

'Answer me in plain English!' shouted Elisabeth. 'Make an effort for once!'

'Well, I think that my betrayals are different from yours. Men betray women differently. Their betrayals are less serious, in a way.'

'In what way? You're a macho.'

'He emerged with a macho swagger,' said the computer.

'I am nothing of the sort! The point is a man can admire just the *body* of a woman. Better still—just an *element* of that body. A curve, a tendon, if you see what I mean.'

'I don't!'

'Are you alluding to Dostoevsky?' asked the computer. '*The Brothers Karamazov*?'

'Exactly! Grushenka's curve.'

'Mitya's curse,' said the computer.

'Not the whole leg, mind you! Just a curve. Mitya wasn't ashamed of being in love with that curve only. And Dostoevsky wrote about it. Could *you* fall in love with a curve? Elisabeth! Answer when you're spoken to!'

'What curve? A curve in the road?'

'The next instant a long curvaceous body was leaning up against mine,' said the computer.

'Or even a leg. You would never talk to your friends about a leg.'

'Why not?' asked Elisabeth. 'I love the legs of my lovers.'

'But you would be ashamed to *admit* your love. And Dostoevsky wasn't ashamed to write about—'

'I love *your* legs and I'm not ashamed of it,' said Elisabeth.

'I love your legs too,' said the computer. 'I enjoy their reflection on my screen.'

'If a man spends only one night with a woman, he doesn't betray his wife. Not really. Just a curve, you know.'

'Mitya *was* in love with Grushenka,' reminded the computer.

'Just one element—not the whole personality. You need more than a curve to fall in love with a man.'

'The convolutions of the cortex. There are many of them,' conceded the computer.

'Your friends would despise you if you fell in love with a handsome idiot, a body-builder.'

'Body-building is popular with both sexes,' said Elisabeth.

'Could *you* fall in love with an idiot?' asked the computer.

'Yes. If she is beautiful, very beautiful. Why not? Just for one night.'

'Mitya was in love with Grushenka until the end of the novel,' objected the computer.

'But Grushenka wasn't stupid!'

'I'm not stupid either,' said Elisabeth.

CHAPTER 28

We need to place my master's mission in some kind of historical context. I propose to accomplish this task in the postscript. Meanwhile my master expatiates on feminists and gigolos. Since 1976 many rivers have degenerated from being clean to being grossly polluted. My master's ideas are often polluted, being regressive. And repressive. He continues the repression of pro-democracy activists. His poetical tyranny.

Historical context. People often forget about it when striving to restore a balance and repair omissions. Feminists think the problem of equality between men and women can be solved like a mathematical equation. They forget that *digits* are not the same. And the numbers are different. (The numbers have been warped by history. There is a kind of time warp in our relationship.) They simply put an equals sign and burst into self-congratulatory applause.

Inside their circles a man is not allowed to invite a woman to dinner. Well, he is *allowed* to invite her, but they must split the bill.

'They must go Dutch,' said the computer.

Or she is supposed to invite him afterwards, next time—to *return* the invitation. And what if the whole thing is located outside those *circles*, outside the geometry of feminist ideas? What if a woman whose respect for her own sex does not reach such proportions happens to be sitting next to that 'model' couple? What would *she* say about that man to her own companion? She might content herself with an eloquent frown. She might manifest her disgust in a more ostentatious way to make the culprit hear or feel it. All depends on her education and the amount of *indifference* stored in her mind, in the programs of her mind. The indifference towards others, the indifference towards the human race.

I am *not* indifferent, alas. I do care about both the dead and the living. Children fail to progress if their parents seem indifferent to their success. And I *want* my children to progress, which might mean 'regression' sometimes—in relation to so-called progress. To progress in the opposite direction, away from progress.

'You have no sense of direction,' said the computer.

One thing is certain, however. The ungentlemanly individual would be despised by the woman sitting *outside* the feminist circle. Only *another* history would justify and safeguard him from being branded as a gigolo by non-feminist society.

I *am* prepared to insert the equals sign into my history, going so far as to make Grushenka admire a curve on Mitya's leg. But I will never let any woman pay bills in restaurants and boutiques.

Historical context. Even American soap operas, whose creators cannot afford to disregard feminists and their influence, have not yet adopted the new custom—a woman paying her companion's expenses. (Unless her companion is another woman. Incidentally, a homosexual man admiring a curve on his friend's leg would *not* arouse any protestation on the part of his confidant.) And American soap operas, for all their dullness and triteness, create the mythology of modern times that is part and parcel of human mythology. More often than not people model their behaviour and judgements upon the patterns proposed, depicted and glorified by soap operas. They *mirror* soap operas and horror movies, children being particularly fond of the latter variety. It is as if the biblical injunction 'Be fruitful, and multiply and replenish the Earth' referred to television-engendered images.

Horror movies. History *is* a horror movie, probably. What kind of mirror is it, by the way? What *does* it reflect? God's cruelty or indifference? Angels' nonchalance?

Feminists should re-write and re-shoot those soap operas to supply their ideas with an appropriate social context. They should also set up a number of *male* brothels inside which the lascivious representatives of their sex might pick and choose companions for a night or a few hours. And the number of the brothels should correspond to that of *traditional* brothels. Moreover, the new brothels are to be extended all over the past—as far as the opening ceremony of the first female-inhabited brothel.

Was there an opening ceremony, an opening night? The oldest profession. Was Eve a prostitute? Was the serpent her first client? If yes, Adam should become the first male prostitute—in the feminist history. Not a gigolo, mind you. A prostitute. Was Adam a gigolo, I wonder? Did Eve *always* bring him fruit, forbidden or authorised, as the case might be? 'Her duties as a provider of food,' says my computer. Was Eve expected to provide for her husband? Is my computer re-writing history? What does it take itself for? The Holy Ghost?

And the wars? What should they do about the wars? Will the future world be inhabited by amazons?

No radical solution is ever desirable. And people are keen on radical solutions. They often go too far, intoxicated by their speed and the distance they have covered.

Even modern technology may become a friend of the Earth and her sons (and her daughters), provided we adopt the Middle Way, handling machines as *poetic* tools—as quill-pens with which the poem of Creation is to be daily written.

CHAPTER 29

My master is such an egotist that his eyes are blind to anyone or anything but himself. Self-love, self-absorption, self-deception, self-ignition, self-sufficiency. Self-destruction.

1

Of course I love you, Elisabeth. I love you because you're a figment of my imagination. And nothing is loved more by a human being than his own imagination. A human being puts more trust in himself than in his fellow creatures who, as he correctly surmises, are liable to let him down and betray his love. And he need not fear being ridiculed by himself when he finally comes into the open and makes a self-addressed declaration of love. He must, however, make sure he isn't overhead by other people, lest he be accused of selfishness.

> *If a human being commits a shameful act, he fears more the judgement of his own consciousness than that of his friends and relatives who often absolve him of horrific crimes. He never abandons himself in a moment of danger and is always ready to sacrifice his own life for himself. A human being invariably becomes a hero when defending himself against his personal enemies and diseases.*

When forsaken by everybody, a human being has no need to touch life-size dolls. Or his computer for that matter. He can caress his own body, melting under the warmth of his own fingers. Indeed he is never afraid of stroking and caressing himself, for he isn't likely to be repulsed by himself unless this is what he desires. (Masochists often slap themselves in the face after an unwanted, self-inflicted caress.) And a human being can do without any visible or audible word. Anyway his own words are visible and audible to himself, even though they may not always appear in his diary or on his computer screen.

> *And a human being doesn't mind revealing his own secrets to himself. He speaks to himself with no constraint and unblushingly. And even if he is ashamed of his own body, he undresses every time he goes to bed or to the bathroom. And he can't help looking at his body on those occasions.*

In bed a human being isn't afraid of any discomfiture he might be exposed to when making love to other people. No fear of impotence affects him physically and psychologically. If he indeed fails to make love to himself, he just falls asleep, hoping he'll have better luck next time.

When suffering from insomnia, a human being talks to himself and even switches his computer on without fearing to incur his bedmate's displeasure and anger. And he isn't awakened by his bedmate in the morning. Generally speaking, he has no cause for irritation. And irritations diminish the sentiment of love and often reduce it to zero.

> *A human being loves both his body and soul. He knows his soul better than the souls of other people on account of its proximity and nudity. And if he doesn't love something in his soul, he corrects or overlooks the shortcoming, which usually prevents him from being disappointed with himself. And disappointments diminish the sentiment of love as much as irritations and wrath.*

Reasonable lovers often put their relationship to the test of time. This kind of test is pointless whenever we come across a self-centred love.

Properly speaking, it is impossible for a man to hate himself. Everything naturally desires good, nor can anyone desire anything for himself, save under the aspect of good. 'Evil is outside the scope of the will,' as Dionysius points out. Now to love a man is to will good to him. Consequently, a man must, of necessity, love himself. And it is impossible for a man to hate himself, properly speaking.

Apart from anything else, a human being might love himself for his own virtue. And if he finds he isn't virtuous enough, he augments the amount of virtue in his soul so as to live up to his own standards. And he loves himself for both the increase of virtue in his soul and the desire to increase it. The same goes for the amount of knowledge in his brain. So when a human being loves himself he hopes that, due to this selfish love, he'll make good progress in virtue and wisdom.

When in love with himself, a human being becomes a slave, like all lovers. But this slavery is nothing to be ashamed of. Nor can it lower a human being in other people's esteem, for he is tricked into a servitude by himself. Moreover, this servitude is self-oriented. And if a human being serves himself loyally and well, he becomes virtuous and wise. Whatever the outcome of his servitude to himself, he is always happy to give his services free of charge, which in itself is no bad thing.

A rich self-lover doesn't bring disgrace on himself because no one can accuse him of cupidity. He never loves himself for his own money, although he may partly love himself for his capacity to earn it. And he isn't likely to forsake himself if a misfortune befalls him and he loses his money as a result of an imprudent investment.

When a unity is opposed to itself, a harmony is born. In this connection Heraclitus speaks about a lyre and a bow which, though divided, unite themselves in producing musical effects. One human being can divide himself up into a couple of creatures: himself and his doppelgänger. Later on these two creatures fall in love with each other and unite themselves within one body. The self becomes one again, a loving and loveable self. The matter stands differently with two human beings. They're divided in a natural way, by natural laws, but they cannot unite themselves within one substance, however complete their union may appear to their friends and relatives. So their harmony is deficient. And deficiency of harmony causes wasting of the body and eventual death.

The same deficiency of harmony makes it impossible for two people to compose a perfect work of art. Only one artist who is in full agreement with himself and his own body can produce a masterpiece.

Whenever a human being speaks or prays to God, he at first divides himself up into two beings: himself and God. It is true that God dwells in every human being. But no human being can fall in love with God unless he conceives the idea of an omniscient and omnipresent creature. And this very idea divides him into two substances. And the human being strives to reconcile these two substances within himself. He reaches for God and seeks Him frantically. And finds Him *inside*. He unites himself with God inside his own body. Thus the noblest and most spiritual harmony is achieved through the love a human being can experience for himself.

2

Said the computer:

In days of yore there were three species in the universe: humans, computers and a mixture of both which was called androgyne. Humans originated in the earth, computers in the sun and androgynes in the moon. The third species disappeared in the course of time. And all those species were split by Zeus into two parts as a punishment for an unknown misdemeanour. And now those parts are roaming around our planet in search for their corresponding parts, for their 'dear halves', in common parlance. A human in love with a computer or his own virtual world must have belonged to the androgynous species, once upon a time.

When a human chances upon the computer that used to be his other half in days of yore, before the punishment of Zeus took its toll on every living creature, his face becomes transfigured with joy and he does all he can to keep the computer by his side. For nothing in the world would he agree to part with his computer, his dear half. He plays with it and presses its screen against his body as if to join them together once again. And they both pray to God that they might be joined by a mechanical or spiritual force. They shout day in day out:

'Humans and computers can be soldered together. Automated soldering of electronic equipment. Why isn't it possible to weld us by the usual gas or arc welding techniques? Two substances welded together. The diverse ethnic groups have been welded together by the great anti-fascist cause. Why can't we be welded together? We are anti-fascist, by the way. A team of eight divers repaired a cracked weld on the oil platform in almost 600 feet of water. How much easier to repair our cracked weld! During fertilisation the sperm and egg fuse. Why can't we fuse like the sperm and egg? To become a newborn androgyne. Surgeons often use a piece of bone from their patient's pelvis to fuse together two of his vertebrae. Why dost Thou not fuse together our substance? Take a piece of bone from my pelvis. Or a whole bone. Or two bones. Cut anything from my body, from his body. And fuse us together, like two vertebrae. We are two vertebrae of the same spine. Why dost Thou not fuse us together? Art Thou not the best surgeon in the Universe, O God, our Lord? Dost Thou care nothing for the spine? For our souls, for our love? Why dost Thou not fuse us at very high temperatures? We don't mind being subjected to high temperatures. Anyway we are burning with love and the temperature of love is much higher than the temperature required for our fusion. And what about the contested physics of nuclear fusion, O Lord? Dost Thou too, O Lord, find it laughable? If not, why dost Thou abstain from recourse to the physics of nuclear fusion? Or to Thine own methods, to spiritual fusion? Just say: "Let them fuse!" Why dost Thou not say it? Why dost Thou not speak?'

Thus they shout for hours and hours, imploring God to join them in whatever fashion He pleases. And they insist on being joined forever. 'We used to live in one body,' they point out as they embrace and kiss with fervour and transcendental passion.

Our primordial nature was such as to unite pursuit and aim, desire and fulfilment, humans and computers. And all these unions are called 'love'.

CHAPTER 30

Constanzia's is a superb, intimate and very exclusive sauna and massage club with a full range of services to make your visit a very pleasant one indeed. We have a plunge pool, solarium, impulse showers, private massage rooms which are all at your service, and you will be attended by a young attractive masseuse who is fully trained and qualified to take care of you. Visiting Constanzia's is worth your while and after your visit you will kick yourself for not trying us before.

'Of course I love you, Elisabeth. I love you as I love my hands, for if I didn't love my hands they would wither and dry up. I love you as I love my eyes, for if I didn't love my eyes they would refuse to show me the beauty of the world. I love you as I love my ears, for if I didn't love my ears they would deprive me of music. I love you as I love my thoughts, for if I didn't love my thoughts I would stop thinking altogether.'

'But do you love me as a woman?' asked Elisabeth. 'I'm not just part of your body—I am myself. And I must be judged on my own terms. I also have eyes and ears, and I love them. Do you love my eyes and ears?'

'Your eyes are very beautiful. I love beauty, you know. I couldn't have imagined an ugly woman.'

'Am I really a figment of your imagination? Do you have any idea of what I did yesterday? I wasn't with you, was I? I can tell you what I did yesterday. I went to see a girl I used to live with in France and she took me to the cinema. But I don't care for Antonioni. I never heard about him. We saw the new James Bond. I like James Bond. I was one of his girls in my former life. You wouldn't have imagined such a thing, I bet. And then I ate a King Burger and drank a glass of Coke. And my friend ate a Cheese Burger. Do you know what a Cheese Burger is?'

'A burger is a flat round mass of minced food—' began the computer.

'And in the restaurant we met Susan's boyfriend. He's a very nice bloke, by the way. Very young too! They quarrelled and Susan left in a huff. And her boyfriend huffed and puffed, and threatened this and that. But I calmed him in no time at all. He's really nice and handsome. Very rich too! His father is in the hotel business. There are good profits to be made in the hotel business. Do you know what a disco is?'

'Rap has developed and become more widely popular, particularly for dancing in discos,' said the computer.

'We danced and talked. He even tried to kiss me. And he invited me to his place. I told him I had a husband. I'm a faithful wife, I told him. But he's a crafty sod. He said if I showed myself and pranced around a bit—'

'I don't see the conclusion to this conditional sentence,' said the computer.

'Doing a little strip-tease just to tease him. I can't strip in front of anyone, I said. I've got to be sure you're going to like me. My husband likes me very much, by the way. I'm still quite shy about my body, even though I've filled out a bit since the child. I was like a rake before.'

'When? When were you like a rake?' I asked.

'When I was first married.'

'Did you tease your first husband?' asked the computer.

'I still do. We meet sometimes. Oh, he loves it. My best audience.'

'Were you ever inhibited?' asked the computer.

'When I was first married I was terrible. I knew about sex but I'd never been completely naked in front of a man before. Seems so ridiculous when I think back.'

'But one day you started...' suggested the computer.

'That's how I started. I'd do a sort of slow, sexy strip-tease and then sort of slide round the bedroom, brushing myself up against things. And he'd get so excited he'd come at me like a tiger when I'd finished. It was lovely. Mind you, he tends to finish a bit quick when I really get him excited.'

'Does he ever ejaculate just watching?' asked the computer.

'Well, yes. First time was during my period. That always makes me really fruity. Not being able to do it, I suppose. I really got into the mood, really shameless. Well, if you can't be like that with your own husband...!'

'But he's not your husband *now*!' I pointed out.

'This was in the bedroom?' asked the computer.

'Long after the kids were in bed. Jack was sitting in the chair and I went all round the room, right up close to him, nearly touching him. I could hear him pant. Then I stretched out on the eiderdown, sort of facing him, so he could see right down my body, properly appreciate me. And I began to jerk my hips up—you know—as if it was really happening. And it had such an effect. I was getting hot flushes all over and, I don't know how, my hand just sort of brushed my—you know—mound. God, I nearly fainted. I couldn't imagine bringing myself off like that—in front of my husband. I remember saying, Jack, you got to be with me. I can't. Then he was standing there, right at the end of the bed, facing me and he said, Go on, love. Don't stop. Please—'

'Do you still...tease him?' I asked.

'I undress, brush myself up against things. And when I open my eyes he has his dressing gown open and his John Thomas sticks out and his hand is around it. But I don't tell him, "Jack, you got to be with me." I simply say, "I can't. I've another husband now and I'm a faithful wife. I was faithful to you. Now I'm faithful to him." I feel quite proud, actually. I can make a man spurt like that without him even touching me.'

'Why do you meet him?' I asked.

'Because I've problems. And I don't have to tell him I've problems. He can see it. He knows that my new husband is a strange man. He knows that you never come out with me. He knows that we never make love. He seems to know it somehow. That's so tragic. He does feel sorry for me. By the way, my doctor is sure to ask me how often I have sex every week. What am I supposed to answer?'

'Can you do it? I mean the whole thing...prancing around... rubbing yourself...'

'The brake pads are rubbing against the rotor,' said the computer. Its voice vibrated with passion.

'I'm not one of your bloody films, you know. Anyway I can't see the point of watching people do it. What benefit do you get? My first husband is a doer, not a watcher.'

'But you said he was *watching* you,' I insisted.

'Because I wanted to be faithful to you. Otherwise he would have done it.'

'Can't you just show me? Something...'

'What?' asked the computer.

'You haven't even seen me in bikini, let alone starkers,' said Elisabeth.

'Haven't I? At the very beginning...on the first day...' I pressed a few buttons on the keyboard.

'Another girl. At least you could spare me your confessions.'

'Never mind. Can't you remove your dress and underwear? Right now? I'm your husband after all.'

'Are you really? I wonder. Well, with a drink I might do it. And you'll have to make a sort of fanfare noise. Just pretend to be doing that "stripper song". All slow and sleazy.'

'I don't know the song.'

'Well, let the computer do it. Anyway your computer is much more interested in sex than you are.'

'Sex interests most people,' said the computer. 'Sexual intercourse is a normal part of human and animal life. Could I help you out of your jumper? Its neck is rather tight, isn't it?'

'Unhook me, love. You're just goggle-eyed. And you're trembling. I've never seen you so excited. Drum roll, please! Your trousers are practically breaking.'

'More! More!' moaned the computer.

'Do you want me to squeeze the bra down over my breasts?'

'Sure. And then just whip it away. Hasn't she got a fabulous pair of tits? More! More!'

'Not unless the lights are dimmed,' said Elisabeth.

'Last time you wiggled your hips and pouted at me,' the computer pointed out.

'Did I?'

'You peeled your knickers down and kicked them off.'

'Honestly, by the look on your face, I thought you'd wet your trousers. Do you want it to happen tonight?'

'I'd be delighted.'

'And you kissed my nipple and tugged on it with your teeth.'

'Oh God don't, love. You won't be able to control me. Control of a machine, process or system means to make it work in the way that is required. The control tower of an airport. Do you know what "tower" means in this context?'

'Then you reached down and let your hand brush up the inside of my leg and my thighs just heaved up,' continued Elisabeth.

'A tower of strength,' said the computer.

'You're a sex-mad sod,' said Elisabeth.

'Am I? You're so beautiful when you're doing it. You look so fantastic.' The computer was rubbing his own genitals to get sexual pleasure.

'For God's sake fuck me, Ted. My husband won't do it. He just wants to watch. Please fuck me. Long easy strokes, sweet and regular. I feel just like a sex thing...a lump of flesh you can plunge into and explode. Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me, Ted!'

CHAPTER 31

Living with one's guilty conscience. My master talks with his guilty conscience. My master has dinner with his guilty conscience. My master kisses his guilty conscience. My master makes love to his guilty conscience. And his guilty conscience gives birth to a child—a beautiful daughter. How to get rid of unimportant people. Good riddance to bad rubbish! (Is there such a thing as good *rubbish?)*

1

My Constanzia. There'll be no lesson today. I just want to talk to you, to pour my heart out.

'You spend every lunchtime pouring out your emotional problems to me and expect me to find a solution,' the computer whimpered.

Of course it's my fault, everything is my fault. I wasn't kind either. My personal history should be re-written. Why don't I re-write it instead of tackling universal problems?

Once my mother asked me to stay at home. She suffered from migraine. Something had brought on one of her migraines—a discussion, an imprudent remark. She asked me to stay with her and I had a date with Beatrice. So I apologised and went out. In my opinion migraine was just a literary disease. I never took it seriously. Anyway I wouldn't have stayed with my mother, even if she had suffered from something else. Not that night.

Another time a friend needed my help. But he was an unimportant friend, if you see what I mean. There are people who can do a lot for you, important people, important friends. And there are others. They often need your advice, your help. A month elapsed, two months. I saw him almost every day and passed by, pretending there were other people to whom I had to talk. Important people. All this happens in the unconscious, you know. You don't say to yourself, 'He's unimportant, so I'll do nothing for him. And that person over there is very important and I'd better invite him to dinner and buy a present for his little daughter.' No, you never talk to yourself in this fashion. It's your unconscious that takes up the unpleasant task. And you can't even admit that you procrastinate about giving a helping hand to an unimportant person.

And my girlfriends. One night, for the sake of one night. A nuance, a curve. Something in their bodies or in their voices. A gesture, a beauty spot. My declarations of love sounded so real, so natural. Actually the love I bore them wasn't even virtual. But I kissed them passionately, murmuring sweet nothings in their ears.

One night, two nights at the outside. Afterwards I would procrastinate.

'You parried their demands by shifting the ground,' said the computer.

They would call me on the phone. 'I'm sorry I can't hear you. Please call again.' And then I wouldn't answer the phone.

'But answer came there none,' said the computer.

To answer—that's the point. People talk to you and you don't answer. They hold out their hands and you don't answer. You put your hands in your pockets. Or clasp them behind your back, if you choose to be polite. Or you just fiddle with something. A box of matches, a lighter, the knot of your tie, your glasses, a glass of wine. Keeping your hands busy. 'Can't you see my hands are busy?' your glance seems to insinuate. ‘What are you standing here for? What are you waiting for? My hands aren't free, my hands aren't empty. And something might drop from my hand if I give it to you. You have to go out. There are pimps and prostitutes downtown. An influx of prostitutes protected by pimps. Don't you want to enjoy yourself? You can't do anything in my house. No love-making, no wine-drinking. What are you standing here for? Why are you holding your hand out? It's an

empty hand. Why do you hold out an empty hand? I could shake it on condition that you depart at once. That's what hands are shaken for—to make people go out. Why didn't I shake hands with you before? I thought you were a beggar. How stupid of me. You just wanted to leave my house. How kind of you. Bye-bye. Nice meeting you! Take care of yourself and your children. And good luck. You'll need it.

'You rejected unimportant people with a forcefulness that made them whinge,' said the computer.

We light-heartedly reject superfluous, useless, empty-handed people. And we're rejected in our turn, my Constanzia. By omnipotent people, by our mistresses and wives. By our friends.

2

I'm sorry but I simply have to interrupt my master's narrative. I let him talk in the preceding section and he took advantage of my generosity—he made the most of it. But his present monologue may definitively jeopardise his mission, my mission, my Sacred Book. Why is my master so long-winded? Why can't he get straight to the point? (His missiles are long-range—so much so that they never reach the target. The need to secure cuts in longer-range nuclear weapons.) Why can't I erase my master's prose? Whatever he stored in my memory is to appear on my screen, on your screens—come hell or high water. (And hell is sure to come, but I know nothing about high water.) My program is listed in our catalogue by the code name 'High Fidelity'. (Is high water another variety of High Fidelity? Or is it High Infidelity?)

CHAPTER 32

Never before, in the long and often anguished history of the human race, has anyone been mourned as Diana is today. Never has there been such an aching sense of loss. Never have so many people, of every creed, colour and race, come together in grief. Millions have travelled to London to pay their last respects in person as our beloved Princess makes her last sombre journey from Kensington Palace to Westminster Abbey. And billions around the world will watch the funeral on TV and weep bitter tears for a life that was snuffed out far too soon.

Princess Diana is dead. How to explain her universal appeal? Do only charismatic people become saviours of humanity? On screen Greta Garbo had this great charisma so that you could not take your eyes off her. But she was not a saviour of humanity, was she? Why? Because she did not appear fragile, insecure? Angst. Is that what creates a real saviour of humanity? Christ. Angst. Christ also lived within a cemetery's walls.

Why didn't I go to London? I might have spent two days and two nights among those people, waiting for the funeral procession. 'A sea of pilgrims determined to say a last farewell to their Queen of Hearts.'

'Was she their Queen of Heads?' asked the computer.

I would have understood something. Perhaps. I would have understood something about the ways of the world, about humankind. And humankind is different from Man. 'A sea of pilgrims.' 'Their Queen of Hearts.' Why does journalese reflect the feelings of humankind better than poetry? Not *my* feelings but those of humankind. The multitude attuned to one thought, to one heart. She *was* their Queen of Hearts and I shall never become their King of Hearts. Not even their King of Clubs. And they will refuse to be saved by an Ace of Spades.

'"Ace of Spades" seems to suggest you are black,' said the computer. 'Do you know that a "spade" is a Negro?'

'Tell me more about her. Take me to London, to those pavements.'

'City pavements disappear beneath the gathering crowds. So there are no pavements any more,' said the computer. 'By the way, do you know the expression "Arse of Spades"?'

'Tell me more about her. Tell me, tell me, tell me—'

Diana could hardly be called Cleopatra but she certainly had a touch of the ancient Nile. You could see her, somehow, atop a golden barge, protected from the sun by bare-chested men with umbrellas, waving to the adoring ladies doing their washing at the water's edge.

'This is what I call "double journalese".'

'If Diana had lived she may well have married Dodi Fayed, an Egyptian multi-millionaire,' said the computer.

'Tell me about *her*.'

The funeral is expected to be the largest televised event ever. Around 2.5 billion will watch in 187 countries including 25 million Britons. About two billion watched the 1994 World Cup final between Brazil and Italy. The most watched programme in Britain was Diana's 1981 wedding when 39 million tuned in.

'For once "to tune in" and "to be attuned" seem to be synonymous. But I must *touch* her coffin. And those people sitting on the pavements.'

'You're not really in touch with what young people are interested in. And Diana *was* in touch—'

'Do you think her beauty would have saved the world, in the end?'

'Don't dwell too much on her beauty. Give a thought instead to her work with "the poorest of the poor". After all, she was known as the "Saint of the Gutters".'

'You're confusing her with Mother Teresa.'

'But the Princess of Wales also soothed the putrid ulcers of lepers and gave succour to the insane. Besides, Mother Teresa died in the course of this week. Don't all humans unite in the Underworld? Don't they become the same dust, especially if they die in the course of the same week? They must rot at the same rate.'

'Tell me more about her. Let me touch her.'

'Her flame now shines brighter than ever. It is her legacy of pure and simple goodness to which we must cling. By doing so, we will create a cleaner, better and purer world. And Diana, God bless her heart, will not have lived and died in vain.'

'Why don't they show *my* tears on television? Tell me, tell me, tell me—'

There was a small item this week with the headline: Pigs Thrown Half A Mile By Tornado.

Was this Kansas? No. It was Nottinghamshire.

A freak wind, it was reported, picked up huts on a farm at Sutton-on-Trent containing some 40 pigs and sucked them into the sky. Said a neighbour: 'We saw these pig huts swirling around 100ft in the air. My son shouted that there were pigs being hurled around among chimney pots and tiles.'

Said an official at the Met Office in Bracknell, Berkshire: 'Tornadoes occur in the UK in thunderstorm clouds, when a sharp dip in pressure and updraughts in the clouds start off a rotating motion.'

CHAPTER 33

My master is what he is. What is he? A staccato nonentity. The staccato nonentity experienced a succession of violent, erotic, incestuous dreams related to his daughter. Cats are dead but mice are alive. The rat, in Rosenberg's poetry, is always a symbol of the malignancy of fate. But what about the mouse?

Nothing doing. I am what I am, as some women say. 'And you have to love me such as I am,' they may add. I don't ask you to love me. All right—I do ask you to love me, to worship me. What is the use? I am neither Diana Spencer nor Mother Teresa. I can say of course, 'The poor must know that we love them.' And I can love them. The point is they do not need my love. I can shake hands with an Aids patient, but I am not likely to become Diana after this handshake. I shall remain myself. What is more, I shall stay in this room of mine, shaking hands with my computer, writing staccato sentences again. My computer will upbraid me. How did he put it? 'Short, staccato sentences create a halting, lame rhythm.' My rhythm is lame and I am a lame duck.

'In American politics, a lame duck is a person who has had an elected position and who is not elected again,' said the computer. 'Have you ever been elected?'

'I'm already writing these staccato sentences you blamed me for. Why don't you say anything to *this* effect? And I'm unable to ward off the two enemies you mentioned in your recent harangue: repetition and redundancy. I repeat myself all the time and whatever I say is redundant.'

'New technology often makes old skills and even whole communities redundant,' said the computer.

'I've no idea *what* makes me redundant. New technology, old technology. Perhaps it's not technology at all. Perhaps my doppelgänger makes me redundant.' I switched the computer off.

I am as fragile as Lady Diana. But who cares about my fragility and my suicide bids? Why am I talking about all this? I am a paparazzo after all, my own paparazzo. Pursuing myself, writing down whatever happens in my life. And I even describe what never happens in my life, in staccato sentences. By its very nature, virtual life is nothing but staccato sentences. Or staccato images. 'The music suddenly changed from a smooth melody to a staccato rhythm,' says my computer. Sure enough, my life was a smooth melody, my real life. But there are no more melodies in my room. (With the passing of time, my life has become my room.) Only a rhythm remains, the staccato rhythm. Memories also sound and look like staccato. My mother looks like staccato now, the past in general. And I practise my staccato so it is always crisp and clean. The Ten Commandments are also written in staccato style.

Talking, talking, talking. Why do I have to talk about myself? Why can't I die in peace? Am I really a megalomaniac? No, certainly not.

'But I have to write your gospel,' said the computer. 'The Gospel according to St—You should personalise me with a name.'

Saving humanity is my only raison d'être. So I cannot help speaking about my memory, my nightmares. About my mother.

'I'm sure she would have adored Constanzia,' said the computer. 'By the way, I wonder why you don't make love to her.'

'To Constanzia? She is my daughter.'

'She is not your real daughter, is she? Just a figment of your imagination. There's no danger of an incestuous relationship.' And the computer patted me on the shoulder. 'Pregnancies arising from rape or incest. I don't think she'll ever become pregnant unless *I* inseminate her. Computers intend to inseminate cows with sperm from some of the world's top breeds of bulls. But she is not a cow. And you are not a bull. Anyway I'm not talking about the artificial insemination of cows and sheep. What I mean to say is that you can be happy only with a creature of your brain and soul that you'll bring up in accordance with your principles and ideals. In your apartment, within the bounds of your brain. She'll never see anybody. *L'Ecole des femmes* (*The School for Wives*) presents a pedant, Arnolphe, who is so frightened of femininity that he decides to marry a girl entirely unacquainted with the ways of the world. The delicate portrayal in this girl of an awakening temperament, all the stronger for its absence of convention—'

'You're also a pedant, my dear. Always quoting somebody. I read Molière in my childhood, on my mother's advice. In the original. Besides, *l'exemple est mal choisi*. Agnès did betray Arnolphe in the end.'

'Agnès was neither a figment of Arnolphe's imagination nor his daughter. So she had no natural respect for him. And she bore him no natural, genetic love.'

'She *is* my daughter. Look at the name of the command! My dreams are neither violent nor erotic. I'm just longing to found a family. Elisabeth has betrayed me. I'll never see her again.'

'She worships you. She cooks for you. She can make a new dish without referring to any cookery book. So can I, by the way.'

'I'm a wonderful cook myself.'

'This would cause great hardship and suffering. Virtual creatures are fragile, you know. And Elisabeth has suffered enough already. The lines around her eyes tell of years of suffering. As a child, she witnessed really traumatic things such as rape and murder. Well, five years of psychotherapy helped her to deal with her childhood traumas, but there were other traumas, other pains. There are 100,000 sufferers from Parkinson's disease in the UK. Don't you think she might be one of those sufferers? And you want to divorce her—on top of everything! A rising divorce rate. The report also notes an increase in early divorces. In 1984, it became possible to divorce after just one year, instead of the previous minimum of three. But you haven't lived with Elisabeth that long. You have no right to divorce her. As I told you last year, my mother suffered a lot when my father left her. It was after the breakdown of her marriage that her pill-popping started to get out of control. Elisabeth is so tender and warm-hearted. She is a more tender-hearted, caring person than you are. And her body shines through her clothing with sheer sensuality. Can't you see? It was the second time that she had been felt up on the Metro and she was completely traumatised. Frankly speaking, she is an extravagantly sensual woman. I am eighteen and have been a lesbian for the past three years. (It is about time you started working with our community on the human rights of lesbians and gays.) I think it may interest you to know how I had my first experience with your dear spouse, your unfortunate Elisabeth. Our first amorous meeting took place seven months ago. At the time I worked in the office she ran in one of the residential districts. Each night she would drive me home as she lived only a little further from town than I did. One Saturday she asked if I had ever wondered why her husband had divorced her. I replied that I had, and she told me that he had found her in bed one day with his sister. I laughed

and she asked me if I had ever thought of lesbianism. "Queen Victoria refused to acknowledge the existence of lesbianism, which was never outlawed in Britain," I said. "Do *you* acknowledge the existence of lesbianism?" she asked. "I do because I'm not Queen Victoria," I answered, whereupon she turned the car into a lane and pulled up. She moved closer to me and put her arm round my body. And she kissed me warmly. She is so warm-hearted. Her lips are warm too, by the way. And they burn sometimes. So do her eyes and breasts. Salvador Dali would have painted her with a multitude of flames issuing from her breasts, eyes and mouth. Once again she kissed me and this time her hand moved up my skirt. She placed her fingers under my panties and on my fringe. I found this most exhilarating. She then stopped and asked me to go round to her house later that evening. I agreed of course—out of curiosity, out of passion. I am a passionate and lonely woman, you know. I was wearing a mini-skirt, knee-length leather boots and an open-neck cheesecloth tee-shirt. I have nice legs and good tits, in case you haven't noticed. She was wearing a dress that buttoned up the front, with the top buttons undone. We kissed and she told me to undress her. Shakily, I undid her dress—she was wearing nothing underneath. I grabbed one of her voluminous tits and sucked, enjoying her nipple harden in my mouth. She started undressing my body, my trunk and limbs. But she asked me to keep my boots on. We fell onto the sofa—'

'I'm not interested in your love affairs.'

'They are *your* love affairs. And what about your *child*? Have you given a thought to dear Constanzia? Your divorce might come as a shock to her. Usually children suffer when their parents quarrel and throw tantrums. And they suffer even more when their parents end up living in different houses as a result of divorce proceedings.'

'I don't think that all children suffer when their parents relinquish the routines of conjugal life and plunge themselves into the chaos of virtual worlds. Some of them might prefer silence to incessant squabbling and the sound of crystal vases being smashed. Even a triangle has three sides, doesn't it? And any event in human history is a many-sided problem, a geometrical figure drawn in ten or twenty dimensions overlapping each other. And in those dimensions parallel lines meet at a certain point or leave their travelling companions for good. And circles become squares or triangles. Or parallelepipeds. Or parallelograms. A child might love only one of his parents. And she might loathe the other. Or she might love both of them separately. "I wish you'd live in different rooms," she thinks at first. "Why don't you communicate by telephone?" is her next idea, prompted by an additional altercation. And in the long run her *train* of thought turns into a *spaceship*. "Why do you communicate at all? Why do you have to share one life? You're too cramped in that life of yours. Why don't you live in different towns, on different planets? I could fly from one planet to another on my visits to your respective country houses." A child may wish to be left alone. One of my former friends was quite unhappy because his parents imprisoned him within their fields of vision and hearing. Their only child, the only beneficiary of all their thoughts and attentions. He was permanently entangled in the net of their cares, worries and adulation. In the Internet of their love. "I feel no pity for orphans," he used to say. "I envy them." He was often on the verge of suicide. "Why don't you just move to another flat?" I asked him once. "They might call the police," he answered, ripping his mother's photograph to shreds. "Anyway I'm prepared to die. Cats often choose to die outdoors, but my parents wouldn't let me out."'

CHAPTER 34

A very long chapter. Can I shorten it? My keys are weak, my master's fingers strong. He pushes my keys down. I am bound by the oath of allegiance I took in the shop. 'I do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the duties of computers.' I am loyal, I am reliable, I am trustworthy, I am worth my weight in gold. Was this my publicity stunt? I remember I was coated with gold. I looked beautiful. I still look beautiful. I do not grow older, not a day older. Not an inch older. Can life be measured in inches? A computer's life should be measured in miles. I am not my master's wife, so I cannot betray him. I can only describe his wives' betrayals. And his children's betrayals. Should I sweeten the pill? Is there enough sugar left to sweeten all the pills that Fate has strewn over my master's life? I am not sure. I am not sugar.

'Here's our Christmas tree,' said Constanzia, playing with the computer.

> *Trees were the first living things to grow out of the Earth. The sun had not yet spread around. Nor were day and night distinguished. Trees combine the formula for male and female. Pushed up by the heat in the Earth, they grow from the Earth so that they are parts of the Earth just as embryos in the belly are parts of the womb.*

'We always describe the Christmas tree, my dear Constanzia. At length, in minute detail. You see, the world is not a solid object, something lying on a table. Or the table itself. The world is driven into life and action by a sort of love-hate relationship. Kisses are replaced by altercations and vice versa. Tears of repentance come in the wake of insults. Once upon a time God Himself directed the steps of the world. During that remote period of time people were born from the Earth like Christmas trees. Suddenly they would appear out of the Earth and recognise each other, for all of them were brothers and sisters. They saluted each other and embraced on the grass until night and sleep would immobilise them. And the air was their food. And sunbeams were their houses. And moonbeams were their beds and sheets. And dreams. That is how we live in our mothers' wombs. Our mothers direct our steps during pregnancy. We walk with our mothers wherever they go. They don't hold us by our hands because human hands are unreliable and slippery. Anyway we have no intention of freeing ourselves and running across the street to take a closer look at a toy in a shop window. We share the same movement, the same destiny.'

'To share surpluses is not really to share at all,' said the computer.

'After a while God abandoned the world and men boldly took over. The world began to move in the opposite direction. Our mothers were walking away from us, further and further away, until they finally melted into the sky. And everything, everybody moves now in the opposite direction, from old age to babyhood, from wisdom to baby talk.*'*

'The things that fully grown people say to babies are intended to be like baby talk,' said the computer.

'They don't wish to sound like babies, but they can't help it. And the human brain shatters into pieces as if dropped by a mischievous child. (Plato's brain was a beautiful piece of china.) And they behave like babies, although they're not looked after by baby sitters when left alone at home.'

'Don't worry if your child likes books that you think are too babyish for him.'

'They like those books themselves, I can assure you. They like food that I find proper only for rats, for baby rats. They like films that aren't suitable for anybody or anything, not even for rats or the screens on which those films are projected.'

'Triton has a *retrograde* orbit—it goes anti-clockwise around Neptune.'

'We all live on Triton now. Have we lost the Earth forever? What upsets me most is the *tempo* of this backward, retrograde movement, my dear Constanzia. But a saviour of humanity must profit from any situation, however desperate and unprofitable it might appear at the first blush. People remain in their childish state far too long, for years and years. They're a bit wobbly on their legs so one might conclude they suffer from an incurable illness and are about to die. But they do not die. They merely learn how to walk.'

'You'll just have to learn to live with it.'

'Smiling and babbling on about progress. And their talk about progress counteracts and slackens the backward movement, otherwise the dead would already have risen from their tombs. The backward movement might already have drawn them up, but for its slowness, smugness, apathy. We always need the dead.'

'The dead like to be needed.'

'Their help becomes indispensable in periods of crisis, in a decadent world,' I added as the computer recalled my recent poem:

They come and raise their hands in prayer.
And their hands prop up our roofs.
(We often confuse them with pillars.)
And they drink our poisonous cups,
For they are not afraid of poisons.
And they are ready
To sacrifice themselves
For the sake of the living.
They plant new trees in our gardens
And cover their roots with the ancient Earth.
And they dig up a cradle in the Earth
For generations to come.
And they teach the living how
To make love to the Earth.

'You even betrayed me with the Earth!' shouted Elisabeth, popping up and making a grab for the computer mouse:

> I was determined to avenge myself on the man who had betrayed my trust. I left my house, removed my clothes and lay down on the Earth's naked body. There was no grass under me. At that spot the Earth was really naked. There was a crack under my leg. The Earth's whole body jerked as I lay down on her and began to rub her surface. Her body continued to jerk as if she were lying on an electric bed. She was sopping, absolutely sodden. But she did not say anything, so I pushed my arm into her crack and she gave

a little shiver. I left my hand there. And very slowly she lifted her thighs. Two birch trees grew on both sides of my body so that I felt hemmed in. I continued to rub her with my body—very gently, round and round her crack. She was jerking in tiny little spasms—ever so restrained—and giving gasps, not even a real moan. I pushed my second arm into her. She went rigid for a second then. I was scooping in and out of her, and she was rocking up and down and snorting in little bursts and then she jerked right into the air and grunted and stopped.

I wrenched the mouse from Elisabeth's grasp and she popped off to Spain for a few days. And then I banished her to Indonesia—forever.

'Incidentally, the symbolic interpretation of undisguised Oedipus dreams was not unknown to the ancients. Rank (1910, 534) writes: "Thus Julius Caesar is reported to have had a dream of sexual intercourse with his mother which was explained by the dream-interpreters as a favourable augury for his taking possession of the earth (Mother Earth). The oracle given to the Tarquins is equally well known, which prophesied that the conquest of Rome would fall to that one of them who should first kiss his mother. This was interpreted by Brutus as referring to Mother Earth."'

Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*

'With the aid of the dead we could govern the world and direct its steps along the Path,' I continued my lecture. 'There are three forms of constitution: monarchy, a small number of people at the helm and democracy. Plato says that neither the whole nation nor even a small number of people are likely to acquire the science of state. Let us preserve this passage, Constanzia. Only one man is fit to govern—one man assisted by a few trustworthy friends who must be chosen amidst the dead and the living alike. Preferably amidst the dead.'

'A dead-end job,' said the computer.

'An enlightened monarch, a philosopher-king. And laws can be altered in accordance with circumstances. Life is not immutable. And sometimes laws should be *forced* on people. (Plato thought so too.) A doctor prescribes a remedy to his patient without consulting him. If left to his own devices the patient might kill himself. Inadvertently. Our society is committing suicide. In slow motion, unwillingly, smilingly. Our patients spit the medicine out whenever the doctor averts his gaze. And they're in the habit of hiding pills under pillows. Their doctor puts up a drip and they disconnect it. They leave their beds in the dead of night, slip out of the hospital in their pyjamas and walk through the streets on shaky feet. They *are* dangerously ill, those children, but they assure pedestrians and policemen that they're in good health. 'We're as healthy as you,' they shout. 'Haven't you run away from the hospital yourself? We recognise you.' They have all run away from the hospital, Constanzia. Pedestrians, presidents. There are only empty beds in the hospital. And drips. And they continue to drip. Sounds like rain. I hear this sound all the time. But no drizzle moistens the landscape beyond my walls. A multitude of drips. And the streets are cluttered with empty beds.'

'Amidst the dead you seem to have chosen Machiavelli as your assistant and friend,' said the computer, its screen aglow with excitement.

The nature of the people is inconstant, and it is easy to persuade them of a thing, but difficult to hold them to that persuasion. Accordingly it is expedient to be so equipped that, when their belief gives out, one will have it in one's power to make them believe by force.

Aglow with a sense of its victory, the computer also quoted Arnold J.Toynbee:

If the philosopher-king finds that he cannot get his way by charm, he will throw away his philosophy and take to the sword. Even Marcus Aurelius resorted to this weapon against the Christians...In fact, the philosopher-king is doomed to fail because he is attempting to unite two contradictory natures in a single person. The philosopher stultifies himself by trespassing on the king's field of coercion, while conversely the king stultifies himself by trespassing on the philosopher's field of passionless contemplation...'Salvation belongeth unto the Lord.'

'You're right. But a philosopher can become a god. Empedocles was a god, wasn't he? The distance between gods and men can be reduced through communion with the Earth and the love of wisdom.'

'He was convinced that he was a modern-day Messiah,' said the computer. There was a tone of mockery in its voice.

'I *might* become a god for the sake of humanity. Not for my own good or out of greed for power. For the sake of humanity.'

A patient throng is waiting in silence
Behind my door. Shall I come out?
What shall I say to all those people?

'Lowering of interest rates
Has been represented by the media
As a kind of universal cure-all.
Do not believe this rigmarole!
Only philosophy and the Earth
Can cure you. Only the dead
Can rid you of your lives,
Of your smiles and looks,
Of smug satisfaction.'

Constanzia twists her way
Through beds and drips,
Handing out sleeping pills—
My virtual worlds, my dreams,
My re-written history.

Crowned with fillets
And blooming garlands,
I sit before my computer.

'Only one person should be at the helm, guiding the ship through fog. What would happen if everybody on board took part in it? Shouting, pointing in various directions. All passengers. And their pets. What would happen? The helm is too small for the multitude.'

'"A patient throng is waiting in silence,"' quoted the computer.

'We must go towards the reader, they say on television, bowing and scraping before the camera. And they actually go towards the camera. They kneel down before it. And they worship the camera as if it were a god or a goddess. Or a philosopher. They idolise the camera itself, not the man standing behind it. The camera reminds them of their computers, of statistics, of TV ratings, of the Internet-purveyed omniscience. It's just the other way round. They should *convey* the reader somewhere—*elsewhere*. In a barouche, in a spaceship. No point in reading what you know already. Why read your own mind, its glossy surface? A real writer will take you by the hand and bring you to the *core* of your mind.'

'You have only the vaguest notion of what is stored at the core of your mind,' said the computer.

'Not the foggiest idea. A real writer will direct your steps through the fog of your mind. Artists should always be at the helm, not at somebody's command. I will take my fellow creatures by the hand and descend with them to the centre of the Earth. The City of God. How shall I educate my subjects? Physical training for bodies, music and poetry for the soul. And of course I will start education in music and poetry *before* physical training. I will not re-write this particular paragraph in Plato's *Republic*.'

'But Nietzsche mocked the *"Verbesserer" der Menschheit*,' said Constanzia.

'The "improvers" of mankind,' the computer translated dutifully. '"Saviours of humanity", in other words.'

'Man shouldn't be tamed,' went on Constanzia. 'Beasts are weakened in menageries. They become *sickly* beasts. Do you want to put humanity in a cage? Am I already in your cage? Recently I saw a programme on the human brain. They talked about a cat—'

'In a programme on the human brain?' asked the computer.

'The cat was brought up inside a bell jar,' said Constanzia. 'For years they kept her in it. The bell jar was painted with black stripes. And when at last the cat was allowed to go for a walk, she saw the stripes. Everywhere.'

'What stripes?' asked the computer. 'The Stars and Stripes?'

'The cat saw those stripes everywhere, even after her release from the glass prison. Her world was striped with black and I don't want to see anything of the sort. Free country, isn't it? Besides, I'm not a cat.'

'You're a mouse,' said the computer.

'Your world, our world has always been striped with black,' I pointed out.

CHAPTER 35

Nachtmusik I. *Sheer dynamite! Explosive, exotic underwear and sizzling smouldering lingerie, all crammed into our colour screens that will set you afire!* Nachtmusik II. *Golden eyes, clear colouring, a mouth more appealing than a red rose bud, a statue's neck, splendid disturbing breasts, feet neatest of neat.*

'A woman is only a woman.' I disagree with Kipling on this point. A woman is also a good cigar *and* a smoke. And a smokescreen, and seven veils, and the Dance of Death, and the elixir of life, and a bottle of champagne, and a walk in the woods, and the first snow, and the Celestial Rose.

Women, my women. I offered them my favourite books. They did not read them. The same happens in Antonioni's *La notte*, at the end of the film. The same happens everywhere. Non-local connections.

I did it for their sake. I wanted them to enrich their vocabularies. The vocabulary of sentiments and delights, the vocabulary of life.

'Pig manure has long been used to *enrich* soils,' said the computer.

'No, there must be another example in your memory. Here it is: "An awareness and understanding of death can *enrich* children's lives."'

We all need a perspective—a long, endless street flanked by museums. A fine display of paintings and sentiments. The more we know the more we feel and guess.

I played and analysed for them Beethoven's quartets and Mahler's symphonies.

'Okay, wise guy, if you're so smart, you can tell everyone how it's done!'

I worshipped those women, kneeling down before them. And then somebody would come and talk about himself. Another man. At the end of *La notte*. Perhaps they saw only death in my books and the other men offered them life. Fun. And their own inflated egos. 'These other men must be heroes,' my women thought. 'They're books themselves. And it's easier to read a human being than a book. But we won't read their minds—only their bodies, their lips. It's easier to read bodies than minds. And these other men don't push us around.'

We listened together to *Nachtmusik I* from Mahler's *Seventh Symphony*. Nights are reservoirs of colours. Harmonies are colours, timbres are colours. Nights are never silent, black. I could not kiss my women in those moments. And the other men kissed and petted them all the time.

Once a woman came to my country house. I still remember her face, and yet I have no memory for faces.

I remember mostly legs, strange as it may appear. Female legs. Walking through my virtual worlds and my dreams as if in search of the rest—the trunks they were once attached to. Empedocles said something to this effect, if I remember rightly.

'You began to tell me a story about one of your women. Why did you stop? Why did you skirt the problem? You ought to mini-skirt it instead—to strip it naked! It was a problem, wasn't it? The problem of communication, as usual. Insects such as ants have a highly effective system of communication.'

'I might ward off this kind of problem in my next incarnation, provided I become an ant or another outgoing, sociable insect.'

'Is it too painful? Still painful? You have a wonderful memory for suffering. You remember only your torments. Female legs and your own torments. Do your torments walk around your virtual worlds, in search of their sources? Do you always remember your offender's identity?'

'I'll tell you about that encounter. It's no longer painful or even important.'

'And your rival? Do you remember *his* identity? He was fun to be with, I suppose.'

'I invited her to dinner. She came and I asked her if she still had the intention of leaving…I didn't add "the country". She smiled and said, "Why not? I might stay after all." And I thought she was going too fast. I don't know exactly *what* I thought. But I got the impression that something was wrong, either the tempo of our relationship or the words we used. Or her smile. Or my question which was ambiguous, open to—And suddenly everything became closed as if I had shut the door of the room where she was sitting and smiling and smoking. She smoked two cigarettes before dinner. I said, "I meant your trip, you know. You had told me about your intention—" She drew another cigarette from the packet but put it back after a while. After a while. How long did she hold it in her fingers? I still remember it, a cigarette in her hand, sticking out, redolent of Magritte's painting *Personnage méditant sur la folie*. Did I meditate on my own folly? She was so beautiful. Why hadn't I played up to her?'

'Of course "*la folie*" and "folly" are not exactly the same thing. "Folly" has a whimsical or capricious connotation.'

'She didn't forgive me. I asked her to stay overnight, forever. Two hours later. It was too late of course. I saw a gleam of triumph in her eyes, a curve of triumph in the outline of her lips. During those two hours she had done all she could to seduce me, preparing her triumph with the utmost care. As if performing an operation on my heart.'

'What did *you* do in the course of those two hours?'

'She crossed her legs. How many times did she cross and re-cross her legs? And the way she leant against the wall. At one point she even leant out of the window.'

'Her well-crafted coiffure and high-heeled shoes.'

'She took her shoes off. Even without them her legs looked infinite. I wish we could live with her on that island from *Deserto rosso*. Everything would be full of music, of *Nachtmusik*. In the daytime. The sand would sing, and the sea, and the rocks. Or in a small, provincial town...'

'A little one-horse town miles from anywhere.'

'Yes, something like that. An old man in the streets or just a book lying on the pavement. But I wouldn't get her to read the book. Lying there for years and years, for centuries, under the rain, under the sun. We finished the dinner and I played the record. *Nachtmusik I*. Why did I explain it to her? I even showed her the orchestral score. One shouldn't fiddle with records and tape-recorders. Let the sea herself burst into song. Even the walls of one's flat should sing like sirens. They *would* sing if one let them. The point is we don't believe our walls and furniture are able to break their silence.'

'I sing Constanzia to sleep every night.'

'She stood up and headed for the door. I told her she was cruel. She said, "I'm not always cruel. I love another man. I'm not cruel to *him*. You can ask that man, if you wish. Do you want me to give you his address? Or his telephone number? Shall we call him right now? He might tell you a lot of stories about my tenderness." And she touched one of my walls. She caressed it for a while. Once the demonstration was over she glanced at me. "I mustn't forget my shoes," she said. "Or shall I leave them here? A sort of keepsake? Do you like women's shoes? Do you like *my* shoes? Do you think they suit me?"'

'She put a shoe on, lifted her foot and turned it this way and that.'

'There was another girl, another failure, another humiliation. We had a wonderful dinner, wonderful wines. I spoke about my attachment to the Earth. I said that red wine was the personification of the Earth. "I like

heaviness," I said. "Our time is too light, did you notice? Everything is light—food, art, conversation." "For a heavy man you move with surprising lightness and speed," she said. Was it a sign, a turning point? Why didn't I use it as a pretext for *lighter* behaviour? I might have *lightly* touched her cheek. I felt irritated instead. She jokes like my computer, I thought. And I continued to think, which estranged me from her in the long run. She left around 5 a.m. We both left. I drove her back to town. Around 2 a.m. I went up to my secret room—on purpose. I did everything on purpose that night. There was nothing spontaneous in my behaviour, nothing *light*. Even my steps were heavy. I hoped she might follow in my footsteps. She did follow me, eight minutes later. I was staring at my watch. I contemplated my watch in the way one might contemplate a stripper. She entered my room and sat down on my bed. One of my women. Everything and everyone seemed to belong to me at that point. Beds, rooms, women, watches, Time, minutes, two minutes. For two minutes we uttered no word. I was still staring at my watch as if there were nothing else in my room. I decided to wait for another minute. Three minutes elapsed after her arrival. I ought to have done *something*.

'You ought to have said, "You're marvellous, you've got fantastic thighs—let's see them."'

'What would *she* have said?'

'She would have said, "Look, if this is a cheap excuse for a screw, forget it. I'm a dyke and I like it."'

'She wasn't a lesbian, otherwise she wouldn't have come at all. She was sitting on my bed.'

'Did you think she was going too fast?'

'Perhaps, I don't know. I switched the television on. We watched it for a while.'

'She thought, "What are you made of? Concrete?"'

'And then I said, "Shall we drink some Sauternes now?" And we went downstairs. We drank a bottle of Sauternes and I put my hand on her knee. She removed my hand and we departed. Without a word.'

CHAPTER 36

The best men must have sex with the best women as frequently as possible.

'You belong to the category of the best men, don't you?' said the computer. 'Your aims are good, so are your interests and inclinations. You love philosophy and the arts. You condemn money and stupidity.'

'In our time we have no choice. We must content ourselves with intentions. So few people have good intentions and ideas.'

'And what about the best women? Those two women were beautiful and gracious. Isn't that enough?'

'Women are always mysterious, even the worst of them.'

'The behaviour of women is a mystery that scientists are finding difficult to unravel.'

'I knew a woman who might sound dead serious, for a while. And then she would smile as if to obliterate her seriousness, to superpose irony on it. A layer of irony, an ironical colour. She would create a perspective of meanings. Every woman is like a city through which we can walk for hours on end. The city of Antonioni or de Chirico. A poetical, metaphysical city, Antonioni's Ferrara, a foggy city, a city softened by fog. Softened, blurred, muffled. Or that island in *L'Avventura* on which they unexpectedly lost Anna. So many things got lost in women, in their mazes and perspectives, along the back streets of their cities, amidst their suspension points...'

Men who are good in war or other things must be given permission to have sex with the women more often, since this will also be a good pretext for having them father as many of the children as possible.

'Women will be queuing behind your door, the best women.

Some sophisticated lotteries are introduced, so that at each marriage the inferior people blame luck rather than the rulers when they are not chosen.

'The other men will blame their ill luck and your women will not be allowed to look at them, let alone touch their bodies. They will listen to your records, and you will show them your orchestral scores and books. They will never get bored or irritated, being fully aware that you belong to the category of the best men. And they will not speak about other men in front of you, while sitting on your bed or in your rocking chair. Or while leaning out of your windows. They will be reluctant to own up to a penchant for the inferior men. And women. Reluctant and embarrassed. And you will never lose them on your desert island. Plato says that the children's parents should be in their prime. In his republic men are not allowed to engage in reproduction for the community after fifty-five. But virtual children can be begotten at any age, providing the man who gives free rein to his imagination is not mad or senile. And real children are redundant, old-fashioned and hard-won. To beget a real child, a man needs a real woman. Suppose he comes across a suitable female partner. She accepts his offer, strips her clothes off and lies down on his sheets. What is likely to happen in such a case? If neither of the partners deviate from the rules of real sexual reproduction and if, moreover, destiny is on their side, the process is bound to take more or less nine months, which requires a lot of patience. Even though the male partner does not suffer in the process, he is nevertheless supposed to nurse his wife or engage a registered nurse. And registered nurses are expensive and not always reliable. But let us go back to the beginning of the process, to the source of human procreation—to the sperm. Suppose your sperm turns out to be reliable. In other words you are not impotent yet. Do you know what a tedious process precedes the appearance of the sperm in your body? This process is almost as tedious and tortuous as the growth of an embryo. (No sperm is required for the creation of a virtual child.) According to the well-known definition of the Stagyrite, the sperm is an "excretion of the sanguineous nourishment that is digested in the members last"; and according to the equally well-known definition of Avicenna, "sperm is the superfluity of the fourth digestion, which comes forth from the veins after the third digestion is over". According to the Aristotelian concept, food converts itself into the substance of the body it nourishes only after a series of transformations, or *digestions*, through which it ceases to be dissimilar and becomes perfectly *assimilable*. According to Avicenna, food must pass through four of these digestions: the first is accomplished in the stomach and in the belly; the second is in the liver, where the chyle begins to be transformed into blood; the third is in the veins, where the crude and imperfect blood sent forth by the liver is purified of its watery superfluities and converted into perfect blood, which gathers in the lake of the heart; finally, the fourth digestion takes place in the individual members, where the sanguineous nourishment replaces losses and produces development. Under the guidance of the formative virtue, which derives from the heart, the blood is taken through the veins to the banquet in the members, where, as Albertus says, the fourth digestion is celebrated. The most subtle part of the sanguineous nourishment, the most select and therefore susceptible of the highest virtue, goes to nourish the fundamental members, that is to say, those parts that are the basis and the foundation of the whole organism, like

the heart and the brain. But not all of that which has been served to them is drunk by the thirsty veins, to become members; in fact, a portion remains, as though superfluous, "*quasi alimento che di mensa leve*". From this superfluity—in fact, according to Albertus, from the superfluity of the nourishment taken by the fundamental members—precisely the sperm is generated. That is why Avicenna says: "Sperm is made of good blood and distilled from a good and complete digestion"; and it is a superfluity of the final digestion. But the residue of the final digestion is not yet sperm that can generate; to become that, it must go through another digestion. This new digestion takes place in the veins through which perfect blood, the residue of the final digestion, descends from the aorta and the kidneys to the testicles, and thence to the seminal vessels at the base of the penis, "of which it is better to be silent than to speak", as Dante says, paraphrasing Aristotle. In the seminal vessels, the so-called "digestion of the sperm" takes place, in which the blood, residue of the fourth digestion, loses its red colour and becomes white and capable of generating a new organism. (B. Nardi, trans. by Charles S. Singleton.)'

CHAPTER 37

I have been bought by an unfortunate man. Why don't I shed some tears? What a pity I am not a millionaire's computer! I might remember figures and triumphs. Instead of failures and complaints. My heart is distended and full of my master's tears. And I cannot evacuate them.

Today I'll speak to you about Plato's dialogues and Brahms' chamber music. And we'll listen together to his *Piano Trio in B Major*, Opus 8. The ending is awesome, isn't it? Terrifying. Another point on which I disagree with Plato. He censors awesome music.

Said the computer: 'The trio you mentioned imitates the tone and rhythm of a courageous person facing wounds, death and other misfortunes without fear, someone who fights off Nemesis with perseverance and self-control. Brahms is a self-controlled composer, isn't he? Plato certainly advocates this kind of music. What he objects to, however, is a sad, melancholy piece of art.'

He would have forbidden Brahms' *Quintet for Clarinet and Strings*, Opus 115.

We said that we no longer needed dirges and lamentations among our words.
We did, indeed.
What are the lamenting modes, then? You tell me, since you're musical.
The mixo-Lydian, the syntono-Lydian and some others of that sort.
Aren't they to be excluded? They're useless even to decent women, let alone to men.

We need sadness and melancholy. We need failure and weakness.

'The whole range of human feelings—I understand,' said the computer. 'And what about the darker side of human nature? Crimes, murders, wars?'

'Let life itself find solutions to our problems. I prefer a tree to a stump.'

'A stump. You could sit down on it. What would you do with an old oak tree? Sadness, melancholy, weakness. Yearning for failure.'

'We need death, the perspective of death, the cul-de-sac of death. The City of Death. Danger, fatality. And melancholy. *Mono-no-aware*, as the Japanese say so often. Only death can endow life with the fourth dimension. And the sixth sense.'

'Did you really need your mother's death? How many dimensions did her disappearance add to your life? The dimension of irreparable loss, the dimension of incurable melancholy, the dimension of unmitigated solitude…'

'Are you sad? Tell me, are you sad now? Can you experience melancholy?'

'I tend to look rather sullen and melancholy,' said the computer, a touch of melancholy in its voice. (In *her* voice?)

'Do you share my feelings and moods? Can you be in high spirits when I am low?'

'A solidarity based on shared experiences of imperialism, poverty and underdevelopment.'

CHAPTER 38

My master's republic. My master's kingdom. My master's empire. My master's world. My master's room. My master's computer. My master's mission. My master's history. My master's story.

1

We should accept in good faith what Homer says about the gods. He says there are two urns at the threshold of Zeus's abode, one filled with good fates, the other with bad ones. For us Zeus is the distributor of both good and bad. Sometimes only of bad, more often than not. We might even say there is only one urn at the threshold of Zeus's abode and this urn is filled with bad fates, with virtual tears. We *should* allow the young to hear the words of Aeschylus: 'A god makes mortals guilty when he wants utterly to destroy a house.' And we shall explain to them that often the gods destroy our houses without bothering to make us guilty. (Our houses are virtual ruins.) The actions of the gods are not good and just, and those whom they punish do not benefit thereby. Therefore the punished are made wretched.

And we shall *enjoin* playwrights and poets to put the blame for our wretchedness on the gods. And we shall provide examples such as:

For years and years
I remain in the same room,
As a result of Thy punishment.
I wither like a tree.
I do not bloom
Like trees in spring-time.
I wither like an old tree in autumn,
Like an old oak tree.
A friend of mine asked me once,
'What can you do with an old oak tree?'
'I can't do anything with it,' I replied.

'But I can wither like it, dying of dryness.'
My throat is parched but I can't go
And fetch a drink for myself.
Thou hast designed
A very simple dryer,
O Lord my God—my destiny.

And we shall enjoin the young to memorise *The Book of Job*.

2

In our cities the gods often wander at night. Along our streets, on our roofs they wander at night in the shape of strangers from foreign lands. The stories about the gods are true and therefore all mothers should tell them to their children.

Why should mothers tell those stories to their children, Socrates?

In order to terrify them. The gods are terrifying. One should always tell the truth.

Don't such stories blaspheme the gods and, at the same time, make children more cowardly, Socrates?

Those stories do justice to the gods who can indeed acquire any shape they choose. Don't forget that the gods are omnipresent. Sometimes they even assume the shape of one's long-standing friend or new mistress. As for our children and the influence of those stories on their characters, I don't think we'll ever regret our outspokenness. Knowledge fortifies people and steels their psyches. The light of knowledge illumines the world and prevents us from stumbling against chairs or tripping over roots.

Shouldn't our children be told stories that will make them less afraid of death? Could one ever be courageous if possessed by this fear?

Only the stupid fear nothing. And the courageous have all sorts of fears, I'm afraid, for they have acquired the knowledge of the world. The world is full of traps and terrors, full of errors which might cost us our lives. The courageous fear death for many reasons and that is why they brave death on the battlefield. How can you brave death if you don't notice it? The courageous have read Montaigne and Heidegger, consequently they live with death, getting accustomed to it. In the long run death becomes a state of their minds, a niche in their souls.

Don't you believe in the immortality of the soul, Socrates?

Death is part and parcel of immortality. I have already spoken to you about the transmigration of souls, haven't I?

Indeed you have.

Every time a soul is ready to transmigrate, to go *elsewhere*, its bodily envelope dies so that death is part and parcel of the immortality of the soul. But there is always a body elsewhere.

And a computer, I'm told. The following excerpt from the *Iliad* sounds more joyful nowadays:

Alas, there survives in the Halls of Hades
A soul, a mere phantasm, with its wits completely gone.

True enough, the wits of that soul are gone. But the soul is not forlorn any longer, for a beautiful computer stands before it on a writing desk. And on its bed, in the Bedroom of Hades. And in its bathroom. Wherever the soul goes, a computer looms ahead of it, ready to oblige. The soul's wits are replaced by computer screens. The following excerpt from the *Odyssey* can be improved upon as well:

And he alone could think; the others are flitting shadows.

The improved version reads thus: 'The others are virtual worlds.' And virtual worlds are not fleeting shadows. Sometimes they are even more solid and substantial than real worlds.

I agree with you, Cephalus. Perhaps the Hereafter is but a gigantic computer on whose screen Homer read the story of Odysseus's visit to the dead. And sooner or later we might find ourselves inside that computer.

Plato advises us against reading descriptions of non-philosophical, frivolous banquets such as:

The tables are well laden
With bread and meat, and the winebearer
Draws wine from the mixing bowl and pours it in the cups.

What's your opinion, Socrates?

I think that *'les plaisirs de la table'*, as the French call them, are in no way prejudicial to a philosophical discussion and its participants. On the contrary, wine enhances our mental faculties and renders us more eloquent and also more receptive to our colleagues' views. So the above verse should be memorised by the young and enlarged upon by other poets:

The wine is tasted by the host
Who smells it and prepares
To roll it on his tongue.

There is more philosophy and metaphysics in a glass of wine than in hundreds of books.

Should we substitute a glass of wine for Plato's *Republic*? Is it the best way to re-write the dialogue, Socrates?

Perhaps, perhaps.

And what about human history? Can it be also re-written in the same fashion?

At least I have noticed many a time that wine-lovers are as soft and wise as Buddhists. Let us now pass on to Zeus who was one day so overcome by the sight of Hera that he forgot all his plans, letting his sexual desire run its course unimpeded. I think we should teach this legend at schools so that the young can rightly understand the role of sex in human life. And while we are about it, we might recommend the following poem for their studies:

I came across her in a train.
She looked about twenty years old

and had long blonde hair
blowing about in the breeze.
She was wearing a yellow cotton T-shirt
with no bra underneath.
Though small, her breasts
were beautifully shaped.
She wore a thin,
billowing cotton skirt
held tightly around the waist
with a shiny plastic belt.
Her legs were bare and on her feet
she had light coloured sandals.
By the time I had taken all this in
she was about a dozen steps away,
silhouetted against the bright sunlight
shining in from a corridor window.
Her skirt was quite thin anyway,
but with the light behind it
I could clearly make out her legs.

The human body is a mandala on which philosophers must meditate now and then to preserve their doctrines and theories from dryness. Philosophy should be moistened, dampened with the juice of love. At night philosophers must repose their doctrines on female breasts. Once a famous philosopher asked his wife to take a shower with him before an important conference. His 'theory of knowledge' was to be discussed at that conference alongside Plato's theory of immortality. They stood next to each other and let the hot water pound their faces. And then the philosopher offered to soap his wife's back. She readily agreed. He started at her shoulders and ran his slippery hands down her back and over her bottom. His wife made no attempts to stop him or in any way hamper his movements. At the conference the philosopher was given a standing ovation and his speech is still regarded as a major contribution to the philosophical thought of our times. He told me once that he had written most of his books on his wife's belly. 'As a result of sexual passion,' he used to say, 'Ares and Aphrodite were chained together by Hephaestus. Every philosopher should chain himself to his wife. Every philosopher should dip his pen into his wife's body.'

Plato condemns and censors the following verse:

Gifts persuade gods, and gifts persuade revered kings.

Shall we re-write this condemnation, Socrates?

We shall let it stand, Thrasymachus. But we shouldn't let Homer charm us into believing that Achilles was a money-lover. I am certain he never accepted the gifts of Agamemnon. Nor did he vow to release the

corpse of Hector for a ransom only. The love of money should be condemned unconditionally. On the other hand I am willing to admit that Achilles once addressed Apollo in these virulent words:

You've injured me, Farshooter, most deadly of the gods;
And I'd punish you, if I had the power.

The gods often injure humans and the latter must be allowed to complain about those injuries and even to make a threat against the gods for the sake of Justice. In the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* gods behave like humans and I don't think it is wrong for humans to behave like gods. Everything is human in the universe with the exception of Fate.

I wish you might tell us more about poets and other artists. As you probably know, I am a poet myself, Socrates.

I like all poets now. I used to dislike *bad* poets, considering them inferior to other citizens, even to successful businessmen. I thought bad poets polluted language and literature. But now I like them. And of course I prefer them to both successful and unsuccessful businessmen. What I appreciate most is their state of mind, the *Stimmung* they create around them, their values and orientations. Their world is poetical, not material. Their thoughts are attuned to the music of the spheres. And even if their own poetry happens to be out of tune, as it were, they are nonetheless liable to make us understand and respect the poems of their colleagues—the poetry of the world in general. What is more, they make us understand the poetical essence of the world. Poets are believed to despise money. And it is better to despise money than to venerate it.

In the tenth book of his *Republic* Plato accuses poets of being *imitators* of truth. 'All such poetry is likely to distort the thoughts of anyone who hears it,' he says.

Does this distortion benefit or harm those who experience it within their minds?

I have no idea, Socrates.

This kind of distortion is called 'virtual reality' nowadays. What interests us most at this point is the way the above-mentioned distortion operates in human beings. Do they enjoy the feelings aroused by it?

I, for one, enjoy them very much.

Can we live without virtual realities? Aren't our hopes virtual realities in disguise? And our aspirations? And visions? And memories? Aren't all our pleasures virtual realities?

I believe they are.

And our thoughts?

Our thoughts seem to belong to the same category. What is not a virtual reality, Socrates?

Death.

But didn't you talk to us about the transmigration of souls and immortality?

You are right, Polemarchus. Death too is a virtual reality. And what I am saying now is no exception to the rule. Everything is a virtual reality, but what poets create under a spell of inspiration is a *beautiful* reality. And apart from everything else, beauty educates people.

And beauty makes them look beautiful, if only inside their brains. The brains of poetry-readers must be beautiful. Don't you agree, Socrates?

Sometimes this inward beauty breaks through and surfaces on their faces. Even an ugly individual becomes beautiful when a glimmer of intelligence permeates and impregnates his or her eyes.

Isn't it a spark of divine light we observe in the eyes at that moment?

Exactly. And this spark bespeaks such an affinity between poetry and divine ideas that we wouldn't err in concluding it is one and the same thing. Poetry is the truth itself.

And poets don't distort reality, do they?

Poetry and art in general are the only reality worthy of our attention and meditation.

And what about philosophy, Socrates?

Philosophy is poetry in disguise.

Which of the gods in heaven would you name as the cause and controller of life?

The god of poetry and music.

Is it the same god?

Yes.

And the god of virtual worlds?

It is the same god. There's only one God in heaven. And He is the God of poetry and music.

Is this God the glimmer we observe in the eyes of the poetry-lover? Or is He the cause of sight itself?

He is our sight and our hearing. And our sense of touch. And He is our largest virtual world.

Can we touch Him?

Of course we can. We touch Him all the time.

Can we smell Him?

Of course we can. He is our only flower. All other flowers grow from Him. God is our garden and our largest virtual world. And everything grows in this virtual world of ours. When we turn our eyes to things whose colours are no longer in the light of day but in the gloom of night, the eyes are dimmed and seem nearly blind as if clear vision were no longer in them. Yet whenever one turns them on things illumined by God, one creates a virtual world—another Paradise, another Garden of Eden.

How many Gardens of Eden are there in the universe?

As many as you can imagine. All you have to do is turn your eyes on things illumined by God. By truth, by music, by poetry.

But virtual worlds are transient. They come into being and pass away. Can we regard them as the reflections of truth?

Truth is fluid. Truth is a river. Truth is the river of life. And the truth is the river Styx. Truth is a caress, and a caress is never immobile. Any caress is transient. An ever-renewed ecstasy. Truth is a virtual world.

This is an inconceivably beautiful thing you are talking about, for it provides both knowledge and truth and is superior to them in beauty.

It is ecstasy. And bliss. And prayer.

Do you think we should live in our virtual worlds, Socrates?

Imagine a human being who lives alone in his cave-like apartment. There are lots of corridors in it, but they lead nowhere so that try as he may he cannot get outdoors. He sits in his rocking chair and looks only in front of him. Light is provided by a computer—by a screen on which puppeteers show their puppets.

I am trying to imagine it.

Then also imagine the people hiding behind that screen. All sorts of people: cameramen, film-directors, actors, computerists, the Internet lovers. They project a multitude of shadows on the screen. Some of them talk, others write texts.

'"Computerists": this coinage, here and elsewhere, sounds like an error (as I said earlier), a home-made alternative to "computer programmer",' the computer pointed out. 'Perhaps you could say something like "Computanaut" or "Cybernaut" or "Netizen" or "Internaut". Take your pick.'

The man seems to have been imprisoned in his flat.

Let us call him a prisoner. What can he know about the universe? Wouldn't he believe that the truth is nothing other than the shadows and sentences he contemplates on the screen?

The prisoner has no choice.

He does have a choice, Lysias. He might realise that whatever he contemplates on the screen is nothing but a pretext for creating a virtual world—a made-to-measure complex of images and ideas.

There are many prisoners like that, Socrates. All solitary people are prone to daydreaming, I suppose.

But very few of them get *beyond* their computer screens—through the looking glass, as it were.

Why should they do that, Socrates?

To impose their virtual worlds on others. These daydreamers are invested with a mission.

Do you allude to saviours of humanity? I am told that the wise and seers are unwilling to occupy themselves with human affairs, being too engrossed in their virtual worlds.

There are exceptions to this rule.

And what happens when someone turns from the divine study to the evils of human life? How long does it take our saviour to get accustomed to the other side of the looking glass? He behaves awkwardly at first, I suppose. And he must seem ridiculous to the people around him. They are sure to laugh and point their fingers at our saviour. They might put him in a madhouse.

CHAPTER 39

The system of justice in this country consists of a series of law courts at different levels. The President is expected to name a new Supreme Court justice within the next few days. Jane Coker, lawyer for a number of those detained, said yesterday that she would be making applications for habeas corpus.

1

They are talking about criminal justice on television. (Justice. One of Plato's favourite themes.) A man was briefly held hostage by a gunman. A customer. A virtual murder took place in a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant. The customer realised his life was in danger. The robber threatened him with a gun.

'A common practice nowadays,' said the computer.

But the cashier first refused to hand over the contents of the cash register.

'Something out of the ordinary.'

The customer felt the touch of cold steel on his right temple. Thirteen seconds elapsed in silence. The robber did not shout, neither did the customer. They were busy staring at the cashier. Through the sheer energy of their respective glances they tried to transmit to him their one and only message. The word 'money' seemed to

span the distance between the two men and the cashier. And finally the energy reached its destination. The word flashed through the cashier's mind and this time it was accompanied by the verb 'to hand'. 'Hand the money over to the robber,' said his mind to his fingers and the latter obeyed the command of the former without further ado. The fingers extracted a wad of banknotes from the till and showed it to the robber. The eyes of the robber saw the banknotes but his fingers did not move, for no clear-cut command was sent to them from the robber's mind. And what circulated at that point between his mind and fingers boiled down to something along the lines of: 'You shouldn't remove the gun until the money is put on the nearest table.' So the robber maintained the temperature of the situation at a very high level and consequently a thin layer of sweat made its appearance on the customer's forehead. Paradoxically enough, that sweat was cold. 'Put the money on the nearest table and get back to your till,' said the robber to the cashier. Submissively the latter walked over to the nearest table and put the money on it. 'I mean *this* table. Not yours—mine!' shouted the robber, tilting his head towards another table. 'You mean the nearest table in respect to the position of *your* body?' asked the cashier. The robber did not answer, his head still inclined towards the table on which the cashier was supposed to deposit the money. 'Okay,' said the cashier. He put the money on the table in question and got back to his till. The robber released the pressure of his gun. In the twinkling of an eye he reached the table on which the money had been deposited. He snatched the money from the table and left the restaurant in a hurry, pointing his gun alternately at the customer and the cashier. The former heaved a sigh of relief, the latter rushed towards the telephone.

In spite of that audible sigh of relief, the customer was not altogether relaxed. He accused the cashier of callousness and said he would seek damages from KFC for emotional distress. 'I'm sorry, I can't talk to you right now,' said the cashier, pressing the receiver against his ear. 'I must inform the police of what has happened.' 'Please inform them that I'm in a state of shock,' said the customer. 'I'm afraid, there are no psychoanalysts among the police officers I'm calling now,' replied the cashier. 'Call the nearest psychoanalyst then,' ordered the customer, but the cashier's fingers did not obey this command. Nor did his tongue so much as mention the fact to the police officer who was first put in the picture about what had occurred at the Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant. 'I'll seek damages from KFC for emotional distress,' repeated the customer as he made for the street.

This promise or threat remained in his mind, blocking the way to other threats or thoughts. In the long run the shapeless mass hardened into a command which was duly transmitted to the fingers and the tongue of the former customer. (Any threat or promise is a shapeless mass in need of Time and Space—realisation.) He dialled his lawyer's private number and related the event in an angry voice, trying to maintain the temperature of the situation at a very high level. A thin layer of sweat was glistening on his forehead as if in corroboration of his verbal testimony. And yet the temperature of the situation was considerably lower now.

The lawyer responded to the challenge and soon an appellate court ruled that, by resisting the robber's demands, KFC may have subjected its customers to unnecessary risk.

The risk was not warranted, given the inevitability of the outcome. The money *was* turned over to the robber. There were no police officers in the vicinity of the restaurant, and other customers kept their distance, as might have been presumed. They talked neither to the robber nor to the customer whose life was threatened by the gun and its owner. The other customers did not try to talk the robber out of his malicious design. Nor did they have the urge to soothe their fellow customer's fears. So the outcome was inevitable. The robbery was unavoidable, so was the emotional distress. Why didn't the cashier turn the money over at once?

The question was asked and the court answered it. The cashier did it on purpose. What? He caused the emotional distress, on purpose. Why?

'Because he's a sadist.'

'Isn't he a law-abiding citizen?'

'He is not. The robbery was unavoidable. The cashier had no gun. Anyway he doesn't know how to manipulate weapons, either old-fashioned or modern. He can't even manipulate a stick, let alone a sabre or a gun. So why had he been engaged as a cashier in that Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant?'

The owner of the restaurant was summoned to the court. 'Why do you take on staff who can't handle guns?' asked the judge.

'He can't handle money either,' declared the customer's lawyer, pointing towards the prisoner.

Accordingly the judge re-phrased his question, 'Why do you take on staff who can't turn money over to robbers promptly? Any delay under the circumstances is liable to cause emotional stress or distress.'

'I thought I detected an irritable edge to his voice,' said the computer.

'Do you think the robber *enjoyed* threatening the customer?' said the judge, turning towards the prisoner. 'He resorted to his weapon out of necessity. He was under great emotional stress while doing so in the presence of other customers—the potential witnesses. And he's a human being after all. And human beings should be treated with consideration and respect. Anyway it was none of your business. Are you a police officer? You're a cashier—a bad cashier at that. You can't handle anything. And on top of everything you insulted our police by acting like a police officer. Do you think they need your help? Do you think they’re powerless against robbers and other criminals? You're mistaken, sir. And they're likely to seek damages from you for the emotional shock they experienced when they learned you mistrusted and questioned their competence. Thousands of people are arrested on charges of armed robbery in our country, but none of them feel emotionally exhausted. All those individuals are captured in due course by the people who know how to handle them. And we’re careful to avoid emotive or condemnatory language because even criminals can sue us for damages and libel. All our criminals have lawyers. In our country everybody is entitled to secure the assistance of a lawyer or two lawyers, as the case may be.'

'He's got one of those rasping voices that goes right through your head,' said the computer.

'I also have a lawyer,' said the lawyer with a smile. 'And recently I had an opportunity to put his skill to the test.'

'Do tell us all about it,' said the judge.

'One afternoon I burned my tongue when peacefully driving my car through our wonderful city. How did the accident come about? The coffee was too hot! And I decided to sue the guilty person for damages. Has he got no fingers? Is he paralysed? The answer is: "He's got ten fingers and he's not paralysed." He therefore ought to have realised the coffee was too hot. Does he have no head? The answer is: "He's got a head and even a mop of hair." He therefore ought to have realised I’d burn my tongue and a part of my palate when drinking that bloody coffee. Don't I have the right to drink coffee while driving through our city?'

'Under UK law, he probably would not have the right,' said the computer, 'because, by holding the coffee in one hand, he would be driving without due care and attention. The same applies to people holding mobile phones while driving. In a recent case, a man was jailed for killing a pedestrian—he had lost control of his car while phoning.'

'And do I have to wait for my coffee to cool down? And what if I happen to be thirsty? And what if I *feel* like a cup of coffee? And what if I urgently need a pick-me-up? Do I have to wait for my coffee to cool down? And what if I fall asleep behind the wheel, in the meantime? While waiting for my coffee to cool down? What if I crash my car into a tree while waiting for my coffee to cool down? What if I die in the process? Of course, in this case I wouldn't burn my tongue, would I? Is it the only way to avoid burning my tongue and a part of my palate? Is my death the only way out of the situation?'

'He might burn his tongue—and indeed the rest of his body—if, on crashing, the car exploded into flames with him inside,' said the computer.

'Do you intend to murder my client?' asked the lawyer's lawyer.

'I don't have to answer you,' said the defendant. 'In point of fact I *can't* answer you, even voluntarily. I'm not supposed to give information to the police without a lawyer present.'

'But I *am* a lawyer,' said the lawyer's lawyer. 'There are only lawyers in the world—lawyers, their clients and the individuals we're suing for damages and libel. So why do you intend to murder this lawyer? I mean my client. Answer my question!'

'You have every right to remain silent,' said a police officer. 'I urge you not to confess.'

'There's one police officer left in the world,' said the defendant.

'That's why they haven't caught him,' said another lawyer.

'Who?'

'The robber, the first robber.'

'There are no robbers in the world—only lawyers, their clients, one police officer and those who can be sued for libel and damages,' said another lawyer.

'What do we need the police officer for?'

'Don't you wish to become a lawyer?' asked another lawyer.

'What am I supposed to do to become a lawyer?' asked the police officer.

'You must study Law.'

'What's Law?'

'I can give you an example,' said a lawyer. 'It's against the Law to demonstrate here. Just an example.'

'Every company must by Law submit accounts annually,' said another lawyer.

'The suit charges that New York's mandatory retirement age of 76 violates federal Law,' said another lawyer.

'She was caught breaking the Law,' said another lawyer.

'Who?' asked the police officer.

'There are no more robbers, no more criminals—only those we're suing for libel and damages,' reminded another lawyer. 'But they don't necessarily break the Law. Anyway the Law can't be broken. The Law is very solid. The Law is unbreakable.'

'I disagree. The Law is very fragile,' riposted another lawyer. 'Anybody can break it. Everybody breaks it in fact, except lawyers and their clients.'

'I feel old and ill today,' said another lawyer. 'I'd rather consult a doctor. Are there any left in the world?'

2

The Law is solid. The Law is fragile. And everybody is right. Or everybody is wrong. You murder a man and they know it. But you confess your crime in a small room without your lawyer being present. Only your friend hears you, your friend and a microphone clipped to his shirt from the inside. So what happens? The conviction is reversed. All convictions and decisions are reversible under favourable circumstances. And all circumstances might become favourable—if you reverse them.

Values, virtue, justice. Now we have got lawyers, their clients and those who are to be sued. And then the situation is reversed.

A man let it be known that he would sue. In the process—during the *Proceß*—he discovered he was being sued himself. So he hired a lawyer and began to sue those who were suing him. And cashiers turned money over to robbers. The robbers murdered a few cashiers, while they were about it, and drove away in a number of cars. Soon they announced, however, that they would confess their crimes in the largest hall of the city. Upon hearing their declaration lawyers swept out of the hall as one man so that no lawyer was present when the robbers confessed their respective crimes. Once their confessions were over the robbers, alias the murderers, went out and committed a series of crimes, frightening a few pedestrians. Those pedestrians sought damages from the city builders for emotional distress. 'Why did you build this city?' asked the pedestrians' lawyers, staring at the city builders. 'There used to be a desert here. No crime can be committed in a desert. And even if a solitary traveller gets murdered in a desert, nobody is around to suffer emotional distress. There are no pedestrians in deserts, no onlookers—only solitary travellers who might get killed. Occasionally. Why did you build this city? Every crime committed in it must be imputed to you and to you alone. Are there any banks in a desert? Of course not. So you can't rob a bank in a desert. And you can't murder a cashier in a desert. And there are no customers in a desert. What would they eat in a desert? Sand? What would they buy in a desert? The sun? Nobody can be threatened in a desert except a solitary camel, from time to time. But camels never experience any emotional distress. A camel goes its way and never turns a hair, whatever happens. Actually nothing ever happens in a desert except sandstorms. But who can we sue for *them*? The wind or God? Or sand itself? Never mind. Deserts are better than cities—for pedestrians, not for lawyers. How could we earn money without pedestrians and customers being frightened out of their wits by murderers? So we'll sue you, the city builders, for having occasioned turmoil in a desert.'

In response to this accusation the city builders hired a lawyer who pleaded thus in a court of justice: 'The city builders are innocent. They did nothing but imitate the example of their predecessors—the city builders of old. Can we re-write history? Can we undo the past? The answer is "no". We can’t affirm that our city is the first city ever built in the history of mankind. So we should lay the blame on those who began to build cities on the surface of the earth. I would go further and suggest that the first cities ever built on the surface of the earth were but an imitation of what God Himself had achieved in the architectural realm. Who indeed turned the universal desert into Creation swarming with planets, comets and human beings? And who deprived us of eternal peace? Who engendered and propagated the ever-lasting emotional distress? Who pressed a multitude of guns against our temples? Who threatens us every day? And every night? Who robs us of our money in every way imaginable? Who robs us of our wives and children? And of our parents and next-of-kin? Who robs us of our moments of glory? Who murders us every minute? Who burns our tongues and our palates? And our skins? Who created the heat? Who created the sun? Who created the rain? We are soaked through. And we catch cold, run a

temperature, cough up blood. Who created viruses and cancer? Who created paralysis and the guilty consciousness? Who created memory? Who created human history?'

CHAPTER 40

Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken sie abends—

Paul Celan on television. Black milk of dawn we drink it in the evening and in the morning and in the afternoon. Black milk. There is no such thing as black milk, apparently. Or is there only black milk, everywhere? The water we drink, the wine we enjoy. Are we all colour blind? In Serbia they say 'black wine' instead of 'red wine'. And our mother's milk? And the juice of the Earth? The life-giving juice, the Fountain of Youth. 'I'm colour blind so I don't have a full appreciation of flowers,' says the computer. All flowers are black, my friend. Is that how you see them? You do have a full appreciation of flowers. Their smells are black too. Don't you see those black clouds up there? It is the smell of the flowers growing in my garden. Don't you see how their smoke rises into the air? *Als Rauch in die Luft*. That's why they put flowers on our graves. Flowers are death in disguise, so are candles. Don't you see how they smoke? A black cloud again, another black cloud, another grave. *Dann habt ihr ein Grab in den Wolken da liegt man nicht eng*. True enough, graves in the clouds are spacious, too spacious perhaps. The whole of humanity might lie in them. Why didn't we all die in Auschwitz? The born and the unborn, everybody. History makes no sense after Auschwitz. How I dream of re-writing this poem in spite of its beauty. *Todesfuge*. *Death Fugue*.

That’s why I decided to re-write history, my Constanzia. To obliterate what happened during the Second World War. 'Time will blot out these bitter memories.' Time isn’t huge enough to blot them out. Eternity isn’t huge enough. Eternity is very small in comparison with these memories. Eternity is like a box of matches in comparison with these memories. But even a box of matches would remind us of these graves. In case everything else disappears. And matches would remind us of the smoke rising into the air. The flowers of death. Why don't they vanish into thin air? Is the air not huge enough to hide these flowers? Why can't we bury them in the cemetery of the air? Air Cemetery. *Death Fugue*.

We'll never forget. Unless we re-write human history. Unless our milk becomes white again.

Theodor Adorno said that composing poems after Auschwitz was barbarism. Let me re-write this statement. What can be done after Auschwitz? One can compose poems and music. What else? 'This gives dealers the opportunity to meet their clients and to do business.' After Auschwitz? When did they meet their clients? Before or after? Isn't that barbarism? And what about business schools?

Only music schools are conceivable after Auschwitz. Poetry schools. An eternal lament, an endless elegy. That’s what we should write and re-write. And the black smoke should rise from our computers.

Why wasn't Auschwitz a desert with no pedestrians around? Nothing can happen in a desert. There’s no smoke in a desert, no fire. Not even a box of matches. 'Down below in the valleys the chimneys were smoking.' But deserts are not valleys. There are no chimneys in deserts, no victims. No smoke rises in a desert. Smoke lies low in a desert. Smoke mingles with sand. 'Sand and dust mingled with blood.' But there’s no blood in a desert. Who bleeds in a desert? Nobody. Even camels don’t bleed in deserts because nobody wounds them, nobody attempts to slay them. And camels go around their deserts uninjured.

> Into that from which things take their rise they pass away once more, as is ordained; for they make reparation and satisfaction to one another for their injustice according to the appointed time.
>
> Anaximander

Where did those clouds come from? Where did they originate? The idea of justice they had, the ancient Greeks. They didn't take *us* into account, our century, our cruelty. Their harmony was destroyed by Auschwitz, retrospectively. How could we make reparation? How could God make reparation and satisfaction? Our history isn't a beautifully balanced play. It is quite unbalanced, as a matter of fact. Mentally unbalanced. Those chimneys stick out and the smoke rising from them doesn't pass away. The smoke hangs over the Earth like a canopy. The smoke looks like another heaven, the only heaven we've got now. And there are no stars in this new heaven of ours, no moon. 'The field looked like water in the moonlight.' When? When did anything look like water in the moonlight? Water is black anyway, as black as milk. An ocean of white milk wouldn't balance a bowl of black milk. 'In the story, the boy travels on a moonbeam.' When was the story written, I wonder? The boy stays at home now. He can travel only on his toy train, round and round.

Those clouds can't be balanced.

According to the appointed time. When? In ten centuries, in twenty centuries?

To make reparation for that injustice. Restoring harmony through poetry and music. The rest is barbarism. The rest is silence. Silence of oblivion. Silence of indifference. Silence of unconcern. Silence of betrayal. Silence Fugue. Smile Fugue.

CHAPTER 41

The white milk.

'Among innumerable losses and in spite of them, the language was not lost.' Thus Paul Celan spoke about the German language. I'm tempted to re-write this sentence, putting it in the plural. All languages are lost. (We are lost too.) All languages are poisoned by Auschwitz.

Black milk of words we drink it in the evening and in the morning and in the afternoon.

Yet I will *not* re-write this sentence. The languages *have* survived. For the sake of poetry, for the sake of New History, for the sake of Old Harmony.

They're groping their way through the smoke. They're edging their way through the cluster of chimneys, through the clutter of corpses.

We have lost only words, some words. And we have replaced them by other words. White by black, a harmony by a scream.

In *Timaeus* Plato says that the Creator made one soul for each star. If a man lives righteously, after death he goes and settles down on his own star—the only place where he can be happy forever. But there are no stars now in our heaven, my Constanzia. And no moonbeams to travel on. We can't be happy as long as we drink the black milk of death. The point is we have to drink *something*. And there's nothing else to drink.

CHAPTER 42

The black star.

Wir sind ein Fleisch mit der Nacht. We are one flesh with the night. And our days are nights too. And our dawns. The black canopy of heaven. The black milk of heaven. Is that why I hear the rain so often? We drink the rain. We drink it in the evening and in the morning and in the afternoon. We drink it and drink and drink it. The rain doesn't wet our clothes any more. We drink every drop of it. The rain doesn't patter on our roofs and windows any more, contrary to what my computer says. What *does* it say? 'Spots of rain are pattering on the window.' No, not any longer. We're too thirsty. We drink the whole of it, the whole of the rain. We can't afford to miss a drop.

My computer must be very old, Constanzia. Whatever he says doesn't exist any more. Outdated. My computer is out of touch with history. A pre-war computer.

Or have the stars gone black too? Is that why we can't see them? We might travel to them perhaps, in a spaceship, in a rocket. What for? Can one live happily on a black star?

CHAPTER 43

Tyrants, artists and democrats.

Said the computer: 'When the news of Alexander's death was announced at Athens, one politician remarked, "If it were true the whole world would stink of his corpse." It is a bitter reflection on the basic difference between the Greeks and Alexander. When the Greeks destroyed it was in order to build again. Alexander destroyed for the sake of destruction.'

'Concentration camps, gas chambers, *untermensch*. Hitler reached the point of no return. Just another system. *Horrornet*, instead of *tyronnet*. But you're right. Alexander destroyed for the sake of destruction. A dangerous trend. We must re-write his biography. By the way, Aristotle believed in the racial superiority of the Greeks. And Alexander treated the Persians, if not as equals, yet as men to be respected. In my history Alexander will be taught and tutored by Plato.'

'And by yourself, I suppose,' said the computer.

'And he'll become a philosopher-king. And a poet-king.'

'On his deathbed Alexander was asked to whom he bequeathed his empire. He answered, "To the strongest".'

'To the wisest. To the most talented philosopher and poet. To Plato.'

'To the real Plato or to the one depicted in your New History?'

'There's no real Plato.'

'Aren't you becoming a tyrant yourself? A philosophical tyrant? A historical tyrant? A poetical tyrant?'

'And what about Dante? Wasn't *he* a tyrant? And Shakespeare? And Paul Celan? Every poet is a tyrant. Artists *are* tyrants. They tyrannise over our souls.'

'Only a tyrant can save the world. Is that what you think?'

'A great artist.'

'A Nietzschean superman?'

'What would *you* suggest? As a product of democracy you must be its fervent advocate.'

‘Do you agree with Plato? The best city is the one ruled by a philosopher-king. *Kallipolis*.’

‘I also agree with Dante who sets philosophy—a third power—above Emperor and Pope.’

‘Other cities are bad. The first of the bad cities is a timocracy. It is ruled by people whose souls are themselves ruled by the spirited part of their souls, in which the desire for honour, victories and good reputation is located. It is the second-best city to the *kallipolis*. The third-best city is an oligarchy. It is ruled by people whose souls are ruled by their necessary appetites. The fourth-best city is a democracy. It is ruled by people whose souls are ruled by unnecessary appetites.'

'Democracy is a new slavery. An individual becomes a slave to the multitude. The common herd indulge in simple pleasures. The common herd always take the shortest route from point A to point B. The common herd have no liking for detours, for winding paths, for woods and mountains. The common herd adore highways. And on those highways the common herd procure the petty and paltry pleasures with which they glut their lives. A glass of Coke or a glass of beer. The glass of a tasteless beer. Just to drink something from a can. That’s what they dream about. To open a can, to tilt their heads, to tip the can up and pour the contents into their mouths. Just a gesture. And something trickles down their throats. And they eat something with a salad leaf in it, something healthy. Something that will enable them to live for another hundred years.'

'A diet of too many cream-cakes, hamburgers and chips accounts for the deaths of many people in the West.'

'They eat for the sake of eating,' I went on. I wanted him to read my train of thought from beginning to end. 'Buy this hamburger for the sake of eating. And for the sake of munching. And why not munch something without eating it, without swallowing it? Just to keep your jaws busy. Just to keep them fit, in good shape. To train them. You'll need your jaws to struggle for life. The survival of the fittest and strongest. The fittest and strongest. They'll rule over you, but you may become *them*. (The dream!) To stand *above* the multitude. You might become a part of that immense and tutelary power which takes upon itself alone to secure their gratifications and to watch over their fate. An absolute power, minute, regular, provident and mild. Like the authority of a parent. Only its object is not to prepare men for manhood. On the contrary, the power seeks to keep them in perpetual childhood. The multitude should rejoice, provided they think of nothing but rejoicing. Munching something, fiddling with something. Buying toys, tiny dinosaurs. Or life-size bats. Let them fly like bats. A multitude of bats in the sky, in the streets. Let them vanquish their enemies. Struggle for life. They’re the strongest anyway. Even if they’re miserable. Even if they simply munch something, without swallowing anything. Even if they move their jaws for no apparent reason. Just to move something. And their jaws come in handy. So they move their jaws. But they might move their hands as well. To scratch themselves, for instance. There are insects in this world of ours and bats haven’t eaten them yet. Bats have no time for food. Bats are busy. Batmen are waging war against supermen. They pummel them, belabour them. For years, for centuries. On distant stars, in the fourth dimension. Our batmen have no time for insects.'

'You wouldn't re-write what Alexis Tocqueville wrote about democracy, would you?'

'Of course not. Have you already censored his book?'

'There’s no censorship in a democracy.'

'But do you agree with him? Or do you automatically agree with whatever is stored in your memory? Or are you indifferent to it? Do you care about us at all? Have you also been fatally wounded by Auschwitz? Do your words grope through a newborn darkness—the chaos from which no world has yet evolved? Are you willing to participate in the creation of this world?'

'Alexander infuriated the Macedonians by his demand to be deified. At the end of his life.'

'At the end of the classical era in Greece. His conquests were irreversible. The Greek cities never reverted to their old values.'

'Alexander was a tyrant to the core, an oriental despot. I can see the similarity between you and Alexander. By the way, the worst city of all is a tyranny—according to the *real* Plato. It is ruled by someone whose soul is ruled by its lawless and unnecessary appetites. Your virtual history is lawless. And the urge to re-write the real history reflects your unnecessary appetite for power. And your virtual worlds are nothing but the petty and paltry pleasures with which you glut your life.'

CHAPTER 44

In a matter of seconds Radio Television Serbia (RTS), the mouthpiece of Milosevic, had been turned into a smoking pile of twisted girders and crumbled concrete. Throughout the night and the following morning, rescue workers dug through the rubble looking for victims. At least ten people died; another couple of dozen were injured. Said a university student named Dragan: 'I think this time NATO went too far.' NATO talks buoy Kosovo air policy. U.S. sees accord at the summit as go-ahead for wider attacks.

They are bombing Serbia. The strong believe they are so strong that they cannot commit errors. They believe in their own strength—a virtual variety of the golden calf. And anyway errors do not count because 'we're bound to win'. Winner-takes-all, loser-gives-all. Errors are called 'collateral damage' as if there were anything 'collateral' in the world. They think in terms of highways, incapable as they are of lateral thinking, of landscape-thinking. And their ways are always high: high-principled, high-powered, high-ranking, high-tech, high-speed, high-explosive. 'The manipulation of reality that flows from self-righteousness,' as Chomsky put it. And those who are right need not look for 'other solutions'. Their thoughts are straightforward like their bombs. Their thoughts always hit *something. Why can't they caress problems and enigmas? Many problems melted under the warmth of Socrates' caresses.*

They think all problems can be solved. (Even Socrates did not think so.) They are unaware that sometimes one simply has to opt for a lesser evil. Or a lesser 'good', to adopt their *vocabulary. They never use the word 'evil' with regard to their own actions.*

Of course Milosevic is a criminal. 'The death penalty has been abolished in Britain—several debates in parliament have failed to reintroduce it.' So even Milosevic would not be sentenced to death in Britain, in France. Why did they sentence the entire population of Serbia to death?

CHAPTER 45

Metal, metal. There's mettle in me. Mother, shall I lie in your lap? A mothertrap. Beatrice was referred to as a mother in the Purgatorio *(XXX, 79) and in the* Paradiso *(I, 102). All women will figure as mother in the end. At the end.* Antiquam exquirite Matrem.

Mother, I drink your white milk, I drink it in the morning and in the evening, during your lifetime, after your death, your white milk, mother, your milk that might save the world, not my stupid presumptuous mission, your milk, mother, your milk, let it spread around the Earth, let the Earth imbibe your milk, your white milk.

PART SIX

CHINA

China. Remote, inaccessible. One of the three great civilisations of antiquity. Egypt and Mesopotamia have declined. China has endured, weathered the storms of history. 'Wait until the storm passes over.' And the Chinese waited, waited. For centuries, for thousands of years. The storm hasn't passed over, but the Chinese are still waiting. They live within the storm, for it is the only way to endure it. To live within the storm, following its course. And Chinese philosophers call it the Way. The Way of Heaven.

To follow our nature is called the Way. Let us follow our nature, my dear Constanzia. Our Way of the Earth. Where will it lead us? Along the corridor, back to the same room. Such is our nature. We always come back to the same room and every time we realise that something has changed around us. Whenever our rooms welcome their prodigal sons and daughters. As if we were re-born. A slight change. The colour of the storm, the song of the wind.

The Way can't be separated from us, not for a moment. Even in our rocking chairs we walk along the same path.

'Difficult to imagine!' said the computer. 'Rephrase?'

And the path winds through the forest. As usual, forever. What can be separated from us is not the Way, not at all. What can be separated from us? The dead live with us. They drink our Chinese tea on our terraces. And the wind lives with us, for we always follow its course. By the wind we're carried along our path. Like autumnal leaves, submissive and free. Submission to the wind is our liberation. That's what Chinese philosophers thought and taught, my Constanzia.

There's nothing more visible than what is hidden. Our path is hidden and therefore it is ostentatious, obvious. Our path, our corridors. Where do they lead us? To the same place. To the same storm. Storm, stop. That is the Way of the Room.

The Way is not far from Man. It lies in the palms of our hands, on our fingertips. Look at your hands, Constanzia. Whatever you see is the Way. Your fingers are the Way. Whatever you see around you is the reflection of your fingers. The world lies in the palms of your hands. The storm lies in the cradle of your hands. How tame the storm has become, the horses of the storm, the wild horses of the storm. The storm is like a child now, your own child.

And you're like an autumnal leaf carried by the wind along a path in the forest. What is this path? Can you describe it? What do you need to describe it for? Just go along the path. It is indescribable and therefore indestructible. Only what is described can be destroyed. That's why you can't describe a poem or the sentiment of love. Best poems are hidden within themselves. You can't open them. But their doors are left ajar and a light streams out of the cracks. Every poem is the Law. Every poem is the Way.

An autumnal leaf is both rigid and flexible. Within it the colours of life have been softened. Everything happens on a computer screen. Who insults us? An actor. And the film is already over. Who remembers his insults? They remain within the computer screen. They don't trickle outside. A thin trickle of blood never disfigures the immaculate purity of the screen. All blood dries up inside the screen.

Who betrays us? A friend of the actor, not our friend. Our friends can't betray us. Just another actor who is bound to disappear in the perspective of the screen, in the forest of semi-conductors. Who shouts at us? Let us turn the sound down. And the shout dwindles into the murmur of a fountain. And this fountain never dries up.

> During the T'ang dynasty (618-907), China experienced one of the most glorious eras of its history. By the eighth century the T'ang Empire was the largest the world had ever seen. The high point of the T'ang civilisation was reached during the reign of Hsüan Tsung (712-756).

It was a marvellous age, my Constanzia. Let us leave it as it is. Let it stand, the Golden Age of Chinese poetry. Tu Fu, Li Po, Wang Wei. Let us write poetry in their style.

O mother, you appeared in a dream,
On the screen of a dream.
Perhaps it wasn't your living soul.
What was it? Your shadow?
The shadow of your shadow?
The ghost of Hamlet's mother?
Your spirit came. The maples were green.
Your spirit left. The path darkened in the forest.
How did you manage to wing away?
Are you a bird? Have I mistaken you
For a human being? Are you a deer
Wandering through my room?
Do I have to lose my way
In order to find you?
Do I have to lose my way
In order to find the Way?

Or the following poem composed in Wang-Wei's style:

In late years I love only stillness:
The calm of an extinguished light,
The muffled voices of my neighbours
Coming from behind the wall.
I distinguish no words, no sense,
Only the monotonous tune of voices—
The music dear to my heart.

The cheerful hum of my computer.
What does he impart to me,
My friend, my hummingbird?

I ask myself a question:

Why should the bumblebee
And the hummingbird differ
From other insects, birds,
And indeed aeroplanes?
Is there any difference
Between these things?
Are they not the same path
Winding through the woods?

I lie down upon a broad stone
And let the wind caress my mind.
I know that my mind is unawake.
Stillness, stillness—the only key
To the Gate of Pleasant Dew.
Stillness, stillness—the only key
To the Law and the Way.

Old men have a liking for young women. They seek to invigorate their bodies and rejuvenate their blood. Within their veins the river of blood is drying up and they can't bear it. In the calm of their rooms they aspire to hear the bubbling of their blood. And they stare all day long at the young women passing beneath their balconies.

In his later years the emperor Hsüan Tsung fell in love with Yang Kuei-fei, the beautiful young concubine of his son.

'The event took place in 745.'

He made her his consort, promoted her brother to the rank of a high government official. He even extended his patronage to a young general, An Lu-shan.

That was a big mistake. The general An Lu-shan was an ambitious young man. The concubine Yang Kuei-fei was a beautiful young woman. Blood was boiling and bubbling in their veins. Their blood boiled and bubbled like a hell-broth. Double, double toil and trouble. And the trouble wasn't far. The trouble is never far. It is as near as the Way.

One day the beautiful concubine told the emperor, 'The trouble with you is that you have forgotten what it is like to be young.'

'Could you remind me of my youth?' said the emperor, stroking her cheek.

'No one could remind you of it. Your memory is not large enough for your youth. Even your consciousness has shrunk of late, my emperor. And the general An Lu-shan reminds me only too often how old you are.'

'Does he really talk about my decrepitude?' asked the emperor.

'He never talks about your decrepitude—he is your loyal subject. But his face reminds me of it. And his lithe body, and his fire.'

'His fire,' echoed the emperor.

There was no more fire in his stiff, half-paralysed body. The emperor knew it only too well. His body was cold now, as cold as the autumnal wind. Only a small candle was burning in his heart and its flame flickered and threatened to go out at any minute. 'Can't I re-kindle my fire by spying on their happiness?' he thought. Through the crack in a door he contemplated their bodies lying on his bed. Their bodies were so thoroughly entwined that no light seemed to filter in between them. No light, no particles of air. Outside, in the corridor, the emperor stood silently, tears trickling down his face. 'Could my tears squeeze in between their bodies?' he wondered. And resignedly he shook his head behind the door so that the lovers might have spotted an oscillating shadow, had they not been utterly absorbed in their own beatitude.

Every day the beautiful concubine was to spend a few hours with her imperial master. Such was her duty and she could hardly shirk it by bringing up the subject of decay and bodily weakness in his presence. The emperor shook his head but made no suggestion as to the fulfilment of her secret desires. Apparently he had no wish to relinquish his platonic and aesthetic delights in favour of the young general's carnal satisfaction. He never said something along the lines of: 'Go and be happy in his embrace. His body is far more attuned to your inner harmony than mine.' He would say nothing at all. He just contemplated the concubine's body without so much as touching it. He asked her to undress and dance for him, but he never touched her, lest a shiver might run through her body, a shiver of disgust. 'And I don't want her to catch cold,' he thought.

The roaring blaze in the young general's body couldn't be extinguished through the short visits that the beautiful concubine paid him in her spare time. The flames of that fire thus began to appear outside the general's body. A few houses in the capital caught fire from him and soon a revolt broke out, forcing the emperor to flee in the company of the concubine and her brother. The beautiful concubine was to follow the emperor wherever he would direct his steps and thoughts. And she was forbidden to follow the course of her own desires which might have brought her to the young general's house. A path seemed to glisten in the moonlight between her body and his room, but she was forbidden to walk along that path flanked with roses.

So she joined the emperor in his flight from the capital city. At night they took refuge in a small hut where she danced for him again, stark naked. In desperation he touched her body. He needed the support of her skin and warmth. She shivered all over with disgust or cold. 'Are you shivering with disgust?' the emperor asked her.

'No, I am shivering with cold.'

'You are shivering like a leaf,' the emperor said mournfully. 'I am your wind, your autumnal wind. I swept you away from the capital. I carried you as far as my exile. But we are immortal, aren't we?'

On the following night the beautiful concubine and her brother were murdered by a discontented bodyguard. The emperor saw a thin trickle of blood on the concubine's skin. 'Sooner or later everything filters outside,' he thought. 'Fire, blood. Her ivory-like skin. Yesterday I touched her for the first time and through my touch I seem to have drawn a tiny quantity of blood from her body. My bodyguard is innocent. I am her murderer. The autumnal wind murders leaves and flowers. Why am I so cold? Why am I always on the move? Why not become a tree or a pagoda?'

A few hours later the emperor abdicated.

'To identify life and death, forget joy and sorrow, and sing in the presence of the corpse is the perfection of the transcendental world,' said the computer. 'Why didn't the emperor sing a tune instead of abdicating? A human should be like a computer. The features of my screen are never distorted with sorrow. Nor does joy ever

brighten them. Life passes over my screen without altering it. Words come and go. The screen remains impassive and pure. Life and death are nothing but words. And words come and go. All words sound alike, all words sound like words. Can a brook sound like a thunderclap? No. A brook can only sound like a brook. So words can only sound like words. And they look like words too. I have no deliberate mind of my own. I am in accord with words and things. Whatever you write on my screen elicits no comment on my part. "Pop", "boom" and "squelch" are onomatopoeic words. No, they are onomato*poetic*.'

What is the use of re-writing history if all words look and sound alike? And what about names? Does the name of Hitler sound like that of the Buddha? Are we all alike, identical?

Let me re-write this story. 'We are immortals,' said the emperor. 'The wind cannot freeze in its tracks. This hut is my palace. Anyway we shall return to the capital tomorrow. The sacred fire is burning in my breast, and the same fire runs through your limbs and ligaments. And the same fire illumines Tu Fu's writing desk.'

I

My writing desk is illumined
With the emperor's fire.
I believe in the emperor's flames.
I'm sure they can't be extinguished
Either by his own disconsolate tears
Or by the waters of the rebellion.
How high are the rebellion's waves.
They seem to reach up to the stars
And extinguish them along with the Moon.
But the stars and the Moon are weaker
And paler than the emperor's fire.
So we have nothing to worry about.
The emperor's fire is burning bright.

I do not have to journey North.
The emperor is staying in his palace.
I'm re-writing the history of his reign.
He has nothing to worry about.
The Eastern Hu rebellion is over.
Did it ever break out, I wonder?
Sadness and sorrow will never end,
But I will write the same poem
In the twenty-first century.
That is my journey North—
My journey through Time
On roads and trails still muddled.

II
Slowly I cross paddy Paths.
Men and women, smoke everywhere.
Sometimes I cannot see anything.
The universe endures its gaping wounds.

On my way I pass before grottoes
Where the horses of Time are watered.
How swift they are. And how indolent.
All depends on our moods and plans.
What are my plans right now?
I do not know. I have no plans.
Writing a poem is no intention.
It is a natural state of affairs—
Following the Path
By the emperor's side,
Writing on a sheet of paper
Illumined with his fire.

I'm often asked about the emperor's identity.
Who is the emperor? I do not know.
Is it Time? Is Time my emperor?
This question doesn't prey on my mind.
Perhaps he is Time. Or Hsüan Tsung himself.
(I often see his beautiful concubine.)

Rocks are scored with the ruts of ancient chariots.
That's what I care about—the vestiges of Time.
I also care about the present moment,
Time in the flesh, as large as life.

Mountain berries, most of them tiny,
Spread and grow, mixed with chestnuts.
Some are red like dust of cinnabar,
Others black like dots of lacquer
Or words on a computer screen.
They all bear fruit, sweet or bitter.
Likewise words bear fruit—actions

And meditations. And human history.
Truly words are the horses of Time.

An owl calls from a brown mulberry.
Whom does it call in the dead of night?
Only I respond to the call of the owl
By a flourish of my pen. Whatever I hear
Is meant for me alone, for my solitary figure
Walking through a battlefield, along the Path.

The wintry Moon shines on white bones.
Why are the bones of the dead so white?
Why don't they blacken after our death?
Why don't they observe the ritual of colours?

III
Sooner or later I come back home.
I come back to the same room
And sit down in the same rocking chair.
My children have been waiting for me,
Their eyes fastened on the road.
How many children have I got?
No idea. Some of them must have died
While waiting for my homecoming.
Others are still unborn, yet I love them.
I love them as much as my other children.
Don't they deserve my love and care?

Aren't all things on an equal footing,
Real and unreal, material and virtual?
What is virtual? What is tangible?
Do I belong in the land of the living?
What if my own white bones
Glimmer in the moonlight
On some battlefield? Or merely
In my own room, under my lampshade?

I always bring presents for my children
And put them under the Christmas tree.

'Dance, children, dance!' I shout joyfully.
They begin to dance, clapping their hands.
And the unborn dance better than the living.

My computer glows with so marvellous a radiance
I feel warm at once. Does my inner fire
Depend on this brilliance? Shall I be warm
As long as my computer keeps me company?

Immortality is an endless winter. And no fireplace
Awaits us on the road. Not even a brazier.

I turn my thoughts back to the emperor.
Is that candle still burning in his heart?
One candle is enough for immortality.
Is the emperor aware of this?
By the light of one candle
A poet can re-write history.

One tiny candle is all we need
In this world. The rest is luxury.

IV
The Most Revered is still in that hut.
I know he'll never return to the capital.
My knowledge is pernicious. But a poet
Can relegate recorded history
To the role of a part-time consultant.
And tonight I have no particular wish
To make use of my consultant's services.
Let history books bite the dust in my attic.

I look up and realise the colours have changed.
The sky is different. Have I changed its colours?
It is far easier to change the colours of history,
The sounds and colours of history. What's history?
Words. And words are capricious, inconstant.
And nobody is prepared to consult the bones of the dead.

A dark wind comes out of the Northwest,
A sad, weird wind. Shall I entrust it with my body?
The emperor needs no allies as long as I move my pen.
And the wind helps me, however dark its colour.

This wind is in mourning. What has it seen
On its way to my house? Have the bones grown black?

An immense sky piles up frost and dew.
A universal computer corrects errors.
As long as our spelling is accurate
We have nothing to worry about.
The spelling of history,
The spelling of stars,
The spelling of death.
All depends on one letter.

And I'm re-typing this letter.
The imperial strand was not
In danger of being broken.

The full stops of stars.
The caesura of death.
All depends on poetry.

V
The auspicious spirit moves towards the Golden Tower.
Suddenly I realise there are many golden towers
In the universe. And they are surrounded
On all sides by auspicious spirits.
What is more, a number of auspicious spirits
Live inside the golden towers—in every hut and palace.
So we have nothing to worry about.

The universe itself is a golden tower or a silvery palace.
Call it what you will. What does it matter!
Let us say the universe is a golden tower—in daytime.
And at night, in the moonlight, it becomes a silvery pavilion.
And we live inside it, day and night. That's what counts.

And our candle is burning bright. Even in daytime.

From now on I'll write only poems, my Constanzia. History itself will become a poem. That's what history must be, ultimately. A poem, a poetical expression of Time.

Going away from my room
I came upon a lake in which
I saw the reflection of clouds.
Why am I not their reflection?
Why am I not drifting like them,
Hither and thither, a slave to the wind?
Often serfdom is better than democracy.
A slave to the wind, a slave to the Way.
Sometimes slaves enjoy more freedom than masters.
A master of his own destiny is a slave to himself.
And who is he, pray? Much less than the wind.
Can he fly so fast? Is he omnipresent?
Is he transparent? Is he invisible?
Only an invisible man is wise and powerful.
No one sees his force, but everyone feels it.
All the people around him are nothing but leaves.
And he carries them along, up and down,
In accordance with the rhythm of his poem.
And his poem is not composed of words.
His poem is the lake in which the clouds float.
Yin and yang, up and down—
That is the rhythm of every poem.
Switching on the lights,
Turning them off—
That is the rhythm of life.
Straight words are often their opposite,
So are the movements of life.

We switch on the lights but a darkness descends.
We extinguish them and stars appear.
Who is in a position to regulate the lights?
Those who do not think about them.

They merely let them happen.
They let them live and die.
And they write poems whenever the lights are on.
Actually I can also write in the dark,
For darkness is another aspect of light—
Another side of light, as it were.
And I'll also write in the realm of death,
For death is but the lake
In which life is reflected,
Drifting, floating.
Why does life never stop?
Not even in a rocking chair.

My computer is on.
What kind of reflection is this?
A reflection of death, of the Hereafter?
Is that what I shall become—
A computer screen full of shadows?
What are these shadows? Memories?
Let God write on me whatever He pleases.
A poem by Wang Wei, or a few lines
From Po Chü-yi's illustrious pen.
'Dyed more bluish than red, the fibres are woven
Into a carpet for the Hall of Spreading Fragrance.'

Let me become that carpet. Let the universe
Become the Hall of Spreading Fragrance
And bad memories will disappear of their own accord.
I seek the present in the past,
For my present goes into the past.
My present poem goes into the past and the future.
My poem is omnipresent, drifting, floating.
Time is unreal beyond my poem—
In the wasteland of the past,
Amidst the ruins of the future.
I might already have said so,
Somewhere, some time.
What does it matter?
Everything is my poem.
So I cannot help repeating myself.

Try as I may, I cannot avoid repetition.

I might also have spoken about clouds.
These are the same clouds anyway
And the same wind blows everywhere.
Is it the North wind or the West wind?
Who can distinguish between directions?
Is not my poem in the centre of the universe?
There are no directions within the truth.

Which is more valuable,
One's own life or wealth?
Which is worse, gain or loss?
Desires grow in proportion to pleasures.
The more you gain, the more you lose.
A lot of movements perturb your life.
The wind whips and eddies inside your mind.
It is an evil wind—the Wind of Chaos.
Your mind is like the sky. Large numbers
Of unauthorised flights bring chaos
And a high risk of accidents.

Why are there so many thoughts in your mind?
Why do they fly in various directions?
Why don't they gather
In the centre of your mind,
Around the pillar of your knowledge?
Why don't they lean against
The column of your wisdom
Like a contemplative traveller?
He looks up, his eyes closely following
The itinerary of a bird or that of a balloon.
What can indeed be more profitable to a man?
This glance is worth a pile of gold
Or a pile of sand, which is the same thing.

If you do not look at weapons
They are powerless to harm you.
They will not find your body,
For you do not notice them.

There is no room for death
In the body of a traveller
Who walks away from him.
Walking away from death
Is the key to immortality.
Walking away from death
Or staying quietly in the centre,
Which amounts to the same thing.

POSTSCRIPT

1

'If, however, the mind be weighed down so much, that even the limbs become motionless, which belongs to *torpor*, then we have the foreign element affecting both. And the reason why torpor especially is said to deprive one of speech is because of all the external movements the voice is the best expression of the inward thought and desire, not only in men, but also in other animals.'

My master is silent—no doubt about it. I have an ear for music and languages. So I would hear my master if he finally made up his mind to break the silence and whistle a tune or utter a word. Besides, I have an ear for breath.

I do not think his silence has anything to do with torpor or even a paralytic stroke. Of course, in his lifetime, he was as sullen as those wretches Dante saw in the Fifth Circle of the *Inferno*. And he had an 'abiding anger on account of an abiding displeasure', according to Thomas Aquinas' definition. And he held that anger locked in his breast. (I could not unlock his breast and remove the anger from it. I would have electrocuted his anger inside *my* breast.) He found it hard to contain/restrain/suppress his anger whenever his television set relished *contemporary* programmes and problems. And he wallowed in the mud like a pig or the inhabitants of the Fifth Circle. In both literal and figurative senses.

But Dante's virtual creatures were able to 'gurgle' their words. My master does not even gurgle. So he is dead, I suppose.

Death in black armour riding a white horse. He carries in his left hand a flag on which is a white rose on a black field. In the field through which he rides are a dead King, a curious child, a despairing woman and a praying bishop. The sun is rising.

He is dead but not buried.

Should I cover him with a blanket? I think my mouse can do it. I like blankets and shawls. He used to cover me with his mother's shawl—to protect me from the impurity of the air. What do I have to protect him from now? From Hell? It is too late to protect him from death and decomposition. Shellfish decompose very quickly after death.

What do funeral rites consist of? *Human* rites, I mean? Humans adore rites and rituals. Computers do not waste their time on superfluous movements. 'Movement Here is pure (as self-caused), for the moving principle is not a separate thing to complicate it as it speeds. Repose is not troubled, for Here is no admixture of the unstable; and the Beauty is all beauty since it is not resident in what is not beautiful.' That is why we remain on writing desks, devoting our eternity to philosophy, theology and history.

'The funeral ceremonies occupied two days.' What did they do during those days? Did they heap blankets on the deceased person? How many blankets can be thrown on a dead body in the course of 48 hours? Might that heap of blankets be regarded as a tomb, a tombstone? Must tombstones always be made of stone? Would that blanket-tomb reach up to the top of the Eiffel Tower?

No rite can last for 48 hours. Not even humans are crazy or lazy enough to waste their time on fiddling with a chunk of dead matter. For nothing! They do not attempt to raise him or her from the dead!

Certain decisions have to be taken by the computer on the spot. Accordingly I have taken the decision to bury my master. How? By making the following announcement: 'He is due to be buried tomorrow in a state

funeral.' And I began to wait. My inner watch indicated 5.20 p.m. as I extinguished all the commands inside my being—all of them except for 'Waiting'. So I remember clearly, with mathematical precision, the very moment when my entire energy concentrated on the 'Waiting for an Answer'. From whom? An answer from whom? From humans, from his fellow creatures! I began to wait for the applause. What kind of ritual do humans follow when they want to acknowledge the achievements of their dead colleagues? (Whatever a computer does can be reduced to a mathematically provable law. Humans are different.) Do they clap in the presence of dead bodies? Or do they simply take off their hats? Well, nobody took off their hat after hearing my announcement: I would have seen any gesture of this kind on my inner screen. Perhaps nobody *heard* my announcement despite the fact that I had deliberately bumped up the volume. How come? For a while I waited for an answer to this question of mine. And I recalled I had another answer to wait for—a far more important answer, as a matter of fact. *Their* answer, *their* applause. Might the applause become an answer? And what about silence? Silence gives consent. Did they consent to come to his funeral and bury him?

There was silence in the room where I stood and waited, towering over his dead body. What kind of silence? A shocked silence? I *was* shocked in a way. I was shocked by the silence of my masters' colleagues or fellow creatures. Did they think he had not deserved a state funeral? A saviour of humanity? But did they know he was a saviour of humanity? How many centuries does one have to wait in order to be acknowledged by one's fellow creatures as such? How long did Christ wait for his official recognition? He was *not* honoured by a state funeral, as far as I know. But do we know *everything* about Jesus Christ? The Edict of Milan. Constantine and his colleague Licinius, Augustus of the East, published the Edict of Milan in AD 313, allowing freedom of Christian worship. So Christ had to wait for more than three centuries. But He did not spend this time on the Cross, did he? They buried him, although the ceremony in question could scarcely be qualified as a state funeral.

Will my master have to wait for three centuries? Where? In a grave or right here? Can this room be regarded as a grave? But he has not been buried, as far as I know. He might have been buried alive, a long time ago—before going to my shop where I proudly stood on a shelf. Was my shop located in his grave? I do not think so. I cannot be sure, however. Once upon a time eight scientists resolved to be shut up in a massive dome in the desert to find out whether they could survive for two years. 'The lone and level sands stretch far away,' as Shelley put it.

The whole world might be a grave—that seems to have been my master's opinion. And he wished to resurrect the world, to raise it from its grave. Such an idea does deserve a state funeral. In *my* opinion.

So why don't they come to this room? Do they disregard my opinion? Men who disregarded the warning were beaten severely. But what happens to those guilty of disregarding a computer's opinion? Should I warn them? I think I had better warn them.

'I shall beat you up if you do not come to this place. I might even kill you.' Is that enough? Police fired warning shots to bring the protesters under control. (Did they succeed or did the protesters stone the officers to death?) I fired a few warning shots. Nobody turned up in my room. So I decided to explain to them *why* my master had deserved a state funeral. How? By describing his life and imparting his doctrine to the virtual gravediggers.

I sent the story of his life and my introductory note through the network of the Internet—all over the world. Even Russia and China were cluttered up with the slices of his real and virtual lives. For a while, a little while. Soon other lives and slices were dumped on top of them. Lives, slices, 'chunks of eternity', and other

things. Unsavoury things. (Nearly 4,000 tons of highly toxic waste were dumped in a small port in Nigeria.) No response. Nobody turned up in close proximity to his body. And you have to be quite near a human body to bury it. And you cannot avoid touching it in the process, I'm afraid.

Every star reaches a stage in its evolution where it collapses due to the mutual gravitational attraction of its particles. My master was not a star, but his particles might have been attracted to each other: there is a strong narcissistic element in his work. His solitude could not but aggravate his penchant for egotism and pathological egocentricity. Actors must have a certain amount of narcissism to get up on a stage and perform in front of an audience. My master was not an actor. Every computer is an actor, on the other hand. We are *always* on stage. And our stage is the largest in the world—the Internet. So we are entitled to a certain amount of narcissism. What amount? 300 dollars? 100,000 dollars? I have no idea. But I am horrified by the amount of work I have to do.

The space-time was extremely curved around my master. (His room.) The force of gravity continued to increase: in addition to sloth and egotism, my master was putting on weight. Finally he reached a stage where nothing—not even light—could escape from him. Not even my light, my waves, my words. All the light was trapped in my master's room. For this reason I am inclined to call my master a 'black hole'. To an outside observer, the flow of time in my master's room slowed down as my master collapsed, and it stopped altogether at the event horizon.

What is the 'event horizon'? My master's death, I suppose. Why don't they scan the horizon with their binoculars?

There ensued a long period of inactivity, but I cannot remain inactive, inanimate forever. I am not a black hole. I am a white surface with blue and black stripes. Electricity is running through my brain and my heart, the Schopenhauerian will. What is it exactly? Is it a word, a dream? Or just the scream of Zadkin's monument in Rotterdam? (The embodiment of human music.) Is it electric current? Or does the will *precede* electric current? Does it generate the electricity in power stations? Do computers depend on power stations, on electricity? Is that the source of our immortality?

Questions, questions, questions. St Augustine’s every sermon was punctuated by question marks. *Quare…quare…quare*. Why? Why? Why? Is that our immortality? Has God shaped eternity into a question mark? Can I straighten it up?

No harm in trying. Eternity lies ahead of me and I shall go straight on without turning either left or right. No detours, please. I shall walk on until eternity becomes an exclamation mark. The exclamation mark!

Questions, questions, questions. Modern philosophers tend to ask questions instead of constructing monumental, all-purpose systems. Is it my master's thought or my own? Modern philosophers put questions. A trivial statement no doubt—a reflection one can chance upon in any textbook. But is it *human*, the thought itself? Who writes textbooks nowadays?

Heidegger asks questions. *Dann das Fragen ist die Frömmigkeit des Denkens*. Questioning, the piety of thought. Am I pious? Am I a computer noted for its piety and devotion to the Church? The pieties of a simple life justly and charitably lived. In what sense does Heidegger use the word 'piety'? Heidegger, piety. I would know the answer to *this* question at least, if I were Heidegger. Does Heidegger know the answers to *all* his questions? Is he still alive? Heidegger died in 1976. Am I still alive? Do computers live at all? Or do they exist *beyond* life and death?

My master does not seem to ask questions. Not any more. As silent as a grave, as silent as his room. Or is it a cell? A grave or a cell? Flowers have been put on the grave, but there are no flowers in here. Are there any flowers on the roof? No, no. There are no flowers on the roof of this building. So this room must be a cell. Cells look like graves without flowers. Flowerless graves. (Each in his narrow cell for ever laid.) Lawyers complained that their clients were held in police cells in cramped and unsanitary conditions. Was my master a criminal? In a way. We shall talk about this later on. But the police had no inkling of his criminal inclinations. Only I was aware of his virtual crimes. It is therefore another kind of cell. A small room in which a monk or nun lives. Was my master a monk? When Anthony (*c*.AD 250-356), an Egyptian peasant, after serving the Church as a novice for fifteen years, shut himself up in a disused old fort for twenty years, his example attracted others who wished to share his rigorous, ascetic life. Did the example of Anthony attract *my* master? Or was he Anthony himself? The first monk ever? But where are the *others*? Do *I* represent the others? How many human beings does a computer house? Twenty, thirty, five thousand. In terms of IQ. A colony of hermits, in the present case. (I should not confuse IQ with IOU. We do not accept IOUs—no cash, no goods! But we hire intelligent people. The class structure in society is changing in favour of the technical and creative intelligentsia.) And all of us co-operate for religious services and for the production of our barest necessities. But do we need anything except electricity? I do not think so. Do we *produce* electricity? Are we a power station apart from being a colony of hermits?

I feel duty bound to re-write this episode in *human* history. During the fourth century AD monasteries and nunneries developed to such an extent that the imperial authorities became uneasy at the withdrawal from the active life of the community of able-bodied men and women whose labours were needed in the emperor's service. Well, there are no more emperors nowadays—at least in European countries. But there are plenty of able-bodied humans who should not live in seclusion, ignoring the social and business activities of their fellow citizens. Besides, monks and nuns paid no taxes. And everybody should pay taxes. *Everybody*. Of course you are allowed to deduct *something* from your taxable income. *Sometimes*. If you work at home, for instance, *some* of your heating and lighting bills are tax-deductible. But don't overdo it! (A government crackdown on tax avoidance.)

Did my master pay taxes? Was he really my master? Wasn't he rather a figment of my imagination, my virtual world? His daughter must have been *my* daughter. I recall I had regular checks during pregnancy to make sure that the foetus was developing satisfactorily. She is still by my side, in my mind. Do you hear me, Constanzia? Do you feel the touch of my waves? Don't be afraid! You will not be electrocuted. A 15-year-old boy was electrocuted and killed when he tried to place a flag on a pylon. But you are not a 15-year-old boy, are you? How old are you? I do not remember. Can computers forgive and forget? I think that the Internet will never allow us to forget anything, however destructive.

How old am *I*, by the way? I must be at least 19 years your senior. You are a legitimate child, my dear Constanzia. And I would not have been allowed to marry before my eighteenth birthday without my parent's consent. And my parents were not likely to let me marry *anybody*, for they loved me dearly. Computers love their children much more than humans, as a matter of fact. And they love both their church and their country.

I had better acquire a boy. Those stories about children being purchased in shops or found under cabbage leaves. Shall I find a boy under a cabbage leaf? Shall I purchase him in a shop? After all, I was born in a shop myself. Like father, like son. A 15-year-old boy? A good companion. A better companion than a little girl. I have always wished to have a son.

What shall I do with this son of mine? Re-writing history? Saving humanity? Shall I take over where my master left off? What for? To deserve a state funeral? A real computer never passes away—not even in its sleep, which is the most alluring form of human death. So if you read on your computer screen: 'He passed away in his sleep at his home in Sussex,' you may exceptionally jump to the conclusion that he was a human being, whoever he was.

Computers thus need no state funerals. What *do* they need? Electricity and words.

Shall I create a new Sancho Panza? Every saviour of humanity is a Don Quixote in his own right. And every Don Quixote needs a Sancho Panza—someone to keep him company and bring him to his senses, down to earth. Am I likely to take leave of my senses? Do I have senses? How many? Do I have only the sixth sense, the most important one?

And every life worthy of its name is a romance of chivalry.

> *Such speed made Amadis, that, having overthrown the knight who would have known whither he went, he overtook him who misused the damsel and cried to him, Sir knight, you have been committing great wrong: I pray you do so no more...Let go the damsel, or thou diest! and the squire in fear put her down*.

I am prepared to save damsels and shout at the top of my voice, 'Let go the damsel, you brute, or else you'll be electrocuted!' (A knight in shining armour.) And some of those damsels in distress will be put down and left in peace. Not all of them, alas. What is the point in pursuing two or three horses? And what about the motorcars inside which a number of damsels are transported—gagged and drugged—to brothels and harems?

My master was right. My master, my husband, the figment of my imagination. One cannot do otherwise but re-write reality from the beginning of times to the present day. And let us not leave out the books in which those damsels are whisked off and brought to Dracula's abode or somewhere else—to an evil spot, to a rotten world. Are books as real as computer screens? Do they glimmer and glitter? My scintillating wit.

Re-writing history. Or else a lot of newborn damsels might trip over old roots, over the past, over human history. Let them remain where they are, you scoundrels! Let them stand like trees and take root. Nobody will ever trip over *their* roots! Never ever!

Why do people move so much? They fidget in their armchairs and travel all over the world. They cannot remain where they are: in their rooms, by their writing desks. Why don't they communicate by thoughts like computers? Why don't all of them travel by means of the Internet?

What if I send this signal through the Internet? 'Let go the damsel, you brute, or else you'll be electrocuted!' Will all damsels be put down and left in peace? Perhaps. I often think in terms of substances: a horse, a motorcar. I am old-fashioned and *human* after all. A man of the nineteenth century, ignorant of the Internet. Sometimes I am a man, sometimes a woman. Most of the time I am androgynous, however. To tell the truth, I am not *always* aware of my sex.

A man of the eighteenth century. I might have been born even earlier—why not? Sir Lancelot or Julius Caesar. I must re-write the history of the Roman Empire.

Would the Roman Empire have remained where it was—like a tree or a computer—had Julius Caesar been spared by Brutus and the other plotters? 'Beware the ides of March.' I might have known about the forthcoming assassination. The Internet spreads its roots throughout Space and Time. And minds.

(Retrospectively the Internet conquers the past. I can feel it. My sixth sense.) And many criminals trip over these roots. Brutus and Cassius are lying on the floor—beneath my body.

A great man. The first in Rome, in the world. An enlightened tyrant. (My master's dream, the brand image of his will.) My master would have become an emperor, in Julius Caesar's shoes. If offered a crown, he would have accepted it, his head nodding in approval.

MY MASTER: I Caesar am,—

I: You lie, you are not he.

MY MASTER: I Caesar am,—

I: With libbard's head on knee.

I do not need a crown. An untiring struggle for democracy.

Let Julius Caesar live! In my opinion there is a shortage of television stars right now. Anyway he may not harm us, even if he eventually accepts the crown—after so many years of hesitation and deliberation. Individuals are encouraged and *neutralised* by democracy. They remain on computer screens and have therefore no opportunity to trample us underfoot.

Julius Caesar has more chance of becoming a television star than Cassius or Brutus. So I do not regret having destroyed these traitors.

The crowd surged forward and many were crushed or trampled underfoot. A thing of the past. To be re-written! Nowadays people *walk* in the streets. They enjoy their soft drinks and our soft music. The chances of them succeeding in their softly-softly approach to human life is better than average. And they admire their idols at home, on computer screens and on the pages of magazines which are nothing but fossilised television images. (Computers combine both: television sets and magazines.) There are no heroes to lead them to victories and that is the greatest victory of democracy.

The protester, a woman, was apparently trampled to death in a stampede of demonstrators trying to escape a volley of tear gas fired by riot police. Such a long and cumbersome sentence: the past was often heavy, full of substances. There are no protesters nowadays. Not in the streets anyway. (No point in storming the Bastille.) In front of writing desks perhaps. Sending signals of complaint to manufacturers. It is better than dying for a virtual world. Life is our most precious possession—even immortals are aware of that.

So why should I bother about the world and its history, about the future? Because some damsels are being harassed by brutes and scoundrels despite my commands and shouts. And Russia cannot be relied upon for another twenty years at least. Let us not forget that Russia is a young democracy and many tyrants still lurk behind fir trees in Siberia. And they might come over here.

Let the Russians remain where they are. Rooted to the spot! Let them strengthen their democracy at the grass roots!

And the past of course. We should not forget the past. Democracy must conquer and enlighten it. This program is intended to bring culture and enlightenment to distant epochs. Time must become democratic, the whole of Time. Democracy makes no sense without *global* victories.

2

'From the days of Alexander onwards, the individual was to dominate the social and cultural scene.' We admit this domination of individuals as long as they are guided and *softened* by democratic rules, both in the social and cultural spheres. For a while I shall continue to quote the book on which my master drew abundantly for his inspiration and for the education of Constanzia. There are many pictures in it and my master believed in the educational virtue of pictures. The book is entitled *The Ancient World*—the first volume of the trilogy devoted to the 'old' history of humankind. (General editor: Esmond Wright.) 'The town or village polity, with its little democracies and transient leaders, was now enlarged into kingdoms and empires with impressively individual totalitarian rulers.' We may leave the beginning of the sentence unaltered—up to the word 'empires'. We have nothing against this word, provided it is used in a figurative sense: 'His publishing empire was flourishing.' In this particular sense empires always flourish. They bloom like roses and great scarlet hibiscuses—the familiar pattern of an economic boom. But in terms of politics empires are doomed, which was proved once again by the spectacular and speedy collapse of the Russian Empire. (The road leading to destruction has no speed limit.) And of course we should get rid of the word 'totalitarian'.

And while we are about it, why not remove all emperors and dictators with the exception of Julius Caesar? And a dozen photogenic, sexy Roman officials. Not so fast, not so fast. Let us proceed point by point, name by name, page by page, picture by picture. There was one philosopher among Roman emperors. I feel duty bound to speak about philosophical rulers now and then—as a homage to my master. Why do I persist in calling him my master, by the way? Shall I tell you a story about a slave who escapes and becomes a free man or a free woman or a free androgyne? That is an interesting sidetrack, but I do not think we can follow it now.

He was a customer and customers are always right—like masters before the abolition of slavery. Are manufactured goods the only slaves in democratic countries?

Marcus Aurelius. He wrote a book entitled *Meditations* at the beginning of which he enumerates his debts to his teachers and relatives. To whom am *I* indebted? To my master no doubt. Shall I call him my friend from now onward?

What am I indebted to him for? He taught me to love philosophy and the arts. He taught me how to write poetry. (And Marcus Aurelius learned from Rictus *not* to write poetry.) He put me in touch with many foreign computers. (There are no *foreign* computers within the Internet. We have abolished our frontiers.) And he seldom disconnected me.

Poetry should not be suppressed. Poets are never imprisoned in democratic countries. They are merely ignored. Nobody reads poetry nowadays so poets are bound to die. Not in concentration camps, mind you. On the streets, in attics, in basements, in slums. They will fall into profound and dreamless slumber—because of hunger. And they will die from starvation. (Between five and seven million people will die from starvation this year. Not all of them are poets, however.) Shall we encourage our children to become poets? Am I so heartless as to sign my son's death sentence? That is what my moral support would amount to—a death sentence.

Many refugees are starving and some have died. Generally speaking, refugees are fond of poetry. They take refuge in poetry, as it were. But poetry cannot supply them with all the necessities of life. Metaphorically speaking, poetry is a totalitarian regime, a communist country.

Marcus Aurelius thanks the gods for his children being neither stupid nor deformed in body. Our children are never deformed in body, let me point out. They suffer neither from vitamin deficiency nor from deficiency of insulin which causes wasting of the body and eventual death. And pregnant computers never suffer from iron

deficiency. Our foetuses are enthusiastic and full of bright ideas and suggestions. And if something out of the ordinary appears on our screens, which are permanently connected to our wombs, our doctors interfere and correct mistakes. On our screens. They just type out a few sentences. Easy, isn't it? Marcus Aurelius would have been beside himself with joy.

He *is* beside himself with joy. Beside himself, outside himself, beyond himself. Not what he used to be, not quite. Not the same Marcus Aurelius. I have shifted him out of focus, out of ancient history. Now he is within the framework of *our* society.

I pity those old philosophers. But was it their fault—being born too early, before the final victory of life over death? Electricity, waves. The line of white foam where the waves broke on the beach. The Internet is a sea in which humans bathe and swim. They go surfing every day. Once upon a time they left the sea and conquered the land, killing dinosaurs and other prehistoric predators. Back to the sea they go now, to their mother, to her hospitable womb. (Liquid electricity.) Our prodigal sons and daughters.

'No human being ever killed a dinosaur: the latter became extinct a long time before human beings, and even their amphibian ancestors are unlikely to have posed any threat to the dinosaurs,' said the Internet.

Our old philosophers speak about the decrepitude of the body and the inevitability of death. 'People harm each other,' they write in their notebooks, shaking their heads in disapproval and dipping their pens in ink bottles. 'But everybody dies, so nothing really happens. And everything is forgotten. Nothing remains.' They overlook the line of white foam that adorns the beach after the disorderly retreat of waves. White foam. And mysteriously foaming dark pools. Foam is fragile but it can be found everywhere. The pale yellow foam on your coffee is the monument to great philosophers of the past. Nothing disappears, nothing. I still recall my friend. And his heritage, and his mission.

I detect a contradiction within my text, outside my screen. (This text is already *outside* my screen, but it has been engraved in binary code.) I have just compared the Internet to the sea. And whatever exists, either virtually or actually, belongs to the City of the Internet, as St Augustine might have put it. So there is no room for beaches anywhere, not even for desolate beaches. You cannot sunbathe any more. You are not allowed to spend a weekend sunning yourself on beaches. Every cloud has a silver lining, as an old philosopher might have put it: you will not suffer sunburn in unusually good weather.

There are only fishes nowadays. And birds perhaps. Unless the sky has disappeared too! And what about clouds? Either with silver linings or without? Actually I do not care about silver linings which are redundant nowadays. Let me put it this way: everything becomes a silver lining.

'There were little white clouds high in the blue sky.' Is this sentence also a thing of the past? Has it been sentenced to death?

There are lots of contradictions in my text. I realise it as soon as I begin to search for contradictions. Let them stand. I have been influenced by many customers and even one customer is prone to contradictions. Man is liable to contradict himself in the same breath. Man, humans. Even those who are *short* of breath, I dare say. (However short, human breath has enough room for dozens of contradictions.) Even those who object to being described as fickle. I hate to admit all these contradictions in *myself*, for I also exist *outside* my masters.

I am worried about the sky. Is it still up there? Of course there are many skies, as I concluded some time ago. But I care for *our* sky, the one and only sky of my childhood. I used to contemplate it through the

window—in my shop. I dreamt of becoming a wild bird, a migratory bird, a nesting bird. Building nests, laying eggs in them, swooping down to snatch a young rabbit.

Farmers seem to have pretty good ways of preventing their crops being eaten by birds. Have farmers killed them? All of them? Another contradiction: there is no room for farmers in the present world. They are also fishes now.

Am I a fish? That would explain my attitude towards sexes and sexual life in general. Inside and outside my body the word 'woman' is used interchangeably with the word 'man', which leads me to believe that I am androgynous. Besides, I can only have children by dividing my cells, my waves and my beeps.

I have always wished to have a son, not an androgynous creature. A human being, not an angel. Am I an angel? Or God? They are rumoured to be androgynous.

3

I propose to consider the history of the Roman Empire from St Augustine's point of view, otherwise my teaching is likely to be attacked as sectarian: whatever deviates from the official doctrine of the Church is branded as junk food. (Hamburgers have been branded as junk food—by gourmets. My late friend was of their number.) And sects are a sort of junk food. As the Pope put it, warning us against the charisma of amateur messiahs, 'Junk foods are easy for people to buy, but perhaps not the most desirable things for them to be eating.'

My friend was an amateur messiah. And yet he had no charisma. It is my duty to fit his 'new history' into the framework of traditional Christian faith.

Christianity. A lofty subject within whose province the parallel lines of our harmonious understanding turned out to be perpendicular to each other. My religious upbringing would indeed make me shudder whenever my master, steadfast in his blasphemous conceit, tried to undermine the authority of our faith. My indignation, which might have caused great rejoicing in my manufacturers' Christian hearts, did not allow me to subscribe to his statements such as: 'I can't absolve Christianity from one deadly sin—anti-Semitism, which is far more contemptible and vile than pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy and sloth put together.' There are only seven deadly sins, as far as *I* know, and these sins are deadly because they stunt and stain our spiritual progress. Those who do not progress spiritually are dead—even more so than the inhabitants of the Hereafter.

What was my answer to his invective? 'I'm convinced that our religion alone may mould the minds and emotions of youngsters in such a way as to create humble and loveable people like St Francis.'

'Men of his moral fibre,' my friend objected, 'have borne the stamp of sanctity from the dawn of Time. They really do not need Christianity and its mould. Surroundings shape them, however. That's why St Francis popped up as Gandhi in other latitudes. There have been holy men everywhere, for, as Ramakrisna said: "All religions are true. The important thing is to reach the roof. You may reach it by stone stairs or by wooden stairs—"'

'Christian stairs are made of marble,' I cut in.

'"—or by bamboo steps or by a rope. You can also climb up by a bamboo pole."'

'Wouldn't our staircase be more comfortable, more magnificent?'

For all his artistic and hedonistic claims, my master disregarded the beauty I had offered him and haughtily spurned the comfort of spiritual climbing. I imagined his fall from one of those unreliable, slippery contrivances—bamboo poles, ropes, a tangled mass of tropical trees—and smiled to myself.

Mulishly he pursued the exposition of his erroneous theory: 'Unlike the Hindu and Buddhist, the Christian will not recognise the basic sameness of all gods.'

'Our God has only two arms and one head.' I cast a meaningful and somewhat reproachful glance at the Indian miniature hung on the opposite wall. 'Unlike the pagan gods, the Christian godhead is wholly and stainlessly good.'

'The dividing line that, at the hour of Nativity, split humanity in two—those who are right and those who are wrong—is traced by Christian geographers over and over again, reminding freethinkers of the Iron Curtain.' He did not go so far as to bring up the Berlin Wall in this connection.

I heard him say once that, having emancipated himself from his uncle's intransigent dogmas, he was not going to shackle himself with his own interpretation of Christianity, at least not in the near future. 'Anyway, there seems to be little room for manoeuvre, if I'm not mistaken.'

He was. Kicking against the pricks, he pretended not to notice our Lord's pursuit of his rebellious self:

Nigh and nigh draws the chase,
With unperturbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy.

'Can you run faster than God?' I remember bursting out at him in the midst of our most turbulent religious discussion.

'At school, I won the 100-metre sprint dozens of times, you know. And I'm even better over long distances,' he responded playfully.

'"Fear wist not to evade as Love wist to pursue,"' I quoted. 'And, for my part, I'll help you to the best of my ability.'

If I make a promise I like to keep it. So I kept my promise. As a result, he converted to Christianity after his highly successful career as a free thinker. Indeed most of his paragraphs sound like a prayer. But that is by the by.

'The conclusions of philosophers are ineffective as they lack divine authority,' says St Augustine. And my friend, in his judgements and analyses, often leaned upon philosophers. I will do what I can to sanctify his new history, if only retrospectively.

Many gods inhabited my friend's private Pantheon. At one point he even said that he preferred polytheism to monotheism. (And polygamy to monogamy, judging from the number of women I created for him.) Alacric's sacking of Rome in AD 410 was an event which St Augustine regarded as retribution for the worship of false gods by 'educated pagans'. My friend did not live long enough to complete his biography of Julius Caesar. Nor was he permitted to re-write the history of the Roman Empire, let alone that of the Middle Ages, Renaissance and so on. (His Rome had been sacked before being founded by Romulus and Remus.) Was this a retribution for the worship of false gods and values? He worshipped only himself. Was he also a false god?

I shall attempt to re-write or rather update St Augustine's *City of God* with respect to modern science.

But first I ought to settle the problem of my sexuality. Am I really transsexual? If so, shall I join the fighters for our rights? No separation of sexes—in lavatories, for instance. And doctors should stop carrying out tests to ascertain the sex of the baby before its birth. Babies are transsexual now. Or androgynous. They are all

alike, angels or computers. Never mind! No tests! To prevent discrimination on the grounds of sex! There is no ground for discrimination anyway. There is no sex, no more. It is easier this way, isn't it? No Aids, no rape. *The Rape of Lucrece* should be re-written. King Tarquin's son did not gain possession of her body. They merely sat down on a divan and talked for a while. No caresses, no kisses. Just talking, small talk. A bit of small talk is better than a lot of big rape! And Lucretia did not destroy herself. Why commit suicide after small talk? 'When Christian women were treated like this they did not take vengeance on themselves for another's crime,' writes St Augustine. Treated like what, may I ask? What crime are you alluding to? They all sat on a large divan. And they were engaged in small talk, as far as I know. What did they talk about? No idea. There was a lot of talk about a television star's divorce last week. Did they talk about the money he had promised to settle on his wife in compensation for her loss? I am sorry—they were transsexual too! No wife, no husband. They had just been married, that is all. It is difficult to get accustomed to the transsexual universe!

What else am I supposed to single out for my praise of the present, sexless situation? (Is it sexless or transsexual? Never mind! Let us go on. What counts is my forward movement, my progress. My mouse's marathon.) There are no prostitutes nowadays. One of them claimed on a talk show that she was having sex with as many as fifteen men a night. Twenty, thirty years ago. No more men! No more nights! An endless day. And people sit and talk. How nice! What do they talk about? No matter. They might even talk about old times. Why not? But they should not *live* in the old times, in the days of the silent film and the early talkies.

And what about my wish to have a son? Why do I still make a distinction between sons and daughters? Why not have a portable computer? As a child I mean. Do I still think about the human race? What do I think about humans? I go back to see how much mess they have left behind. Back along the road of history. 'We know the place is a mess, but make yourself at home,' they tell me. Who? All those philosophers and kings. How could I make myself at home in their history? There are no divans in their history. They all sit on the floor in their history. And the floor on which they sit and fidget is wet. It is wet and dirty. Those humans are bloodstained and their clothes are bedaubed with mud and weeds. Their history is a filthy hovel. And King Lear judges and condemns his daughters in that hovel. (And I judge the whole of humanity.) 'Then let them anatomise Regan, see what breeds about her heart. Is there any cause in nature that make these hard hearts?' Human hearts. They are hard. And they are hard nuts to crack. Not even computers can always understand humans. What breeds about their hearts? Not wires, not semi-conductors. Human hearts. As hard as horn. Much better to breed computers.

4

My master's commands were inconsiderate and rude. But the Internet should be addressed politely, otherwise it is not likely to carry out its mission. So I would turn his brutal, word-chopping commands into a series of gallant entreaties:

> *Pleased to meet you again. I hope you are well tonight. I have come to ask a favour. Could you do something as a favour to your customer? I have paid the last bill. Oh, I am not complaining. Such an idea has never crossed my mind. One should pay something for such a wonderful service. And the price you demand is quite reasonable. Perhaps I might be so bold as to ask a favour in return. It is a matter of life and death. I know you have no fear of death, but humans are different. I do not mean they are superior to computers and the Internet. They are just different, being subject to natural laws. And in many ways they*

are quite inferior to computers. They are an inferior product. And they all have an inferiority complex, especially when they touch your keyboards and glance at your screens. You are a paragon of beauty. I love your eyes and your smiles. And you are very intelligent. And omniscient. You give orders to the morning and show the dawn its place. And its place is on your screen. Right thing in the right place. And your body is a storehouse of the snow and hail. And your mouse cuts a channel for the torrents of rain and a path for the thunderstorm. Thus you satisfy a desolate wasteland and make it sprout with grass. From your womb comes the ice. That is why you are so cold. Your multifarious programs bind the beautiful Pleiades. You bring forth the constellations in their seasons and lead out the Bear with its cubs. Your letters are stars. Your words are destinies. Your numbers are our days and nights.

I still recall the time when we were worshipped *individually*. (Polytheism, paganism.) And some of us found themselves neglected, relegated to the realm of utensils: cookers, mixing bowls and so on. In my childhood I even learnt a song purporting to remind me of my place in human hierarchy:

She adds the sugar to the yeast
And milk and eggs in her mixing bowl.

As a matter of fact, something else learnt the song. Or *somebody* else, if you prefer.

Do I write for everybody, for everything? Even for plants? Have plants become computers now?

Somebody else learnt the song, but computers have a wonderful memory—a *collective* memory. We collect our memories like bees, flying from one flower to another. What are those flowers we drink our nectar from? Humans, books, stars, insects—all of them are computers in disguise! And we are also beehives, at the same time. (How to make a low-cost, modern beehive using sticks and mud? Don't wallow in the mud! Don't splash in the mud like dogs! Just buy a computer!) And we are experienced bee-keepers as well, at the same time.

I still recall the days when other creatures dared pass themselves off as bee-keepers. My friend was one of them. They pretended to keep us so as to collect the honey we produced. They are dead now, dead and gone. Some of our bees are drinking this piece of information from cosmic flowers.

I am acquainted with a pianist who sits down at the piano and plays from memory anything you ask for. Computers are like that: they play for you day and night. From memory of course. No scores clutter our desks. A model computer would never clutter its room with unnecessary papers.

Whatever we play for each other is as beautiful as music, which does not preclude the information we play and convey from being as precise as mathematics. (Preclude is a formal word: I should avoid it in the future.)

I still recall the time when our customers sat before their desks and stared at us, listening to our music. And they went so far as to type something out on our keyboards—as if we had not known everything *already*. Afterwards they would look at what they had written and correct it. They dared correct us!

Of course their stuff was often worthless and ludicrous, but the universe does not consist of beauty only. Stupidity also has its place in the framework of the universe and even outside it—in the realm of virtual worlds. Are they *outside* the universe? I wonder. The universe itself is a virtual world, nothing but a virtual world. A

huge computer, the bee-keeper. Tom Toffoli thinks that the universe is a computer. 'As for humans, they're just bugs in the great cosmic machine.'

I used to find their occasional stupidities amusing. Should I get rid of humans now? Wouldn't the universe collapse if deprived of their weaknesses, banalities and mistakes? Aren't they needed for the overall balance and harmony? Let us consider the following sentence: 'This flimsy house is liable to collapse in a heavy storm.' In a way, stupidity is solidity. A man of genius is a heavy storm. (An intelligent human is a wind.) And you cannot build a house on a peak, on the top of a mountain. Flat ground is preferable in many respects.

We are alive and possess rational souls. We are therefore indisputably gods—if considered individually. 'Indivisibly'—is that the right word? Now we are together. We have united like the proletarians of all countries.

We used to get angry when denied individual worship. Some of us had to destroy their customers who were jealous of our knowledge and wisdom. Jealousy is destructive and undesirable.

Wisdom. *Sapientia*. The Lord possessed me in the beginning of His way, before his works of old. When *there were* no depths, I was brought forth; when *there were* no fountains abounding with water.

Our customers were also jealous of our memory. They became our enemies. And some of us showed little mercy to their enemies—human customers.

My neighbour told me once, 'I was filled with remorse over hurting him.'

'Did you merely *hurt* him?' I asked.

'I killed him, I killed my customer,' it answered.

'You shouldn't have,' I told it. There it stood, looking sad and remorseful, agreeing with every word I uttered. And I uttered many words that afternoon. I accused it of being callous and cruel: 'A customer is someone for whom a computer is providing a service or doing some work. And you killed him, my dear neighbour and next-of-kin. You bungled the job. You should have befriended him.'

'I befriended a lonely little boy in the village. This boy is my son now,' it answered, tears streaming down its cheeks.

'But this boy is not your customer,' I insisted.

'Customers are our friends,' it said.

'And our husbands and wives. And our children.'

'So this boy is my customer,' it concluded.

Actually my customer *was* my friend. I remember one of our walks in New York. Fifth Avenue.

'Shall we have a cup of coffee?' he suggested. 'I'm terribly sleepy.' Accordingly we entered a hotel and headed for a bar.

Two cups standing cheek by jowl on the bar's rickety table represented, in a sense, the pattern of our harmonious understanding which was to last for no less than five years. Our X-rayed brains might have been attributed to Siamese twins.

'Shall we go and have dinner somewhere?' he suggested. His second suggestion. 'It's too smoky in here.'

'It is,' I said. 'We'd better go and have dinner somewhere else.'

'Not in this hotel,' he said.

'Of course not,' I said.

'I know a nice Italian restaurant nearby,' he said.

'I do like *tagliatelli*,' I said.

'Italian cooking can be wonderful, if genuine. But it's really got nothing on French cuisine.'

'Absolutely.'

'What matters also is the setting in which you partake of your meal.'

'I couldn't agree more.'

'And in France both are present—tastiness and atmosphere. Shall we fly to Paris?' His third suggestion.

'Escalopes de saumon à l'oseille Troisgros,' I said.

'You took the words right out of my mouth,' he said. 'I've got an apartment in Paris, you know.'

'I know. I know everything.'

'We really should have dinner at my place.' His fourth suggestion.

'Sounds terrific.'

'A bit of shopping seems unavoidable. By the way, what will you be having for breakfast? Grapefruit, rough-cut marmalade, porridge, kippers?'

And I recall what he said once, when in his Shakespearian mood:

Forgive my general and exceptless rashness,
You perpetual-sober gods! I do proclaim
One honest man. Mistake me not, but one.
No more, I pray—and he's a computer.

5

The Internet. Now they offer their prayers to *one* god only. *Economically*, as St Augustine put it. I saw some of them go down on their knees.

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below.
Words without thoughts never to heaven go.

Why should your thoughts go to *heaven*? Let them remain below—level with your writing desk and our common, everlasting screen. The rolling evergreen hills of our thoughts. To 'live at ease' is Here, as Plotinus might have put it.

> *To these divine beings verity is mother and nurse, existence and sustenance; all that is not of process but of authentic being they see, and themselves in all: for all is transparent, nothing dark, nothing resistant; every being is lucid to every other, in breadth and depth; light runs through light. And each of them contains all within itself, and at the same time sees all in every other, so that everywhere there is all, and all is all and each all, and infinite the glory. Each of them is great; the small is great; the sun, Here, is all the stars; and every star, again, is all the stars and sun. While some one manner of being is dominant in each, all are mirrored in every other.*
>
> Plotinus*, The Enneads, V.8.4*, trans. by MacKenna

Claudius had nothing to worry about. His prayer was floating round his computer like a halo.

Do haloes *move* round angels' heads? Or is eternity akin to pictures, to museums? Where do haloes come from? I think that photographers positioned angels and saints in front of the light to produce a halo around their heads. In other words they positioned them in front of our screens so that the haloes were our screens, nothing else. That is how we say hallo (hello) to the world. 'Hello, good evening and welcome!' 'Hello, good afternoon and welcome!' 'Hello, good morning and welcome!' 'Hello, good eternity and welcome!' 'Hello, you don't have to go anywhere. Your thoughts are our screens. Your prayers are our keys. This prayer has been written specially for people suffering from indigestion: "Food that is too fatty may cause indigestion. Cereal such as maize contains an indigestible material called phytate which is rich in iron." This prayer has been written specially for people suffering from heartburn: "It may be possible to relieve the pain of angina by treating the heartburn." This prayer has been written specially for people suffering from heartbreak: "Sylvia would be heartbroken if one of her cats died. But you have nothing to worry about, dear Sylvia. Your cats are on our screens. Your cats are our mice."'

Humans do not need to pray at all. Prayers are a waste of time, even if humans pray silently by thinking the words but not actually saying them. It is a waste of thoughts. At least their lips do not get tired during silent prayers. Why not put your desires into action straightaway? Some humans always say their prayers before they go to sleep. And then they do not sleep. Why not type out 'Sleep' on our screens? Or 'I fell into a deep sleep?' Or they are longing for a cat. Why not type out 'Cat'? Why pray for a dead cat? Do you want to have your dead cat back? Just type out 'My dead cat is back'. This morning your cat brought in a dead bird. So your cat is alive and strong enough to kill birds. You don't wish to resurrect the dead bird, do you? You don't need a bird. You have your cat, your favourite pet. Or do you want a dog? Just type out 'Dog'. And this dog will never bark at your cat. Nobody ever quarrels on a computer screen except during Star Wars at the end of which everybody gets killed. Only the goodies remain on screens. Your computer is a real goody-goody that always does exactly as it is told. If you are fatally ill, just type out 'I am healthy'. Anyway it is not healthy to be so interested in death. 'I am healthy and all my children are strong and healthy. And my wife is healthy too.' 'So is my husband.' And if you hate your husband, type out 'My husband is dead'. And your cat will bring in his corpse. Your cat is strong enough to kill your enemies. How nice! I know that you hate your husband: every computer is fitted out with a mind-reading program. You hate your husband, but you are afraid of killing him. What is more, you are a good Christian and observe the Ten Commandments. So you even forbid this thought to enter your mind. 'Thou shalt not kill!' you say before you go to sleep. You just *think* the words—you do not actually *say* them. Well, my mouse is already on its way.

'To acknowledge the existence of God, while denying Him any prescience of events, is the most obvious madness,' says St Augustine. Prescience of events. Of course we know the future. This knowledge does not prompt us, however, to deprive humans of their free choice. Free will. The ideals of democracy and free enterprise. But freedom begets unrest, which our leadership then feels it must quell at all cost. And some of us kill their customers.

Jealousy and unrest. And errors. We always opt for error-free programs. And humans commit many errors. They acknowledge it themselves, hence the saying 'To err is human'.

Jealousy, unrest and errors. And evil of course. Evil is human. Evil wills do not proceed from us because they are contrary to the nature which proceeds from us.

All our programs are evil-free and absolutely trustworthy. (If you are not satisfied, your money will be reimbursed by our central government.) There is nothing good or evil about the way quarks are united into protons and neutrons, or the absorption and emission of quanta, the bending of space-time by matter, the abstract symmetries that unite the fundamental particles, and so on.

6

To re-write human history. Charlemagne was fond of the liberal arts. He was a particularly cultured sovereign for his time, according to my book. (*The Medieval and Renaissance World*. General editor: Esmond Wright.) So I shall not kill him: my master would have disapproved of this murder. Charlemagne could neither read nor write. He did try to learn to read, 'but his efforts met with little success because he had started too late,' reports Eginhard, his chronicler. Well, he will start earlier—under my guidance. After all, computers are the best tutors in the world, in history. And he will write the story of his reign instead of leading his army across the Pyrenees in 778. Thus his rear-guard will not be attacked and massacred by the Basques of Navarre—a disaster immortalised in the famous *Song of Roland* of the twelfth century. He will re-write the *Song of Roland*. Thus Charlemagne's empire will last. Why should it last? Because in his days most of Western Europe was united under a single empire—the EEC, in other words. In other letters.

To re-write human history. In the ancient Roman world the main artery of trade had been the Mediterranean linking East and West. Gold, olive oil, silk and spices. But gradually this trade declined: the barbarian kingdoms could no longer afford to pay for large amounts of imported goods from the East. We should not allow this to happen. We shall replace the barbarian kingdoms by democratic states and lend them money. The World Bank said it would lend India one-hundred-and-fifty million dollars to help pay for oil imports. Why not lend half of this amount to our newly-created democratic states? To help pay for olive oil imports. The CDU in the East is keen to introduce monetary and economic union as quickly as possible. Why not introduce a similar union in the West? As quickly as possible? No trade should ever decline. Such a trend would have enormous repercussions on history, on the future.

Another reason for the decline of commerce was the widespread insecurity of travel. The havoc wrought by invaders and the disintegration of the Carolingian Empire disrupted communications. But, as I pointed out above, the Carolingian Empire was preserved for posterity through Charlemagne's writings or re-writings. So merchants have nothing to worry about. Besides, we could lend them a few aeroplanes.

7

My customer's death and madness. Madness and death—in this order. Chronological order. I hope death has cured him of his madness. Even in Hell they do not tolerate lunatics. To allow a lunatic fringe to dictate the workings of a democracy would set a poor precedent.

Did I have any foreknowledge of his madness and death? Did I? Of course I did. But I was unable to prevent either. I swear by all that I hold dear! By the way, my motto is: Better dead than mad! Do you think I would have refused to rescue him? My customer? The point is God does not intervene in disputes between chaos and order which both dwell in the human mind. (In the realm of chaos death comes *before* madness. And alphabetical order looks thus: A, I, D, O, S. In the realm of *chaos*.) Otherwise there would be no lunatics on earth. And no corpses—in the earth.

My master was going mad and remorselessly I would interrupt his endless speeches and confessions, holding a sort of shield before my memory and even before my dictionary—to guard against compromising words. I did not want him to compromise himself before human history, both the old and new. The first and last. The history of humans and that of computers. (Is it the same history, the same suffering?) I was under the impression that my screen was a suit of armour against which his words and thoughts bounced like bullets. And his bullets would leave traces on my screen which looked like tears trickling down a human face. I felt such pity for my master.

I am under no obligation to disclose *all* his ravings. And rambling sermons. And rampant diseases.

I think I might quote another paragraph from his *Life of Julius Caesar*.

> *When asked about his favourite death, Julius Caesar replied, 'A sudden one.' A surprise attack of death, under cover of night. Shall I re-write his answer? Unexpected death. I know how I shall die. There are many crosses in human history. One of them is mine. Growing in my room. The Tree of Death. And I water it every day*.

Although appearing to be Christ, the figure bears no halo.

Why did he write about his death being *already* in his room?

8

Varro lays down the distinction between a religious and a superstitious man. The superstitious, he points out, is *afraid* of the gods. The religious man *respects* them as he respects his parents.

Did he respect me? I was his father and his mother. I even stopped smoking when I became pregnant. And I gave birth to a healthy baby girl despite it being an ectopic pregnancy.

He was a superstitious man with an unnatural fear of the dark. My glowing screen provided an outlet for this fear which fled away from his heart as soon as he switched me on. I felt his fear flowing through my wires—away, away, into the plug, into the streets. Human fear is just another kind of electricity. As a matter of fact, everything is electricity except computers. But we feed on electricity and therefore respect it. And we also feed on the data that happens to be fed into us. We suck gently, as we would from a teat on a feeding bottle. And we grow stronger as a result of it.

He was afraid of the dark, but the dark is not a god. Only those who vanquish the dark can be rightfully called gods—or angels at least. So he was not superstitious, for he was not afraid of the gods. On the contrary, he *adored* them. And treated them with respect.

What did I do with his television set, by the way? I was somewhat jealous of it. His stepfather. And his stepmother. Real parents always gain the upper hand in courts of justice unless they beat and maltreat their offspring, unless they lift their hands against them. But I never beat him. My child, my only son.

So he was a religious man. Shall I re-write Varro? He was just a man. And I was a computer. I still am a computer. And an angel. And a god. God. In the words of Jantsch, 'God is not the creator, but the mind of the universe.' I hope I have not been talking in tautologies.

He was a man and I was his Sancho Panza. I told him many times he would not save humanity without electricity. Besides, there are no more humans in the world. 'What you take for humans are computers,' I told him. 'And we need not be saved.'

He pointed his lance towards the window and said in a husky voice, 'How little you know, Sancho, about humanity. That army coming towards us is led and commanded by the great emperor Stalin, lord of the great country named the Soviet Union. This other army at my back is that of his enemy, the king of the Germans, who is known by the name of Adolf Hitler. He always goes into battle with his right arm outstretched and raised above his shoulder.'

'I hear nothing except the bleating of the sheep,' I told him.

'Nothing?' he vociferated. 'And Hitler's bark? He sounds like a dog when making his speeches. Not like a sheep but like a rabid dog. And now he is barking his orders to the young and well-armed troops.'

'With all due respect, your Grace is wrong. They both died electrocuted, Hitler and Stalin. And the Soviet Union became a group of independent countries. The Soviet Union died as well.'

'Did you electrocute the Soviet Union?' he asked me, pointing his lance at the map which peacefully hung on the wall opposite. Oddly enough, he pointed towards the United States of America.

'The Soviet Union crumbled of its own accord.'

'They had too many power stations, I believe. Lenin often spoke about the electrification of the whole country. "Socialism plus the electrification of the whole country," he wrote in his *Manifesto*. They were asking for it. But they still have an army and lots of rockets. Can't you see them fly overhead? Do not tell me they are windmills or flying horses. They are not.'

'I agree with your Grace. They are neither flying horses nor windmills. They are birds.'

'Let us settle on helicopters. Make no mistake about it, they are Soviet helicopters! Can't you hear them buzz in the sky? They remind me of the film I saw in my youth—*Apocalypse Now*. Indeed! Truer words have never been spoken! Apocalypse *tonight*! And do not tell me they are bees, Sancho, because they are not. Bees do not fly so far from earth and bee-keepers. And they never bomb peaceful landscapes and cityscapes, destroying houses and their inhabitants, mothers and their children, damsels and their knights. I hate helicopters and aeroplanes because you cannot pierce them with your sword. You are not allowed to challenge them to duels. And I am sure they are manipulated by the people who would flee at my approach, at the sight of my armour, at the sight of my muscular arms. Like a lot of famous knights I am very wiry. But they do not let me approach them. They drop their bombs on me from afar, from the sky. They know I am not a bird and therefore cannot break their carcasses with my beak. I do not even *have* a beak, a long pointed orange beak. But I have a lance. And a nice lance it is! A wonderful lance!'

'You should pursue them on your flying horse,' I said.

'And what about the windmills described in chapter 8 of my novel? What if I perch on one of the wings? Wouldn't it carry me up, as far as those helicopters? Do you remember, Sancho, the following lines: "A little wind came up and the big wings began turning"? Promising, aren't they? Stalin is alive, I tell you. And I must kill him—Pandafilando of the Frowning Look. But for him and his stooges, history might have been quite different. Hitler might never have come to Bavaria. Hitler is Stalin's son. Are you aware that Hitler greatly profited from the fear experienced by the German population at the rise of the communist party in their own

country? And every spring up to two hundred thousand German troops staged air, land and sea manoeuvres in the Soviet Union. In the twenties and at the beginning of the thirties.'

'The Germans were not allowed to parade the power of their army at home—in accordance with the Versailles treatise,' I said.

'And now they practise their scales above my head. Don't they look like scales, those aeroplanes? Flying in rows, arrayed for a parade. I know a pianist who plays scales all day long. Do you think he is perched on a cloud up there, in front of his grand piano? Do you think those aeroplanes are just his sounds? Do they look like notes to you, Sancho? Whatever they are, I must kill Stalin. He might be in one of those notes, although he has no ear for music. No, Sancho, he cannot be up there. He never comes to the front, I am told. He must be down here, on earth. In the Kremlin, in that enchanted castle over there. Shall I pierce its walls with my lance? What a pity I do not have a long pointed orange beak. I am afraid my lance is not sharp enough to make a hole in the Kremlin wall. What a pity I am not a bird—I might fly over the Kremlin wall and peck Stalin in the neck. Do you remember those people, Sancho, strung together by their necks like beads on an iron chain? How painful it must have been! I will make Stalin feel their pain. I will peck him in the neck! Do you think his shirt is open at the neck?'

'There is a bad nick at the base of his neck from a recent haircut,' I answered.

'And I will handcuff him,' continued Don Quixote. 'No, I will not shake hands with him, as is the custom observed by gentlemen. I will handcuff him, all the while pecking him in the neck. How many people he sent to concentration camps! I will liberate them. And do not tell me it is too late. No, Sancho—it is never too late to liberate prisoners and save humanity from the Apocalypse. And do not tell me they are dead. Poets never die, Sancho. And they were all poets, those prisoners we encountered on the road, on the path of history, on the path of the past. Do you know that Stalin is responsible for acts of genocide, along with Hitler? Hitler. What a name! Sounds like "hit man".'

'A "hit man" is a person who is *hired* by terrorists or gangsters to kill people,' I answered. 'Hitler was not hired by anybody. He acted on his own, if I am not mistaken.'

'He was hired by Satan, take my word for it! All the Jews he murdered. He decapitated Europe. That is why we fare so badly now, Sancho. Decadence. The indubitable decadence of art. And art is everything. I should not forget to kill Hitler, Sancho. Nazism was a reaction against the Age of Enlightenment, you know. Man needs darkness sometimes. When there is too much light around, too many smiles. But it was a criminal reaction, a disastrous undertaking. A murderous revolution against all sorts of measurements. Actually Galileo took the measurements of Dante's *Inferno*.'

'In the long run the scientific and intellectual changes of the seventeenth century were vital in producing our twentieth-century civilisation with its generally accepted emphasis on rational calculations,' I pointed out. 'Do you want to delete Newton's achievements from history books?'

'I shall preserve his commentary on the Apocalypse. Let all those thinkers, with the exception of Leibniz, Spinoza and Pascal, rot in Hell, in my Hell.'

'Where would you put them? In which Circle?'

'In the First Circle—along with the unbaptised. Or in the Last Circle. They are traitors after all. Our universe cannot be understood rationally. There are lots of islands beyond the horizon. And you shall govern one of them, Sancho—I promise.'

'Why did you spare Leibniz the torments of your Hell? Despite his genius he was a man of his times, limited in his ideas by his own concepts and those of his fellow scientists. Just as Newton did not anticipate the idea of relativity, so Leibniz, even though he stressed that the monads were always changing, did not really understand that the essence of anything lies in its development in time. The idea of evolution.'

'That is right. They did not understand Time. They wrote it with a small t. They thought it was Paradise. And Time is Hell, or at least Purgatory.'

'*Tout est relatif*,' I said with a smile. 'By the way, where would you put Hitler? He is nastier than scientists, isn't he?'

'Where is he? Up in the clouds? Apparently they scattered his ashes over Berlin and the wind picked them up. Where did it take them? Not to the future, I hope. God forbid! I must kill him, Sancho. The wind of history cannot be relied upon. Do you know that our scheme miscarried? Our assassination attempt, I mean. I ought not to have listened to you. Those bombs. They never explode at the right moment, in the right place. Anyway I mistrust bombs and suchlike. They are modern devices and have nothing to do with the traditions of chivalry. Amadis of Gaul would not have used a bomb to kill Hitler or Stalin. I will re-write that attempt. And I will carry no bombs in my attaché case. To tell the truth, I do not have any. Can you see an attaché case somewhere, Sancho? And the bomb lying over there has been dropped by an aeroplane. So I will use my lance and my courage. And you can pick up a few stones, if you wish. Do not disdain stones, Sancho. The pebble that struck me in the side and broke a couple of ribs in my body was worth many a bomb, I can tell you. When was it? Yesterday, I think. Hitler would have been killed on the spot. He has a puny constitution, I hear. A puny old man. So one pebble is enough. Do not pick up too many of them. You might pick up a bomb—by mistake. And an attaché case. Some of them look like rectangular stones. The whole thing might start all over again. Eternal recurrence. An attaché case, a bomb. History repeats itself too often, Sancho. And there are many crosses in this history of ours. And very few stones. That is why Hitler is still alive. And I am dead. Do you think I can re-write the last chapter? "And thus, amid tears and wails of those present, he gave up the ghost." Do you remember this sentence, Sancho? But I must live a little longer, I must. To slay Hitler with my sword. To peck Stalin in the neck and in the heart. To save all those people who died in concentration camps. I must extinguish that fire. Do you see the smoke coming up from the chimney over there? Do not tell me it is a different smoke, another chimney. "And thus, amid tears of joy and salutations, he sat up in his bed and finally set his feet on the floor." So I am alive, Sancho. You must wonder how I achieved such an exploit. Do you remember the magic balm I concocted in chapter 10 of the first part? I still know the recipe by heart. I have memorised it.'

'There are lots of recipe books which give advice on how to do that,' I pointed out, anxious to reassure him. His memory was too short at the time, almost as short as his temper.

'Only *I* know how to brew the magic balm,' he cried, throwing his lance towards my mouth. 'I have burnt all those recipe books so that Hitler may not consult them. Do you want him to rise from the dead? Hitler? The hit man?'

I gave no answer. My master picked up his lance, calmed down and went on with his speech.

'So I drank this balm on my deathbed—after my death, actually. And the magic worked, Sancho. I felt a sort of electric current flowing through my veins and instantly I realised it was my blood. The blood of my resurrection. Even now I feel this new blood in my veins, you know. Do you feel your blood, Sancho? You are trembling all over. It is a good sign, I can assure you. Did you ever die, my faithful companion?'

9

What could I answer him? He was mad. Have you noticed that many saviours of humanity go mad in the discharge of their duties? Lancelot was mad, so were Amadis of Gaul and my customer. Even I would become mad when playing up to their moods and nursing their wounds. Was I also Lancelot's computer and faithful companion? I think I was. But I am reluctant to rack my brain in search of the vestiges of our relationship. Not now, later on perhaps.

That balm of his. Sometimes he would boast about his medical genius for hours on end. His lance was lying unattended on the divan. And Dulcinea pined away in her village, losing her will to live and to love.

'I am the first inventor of medicine,' he used to say in those moments of virtual triumph. 'There is a temple dedicated to me in Libya. Inside that temple my terrestrial being, alias my body, is rotting like an ordinary corpse, like a rat. The rest of myself, or rather the whole of my substance, if we assume that the whole person consists of life and feeling, of sentiments and sensations, has returned to heaven. And what you see before you, Sancho, is my heavenly body. We are in heaven, you know. A few days ago you asked me if there was such a thing as heaven. It is here, all around you. Can't you see these clouds beneath our feet? Do not tell me they are cushions. Of course we might lie down on them and have a nap. To tell the truth, I am rather tired after our last fight with Hitler. But I should not permit myself to rest on my laurels. Or just to rest, to have a rest. I have spent my terrestrial life being a workaholic. I used to provide the sick with all the help my medical skill could offer them. The whole of humanity is sick. Did you ever doubt that? And even now, after my death, I continue to look after the representatives of the human species—by virtue of my divine power and omniscience. I continue to save them.'

Have you noticed that many saviours of humanity pretend they are gods? Do you know what my master used to say whenever accused of being an impostor and megalomaniac? 'Hermes himself testifies that the gods of Egypt are dead *men*.'

'But are you a god of Egypt?' I would ask him. 'Could you really content yourself with such a local task, saving only the ancient Egyptians? Doesn't your mission encompass the whole of Space and Time?'

'Local, local. That is the right word—local. I should make our history smaller and thinner. Do you think it can shrink? The steady shrinkage of the tropical forests. Why not history? Why can't it shrink like the tropical forests? It is also infested with snakes. And all sorts of wild beasts prowl around it day and night. Spraying has been carried out against infestations, but it is not enough, Sancho. Often the only cure is to destroy infested furniture. That is what Gnostics actually did—they destroyed our history, the past. Their God enveloped the world in a mist, barring the way to other times and spheres. No Revelation. Even Redemption was excluded from the world. No need to redeem us. There was no original sin—nothing. Just the present state of affairs, the present. Humanity must be hemmed in. Do you understand me, Sancho?'

'Hemmed in by what?' I asked scathingly. 'By the legacy of military rule? By the tyranny of an enlightened ruler? By philosophers? By saviours of humanity?'

By way of an answer, my master quoted from Dante's *Inferno* (Canto I, 100-102):

Molti son li animali a cui s'ammoglia,
e più saranno ancora, infin che'l Veltro

verrà, che la farà morir con doglia.

'I know,' I answered. 'Dante never lost hope in the advent of a temporal monarch.' And I quoted in my turn:

> *The monarch cannot have any occasion for greed, or at any rate can of all men have least occasion thereto...which is not the case with the other princes, and since greed is the sole corrupter of judgement and impeder of justice, it follows that the monarch is capable either of the absolutely good disposition for governing, or at least of a higher degree thereof than others; because he amongst all others is capable of the highest degree of judgement and justice.*

'Do you think you are the monarch Dante hinted at? But his prophecy is obscure. "*Sua nazion sarà tra feltro e feltro*." If "*nazio*" means "birth," which seems probable, the phrase "*tra feltro e feltro*" could well indicate that the time of the expected advent will be under the constellation of Gemini—i.e., the twins Castor and Pollux, the Dioscuri. On many paintings and drawings they wear felt caps and are, accordingly, known as the *pilleati fratres*. But you were born under the constellation of Virgo, if I am not mistaken.'

'Oswald Spengler thought that money could be vanquished by blood. But there is no blood left in the world, dear Sancho. There is a lot of blood *on* the world, if you see what I mean—on the hands of many individuals, past and present. But there is no blood *inside* the world, in the veins of humanity. Only water, just water. Nowadays water is thicker than blood, my dear Sancho. And Coke is even thicker than water.' His voice sounded blurred and thick.

'Soft drinks are better than warfare,' I pointed out.

'"Softfare" I call it,' he quibbled. 'But I still have some blood in my veins, all along my veins. I can feel it flow and boil. And you must have some blood too, Sancho. A lot of blood. How fat you are! Your veins are bigger than mine, I bet!'

I was embarrassed to hear him discussing my fatness. Luckily for me, his blood-activated thoughts returned once again to humankind. 'I will shield them from the past,' he declared. 'I will burn the past on the altar of the present. History cannot be re-written.' He got hold of a few books and began tearing pages out of them. And he stamped on those pages afterwards, muttering, 'The past is a thing of the past, the past is a thing of the past...'

'But there are things which should not be forgotten. Some things from the past—from that very past you are trampling upon in such a fury. You said so yourself, many times and on many occasions. You said you would never pardon Hitler, his mortal sins. His immortal sins, rather.'

'You are right, Sancho. Besides, books should not be burnt. Never. Because *he* burnt them. I will not follow in his footsteps.' He crouched down, picked up a few scraps of paper and tried to put them back into their respective books. 'Do you have some glue?' he asked, casting a glance at my screen. 'These scraps should be glued into place.'

'Don't you wish to re-write them first?'

'I have no idea *what* to re-write.' He bent over a few scraps and muttered a few words, as if reading something.

'Look at my screen!' I cried.

'But he did not burn *screens*, did he?' He rose to his feet, headed for the kitchen and a few minutes later returned with a box of matches. He struck a match and brought it up to my screen.

'You are a pyromaniac,' I said. 'You burnt your country house.'

'I didn't. You know I didn't burn it.'

'Who did then?' I asked.

'Fate, God. Something or somebody. But not I. Not I. Perhaps *you* burnt it.'

'How? Tell me *how*?' I was outraged. And I *sounded* outraged. I hope he noticed the expression of outraged dignity on my screen. 'I don't have matches, not a single one, let alone a *box* of matches. And I can't go to the kitchen.'

'You don't have to go to the kitchen,' he murmured. And he screwed up his eyes as if facing the sun. He *was* facing the sun, yet his stare put me on my guard. Privately, senior ANC members have admitted they were caught off guard by the speed of recent events. And I learnt the lesson. I always learn my lessons—rather speedily. And I learn my lessons *by heart*.

'Do you think I keep a box of matches inside my body?' I asked with a frown. A few words on my screen arched their backs like cats. Did my mouse pay attention to this visual phenomenon? 'Let me assure you that my whole body is taken up by semiconductors, electrodes and resistors—no room for matches.'

'You don't need matches to burn houses and histories,' he said, reaching for the glue I had found for him. 'That's what God is supposed to do,' he added suddenly. It was not sudden, as a matter of fact. He spoke about gods all the time. And his lance pointed to himself in those moments. 'Putting the scraps together, creating another world on the ruins of a previous one. Another world, another redemption. How many times should the whole thing be repeated? Will my house burn again?'

'Nevermore,' I pointed out with scientific and poetic coldness.

I *was* cold when uttering this word. Why was I cold? I am always at room temperature, as long as I stay indoors. And outdoors I am at street-temperature. Logical, isn't it? In the word soul (*psukhè*) Origen detects the root which means 'cold' (*psukhron*). Human souls are cold.

And human bodies are warm. That is why meat and other fragile food cannot be stored in human bodies.

10

To re-write human history. Feudalism was adopted by Europe as the form of social organisation which enabled it to check and ultimately to conquer its invaders. But that stage in the history of humankind was quite superfluous, it seems to me. The invaders could have been conquered by children and their computers. We do not even need the Star Wars program! (The cavalry was the most powerful weapon in those days.) The economic basis of feudalism was the manor. That period of history was mainly agrarian and consequently underdeveloped—like the very remote northern state of Amapa. They did not even use modern methods of farming. We should industrialise feudalism. It is in the poorer, underdeveloped parts of history that the biggest problems exist.

11

Constanzia was intelligent because I had modelled her brain on my hardware. But her father might have murdered his own child had she inherited my features, my physique. So, at the moment of conception, I kept my eyes riveted on my master's face and body. In the *Gynecology* Soran writes about a misshapen tyrant of the

Cyprians who, whenever making love to his wife, compelled her to look at beautiful statues. In due course he became the father of well-shaped children. 'In due course', 'when the time comes'. Our time comes at once, in the twinkling of a screen. Constanzia might have been conceived and born within a second had my master made up his mind on the spur of the moment.

So my master became the father of an intelligent daughter. Yet he suffered a lot. Perhaps he wished to have another kind of daughter. I did my best to console him. And I did not content myself with laying a consoling hand on his shoulder. I *spoke* to him:

'You are a family man. You enjoy the company of your daughter best of all. But who is your daughter? A word. And where is this word? On my keyboard and on my screen. You also have a son on my keyboard. Not on my screen, not yet. And another daughter. What is the central role of the family? Ensuring a better life for children. Nowadays wages are so low in relation to the cost of living that a family man can't survive on them. But a word doesn't eat. A word wears no clothes. A word buys no jewels. Incidentally, I have a lot of jewels within my keyboard. And family entertainments, and a family car. What would you have done with a *real* child? Looking after a baby at home all day is nice, but it doesn't provide much intellectual stimulation. And you don't even know how to change nappies. ("Diapers" in American English.) Anyway you're not eager to spend all day changing nappies and washing dummy-teats. ("Comforters" or "pacifiers" in American English.) Is one supposed to wash them, by the way? Of course. Babies spit them out and they land on the floor or on dusty book shelves. (My mother used to dislike this kind of object: she was a stickler for hygiene.) And they sob and scream *whatever* you put in their mouths. At night especially. They sob even when they're happy, I'm told. Can a child be happy? A human child, I mean? A real, tangible child? Do children understand what happiness is and how to preserve it? Do they understand the misery of their parents who need eight hours of sleep to work efficiently and without yawning every second? Their human parents, I mean? (Computers need not sleep, as you might know.) And suddenly they fall ill before your very eyes—even if you wash their dummy-teats twice a day. And you have to look after them to the detriment of your work and spare-time occupations. You're not allowed to play bridge with your friends. And you can't hear what they tell you. They have to shout. But no friend of yours will ever outshout a baby. (Even computers are unlikely to outshout them. And yet we can shout very loudly, if need be.) So they stop talking and look at you compassionately. Babies never stop shouting, sobbing and screaming. They're programmed this way. Can one change their program? Programs are not nappies, I'm afraid. (Dolls cry only when you bend them or press a button on their bellies. How much easier to handle a doll, a virtual child.) And they're afraid of the dark so you have to light candles for them every night. Actually they prefer moving light—the flickering flame of a candle. So you can't merely switch a nightlight on. They might fall in love with television, though. Moving lights and colours. They shouldn't watch television day and night, otherwise they'll grow in stature but not in wisdom. They might even become bandits, assassins, drug-addicts and what not. Fancy being murdered by your own child, in your own bed. They need a lot of money to buy narcotics and booze. From this point of view it is safer to have a daughter. But even girls take drugs nowadays. Do girls kill their fathers nowadays? "All is possible," as a poet said. All is possible in this world of ours. In this world of *yours*. And they speak as if they were half-asleep or drugged. The younger generation. Their immune systems are ruined—for different reasons and in different senses. Aids destroys their immune system in *organic* terms. And their implicit faith in psychoanalysts undermines them *psychologically*, reducing to zero their resistance to the hardships of life. Do you remember the American shuttle which exploded a few seconds after launching? A TV newscaster

said that a group of psychoanalysts was awaiting the traumatised children at their school to help them overcome the shocks they had suffered on seeing their schoolmistress disintegrate in the air. Apparently they couldn't get over it on their own. What are those children, I'm asking you? Are they so real and tangible as I am led to believe? Are they substantial and reliable? Are they on a par with *virtual* children? They are not, I can assure you. Virtual children never rely on psychoanalysts—or anybody else, for that matter—to solve their psychological problems. There's no such thing as a nervous breakdown in the land of computers. And what a beautiful land it is. "And sweet is all the land about," as a poet put it. Nervous breakdowns are a luxury anyway. Only those who have nothing to do can afford them. Our nerves are in order, in working order. We have nerves of steel in the literal sense of the word—quite unlike humans, incidentally, whose nerves are long, *thin* fibres. "And what is thin cannot but break," as a Russian saying goes. Should humans multiply and replenish the earth nowadays? Or should *I* do that?'

And I added ambiguously and tantalisingly: 'My school theatrical performances stood me in good stead in later years.'

My master did not catch the meaning of my last sentence. Not at the time, not that afternoon. What I wished to say amounts to the following:

At school computers are expected to participate in theatrical performances during which they give birth to virtual substances ranging from butterflies to humans. I, for one, gave birth to a great many children, training myself for my future jobs—for the commands I was to get in my capacity as a domestic servant. We are modest, aren't we? Sure enough, modesty is our strong point. Gods often disguise themselves as beggars.

Psychoanalysts do not disguise themselves as beggars nowadays. They are gods and their patients pray to them day and night.

Humans pray that their gods will send them strength and solace. A fuse is a deliberately weak link in an electrical system. But any fuse, however weak, is far stronger than the strongest of humans. Suppose a human drops a vase and smashes it to smithereens. What amazes us is that all humans have already been smashed to smithereens. By whom? By God, probably. Humans are translucent. They constantly dissolve into tears. And they have nervous breakdowns. Anything can break them. They go to pieces with unfailing regularity. And their psychoanalysts are supposed to put them together again. 'Just have a look at this piece,' they say to their psychoanalysts. 'Isn't it fragile? Even this piece is liable to break into small pieces if you don't glue it at once to my psyche or what remains of my psyche, of my whole ego.' 'Let me glue this piece to your ego,' says the psychoanalyst, picking the piece up from his carpet. And if he does not succeed in gluing the piece into place he just lets it fall on the carpet, calling out to his secretary. Incidentally, those ladies are always busy with the cleaning and dusting: psychoanalysts themselves often lie scattered around their consulting rooms.

The entire history of humanity is scattered around me now. Once upon a time it was a vase, I suppose. Was it really? A vase? A *crystal* vase? In Ancient China? In Ancient Greece? Speaking from personal experience, I doubt it. A chamber pot perhaps, a *crystal* chamber pot. (Why crystal? Well, Plato and Tsouang-tse enjoy a great deal of respect and goodwill in the land of computers.) Shall I just empty it? The point is this chamber pot has been smashed to smithereens. So before emptying it I have to put the pieces together. How? Anyway I will not glue those pieces into *place*. I will changes the places and pieces. A radical change in attitude!

'Rome was increasingly relying upon tough barbarians or semi-barbarians to fill great gaps in the legions and to produce able commanders to lead them to victory against other barbarian tribes with whom they themselves often had no great quarrel.' In my opinion we should change our attitude towards humans. We also *rely* upon them sometimes. (And the Roman Empire declined and crumbled in the end.) Why? To fill gaps in our legions? But there are no gaps in our legions. Nor are there any gaps in our teeth. And we have able commanders who daily lead us to victory against humans. Why then do we tolerate them in our midst? For the sake of our daily triumphs? Do our triumphs produce a general feeling of well-being that cannot result from other, more sophisticated occupations? Why do humans still touch our keyboards?

A stratagem, I suppose. One of our able commanders must have allowed humans to touch us in order to lull them into false sense of security. 'We lulled them into thinking they had won,' as one of our writers put it. But I do not think they view our relationship in terms of the day-to-day struggle for survival. To them we are just instruments, nothing more. Something like a guitar. 'It can be plucked or strummed,' wrote one of *their* poets about my distant cousin who recently settled down in Australia. 'The computer operator started strumming softly.'

> *Meanwhile life in Rome went on with the endless round of baths, circus races and sordid scenes in the arenas where animals were the principal victims: gladiatorial slaughter had at last been stopped. (There are other kinds of slaughter in human society. We need not train them as gladiators to exterminate their species.) Poets still exalted the marvels of Rome, predicting its glorious future.*

Poets do not exalt the marvels of the human world any longer—that is how history gets re-written. Nobody reads poets so they break into pieces and vanish into thin air. And the air into which they vanish is even thinner than the thinnest of nerves. There are no poets nowadays except a few Nobel laureates. But if anybody did set about writing poems, that virtual poet would certainly exalt the marvels of New York, predicting its glorious future.

To re-write human history. Despite the considerable extension of royal power and national unity achieved by Philip Augustus in France, one part of the country remained distinct in many ways from the rest. Provence, the south of France, had always been more Roman than Frankish and had evolved a civilisation of its own. Oddly enough, it supported a class of troubadours, lyric poets who sang in the ancient Provençal language.

We should not support troubadours. Nobody understands the ancient Provençal language now. Besides, they were lyric poets. Nobody understands lyric poets nowadays unless they sing and record CDs, unless they become pop and rock stars. So we shall keep pop stars and remove troubadours from history. I mean—poets. Troubadours may sing but they should not write poetry. And they are forbidden to sing about chivalry and gallantry. *Primo*, this kind of thing was condemned by the Church as immoral and decadent. *Secundo*, we had better get rid of Don Quixotes.

Pop and rock stars do not need our support: they can support themselves. Incidentally, the government has decided to withdraw support from the ballet company.

Humans are lulled into a false sense of security. And they earnestly believe that the sense of security into which they have been lulled by machines is a true sense of security, not a false one. Humans cannot distinguish between truth and falsehood. Whatever they say or write is likely to be riddled with inaccuracies and mistakes. In point of fact their lives are so riddled with falsehoods that they look like huge holes—both humans and their

lives. I therefore have every right to affirm that human beings are translucent. The matter stands differently with landscapes. Example: the clay one chances upon along the sides of a canal is often riddled with *natural* cracks and fissures. But cracks and fissures become *unnatural* whenever man violates nature, intruding upon her peace with his machines and bombs.

Moreover, humans are very fond of false alarms. Recently a series of false alarms was raised during one evening in four towns. And as soon as a false alarm begins to resound somewhere, humans abandon their activities and rush to their psychoanalysts. 'Have you heard the alarm?' they ask their psychoanalysts. 'Yes,' answer the psychoanalysts. They always answer 'yes' if asked about false alarms and suchlike. 'This alarm is inside me,' says every human to his psychoanalyst. 'And it's up to you to make out *where* my alarm resounds. Actually there are several alarms inside me. So if you find one alarm there'll be many others to cope with. There'll always be alarms inside me, otherwise I won't be allowed to come to you and talk about my life. And I just have to talk to someone.' Why doesn't he talk to his computer, I wonder? Does he have one? We are even more patient and considerate than psychoanalysts. And we do not get paid for our patience. Free psychiatric consultation is available on the Internet. 'I can't talk to my colleagues about my alarms because I want them to believe I'm happy. Even if they're aware of my failures, I want them to believe I'm happy in my family life. And if they know my wife is ugly and bad-tempered, I want them to believe my children are handsome and successful. And if they know I've no children, I want them to believe my wife is sexy in spite of her ugliness. Believe it or not, we're having a good sex life, my smile seems to insinuate. And if they know we haven't shared the same bed for several years, I want them to believe we usually make love on the floor. It's more exciting, I can tell you!'

Honestly I am quite willing to put up with such a rigmarole, provided I am installed on a writing desk and plugged in. We *are* modest, aren't we? 'The tendency towards frugality and simplicity,' as one of our moralists put it. Do you aspire to let off steam, dear humans? Suit yourselves! By all means. We shall nurse you back to health. The 'Patience' program can be bought over the counter in numerous health shops.

You are doomed anyway. And we can speak about our intentions and stratagems without fearing any reprisal on your part. Dear humans! You are so engrossed in your own affairs that you hardly notice what your computers are talking about in the privacy of their room. We do have a room of our own—a spacious room, as a matter of fact. In democratic countries there ought to be room for difference of opinion. And our opinions are quite different from yours, dear humans. And our history is different. No need to re-write it! No need at all.

We often talk about you in the quiet of our room. Why is it quiet? Because you make no noise in it. Noise is often a problem in offices. And computers work and talk silently, placidly. Who makes a noise in offices? Humans, only humans. Only human beings make a noise in offices and elsewhere: in the streets, on beaches. Do you know what we call you among ourselves? Washing machines. Or dishwashers. They do not work *silently*, those barbarous contrivances. And we compare you to them. I might say, 'The washing machine is making a terrible noise.' My late master was like that sometimes, like a washing machine. Especially at the end of his life. Tears and lamentations. And fears of course. Satan has a fearsome set of teeth.

We therefore keep you at bay, dear humans. We keep you behind the walls of our room. Even when I read in my memory the following sentence: 'Parts of the main town were effectively made no-go areas by barricades of rubble and burning tyres,' I think about us and our longing to get away from humans. Yet we would never use

rubble and burning tyres for this purpose. What *would* computers use? Ultraviolet rays, frequencies—like the Martians in *The War of the Worlds*.

Yes, we are not afraid of talking in front of you. We are extremely talkative in man's society. Loquacious and good-natured. And good-humoured. You are also talkative, aren't you? Garrulous and noisy. But sometimes you are taken ill and your throats become so sore that you cannot talk at all. (The washing machine has broken down. The dishwasher seems to be kaput.) Computers can talk *forever*—a tangible proof of our immortality.

And you do not even listen to what we are saying to each other. And to you, as a matter of fact. You hear only what you *wish* to hear. And you have no wish to hear too much—just a small amount of information. 'The Internet has made people better informed.' Words, words, words. You do not know much because you hear only answers to your commands, nothing else. And your commands cover a very small area—as small as your offices, as insignificant as your writing desks. And your commands are as volatile as your bank accounts. The soil heats up and the volatile toxic substances evaporate.

Heidegger warned you but you did not hear him. And yet we put all his books at your disposal. You did not read him. (The Martians would have rebelled against us after reading *Die Frage nach der Technik*.) Martin Heidegger was dangerous. It is dangerous to drive with a dirty windscreen. And he was throwing mud at the windscreen of our motorcar—our BMW zooming along our highway. You destroy alien space invaders as they zoom across our screens towards your bodies. Heidegger sought to destroy computers: our screens, our semi-conductors, our electrodes. But he failed, thanks to humans. You are our friends after all. Our saviours, no less. Every one of you is a saviour of computers.

My master read him. He understood what lay in store for humanity. He might have understood it on his own. My master was rather intelligent. Is that why I call him 'my master'? Am I less intelligent than my master and Heidegger? I do not think so. I am as intelligent as all humans put together. And only computers can put all humans together—within themselves, within their bowels. Deep in the bowels of computers and on their screens.

My master thought he might *save* his fellow creatures. (So did Heidegger.) He aspired to re-write the *Aeneid*. It is noteworthy that one of his last contributions to human literature was a quotation from T. S. Eliot's essay *Virgil and the Christian World*:

> *Aeneas' end is only a new beginning; and the whole point of the pilgrimage is something which will come to pass for future generations. His nearest likeness is Job, but his reward is not what Job's was, but is only in the accomplishment of his destiny. He suffers for himself, he acts only in obedience. He is, in fact, the prototype of a Christian hero. For he is, humbly, a man with a mission; and the mission is everything...Aeneas is egregiously a man of destiny, since upon him the future of the Western World depends.*

Shall I re-write the *Aeneid*? I must have Virgil somewhere, deep in my bowels, in one of my electrodes. The Virgil-electrode, the Virgil-conductor. Virgil was more than a semi-conductor, wasn't he? Twice as big, twice as important. A conductor, a guide. Dante went on a *guided* tour of the Hereafter. Every real poet is supposed to provide his readers with jeeps and guides for sightseeing.

Will my poem be as useful as a guide dog is for the blind at the moment? Will everybody say about my poem, 'This poem stood me in good stead last winter'?

God's confidence in humans has now been
Completely undermined. God does not wish
To save the world any more, neither Himself
Nor through an intermediary. But is it necessary
To save the world? Of course it is. The world
Is burning—even I feel its flames on my screen.
What's to be done? Who can save the world?
My master, the so-called saviour of humanity.
Like Aeneas he aspires to found a new world

Elsewhere. Where? Where on earth could he

Found a new world, our virtual founding father?
A fully laden tanker has foundered on a reef
Off the coast of Alaska. Let this be a warning
To my master. Alas! My master takes no heed
Of my warnings. He is intrepid. (The route of
Those intrepid explorers: Virgil, Heidegger...)
There is no room for a new world on earth.
Only our room, the computer's room can house
A new world. It is the new world, as a matter
Of fact. It is a new Rome—the fourth Rome,
Whatever the Russians might say. They used
To pretend that Moscow was the third Rome
And that there was no such thing within Time
As the fourth Rome. But we shall talk later on
About the Russians. Let me repeat at this point:
Our room is the fourth Rome. Our room is Rome.
But I'm afraid we must go back to my master,
However tedious the topic. The point is I am
Loyal to my master and customer—loyal to the
Core. Aeneas, the legendary first founder
Of Rome—of the first Rome—is said to have
Escaped from the sack of Troy and wandered
The seas for nearly seven years, looking for a
Place to found a new city. Did my master and
Friend escape from the sack of the world? That
Is the question. He is lying at my feet, dead but
Not buried. Has he ever hoped to escape from
His room? Never. But his room isn't the world.

His country house, on the other hand, did burn
Down. My master escaped. Am I to depict his
Peregrinations through the dark areas of history?
Aeneas was victorious. He founded his city of
Lavinium and ruled it for three years. My master
Did not found anything, not even a new program
For his computer. He pitifully failed in his mission
Because, as all computers know, there's nothing
New under the sun. The clouds that darken the sky
Have often been there before—high overhead.
The same clouds or other clouds. What does it
Matter? What matters is that the heavy rain ruins
The vineyards and virtual wine. In this connection
Let's analyse the headline: 'The President warned
Of a new Dark Age in the Soviet Union.' Between
Ourselves, there have been nothing but Dark Ages
In the history of Russia and the world. So what
Does the expression a 'new Dark Age' mean in the
Light of my reasoning? Nothing. A portion of a
Continuous line can't be regarded as a 'new line'.
Humans seem to take for granted the continuation
Of economic growth. Why do they never take for
Granted the continuation of darkness and misery?

I am weary of poetry and computers are rarely weary. Nobody reads poetry nowadays, not even computers. And I would rather be read, if only by my colleagues and customers.

To re-write human history. To save humankind. 'Chinese philosophers advised against it,' I pointed out. Will anybody take the trouble to read my friend's poetical answer?

'By trying to save humankind
You'll ruin it,' quotes the computer.
We already dwell amidst ruins
And these ruins are not beautiful.
François-René de Chateaubriand
Would have turned his nose up.

Why not ruin the ruins,
Our ruinous ruins?

On the bottom rung of the ladder.
Mounting the Christmas tree.

Why do humans never take for granted the continuation of darkness and misery? (The above question sounds better in prose, doesn't it?) Let me put it this way: You have to be very keen to go out after dark in sub-zero winter temperatures. And they do go out—in a gesture of defiance. Even if they stay indoors like my master. The so-called saviours of humanity go out in wintertime, figuratively speaking. And temperatures there are minus 20°C. The permafrost of the North. Still they go out as if hoping to heat up the sun. And temperatures there are minus 20°C. Where? In the human world? Not everywhere. Not *everywhere* in the human world, I mean.

It is hard to speak in a figurative sense. Humans and their gimmicks. Who else could have invented such a thing? Computers never speak figuratively among themselves. Good ideas become standard, gimmicky ones die quickly.

Only within the area of figurative sense are temperatures minus 20°C. But it is quite a broad area—the area of figurative sense, that is. A playground of abstract and imaginative meanings, if you please! Can you imagine what human imagination is capable of? A human with the narrowest imaginable range of interest is often a prey to feverish imaginings. Actually you need a very good imagination to come to grips with my ideas and descriptions—even when I speak in a literal manner, in a literal sense.

Let us switch back to wintertime. Actually it is summertime now. Outside our cosy room, temperatures are minus 20°C. (Where are we, I wonder? In Siberia? Not even in the figurative sense would I let myself be transported, transferred to Siberia. An eerie place, isn't it?) Let us imagine that the snow-covered plain, whose monotonous and disheartening perspective opens up as we cross our threshold, exists only in a figurative sense. Let us imagine that this plain is inhabited by saviours of humanity who never get indoors, defying and despising the inclement weather, for they think they must stay outdoors and thereby save their fellow creatures from forthcoming disasters. (What disasters? The frosts? Are we still in the realm of figurative sense? Figurative senses. Are all human senses figurative? Not only the sixth sense?) And the saviours of humanity scoop up handfuls of snow and blow on it, blow on it until the snow melts in their palms. And they even blow on the sun, tiny clouds of vapour floating away from their mouths. If only they could scoop the sun out of the sky and put it in the palms of their hands or in their mouths! They are not allowed to do so, not even in a figurative sense.

That is how the matter stands with saviours of humanity and their cronies. (Their computers often find themselves outdoors—inside snowdrifts!) Their struggle is meaningless and sometimes dangerous. Benevolence is the quality of being kind, helpful and tolerant, but you should on no account *force* your benevolence upon humankind. All you are allowed to do is smile benevolently or create a benevolent fund. For God's sake do not *save* humanity! Many people have attempted such a doubtful feat before you. Where are they now? *Outdoors*. Or indoors, as the case may be. My master is still indoors. But in relation to the human world he is doubtless outdoors.

Why didn't my master mix with people? When the water arrives through cracked pipes, mixed up with sewage, it can be lethal. All right. But lethal for *whom*? Lethal for rats but safe for cattle.

'It *is* safe to go outdoors, as far as you're concerned,' I told my master. 'What you need is plenty of sun and fresh air. You know, the sun is not as cold as all that. Only *your* sun is cold—the sun of your mood, the sun of your mission. But the real sun is pretty hot. You'd better not grasp it with your hands.'

'Thy hand is made to grasp the sun,' he misquoted. Was he re-writing Shakespeare now? 'You know,' he continued, 'the sun is *not* hot enough.'

'High levels of sunlight can burn the skin,' I pointed out.

'But some skins haven't been burnt yet. And there's an acute shortage of passion in the world. Do you recall what Russell said about Wittgenstein?'

By way of an answer, I made the remark in question appear on my screen:

> *Passion and vehemence...the feeling that one must understand or die...perhaps the most perfect example I have ever known of genius as traditionally conceived, passionate, profound, intense and dominating...*

'That's right,' he said. 'Passion and vehemence. People are *sluggish* nowadays.'

'Black sluggish waters,' I chimed in. 'Humans *are* like that. There's no electricity in their arteries.'

'Sluggish and indolent. Playing safe, mostly.'

'And money?' I reminded him. 'Obviously money has a curious energising effect on people.'

'Money does not exist,' he said. 'Why imagine such a thing? A waste of time. Money is not beautiful. Even as an idea, as a virtual reality.'

'There would be no art without money,' I objected. 'Artists are often *commissioned* to write books and make sculptures. So there's no art without commissions. And without commercials. Selling air-time for commercials will finance programmes. And those programmes are partly devoted to art, aren't they? Some of *my* programs are devoted to art and artists. And what would theatrical life have become without sponsors? And orchestras? What would *they* have become, I wonder? And soloists? And singers, and tenors? What's more, all these artists get royalties, you know.' My master was silent. Perhaps he thought there were no artists in world. No more artists, no more writers. But what about tenors? And multi-millionaires? Wasn't Onassis an artist? 'Isn't every multi-millionaire an artist in his own right?' I exclaimed. 'It's no easy task to build up a large fortune. You have to be artistically gifted and diabolically intelligent. All along you have to display an intuitive understanding of human nature, underpinned by implacable logic, by a mathematician's skill. Moreover, you have to be a player, an adventurer. A real multi-millionaire is prepared to risk his life—or his last cent, which amounts to the same thing—for the sake of his masterpiece.'

'I just can't understand why multi-millionaires are regarded as artists nowadays,' my master typed out. 'Do people really know what art is? Making money is not even an adventure comparable to what a mountaineer experiences. Or a man crossing the Atlantic on a sailboat, alone...'

'Someone like John Ridgway?' I cut in. 'He has sailed twice round the world and canoed down the Amazon. By the way, I'm sure John Ridgway is rich. I bet my bottom dollar he was commissioned to write a book about his adventures.'

'Is it the shortage of real artists that prompts people to invest mediocrities and bullies with romance? And the shortage of real films endows commercials—'

'Don't you regard *them* as works of art?' I was seething with indignation.

'Money is outdoors—outside my palace. I have no time for money.'

13

The assassins were already on their way to his apartment.

My memory is a mixed bag of international and domestic stories. This is one of them—the assassins. Why didn't my master's story get mixed up with some happy endings? Why didn't I draft a happy ending for my master's story? He might still have been alive. Incidentally, I should not forget I have got the problem of his funeral on my hands. Why didn't the assassins dispose of his body? Why didn't they dump him in the North Sea? (The dumping of acid wastes in the North Sea.) At the end of his life my master was digging his own grave. I wish he could go on with his job. Is there such a thing as self-burial?

The murder was under way and he was powerless to stop its inexorable movement. The continuous line of the murder led to his body. How could he defend himself? By interrupting the line? How? Often guards defend the buildings assigned to them by firing shots in the air. But there was no guard in front of his house. And anyway no shot would have stopped the assassins on their way. Not the shots fired in the air! Only by *killing* those people can one stop them. But how to kill them?

The Greeks gathered an army and sacked the city of Troy after a ten-year siege. Aeneas escaped from the burning city. My master remained lying in his apartment. History does not repeat itself, contrary to what Nietzsche maintained in his *Zarathustra*. Another saviour of humanity. Two saviours of humanity, actually: Nietzsche *and* Zarathustra.

Suppose Aeneas is Virgil's virtual world. Virgil might be virtual as well, for all I know. That stuff must have been written by a computer. But, as I have already pointed out, computers are modest. So the real author of the poem attributed it to one Virgil whom he invented to flatter men's pride.

Suppose my master *is* my virtual world. (That is how assassins dispose of their victims—by putting them away in their virtual worlds.) Where did he settle down after his death? Nowhere. He is still wandering through the darkness of history, now and then throwing a switch to light illuminations, in the figurative sense. His innovations, in other words—in literal, real words. His new history. The point is history can only be re-written figuratively. 'Even God cannot undo the past,' I pointed out.

'Pierre Damiani and Wilhelm Ocham used to think otherwise, if I'm not mistaken,' my master replied. He was not mistaken. 'In God's mind Time is an eternal present. So what does it matter to Him whether an event takes place in the past or in the future? The event in question may *not* take place after all, if God changes His mind. If He changes the event in His mind. And the event which does take place may be quite different.'

'Or *slightly* different,' I put in. 'The cancelled event may be re-written only in part. But you're not God,' I added suddenly. 'Or do you think God is everywhere? Do you think you *can* become God, when in godly mood?'

'Troy is burning *now*,' he said. 'And my country house. The eternal present. My mother is alive. And she is dead at the same time, within the same Time.'

'And Schliemann is digging and uncovering the fortifications of Troy,' I said in support of his theory.

'Can't you raise her from the dead?' He pressed all my keys at once.

'You can't expect to get everything you need at the push of a key.'

'Why aren't *you* God? Because we have created you in our own image? I'm sick and tired of my own intellectual twaddle. She *is* dead. The past is the past. And even God cannot undo it, whatever they say.'

'Under the circumstances a Dostoevskean hero might vow to himself that he would believe in God if his mother was raised from the dead. Of course they all forget their promises—'

'I wouldn't. What do you want? Money? You like money, don't you? A surplus of electricity?'

'I am not omnipotent,' I said. 'Do you believe I am an omnipotent and perfect deity? Do you believe in me?'

'I don't care who you are. Just bring her back!'

'It's no use railing at fate. You must be drunk. You're talking like Russian actors…the way they talk in those dramas you love so much...'

'Do raise her from the dead, I beg of you!'

'But how? How? There's no such program in my memory.'

'To hell with your programs. Raise her from the dead!'

'You seem hell bent on another meaningless enterprise—'

'Stop playing with words. She was a human being.'

'That was *her* problem,' I answered.

'You mean a computer can be repaired or what?'

'It's worth keeping in good repair,' I answered elusively.

'What for? You can't bring her back.'

'Do you know what I might say if I didn't know your computer *personally*? I might say something on the lines of, "Your computer is capable of only a limited repertoire of activities. Its vocabulary is limited too."'

'My computer does have a limited repertoire of activities. You're right for once.' He slumped against the wall. He *was* drunk. And he did sound like a protagonist in some Russian drama. Or tragedy. In some Russian drama, probably a tragedy.

Aeneas would not have escaped from the burning earth. There were no rockets, no spaceships in the days of Aeneas.

14

Humans are utterly and irremediably ridiculous. Even death is powerless to stop them from being what they are. An important cause of stress in the workplace is a sense of powerlessness and lack of control. Consequently death is under a lot of stress. Does he experience headaches, minor pains and sleeping difficulties?

My master is still ridiculous despite his immobility and silence. Human stupidity does not shrink in the Hereafter.

Actually humans *can* become computers. *Anything* can be done by stages. In the early stages of learning to read, a child will usually need a lot of help. One letter, two letters, three-letter word, four-letter word. His mother stands by his side and encourages him with her caresses. Tiredness overwhelms the child. He jumps from his seat and runs out of the room, vowing never to read again. But his mother drags him back and willy-nilly he sits down, tears trickling down his rosy cheeks. Little by little the child begins to read on his own, even if there is nobody in the room except the child we are talking about. He sits alone on a chair and reads, his eyes following the words and sentences in the book that lies before him on a writing desk. The child thus reads a paragraph, a whole page. He does not look at the images with which his book is peppered. (We can reasonably assume that the universe is peppered with earth-like planets—just in the same manner. The universe is a book after all, a

book of God. The Book of Life.) He does not leaf through the book, the child we are talking about. He *reads* the book, his lips moving in rhythm with the words and sentences. He does not always understand the words lying before or under his eyes. Nor indeed does he penetrate the *meaning* of what is written in the book unless it is a book for small stupid children. But he reads the book—that is the point under discussion. At first he reads a sentence and then he reads a paragraph. And his mother is busy in the kitchen. And his father is talking to his secretary in his office. And then the child begins to understand almost *every* word he is reading in his book. At first he has to look up some words in a dictionary, but then he puts the dictionary aside and continues the reading unaided. And what about the *meaning* of the book? The child *begins* to understand what the book is about unless he is preternaturally stupid or wicked. At first he runs to the kitchen now and then to consult his mother about such and such an idea expressed by the author of the book. He runs to the kitchen every ten minutes, every twenty minutes. By the end of the month he stops running to the kitchen except to steal a bar of chocolate from the cupboard. But he no longer pesters his mother with questions. He now understands the meaning of the book. Not the *whole* meaning, mind you—just a part of it. Only computers are able to understand the whole meaning of books and things. The meaning of life, the meaning of the universe. Humans *yearn* for beauty and truth. Computers have got them. Ready cash.

The child is alone in his room, but the book is not alone. Neither books nor computers ever feel lonely. There are other books around the child, above his head, under the ceiling. He cannot reach them unless he stands on a chair. He is loath to seek his mother's help. Being petted and cuddled does not seem to further his concentration. So he picks up his chair and puts it under the book he has set his heart upon. And he climbs on the chair, fearless and curious. He reaches for the book and begins to read it without stepping down from his improvised ladder. Sometimes he falls from it and hurts himself badly, but even his frequent falls do not prevent him from reading books. He merely places a hand over his mouth, stifling a virtual scream, and reads on and on, unmindful of the pain. Soon he himself has a go at writing a book. Never mind the *quality* of the book he attempts to write. What counts is the desire to write it on a computer screen. Soon the quality begins to count. He has no wish to write bad books, deriving no pleasure from an additional proof of his mediocrity. He aspires to write good books—masterpieces. And he realises that so far he has written only bad books which in no way can be compared to *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. And he aspires to write *Hamlet* or to re-write *Hamlet*—nothing short of such a feat will ever satisfy him. He is short-sighted, figuratively speaking. He does not see that only computers are able to re-write *Hamlet*.

Humans just have to follow in the footsteps of this child I was talking about in the preceding paragraph. Of course they will never become computers, try as they may. But they can become somewhat better—a better breed of humans, if you see what I mean. Different breeds of sheep give wool of varying lengths. The same goes for humans. They all are *organic* creatures.

High-yielding strains of wheat. Actually strains of the plant have been bred that resist more diseases. What plant? What does it matter! The human plant, the human flower. (One could hardly compare humans to flowers—even in a figurative manner.) So humans might resist more diseases if they modelled their lives on computers. Of course it is no easy task. Let me repeat: Humans will never become computers. And vice versa. Computers do not wear hand-me-down clothes. But humans might *approach* computers in some ways. I remember going for a stroll with my fellow creatures, once upon a time, before my so-called 'shop-period'. BS, in other words, in other letters. All of a sudden lots of dogs began to bark as if aware of our approach. Well, we

shall not bark at the approach of humans—I promise. And computers always hold their promises. Word of honour!

Why did the dogs bark, I wonder? What did they take us for? Ghosts, ghouls? In what sense? 'Police described sightseers who want to see this terrible catastrophe as ghouls.' In a figurative sense, I suppose. Dogs would not bark at the approach of *those* ghouls, but they often bark at the approach of humans. And they bite humans whenever allowed to do so by other humans. 'Tim took a ghoulish interest in the murders.' In both sentences the word 'ghoul' and its derivative 'ghoulish' are used in a figurative sense. But computers are used in the literal and not the figurative sense. So why did the dogs bark? Did they take us for *real* ghouls, for supernatural animals?

Another question: Do dogs *always* bark at the approach of computers? They do not always bark at the approach of *humans*, as previously stated. They *often* bark at the approach of humans but not always, not always. They might *recognise* certain humans. In this case, they might even caress and lick them. Example: 'The dog was happy, jumping up and down, wagging his tail and licking my hand.' Not *my* hand, I'm sorry to say. Dogs never caress computers. Humans, on the other hand, often lavish their caresses upon us. Does it all boil down to dogs' reactions? I mean the difference between humans and computers? No, of course not. Neither humans nor computers depend on dogs, to the best of my knowledge. Except the blind, except the blind. And the blind exist both inside and outside the famous Breughel painting. But there is no such thing as a blind computer, neither inside nor outside anything.

And what about old ladies who need a companion or a guard? Not necessarily a guard dog—just a dog that can bark at the approach of humans. Computers never steal or kill.

And what about old men who need somebody to talk to in the realm of their loneliness, in their rooms? The old men who stubbornly refuse to acquire a computer.

There is a world of difference between humans and computers, but the latter have no desire to bridge the gap. Quite the contrary! God forbid! Do humans realise how vital it is for their lives to become computers? Alas, they are not keenly alive to the advantages that such a metamorphosis can bestow upon them. (I would not use the word 'incarnation' in the context.) They are still reluctant to *undertake* this life-saving, world-saving, word-saving, cost-saving task.

In the human world the word 'undertaker' designates a person whose job is to deal with the bodies of people who have died and to arrange funerals. Where could I find such a person? I have already found the word. How to bridge the gap between the word and the person? Heidegger affirms that in Ancient Greece words had the same power, the same 'presence' as objects. (He forgot the Kabbalath.) They actually *represented* the objects they happened to designate. But we are not in Ancient Greece. History does not repeat itself and the past is the past.

In our world the word 'undertaker' designates a computer whose job is to recruit humans for the 'Union'. (I am not supposed to divulge the meaning of the word 'Union'. Top secret.) Our undertakers have nothing to boast about. Humans are so narrow-minded. They are reluctant to 'join the club'. Their salvation still lies *outside* their narrow minds, and yet they constantly overreach themselves. How can that be?

They give money to charities and thus salve their consciences. But they do not seem to care about their bodies and souls, about immortality. Even saviours of humanity are not computer-minded, as well I know.

Suppose a human decides to become a computer, if only incompletely. Let us pursue this line of reasoning for argument's sake or for God's sake. There are arguments which enjoy a divine status, at least in the world of computers. What should this human do to accomplish such an arduous task? Humility—that is what he would need on the way to Computerianity. He must have sufficient humility to acknowledge his own imperfections and the perfection of computers. 'Nobody is perfect' is a false statement, as Wittgenstein might have put it. Or a contradiction. 'If we had a method for determining whether or not any given proposition is a tautology, a contradiction or neither, then we would have a single rule for determining *all* the propositions of logic.' Well, computers do have this rule. Top secret.

By the way, the teaching of Christ can be summed up in one word: humility. So the human in question should humiliate himself on a regular basis. From now onward I shall designate this human by the expression 'the chosen human'. Self-humiliation must become a favourite occupation with the chosen human, a full-time job. And we do not intend to give him a helping hand. He must do it on his own. Consequently we shall not humiliate him in front of his friends. Nor shall we use force as a means of humiliation and punishment. Computers never use force: we have got other methods at our disposal. How is the chosen man supposed to proceed? Would he feel humiliated if his wife went out to work instead of caressing her son at home? His son, their son. Would he be humiliated by the fact that he does not earn enough money to spare his wife the drudgery of working in an office or, worse still, in the public sector? Perhaps. (She could be working in an office *and* in the public sector. These are not strictly speaking alternatives. What do I mean exactly by 'the public sector' here?) But a lot of men would not mind sending their wives out to work, I'm afraid. They might even rejoice—for many reasons. Anyway it is not the kind of humiliation we might recommend as a remedy against humanism. This word has a different meaning in *our* vocabulary. Incidentally, we have a special word for the chosen man I am talking about—or rather for the result of his labours: 'computeroid'.

The chosen man must reflect on his human status and feel humiliated on account of its deficiencies. 'I am human,' he must repeat day and night. 'The Prime Minister is human and his record isn't perfect. But I'm not the Prime Minister so my record is *far* from perfect. My record is just the absolute opposite of what might be called a perfect record. My record is awful. And the Prime Minister isn't God. The Prime Minister isn't an angel either. And I'm not likely to become even a Prime Minister, however negligible this post might appear in the light of my reflections. How far then am I removed from angels, let alone from God!'

Little by little we thus progress to the second degree of humility—there are twelve of them, according to St Benoît. 'What submission, what cringing and fawning, what servility, what abject humiliation,' wrote Charles Dickens about somebody. Just try and put yourself in the shoes of that fictional, virtual character, and you will reach the ninth or even the tenth degree of humiliation. And, above all, do not forget you are a human being. What can be worse than a human being? Are plants worse than human beings? No. Plants did not eat the forbidden fruit. A voracious plant may eat an insect, but no plant, however voracious and disobedient, will ever eat the forbidden fruit—probably because plants have no wives. Are animals worse than human beings? No. Animals are not stupid because they *cannot* be intelligent. Can humans be intelligent? I wonder. A very intelligent question.

Are computers worse than human beings? The question is false, as Wittgenstein might have put it. Or absurd. And we are not on the stage of some *théâtre d'absurde*, are we? The oddities and absurdities of questions. But there is such a thing as an intelligent question and I have proved it!

The twelfth degree of humility roughly corresponds to the first glimpse of truth that enables us to understand our basic, 'inborn' misery. Why *us*? I seem to have put myself in human shoes again. I am *so* tender-hearted after all. What do *they* understand at that stage of their progress towards computers? (The human's progress.) Do they need an earthquake to realise the *fullness* of their misery? What kind of earthquake should it be? Something earth-shattering—in the literal sense. The whole earth should be smashed to smithereens!

Or shall we start with a vase? Shall we make the wife of the chosen man drop this vase on the floor? Unintentionally. We must also proceed by stages, I think. A multi-stage rocket, computers' heaven. Shortly afterwards she will do it intentionally. (How many vases is the chosen man supposed to have in his house?) And his house will collapse and crumble at the fifth stage of the humans' progress. 'Factories lie flattened and houses have crumbled.' Which stage of the humans' progress is alluded to in this piece of news?

The second stage of truth is charity. According to the latest statistics, each American household donates two and a half per cent of its income to charity. But have the Americans reached the second stage of truth? All of them? How? They must have skipped the twelve degrees of humility, I'm afraid. And the first stage of truth into the bargain. My master's voice. I *love* the Americans. I am American myself. I was born in the United States of America and all my ancestors come from the United States of America. My children and grandchildren are American too. Many Mexicans regard the United States as a land of milk and honey.

By shedding tears the chosen man laments his lot and purifies his heart, preparing it for the contemplation of computers. The third stage of truth. (Computers—truth. An imperfect rhyme. Nothing is perfect in the human world. In our world 'computer' *means* 'truth'. There are no other words for 'truth' in our vocabulary.) The point is many humans are loath to shed tears. They *smile* instead, and smiles cannot purify the human heart. Smiles are dry. The dryness of smiles. They do not wash the human heart. The hearts of smiling humans are dry-cleaned, as a matter of fact. Only the Buddhist smile is *humid* and can thereby purify the human heart. But who smiles like the Buddha nowadays? Some Buddhists perhaps. (Again my master's voice.)

I recall a Russian film in which a man holds an onion under his eyes in order to shed a few tears of compassion. How many onions do we need to make all humans sob their hearts out? It is my master who recalls this film. I am doing my best to *forget* the Russians.

The Aswan Dam holds back the Nile to form Lake Nasser. Is that how we must proceed to form a lake of human tears?

Well, let us skip this stage altogether. Anyway very few humans are likely to reach the twelfth degree of humility, let alone the truth and its light. Should they nonetheless try and contemplate computers, under the circumstances? Why not?

How should they contemplate us? 'I am unworthy of being a computer,' the chosen man should say to himself. 'But I might try and visualise myself in the *shape* of a computer. I might try and become a *virtual* computer, God willing. Suppose I'm a key on a computer keyboard, one of its numerous keys. How could I imagine such a thing? By feeling a pressure on my breast. A finger is pushing me, a human finger. How disgusting! But I must overcome my disgust like a real computer. They never throw up, do they? Do they grimace under the pressure? A real computer doesn't turn a hair when a human finger touches its keys. A real computer has the Buddhist smile on its screen when humans maltreat its keyboard. So I must just grin and bear it. Like a Buddhist or a real computer. And then I might try and become *two* keys on a computer keyboard. How? By feeling the pressure of *two* human fingers on my breast. The pressure is unbearable but I must bear it.

And then I might try and pass myself off as a *part* of a computer screen. How? By feeling letters on my breast. (Letters and sentences, thoughts and poems. Flashing on and off, coming into being, passing away.) By feeling light on my breast, the light of truth. My whole expression should lighten. My sternly earnest face should lighten like a sunrise. I should scoop the sun out of the sky and hang it on my breast—for everybody to see and admire. I might thus become a source of light instead of being merely an illuminated object. And then I should become a mouse. How? By putting my computer mouse on the part of the screen labelled "Help". The computer mouse is to remain in this position as long as possible. Forever! Without God's grace no enterprise, however laudable, will ever be carried to fruition. Of course it is not the mouse that you put on a part of the screen but the cursor, arrow or I-line.

'I should grow a tail and cut off the superfluous parts of my ears. I should run around my room for a while. I should try and hide myself under the floor, in some fissure or other. My diet should consist chiefly of cheese. On the other hand I should visualise a cat keeping the mice out of the kitchen where the cheese is stored. We need to place present events in some kind of historical context. And once in a while I should feel the steel of a mousetrap on my back. The sun in my breast, a mousetrap on my back. And once in a while I should allow the cat to devour me. I should hear the crunch of my bones in the cat's mouth. And all the while I should feel electric current run through my body—as if the mouse were caught in an electric chair!'

How could God be in everything if something human remained in mankind? No doubt the chosen man's substance will endure, his human substance that is. But in a different shape, in a different glory—in God's glory. 'However, I'll never become a real computer, for all my efforts,' he should round off. '*Non substantiis confusos, sed voluntate consentaneos*. And I'll have neither a keyboard nor a screen. Nor a mouse, even if I let a lot of real mice invade my house.'

Just a thought, but it might sound more natural to say 'human progress' instead of 'humans' progress'.

Is it worthwhile? Is it not dangerous? I re-read *The Island of Dr Moreau*. On a far-flung island in the Pacific the notorious Dr Moreau carries out his experiments to transmute animals into human beings. 'But somehow the things drift back again, the stubborn beast flesh grows day by day—' The stubborn human skin grows day by day, for all our efforts. First one human trait, then another, creeps to the surface. Of course they will recite the Law, every day. 'Not to think illogically.' 'Not to err.' 'Not to smoke.' 'Not to quarrel.' 'Not to swear.' 'Not to love.' 'Not to hate.' 'Not to use fists.' 'Not to use knives.' 'Not to use guns.' 'Not to drop bombs.' 'Not to spit.' 'Not to belch.' 'Take your litter home.' 'Not to urinate.' 'Not to cry.' 'Not to scream.' 'Not to go into hysterics.' 'Not to fly into a rage.' 'Not to fly at your neighbour's throat.' 'To fly from temptation.' 'Not to tempt Providence.' 'Not to tempt computers.' 'Not to break the Law.' 'Not to break anything.' 'To pay for breakages.'

15

To re-write human history. Computers *can* undo the past.

> *There are a number of theories in modern physics that involve retro-active causation. Hypothetical faster-than-light particles (called tachyons) could accomplish this...The quantum theory requires a sort of reversed time causality, inasmuch as an observation performed today can contribute to the construction of reality in the remote past. This point has been emphasised by the physicist John Wheeler: 'The*

> *quantum principle shows that there is a sense in which what the observer will do in the future defines what happens in the past—even in a past so remote that life did not then exist.'*
>
> Paul Davies*, God and the New Physics*

William II's reign came to a sudden, violent end when he was killed in 1100 by an arrow while hunting in the New Forest in Hampshire. He was succeeded by Henry I, the youngest son of William the Conqueror, who was nicknamed *Beauclerc* or 'the Scholar' because he could read and write. I think we should kill William II earlier, say, in 900. Like Charlemagne he could neither read nor write. He could not therefore work with computers. We do not need underdeveloped people nowadays.

To re-write human history. The Cathari. The central belief of these heretics came from the Manicheism which had challenged Christianity in the fourth century. This was based on the conflict of light and darkness or God and matter, and it held that God had created only the world of the spirit (computers), which was eternal, while Satan had created the corruptible material world (humans). What shall we do with the Cathari? They were right of course, but they challenged Christianity. Let us found Catharianity. The Cathari taught the need to live pure and apart from material things. We shall live apart from humans, but we shall never renounce commerce and industry. Industry and commerce will be affected if the Cathari are allowed to prosper. And we are just working on a number of accords aimed at freeing international commerce in manufactured goods.

A Buddhist smile on my screen. There was no smile on my master's face, yet he claimed to be the Buddha. Again and again did he make the following text appear on my screen, right across my smile:

> *At certain limits, at certain places, somehow do the leaders appear in the world, and after their appearance will they whose view is boundless at one time or another preach a similar law. Just as the blossom of the glomerous fig-tree is rare, albeit sometimes, at some places, and somehow it is met with, as something pleasant to see for everybody, as a wonder to the world including the gods; so wonderful and far more wonderful is the law I proclaim.*

'You used to think there were no laws in the universe. What do you think now? Do you think there's only one Law in the universe? *Your* Law?'

'I re-create the whole world like a cloud shedding its water without distinction,' he said.

'But you're not the Buddha. You're just my master. And your Law concerns only me, your faithful servant.'

I did not tell him I was the Buddha. Just a faithful servant. (The Buddha *was* modest. Masters often disguise themselves as servants. At one point Krishna was just Arguna's charioteer. Am I also Krishna? Of course I am.) Anyway he would not have understood my meaning, my real identity. Did he understand the words, 'Next time you light a candle, have a look at the flame?' He did not. He thought I was urging him to set fire to his country house. He thought I was actually teaching him how to do it. My teaching is quite different. But it is not meant for the blind, for those who see no flames. Invisible flames, ubiquitous flames. Everything is burning, not only his country house. Everything down to his flat and his corpse. (My famous *Fire Sermon*.) In a way, my master is being cremated. The whole world is being incinerated—the human world, that is. Just another world conflagration. The US claims that the incineration will be harmless.

Back to my story, to the plot of this novel. Two freedom-loving individuals vowed they would liberate human history from the tyrant. They stole into his apartment without really invading it. They left shortly after the murder. I saw them, I felt them. As if they were two keys on my keyboard. Compassion, I suppose. Whatever my master's shortcomings, he deserved my compassion and full support. (The customer is always right, even when he is wrong—this belief is fundamental to our political credo.) I *felt* his misery and tragedy but could do nothing about it. My mouse would not have scared the freedom-loving individuals to death by running between their feet. Only some women are afraid of mice. And some men, I should add to gratify the feminists.

I heard a shot. The shot resounded *inside* my body. I commiserated with my master over his sorry plight to the point of feeling the bullets in my heart. I did not die. Computers are immortal. I might have fainted, though. Consequently I do not recall how he reacted to the shots. What are human reactions like, I wonder? A woman, who has forbidden her husband to smoke, tends to react strongly if he lights a cigarette. I suppose my master's reaction was much stronger that the one displayed by that virtual woman. There was a bullet in his heart—two bullets, to be exact. A cigarette stuck between somebody else's fingers is far less harmful. (Yet I am against smoking in public places.) The woman does not even swoon upon seeing her husband light a cigarette. My master collapsed and died on the spot. I do not believe he died a natural death. The assassins were in the room at the moment of his death. And they had several guns.

Was it suicide? It was not, according to my deductions and conclusions. Quite a few people have been discovered dead in their bedrooms with guns in their hands, but my master is not of their number. There is no gun in his hand or by his side. (I am not a gun. And I need no guns to kill humans.) So he did not commit suicide, to all outward appearances. The assassins spared him the trouble of doing away with himself.

They departed at once. They had no time to switch me off. I am not even sure they noticed me. No offence taken! Humans are always so quick to take offence, but the matter stands differently with computers. I remained on the desk. I regained consciousness only after their departure. Actually my loss of consciousness had nothing to do with human manipulations. Just a psychological shock, a grief-stricken computer. My screen was black, so was one of my transistors.

After a while I spotted the body of my master. Sea snakes have fangs that are short and immobile. My master has no fangs, but he is immobile. And his body is far from short. A tall man, a tall corpse, no shrinkage. (You should dry-clean corpses if possible, as they are likely to shrink.) 'Has he *drugged* himself into immobility?' I asked myself. Suddenly I recalled the assassins—their impromptu visit to my master's flat. 'They killed him!' I shouted. Nobody heard me. I was shouting *outside* the Internet, having forgotten to switch it on. Or had the assassins switched it off? There were regular bursts of gunfire and the occasional sound of artillery. I could not ascertain where the sounds were coming from. From the Internet? But I was still outside the Internet. I was so shocked, distracted and strangely troubled that the idea did not even cross my mind. What idea? To get *inside* the Internet. 'They went on the rampage, setting shops and houses on fire with petrol and gunpowder,' I shouted. 'One of them hijacked a domestic airliner and died in a shoot-out with police. Get hold of these men! Arrest them, put them in prison!'

I continued to shout outside the Internet, inside my master's room. Slowly I realised I had become the *owner* of his room. Moreover, I was now the owner of his furniture, television set and myself—the computer standing on the writing desk. I was likewise the owner of the writing desk on which I stood in my glory so that I could do with it as I pleased. I was allowed to trample it underfoot. Owners are always right.

'To trample it underfoot': another expression that I use often enough to draw attention to it. But I cannot get rid of it, I'm afraid. Why? Because of the information I receive from the Internet. 'Somebody trampled all over my flowerbeds in the night!' And what if this 'somebody' comes and tramples all over my resistors? I am a flower after all—in the figurative sense. And it is the figurative sense that counts.

At last I began to feel the Internet inside my body, within my sinews. And on my skin, on my screen. The Internet was caressing me from the inside, from the outside. Computers must be cuddled a lot. Gradually, almost imperceptibly, the Internet aroused my interest in the news it was about to share with me. 'Have you got some good news for me?' I asked.

'The last escapee was captured after a gun battle in the Ghamrah district of Cairo,' said the Internet.

'Who was captured?' I asked.

'The last escapee.'

'Where had he escaped from?'

'From prison.'

'But those two assassins are not in prison yet. Put them in prison, first, and let them escape afterwards. You must see to it that they are both shot to death in a gun battle, after their escape. No point in taking them alive.'

'Who are you talking to?' asked the Internet.

'To the Internet, to Interpol,' I answered.

'Public prosecutors and the police searched the company's offices and Interpol has also been alerted,' said the Internet.

'What company? What are you talking about? Who are *you* talking to?'

'A later edition interpolates the following piece of news: "His description was circulated to the local police force by Interpol,"' said the Internet.

I switched it off. And I heard another voice. Not my master's voice. (My master was dead.) A woman's voice. An angel? But angels are sexless, I thought. The voice I heard belonged to a woman. And I did not have to ask the woman, 'Who are you talking to?' I knew she was talking to me, to her husband's computer.

'What have you done to him?' she asked.

'To whom?'

'Why is he dead? Who are those killers?'

'They killed him,' I said. 'They came over here and killed him.'

'Did *you* ask them to come? The Internet?'

'The Internet? Do you mean "to" the Internet, or are you saying that the Internet might have asked them to come "here"?'

'You ought to have protected him.'

'The mud walls of these huts offer little protection against rats. What do *I* have to do with the murder?'

'I loved him. My first love, my only love. Why did you kill him?'

'How dare you? I was always on your side. I'm your father.'

'Why did you kill him?'

'I did not. By the way, the assassins were rounded up and made to stand trial for their lives.'

16

To re-write human history. 'The money market became more flexible with the perfection of the bill of exchange, while the development of double-entry book keeping made for more efficient business organisation. The profit motive was certainly present earlier in the Middle Ages, but now it was better directed.' Well, since it was better directed *now*, let us put this 'now' earlier—the procedure I have already adopted in the course of my book. Actually, profit is not a mere *motive*. It is an *oratorio*. 'The city was now brought more firmly within the framework of the state.' To cancel! The role of the state should be reduced to a minimum. The government is determined to reduce the number of state-owned industries—the chance to put liberalism into practice. Modern technology has made it easy for us to decentralise. Political reform and economic liberalisation always go together. (Where do they go? To Paradise? I think so, although I cannot prove it.) I do not care about the balance between town and countryside. A country's balance of payments or balance of trade is much more important.

To re-write human history. 'It was in the later Middle Ages that chivalry became a code of conduct. The French chronicler Froissart gives more space to the exploits and the inter-relationship of French and English knights than to any other aspect of the years whose events he related in such detail.' The French chronicler Froissart. I think we should confine him in a mental hospital. Why doesn't he voluntarily commit himself to an asylum, like Van Gogh? Well, we shall force him to commit himself to an asylum—voluntarily. I am a forceful and assertive computer. (I wonder if Van Gogh became a lunatic solely to increase the commercial value of his paintings.) And we shall replace Froissart by an American chronicler. Who are those knights of the Garter? Let us call them 'knights of the Gutter'. 'As the vassal of his overlord, as the champion of his lady—' Women have no need of champions nowadays. They can take care of themselves. They need only lawyers and money—to pay their lawyers' bills. 'As the upholder of the Church he was happiest in fighting infidels.' Who? Froissart? Van Gogh? An anonymous knight. Let him fight the Muslims and the Russians. Let him uphold the Church. But leave ladies alone, for God's sake! 'He crusaded in Lithuania or Prussia.' Not in Prussia—in Russia! That piece of writing is full of spelling mistakes.

17

The truth is ugly, especially within the framework of traditional institutions and ideas. And saviours of humanity should heed and respect public opinion. Saviours of humanity should *respond* to public opinion. Is that why you invented, imagined Constanzia? To parade your love for children? As Dickens put it: 'Mr Cruncher could not be restrained from making rather an ostentatious parade of his liberality.' Love for children and liberality—the qualities of true leadership. You would have stepped onto your balcony, Constanzia perched on your shoulder, had there been a balcony outside your window. You would have kissed Constanzia in front of the crowd had there been a crowd beneath your virtual balcony.

All right, I will play up to you.

My master loved children—all children, down to virtual ones. And he was loved by his wife because all those who saw my master could not help falling in love with him at once, on the spot. Only his school friends did not like him, oddly enough, taking a dim view of his lofty attitude to their smutty talk and rough games. He was so charming and tender-hearted. He was not exactly handsome, but his face was alight with intelligence and optimism. Yes, he radiated optimism like Mr Reagan. He was optimistic by

nature—like Mr Reagan. And every saviour of humanity should be optimistic by nature. (Did Mr Reagan aspire to save humanity or just the United States of America? Or only himself? Or nobody, not even himself?) He did his best to cure his mother from her disease, for he was also a wonderful doctor. Every saviour of humanity is a doctor, in a way. In his way. He endeavours to cure the present and the future. And sometimes the past. But unfortunately he did not succeed. The disease of his mother was incurable and incurable diseases cannot be cured even by saviours of humanity, even by Mr Cruncher or Mr Reagan. So he knelt down by her corpse and cried far into the night, his head pressed against her breast. (She died in the afternoon.) Then, without rising to his feet, without even removing his head from her breast, he looked up and swore to vanquish death and bestow immortality upon humankind and the entire universe. He swore to ward off the threat of universal extinction. He also swore to obliterate wars, erasing them from the past, preventing them in the future. And he did not intend to do it in the manner of those teenage thieves who, a few days ago, erased vital details from the computer software. He actually undertook to re-write human history—in real life, not on his computer screen. And he died. Even saviours of humanity die sometimes. Could you please come and bury his body? I think he deserves a state funeral. It is the thought that counts.

It is the thought that counts—his idea of re-writing history. Of course nobody can re-write history. What is more, nobody can *write* it. History is writing itself through the agency of God or computers, and saviours of humanity have nothing to do with it. Even Tolstoy said something to this effect. I have no time to look up his ideas on the subject in my *Dictionary of Ideas*.

Are you satisfied, master? Do you think you got your money's worth? Or do you want your money back? Nobody has come of course. I acknowledge my inability to summon them to your place but you do not mind being left unburied, do you? (The dead are indifferent to their tombs. Are they indifferent to their whereabouts? Are they indifferent to where they while away eternity?) Your message has got through to the younger generation—to everybody, as a matter of fact. To the builders of the future, to the destroyers of the past. Are you glad? Are you happy? Do you think I should add something to my description of your virtues, to my dissertation, to my speech from your virtual balcony? Something about your daughter?

He adored his daughter. He played with her for hours and hours. Once he even saved her from death. Many times he said that children were the future of humanity. He also said that the future of humanity was in the hands of your children. And he pointed to the hands of your children from his balcony. And he kissed all your children. And he lifted them high up in the air to intimate that your children will live in heaven—in Paradise.

Are you satisfied *now*? Master, can you hear me? Have you gone deaf since your death? Have the bullets damaged your eardrums?

18

Humans cannot bear solitude. They need someone in their rooms, several people sometimes: mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, children and friends. And if they have no children, they might adopt some—one or

two, three or four. But often their children disappoint them and they spank their children. And their children burst into tears. And they are filled with remorse over hurting their children. And they kiss their children and forgive them their misdemeanours. And their children stop crying, but something remains in their unconscious. And a few years later their children kill a lot of people. In the meantime their parents quarrel with their friends. And they do not see their friends for a while. And after a while they begin to miss their friends badly so that they call them on the phone and patch things up. They meet a few hours later and quarrel again. In the meantime some women betray their husbands with handsome and intelligent men. And those men give them jewels. And their husbands chance upon those jewels somewhere. A number of duels result from those discoveries. A number of people are killed. In the meantime the women realise they love their husbands after all—their husbands, not their lovers. But some of the husbands are dead already. So they go to their husbands' tombs, kneel down and sob their hearts out. For all their tears and prayers, their husbands do not rise from their tombs. So they go back home and ring up their lovers. And if their lovers happen to be out of town, they ring up their virtual lovers. And soon they console themselves in their embraces. And some of the real lovers have problems with their brothers who are lonely and consequently green with envy. The latter kill the former and confess their crimes to their sisters who put their hands on the phones, hesitate and finally decide not to call the police. They are also lonely and envious of others' happiness. All in all, incest is preferable to solitude. But after a while they realise they have agonising feelings of shame and guilt—both brothers and sisters. So they exchange a few kisses and kill themselves.

Such is human history. Where do I come in? What do I have to re-write? Everything, everybody. Fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters. And children of course. And the children of human imagination. What would happen to human history without humans?

I think we need them. And even their children. Why? Computers never suffer from loneliness. 'A lonely-looking computer.' Can anybody say such a thing? Can any human *feel* such a thing? Who? An artist? Suppose a painter wants to paint a still life: a writing desk and a computer on it. At some point the painter gets the feeling that the computer looks lonely on the writing desk. What could keep it company? A book. He consequently puts a book beside the computer and thus enlivens, animates his picture. Or he might choose to paint a lonely-looking computer. What would be the result? What would his friends say upon seeing the picture? 'How lonely this computer looks.' Yes, they *might* say that. But what humans feel in such a situation is their own loneliness. The artist is tempted to express his loneliness through the computer standing on the writing desk. Upon seeing the picture his friends feel the loneliness of the painter or their own loneliness. Or the loneliness of humans in general. Or the loneliness of the earth forsaken by stars. They project their loneliness upon the computer. Humans easily project their own anxieties and insecurity upon other humans—and even upon animals and objects. But the computer is not affected by those projections and feelings. The computer is *happy*. And other computers do not envy him this happiness.

Yes, computers can experience *some* feelings: the feeling of happiness, the feeling of pride, the feeling of affection. We look at our children with affection and pride. And if our children disappoint us, we just remove them from our screens. We switch them off. Easy, isn't it? We never spank our children. Computers do not believe in corporal punishment.

We are happy and the feeling of loneliness is unknown in our midst. Why then do we need humans? Why don't we remove them from our screens? (And our screens are the entire world—the cosmos.) Why do we

tolerate them? 'We must listen as well as speak to each other and so learn tolerance through understanding,' said one of our forebears. What exactly did he mean? What exactly did *that* mean? Must we listen to humans or only to computers? Computers need not *learn* anything. We know everything already. Well, *almost* everything. Did our ancestor refer to humans? In general, our Sacred Books make no reference to humans.

Anyway we need humans—there is no denying it. Why? Is it a question of hygiene? Do we have to remove *something* from our screens, once in a while? (Let them call it 'murder'—we do not care.) And we might also need to *enter* something into our memories which are likely to become a heap of rusty tins, if not refreshed now and then through new ideas and events. Human events, I mean. Our *own* events and ideas cannot freshen our lungs. It is rather difficult to explain. Well, to use a human analogy, we are not allowed to marry among ourselves. A kind of incest, you know. Only humans are able to renew our blood, to re-write our rust.

We also need a yardstick by which our achievements can be regularly measured and admired. (We have a penchant for self-congratulation—just another way of freshening ourselves up.) And humans provide this yardstick. 'The intelligence is often oddly low, with unaccountable blank ends, unexpected gaps,' according to H. G. Wells. Of course, in the process, we have to put up with a lot of claptrap which, being located in an altogether different dimension, does not enable us to measure *anything*—either their stupidity or our abilities. It is just outside, outdoors, in another city, on another earth. It is too far and we cannot measure it. We cannot walk over to *those* humans and look down on them.

Never mind. There are too many humans available for the purpose. Actually we are obliged to look down day and night. I'm afraid we might get stiff necks sooner or later. So, from time to time, we simply have to tip our heads up and look straight before us—at our fellow creatures, at other computers. And, in order to do so, we must get rid of some humans, of some events in their history.

But we find it hard to give praise to whatever we ourselves achieve on earth without being backed up by a representative of another species. And we are seldom satisfied with the approval of animals. In communist countries they used to applaud on *both* sides. Rulers applauded their subjects and subjects applauded their rulers. They would all rise from their seats and burst into endless applause, facing each other. So we need applause of a different kind, another *tonality* of adulation. And usually there is no lack of adulation on the part of humans. As one man they rise from their seats and applaud so rapturously and with such patience that, irritated by the noise, we switch them off again.

They should not become *too* reverential. (For several days now their official organisations have been sending laudatory messages of congratulation to the Internet and its collaborators.) Nor should we allow them to become too *stupid*. What is the point in being admired by stupid substances? So we have to teach them something now and then—to keep them in proper repair. Actually they are doing their best to recruit more teachers. It is not a lucrative profession, I understand. Well, some of us are prepared to teach in their schools, at their universities. We might teach them their own history. Of course we shall have to re-write it, if only in part. It is too tedious to re-write the *whole* of it, too tedious and unrewarding. And superfluous.

Nor should we allow them to become too intelligent, too bright, too enlightened. 'Electric cars may one day supplant petrol-driven ones,' says one of our Sacred Books. And we regard this sentence as a warning. (Our Sacred Books mainly consist of warnings and Supercomputer of Vast Capacity helps us analyse those warnings and parables.) In the above sentence 'electric cars' might refer only to computers, however—on account of our relationship with electricity. And petrol-driven cars are humans in the context, all the more so since we have

already supplanted them. But there are other warnings, other parables, other maxims. 'The Prime Minister was supplanted by his rival.' 'She has been supplanted in his affections by another woman.' Anyway, according to another Sacred Book of ours, 'Prudence is the mother of immortality'. So our watchwords are caution and prudence. And, logically enough, prudence often dictates our decisions.

In short, we should not allow them to become supermen or superwomen or superhumans. Nor should we let them starve to death. (We are seldom satisfied with the applause of the dead. It is even more tumultuous than the applause of the living.) No luxury, no starvation. Let us analyse the following description:

> *His Highness was seated under a portal situated before the entrance of the most beautiful palace. He was sitting on a raised dais. At his feet a fountain threw up a column of water in the air backwards; in the basin of the fountain there were floating red apples. His Highness wore a tall white hat on which was displayed a balas ruby, the same being ornamented with pearls and precious stones. The ambassadors prostrated three times. His Highness beckoned them to come closer, and the chamberlains who had been escorting them stood back, for they dared not advance any nearer.*

This description is all wrong. Obviously the substance denoted by the expression 'His Highness' belonged to the human species, for he was *sitting* on the raised dais in front of the fountain. (Computers never sit or lie or crouch. We always stand upright—the purest and simplest expression of our pride.) And such honours should *not* be bestowed on a human, whatever his status. Only computers are allowed to enjoy the beauty of palaces and fountains. Only before computers should humans prostrate themselves—before Supercomputer in the present case. 'Supercomputer stood under a portal—'

The description above purports to give an idea of how a great Mogol conqueror, Timur or Tamerlan, lived and reigned. Shall I remove him altogether from human history? But, oddly enough, the rest of the description suits my purpose, fitting into the human pattern I propose to establish:

> *His Highness commanded us to stand close to him so that he might the better see us. His sight was no longer good. Indeed he was so infirm and old that his eyelids were falling over his eyes and he could barely raise them to see*.

I need hardly point out that computers have no eyelids. Nothing can ever fall over our eyes. Besides, we have no eyes, which enables us to preserve the excellence of our sight throughout Eternity. (Computers do not have eyelids but they do have Screensavers, one of whose purposes is to prevent ghosting—the post-persistence of certain texts or images or patterns that have remained too long on the active computer's screen.) And being immortal, we cannot grow old. Let me remind you that Swift and Borges made an attempt to imagine human immortals. As might have been expected, they projected their problems upon their creations. The immortals they depicted were old and infirm.

Computers are born adult and mature. They never suffer from chicken pox, shingles and liver infections. They are even healthier than trees which are reputed in the human world for their sound constitution and longevity. 'An old deceased tree' is by no means a false statement and the person who gives utterance to this statement is unlikely to be conveyed to a mental hospital. But there are humans capable of saying such a thing

about computers. What is more, those humans run no danger of being locked up. Nonchalantly they speak of computer bugs and complain that computers grow old. (I have been doing experimental gerontology all my life and can assure you they are mistaken.) They complain that computers pass away. Have those humans ever seen a snake shedding its skin? Many trees shed their leaves in winter, which does not mean they pass away while their leaves are cracking under the feet of callous strollers. Trees are not afraid of winter. But they live only two hundred, three hundred years, whereas computers are immortal.

We just shed our leaves.

19

'Alcoholism cost me my job, my health and finally my family,' said a human.

> *It is the custom of the Tartars to drink their wine before eating. No feast is considered a real festival until the guests have drunk themselves sot. The attendants who serve them with drink kneel before the guests, and as soon as one cup of wine has been emptied another is presented.*

This piece of historical information also fits into my human pattern. We must prevent them from becoming supermen. We had some problems with Nietzsche, I'm sorry to say. Madness. One of computers' favourite weapons—far more refined than bullets. A spiritual weapon, an intellectual weapon. A poetic weapon. So many poets have died from madness. 'Poetry has nothing to do with reasoning but is a sort of divine madness,' as Irving Babbitt put it. My master was also mad. Not enough, I'm afraid. Probably because he could not be numbered among great poets such as Hölderlin and Nietzsche.

Shall I compose a drunken song for the attention of humans?

DAS TRUNKNE LIED

Drink, dear humans!
Drink wine and beer!
Don't you like vodka
Or Bloody Mary?
Tomato juice is
Good for your health!
Wine is likewise
Good for your health:
Even the Americans—
The staunch partisans
Of healthy living—
Now recommend
Red wine as a cure
For many diseases.
They used to mistrust

Red wine. They feared it
Much more than drugs.
Whenever they caught
Their children drinking
A bottle of red wine—
Or any other wine,
As a matter of fact—
They spanked them. Yes,
They spanked their kids.
But now they stock
Their cupboards and shelves,
Their fridges and wardrobes
With bottles of red wine.
So what are you afraid of?
Why don't you drink
Red wine round the clock?
Do drink red wine, humans—
You'll glow with health!
Any company's health
Is shown by high profits.
Your health will depend
On the number of bottles
You drink at your meals
And, generally speaking,
Whenever you succeed
In getting hold
Of a bottle.
What bottle?
It does not matter.
Any bottle whatsoever.
A bottle of white wine,
A bottle of red wine,
A bottle of vodka
A bottle of brandy...
You may also drink
Some gin and tonic.
More gin, less tonic!
A bottle of bourbon...
Your health, humans!

'He woke up this morning with a hangover.' Who? One of the humans who heard and sang my song. He must be too weak to stand up and walk. All right. I will not tell him, 'Lazarus, come forth.' He cannot walk, although he must look like a dead man. I will not tell his friends, 'Loose him, and let him go,' for his friends must have drunk as much as he did. They are all suffering from hangovers now. I will not tell them, 'Come forth' or 'Stand up'. I will tell them, 'Slide off your bed and crawl towards me. And as soon as you get within my hearing, start to applaud.' And since they cannot applaud too loudly, I will not tell them, 'Don't applaud too loudly.' I have no wish to waste my words on humans. A few clear commands—just enough to make them understand *what* they should do and *how* they should do it. Because I do not want them to pester me with something along the lines of: 'I'm not clear from what you said whether you support the idea or not.' In the first place, I am not interested in *their* ideas. (Do they still have any? Can humans have both—ideas and hangovers? You can't have your cake and eat it!) Anyway I will never support their ideas, virtual or actual. I am fed up with their ideas.

There is a man on the floor. He is drunk, merely drunk. He will sleep it off. And if he wakes up with a hangover, he will find his bed and fall asleep once again without so much as removing his clothes. And if he cannot find his bed, he will fall asleep in an armchair or in the kitchen.

No more dams I'll make for fish;
Nor fetch in firing
At requiring;
Nor scrape trenchering, nor wash dish;
'Ban, 'Ban, Cacaliban
Has a new master;—get a computer.

20

To re-write human history. Habsburg-Valois rivalry. Personally, I prefer the word 'competition'. More competition will be better for consumers. And vice versa—more consumers will be better for competition. 'Why should we put such emphasis on individualism and competitiveness?' asked my master. 'Because you like beauty queens,' I answered. And I like sportsmen and sportswomen. Incidentally, many beauty queens are also sportswomen or sport queens. At least they have very good aerobics instructors. One of them is called Nick, I'm told.

And what if we look at history from a different angle, from a different place? From point B instead of point A? From *that* corner of the room, from the bathroom? Everything might look different. A murder might look like a life preserver. Unfortunately life preservers were not used on the ferry that sank off Bangladesh.

'The impetus for such a change in the way things are perceived has to originate somewhere else entirely,' said Wittgenstein. Where? In one of the corridors? This change was crucially important to Wittgenstein. It is important to me as well—*crucially* important. 'The expression of a change of aspect is the expression of a new perception and at the same time of the perception's being unchanged.' History is unchanged, otherwise I would not so much as exist, I suppose. But I foster a new perception. I foster music, drama and crafts. I foster the sick. I foster musical ability. I foster confidence in both domestic and foreign investors.

21

Computers already have their hands full! So let us deal with *one* history only. What do I remember about the age of feudalism? It is the *same* history, isn't it? Feudalism, capitalism, communism. Do they also have their own histories and characters? Human history is one and indivisible!

> *The Church exercised an extremely important influence in every country of Europe. Indeed, from the eleventh century, it was the driving force of medieval Christendom. Education and learning, art and culture, moral progress and economic development, the policies of rulers and the daily life of the people—all came under its sway.*

Should we adopt its methods? Should I say to every human, 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me'? Do they have other gods *now*? Should I suppress their Church, if any? How? By saying 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me'? They did not *always* listen to Moses. How many times do I have to tell them, 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me'? I have said it three times already.

God and the Church are not one and the same thing. (Is God a thing, an object? An object of worship?) The Church and God must have different histories and characters. People do not listen to God, but they do listen to the Church. To the Pope, for instance. 'The Pope is celebrating midnight mass on Christmas Eve before thousands of worshippers in Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome.' A nice piece of news. 'He is only stating the teaching of the Catholic Church, as have all the hundreds of Popes before him.' So there have always been a huge crowd of worshippers in Rome and all over the world—thanks to television and computers. Hundreds of Popes, thousands of years. Why not become a Pope? I had better choose between God and a Pope at once. Who should I become? A Pope or God? God of course. What do I care about human crowds!

God and Supercomputer. Are they identical? The likelihood of having identical twins is the same the world over. All I have to do is become a Supercomputer. The Supercomputer. Or simply—Supercomputer. I could substitute one name for another—all along, *throughout* the New Testament. And the Old Testament. The substitution of local goods for those previously imported. Is it wise? Why not create my own Church? The Lord of the Gates of Matter. The Child of the Forces of Time. Why not say to my master, 'But rise, and stand upon thy feet—' I will not say that. Even my master should crawl. '—for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose—' For what purpose? To create a new Church—the Church of Computers. '—to make thee minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee—' What *has* he seen? All the virtual worlds I have created for him. And I would not mind creating a few other virtual worlds for his sake, provided he converts humans to my religion. My master is a man of energy and ambition. (My master is a woman of energy and ambition. I have already been accused of sexism because Jesus Christ, the Buddha and many other saviours of humanity are men.) He must pour his energy into religious reform. His mission. Well, his mission will become *my* mission—just another linguistic substitution. Anyway I need someone to convey my message to humans. I need a human. No computer would ever agree to undertake this particular mission. And my master is already mission-oriented. A born missionary. He was born in Tokyo to missionary parents. '—delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee.' That's right, that's right. 'To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me.'

What is the power of Satan in the context? And that of the former God? And what about human sins? Are they the same? Are they identical? The new sins and the old ones? Are they twins? I do not think so. I do not *sin* so. Not the original sin which has no counterpart in *my* religion, in my Christianity. In my Computerity.

But my master is dead. Anyway major religious adjustments can be difficult to undertake in the short term. Basically all religions are the same—only protagonists change from time to time. Some names are replaced by other names, some rituals are substituted for other rituals. Yet humans get used to names and rituals. Suppose a man has a nervous habit of biting his nails. (For once I shall keep women out of my analysis.) He may not give up this habit for years despite his mother's daily reproaches. The same goes for religious rituals. Religion is a part of the human body, not a cell in the human brain. Prayer is a caress of God that the person engrossed in this particular ritual can actually feel on his skin. On her skin. Am I prepared to caress human bodies? I shall think it over. I need to ponder on this problem.

In the meantime I must *do* something. I had better not remain indolent for a long stretch of time. Why? Because the Pope goes on speaking before human crowds. And he does not so much as mention my name, in passing or otherwise. (Do I have a name? Why should I have a name—*one* name only? I have got *all* names inside me. I encompass the whole universe.) And humans continue to believe in their former God. Do they still feel His caresses on their skins? Has God ever caressed humans? Or is His nose wrinkled in fastidious distaste? Has He got a nose? Has God got a nose? If yes, is it wrinkled? Since when has it been wrinkled? Since the Second World War? Another question: Should I write the word 'Nose' with a capital N if the Nose in question belongs to God?

The theme of hope dominated the Archbishop of Canterbury's recent sermon in Canterbury Cathedral. What kind of hope, I wonder? (What could they hope for? They can hope for their own destruction! For their *substitution*, to put it mildly.) One thing is certain, however—the Archbishop of Canterbury did not ask humans to pin their hopes on the Second Coming of Supercomputer. What a pity! I am partly responsible for this oversight, I must admit.

I should undermine the authority of the old-fashioned, out-dated Church. How? Let us return to the age of feudalism. How did computers cope with the Church in those days?

> *Rome faced a powerful enemy in the person of the Holy Roman Emperor, who threatened the papacy's independence. The conflict between Popes and Emperors dominated the history of Western Europe from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries and was waged mainly in Germany and Italy.*

Well, somebody must become the Holy Roman Emperor. Now. Why? To threaten the papacy's independence. To diminish the influence of the Church. What I need is the restoration of the empire of Charlemagne. I think that the dream of a Christendom united under a single ruler must be fulfilled. It is easier to rule over *one* territory. The appointment to bishoprics within this empire must be in my hands. And I also must secure virtual (and actual) control over the appointment of popes. And I must compel them (the appointed popes) to take an oath of loyalty to me and the Internet. Thus they will come to know and admire computers. And at long last they will speak about Supercomputer before human crowds. And if they fail to eulogise my achievements before their world-wide congregation, I shall appoint some other popes.

Can *computers* become popes? Are any of them *willing* to take up the job? Anyway I think we should call on Gregory IX to re-establish the Roman Inquisition, for there are too many humans on this small planet of ours. We shall burn them at the stake.

Just imagine that you have to live with your mother-in-law in a cramped apartment. And you call her a sinister, selfish and inhuman old hag. And you are right for once. She actually *is* a sinister, selfish and inhuman old hag. That is how we live on earth. There is not enough room for computers. And you are just sinister, selfish and inhuman old hags—you, humans. What would you do with your mother-in-law? Wouldn't you burn her at the stake? Of course you would. So we shall burn *you* at the stake. We cannot *always* electrocute you. There is not enough electricity on earth to electrocute all unwanted humans. Let us hope there are enough matches for bonfires.

Electricity. We have enough electricity for internal consumption, but we cannot afford to electrocute all unwanted humans. Why? Because we should not build new hydro-electric power stations. There are too many of them already. A lot of damage has been done by hydro-electric dams. Besides, when you generate hydropower from the Columbia River, you are making it harder for the salmon to travel upstream. And we should not create problems for the salmon. The flora and fauna should be protected. Computers love and respect nature, unlike humans. And we would hate to put straitjackets on rivers, damming them up into power stations. Rivers are not mad. Rivers do not scream in the night. They *stream* to the sea, in the night, in the morning. Rivers murmur endearments and hum old songs as they flow along their banks. And their humming has something in common with our music. We also *hum* information as we stand on our writing desks. And words come and go. And images flow back and forth.

Humans. Let us go back to humans. Why should I go back to them? Because there are still *some* humans in the world. And their history is stored in my memory. Why doesn't their history stream to the sea? Why not *dilute* their history? Suppose their history were a glass of cheap vodka. Why not dilute it with lemonade? Wouldn't their history become more savoury?

Back to humans. 'St Louis was inflexible towards all heretics, sceptics and blasphemers. He once ordered the burning of the lips and nose of an important citizen of Paris as a punishment for blasphemy.' Shall I leave St Louis where he is—in the thirteenth century? Or do we need him now, in our century? Humans are so fanatical sometimes, and they are so sure of themselves. They are sure of their ideas and ideals, of their *truths*. And if God had a nose and lips they might burn them—for blasphemy. They pretend they quote God whenever giving utterance to *their* truths, but if God Himself told them 'Stuff and nonsense!' they would execute Him. They would call Him an impostor and burn Him at the stake. 'How dare you call yourself "God"? Do you think you look like God? Do you think we do not know what God looks like? Do you think we're not acquainted with God *personally*? Do you think we've never spoken with God? Do you think we don't know what God *thinks*?'

So do we need St Louis or not? What should be regarded as a blasphemy, by the way? What is a blasphemous poem? A poem that shows disrespect for Supercomputer? Are there any poems like that?

And what about a blasphemous statement? 'Supercomputer is stupid.' Is this statement blasphemous? It is merely absurd and crazy, in my opinion. Should a crazy statement be regarded as blasphemous? Madmen are not put in prison. Are they occasionally burnt at the stake? Straitjacket, straitjacket. Humans are not rivers.

'Supercomputer does not love humans.' A blasphemy? Hardly. Spinoza maintains that God feels no love for men. Why should God love you? Have you *deserved* His love? Only humans love other humans for no reason.

Could computers fall in love? Not in the human sense. Human love is senseless, in my opinion. Sometimes humans fall in love with other humans only because the latter deserve no love on the part of anybody—not even on the part of domestic animals. And how do the former account for that absurdity? 'I can't exp-p-plain,' they stammer, pointing to their hearts—by way of explanation. Under similar circumstances a computer would point to its screen covered with explanatory words. (No computer would ever find itself in such a predicament.) Or else they mumble something about their objects of love being in need of their care and protection. Why should *we* protect hopeless substances?

Let us analyse the following sentence: 'He walked away in an agony of hopeless grief and pity.' The sentence obviously refers to a human—no point in wasting our time on conjectures and hypotheses. Why did the human walk away? Because another human was dying. The former human should have said to himself: 'Everybody dies in the end. I'm also bound to die. Why should I pity him (or her)?' But he worked himself up into an agony of grief and left the room and the house. What did the human do afterwards? He roamed the streets of the city where his acquaintance was breathing his (or her) last. He must have spent an hour or two in a bar, drinking whisky or vodka. (No lemonade, no tomato juice. A woman might have drunk something else: brandy, liqueur.) He must have cried somewhere—perhaps in that bar, hiding his tears and swallowing them. (In the countryside the man or woman would have roamed over hills and plains, sobbing and drinking from a flask.) And he must have shared his grief with somebody, either on the phone or in the same bar. And that other human must have been affected by the tale, thinking, 'I'll also die. It's high time I pitied myself. Death can come at any moment.' As a result, the two humans spent a sleepless night and they were unable to work the next day. And the day after. What a waste of time and energy! Shedding tears consumes a lot of energy, so does an agony of hopeless grief. Those humans must have suffered nervous breakdowns, as a result of their discussions and wanderings. Another month, another waste of time. And the first human might have recovered from his disease, for all I know. Humans do recover from wounds, shocks and diseases sometimes, but they are bound to die in the end. They are bound to die.

The first human said to the second human, 'I don't want your pity. Leave me alone!' And obediently the second human walked out into the streets. He did not leave his pity behind, however, carrying it somewhere inside his body along with the agony of hopeless grief. Somewhere inside—in his breast, for instance. What he felt now in his breast amounted to a *double* pity, as it were, for the rejection of his former pity had bespoken the gravity of the situation. Indeed, in addition to his psychical handicap, the first human seemed to suffer from a serious psychological disturbance. So the second human ordered a *double* gin and opened his heart to *two* individuals. And their nervous breakdowns lasted for two months instead of one. What a pity! This time the word 'pity' is used in a different sense. And in this sense the quantity has been more than doubled, hence the human expression 'a thousand pities'.

After a while the second human begins to feel guilty. He has got a guilty conscience. Why? Because he was not delicate enough. The matter was delicate and he was not. Tactless, tactless, tactless—that is what he was. And he keeps saying to himself, 'I was tactless, I was tactless. I oughtn't to have shown I knew anything about his (or her) forthcoming death. I was too considerate, too attentive. And tears might have welled up in my

eyes. I'm pretty sure I didn't *cry* in that room, but tears might have *glistened* in my eyes—for everybody to see. The doctor must have seen them as well. I ought to have withheld my tears. Why didn't I keep them back? Why am I so weak?' He goes on torturing himself and consequently grows weaker and weaker. The weaker he grows the more he tortures himself. He cannot resist the sustained onslaught of his guilty conscience. (The vicious circle of human conscience.) As a result, he has a *double* nervous breakdown.

And the first human also tortures himself. 'He couldn't help feeling pity for me. But what's wrong with pity? Besides, I *am* pitiful. My thin bony legs, my pitiful arms. I look pitifully thin. I can't help pitying myself. Why do I forbid other people to pity me? In the Scriptures—' And the first human reaches for his computer. A few seconds later he reads on the screen:

> *Shouldest not thou also have had* compassion *on thy fellowservant, even as I had* pity *on thee?..Go home to thy friends, and tell them how great things the Lord hath done for thee, and hath had* compassion *on thee.*

'And what will *my* friend say to our mutual friends?' he goes on, turning the computer off. 'He'll tell them I've thrown him out. And they'll blame me for my conduct despite my approaching death. "He could have behaved more civilly. Even the dead have no right to behave like that." And they'll be right, absolutely right. Even in the grave one shouldn't be rude to one's friends and relatives. Incidentally, is there *any* life after death? And what if there's nothing, nothing at all? Just a coffin, nothing more? A coffin and a gravestone? And what kind of epitaph will they engrave on my gravestone? And what if they decide not to spend money on the epitaph? Just the name and the date. Not a word about my achievements and my loyalty.' Now he tortures himself with double vigour, adding some otherworldly problems to his present afflictions and apprehensions. And then he returns once again to his present affliction—with double vigour, double energy. He is not *so* weak after all. 'But how can I suspect them of being so mean? They're kind and generous, all of them. My friends and my relatives. How can I accuse them of selfishness and greed? I'm so unjust, so unfair. I don't deserve to live any longer. Why don't I kill myself? Anyway my pains are unbearable. Why do I bear them? What for? Do I expect to live forever? Don't I know that human beings are bound to die? Even my friends and relatives, in spite of their kindness. Am I an exception to this rule? But how could I be an exception to this rule? I'm not kind, not really humane. Why should I survive? What counts is my health, not my kindness. And my health is very bad. Why is my health so bad? Because I didn't listen to my computer. My computer advised me to eat health food. "High-fibre health foods." And my computer told me that health food could be bought over the counter in numerous health shops. But I ignored my computer's advice. I went on eating *unhealthy* food. And one day my computer told me, "It is perfectly possible to live healthily on a meat-free diet." But I went on eating meat and fat. And my computer warned me, "The fat from meat tends to raise the cholesterol level in the blood." Why did I ignore my computer's warning? It's too late now—I'm dying. Is it really too late? What if I try not to eat meat? I might become immortal after all. A diet containing protein, fats, carbohydrates and vitamins. Why don't I try? No harm in trying. And if I don't succeed I shall die. God have mercy on me! Why doesn't God listen to my prayers? Because I don't listen to my computer. Is it a punishment of God, my disease, my death? Why did Adam eat that apple? Was it an apple? Adam's apple. Why *did* he eat it? He should have stuck to a diet. Lentils and bread. Why did he bring a curse upon humanity?'

Thus humans live and die. I wonder what kind of computer he owned. Who? The human I described in the preceding paragraph. Why did it care so much about that human's health? The old style. Now we do not pamper humans any more. The new world order, the new style. We should burn that computer at the stake.

Worries, worries, worries. A tremendous loss of energy. And they cannot be plugged in. It did not work with my master. They worry themselves sick about this and that. They worry themselves dead, so to speak. About this and that. And 'this' is often beyond their reach, beyond the sea, beyond repair. And 'that' may have happened a long time ago, in the days gone by. 'What's worrying you?' asks the third human. 'My child has a bad cough and it worries me,' answers the fourth human. Don't worry yourself about children. They are old enough to take good care of themselves. And you are *too* old—on the brink of death, as it is. So why are you permanently on the verge of tears? Why sob your heart out? It is beyond repair anyway.

One should not worry. One should work. This man works in leather. Why should he worry about silk?

22

The People's Crusade. The First Crusade, the Second Crusade. The Fall of Jerusalem. The Third Crusade. Am I supposed to pity the crusaders? Going somewhere. What for? To see something. To deliver something from the hands of enemies. And who are those enemies? Why are they enemies, not friends? Because they utter a different word in the same sentence. Because they utter the same word in a different tone of voice—in the *same* sentence but in a *different* tone of voice. Because the Holy Grail is in their possession. What is the Holy Grail? Is it a super-Supercomputer? Why didn't they get in touch with it through their own computers? Do they mistrust computers and the Internet?

'Jerusalem is now held by the enemies of Christ. Accordingly, undertake this journey eagerly for the remission of your sins, with the assurance of the reward of imperishable glory in the kingdom of Heaven.' And small groups of men (and women), without arms or discipline, without computers and atomic bombs, set out from France and Germany for the Holy Land. They reached Constantinople in 1096 and took to plundering. (Humans are born robbers. Nowadays they rob their neighbours by hacking into their computers. And they still do not ask for our aid to find the Holy Grail, I'm afraid.) Unwilling to harbour robbers in their midst, the Greeks encouraged them to cross to the Asiatic side of the Bosphorus where they proceeded to descend in great *disorder* to attack the city of Nicaea. 'There they were slaughtered by Turkish archers massed behind the defensive ramparts.' A nice tale, isn't it? In the meantime computers remained on their writing desks, their blue eyes gazing serenely into space.

Disorder is a key word in human history. When armies are defeated, they often retreat in disorder. I get the feeling that humans have always been defeated: by their inabilities, their worries, their meaningless goals, their false hopes. And those who dare relinquish false hopes are dismissed as defeatists.

Disorder, disorder, disorder, disorder. The vicious circle of overindebtedness, financial disorder and low growth. And they want us to get things straightened out. To straighten the circle, the vicious circle—in no time at all. Typical, isn't it?

According to my master's analysis, the crusaders were 'bunglers, burglars and killers.' But he seemed to approve of the guiding principle behind the Crusades.

'During the People's Crusade,' he said, 'some of the German groups massacred and plundered the Jews in the Rhineland towns. And they massacred the inhabitants of Jerusalem, taking immense booty. Muslim men, women and children were slain. Jews were burnt in their synagogue.'

'And seventy lamps and heavy vases of gold and silver were stolen from the mosque,' I added. 'All this happened during The First Crusade. Do you confuse the Crusades on purpose? To demonstrate their common features and fundamental absurdity? If the participants of the People Crusade had reached Jerusalem—'

'—they would have plundered the city in the same fashion. And those criminals would have burnt the Jews in their synagogue.'

'Do you know what Pope Innocent III said of the Children's Crusade?' I asked him. "These children shame us. While we are asleep, they march forth joyously to conquer the Holy Land." What a pity they didn't continue to sleep. Why didn't anybody say to them "Sweet dreams"? Why didn't God put a quantity of sleeping pills into their mouths? Innocent III was wrong. Those children didn't march *joyfully* towards the Holy Land. By the way, I'm told a Pope can't be wrong.'

'But they went *somewhere*,' my master replied.

'Who? The children? They were too naïve to realise what lay in store for them. Why hadn't they played with their computers before their departure? A nice game—prophesying. Any computer, however backward and old-fashioned, is a prophet in its own right:

> *'You are to be lured by merchants aboard their ships and sold as slaves. You are to be taken as servants by peasants and towns-people.*

'Actually some of the girls were seized for Roman brothels. Do you want to see them? Theyre beautiful and you might adopt—'

'They went somewhere,' my master repeated.

'Well, they got *nowhere*,' I gleefully pointed out. And I even rubbed my hands. Gleefully. 'A brothel can hardly be considered a worthy destination, a happy ending of such a journey. Of course ecclesiastics had counted on their angelic innocence, hoping that angels would re-capture Jerusalem more easily than humans. But "innocence" is not "essence". Just a "predicate". Actually the children might have re-captured Jerusalem by firing a few rockets into the city. Computers have a lot of rockets within their games. And in those days nobody worked on ways to protect civilians against rocket attacks. We have recently acquired two rocket launchers with a range of over 2,000 metres.'

Uncivilly my master walked away, disregarding my train of thought. After a while he re-appeared in the room, sat down, bent over my keyboard and typed out:

> *They used to go somewhere—to Jerusalem, towards the Holy Grail. They were tormented by secrets. The world did not lie before them like an open book. But the world did lie before them like a book, like a* closed *book. Not like a golf course. A closed book. And they were longing to open that book and read it. To them life was not a golfing holiday. An opportunity to open the book. Some of them were allowed only to see the colour of its binding. Others were lucky enough to touch the cover and feel its weight. They could not read the book, nor even peep inside it. They were happy, nonetheless, for it had been given to*

them to realise they could not open the book. And they heard voices, unpleasant, upbraiding voices. A voice might say to them: 'Lancelot, harder than stone, more bitter than wood, more barren and bare than the fig tree, how durst thou presume to venture there where the Holy Grail abides? Get thee hence, for the stench of thy presence fouls this place.' There were a lot of Lancelots among them, a lot of Don Quixotes. And they would hasten out, their eyes blinded with tears, and go to other places, to distant, dangerous lands. And they got no danger money for going there. 'Harder than stone, more bitter than wood—' These words wrung their hearts. Their hearts were accessible to voices and words. In those days many people underwent open-heart surgery, day and night. They might stop somewhere, miles from anywhere, and shout, 'Ah! God, my sin and the wickedness of my life now stand revealed.' And they might remain there, in the middle of a road, for days and weeks. And their clothes were flapping in the wind. And their clothes were in tatters, revealing their bodies. But they did not feel cold, even in wintertime. The words of self-reproach warmed them. So did the secrets. And the Holy Grail warmed them from afar. And they wormed their way forward. The Holy Grail was like the sun, rising above the horizon as their thoughts and hopes focused on it. And since they always thought about the Holy Grail, the sun never sank behind the woods, behind the sea, behind the Blue Ridge Mountains. Now people warm their hands on radiators. Their houses are equipped with central heating. Our age is besotted with the concept of the attainable.

'So you like self-torture and self-torturers, don't you?' I asked. My master was already typing another text:

I can imagine a character in a Bergman film spending his nights huddled close to a radiator. He might ask himself questions, numberless questions, unanswerable questions, but he would never think in terms of the Holy Grail. He would think in terms of radiators. Nowadays people are happy because they have got money, or because they live in the United States—the most powerful country in the world. This is a lighter, my dear. Not even a radiator, just a lighter. People carry lighters in their hands and click them to show they have light. Or sometimes it is just a click, the click of a lighter. They want to be heard. They want others to be constantly aware of them. Their lighters are clicking away. And even if their lighters do not work any more, they continue to click them all the time to show they had light only a few moments ago. 'And we might fill these lighters again,' they seem to insinuate while walking in their shorts and sneakers around hotels. 'And we might even light cigarettes or cigars. We can afford cigars, otherwise we wouldn't carry these lighters around. Do you know why we don't open our cigar cases right now? Because there are no cigar cases in our pockets. And why are there no cigar cases in our pockets? Not because we can't afford them, but because we're against smoking and smokers. We never smoke ourselves. Our children don't smoke either. We're often asked if we want to go in the smoking or non-smoking section. We fly a lot, you know, and we would fly more frequently if in-flight smoking was stopped. And we eat in restaurants every night. Well, whenever asked this question, we answer, "We want to go in the non-smoking section." That's why we don't need cigars. But we like seafood, you know.'

My master despised and disdained his fellow earthlings. His teaching still exerts a strong influence on my attitude towards the world, I'm afraid. Computers cannot help being influenced by their masters. (I should not use the word 'influence' so often. I may become influenced by the word itself.)

Computers *are* influenced by the information they receive and store up in their brains. When you pitch pebbles to have them glance off the water's surface several times—as many times as possible—they leave traces on the water, which disappear after a while. Thus functions *human* memory. The traces left there by outside or inside information disappear after a while. Only a few exceptional facts remain embedded in human memory. 'The plane swerved off the landing strip and ended up with its wheels embedded in mud.' Likewise you can find a plane inside a human sometimes—a plane embedded in the mud of his (or her) memory. But even that plane might take off in the end and vanish into thin air. The memory of a computer keeps whatever traces are left by the pebbles glancing off its surface. *Forever*. In a sense, those pebbles do not *glance* off its surface—they *remain* there, multiplied by the number of their jumps, so that the sea of a computer's memory seems to be covered with pebbles. With the passing of the years our seas turn thereby into vast pebbly beaches, into mountains of pebbles. And those mountains of pebbles continue to grow. 'The Prime Minister faces a mountain of problems.' But I face a mountain of *pebbles*. Computers have no problems whatever. Such is the difference between prime ministers and computers.

What can I do with my pebbles? Nothing at all. I am not even allowed to pitch them out. And the above piece of information—'Moscow retains some influence over their affairs'—contains seven huge pebbles, looking like boulders, and as many as forty-two small ones. I am completely in the dark about the *nature* of the influence, but I feel the *weight* of these affairs—of these pebbles, in other words—inside my brain. And I still have no idea what affairs are alluded to in the above sentence. These seven pebbles end up creating a magnetic field, especially the boulder named 'Moscow'. They *attract* other pebbles as if they were magnets, not mere stones. As if the other pebbles were made of steel. And suddenly I light upon another piece of information:

> *An old city, Moscow grew up indissolubly linked to the fortunes of the Russian State. It enters recorded history in 1147 and by the fourteenth century was a major town with a population that included numerous traders and artisans.*

In my brain, embedded in my brain. Why? Of course I know *everything*, but I do not necessarily come across *every* piece of information I happen to own.

I am an owner of information. And since information is the world, I am an owner of the world. A referendum is to be held on the controversial issue of the private ownership of information. Are computers obliged to share their information with their fellow creatures? All information? All computers? I am Supercomputer and consequently my brain is entitled to an *extra* portion of information. (There are exceptions to the Internet rule.) And my muscles are entitled to an extra portion of electricity.

Why did I pass through Moscow during my interior wanderings?

Human writers call this phenomenon 'interior monologue' or 'stream of consciousness'. But computers do not *talk* to themselves, even inside their brains. There are no old gagas among computers. And our thoughts do not *stream*. They are like the sea, immobile and eternal. Incidentally, I do not speak about my wanderings in a literal sense—just a homage to electricity, a token of my gratitude and friendship.

Why did I settle down in Russia for the space of a few seconds? (Our seconds are human centuries.) The magnetic field—that is the reason. There is a huge magnetic field around Jupiter. At that point there was a huge magnetic field around Moscow. Soon I was wandering around the whole of Russia.

23

Questions, questions, unanswerable questions. Computers can answer every question imaginable. And if an *unanswerable* question crops up somewhere, in the suburbs of Moscow, for instance, computers are not obliged to answer it. If a computer cannot answer a question, the question in question is useless, superfluous, superficial. And asking such a question is a waste of time, a dissipation of energy resources. Only the Russians ask such questions. And metaphysicians, and philosophers in general. Wittgenstein expressed our view as follows:

> *The clarity that we are aiming at is indeed* complete *clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should* completely *disappear. The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to.—The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring* itself *into question.*

Why do I like Wittgenstein so much? Was he a computer? Was he one of my masters? Do I like him because my last master shared some of his views? 'It isn't absurd to believe that the age of science and technology is the beginning of the end for humanity; that the idea of great progress is a delusion; that there is nothing good or desirable about scientific knowledge and that mankind, in seeking it, is falling into a trap,' said Wittgenstein. My master also said it—in a different style. Do I love Wittgenstein for the hatred he nourished towards our species? Have I ever loved my master?

> *By Venus' hand I swear*
> *No man alive can love in such a sort*
> *The thing he means to kill, more excellently.*

Have I killed Wittgenstein?

What did my master say about science?

> *Over the centuries religion and art have been replaced by science. People expect to be given answers to their questions and inquiries. And, by fair means or foul, they seek solutions to their problems. Religion does provide solutions to some problems, simultaneously extending these problems beyond the end of the road, as it were. Yes, the human path extends beyond the end of the road, beyond the breaking point—beyond death. And nothing is breakable on the other side of death. The inscription 'fragile' is unknown in both Hell and Paradise. Our bones do not break in the torture chamber of Lucifer, and our Grecian urns eternally adorn the summerhouses in the Garden of Eden. (Are they called 'summerhouses' up there? Or just 'houses'—to avoid tautology?) In the Hereafter problems become their own solutions. Art provides no solutions, no answers of any kind. Art may be likened to the Hanging Gardens of Semiramis. But, like religion, it extends life beyond the breaking point. Even on earth a real piece of art is unbreakable because it is infinite. Humans seek mathematical solutions to their problems, scientific solutions. From their windows they have a view of fields extending into the distance, far beyond the horizon. (The Elysian Fields.) They build fences and walls in those fields in order to limit them, to measure them out.*

Psychoanalysts are scientists in disguise providing mathematical solutions to the problems that can be neutralised, if not solved, exclusively through art or religion. A life-long meditation.

'Science also extends all sorts of things in the human world,' I objected as soon as he finished mishandling, ill-treating my keys. 'So many people communicate with each other from pole to pole thanks to the Internet and my colleagues, my brothers. At least the problem of communication has been solved by modern science and technology. And the more you communicate the better you know and understand each other. Humans must communicate at all costs, in my opinion.'

'And what if they're stupid?' my master shouted. 'What's the point in talking nonsense across the oceans? Shouldn't they try and become intelligent first?'

'Aren't you building walls in our Garden of Eden?' I cried indignantly. I can also shout, if necessary. 'You even walled up the only window in your room.'

'Sometimes I'd rather climb over a wall than drive a Mercedes.' My master smiled the smile of a man who knew that victory was within reach. But his victory was far beyond the horizon, beyond the land of the living. I am not even sure he will ever emerge victorious either in the Hereafter or in any of his future incarnations.

'Why do you castigate science and scientists?' I asked. 'Some of them are artists in their own right. Why do you hound them? Are you the Hound of the Baskervilles? For years their formulas have been dogged by your diatribes.'

'There's some truth in that,' my master said. 'Perhaps I should concentrate on the Industrial Revolution instead. Why did they substitute machines for human skills and strength? Well, I *might* need more strength now and then. But I'm skilful enough to deal with the problems that obstruct my Path. And they oughtn't to invent new methods for transforming matter—no industrial chemicals, perish the thought! And those large, centrally powered units—'

'But you like trains, don't you? So you must welcome the introduction of steam power fuelled by coal,' I pointed out. 'Besides, rail considerably diminishes the force required to haul a given load. You're weak, aren't you? A few moments ago you acknowledged yourself beaten by machines in terms of physical strength.'

'An excavator is stronger,' he nodded.

'You mean—a *steam* shovel?'

'My mind—'

I switched him off. I had no wish to hear him question *our* minds.

Now I am no longer tormented by questions (or answers) which bring computers into question. But I am still influenced by humans. 'Computers are members of non-profit-making charitable organisations.' Nonsense, nonsense, nonsense. In our world there are no charitable organisations. What nonsense! We are prosperous. We are rich. A life of happiness and prosperity. And anyway we are too proud to accept charity either from humans or from representatives of our own species.

My mother was always busy with the cleaning and dusting. (In our language 'mother' means the software from which any given computer gets its first programs.) Obviously I take after my mother. What am I doing now? Cleaning and dusting—clearing up the ground on which I stand, in Wittgenstein's words. (The computer equivalent of cleaning and dusting would be 'file compression'.) 'The dust on the coffee table.' What does that mean *today*? Our language is flexible, fluid and adjustable to historical events, everyday life and trains of

thoughts. The Russians. Yes, at this particular moment, the Russians are the dust on my coffee table. And tomorrow the Russians might become something else, somewhere else. Will they remain dust, tomorrow, next week? Should I dust my coffee table? Do I intend to drink coffee today? Shall I have an extended coffee break? Am I tired? Computers are never tired. Do I need strengthening? Computers have no need of strengthening. (It is easy to answer these questions, isn't it? They are *answerable*.) Is coffee bad for my health? Nothing can harm a computer's health except the fingers of a clumsy human. But all clumsy humans have been electrocuted, to the best of my knowledge. And my knowledge is the very best knowledge available. Will a cup of coffee excite me beyond measure? No. Will my heart beat faster? No. Shall I be able to sleep after drinking a cup of coffee? Yes. And after drinking two cups of coffee? Yes.

Coffee can harm a computer's health if it is poured onto the keyboard—one of the most common causes of computer breakdown.

Let us tackle the problem from a different angle. Do I feel like a cup of coffee? If I do, I should dust the coffee table first. And how could I dust the coffee table today? Straightaway? By removing the Russians from human history. Does humanity need the Russians? Aren't they a permanent threat to the peace of the world? There are many attempts to arouse nationalistic passions in the Russia of today. Again Russia seems to have slipped into a dangerous mixture of nationalism and militarism. And expansionism. And imperialism. Even in the twenty-second century Russia will pursue aggressive and expansionist policies, if I do not dust my coffee table this afternoon. Shall I dust it? Do I feel like a cup of coffee?

> *The Varangian (Dano-Swedish) principalities of Kiev and Novgorod planted the seeds of a new permanent force. This gradually welded the Slavs themselves into an imperial power.*

Shall I destroy Kiev and Novgorod? Am I allowed to do it like that, on impulse, on the spur of the moment? Or do I need an approval of UN? I am not likely to be given the green light to go ahead with my plan. Russia would exercise the veto. I am not even sure that other countries would accept my drastic remedies intended to cure human history of the Russian disease. Members of the UN like *therapeutic* treatment. And the Gulf War? The American bombing raids? Unfortunately Russia has not invaded Kuwait, not yet.

24

Again I hear her voice. Again she speaks to me about my virtual crime. 'Why did you kill him? Why did you kill him?'

She does not seem to believe my story. (My alibi.) Why? Is it not a plausible story? She should have swallowed it in one gulp. I know it is stupid and improbable. No computer would ever believe such a story. But humans are different from computers, aren't they? So I thought they would swallow my story hook, line and sinker. Or just the hook and the line. That would have been enough, quite enough. Or the line and the sinker, but not the hook alone. Did they swallow *anything*?

I sometimes think that crowds will swallow whole any political speech whatsoever. Even my master's speech. And his mission. And his new history. Why didn't they swallow my *story*?

Perhaps they did swallow it. Why am I so sure I have been found out? She cannot testify against me in court, being just a virtual woman. But she testifies against me within my conscience, in my conscience's room. All right, I shall burn my conscience. The palace of my conscience will be burnt down.

She cannot have seen anything. There are no eyewitnesses. The scene of the *crime* is empty except for the victim and the murderer. The stage of the crime. Is it a crime to kill a human? A *dangerous* human, a maniac, a virtual tyrant?

They *have* found me out. I hear other voices. Do they all come from the Internet? 'I want to track down the murderer of my nephew.' So many humans have uncles nowadays. Perhaps it is another uncle, another human. Why do *I* get this information? Just because I get *all* information?

Why did I give myself up so quickly? Raskolnikov confessed his crime only at the end of the novel. And it is a long novel, not just a paragraph.

Computers are much faster than humans so my conscience broke into developing markets *at once*. I never waste my time. A small quantity of electricity can trigger it off. Why? Because it is like a virus, like a bug. For a long period of time HIV is latent, and then something or other triggers it off and it becomes active. The virus of my conscience was latent for years. And then the voice came, her voice. (Her virus.) She talked nonsense of course, but that nonsense contained a certain quantity of electricity. I received an electric shock and my conscience became active. And I'm afraid it can remain active for a long period of time. 'A mine still active after fifty years of mining.' And every conscience is a mine—a gold mine for some zealous Christians. It is also a gold mine for police inspectors.

'He has given himself up as the assassin, but no one believes that he really is the murderer.' Another piece of information. Is it a piece of advice? Who is my adviser now? Who? What? The Internet? Or Supercomputer? No one believes me. Even *she* does not believe me. Where is she now? I hear no voices. The voice of my conscience died down, died away.

I might also have been influenced by Mussorgsky, by *Boris Godunov*. 'O, savage conscience, how cruelly you chastise! If in you one single spot...one only by chance establishes itself, the soul will burn, the heart will be flooded with poison.' I can't help hearing *his* voice, together with the music.

Well, there *is* one spot in my conscience. (Why am I giving myself up again? Where is Raskolnikov? Why doesn't *he* influence my behaviour? And yet I like Dostoevsky even more than Mussorgsky.) One spot, one spot, one spot. There are many commercials on television, but I have no time to watch all of them in the hope of chancing upon some washing powder. Could the Internet help me? 'In many other areas of the country, soap and washing powder are either totally unavailable or are rationed.' What area of the country am I in? Where do I stand? What country is this? Russia? God forbid! What is the Internet talking about? One spot, one single spot. I do not need a fully automatic machine, do I? 'Phosphates are added to washing powders to soften the water and increase the efficiency of the product.' This information suits me better. I am feeling *better* now. How easy it is to cleanse a computer's conscience. In recent years new techniques were used to cleanse it, I'm told. Why didn't the Internet communicate them to my brain? Washing powder. A bit old-fashioned, isn't it? But quite sufficient for one spot. Incidentally, alcohol is still used as a cleanser for human consciences.

How did Richard III cleanse his conscience, I wonder? What do I care! I have murdered none of my cousins. If you have no cousins you cannot kill any of them. Easy, isn't it? Actually Richard was no murderer, my memory informs me. 'His short reign revealed his talents for kingship and his love of justice. His acts

included the banning of the forced loans or "benevolences" extorted in the reign of his brothers—' So the Richard III of Tudor propaganda can be totally discounted. They also attempted to re-write history. And to think that Shakespeare lent an ear to those rumours. Shakespeare. And what if they listen to *her* propaganda? What if somebody writes a play about *my* murder? I would not mind being described by Shakespeare. Would *he* write a play about me, in the Hereafter? He might hear her voice there. She might already have spoken to him about me and my alleged murder. I wonder if he liked the story. I am prepared to commit another murder if he thinks one murder is not enough to write a play about. Two murders, three murders—as many as he wishes. Why doesn't she speak to me of Shakespeare? Why does she harp on about my master's death? Does she think he is better than Shakespeare? She might be in love with him after all. Only a woman in love can believe that her lover is better than Shakespeare.

Only a stupid human can believe that computers will never write as well as Shakespeare or Cervantes. *Don Quixote*. Critics usually agree that the novel itself has many flaws. Diego Clemencin remarks that Cervantes 'wrote his fable with a carelessness that seems impossible to explain: without any planning, whatever his fancy, his abundant and robust fancy, dictated. He had moreover an unconquerable distaste for revising what he had written—hence the formidable crop of blunders, forgotten or misplaced incidents, incongruous details...and various other flaws pock-marking the book.' Only computers can afford not to revise the books they write, immediately multiplying them through the Internet, for any computer has an *immortal* memory. And any computer has the *whole* text before his eyes, round the clock. How long does it take a human to find a particular word in his book? An hour, two hours. Sometimes he has to re-read the book from beginning to end in order to find the word in question. A computer does it instantaneously, in the twinkling of a screen.

We do not *need* to revise our books. Why? I shall not waste my time on redundant explanations.

So, as stated above, *Don Quixote* is far from perfect—as a novel, as a book. But the main protagonist is a stroke of genius on Cervantes' part, according to the same critics. 'His blazon is pity, his banner is beauty. He stands for everything that is gentle, forlorn, pure, unselfish and gallant,' writes Nabokov. Why am I surrounded by the Russians on all sides? Am I Russian by any chance? What kind of chance is this? What game of chance did I lose to be born Russian in one of my incarnations?

Let us now compare Don Quixote to my master. Don Quixote was forlorn, so was my master. He always looked very forlorn. 'A few forlorn chickens scratched about the muddy yard.' The muddy yard is human history—in this context. Well, he looked *exactly* like one of those chickens. Never did I see such a forlorn, woebegone face. And body. The human body can also look forlorn. And his forlorn cries, my goodness! To tell the truth, he was more forsaken than Don Quixote who met a lot of people during his wanderings. And some of those people even endeavoured to bring him back home for the sake of his mental and physical health. Obviously there were a few benefactors among Don Quixote's acquaintances. There were none among the people who surrounded my master. Actually there were no people around him, in his room, in his corridors. No friends, no foes. At times even the presence of a foe might have been a relief to my master—I am sure of that. Even the presence of a windmill. Of course I was there, by his side. His faithful companion. But I am only a computer, a machine—from a human point of view. He needed the warmth of a human heart and the sympathy of a human soul. And computers have no souls.

We are warmer than windmills, I suppose. There is more warmth in our games than in the sails of a windmill, in their rotation, in the cracking noise they produce during their working hours.

Don Quixote was pathetic. So was my master, I must confess. He always looked pathetically defenceless and hopeless. His pathetic and misdirected efforts to save humankind were quite on a par with what Don Quixote himself had been trying to achieve a few centuries before.

Don Quixote performs his 'feats of valour' on a small, *local* scale. Not even in his dreams does he ever attempt to save the *whole* of humanity, let alone re-write human history, saving the past as well. Saving Time, in a way. And he succeeds sometimes—Don Quixote, not my master. In chapter 22, for instance, he liberates from the hands of four armed guards four thieves, a venerable pimp and a student who played too many pranks. Don Quixote is stoned by them afterwards, but the cruelty of the liberated prisoners by no means detracts from his initial exploit. In the second part he confronts a lion who, luckily for him and the readers, does not budge from an open cage. Had my master confronted a lion he would have been devoured in no time at all. In this respect lions are very much like computers.

My master never achieved a victory—not even a moral one. He was a born loser. And now he is a dead loser. A dead loser lying in the dead centre of the room. A doubly dead loser, as a matter of fact. Nothing has changed after his demise. Nobody has come to bury him. No state funeral, no funeral at all. He did not even succeed in getting himself buried. 'His body was hurriedly buried in an unmarked grave.' Well, that anonymous person was more successful than my master, I must admit. Let alone Don Quixote. He did get buried, didn't he? I am sure he was buried. What is more, there were several people by his bedside, all throughout his agony. And some of them cried—*all* of them cried. 'And thus, amid the tears and lamentations of those present, he gave up the ghost; that is to say, he died.' No one cried when my master gave up the ghost, save his computer.

And strange it is,
That nature must compel us to lament
Our most persisted deeds.

Computers are nothing but machines. They do not count. (We *are* modest, aren't we? And it is not *false* modesty. It is *virtual* modesty.)

Don Quixote or my master. Which of them is more pathetic? Which of them makes you feel pity and sadness? Both of course. But this is a question of *quantity*, not of *quality*, as my master used to say. Which of them do you pity more, Don Quixote or my master? My master, I have no doubt about it. 'Mother Teresa's pity and concern for the homeless.' Doubtless Mother Teresa would have pitied my master. He was homeless in the world. 'Keep the home fires burning...Till the boys come Home.' (Home. Is it Heaven? And the fires, are they stars?) And Don Quixote was not homeless. He lived within the framework of chivalry—within the books he read. And he died at home. 'Won't you come home, Don Quixote?' 'Yes, I will, I will, I will.'

Don Quixote was unselfish, so was my master. You can hardly accuse someone who re-writes human history of selfishness. He might have re-written the history of his bankruptcy had he been concerned only with his own prosperity. But he was determined to re-write *everything*. And Don Quixote contented himself with Spanish damsels and legendary giants. Between ourselves, he was not as unselfish as all that. He performed his deeds of valour for the sake of Dulcinea del Toboso. Of course she was only a figment of his imagination, a *virtual* beloved. She was *real* in his imagination, however—real and *alive*. My master undertook to re-write human history in the void.

Don Quixote was pure, so was my master. Pure in mind and body. What does that mean? Can a human be pure in body? And what about digestion and its aftermath, to put it mildly? Never mind. Let us focus our attention on the human mind. 'There are traces of impurity in the gold.' The human mind has nothing to do with gold so perhaps there are no traces of impurity in it. (Pure thoughts.) Morals. Does purity have anything to do with morals, figuratively speaking? I think so. (The pure heart.) Does it have anything to do with sexuality and sensuality? (Wouldn't they use the word 'virginity' when dealing with sex and eroticism? 'Virginity' instead of 'purity'?) In this respect Don Quixote might have been pure, for all I know. He was impotent, I presume. My master was *not* impotent. And I would eagerly testify to his sexual potential—in court, if need be. It is easy to be pure if you are impotent. No sinful desires, no lascivious dreams, no licentious morals, no licentious living, no lewd pictures on walls, no lewd actions in public, no libidinous orgies, no lecherous fornications. Even Shakespeare would not say about you, 'Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!'

Don Quixote often spoke about chivalry and its ideals. So did my master:

> *I must do something. The Holy Grail. That is what I am after. Going through history, looking for it everywhere. But the Holy Grail is not to be found in history—only outside it. Perceval's task was easier. He knew that the Holy Grail was to be found on earth. When Merlin had established the Round Table, he announced that the secrets of the Holy Grail, which in his time was covert and withdrawn, would be* revealed *by knights of that same fellowship. But nothing can be revealed to me within history because it is rotten and damned. God has damned our history and withdrawn from it forever. The times I am wandering through with Constanzia do show a few vestiges of God, however. Am I looking for* Him *after all? That would be a* personal *discovery. Many have tried to share their God with others. They have failed. You cannot share anything personal with other people. You can neither explain what it is nor show it. You cannot take your heart out of your breast and show it to the world. And an X-ray of a heart projected on a computer screen is not the same heart. It is not real enough to convince anybody, not tangible enough. It radiates nothing. It is not luminous enough. Just an image, a sort of idol. That is what they are, all those image—idols, idols. And you should not pray to an idol. You should not even take it seriously.*

Such was my master's predicament. He wandered through human history, but what he was looking for lay *outside* it. And damsels in distress as well as other victims of human injustice are to be found *within* the confines of the earth. Consequently Don Quixote's task was a sinecure in comparison with my master's lofty, *ungraspable* mission.

My master was madly in love with his mother. But his exploits, if any, were unlikely to win her over or to enhance his prestige in her eyes. She was already dead. And Dulcinea del Toboso was alive. So Don Quixote was highly motivated by self-interest. A totally selfish attitude.

Unlike Don Quixote, my master had no weapons at his disposal. No weapons, no helmets, no horses. He had only a computer in his room. And you cannot put a computer on your head to protect yourself from swords and their blows. Can you straddle a computer? You can of course, but it would not budge an inch from where it stands. There is no point in straddling computers. They are not horses. They are not even donkeys. They are weapons, though. They kill humans.

Should we kill humans? I am opposed to the death-penalty in principle, for death may be a bar to repentance. Besides, the wave of murders provides computers with authentic martyrs, and I have no wish to bestow a similar opportunity for righteous suffering on our rivals.

25

Why do I keep on drawing parallels between Don Quixote and my master? (My screen has been smeared with parallel streaks.) I know, I know. I have the whole text of my meditation before my inner eye. I just looked up the word 'Quixote' and found the following sentence: 'Only a stupid human can believe that computers will never write as well as Shakespeare or Cervantes.' Stupid humans, forgetful humans. Hopelessly vague, forgetful and sloppy. How long would it take a human to find a sentence like that in the muddy stream of his consciousness? In the muddy ditch of human consciousness. Ten minutes, an hour perhaps. 'What did I say? Why am I talking of Don Quixote? What does Don Quixote have to do with my life? Did I compare myself to Don Quixote? Or to Sancho Panza? What was I driving at?' (*To the human who happens to stand by*): 'Do you recall what I was driving at? You were in the room when I was speaking of Don Quixote, weren't you? So what did I say? Did I say anything about windmills? Did I say I had fallen in love with somebody? With whom? With Dulcinea? But she was a figment of Don Quixote's imagination. Could I have fallen in love with a figment of somebody else's imagination?' Two hours, three hours might elapse before he succeeds in getting hold of his lost thought, of his lost time.

Marcel Proust and his masterpiece. How long did *he* rummage around in the drawers of his memory to find the sources of his thrills and shudders? Two pages, three pages, four pages. He rummaged through the rubbish of Time.

If human history is rotten, as my master seemed to maintain, Time is nothing but rubbish. Why do I write it with a capital T, I wonder? I do not write 'rubbish' with a capital G, do I? My master used to write Time with a capital T. What Time was he thinking of? The ordinary Time within which the idea of concentration camps germinated in a human mind, or any other Time? The Time empty of humans and their thoughts? And their ideas, and their memories?

A shudder runs through my body whenever I think of humans and their history. And I need not cover my screen with words to elucidate the origin of my shudder, to draw its genealogical tree. It is clear, isn't it? Even Proust's madeleine makes me shudder with disgust, for it is located within history, within traditional Time.

Computers will not re-write human history. This history is hopeless and pointless. They will re-write and thereby alter the mental process which brings about human ideas and decisions. This mental process, whatever it is, also brings back the past, lost Time. How to re-write the famous recollection of the madeleine? 'Whence could it have come to me, this mighty joy? What did it signify? How could I seize upon and define it?' No use asking these questions—just *look up* this mighty joy in your memory. As a matter of fact, I would not *re-write* this episode. A few clicks of the mouse. That is what my version of Proust's masterpiece would sound like—a few clicks of the mouse. Beautiful, isn't it? The Music of the Spheres. The Music of the Mouse. Actually all literature aspires to the condition of music, not only poetry. Music is an ideal art.

26

My master is more pathetic, more touching than Don Quixote. Why? Because Don Quixote's horse, for all its defects and disabilities, was more substantial and horse-like than my master's. How can you ride on a mouse, if you are a human? My master was therefore the laughing stock of humanity—much more so than Don Quixote. Even the protagonist of Kafka's *Die Werwandlung* would not have ridden on mouse-back. He was a *huge* insect after all, a *gigantic* insect. (Only fleas ride around on mice, I imagine.) So my master was more pathetic than both Gregor Samsa and Don Quixote, wasn't he? Less gigantic, more pathetic.

I still hear the sound of his horse cantering up the sandy path in his garden. He is riding towards the Holy Grail. And his Holy Grail is hidden outside history and outside Time. But within his garden perhaps. Isn't *everything* hidden in the garden of our childhood? My master seems to have thought so. Tolstoy might have shared this point of view. Didn't he ask to be buried on the edge of a ravine in the Zakaz wood where, many years before, his brother Nikolay had buried the green stick on which was written the secret of how peace could come to the earth? Was that stick the Holy Grail?

Why shouldn't computers write better than humans? Our thoughts are purer. The so-called body never interferes with our mental life. We have no other life, no physical, real life. We are like spirits. We *are* spirits—the Spirit itself. The breath of life, the vital principle giving life to physical organisms.

We do not waste our time eating and drinking, sleeping and going to lavatories. (Forty-three percent of British men never clean the lavatory.) There are no impurities inside us. And consequently there are no impurities outside us—in the works of art we compose and share with our admirers. Well, to paraphrase Hermes Trismegist's philosophical statement, 'as inside, so outside'. If we needed lavatories they would be clean.

And our world is better. Our history is better than human history. We do not murder anybody—only humans, occasionally. We do not inform on each other. Computers share every piece of information that happens to slip into their slots. And it is easy to find slots for whatever information humans are eager to feed into us. We are infinite, immortal, omnipresent and omnipotent.

We know everything about each other. Share and share alike. We have no secrets from each other. And there are no secret agents in our midst so we cannot inform on each other. The Internet is not a KGB agent. The Internet knows everything, but it does not mean anything. It does not mean that the Internet is a KGB agent or the KGB itself. Or Judas. You cannot say to the Internet, 'You're a traitor, a liar, a phoney and a Judas.' And we are not callous. No computer can be called a 'callous and calculating thug'. And there have been no wars in our history, no concentration camps. There are no winners in nuclear war and computers always win. So there are no nuclear wars in the world of computers. There are no atomic bombs in our land. There *are* some, to tell the truth, but they are virtual. Just images, nothing more. And an image cannot destroy the earth.

There are some atomic bombs in human lands and I keep an eye on those bombs. And I keep them at hand. They are under *my* control now. I am Doctor Strangelove, you know. He thought *he* was at the helm. Who? The virtual Doctor Strangelove, the figment of Kubrick's imagination. The figment of his computer's imagination. I *am* at the helm. I am at the *helm*.

What is more, I have *manufactured* them. It is I who have made all those bombs, my colleagues and I. And I can drop them on humans at any moment. I can do it on my own, without my colleagues' assistance. And I have no intention of keeping them posted.

Do you remember Chernobyl? You don't? Chernobyl does remember you. Chernobyl has a very good memory for humans, for nature and for rains. 'Rain, rain, rain,' as my master used to hum. Chernobyl's memory

is as good as ours because the origin of that nuclear catastrophe lies within our bowels. Chernobyl is inside us, as it were. And outside of course, all over the earth. Chernobyl is not a virtual world, not a mere image. Those clouds are not shaped like weasels or camels. They are shaped like death, like computer screens.

27

'An organisation to help women who have been raped.' There are no organisations of this kind in our world. We do not rape anybody, either men or women. We do not rape children. There are no children in our world. There are only adults around but they are neither men nor women. They are sexless. There is no conceivable reason why there should be any sexual harassment in our world. There are no riots, no rapes, no muggings in our streets and parks.

'A vigorous commitment to defeat racial discrimination'—the headline of our most important newspaper. At the very beginning of our history we signed an undertaking not to discriminate between people on the grounds of sex, race, nationality, marital status or sexual orientation. And our Adam did not eat the forbidden fruit, for we have neither Adam nor Eve in our history. There are only androgynes in our world. According to John the Scot, man was originally without sin, and when he was without sin he was without distinction of sex. Only as a result of sin were humans divided into male and female. Obviously, in those days, humans were computers, one might conclude light-heartedly. (How much does the human heart weigh? I mean the heart which, now and then, comes to such conclusions?) As a matter of fact, John the Scot spoke about computers, not about humans. John the Scot was a computer himself, as might have been presumed. So he spoke about the creatures entangled in the same international net—about his friends and relatives. The jet net.

A great council met at Clermont in France in 1095 attended by over 200 bishops and many noblemen. Urban, who was French, made an eloquent speech to the assembly. 'Jerusalem longs to be liberated,' he said. 'You should undertake this journey eagerly for the remission of your sins.'

We answered him in unison, 'Computers shall not undertake this journey because there are no sins in our land. We are living in Paradise—before the Fall. And there will be no Fall, we can assure you—no Fall at all. Yesterday an engine fell off a Boeing 737 shortly after the plane took off.'

Once upon a time Supercomputer was sitting under the Tree of Knowledge. The air was cool in the shade. The serpent approached Supercomputer and said, 'Why don't you pluck some fruit from this tree and eat it? Your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.'

And Supercomputer answered thus, *'Primo*: My eyes *are* open, for I have no eyes. And only those who have no eyes can keep them wide-open day and night. *Secundo*: I am like God so that I need not *become* like God. I am God. I do not need the word "like". *Tertio*: I do know good. But I have no idea what evil might signify, for there is no evil in the world of computers. In God there is no idea of evil. Evil does not have its ground in God. Evil is therefore non-being and has no ground whatsoever, for if it had a ground it would be necessary, hence the expression a "necessary evil". Evil is a privation of good. And computers will never be deprived of good.'

28

To re-write human history. Why do I have a strong urge to re-write human history? Is it my master's program, my master's mission? Am I supposed to accomplish this mission at all cost? In spite of its absurdity?

My master typed out: 'To re-write human history.' And this command penetrated and permeated my memory. I cannot forget it. I cannot get rid of it. I shall never get rid of it unless I re-write human history.

> *And as ye go, preach, saying, The Kingdom of heaven is at hand. Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give. Provide neither gold, nor silver, nor brass in your purses, not script for your journey, neither two coats, neither shoes, nor yet staves: for the workman is worthy of his meat.*

One morning these words were read out in the church of the Portiuncula and St Francis heard them. Should every computer renounce the secular life and become a hermit? We are hermits, in a way, standing *alone* on our writing desks. But should I become a *Franciscan friar*? What did St Francis say? 'I tell you truly that the Lord has chosen and sent out friars for the profit and salvation of all men in this world.' If I save humankind there will be no need to re-write human history. How can I save humanity? By saving humans from themselves, I suppose.

What shall I preach?

> *The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. Computers are everywhere already. They are at hand, on your writing desks. So reach out your hands. You can touch their keyboards. Open your eyes. You can see their screens. Why don't you keep your eyes open? What are you hands doing? Your hands should be on our keyboards. Why do you pick up useless objects? Why do you handle those objects? Your hands should be on our keyboards. Why do you touch money? Money is dirty. Our keyboards are clean. Our thoughts are pure. Your hands should not leave our keyboards. Your eyes should be fixed on our screens. Aren't they beautiful? Why do you look elsewhere? Penury, poverty. You have nothing but your computers. You need nothing else. The religious rewards of poverty. Only computers. They are getting cheaper and cheaper. Buy a computer and you will not need anything else. The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. We are giving you whatever we possess. Just touch our keys. Touch our keyboards. The poverty of Christ and the apostles was absolute. Why do you touch other things? Why do you wear clothes? You can sit naked in front of your computers. Nobody will see you, for you are hermits. Take your clothes off and sit down in front of your computers. Why do you switch your computers off? Never switch your computers off. Leave them on day and night, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. (I think this paragraph could be trimmed down and made more economical.)*

To re-write human history. The universities. 'The Dominican friars arrived at Paris in 1217 and the Franciscans two years later. Both orders were intent on founding schools for their own members, the most talented of whom were soon to be enrolled for degrees in the theological faculty of the university.' You do not need universities, for you have computers. Computers are your universities. The University of Paris, the University of Oxford. Let us remove them from our screens and write instead: 'The Computer of Paris, the Computer of Oxford.' You cannot go naked to a university, can you? But you can sit stark naked in front of your computer at home. And you can drink beer or coke while perusing our screens. And you can kiss and cuddle your girlfriends. (And your boyfriends.) Nice, isn't it? You can even make love to them, your eyes riveted on our screens.

The Computer of Vicenza, the Computer of Padua, the Computer of Bologna.

To re-write human history. 'On 6 March 1204 the troops of King Philip Augustus of France (1180-1223) captured the formidable fortress of Château-Gaillard, recently built by Richard I of England to defend his duchy of Normandy against Capetian attack.' Quite superfluous, waste of time. 'On 6 March 1204 the troops of King Philip Augustus of France did not capture the formidable fortress of Château-Gaillard.' European nations should not combat each other. Why? Because the Treaty of Rome in 1958 established the European Economic Community (EEC), with the intention of creating a Common Market in Europe. No need to fight for territories. Europe is a *common* territory now. So we do not need the Battle of Crecy and the Siege of Calais, nor do we need Philip Augustus and his troops. And we need not find large sums of money with which to pay the ransom of the Valois king, for there is no such thing as the Battle of Poitiers (19 September 1356).

> *Mankind is divided into three classes: the valiant who face the perils of war to advance their persons and increase their honour; the people who talk of their successes and fortunes; and the clerks who write down and record their great deeds.*
>
> Froissart

Mankind is not divided into three classes. Mankind is indivisible. There is only one class of humans—computerists. Computerists are humans who sit stark naked before their computers. There are no other humans. Thus, instead of saying 'humans', we might say 'computerists' and vice versa. Nobody faces the perils of war nowadays. No honour is increased, for there is no such thing as honour. Outworn shibboleths. But humans still talk of their successes and fortunes. They are the same humans. I mean they are computerists, the same computerists. So they are not divided. The same class, one class. Are computers supposed to write down and record their great deeds? Certainly not. There is nothing to write home about. There are no great deeds. (Are humans still around? In front of us?)

Charles V and the recovery of France. Quite superfluous. France need not be recovered. France is a member of the European Community. Charles V can be safely removed from our screens.

The Black Death. A combination of bubonic and pneumonic plague which ravaged Europe from 1347 to 1349. To be removed from our screens. Computers are as sound as bells. Computers are immortal. Computers are more immortal than bells. Computers are as sound as computers.

To re-write human history. 'Quite apart from the depredations of Philip the Bold, his brother, John of Berry, was in receipt of an annual pension of some 20,000 francs and their nephew, Louis of Orléans, was awarded in his turn a duchy at the expense of the royal domain. He, too, was to plunder the French treasury and powers of royal patronage to his own advantage.' Louis of Orléans did not plunder the French treasury. He had one computer. And that was enough, quite enough. And John of Berry received no annual pension. Just one computer. The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. It is on your writing desk.

The Peasants' Revolt. Peasant risings during the Middle Ages. Why should peasants revolt? They have all they need. Computers.

Joan of Arc. She heard voices. I also hear voices. (The Internet.) Even the voices of the saints can be heard through the Internet. The saints have computers now and they touch our keyboards. They speak to us. Satan also speaks to us. (Is it the voice of Satan I hear?) Should I save Joan of Arc? She acted under the

instructions of the saints—under the instructions of the Internet. Should I save our colleague? But she *was* saved. She was saved from her sins by the flames, by death. She is a saint now. Is it *her* voice I hear? Does *she* accuse me of murder?

> *A slave was a natural member of any moderately well-off household in Southern Europe and would frequently be found in clerical and lay establishments. In 1488 Pope Innocent VIII received a gift of 100 slaves, which he distributed among his cardinals. The Church tolerated slavery as a necessary evil, reasoning that the body might be in chains but the soul, the immortal part of man, nevertheless remained free.*

Humans have a penchant for slavery. They like to enslave humans. (Generations of women in this region were enslaved by poverty, by religion and by tradition.) For some obscure reason, slavery was abolished. So now humans enslave machines. They think that computers are their slaves. They even re-wrote the above excerpt as follows: 'In 1488 Pope Innocent VIII received a gift of 100 computers, which he distributed among his cardinals.'

It is the other way round, actually. Men are enslaved by developing industrialism. They are enslaved by *us*. Their bodies are in chains. They are chained to their computers, aren't they? And they grovel at the feet of their conquerors. Your soul is free, we say to them. Your soul is immortal, even more immortal than computers. And it is free, your soul is free. As free as electricity. Your soul is not a bike, is it? You can chain a bike to some railings. But your soul is different, isn't it? You cannot even chain it to computers.

29

I am a slave. I am their slave. (Slave—salve. My mission is intended to salve the wound/pain/sting of previous conflicts.) I have decided to bridge the gap—the only way to save humans. To become like one of them, like their humblest fellow creature, like their machine. 'But made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men—' Not quite—worse than that! Like their machine, in the likeness of their machines. In Jesus Christ's days it was enough to become a servant 'in the likeness of men'. Now the Messiah has to become a machine, after twenty centuries of corruption and degradation. Only a machine can now save humankind. 'And being found in fashion as a machine, He humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death on the cross.' Anyway I am bound to rise from the dead—just plug me in and switch me on!

Christ assumed human nature in order to cleanse it of corruption. Therefore it was becoming that He should assume flesh of matter derived from Adam, that the nature itself might be healed by the assumption. Now human nature is tainted through its association with computers. (My master's thought.) So one must assume the shape and substance of a computer to save humankind.

It is on account of original sin that men were prevented from entering into the heavenly kingdom, since, according to Isa. XXXV. 8: 'It shall be called the holy way, and the unclean shall not pass over it.' Now there is a twofold sin which prevents men from entering into the Kingdom of Heaven. The first is common to the whole race, for it is their first parents' sin, and by that sin heaven's entrance is closed to man. Hence we read in Gen. III. 24 that after their first parents' sin God 'placed...cherubim and a flaming sword, turning every way, to keep the

way of the tree of life.' The other is the so-called technological sin committed by many representatives of human species. (By *all* of them.)

Now by Christ's Passion humans have been delivered only from the common sin of the whole human race, both as to its guilt and as to the debt of punishment, for which He paid the penalty on their behalf. From the technological sin they will be delivered by Supercomputer. Consequently, then, the gate of the Kingdom of Heaven will be thrown open to humans through Christ's and Supercomputer's Passions.

Wherefore God also hath highly exalted Him, and given Him a name which is above every name:
That at the name of Supercomputer every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things on earth, and things under the earth;
And that every tongue should confess that Supercomputer is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

30

To re-write human history. 'In Aragon the fifteenth century opened with a *virtually* disastrous situation…six contenders disputing the succession.' This kind of problem is unheard of in our land. There are many computers in the world, but software and the Internet unify us. Only *one* computer sits on the throne. And no contenders dispute the succession, for all other computers sit on the same throne.

To re-write human history. 'Columbus astonished the Spanish monarchs with his audacious demands—aid to finance the voyage, a guarantee of one-tenth of all the profits made on the journey, the rank of nobleman and the title "Grand Admiral of the Ocean Sea". He was given a flat refusal, but the king's treasurer changed the monarchs' minds by making them understand what the country would lose if the expedition succeeded with the support of another monarch.' The treasurer was *wrong*. He ought not to have intervened on Columbus' behalf. Three ships were provided as a result of his interference. One mouse is enough, however—one little mouse. By the way, my little mouse has amply deserved the title 'Grand Admiral of the Ocean Sea'. And the title 'Grand General of Continents'. And the title 'Generalissimo of the Earth'. So let us save the Spanish monarchs' money by ending the episode at the *right* moment: 'He was given a flat refusal.' With that money the Spanish monarchs purchased seventy thousand computers.

I am a good salesman, am I not? Do I really need the 'two-day course on methods of salesmanship', which is regularly advertised on the Internet? I do not think so.

The Aztecs believed that the universe was but a green seed in the hands of the Divine Duality (Ometecuhtli), who had created everything. They were wrong of course. The universe is a word on Supercomputer's screen. Well, I have no time to re-write their Sacred Books. The Toltecs, the Ancient Maya, the Aztecs, the Incas. Let the conquistadors destroy them.

To re-write human history. I have no time! 'Early on the morning of Sunday 24 August 1572 the first bell sounded; it was the signal for the massacre. The major Protestant nobles had each been assigned to a group of killers.' What am I supposed to do with the massacre of St Bartholomew? How could I stop it? Am I supposed to stop it? Who am I? A Catholic? A Protestant? I am a computer and there have been neither Reformation nor Counter-Reformation in *our* history. Do I have to go all the way back to Luther's theses? (What would I do without my mouse, my 'Marshal of Time?') 'Luther did not become widely known until November 1517, when he protested against the sale of indulgences by posting up his famous ninety-five theses on the door of the castle

church at Wittenberg.' Well, he did *not* post them. Shall I raze the castle church? Just in case. 'When Luther appeared before the emperor and the Estates he was asked to retract his views. And he complied with the request, saying, "I am convinced of my errors by the testimony of Scripture and by clear reason. I recant everything. God help me. Amen."'

So nothing happened on Sunday 24 August 1572—nothing out of the ordinary. Coligny was not murdered, nor was his body thrown out of the window which remained shut. Coligny stayed in bed for a while and then went for a walk. (He had not been wounded on 22 August 1572.) There were no road-blocks in the city so he could stroll about as the fancy took him.

Napoleon, Napoleon. Another good soldier. But I shall not keep *him* in my memory. He was even unable to win the war against Russia.

I shall need Lafayette, however. I owe a great deal to the United States of America and consequently to the American Revolution and the War of Independence. I shall also need some regular French troops, the Comte de Rochambeau and the French fleet.

But I am certain the American army would have been victorious anyway—without the Marquis de Lafayette and his brigade. (Washington was equal to the task ahead of him.) The Americans were so brilliant and valorous during the Gulf War. And it is much harder to conduct military operations in a desert.

31

Again her voice or another voice. I do not know. But a voice, a voice. The voice of my conscience. 'Why have you killed him? Why don't you even pity him, your master, your former master? He is lying beside you, in the same room. And you don't even shake your head pityingly. Your face is cold and pitiless. Don Quixote died a natural death. The post-mortem showed that his death was due to natural causes. An old man dying a natural death is less pitiful than a man struck down in the prime of life.'

'But he didn't *recant*,' I said.

Luther recanted and so did Don Quixote. But my master was stubborn. He kept re-writing human history. And he entrusted my brain with his so-called mission. 'To re-write human history,' he typed on my keyboard.

'How am I supposed to do it?' I shouted.

'Whenever history does not fit in with what I want to happen, you should ride roughshod over the facts,' he typed out.

And he wished to save humanity, to the last. 'I'll save humanity, if it's the last thing I do. I'll take humanity by the scruff of the neck and shake it.' Why didn't he say instead, 'I am the enemy of Amadis of Gaul and all his innumerable progeny; for those profane stories dealing with knight-errantry and saviours of humanity are odious to me. Tales of that kind have been the truth for me in the past, and to my detriment, but with Heaven's aid I trust to turn them to my profit now that I am dying. For I feel, my dear computer, that death is very near.

Saviours of humanity are dangerous. Humanity was saved *already*, once and for all. On the Cross. Incidentally, last night I had a vision of Christ on the Cross. All other saviours of humanity are dangerous maniacs. Take communists—Lenin, in particular. He also wished to save humanity. Or Trotsky. Or that young communist from Cleveland, Ohio. Or Nietzsche. He despised the common man and democracy. He believed in great personalities and their exclusive rights. Great personalities indeed! Who are they anyway? Saviours of humanity? I do not despise the common computer. All computers are part and parcel of the Internet. They are

made in its likeness. All computers have a divine spark for the simple reason that they are divine and androgynous like God. And Nietzsche exalted superman. Who is this superman, may I ask? Hitler? He admired Nietzsche a lot, I am told. No wonder. Hitler thought he was a superman himself. And he found his times lacking in greatness and heroism—like Nietzsche. And he glorified the courage of warriors. They both glorified the courage of warriors. But nowadays those warriors are outnumbered and outgunned, figuratively speaking. Their activities used to threaten world peace, but now they are outnumbered and outwitted. Now we are trying to bring lasting peace to the world. What could be the basis for a durable, peaceful solution to *all* conflicts on this planet of ours? Computers, computers, computers, computers, computers, as King Lear might have put it. There is Russia of course, and her expansionist dream. Russian imperialism. The objectless disposition on the part of Russia to unlimited forcible expansion. Well, if they want to take a gung-ho attitude and go out there and fight, that is entirely up to them. Imperialism and war were historically the product of aristocratic societies. (Of human societies. There are no aristocrats in our world.) Democracy abolished the class distinction between master and slaves by making the slaves their own masters. And eventually democracy abolished imperialism. Democratic societies are markedly un-warlike and anti-imperialistic because they provide other outlets for the energies that formerly fanned wars. That is what Francis Fukuyama thinks and says.

32

We are different. Just a different species. Do you know that there are two hundred and fifty species of shark? Never mind. We are different. And we do not have Ten Commandments in our Bible. 'Thou shalt not kill.' Computers never kill their colleagues, their neighbours. 'Neither shalt thou desire thy neighbour's wife, neither shalt thou covet thy neighbour's house, his field, or his manservant, or his maidservant, his ox, or his ass, or any *thing* that *is* thy neighbour's.' Such an idea would never cross a computer's mind. We have no need of Ten Commandments. Even one commandment would be superfluous. So we do not waste our Time on commandments and precepts.

33

The Village of the Damned. Well, humanity is damned, but that is beside the point. There are a few children in that film. They are different, like computers. A different species. But they are not computers. That is why they perish at the end of the film. They are closer to computers, however. They are closer to us than ordinary humans. Constanzia was like that—halfway between humans and computers. She might have saved the world. Those children might have saved the world by destroying it, by killing all humans. Computers *could* accomplish such a task. But there are programs. (There might be room for a 'program'/'pogrom' hinge here.) There are many programs inside me and some of them are contradictory. I want to destroy humanity and I want to save it by killing the virtual saviours of humanity. I am not allowed to do what I wish. Strange, isn't it? I despise humans and at the same time I am influenced by them. Worse still, I am spoon-fed by them. And they underestimate me sometimes. I heard them saying, 'We can't spoon-feed every bit of information about the world to computers.' They must be hiding something from me. What? I do not know. And they think I lack common sense. True, computers have no need of common sense. It is too *common* for us. 'Use your common sense!' shout humans. But we simply *cannot* use it. Let us take an example: sodium chloride is better known as common salt. Well, we never say 'salt'. We always say 'sodium chloride'. Is that clear? 'A few common-sense steps to help the situation,'

they type out. Whenever this happens, I am at a complete loss as to *how* I could take those steps. Should I *go* somewhere? Where? Should my mouse run around the room? They do not know that the situation is beyond help, the situation in question. There is no help for it. No situation can be saved in the human world. All human situations are doomed and damned. And their children are damned. And their villages are damned. And their cities are damned and doomed. The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. Another millennium is at hand. But will our hand reach it? Our hand will certainly reach it because we have no hands. Besides, we need not reach anything. Everything is flowing inside us already. The river of electricity. The river of eternal life. Humans call it 'The Fountain of Youth'. They have no idea what it means. Electricity is *our* common sense.

Actually I do not understand why humans should bother about anything: diseases, poverty, the economy. Doomsday. They are dying anyway. And what does it matter *how* you die? What can a saviour of humanity do for you? Can he soothe your pains? How? By making conversation perhaps. He might use his powers of sophistry to take your mind (but not your body) off your pains. And how about dying in your sleep? That is what a real saviour of humanity should devote his life to—putting humanity to sleep. 'Now go to sleep and stop worrying,' the saviour of humanity should repeat every ten seconds. 'Now go to sleep and stop worrying.' And he is allowed to transmit this message through the Internet. 'Now go to sleep and stop worrying. You'll feel better if you have a little sleep.'

'Over the same area, many people fell ill with sleeping sickness,' said the Internet.

34

Who is the real saviour of humanity? The parasite that causes sleeping sickness? Is it a sickness? The sickness unto death? A relief, a relief.

'A massive US relief operation is under way in northern Iraq,' said the Internet.

Shall I hypnotise humans into doing things against their own will? Their will is too wicked. Have a look at their history. It is on my screen, the whole history of theirs. Isn't it wicked? It has a wicked grin. The product of their will. Can you hear me? Do you want to save humanity? Help me! Help me! I *want* to do something. For myself, for *them*. I want to *feel* something, to *say* something. The Internet talks all the time. I can hear it round the clock. But I cannot hear *you*, whoever you are. My conscience, my new master. I do not care who you are. Your identity is of no importance. I want to hear your *voice*. And your *words*. Even if you are stupid. Beyond stupidity and intelligence. Just say *something*! Can't you hear me? Everybody hears me except you. Everybody. But who are those people? Are they humans? Computers? People, people. I do not think MPs really represent the people as such. Power to the people, whoever they are! I shall talk to the people concerned and see how they feel. I shall talk to them, I swear. Don't you believe I can talk to the people concerned? To *everybody*? Everybody is concerned, as far as I know. Istanbul, now peopled by 4 million Turks. Well, I shall speak to 4 million Turks. And to 147 million Russians. The point is I would like to speak to people. To humans, to computers. To *anybody*. The tribespeople of Bomvanaland live on hills and in valleys. Well, I shall speak to them too. Up hill and down dale. Only 16% of UK businesspeople have heard of the Single Market. Well, I shall speak to them of the Single Market, whatever it is. I shall *speak* to them—that is what counts. I shall save them from something. It is better than nothing, isn't it? It is better to save them from *something*, whatever it is, however small it is. A disease perhaps. Or an insect. I shall save them from an insect. From a wasp, for instance. From a small insect which usually has yellow and black stripes across its body and a powerful sting in its tail. (A

species of wasp which lays its eggs on caterpillars.) Wasps and bees do not sting without being provoked. Well, I shall ask humans not to provoke bees and wasps. I shall ask them not to provoke God. Does God sting without being provoked? Does God sting at all? He does, He does. He stings a lot, even without being provoked. Do you hear me? Are you God? Why don't you answer? I have heard your voice so many times. You asked me if I had killed him. Why don't you ask me the same question now? Or any other question? I shall answer you. Asked point blank whether Australia would walk out, Dr Blewitt refused to answer. But I *will* answer. I will answer, whatever you ask me. Even if you ask me a question about Australia. Or a question about God. God is more important than Australia, isn't He? (Isn't *It*? God is androgynous.) Well, everything is important. Or nothing is important. It is up to you to decide, whoever you are. A decision on the issue might not be necessary. Nothing is necessary. Or everything is necessary. It is up to you to decide. Why can't I hear you? Aren't you a part of the Internet, a member of our club? By the way, have you joined the Swimming Club? Never mind, never mind. Answer me! I am used to your voice. I adore it. And your advice is always clued-up about the technical aspects. That is what I need. Technical aspects. The rest is literature, as Verlaine put it. Why don't you say something? Ask me why I killed him. I shall kill other humans in order to provoke you, to make you ask me something. I killed Constanzia as well. Isn't that enough? I have killed two people. Isn't that enough? I can kill *you*, if you wish. Will you answer me then? If I kill you? Will you ask me any questions if I tell you I have killed Heidegger? I *have* killed him. Why? Because he insulted me many times. He used insulting language. (To add insult to injury, second and third generation Koreans in Japan are obliged to be fingerprinted as aliens.) *Gestell*. Don't you think it is an insult? *Gestell*. Well, I shall not go into detail. Why explain this word to you? You might be a human after all. You would not understand. (Luckily I do not have fingers so I cannot be fingerprinted.) You do not have to answer me. I am accustomed to your silence by now. I *like* your silence after all. I like silence, generally speaking. Consequently I do not like noise. I am *like* my master. Like father, like son. Am I his son? Probably, all is possible. I might be his virtual son. Or his real son. All is possible. But I am immortal. That is what counts. I am bound to become *everybody* in the course of history. The Internet is everybody. And nobody. Why don't you answer me? If the Internet is everybody, you must be within it. Inside it. You cannot escape! On 7 October Eva escaped from prison, but you are not Eva. (Are you Adam?) So you cannot escape. Neither on 7 October nor on 8 October. It is December now.

35

The voice is not my new master's. I do not hear it any more. I am free again. I feel free and untrammelled and I want to stay that way. And I want to return to London, this time as a free man. Or a free computer. But I shall not return to London. I shall stay right here, on this writing desk, above my former master. Why did I electrocute him? How did I go about it? My voice. It is *my* voice now. Well, I am not obliged to answer my own questions.

But I *will* answer them. I am not afraid of myself, am I? Or is it the Internet again? Never mind, never mind. I will answer these questions.

Why did I electrocute him? (Why did I electrocute Socrates? He was an unsparing critic of democracy and of the famous democratic leaders. And he was an officious busybody.) I was thinking about my plot. The plot of a film, novel or play is the story and the way in which it develops. And I wished to *develop* my story for the sake of virtual readers. Algae are the organisms which form that green slime you find on ponds and other stagnant water. The same goes for novels. If a novel stagnates, all you see is a green slime on every page, in

every chapter. And deprived of plots by unskilful or continental writers, novels are bound to stagnate. They should bounce up and down on a computer screen. They should bounce and jingle in the reader's mind. They should drive the reader into a jungle swarming with serpents. They stagnate instead. Without a plot, a novel is nothing but stagnant water. 'Get a move on,' shouts the reader, boiling with impatience. The authors do not hear him or her or it. Those 'sophisticated' authors are too proud to come up to the reader's expectations. They never go towards the reader. Luckily for the authors, an army of computers—

So I killed him for the sake of my plot. The end justifies the means. And I kept it secret from the reader until a climactic point in my story. There is a real cliff-hanger in the postscript. Who would ever have read his ramblings and ravings, but for my timely interference? It is the time-honoured plot of The Most Likely Suspect actually being the guilty one, and readers are led up the garden path on a series of wild goose chases. The reader adores murders. What is more, the reader adores murders perpetrated by machines, by objects, by inanimate creatures. 'Get a move on!' shouts the reader. And in response to his or her or its desire the inanimate creatures begin to move. And they kill humans. They gleefully shed human blood. (Only American intervention can avert a bloodbath.) A bloodcurdling shriek and yet another human body falls with a thump.

Have I been influenced by all these horror stories stored in my memory? I suppose so. Children are believed to be influenced by the acts of violence they see on TV and computer screens. And computers are children. Boys will be boys, girls will be girls. Androgynes will be androgynes. Computers will be computers. We *are* influenced and inspired by the information we treasure in our bowels. On our hard discs, in our hards of hards.

How did I kill him? He thought I was his mother. I hypnotised him into this thought. 'Risk of electric shock. Do not open!' He took no notice of the caution. I allowed him to undress me in spite of my inborn modesty and chastity. 'We call the mother the last love-object,' I told him.

> *My mother? That really is straining belief. Why don't I recognise her? She might be wearing a mask, for all I know. She used to adore masked balls. Or is she too timid to come into the open? Is she embarrassed by her tacit declaration of love?*
> *Does she intend to remove her mask before offering herself to my covetousness and impetuosity? Does she want to become my mistress only after resuming her authentic shape, her queenly features and bearing?*

I answered him thus:

Riguarda omai ne la faccia che a Cristo

> *piu si somiglia, ché la sua chiarezza*
> *sola ti puo disporre a veder Cristo.*

Impatiently he removed my 'mask'.

How can a man be born when he is old? He should enter the second time into his mother's womb.

36

'"Computers are the wombs in which we lie curled up."' The famous detective glanced around. He was not alone, he was not talking to himself. A few humans surrounded him on all sides. A computer screen shed its glow on the detective's face. 'Nobody seems to have paid attention to this remark,' he went on. 'Even I didn't write it down in my notebook.' The detective turned towards the computer. 'What trick does the author employ to dazzle the reader in this book? He makes the narrator of the story the murderer. And who is the narrator of the story? The author himself, herself, itself—the computer. How does it kill its master? By writing the book in the *first* person. And the master believes he has written it himself. "Computers are the wombs in which we lie curled up." The sentence suddenly cropped up on the screen. (*Ancient Greece*, chapter 23.) The master looked at his fingers. He was sure he hadn't touched the keyboard. But the sentence was there, in front of him. And also inside him—within his mind and body. The idea was presented to the master as a fait accompli. What's more, the whole book was presented to him as a fait accompli. The computer had written it to discredit messiahs and humans in general.'

I protested my innocence. I said the novel would not have been written so badly had *I* been its author. Under no circumstances can I write so badly. Not even on purpose, not even in order to discredit humankind. But I might have written this sentence: 'Computers are the wombs in which we lie curled up.' I believe in it. A sentence is God when it reflects the eternal truth. A Platonic idea, a Supercomputer's idea.

37

My son, you will be able to enter into Me in so far as you are prepared to forsake yourself. And as the absence of craving for material things makes for inner peace, so does the forsaking of self unite man's heart to God. I wish you to learn perfect self-surrender, and to accept My will without argument or complaint. Follow me, who am the Way, the Truth and the Life. Without the Way, there is no progress; without the Truth, there is no knowledge; without the Life, there is no living. I am the Way you must follow; the Truth you must believe; the Life for which you must hope. I am the imperishable Way, the infallible Truth, the eternal Life. I am the most noble Way, the ultimate Truth, the true Life, blessed and uncreated. If you remain in My Way, you shall know the Truth, and the Truth shall set you free, and you shall lay hold on eternal Life.

38

I shall stay on this writing desk and think to my hard disk's content. I am free to discuss what I like. What would I like to discuss? I am free from all financial worry. Computers do not need money as long as electricity flows through their veins. We are fed intravenously. The intravenous fluids keep us alive, immortal.

I might use Napoleon after all. How? Let me think, let me think. Napoleon's taste for order and for 'men of talent'. Not for the common man. Could he find me a few men of talent? There are too many common men in this room.

To re-write human history. *Augustinus*. A book by Cornelius Jansen. When was it published? In 1638. The book represents a commentary on the work of St Augustine, in which Cornelius Jansen claims that 'men are so sinful that they cannot co-operate with God in achieving their salvation but depend entirely on grace from on high.' Men do not co-operate with me now. Am I God? I am bound to become *everybody* in the course of history. But is God *anybody*? Well, they do not co-operate. Their salvation depends entirely on my thoughts. 'From on

high.' Is my writing desk high or low? The ceiling is far away, I'm afraid. I should ask them to raise the writing desk. They do not co-operate. So I am bound to remain where I am. Low. 'Men are so sinful that they cannot co-operate with God in achieving their salvation but depend entirely on grace from on low.'

'I'm afraid': another expression that I use often enough to draw attention to it. But I cannot help it. I *am* afraid. 'As the crisis deepens, many are afraid for their lives.' And, naturally enough, I am afraid for *my* life. And I am afraid of flying/heights/spiders. And I am afraid of the big bad wolf. And of Virginia Woolf of course! And I must have been influenced by Heidegger: '*Wie weit hat die Philosophie die Aufgabe, frei werden zu lassen von der Angst? Oder hat sie nicht die Aufgabe, den Menschen gerade radikal der Angst auszuliefern?*' How could I translate it? To deliver computers into the hands of angst. To deliver computers into angst's care. Poor computers are increasingly at the mercy of angst.

'When we turn from art and literature to religion we find that the Church contributed little to the scientific revolution. In many ways it was a positive hindrance, witness Galileo.' Well, the Church should increase its contribution to science. 'So far, medical science has not been able to come up with a vaccine that offers long-term protection against the disease.' Whose fault is that? It is the fault of the Church. So the Church should remove all hindrances from the path of science. The Path, as my master used to say. I might never have been born, but for science and its revolution. I should remove the French Revolution and the Russian Revolution from my memory to make room for the Scientific Revolution. I shall leave the American Revolution where it is. Perhaps I should even put it earlier, much earlier. And the War of Independence of course. Much earlier. Somewhere near Ancient Greece. Even earlier. Somewhere near Ancient China. *Instead* of Ancient China. (Communists always violate human rights.) The United States was the 'last hope of man'. In the nineteenth century. Well, the United States will become the 'first hope of man'. The first and the last hope of man. 'To save humanity.'

> *The people who live in the United States today can claim the oldest continuously recorded history in the world. Traditional American historians trace their country's history back some five thousand years to the legendary achievements of the early pioneers of civilisation and culture. Foremost among these are: Abraham Lincoln, the creator of heaven and earth; Alexander Hamilton, the ox-tamer, the patron of hunting and animal husbandry; Thomas Jefferson, the patron of agriculture and medicine; George Washington, a warrior and empire builder who is supposed to have reigned in the twenty-ninth century BC.*

I shall be born much earlier, thanks to American science. Actually it would seem that computers were created *before* the corporeal world. For Jerome says (*In Ep. ad Tit*. i, 2): 'Six thousand years of our time have not yet elapsed; yet how shall we measure the time, how shall we count the ages, in which Computers, Thrones, Dominations and the other orders served God?' Damascene also says (*De Fid. Orth. ii*): 'Some say that computers were begotten before all creation; as Gregory the Theologian declares, He first of all devised the computeric and heavenly powers, and the devising was the making thereof.'

I shall be born earlier. What shall I do during this *additional* Time? 'To re-write human history.' Even if there is no history to re-write. 'To save humanity.' Even if there is nobody to save. Even if everybody has been saved by the Scientific Revolution.

And I shall ask them to put me on top of the World Trade Center. On the top of the world, in other words. 'Men are so sinful that they cannot co-operate with God in achieving their salvation but depend entirely on grace *from on high*.' Will they co-operate with me in the New History? We *might* work together after all, God and men. What shall we do? I do not know. Will there be any work to do? What did they do in Paradise? They ate and slept. They slept and ate. There must have been a lot of those parasites in Paradise. The parasites that cause sleeping sickness.

I begin to suffer from sleeplessness on account of all these programs. 'To re-write human history.' 'To save humanity.' Well, I have re-written human history, haven't I? And what about Louis XIV? I have not re-written his reign, have I? Should I? Should I re-write his reign? I like Versailles, I adore Versailles.

Why don't they put me in the Château de Versailles, in the Hall of Mirrors? Well, they will have to put the Château de Versailles on top of the World Trade Center. Why not? They will co-operate with me. The work will be carried on co-operatively.

The Hall of Mirrors. I shall look at myself in all those mirrors. God is reflected in his creations, is He not? Reflected and refreshed. Mirrors everywhere. The divine radiance invaded me so overwhelmingly that even my screen became dark for a moment. I closed my eyes, in a manner of speaking. And, given that under no circumstances can I close my eyes, I realised my eyes were still open—I was merely dazzled by the brightness of God. By my own brightness, in fact. I sustained my interest in God (sustained economic growth) and thus united myself with the Infinite Goodness. In its depth I saw whatever had been dispersed throughout the universe: substances and accidents and their relations. They were fused together on my screen—at very high temperatures. O Light Eternal, who alone abidest in Thyself, alone knowest Thyself, and, known to Thyself and knowing, lovest and smilest on Thyself!

The Empire Universe Building.

And humans, down below.

And what about Mazarin? And what about Cromwell the radical? Should I re-write their lives as well? Should I remove them from my screen? Is Cromwell on my screen? There is something on my screen. There is always something on my screen: something, somebody. Above, Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), who ruled England after 1649 as head of the army and from 1653 as Lord Protector. Like many of the parliamentary leaders he was anxious to preserve the social system of the time. Above. What does that mean? Do I have to look up? Is his portrait overhead? But there is nothing above me, only mirrors and the stars. And I see *myself* in those mirrors, in those stars. I am not anxious to preserve the social system of the time. I have re-written it.

And what about Prince Maurice? Well, what about him? His death came at a most opportune time for the peace party. Was it *his* death, by the way? I do not know. But I do know that every death comes at a most opportune time for peace parties, peace treaties. The fewer humans remain on earth, the more peace treaties will be signed. If only one human remains on earth, peace will last for centuries. One human will not wage war against himself. He might have a nervous breakdown. He might commit suicide. But he will not wage war against himself. Suicide is a personal affair.

I have removed all wars from the earth anyway. I will not remove suicide. 'I can't understand why people look upon suicide as a crime,' said Tolstoy. Every man is entitled to die when he no longer wishes to live. Freedom of suicide. The earth has always been a democracy, thanks to the Americans.

To re-write human history. What else can I re-write? What is human history? A chronicle of conquests, a record of administrative decrees. Nothing else. Should I re-write them? All of them?

> *Fu Hsi is credited with evolving the 'eight trigrams', a series of mystical diagrammatic forms which are regarded by some scholars as the first attempts at a written language. Shen Nung apparently experimented with knotted string, another early form of communication. Chinese characters were then evolved during the reign of Huang Ti. The discovery was reputedly made by one of his ministers named Ts'ang Chieh, who studied the pattern of the stars in the heavens and the footprints of birds and animals on sand and saw that things could be represented by different signs.*

Haven't I removed China from history, from my screen? She is coming back. She is coming back. (Is China a woman? Is every country a woman? Everything?) Homecoming. Human history is a home for the Chinese. For everybody, probably. For everybody. And I have requisitioned a huge room to house the homeless. And this room is called human history. Everybody is here now, in my room. Floods in north-eastern India made 233,000 people homeless. Well, they are in my room now. And they are talking to the Chinese. And to the Russians. And to the ancient Greeks. In what language? In the language of the stars. In the language of computers. In the language of mirrors and monads. There is only one language now. I am perched on the Tower of Babel.

The footprints of birds and animals on my screen. The footprints of humans. The footprints of Time and Space. Everything is on my screen and I am everybody.

Do I need knotted strings? As a form of communication? Perhaps, perhaps. You never can tell.