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CIRCLES

THE INITIAL CIRCLE

At the beginning there was the circle. And apparently this circle contained everything, not only itself and the letters we use to say ‘the circle’. This circle, the last circle mentioned in this text, is made up of what we come across in our daily life. For instance, we stumble upon the day during which we suffer without complaining about our suffering to all and sundry – every blessed moment. Why? Because we are highly, exceptionally polite and our politeness, either inborn or acquired in the course of our existence, forbids us to get on other people’s nerves, if it is not absolutely necessary. Suppose you are subjected to unbearable pain, and you complain about it to all and also to sundry, ‘My pain is unbearable to the point where I can’t bear it on my own. May I ask you to bear at least one third of my pain?’ Of course a multitude of people, of human beings, refuse to comply with your wish which may become your last wish; your last cigarette, if they do not comply with it, for all your supplications and the almost visible torture you endure. This torture finds its expression on your face where your teeth continue to bite your lips which suffer as well, imitating some unknown part of your constitution. Suffering for nothing, as they call it. And what about you? What do *you* suffer for? ‘For everything,’ as you usually answer, in accordance with your custom of which you cannot get rid. And yet you have everything in your power. Well, whatever you have in your power is directed towards your lips and tongue; and you must recognise that this power you are talking about is not sufficient to overcome, to vanquish, your bad habits, one of which makes you bite your lips – by means of your teeth – whenever you feel like it.

You do whatever you can do, as I put it earlier. You go so far as putting some objects in the space where your teeth disport themselves whenever you are nervous and, generally speaking, under pressure. Where does this pressure come from, may I (or someone else) ask? Suppose you look at a wall, at an innocent-looking wall, and ask yourself if this wall tends to oppress you. ‘Yes, this wall does oppress me because it can’t do otherwise.’ Why? Because walls – not only the Great Wall of China, mind you – are built for oppression or segregation. Of course, whenever any wall is touched upon – and that can happen during a casual, run-of-the-mill conversation – its oppression gets under way. It happens during this conversation, and you begin to bite your upper or nether lip; or both, come to think of it. (How come you came to think of it? Doesn’t matter, doesn’t matter. Not everything matters in this world of ours.) What happened in the course of this legendary conversation? You bite your lips – that is what usually happens, whenever you meet another human being. You meet this being and you say to yourself, sometimes without uttering any word, either inwardly or outwards (*a lied ohne worte*): ‘I wish this being were a non-being.’ And then you bite one of your lips. You wait for a while – for the sake of decency, one might conjecture – and you bite the other lip, after this pause. And then you realise you are unlikely to keep the word you gave to yourself some time ago. The word, to tell the truth, concerned this bad habit of yours: ‘Biting my lips.’ Well, you cannot bite anyone else’s lips: this would be quite indecorous. And whatever your feelings, the ones you experience in someone’s company, you forbid yourself to go too far. You just go: no one can deny this fact. You go, wobble, stumble, fall down, collapse, suffer from concussion, but you do go; no matter where, in what direction.

According to your *poor* judgement – *en passant*, you admire your inborn modesty – you never go too far because you never cross any lines; not even violet or navy-blue ones. You say to yourself, ‘If, in the course of my life, I were in the habit of going far, too far, as my fellow-citizens might occasionally say, I would be happy, living in the midst of angels and archangels. Alas, I look around and see only human beings, who are far from

being angels, let alone archangels.’ In desperation you draw a line on the ground, not far from your feet, and cross it – just for the heck of it. (Where is this heck, I wonder? At least, I might have this heck. A consolation prize.) How do you know you are too far? You see a row of buildings which do not appeal to your sense of beauty. And you say to yourself, ‘No, I haven’t gone too far, otherwise I would see celestial beauty.’ So you decide to go to heaven, but at the last moment – your decision-making lasts for two minutes at least – you realise that this action might be dangerous: you wish to go to Paradise, but not at once, not today. I have something to do on this Earth of mine – that is how you express your feelings through words, through their medium, with their blessing.

There are people – I am not of their number, far from it – who prefer the face value of this expression; going too far, I mean. At first they look at their face and say to someone, ‘If I go too far, when exploring my face, I’ll just fall into nothingness which is not far from death, I presume.’ Let us leave Heidegger and others far from this problem we are facing right now; for no reason at all. Where is this reason, in question? Survival – this is the only reason to which we can trust our life and its ramifications. All right, our life can survive on its own without any participation on our part. (Pills, doctors, clinics, resorts, skies, gymnastics, diets and so on.) But what about ramifications? (That is what our life consists of, to tell the truth: ramifications, ramifications, ramifications. The rest is silence.) All right: we disdain all these ramifications and clutch the trunk. What kind of trunk are we clutching? The trunk of life, as we immediately answer, being involved in the stream of life, of its inexorable movement; disregarding the inevitable collapse. All right: we do not disregard the collapse: we *regard* it. And where is the ‘dis’ that we discarded so nonchalantly? We start playing with it; or trifling with it, if you prefer. What *do* you prefer? You cannot prefer dis, can you? Whenever you pronounce this word or syllable – consciously, if you please – you realise to what extent it is close to what you find in most of the requiems performed all over the world, even today. Dies ira, dies illa. Your wrath or whatever. Or Thy wrath, which is even more frightening, horrible and inevitable. So we choose not to speak about dis; we do not even mention it as if someone was saying non stop, ‘Don’t mention it, don’t mention it.’ Don’t mention what? Life, death, coffins, cemeteries, crematoriums? What else? Digging, putting, throwing a few morsels of our Earth on coffins and our deceased, our friends, sisters and so on?

Throw a clod of your soil in the direction of a human being and you will hear these words, ‘Are you taking me for a corpse?’

‘No, I’m taking you for a human being whose life isn’t over yet.’

‘Do you think I need these clod? Do you think I can’t be happy without them?’

‘Perhaps you can. But the happiness I have in mind is of a higher order.’

‘What kind of order are you talking about?’

‘The angelic order. Perhaps, however, you don’t understand the word “angel”. At least you don’t understand it rightly. Usually you associate this word with your wife and children.’

‘Do you mean to say they’re not angels?’

‘They are, of course they are. But they’re *human* angels, if you see what I mean.’

‘I don’t.’

‘Then you’re blind, if you forgive this frank expression of my judgement related to your behaviour, to your vision of the world.’

Of course, from time to time, you ask yourself what relation you personally have to the world where you live and prosper, from time to time. ('Time' grows thinner and thinner, whereas 'from' gets bigger and bigger as if it meant something. On its own.) I have spoken about it many times, about questions and answers. You question yourself, your life and also others, whoever they may be and are, as a matter of fact. What answer do you get? I might have spoken about this answer many times, but I do not remember it; in other words or rather in another word, I do not recall it. And that puts me somewhere, in a situation from which there is no issue, no exit; as if someone had written over it, overhead: 'No exit.' All right – I shall stay here for the rest of my life. The point is it is quite satisfactory, this formula, this definition or conclusion. The rest of my life. This means I have a life before me, in front of me, something to speak about, to think about. You utter the word 'life' and that is enough to fill you with a sense or nonsense of happiness which knows no bounds. And even if this happiness of yours decides to find these bounds and analyse them, your vital élan (or whatever it is) determines not to answer this question, not to discuss this matter any further. Why? Because it is vital not to get to the bottom of this matter, for the simple reason that its bottom – like many other bottoms – is equal to death, synonymous with death. You can say, 'The bottom,' and you do not have, in this case, to add anything to this conclusion or admission or definition or statement: it is death and nothing else. In other words or word: there is no exit. It simply does not exist. Therefore you can say (not to waste too many words on this subject): There is no exit (no exist). That is and that is all.'

Of course it is better to fill the world with beds of various sizes, which might allow you to spend your lifetime (your time and life) in somnolence, going from one half-dream to another. Dreams as such may grow obsolete and even annoying, given that they do their best to substitute themselves for reality; for one reality you are acquainted with thanks to your everyday life. You see a fairy tale and believe it is real, although fairy tales are what they are: tales in which there are fairies, wolves, princesses, peas and so on. It is true that, within the domain called fairy tales, you do not necessarily sleep on peas: more often than not, you walk on them barefoot. This exercise is even more unpleasant than sleeping on peas. Oddly enough, whenever such a combination of words presents itself (sleeping on peas) you are tempted to play with it, to disconnect it, to connect it again, squeezing every drop from this delightful, orange-like mixture. For instance, you say to yourself, 'Pissing your pants,' and you go on, growing more and more unbearable to those who happen to overhear you. Luckily for you and for them, no one eavesdrops on your interior monologues which are often vulgar – not on account of your inborn vulgarity, though. The point is we are often tempted to cross frontiers, whatever their significance, size, their degree of decency. This pleasure is called 'crossing frontiers'; or borders or crossings. Crossing crossings is more compact, although I am not sure that grammarians would applaud, upon hearing such conjunctions, such hybrids.

So you walk on your life or on the time allotted to you, and you also recall the space you manipulate in the course of your walk. And if the peas I talked about in the previous paragraph keep you company, you often bend down and pick some of them. This exercise is called 'picking up peas'. Or 'picking on peas'. Why should you pick on peas? And you recall some episodes from your youth, which happens now and then to remind you that you were not born yesterday. Throughout your youth and childhood you constantly got picked on by other boys because you were so small. The image you are striving for is clear enough: you pick on peas because they are so small. At least they are smaller than your body which has never been conspicuous by its presence. One might even come to the conclusion that your body has always been conspicuous by its absence. Often, upon

seeing your body in a concert hall – upon not seeing it in the same concert hall – some music lover just sits down on your body. When you start heaping insults on him or her, the reaction is quite predictable: ‘I thought the chair was empty.’

That is how your life goes on, and they call it ‘routine’, which is logical, even though it is likely to leave an unpleasant aftertaste in your mouth. You jump over beds, over the rows of beds, instead of lying down and catching forty winks. Why don’t you yield to the temptation and start catching these winks? Because you are aware of the fact that, notwithstanding your patience and professional zeal, you will never catch *forty* winks. And catching thirty-nine winks is not your cup of tea. I mean, this occupation or hobby does not appeal to your senses. ‘It appeals to my nonsenses,’ you reply, whenever someone asks you a question in this domain. Suppose, however, that you do catch thirty-nine winks. In spite of the euphoria you experience in such situations, sooner or later you are likely to realise that one wink is missing from the heap of winks you have collected over the last ten minutes or so. ‘Where’s this bloody wink?’ you ask yourself. The question is asked by yourself, and this situation is more comfortable, more easy-going than the one you face, whenever questioned by others. Nevertheless the question remains, stays, and the sensation it creates by staying within your body and mind is far more uncomfortable than any nightmare. You have no alternative but to count all the winks you have collected during your ritual, your bed-oriented ritual. You reach the number ‘twenty-two’ and begin to wonder whether your count is correct or not. When counting peas or winks, you often deviate from the right numbers, being led astray by the wrong ones which are much stronger, more influential than whatever is right.

How do you measure both rightness and wrongness? You can measure them separately of course; no one makes you do it one way or another way, the other way. All the ways lead to cemeteries – everybody is aware of this truth, but no everywhere knows that cemeteries differ from one another, from each other – not only on account of the names engraved on tombstones or just on stones. If you do not have enough money to offer your deceased a tombstone, you content yourself with the tomb you see in front of you, saying to yourself or to others – I am growing weary of this formula, yourself or others – ‘This tomb speaks for itself. Can’t you hear its words? “I’m a tomb, I’m a tomb and nothing else.”’ The song of tombs is rather sad, on the sad side of history and many other stories. Let us not forget that human history is just a story, in spite of the number of corpses you trip over, when studying this so-called history. Even if you call it just ‘his’, you may trip over a corpse, one corpse or two corpses. It depends on the size of your ‘his’. But if you happen to concentrate your attention on ‘mine’, instead of repeating almost automatically his, his, his, his, his, you will instinctively reduce the size of your utterance to a minimum: you have no wish to speak realistically about your tomb. And if you say ‘mine’, it is your tomb you are speaking about. In other words, you are not supposed to ask yourself, ‘Whose tomb is it?’ because it is your tomb; John Donne explained it once and for all. Perhaps he did it many times: whatever he talked about was related to bells. And tolling, tolling, tolling, tolling, tolling. It is rather funny. What? The way some readers talk about the last part of *Ulysses*. Mollying, mollying, mollying, mollying – that is how they talk about it.

Everything tolls for you, and if you doubt this affirmation, you should realise that every action of yours does not have to look like a bell; or sound like one. It just tolls, whatever it is. Your table, the one on which you put many dishes in expectation of a delicious meal, tolls for you or for your meal. You eat something, no matter what, and your stomach is upset. In other words, you are upset because your stomach is in this state, in the situation that the word ‘upset’ describes, depicts so brilliantly, with such accuracy. You do not have to overturn tables, to kick them – to upset them, to be more precise and scientific. They are all upset, all of them. Whatever

you put on them, falls down or flies off, gathering a lot of birds (and feathers) in the course of its flight. Apparently stones do not gather any moss, if they make an effort to roll along a path – any path you offer them – carried away by their own spectacular generosity. Well, a flying table gathers a lot of birds, even if you have no need to catch a lot of birds for your private zoo – for the simple reason that you have no zoo either in your house or in your garden. You have no zoo anywhere; unless humanity and the world itself are zoos in their own right.

In this respect I recall a story about a zoo or rather about one of its exhibits – a lion moving in a cage. A lion can eat ninety kilos of meat – during one meal, mind you; according to a piece of paper hanging from one of the ingredients of the cage. From one of its elements, if you prefer. A child puts the following question to his (not her) father, ‘Daddy! Could you please tell me if the lion imprisoned in this enormous cage can eat so much meat during one tiny meal?’ The father looks at his son and says, ‘Of course he can. We all can. But who will give us such a quantity of meat? God?’ That is how many children set their feet on the path leading to the Almighty and His consort. Why? Because they want to consume as much meat as possible; unless they are vegetarians. Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that they are not. They adore meat and aspire to reach a stage in their personal development where, on its platform, on the step of its ladder – on the highest step – they are served a monstrous quantity of meat. And for a while you become this monster: you eat, eat and eat, but you do not burst as if determined to contradict the exclamation you hear in many families, in many schools. ‘Do you want to burst?!’ ‘You’ll burst, if you go on like that for twenty minutes!’ Please note they do not say, ‘You’re fit to burst.’ They say, ‘You’ll burst!’ And sometimes they even show how this will happen.

Of course your spirit and its level or rather height do not depend on what you eat unless you go to India and buy some herbs or leaves that carry out this ritual (elevation) mechanically, by virtue of the elements included in their chemical formula. But this does not happen every day; not even every month does this happen. So you have to rely on what you can get at home and, apart from aspirin, you can count on something very specific, dealing with your throat or legs or rather knees. (How could you get rid of what happens to your legs which refuse categorically to walk?) What this means amounts to our incapacity to assess what we achieve during our spiritual exercises, often based on diets and suchlike. Or nonsense, in other word or words or nonsense. You know – at least you *can* know your height, your physical height – whatever is linked to your body, to its dimension and even to your digestion; to your body’s digestion. As for your spirit, you consult a lot of books where your capacity for empathy and refusal of money are commented upon. (Your scorn for whatever is promised by a huge, immeasurable quantity of this unblessed and forever cursed metal. That is how Mephistopheles airs his ideas in a very famous opera.)

As for spirituality or elevation, you cannot know anything in this domain where spiritual matters literally swarm. I think I should express the same thought in a slightly different way. Actually you swarm with spirituality, and this phenomenon reminds you of bees, wasps and ants. What do you have in common with wasps? Almost nothing, and that creates a lot of sad thoughts within your skull; or call it what you wish. Why? Why do these sad thoughts now inhabit the upper part of your body? Because you cannot sting all those humans who get under your skin. The state of affairs you got involved in boils down to this mixture: you swarm with incurable thoughts and spiritual matters. But what is really sad about this situation is your incapacity to take advantage of your spirituality and thoughts as such. No one can say you are deprived of a Descartes-promoted brain, but no brain is really useful if it cannot elevate your spirits and get you closer and closer to archangels and their way of thinking. Of course there are individuals who affirm that angels do not think: they just fly, using

their wings to the utmost. (Flapping them almost hysterically.) They fly and their flight invariably blesses all those who contemplate it, while sitting on the seashore, while listening to the waves, to their way of breaking their substance during their encounter with the shore, rocks and other busybodies. But as soon as the archangels I described to the best of my abilities begin to think, their blessings are deviated towards Kant and other philosophers. In short, they forget human beings – entirely, entirely. They forget everyone with the exception of Kant. But what are you supposed to do with this Kant of theirs? Well, put him on your dinner table, near what the Russians call ‘samovar’. You drink tea and think in terms of the famous categorical imperative. Little by little you realise that humanity would be better off if everyone could drink the same Indian tea from the same Russian samovar. So you sincerely wish your situation might become universal to the point of finding enough room for its existence in the constitution of the country to which you belong.

But is the samovar you find on my table really spiritual? You cannot even maintain that the tea you enjoy as you sit by the samovar at your dinner table elevates your spirits, although some movement can be detected within your head or brain or what not. What does this movement promise? Any movement may result in another movement, especially if you deal with a ball that often collides with another ball and thus a game of billiards proceeds from beginning to end. But these movements, the ones engendered by billiard balls, do not lead to any spirituality, however common and ridiculous. What you really need is stability; in reality it is stability you need to last until your last days and minutes on this Earth. Greater personal stability can surely only be to the good, as they say. And they are absolutely right. Of course you can climb, move and enjoy a lot of sensations on the ladder you set your foot on some time ago. But if you settle on a step, you should be sure that the step you set your heart (and foot) upon is large enough to allow you to get a lot of rest, a sort of nirvana you have aspired to since your childhood in the middle of which – you were three or four – you heard this word for the first time. Yes, the step we are analysing so meticulously should be large enough – as large as a comfortable bed, like the one you admire in pictures devoted to Louis XIV, for instance. During your stay on this step you can wallow in the luxury afforded by it, by the ladder you chose some time ago in the hope of achieving all your goals. Not at once, perhaps, but assuredly in the long run. You say to yourself, ‘This run will certainly be very long, but I’m patient, and my patience will be rewarded in the long run.’ There are too many long runs all around you. They are too long and massive, but you are not afraid, contrary to what may be concluded, especially if you are used to hasty conclusions and enjoy them.

People say the appropriate step on the spiritual ladder can cure colds, cancers and other diseases from which we suffer on a regular basis, but I am a bit of a sceptic. I do not believe that any step, however spiritual and healthy, can cure you of cirrhosis of the liver. As everybody knows, the commonest cause of cirrhosis is alcohol consumption. I vaguely recall an American architect who, eager to defend his construction or the project where this construction was depicted in detail, said, ‘Put as many tons of different materials on the roof of my construction and you’ll see whether it collapses or not.’ For a while they put gigantic bags filled with metal, bricks and other heavy ingredients of our life on it. The architect was laughing in his opponents’ faces. At some point the construction collapsed, but it was too late: the architect proved he could guarantee the safety of the people attracted by the beauty of his architectural monument.

Well, let us not forget the alcoholic ingredient of our discussion. There are people who do all they can to forget this ingredient which overflows from their discussions which are often limited to exclamations, due to

their alcohol-impaired state of mind. (I am probably one of these people: I forgot when and where I spoke about alcohol.) Their friends and also members of their families keep on saying, 'Please, forget the word "alcohol".'

'All right, I promise you to forget this word,' they say. (The alcoholics in question answer the well-wishers in this fashionable manner. It is fashionable to speak about memory in this milieu.) 'My memory is not what it used to be. Alcohol attacks not only my movements, but also my thoughts, the dearest images of my youth and childhood. I can hardly remember where I was born and what my mother did in her spare time. The general weakness of my memory is sure to help me during this cure or ritual. I'll easily forget the word, the powerful word "alcohol". But what about the deed inherent in this word? Will I ever forget the symbolic glass of vodka?'

'Don't you worry – you broke this glass last night.'

'I have a huge number of glasses of the same kind . How to forget all of them?'

'You don't have to forget them. Just pour some water into them.'

'I won't, I won't! I can't!'

We can count on alcohol in our struggle for a better life deprived of worries and forebodings which are even worse than ordinary worries. These go their way and sometimes we succeed in arresting their inexorable movement towards our unhappiness or death, whereas forebodings warn us about something we can neither see nor touch. A worry is in front of us and we just pick it up and talk to it for a while; or let it drop and walk over it for twenty minutes or so. Then we look at the result of our labours, and the result is not always satisfactory, for the simple reason that either our legs are not as weighty and mighty as they used to be or our pity, the quantity of empathy we keep in our chest, is too big, too obtrusive. Whenever we decide to get rid of our troubles, our personal load of pity interferes and makes our legs insignificant, ineffective. We know that if we go for a walk near some lake or other, our legs will respond positively to our desire to rest a little, to forget our job and the people who surround us in our office; in their office, rather. Yes, they behave in such a way that we feel we intrude upon their ways of life, their relaxation, their holidays and family *fruitfulness*. Why use this word? Because that is how they talk about their families, their existences. If you ask them, 'Are you satisfied with what you do and achieve, with your lives in general or in particular?' they say, 'My life is quite fruitful,' and if you ask them to show its fruit, only one fruit of their exploits, they do not show you anything, with the exception of their angry faces. More often than not they go so far as to say, 'Get off my back,' and obediently, politely, you get off their backs. It is not as hard as can be imagined, considering that you do not really *need* their backs, and the only problem you can face on these occasions is the process itself. If the situation puts you in the company of a tall person, getting off this person's back is made excruciatingly impossible on account of your constitution which does not permit you to cope with heights, jumps and landings. You realise that the back you are sitting on intends to get rid of you, and you do not mind this unfriendly gesture. What is more, after much soul-searching you determine to remove your body from the back in question as soon as possible. The problem is it is not always possible; at least the expression 'as soon as' (is it an expression?) does not seem adequate. The point is you cannot replace it easily. The only replacement you find in your mind upon realising you *have* to find something suitable for the occasion is 'as late as', but the person on whom you sit or lie reminds you that it is never too late to get off someone's back. 'Be kind, generous and understanding, if only for once,' this person tells you. What do you answer to this person? You say, 'All right, all right. I'm quite willing to get rid of your hospitable back. But the procedure may take some time, independently of my will. At my age, sitting or lying

somewhere, be it someone's back or a mere rock, is much more comfortable than getting off the object you use for your personal comfort. Suppose you are holding a delicious pastry; in your right hand, for instance. And you yearn to eat this pastry, to savour every bit of it. Instead, you are asked to throw it away. You are asked to open the nearest window and fling this pastry through this window beyond which there is a street, a thoroughfare swarming with people, with pastry-eaters. And you are not inclined to let them take advantage of your personal pastry. It is all the more painful since you adore this pastry and desire to taste it with every fibre of your being. But if you voice your opinion, you hear something to the effect of...Well, they point out that your fibres should not eat cakes. In the first place, they cannot really do it. In the second place, you risk augmenting the quantity of sugar within your anatomy, which may lead to serious consequences, to failures of all kinds (and minds, they add), to unbelievable health problems. So you fling the pastry you are still holding out of the window, shouting, 'Out it goes!' and it does go out. It flies, rather, but you are no longer thinking about this pastry. You have already forgotten it. Sometimes we regard the loss of memory as a boon, as a blessing in disguise. Or just as a blessing.

And alcohol? The wife of one of my friends – that is how we are supposed to talk about such matters – usually says, 'You were drunk,' whatever the subject matter under discussion. So, whenever you say, 'such matters' in this old lady's presence you are sure to hear the word 'alcohol', although, the greater part of the day, this word has nothing to do with her husband and his routine. It is true that Apollinaire used this ambiguous word to the utmost. Why is it ambiguous? you may ask. Because you do not know exactly what is meant, who is under discussion: an inveterate drunkard or just a poet who needs to write another poem, which cannot be done without what is justifiably called 'inspiration'. If you are not inspired, the best you can do in this domain amounts to something like: 'Be, be, be, be, me, me, me, me.' What is more, you should pronounce these syllables in the French manner. Not 'to be, to be, to be'. No, the soundtrack of your intrusion should sound like the speech of a mutton.

We cannot say that the world is full of bells which fill our life with music, with their tolling – to the brim. We walk through them but mostly they do not react to us passing by; they do not toll, in other words. That is what they call 'hope': we hope that untolling bells are a sort of guarantee of our immortality. They are guarantees of, of, of, of. Of course we feel excited and even happy upon realising we are immortal and so do not have to set about preparing our own funeral. But what about diseases? Is it worth our while living in constant pain, our body covered with wounds of all sorts? Often our comrades ask us, 'Which wound do you suffer from today?' Yes, they put this question to their comrades, instead of saying, 'How are you today?' Well, to tell the truth, they may ask you occasionally, 'Which wound don't you suffer from today?' That explains the pastime to which we are all subjected in our modern world. Automatically we say, 'I don't, I don't, I don't,' being certain that the question concerns our pains and their rituals; their activities, if you prefer. But sometimes, contrary to our expectations, we are asked the following question, 'Do you have any idea what quantum mechanics is about?' No, you have no idea, no ideas – either in this domain or adjacent domains, realms and kingdoms. True, you still have your batons; either in your hands or on the ground, near your feet. As usual you begin to brandish them to the best of your ability, and your parents smile at last. 'That's the quantum mechanics you affirm to have no idea about. Why do you have a nasty habit of lying through your teeth?'

As a punishment you are forced to watch the procedure known as ‘teeth punishment’. Your father picks up a baton and begins to attack your teeth as if they were his enemies’ fortress. How to win such a battle? Well, your father demonstrates one of the solutions. And he calls it ‘the final solution’. He aims at one of your teeth and knocks it out. This is justifiably called ‘a real knock’. The audience applauds and your father bows to the audience whose members seem to appreciate his art of knocking; his teeth-art, in other words. He proceeds in the same manner and at the end of a short period of time – say, two and a half minutes– you realise you can no longer lie through your teeth. And lying through your tongue is not very pleasant – for many reasons.

If the word ‘through’ means something either important or unimportant – it does, otherwise you would not write it down – it denotes a number of holes because you cannot pierce a material without making holes in it. There are some fissures – call them what you wish – in the space where our teeth grow, rot and fall. And our speech, our witty remarks and insults directed at others, can use these interstices in their effort to reach their various goals. One of these goals is hidden in your heart which can be harmed – rather successfully – through a number of mockeries you collect, when devising a scheme for triumphing over your rival or just a human being you see on the other side of the room where, a few moments ago, you decided to stay for a while. You know for sure you will not stay in this room forever, not only because its space is too narrow and uncomfortable. From your experience, which is not always bitter, you know that narrowness is not always hand in hand with what is called ‘the uncomfortable side of life’. A diamond necklace is not always very large, which might impair its elegance. A huge, almost swollen necklace is heavy, uncomfortable and finally displeasing from our point of view. And we side with those who always vote for beauty, not for wealth, heaviness and flashy, showy things, usually opted for by the nouveaux riche. (The people who can rely on new riches.)

Well, in spite of your knowledge – you know you will not stay in this room till doomsday – you cannot bear any presence; any human presence, that is. Not only in this room – everywhere. In the room this presence acquires morbid, unbearable qualities, such as the narrowness of humans and their race. You are not a racist, contrary to what might be presumed upon a hasty examination of my description, but you just cannot bear men, women and their descendants, relatives. Never mind the colour of their skins: you have never paid attention to them. Frankly speaking, you do not pay attention to colour at all; generally speaking. You stop your car in front of a beautiful, autumn-decorated forest, but instead of thoroughly enjoying the colour of every leaf – that is usually done by painters and romantics – you just unfold your chair, draw a cigarette from one of your pockets, strike a match – an old-fashioned procedure – and begin to inhale an unhealthy quantity of smoke, of nicotine, of death. One might draw from this scene the following conclusion: the smoker is anti-romantic and his mentality is on the suicidal side. Or on the suicidal track.

Even one victim of Jack the Ripper is enough to receive humanity in the hall of death. Well, you sit in this room and think you are doomed – condemned to eternal solitude. Not at all, not at all. After a while someone comes and destroys your beautiful solitude and all sorts of interior monologues thanks to which you might fall in love with life – at last, in the long run. Actually you were on the point of falling in love with humanity; even with humanity, with those who make life lovely, according to them, to the same people. ‘What would you do without us,’ they say as soon as they violate the space of this room, encroaching upon your philosophical investigations. What did they lead to, these investigations? You know that any investigation leads only to itself: you repeat the question and give up the whole procedure which is designed for some result about which you keep

on wondering. What is it? you ask yourself again and again. It is, your answer. Or it is it. Or it, it, it, which amounts to the same it.

So you are sitting in this room and someone appears; and this someone assures you that you will feel much better in a few moments. You say to this intruder that you are quite well, but nobody believes you when you say you are not on the threshold of death, 'contrary to what may appear to your eyes and brain. Your brain looks at me and comes to an erroneous conclusion, "This man is about to join Purgatory where a wheelchair is waiting for him." This is wrong from beginning to end. There are no wheelchairs in Purgatory. There are no benches either. There are bonfires where you burn unwillingly and not completely. And raindrops continue to spoil your walks through the woods where all branches are rotten. You take a step and a rotten branch falls on your head. At the end of the walk the director of Purgatory asks you how many branches you collected in the course of your exercise. And you count the branches. And the director asks you how many nerves you lost in the course of your exercise. And you count the nerves on which you can still rely, in spite of the exercises to which you are subjected every day and every night.'

All this is unpleasant, but you were sure you would get rid of all your personal horrors upon coming into this room. Once again you were wrong, and you regret your decision. Now you regret the movement of your will which directed you to this room where you hoped to receive an immeasurable gift: serenity, serenity, serenity. Your mummy talked to you mainly about wolves – when trying to put you on your guard against the weirdness of life. At first, whenever you saw a human being on the threshold of your room, you thought, 'That's all right. It's just a human being.' Of course, on such an occasion, you would recall the saying, 'A human being behaves like a wolf, whenever in the presence of another human being.' (Actually, you knew this saying in Latin and always quoted it in Latin. But what does it matter now?) All right, it is a human being whose behaviour may remind you of a pack of wolves. Yet he is not the wolf about which your grandmother spoke to you almost every night. That was her fairy tale. In your fairy tales you were always devoured by wolves. Well, the human being you see in front of your body is not likely to devour you: his teeth are not designed for this exercise. That is what you say to yourself, but you are wrong. And you are perfectly aware of the fact that you are wrong. This meal does not depend on the quality of the eater's teeth. Nor does it depend on the quality of the eater's intestines. (Let us not specify the category to which this human being belongs. A lady, a gentleman. A woman can devour you even more promptly than a man. So the eater's sex does not really count.)

The human being in question comes up to you, his or her teeth at the ready. You look at these teeth and say to yourself, 'I shouldn't worry because my nervous system may suffer as a result of this additional worry. What I see is just a smile, a friendly smile. Probably this human being is waiting for my embrace, for my bear hug.' In the twinkling of an eye, you become a bear and then you hug the human being about whom you talk too much, with insistence and nervousness. To an objective observer the image may appear strange: a wolf is about to embrace a bear. The observer knows it is all wrong: these animals never embrace each other, except in a show you might see at a carnival. What is more, these animals kiss each other, which is utterly surrealistic. So this sort of thing cannot happen; and it does not, whatever you dream about in this room of yours. What happens looks like a confrontation of two wild animals whose sex and identity remain undetermined throughout the scene. Yes, it is undetermined, except that at the end of all this horror one of the animals dies. At least you can see him or her at the feet of his or her opponent who applauds his or her deed. That is humanity for you, in a nutshell. You

remove this nutshell and see humanity – in another nutshell. You remove the second nutshell and see a second humanity, or a third humanity. They all resemble each other; so do the nutshells you come across.

What is even more disastrous concerns the room itself. You think about it in terms of rooms, of spaces determined by events, our mentality, our experience, the one which unfolds during our relationship – at the very heart of this relationship – with life itself. Life goes on and we realise that if we enter a room; it is a room we enter. And even if there is a certain quantity of herbs in this room, it does not turn into a field; not in the twinkling of an eye anyway. And no cows walk around in this room of ours; and if there is a cow in it, you can attribute it to the eccentricity of the owner who, once upon a time, resolved to live with a cow and not with a dog or a cat. Why? Perhaps he is very fond of milk and dairy products. This owner does not drink alcohol because he thinks that milk is much better for his health; even for his mental health, believe it or not. He usually says that his brother is a drunkard and so he has a lot of trouble with explanations, even with those related to ordinary events and things, ‘When it came to explaining the lipstick on his collar, he found that drink had clouded his memory,’ he says about his brother. ‘Of course the lipstick in question comes from one of his mistresses. My brother is a notorious womaniser. His friends maintain that he never pays them visits in a state about which we invariably say, ‘Spick and span.’ ‘His collars are always covered with lipstick stains or with other indecent vestiges of his libido’s exploits.’

Colours play an important part in amorous games, and whenever we see a lot of colours on someone’s clothes we do not always think about designers and couturiers. We just say to each other, ‘This person enjoys a very intense libidinous or sexual life. And we all envy him or her because there’s nothing else to do in this wretched life of ours.’ We see a bed and say either inwards or outwardly, ‘This is the instrument of our happiness. What else can we do today and tomorrow? Let us wait for our partner, hoping this partner won’t be too late. Love, its physical expression and justification, are not eternal, alas.’ On the other hand, whatever remains in the domain of physics, is not really essential, considering the importance of love as such. Love presides over everything, including our life, eternity and the Earth, its surface that we explore with our feet and sometimes also with our entire body. Our body lies down on the surface of the Earth and we heave a sigh of relief because we realise at last that we do not live for nothing, that there is a purpose guiding us through the labyrinth of successes and failures. What is this purpose? This is our instinct, and our lying down or standing up is not senseless, ridiculous and without any meaning, however unsubstantial. All right, this meaning *is* unsubstantial. It is also laughable, but we go on living and this triumph, whatever its size and logic, inner and outer logic, is so outlandish that we stand up: whenever we are in a horizontal position, it is vital to stand up, to regain our footing in this world. And if a chance pedestrian says to us, ‘Why do you give utterance to your will to live which has no pedestal, no foundation, no reason?’ you answer, ‘Can’t you see my body? Isn’t it vertical? Don’t I celebrate life in all its varieties and worries and what’s not? In spite of everything, I live and outlast whatever happens to me. I last, in spite of being the least of everything and everybody.’

You are in your bed and no partner enlivens your life, the horizontal expression of your life. And one wonders if there is any other expression of this life of yours. Is this life really yours? Yes, you say to yourself. It does not belong to superior or inferior beings, to the Devil, among other beings or non-beings. It belongs to me, for better or worse. For worse, most certainly. But what can be worse than this life you live and hate? Another life situated *under* this life of yours, under its content and all the innuendoes you can imagine and figure out. But how could you stumble upon this second life of yours? You stumble often, but there are no lives beneath

whatever you encounter as a result of your fall. Your right hand searches for other lives, and this search takes place under your body and also over it – just in case. You are perhaps in Paradise: there are people who live in Paradise before their death, on account of their sanctity. ‘You’re a saint,’ says someone, when looking at your face, and St Peter puts a cross in his notebook. And thanks to this cross you enter Paradise before entering any cemetery situated on the surface of the Earth.

Why do we so often mention the surface of the Earth, instead of speaking about interiors, thinking in terms of our soul hidden in our entrails, inside our body, in our pineal gland for instance? (There are many instances in this domain, in the domain of the soul and that of the body.) We know what lies on the surface, and whatever prospers beneath it constitutes an enigma about which we have a superficial knowledge, based on hearsay and theresay – on says of all kinds, as we usually say. You say something here, and instantly it becomes hearsay, whatever you may think about this definition and state of affairs. You think it is unjust and unfair, but this hearsay remains where it is, in spite of your protestations. This occurrence leads us to the inevitable conclusion: hearsay does not depend on our volition. On whose volition do they depend? We are tempted to call them ‘follition’. It is crazy, crazy, crazy, crazy, we exclaim, and our exclamation asserts itself to the point of being inscribed in our history, in the history of our mentality.

Sounds come and some of them carry a lot of information with which we are supposed to cope in the hope of making our life even better, even richer and more beautiful. On what depends the beauty of our life? On duration of course. The longer it goes in some direction or other, the better. Directions do not count: they all belong to life and so cannot be questioned by a mere mortal being. Quo vadis – is that how they ask this question? – means you vadis, and quo is a mere preposition or proposition; or a tail you see, when looking at animals. You know that their tails enable them to keep their balance during expeditions in the midst of trees and mountains. But there are animals whose fear of trees and climbing is well known. Why do they carry this addition around? I mean, the tail? There are wasps, flies, and one gets rid of them so as not to laugh too much, among other things. ‘My nose is tickling, I think I’m going to sneeze,’ you say to yourself, and suddenly you see a mosquito or a wasp – on your very nose. You don’t mind the tickling, but a bite is a different story. And sometimes it is a long story, given that wasps are nasty animals. (Are they animals or insects? Judging from the nastiness of their bites, they are animals.) They do not leave you in peace before declaring war on your chest, nose and also on the time during which you will suffer from their bites. Tickling may be pleasant, especially if it is performed by a human being you are in love with. But this human being is often much more powerful than a mere wasp, and then you are likely to fall back on the following reasoning, ‘I wish I were bitten by a wasp. This *garce* is so inhuman I may pass away, as a result of her bites, jokes, sermons and subterranean schemes. She is determined to deprive me of my country house, of my house, of this house where I’m talking, of my car where I’ll talk in a few minutes, of my forests and lakes. Well, wasps aren’t generous, but they’re not really nasty, in comparison with this *garce*. Or bitch, if you prefer.’

If all your doors are shut, if all your windows are there only for the sake of light, you think you can rely on your solitude, on its temple where your thoughts and hopes are enshrined. And then you realise your nose, or any other part of your body, tickles. You do not have a charming partner of whom you might say, ‘I’m in love with this partner.’ And of course you are not likely to say, ‘I’m in love with this wasp.’ And yet, more often than not, you see a wasp on your nose, especially if you have a mirror within your reach or within walking distance. (All depends on the size of this mirror and on the acuity of your vision.) You may be mistaken, in spite of the

precautions you resorted to some time ago. I am speaking about your windows, their impenetrability, and also about your doors, walls and so on. The *garce* is there, and you have no idea how she triumphed over your closeness, impenetrability, hermetism; over your alchemy. (Why did you bestow this lofty word on your habits? Do you think you are made of gold?)

Another interior monologue gets under way. You ask yourself if this time the *garce* will content herself with tickling your nose. But you are aware that she thinks big and consequently, during this nasty ritual, your nose might become your whole body. And even your soul cannot enjoy its safety, which is not proverbial, to tell the truth, because that woman is capable of overcoming the resistance of souls, bodies and also of the Almighty Himself or Herself. This is rendered easier by your weakness, although you are not in love with this woman. You are just weak, and your general weakness becomes quite particular in her presence. So she tickles you to her heart's content, and then she begins to bite you; also to her heart's content. And, needless to say, her heart is never content.

And what about your soul? Does it laugh during the procedure you are so accustomed to? Your soul laughs and your body trembles as if reacting to the laughter of your soul. Did Nabokov mean the soul, when describing his laughter in the dark? Usually the soul laughs in the light, but the dark is not removed from the list of possibilities, of virtualities. It is not deleted from the list. It is not crossed out either. So you are not really surprised when you begin to pay attention to the darkness that gathers all around you. This darkness may be attributed to your blindness, your physical blindness, but you are *psychically* blind, and you have no idea what this really is and where it is located. In short, you have no idea where your psyche is and why you have to use it from time to time. If you do not use it, you have at least to justify its presence in your being. As soon as you utter the word 'being', you are tempted to correct yourself and also the world's order which needs corrections even more than you, your so-called 'substance'. First, you correct your substance and it becomes a mere 'stance'. Or trance which appeals much more to your expectations. These are invariably great because you are very fond of literature.

The darkness of the soul, the darkness of the body. What does this particular darkness amount to? You have the feeling your body is mottled, or it is rather a gigantic bruise. You must have fallen recently; from your pedestal, probably. Throughout our lives we build pedestals for ourselves. And only a few of us test them before they are finished, complete, perfect. Actually, we should test our pedestals almost every day, otherwise we might get a lot of bruises, when falling from them one day. And this day will come – we all are aware of the fact. And if we are not, the fact will come anyway, and our body will rest at the foot of the pedestal, at the feet, at the beginning of our imaginary glory. Incidentally, we should always think in terms of falls, and from this point of view it is better not to build any pedestals at all. You just buy a comfortable divan and spend the rest of your life on this divan, surrounded by cushions of all kinds. And by many bottles of wine. Four glasses are enough for your forthcoming feasts. What are you supposed to celebrate? You do not have to celebrate anything: drinking wine is not necessarily linked to any celebration, however local and insignificant. Or however universal and majestic. Anyway, bruises are not believed to celebrate anything, with the exception of their own defeats. And I already touched upon the colour of this defeat, if I am not mistaken.

At some point you are bound to realise that your life is nothing but a series of pedestals at the feet (at the toes) of which your corpses seem to enjoy a sort of eternal rest. Many people speak of death in these terms, but very few of them find a sort of consolation (a consolation of sorts, of course) in this thought, in this parallel, in

this illogical conclusion. Rest is logical only within the context of life, otherwise it is just an idiotic equation: death=rest. Stay with your illusions, if you wish. I am not really sure you wish to stay with your illusions. You do your best to get rid of them, dreaming about nothing but the truth which will assure everybody you are immortal, eternal and happy, the happiest human being. Why? Because this belief makes you happy: you are literally surrounded by happiness and rainbow-like feelings. Actually you are not only *surrounded* by these feelings: they actually move inside you, palpitate in the vicinity of your intestines.

There are construction sets which allow you to make not only pedestals, but also cranes and all sorts of other instruments of doom. (Everything is your doom, isn't it?) But little by little you reduce your activities to the pedestal about which I have been talking for many hours and years. This is the only thing you pay attention to in your life, however thin it may appear to you, if you cast a glance at these constructions from your deathbed. Yes, death looms ahead of you and even behind your back, and you eventually realise that your pedestals were nothing but tombstones, and not sophisticated tombstones at that. The tombstones I have in mind often allude to the Greeks and their sculptors, their beauties and grandeur. And what about *your* pedestals? Just a number of stones thanks to which you grow, grow, grow, but your physical growth has nothing to do with your spirituality. (I seem to have spoken about everything, even about spirituality.) Of course you can say as you look at your pyramids and self-concocted grandeur, 'This is my spirituality. There's nothing physical about it, nothing base. It's not a sort of base metal. It's gold, if you please.'

Somebody comes in and says, 'Could you prove your point? Let's consider the spirituality of your construction. Could it recite a few verses from the Bible? Or a few excerpts from the Chinese wisdom we admire so much? Even Mao was addicted to it. Do you know what kind of poem he wrote on the eve of his death?

I am a traveller and I go by foot.
 New shoes always give me blisters.
 My shoes are always new
 And new shoes always give you blisters.
 So do old shoes. And even if you
 Venture outdoors barefoot,
 These barefeet of yours give you blisters.
 Such is the fate of humans to whose race
 I belong, whatever I say and write.

Mao endeavours to persuade everybody he is immortal, and some of his poems *are* immortal, because they are ridiculous. And whatever is ridiculous and makes you laugh is immortal, whereas profound thoughts are too profound: you cannot really see their bottoms. And if you cannot see the bottom of something about which you muse, you are irritated beyond measure. Since this measure exceeds your patience, you grow irritated – beyond measure as well. All these beyond measures are so obnoxious you curse your life and also its Creator. You uncreate your life, in a manner of speaking. What kind of manner is this? you are asked by a local priest. And you answer as follows, 'You know, Mao spoke about his barefoot, unprotected wanderings in nature. He had no umbrella either, no shoes, no umbrella. You are attacked from the air and also from the Earth. What could you do to resist these attacks? You just die on the spot, wherever this spot is located. Anyway this spot is submitted

to the cruelty of rains, and your feet are still bare, as bare as your thoughts. Why are your thoughts bare? Because you expose them in your essays, poems, novels and suchlike.'

How could you protect your thoughts? As you can figure out, it is not enough to put your hands on your head and imagine that your skin and tendons will protect you from cosmic catastrophes. And every catastrophe is fatal because we are linked to everything, to the whole, indissolubly. Yes, it is a chain and, like proletarians – we are all proletarians – we had better get rid of our chains; of the cosmos, in other words or word or expression or idea. If you wish to live in the world where inflation as such does not reign, you just renounce your purchases. You no longer go shopping, and if you do not buy anything, prices will never go up. They will never go; they will stay where they are and die slowly, but surely. The death of a product you see on a counter is not spectacular; it just dies and you cannot profit from its death. What *can* you profit from? From your own death. Yes, you can take advantage of it, on condition that paradise is not a fairy tale, but a slice of life. What life, which life? Just life, for God's sake. Don't ask too many questions, especially if they are aimed at the Hereafter. There is a here and an after – that is all you need to know, as John Keats put it. What is here? An empty bottle you can touch. What is after? The same bottle. But to experience its afterlife, you have to break it. So you pick it up and smash it. You drop it and watch it smash to pieces or smithereens on the stone floor. And if you are not a born killer? If you are reluctant to kill an empty bottle? You know that, sooner or later rioters will run through the city centre smashing windows and looting shops. Well, according to this report, you will have enough of corpses within your reach; or out of it. Never mind – you can have a walk during which you will pick up whatever appeals to you. In this manner you can inaugurate your collection of what is called an afterlife. Do you know a better word for this phenomenon?

Sometimes, to change your life radically, you just have to wave goodbye to one of your ancient procedures; or to all of them. You used to count money as a cashier. Now you count it as a billionaire. Or rather – still better, still better – someone else counts it for you. But that is not the niche in Paradise we were talking about at the beginning of our fairy tale. What is a fairy tale? At the beginning of this tale you see a folding chair on the stage. But you do not hope to see a poor girl in it. Cinderella is all right with me and somebody else. But there are people who want another girl, another human being – even at the very start of their career. 'We would loath being encouraged by Cinderella, of all people,' they say. So they begin their ascension, thanks to 'very high protection', as they affirm. And if there is ash on their impeccable clothes, they say, 'I spent the whole evening in front of my fireplace. Inevitably you get a few vestiges of this contraption on your clothes. A few homages, I might say.' But these homages are a warning, a bad omen, and some of your friends already say, 'Amen.' What does all this mean?

There is still this armchair in the middle of the room to which you have grown accustomed, with which you are now wholly acquainted. Such is life, you say to everybody. And yet you wish to remain alone, on your own; for the rest of your life. 'I could live with this armchair, if necessary.' But it is not necessary; nothing is necessary, as a matter of fact. There are moments when nothing seems obligatory or even present – everything seems evanescent, in other words. (Do I often say 'in other words'? Are there other words? I am not sure.) In desperation you might say, 'Go to Hell, all of you!' They do go to Hell, contrary to your expectations. Usually, when someone says 'Go to Hell' nobody moves, nobody budes. They are all rooted to the spot, the people, the beings you send to Hell, to one of the halls of Hell. Disobedient little rascals! Why don't you go to Hell? Do you expect to find yourselves in Paradise one of these days? And you laugh hysterically, hoping that your fit, your

hysterics (that is your history, after all) will make them understand how ridiculous they are. They do not believe in Hell; nor do they believe in their own death, in its mere possibility. And what about you? The usual question. You are covered with ash from head to foot. And you think it is nothing. Just a joke of nature. Instead of covering you with flowers, from head to foot, our nature, our beloved mother nature covers you with ash; for some obscure reason. The reason you are talking about is not obscure; it is crystal clear, as a matter of fact. Never mind, never mind. It is obscure, it is black. Does it remind you of anything? Of course it does. There are many ashtrays in the world, and some of them are full. Someone should clean them, otherwise another group of smokers will not be able to use them properly. Instead of filling these ashtrays – properly, properly – they will discolour your carpets and even your clothes: some smokers are used to getting rid of their ash in cupboards and wardrobes.

Well, they put a coffin in front of you, before your very eyes, and you still do not understand a thing. You do not understand the thing standing in front of you as if there were no fronts, no affronts; as if there were no things. Actually, at this point of time there are no you, but you are blissfully ignorant of the situation. You believe there are no situations to speak of; nothing to write home about. All right, you do write home, but you do not mention the coffin and the deplorable state of your health. The word ‘deplorable’ flickers across the room and for a while you ponder over this enigma. Why did it flicker? you ask yourself. Did anything flicker? And then you write to your dearest friend, ‘The word “plorable” flickered across my room, but I have no idea to what it refers. Perhaps it refers to nothing. Perhaps it doesn’t refer at all. It just fers, fers, fers, fers.’

Getting rid of forebodings, bad omens – but not of badness as such – is customary; it is one of the customs to which we are all addicted. If a black cat crosses the street, your street, under your very nose, you stop in your tracks, shrug your shoulders and wait for a white cat, for her passage, for her walk, for her participation in the ritual; in the morning to which you have already devoted and even dedicated your time. No white cats seem to enjoy this morning outdoors, and you content yourself with a woman wearing an ugly white dress. The woman herself is ugly, but for once this detail does not count. After all, you just have to go on, notwithstanding some ghastly interference. Then you begin to educate yourself. You realise that putting up with an ugly dress is not appropriate. What is more, this dress may spoil not only your morning, but the whole day which you would like to spend in your office, doing a lot of important work; signing documents, among other things.

So there are letters and pedestals in your room, and you begin to wonder whether these letters can exist on their own. Of course they can. For instance, you write A L E F F and apparently they stand on their own. You open your window and a gust of wind penetrates your abode, a part of it. Nothing happens: the letters are where they were only a few seconds ago, before the advent of the gasp. Then you switch on your vacuum cleaner and repeat the same procedure, replacing the gasp (I wrote the gast, the ghost) by the vacuum cleaner. You are not mistaken: it is a vacuum cleaner you are holding in your right hand. What is more, you used it many times, on many occasions, in many rooms. It is true that you have several houses, but for some reason you use only one vacuum cleaner as if you were in love with it, as if you could not separate yourself from it; if only for a minute. Yes, you can, as Obama put it. During your walks around your city and its suburbs, you take leave of your vacuum cleaner, imparting to it the following truth, ‘My dear, dearest and only vacuum cleaner. I’m sorry to leave you for a few minutes, for an hour perhaps. But I’ll be back as soon as possible, as soon as I can manage. You see, my lungs and the rest of my substance are badly in need of fresh air.’

‘Me too,’ answers the vacuum cleaner.

‘I know, I know,’ you answer. ‘But many things happen outdoors.’

‘You mean, young boys like taking a ride on vacuum cleaners?’

‘Not exactly. They all have motorcycles.’

‘So they just kick us. Is that what you mean?’

‘They kick you and smash you to smithereens. And the police forgive them their crimes. No one is beheaded, believe it or not.’

You also talk to your vacuum cleaner about rain and drizzle, about short-circuits and the pain they cause or occasion.

‘All this doesn’t matter. What matters, however, are your senses, your sensitivity. You may fall in love with a young or old woman – without the slightest provocation on her part. She does nothing, nothing at all. None of her fingers and neither of her cheeks move ever so slightly; not even so slightly, mind you. But you rush towards her, kiss her feverishly. A policeman can’t stop you, even when he starts blowing his whistle like a hurricane.’

You just have to possess many pedestals of various sizes, otherwise you will not be able to put one of them under your pillow, which is of the utmost importance, considering the impeccability of your sleep, strongly suggested by your renowned doctor. Up to now you have followed the advice propounded by a famous doctor whose fame exclusively depended on a famous American film I saw many times in my youth. He said to his patient, ‘Try to spell the word “Czechoslovakia”. You spell it, you spell it, you spell it, you spell it, and then you sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep.’ The point is Czechoslovakia is no longer on our maps, either electronic or otherwise.

There is another solution to the same problem. You just put all your pedestals around you – you are already used to this image – and try to scale them with your fingers. Of course your fingers are more agile and gymnastic than your legs which, now and then, most of the time, slip, trip and find themselves (and your body) at the foot of the pedestal.

Humans are very sensitive to remarks and so, before making any remark, before opening your mouth and setting your lips in motion, you should think twice, thrice about what you are going to say. For instance, you utter the word ‘A’ and the people whose bodies surround you on all sides, look at you in wonder, waiting for what the rest of the word is hiding from them. So you say ‘AN’ and the faces you see begin to acquire a few understanding wrinkles, as they are called in psychiatry. Well, you pronounce ‘ANT’ and everyone’s attention is pricked or picked. Doesn’t matter – you know what I am talking about. Everyone is excited and waits for the end of the story, even if this end might mean the end of humanity. You say ‘O’ and everybody repeats this ‘O’ as if without their - this crowd’s - participation nothing could be achieved or just finished. And everything should be finished, not only Schubert’s *Unfinished*. (Why do we always talk about Schubert in this connection? And this connection denotes a sort of unconnection. There is a slice of life, of music, of literature – of whatever you can imagine. Well, you imagine this slice and stop for one of the reasons I touch upon in the following sentence. Lack of inspiration, lack of time, lack of life. You just die and that is the end of it.) This slice is solitary to some extent, and you are too lazy to add something to it. That is what happened to Puccini’s *Turandot*. Too weary to marry the Princess and Kallas, or whatever his name is. (Le Kallas?) Anyway, you utter another letter: ‘N’. And everybody starts talking to you about the ‘*Seagull*’ or simply cherries. People begin to wonder why there are no

cherries on the table. There is a film at the end of which an old lady asks somebody whether the road on which she is standing leads to a temple. And this somebody (we are so used to nobodies) answers, 'No.' 'Why does it exist, this road?' asks the woman. 'Do we need the roads that lead to no temple?' Or 'don't lead to a temple?' There are people whose name might be 'no temple'. There are nations whose name might be 'no temples'. There are roads leading to these nations. Should we follow these roads?

Actually, the person I touched upon at the beginning of my discussion of letters was the film director Antonioni in one of whose films there is a lot of vapour. The director shows a number of factories, a number of microbes going up into the sky and staying for a while over our heads, filling our nostrils with poison. What poison? No idea. But I know that even in nineteenth-century England there were lots of poisons in the air and also in the lungs of walkers. Not all of them were called 'Johnny' but never mind, never mind. Not everybody is called 'Anton' either. Not everybody writes about cherry trees. You can occasionally eat a cherry or put it on a tart you are about to devour. And you may also say to your friends and foes, 'This is the cherry on the tart.' I have no idea whether this expression is used in other languages, but I am sure that the Russians often say, 'And the cherry on the tart...' meaning you are not yet at the end of your worries; or joys, the latter occurring very seldom.

Incidentally, it means that whatever you have already heard (from the mouth of the narrator) is nothing in comparison with what you are about to hear. Why? Because a cherry, any cherry, is either much better than the rest or just worse, worse, worse. Much, much worse, to say the least. An impolite guest might say to the owner of the house or to his spouse, 'I'd like to know what can be worse than your tart. I had the honour of partaking of many of your tarts, and all of them were worse than this cherry I know only by sight.' As for the better side of it, I think I have already discussed the better and the worse (both) sides of this phenomenon, which should thank its own destiny for giving it an opportunity to relish two sides in this world of ours. Of course every phenomenon or man or woman has two sides, like an LP. One side is either gorgeous or criminal. Suppose we are dealing with a criminal, with someone who has gone so far as to kill someone outright; or not outright. What counts in this matter is the death of one individual, due to the monstrosity of another individual. One individual, the second one, is monstrous too, but not to the extent of getting rid of another individual belonging to the same race and sometimes to the same family or nationality. But the first individual, the one who gets killed as a result of this reflection or meditation, is not innocent either. In short, he or she is not like a lamb. A lamb is arch-innocent because, even if offered a pistol, a gun, it will never kill anyone. What is more, it is not even *tempted* to kill anybody, with the exception of the animals it eats three or four times a day. The other individual, however, eats and kills all the time. That is why killers, murderers and suchlike are usually fat in spite of the competitions in which they are daily, constantly engaged, when doing their best to escape from justice – from an ordinary policeman; in Charlie Chaplin's films, for example.

What am I driving at? There are two sides, and usually we drive towards the second side; or the first one: it depends on the point where you find yourself in the course of your speech. Suppose you have already analysed the first side rather thoroughly, but your analysis cannot be called 'complete', if the other side is conspicuous by its absence. Even if it is only a coin you are dissecting, you have to dissect its other side, otherwise your coin is not a real coin. Neither of these sides resembles a cherry, and even an obvious resemblance does not guarantee what is called 'identity' or a spitting image. Well, the image may be spitting, but the taste does not always catch up with the image, however primitive and vulgar. (Vulgarity is widespread in the world, alas.) The other side is a

must, but if you show just the other side of the coin you are holding in your hand, a cashier may decline to accept it as payment. 'Show me the other side of the coin, please,' he might say, and of course you feel offended – to the bottom of your heart or soul or body. You do not voice your feelings. You just say to the offender, 'Don't you believe me?'

'Of course I believe you. And yet it is my duty to ask you to show me the other side of the coin you are generously showing me.'

'But the other side of this coin is part and parcel of the same coin. And you can contemplate this side to your heart's content, as long as you wish.'

'Thank you very much for your exceptional, almost unique generosity, but whatever you offer me, whatever your bountiful heart is prepared to part with, I need to see the other side of this particular coin. Come hell or high water, you know.'

Two sides of the same coin are what they are, and two individuals we come across almost daily belong to the same human race which we are interested in, sometimes willy-nilly. Well, there are two individuals in front of us. One of them is a woman, the other a man. But there is a third individual in the story I am about to tell you, and this individual does not belong to the human race, contrary to what can be imagined. (We often think there are only human beings in this world of ours.) The third individual is a she-dog called Dashen'ka. This is a Russian name or rather a diminutive of Daria. Considering that the situation in the middle of which we find ourselves is centred upon a dog, we might say that Dashen'ka is a pet name for Dasha. I still recall the day at the end of which I met this dog for the first time. Her owner told me straightaway, 'Her name is Dashen'ka so you can talk to her in Russian.' I uttered a few Russian words and then made a disastrous attempt to stroke the animal – to demonstrate my love for animals on her skin. She bit me viciously, ferociously.

A few years later, I said to the owner of Dashen'ka or to her mother, although the woman I am talking about (I talk so much, a lot, all the time) said to me earnestly, and I am sure she did not smile at that moment, 'I didn't know you had to warn her about your caresses.' How could you warn a dog about the caresses you are planning to bestow on her body? (To bestow is the right word, if you take into consideration Dashen'ka's character. You do not caress such dogs out of tenderness. You might think, however, that one should caress *any* dog, notwithstanding the dangers inherent in this ritual. Actually, during my walks near my house, I have caressed many dogs, but biting my hand is reserved for Dashen'ka who is no longer there, of this world.) As a matter of fact, I should have bitten this mother, Dashen'ka's mother, two or three times, when it was possible. Now it is out of the question: she is in a madhouse or whatever they call it. I call it a madhouse, and I think I am right. What is more, I think I am *absolutely* right.

Suppose I go to this house and imitate a dog, which was done by one of Lubitsch's characters; in similar circumstances. I ring the bell, someone opens the door, I say, 'Gav, gav, gav,' and am admitted to the house in question which is unquestionably mad. I cannot bite just anybody. Of course I can, considering that I am mad, as mad as many dogs. But I have no wish to bite just anybody, any person. I wish to bite Dashen'ka's former mother, owner or *propriétaire*. (She is French, by the way; or Belgian.) But how could you gain access to a madman or a madwoman? Of course you can act as a dog acts in any circumstances. If a dog needs to go to a madhouse, he does not have to do anything special. He barks and is admitted to this madhouse without any problem that may arise if a human decides to perform the same act. Some dogs, many of them, cannot go to restaurants, and some buses, trolleybuses are forbidden to take such animals on board. (Only ants are permitted.)

Well, I am admitted and can therefore walk inside the establishment to which I was generously, humanely admitted by some nurse or other. I think it is the other nurse I spoke to in the course of this admission. Anyway, I am already inside. But how to find the madwoman I am looking for? Why look for mad people? To say they are amusing is vulgar; and if you cannot characterise such an act in such a manner – too strong, isn't it, too irrevocable? – you just do not define them, madmen and women. You just say, 'They're mad,' but the problem is you are looking for one person, not for the greater part of humanity. This part is too great and you may get lost during your search, even if you reduce it to a minimum.

Suppose you have three women in front of you. They are all mad – no doubt about it. But the woman you are looking for, determined as you are to insult her once and for all – of course you can insult her as often as you wish, but every time it should be once and for all – is not really recognisable. One of these women is Marie-Antoinette – this goes without saying; as usual, as usual. Many people wish to write novels or at least some poems. They spend hours in front of their computers and finally say to the whole world, 'All this goes without saying. Why should I write anything?' But what goes without saying, pray? (Pray or prey? Anyway, you are a prey, one of them. And this, this instance, truth or occurrence also goes without saying.) And actually, praying will never do you any harm, even if you are a criminal.

One woman is called Marie-Antoinette – please, consult the previous sentences – and one of the other women bears the name of the last Russian Empress. And the third one is just Cleopatra. Which one are you looking for? Don't forget you are longing, yearning for a bite; not for a sexual intercourse. If sexual intercourse were on the agenda, you would rush towards the woman who says 'Yes', whenever Marie-Antoinette is touched upon, if only on a sheet of paper – you touch her name and hear 'Yes' coming from the row of these women – and you wonder what this 'yes' means. You have heard so many 'yeses' in the course of your life. (And everything happens in the course of something; of your life, for instance. Or of the life of Julius Caesar. Or of the life of Pushkin, as the Russians usually say.) Everything has changed, and this sentence or judgment could be repeated every morning, if we took the trouble to look at the word closely, not superficially. We open our eyes, look at the world and say, upon awakening, 'The same merde,' and it is not necessary to put this word in italics: everyone knows what merde means, even if they do not speak French. You say, 'Merde,' and hear the inevitable, inexorable answer, 'Merde.' Sometimes you also hear, 'That's right,' or 'By all means,' although I do not quite understand the second reaction.

There are other reactions to be envisaged. For instance, 'Yes, it's merde, but I don't have any reason which might incline me to pursue this discussion, telling the whole story of MERDE.' This story is told every day and we have no need to state, to reaffirm that it is also told every minute and even every second, every tiny, little second. And if there is something smaller than a second, this story resounds within this entity daily, hourly.

What else resounds daily? If you live in Moscow – and I lived in Moscow for 26 years – you are aware that your life unfolds in the neighbourhood of the Kremlin which booms, booms, booms; not all the time, *Gottsei dank*. That is how the Russian emperors gave utterance to their sentiments attuned to the bells suspended somewhere in the Kremlin. You hear these booms, booms – or tombs, rather, given the number of Russian patriots and ordinary citizens assassinated during Russian history – and your day becomes a piece of music you do not like or you adore: there is no other way, no third solution, no third policeman. (I like this novel very much.) You hear these booms and begin to imitate them in your apartment (you seldom own houses in Moscow). Boom, boom, boom; and at the end you find the ugly remains of what your apartment was in days of yore.

Everything is yore; so is everybody. That is what Russia looks like today, feels like today. Just yore, yore, yore. That is how they sang in the region of the Volga, in days of yore:

Yore, yore, draw this bloody boat.
 Yore, yore. Let's draw it once again.
 For the last time, for the last time.
 Yore, yore, yore, yore, yore, yore, yore.

Little by little, you begin to imitate these drawers– or whatever their name was – in your intimate life. Your companion does not want to do anything, no matter what. Suddenly, you burst into this song, 'Yore, yore, yore.' (Sung by Chaliapin, by the way.) You sit down at your dinner table with your spouse – and literally sing, 'Yore, yore, yore,' while waiting for your favourite dish. That is how the Russians are depicted by Westerners who mock them viciously and round the clock. And if they find the clock that does not respond to their expectations, they make it rounder still to mock the Russians round and round and round and round and surround the clock. I do it as well – How could I approve their ways? – but leisurely, ferociously; somehow tenderly, in homage to Pushkin. Why should I be tender on account of Pushkin? Tender towards the Russians in spite of the war they imposed on the Ukrainians? Why? Because Pushkin is in my blood, and what could you do with your blood? You could open your veins and let it go, go, go – wherever it likes, as far as it likes. And you are not prepared to collect this lost blood, saying to it, 'Please, fill the cup I hold in my right hand.'

And there are names, and we often forget names for the sake of words. And one can say, 'Well, a name is a word, and if you cherish words you should also cherish names.' I shall pick out one name only: Vavilov. Another Russian name, and many of us are already weary of Russian names. Pushkin is all right, of course, because he wrote, 'I loved you, the love is not completely extinguished in my heart.' There are no extinguishers for love among the objects I possess. They may extinguish a bonfire which spreads too insolently through the forest I chose as a monument to my walk and rest. But this extinguisher is not fit for love, and that happens or does not happen because love is not a forest, although there are many trees in it: the Tree of Life, the Tree of Love, the Tree of Betrayal, the Tree of Trial, and so on. Oh, these trials they talk about on television, on YouTube. 'This child is mine.'

'No, this child is mine.'
 'I know you're his mother. He left your womb and saw the universe only after leaving your womb.'
 'My womb, mind you.'
 'Yes, I know. I have no womb.'
 'You have nothing at all, not even brains. Let alone a heart.'
 'But I'd like to have my son.'
 'This son of yours, for all his beauty, will never perform the part of a heart. In your body.'
 'But he'll perform the part of my son. And that's enough, you know.'
 'I don't know, I don't know. Why don't you sentence this bastard to death?'

They sentence the bastard to death. So what? His son feels the absence of his father acutely. Now and then he stretches out his arms, saying, 'Daddy, come to me, please! You never do, I know, but this time I

earnestly ask you to come and accept my embrace, my filialembbrace. If you don't accept this embrace, I'll fling my body out of that window over there; or this one over here, if you wish.'

The window is open; both windows are open, as a matter of fact, but the son hesitates. Now he goes to one window, now he changes his mind (and also his gate) and goes to the other window as if it was beautiful, as if it appealed to his senses which were educated by Raphael, among other masters of the past. At some point, this young man says to himself, 'Why should I throw myself out of the window which never felt Raphael's hands and chisel?' So you go to the Vatican and choose an appropriate window, the window appropriate for your suicide. And yet you realise that no Vatican window is appropriate for your suicide; for obvious reasons. People come to the Vatican for blessings, their thoughts filled with blessings of all kinds. They hear, for instance, 'God has chosen you for the next Nobel Prize. Be careful! Don't drive your car too often. If I were you, I wouldn't drive it at all before the ceremony.'

The daughter, if you have a daughter and even if you do not have one, hesitates as well. But, for all the love she feels for the centuries which are no longer with us, except in museums, she prefers her own addition to these vestiges of the past. On one portrait she puts her favourite ribbon, celebrated by several songs and singers; on another she puts a letter from her beloved whose love is expressed rather briefly, though poignantly, 'I love you.' He wrote it somewhere, probably during one of his expeditions about which he talks spontaneously and with great gusto; so no one suspects foul play. And the play he is engaged in is really foul, *wirklich, wirklich* foul. Well, as soon as he leaves the house, waving at least two hands to accentuate the importance of his farewell, he greets his sweetheart who asks him the following question, 'On what expedition are we going this time?' And he answers innocently – at least his looks are innocent – 'To the island of love.'

'What did you say?' says his companion, trembling all over.

'To the island of love.'

'To the *island* of love?'

'All right, to the continent of love.'

'To the *continent* of love? And what about the world? And the cosmos?'

'All right, all right – to the cosmos of love.'

You jump higher and higher, and after a while you have the feeling you have encapsulated the whole of love at the end of your jumps. You open your hands and see the whole of love, all its details, nuances and circumstances. But what is unrequited love? The question of love is a neighbour of the problem we tackle day in, day out. Some scientists affirm it is the same problem, but only naive representatives of our species think that if one problem is resolved, the other will be no problem at all. In other words, by solving one problem, you will solve both. This is not as simple as might appear at first glance. And even your second glance finds no outlet, no easy-going solution. On the other hand, you see a non-easy-going solution, strolling by your side, in the same street. You regard this neighbourhood, the very fact of their closeness, as an affront to your dignity. Well, the second problem is death of course, and you launch into the same question-answer discussion which has bothered you for so many years. If your love is not inside or, to make things easier, if you do not hold it in your hand, if you do not carry it through the streets towards a place, the Black Sea, for instance, you do not have it. The verdict is rather obvious, and you do not like it. Some of the sages you are acquainted with say you should lose touch with love; and life. This means that all your life you lose touch with death, and if asked about your

relationship with death, you just answer. 'We are no longer in touch. Actually, he must be rather far from where we're talking now. He is on a geological expedition.'

'What is he looking for?' asks your interlocutor.

'Oh, he's on his usual rounds. Looking for interesting corpses.'

'What kind of corpses? I know that there are interesting corpses and uninteresting corpses. An interesting corpse gives you an opportunity to find a new remedy against cancers. All other remedies have failed, as you must know. After all, you're an eminent specialist in this field. But suppose that both corpses contain a lot of cancerous cells. Which one would you prefer? Do you have any means of measuring this kind of thing?'

'In my opinion, an interesting corpse speaks to God and you can hear their conversation.'

'Really? In what language do they converse?'

'In God's language.'

'In Aramaic? In Hebrew?'

'None of your business, you know.'

Yes, that accounts for the unusual sights you see in the streets, on public squares. Some people hold something in their hands, and for nothing in the world would they show you what they treasure to such an extent, with such intensity. Of course they are convinced they carry and protect the sentiment of love, of universal love, or of a particular love; and their conviction is not easily shaken.

Nothing is really easy in this world of ours. Of course it is easy to catch cancer and even to die from it, but there are other domains where you are powerless and often ridiculous. For instance, the cure. You wish to cure cancer which has already reached its last stage. A doctor puts you in the picture, and you tell him frankly you do not like the picture. 'Well, there's nothing I can do about it,' he says, opening his arms as if to embrace you.

'Don't open your arms, please don't! One might think you welcome death with open arms.'

'Let us believe I welcome the cure and a happy life.'

'But you told me the cancer was incurable. Why did you lie to me?'

'Not to see you grief-stricken. Such an image is always ugly.'

'But you continue to lie about my brother's convalescence and happy life.'

'To make you smile. I like your smile, you know.'

'It's not the problem of your likes and dislikes we are tackling. Pull yourself together, Herr Doctor.'

'I'm trying my best.'

'Of course your fatness doesn't allow you to pull yourself together without toil, but take the trouble, please. Consult the sorcerers of *Macbeth* fame.'

Pulling yourself together is a figure of speech, although such figures play an important part in our development, in the development of our faculties; and even in the development of the underdevelopment of our body. We pull ourselves together, and often our mothers and cousins say to us as they smile viciously, 'Pull yourself together, and I don't mean psychologically.' Upon hearing such advice, you can answer as follows, 'I'm afraid I'm not a very good advertisement for the diet since I've actually put on weight!'

'I don't ask you to become an advertisement for the diet. I need you as a scientist who can't work properly if he – you, in the present case – doesn't pull himself together.'

'But how could I do that?'

‘Just enter a lift and let the doors embrace you heartily – a Russian bear hug, you know. And then the Russian bear will squeeze the last drop of your blood from your brand-new body.’

Life is hard and sometimes you pull yourself together so as not to leave your members, your tendons and joints, on the ground; so as not to scatter them around. Of course you can inaugurate a museum wholly devoted to your body and its parts. In the history of the arts they have been trying to create this attraction, standing for hours and hours in front of several sceptics who would give them water and even eggs; but no bread, no butter, odd as this may appear. Everything was bizarre: two or three people exposing their bodies to the torments of famine, to a shameless exposure of their members and so on. Some visitors went so far as to hang their visiting cards on those shameful members. Actually, after a while one had the feeling those members were more ashamed of the ongoing process, of the unheard-off situation that their owners who, according to journalists, did not mind at all.

They continued to remove some parts of their bodies, affirming they cannot eliminate weight classically, whereas a romantic approach to the problem guaranteed both health and longevity. Some of the experimenters would remove literally everything, with the exception of their nails, saying, ‘Everyone knows that our nails survive our disasters, including death. And if they dare lift the panel beyond which our body enjoys its partial rest – the lid is removed regularly; by thieves, by boys – they find only nails. Precious stones are gone, statuettes are gone as well. (I’m thinking about Egyptian tombs.) But our nails are still there, on the spot. And some of them continue to scrub the earth and some parts of the sarcophagus or whatever it is, whatever our body is protected with. Sometimes the nails get out and aim their weapons at the stars and what lies beyond them. The apocalyptic Russians – some call them apoplectic – are determined to ‘scrub the eyes of the universe out’, depriving it of starry nights and other romantic touches. ‘There’s nothing romantic in our bloody life,’ they maintain. ‘And I, for one, have no wish to see this horror any longer!’ One wonders why they do not scrub their own eyes out to participate more convincingly in the performances of *King Lear*. They do their utmost to get this part, to get enlisted, as Buster Keaton said and did. They scrub out one of their eyes. They stumble and complain about the universal darkness. But the stage director shakes his head. ‘You saw this chair, otherwise you wouldn’t have walked round it. You wouldn’t have skirted this chair. You would have received it fairly and squarely – right in your genitals. I mean, your genitals would have received the weight, the might of this chair, which would have crippled you for life. At least for some part of your life. Frankly speaking, I don’t know which part I’m talking about, but I can see you wobbling around, shedding tears and some of your clothes that always get in the way, especially when you’re crippled and so can’t handle your body and whatever comes (and goes) with it properly.’

But is it really necessary? Pulling yourself together? All right, your whole body is one thing; you are huddled up, compact, condensed. A nuclear bomb descends upon you and your compact body is scattered all over the Earth; in the twinkling of an eye. And this eye of yours is also scattered – perhaps not really all over the Earth. But what does it matter? Does it really matter to you whether your eye (the one that twinkled) can be found in Australia, among other countries and continents? I think I got the gist of what I was thinking about. Wouldn’t it be better for all of us not to pull ourselves together? On the contrary – it might be better to tear ourselves apart so as not to expose our whole body to one or several bombs – in one lump, The bomb is dropped and your life, your whole existence, ends up in a shapeless lump. Is it all right with you? I don’t think so. And I am not sure the problem concerns your shapelessness or shapefullness. (Or shamefulness, for that matter.

Whether you are shameful or not concerns only God, St Peter and other substances of this kind.) Well, you are absolutely shapeless. Your thoughts are shapeless, your legs look like your thoughts, your sentiments look like your arms or armpits. Of course you can pull together whatever is left of your being, whatever you (or rather the bomb) left behind. All right, go ahead. You have my blessing, as they say sometimes, before an operation or just an action begins. Blessing or not, your jelly-like remains just remain – that is all they can do. And if you are satisfied with this state of affairs, you can also remain, just remain. You are not allowed to surpass yourself, this state of yours. You are not allowed to overshoot yourself. You are not even allowed to shoot, to use a water pistol, for instance. You are not allowed to use anything at all. As a matter of fact, you cannot even go to the lavatory. Actually, you do not need to. Your remains remain where they are: nobody minds this particular disorder. Why? Because there is nobody left to protest, to manifest one's or his or her displeasure. There are no ones, no twices, no thrices. Is it the end of the world I am trying to describe to the best of my abilities? Do my abilities stop at this mark, at this incomplete stage? Probably they do. But what do I care? Some of my abilities might lie scattered in New Zealand. But am I prepared to fly all the way to that distant country and recover my abilities or what remains of them? What for?

Well, suppose I am hungry, and the only country where I could find something to eat is New Zealand. I put on my trousers and the rest of my remains (my clothes are also a heap of remains) and go to the nearest airport and fly, fly, fly, fly, for hours and hours and hours. I arrive at my destination and concoct the most amazing dish from all sorts of unlikely ingredients. Sure enough, the ingredients are unlikely; so is the dish. I am unlikely too, come to think of it. But what is really likely? It is likely I shall remain at the spot where, some time ago, I realised that a bomb, an atom bomb, had dropped on my head. My head is not Hiroshima: I am quite aware of the fact. According to Putin, however, atom bombs may drop everywhere and destroy everything, not only Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And some other Russians – many of them, I'm sorry to say – agree with their president. One of them said recently, 'If I had an atom bomb in my pocket, I would take hold of it and drop it on the United States, on England.'

'But atom bombs cannot be put into your pockets,' someone said.

'Have you ever heard the word "nanotechnology"?' asked the first character.

'Yes. So what?'

'Have you heard about the amazing progress of technology and science?'

'Yes.'

'I'm sure that in one or two years this technology will enable me to put a bomb into my jacket pocket. And then I'll drop it on the United States and many other states. And Russia will conquer the world.'

There are lots of balls in the world, and sometimes we even get the feeling there is nothing else in the world: only balls, balls, balls. Of course we realise, after a while, that not everybody dances around us, and even if we walk for several hours, we shall see a lot of people who hurry in one direction or another. But when hurrying in these directions, they do not dance, contrary to what the word 'ball' suggests; they just walk or run. The word 'ball' may also be applied to the thing which we see in stadiums, and some of us prefer these balls to bombs, especially if the bomb we are talking about can destroy a country or several cities. It is preferable to watch a game, be it football, soccer, volleyball and other balls, on condition that these balls are in no way connected to atoms. We know that atoms are very small, and their infinitesimal size bars our way to the usage I touched upon in the previous sentence. You cannot select one atom, put it near one of your feet and open the

score, as they say. No goalkeeper will see such a ball; and if you do not see a ball you cannot defend your goal, whatever this goal happens to be in this world of ours. Of course you can judge some people in these terms, saying, for instance, 'I can't say he's lazy and spends his time on divans and similar objects. No, he has a goal in his life, as they say. A goal in his or her life. But this goal is so insignificant you cannot really see it. Nor can you feel it. You need a collection of the balls of this kind. And it's almost impossible to express the meaning you have in your head, when dealing with such balls, matters and so on. They are so insignificant, infinitesimal, indefinable, inde, inde! In short, all this is inde. Not indeed – inde, if you please. Even if your spellchecker doesn't accept your way of reasoning, you insist and inde remains on the pages you write for posterity or just for yourself, to kill time. And space, come to think of it. How come? How come you can also kill space, while you are at it? The explanation is very simple, and its simplicity is astonishing, not to say incredible. If you write inde or something of the kind, another nonsensical word, you realise you have no wish to go anywhere. Your space has been reduced to the size of the word inde. You can use four gigantic letters to express your thought completely, fully. INDE, or something along these lines. But don't yield to the temptation that always lies in wait for you. Don't go on! Yes, you're a coward, and they certainly say, "He's too lazy to walk to work." And they may add, "He's too lazy anyway. He can't even walk towards the table on which there lies a bar of chocolate." They can also say something like, 'He's too lazy to pick up a heap of banknotes lying on the same table.' And then you can interfere, interrupt their exterior monologue to say, 'It depends on what kind of banknotes can be found in this heap. What is it made up, in other words? Actually, I can explain my laziness very easily. I know for sure that this heap displays only roubles, nothing else. Who needs roubles? may I ask. Do *you* need roubles? Well, no one prevents you from picking this heap of rubble up and putting it in your attaché case. And if your attaché case is too small for this heap, go and buy another attaché case, a bigger model; if you think that this heap of roubles is worth the effort you'll make in the course of your exercise. Or do you want to count them first? The roubles, I mean? Is it worth our while counting roubles? Is it worth our while touching them? Don't we run a great many dangers, when touching such objects? Any object of no value? Even *speaking* about such objects may result in what they call untold harm. You may get contaminated. You become a rouble yourself. Or a heap of roubles, which amounts to the same thing. Actually roubles never amount to anything – it's not in their nature. In a way, they're amountless. You can't affirm that this morning you saw an amount of roubles. You can't even say "an amountless of roubles". Don't use the word "amount", when speaking about roubles. Even the word "amountless" is too honourable for them. Don't bestow any honour on roubles – they're not worth it. They aren't worth anything. But don't say, "They're worthless," because they don't even deserve this worthlessness. They don't even deserve the word "less". They are less than less. They are less than anything. They are even less than less. I have no idea who is talking now. Roubles are talkless and so it is unnecessary to put any sign, whenever the word "rouble" enters into the spirit of the game. '.....'. All this is meaningless. Even the word 'roubles' is meaningless. Why? Because even a hundred roubles are not worth anything, let alone a rouble, a single rouble left somewhere, on some table or other. For an hour or so, you try to make the most of it. As a result you get a heap of ashes, but you protest on the ground that, even if a rouble itself is worthless it does not bury you on the spot, because you are worthless too. No, you wrote a lot of treatises, mathematical formulas and equations; and also axioms. These are not mere pieces of paper: they are axioms, eternal truths. And one of these eternal truths says, 'I got out of my bed and saw the sun which I cut in two, in

three, in four. And I got the moon as a result of my experiment. I also applied the same knife to my body and accordingly became a moon, Saturn. Satan.'

You cut out the world; at least you cut out what you have before your very eyes. A newspaper, for instance. You see an announcement in this paper; or on the screen of your computer. You cut it out and put it in your bedroom: it is a wonderful, comfortable, prolific bed. This means you can make love on it to your heart's or rather your genitals' content or contents: contents are always better than mere content. When asked, 'Which one do you prefer? Singular or plural?' you always say, 'Plural, for God's sake.' And once again you repeat the phrase you like so much (among other phrases and idioms and what not): It goes without saying. All right, it goes, it goes, it goes. And sometimes you write, 'It toes, it toes, it toes.' As if only your toes were involved in the process. All right, I accept it. I accept everything, as long as it does not harm my body to which I cling with all my psychological and mystical powers. And whenever it starts harming my body in earnest – these harms are often performed in earnest – I stop them with a categorical gesture. (They understand gestures much better than words.) My gestures say (but not literally; not verbally, rather), 'Stop it, you fools,' and they stop rather frequently. And if some of them do not, I repeat the gesture. Finally everything (let alone everyone) subsides, and worldwide peace comes at last; and there are no better moments in my life. Which moment could triumph over this moment of absolute peace? A moment of absolute war? No way, no way, as they used to say in the States. No way, no way. And little by little you grow rooted to the spot. Or rather you *become* rooted to the spot. If you grow, you do grow, and when growing you lose the spot to which, for some time, for a few seconds or hours, you were rooted. Consequently you are no longer rooted to this spot. They add 'up' to your 'rooted' and you become uprooted; or grow uprooted. What counts is your state, and your state is defined as 'uprooted'. It does not really matter how you came to this state of affairs, to this cul de sac, to this utter misery. What you single out from your dire straits is 'utter misery'. You utter this misery and subside. All your passions and élans subside at the same time or moment. What to do? To subside utterly.

Notwithstanding your misery or rather your miseries, you go on cutting up the world. And as you go on and on, you say to yourself and to others, 'This bit is mine, this castle is mine as well. And if you don't mind my driving this wonderful car, it is mine too. I hope you don't mind. And if you do, I don't mind.' Cut the meat up into small pieces. This knife does not cut very well, it is not sharp enough. You go on cutting up the world and these phrases or rather sentences (death sentences) pop up all the time as if they had nothing to do; nothing except popping, popping, popping. From time to time you realise you cut up some sort of meat, and then you require a sharper knife which might enable you to cut up some parts of the world population. Why not? You do not underestimate this population, not at all. Of course you prefer paintings and jewels, but cutting up the world population or some part of it, some carefully chosen part, is also part of your hobby. Cut the meat up into small pieces. Why do you really need to cut it into *small* pieces? Because small pieces are easier to manipulate, to devour. If you have a small piece of meat on your plate, you can just put it into your mouth, without any preliminary gestures. In other words, you do not have to cut a small piece into pieces: it is already small; small enough for your mouth; and stomach. And what if your stomach informs you at some stage, 'You know, the piece you sent me isn't small enough. It is unwieldy, you know. What am I supposed to do with it?'

'Try to cut it into pieces.'

'But I have no knives at my disposal. That's how we talk in our intestine world. We're Francophiles.'

'Well, you have enough teeth at your disposal, I suppose.'

‘But they’re not sharp enough. I’m a soft, mild creature, you know.’

‘I don’t mind your being mild, but leave me in peace. Will you? Leave me alone.’

What am I sure about? Many people are sure about bum, bum, bum. They hear a bum or produce it. And they are convinced they have achieved their goal, whatever this goal is or meant to be. Incidentally, all these goals aim at one end, and you can see it at the end of the road. The end of this road is over there, at the end of your thoughts or your computer. You just type, ‘The end of the world,’ and that is the end of it. Yet you continue to think, and when thinking you ask yourself, ‘What is there beyond the end of the world?’ And then a lot of theories sprang up everywhere, and you declare that the world has no end because Giordano Bruno said so somewhere, in one of the centuries you did not live through. Why didn’t you say that yourself? You were born too late for this kind of exploit. What exploits were you born for?

A priest says to you, ‘This is the end of the road. Do you believe me?’

And you say, ‘I do. Where’s this end?’

‘You understand it too literally. You’re imbued with literary notions, with literality.’

For a while you play with odds and realise there are no ends as such.

This reminds me of the game we used to play at school: noughts and crosses. For some reason, even if I was losing reason I saw the advantage of the noughts. Such things happen not only in games, but also in trivial lives which are so trivial sometimes they do not even know how to designate themselves. In other words, they have no passports and so, whenever asked about the whereabouts of such a thing, they say, ‘You may look for it at nullissimos.’ Sounds like Patmos. Yes, it does have a venerable, respectable ring to it. So they produce your nullissimos and you say, ‘That’s what I mean. That’s what I am.’

‘But you’re also Grandissimo, according to another page.’

‘Oh, it’s just another page. Don’t pay too much attention to it.’

‘But it’s in your passport, so we can’t discard it offhandedly.’

‘So discard it offhandedly, if you wish. You wish to discard something, you just wish it, and it discards itself selfishly.’

Communication, communication. They often repeat this word, showing how they communicate, the upper regions and the lower ones. Apparently they just take their index finger and draw an imaginary line from bottom to top or the other way round, or the other way updown. What comes first? The up we are talking about or the down we are loath to talk about; for obvious reasons? What is down will never be up, whatever Trismegist says. Hermes, I mean.

Pain, pain, pain. If you ask me when and where, I shall tell you, ‘Right now, at this particular moment, in this particular arm or hand of mine. It may even happen in my little finger. Nothing is little when pain happens to be so big. So, please, call your nurse, ask her by phone to put her biggest syringe in her Hermes bag and take a taxi to reach my place in no time at all. You know my address, don’t you?’

An atom is flying towards a remote galaxy, and this atom is called a ‘bomb’. That is why we waste our precious time on its content and significance. If it was an atom, just an atom *de rien du tout*, we would not even talk about

it, saying, 'It's something. Starting with an A.' But if you attach the word 'bomb' to this atom, you endow it with something unbelievable, which is believable, alas, more and more believable. Of course even the word deprived of atoms – I mean, the word bomb – is not pleasant, and it is better to avoid it, even if you are at home. And if you leave your abode and walk in the direction of the office where you spend some hours, it is better to take another road. Road taken, not taken – this reminds you of a famous poem. You take a road, and you have no idea what is flying along this road. If they take the trouble to inform you that along this road, flying in the direction of your body, of the most vulnerable parts of it, there is an atom, you answer thus, 'All right. This atom is not alone, I suppose. And I hope it's accompanied by a number of worthy fellows.' And then you are stopped in your tracks; someone stops your speech in its tracks. Your speech presupposed an exposé of what happens in the worlds where atoms fly, copulate and create all sorts of combinations, some of which may remind chess players of Alekhine or Capablanca. Actually a great many games are delivered by our cosmos in the course of our unconscious flights, and these games are called 'immortal', some of them; and others are stigmatised on the basis of their contents.

What counts is the transmission, communication. Yes, you finally decide to draw a hole in your floor, which will enable you to contaminate your neighbours. Misunderstandings are always lying in wait for us, and you should not think I want to kill all my neighbours outright; or even in slow motion. There is no motion in this direction – I can assure you. This means I mean no harm to my neighbours, although I hate them heartily. Which organ best suits my hate? Not the heart – that is for sure. Bile? (Not an organ.) A bitter yellow liquid produced by the liver which helps to digest fat. What seems appropriate for my scheme is the word 'bile' and even its definition. It does not happen regularly, contrary to what many people think: words do not *always* correspond to their definitions. Bile is an ugly word (Bayle, Stendhal?) and the explanation they supply puts us off whatever is connected with this world, world, galaxy and atoms. Of course they add the following bit, 'Meat-eaters must produce extensive bile acids in their intestines to properly digest the meat that they eat,' but we are quite aware of the fact that vegetarians live much longer than meat eaters; and that is enough to make us use the construction 'to guard against' more often than not. It is all the more sinister since all these mixtures and combinations are full of atoms. And some of them – I am sure of that – copulate with bombs on a regular basis. What happens when you copulate with a bomb? The bomb explodes, even if you remain relatively indifferent. You cannot deny you experience something in the course of this contact, but this contact and what you experience in the course of it have nothing to do with what they call 'erotica'. It is just a sort of spasm, and you can have a series of spasms at the end of your life. a muscle/muscular spasm (mainly UK). My leg suddenly went into spasm. Wait a minute! On condition that you have a leg to speak of; and if you happen to stay in Moscow, your leg can suddenly go into spasm – that's for sure.

The point is, the members of your body, of any body, of anybody, are likely to feel jealous, if another member belonging to the same constitution or construction does not feel what that other body feels, for instance a spasm. One member goes into spasm, and another member is totally frustrated. This other member does not know exactly what spasm means, but it does mean something, and any meaning is better than no meaning, according to this other member. So this member decides that in the world there is only injustice which allows some member to take advantage of life, of being alive in this life of ours, and other members do not get anything from this so-called life; nothing at all, to be precise. Spasm is probably nothing, nothing special, that is, but it is better than mere nothing. On the one hand you get nothing; on the other you get something. And something is

always better than nothing, according to our common sense. You can contradict whoever airs this view, saying, that it is better not to be wounded than to have your body injured from head to foot. This means that your body is just a wound, a prominent, noticeable, ugly scar. ‘That’s nothing,’ they say to you. And the Russians add, ‘That will heal before your wedding.’ But there are other points of view. Her scar healed, but the redness remained for a long time. His face is covered with scar tissue where he was badly burned. This woman and this man are in front of you and you can see the relevance, the truth of the sentences I wrote a few moments ago.

Whatever happens to you may be healed, to some degree, but something remains; the redness, for instance. The woman you are in love with said something to the effect that she loves somebody else, and you said to her, ‘You know, it doesn’t matter because I don’t love you.’ Suppose you do not love her, but the redness remains, for some reason. You explain this phenomenon to many people: to all those who react upon looking at your face. These reactions are different and range from a grunt to a sort of ‘O’ you have never heard before. You have not decided yet which reaction you prefer and, frankly speaking, you think you have no preferences in this domain. But one thing is certain: you are annoyed, whenever you detect a reaction on the part of the people who cross your path in the street as if nothing had happened. I mean, they were preoccupied by their financial situations and had no time for other pedestrians whose walks might be bizarre from time to time, to put it mildly. And suddenly they react to a redness which has nothing unusual in itself and appears on many faces, for many reasons. You are slapped by your rival or by a jealous woman. What may surprise us is the fact that, among the pedestrians you pass, some are so curious and nonchalant that they follow you to find out if your redness is a momentary phenomenon. If it does not disappear after two or three minutes, they conclude that the woman you infuriated loves you deeply or is just an Olympic champion.

Oddly enough, there are passers-by who think you murdered someone, a human being. Instead of making a list of possible victims, they come to the hasty conclusion that you destroyed a human life, the most precious life in the universe. First they dwell (for a few seconds) on the preciousness of this life – of which they partake as well, mind you. If their reflections on the subject take more than a few seconds, they may consider some negative moments of the same life, saying to themselves, ‘After all, I wouldn’t mind being dead. What does my existence amount to, may I ask? (In such moments we always speak to someone.) Of course I’m not courageous enough to do myself in, but if a stranger could do it in my place, I wouldn’t avert his knife. I wouldn’t lift my finger to interfere with the perfectness of its trajectory. I might even give it an additional push to make sure it doesn’t miss my heart. Yes, I should make sure that nothing goes amiss.’

There are holes in the world, and some people think there are white holes in their midst. I maintain there are only black holes, and this does not necessarily mean that everything disappears into them, once and for all. Something might *appear* in them, something sinister, weird and awful. And all these weirdnesses surpass whatever we can imagine, when consulting our notebooks and other books we chance upon during our wanderings around the world. I have the feeling that, even if such things did not exist, we would figure them out or up or down. We would fill the world up with awful figures, if it was not already filled to the brim many centuries ago. Every century made its own contribution to the general evil, but many of us are convinced that the Second World War put an end to these horrors by the most unimaginable horrors. You try to imagine a piece of horror – let us call this phenomenon thus – and then you imagine something even more horrible. You go on and on, in spite of the

horridity (I cannot find another suitable word) accumulated so far, and come up with a world record, a universal record. (Horridness?) And then you call it just ‘a record’ and tell yourself, ‘I should surpass myself, otherwise I’ll never become a superman.’ And you become a superman with the passing of the years and centuries. They pass and old records are beaten. You beat them hollow. You beat their brains out. (Oddly enough, even horrendous horrors have brains so that some saviours of humanity think we should beat their brains out.) And if you are reminded of this hollow truth – there are hollow crowns and hollow truths – you just say to these philosophers, ‘Do you see that object over there?’ And if they tell you they are short-sighted, you answer as follows, ‘Can you see your own nose? In this mirror I’m holding before your very nose?’ And then you beat this noses’ brains out.

There are sages whose belief in the unquestionable purity and innocence of our world is unshakeable. You shake their heads, shoulders and the rest of their anatomy, but they are stubborn: they stick to their pure truth and nothing can make them change their minds, points of views and the rest of their private nonsense. So you beat their anatomy’s brains out, and you continue to beat them as long as something – however tiny and weenie and weedy – remains or stays or persists somewhere down below, in their hearts of hearts, in their brains of brains. At some point you may feel satisfied; in spite of the great, profound experience you have in this domain, in the domain called ‘beating their brains out’. And then (after a while) you notice a hole, a tiny, weenie hole through which an optimistic rivulet makes its pernicious, brain-confusing way. And so the world where you felt yourself on the safe side – because you put everything on this side, in safe hands operating within safe houses, in a safe – turned out to be even more hideous than what they call ‘hideousness itself’. And all this happens on account of one miserable hole. After all, this is logical, isn’t it? All the miseries we encounter in this world come from a tiny hole you are not even supposed to notice, let alone pay attention to. And then another sage comes along with a gigantic magnifying glass. ‘Magnificent, isn’t it?’ he asks.

‘It is. Very beautiful indeed,’ you answer.

‘Do you wish to use it, for the sake of trying? For argument’s sake?’

‘What argument? What are you talking about?’

‘You don’t even know what I’m talking about.’

‘No.’

‘And you’re convinced you know the great secret of the world.’

‘No. What secret are you talking about?’

There are no secrets either in the world or outside it. Everything is crystal clear and even more so, if you wish. And I am sure you wish something of the kind. Anyway, your wishes are irrational, emotional and ridiculous, so taking them seriously makes no sense. Nothing makes sense apart from the holes I am talking about. You can build a beautiful palace, but if there is a hole in this palace of yours – I mean a hole can ruin anything and everything – it is not really a palace; it is just a hole. Sometimes it is an ordinary, innocent-looking hole. (They are all innocent and poisonous.) And even if you make a tremendous effort and examine every tiny inch of the palace in question, you are sure to overlook something; a tiny, hideous hole. And through this hole they will annihilate everything, down – or up, if you prefer – to your personal life. You think it is personal and so unreachable, in every sense of the word. But there are other senses of which you are not aware; or not *completely* aware. These senses are reachable and they bear this name proudly as if it meant just the opposite – unreachable. Whatever you can reach in no time is not interesting, and you know the trick; you learnt it some time ago. They

say ‘unreachable’, when speaking about your future goal, but you know it works the other way round. Whatever is easy is not worth the slightest of your efforts. It does not cost you much, but it brings no money to your piggy bank.

In a corridor I knocked into the woman I love and sent her sprawling, knocked her over. What on earth did I do that for? Of course I might have offered her a bunch of flowers or some jewellery. But these are commonplaces, and she dislikes common things; and even uncommon things do not send her into raptures unless they are really uncommon and can happen only once in a century. You are used to hearing her remarks directed at those who try to win her affections by *slightly* unusual things. Those suitors, those wooers count on her fondness for subtleties, but they are bitterly mistaken: subtlety as such is too common for her. Upon seeing such a trick, she turns away, purses her lips, says, ‘I don’t approve of that kind of subtlety,’ and leaves the room. Alas, we are in for yet another misunderstanding. Her wooer thinks that, to pursue his doomed love affair, he must remain within the kingdom of subtleties, instead of leaving it as soon as possible, settling in what they call an aestheticknockout. In this area – whenever you are lucky enough to reach it and make a few steps within that blessed region – you immediately stumble upon bodies that are lying around. You kick them, stumble upon them, play football with them. That is how it works, and I suppose the lady in question is eager to undergo this experience. Of course you could say to her, ‘I have no idea what you mean, when talking about these exquisite knockouts, but if you wish to lie down on my bed, I can knock you down rather easily.’

‘And what about soccer?’ she asks.

‘Well, are you really so keen on soccer?’

‘Yes, I am.’

‘And what about their football, the American variety?’

‘I prefer Pele. And Di Stefano, by the way.’

‘Fiorentina’s win against Palermo last night has considerably increased their chances of promotion this season,’ you say, just in case. Alas, the example you chose during your painstaking search for an interesting topic for your ongoing conversation was not the right one. It was an utterly wrong choice, and the lady left you stranded. Actually she left you stranded in town with no car and no money for a bus. How come? How come? How did all this happen so suddenly, so illogically? You had never been to the town where you landed because of your love, or rather because you do not know how to court such women. What kind of women do you have in mind? The women who are in love with knockouts. Not with *ordinary* knockouts, mind you. She is fond of *subtle* knockouts, of not-too-subtle knockouts, and no wonder that, from time to time, a hooligan, someone like Putin – who by now is as famous as Stalin, I suppose – might be tempted to send her flying. Not only her body, mind you. First he would send her wristwatch flying, and also some of her precious jewels. (‘Precious’ is a truism, this goes without saying. This goes without saying is also a truism. When all is said and done is also a truism except that all is not said, not yet; nor is all done.)

So you proceed in your usual manner. First you slap her face (to put her in the picture about what is going to happen) and then you snatch the victory from the jaws of the defeat. Why? How? How come? She looks at the jewels you continue to kick around the room and says, ‘You can strip my jewels and clothes off, but you’ll never possess me wholly.’

‘Are you really sure of what you’ve just said?’ you ask.

‘Pretty sure.’

And then you proceed in your usual manner. Actually, your manner is not really usual: it varies in accordance with the number of jewels you have to confront in the course of your battle with exaggerations, unimportant things, riches – with whatever hampers the progress of human beings, their movement towards perfection, purity and spirituality. Of course, upon reading the first lines of my report, many readers will exclaim, ‘How disgusting! What a horrible macho! What an unparalleled sadist! Where does he come from? From Russia, no doubt. In Russia there are only savages, jewel-snatchers. Yes, they’re all body-snatches, but they snatch mainly the bodies that are adorned or decorated with jewels. And if there are no jewels on the body they set their hearts upon, they snatch it all the same and begin smashing everything, armed with this body’s bones.’ ‘Ashes to ashes, bones to bones,’ they chant. And then they recall that the foundation of every piece of music is a tone and so they switch to another melody, ‘Tone to tone, tone to on.’ And we hear a funeral march which surpasses both Beethoven’s and Wagner’s creations. That surpasses Creation, and one has the feeling that nothing has ever being created, not even the tones you hear. They create themselves, responding to the funereal mood of Creation. There is a series of creations, and one exclaims, upon hearing booom, bbom, bbbbbb, ieneie, ziziz: ‘Another creation, another creation.’ Cr, cr, cr, cr, cr. And cr, cr raven, ‘Ever more!’

But sages never leave us: they are convinced they have a lot of lessons to deliver to humanity and its members; and to the members of their members. One member says to another, ‘Did you hear BVujh,ejkc vxoiseq?’ And the other answers, ‘Yes, I heard eiv i zozpozpz^\$z.’ And the show goes on. Someone says, ‘I see a hole.’ ‘Where? Where? Where?’ A few voices join in. ‘I see a tiny hole under my feet.’ And a I dialogue gets under way.

‘Where are your feet?’

‘Down there.’

‘Down where?’

‘Down there.’

‘Do you mean “*up* there”?’

‘No, I mean *down* there.’

‘Is it a topsy-turvy world?’

‘Not in the slightest.’

‘The government’s topsy-turvy priorities mean that spending on education remains low.’

‘Very low, very low indeed. People no longer know what “topsy” means.’

‘And what about “turvy”?’

‘Not in the slightest.’

‘And what about torvy?’

‘Not in the.’

‘And what about the?’

‘Not.’

Why can’t we just sit down, light up a cigarette and stay still for a while, if not forever? Because smoking is bad for our health, good for our death? All right, you do not have to smoke or do anything special, anything at all. You just sit in your armchair or in someone else’s armchair and do nothing. Doesn’t this idea appeal to you? It does and for a while – everything happens for a while, life, death – you do not move; even your eyes look at the wall opposite without moving, without moving in the direction of some other wall. But then the eyes, your

eyes – and someone else's eyes as well – get under way, and this way is as pernicious as all other ways you have endeavoured to cross so far. Crossing the North Pole on foot was an amazing feat of human endeavour, but you have never attempted such a feat. Yet, whatever you do is an endeavour; not an amazing endeavour perhaps. You promise to yourself – it is only to yourself that you promise anything – not to look in the direction of the only window you can boast about, when talking about your room; about anything. Even when you just talk about abouts, you always mention this window as if it were a feat in itself; being a window. Is it a hole? Why are you so afraid of this window of yours? Because it is an outlet, a promise; and all promises are vain, not to say ridiculous. All right – it is ridiculous. So what? Of course you live in a free country and so can look (to the) right and (to the) left. And even if you look straight ahead, if you examine the stretch of space lying in front of you, you will not be put into any prison you can think of. (Habitually you do not think about prisons, in terms of prisons.)

Of course there are holes everywhere, and you are tempted to certify this fact, whenever you have this opportunity. And you have it almost every second: it is enough to open your mouth and impart a few movements to your tongue which is lazy sometimes. Sometimes you cannot stop it, cannot stop talking as an individual, but mostly it lies indolently at the bottom of your construction, bodily construction, and you just enjoy your life; doing nothing, in other words. Of course there are holes everywhere, and you bear witness to this unavoidable fact. But there are also stopgaps; not everywhere, as might be supposed. But there are enough stopgaps in the world, and you often realise this inevitability; chiefly when you are on the threshold of a discovery or of plain happiness. You say to yourself, 'In a few moments I'll be happy forever.' And this forever never comes, I am sorry to say. Sure enough, something does come; for instance 'for'. But 'ever' remains forever beyond your reach. (And anybody's reach, if this can bring you some consolation.) So, more often than not, you say to yourself, 'Another stopgap, yet another, yet another.' You end up waiting for gaps, just for a few fragile, almost ludicrous gaps, but even they do not come. The result is even more lamentable than the rest of this sad story. You often come across the individuals who, upon doing something unusual (or even usual) say, 'Oups, ops, aps.' Actually these interjections have their origin in their expectation of a gap, of some gap or other. They see and feel an enormous wall – yet another homage to Pink Floyd – but there is nothing else in front of their eyes. That is how the Pink Floyd recording saw the light of day: there are no gaps and that is the end of it. An endless wall. An endless negative 'Vow'.

There are lights and their absences that we call 'night' or 'lightless day'. Of we just say, 'Something is wrong with my left eye.' Then we close this eye of ours and realise that the other one, our right eye, does not see anything either. How come we do see something? Well, we see the Devil or what they call 'the absolute blackness'. At times they just say 'blackness' and you mentally add the missing adjective. Absolute, absolute, absolute – the only way to reach the Absolute Truth after which we hanker all our lives. It is true that you can put some flowers on this blackness and its absolute character or tendency, but no change will ever occur within this situation. And this situation has only insides: no outsides at all. Whenever you say, 'I'll go for a walk,' your wife bursts into hateful laughter, for she knows you will never reach the threshold of your house, as Kafka might have put it. (He used to talk about next villages.) Yes, you do go for a walk, and after taking a few steps, knock your head against a book you re-read last week. Or last month – what does it matter! Yet this matters and you seize this opportunity which enables you to walk on, in spite of your utter immobility. You move your finger and ask it, 'Are you really moving? Or is it an illusion, another one? Yet another, yet another?' In this manner you

move all your fingers and also your legs. And while you are at it, you also move your thoughts. But do they move at all? You utter the following sentence, 'Police officers at the scene of the accident were asking passers-by to move along.' But the passers-by in question did not budge. That is what happens in Russia today. Some people – there are hundreds of them – put flowers on the monuments that keep the memory of the regime alive. (Putin's regime. Does that still ring abell? The one that tolls only for you?) Let us do away with these parentheses. Yes, these bells, Edgar Poe's inspired bells, toll and toll and toll. And John Donne joins them after a while. There is a character from some comedy or other. He says, 'Don, don, don, don,' at the end of every sentence he utters; or tries to utter; or thinks he utters. He also joins the battle, hands and the Putin club.

You speak about a war – not about wars in general, but about one particular war. And three centuries later no one knows what you are talking about. Of course wars are in our blood, and whenever you speak about them, you are not beside the point. You hit the point, you drive it in, and wars are always on the agenda, despite the treaties they sign almost every day. They sign a treaty and a bomb drops and explodes under your very nose. Of course you turn your head and your nose does not feel anything, but people drop on the left-hand side, on the right-hand side. Buildings and palaces drop too, and you can witness – you cannot do otherwise – a sort of rain. You may like it or not: it rains, pours and you are in the middle of all this havoc. What is more, you are wreaking it.

You decide not to wreak it anymore. But does it depend on your decisions? Do your decisions depend on your own decisions? Wreaking goes on, on its own, on its own, wreaking, reeking; and yet nothing really happens. Of course you execute a few flights and they say, 'He's tilting at windmills.' You hear some degrading notes, a reproach boarding on ridicule, and what is ridiculous kills you on the spot or on the next spot. You are killed on one spot but you are a fighter and so continue your journey through the night or through the day, as the case may be. Is it day? Is it night? The journey is there, under you, somehow, and then you realise you have just arrived at the other spot where you undress, in accordance with a venerated custom. You undress, keeping your trousers on for the sake of decency. But you are indecent nonetheless; everybody is aware of the fact. But you are not; you are not aware of the fact that everyone is aware of the fact you are indecent. And so you ask everybody, 'Am I indecent? Am I indecent?' They reassure you, they console you, and then you die because you are supposed to die on the spot; on this spot, among other spots of similar dimensions and structures. But what do the windmills have to do with the whole business? Then you decide to die in a blaze of glory and a pair of windmills may give you a helping hand or rather a helping wing. A helping wing flies towards you, you install yourself on it, you fly through their or through another substance, if you have already left the Earth. But there is something slightly ignominious in the whole enterprise, and you do not know exactly what it is. You cannot put your finger on the difficulty. Well, you do put your finger on the difficulty which happens to lie on one of the wings. So now you and the wing and the difficulty lying on it do your best to fly through the country you have never visited, not even when perusing Cervantes' book. Perhaps it was situated in a book written by one of his contemporaries. You go to several libraries in search of the book in question, but find only recent or old editions of the famous novel. Nothing doing – you resume your flight. And they say, 'He's tilting at windmills. And he has no idea how to do it properly.' So you try to do it properly, but they go on laughing and saying you should practise for this kind of flight. 'It's not a Boeing, you know,' they say, before resuming their laughter. So you sit down in a chair, tilt your chair backwards and put your feet up on your desk. 'How indecorous,' they say. 'You

behave like an American upstart, a vulgar individual whose origins are lost somewhere, in the wildness of the West.'

What counts in this ghastly ritual is the tilting you perform when appropriating this armchair for your personal comfort. (There are no other comforts in the world.) But once again you ask yourself a ritual question, 'What's all this about?' It is about the windmills of *Don Quixote* fame. The fame is there, but the windmills should be found and brought immediately to the spot where our discussion is taking place and space and sense. Where are the windmills? Everywhere, you are answered. Whatever you do is an encounter with a windmill. Now you encounter a wind, now a mill. The point is everything is superfluous and ludicrous, and we do not need commentators to lay down this truth in front of our minds. Our minds are there and they are waiting for a truth. Not for a truth of sorts, though, but the absolute truth the absolutism of which may equal and rival that of the Russians, of their emperors. So you lift your leg and put it somewhere, being assured that whatever your leg meets during its journey is a windmill. And very often you say to yourself, 'If there are no mills and winds in the neighbourhood, I'll just stay where I am, for it's pointless to go anywhere. No any is of any interest to me.'

What does it look like? A windmill? Or a wind, to start with? You just doodle for a while – apparently John F Kennedy devoted a lot of time to this pastime – and put a sentence beside this doodling. You call it 'The Wind,' or you call it 'The Nothing,' which is more appropriate, by the way, given that everything is nothing. All right, you call it 'Nothing'. And what about All Right? You call it 'Nothing' too, and then they start, all your dilemmas. Am I flying? The question you ask yourself at the beginning of your journey through space and your personal life. (Not the life of humanity – let us leave it alone.) Are you flying? If you are, you cannot just sit down in any chair. You try to do so and collapse, fall – as heavily as the Roman Empire fell many years ago. (It goes on falling, by the way; thanks to books and other things.) You fall and you rejoice – vainly and ingloriously, I must say: your falls do not mean much, considering that falls do not prove your participation in what are called 'universal flights'. You fall, but this does not mean you have flown, taking part in cosmic, majestic flights that cross the universe. (They call these flights 'crosswise'.) Let us examine the following statement, 'With scarcely any funding and a staff of six, they were operating on a wing and a prayer.' You operate on a wing, that is for sure; on condition that we continue to talk about your flights, not about your crawls, about your all fours. What about this funding, for God's sake? Where is it? I need this funding badly, personally; for many things and projects. What are you talking about? I am asking once again. What all this all this all this all about?

Well, let us cool down and analyse this proposition thoroughly. You operate on a wing. You just catch a butterfly, take off one of its wings – we should not use a more radical method – and just operate on it. How? You put this wing under your belly and do your best to take off; like a plane you saw recently at some airport or other. At that airport there were what they call attendants, but you may be mistaken. It is not your pigeon. Anyway, with a pigeon you are unlikely to make a long, profitable journey; to other planets, for instance.

What kind of journey are you aiming at? Actually you do not think in these terms, journey, aims. You just go because the show must go on, as someone constantly says. What show? Which one? The one to which you are viscerally attached; for some reason or other. You know some reason but not the other, the one they are talking about from time to time, adding it to sentences, to various sentences. (To death-sentences as well.) There are many tags, and price tags are the ones to which we pay more attention than to the rest of our life. But there are also tags such as 'isn't it?' You can use this particular tag all the time to show you are not as self-important

as may appear at first glance. (And some of us do not like self-sufficient, self-imposing people. And we often vote for other sorts of people, unimportant, stupid and insignificant from every point of view we are prepared to consider.) Well, the show goes on, but we are weary and once again our legs are killing us, without killing us altogether. That is the ordeal you did not take into consideration at the moment of your birth; otherwise you might have changed your mind so as to your stay in the womb of the world; let us put it this way. (Our mothers are already overburdened with tasks, duties and moral obligations. And milk, for God's sake!) So our legs are on their last legs, and in such moments of utter lucidity we begin to count the number of legs we may count on in the course of our journey through life and death. Let us not forget that, while travelling through life, we also travel through death, although our travel agency mercifully spares us additional payments; death payments; on condition that we discount all sorts of insurances. But you do not have to accept all these insurances, and one of the ways of keeping your money in your purse is by saying to your agents, 'No, thank you very much. I'd like to brave death, if only for once. And this once will happen this time, during my forthcoming journey for which I've already paid you a lot of money.'

Yes, it is confirmed: your legs are on their last legs. And even if they are on the legs that precede the last ones, you prefer not to use them to the utmost. But how to preserve their strength and shape? You need a wing, and at this particular moment are you likely to remember Cervantes and his famous, indecorously famous novel? (They mainly talk about *War and Peace* and *Don Quixote*.) You say to yourself, 'Butterflies and their wings are unreliable; they crumble in your hands, under the pressure of your fingers. (And yet you touch them ever so gently.) So your expectations turn towards the wings of windmills which may cause you a lot of trouble, but at least they do not crumble under the pressure of your fingers. What is more, you do not dwindle to a speck either. No, this is the other way round. If you handle butterflies and forget about windmills, you can be assured that your shape will be preserved for posterity; at least for some time. Then you die and your posterity forgets about you, in spite of the number of photographs and films you left behind. And the members of your posterity also leave them behind; they just go forward, leaving both photographs and films behind. Of course your money is still working in different spheres of human activity, but you no longer care about anything or anybody; Don Quixote, among other people and things. (His armour, for instance.)

So you set your heart upon a windmill and go to Holland. You decide not to drive too far: the first mill will suit you perfectly. But what if it does not work? What if the wings do not turn and fly? Of course you are aware of the number of buttons that you push to ensure the functioning of wings and other engines. You press a button and fly like Gagarin or Armstrong; not necessarily as far the Moon. You fly and lose your balance which has anyway been lost for some time; as far as you can remember. But what does this mean: balance, losing it, losing anything or everything? What do you have? At least you have a windmill at which you can tilt, if you wish. At least Don Quixote's exploits are reachable; within your reach or anybody's reach. The point is you do not always have a windmill within your reach. You can reach it after a while, if you wish it to appear in front of you at all cost, but for the moment it is somewhere in Holland and not right beyond your window. And even if you find another window, a dozen windows situated within your walking distance, which is different from the walking distance they usually talk about, beyond these windows you are not likely to find a windmill of the kind you easily come across when leafing through Cervantes's book.

But you do not have to look for windmills because, more often than not, they say, 'You're tilting at windmills,' and laugh as they examine your way of protecting yourself from evils, about which American

presidents like to talk. (Communism is a great inspirer.) You protect yourself, and then you resolve not to do it any more: you are just weary of all the cries you hear around you. Tilting, tilting, you're tilting. There are no giants today; from this point of view, it is pointless to protect oneself, to battle against injustice and so on. There are no giants, no injustice; just a few windmills in Holland. But perversity never leaves one in peace. Sooner or later, instead of enjoying peace and quiet on our divan we leave our bed and zoom forward, backward – in any direction we know nothing of; except the visible or invisible presence of windmills you are supposed to tilt at, otherwise you are bound to lose the game. You are also supposed to enrich the rules which pale into insignificance, going out of fashion rather quickly as if mocking your ardent desire to play their games, with their windmills, and so on and so forth.

In short, you just expose yourself to dangers. Contrary to what might be presumed, you do not think that your bravery will raise a lot of sympathy on the part of your enemies or simply other earthlings. (Soon we shall talk about Martians.) Yes, you take your clothes off, which makes things easier for them. If they want to deprive you of your heart, your naked body shows them this heart of yours. And if you think the image is not distinct enough, you can paint your heart on your heart – on your body, on the spot where your heart is supposed to beat. For the moment it is beating, and you can even hear this beating which guarantees a long, happy life. They lived happily hereafter, thereafter, as they say. And then something goes wrong. But for the moment you are just naked, stark naked in front of the whole world which aims at your heart. It is pointless to appeal to windmills because, even your flying heart or colours, are so visible that they (all others, this so-called humanity) can just aim a pebble at all of them and you collapse, whatever your height and the majesty of your pedestals. You collapse with all your pedestals. The noise you make! (Let us call it 'noise' and not 'hurricane' or 'earthquake' or something along these lines. Along these lines there are many noises; the utter, irremediable collapse of the cosmos, for instance. *Passons, passons.*)

So you invite your enemies or just all those who stand in your vicinity. Where to? Where is the destination of your invitation? Your chest, for God's sake. 'You can discharge your rifles,' you say to them, instead of talking to yourself for hours and hours. 'You can discharge your rifles and bombers and what not. And what is! I promise I'll have no recourse to windmills. No need of their help, imaginary or otherwise. It is always otherwise, otherwise, I know. And what does this "otherwise" mean? It means you can send your bullets in the direction of my liver, creating a sort of cirrhosis.' You die and your enemies proclaim (and their proclamation is recorded by television studios), 'He died of alcohol, of the dependence he showed throughout his life. He depended on alcohol, instead of trusting our help and cordiality. We tendered him our cordiality and he rejected it on the grounds that he is a superman, and not just a human being. That's how it works with him, alas. No longer, alas. He is dead and we must bury him with military honours, otherwise all those others we are always talking about will think we killed him.'

What does *that* mean? All right, life stops once, for once. But then, little by little, this stop is removed from where it seemed to have found its eternal rest. 'The rest is not eternal,' you hear. And the 'once' you relished so much only a few moments ago is not eternal either. Even if you repeat this word – once, once, once, once – it mercilessly belies its own sense. And if you repeat the word 'for', then it becomes excruciatingly painful. Once, once, once, once, you hear or utter. And then you ask the eternal question, 'What for?' and you are answered almost immediately, 'For, for, for, for, for, for, for.' And you ask Providence to show you this 'for'. And you see it. After this show you renounce all shows and say to them, to all these shows, 'I will *not* go

on.’ The point is, when uttering this sentence – another death, another life – you begin to kick against your immobility, your coffin, tomb and eternity. You have no wish to adhere to your eternity. It is too eternal, in your opinion. Just give me morsels of it, you say to the Providence you have adopted in the course of your investigations and wanderings. As an eternal interlocutor, as they say sometimes; somewhere. And even if they – or someone, somethey – do not say anything of the kind, you just go on, being determined to adhere to your eternal formulas, such as, ‘Life is beautiful,’ or ‘There’s nothing better than the ordinary, simple life advocated by Tolstoy and Gandhi.’ And if they ask, ‘Who are you?’ you answer simply, ‘I’m Gandhi.’

I am not Gandhi. Even if I go half-naked around Benares or elsewhere, they will not kill me in the same manner. Let us recall what happens when you speak about sameness as such, ‘They won’t aim at your heart, you won’t say, “Oh, my God,” because you do not really believe in God. And even if you do, you will not remember Him at the last moment of your life. Why? Because you will reflect upon this problem as follows, “For the moment, I’ve a lot to do with my society and its bankers. Of course God is important, but I’ll speak to Him at the very last moment of my moment. Like Gandhi.”’ The last moment comes and you are distracted, looking at a young woman’s legs, for instance, for instance. There are other instances, of course; for instance, the same lady’s bosom. You look at this bosom and forget not only Gandhi, but a whole package of saints and philosophers. So, if they ask you what you think about non-violence, you answer, ‘Bosom, bosom, bosom, bosom.’ (I wonder if in such cases culprits repeat the same word four times.) You forget Gandhi and look at the bosom you can even touch; at least you are allowed to do so, judging by the utter absence of police officers and official lovers. In other circumstances, an official lover might come up to you (with a knife or just barehanded) and say, ‘Why are you looking so intensely at the bosom of my wife?’ And you reply, your fists at the ready, ‘I’m looking at the *bottom* of your wife, not at her *bosom*.’

But what about it? What about it? What about it? You draw a few bosoms, side by side; and then you also draw a few buttocks. You compare them at leisure and come to the inevitable conclusion, ‘They’re all alike.’ But if you compare *this* woman’s legs to her bosom, you realise they are quite different, and the sentiments or instincts aroused by them are located on different sides of your personal cosmos. The cosmos you contemplate at 10 p.m. is a leggy cosmos. The rest is wholly devoted and dedicated to someone’s bosom; you do not even know whose, to be honest.

Then you draw a line, a red line, a blue line: you have a collection of lines within your reach; on your writing desk, to be precise. But mostly you draw lines in your imagination, which is quite appropriate: the bosoms and legs you are dreaming about unfold in your dreams or rather in your imagination. Now this imagination of yours devotes halfanhour to a leg or rather to a part of this leg; a thigh, for instance. Now you concentrate on some part of a bosom you saw somewhere; in one of your dreams perhaps. It is astonishing to realise to what extent we depend on our dreams: not only in terms of the future or just some palaces you are longing for. (Your bed in such and such a palace.) But you draw a line, the line – call it what you wish; put as many ‘the’ as you wish on a sheet of paper lying in front of you. (More reliable and historical than a computer, isn’t it?) What about your superior, divine predestination? Is it based on a female leg? Or on a male leg, for that matter? For what matter? What are you talking about? Usually these frivolous talks and subjects and dreams end up in this fashion: you draw a line and say to yourself, ‘What are you talking about?’

And what is this superior destination? It is not a leg, is it? Even if you choose a Greek sculpture, no leg will ever permit you to catch a glimpse of divine superiority, becoming a hero of all times. Even Pythagoras did

not think in terms of legs and bosoms and torsos. And yet he was swimming in the Sea of Numbers. And what is a beautiful leg? A beautiful adjustment of numbers. The same goes for bosoms and torsos – no question about it. But what is it? What is it you are talking about right now? Something spiritual, highly spiritual, divorced from base materials and interests. And the war you had in mind, when talking about Don Quixote's fame, his posthumous fame? Just two hours ago I saw Putin – does his name still ring bells and hells – in a church, bowing to icons and kissing them fervently, almost feverishly. And on the other hand – actually it is the same hand – he signs orders that result in thousands deaths, mutilations and ends; the innumerable ends of happiness, for instance.

And then you remember Saint Augustine; it is inevitable in this spiritual context. Saint Augustine said (or declared), 'If God is with us, who can be against us?' Or just who is, how is. How is it possible? God stands by your side, but there is a man or a woman who bursts into laughter and says, 'Can you stand on your own? Without God?' And if you answer, 'Yes,' she comes up to you and starts tickling you everywhere, on every side of your body. She tickles you and you begin to vacillate. Not only your mood vacillates between hope and despair – your body undergoes the same contortions. As usual an objective observer observes you and says to himself or to all the others you can include within your vision, 'Now his body exhibits a few rays of hope. Now it is sinking in the deepest despair one can imagine. No strength of imagination can imagine such despair, frankly speaking.' Let us take a famous sculpture: *Le penseur*. Rodin thought he was capable of capturing human thought, its visual expression. But the thought we are talking about vacillates between horror and miracle. Actually, to be true to life, this sculptor should vacillate all the time – without falling, however. And what about the sinuosity of thoughts? You just put your elbows on your knees and become a great work of art. Fiddlesticks, fiddlesticks, fiddlesticks.

So you think and exist, but what you think about is limited to the stretch of your floor where your gaze or whatever it is strolls, wanders and kills time, hoping to survive till the twelfth stroke of your grandfather clock; or any other clock; or any other midnight. The tenth stroke. During this stroke you think of your childhood when you still took advantage of nature, of its generosity, of your mother's generosity and overall help. But what happened afterwards? The eleventh stroke. In other worlds (and words), someone beats you on the head and you count the strokes as if they had promised you to stop at the eleventh stroke or at the thirteenth stroke. It is always at the thirteenth stroke they stop, but you do not know it. And you are not likely to learn the truth in your lifetime; or even outside it, as I usually say.

You contemplate the floor of your house and think there is nothing else in the world; just this stretch, this floor. Nothing else. And what about the National Gallery and the Louvre? Yes, there are paintings, pictures, sculptures, and you just watch your knees or something else. And what if Piero de la Francesca vouchsafes to penetrate your field of vision? Then they tell you, 'Sorry, but Piero doesn't understand the verb "to vouchsafe"'. He is certainly old, but not to that extent.'

'What's the extent of his oldness, pray?'

'Eternity, you know.'

'I know nothing of eternity. First show me this notion in action.'

'Here it is.'

'Sorry?'

‘You look at this painting and eternity enters your mind, spirit and even your body. To some extent, though.’

‘To what extent, pray?’

‘To this extent.’ And they strike you once again.

Strikes, strikes, strikes. What else is there in your life? Beatitudes. That is what you say to those who run down, denigrate your life at the earliest opportunity. And this opportunity comes very early, too early, so to speak and so to live. And what about these co-called beatitudes? You go to a picture gallery and freeze in front of a picture that seems to invade your every nerve; or every sinew, come to think of it. You come to think about every sinew and you say to all the pessimists you see around you, ‘My sinews, every one of them, are filled to the brim with what I call “beatitude”. And you should use this word, whenever you come across the same sensation or invasion. Just listen to Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata*.’

BLACK CIRCLES

What is a slogan? If you ask a pedestrian, any pedestrian, what is... he answers immediately, without waiting for the content of the question – for the simple reason that any question bothers him, deprives him of a few nights filled to the brim – where is the brim of such nights? – with psyche-consoling, body-restoring sleep. Instead, he receives (as a present; or almost) a few white, sleepless nights which are usually grey. And that keeps them away from the whiteness for which St Petersburg is widely known. I am alluding to the period during which you can read Shakespeare and other authors of genius at three in the morning, while standing on a bridge, on one of the bridges spanning the Neva – the river known even beyond Russia's frontiers. Its fame mainly reposes on the icicles one can see on the surface of this river in the spring, when the temperature of the former capital of Russia – the temperature of its air – grows warmer and warmer; as if to welcome someone with open arms. But this river – in this domain it is no exception to the general rule – has no arms. It does not even have a little finger which it could lift, determined to alleviate someone's suffering; a suffering experienced by a young, beautiful woman; for instance. This woman – described in this book of mine – suffers a lot on account of unrequited love (as usual, as usual), but a river lifts its finger and the suffering I am talking about disappears. And for once I have no idea whether it disappears in the twinkling of an eye or not.

Actually – not only Montaigne speaks and writes about it – you cannot know if you are well or not if you do not suffer atrociously at some point (or several points) of your life. If you dare – in the face of all the suffering endured by humanity – to declare that you are happy and that your health is perfect, as perfect as any picture by Leonardo da Vinci you must be aware of what happens to lie on the opposite side of human experience: cancers, misfortunes in the domain of love and so on. You fall in love and realise (two or three days after the fall) that the individual you are in love with does not care at all about your body, psyche and literary ambitions. This individual does not give a damn, as they say. He or she does not give anything, in point of fact, but if you vouchsafe to give anything to this individual – anything of value, it goes without saying – this individual, be they he or she, may stay by your side for a while and even forever, provided you give them (or him, or her) many hundreds of dollars every day; and also every night. You give and give and give, but if you ask this individual to define your role in his or her life, they say, 'You're a receiver.'

'How do you mean?' you ask understandably and indignantly.

'You receive my gratitude every day and night. And also my time, if you must know.'

'All right – now I know it. But can't you acknowledge the importance of *my* role in your life? Don't you think I could receive all these gifts I shower on you myself? In my bosom there's plenty of room for all sorts of gifts including the diamonds I gave you last winter. And also the bank account I opened in Singapore.'

After a while you no longer know who is talking, around what the discussion circles tirelessly as if living an eternal life of its own making. Is this a good example of what we usually call a 'slogan'? 'You are a receiver.' A short easily remembered phrase, especially one used to advertise an idea or a product. It is not a short phrase, although I could memorise it, if I am paid to do so. I am not and so I do not memorise it. I wrote it down and that is enough, quite enough. For once I know what is enough and what is not. It is high time I stopped this nonsense, and I stop it, even if this does not really mean 'the end of it'. And what is the end of it? Of what? When you are in the middle of the muddle you have created yourself, for no reason at all, you might have recourse to a slogan which you can find in any Cambridge dictionary. Smoking is bad for your health. Is that a slogan? You smoke

one cigarette, two cigarettes. You begin to cough atrociously. And you recall the sentence you wrote half an hour ago. A relatively short sentence. A slogan, after all. After what?

You also remember the fact that you have to suffer, if you wish to appreciate fully your happiness which may descend upon you one of these days. Why not? As the Russians say, 'The devil has many jokes in his pocket.' You pick up a needle and prick one of your fingers. After all that is better than to suffer from unrequited love or a broken spine. You fling the needle out of the window, nurse your finger and your happiness begins to grow. At first it is no bigger than the finger you have just been nursing. Why nurse a healthy finger which continues to boast about its own health? Instead, you begin to watch the growth of your bliss and soon you realise it has become as big as your shoulder. And then, after a while – this while may last several minutes or several months – it becomes as big as your own body. In other words, it becomes your doppelgänger. You look at your bliss (at close quarters) and cannot help admiring its strength and beauty. 'How beautiful it is,' you murmur to yourself. Do you *really* hear the beauty of your bliss? Yes, yes, yes. And if someone voices a doubt in this domain, in the domain of your ability to hear your own, private paradise, you begin to hum a song which corresponds exactly to the happiness you hear inside yourself; and also outside yourself. This means you begin to radiate your happiness. This is the right moment for many things – for writing a novel, for finding the ideal woman. (I am talking about myself. Why should I bother about other people's happiness?)

Speaking about the bloody Mary. We should not forget many other bloodies who continue to walk in our midst as if nothing had ever happened; neither on battlefields or in the building where you live and seemingly prosper; in accordance with the song you hum day and night. Everything and everybody is bloody – such is the verdict of the writers, poets and composers we continue to rub shoulders with during our daily rounds. Well, you lift your little finger – to cut short all unnecessary discussions. You remember (you remember so many things, my God) the following sentence you found somewhere or heard somewhere, at some point of your life, 'We'd better stick to the main road, because the other roads are blocked with snow.' Well, this time the main road is the little finger I lifted some time ago. So many people lift their little fingers and go about in this fashion, paying attention to the people who surround them on all sides. They make sure that all these people are fully aware of their importance. And what if nobody appears in the neighbourhood of their bodies? They fall on their knees, crawl on all fours to their beds and show their little fingers to those who might hide under these beds; for instance those lovers who have no wish to encounter their mistresses' husbands. These lovers are so frightened by the presence of those fingers – they think they belong to all sorts of husbands – that they take to their heels; immediately, immediately.

They talk a lot about power and the evil forces that accompany powerful people, dictators or mere generals, directors. To wield influence, power and so on you have first to conquer a post, an important position in what is called 'society'. How can you do that? Sometimes it is enough to lift your finger, your little finger. You lift it and everyone or almost everyone bows down. People literally prostrate themselves in front of this finger which can abandon its position, reverting to the common life of the hand where it belongs. Oddly enough, the people do not budge: they remain at your feet, their arms outstretched, their voices singing a hymn dedicated to your power.

But sometimes you have to realise you cannot count on their unconditional obedience and devotion to your persona. If such is the case, you have no alternative but to lift a second finger (of your choice). Of course you are permitted to clench your jaw and even your fists, both of them. But I would not use them at once, if I were you. First you had better assess your servants' abilities. Are you sure they are your obedient servants? All of them? And what if in their midst you suddenly discover a rebel whose desire to overthrow you grows as he starts clenching his fists and also his jaw? Then he takes a lift – I usually take the lift of my little finger, as one of them put it – and soon appears in all his splendour on some balcony or other. Putting his hands on some railing he begins to address the crowd gathered beneath this railing. And if there is no crowd to speak of, he just directs his mouth towards a few ears sticking out of some heads, a dozen heads, and launches into a speech composed of slogans among which you inevitably find 'our glorious future', 'our struggle against evil and its consequences', 'the traditional values for which you must be prepared to sacrifice everything, including your life, children and fortune'. The ears sticking out of some heads or other – there are many *other* heads at this particular moment, beneath the same balcony – undergo a metamorphosis. By dint of sticking forcibly out of their heads, they grow and become more and more receptive to the idea of a Freedom of Information Act. What is this Information Act? you may ask. Well, it is the mouth I touched upon recently; or rather the words, sentences, commas and exclamation marks flowing out of this mouth. They flow or fly and then settle in the aforementioned ears and in the hearts metaphorically linked to these ears. Of course you feel free to reject the information you thus receive; not on a regular basis, mind you. No – you receive it as long as the mouth I am talking about (without opening my own mouth, mind you) opens of its own accord. As I pointed out earlier, you feel free to reject whatever comes or flies from the balcony, from the individual standing on this balcony. You reject it so symbolically that your arms enter a sort of competition. Which arm is more determined to get rid of the Information? Every single participant in this game flails his or her arms around so that, what one can see all around and even elsewhere, amounts to a number of arms that seem to execute a dance. What kind of dance? you may ask. 'The flailing dance' or 'the rejection dance' or 'the no to the speaker dance'. All these dances can be executed without any involvement on the part of the legs, armpits and so on. Your arms bear the brunt of the information attack, and you feel more and more comfortable. Everything goes according to plan, as some contemporary leaders put it, whenever they appear on TV or in the middle of a stadium. Whatever actually happens in these stadiums or in those TV studios boils down to what is commonly called 'The Obedience Act' or 'The Acceptance Act' or 'The Adulation Act'. From this moment on, Machiavelli takes over and unconditionally bestows the power and its evil upon the speaker whose mouth was talking and vociferating only a few moments ago. Power is always evil – is that what Machiavelli and his followers have always endeavoured to maintain, to impose on humanity? And what about a conductor who executes a Mahler symphony? For instance. Isn't he powerful? He is, of course he is, otherwise the symphony in question would sound like the song universally known as 'The Homage to Clementine'. Oh, my darling, oh, my darling and so on. In point of fact, many singers execute only the so on, but this paradox deserves an essay, not just a paragraph in a huge, abnormally intricate book.

The point is you are supposed to lead a number of followers to the goal they might ignore and most frequently do ignore. In this case you use your arms differently, which means that, instead of flailing them about – some find this pastime useless, if not ridiculous, risible – you grab someone's shoulder or hand or neck and conduct these parts and also the whole to which they belong in the direction dictated by the goal you cherish and strive to accomplish. If asked, 'What's your goal?' you just point to a point; or a slogan, which is more

appropriate. What kind of slogan? Our enemy is a Nazi follower and therefore he and all his family or rather families (mental, psychological) should be destroyed, annihilated. So you grab someone's hand and manipulate it in such a manner that a lot of people (and even some countries) grow more and more annihilated. Someone may point out that any annihilation calls for an immediate action. You annihilate your partner or opponent and give a kick to his prostrate, dead but not yet buried body. The same goes for countries and continents. That is why in the world or universe wars are still on the agenda. 'That doesn't concern *you*!' you retort, meaning you intend to annihilate the enemy in question over a certain, indeterminate period. You yourself do not know exactly how long this period is supposed to last: all depends on the pleasures you experience in the process.

You slap somebody's face and it does not really matter whose face you strike, provided you keep in mind the glorious future of humanity; of your own glorious life, which amounts to the same thing. To paraphrase the Kabala, if one human being is happy, all of humanity is happy and dances on Red Square or White Square, wearing white dresses, white costumes, repeating insensately, luminously fiery speeches. And your listeners' clothes. Clothes and human beings spontaneously ignite because of the high temperature of the speeches and, generally speaking, an idealistic, futuristic pressure. I think that many years ago there was a magazine called *Fakel*, and I am almost sure it was a magazine of German origin; or of Austrian origin. Why did it adopt this name? Because every article it displayed caught fire as soon as a reader opened it, started to read its enigmas. The readers of this magazine were sunburnt.

A dictator or a tyrant picks up this magazine and admires its fire, its fiery inspiration. And the witnesses of these intellectual or rather ideological flames just wait; they wait and wait until the fire consumes the dictator and thereby liberates the world or just one country from their tyranny and its numerous corpses.

Why did God choose this world in preference to any other? Perhaps on account of the light He saw, whenever He directed His gaze towards our world which was completely lost in the midst of other worlds, stars and galaxies. What kind of light did God see and appreciate – to the point of making a point of creating it, bit by bit? God creates a continent and evil, a particle of what is known as Universal Evil, comes into existence or rather *springs* into existence, into our daily life. And this particle, in spite of its rather modest size, of its miniscule dimension, begins to devour everything or almost everything; it devours chiefly what is called 'Our Good'. In other words, whatever is good for our health, mental and otherwise, is regularly consumed by evil, usually associated with Russia or the Soviet Union. An American president points his finger – he makes a point, as a matter of fact – and says, 'Can't you see where this universal evil issues from?' And his listeners see a bit of Moscow, a bit of Saint Petersburg; and also a few villages which are on the point of becoming mud or nothingness, which amounts to the same thing, to the same mud and evil. What is so gorgeous about this world? All right, we do not live in Russia; nor do we live in the vicinity of Russia, even if our borders touch the Universal Evil's borders. The Universal Evil I am talking about stinks, and everyone is aware of this odour; even those who permanently protect their noses from the air – through the agency of handkerchiefs. Handkerchiefs are good agents (they are not secret agents, though) and act so promptly and self-assuredly that one might get the feeling they are right. The point is nothing is right in this world of ours; chosen by God; let us always remember this inadequate truth.

Yes, God must have seen some light wandering about this planet of ours. *Feu follet*, as Franz Liszt called it, after finishing his famous étude. This light of ours is mad; and it is even madder than Hamlet, to tell the truth. As everybody knows, Hamlet faked his madness, whereas this light of ours does *not* fake it. It is really mad; even more so than King Lear. Why? Why am I convinced it is madder than Lear? Because Lear says to evil, 'Never, never, never, never, never.' And our light says to it, 'Always, always, always, always, always.' No wonder our madness keeps on conquering new territories; every day and every morn. From time to time we say to it, 'Please, stop it, stop it, stop it. You're not on the right track.'

'Where's the right track? In your opinion?' asks Mr Evil.

'On the right-hand side.'

'Do you mean to say I'm on the left-hand side?'

'That's right.'

This kind of discussion goes on in our psyche and brain almost hourly; every hour, every other minute. (Evil is everywhere, and we try to analyse it to the best of our ability. Maybe we should ward it off, instead of analysing it, of dissecting it assiduously.) We seem to have identified the evil I am talking about. (What kind of evil am I really enlarging upon? Universal Evil, the Universal Evil, the universal evil, the local evil, Russian evil, Prussian evil, the so on evil, the so forth one.) Well, you just pick up a drone and send it towards all these evils; and after a while you hear, 'Bum, bum, bum, bum.' You look in the direction of these bums, hoping to gaze at the absolute absence of evil, but (bum, bum, bum) the Evil they talk about on TV is still conspicuous by its presence. And if you hesitate, if only for a second or two, you see the following inscription, 'Don't mistake me for good. I am evil from head to foot.'

Once again you gaze at this phenomenon and say to yourself, 'At least his right foot is good. Not entirely though.' Don't delude yourself – even his right foot is evil, let alone his left foot. Therefore both his feet are evil, incurably evil. And so are his arms, neck and his neckband, his necktie. It is universally acknowledged that evil is different from good; what is more, it is at the opposite end of good. Well, it stands opposite good, whenever you dare or vouchsafe to look at it. You are obliged to use both arms to differentiate evil from good – whenever you are tempted to show this difference to indifferent onlookers. You look at them to make sure they are really interested and point first at evil and then at good, saying all the while, 'This is good and that is evil.' Or 'this is evil and in the opposite corner you can see good, its splendour and benevolence.' But sometimes you happen to mix your arms, to confuse the right arm with the left one. Sometimes you even get the impression you just have 'one', and this one cannot be applied to one of your arms; let alone to both of them. The onlookers to whom you are supposed to explain the difference between good and evil, their different, opposite values, keep on looking at you and saying, 'What is he trying to show, to demonstrate? The action of a windmill?'

Recently I saw a play in some local theatre or other. The play was entitled 'Nietzsche and His Ways'. During the play I experienced only one feeling – that of boredom. Nothing happened on the stage where one could see two gigantic cubes. On one cube one could see the inscription 'Good'; on the other, the opposite was represented, 'Evil'. The actor – the only actor whose body the spectators were allowed to see on the stage – stood beyond the two cubes. In the intermission I asked the actor why he did not act on the stage, instead of standing between the cubes. He answered thus, 'I'm utterly exhausted. I had an interview this morning – they really put me through the mill.'

'Don't you intend to put this play on?' I asked.

‘What play are you talking about?’
 ‘I had an interview this morning – they really put me through the mill.’
 ‘How do you mill? Sorry, what do you mean?’
 ‘You’ll just have to install a mill on the stage.’
 ‘But who’ll put me through it, pray?’
 ‘A beautiful actress.’
 ‘Our theatre is a one-man theatre,’ he answered.

There are people who follow another stratagem, and sometimes they follow it to the very end. So nothing can be seen beyond; nothing at all, not even another stratagem. Among these people there are individuals who pretend to know the truth, and for them the only truth available is an impasse. They call it ‘the impasse’, as if there were no other impasses in the world and in their lives. They themselves might realise the truth of this multiplicity of impasses, for they are capable of saying something along these lines, ‘The dispute had reached an impasse, as neither side would compromise.’ They often talk like that about military conflicts, which means there is something beyond this impasse, the one they touched upon on this occasion, in the context of this situation. What is there beyond it? Cannons, drones, rockets and a lot of blood. Of course you can try to convince everybody that the only truth we always stumble upon is blood, whether this blood is linked to life or to death. Let us not forget that in days of yore they used to bleed their patients. I mean some doctors saw no other solution to whatever illness they came across. They looked at each other and also at the members of the family in the heart of which their patient was on the point of dying and said, ‘Well, we’ll have to bleed him, you know.’

‘Is there no other solution?’ a member of the family might ask hesitatingly.

‘Unfortunately no. But don’t you worry: I won’t bleed him dry.’

Nevertheless, sometimes (more often than not) they bled their patients dry. For instance, Gogol was dry at the end of this ritual which cost him his life. A few witnesses were shocked, literally scandalised by this treatment of the great writer, but the doctor said, ‘This treatment and its result tie in with the patient’s life and literary work. Have you forgotten his dead souls? Do you think they were moist or what? The dead souls he described in detail? They were dry, as dry as dead leaves. Don’t you know that dead souls (and Gogol’s) grow well in dry soil/a dry climate?’

How does one grow a dead soul? To begin with, you have to ascertain whether the soul you have in one of your drawers – in a drawer of your writing desk, for instance – is really a soul and not just a piece of shit, as they say rather vulgarly. ‘Well, it looks like a soul,’ you say to yourself. ‘But it’s not big enough, in my opinion. So I have to grow it – for more reasons than one. One reason is its size, its microscopic nature. The other reason – the chief reason, in my estimation – is the fact that this soul is still alive. It’s as if it was still within some body or other. What body? you may ask. It doesn’t really matter. Gogol’s body, for instance. He couldn’t bear living souls, and whenever he saw one, somewhere, he would immediately put it to death. How? By letting it know it was nothing but a chapter in his book entitled *Dead Souls*.’

Every day you can hear the remark, ‘You have no soul.’ You hear it in your presence and, after checking its origin, you draw the following conclusion, ‘This remark is directed at my own persona.’ And you say, half-jokingly, ‘I do have a soul, but it’s dead, I’m afraid.’ Of course your opponents do not miss this golden

opportunity: they begin to question you on the subject. ‘Are you really afraid of its death?’ they ask. ‘If you are, you’re on the right track. At the end of this track, you’ll find a compassionate, living soul filled to the brim with love.’ That is what they call a magnificent, fruitful impasse. Not a dead end, though. This end is throbbing with life and only beneficial blood circulates within it.

Generally speaking, we are not afraid of ends because some of them signify the end of a chore, the end of a painful relationship in the course of which a lot of money was misused, spent for nothing or, worse still, for something utterly disgusting and harmful. As a result, you suffer from yet another heart attack and stay in bed for several weeks, fiddling with your computer. And you see no end to this fiddling, for you continue to fiddle with your YouTube videos even after your so-called convalescence, which reminds you of illnesses as such. As a result, you fall ill once again, and once again you see no end to your suffering. Your friends do their best to help you, thereby justifying their vocation: they are *your friends*, after all. But is this really their vocation, their true vocation? One of them is a violinist – a bad one, into the bargain. Another boasts about his philosophical investigations: she attends a series of lectures on philosophy in a local university or institute or institution. She seldom misses an opportunity to speak to you about the last lecture which is never really the last: once again you encounter a situation without end; but with a lot of bits.

And then you run into another set of troubles at the beginning of which there stands the following sentence, ‘And this species of the divine patience indeed being, as it were, at a distance, may perhaps be esteemed as among “things too high for us.”’ At first you feel elated: you seem to have found an excuse for your unwillingness to grasp the main points of the last lecture you heard in the presence of your female friend. (What did she speak about? Hegel’s mind, Kant’s suppositions?) You cannot affirm that you followed her explanations to the very end; from the very beginning. As usual you find it easier to follow your hunch, whatever this hunch talks to you about. (Usually your hunches talk to you about nonsense; they talk nonsense, in other words.) Incidentally, you do not always know whether the feeling or itch you recognise in the structure of your body (or on its surface, to be more precise) has anything to do with a real hunch. ‘I’ve got an itch on the back of my neck,’ you say to a friend of yours. And this friend – and any other friend – is unlikely to miss this opportunity. There are many opportunities our friends are reluctant to miss, especially if they (the opportunities) are in the domain of ridicule. They are eager to turn you into what is called ‘the laughing stock of humanity’. They use this opportunity (the itch on the back of your neck) and make the most of it by questioning you on the subject. They are likely to say, for instance, ‘I’m sure you’ve mistaken this itch for a hunch you have to follow so as to become the richest and happiest man in the world.’

‘No,’ you answer. ‘It’s just an itch, nothing more.’

‘But don’t you think it’s a good omen?’

‘I don’t think it’s an omen. Just an itch.’

‘But an itch can be an omen. Actually nothing prevents it from becoming an omen, especially if it is an omen already.’

It is true that we look for good omens everywhere; even under our beds. Of course we mostly explore *the surface* of the bed where, in our learned opinion, we are sure to find a beautiful woman patiently waiting for our caresses; and even for what lies *beyond* caresses. I never question the theory according to which some caresses do not lead to anything lying beyond them; a sexual act, for instance. They are just caresses in their own right; things in themselves, more or less. You caress somebody, a man or a woman (let us not speak about boys in this

connection) and whisper into this individual's ear, 'You don't have to be scared stiff. Don't be stiff anyway – my caresses aren't fond of stiffness. I won't rape you afterwards, after the end of my caresses. Like everything in the world, including life and even death, according to Christian thinkers, my caresses are not eternal. Sooner or later I'll stop of my own accord. You don't even have to count on your hunches in this domain.'

This discussion reminds me of the Russian president Vladimir Putin. They used to say, 'He has only two qualities. He doesn't drink too much alcohol, and he is not an anti-Semite.' A little later they realised he was an anti-Semite. What's more, he is a paedophile, and his addiction to paedophilia is often shown on Russian television. He walks towards a young, beautiful, fresh and sexy boy, grabs his shirt, removes it, at least partly, and kisses this boy on the tummy. Actually there are people who hesitate, when confronted with the name of Putin. They wonder if the Russian president is really Putin or Rasputin in disguise. But their opponents, the opponents of the equation Putin-Rasputin point out that Rasputin drank like a fish, whereas Putin drinks like a Russian president who is addicted neither to alcohol nor to drugs. As everybody knows, we often come across some opponents of the opponents we have in mind and even analyse in our talks and articles and essays. And these opponents (the last ones) say that Rasputin did not look like a fish. 'What *did* he look like?' ask other opponents. Instead of saying, 'He looked like Rasputin' we often hear the following remarks, 'He looked like a Russian peasant whose libido was renowned amongst the beautiful Petersburg princesses.' 'He looked like the empress's lover.' 'He looked like the actor assassinated by a group of plotters in a castle, not far from the Neva.'

And what about Putin? The one who remains without any ras? (Looks like a naked king.) They announce his death on TV and speak about him in the past tense. Some television viewers are tense, whereas others open a series of bottles among which you see a bottle of Krug. 'This death calls for a celebration,' they say. Who are 'they'? The opponents of the opponents of the opponents? Putin sleeps in a refrigerator, while waiting for his own funeral, or for the funeral of the cosmos. So does Stalin whom they evoke rather often in connection with Putin.

In this proverbial life we are told that love is the best feeling or sentiment one can experience (or go through) in one's lifetime. Can you really go through it; even if all this happens in parentheses? You do your best to take a few steps on the road leading to absolute love, whatever that is. One may even wonder if it does exist somewhere, and finally one is forced to come to the following conclusion, 'This hypothesis exists only in the virtual world we are acquainted with thanks to our dreams and wild, unrestrained, unpunished fantasies. Our imagination goes on a stroll, deviates from every pattern imaginable (and unimaginable, mind you) and everything goes astray, not only our stroll or rather our legs – our very life. Yes, you are led astray by your own imagination, not by a bad boy who lives next door and has a pair of fists that frighten everyone, including ferocious dogs. You make mistakes which unmake you in the long run. Sometimes – you have to admit it, otherwise you will never come to terms with your existence – yes, sometimes even in the short run you are undone. (This 'undone' reminds me of an English poem I knew by heart two or three decades ago.) You imagine that you are in love with a beautiful or ugly lady. (Such things, the latter version of this supposition, take place more often than not.) And you fancy that her feelings explore the same space, the same notion, the same slogan which may be rendered literally as follows, 'There is nothing more rewarding than the reward widely known

under the name of love.’ But what kind of rewards do you receive, enjoy, take notice of in the course of your amorous adventure? A few kisses, a dozen or so? On your cheeks, on your lips, on your shoulder blades?

It is commonly assumed that love triumphs over death. The latter grabs you by the throat, but you can hear the sound associated in your mind with your door that creaks, creaks and even squeaks, if you listen to it attentively. Anyway, what counts in this situation is the protagonist that enters your room. And you know, yes, thanks to your forebodings, presentiments or rather positive feelings, that what penetrates your private space is love, proverbial, slogan-elevated love. Love makes you forget your worries, whatever their size and evil contents. Love elevates you, puts you on a pedestal from which you can see the whole world and even whatever happens in its fissures. It is true that the cracks I am talking about are rather narrow, according to many dictionaries, but one is always surprised by the number of misfortunes they harbour within their entrails. Whenever you see these entrails, you understand to what extent this can ruin your life. (There are people who believe that one ruin is quite enough and so you do not have to resort to what is called ‘pluralisms’; at least on this occasion. No, no, no, no, no! There are many ruins everywhere; quite a number of them.) You do understand the phenomenon, but what can you do about it? Well, you can pick up one ruin and squash it as if it were your hat that you can squash by sitting on it. The point is the ruin, no matter which ruin and whose ruin, is not your hat and consequently you cannot sit on it. Nor can you lie on it. What *can* you do? Nothing, nothing at all. What can you do in the context of your life? This morning I saw a documentary on Hitler’s life and death. There are so many documentaries about him; the world is swarming with such documentaries from which you may learn that Hitler had a number of lazy bones. So what? It did not prevent him from destroying a huge, a monstrous part of the world where we live and prosper, according to our newspapers and some of our colleagues who do prosper, by the way.

What is prosperity, by the way? (By the same way, it goes without saying.) Love, love, a huge number of kisses. Could we add anything to this love? To make it look even more prosperous? Eva Braun loved Hitler; or his power, or his cottages. But in addition to Eva’s love, Hitler just had to destroy a great many monuments and human lives; and loves, as a matter of fact. What can an ordinary citizen do to make his or her life look quite gorgeous? Quite is quite necessary in the context; incidentally. Suppose you limit your remark to the words ‘life’ and ‘gorgeous’. Of course you do not make this statement for your own sake: you wish this truth to be widely known and universally recognised as a symbol, an unalterable symbol of your lifelong happiness. Suppose, however, that your neighbour shakes her head and even shrugs her shoulders as if doubting the veracity of your hasty conclusion. What do her gestures seek to impart to you and probably to two or three other neighbours of yours? Does she mean to say your life cannot be gorgeous without her participation in it? Without her kisses, to put it bluntly?

I know a man whose power of seduction resides in his ability to sing lullabies. When I speak about this ability, this addiction to lullabies, to the people who ignore and even despise – to some extent – this ability and whatever is linked to it, they nod their heads and say, ‘Me too, I often sing various songs to my wife – before midnight, before going to bed. I have no idea whether they’re lullabies or just extravagant songs, but I do sing them and my wife kisses me on both cheeks, saying, “I love you so much. You’re still young and naive – like a little boy who believes in the goodness of the world and its inhabitants.”’ No, no and no. What I am talking about concerns a man who is neither young nor old. At least these are not the terms that come into my head, whenever I feel like talking about him. What he does has nothing to do either with young ages or with old people

who nod their heads too often: they are always on the brink of a profound sleep. He lies down, moves on all fours towards his beloved's bed and makes himself comfortable under it. Then he feels and hears his beloved's body that adopts this bed for the forthcoming night. After a while, before she really goes to sleep, before she begins to penetrate the kingdom of Morpheus, he launches into his adventure: singing a lullaby designed to provide a beautiful dream – or a series of beautiful dreams – to his beloved, to her brain and heart. He sings, for instance: 'La-la-la-lara, La-la-la-lera.' According to him, these la-las guarantee what he calls 'the advent of beauty and virtuality'.

'Isn't your beloved beautiful?' I ask him.

'Of course she is,' he answers.

'So you can't call the virtuality you painfully and ardently create through your songs the advent of beauty. Your beloved is acquainted with beauty as such, given that she looks at herself in mirrors – every day, especially if she is about to leave the house for some reception or other, some ball, whether masked or not.'

'If you allow me to interfere with your exterior monologue, I'd like to point out that, if you have in mind a masked ball, it's quite pointless to put any makeup on. The mask will take care of beauty.'

'And what if, at some point, your beloved has to remove her mask, driven by the desire to speak to her partner with an open face?'

'I am her habitual partner, and I never ask her to remove her masks. I love all of them.'

'More than your beloved or wife? Call her what you wish.'

'No, but this is a matter of choice, of *her* choice. And considering that every choice of hers involves the activity of her brain and sensitivity, I'd insult her taste if I asked her earnestly, in earnest and so forth, to remove the mask she's chosen, after much soul-searching, taste-searching.'

Sometimes we realise – and this does happen, whatever we may think about human stupidity – that the conversations we lead in the course of our lives are just unbearably pointless, ridiculous and almost criminal. Indeed – we waste our lives without taking into consideration its preciousness or preciousness or whatever it is. But an individual, a human being in whose heart and brain there remains a particle of good will, one hundredth part of good will (I do not use the expression 'excellent will') can still count on hope, on the possibility of a good life, of a happy denouement to every situation he or she gets involved in. If it is a woman we are talking about, she can just remove the bad mask she wears for some obscure reason, and everything immediately grows beautiful and intelligent. Even brambles and thorns look intelligent on such occasions, believe it or not.

Yes, our heart is corrupt; and so are our members, the members of our body. But the good will I have just touched upon comes along and writes on all our members only one word, one significant, magnificent word, 'Good'. It is important to use capital letters, when writing or engraving this word, otherwise it might disappear of its own accord, for no reason at all. Is there any reason for any disappearance? Of course – death, for instance. But this word should remain, whatever happens. Even cancers should not be able to make it disappear from our existence and dreams.

Your good will can be directed towards the creation of a masterpiece – either in the domain of music or in any other domains. You recall Beethoven's efforts directed towards the same goal, and a number of drafts or useless, abortive attempts parade in front of your inner (and sometimes even outer) eye. You see the notes that do not feel comfortable – either on account of themselves or because of the annoying, almost baleful presences of their colleagues. Now and then, all these notes grow irritated and their conversations reflect their

dissatisfaction with the composer's genius that they begin to question in earnest. 'What does he think about us, about himself? Does he really believe that, in spite of his inability to hear anything, not even a clap of thunder, he can compose the *Ninth Symphony* and his late quartets?' They even have a go at intervals, pointing out – the composer does not hear them, alas – that such notes cannot sound together, feigning to participate in the score which is a failure and cannot be otherwise; in their opinion. They begin to jump from one chord to another, recomposing, in point of fact, the music about which humanity will dream for centuries to come. Being aware of Beethoven's cosmic talent, these people dream about his future compositions, asking each other, 'What do you think about his next work? Another quartet, another sonata or trio?' And once the composition gets out of the composer's study, music lovers listen attentively to its intricacies and soon their dreams reproduce them, willy-nilly, during the stretches of time and space devoted to sleep. Some of these dreamers are determined to see their late relatives – especially their mothers and fathers, their grandmothers – but instead of their nearest and dearest they watch a dance of notes they cannot hear at the outset of the ritual. (They are Beethovens, to some extent. All of them.) But little by little all becomes audible and beautiful, and they forget about their nearest and also their dearest.

The individuals who say, if only occasionally, 'This (he, she) gets on my nerves,' must know what they are talking about: their personal, manifold experience. They lose their tempers or some of their nerves and shortly afterwards come across these discarded things. They literally get on their own nerves, walking on them; jumping on them, if necessary. (Surprisingly it is often necessary or even vital to jump on your nerves, otherwise they might never leave you alone.) Incidentally you do say – now and then – 'Please leave me alone,' addressing your nerves. And then you find yourself in a speechless, pointless world from which not only Beethoven's bagatelles are excluded: even Mozart's operas cannot be heard within it.

A bundle of laughs, a bundle of nerves. A bundle of laughs can be deciphered and understood rather easily. Someone makes a joke and you laugh heartily; or you just laugh, heartily or unheartily. You go to sleep but the sleep does not descend upon you, upon your busy brain which is often in turmoil. The sleep does not descend and you have plenty of time on your hands. And you begin to recall some episodes from your life, and among these episodes there can be seen the joke made by someone in your presence; rather recently, as you recall. You laugh once again; and once again. The laugh that resounds in your room does its best to prevent you from falling asleep, and you curse your friend or rather enemy – the creator of this joke. It is true that it makes you laugh, but it does it at the wrong moment. You are not sleeping in the midst of your friends and colleagues, in the midst of beautiful ladies who might admire your smile and the sound of your laughter. Nobody admires it, as a matter of fact. What is more, this laughter of yours destroyed your sleep, your present sleep, your forthcoming sleep; and it might have destroyed the sleep you expect to enjoy tomorrow and the day after tomorrow because you are unlikely to forget this joke, associated now with your bed. As soon as you see your bed, you burst into laughter. And you cannot add, 'For no reason at all,' because you know the reason; and you can see the roots of this reason. And even the glance you cast at the reason of this laughter makes you laugh almost automatically. This predicament pursues you for a week or so; for a month or so. And 'or so' remains with you for a while which may last two or three years.

As for the bundle of nerves, you know perfectly well what it is. Lightheartedly you might presume at some point that you are dealing only with one nerve you have just found on your way to the kitchen. But then you realise this nerve is very sociable, and the sociability of the nerve is usually displayed in the kitchen where you cannot find what you look for. You look for a knife and find a spoon. You begin to cut a piece of meat with this spoon and realise once again – so many realisations, so many deceptions – that it does not work. In other words, your tool does not work, for its destination and vocation are quite different. In Russia – at least in nineteenth-century Russia – it was used during disputes. Instead of looking for an argument, a worthy or unworthy argument, you would just pick up a spoon and strike your opponent on the forehead; once or twice or many times. You would break the spoon in the process, but there were many spoons around you, especially if you were in the kitchen. Nowadays the Russians use mostly their bundles of nerves: they throw them at their opponents. The bigger the bundle, the greater the harm. That is why the Russians are so nervous: it is useful, after all. And this stratagem permits them to struggle for their lives most efficiently. And they really have to *struggle* for their lives.

What was I talking about? One wonders whether I was really talking or doing nothing. The point is we have a baleful tendency to take care of unimportant things, letting the important ones inexorably rot somewhere, far from our eyes and attention. Oddly enough, we eagerly pay attention to subordinate clauses or unimportant things, and they come to the fore, sometimes unwillingly; against their will. After all, they *are* unimportant things and often they repeat the following saying, ‘A place for everything, and everything in its place.’ Of course, from time to time, they may ask themselves the ritual question, ‘What am I?’ Another question follows immediately, ‘Where’s my place? Am I really subordinate, secondary?’ Revolts are a common feature of human life, of human society. (Such things can even happen in the world of animals.) But subordinate clauses are really subordinate, otherwise they would have merited another name for their activities (or inactivities).

But, in point of fact, subordinate clauses do not think they are subordinate, for they dominate the world. Subordinates always win because they will be first. They are already first and often you stumble upon a group of people who stubbornly turn the pages of the Bible, in English, in French or even in Russian. *Will* be first or *are* first? The last are always around so you do not have to look for them – under beds, for instance. (Why do they speak so often about the spaces under beds? Because many fortunate or unfortunate lovers know these space tangibly, having spent hours and hours within them, while their rivals, the lawful husbands of their mistresses, enjoyed the latter’s bodies *on* the beds.)

Another grammatical and vital problem: the first will be the last or the last will be the first? Well, let us tackle every problem in its turn. Here comes the turn of last and first. Last will be first or the last will be the first? In both camps you can come across the partisans of those who say, ‘We are the first, the very first. There’s nobody in front of us.’ And what about lasts and the lasts? ‘We are the last of the Mohicans,’ they say, stamping their feet and thereby proving that ‘the’ confers upon them a special status, a sort of championship that cannot be contested and rivalled – not even in the presence of Olympic champions. The latter jump very high, but an owner of ‘the’ says to them, ‘I don’t even have to jump. My “the” accomplishes this duty for me on every occasion.’ And a few amazed observers follow the trajectory, not to say the itinerary of a ‘the’ that flies off, up, up, touches

one star, another star, becomes a star in the process and brings its newly-appropriated status to its rightful and happy owner.

Why are slaves so determined to become their opposite: masters, masters, grossmasters? Even if someone dares to point out within their hearing, 'You're just slaves,' they may retort, 'No, we're the last. The last Mohicans, you know.' If you run around a stadium and another runner beats you in the course of this race, you may always say, 'The last Mohicans always come second, otherwise they wouldn't be the Mohicans at all.'

'Not even the first Mohicans?' someone may ask. (The same someone, always the same.)

'The first Mohicans were superior because they were aware of their final destiny – to become the *last* of the Mohicans. Actually, being the first of the Mohicans is not only ridiculous – it is useless. Sooner or later you'll become the last of the Mohicans. You should always enlist before the call-up.'

But the last, whoever they are, enjoy a bad reputation – and they really seem to *enjoy* it – and that not only on account of the Biblical truth. For instance, they are convinced they are the best judges, whatever the court in the midst of which they defend their causes. Why, why, why? Why do you think you know better than others? they are constantly asked. 'Because we embody the *last* judgement,' they answer in unison. Sure enough, as soon as they finish to read their judgement, the person at whom it is directed puts her right or left hand on her heart and dies peacefully. After all, she knows the verdict, the content of the last judgement devoted to her life and achievements. Real achievements or minus achievements, as they say now in Russia, in Putin's Russia.

And if they are accused of a murder, they answer as follows, 'No. Our so-called victims are holders of evil, of its treasures, so to speak. This evil is not efficient and concerns only itself – such is the law of Providence, if you must know. So, at the moment of judgement, of our judgement, the evil they bear within themselves quits their bodies, flies off and falls on them like a bomb, destroying their bodies, souls and everything else. Are you satisfied?'

Who are they? This is the question one is likely to ask, when reading about they, those, and so on: I am not always specific about my heroes and whatever they touch on their way to hell. (There is no other way, as they used to say in communist countries; and also in Nazi Germany.) Well, let them remain what they are; or who they are, considering that anybody, if not anything, is entitled to existence; at least in the sense attributed to it by Descartes, by his 'cogito, ergo sum'. Yes, I cogito, even if my thoughts are evil, nonsensical and almost non-existent. But they do exist. Medical scientists often say, 'The drug is very effective – the only snag is that it cannot be produced in large quantities.' Once again, I limit my narrative to a general notion, to a drug you can get or rather cannot get somewhere; or nowhere, as the case may be. The point is, existences can be produced in large quantities unless there is a war everywhere, one of these world wars that last forever and are not likely to be extirpated from our lives; and even from our deaths, logically enough. Well, let us explain to ourselves and others what this actually means: 'Cogito, ergo sum.' Of course we always look for stability, provided now by God, now by a president, however unreliable and absurd; and unredeemable.

According to Descartes, you can cogito about whatever you like, and you do not even have to bother about whether you cogito or not. You always cogito, whatever you do or think about. For instance, you touch a piece of clothing, and you can add, 'I never thought about it in my life until the moment I touched it.' Nevertheless, the moment came and you did touch it, which means you committed the sin of participation in the evil that reigns in the world – *sans partage*, as the French say. Right now I have no time to look for a translation, however imperfect, but that is not necessary, considering that whatever we do is evil, even if we do not think

about it. Even if we do not think about evil either on its terms or on our own terms. On our own, our own, our own. Sometimes we are prepared to sacrifice anything, even our most precious possessions, so as not to be our own, ours, owns, and so on.

You cogito and that might mean you exist, and whoever cogitos – and everybody does, according to our earlier conclusions – is entitled to our full respect on the strength of what our declaration of human rights declares. There is a text where everything is fully explained – down to cogito and even down to ergo sum. So what? Well, whoever thinks and does whatever this thinking leads to has every right to have all the rights, and therefore this individual reigns in the world we have in our field of vision and thoughts...and therefore, and therefore...The rest is hard to articulate. But it might mean we have to accept this member as a rightful, full-bodied – like a good wine – member of our community. We do not *kill* him on the spot: we may begin to *look* for the right spot in this domain, in the domain of killing this undesirable individual. How do we go about it? We just walk around and say to ourselves or to others, our companions in killing and getting rid of, ‘Is this the right spot, in your rightful opinion?’ And if some of our companions in fortune say, ‘No, I don’t think so,’ you continue to walk around, looking attentively around you, saying to yourself from time to time, ‘Right or not, right or not.’ And then the right spot comes, and you know its destination from the very start – as soon as you glance at this spot; as soon as this spot receives your glance. Actually, you do not really have to wait for the reception of your glance: you did cast it, thereby accomplishing your duty. The rest is silence – on your part; whatever happens in the exterior world.

Well, this is the right spot. All right, all right. The next step can be deciphered thus: the victim should be brought to the right spot at all costs. You assume the costs and bring the victim to the spot. And if the victim asks you, on the way to the spot, ‘What’s our final destination?’ you answer, ‘The spot.’ And if the victim continues to question you on the subject, you answer, without turning a hair or anything else, ‘You seem to have answered your question yourself. Final, final, final. Can’t you hear the final note which resounds in your question? And in my answer, in a manner of speaking?’

There are only final spots in the world; there is nothing else. This is another way of thinking, of signing verdicts. A friend of mine (perhaps my former mistress, as a matter of fact) says, paraphrasing Descartes, ‘We are what we think.’ But there are things about which I do not think; at least not in advance. I touch something inadvertently, and this something becomes part of my life, even if I do not collapse and die on the spot. Chance should not be *badiner avec*, as the French would put it, if put in touch with our conversation. (Treated lightly, if you wish. You should treat it *heavily*.) You go somewhere – you cannot do otherwise – and if someone (this someone is the same individual, as I pointed out on several occasions) asks you, ‘Where are you going?’ you answer, ‘Somewhere.’ Of course, this someone is not inclined to waste this someone’s (my someone’s) time and points out straightforwardly, ‘You’re right for the final spot.’ And then you ask yourself an earnest question; and you ask it in earnest. You earnestly ask yourself an earnest question; and that is how this should always happen. At least when you ask yourself questions. (Sometimes – very often, in fact – you wait for no answers.)

Unfortunately – what a calamity – it becomes a dialogue. (You should not talk to people like that. There are people with whom you are not supposed to shake hands. Putin, for instance. There are people to whom you had better not talk, for better or worse. I mean, for hearing something worse, for you cannot hear anything else from them.) Well (bad, bad) you set your foot on another journey which demonstrates its length in front of you, starting from your foot, from your right foot, to be exact. You put your right foot forward and begin to put it into

action. You can see it perform all sorts of exercises – in front of your eyes and probably for the sake of your eyes. Your eyes take no advantage of it – I can assure you. After all, I know my eyes better than any of you do; whoever you are. (As usual, as usual. Whoever you, whoever you are. And what if among these whoever and you and are there comes forward Julius Caesar? What would you say to him?)

Another spot, another spot. And for once you are not talking about Lady Macbeth who, as everybody knows, is obsessed with spots. As soon as she sees one, she exclaims, ‘Another one. Will there be...’ and so on, although, as a matter of fact, there are no so ons, as I pointed out many times in my youth and even in my childhood. Well, bad, dead – it is just another spot of ink celebrated by W.B.Yeats. But then you can say, in the same breath, ‘A schoolboy I was acquainted with in the Sixties, in the Soviet Union, talked to me at length about the ink spots he would leave in his notebooks or whatever this kind of thing was called in the Soviet Union. He said to me, “Every spot of ink requires spring-cleaning.”’

What am I prepared for?

Kjjkbjhc yjvh yuhjvytff uyhgcytfufcyjgf \$èyuivyuijkbjytuh ktg yçoilhbiè!çyouijlk;n!çpomlk=:;, k!lçol jllohkj n iohkj,n;

I am not prepared for this. What’s more, I do not know how to deal with it. What’s more, I do not know whether one should really deal with it. How do you deal with it, ITOTYOTO9TOTOTOTOTOTOTTOTOTOTOTOTOT?

There is an individual by your side and if God or one of His servants looks at you directly, not obliquely, this servant can say to God or someone else, ‘This man is great because nothing casts a shadow over his persona.’ Suppose, however, that this individual whose presence does not seem to bother you beyond measure, shifts his position and installs himself in front of you. Now God’s servant cannot see you properly. This servant sees you improperly on account of this figure which literally casts a shadow over your existence, over your very life. Indeed, is it worth your while to live within this shadow, leading a sort of truncated existence?

Let us suppose that this individual, this shifty, shadowy individual is lazy, being made up of lazy bones. (Not a single bone of this individual is active, in spite of a few movements you may notice, from time to time; a few movements coming and going within the substance I am doing my best to describe.) This individual or substance is consequently too lazy to budge, to move from one position to another. He cannot shift for himself, let alone for others. But he can say a few words, which is easier than lifting one’s legs, let alone putting them elsewhere. So he says a few words that contradict what you announced a few minutes ago; or a few seconds ago. And everybody listens to what he says. And even if no one listens to him, you know he has just contradicted you, your opinions – your very life, in a way. And this is unbearable, your being conscious of this contradiction, of this verbal attack on your status, on the statue you have built in your own honour. Yes, someone else seems to have ruined this statue, if only in part, in parts. This someone seems to have chipped it, after taking a penknife from one of his pockets. You are not sure to have seen the manoeuvre, but this does not really matter, considering that the evil has been carried out after all. After all the problems you had during the erection of your own statue. And you cannot tolerate this nonsense, this attack on your identity and achievements. They chip my achievements, you say to yourself. Chip, chip, chip, chip. Is that how they address chickens?

What is more, no chicken comes, whenever you mutter ‘chip, chip, chip’, which means that even chickens despise you in this world of ours. And this is the last straw which cannot be put up with, for all your tolerance (you are Gandhi’s worshipper) and endless amiability. What should be done? First you have to find the individual that spoils your party; or spoils the party for you, which amounts to the same thing, to the same spoils. Well, you leap into space and find no one in this space; no one and nothing. This too amounts to the same thing, to the same nothingness. All this means you have a fertile imagination: no one has ever contradicted you. Why? Because you are always right, and only a fool is capable of contradicting the truth. And there is only one truth and so if you say something else, something beyond this truth, behind it, you are wrong and condemned by the general, public opinion on which, at one point, at many points, Charlie Chaplin focused his energy and imagination. But the general opinion is not always worthy of its own reputation. Sometimes it is neither general nor has anything to do with what is generally called ‘opinion’. It is just gav, gav, gav, or something of the same kind. Just a stray dog barking at the moon.

What do I care about the general opinion? I am a general of my own opinions, and even Le Grand Trompeur is not powerful enough to remove me from my pedestal. Of course this pedestal has nothing to do with glory, fame and money, but the aptitude for dealing with the objects that lie within your reach is much more important. All right, you wish to handle the Almighty and in this respect, in the respect called linguistics, it is easier to deal with God, given that this creature of flesh and blood has only three letters. First you appropriate G, then O, and realise it is not necessary to go any further: God is already in your pocket.

Apparently, upon arriving at some of the Moscow railway stations you were supposed to close your pockets, to sew their respective parts together so that no one could put anything into them. I have no idea what they were talking about, but usually I sew all my parts together before going out or just upon awakening: one never knows. They – whoever they are – are capable of putting into you any sort of nonsense from which you are likely to suffer all your life. You had better sew together your lips and tongue – in the same way – so as not to say anything dangerous, as someone might presume. They might put *anything* into your mouth as well. And this anything can turn out to be a mouth-size atomic bomb. All this is far from what they call an open work. Indeed it is a closed work I am talking about. Closed in every sense of the word, of the deed and of the need.

Well, at least you are allowed to sew together some parts of your body, which means you are, to some extent, a master of your own destiny. You can go on with this ritual, sewing together some parts of the whole world you are supposed to deal with on a regular basis, if the aim of your existence has anything to do with humanity. Of course you do not hanker after money which cannot buy you eternal life and the total absence of death. Yes, you lift your blanket, walk along your endless corridors and look under every book you have read in the course of your life. You also look under all the books you have never read: neither in your life nor before it, in a sort of limbo. During your search you have never come across what is commonly known under the name of death. So you are eternal and have nothing to worry about: this eternal life will enable you to correct a multitude of mistakes, all of them. And if you correct all the mistakes you have ever made, either consciously or unconsciously, you get a white sheet of paper with a diamond at the centre of it. What else do you need?

But are you really *allowed* to live eternally? The absence of such an allowance might mean something; in the long run anyway. I think it might contradict some general laws of the universe; your eternal life, I mean.

Even the stars die in the long run, and to them this run appears as a very short run. The same goes for the gods; not for God, though. And what about angels? They run, they run, they run. They run errands for God, and at some point they realise they can no longer run or walk or use all four limbs for any kind of movement. You can hardly call that 'eternal life'. What is more, during her existence, an angel is always asking for something. 'Even after all these years, I still hanker for a motorbike,' one of them said to a journalist recently. The magazine for which the journalist worked – she was on the staff of this magazine – supplied the angel with all sorts of motorbikes, which enable the former to run her errands on various bikes. To motorbike them, so to speak. But in the long run – this run was rather long – she fell from one of these motorbikes and died like an ordinary human being. What is the point of becoming an angel?

Let us return to the Great Deceiver who works day and night, and thereby deprives us of almost everything; of luxurious motorbikes, among other things. 'She claims she is a duchess living in reduced circumstances.' Such is the motto of the humans we are living with; for all their billions of dollars. Yes, we are dukes, duchesses and kings, but even our motorbikes are not up to what are rightfully called 'cosmic standards'. What is more, we often fall from them, and some of us think this is their fault. Well, instead of blaming the cosmic standards of which we are perversely deprived, they think in terms of their puny constitutions. 'My constitution is too puny,' they say to themselves, and they begin to fall, even when standing on a carpet in the middle of their room. No angle, no piece of furniture seems to influence their lives at this particular moment, but they fall ineluctably as if guided by an evil hand or rather arm – such is the force, the power of the guidance. They continue their journeys on all fours, which is embedded in them; I mean this method or fashion, this way of moving around is part and parcel of their puny, tiny constitution, and even those whose constitution is situated at the opposite pole – poles apart, as they say – succumb to the same allurements, the all-four allurements, sooner than they presume. Of course death, its very existence, prepares us for all sorts of mishaps and so we say to ourselves, 'Now I'm on all twos, but one day I'll be on all fours, otherwise I wouldn't have these fours within my reach. Nature never errs on this side, on the side of multiplicity for nothing, of plurality for nothing.'

Whether you believe it or not, whether you accept it or not, all evil we suffer from on different occasions (and they diversify themselves, these occasions as if writing a set of variations on suffering) originates in Adam's Fall; or Fool, as they sometimes say, exasperated by the consequences of this misdemeanour. Is this really a misdemeanour? Let us not forget that these so-called misdemeanours are situated beyond whatever can be believed in the domain of suffering. You naively drive a nail into someone's skin, and your pressure produces a result you expect or do not expect – it depends on whose side you are. You are on your own side and so you go on driving the nail into the skin I shall not attempt to describe because it is already beyond any description; unless you wish to depict a heap of bloody odds and ends. And bits which look like a fruit of a savage succession of bites performed by a prehistoric animal. Suddenly a number of women come to the spot over which you have presided for some time. The women gather around the coffin and begin to wail, as is the custom in the region of the cosmos called the Earth. That is human life in a nutshell; for you.

There are many nutshells around me and I just pick up some of them, one by one. And I see a lot of bites, of cuts, and blood continues to seep or ooze – it depends on what you wish to express, apart from an abominable instance or specimen of death. What can one wish to describe outside, apart from death? (There is nothing

outside it, as we all know.) Yes, you wish to express the ways that lead to death, to what they define as the utter destruction of life. (As if life were not self-destructive.) Well, one of the ways, one of the reasons for this destruction of yours is your desire to live. You wish to live and this desire seems to be natural, in spite of all sorts of drawbacks one can think of almost instantly. Even an innocent-looking scratch – you scratch yourself on the roses growing and flourishing in your garden – and the scratch in question makes its appearance in the world, in the visible world where we all live and suffer. You know a lot of sayings related to the roses which are not really roses, considering the harm they may do, if you go near them with open arms; with open fingers, rather. And today we are growing aware of yet another saying which sounds as follows, ‘Roses are death and nothing else.’ Of course you can apply this saying to anything, except that sometimes you find an excuse, an explanation, a sort of consolation; by reflecting on something remotely associated with the object of your scrutiny. But roses are roses, and nothing else – not even remotely – can be said about them. Do you think you could say, ‘Roses are daffodils?’ No, no, no way, as they say.

The etiological myth which puts Adam at the centre of evil (he does not only come to the fore – he is *at the centre* of it) may be alleviated or attenuated through a sort of *dédoublement*: evil is not a natural, organic product. (A human being is natural, organic and full of tissues.) You can just maintain the following doctrine or statement, ‘Evil is on the agenda of God.’ Or to avoid anything blasphemous, ‘Evil is on the cosmic agenda and so you can follow its zigzags by watching the stars through your telescope.’ It is true that the agenda of the cosmos is always in front of us; but it is not *always* under our scrutiny, which accounts for our numerous mistakes, some of which are irretrievable, obnoxiously fatal. Or just ludicrous. You can watch a number of lovers who gaze at the sky, at the nocturnal sky, from one of the benches that can be found in our parks; you can also listen to their dialogues which boil down to: ‘Beautiful, isn’t it?’

‘It’s very beautiful.’

‘I wish I could offer you one of these stars.’

‘Why only one?’

‘Two or three, if you wish. If you are so inclined, my darling.’

‘Indeed, I am so inclined.’

From time to time some inhabitants of the Earth look up and see almost nothing. No stars, no Milky Way; only a few specks of dust that someone – an inhabitant of Hugo’s famous poem – flung upward. This becomes more and more common – the glance you cast at the sky and find no stars to which you have grown accustomed in the course of your existence. But who told you you would always find them where they were, once upon a time? Now they are replaced by dust or by ashes, which amounts to the same thing; at least within most cemeteries. Amounts to the same thing is just another of my leitmotifs. Of course – of course is also one of my leitmotifs because human life is so simple – everything seems similar to another thing, however different. Everything amounts, amounts, amounts – to no avail. Suppose you ascend a staircase which leads to the Absolute Truth and a lot of achievements related to this Truth, and not just to petty successes. You ascend, ascend, ascend, and then stop, for no reason at all, as they usually say, searching for excuses. But the reason is here, just beside you; and this reason tells you you are inadequate; you are not even quate. You are just ‘in’ and ‘a’, occasionally. What can you do? You start over and over again to please your boss or someone else. This someone may be God – why do I speak of God so often? Because He is better than any boss – and you please him, her, it; and you seem to please yourself. But then you realise you only *seem* to please yourself, whereas you

please only a *part* of yourself. What's more, you have no idea which part of yourself you please. And is it really a please? A party? Do your enterprise or undertaking please anybody, anything? Hardly.

What is your undertaking? Body-building? Hardly. Not Hardy, not Hardy – you are not scrutinising his poems you like so much. A poem-building.

A	POEM
A	
A	POEM
APOEM	
A	POEM

You build a poem, turn back and look at your building. And you tell yourself, 'If I lodge in one of its parts, I'll collapse immediately as if in expectation of a group, an array of apples.'

You build something that succumbs to the allurements of the force of gravity. What are these allurements? I am gravity, you know. I really force my way through reality, and the latter submits to my force, becoming my vassal, my vassal, my vassal. That is what force and domination are about. They are about this:

F	G
F	G
F	G
F	G
F	G
F	G
F	G

And what do you conclude? Nothing. Yet conclusions do count. For instance, you conclude that the Earth is just a hump, a clod, a sort of turf, a sort of sod.

Lots of men – Lot is among them – did their best to dethrone or merely depose Adam because there are other traits, other tendencies in the world; not only perversity and apples. These men repudiated, relinquished apples as such and ate mainly peaches, for some reason or other. One of the reasons was the banishment of apples, but nothing ideological could divert their attention from grapes, for instance. Nothing doing – they did not consume any fruit as if fearing a sort of exchange, replacement – treason, in other words (or word). You are convinced the fruit you are holding and putting into your mouth is innocent, an innocent-looking (and tasting) orange. But in fact, as a matter of fact, you are devouring an apple – a close relative of the one devoured by Adam at the outset of our history. Niam, niam, niam, as they say. And then a war was declared; a war flared up somewhere. Yet you were warned: 'There is likely to be civil war if the region tries to secede from the South,' you were told. But you paid no attention to this remark. Why? Because you thought you were eating an orange or a grapefruit. And also because you usually do not think in terms of the South. You live in a northern country and, frankly speaking, you are not extremely keen on the sun, its rays and the scorching effect it produces in its wake. But the war was declared and now thousands and thousands of soldiers (and civilians) die because of your

culinary habits. Besides, one has to observe a simple rule: before eating something one has to make sure that the object of one's gluttony is harmless; and not only in one sense of the word. Actually, the only sense that counts everywhere is the war; and its absence. The latter never takes place, to tell the truth.

Well, men can do other things; apart from eating apples all the time. They are not really warmongers; at least they are not *born* warmongers. They may become warmongers in the course of their lives, especially if they live in Russia where people dream either of peace or of war. Usually they say, 'We must go to war – even the result of our going is bound to be bloody, dreadful and full of corpses. But we must go to war, to this particular war because otherwise they will go to war – against us. And this war, the second war, will be even bloodier – bloodier than any Mary – than the first one.' You look behind you and see a pool of blood. And you compare this pool with the one you have just jumped over, determined not to soil and spoil your trousers. Yes, in Russia, instead of soiling your hands you may inadvertently soil your trousers. There is a lot of blood in Russia – everywhere. That is why mothers say to their sons, 'Be careful – don't soil your trousers.'

'Do you mean to say it's better to soil my hands?' asks the son.

'You can always wash your hands – we've got enough bars of soap for that. But what are we supposed to do with your trousers? According to Western media, we've got no washing machines.'

'Let us switch the sound off and we'll have a washing machine, the latest German model.'

When reading this text, you may raise objections to my way of depicting an individual who lives in a northern country. You might say, for instance, 'The people of the North think only about their holidays on the Riviera.' So the South – especially the south of France – cannot be excluded from your way of thinking, from your interior and exterior monologues. You think about the North, for a while, and then unavoidably switch to the South, for fear of catching pneumonia. The points of the compass are North, South, East and West. But your neighbours usually spend their holidays in the south of France. And for nothing in the world would you wish to look *inferior* to your neighbours. That is why, when passing one of them in the streets, you murmur, 'In the south of France' – in three languages.' And then you inquire, almost innocently, 'Do you speak Spanish?'

'No,' answers your neighbour.

'Well, next time I won't speak to you about the south of France in Spanish. Do you have a smattering of Chinese?'

Just in case, you learn this sentence or rather this bit of the sentence (the south of France) in Japanese and go to Japan so as not to reproach yourself for wasting your time, for wasting your life. You waste it anyway because you cannot help saying something important, otherwise your opponents might think you have nothing to say. And then you say this or that, looking straight into their mouths, as if waiting for a thunderous reply, riposte or applause; or for its absence.

There are far more important problems than the one I am confronted with at this particular moment. (It is not really particular unless I misunderstand its essence and substance.) For instance, an evil man can create an insurmountable obstacle on our way to progress and its goal: general happiness, joy and love. This evil man should be eliminated at all costs. But what are these costs? We often speak about them, about all costs, but even one cost should be explained, weighed on our moral, psychological and eschatological scales. (To weigh up the pros and the cons.) And no one takes the trouble to use these scales: only money counts, as we know. If a gigantic amount of money is not involved in the situation under scrutiny, we just disregard scales and other

instruments of moral responsibility. We fling all sorts of scales into a huge rubbish bin and go about our affairs. (And moral damage is not to be found in the midst of our affairs.)

Well, we have an evil man breathing down our necks. He also puts spokes in our wheels (the evil man and our wheels, a nice title for a tale). We have a lot of spokes in our wheels, and we also have a revolver in one of our pockets. Shall we kill the evil man, outright or after a while? And then the scales I have talked about for some time interfere in our game, in the game entitled 'life or death'. Yes, this time – all the time, as a matter of fact – we are dealing with death, life and an outcome of some conflict or other. If we kill this man, we get rid of the conflict, but death remains: he is faithful to the post, as the French put it. If you could become immortal, you might kill a thousand men, saying to your opponents, 'They are all evil, they're Putin's partisans, stooges.' Or Stalin's stooges, or Lenin's stooges, or Hitler's stooges. Is Hitler better known than Putin? Today? This depends on the whereabouts of this today.

If asked to compose a song about today's world, I would come up with the following result:

Evil, evil, evil, evil,
Piff paff, piff paff.
Evil, evil, evil, evil,
Vile, wail, vile, wail.

Yesterday I read in a newspaper, 'Tomorrow will be cloudy with outbreaks of rain.' Well, today's weather ties in with this description and so one might say, 'Yesterday's article corresponds exactly to what is going on today.' If I had a revolver, I might practise my slaughter machine by killing the drops of rain; outright, outright. You shoot a drop of rain dead and then verify, make sure it is dead, lying on some leaf of grass. Is it worth my while composing a song about this drop, this leaf?

A leaf of grass,
A tomb of a drop.
Could you find
A better tomb?
Shall I die and lie
Down on a leaf, or rather
On a large range of herbs and spices
To feel more comfortable, at home?
So to speak, so to speak.

You know for sure that 'this is the evil'. That is how you talk about an evil man on whose shoulder the whole world was installed some time ago. And ever since this installation you know that the world will not survive its next anniversary – whatever anniversary and date you have in mind – because its destruction is to be found on the same shoulders. Well, this man should be disposed of – that's for sure. You are sure you are right and so are many of your friends. But the point is – what quantity of evil can justify such a decision, this so-called exploit? You begin to count: one hundred, two hundred, three hundred. You look at this evil man – this man really

symbolises evil – and go on counting the amount of evil you encounter, whenever you look at this man. And still your inner struggle is unfinished: you still ask yourself whether by killing, destroying this man you will not become an evil one yourself.

Yesterday I watched yet another documentary or news programme, and I saw a woman who made a declaration or a speech meant for almost everybody; with the exception of babies who do not speak and understand either the new speak or the old one. The woman was on the verge of tears, and actually a few tears jumped over the barrier erected by modesty and decency and entered the public space. But this does not really matter, given the importance of what this woman said to us. She said we had to pursue, to haunt Putin and eventually murder him. She even said, ‘Give me a revolver and I’ll bump the bugger off.’ There were many pedestrians, onlookers and observers around the woman, but none of these participants in the television programme seemed to own a revolver or an ordinary gun. (To bump off, to gun off.) Many viewers were sitting in front of their screens and some of them had revolvers and guns in their possession. But how to cross the screen and walk towards this woman, determined to hand her the gun in question? You are determined to hand her the gun and she is determined to accept it with an ingratiating smile and a few words of *remerciement*. She is also determined to bump the bugger off, or to bug the bumper off; by means of the same gun, revolver and Browning. (Does this Browning have anything in common with the poet we all admire?)

There are evident evils or open-book evils, as the Russians often say. An open-book crime, an open-book masterpiece. You open a book and realise after a while, after reading a few sentences, that you are dealing with an absolute masterpiece. That is what usually meant by an open-book this and an open-book that. You look at a dictator; at Putin, for instance. What to do? You cannot open him, which might permit you to read a few sentences he harbours in his heart. We are acquainted with the following remark, ‘He’s been harbouring a grudge against her ever since his promotion was refused.’ We spend a lot of time on substitutions. There are many remarks or sentences in our brains and, weary of producing novelties every two minutes, we use these sentences, ready-made judgements, after making them fit such and such a situation. We select a sentence after submitting our brain to a thorough search. (Or a light-hearted search. A light search, if you wish.) And we substitute one word for another, which enables us to discuss the situation we got involved in some time ago. That is how we get rid of hectic periods and insoluble problems. ‘He’s been harbouring a grudge against her ever since his promotion was refused,’ said someone. We substitute he’s for Putin’s, Ukraine for her, and the rest can stand because Putin wished to be promoted. What kind of promotion did he have in mind? He wished to restore the Russian Empire. He also wished to become the Emperor of this Empire. But this promotion, the one he harboured for some time and cherished in his mind, heart and body, was refused; by the Ukrainians, in the first place.

Many shots and sabres were aimed at Russian ministers, colonels, presidents and even tsars: we are all acquainted with their stories. Some of them may equal in some minds the assassins of Julius Caesar and their victim. And Du, and du, resounds in our history, as well as the name of the Du – Brutus. Later on, Du will turn into Duce, but this is another story.

Yes, I do know what I am driving at. Evil is not everywhere, otherwise we might just sit down and wait. Evil things, evil doings and unhappiness, misery, tragedy: all this happens either to us or to others. We see a black square in the distance, but this distance grows shorter and shorter – not in the twinkling of an eye, though. It grows shorter *in* the eye to such an extent that the eye itself grows smaller and smaller. And soon there remain

on our face only two dots, as if we were writing something, using punctuation marks. There are two dots, and one would expect yet another dot to accomplish the task known as 'to be continued' or something along these lines. To be continued, to be continued. What for? All right, all right: let us add something to these two dots that do not mean something significant. Of course you can talk about a colon in this respect, within this figure of speech or punctuation. And if you add a tail to one of the dots, you will be able to speak about semi colons and commas in general. You see a comma in front of you, on a sort of carpet, and say to yourself, 'It's not over, not yet. Not all over, at least.' You take a few steps, reach the comma, trip over it and they have to call an ambulance: there is no other choice. They have no choice, in other words.

Once again, I am almost duty bound to touch upon Putin. (I wish I could really touch him – with a huge hammer or a pneumatic drill. I wish I could drill a few holes in his chest.) When asked about his terrorism, he always answers, 'We had no choice.' And you hear thunderous applause; and you conclude that his partisans are not dead; not yet, as you often add. One might conclude there are not enough pneumatic drills in the world and so all these partisans, admirers and fascists continue to walk in our midst. Some of them carry pneumatic drills, and after a while we realise we are full of holes. And these holes are not only all along our legs. Even our hearts are full of holes as if they needed to breathe, as if they were suffocating within themselves. Putin's stooges, partisans and worshippers aim at our evil, at the evil that, according to them, should descend on us – the sooner, the better. That is why we see so many Maleviches or rather black squares that descend on us, run towards our bodies, brandishing their pneumatic (and other) drills. We say to them, 'Pity, pity, pity. Have pity on us. At least remove all those squares from our field of vision. You may replace them by triangles which are less threatening, less weird, less horrifying. Or you may put a few balls on the spots where we see (and shudder, with a shudder) the squares we're talking about. We could play a game of football, instead of waiting for atrocious, merciless death.'

In the meantime the Japanese talk about purities and impurities. Of course it is not enough to go to a Japanese bath designed for several persons, instead of letting one man or woman to enjoy himself or herself in a tiny, more or less comfortable bathtub where one could even play with a few toy boats and one other toy, a harmless crocodile. No, you have to plunge your body into a huge receptacle shared by several people whose impurities are supposed to disappear in the water and in holes designed for the purpose. And you can watch one impurity after another disappear somewhere, probably into the kingdom of purity. Never mind, you feel pure and are prepared to confront yet another series of impurities, for life is made up of impurities among which death takes pride of place. That is why poets say, almost in unison, 'Death, be not so proud! You'll disappear into one of the holes I touched upon in days of yore.' All this is sheer nonsense: death does not disappear; neither into a hole, nor into hell. Even hell is not big enough for death. You put death in hell, hoping it would disappear forever, being burnt by hellish fires, being utterly destroyed by hell's high waters. No way, as they say: you can still see a huge slice of death, a morsel of death; and there is no way of getting rid of it. No way, no way. Even if you put death in paradise, it will not disappear.

Yes, the Japanese firmly believe that death is the impurest thing one can come across during one's life. You walk in the midst of impurities, and from time to time you say to yourself, 'What a horror! I don't seem to have seen anything like that in my whole life. Hopefully I'll never see anything like that again.' But your hopes are dashed and shattered mercilessly – everything and everybody is merciless, when all is said and done – and you see something unutterable. You try to utter it and a series of sounds come from your mouth. But the

Japanese say – actually they do not say it, their mouths being shut almost irremediably – something along the lines of, ‘Better to be shut, my mouth, my mouth. Try to learn this simple truth by heart.’ The mouth learns this truth by heart and repeats it on a regular basis, ‘Better to be shut, better to be shut.’

‘Don’t repeat it,’ you say to your mouth.

‘I can’t help it,’ the mouth answers.

‘Why?’

‘Because I learnt it by heart, and my heart can’t help talking to others all the time. That’s how I communicate with the world which should be shut once and for all.’

Alas, they do shut the world from time to time, but they do not *keep* it shut. They simply cannot live without the world, saying, ‘This wouldn’t make sense.’ And they make sense all the time, to account for their sheer existence. They simply do not realise their existence is just sheer.

So the mouth says to us that in the whole world there is nothing more impure than death. That is why they wash corpses several times before dinner and several times after dinner. They pin their hopes on the ultimate purity where death cannot prosper, in accordance with their beliefs which are utterly wrong because there is such a thing as a wrong belief. And whatever is conceivable is doable, and death just does it. That is how our things stand, no matter how many litres of water we pour on these things.

The Japanese keep their corpses – their own corpses, mind you – in coffins; for a long time. Perhaps it is true: seeing a coffin is more reassuring than watching a corpse day and night, day after day. But why can’t you just bury the corpse we are talking about almost endlessly? Because his or her presence would impurify the Earth. And the Earth should be kept clean, if only for the sake of rice. At least that is what the Japanese firmly believe and keep in their heart of hearts. And for the sake of cherry blossom. To enjoy cherry blossom you have to be able to walk on the Earth – from your house to wherever there are trees and cherries and blossoms.

You see a tree and a cherry, and they start looking for an armchair where you will spend several months, waiting for the blossom to appear. And then you write a few haikus that immortalise your name and thoughts. You just write: ‘Cherry blossom, how beautiful and how new, although I’ve seen it all my life.’ It is a beautiful poem, and you can send it to a woman you are in love with, at least for the moment, for a moment. But this moment counts and please count it for as long as possible; at least until the advent of the next cherry blossom flowering which is to come in a month or so. You wonder how you will spend this month, and this perspective seems cruel, unbearable and endless. But it has to end sooner or later, and eventually the cherry blossom you are waiting for with such eagerness comes and you enjoy it once again. As they say in some Japanese restaurants, ‘Please, enjoy it.’ And obediently you enjoy whatever they put on your table. And, one must simply admit it, the thing you find on your table is delightful, succulent and unforgettable; at least to some extent, to the extent of your memory and being.

The Japanese – and here lies the fundamental difference between them and my mentality – tend to live in groups, listening to what other people say and think. They detect a thought coming from another brain and decide to follow its itinerary. In this manner they grow attuned to their contemporaries; at least to some of them. They do not say every now and then, ‘I disagree with you because you seem to go against nature, against the cherry blossom we contemplate on the other side of the street.’ This does not mean that the Japanese, whatever their status and bank balance, neglect their cherry blossoms: this just cannot happen. They may even neglect their lunches, their dinners and even their baths so as not to miss a single moment of the blossom to which their

cherry trees pay homage every year as if their very lives depended on it. As if they knew that only their blossoms save them from continuous and dolorous death. Of course they die every day and every night, but they pay attention only to their blossoms which hide the hideousness of death from them. Death is hideous and you appropriate it, slice by slice, particle by particle. After a while, you can admit that your unconscious job has brought magnificent results. You are almost dead, as a matter of fact, and the rottenness of your matter is on the point of reaching the fact, the only fact of our existence: death and its ramifications such as tombs, coffins and make-up. (Apparently the Japanese put a lot of make-up on their corpses, on their own corpses and on those of their friends, wives and nephews with the intention of hiding the hideousness of death. They never succeed completely: *ness* or *s* remains in spite of their herculean efforts.) You walk towards something that looks like a bed. In fact it is a coffin and you realise this as you get nearer and nearer to its surface or rather to its hideous, abominable contents. This content displays human death, its volume, proportions and unattractive character, and you do what you can not to touch it (inadvertently) with your fingers. Of course your fingers begin to move in the direction of death as soon as the corpse appears within their reach. No wonder they are always on the point of reaching death; as we all are, as a matter of fact. (Another of the facts you cannot bear.) Your fingers are suspended over the body or the rest of it; in question. (Everything is in question; everything can and should be questioned.) Your fingers dance a *Totentanz* over the body. Or deathendance, if you prefer. After a while you become so involved with the movements of your fingers that your body flies off in order to suspend itself over the body you seem to contemplate for the sake of your health and everlastiness. Evernastiness, evernastiness, as your mother used to say as she endeavoured to describe your disrespectful behaviour; and this is also far away, dead and buried, to all appearances.

The Japanese look at all these dancers and decide to join them, mindful as they are of the so-called Japanese team spirit. They know that if someone disjoins the dance, the group will lose its coherence and bungle the job. 'He's an incompetent bungler,' they say about such an individual. Now he stands in the group I have just described, and now, for no reason at all, he disjoins, he disjoins, he disjoins. He puts the members of the group out of joint, thereby putting the aforementioned members' noses out of joint. And Hamlet joins in and one is tempted to end a chapter on this desperate note, waiting for 'the rest is silence'.

But silence does not come, contrary to one's great expectations. The great expectations are truly great, but silence is even greater, for the simple reason that it is made of gold, whereas the great expectations are not silver. They are made more or less permanent through the medium of ordinary wood. Of course it is better than nothing because nothing means nothing: you put your fingers into the void and your body follows the pattern initiated by your fingers. And you fall through, through, through, and no one knows how many throughs you will explore in the course of your Adam-unlike fall. (It does not even deserve a capital F.) You just fall somewhere and somehow, and no one takes notice of your fall; not even second-rate journalists. They just write about royal families and their descendants or ascendants, and everybody reads this worthless stuff which is worthless on account of the number of lies told in the tabloid or yellow or rose or black-and-white press. You know that what you read amounts to nothing else; lies, lies, lies or words, words, words. But you have no desire to embroil yourself in lengthy lawsuits with the tabloid newspapers. And so you let these things (and many other things) stand. And contrary to many expectations which are eternal and omnipotent; and, contrary to Beckett's famous play – these things do not fall. All that fall turns into 'some fall and some do not', which makes things even

worse, although you are convinced that nothing can be worse than these things. Not even awful, evil, transcendently foul things.

And the Japanese believe that one's death might make things easier for one and for others, for one's descendants. The latter say to each other, 'What good luck we have. Luckily for us he committed suicide, otherwise we would have suffered atrociously throughout our tiny lives. We know that all lives are tiny and they grow even tinier if your antecedent doesn't kill himself, after committing a lot of mistakes, grievous and even mortal.' You make a mistake and you know it is mortal, judging from its atmosphere and content or subject-matter. Incidentally, its subject-matter is called 'a grievous mistake', and this is enough to condemn you to a series of eternal punishments, such as fire, brimstone, stones falling from nowhere every second, every tiny, puny second, and cetera. By the way – and cetera also falls on you, on your skull and so on.

What else did I wish to say about the Japanese? They fall into silence, when the fear to be misunderstood overcomes them to the point of shutting their mouths; not forever, just for a few minutes. Yet some of them wish their mouths could be shut forever so that even their death will be deprived of what is frequently called 'communication'; or 'the communication's umbilical cord'. There is only one communication worth of our attention, according to the people who speak almost relentlessly about umbilical cords. You lose this communication and, understandably enough, start looking for a cord. Then you look for something umbilical and finally give up your searches, a number of them. And you feel relieved. My God, you do feel relieved, although you are not really relieved, removed from troubles without ends; and odds, mind you.

And what if, what if, you say to yourself, speaking to yet another deity. All right, you win one race, two races, and your horses or whatever replace them, run tirelessly over the surface of the Earth; and even beyond this surface – in other worlds, along other surfaces and depths. So what? What if, what if.

What if I lie down and forget?
 What if I die up and recall?
 Everything, everything, and things
 Put themselves in order. And so
 You stay arrayed, arrayed,
 Forever and ever. And ever,
 Perhaps. Just in case. In evermore.

But whatever happens or is written, composed, imagined on the spur of the moment, death remains the blackest thing in the world; even if you hide it within a coffin which you try to whiten by pouring a lot of water over it, gallons of water. An imperial gallon, used in Britain, is equal to 4,546 cubic centimetres. Well, you pour 444,555,666 cubic centimetres of pure water on the coffin by which you stand, running a number of risks. In the first place, you risk your life by standing in proximity to the coffins where your friend and mistress are doing their best to find eternal rest. Actually, they hope this rest will not be eternal, for they believe either in Christ's promised and assured resurrection, usually written with a capital R, or yet in another incarnation. Habitually, they do not mind undergoing the same or slightly different tortures (in this life of ours), provided they are given an opportunity to do it once again, at the expense of their wealth, health and spiritual tranquillity.

But spiritual things are often, if not always, related to spirits – to vodka, among other things and doings. (Vodka makes you do a lot of things about which we shall keep silent, for the sake of decency and order.) And vodka is associated with purity – not in the brains of the Japanese, to be exact and fair. Well, you have a coffin in front of you; and your eyes, consequently. Your eyes are open and consequently a coffin lies in front of them. It could lie behind them, but, unlike some representatives of the animal kingdom, you cannot see whatever is behind you. (Am I confusing this kingdom with some supernatural forces, with God, for instance? Yes, God can see whatever happens behind His back, and the expression ‘behind my back’ does not exist in His vocabulary. What does exist in God’s vocabulary? God, God, God, God. A sort of quadrinity.)

So they see a coffin and begin to pour a lot of water or vodka on it, in the hope of removing impurity from its very nails or whatever they are replaced with. (Today you often replace these cumbersome things – nails and their acolytes – by laser beams.) They pour and pour and pour. Contrary to what many linguists suggest, they do not become poor (nor even *pauvres*, mind you), but slowly but surely (too many buts, as usual) they realise that nothing purifying happens in front of their eyes. And somehow they are aware of the same doings of nature – behind their backs. All this means that water does not accomplish its duty – far from it. Indeed, if you put water and duty in the same room, they will occupy the spaces located at the utmost distance from each other; in the opposite corners, for instance.

At some point in history water, which was married to duty and purity, divorced both of them and became a solitary traveller or vicar. You are solitary and solitary is you – that is the end of many Japanese stories where a woman appears to your eyes in the shape of a bird and asks you not to open any door in her abode. Of course, as soon as she is out of sight, she is also out of mind, and you grow engrossed in doors, so to speak. You open them in the twinkling of an eye; in the twinkling of a hand, you might say, except that your hands never twinkle. And it is too late to teach them this kind of exercise; or any exercise associated in your mind and body with spirituality.

You continue to pour water – a huge quantity, as a matter of fact – on coffins, on corpses, on death himself, and suddenly it dawns upon you that the water you resort to on this occasion (and other occasions, and other occasions) is not really pure. It is impure, for God’s sake! That is what you exclaim, after a while. And you go on exclaiming, ‘For God, for God.’ You are persuaded you have always done. What? For God. Never mind what. For God and for you. And the result is so poor that even your pouring some water over some coffins does nothing to bring you nearer to your goal; to paradise. You hold rather firmly a glass into which you poured some pure or impure water; some time ago. And you see some sort of paradise in front of you, and you rejoice to the utmost of your abilities. You shout successively, ‘Paradise, happy, at last, my God, my You, whoever You are, my Thou, whoever, whoever!’

So wherever you go, whatever you do, you create a sort of black perspective, and a museum asks you to sell this picture to the world, meaning you are a great painter, creator, and so can be exhibited in museums and even on public squares – for the sake of the taste that reigns among professionals, art-lovers, the so-called elite that cannot live without perspective and transmigrated, transsupposed, transresurrected, transvirtuosed death. You recognise the subject matter thanks to the blackest colour ever, but they take it differently, turning it into a work of art, a new tendency, a new road by means of which humanity is sure to escape from the cul-de-sac known to everybody as ‘our time’.

No, I wished to tell another story. At some point Goebbels said, 'You shouldn't fear death.'

'But how could we do it?' they asked. 'How could we rather not do it? Is it possible? Not to fear death?'

'You just separate death from fear. They should part in opposite directions.'

'Do they have to say "adieu" to each other?'

'They may, if they feel like it.'

'And if they *don't* feel like it?'

'You order them to feel like it.'

'All right, they part. So what?'

'You pick up death and bury it somewhere, far from the fear and its outstanding eyes. Don't forget that fear's eyes are outstanding and therefore they outstay their welcome and also a lot of objects created on their own initiative. So this fear says to itself, "Well, I created death and that was a mistake – I recognise it fully and truly and coolly. But I promise – I'll never come across it again, walking around its tomb, circling around it, over it. I'd rather become a vulture than pay homage to my mortal enemy, called *mort*.'"

In short, Goebbels said we should nip in the bud our fear of death, and this is the only way of making death respect us. Death says to himself, 'He and she do not fear me any longer. This impossible task was put on their shoulders and their shoulders bore it triumphantly, without giving way either to this part or that part of my magnitude. This exploit deserves my respect, and so I declare this respect openly.'

Actually, it is hard not to declare it openly, given that whatever is open is also declared. For instance, you bare the jewels hidden in your suitcase and, by this very gesture, by its openness and open-heartedness, you open whatever can be open in your substance, including your intestines that begin to float in the open air. The air is open to your intestines, and they take full advantage of it, floating in it, flying in it and over it. That is what they call 'democracy' or 'freedom of speech' or 'freedom of pitch'. What is the motto of this freedom and speech and mich, whatever it is? 'By this time their disagreement had reached such a pitch that there was no hope of an amicable conclusion.' An amicable conclusion is anyway out of the question. But what kind of conclusion is it? (One wonders.) 'Do you respect me?' That is the question, as Hamlet might have put it; and he did not put it, I am afraid. So I have to do it on my own, and first I have to decide whether I have my own. Or is it His own? Or Her own?

According to our German enemy, Doctor Goebbels, or whoever he was, said that we should respect Mr Death; and vice versa, which means that death says to us rather solemnly, 'I respect you.' And then again you yield to the temptation and launch into a well-predicted discussion.

'Do you really respect me?' asks death.

'I do, except that I don't respect your custom of snatching us from where we are to transport us to where you are, my dear Death.'

'I have no choice, as the President of Russia, Mr Putin says.'

'You could leave me where I am. On the Riviera, for instance.'

'But are you sure you feel comfortable on the Riviera?'

'Absolutely sure.'

'But don't you know my kingdom guarantees a total remedy?'

'How do you mean?'

‘You cut your finger and you die from it. You can cut as many fingers as you like after your death.’

Actually Doctor Goebbels said you should not fear death, which might allow you to respect him in the long run. And then, in the course of the same run you will see a few ceremonial bows coming from death himself, which might mean that death respects you in his turn. Well, I have talked about it abundantly, and I think I even talked about the hats lifted on this occasion, on both sides.

Do you respect me or not? This question is crucial for Russian people. They stand in front of each other, posing this question seriously, earnestly, and if the obvious answer does not come at once, they begin to strike each others with fists and even with bottles of ink. After one such encounter, a journalist wrote, ‘He was disappointed to see his body returned with a mass of corrections in red ink.’ We realise at once we are talking about the world in general where bodies float, fly and collide with each other to such an extent that a number of bottles appear. Contrary to what one might presume, these bottles contain not only vodka, but also ink, which means that, at the end of the battle, you are covered with ink from head to foot. Your body, rather. But what else do you have? The soul?

Something is wrong and everyone knows that. That is why there is the word ‘redresser’ which allows us to comprehend the structure of the world and its history. There is something ‘dressé’ and apparently this dressage signifies the best state of whatever happens. The situation we are in is far from being dressed or simply vertical. It is full of angles and holes – like an old branch that belongs to an old tree. You take hold of this branch and it no longer belongs to the tree, for the simple reason that it is broken; or sad. If a writer speaks about a broken flower, he or she wishes to convey the sentiment of sadness or rather the sediment of joy. Only a few minutes ago this branch or twig was more or less happy; at least it was part and parcel of a tree. And every tree originates in the huge, indescribable Tree of Life. In other words, this twig was living in our world, and our world is fully alive, in spite of the number, of the increasing number of wars during which people hold their revolvers, guns, machines guns and aim something – a bomb, to all outward appearances – at somebody or something. The appearance of this bomb leads an observer to the insides of the bomb where the observer finds a lot of lethal material. And this material seems to be ready for a huge strike, as a result of which many children will exchange their vertical position – they were engrossed in some game or other – for a horizontal position. Mind you, this downward position is not always associated with death. They are a pair of close associates: no one can deny it. Sometimes you lie down on account of a mortal wound uncompassionately settled in your chest or head; sometimes, however, you just wish to give yourself over to the sun, to its so-called bath. But the day we are speaking of is not a sunny day, contrary to a number of suppositions. It is a rainy day, which can be proved rather easily. Just look at the chest of a man lying in front of you as if determined to exhibit the beauty of his chest and belly and organs, whatever their name. Usually, they just say ‘organs’, and everyone understands what they mean and what their intentions are. ‘What are their intentions?’ you may ask.

‘The organs.’ Such is the answer you hear in proximity to your right ear.

‘How do you mean?’

‘I mean “the organs”. Do you think these organs are where they are for no purpose at all?’

‘There must be some purpose, I suppose. To pee?’

‘Are you joking? What kind of joke is this?’

‘Am I wrong?’

‘You’re not, but you’re not ambitious enough. You could use the organs for wealth and health.’

‘How so?’

‘You could make love to a billionaire. And money means holiday resorts and health in abundance.’

Every drop of sperm deprives us of vital energy; and so does every declaration of love, every sigh, every ‘ah’, ‘ha’, ‘you, you, you, only you’. You say ‘you’, and you utter this pronoun emotionally, otherwise it will never be accepted by your addressee. A quarrel ensues and you lose the rest of your daily energy in the course of this quarrel, while coming up with all sorts of explanations and excuses. Your vital energy is also used on your mistress’s resistance.

‘Peace, peace, peace,’ they say and humans keep their fists in their pockets, instead of brandishing them in the air and touching, now and then, faces, noses, stomachs that categorically refuse to work after this touch. You eat something, but your stomach says to you, instead of working full time and digesting whatever you put into it or rather stuff into it, ‘What you rudely stuffed into me will not be digested, for the simple reason that you touched me last Sunday. Why did you do it? Don’t you know I’m untouchable?’ And you go to your favourite lavatory, and the story of your relationship with your stomach goes on as if it could not stop once and for all. All right – it does stop once and for all. So what? Your stomach does not work at all; it is jobless. ‘The job is right here,’ you say to your stomach. ‘All right,’ says your stomach. ‘But why should I listen to your orders? I exist and function on my own. I digest my own thoughts about which you know nothing at all. So leave me alone, if you please.’ And the stomach, your stomach, leaves your body and writhes and squirms at your feet, in the proximity of your majestic body.

Of course there is only slavery, and we talk about slavery day in day out. And we *do* this slavery, what is more. What *is* more than this slavery? You fall on your knees and begin to scrub the floor you see in front of you. What *do* you see in front of you? A piece of the floor you are supposed to scrub so as not to displease your master whose very nature is attached to Hegel’s definitions. You see this stretch of the floor and say to yourself, ‘That’s not enough. After all, I’m a slave and I’m not supposed to think big, otherwise I’ll be punished. Actually, in this case, I’m not supposed to think small, and so I think big, in the positive sense, meaning I wish to please my master by polishing a stretch of the floor which belongs to his mansion, castle and so on. Perhaps it is Olympus I’m scrubbing. So much the better. So I’m part of Olympus. Does this definition mean to displease me? Am I mean, after all?’

You scrub the floor, and the bigger the floor you scrub, the bigger the castle you build. So you become a master after all, after all this scrubbing, scratching and matching your own power against the master for whom you do not work any more, having become a master in your turn. Somebody always cries, ‘It’s your turn!’ That is what democracy means, after all. Upon hearing this injunction, you turn, turn, and the injunction screams, ‘Do not turn, you fool! You’re supposed to come forward!’ You do come forward, and the same voice and individual says to you, ‘This is not forward. This is sideways.’

In Japan they never say your future is cloudless, and they never point to a cloudless sky to describe your future, your happiness: there are always clouds in Japanese skies, even if there are no clouds. And if they have to resort to a coin, things are made even less complicated: in the sky there are always vestiges of past or future clouds. They just show you the coin and say, 'You know what will happen, if I turn this coin.' And of course you say, 'Yes,' for you have no wish to be treated badly, verbally. 'Moron,' and so on. You are aware of the fact that the other side of the coin is the other side of the coin, consequently you are always both sides of the coin. Actually you are both sides of everything. You look at the sky and think about God; at least a few thoughts of yours are devoted to God and are even permeated by His name and Substance. And then you lower your gaze and this gaze of yours meets the Devil or something (somebody) of the kind. You see some horns, two or three cleft feet, and you recoil in horror, which never happens when you look at the sky, at the Almighty and His army composed of angels and spirits of the highest order. There, up there, among those spirits you encounter the same problem or rather exercise: you have to go up and up and up and up. Nicolas of Cusa (Kuzanez or Cusanus) said you can go up as far as you wish, but you will never meet either God or even a single angel. Why? Because you are human and therefore condemned to ignorance or damned to ignorance. And this can be blessed or yearned for; it does not really matter. This is ignorance, and you should memorise this maxim once and for all. You start with the letter I and then pass to the letter G. Don't try to replace this letter, to substitute some other blessed symbol for this stupid, plain and damnable letter G. And if you proceed in this way, sooner or later you will come to utter damnation. You will utter it to make sure you have not been led astray once more. You shout, almost scream, with tears in your voice, 'Utter damnation, utter damnation, damnation, damnation with horns and cleft feet!'

And suddenly you think about utopias. But these utopias should be constructed in this world, in this rotten, lost and never found world. Every brick of this world is rotten. Whenever you put it somewhere – you believe it is the foundation of a new, better, better, better world – this brick divides itself, if I may say so in English (the point is, the brick *can* say everything) and every division or rather part of it can become the foundation of yet another utopia. At least that is what you believe, what you are convinced of. That is how you proceed this time, putting small bricks on the patch or whatever of the Earth you see in front of your knees. Then you put some brick or other on those bricks and your construction collapses once again. The point is, you believe that this collapse does not rhyme with what is called 'once and for all'. You are convinced that there are no rhymes of this kind in your kingdom.

This utopia of utopias and utopias (or these, or those) goes on and on. At the end of something you sit down to get some rest in some other kingdom, but you do not realise the uselessness of your undertaking; not yet, odd as it may appear. It does appear odd, but you do not stop. For you, within your vision of the world, it is good – everything is good and all right. 'All right,' you say to yourself and in the middle of uttering this expression you recall a film where a man always goes right because he thinks it is right, and that is where he should go. 'Right, right, right!' he exclaims, instead of saying to himself, 'Left, wrong.' Well, you say to yourself, 'Left, left, left, wrong, wrong, wrong.' What is the result? Where are you, as a result of your undertaking, your formula and mantra? You could also take advantage of some mandala or other. (Mandalay, mandolin.)

Long story short, whatever you do is bound to fail because you always think in terms of a better world, of an upper world, of a flawless world, whereas our world is flawed, ugly and downtrodden. Yes, you need a lot of

material for your new construction, utopia and paradise, but you only have a few ideas, volatile and unreliable ideas at that. You rely on an idea, but it is no longer within your reach because it is volatile – like a capricious woman, as they say after a vulnerable approach to such a woman. You try one word, another word, another gesture, but they all fall flat and you see, you realise they are flat, as flat as an LP. You put the LP on and listen to Beethoven's symphonies, waving your hands about. These symphonies call for a lot of actions to be performed, carried out on busts, on breasts, on bosoms. Instead you caress your LPs and no sound issues from their surfaces, whereas female bosoms know a lot of sounds, a rainbow of sounds. Apparently, Scriabin and Rimsky-Korsakov were inspired by female bosoms when revelling in their colour symphonies.

In the utopias you construct so laboriously there are lots of bosoms, and one cannot help wondering whether the sculptor is not merely a sex maniac, focused only on his libido, not on the happiness of the whole of humanity. Well, you take a rubber ball and throw it on a meadow, in the presence of a few men who instantly begin to play with it. But it is not a game universally known to every normal citizen: there are no goalkeepers, no referees. Some of the participants whistle, but their whistling has nothing to do with goals or penalties. You can hear similar noise at the beginning of the famous scene where a Mussorgsky-inspired crowd hangs, beats and otherwise humiliates a group of boyars. What does that prove? It proves that there are neither sexual games, nor enjoyable, libido-stuffed bosoms. There are only punches, knocks, shocks, bullets, bombs. They roll all over the meadows and explode from time to time, determined to destroy the runners and even simple pedestrians. Even if they are not bombs; even if they are not supposed to explode under your feet. The point is they are always supposed to explode, whether you step on them or not. If you pull the pin out of a hand-grenade, it will explode. If you do not pull the pin out of a hand-grenade, it will explode. Even if you have no grenade in your possession, they will all explode. Even if you have no idea what the word grenade means, it will explode; and other devices of this kind will explode as well.

You just put a dot somewhere; you do not even have to say, 'Dot, dot, dot.' And all these dots will explode sooner or later, in a minute or so. And consequently this minute will explode too because it cannot do otherwise, being in the aftermath of the explosion; or in the beforemath – that can also happen. Everything is possible and anything can happen, as everyone knows. Many more people died in the aftermath of the explosion. After a while, you are driven to correct this sentence, 'Many more, more, more, more, more, people died in the aftermath of the explosion.' Then you correct it once again: 'Many more people died in the aftermath of the explosion, of the explosion, of the explosion, of the explosions.' Then you are forced to show what has actually happened under your very eyes:

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The famous Debussyprelude *Des pas sur la neige* ne paraît pas très tragique, à première vue, d'autant que nos propres pas dans les circonstances (sur la neige) ont l'air plutôt réjouissants. Il n'est pas agréable de marcher dans la boue, mais la neige est une substance douce, presque tendre, sauf si elle est trop dure, glissante et nous expose aux chutes vertigineuses. Nous glissons, nous glissons, imitons Buster Keaton dont les acrobaties aériennes nous enchantent, malgré le temps qui continue à écouler, à s'écouler, comme vous voulez. (Ces acrobaties datent d'il y a cent ans.) Il glisse, vole, atterrit et, malgré tout, malgré les bleus et la douleur, continue sa route ; et on est

I stopped at the beginning of the previous paragraph, and when I resumed my work on this work I thought quite sincerely I was naturally going on, although I was writing my text, my work in French, instead of sticking to English, to the language of the work in question. There are transitions in this world of ours, and our life would become even more unbearable, which is hardly imaginable, if there were none; if there were no transitions in this world of ours. But there *are* transitions – some of them are within our reach – and their presence enables us to pass into another state of mind or whatever you can hit upon in your search for a better world; or state of affairs, to put it modestly. I am in transit, I am in transit. It is possible to make an insurance claim for any goods lost or damaged in transit, and this time these goods, the ones I am talking about, are my own self, believe it or not. You make this claim, the insurance claim, and they say, 'You seem to have insured a nonentity. Well, here it is, right in front of you or rather at your side. In short, this nonentity is yourself.' And then you ask them the following question, 'The question is whether road transit is cheaper than rail.' That is right – in this case the transit was cheaper than rail, but what did you get as a result of your transaction or your transition? Yourself. And you wished to get rid of yourself at all cost. The cost was not high, but you did not get rid of yourself, of the maniac who does his best to make things worse and worse. And if there are no things within his reach, he creates them in the twinkling of an eye to worsen them, to make them abominable and vicious; as vicious as possible. And what about a rapid-transit train? Nothing, nothing, nothing. Nothing about it. This train is irrelevant, more than irrelevant. Let us not talk about it any more.

But what did I say in French? Relevant or irrelevant, it supplies us with a cue thanks to which we could really hit upon reality as such – a new set of real things, considering that we are now in a new state of affairs, in a new incarnation, if our stars are good, lucky and benevolent. A new state, a new set of affairs? But what are these affairs, may I ask? Money, of course; and there are also goods, otherwise money is of no use; and money is never of no use, out of use. Money is never out, so to speak. And you repeat, 'Out, out, out, out, out,' as if there were no 'never'. But never is always there; or here, if you prefer. So you just empty your pockets and realise that not everything is hidden in these pockets. The enigma or rather the solution to this enigma is hidden elsewhere;

perhaps in your trousers, in the whole pair of trousers. You go on shedding your clothes, but, contrary to all expectations, you do not come to the inevitable conclusion: the solution to the problem is lying inside you, not far from your heart, from your liver, from all the organs or whatever their names might be outside this procedure of yours: shedding your clothes. You, you, you, yours, yours, yours. Whatever you do or say aims at you and comes out with you, if I may say so.

Are you so sure it is a new set or state of affairs you are facing right now? In comparison with what you faced – never mind the part of your body which was used in the process – only several minutes ago. This is the same life, as they usually say, and there is no escaping it. And suddenly a metamorphosis occurs; or just a transition, an unmistakable, almost invisible, untouchable transition. How do you know it is a transition and not a mere division? The division of what? Of cells, for instance? A cell undergoes what is called a division; you now have two cells instead of one. Where are you now? On the right-hand side or to the left? What does it matter, as long as you remain a human being. But are you still human? Are you still a being? Perhaps you are a being, given that you think and therefore exist, *ergo sum*. But sometimes you think, ‘I’m a cell, just a cell. A prison cell, into the bargain.’ All right, all right. I am a prison cell. What is more, I am a prisoner in whose cell there is a prisoner, himself, myself. Whose, whose, whose. Whose footsteps can be found outside of the cell, on the snow where you might have walked some time ago, according to the text you wrote some time ago? Whenever you look at these footsteps immortalised by your pen or *ordinateur*, you shudder. You still shudder when you think of the risks you took when traversing this plain, this patch or rather space of snow. Every patch of snow is treacherous: it might conceal a chasm at the bottom of which many of your fellow-creatures have already found their death; and probably your death as well. You shudder with horror. Why? Because even you cannot find your death, if asked to do so rather quickly or slowly. Never mind, never mind. The point is you have no idea where your death conceals its being or rather non-being. The non-being of death. Does that mean life? No, no, no, no – nothing means life, nothing at all.

Let us go straight to the point. What did I say during my French outburst? First I talked about the footsteps or rather footfalls – every step is a fall anyway – but for some reason I did not think (at the time, at the time) that all these falls were tragic, as if you could fall without breaking something, some member of yours, some leg or some finger. And then I deal rather well with all the criticism heaped on me, on my pessimism which induces me to regard every step I make as a fateful step or manoeuvre, leading straight and inexorably to death. ‘No,’ say my opponents. ‘These steps of yours lead to life, not to death or hell.’

‘All right, all right,’ I answer. ‘But this life is tragic, isn’t it? Sometimes I’ve the feeling it’s even more tragic than death himself.’

‘What do you know about death?’ they ask.

‘I know everything about it,’ I answer.

‘You do know everything about it, except death himself.’

‘I know, I know.’

That is what is included – the main item – in your so-called knowledge of death. You do not know it *personally*; you know it only by proxy. And any proxy is a bad source of information. Sometimes this or that proxy says, ‘Yes,’ and, as a matter of fact, it is ‘no’. But no one really knows what no or yes means under the circumstances; and you have no idea and no means to know what ideas, what circumstances you are dealing with

at this particular moment. And you do not even know if this moment is really particular or not. Perhaps it is just a moment, and it has nothing in common with Faust and his immortality, both literally and really.

The footfalls you see on the snow are different from other footfalls which you see on another patch or snatch of snow; on another drift of snow, in short, in brief. When writing to your cousin you speak about the snow you walked through one of these or those days. You say, 'I was frightened because my life seemed to have been written on that snow, without my being aware of it, of this writing, of this novel, of this diary or confession.' You see your footsteps and realise you will never walk this way, in this way. Of course you can retrace your steps and any other steps – the steps of your colleagues or enemy. Why not? But this will be a different story, written in a different space of time. You are different; everything is different. And every difference brings you closer (and closer) to death, to the end of all differences, for one corpse is hardly different from another unless it is decorated and continues to keep its medals and other distinctions; on its chest, for example. But you are reluctant to say, 'On his or her chest.' It is just a chest, nothing more.

What do you really see on the snow? Whose footfalls, footsteps, two-steps? They dance, they dance, they dance; on the snow. What else could they do? On the snow? There are skies of course and you can ski on the snow until the moment when the snow and the rest of the atmosphere to which everything is submitted gets the better of you and you fall, collapse, break whatever you can break or damage somehow, and either everything is over with you or everything is not over with you. Just some things are over; and there are other things which remain faithful to you, your existence, your body, soul and psyche; odd as it may appear. And it does appear odd; it does, it does. But what is actually odd? The fact that you are still alive, in spite of the odds and nods and odes they write about heroes and heroines?

What *do* you see on the snow? You see some snow, in the first place; and probably even in the second place. You might see the snow in the third place, if you knew where this place is located in the cosmic arrangement of things and beings. This is the cosmic arrangement I am speaking about. Here is this, and there is his. And somewhere, in between all these thises and theres, you see the third place you are looking for. Yes, you are looking for the third place; not for the second place; not for the first place, God forbid. (They might think you take yourself for God; or at least for a demigod.) As if a demigod could not walk on the snow, on what is called 'the ordinary snow about which Debussy wrote a prelude'. This question arises almost at once, 'Is the snow about which this prelude was composed ordinary snow, run-of-the-mill snow?'

What else did I write about the snow I am talking about? It is not pleasant to walk in the mud. But this exercise can be pleasant if you *wish* to walk in the mud, in the texture generously offered by the mud. Yes, your feet get captured and you wonder where you will be sent by the mud, by this capture: you have no wish to remain, to stay on this Earth of ours; for nothing in the world, if you must know. And you must not know anything: we should forgive him a few youthful indiscretions, as they say. But you are no longer youthful. You are full, full, full, but not of youth, regrettably. What are you full of? Of oldness, of ness or just of ol?

Ol, ol, ol, ol, ol. Are you already full of ol? Have you fulfilled your duty? Well, you walk on the snow and you seem to rejoice at performing this exercise of yours, even if it is not really an exercise. You just walk on the snow, for some reason or other. For what reason, may I ask? Because you need some water. All right, you just kneel down and scoop up some snow into your mouth and intestines. And that is enough, you think. But several inches further you repeat this new exercise, anxious to eliminate an unpleasant taste that seems to have chosen its abode in your mouth, all along your palate. Your relationship with the snow you are trying to conquer

by means of your footsteps is complicated, not to say impossible to define. It is poetical, on the one side, on the side of Debussy's inspired snow. The snow you are consuming by means of your shoes is melting in a way, being seduced and conquered by Debussy's music. And then a new mood invades your inner self and you realise you are cold; and the cold you experience is usually associated with death. So every step you take within the space of this snow is mortal, fatal and what not. It is not vital for your being, and you are quite sure of that. Or let us say you are just *aware* of it, but every step you take brings you closer to the full realisation of your sorry plight. First you reach the word 'sorry' and begin to wonder what it is appended to. You are used to saying 'Sorry' to the old ladies you happen to knock down in shops and also in the streets. But this time there are no old ladies in front of you; nor are there any behind your back. At least they do not do anything behind your back, anything that could destroy your constitution on the spot.

If you are a pianist, which seems to be the case, you should not forget about *glissandi*, especially if you continue to walk on the snow (whether it is inspired by Debussy or not). You produce a magnificent *glissando* which might embellish your execution of the *Suite Bergamasque*, but you are no longer at the piano; you are in the middle of nowhere; as usual, as usual. As usual you do your best to attenuate the circumstances, their baleful omens and facts, bare facts, but today you are tuned to a different tune, a different harmony. And one may rightfully ask if this harmony is a rightful harmony or just anything, *n'importe quoi*. Anything goes and you go with this anything; or any other anything, come to think of it.

Whatever you say or write, snow may be tender, almost mother-like. You hold some quantity of it in your hands and say to yourself or to your spouse, 'This snow is my mother, you know.'

'I don't know,' she answers unabashed.

'Don't you really?' you ask her wrathfully.

'I know your mother personally. And I like her very much, not to say I'm in love with her.'

'What kind of nonsense is this? Are you a lesbian?'

This kind of nonsense may occur in any conversation, however friendly and sophisticated. No wonder, we often see two persons raise their fists and separate in the middle of a square, instead of sitting down on one of the available benches. There are so many topics lying in front of you, waiting for you to pick them up for a casual conversation. You do nothing of the kind; and if you do, it is not a topic you pick up. You pick up a stone and throw it in the direction of your former friend and associate; and colleague and who's not. If this stone is well-aimed, and if it strikes the most vulnerable part of your former associate's head – we all know what part I am talking about – this associate of yours dies on the spot. (One wonders if the expression 'on the spot' is really important in the matters connected with death and his results. Suppose your friend or colleague does not die on the spot. After all, he may die *beside* the spot, but that does not mean he died beside the *point*. He died on the point and now he looks exactly like a doornail; or any other nail, come to think of it.) Well, you have no time to take care of all the nails you have within your reach. (How wonderful it is – the fact that you have so many things within your reach. Even happiness, even immortality, even eternity, and so on.) You walk around your house and literally stumble upon a nail, although this instrument of doom is not really gigantic; far from it. You pick it up, look at it scrupulously; you scrutinise it in other words and say to yourself, 'This is also eternity, a piece of it.'

But anything is a piece of eternity; not only because it is part of this world which is eternal, according to you. And do not forget you are always mistaken, at least as far as the world goes. (And it does go, whatever they

say. Not only on account of Galileo's pronouncements.) This pen is such a piece – not because some Dante or other will write some commedia (or other) on a few sheets of paper. Such a pity, such a pity. Whatever is done, made and thought is eternal. And you hesitate before adding, 'For God's sake.' The point is nothing is done for God's sake in this world forsaken by everybody; except us. Is it high time to write a poem?

Forsaken, forsaken, forsaken,
 Before taken, taken, taken.
 And shaken, shaken, shaken,
 Even if not taken, possessed,
 Fully or firmly, or not at all.

You see a line leading somewhere, inexorably as is always the case. You see this case – not any other case, mind you – and you follow the line because you have no other choice. You have no choice at all, whether it is another choice you have in mind or anything else. A glass of vodka, for instance. A line leads you somewhere, and you say to yourself that anything leads you somewhere, especially if the word 'astray' presides over the operation; almost a ritual, to tell the truth.

You follow the line, even if you do not know where it leads you; or whether it leads or misleads; whether it is a line or a misline. Mis, mis, mis; and you begin to play with these words, as usual. That is what you do, when at least ten thousand dollars do not lie within your reach, within this famous, legendary reach we have already spoken of so many times. And what else is on the line? They say all the time, 'On line, on line.' There is probably on, but I am not sure at all there is a line, a link or whatever can connect you to another world where you could live as a happy citizen; of a happy world. You are already a citizen, probably even Citizen Kane. But this does not mean anything. You are a citizen of what? Of your own walking stick? I am a walking stick, I am a walking stick – that is what you repeat or say or not say or nonsense. Everything comes down to non, and every absence of sense. What is sense? It is work, world, life, enjoyment. What is the so-called nonsense? Nonwork, nonworld, which is advisable in a way, in a world. It is better to live and prosper in a world which may be defined as in opposition to the world we are living in forever and ever.

And that is the point where I would like to enlarge upon the transition I touched upon – I did touch upon it so it became transi or mamsi or whatever – and the point is you do not even have to touch upon it. Everything happens of itself, by itself, or by and by. I have been writing this nonsense for some time, in English, of all languages; and then (no reason at all) I switched to French. There *was* a reason for it; and the reason was rather simple, come to think of it. I quoted the title of the famous prelude, '*The Footfalls on the Niagara Falls*,' or something along these lines. What could be found along these lines? The Footsteps on the Niagara Steps. But then you feel duty bound to find out if there are some steps in the Niagara region you speak of so freely, abundantly and eagerly.

There are some steps everywhere, and some of them lead to the summit of the Niagara Falls. You fall, you fall, you fall, and suddenly you realise you are at the top of the stairs – of the Niagara Falls you have heard so many words (about? about?) in the whole course of your life. You take a step and suddenly the whole perspective of life and death opens up (and closes up) in front of you, in the back of you. In, in, in, and also out, out, out.

What is a transition? A step, a thought. You think this thought and then another thought comes in its stead, in its step. So what? So what that? How can you ask such questions? Everything is different, isn't it? EVERYTHING. You look at a landscape and admire it – differently. What is the difference? Everything is the difference. And if you feel like putting capital letters everywhere, you can do it: we all live in democratic countries. Do we?

Actually the only question we might put to Creation is this one, 'Are we?' And then you resort to this and that:

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The famous Debussy prelude *Des pas sur la neige* ne paraît pas très tragique, à première vue, d'autant que nos propres pas dans les circonstances (sur la neige) ont l'air plutôt réjouissant. Il n'est pas agréable de marcher dans la boue, mais la neige est une substance douce, presque tendre, sauf si elle est trop dure, glissante et nous expose aux chutes vertigineuses. Nous glissons, nous glissons, imitons Buster Keaton dont les acrobaties aériennes nous enchantent, malgré le temps qui continue à écouler, à s'écouler, comme vous voulez. Il glisse, vole, atterrit et, malgré tout, malgré les bleus et la douleur, continue sa route ; et on est

EMPTY CIRCLES

What was said about Aristotle can be maintained, affirmed and even bet on, provided the person you are talking about, or writing about, was born. And this person *was* born; conceived, born (in this order) and lived, and died, and was buried, for all I know. Let this person remain where he is (let us let women out of this sordid business) – on a battle field, for instance, where crows and conquerors rob them of their lives and even of money or rather of the pockets where this money hides until the hand of a conqueror appropriates it rather brutally. This hand says nothing to the money; nor does the mouth let any sound out; any relevant sound, that is. You hear all sorts of =lkjhlikjvhqaomielj fkjzea hfiu'r hoi e jlk rzhuyogfihij that remind you of any modern composer you dislike intensely, with more intensity than can be imagined by an ordinary person who never heard anything classical.

So what you say about Aristotle can be said about me, mostly because I was born. And I lived many years, according to many calendars; unless they are all wrong, according to a Dostoyevsky's hero. Yes, I was born, lived and died, although I have never written books on ethics, unlike my hero or Aristotle. When I speak of Aristotle in somebody's presence, this presence or persona says, 'I know who you're speaking about. Onassis! He died in Paris, didn't he? But before his death he paid a visit to Maria Callas who remained behind the curtains of her windows, leaning on a windowsill. It was probably silly of her, but she didn't say anything to Onassis, although he was a billionaire and left her several millions that she received after his death. She might have received two millions more, had she received *him* and acknowledged gracefully his call.' Actually, he *might* have been received, for all I know, for everybody knows. He saw a sign (a skirt, for instance) and rushed to everything that was within his reach and also out of his reach, as it usually happens. But his death was beyond all these reaches; or before them. Anyway, they all missed the mark; except my life. Except my life. No – except my death, except my death, except my death.

What I am interested in – and I am the whole world – is myself; that is what usually happens with individuals of various kinds. And even if they understand others, they add: 'I'm on my own, and I'm the first on the list and also in the world; at least in this hemisphere.' And what about the mysteries we are confronted with on account of the world's infinity? You have one mystery and you seem to solve it, but all at once there arises another mystery connected to the first one, to the second one. And if you say, 'What about the rest?' they say to you, 'There are other histories you don't care about because you don't get any money for that.' And then you get the money for the rest. But do you really care more about this money-justified, money-rewarded rest? Isn't it rather unjustified, as it happens, when a woman you are in love with does not kiss you at the right moment, on the upper lip?

Aristotle is universally known for his categories and probably for the rest of his life. Usually people think in terms of categories only when they travel, saying to each other, 'There are three categories of accommodation – standard, executive and deluxe. What category do you stand for?'

'The last one suits me perfectly,' some people say on the spot, without going elsewhere, without changing their seats with somebody else.

'And what about you?' asks the same curious journalist. (All journalists are curious, as a matter of fact.)

'I agree with your previous victim,' says the next victim; the talking victim, in other words.

'And what about you?' the journalist goes on.

'I prefer standard accommodation. I belong to the group of great Tolstoy admirers and he always travelled third class.'

‘And I always travel within the executive part, because I execute my own plans without failure. And I do it perfectly in all sorts of business class compartments.’

But if someone says to you, ‘There’s a prize for the fastest three runners in each category,’ you do not even enquire about the conditions which preside over the competition in question. You just say, ‘I want the first prize because I deserve it.’ And if someone dares claim your claim, you begin to show off your muscles or walk with a swagger. You could also sway your shoulders as you walk around. You sway them, sway them, sway them and they finally detach themselves from your body and start performing a sort of dance in the atmosphere as if competing with Plisetskaya or Anna Pavlova. And then you say to them, ‘Enough!’ and they join your body without further ado.

What else can be said about categories? Of course you can say, for instance, ‘Each category has several subdivisions.’ And if they ask you what kind of subdivisions you have in mind, you will never confess you have no mind to speak of – only a kind of brain. No, of course not. It is better to be stigmatised than ridiculed. So you say, ‘I, for one, am always running in the veterans category.’

‘What do you mean?’ they ask. (They cannot avoid this question.)

‘I’m a veteran, you know,’ you answer.

‘Did you fight in the last war?’ they ask.

‘I also fought in the one before last,’ you answer.

‘Before the last war?’

‘That’s right. And also before that one.’

‘Have you ever been decorated?’

‘Several times. Before and the one before and the two before.’

‘And the three before?’

‘And the three before as well.’

I wonder why they never go as far as the four before; as four as the far before.

But if they continue to look in wonder at you, you add the following remark, ‘There are sporty people and non-sporty people, and I’m definitely in the second category.’

‘Non-sporty people!’ they exclaim in unison.

‘No, no, no, no – sorry! Sporty people of course.’ And you are so happy you turn three somersaults on the lawn.

Then we pass to another category. But there are so many of them you have no idea where to start with, with all this nonsense. Some categories appeal to you. Yet you do not know for sure if their appeal is sincere and honest; and any dishonest appeal will lead you astray, even if it takes some time, the procedure during which the appeal is leading you astray. What to do? You must choose an appeal which will never lead you astray, whatever happens. And what could ever happen? Hell or High Water. You laugh for a while and afterwards resume your studies of categories. High Water, however high and menacing, is certainly not a category, not even a Kantian category, let alone the one you can find on the list of Aristotle’s achievements. And what about water? Let us not forget that, in accordance to the latest scientists on our list, water recalls everything, even the elements that belong to other elements, such as fire, earth and air. What does it recall of the air? you may ask. ‘When children bombard each other with water, inspired by some war or other, they think they really bombard their adversaries and kill them. It’s not true, of course, but let them believe it, let them believe it. It does them a lot of good.’

And the earth as such is a close friend of water because it lets it in all the time. Suppose a drunkard – a Russian drunkard, as usual – drinks a bottle of vodka on a bench somewhat lost in a park. He drinks, drinks, drinks, and then (finally) removes the bottle from his lips and the rest of his constitution. The bottle assumes a precarious status and the precious liquid begins to quit it as if dismissed by Trump. *Fired* by Trump, I should have said; but I missed this opportunity.

And what about subdivisions? Suppose you take your liver out. ‘Why?’ do they ask you justifiably, logically and even lawfully. ‘Because I don’t want it to poison my body with its cirrhosis.’ Logical enough, isn’t it? So, before drinking a bottle of wine, you extract your liver from your body, anxious as you are to spare it an unpleasant experience, and put it on your table – for everybody to see. And then you say to everybody, ‘Can you see my liver? I exhibit it to make you realise I’ll never poison it with alcohol, considering you can see it on the top of the table. And what could it drink on the top of the table? It could have licked something from the napkin, from the glasses. But not from the top. Can you hear me? Could it leak my liquor from the air? I’ll never let it do it with impunity. I would massacre it. I would smash it to smithereens or to reens, to reens, to reens, to reens, to reens.’

But what about suburb? You often come across the same problem in your ordinary life. You must wash dishes because your machine never works, for some reason known to itself. It knows this reason, but it will never talk to you about it. You come across a problem, but it is not easy as all that – coming across a problem. Here you are; and there is a problem. Is it a sub problem? Or subsubproblem? Of course you say optimistically, ‘You’re just a problem, and I’ve solved so many problems like you in my life that you shouldn’t worry – you’ll disappear in the twinkling of an eye.’

‘What eye are you speaking about?’ asks the problem. ‘One of *your* eyes, with all due respect?’

‘As you can see, my both eyes don’t twinkle.’

‘What kind of eyes are you speaking of, then?’

We are speaking of categories. There is a category on the left and on the right as well; on the right-hand side of the table. What is the difference between them? There is no difference you can speak of, except that one category is made of silver and the other of gold. Of course you choose the latter one as you remove it from the table, putting it slowly but surely and also accurately into your numerous pockets – they are more numerous than what is usually expected in the course of such meetings – and you depart; at least you think you depart with honours and many salutations. Instead they throw tomatoes at you, rotten tomatoes, and you have no alternative but to remove your jacket, your Sunday best jacket. But then you realise your shirt is also painted rather abstractedly, not to say surrealistically; so that you remove it as well and what you are left with does not even amount to what may look like a pair of shorts. Somebody says, ‘Your shorts aren’t short enough. You should shorten them as quickly as possible, otherwise you won’t be admitted into the treasure of our club.’

What category are you talking about right now? Now and then, when speaking to Aristotle, you wonder what kind of category you are discussing with him. Sometimes you are tempted to put him a blank question, ‘What category do you have in mind, Professor?’ And sometimes the Professor replies, ‘The category of the categories,’ and then you simply bow and leave the country, being afraid of persecutions. This sort of thing happens from time to time. Some boy or other pursues you with a rifle at the ready and shoots you either in your heels or in your elbows, saying, ‘What category is this, pray?’

You are walking down the street. What kind of category is this? Is it walking, is it walking down, is it a pair of boots you are wearing? Is it the lady you fell in love with during your short walk? You fall in love with her or him or it and this must be a category in its own right. Suppose you say rather proudly, 'I fell in love with her.' But what kind of category are you discussing when addressing to me your meaningless words? You say, 'This category concerns my falling in love.'

'And what about *her*? Don't you ever forget women, otherwise you'll go to prison, you know.'

'But she's an internal, imperial part of this category.'

'Is she only a *part* of this category, nothing more?'

'Every category is made up of parts, and each part is essential to the whole of the category.'

'The woman is the essential part of every category we're dealing with. Otherwise it's no use dealing with this particular category.'

Let us take this category apart. You have a pair of boots which follow the lady in question. The lady in question does not want this particular pair of boots to follow her feet. That does not matter; not for the moment, at least. Actually, the pair of boots we are concentrating upon is not fond of the pair of feet it is slavishly following. But it cannot, out of its own volition, jump from one pair of feet to another, bent on following another, far more attractive pair of feet and legs – merely because it does not belong to itself. It belongs to its master, and Hegel is too far away to interfere and intervene on behalf of the pair of boots. Of course many feminists stage a revolution, proclaiming that even a pair of boots – even if it belongs to a man – has every right to choose an appropriate pair of legs, although every pair and every leg which belongs to a woman is perfect to the point of being suited to any boot, shoe, man, office, cavalier, and so on.

Let us continue to take this category apart. You look at the lady you are following, don't you? And if you do not look at her, you are not interested in her – the problem is solved once and for all. All right – your glance follows her movements, gestures and even the way she breathes, otherwise she would die on the spot; or on the next spot, on the second spot, on the third and fourth and fifth (and filth) and sixth spot. She no longer breathes. Why? Because you don't look at her lungs, letting them act on their own. And her lungs are always against you: whatever you say or do or intend to do is directed against her lungs: that is what her lungs think anyway. Are they in their own category? Do they act as responsible beings? Suppose they decide not to breathe at all, and you are waiting for a declaration of love. You wait, wait, wait, wait, you listen, listen, listen, listen – nothing. Of course you don't stomp off out of the house to demonstrate the magnitude of your anger. Is it a category? What is it, for God's sake?

And what about the face of the lady we are talking about? So far we have followed only her shoes; her legs at best. Her legs are not on their own, and every pair of legs, worthy of this name, knows this truth. So if one leg wants to overtake the other leg that belongs to the same pair of legs, it cannot do it for the fear of dismembering the body to which all these legs belong, even if their own volition has nothing to do with this arrangement. Suppose, however, that one leg floats conventions and goes much faster than the other. As the result of this operation, the other leg feels humiliated, offended, persecuted, but it cannot do anything about it because its owner has no wish to accelerate his or her body's movement which, supposedly, is on the slow side. Changing sides is not always as easy as – there are many additions to this as, as everybody knows. For instance, 'As easy as drinking a glass of water.' All right, you have a glass of water by your side and you drink it. All right, once again. And what if you do *not* have a glass of water by your side? All right – all these all rights are all

right, given that you have every right to be all right – but this glass of water is not *always* by your side, quite near your elbow. It may repose in the kitchen and so you have to walk as far as the kitchen to get this glass and think you are awakening progressively as if any progress were still on the agenda. Well, you show the agenda and say, ‘This curve leads you upwards, to the tops of the tops of the worlds. And also to the top of the worlds – in the light of what our semiologists discovered in the course of the last thirty years. During the first year that marks this period – it got a bad mark, I supposed – we discovered light; once and for all, as we decided on the spur of the moment. Then we changed our minds and re-decided everything on the spur of the moment: it is as if a cat were purring all the time, whatever happens. And whatever did happen – not once, I can assure you: twice, thrice. When whatever happens, you first ask yourself, ‘Is it really whatever? Does this word or notion or event or catastrophe really happen? Or does it just pretend to happen which is easy, making believe a million of spectators that whatever really happens does happen – really, into the bargain. You wish to stand up and proclaim the truth to the world, but your teacher admonishes you to keep your seat and remain silent.

Sometimes you stand up and say, ‘Liberty is far more important and progressive than serfdom.’ Then you hear a voice that says to you directly, without mincing words – when you do mince words, they become more and more mince, unsubstantial; in French at least – ‘If you feel free to do whatever you like, you’ll collapse at once, even if you’re not inclined to find yourself on the floor or rather in the mud, your lips swallowing this mud rather savagely.’ And what does serfdom mean in the context? You just continue to swallow the mud because the mud gives orders, something along the lines, ‘You should swallow me to the rest of your life, otherwise you’ll be punished by many policemen and presidents armed with whips fabricated by Nietzsche at the end of the nineteenth century. Don’t you wish to be whipped by a Nietzsche-signed, Nietzsche-autographed whip? Before the procedure you should act rather prudently: you don’t let them whip you for nothing. This makes no sense, as we all know pretty well after signing many papers that ruin us altogether, without leaving us a penny to live on. All right: they (the gods) leave you two pennies. So what? What could you do with these two pennies? One penny buys you a piece of bread; the other provides you with a glass of milk. You consume both and enjoy your annual rest or your daily rest – does it really evolve in the gigantic context of the world and its things? You enjoy an afternoon nap, saying to yourself it will do you a lot of good you need. You don’t just need good, any good, too put it bluntly – you need *a lot of good*, otherwise your health will go from worse to worse. It is already at the third worth, if you must know. But if you let it go, it will find yourself (and you, and you) at the fourth worth in no time. For once, you address time very earnestly, talking in French, ‘*Suspend ton vol, my dear.*’ You mean, our time (whatever it is) should in the first place take flight or wing – for a while it is absorbed in this dilemma: wing or flight? – and then it does take both flight and wing. Sometimes it even takes two wings, so as not to experience shortages during his Paradise-oriented flight. It takes two wings and then it drops one of them because it cannot carry two wings at once. Let us not forget: these are occasional wings you acquire during the procedure called, ‘Taking wing.’ And what if your command says to you, ‘Take flight’? What flight are you supposed to take? You consult numerous timetables and all of them seem to imply you should not take any flight, for fear of being squashed (or *moched*, as the French put it).

So you don’t take any flight – anything, as a matter of fact. You just walk down the streets, saying to yourself you can do it safely – without losing your life once and for all. Sometimes you lose your life once; sometimes you do it twice; but the third time, whenever it happens, you lose it forever, and that is something you do your best to avoid to the best of your abilities. You align a few ‘best’ and hope this alignment, this array, this

parade will help you tide over the next week at least; or at most, *it depends*, as we all know. What are you doing right now? This question is rather useful in any contest because you are not supposed to do anything, anything at all: whatever you do is supposed to be useful and serve the cause, whatever the cause in question and causality. This causality says to you, ‘Go right, otherwise you’ll meet death.’ (Mostly we do our best to try to get rid of causality. Sometimes we succeed, sometimes we do not. For instance, we seduce a young lady who is duty bound to abort. The cause is clear and the result is deplorable – everybody knows that. But not everybody *feels it profoundly*.)

What does our progress depend on? If we don’t progress, we regress, and we do all we can to eliminate ‘re’ from our vocabulary. For instance, we say to everybody, ‘We’re not retrograde. We’re just trograde.’ And this proclamation works; at least within one union of one party or association. But let us not go back, within our civilisation. What would we find in this back of ours, of yours? Bickering, bickering, bickering? Many other bicks and backs as well; as worse, as I am tempted to say. And for once I yield to my temptation – not to get rid of it, though. Let it remain where it is, troubling my spirit and body to the point of making me spend another sleepless, dreamless night or afternoon. So much time wasted on dreams with no end, because the only end to these dreams is the emptiness of the packages filled to the brim with sleeping pills which do not allow you to dream: they eliminate everything down to your very life. And then your life raises its ugly, beautiful, or non-descript, non-existent head again and you see the same picture associated in every mind with isolation, horror and just orroooo, orrrrrroooo, orrrrrrrroooo.

There are sentences you see either on a wall – in this case you are very close to the Bible – or just in the air; and that reminds you of parades of all kinds. The walls you talk to highly praise tolerance that you can renounce once and for all if you feel that intolerance is much more profitable in the domain of life. (You damn tolerance with faint praise.) For once, you do not quote Aristotle, although you could quote him all the time, given that one of his books adorns your writing desk and also your mind, provided you are capable of reciting some sentences, some remarks, some pieces of wisdom from these books. This time – and I have no idea where this time is situated. I have decided that time is not situated anywhere: it does not exist any more, which will enable me to live without problems to the very end of my endless, eternal life. Well, whatever I say or do, Aristotle did say something and, after all, this book is partly devoted to Aristotle and his categories; to the category named or entitled ‘Aristotle’. After all you can always call a category by the name you might have heard in your childhood, if your parents and grand-parents were versed in philosophy to the point of making you learn the words pertaining to it. Of course, with the passing of the years, you realised that what counts is not a category as such but your *conduct* in the society to which you belong *corps et âme*: no translation is needed in this case and respect. All the sinews of your body and the sinuosity of your brain belong to either Aristotle or Plato. Some thinkers add St Augustine to this list – they enlist the saint in the army of thinkers endowed with the legendary capacity of constructing our future and ideals – but let us leave him alone for a while, which is all the more charitable since I solemnly promise he will not remain in an ammunition/arms/weapons/food dump for long.

Often they ask you what you really think about Aristotle: is he a piece of ammunition, an arm, a weapon or just a piece of bread, of well-bred bread. (There is such a thing as a well-bred bred and a bad-bred cheese.) To put it in a nutshell; does it belong in the domain of food or good? Good, you say at once, for you think in terms of the human brain, of its inevitable, ineluctable development that nothing can stop, not even an atomic war with

all its disasters, collaterals and otherwise. Let us not forget that any collateral damage may become – and does become – quite *literal* damage. You say, for instance, ‘Theatre, park, the Eiffel Tower, the Windsor Palace,’ and you don’t always realise you are speaking about ruins, not about possibilities, virtualities. You say the Buckingham and think you talk about a piece of reality, a piece of life, of real life. Actually you touch upon a photograph taken many years ago in front of the Buckingham Palace, and you wonder, silently, sullenly, why there is an individual in front of this palace, in front of its façade. Is he really dead? Does he belong to the world where we can still have a glass, a stew, a piece of all culinary masterpieces?

They say to us that children were conceived and given birth to by a lot of devils and consequently they are all perverse – as perverse as Scriabin’s works. (At the beginning of the twentieth-century, musicians, especially those who studied at the Moscow Conservatoire, repeated inclemently and indecently that Scriabin’s music is as perverse as our world, our today’s world where a man turns into a woman in no time at all. And even if it takes some time, his boss supplies enough money for all the operations involved in the process; and you can stay away from your office as long as you do not feel the real woman in your entrails, her entry into your body and also, almost at the same time, into your immortal soul which is now depended on a woman, on a female element reigning in our world. And let us not forget it is also *defended* by it. A murderer confronts you, but you raise your hand and say simultaneously, ‘Do be careful. I’m a woman.’ And the potential murderer beats a retreat. Man is not born bad, says Hegel, or someone else. (Many men say that just for the heck of it. Little by little, the heck grows bad – as bad as Putin, shall we say?) Others add, ‘But this child’s mother is bad and anyway women are devils in disguise.’ The discussion grows more and more animated to the point of becoming a declaration condemned by the Vatican and many concomitant services: ‘Women are as bad as men and so we should pray for the salvation of their souls and bodies which often helps our body recover its good, healthy shape.’

They say you should not throw caution to the wind. But what about words? Anyway, you do nothing else, unless you write a book instead of talking all the time either on the telephone or in the streets. (Today, there are other means of communication, needless to say.) What else do you do, when talking to somebody or to the sky; to God, in other words? You talk, talk and talk, and words float in the wind: as soon as you utter a word it begins to float or fly or remain suspended in midair. But if it is a windy night you choose for your soliloquies or communications, the wind literally takes care of your words, carrying them elsewhere, not necessarily to other continents where you might become a celebrity; thanks to your words. What does all this boil down to? You throw words to the wind and, according to some thinkers, by voicing your grievances or other sentiments you are prey to, you waste your time; whereas Aristotle did not talk to the wind. At least he talked to sheets of paper, now and then; and that is why we can quote him once in a while, at length or otherwise.

Here are some of his words translated from the Arabic: ‘Buying pleasure, treating it as a commodity that we work to achieve, cannot therefore be the supreme Good for humans.’ What does ‘therefore’ mean in the context? And even out of it? (We have to take notice of every possibility and virtuality.) (Why does my spellchecker suggest *verticality*?) To find an answer or the answer to this question you have to read the Complete Works of Aristotle, which cannot be done overnight; and even overday. And even over threedays, to tell the truth. Of course a lot of guessworks are as usual at your service and so you plunge into them, into their mess and chaos, headlong. You buy a pleasure, a jewel as usual, and your wife or mistress purrs like a cat. Or your cat purrs like your wife – this does not really matter. What’s the problem, as they usually ask you, for some reason?

The problem is you have no idea why you cannot purr if you feel like it; and you do feel like it at this particular moment. (And this moment is quite particular, given that usually you feel like crying, dying and so on and so forth.) Apparently – according to Aristotle, at least – you had better ponder over the enigmas of life and your own self and finitude and the result of whatever happens over years. You ponder and ponder and ponder, and finally you come up with an answer that satisfies no one; not even yourself. What is the use or point? No point, no use. But you continue to ponder – just for the sake of wasting time in a sort of Aristotelian manner.

You spend time in this manner and get an upset stomach or indigestion; or a headache, as a result of your pondering, meandering in the labyrinth of thoughts; and so forth. Well, you buy a commodity and enjoy yourself thoroughly in spite of Aristotle and his interdiction with regard to purring with pleasure. And pleasure is a *physical* phenomenon – not a *spiritual* one, mind you. And what if the commodity I enlarge upon is one of Aristotle's books? Of course you are unlikely to purr with pleasure upon reading his texts. Anyway, you have no time to purr or to imitate cats in any other domain. You just imitate a human being who reads Aristotle after opening one of his books; either in the original or in an English translation. I am using one of the English translations because I have no Arabic, and my Russian does not allow me to understand anything in Arabic. (Or Greek.) Or even in Turkish, whatever their language is called.

What Aristotle thinks and says can be summarised thus, 'If you are human, a human being, that is, you should behave accordingly, in full accordance with your status. And your status is called "a human being", and you should never forget it, when passing before a shop or mooning around a market, a market place.' But what does it mean? Being a human being? Aristotle devotes to this matter, to this question rather, his whole existence; and also the whole content of his inkpot. Actually, he also dissects the sky, and a number of planets appear in his writings – together with a multitude of stars which do something irrelevant, if we lend ear to the learned opinion of our astronomers and their telescopes, taking their cue from Galileo, if I am not mistaken.

But there are things that trouble us much more than the distant stars about which we are told a lot of nonsense, namely, 'These stars will never come home, for they are too far from the Earth.' There are many people for whom there are homes, motherlands, fatherlands and other contraptions that make them survive in the world where there are only traps, nothing else. Once again we are over the top, I'm afraid. Where is the top, may I ask? Is common sense the top? If it is you go ahead, cross a few common senses on the way to perfection or truth and say to everybody, 'Here's the top, the top of the tops. But common sense has nothing to do with it, you can believe me.' No one believes this man or woman and the game starts afresh, anew. It is neither really fresh nor new. Well, everybody enjoys it and that's what counts. Does it really count? You begin to count this particular matter and sometimes the count is good, as the French put it. (And I put it rather frequently as well.) Sometimes you are out for the count, sometimes in, but no one knows what being in for the count means because there are individuals who are never in, even if you invite them to come in; and the door is wide-open. They are *in*, but you have no idea whether they are in for the count; or just for money, for cash. They say, 'Cash, please,' and you answer, 'All right', although you have no cash in your drawers. What *do* you have in your drawers? Just a few love letters, I'm sorry to say. But you do not send these letters to your beloveds, contrary to what might be supposed. You just send them anywhere; you burn them, in other words. You burn their words in other words, and you will never know the result of your alchemical experiments.

The 'perfect' happiness can only be in intellectual contemplation – that is what we willy-nilly (nilly, nilly, Willy) inherited from Aristotle. But is my contemplation intellectual or not? That is the question I often ask

myself during my visits to bookshops of all kinds. I browse through the books on display and find that the contemplation they offer is not intellectual at all. It might be erotic, for all know. But, frankly speaking, I don't really know erotic semiology, and even if a lady undresses in front of my eyes, I will not be able to decide whether the image I have in full view – in full view on the bed – has anything to do with any erotic picture of the worlds. The pictures I am talking about can be bought at any newsstand, and I just have to summon your intellect before looking at them earnestly, appealing to your concentration and your own sex appeal which helps a lot in the course of these games. You appeal to your concentration, the intellectual brand of concentration, to be precise, and therefore eliminate whatever is linked, connected and united forever with your shameful organs of which we shall talk some other time – not to mar the intellectual honesty and dignity of our present discussion.

What is purity, this proverbial purity of our intellectual discussions? The Supreme Being consists entirely of reason and spends eternity contemplating itself. And what about our private parts? Are they private to the point of not being able to take part in a discussion where the Supreme Being comes to the fore? As it may appear, the Supreme Being is always in the limelight, otherwise It would not be Supreme. The point is our humans do not always talk to the Supreme Being, mistaking him or her for an ordinary being who writes detective stories and nothing else, nothing else; apart from a few tales for children, not unlike those written by Oscar Wilde at the end of his career. The point is, we had better not touch our private parts during our investigations oriented towards Aristotle's enigmas. And if we do touch them, everything goes wrong – that's for sure; although some thing may *not* go wrong. Sometimes it does happen: something it does *not* go wrong; and yet everybody shouts, 'It's wrong, it's wrong, everything goes wrong!' All right: this goes wrong and that goes wrong, after much soul-searching, after much-instrument searching. You search, you search and you end up proclaiming, 'I'm right,' and sure enough, you are decorated, once, twice, thrice. And that is how your life goes on, in spite of all your failures, obvious and not quite obvious. They are obvious anyway, to tell the truth.

We, humans have a spark of the Supreme Being in us; or rationality. But what about our irrationality or internationality? Is it a spark or a black hole or the start of a new road leading towards our galaxies about which we know next to nothing? This spark or this nothingness enables us to contemplate the unchanging universe, provided the spark remains a spark and does not grow into a flame, a bonfire installed in the middle of a forest. For a while we contemplate the unchanging universe and enjoy the sight to the utmost, but then the fire spreads all around us and we contemplate a world conflagration, a change of time, of period, of paradigm. There is a war in Ukraine, at this very moment, and I think the spark is to blame: instead of remaining an instrument of contemplation, it became a tank, a rocket, a drone and now we contemplate a lot of flames everywhere, and we walk in the midst of these flames, allowing our bodies to burn now and then – to keep the flames company, out of our commiseration and patriotic (idiotic) feelings.

You walk amidst the flames and now and then you offer your body to their savagery in order to participate in the conflict – not automatically, not publicly, as you might think, whoever you are (you may be nothing, as far as I am concerned). And then you retire because you are inspired and wish to write a poem or a novel – why not? At the same time – and you are quite aware of that – they drop bombs after bombs, not necessarily on old women and children. You throw a bomb and it hits a child. Immediately you write about it in your newspaper. And so you do upon learning about the death of an old woman. A young woman is wounded. She is lying by your side, but the old woman is in front of you, and you feel duty bound to write first about the old woman – after all she is really old – and then pass on to a young woman who is not as much in the news as

her old counterpart. Her old counterpart survives yet another operation, whereas she (the young one) succumbs to a series of complexities, as they call them sometimes, and these complexities kill her in the long run. This run may be long, short, middle and even half-middle, but as soon as you begin talking about the run, everybody knows it is the end you touch upon all the time. You hold your hand upon this run and, oddly enough, it reminds you of the footballer who scored the last goal in the last match of the World Championship; in Switzerland; in 1954.

If the intellect is divine, compared with the life of the man, the life of the intellect must be divine compared with the man; the life of the intellect must be divine compared with a human being. Compare anything to a human being! What can you compare? Who do you compare? We are losers, all of us, but Aristotle says to us that he can save us in the long run, in the short run, in the longest run possible and imaginable; and unimaginable, as usual.

Therefore, when we contemplate the unchanging universe we are being about as divine as humans can be. Well – this well comes in handy – we are about, we are about, we are about. We are out as well. What do we contemplate, in the final analysis? We contemplate something final and an analysis. And the universe changes under our very eyes, due to the war in Ukraine or just the water that refuses to flow lavishly and humanistically in my kitchen. If it doesn't flow, I say to it, 'You're cruel, my dear. You'd better lavish upon me all your boons and moons, otherwise I'll remain a human whom our supreme force destitute of luxury for no reason at all.' Next day I get an email where all sorts of reasons are described in graphic detail and even in nuances. What am I supposed to do?

Apparently Nureyev, upon awakening or upon finishing yet another glass of champagne, rushed towards his numerous telephones and rang his advocates and lawyers up to find out whether he had lost some of his money in the course of the night and they answered him, triggering off an avalanches of contemplations among which there were some images of doom because the stock market is unpredictable. When dancing the *Swan Lake* Nureyev did both: he contemplated swans and jumped as often as he could; and he could jump a week, a whole week without letting his legs to repose on the floor – the floor of the Maryinski Theatre in Petersburg, for instance. His whole being was harmonised to the utmost because he both contemplated and jumped, never failing a movement for the sake of an image. That is how we are supposed to live apparently – imitating Nureyev's movements whose vitality nourished his body and soul to the point of letting him go on with his masterpiece almost to the end of his tether. Alas, his tether was neither very long nor strong. And often, in the middle of a conversation, he would begin to dance with a telephone, a whole apparatus, in order to keep his hands, legs and shoulders in. 'What's going on?' his partner would ask. 'I'm dancing, you know. I'm Nijinsky today; or Fawn, if you prefer.'

'I prefer Nijinsky,' his partner would answer unashamedly, counting on Nureyev's generosity.

'How come?' vociferated Nureyev. (He liked neither Nijinsky nor Baryshnikov and would renounce any deal, however advantageous and luminous, if their names were pronounced at the beginning or (more often) at the end of discussions.) Well, according to Nureyev, you have to use legs even if you stay at home and talk to your favourite broker who is in the know, supposedly and almost surely. 'In the know?' asked Nureyev.

'In the know,' answered the broker.

'How much?' asked Nureyev.

'Much,' answered the broker.

‘How much much?’ asked Nureyev.

‘Too much of the much,’ answered the broker. ‘But that’s what you want, if I’m not mistaken.’

‘But this isn’t as much as the much I have in my head and especially in my legs,’ answered Nureyev, executing one of his jumps.

‘Now it’s much, much, much, as much,’ the broker would say.

‘How much?’ Nureyev would answer. Upon receiving an answer, he would jump again and again until reaching the amount of money he had in his legs; and also in his head.

Why do men suffer from the plague euphemistically named ‘nastiness, spitefulness and wickedness’? If you just say, ‘He’s nasty,’ some women are sure to interfere and add, ‘He’s also spiteful. Do you remember what he said last night?’ And if you say, ‘All right, all right – he’s nasty and the very image of spitefulness, its spitting image,’ they are sure to interfere once again. ‘You forget his wickedness. What’s wrong with your memory? You should go and see a doctor on the spot. *C’est urgentissime!*’

What is the definition of wickedness? We are supposed to align our emotions with what is the right thing to do in particular circumstances: we want to do what is right. But first of all we determine the nature of circumstances we are confronted with: are they really particular? This happens every time, a thousand times on every square; on every bench, to be precise. What is so particular about them? But they might become particular on the strength of the people who take part in them either willingly or unwillingly. They might also turn out to be peculiar under the rays of a new synthetic sun often used in the cinematographic studios. You turn a camera and someone proclaims, ‘This situation is very particular. We should film it at once, and then we’ll do what can be done about it in the world of the commerce, of our oligarchs.’ We are excited on account of a young actress who is likely to be loved to distraction by the producer of the production, but we hesitate a moment, two moments, because there is another diva whose participation in the team creating a film or an opera cannot be questioned even by Jesuits, if they happen to be in the neighbourhood of the production in question which grows together with the question (or the question grows together with the production) so that one cannot help asking oneself the following question, ‘What does it all lead to?’

I think the Japanese have a sort of a ritual *au ralenti* – they really add this French tag to their tradition-illuminated gesture which deprives you of your belly, entrails and even your life. To *terminer en beauté*, as the same French says without blinking. So you terminate everything in a blaze of glory or with a match you strike at the right moment; at the twelfth stroke of midnight, as usual.

Am I not weary of all my thoughts, bright or dim? I may have the feeling that such and such thought is bright; or is it just a bright idea? Who knows. Who could distinguish a thought from an idea? But the more you direct your torch at it, focusing your torch’s intensity on its brightness, the gloomier it becomes – like a hero belonging to the descendants of Alberich we all know thanks to Furtwängler, Clemens Kraus and also Toscanini. Let us isolate one bright idea or thought or mood and create what is grandiloquently called ‘The Virtue of the Soul’.

We align our emotions and think that part of the job is done: our emotions seem prepared for a solemn parade. They are arrayed for it, so to speak. Usually they look a complete mess – dressed anyhow with hair sticking up on end. And then we realise we are speaking about an individual, not about humanity, for the sake of humanity and its worries. Humanity is dressed any old how but at least its hair does not stick up on end, on any ends it has. (Usually it has four ends.) But what is the right thing to do, for God’s sake? Of course, before the

beginning of our ritual at the end of which we are supposed to receive a letter from God, we ask ourselves constantly, stubbornly, ‘What is the right thing to do?’ We read all the literary works that bear the title, *The Right Thing* before we launch into a verbal attack on the world’s handling of the finances, on the world’s handling of basic virtues, on the world’s handling of our civilisation which goes from one hell to another, without even having a coffee-break, according to the well-known tradition. We align our emotions, our bodies, our souls with a number of right things that turn out to be wrong, in the long run; which is normal, more or less. And we realise this truth when studying the statistics they show us on television, on many other visions, and even our inner vision is subjected to their vision of the world’s infrastructure.

What do our emotions attach to? Their attachments are often wrong, being linked to, being in love with wicked persons, beings, perverse substances whose charisma and sex destroy us completely, which reminds me of a story told by a Russian friend of mine. He said that at some point the Minister of Soviet Culture said upon watching *Anna Karenina*, the ballet created by Plisetskaya. She said, the minister of the culture, ‘In the Soviet Union we have neither sex nor God.’ Is it the right moment to speak of the virtue of the Soul or even of the Body which plays an important part in our relationships with men and women? An important network? An important nexus?

Ribbentrop said something before being hanged, and he was right that, by talking on the verge of eternal tears, he offered enough material to journalists and other artists on which they could repose their luxurious inspiration. You know how it works, don’t you? Our opulent inspiration lies on a Louis the XIV bed and paint arabesques on the nearest wall. Then it dances along with some arabesques on the wall opposite. One is astonished to note that the arabesques we have been attentively watching so far can travel in the cosmos, which allows us to discover new stars, nebulae and what not.

But you are supposed to resist a temptation – and you have no idea what temptation they are talking about – and you yield to the temptation. You become a sinner for life unless your neighbours and relatives pay a lot of money to God to atone for your sins. Your sins are atoned for – you hear the tonality of your atoned sin – and you take a walk somewhere, not necessarily in your garden. In what garden then do you take your walk? In the Garden of Eden, needless to say. You say it nevertheless; and you repeat incessantly, ‘My Garden of Eden, my Garden of Eden, my Garden of E.’ That is enough, considering you are already welcome in Paradise – not only with open arms, mind you. You are welcome with the open body. Everything is open in this body: arms, legs, ankles, calves, shoulder blades. That is what openness means in the domain of liberty.

After a while, you notice, however, that your bench, the one you are allowed to enjoy in the Garden of Eden – its smoothness, velvet, temperature and tenderness – has a motherly disposition (in spite of a truant one for which Shakespeare’s Hamlet is acclaimed all over the world) and caress, both furtively and openly, the bodies kissing and cuddling on it day and night. But let us suppose, if only for the sake of argument – of what argument, pray? – that one of the lovers grows jealous, which seems to demonstrate its (benche’s) love with far more panache, certainly due to the quality of its wood. The lover draws a knife from his pocket – a woman is unlikely to commit such a crime – and begins to cut the bench into pieces or write on it obscenities – the obscenities of such vulgarity and unbearability (unbearable unbearability) that his mistress wrenches the knife from his hand and points it to her own body, saying, ‘Your making love to this inanimate creature proves to what extent you neglect *my* body, for all its loveliness. I demand your attention, your caresses, your sadism – your attention, for God’s sake. Don’t you feel responsible for your actions in the presence of God?’

That is when a real attention often comes to the fore because nowadays you are supposed to use the maximum of your ingenious love apparatus to vie with actors who, in many sadism-oriented films, kill their partners so brilliantly that, instead of blood, a lot of sexual liquids I am too fastidious to enumerate traverse the screen and drop on the heads of cinema lovers who do not believe their eyes or rather skulls. How could you believe your skull that informs you you get a quantity of someone's sperm without really seeing it? Of course you can rise; you are actually welcome to do it. But in this case you will receive the same quantity of sperm in your eyes, which would prevent you from enjoying the representation to the utmost. And you may regret this failure all your life, considering that not many artists are willing to shed such a quantity of their vital liquid for the sake of some provincial theatre where only amateurs, not to say tramps and downs-and-outs and outs-and-downs applaud your generosity and skill. Not to say your *maestria*.

Only if he is not even tempted in the first place, or if he is able to dismiss the temptation easily, will he be contented and happy. But how could such an exploit be achieved? In the first place, in the second place? You feel a drop of sperm on your skull and you say to yourself quite honestly, 'This is a real temptation. I should resist it at all costs. And the costs I'm dealing with are high, I must admit. Every drop of this sacred, live-giving liquid is delicious and exciting. The more I drink, the more excited and delicious I become; and probably more sacred as well. Who knows? A friend of mine usually puts a lot of questions – to the Almighty, of all substances or figments of imagination. "This is an elixir," he says. "Could I please have another glass of it? After all, it's not as pernicious as a glass of vodka, drinking a glass of vodka." Frankly speaking, the Almighty never hears such questions, but you continue to ask them, assured they successfully replace a prayer you forgot a long time ago, at the door leading you out of your childhood where your mother took care of your prayers and of your Pamperses, if I remember them rightly. 'Here's your Pampers,' says your mother. 'And here's your prayer. Don't confuse them please. And yet it doesn't really matter – everything and everybody are God.'

'And what about the liquid I receive on my head, on my face, from time to time?' asks the child.

'This is a sort of morning dew,' answers the mother. 'You can find it – in the morning, mind you – on flowers, on leaves.'

'I tasted the liquid you're talking about, Mother,' answers the child. 'The taste is not the same.'

'The dew you get on your skull is a little bit older,' answers the lady. 'It often tastes like sour milk, a sour glass of wine. You don't have to love a glass of sour wine. But if you succeed in this undertaking you'll find a real happiness.'

Each virtue is a 'mean', on average, set between two vices – one of excess and one of deficiency. Generosity is an important virtue that bonds us to each other. Life would be much bleaker without it. It is obviously possible to be insufficiently generous. Such a person would have the vice of meanness. You see a virtue – at least you see a cube on which they wrote the word 'virtue' – and you make a few steps to find out where a vice hides itself. Usually vices do not hide themselves, unless we are confronted with deep, almost incurable vices that aim at our heart, at the destruction of our heart by means of a knife or a bullet. So we walk from a vice to generosity and knock our head against little vices, little generosityes – on our way to the great, exemplary generosity which offers you, sometimes offhandedly, mind you, trinkets and also Bentleys, odd as it may appear. You install yourself in one of the Bentleys – you are weary of walking between the poles of human existence – and drive straight towards the vice you left some time ago. And you see a beautiful woman instead of the cube you frankly disliked some minutes ago. What happens? What to choose? Can you choose anything at

all? Everything is in front of you, around you. The woman stretches her arms in your direction and you succumb to the temptation all the more easily since your Bentley do not act at all. And then Bentley does not really stroke you – between ourselves, it might have stroked your hand lying on the steering wheel; several times, in the course of your journey – and you choose the woman who strokes every member of your body and even take some of them in her mouth, although you warned her, ‘I have no candy either in my pockets nor on my body.’

And yet you eat a lot of chocolate together and many years suffer from diabetes which was incorporated in the sweets, in whatever was sweet in your life. Now you realise you should have switched to bitter tastes and ways many years ago. Now it is too late: you drink too much water; and you drink it too frequently for a normal person, whoever he or she is. Even if you drink a cup of tea without sugar – ‘No sugar, please’ – your organism, as they say now everywhere, adds a few lumps of sugar to your relatively small cup, looking rather like a cup decidedly destined for coffee.

You destroy your health at every step, with every rap you sing or say, sometimes unconsciously – it is under your skin and inside your throat. Such is today’s (or yesterday’s) fashion and you cannot get rid of it unless you are prepared to get rid of both today and yesterday. You sing, you talk, you sing and you die as if nothing had happened; as if you had never sung, never talked, never uttered the word ‘rap’. And what about chocolate? I have a friend, a half-friend, a half-mistress, who spends her days in a clinic where they look after semi-permanent mads. (Not maids, mind you – aristocrats.) She likes chocolate and I intend to buy her a box of chocolate to sweeten her existence, if any. Provided there are any sweets conceived and designed for this kind of temporary cure; or happiness, so to speak. We so to speak very often and sometimes someone says to us, ‘Yesterday you said “so to speak”, while talking about an important project. Well, our project is on the agenda and so we earned a fortune – in every sense of the term, mind you. Every one of our member married a beautiful lady or man and now we are all extremely happy, rich, clever and illustrious.’

But before becoming illustrious you have to be virtuous, and that is not as easy as you can imagine as you think about your parents who are, according to you and many other children, virtuous – almost automatically, mind you. Yes, your parents are virtuous for the reason you do not even have to elucidate, explain in detail and insist upon: it is obvious. They are your parents and consequently they are virtuous or barbaric, according to the disposition of your mind and body. If your father beats you on a regular basis you hate him and never say, ‘My father is the most virtuous man in the world.’ Your father is a virtuoso in the domain of beating – that’s for sure. Your body knows a lot about this virtuosity, and your mind does not succeed in forgetting all the blows you received in the course of your childhood and even during your adulthood. Your father used to say, ‘I know, you’re an adult now. So you’re supposed to understand what is wrong, but you don’t understand it. You don’t understand the difference between what is right and what is definitely wrong. Unfortunately I have to teach this difference to your body which understands the world and its manners much better than your mind and brain and so-called psychology do. Actually, I’ll give your psychology or metapsychology the same lessons – just for the hack of it.’

What could you have answered? What kind of answer could you have given to your father, had you been more intelligent and knowledgeable? Here is the answer you ought to have given your father, ‘My dear Father! I’m grateful to you for being attuned to virtue and the means that allow human beings to reach it in no time at all. But allow me to contradict you by putting an emphasis on the role of the state – in the process under discussion. Are you aware of what Aristotle said on the subject? I know you’re deeply versed in philosophy in general. But

even Wittgenstein used to say or admit he'd never read Aristotle. So I don't think you merit bad marks for your ignorance of this great philosopher. That's what he said on the subject and also on the object of our discussion, "The purpose of law is not so much the punishment of wrongdoers, but the urging of people in the direction of virtuous action." Let us take notice of words – for once. All right, you're on the point of beating me with a stick – with your walking stick, to be precise. Could you apply the word "urge" to this stick of yours? Don't you think it merits a more vigorous definition? A torture, for instance? Or an example of how the Holy Inquisition punished its slaves? Let us try and find another, more humane and *dolce* – you know Italian, don't you – method. Why? To get closer to the word or verb "to urge"? Why don't you quote Aristotle's works, for instance? Aren't they better than your stick? Is your stick as beautiful as the philosophy I'm trying to introduce into our relationship? Far be it from me to affirm that our relationship is absolutely deprived of philosophical motives and nuances. But this time you're about to forget philosophy for the sake of your whip. I'm afraid I don't approve of this substitution. Allow me to prefer Aristotle to the bruises with which you wish to cover my life, my adult unfledged life. Actually, Plato would also have approved of what I've just said. I'm sure he would have sided with your future, present and past victim.'

So, in accordance with Aristotle's testimony, the state is supposed to push us in the direction of virtuous doings, such as charity, valour on a battlefield and so on. The Russian state offers you a sort of prayer in which you mention the glory of your motherland and your willingness to leave your head and the rest of your body in a lot of battlefields; although one battlefield is quite enough for your life and even for your immortality. The Russians receive a lot of emails from the state where the war in Ukraine is touched upon rather despotically. You must, you must, you must, say the letters. But do we really have to speak about Russia in this connection? Or any other connections? In *Anna Karenina* Tolstoy spoke about the predicament faced by his hero in his estate where a sort of election had been organised. For what purpose? No one knows, given that election, the very system that presides over this notion is still unknown in Russia. So let us forget this unorganised, medieval group of people who push the world towards an atomic war. As if this were the real and only aim of humanity.

What else could we speak of? 'By repeatedly doing virtuous things, even if we don't want to, we can turn ourselves into virtuous people.' Aristotle again. What else, who else are we allowed to speak of within this essay?

Aristotle again. Of course we might say a few words about St Thomas, but that moment will come sooner or later. Any moment, this one, that one will come once upon a time, and once it will be death, another time a sort of resurrection. We resurrect and think we have found a comma on our eternal way to Eternity. And then we realise it is a semi-colon. We are not very fond of the word 'semi' so we choose 'colon' as if we could choose anything or anybody in this or any other matter. We see a column and a lot of smoke that never goes anywhere without being born of fire. We cannot see the fire for an obscure reason, and that does not worry us, for a guru we saw in another century said we should not pay attention to anything with the exception of nirvana. We look for nirvana and find 'ni, ni, ni, ni' which means 'neither nor' in French and probably some other languages. And Aristotle continues to talk for the sake of talking, needless to say; or to talk. 'Every virtue is a "mean", or average, set between two vices – one of excess and one of deficiency.' What is my deficiency? I ask myself and find too many answers which do not help me in the domain of virtues. I get away from them, one by one. In other words, I get away from vice and then knock down another; and another, and another. They all lie in a lot of dust and I go on; I go towards perfection. Wait a minute! What am I talking about? I am supposed to knock

down some kind of deficiency associated in my mind with a particular vice. Because it *is* a vice, isn't it? Every deficiency is a vice in its own right; or wrong, as the case may be: everybody is aware of this truth. All right: I seem to have found a solution to this problem; at least for a while. I take off my trousers and say, 'I'm deficient, am I not? And my deficiency lies near my feet, touching one of them.' Half-naked I proceed towards one of my shelves on which there are two or three pairs of trousers. Suddenly I realise I am already virtuous: wearing trousers is an excess which leads one and almost everybody to the vice called 'Being excessively generous.' Towards yourself, obviously. Can't you walk along the streets, up and down the streets of your native city without one of the pairs of trousers you rightly own and have in your house, on numerous, opulently furnished shelves? But by having your trousers on – any pair of them, to be exact – you run the danger designated as 'being excessively generous', as I already pointed out in one the previous sentences. But if, on the other hand, you decide to moon around your native city stark naked, you would incur wrath/anger of Aristotle who writes abundantly about 'the vice of meanness'.

You do walk stark-naked around your native city, and some pedestrians stop in their tracks and say to you, 'I've known you for many, many years. But I could never have accused you of meanness, if two minutes ago my glance wouldn't have encountered this appearance of yours. Stark-naked, if you please. Well, I'm not pleased at all, if you must know. And you *must* know that, otherwise you'll go on and on – stark naked, if you deplease.' What else does he talk about, our Aristotle? He says you should not give away too much of your money that you do not have enough for yourself. No one has enough money for oneself and for one's family. So one wonders when one can stop or start? Start what? Giving money away non-stop. No, no, no – this is a vice: we should never forget that. '*Non*' is wrong and 'stop' is correct. But when do you have to stop? 'The mean is not mathematical,' says Aristotle. So if you say '200', no one can tell you whether it is mean or not. And what about '300'? The same goes for '300' and even for '3000'. The same goes everywhere, and you have no idea whether this 'same' goes naked or half-naked; or third-naked, for this matter. And this matter is endless, endless, I'm sorry to say. That's why it is better not to say it.

We go on as if we were a show. In some respect we *are* a show, considering that we show something of what we are doing, sometimes when hiding from something else. We always hide from something, even if no danger lies in wait for us behind a boulder or a mere stone. And then we come into the open and this open may become closed at any second, depending on some authorities or other. Well, we do depend on these authorities because we cannot do otherwise. Sometimes we are close, sometimes open. They say, 'This is an open work of art.' And others say, 'You're wrong – it's a closed work of art because you don't understand its contents. You don't even understand its contours.' What *do* you understand in the final analysis? A Christmas Tree.

These discussions lead nowhere; as any other discussions, to tell the truth You go on telling the truth and say, after much soul-searching that nothing leads anywhere, simply because nothing cannot lead anywhere. Nor can a zero. What does a zero lead you to? A number of zeros that you might enjoy if you love zeroes in the first place and also in the second place. Sometimes you are asked, 'Do you like zero in the third place?' and you reply, 'Frankly speaking, I'm weary of zeros. I prefer millions, billiards, frankly speaking. And if you think I should be more modest, I'll say I prefer three roubles.'

Someone who is well-off should give more than someone who is poor. You say, 'I'm poor,' and they begin to search you – literally and almost mystically – to find out if you have more than what every poor man or woman are allowed to possess. Allotted to, as they say all the time. 'Allotted to when and where?' you are asked.

And all disintegrates, once again. It literally falls apart and as a result you find a rouble here and a euro somewhere else, probably in the kitchen, Why? Because supposedly you were charged with a mission you did not accomplish, for some reason or other. You had – it was your duty – to buy a lot of potatoes, and you did not know how many potatoes you had to buy. But you knew that these potatoes were meant and ordered to nourish the whole population of two villages, of three villages and even of a small city called Klin where Tchaikovsky found his last refuge. Or the one before last.

This is a problem apart which should be tackled separately. What is your one-before-last refuge that precedes your deathbed? You say to yourself your *Winter Reise* or the way of all flesh, assuming that you still have a few morsels of flesh to call your own, is under way. Of course you ask yourself an obvious question, ‘Should I keep this flesh for myself or give it to the needed – to children, in the first place?’ Actually, you are prepared to offer this flesh to the needy and children and the old in the second place as well, but you are not sure you will safely reach this second place, and in this case you have to give whatever you have right now and almost to everybody. So you give your underwear to many people among whom you notice a few females who say, ‘We’ll never wear this nonsense.’ Men do not usually pronounce the word ‘nonsense’, at least in this respect, but they say, ‘Pfui, pfui,’ or something else along these lines, following this vein. It does not mean that masculine taste in the domain of underwear varies so much: they are just determined to say ‘pfui’, to express their utter disgust with what happens in the world, and unless you show them a masterpiece from the Louvre collection, they will go on repeating ‘pfui’ until midnight, when they usually recall Shakespeare and his dreams. Luckily for them. This last item proves it is better to know Shakespeare almost by heart, otherwise you may be confronted with the horror of a non-Shakespearian world. (But Shakespearian world is not all beer and skittles either.)

Let us not forget that by repeatedly doing virtuous things, even if we do not want to, we can turn ourselves into virtuous people. I have no wish to give you ten roubles, but I do give them to you. Why? Because I think that my repeats will turn me into a virtuous man; my virtuous repeats, that is. It is as if I held a sheet of paper on which someone, God perhaps, wrote ‘virtuous’. What kind of thing can be related to this piece of paper? I give it to someone – instead of giving to this someone a million of dollars – and simply say, ‘Here you are.’

‘What do you mean?’ asks the simpleton. (That is who you are talking to – unavoidably.)

‘This is a ticket that allows you to take part in the show called “Virtue”. If you win, you’ll be virtuous, you know.’

‘And if I lose?’

‘You’ll be vicious. Isn’t that clear?’

You lose, but you nurse a covid victim, running the well-known danger, and finally the God-presided committee resolves to bestow an honour upon you; a medal, in other words. You put this medal on your chest and have a walk throughout your city, showing off your honours and achievements, instead of putting on display your nakedness; or half of it, as the case may be. And the case is always ‘maybe’ or ‘be’ or ‘not to be’, and so on.

You should get inspired from older people who point their sticks to almost everything and everybody, saying, ‘You should give, you should give,’ and ‘otherwise’ always accompanies these speeches, which confirms

once and for all that 'otherwise' is part and parcel of our life. And you cannot remove these parts and parcels without destroying your life, which needs all these others and wises.

How many virtuous things have you repeated since last Sunday? Two or three, according to your calculation. Well, plunge into your arithmetic once again and find geometry or something else: semiology, for instance. I said, 'The world is beautiful,' which is virtuous enough to fill to the brim my claim for virtuousness. Indeed, I draw everyone's attention to the beauty of the world which enables them to survive in this world. They manage to surmount all opposition/objections to their plans. However, there are still a few technical problems/obstacles/hurdles to be surmounted before the product can be put on sale to the public. What product, what sale? What a question to ask! In this world – and everyone is aware of this state of affairs – everything is a salesman (even women, even women) and everyone is a product. (Is this the other way round?) What kind of product? What does it matter! You know you are a product – even if no one buys you. Even the people who show no interest in your persona, in your body and so on are capable of saying, from time to time, 'I know he or she is a product, but I don't need it. I have enough of worthy, expensive products within my reach both at home and also outdoors.'

This time we are talking about the product called (or entitled: there are so many books written about it): *The Beauty of the World*. This subject is vast indeed, almost gigantic, because some people just show you their watches, saying, 'Beautiful, isn't it?' Of course you can always answer thus, 'It's certainly expensive and in some respects beautiful, but I prefer that tree over there.' On this and other occasions the Russians point to birch trees, whereas others think in terms of Christmastide and the things they can hang on their Christmas trees. Actually these things count much more, given that children seldom admire a tree on which these things hang rather indifferently as if there were simply exhibited in a shop. The children do not seem to admire the smell I took advantage of in my childhood, which did not prevent me from enjoying the things I am talking about right now. Probably at length. Frankly I do not know how much time I wish to sacrifice for the sake of these things on which I counted in my childhood. I thought the world was just a thing, a plaything – something hanging from a Christmas tree; from *my* Christmas tree, preferably. From which tree does the world hang? Not from the Tree of Life, that's for sure. From the Tree of Death? Perhaps, perhaps. Let us leave the question open. I am not keen on open works of art, considering that most of them, most of masterpieces are closed forever. But an open question does not really disturb me; not really, not beyond all measures.

Shall we go on enlarging upon virtues? Beyond all measures, so to speak? Everybody will air his and her grievances upon the matter, saying that acts speak louder. Suppose you notice a child – in a Siberia, of all places. (Even in Siberia, in this inhuman land you come across children, now and then.) Understandably enough, this child freezes to death; or starves to death, if you prefer. (Of course you prefer the life of this child and this goes without saying.) Well, you take notice of this child, draw a box of matches from one of your pockets and strike a match. This is called a 'virtuous act' or a 'virtuous deed'. If you strike two matches – in the same set up, within the same winter – you double the number of your virtues. If you walk around Siberia in search of freezing-to-death children, your pockets full of matches and boxes, automatically, almost mechanically you grow as virtuous as mothers and Therasas. What is the lesson we can draw from this narration? Never leave your house without matches. I mean, you have to fill your pockets with matches – to the brim, if possible – and begin your walk through your native city; even if it is not located in Siberia, contrary to all the stories told about matches.

And if you see a lonely child, you should assume he or she has no parents to take care of. What I mean boils down to this: no one takes care of this child. So you should bend over and put your finger on this child's shoulder. Why not put your *hands* on his or her shoulders? While you are at it? If you put your both hands on this child you will be accused of an act associated with paedophilia. So you limit this effusion of tenderness and humanness to a mere murmur, such as, 'Tu-tu-tu' or 'su-su-su'. What happens next is quite foreseeable: there is a man who reproaches your nature for not giving free expression to your natural feelings, meaning, 'You're a father by nature, considering your age and experience. Why don't you welcome this child to your open arms and carry him to your wife who'll certainly give him enough chocolate to tide him over the weekend?' And you answer logically and self-defensively, 'Don't you know our police? Do you have no idea what our justice department is capable of?' It is capable of justice – that is the only comment you can hear under the circumstances.

Someone who is well-off should give more than someone who is poor. And someone who is poor should give more than someone who eats everything he can lay his hands on. He lays hands – so does she – on a morsel of fish, and a bystander whispers a word in his ear, 'Why don't you give this morsel to a starving child?'

'This child isn't really starving, according to my analysis of the situation,' says the man enjoying the morsel of fish; of sturgeon, in all probability.

'I bet you anything you like it.'

'Can you bet your boots? Can you boot your bets?'

'With pleasure.'

'Well, let's watch and see what happens.'

At the end of the week the child dies of starvation. Who won this game of bets and deaths? I have no remembrance of this incidence or rather of its details, and so one had better consult a few newspapers which concentrate their efforts on children and their deaths from the lack of morsels of fish, of meat and so on.

Some of the journalists bet on quantity and not on quality. Of course you can always say the morsel under discussion is so succulent you might consume a hundred kilos of it. But the child does not seem to enjoy the quality, the taste of the morsel because you do not really relish anything on the threshold of death; except your own paradise-oriented hopes. So the child dies and you say to yourself, 'I'd give anything to know if he thought about Paradise on the point of passing away. This is so important for my article centred upon children and their mortality. Or immortality, if you prefer. Not their morality, mind you.'

You follow your elders and Aristotle does not seem to question this ritual because every year adds something to the amount of knowledge you are supposed to accumulate in the course of knowledge. St Peter walks towards or flies towards your knowledge and asks you the ritual question, 'Is that what you've unashamedly bring to Paradise? Do you think there are no treasures to offer its Guardians?' You empty your pockets and find a piece of gold or silver; or just a piece of anything or a piece of nothing. St Peter looks at this piece, studies it for a while and says at last, 'This piece is far more precious than all the gold they found in Charlie Chaplin's film *The Gold Rush*. Bravo!' And you make yourself comfortable in Paradise. That is what life is about.

How can we be sure we are doing the right thing? You cannot find the answer to this question in Aristotle's books because the only answer he can give is, 'Read my books.' You go on reading his books and find the following sentence: 'Doing the right thing.' Well, let us admit – for the sake of argument – that I do the

wrong thing. Let us go a little bit further. Let us admit I do three wrong things, four wrong things. And even five wrong things, why not? What danger do I run when I admit I do five wrong things? Your judges say, 'Five things are not a crime in itself, admitting you did commit them and are fully responsible for them. And let us not get entangled in the calculus of sacred numbers within which we seldom find five, contrary to what happens with three, four and six.'

You do five wrong things. Contrary to what might be admitted (officially) more or less accurately, you do not use a heavy object, when getting closer and closer to the head of a child you have no wish to harass and submit to your boundless desire; contrary to all sorts of documents. But what *do* you do? You step forward or backward or outward; and every step, according to the protocol, leads you to a crime. This crime can be less or more, or most, or gigantic, or minuscule. It is a crime, nevertheless, and you should suffer as a result of this crime and its punishment, its roubles spent for nothing. 'Such people might know in great detail, for example, which vitamins and minerals are conducive to healthy living.' You find this sentence in a book (*Introducing Aristotle*.) Well, you follow the advice to the letter and the letter is A, and also B and Z. You take all these vitamins and feel much better: you are capable of mounting any number of stairs without being short of breath. At some point you even think you are short of *steps*. And then you become a victim of your own optimism (your doctor never said anything of the kind.) You sit down on a step and feel a desire that grows within you every minute as if it had nothing else to do – the desire to take the last step in this life, whatever its measurements, virtual and real. You really want to take leave of this life, even if there is no step under your feet. You say to yourself or any passer-by who happens to be within your hearing, 'Can you see my foot? It is installed on the last step of my life. I'm not sure you can see it – this kind of vision is reserved for the dying, not for the living, but this doesn't really matter – here's my foot, my death and immortality, whether you agree with me or not. Farewell, my dear pedestrian.'

And that is done. So many things are done, and you know them by heart, if you do have a heart after all. What happens next? You discover you have another foot to lean upon, and you lean upon it, forgetting all your previous experiences, tests in the this domain and many other domains which communicate to you the only truth we are allowed to come across, 'You'll fail, whatever you do and are. So you'd better sit ensconced in your armchair and take your time, your rest, your life and even the rest of your life. Take the rest, the r, the s and whatever can be found under your feet that accumulated a lot of objects during your wandering.

What sounds appropriate, in your opinion? You cannot pretend to hear Mozart's or Haydn's quartets. What do you actually hear? Blam, blam, blam; blam, blam. But the chief thing is: you can survive all these blam, blam, blams and live happily ever after. And even after happily, you know. And even after 'after'. That is what counts, that is what you can rely upon.

And then Aristotle talks about rulers of all kinds. Of course a monarchy would be an ideal solution except that a king can turn out to be fool – and he often is, our king; fool, fool, fool – and his benevolence is always accompanied by a big question mark. This mark is almost as big as the monarch himself; and sometimes it is even bigger, so this question often hits the ceiling during his numerous and senseless speeches. First it lifts its crown and carries it as far as the biggest chandelier. Then the chandelier begins to tinkle and twinkle – like the proverbial little star. Everybody looks at the chandelier and they say to each other, 'This is a good omen. God must have heard our prayers.' But one cannot even be sure their prayer was heard by the chandelier in question, let alone by the crown. The taxes continue to grow as if lifted by the same question mark, and everything,

everybody are questioned from now and on. Some people are questioned by the police and by judges. They are sent to prisons and concentration camps where they concentrate on their labours. And judges concentrate on the denunciations that float through various halls accusing this and that and him and shim.

‘Monarchs will almost certainly rule to promote their own advantage.’ What kind of advantage could be discussed in the context? Monarchs say to almost everyone, ‘One crown isn’t enough. I wish I could wear three or four crowns.’

‘But Your Majesty! With all due respect we doubt whether your head will be capable of wearing so many crowns at the same time.’

‘They float, you know,’ answers the monarch. ‘They float in the air and elsewhere. And the air and also elsewhere are capable of wearing as many crowns as necessary to maintain my Absolute Rule.’

‘An aristocracy might work but, again, the small number of rulers probably could not be trusted.’ Well and good: you trust a small number of rulers who surround you on all sides – to protect you from bullets and bombs. But for no obvious reason one ruler leaves his post and leaves a hole instead – a hole through which a bullet can squeeze as easily as a pea. As easy as a pea, say the people who are allowed to witness the situation or rather the monarch’s predicament. (We are still talking about a monarch. About whom could we talk? By whom could we replace him? No one else is worthy of our praise, blame and attention.) The group of courtiers grows smaller and smaller and finally a few bullets turn into a number of peas and penetrate the circle where the ruler, alias the monarch, makes yet another speech. The speech is interrupted by a bullet that gets stuck in the monarch’s tongue. From now on he will speak only about bullets, canons, tanks and pilots. That is how wars traditionally start: a bullet turns into a pea and flouts all conventions. It even snaps its fingers at the dangers associated in every mind with the assassination of a king. It snaps its fingers once, it snaps its fingers twice, and the monarch collapses in front of his (or her) prime minister.

But let us continue our talk about small number. (This discussion has nothing to do with nanotechnology.) This small number of rulers turns into an oligarchy – in no time at all, mind you. (No time for bullets to introduce themselves into the king’s inner circle.) These oligarchs make decisions to serve their own ends rather than those of the community as a whole. And their own ends have no ends, as everybody knows, whereas the ends of the community stop, having no time to gain any momentum. A lot of conversations burst into existence because of this discrepancy. No, no, no – discrepancy. Let us follow one of the ends that belongs to community – rightfully, for once. This end is at the end and the whole community deplores this fact of affairs understandably enough. (We understand everything, don’t we?) You see an end – of a cable, for instance – and say to whom are interested or not interested. ‘This is the end, you know.’

‘The end of what?’ they ask you.

‘The end of everything,’ you say.

‘Or everything? Look at this bit, for instance. It doesn’t seem to me that this bit is the end of everything. This bit is probably the end of itself, which doesn’t mean your world has come to an end and all our volcanoes erupt at the same time and probably even earlier, probably earlier. So we may erupt at any moment. Aren’t we erupting right now?’

‘No, I don’t. I don’t think you’re erupting right now. But nothing prevents you from erupting in two minutes. Do you feel anything in your stomach?’

They would turn into an oligarchy? You turn into oligarchy? You stop at some point and ask, 'Is it oligarchy?' They don't answer you. But why should you turn into oligarchy? That's not necessary. You just turn into Oli and life begins as if nothing had ever happened. So many times, so many happenings. But you just say 'olli' whenever they turn their faces to you and open their mouths. You say 'Oil, I am Oil' and they accept you as if no crimes had ever been attached to your substance.

They ask you, 'What's your name?' and you say oil, oil, oil. And they put you into their machines, saying to their spouses, 'Do you know who helps us during our journey to the Riviera? It is oil, and she is very nice, very beautiful into the bargain.'

But Aristotle appreciates psyche in terms of its capacities. But what is psyche capable of? She is capable of crying, 'I'm Psyche, I'm Psyche, I'm Psyche.' So what? Or what else? We have lived without psyche for many, many years. Why should you put this burden on our backs at this particular moment? Let us speak rather of the soul which, according to some specialists, is tantamount to the psyche. Some of us say to others, 'You have no soul,' whereas the others did not nod their heads, contrary to what may be expected by polite people. They shake their heads and say, 'We do have our soul, but it is called "psyche".' 'Really?' 'Really.' 'What do you call psyche?' 'Psyche.' 'And what do you call that tree over there?' 'Psyche.'

You write a text and put semi-colons from time to time, when you feel like it. Psyche is the world, says someone. Someone also says someone, and that is also someone and probably psyche as well. But let us listen to Aristotle, instead of talking nonsense or rubbish. 'This is the ability to grow, to thrive and to carry out basic biological functions' What? What? What? My ability to grow is dependent on my basic growth, but my basic growth, I'm sorry to say, is too basic so you cannot grow. It can only jerk and that is apparently enough for healthy, Olympic, basic, growth,

It goes without saying that you can obey a set of rigid (not rich, no way) rules which are often contradictory. You obey one rule, and another rule knocks you on the head and says, 'You contradict. Yet I've never been impolite or otherwise unpleasant in your presence.' You do not wish to hear all sorts of nonsense without being able to answer your adversary, and so you say, 'Once – I think it took place five months ago – you touched your nose in a quite unpleasant, not to say vulgar manner. I was deeply offended by your behaviour and actually everybody present – and many people were in assistance on that particular occasion – were as offended as I was. Do you think you can pick and choose in the matter of your nose and other overtures, other holes you possess for some reason I ignore?'

Fiddling with one's nose or fingering it – God forbid! – does not belong to the domain we unanimously call 'ethical'. *Et encore, et encore*. I don't know. What *do* I know? Let us choose another, 'righter' moment for the dissection of this problem. Ethical action is almost always about negotiation and compromise. But let us leave the nose aside, its problem, its picking which, in my opinion, lives outside of all other questions, ethical or not. It is merely disgusting, and that is what I have to say on the subject, rounding it off, once and for all. Or all and for once. So you do not negotiate in this domain, if I am understood rightly; once and for all. Let us analyse a few sentences I picked up at random in newspapers bought by everybody in the streets and elsewhere. 'The government has refused to negotiate with the strikers.' All right, we encounter this piece of information every day, especially if we live in France. And sometimes (mostly, I must admit) we just do not care about these negotiations and their results. But one thing is accepted by everyone, without any exclusion: they were not

negotiating about your nose and the way you maltreat it, more often than not. After all, you are not Gogol who devoted a short (or rather long) story to this problem which can leave you noseless, so to speak.

‘I’m negotiating for a new contract.’ Who cares about your new or old contracts? Unless we are vitally involved in the projects, anxious to protect our families from famines and other disasters strewn all along our paths. What’s the use discussing the ethical side of the problem; if any?

‘I’ve managed to negotiate (= get by discussion) a five per cent pay increase with my boss.’ Is this an ethical question? If it is, I should negotiate and discuss it with my boss. But I have no boss except myself. Sure enough, I could discuss this problem with myself, saying, for instance; ‘What do you think about this clause and that clause?’

‘Let’s leave all these clauses alone,’ I might answer to myself.

‘All right, all right. But wouldn’t you leave me alone?’

‘Myself?’

‘Wouldn’t you wish to listen Haydn’s quartets alone, on your own, undisturbed in any way?’

‘Yes.’

So I leave myself alone.

Bringing up our children to be ‘virtuous’ will better suit them to this kind of decision-making. What children? What kind of decision-making? What unkind of decision-making? (This is often the case, mind you.) First you have to find out what kind of decision-making is alluded to in this all-comprehensive book. All answers related to all sorts of problems are treated magnanimously, and yet I cannot find in it the decision and the making emphasised in the above sentence. There are doubtless many sentences situated *below* the sentence I am enlarging upon, but what is below is also above – everybody knows that.

But what do they say about Hokusai with whom I have been involved (have evolved) ever since I realised to what extent water and mountain play the game of my life within my ego? It is easy to find a text where they tell you that Hokusai is accessible – admired by – not only to the Westerners who see Western girls and Western boys and mountains and fountains we see not only within our landscapes, but also in Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*. They show you the *real* Hokusai, but what you see amounts to this, I’m afraid: M – meaning ‘mountain’, V – meaning ‘vague’, H – meaning Hokusai, J – meaning Japanese, B – meaning beautiful. Of course you see old men and old, young women, but what does it mean? We live in different countries. Suppose Hokusai were still alive. Well, we live in different countries. He paints a mountain, and we say, ‘This is a mountain.’ But we say, ‘A mountain’ and he says ‘Moutunogiub-shi.’ What do we see, when studying his picture? We see ‘Mout’ and we say to ourselves in jubilant tones, ‘Mountain, mountain. We understand the beauty of this magnificent work.’ And what about the rest? What *do* we understand or feel? ‘Tuno’, ‘gee’,. Tuno means a ‘tune’ inside our vocabulary, so we start singing and that is the only reason we can give for our sudden ‘bursting into song’, as we define it. And what about ‘gee’? ‘Gee, honey, is that all your own hair?’ That is all we can add to Hokusai’s famous painting, and this is unfair, frankly speaking. It is better not to say anything at all or remain silent, which amounts to the same thing. It is better to mount to the same thing many times – to this *same* thing – so as not to commit a fearful, dreadful blunder which might consist of being disrespectful towards one of the most respectful painters in the history of this art. And in the history of many museums located all around the world.

If I am not mistaken, I had a talk about virtue, and Hokusai’s painting belongs to this facet of human existence. It is true that, when you look at his mountains, you might say to yourself, ‘I wish I could climb this

mountain one of these days.’ But his women and men are of another kind. They are inaccessible, so to speak. You never say to yourself – and not even to your best friends – ‘I wish I could...’ No, you don’t wish. No, you cannot. All sorts of sexual harassment are excluded from the museum where you have an incredible opportunity to scrutinize these pictures. What’s more, this particular kind of harassment is excluded even from the books you contemplate at ease in your library; or any other library for that matter. Even if you pick up the book in question and begin to fiddle with it, finger it, using occasionally your feet in the process, you *cannot*. Nothing doing. You fiddle, finger, fiddler, foodler, moodler – whatever you like. The picture remains innocent, virtuous, pure – virgin, if you wish. (And you do wish it – at the bottom of your heart. Because you are created in the image of God.)

So what could you do with Hokusai? You are sure to enlist him in the army of your supporters. Why? Because he does not care: he is dead and nothing can move him anymore. You move him and he does not move – that is his reaction to your moving. Move him if you wish; play a few Chopin nocturnes for him. Do you think he would shake a few tears, while listening to your cadenzas? What can move a dead man? Even a *great* dead man? Of course you can whisper into his ear, ‘You’re great, and you must know that. You’re immortal and you know that as well. If you’re immortal, you’re sure to hear your descendants or any other descendants. Your great-great-great-great-great-great-great. They say to you, “Your pictures are beautiful. Your mountains are beautiful, your waters, whatever their sources, are beautiful. Your lines and colours are beautiful. We faint, when looking at your pictures. They – the attendants of all kinds – come to our rescue, we resume our postures and go on looking at your pictures, your waves, your Merus, your Hokusais. We even look at your kus and ais. Could you please admire the size of our admiration?”’

But what do we have in common with Hokusai and his waves? We just say, ‘He’s a great painter. We feel the world so profoundly, thanks to him, to his waves. We follow his waves and the world gets profound, and even more profound than before, a few seconds before. And then we aspire to heights and his mountains appear before our eyes as if summoned from some nebula of existence. Existence exists and there are waves in it; the waves of fury, for instance. But the wave we are engulfed by has nothing to do with fury. What we experience is a *pure* engulfment. By the way, we should repeat these words as often as we can: nothing to do, nothing to do, nothing to do, nothing to do, because nothing has to do with anything. You see a painting or just a wave, a real wave, and you don’t even have to say to yourself, ‘nothing to do’, because it has nothing to do with whatever you have seen before. Everything is anew, but it is not a brave new world – God forbid. It is a new *timid* world that accepts a timid beauty symbolised by a leaf and a nonsensical world – certainly not love. This word might have significance somewhere, but what does it matter? It does have significance; in other words, it signifies something or somebody or nobody. Most frequently. But it is just a word and that is what counts. A word. Or an ord. Rd. How beautiful it is! Almost as beautiful as Hokusai’s painting.

And what about Rousseau? What about the world in general? Rousseau says, ‘We live in constant and constantly changing relationships with other people, and so we do need also to be well-disposed towards them.’ We are well-disposed towards them. And what about *them*? They are also well-disposed towards us, for they read Rousseau in their childhood and even in their youth when very few people read Rousseau, with the exception of Derrida and some other philosophers of note. But we are neither philosophers nor of note, so we do not have to read either Derrida or Rousseau. We do not have to read anything, not even newspapers which talk

nonsense and rubbish all the time, even if they do not belong to what they call ‘tabloid papers’ or something of the kind. Something of the kind is always of the kind because it is nearer to the truth; to kindness.

Constantly changing relationships with other people. My God – how true this is! Truth itself, I must say! Today you are my friend, so to speak; tomorrow you are not even my enemy. Tomorrow you are my awfulness, perniciousness, terribility, horribality, territerriterriawful. Or just fool. Why should I be well-disposed towards horribality or terribolity? All right, you are well-disposed towards terribolity. After studying this nonsense for a while, you conclude that terrib is threatening because it is ‘terrible’, in disguise. But the rest of the word seems rather benevolent. Olity. This reminds you of oil and you imagine the world where you could slide from one oily Hokusai-inspired mountain to another and really enjoy yourself, which seldom happens in our and other worlds. You slide, you slide, you slide, you glide, and – wonders of wonders, marvels of marvels, karmas of karmas – you enjoy yourself, which has never happened since 1999. You seem to take advantage of both Hokusai’s mountains and his wave – his fountains, in other words. What else do you need? A piece of cake?

And then you find yourself in front of all sorts of questions related to cakes, and you resolve not to plunge into this chaos, for the simple reason that it is not simple, this reason, the number of cakes and chaos in general, although, at some point you were interested in the theory attached to chaos. But what is attached to chaos nowadays? Everything. That is why it has grown so uninteresting. You point to Putin and say, ‘He is a good example of chaos.’ And everybody applauds. Then Putin strips his clothes off and throws them anywhere, any, any, any, any how. And any, any, anyhow where. And everybody applauds. Why? Because they say the following. They say, ‘We understood his inner nature. He is anyhow and anywhere. And we wish he were nowhere.’

We live in complex and constantly changing relationships... Let’s stop for a while sometimes, otherwise we are likely to go on forever, which is tiresome, to say the least. You can go on and on until you trip over something, be it a root or your own problem. You do it several times in the row, and the row grows too long; and you grow weary as well. So both you and the row grow weary and you say to yourself, ‘It’s enough, I’ve gone a long way and the tether is just in front of me. So I’d better stop. I know nothing about my row’s tether, my path’s tether, my life’s tether and my tether in general.’

What do you know about anything? You know that the word ‘tether’ starts with the letter ‘t’. But where is this tether of yours? Is it here, is it there, is it anywhere? Apparently you have a tether, otherwise you would not be able to get to the end of it. But can you be in the middle of your tether? In the middle of anywhere, of nowhere? You can say that; yet you have no idea what you are talking about. You do not know any middles so you cannot say, ‘I’m in the middle of nowhere.’ What’s more, you do not know anything about nowhere. You know ‘no’, vaguely. If you ask for a cup of tea and they say to you, ‘No,’ you know you will not have your cup of tea, even if you pay for it. Of course if you pay a hundred dollars for your cup of tea, they will give something to you, but does this really count? They say that Aristotle’s arguments in favour of slavery and subjugation of women are not very convincing. He says, ‘You have no wish to work so you look for someone who can perform this task for you. You see someone in the streets and say, “He’ll do nicely for the job.” And this person becomes your slave. The same goes for women. You see a woman and say to her, “You’re my woman so you’ll have to wash my dishes and also my body, from time to time. And then you’ll wash my house which will never be yours because you’re a woman and nothing else; nobody else. Anyway, you’re not a man. That’s why you’ll wash everything, while I’ll catch forty winks and forty sweet dreams. And I don’t even ask you whether this suits you

or not. That suits me. Can't you hear me?' Of course she hears you. At least that is what happened in the times when Aristotle wrote his books on philosophy, women, men and washing.

Another question is on our agenda: 'How should people act so as to meet their obligations to their community?' What kind of community are you talking about? There are pedestrians and they choose to walk beyond my windows. (Luckily for me they do not walk *within* my windows. When someone walks within your windows you really feel his or her presence. And that is unbearable.) What kind of obligations, for God's sake? What do I owe you? Do you think I owe you this chest of drawers I bought 20 years ago in Paris? I do admit there are some people somewhere. Can they be called 'community'? All right – call them what you wish. But what do *I* have to do with all these nominations, designations and nonsense? You can have my chest of drawers on condition that you promise to leave me in peace for the rest of my life. And if, at some moment of this rest of my life, you interfere with the course of this life of mine, I will have my chest of drawers – I will. Why? Because that's my will. And, according to Aristotle, you should meet your obligations to my will.'

People are essentially social and can be *be^rpà^permua* in a community. That is what I wrote after being involved with a group of people who were social, to all appearances, and my dearest wish eventually focused on their disappearance. How could they disappear? I might say to them, to everyone, 'Please, disappear. You're unwelcome in this house and probably in Paradise, at the famous gate about which our folk talks abundantly in their deathbed speeches. They clear their throats and begin to talk to those whose bodies they can see in spite of their pre-death blindness. What do they say? 'I depart.' That's what they and we usually say, but that is not necessary: everyone knows our life is a series of departures and arrivals. Sometimes you see a napkin or whatever it is; sometimes you see a sort of smile, meaning I'm happy to get rid of you. As for life, it is happy to get rid of you too. That is how all this comes to an end. And we are happy when it *crawls* to an end.

We have an unavoidable obligation to take part in community life, bear responsibility for its decisions. They go somewhere and decide what should be done, whereas I stroll along the path I see and feel in front of me. I don't really know if that path belongs to life or to a park. Let them belong to whatever they wish if they have this wish: belonging, belonging, belonging. Some women or men just throw themselves into your closed arms, shouting, 'I belong to you.' What does it mean? Are you a Russian serf? Probably not. Do you want me to take advantage of your body at once, proving to you and everybody else you do belong to me, *corps et âme*? Body and soul, soul and sinews? Nothing means anything; everything just happens. What is happening now? Some man fiddles with a female body. He fingers it and also toys with it. He says to it, 'You're not only my wife but also my sister. We play hide and seek every day. You hide and I seek. I find you at once, but before proclaiming my victory I slap your face several times, and I do it as long as I wish. Sometimes I no longer wish to do it, but *noblesse oblige*, or something else obliges: there are many somethings and obligations we have to deal with; I in particular. So I slap, slap, slap and at one point – I don't remember where it is located – you say 'Enough'. In other words, I stop slapping your face. Of course I don't stop other action I triggered off at some point (at another point). What are these actions directed at? Several cheeks are aligned in front of you. Do you necessarily have to slap them? (It is better to slip them, to sleep, as Hamlet used to say.) To allow to turn the other cheek, Well, if you wish to turn your cheeks you do it at leisure. And if you don't have enough leisure to turn your cheeks or even your head or even your thumbs, you just do not turn anything and say to anybody, 'Go to Hell.' And everybody goes to hell. How remarkable it is, this obedience, this law, this command, this sentence. You

say, 'Go to Hell' and people follow your advice as if they were sure you are right. Are you right? Don't ask too many questions, especially if they are directed at yourself.

We do take part in communities. So we arrive to a community, after knocking profusely at the door, and say, 'I wish to become a part and probably even a parcel of this community.' They say 'all right', even when they do not say anything and nothing happens. That is their custom. Then they show you a part of their community and say, 'Do you like this part?' You answer, 'No.' They say, 'Doesn't matter. Otherwise you won't have anything.' So you have anything, and this anything does not look worse than what they suggested you should have in the first place. Whatever one might think, sometimes the second place is even superior to the first one. You pick up this place or part of it and carry it somewhere, and you do not always know where you carry it. From time to time you hear a voice, 'Where to?' But you do not answer this voice because answers mean confusion, and confusions should be avoided at all cost. The cost is high, but it does not really matter, given that confusion is avoided.

You carry this part; well, you carry something and you honestly think you carry a part of the community. And you may carry it as far as the ear of communism, but then someone whispers into your ear, 'Carry it towards socialism, and that will be enough.' 'How much? How much?' You begin to negotiate your communism or socialism or whatever.

'Ten thousand.'

'Ten thousand roubles?'

'Ten thousand dollars.'

'Ten thousand...'

'Thirty thousand...'

No one is capable of rounding off this dialogue, so it goes on and on. And then someone walks round this group of people and the conversation is rounded off. What is the result? **FOURTY THOUSAND, SIXTY SOMEWHAT!** What some, what what? Who cares.

The limit of the state's power is that beyond which it ceases to serve its citizens. Do you serve me? Do you serve me? Do you serve me? You hear these questions all the time. A representative of the state walks down the street; or up the street – habitually these representatives walk *up* the streets. A passer-by stops in his tracks and asks the following question addressed to the representative of the state (or stake) who, let us not forget it, walks *up* the same street. 'Do you serve me?' asks the passer-by.

'In what sense?

'In every sense of the term.'

'How many terms does my servitude contain?'

'Around 80. I haven't really counted.'

'Please, do count my servitudes. Then come to my office and we'll analyse your arithmetic.'

'It is geometry I'm talking about.'

'We could also talk about quadrometry.'

'Why not?'

'And quidrometry.'

'Why not?'

What the point? The community is still there and chimney pipes seem to be in order. What else can count in the life of an ordinary man? He studies Wittgenstein and often talks when it is better to keep silent, probably forever. I have always wondered how the people – monks, chiefly monks – inaugurate their vow of silence and keep their mouth shut until the day of their death or another life. Sometimes they need the help of their hands: their mouth wishes to come into the open. It does come, but at the last moment a hand or a finger makes it to behave in such a way that it comes to a standstill. There is no openness they speak so often of on the Internet. Openness, openness. Sometimes they even go so far as to pronounce the word ‘transparency’. Well, the mouth is open, but it is not transparent, not in the least.

And a town, any city are open to. To whom? To bandits, to billionaires? This city is open and I enter it just for the fun of. Of it, of it. All these its look and sound alike. And together, sometimes. What do we know about our own house? We know a table, but this table knows us much more thoroughly. And that irritates us beyond measure. Why does this inanimate thing knows me better than whatever I can know, after studying in three or four universities? How come? How come? It comes, it comes and no one knows *how* it comes; or whether it comes at all. This phenomenon has taken place so often in the history of humankind. Some of them shout, ‘Here he is. He’s finally come!’ And others murmur, ‘I don’t understand what they’re talking about.’

‘Can’t you see?’

‘Whom?’

‘Him.’

‘Kim? Kim Bassinger?’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Who are you talking about?’

‘Him, Him, Him, Him.’

‘It is her, isn’t she?’

‘Why should I become virtuous? It’s so hard. It’s much easier to earn several millions. And you know what I’m talking about. So what’s all this fuss for?’ ‘For nothing,’ you reply. ‘Nothing is also for nothing.’ And what about rationality, for God’s sake? Who is rational? A mathematician, a billionaire? Look at them closely and the rationality will vanish into thin air, as I usually say; together with Shakespeare. At the beginning the air says, ‘I’m too thick for your vanity, ridiculousness and other nonsense you harbour within your substance and your thick head and skull. Why can’t I welcome you in my thin air? Because your thick head and skull are too thick to squeeze into it. Can’t you hear this whistle, sort of whistle? That’s how they do their best to penetrate into my thin air. SHGS – this is the aria of their penetration.’

Why should I live well with other people? If an enemy betrays you, you say to yourself, ‘He’s my enemy and his profession is betraying me, understandably enough.’ So you applaud his deed and offer him a bunch of flowers. Let us take another case. You live virtually, rationally, in a lovely manner with other people you call ‘my friends, my dear friends, my beloved guests’. (*Invités?* Did I wish to say *invités?*) And then one of these beloved guests betrays you then and there, all of a sudden; and his betrayal comes out of the blue, as usual. ‘It comes, it comes, it comes,’ they shout. For once they think about a betrayal (Judas), not of Jesus Christ. You see the blue, but you do not see anything special, anything out of the ordinary. ‘What has come out of the blue?’ you ask your guests. ‘Have you grown blind or not?’ they ask you.

‘I don’t think I’ve gone blind, considering that I can see the score of Beethoven’s *Hammerklavier Sonata*.’

‘This sonata isn’t the only item we can enjoy or destroy in this world, you know.’

Why should I live with other people? This question remains, whatever you can do to remove some or someone from wherever you happen to be, not to be. Sometimes you just see a lot of people and say to them, ‘Why should I live with you together? In some proximity or other? Why do we have to rub shoulders with each other, one another? Rubbing shoulders is an unpleasant ritual. You see a person and think you should treat her friendly, otherwise someone might think wrongly about you. So you begin to rub shoulders with this individual. You rub one shoulder with him, another shoulder. You begin to see the difference between these two rubbings. You say to yourself that the first rubbing is better than the second. But on second thoughts you begin to think (or to feel) that the second rubbing is not so bad as you thought only five minutes ago. But why do you have to choose between these rubbings? You like the first; at least you liked it at the very beginning of your rubbing exercise. And then you voted for the second rubbing, but nothing prevents you from enjoying both rubbings alternatively. You decide to enjoy the first rubbing for five seconds. If it is not enough, you enjoy it for six seconds, for eight seconds – for as many seconds as you wish, for God’s sake! (What wouldn’t you do for God’s sake, my God!). Then there comes the second shoulder – if you are weary of the first one. You begin your operation and suddenly you realise you are tired – not only of rubbing, but also of everything else. Of living, among other things. Of listening to Beethoven’s quartets. What aren’t you tired of?

Are you tired of writing the following sentence? ‘I go for a walk and I am tired already.’ All right. Were you really tired at the end of your labour which consisted of writing this short sentence? Yes, you must acknowledge the following fact, ‘You were half-tired when you got to the end of the first half of this sentence, namely, “I go for a walk.”’ When you represent the ritual you submit yourself to – willingly or not – you might not feel anything yet; not the fatigue at least. Perhaps a sort of joy and liberation. But then there comes the frustration I am talking about. What frustration am I talking about? You have to raise your foot and put it somewhere. Actually you cannot put it anywhere because if you do, you may collapse, and it is much harder to rise from the Earth than to fall on it. Anybody can fall on the Earth: you just do it. Nothing doing, so to speak.

But what about the thought that accompanies the ritual, the process and the tedium of all this? First you have to put one of your feet somewhere. One of your feet. Which one? Assumingly you must know which feet (or leg) of yours is more appropriate for this task. If you are left-handed, you might think it is your left foot you have to choose for this kind of exploit. All right, you choose your left foot, but it is not apparently up to your left hand’s standards. After all, a hand is not a leg or foot – everyone knows that. So you choose your right leg – you have no choice, anyway. How many legs or feet do you have? Well, let us not become entangled in the maze of eternal problems.

What was said about Aristotle can be maintained, affirmed and even bet on, provided the person you are talking about, or writing about, was born. And this person *was* born; conceived, born (in this order) and lived, and died, and was buried, for all I know. Let this person remain where he is (let us let women out of this sordid business) – on a battle field, for instance, where crows and conquerors rob them of their lives and even of money or rather of the pockets where this money hides until the hand of a conqueror appropriates it rather brutally. This hand says

nothing to the money; nor does the mouth let any sound out; any relevant sound, that is. You hear all sorts of =:lkjhlkijvhqaoimielj fkjzea hfiu'r hoi e jlk rzhuyogfihij that remind you of any modern composer you dislike intensely, with more intensity than can be imagined by an ordinary person who never heard anything classical.

So what you say about Aristotle can be said about me, mostly because I was born. And I lived many years, according to many calendars; unless they are all wrong, according to a Dostoyevsky's hero. Yes, I was born, lived and died, although I've never written books on ethics, unlike my hero or Aristotle. When I speak of Aristotle in somebody's presence, this presence or persona says, 'I know who you're speaking about. Onassis! He died in Paris, didn't he? But before his death he paid a visit to Maria Callas who remained behind the curtains of her windows, leaning on a windowsill. It was probably silly of her, but she didn't say anything to Onassis, although he was a billionaire and left her several millions that she received after his death. She might have received two millions more, had she received *him* and acknowledged gracefully his call. Actually, he *might* have been received, for all I know, for everybody knows. He saw a sign (a skirt, for instance) and rushed to everything that was within his reach and also out of his reach, as it usually happens. But his death was beyond all these reaches; or before them. Anyway, they all missed the mark; except my life. Except my life. No – except my death, except my death, except my death.

What I am interested in – and I am the whole world – is myself; that is what usually happens with individuals of various kinds. And even if they understand others, they add: 'I'm on my own, and I'm the first on the list and also in the world; at least in this hemisphere.' And what about the mysteries we are confronted with on account of the world's infinity? You have one mystery and you seem to solve it, but all at once there arises another mystery connected to the first one, to the second one. And if you say, 'What about the rest?' they say to you, 'There are other histories you don't care about because you don't get any money for that.' And then you get the money for the rest. But do you really care more about this money-justified, money-rewarded rest? Isn't it rather unjustified, as it happens, when a woman you are in love with does not kiss you at the right moment, on the upper lip?

To tell the truth everything happens on the wrong lip, at the wrong moment. They kiss you on the wrong lip and this lip begins to swell – for no reason at all. And yet it bleeds for the reason known to both your offender and the offended – yourself. What are you supposed to do? Either you offer your other lip (the biblical solution) or you retire like a gentleman who has enough money in his bank to provide him with girls and boys

Aristotle is universally known for his categories and probably for the rest of his life. What's more, even his life is provided with the rest of his life. And this particular rest rests as long as his life-long, death-long-rest because they are universal and nothing escapes their notices; and the notice of the universal. If there is small or short category somewhere, they (universals) begin by noticing it either under a pillow or under a blanket – it depends on where our destiny hides its secrets – and then they bestow upon it a status it rightly deserves. And we should not forget that Aristotle himself sanctified this status, putting his signature under it and sometimes even over it – to avoid all sorts of misunderstandings. So you see something over which there is written in capital letters 'My Favourite Category' and then you read what all this is about – either under the word 'Category' or before it; or behind it. Usually people think in terms of categories only when they travel, saying to each other, 'There are three categories of accommodation – standard, executive and deluxe. What category do you stand for?'

‘The last one suits me perfectly,’ some people say on the spot, without going elsewhere, without changing their seats with somebody else.

‘And what about you?’ asks the same curious journalist. (All journalists are curious, as a matter of fact.)

‘I agree with your previous victim,’ says the next victim; the talking victim, in other words.

‘And what about you?’ the journalist goes on.

‘I prefer standard accommodation. I belong to the group of great Tolstoy admirers and he always travelled third class.’

‘And I always travel within the executive part, because I execute my own plans without failure. And I do it perfectly in all sorts of business class compartments.’

But if someone says to you, ‘There’s a prize for the fastest three runners in each category,’ you do not even enquire about the conditions which preside over the competition in question. You just say, ‘I want the first prize because I deserve it.’ And if someone dares claim your claim, you begin to show off your muscles or walk with a swagger. You could also sway your shoulders as you walk around. You sway them, sway them, sway them and they finally detach themselves from your body and start performing a sort of dance in the atmosphere as if competing with Plisetskaya or Anna Pavlova. And then you say to them, ‘Enough!’ and they join your body without further ado.

What else can be said about categories? Of course you can say, for instance, ‘Each category has several subdivisions.’ And if they ask you what kind of subdivisions you have in mind, you will never confess you have no mind to speak of – only a kind of brain. No, of course not. It is better to be stigmatised than ridiculed. So you say, ‘I, for one, am always running in the veterans category.’

‘What do you mean?’ they ask. (They cannot avoid this question.)

‘I’m a veteran, you know,’ you answer.

‘Did you fight in the last war?’ they ask.

‘I also fought in the one before last,’ you answer.

‘Before the last war?’

‘That’s right. And also before that one.’

‘Have you ever been decorated?’

‘Several times. Before and the one before and the two before.’

‘And the three before?’

‘And the three before as well.’

I wonder why they never go as far as the four before; as four as the far before.

But if they continue to look in wonder at you, you add the following remark, ‘There are sporty people and non-sporty people, and I’m definitely in the second category.’

‘Non-sporty people!’ they exclaim in unison.

‘No, no, no, no – sorry! Sporty people of course.’ And you are so happy you turn three somersaults on the lawn.

Then we pass to another category. But there are so many of them you have no idea where to start with, with all this nonsense. Some categories appeal to you. Yet you do not know for sure if their appeal is sincere and honest; and any dishonest appeal will lead you astray, even if it takes some time, the procedure during which the appeal is leading you astray. What to do? You must choose an appeal which will never lead you astray, whatever

happens. And what could ever happen? Hell or High Water. You laugh for a while and afterwards resume your studies of categories. High Water, however high and menacing, is certainly not a category, not even a Kantian category, let alone the one you can find on the list of Aristotle's achievements. And what about water? Let us not forget that, in accordance to the latest scientists on our list, water recalls everything, even the elements that belong to other elements, such as fire, earth and air. What does it recall of the air? you may ask. 'When children bombard each other with water, inspired by some war or other, they think they really bombard their adversaries and kill them. It's not true, of course, but let them believe it, let them believe it. It does them a lot of good.'

And the earth as such is a close friend of water because it lets it in all the time. Suppose a drunkard – a Russian drunkard, as usual – drinks a bottle of vodka on a bench somewhat lost in a park. He drinks, drinks, drinks, and then (finally) removes the bottle from his lips and the rest of his constitution. The bottle assumes a precarious status and the precious liquid begins to quit it as if dismissed by Trump. *Fired* by Trump, I should have said; but I missed this opportunity.

And what about subdivisions? Suppose you take your liver out. 'Why?' do they ask you justifiably, logically and even lawfully. 'Because I don't want it to poison my body with its cirrhosis.' Logical enough, isn't it? So, before drinking a bottle of wine, you extract your liver from your body, anxious as you are to spare it an unpleasant experience, and put it on your table – for everybody to see. And then you say to everybody, 'Can you see my liver? I exhibit it to make you realise I'll never poison it with alcohol, considering you can see it on the top of the table. And what could it drink on the top of the table? It could have licked something from the napkin, from the glasses. But not from the top. Can you hear me? Could it leak my liquor from the air? I'll never let it do it with impunity. I would massacre it. I would smash it to smithereens or to reens, to reens, to reens, to reens, to ens.'

But what about suburb? You often come across the same problem in your ordinary life. You must wash dishes because your machine never works, for some reason known to itself. It knows this reason, but it will never talk to you about it. You come across a problem, but it is not easy as all that – coming across a problem. Here you are; and there is a problem. Is it a sub problem? Or subsubproblem? Of course you say optimistically, 'You're just a problem, and I've solved so many problems like you in my life that you shouldn't worry – you'll disappear in the twinkling of an eye.'

'What eye are you speaking about?' asks the problem. 'One of *your* eyes, with all due respect?'

'As you can see, my both eyes don't twinkle.'

'What kind of eyes are you speaking of, then?'

We are speaking of categories. There is a category on the left and on the right as well; on the right-hand side of the table. What is the difference between them? There is no difference you can speak of, except that one category is made of silver and the other of gold. Of course you choose the latter one as you remove it from the table, putting it slowly but surely and also accurately into your numerous pockets – they are more numerous than what is usually expected in the course of such meetings – and you depart; at least you think you depart with honours and many salutations. Instead they throw tomatoes at you, rotten tomatoes, and you have no alternative but to remove your jacket, your Sunday best jacket. But then you realise your shirt is also painted rather abstractedly, not to say surrealistically; so that you remove it as well and what you are left with does not even amount to what may look like a pair of shorts. Somebody says, 'Your shorts aren't short enough. You should shorten them as quickly as possible, otherwise you won't be admitted into the treasure of our club.'

What category are you talking about right now? Now and then, when speaking to Aristotle, you wonder what kind of category you are discussing with him. Sometimes you are tempted to put him a blank question, 'What category do you have in mind, Professor?' And sometimes the Professor replies, 'The category of the categories,' and then you simply bow and leave the country, being afraid of persecutions. This sort of thing happens from time to time. Some boy or other pursues you with a rifle at the ready and shoots you either in your heels or in your elbows, saying, 'What category is this, pray?'

You are walking down the street. What kind of category is this? Is it walking, is it walking down, is it a pair of boots you are wearing? Is it the lady you fell in love with during your short walk? You fall in love with her or him or it and this must be a category in its own right. Suppose you say rather proudly, 'I fell in love with her.' But what kind of category are you discussing when addressing to me your meaningless words? You say, 'This category concerns my falling in love.'

'And what about *her*? Don't you ever forget women, otherwise you'll go to prison, you know.'

'But she's an internal, imperial part of this category.'

'Is she only a *part* of this category, nothing more?'

'Every category is made up of parts, and each part is essential to the whole of the category.'

'The woman is the essential part of every category we're dealing with. Otherwise it's no use dealing with this particular category.'

Let us take this category apart. You have a pair of boots which follow the lady in question. The lady in question does not want this particular pair of boots to follow her feet. That does not matter; not for the moment, at least. Actually, the pair of boots we are concentrating upon is not fond of the pair of feet it is slavishly following. But it cannot, out of its own volition, jump from one pair of feet to another, bent on following another, far more attractive pair of feet and legs – merely because it does not belong to itself. It belongs to its master, and Hegel is too far away to interfere and intervene on behalf of the pair of boots. Of course many feminists stage a revolution, proclaiming that even a pair of boots – even if it belongs to a man – has every right to choose an appropriate pair of legs, although every pair and every leg which belongs to a woman is perfect to the point of being suited to any boot, shoe, man, office, cavalier, and so on.

Let us continue to take this category apart. You look at the lady you are following, don't you? And if you do not look at her, you are not interested in her – the problem is solved once and for all. All right – your glance follows her movements, gestures and even the way she breathes, otherwise she would die on the spot; or on the next spot, on the second spot, on the third and fourth and fifth (and filth) and sixth spot. She no longer breathes. Why? Because you don't look at her lungs, letting them act on their own. And her lungs are always against you: whatever you say or do or intend to do is directed against her lungs: that is what her lungs think anyway. Are they in their own category? Do they act as responsible beings? Suppose they decide not to breathe at all, and you are waiting for a declaration of love. You wait, wait, wait, wait, you listen, listen, listen, listen – nothing. Of course you don't stomp off out of the house to demonstrate the magnitude of your anger. Is it a category? What is it, for God's sake?

And what about the face of the lady we are talking about? So far we have followed only her shoes; her legs at best. Her legs are not on their own, and every pair of legs, worthy of this name, knows this truth. So if one leg wants to overtake the other leg that belongs to the same pair of legs, it cannot do it for the fear of dismembering the body to which all these legs belong, even if their own volition has nothing to do with this

arrangement. Suppose, however, that one leg floats conventions and goes much faster than the other. As the result of this operation, the other leg feels humiliated, offended, persecuted, but it cannot do anything about it because its owner has no wish to accelerate his or her body's movement which, supposedly, is on the slow side. Changing sides is not always as easy as – there are many additions to this as, as everybody knows. For instance, 'As easy as drinking a glass of water.' All right, you have a glass of water by your side and you drink it. All right, once again. And what if you do *not* have a glass of water by your side? All right – all these all rights are all right, given that you have every right to be all right – but this glass of water is not *always* by your side, quite near your elbow. It may repose in the kitchen and so you have to walk as far as the kitchen to get this glass and think you are awakening progressively as if any progress were still on the agenda. Well, you show the agenda and say, 'This curve leads you upwards, to the tops of the tops of the worlds. And also to the top of the worlds – in the light of what our semiologists discovered in the course of the last thirty years. During the first year that marks this period – it got a bad mark, I supposed – we discovered light; once and for all, as we decided on the spur of the moment. Then we changed our minds and re-decided everything on the spur of the moment: it is as if a cat were purring all the time, whatever happens. And whatever did happen – not once, I can assure you: twice, thrice. When whatever happens, you first ask yourself, 'Is it really whatever? Does this word or notion or event or catastrophe really happen? Or does it just pretend to happen which is easy, making believe a million of spectators that whatever really happens does happen – really, into the bargain. You wish to stand up and proclaim the truth to the world, but your teacher admonishes you to keep your seat and remain silent.

Sometimes you stand up and say, 'Liberty is far more important and progressive than serfdom.' Then you hear a voice that says to you directly, without mincing words – when you do mince words, they become more and more mince, unsubstantial; in French at least – 'If you feel free to do whatever you like, you'll collapse at once, even if you're not inclined to find yourself on the floor or rather in the mud, your lips swallowing this mud rather savagely.' And what does serfdom mean in the context? You just continue to swallow the mud because the mud gives orders, something along the lines, 'You should swallow me to the rest of your life, otherwise you'll be punished by many policemen and presidents armed with whips fabricated by Nietzsche at the end of the nineteenth century. Don't you wish to be whipped by a Nietzsche-signed, Nietzsche-autographed whip? Before the procedure you should act rather prudently: you don't let them whip you for nothing. This makes no sense, as we all know pretty well after signing many papers that ruin us altogether, without leaving us a penny to live on. All right: they (the gods) leave you two pennies. So what? What could you do with these two pennies? One penny buys you a piece of bread; the other provides you with a glass of milk. You consume both and enjoy your annual rest or your daily rest – does it really evolve in the gigantic context of the world and its things? You enjoy an afternoon nap, saying to yourself it will do you a lot of good you need. You don't just need good, any good, too put it bluntly – you need *a lot of good*, otherwise your health will go from worse to worse. It is already at the third worth, if you must know. But if you let it go, it will find yourself (and you, and you) at the fourth worth in no time. For once, you address time very earnestly, talking in French, '*Suspend ton vol, my dear.*' You mean, our time (whatever it is) should in the first place take flight or wing – for a while it is absorbed in this dilemma: wing or flight? – and then it does take both flight and wing. Sometimes it even takes two wings, so as not to experience shortages during his Paradise-oriented flight. It takes two wings and then it drops one of them because it cannot carry two wings at once. Let us not forget: these are occasional wings you acquire during the procedure called, 'Taking wing.' And what if your command says to you, 'Take flight'? What flight are you

supposed to take? You consult numerous timetables and all of them seem to imply you should not take any flight, for fear of being squashed (or *moched*, as the French put it).

So you don't take any flight – anything, as a matter of fact. You just walk down the streets, saying to yourself you can do it safely – without losing your life once and for all. Sometimes you lose your life once; sometimes you do it twice; but the third time, whenever it happens, you lose it forever, and that is something you do your best to avoid to the best of your abilities. You align a few 'best' and hope this alignment, this array, this parade will help you tide over the next week at least; or at most, *it depends*, as we all know. What are you doing right now? This question is rather useful in any contest because you are not supposed to do anything, anything at all: whatever you do is supposed to be useful and serve the cause, whatever the cause in question and causality. This causality says to you, 'Go right, otherwise you'll meet death.' (Mostly we do our best to try to get rid of causality. Sometimes we succeed, sometimes we do not. For instance, we seduce a young lady who is duty bound to abort. The cause is clear and the result is deplorable – everybody knows that. But not everybody *feels it profoundly*.)

What does our progress depend on? If we don't progress, we regress, and we do all we can to eliminate 're' from our vocabulary. For instance, we say to everybody, 'We're not retrograde. We're just trograde.' And this proclamation works; at least within one union of one party or association. But let us not go back, within our civilisation. What would we find in this back of ours, of yours? Bickering, bickering, bickering? Many other bicks and backs as well; as worse, as I am tempted to say. And for once I yield to my temptation – not to get rid of it, though. Let it remain where it is, troubling my spirit and body to the point of making me spend another sleepless, dreamless night or afternoon. So much time wasted on dreams with no end, because the only end to these dreams is the emptiness of the packages filled to the brim with sleeping pills which do not allow you to dream: they eliminate everything down to your very life. And then your life raises its ugly, beautiful, or non-descript, non-existent head again and you see the same picture associated in every mind with isolation, horror and just orroooo, orrrrrroooo, orrrrrrrroooo.

There are sentences you see either on a wall – in this case you are very close to the Bible – or just in the air; and that reminds you of parades of all kinds. The walls you talk to highly praise tolerance that you can renounce once and for all if you feel that intolerance is much more profitable in the domain of life. (You damn tolerance with faint praise.) For once, you do not quote Aristotle, although you could quote him all the time, given that one of his books adorns your writing desk and also your mind, provided you are capable of reciting some sentences, some remarks, some pieces of wisdom from these books. This time – and I have no idea where this time is situated. I have decided that time is not situated anywhere: it does not exist any more, which will enable me to live without problems to the very end of my endless, eternal life. Well, whatever I say or do, Aristotle did say something and, after all, this book is partly devoted to Aristotle and his categories; to the category named or entitled 'Aristotle'. After all you can always call a category by the name you might have heard in your childhood, if your parents and grand-parents were versed in philosophy to the point of making you learn the words pertaining to it. Of course, with the passing of the years, you realised that what counts is not a category as such but your *conduct* in the society to which you belong *corps et âme*: no translation is needed in this case and respect. All the sinews of your body and the sinuosity of your brain belong to either Aristotle or Plato. Some thinkers add St Augustine to this list – they enlist the saint in the army of thinkers endowed with the legendary capacity of constructing our future and ideals – but let us leave him alone for a while, which is all the

more charitable since I solemnly promise he will not remain in an ammunition/arms/weapons/food dump for long.

Often they ask you what you really think about Aristotle: is he a piece of ammunition, an arm, a weapon or just a piece of bread, of well-bred bread. (There is such a thing as a well-bred bread and a bad-bred cheese.) To put it in a nutshell; does it belong in the domain of food or good? Good, you say at once, for you think in terms of the human brain, of its inevitable, ineluctable development that nothing can stop, not even an atomic war with all its disasters, collaterals and otherwise. Let us not forget that any collateral damage may become – and does become – quite *literal* damage. You say, for instance, ‘Theatre, park, the Eiffel Tower, the Windsor Palace,’ and you don’t always realise you are speaking about ruins, not about possibilities, virtualities. You say the Buckingham and think you talk about a piece of reality, a piece of life, of real life. Actually you touch upon a photograph taken many years ago in front of the Buckingham Palace, and you wonder, silently, sullenly, why there is an individual in front of this palace, in front of its façade. Is he really dead? Does he belong to the world where we can still have a glass, a stew, a piece of all culinary masterpieces?

They say to us that children were conceived and given birth to by a lot of devils and consequently they are all perverse – as perverse as Scriabin’s works. (At the beginning of the twentieth-century, musicians, especially those who studied at the Moscow Conservatoire, repeated inclemently and indecently that Scriabin’s music is as perverse as our world, our today’s world where a man turns into a woman in no time at all. And even if it takes some time, his boss supplies enough money for all the operations involved in the process; and you can stay away from your office as long as you do not feel the real woman in your entrails, her entry into your body and also, almost at the same time, into your immortal soul which is now depended on a woman, on a female element reigning in our world. And let us not forget it is also *defended* by it. A murderer confronts you, but you raise your hand and say simultaneously, ‘Do be careful. I’m a woman.’ And the potential murderer beats a retreat. Man is not born bad, says Hegel, or someone else. (Many men say that just for the heck of it. Little by little, the heck grows bad – as bad as Putin, shall we say?) Others add, ‘But this child’s mother is bad and anyway women are devils in disguise.’ The discussion grows more and more animated to the point of becoming a declaration condemned by the Vatican and many concomitant services: ‘Women are as bad as men and so we should pray for the salvation of their souls and bodies which often helps our body recover its good, healthy shape.’

They say you should not throw caution to the wind. But what about words? Anyway, you do nothing else, unless you write a book instead of talking all the time either on the telephone or in the streets. (Today, there are other means of communication, needless to say.) What else do you do, when talking to somebody or to the sky; to God, in other words? You talk, talk and talk, and words float in the wind: as soon as you utter a word it begins to float or fly or remain suspended in midair. But if it is a windy night you choose for your soliloquies or communications, the wind literally takes care of your words, carrying them elsewhere, not necessarily to other continents where you might become a celebrity; thanks to your words. What does all this boil down to? You throw words to the wind and, according to some thinkers, by voicing your grievances or other sentiments you are prey to, you waste your time; whereas Aristotle did not talk to the wind. At least he talked to sheets of paper, now and then; and that is why we can quote him once in a while, at length or otherwise.

Here are some of his words translated from the Arabic: ‘Buying pleasure, treating it as a commodity that we work to achieve, cannot therefore be the supreme Good for humans.’ What does ‘therefore’ mean in the

context? And even out of it? (We have to take notice of every possibility and virtuality.) (Why does my spellchecker suggest *verticality*?) To find an answer or the answer to this question you have to read the Complete Works of Aristotle, which cannot be done overnight; and even overday. And even over threedays, to tell the truth. Of course a lot of guessworks are as usual at your service and so you plunge into them, into their mess and chaos, headlong. You buy a pleasure, a jewel as usual, and your wife or mistress purrs like a cat. Or your cat purrs like your wife – this does not really matter. What's the problem, as they usually ask you, for some reason? The problem is you have no idea why you cannot purr if you feel like it; and you do feel like it at this particular moment. (And this moment is quite particular, given that usually you feel like crying, dying and so on and so forth.) Apparently – according to Aristotle, at least – you had better ponder over the enigmas of life and your own self and finitude and the result of whatever happens over years. You ponder and ponder and ponder, and finally you come up with an answer that satisfies no one; not even yourself. What is the use or point? No point, no use. But you continue to ponder – just for the sake of wasting time in a sort of Aristotelian manner.

You spend time in this manner and get an upset stomach or indigestion; or a headache, as a result of your pondering, meandering in the labyrinth of thoughts; and so forth. Well, you buy a commodity and enjoy yourself thoroughly in spite of Aristotle and his interdiction with regard to purring with pleasure. And pleasure is a *physical* phenomenon – not a *spiritual* one, mind you. And what if the commodity I enlarge upon is one of Aristotle's books? Of course you are unlikely to purr with pleasure upon reading his texts. Anyway, you have no time to purr or to imitate cats in any other domain. You just imitate a human being who reads Aristotle after opening one of his books; either in the original or in an English translation. I am using one of the English translations because I have no Arabic, and my Russian does not allow me to understand anything in Arabic. (Or Greek.) Or even in Turkish, whatever their language is called.

What Aristotle thinks and says can be summarised thus, 'If you are human, a human being, that is, you should behave accordingly, in full accordance with your status. And your status is called "a human being", and you should never forget it, when passing before a shop or mooning around a market, a market place.' But what does it mean? Being a human being? Aristotle devotes to this matter, to this question rather, his whole existence; and also the whole content of his inkpot. Actually, he also dissects the sky, and a number of planets appear in his writings – together with a multitude of stars which do something irrelevant, if we lend ear to the learned opinion of our astronomers and their telescopes, taking their cue from Galileo, if I am not mistaken.

But there are things that trouble us much more than the distant stars about which we are told a lot of nonsense, namely, 'These stars will never come home, for they are too far from the Earth.' There are many people for whom there are homes, motherlands, fatherlands and other contraptions that make them survive in the world where there are only traps, nothing else. Once again we are over the top, I'm afraid. Where is the top, may I ask? Is common sense the top? If it is you go ahead, cross a few common senses on the way to perfection or truth and say to everybody, 'Here's the top, the top of the tops. But common sense has nothing to do with it, you can believe me.' No one believes this man or woman and the game starts afresh, anew. It is neither really fresh nor new. Well, everybody enjoys it and that's what counts. Does it really count? You begin to count this particular matter and sometimes the count is good, as the French put it. (And I put it rather frequently as well.) Sometimes you are out for the count, sometimes in, but no one knows what being in for the count means because there are individuals who are never in, even if you invite them to come in; and the door is wide-open. They are *in*, but you have no idea whether they are in for the count; or just for money, for cash. They say, 'Cash, please,'

and you answer, 'All right', although you have no cash in your drawers. What *do* you have in your drawers? Just a few love letters, I'm sorry to say. But you do not send these letters to your beloveds, contrary to what might be supposed. You just send them anywhere; you burn them, in other words. You burn their words in other words, and you will never know the result of your alchemical experiments.

The 'perfect' happiness can only be in intellectual contemplation – that is what we willy-nilly (nilly, nilly, Willy) inherited from Aristotle. But is my contemplation intellectual or not? That is the question I often ask myself during my visits to bookshops of all kinds. I browse through the books on display and find that the contemplation they offer is not intellectual at all. It might be erotic, for all know. But, frankly speaking, I don't really know erotic semiology, and even if a lady undresses in front of my eyes, I will not be able to decide whether the image I have in full view – in full view on the bed – has anything to do with any erotic picture of the worlds. The pictures I am talking about can be bought at any newsstand, and I just have to summon your intellect before looking at them earnestly, appealing to your concentration and your own sex appeal which helps a lot in the course of these games. You appeal to your concentration, the intellectual brand of concentration, to be precise, and therefore eliminate whatever is linked, connected and united forever with your shameful organs of which we shall talk some other time – not to mar the intellectual honesty and dignity of our present discussion.

What is purity, this proverbial purity of our intellectual discussions? The Supreme Being consists entirely of reason and spends eternity contemplating itself. And what about our private parts? Are they private to the point of not being able to take part in a discussion where the Supreme Being comes to the fore? As it may appear, the Supreme Being is always in the limelight, otherwise It would not be Supreme. The point is our humans do not always talk to the Supreme Being, mistaking him or her for an ordinary being who writes detective stories and nothing else, nothing else; apart from a few tales for children, not unlike those written by Oscar Wilde at the end of his career. The point is, we had better not touch our private parts during our investigations oriented towards Aristotle's enigmas. And if we do touch them, everything goes wrong – that's for sure; although some thing may *not* go wrong. Sometimes it does happen: something it does *not* go wrong; and yet everybody shouts, 'It's wrong, it's wrong, everything goes wrong!' All right: this goes wrong and that goes wrong, after much soul-searching, after much-instrument searching. You search, you search and you end up proclaiming, 'I'm right,' and sure enough, you are decorated, once, twice, thrice. And that is how your life goes on, in spite of all your failures, obvious and not quite obvious. They are obvious anyway, to tell the truth.

We, humans have a spark of the Supreme Being in us; or rationality. But what about our irrationality or internationality? Is it a spark or a black hole or the start of a new road leading towards our galaxies about which we know next to nothing? This spark or this nothingness enables us to contemplate the unchanging universe, provided the spark remains a spark and does not grow into a flame, a bonfire installed in the middle of a forest. For a while we contemplate the unchanging universe and enjoy the sight to the utmost, but then the fire spreads all around us and we contemplate a world conflagration, a change of time, of period, of paradigm. There is a war in Ukraine, at this very moment, and I think the spark is to blame: instead of remaining an instrument of contemplation, it became a tank, a rocket, a drone and now we contemplate a lot of flames everywhere, and we walk in the midst of these flames, allowing our bodies to burn now and then – to keep the flames company, out of our commiseration and patriotic (idiotic) feelings.

You walk amidst the flames and now and then you offer your body to their savagery in order to participate in the conflict – not automatically, not publicly, as you might think, whoever you are (you may be

nothing, as far as I am concerned). And then you retire because you are inspired and wish to write a poem or a novel – why not? At the same time – and you are quite aware of that – they drop bombs after bombs, not necessarily on old women and children. You throw a bomb and it hits a child. Immediately you write about it in your newspaper. And so you do upon learning about the death of an old woman. A young woman is wounded. She is lying by your side, but the old woman is in front of you, and you feel duty bound to write first about the old woman – after all she is really old – and then pass on to a young woman who is not as much in the news as her old counterpart. Her old counterpart survives yet another operation, whereas she (the young one) succumbs to a series of complexities, as they call them sometimes, and these complexities kill her in the long run. This run may be long, short, middle and even half-middle, but as soon as you begin talking about the run, everybody knows it is the end you touch upon all the time. You hold your hand upon this run and, oddly enough, it reminds you of the footballer who scored the last goal in the last match of the World Championship; in Switzerland; in 1954.

If the intellect is divine, compared with the life of the man, the life of the intellect must be divine compared with the man; the life of the intellect must be divine compared with a human being. Compare anything to a human being! What can you compare? Who do you compare? We are losers, all of us, but Aristotle says to us that he can save us in the long run, in the short run, in the longest run possible and imaginable; and unimaginable, as usual.

Therefore, when we contemplate the unchanging universe we are being about as divine as humans can be. Well – this well comes in handy – we are about, we are about, we are about. We are out as well. What do we contemplate, in the final analysis? We contemplate something final and an analysis. And the universe changes under our very eyes, due to the war in Ukraine or just the water that refuses to flow lavishly and humanistically in my kitchen. If it doesn't flow, I say to it, 'You're cruel, my dear. You'd better lavish upon me all your boons and moons, otherwise I'll remain a human whom our supreme force destitute of luxury for no reason at all.' Next day I get an email where all sorts of reasons are described in graphic detail and even in nuances. What am I supposed to do?

Apparently Nureyev, upon awakening or upon finishing yet another glass of champagne, rushed towards his numerous telephones and rang his advocates and lawyers up to find out whether he had lost some of his money in the course of the night and they answered him, triggering off an avalanches of contemplations among which there were some images of doom because the stock market is unpredictable. When dancing the *Swan Lake* Nureyev did both: he contemplated swans and jumped as often as he could; and he could jump a week, a whole week without letting his legs to repose on the floor – the floor of the Maryinski Theatre in Petersburg, for instance. His whole being was harmonised to the utmost because he both contemplated and jumped, never failing a movement for the sake of an image. That is how we are supposed to live apparently – imitating Nureyev's movements whose vitality nourished his body and soul to the point of letting him go on with his masterpiece almost to the end of his tether. Alas, his tether was neither very long nor strong. And often, in the middle of a conversation, he would begin to dance with a telephone, a whole apparatus, in order to keep his hands, legs and shoulders in. 'What's going on?' his partner would ask. 'I'm dancing, you know. I'm Nijinsky today; or Fawn, if you prefer.'

'I prefer Nijinsky,' his partner would answer unashamedly, counting on Nureyev's generosity.

‘How come?’ vociferated Nureyev. (He liked neither Nijinsky nor Baryshnikov and would renounce any deal, however advantageous and luminous, if their names were pronounced at the beginning or (more often) at the end of discussions.) Well, according to Nureyev, you have to use legs even if you stay at home and talk to your favourite broker who is in the know, supposedly and almost surely. ‘In the know?’ asked Nureyev.

‘In the know,’ answered the broker.

‘How much?’ asked Nureyev.

‘Much,’ answered the broker.

‘How much much?’ asked Nureyev.

‘Too much of the much,’ answered the broker. ‘But that’s what you want, if I’m not mistaken.’

‘But this isn’t as much as the much I have in my head and especially in my legs,’ answered Nureyev, executing one of his jumps.

‘Now it’s much, much, much, as much,’ the broker would say.

‘How much?’ Nureyev would answer. Upon receiving an answer, he would jump again and again until reaching the amount of money he had in his legs; and also in his head.

Why do men suffer from the plague euphemistically named ‘nastiness, spitefulness and wickedness’? If you just say, ‘He’s nasty,’ some women are sure to interfere and add, ‘He’s also spiteful. Do you remember what he said last night?’ And if you say, ‘All right, all right – he’s nasty and the very image of spitefulness, its spitting image,’ they are sure to interfere once again. ‘You forget his wickedness. What’s wrong with your memory? You should go and see a doctor on the spot. *C’est urgentissime!*’

What is the definition of wickedness? We are supposed to align our emotions with what is the right thing to do in particular circumstances: we want to do what is right. But first of all we determine the nature of circumstances we are confronted with: are they really particular? This happens every time, a thousand times on every square; on every bench, to be precise. What is so particular about them? But they might become particular on the strength of the people who take part in them either willingly or unwillingly. They might also turn out to be peculiar under the rays of a new synthetic sun often used in the cinematographic studios. You turn a camera and someone proclaims, ‘This situation is very particular. We should film it at once, and then we’ll do what can be done about it in the world of the commerce, of our oligarchs.’ We are excited on account of a young actress who is likely to be loved to distraction by the producer of the production, but we hesitate a moment, two moments, because there is another diva whose participation in the team creating a film or an opera cannot be questioned even by Jesuits, if they happen to be in the neighbourhood of the production in question which grows together with the question (or the question grows together with the production) so that one cannot help asking oneself the following question, ‘What does it all lead to?’

I think the Japanese have a sort of a ritual *au ralenti* – they really add this French tag to their tradition-illuminated gesture which deprives you of your belly, entrails and even your life. To *terminer en beauté*, as the same French says without blinking. So you terminate everything in a blaze of glory or with a match you strike at the right moment; at the twelfth stroke of midnight, as usual.

Am I not weary of all my thoughts, bright or dim? I may have the feeling that such and such thought is bright; or is it just a bright idea? Who knows. Who could distinguish a thought from an idea? But the more you direct your torch at it, focusing your torch’s intensity on its brightness, the gloomier it becomes – like a hero belonging to the descendants of Alberich we all know thanks to Furtwängler, Clemens Kraus and also Toscanini.

Let us isolate one bright idea or thought or mood and create what is grandiloquently called ‘The Virtue of the Soul’.

We align our emotions and think that part of the job is done: our emotions seem prepared for a solemn parade. They are arrayed for it, so to speak. Usually they look a complete mess – dressed anyhow with hair sticking up on end. And then we realise we are speaking about an individual, not about humanity, for the sake of humanity and its worries. Humanity is dressed any old how but at least its hair does not stick up on end, on any ends it has. (Usually it has four ends.) But what is the right thing to do, for God’s sake? Of course, before the beginning of our ritual at the end of which we are supposed to receive a letter from God, we ask ourselves constantly, stubbornly, ‘What is the right thing to do?’ We read all the literary works that bear the title, *The Right Thing* before we launch into a verbal attack on the world’s handling of the finances, on the world’s handling of basic virtues, on the world’s handling of our civilisation which goes from one hell to another, without even having a coffee-break, according to the well-known tradition. We align our emotions, our bodies, our souls with a number of right things that turn out to be wrong, in the long run; which is normal, more or less. And we realise this truth when studying the statistics they show us on television, on many other visions, and even our inner vision is subjected to their vision of the world’s infrastructure.

What do our emotions attach to? Their attachments are often wrong, being linked to, being in love with wicked persons, beings, perverse substances whose charisma and sex destroy us completely, which reminds me of a story told by a Russian friend of mine. He said that at some point the Minister of Soviet Culture said upon watching *Anna Karenina*, the ballet created by Plissetskaya. She said, the minister of the culture, ‘In the Soviet Union we have neither sex nor God.’ Is it the right moment to speak of the virtue of the Soul or even of the Body which plays an important part in our relationships with men and women? An important network? An important nexus?

Ribbentrop said something before being hanged, and he was right that, by talking on the verge of eternal tears, he offered enough material to journalists and other artists on which they could repose their luxurious inspiration. You know how it works, don’t you? Our opulent inspiration lies on a Louis the XIV bed and paint arabesques on the nearest wall. Then it dances along with some arabesques on the wall opposite. One is astonished to note that the arabesques we have been attentively watching so far can travel in the cosmos, which allows us to discover new stars, nebulae and what not.

But you are supposed to resist a temptation – and you have no idea what temptation they are talking about – and you yield to the temptation. You become a sinner for life unless your neighbours and relatives pay a lot of money to God to atone for your sins. Your sins are atoned for – you hear the tonality of your atoned sin – and you take a walk somewhere, not necessarily in your garden. In what garden then do you take your walk? In the Garden of Eden, needless to say. You say it nevertheless; and you repeat incessantly, ‘My Garden of Eden, my Garden of Eden, my Garden of E.’ That is enough, considering you are already welcome in Paradise – not only with open arms, mind you. You are welcome with the open body. Everything is open in this body: arms, legs, ankles, calves, shoulder blades. That is what openness means in the domain of liberty.

After a while, you notice, however, that your bench, the one you are allowed to enjoy in the Garden of Eden – its smoothness, velvet, temperature and tenderness – has a motherly disposition (in spite of a truant one for which Shakespeare’s Hamlet is acclaimed all over the world) and caress, both furtively and openly, the bodies kissing and cuddling on it day and night. But let us suppose, if only for the sake of argument – of what

argument, pray? – that one of the lovers grows jealous, which seems to demonstrate its (benche's) love with far more panache, certainly due to the quality of its wood. The lover draws a knife from his pocket – a woman is unlikely to commit such a crime – and begins to cut the bench into pieces or write on it obscenities – the obscenities of such vulgarity and unbearance (unbearable unbearance) that his mistress wrenches the knife from his hand and points it to her own body, saying, 'Your making love to this inanimate creature proves to what extent you neglect *my* body, for all its loveliness. I demand your attention, your caresses, your sadism – your attention, for God's sake. Don't you feel responsible for your actions in the presence of God?'

That is when a real attention often comes to the fore because nowadays you are supposed to use the maximum of your ingenious love apparatus to vie with actors who, in many sadism-oriented films, kill their partners so brilliantly that, instead of blood, a lot of sexual liquids I am too fastidious to enumerate traverse the screen and drop on the heads of cinema lovers who do not believe their eyes or rather skulls. How could you believe your skull that informs you you get a quantity of someone's sperm without really seeing it? Of course you can rise; you are actually welcome to do it. But in this case you will receive the same quantity of sperm in your eyes, which would prevent you from enjoying the representation to the utmost. And you may regret this failure all your life, considering that not many artists are willing to shed such a quantity of their vital liquid for the sake of some provincial theatre where only amateurs, not to say tramps and downs-and-outs and outs-and-downs applaud your generosity and skill. Not to say your *maestria*.

Only if he is not even tempted in the first place, or if he is able to dismiss the temptation easily, will he be contented and happy. But how could such an exploit be achieved? In the first place, in the second place? You feel a drop of sperm on your skull and you say to yourself quite honestly, 'This is a real temptation. I should resist it at all costs. And the costs I'm dealing with are high, I must admit. Every drop of this sacred, live-giving liquid is delicious and exciting. The more I drink, the more excited and delicious I become; and probably more sacred as well. Who knows? A friend of mine usually puts a lot of questions – to the Almighty, of all substances or figments of imagination. "This is an elixir," he says. "Could I please have another glass of it? After all, it's not as pernicious as a glass of vodka, drinking a glass of vodka." Frankly speaking, the Almighty never hears such questions, but you continue to ask them, assured they successfully replace a prayer you forgot a long time ago, at the door leading you out of your childhood where your mother took care of your prayers and of your Pamperses, if I remember them rightly. 'Here's your Pampers,' says your mother. 'And here's your prayer. Don't confuse them please. And yet it doesn't really matter – everything and everybody are God.'

'And what about the liquid I receive on my head, on my face, from time to time?' asks the child.

'This is a sort of morning dew,' answers the mother. 'You can find it – in the morning, mind you – on flowers, on leaves.'

'I tasted the liquid you're talking about, Mother,' answers the child. 'The taste is not the same.'

'The dew you get on your skull is a little bit older,' answers the lady. 'It often tastes like sour milk, a sour glass of wine. You don't have to love a glass of sour wine. But if you succeed in this undertaking you'll find a real happiness.'

Each virtue is a 'mean', on average, set between two vices – one of excess and one of deficiency. Generosity is an important virtue that bonds us to each other. Life would be much bleaker without it. It is obviously possible to be insufficiently generous. Such a person would have the vice of meanness. You see a virtue – at least you see a cube on which they wrote the word 'virtue' – and you make a few steps to find out

where a vice hides itself. Usually vices do not hide themselves, unless we are confronted with deep, almost incurable vices that aim at our heart, at the destruction of our heart by means of a knife or a bullet. So we walk from a vice to generosity and knock our head against little vices, little generosityes – on our way to the great, exemplary generosity which offers you, sometimes offhandedly, mind you, trinkets and also Bentleys, odd as it may appear. You install yourself in one of the Bentleys – you are weary of walking between the poles of human existence – and drive straight towards the vice you left some time ago. And you see a beautiful woman instead of the cube you frankly disliked some minutes ago. What happens? What to choose? Can you choose anything at all? Everything is in front of you, around you. The woman stretches her arms in your direction and you succumb to the temptation all the more easily since your Bentley do not act at all. And then Bentley does not really stroke you – between ourselves, it might have stroked your hand lying on the steering wheel; several times, in the course of your journey – and you choose the woman who strokes every member of your body and even take some of them in her mouth, although you warned her, ‘I have no candy either in my pockets nor on my body.’

And yet you eat a lot of chocolate together and many years suffer from diabetes which was incorporated in the sweets, in whatever was sweet in your life. Now you realise you should have switched to bitter tastes and ways many years ago. Now it is too late: you drink too much water; and you drink it too frequently for a normal person, whoever he or she is. Even if you drink a cup of tea without sugar – ‘No sugar, please’ – your organism, as they say now everywhere, adds a few lumps of sugar to your relatively small cup, looking rather like a cup decidedly destined for coffee.

You destroy your health at every step, with every rap you sing or say, sometimes unconsciously – it is under your skin and inside your throat. Such is today’s (or yesterday’s) fashion and you cannot get rid of it unless you are prepared to get rid of both today and yesterday. You sing, you talk, you sing and you die as if nothing had happened; as if you had never sung, never talked, never uttered the word ‘rap’. And what about chocolate? I have a friend, a half-friend, a half-mistress, who spends her days in a clinic where they look after semi-permanent mads. (Not maids, mind you – aristocrats.) She likes chocolate and I intend to buy her a box of chocolate to sweeten her existence, if any. Provided there are any sweets conceived and designed for this kind of temporary cure; or happiness, so to speak. We so to speak very often and sometimes someone says to us, ‘Yesterday you said “so to speak”, while talking about an important project. Well, our project is on the agenda and so we earned a fortune – in every sense of the term, mind you. Every one of our member married a beautiful lady or man and now we are all extremely happy, rich, clever and illustrious.’

But before becoming illustrious you have to be virtuous, and that is not as easy as you can imagine as you think about your parents who are, according to you and many other children, virtuous – almost automatically, mind you. Yes, your parents are virtuous for the reason you do not even have to elucidate, explain in detail and insist upon: it is obvious. They are your parents and consequently they are virtuous or barbaric, according to the disposition of your mind and body. If your father beats you on a regular basis you hate him and never say, ‘My father is the most virtuous man in the world.’ Your father is a virtuoso in the domain of beating – that’s for sure. Your body knows a lot about this virtuosity, and your mind does not succeed in forgetting all the blows you received in the course of your childhood and even during your adulthood. Your father used to say, ‘I know, you’re an adult now. So you’re supposed to understand what is wrong, but you don’t understand it. You don’t understand the difference between what is right and what is definitely wrong. Unfortunately I have to teach this difference to your body which understands the world and its manners much better than your mind and brain and

so-called psychology do. Actually, I'll give your psychology or metapsychology the same lessons – just for the hack of it.'

What could you have answered? What kind of answer could you have given to your father, had you been more intelligent and knowledgeable? Here is the answer you ought to have given your father, 'My dear Father! I'm grateful to you for being attuned to virtue and the means that allow human beings to reach it in no time at all. But allow me to contradict you by putting an emphasis on the role of the state – in the process under discussion. Are you aware of what Aristotle said on the subject? I know you're deeply versed in philosophy in general. But even Wittgenstein used to say or admit he'd never read Aristotle. So I don't think you merit bad marks for your ignorance of this great philosopher. That's what he said on the subject and also on the object of our discussion, "The purpose of law is not so much the punishment of wrongdoers, but the urging of people in the direction of virtuous action." Let us take notice of words – for once. All right, you're on the point of beating me with a stick – with your walking stick, to be precise. Could you apply the word "urge" to this stick of yours? Don't you think it merits a more vigorous definition? A torture, for instance? Or an example of how the Holy Inquisition punished its slaves? Let us try and find another, more humane and *dolce* – you know Italian, don't you – method. Why? To get closer to the word or verb "to urge"? Why don't you quote Aristotle's works, for instance? Aren't they better than your stick? Is your stick as beautiful as the philosophy I'm trying to introduce into our relationship? Far be it from me to affirm that our relationship is absolutely deprived of philosophical motives and nuances. But this time you're about to forget philosophy for the sake of your whip. I'm afraid I don't approve of this substitution. Allow me to prefer Aristotle to the bruises with which you wish to cover my life, my adult unfledged life. Actually, Plato would also have approved of what I've just said. I'm sure he would have sided with your future, present and past victim.'

So, in accordance with Aristotle's testimony, the state is supposed to push us in the direction of virtuous doings, such as charity, valour on a battlefield and so on. The Russian state offers you a sort of prayer in which you mention the glory of your motherland and your willingness to leave your head and the rest of your body in a lot of battlefields; although one battlefield is quite enough for your life and even for your immortality. The Russians receive a lot of emails from the state where the war in Ukraine is touched upon rather despotically. You must, you must, you must, say the letters. But do we really have to speak about Russia in this connection? Or any other connections? In *Anna Karenina* Tolstoy spoke about the predicament faced by his hero in his estate where a sort of election had been organised. For what purpose? No one knows, given that election, the very system that presides over this notion is still unknown in Russia. So let us forget this unorganised, medieval group of people who push the world towards an atomic war. As if this were the real and only aim of humanity.

What else could we speak of? 'By repeatedly doing virtuous things, even if we don't want to, we can turn ourselves into virtuous people.' Aristotle again. What else, who else are we allowed to speak of within this essay?

Aristotle again. Of course we might say a few words about St Thomas, but that moment will come sooner or later. Any moment, this one, that one will come once upon a time, and once it will be death, another time a sort of resurrection. We resurrect and think we have found a comma on our eternal way to Eternity. And then we realise it is a semi-colon. We are not very fond of the word 'semi' so we choose 'colon' as if we could choose anything or anybody in this or any other matter. We see a column and a lot of smoke that never goes anywhere without being born of fire. We cannot see the fire for an obscure reason, and that does not worry us, for a guru

we saw in another century said we should not pay attention to anything with the exception of nirvana. We look for nirvana and find ‘ni, ni, ni, ni’ which means ‘neither nor’ in French and probably some other languages. And Aristotle continues to talk for the sake of talking, needless to say; or to talk. ‘Every virtue is a “mean”, or average, set between two vices – one of excess and one of deficiency.’ What is my deficiency? I ask myself and find too many answers which do not help me in the domain of virtues. I get away from them, one by one. In other words, I get away from vice and then knock down another; and another, and another. They all lie in a lot of dust and I go on; I go towards perfection. Wait a minute! What am I talking about? I am supposed to knock down some kind of deficiency associated in my mind with a particular vice. Because it *is* a vice, isn’t it? Every deficiency is a vice in its own right; or wrong, as the case may be: everybody is aware of this truth. All right: I seem to have found a solution to this problem; at least for a while. I take off my trousers and say, ‘I’m deficient, am I not? And my deficiency lies near my feet, touching one of them.’ Half-naked I proceed towards one of my shelves on which there are two or three pairs of trousers. Suddenly I realise I am already virtuous: wearing trousers is an excess which leads one and almost everybody to the vice called ‘Being excessively generous.’ Towards yourself, obviously. Can’t you walk along the streets, up and down the streets of your native city without one of the pairs of trousers you rightly own and have in your house, on numerous, opulently furnished shelves? But by having your trousers on – any pair of them, to be exact – you run the danger designated as ‘being excessively generous’, as I already pointed out in one the previous sentences. But if, on the other hand, you decide to moon around your native city stark naked, you would incur wrath/anger of Aristotle who writes abundantly about ‘the vice of meanness’.

You do walk stark-naked around your native city, and some pedestrians stop in their tracks and say to you, ‘I’ve known you for many, many years. But I could never have accused you of meanness, if two minutes ago my glance wouldn’t have encountered this appearance of yours. Stark-naked, if you please. Well, I’m not pleased at all, if you must know. And you *must* know that, otherwise you’ll go on and on – stark naked, if you deplease.’ What else does he talk about, our Aristotle? He says you should not give away too much of your money that you do not have enough for yourself. No one has enough money for oneself and for one’s family. So one wonders when one can stop or start? Start what? Giving money away non-stop. No, no, no – this is a vice: we should never forget that. ‘*Non*’ is wrong and ‘stop’ is correct. But when do you have to stop? ‘The mean is not mathematical,’ says Aristotle. So if you say ‘200’, no one can tell you whether it is mean or not. And what about ‘300’? The same goes for ‘300’ and even for ‘3000’. The same goes everywhere, and you have no idea whether this ‘same’ goes naked or half-naked; or third-naked, for this matter. And this matter is endless, endless, I’m sorry to say. That’s why it is better not to say it.

We go on as if we were a show. In some respect we *are* a show, considering that we show something of what we are doing, sometimes when hiding from something else. We always hide from something, even if no danger lies in wait for us behind a boulder or a mere stone. And then we come into the open and this open may become closed at any second, depending on some authorities or other. Well, we do depend on these authorities because we cannot do otherwise. Sometimes we are close, sometimes open. They say, ‘This is an open work of art.’ And others say, ‘You’re wrong – it’s a closed work of art because you don’t understand its contents. You don’t even understand its contours.’ What *do* you understand in the final analysis? A Christmas Tree.

These discussions lead nowhere; as any other discussions, to tell the truth You go on telling the truth and say, after much soul-searching that nothing leads anywhere, simply because nothing cannot lead anywhere. Nor

can a zero. What does a zero lead you to? A number of zeros that you might enjoy if you love zeroes in the first place and also in the second place. Sometimes you are asked, ‘Do you like zero in the third place?’ and you reply, ‘Frankly speaking, I’m weary of zeros. I prefer millions, billiards, frankly speaking. And if you think I should be more modest, I’ll say I prefer three roubles.’

Someone who is well-off should give more than someone who is poor. You say, ‘I’m poor,’ and they begin to search you – literally and almost mystically – to find out if you have more than what every poor man or woman are allowed to possess. Allotted to, as they say all the time. ‘Allotted to when and where?’ you are asked. And all disintegrates, once again. It literally falls apart and as a result you find a rouble here and a euro somewhere else, probably in the kitchen, Why? Because supposedly you were charged with a mission you did not accomplish, for some reason or other. You had – it was your duty – to buy a lot of potatoes, and you did not know how many potatoes you had to buy. But you knew that these potatoes were meant and ordered to nourish the whole population of two villages, of three villages and even of a small city called Klin where Tchaikovsky found his last refuge. Or the one before last.

This is a problem apart which should be tackled separately. What is your one-before-last refuge that precedes your deathbed? You say to yourself your *Winter Reise* or the way of all flesh, assuming that you still have a few morsels of flesh to call your own, is under way. Of course you ask yourself an obvious question, ‘Should I keep this flesh for myself or give it to the needed – to children, in the first place?’ Actually, you are prepared to offer this flesh to the needy and children and the old in the second place as well, but you are not sure you will safely reach this second place, and in this case you have to give whatever you have right now and almost to everybody. So you give your underwear to many people among whom you notice a few females who say, ‘We’ll never wear this nonsense.’ Men do not usually pronounce the word ‘nonsense’, at least in this respect, but they say, ‘Pfui, pfui,’ or something else along these lines, following this vein. It does not mean that masculine taste in the domain of underwear varies so much: they are just determined to say ‘pfui’, to express their utter disgust with what happens in the world, and unless you show them a masterpiece from the Louvre collection, they will go on repeating ‘pfui’ until midnight, when they usually recall Shakespeare and his dreams. Luckily for them. This last item proves it is better to know Shakespeare almost by heart, otherwise you may be confronted with the horror of a non-Shakespearian world. (But Shakespearian world is not all beer and skittles either.)

Let us not forget that by repeatedly doing virtuous things, even if we do not want to, we can turn ourselves into virtuous people. I have no wish to give you ten roubles, but I do give them to you. Why? Because I think that my repeats will turn me into a virtuous man; my virtuous repeats, that is. It is as if I held a sheet of paper on which someone, God perhaps, wrote ‘virtuous’. What kind of thing can be related to this piece of paper? I give it to someone – instead of giving to this someone a million of dollars – and simply say, ‘Here you are.’

‘What do you mean?’ asks the simpleton. (That is who you are talking to – unavoidably.)

‘This is a ticket that allows you to take part in the show called “Virtue”. If you win, you’ll be virtuous, you know.’

‘And if I lose?’

‘You’ll be vicious. Isn’t that clear?’

You lose, but you nurse a covid victim, running the well-known danger, and finally the God-presided committee resolves to bestow an honour upon you; a medal, in other words. You put this medal on your chest and have a walk throughout your city, showing off your honours and achievements, instead of putting on display your nakedness; or half of it, as the case may be. And the case is always 'maybe' or 'be' or 'not to be', and so on.

You should get inspired from older people who point their sticks to almost everything and everybody, saying, 'You should give, you should give,' and 'otherwise' always accompanies these speeches, which confirms once and for all that 'otherwise' is part and parcel of our life. And you cannot remove these parts and parcels without destroying your life, which needs all these others and wises.

How many virtuous things have you repeated since last Sunday? Two or three, according to your calculation. Well, plunge into your arithmetic once again and find geometry or something else: semiology, for instance. I said, 'The world is beautiful,' which is virtuous enough to fill to the brim my claim for virtuousness. Indeed, I draw everyone's attention to the beauty of the world which enables them to survive in this world. They manage to surmount all opposition/objections to their plans. However, there are still a few technical problems/obstacles/hurdles to be surmounted before the product can be put on sale to the public. What product, what sale? What a question to ask! In this world – and everyone is aware of this state of affairs – everything is a salesman (even women, even women) and everyone is a product. (Is this the other way round?) What kind of product? What does it matter! You know you are a product – even if no one buys you. Even the people who show no interest in your persona, in your body and so on are capable of saying, from time to time, 'I know he or she is a product, but I don't need it. I have enough of worthy, expensive products within my reach both at home and also outdoors.'

This time we are talking about the product called (or entitled: there are so many books written about it): *The Beauty of the World*. This subject is vast indeed, almost gigantic, because some people just show you their watches, saying, 'Beautiful, isn't it?' Of course you can always answer thus, 'It's certainly expensive and in some respects beautiful, but I prefer that tree over there.' On this and other occasions the Russians point to birch trees, whereas others think in terms of Christmastide and the things they can hang on their Christmas trees. Actually these things count much more, given that children seldom admire a tree on which these things hang rather indifferently as if there were simply exhibited in a shop. The children do not seem to admire the smell I took advantage of in my childhood, which did not prevent me from enjoying the things I am talking about right now. Probably at length. Frankly I do not know how much time I wish to sacrifice for the sake of these things on which I counted in my childhood. I thought the world was just a thing, a plaything – something hanging from a Christmas tree; from *my* Christmas tree, preferably. From which tree does the world hang? Not from the Tree of Life, that's for sure. From the Tree of Death? Perhaps, perhaps. Let us leave the question open. I am not keen on open works of art, considering that most of them, most of masterpieces are closed forever. But an open question does not really disturb me; not really, not beyond all measures.

Shall we go on enlarging upon virtues? Beyond all measures, so to speak? Everybody will air his and her grievances upon the matter, saying that acts speak louder. Suppose you notice a child – in a Siberia, of all places. (Even in Siberia, in this inhuman land you come across children, now and then.) Understandably enough, this child freezes to death; or starves to death, if you prefer. (Of course you prefer the life of this child and this goes without saying.) Well, you take notice of this child, draw a box of matches from one of your pockets and strike a

match. This is called a 'virtuous act' or a 'virtuous deed'. If you strike two matches – in the same set up, within the same winter – you double the number of your virtues. If you walk around Siberia in search of freezing-to-death children, your pockets full of matches and boxes, automatically, almost mechanically you grow as virtuous as mothers and Therasas. What is the lesson we can draw from this narration? Never leave your house without matches. I mean, you have to fill your pockets with matches – to the brim, if possible – and begin your walk through your native city; even if it is not located in Siberia, contrary to all the stories told about matches.

And if you see a lonely child, you should assume he or she has no parents to take care of. What I mean boils down to this: no one takes care of this child. So you should bend over and put your finger on this child's shoulder. Why not put your *hands* on his or her shoulders? While you are at it? If you put your both hands on this child you will be accused of an act associated with paedophilia. So you limit this effusion of tenderness and humanness to a mere murmur, such as, 'Tu-tu-tu' or 'su-su-su'. What happens next is quite foreseeable: there is a man who reproaches your nature for not giving free expression to your natural feelings, meaning, 'You're a father by nature, considering your age and experience. Why don't you welcome this child to your open arms and carry him to your wife who'll certainly give him enough chocolate to tide him over the weekend?' And you answer logically and self-defensively, 'Don't you know our police? Do you have no idea what our justice department is capable of?' It is capable of justice – that is the only comment you can hear under the circumstances.

Someone who is well-off should give more than someone who is poor. And someone who is poor should give more than someone who eats everything he can lay his hands on. He lays hands – so does she – on a morsel of fish, and a bystander whispers a word in his ear, 'Why don't you give this morsel to a starving child?'

'This child isn't really starving, according to my analysis of the situation,' says the man enjoying the morsel of fish; of sturgeon, in all probability.

'I bet you anything you like it.'

'Can you bet your boots? Can you boot your bets?'

'With pleasure.'

'Well, let's watch and see what happens.'

At the end of the week the child dies of starvation. Who won this game of bets and deaths? I have no remembrance of this incidence or rather of its details, and so one had better consult a few newspapers which concentrate their efforts on children and their deaths from the lack of morsels of fish, of meat and so on.

Some of the journalists bet on quantity and not on quality. Of course you can always say the morsel under discussion is so succulent you might consume a hundred kilos of it. But the child does not seem to enjoy the quality, the taste of the morsel because you do not really relish anything on the threshold of death; except your own paradise-oriented hopes. So the child dies and you say to yourself, 'I'd give anything to know if he thought about Paradise on the point of passing away. This is so important for my article centred upon children and their mortality. Or immortality, if you prefer. Not their morality, mind you.'

You follow your elders and Aristotle does not seem to question this ritual because every year adds something to the amount of knowledge you are supposed to accumulate in the course of knowledge. St Peter walks towards or flies towards your knowledge and asks you the ritual question, 'Is that what you've unashamedly bring to Paradise? Do you think there are no treasures to offer its Guardians?' You empty your pockets and find a piece of gold or silver; or just a piece of anything or a piece of nothing. St Peter looks at this

piece, studies it for a while and says at last, 'This piece is far more precious than all the gold they found in Charlie Chaplin's film *The Gold Rush*. Bravo!' And you make yourself comfortable in Paradise. That is what life is about.

How can we be sure we are doing the right thing? You cannot find the answer to this question in Aristotle's books because the only answer he can give is, 'Read my books.' You go on reading his books and find the following sentence: 'Doing the right thing.' Well, let us admit – for the sake of argument – that I do the wrong thing. Let us go a little bit further. Let us admit I do three wrong things, four wrong things. And even five wrong things, why not? What danger do I run when I admit I do five wrong things? Your judges say, 'Five things are not a crime in itself, admitting you did commit them and are fully responsible for them. And let us not get entangled in the calculus of sacred numbers within which we seldom find five, contrary to what happens with three, four and six.'

You do five wrong things. Contrary to what might be admitted (officially) more or less accurately, you do not use a heavy object, when getting closer and closer to the head of a child you have no wish to harass and submit to your boundless desire; contrary to all sorts of documents. But what *do* you do? You step forward or backward or outward; and every step, according to the protocol, leads you to a crime. This crime can be less or more, or most, or gigantic, or minuscule. It is a crime, nevertheless, and you should suffer as a result of this crime and its punishment, its roubles spent for nothing. 'Such people might know in great detail, for example, which vitamins and minerals are conducive to healthy living.' You find this sentence in a book (*Introducing Aristotle*.) Well, you follow the advice to the letter and the letter is A, and also B and Z. You take all these vitamins and feel much better: you are capable of mounting any number of stairs without being short of breath. At some point you even think you are short of *steps*. And then you become a victim of your own optimism (your doctor never said anything of the kind.) You sit down on a step and feel a desire that grows within you every minute as if it had nothing else to do – the desire to take the last step in this life, whatever its measurements, virtual and real. You really want to take leave of this life, even if there is no step under your feet. You say to yourself or any passer-by who happens to be within your hearing, 'Can you see my foot? It is installed on the last step of my life. I'm not sure you can see it – this kind of vision is reserved for the dying, not for the living, but this doesn't really matter – here's my foot, my death and immortality, whether you agree with me or not. Farewell, my dear pedestrian.'

And that is done. So many things are done, and you know them by heart, if you do have a heart after all. What happens next? You discover you have another foot to lean upon, and you lean upon it, forgetting all your previous experiences, tests in the this domain and many other domains which communicate to you the only truth we are allowed to come across, 'You'll fail, whatever you do and are. So you'd better sit ensconced in your armchair and take your time, your rest, your life and even the rest of your life. Take the rest, the r, the s and whatever can be found under your feet that accumulated a lot of objects during your wandering.

What sounds appropriate, in your opinion? You cannot pretend to hear Mozart's or Haydn's quartets. What do you actually hear? Bliam, bliam, bliam; bliam, bliam. But the chief thing is: you can survive all these blam, blam, blams and live happily ever after. And even after happily, you know. And even after 'after'. That is what counts, that is what you can rely upon.

And then Aristotle talks about rulers of all kinds. Of course a monarchy would be an ideal solution except that a king can turn out to be fool – and he often is, our king; fool, fool, fool – and his benevolence is always

accompanied by a big question mark. This mark is almost as big as the monarch himself; and sometimes it is even bigger, so this question often hits the ceiling during his numerous and senseless speeches. First it lifts its crown and carries it as far as the biggest chandelier. Then the chandelier begins to tinkle and twinkle – like the proverbial little star. Everybody looks at the chandelier and they say to each other, ‘This is a good omen. God must have heard our prayers.’ But one cannot even be sure their prayer was heard by the chandelier in question, let alone by the crown. The taxes continue to grow as if lifted by the same question mark, and everything, everybody are questioned from now and on. Some people are questioned by the police and by judges. They are sent to prisons and concentration camps where they concentrate on their labours. And judges concentrate on the denunciations that float through various halls accusing this and that and him and him.

‘Monarchs will almost certainly rule to promote their own advantage.’ What kind of advantage could be discussed in the context? Monarchs say to almost everyone, ‘One crown isn’t enough. I wish I could wear three or four crowns.’

‘But Your Majesty! With all due respect we doubt whether your head will be capable of wearing so many crowns at the same time.’

‘They float, you know,’ answers the monarch. ‘They float in the air and elsewhere. And the air and also elsewhere are capable of wearing as many crowns as necessary to maintain my Absolute Rule.’

‘An aristocracy might work but, again, the small number of rulers probably could not be trusted.’ Well and good: you trust a small number of rulers who surround you on all sides – to protect you from bullets and bombs. But for no obvious reason one ruler leaves his post and leaves a hole instead – a hole through which a bullet can squeeze as easily as a pea. As easy as a pea, say the people who are allowed to witness the situation or rather the monarch’s predicament. (We are still talking about a monarch. About whom could we talk? By whom could we replace him? No one else is worthy of our praise, blame and attention.) The group of courtiers grows smaller and smaller and finally a few bullets turn into a number of peas and penetrate the circle where the ruler, alias the monarch, makes yet another speech. The speech is interrupted by a bullet that gets stuck in the monarch’s tongue. From now on he will speak only about bullets, canons, tanks and pilots. That is how wars traditionally start: a bullet turns into a pea and flouts all conventions. It even snaps its fingers at the dangers associated in every mind with the assassination of a king. It snaps its fingers once, it snaps its fingers twice, and the monarch collapses in front of his (or her) prime minister.

But let us continue our talk about small number. (This discussion has nothing to do with nanotechnology.) This small number of rulers turns into an oligarchy – in no time at all, mind you. (No time for bullets to introduce themselves into the king’s inner circle.) These oligarchs make decisions to serve their own ends rather than those of the community as a whole. And their own ends have no ends, as everybody knows, whereas the ends of the community stop, having no time to gain any momentum. A lot of conversations burst into existence because of this disc regency. No, no, no – discrepancy. Let us follow one of the ends that belongs to community – rightfully, for once. This end is at the end and the whole community deplores this fact of affairs understandably enough. (We understand everything, don’t we?) You see an end – of a cable, for instance – and say to whom are interested or not interested. ‘This is the end, you know.’

‘The end of what?’ they ask you.

‘The end of everything,’ you say.

‘Or everything? Look at this bit, for instance. It doesn’t seem to me that this bit is the end of everything. This bit is probably the end of itself, which doesn’t mean your world has come to an end and all our volcanoes erupt at the same time and probably even earlier, probably earlier. So we may erupt at any moment. Aren’t we erupting right now?’

‘No, I don’t. I don’t think you’re erupting right now. But nothing prevents you from erupting in two minutes. Do you feel anything in your stomach?’

They would turn into an oligarchy? You turn into oligarchy? You stop at some point and ask, ‘Is it oligarchy?’ They don’t answer you. But why should you turn into oligarchy? That’s not necessary. You just turn into Oli and life begins as if nothing had ever happened. So many times, so many happenings. But you just say ‘olli’ whenever they turn their faces to you and open their mouths. You say ‘Oil, I am Oil’ and they accept you as if no crimes had ever been attached to your substance.

They ask you, ‘What’s your name?’ and you say oil, oil, oil. And they put you into their machines, saying to their spouses, ‘Do you know who helps us during our journey to the Riviera? It is oil, and she is very nice, very beautiful into the bargain.’

But Aristotle appreciates psyche in terms of its capacities. But what is psyche capable of? She is capable of crying, ‘I’m Psyche, I’m Psyche, I’m Psyche.’ So what? Or what else? We have lived without psyche for many, many years. Why should you put this burden on our backs at this particular moment? Let us speak rather of the soul which, according to some specialists, is tantamount to the psyche. Some of us say to others, ‘You have no soul,’ whereas the others did not nod their heads, contrary to what may be expected by polite people. They shake their heads and say, ‘We do have our soul, but it is called “psyche”.’ ‘Really?’ ‘Really.’ ‘What do you call psyche?’ ‘Psyche.’ ‘And what do you call that tree over there?’ ‘Psyche.’

You write a text and put semi-colons from time to time, when you feel like it. Psyche is the world, says someone. Someone also says someone, and that is also someone and probably psyche as well. But let us listen to Aristotle, instead of talking nonsense or rubbish. ‘This is the ability to grow, to thrive and to carry out basic biological functions’ What? What? What? My ability to grow is dependent on my basic growth, but my basic growth, I’m sorry to say, is too basic so you cannot grow. It can only jerk and that is apparently enough for healthy, Olympic, basic, growth,

It goes without saying that you can obey a set of rigid (not rich, no way) rules which are often contradictory. You obey one rule, and another rule knocks you on the head and says, ‘You contradict. Yet I’ve never been impolite or otherwise unpleasant in your presence.’ You do not wish to hear all sorts of nonsense without being able to answer your adversary, and so you say, ‘Once – I think it took place five months ago – you touched your nose in a quite unpleasant, not to say vulgar manner. I was deeply offended by your behaviour and actually everybody present – and many people were in assistance on that particular occasion – were as offended as I was. Do you think you can pick and choose in the matter of your nose and other overtures, other holes you possess for some reason I ignore?’

Fiddling with one’s nose or fingering it – God forbid! – does not belong to the domain we unanimously call ‘ethical’. *Et encore, et encore*. I don’t know. What *do* I know? Let us choose another, ‘righter’ moment for the dissection of this problem. Ethical action is almost always about negotiation and compromise. But let us leave the nose aside, its problem, its picking which, in my opinion, lives outside of all other questions, ethical or not. It is merely disgusting, and that is what I have to say on the subject, rounding it off, once and for all. Or all

and for once. So you do not negotiate in this domain, if I am understood rightly; once and for all. Let us analyse a few sentences I picked up at random in newspapers bought by everybody in the streets and elsewhere. 'The government has refused to negotiate with the strikers.' All right, we encounter this piece of information every day, especially if we live in France. And sometimes (mostly, I must admit) we just do not care about these negotiations and their results. But one thing is accepted by everyone, without any exclusion: they were not negotiating about your nose and the way you maltreat it, more often than not. After all, you are not Gogol who devoted a short (or rather long) story to this problem which can leave you noseless, so to speak.

'I'm negotiating for a new contract.' Who cares about your new or old contracts? Unless we are vitally involved in the projects, anxious to protect our families from famines and other disasters strewn all along our paths. What's the use discussing the ethical side of the problem; if any?

'I've managed to negotiate (= get by discussion) a five per cent pay increase with my boss.' Is this an ethical question? If it is, I should negotiate and discuss it with my boss. But I have no boss except myself. Sure enough, I could discuss this problem with myself, saying, for instance; 'What do you think about this clause and that clause?'

'Let's leave all these clauses alone,' I might answer to myself.

'All right, all right. But wouldn't you leave me alone?'

'Myself?'

'Wouldn't you wish to listen Haydn's quartets alone, on your own, undisturbed in any way?'

'Yes.'

So I leave myself alone.

Bringing up our children to be 'virtuous' will better suit them to this kind of decision-making. What children? What kind of decision-making? What unkind of decision-making? (This is often the case, mind you.) First you have to find out what kind of decision-making is alluded to in this all-comprehensive book. All answers related to all sorts of problems are treated magnanimously, and yet I cannot find in it the decision and the making emphasised in the above sentence. There are doubtless many sentences situated *below* the sentence I am enlarging upon, but what is below is also above – everybody knows that.

But what do they say about Hokusai with whom I have been involved (have evolved) ever since I realised to what extent water and mountain play the game of my life within my ego? It is easy to find a text where they tell you that Hokusai is accessible – admired by – not only to the Westerners who see Western girls and Western boys and mountains and fountains we see not only within our landscapes, but also in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. They show you the *real* Hokusai, but what you see amounts to this, I'm afraid: M – meaning 'mountain', V – meaning 'vague', H – meaning Hokusai, J – meaning Japanese, B – meaning beautiful. Of course you see old men and old, young women, but what does it mean? We live in different countries. Suppose Hokusai were still alive. Well, we live in different countries. He paints a mountain, and we say, 'This is a mountain.' But we say, 'A mountain' and he says 'Moutunogiub-shi.' What do we see, when studying his picture? We see 'Mout' and we say to ourselves in jubilant tones, 'Mountain, mountain. We understand the beauty of this magnificent work.' And what about the rest? What *do* we understand or feel? 'Tuno', 'gee',. Tuno means a 'tune' inside our vocabulary, so we start singing and that is the only reason we can give for our sudden 'bursting into song', as we define it. And what about 'gee'? 'Gee, honey, is that all your own hair?' That is all we can add to Hokusai's famous painting, and this is unfair, frankly speaking. It is better not to say anything at all or remain silent, which

amounts to the same thing. It is better to mount to the same thing many times – to this *same* thing – so as not to commit a fearful, dreadful blunder which might consist of being disrespectful towards one of the most respectful painters in the history of this art. And in the history of many museums located all around the world.

If I am not mistaken, I had a talk about virtue, and Hokusai's painting belongs to this facet of human existence. It is true that, when you look at his mountains, you might say to yourself, 'I wish I could climb this mountain one of these days.' But his women and men are of another kind. They are inaccessible, so to speak. You never say to yourself – and not even to your best friends – 'I wish I could...' No, you don't wish. No, you cannot. All sorts of sexual harassment are excluded from the museum where you have an incredible opportunity to scrutinize these pictures. What's more, this particular kind of harassment is excluded even from the books you contemplate at ease in your library; or any other library for that matter. Even if you pick up the book in question and begin to fiddle with it, finger it, using occasionally your feet in the process, you *cannot*. Nothing doing. You fiddle, finger, fiddler, foodler, moodler – whatever you like. The picture remains innocent, virtuous, pure – virgin, if you wish. (And you do wish it – at the bottom of your heart. Because you are created in the image of God.)

So what could you do with Hokusai? You are sure to enlist him in the army of your supporters. Why? Because he does not care: he is dead and nothing can move him anymore. You move him and he does not move – that is his reaction to your moving. Move him if you wish; play a few Chopin nocturnes for him. Do you think he would shake a few tears, while listening to your cadenzas? What can move a dead man? Even a *great* dead man? Of course you can whisper into his ear, 'You're great, and you must know that. You're immortal and you know that as well. If you're immortal, you're sure to hear your descendants or any other descendants. Your great-great-great-great-great-great-great. They say to you, "Your pictures are beautiful. Your mountains are beautiful, your waters, whatever their sources, are beautiful. Your lines and colours are beautiful. We faint, when looking at your pictures. They – the attendants of all kinds – come to our rescue, we resume our postures and go on looking at your pictures, your waves, your Merus, your Hokusais. We even look at your kus and ais. Could you please admire the size of our admiration?"'

But what do we have in common with Hokusai and his waves? We just say, 'He's a great painter. We feel the world so profoundly, thanks to him, to his waves. We follow his waves and the world gets profound, and even more profound than before, a few seconds before. And then we aspire to heights and his mountains appear before our eyes as if summoned from some nebula of existence. Existence exists and there are waves in it; the waves of fury, for instance. But the wave we are engulfed by has nothing to do with fury. What we experience is a *pure* engulfment. By the way, we should repeat these words as often as we can: nothing to do, nothing to do, nothing to do, nothing to do, because nothing has to do with anything. You see a painting or just a wave, a real wave, and you don't even have to say to yourself, 'nothing to do', because it has nothing to do with whatever you have seen before. Everything is anew, but it is not a brave new world – God forbid. It is a new *timid* world that accepts a timid beauty symbolised by a leaf and a nonsensical world – certainly not love. This word might have significance somewhere, but what does it matter? It does have significance; in other words, it signifies something or somebody or nobody. Most frequently. But it is just a word and that is what counts. A word. Or an ord. Rd. How beautiful it is! Almost as beautiful as Hokusai's painting.

And what about Rousseau? What about the world in general? Rousseau says, 'We live in constant and constantly changing relationships with other people, and so we do need also to be well-disposed towards them.'

We are well-disposed towards them. And what about *them*? They are also well-disposed towards us, for they read Rousseau in their childhood and even in their youth when very few people read Rousseau, with the exception of Derrida and some other philosophers of note. But we are neither philosophers nor of note, so we do not have to read either Derrida or Rousseau. We do not have to read anything, not even newspapers which talk nonsense and rubbish all the time, even if they do not belong to what they call ‘tabloid papers’ or something of the kind. Something of the kind is always of the kind because it is nearer to the truth; to kindness.

Constantly changing relationships with other people. My God – how true this is! Truth itself, I must say! Today you are my friend, so to speak; tomorrow you are not even my enemy. Tomorrow you are my awfulness, perniciousness, terribility, horribility, territerrerriawful. Or just fool. Why should I be well-disposed towards horribility or terribility? All right, you are well-disposed towards terribility. After studying this nonsense for a while, you conclude that terrib is threatening because it is ‘terrible’, in disguise. But the rest of the word seems rather benevolent. Olity. This reminds you of oil and you imagine the world where you could slide from one oily Hokusai-inspired mountain to another and really enjoy yourself, which seldom happens in our and other worlds. You slide, you slide, you slide, you glide, and – wonders of wonders, marvels of marvels, karmas of karmas – you enjoy yourself, which has never happened since 1999. You seem to take advantage of both Hokusai’s mountains and his wave – his fountains, in other words. What else do you need? A piece of cake?

And then you find yourself in front of all sorts of questions related to cakes, and you resolve not to plunge into this chaos, for the simple reason that it is not simple, this reason, the number of cakes and chaos in general, although, at some point you were interested in the theory attached to chaos. But what is attached to chaos nowadays? Everything. That is why it has grown so uninteresting. You point to Putin and say, ‘He is a good example of chaos.’ And everybody applauds. Then Putin strips his clothes off and throws them anywhere, any, any, any, any how. And any, any, anyhow where. And everybody applauds. Why? Because they say the following. They say, ‘We understood his inner nature. He is anyhow and anywhere. And we wish he were nowhere.’

We live in complex and constantly changing relationships... Let’s stop for a while sometimes, otherwise we are likely to go on forever, which is tiresome, to say the least. You can go on and on until you trip over something, be it a root or your own problem. You do it several times in the row, and the row grows too long; and you grow weary as well. So both you and the row grow weary and you say to yourself, ‘It’s enough, I’ve gone a long way and the tether is just in front of me. So I’d better stop. I know nothing about my row’s tether, my path’s tether, my life’s tether and my tether in general.’

What do you know about anything? You know that the word ‘tether’ starts with the letter ‘t’. But where is this tether of yours? Is it here, is it there, is it anywhere? Apparently you have a tether, otherwise you would not be able to get to the end of it. But can you be in the middle of your tether? In the middle of anywhere, of nowhere? You can say that; yet you have no idea what you are talking about. You do not know any middles so you cannot say, ‘I’m in the middle of nowhere.’ What’s more, you do not know anything about nowhere. You know ‘no’, vaguely. If you ask for a cup of tea and they say to you, ‘No,’ you know you will not have your cup of tea, even if you pay for it. Of course if you pay a hundred dollars for your cup of tea, they will give something to you, but does this really count? They say that Aristotle’s arguments in favour of slavery and subjugation of women are not very convincing. He says, ‘You have no wish to work so you look for someone who can perform this task for you. You see someone in the streets and say, “He’ll do nicely for the job.” And this person becomes

your slave. The same goes for women. You see a woman and say to her, “You’re my woman so you’ll have to wash my dishes and also my body, from time to time. And then you’ll wash my house which will never be yours because you’re a woman and nothing else; nobody else. Anyway, you’re not a man. That’s why you’ll wash everything, while I’ll catch forty winks and forty sweet dreams. And I don’t even ask you whether this suits you or not. That suits me. Can’t you hear me?” Of course she hears you. At least that is what happened in the times when Aristotle wrote his books on philosophy, women, men and washing.

Another question is on our agenda: ‘How should people act so as to meet their obligations to their community?’ What kind of community are you talking about? There are pedestrians and they choose to walk beyond my windows. (Luckily for me they do not walk *within* my windows. When someone walks within your windows you really feel his or her presence. And that is unbearable.) What kind of obligations, for God’s sake? What do I owe you? Do you think I owe you this chest of drawers I bought 20 years ago in Paris? I do admit there are some people somewhere. Can they be called ‘community’? All right – call them what you wish. But what do *I* have to do with all these nominations, designations and nonsense? You can have my chest of drawers on condition that you promise to leave me in peace for the rest of my life. And if, at some moment of this rest of my life, you interfere with the course of this life of mine, I will have my chest of drawers – I will. Why? Because that’s my will. And, according to Aristotle, you should meet your obligations to my will.’

People are essentially social and can be *paria* in a community. That is what I wrote after being involved with a group of people who were social, to all appearances, and my dearest wish eventually focused on their disappearance. How could they disappear? I might say to them, to everyone, ‘Please, disappear. You’re unwelcome in this house and probably in Paradise, at the famous gate about which our folk talks abundantly in their deathbed speeches. They clear their throats and begin to talk to those whose bodies they can see in spite of their pre-death blindness. What do they say? ‘I depart.’ That’s what they and we usually say, but that is not necessary: everyone knows our life is a series of departures and arrivals. Sometimes you see a napkin or whatever it is; sometimes you see a sort of smile, meaning I’m happy to get rid of you. As for life, it is happy to get rid of you too. That is how all this comes to an end. And we are happy when it *crawls* to an end.

We have an unavoidable obligation to take part in community life, bear responsibility for its decisions. They go somewhere and decide what should be done, whereas I stroll along the path I see and feel in front of me. I don’t really know if that path belongs to life or to a park. Let them belong to whatever they wish if they have this wish: belonging, belonging, belonging. Some women or men just throw themselves into your closed arms, shouting, ‘I belong to you.’ What does it mean? Are you a Russian serf? Probably not. Do you want me to take advantage of your body at once, proving to you and everybody else you do belong to me, *corps et âme*? Body and soul, soul and sinews? Nothing means anything; everything just happens. What is happening now? Some man fiddles with a female body. He fingers it and also toys with it. He says to it, ‘You’re not only my wife but also my sister. We play hide and seek every day. You hide and I seek. I find you at once, but before proclaiming my victory I slap your face several times, and I do it as long as I wish. Sometimes I no longer wish to do it, but *noblesse oblige*, or something else obliges: there are many somethings and obligations we have to deal with; I in particular. So I slap, slap, slap and at one point – I don’t remember where it is located – you say ‘Enough’. In other words, I stop slapping your face. Of course I don’t stop other action I triggered off at some point (at another point). What are these actions directed at? Several cheeks are aligned in front of you. Do you necessarily have to slap them? (It is better to slip them, to sleep, as Hamlet used to say.) To allow to turn the other cheek,

Well, if you wish to turn your cheeks you do it at leisure. And if you don't have enough leisure to turn your cheeks or even your head or even your thumbs, you just do not turn anything and say to anybody, 'Go to Hell.' And everybody goes to hell. How remarkable it is, this obedience, this law, this command, this sentence. You say, 'Go to Hell' and people follow your advice as if they were sure you are right. Are you right? Don't ask too many questions, especially if they are directed at yourself.

We do take part in communities. So we arrive to a community, after knocking profusely at the door, and say, 'I wish to become a part and probably even a parcel of this community.' They say 'all right', even when they do not say anything and nothing happens. That is their custom. Then they show you a part of their community and say, 'Do you like this part?' You answer, 'No.' They say, 'Doesn't matter. Otherwise you won't have anything.' So you have anything, and this anything does not look worse than what they suggested you should have in the first place. Whatever one might think, sometimes the second place is even superior to the first one. You pick up this place or part of it and carry it somewhere, and you do not always know where you carry it. From time to time you hear a voice, 'Where to?' But you do not answer this voice because answers mean confusion, and confusions should be avoided at all cost. The cost is high, but it does not really matter, given that confusion is avoided.

You carry this part; well, you carry something and you honestly think you carry a part of the community. And you may carry it as far as the ear of communism, but then someone whispers into your ear, 'Carry it towards socialism, and that will be enough.' 'How much? How much?' You begin to negotiate your communism or socialism or whatever.

'Ten thousand.'

'Ten thousand roubles?'

'Ten thousand dollars.'

'Ten thousand...'

'Thirty thousand...'

No one is capable of rounding off this dialogue, so it goes on and on. And then someone walks round this group of people and the conversation is rounded off. What is the result? **FOURTY THOUSAND, SIXTY SOMEWHAT!** What some, what what? Who cares.

The limit of the state's power is that beyond which it ceases to serve its citizens. Do you serve me? Do you serve me? Do you serve me? You hear these questions all the time. A representative of the state walks down the street; or up the street – habitually these representatives walk *up* the streets. A passer-by stops in his tracks and asks the following question addressed to the representative of the state (or stake) who, let us not forget it, walks *up* the same street. 'Do you serve me?' asks the passer-by.

'In what sense?'

'In every sense of the term.'

'How many terms does my servitude contain?'

'Around 80. I haven't really counted.'

'Please, do count my servitudes. Then come to my office and we'll analyse your arithmetic.'

'It is geometry I'm talking about.'

'We could also talk about quadrometry.'

'Why not?'

‘And quidrometry.’

‘Why not?’

What the point? The community is still there and chimney pipes seem to be in order. What else can count in the life of an ordinary man? He studies Wittgenstein and often talks when it is better to keep silent, probably forever. I have always wondered how the people – monks, chiefly monks – inaugurate their vow of silence and keep their mouth shut until the day of their death or another life. Sometimes they need the help of their hands: their mouth wishes to come into the open. It does come, but at the last moment a hand or a finger makes it to behave in such a way that it comes to a standstill. There is no openness they speak so often of on the Internet. Openness, openness. Sometimes they even go so far as to pronounce the word ‘transparency’. Well, the mouth is open, but it is not transparent, not in the least.

And a town, any city are open to. To whom? To bandits, to billionaires? This city is open and I enter it just for the fun of. Of it, of it. All these its look and sound alike. And together, sometimes. What do we know about our own house? We know a table, but this table knows us much more thoroughly. And that irritates us beyond measure. Why does this inanimate thing knows me better than whatever I can know, after studying in three or four universities? How come? How come? It comes, it comes and no one knows *how* it comes; or whether it comes at all. This phenomenon has taken place so often in the history of humankind. Some of them shout, ‘Here he is. He’s finally come!’ And others murmur, ‘I don’t understand what they’re talking about.’

‘Can’t you see?’

‘Whom?’

‘Him.’

‘Kim? Kim Bassinger?’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Who are you talking about?’

‘Him, Him, Him, Him.’

‘It is her, isn’t she?’

‘Why should I become virtuous? It’s so hard. It’s much easier to earn several millions. And you know what I’m talking about. So what’s all this fuss for?’ ‘For nothing,’ you reply. ‘Nothing is also for nothing.’ And what about rationality, for God’s sake? Who is rational? A mathematician, a billionaire? Look at them closely and the rationality will vanish into thin air, as I usually say; together with Shakespeare. At the beginning the air says, ‘I’m too thick for your vanity, ridiculousness and other nonsense you harbour within your substance and your thick head and skull. Why can’t I welcome you in my thin air? Because your thick head and skull are too thick to squeeze into it. Can’t you hear this whistle, sort of whistle? That’s how they do their best to penetrate into my thin air. SHGS – this is the aria of their penetration.’

Why should I live well with other people? If an enemy betrays you, you say to yourself, ‘He’s my enemy and his profession is betraying me, understandably enough.’ So you applaud his deed and offer him a bunch of flowers. Let us take another case. You live virtually, rationally, in a lovely manner with other people you call ‘my friends, my dear friends, my beloved guests’. (*Invités?* Did I wish to say *invités?*) And then one of these beloved guests betrays you then and there, all of a sudden; and his betrayal comes out of the blue, as usual. ‘It comes, it comes, it comes,’ they shout. For once they think about a betrayal (Judas), not of Jesus Christ. You see

the blue, but you do not see anything special, anything out of the ordinary. ‘What has come out of the blue?’ you ask your guests. ‘Have you grown blind or not?’ they ask you.

‘I don’t think I’ve gone blind, considering that I can see the score of Beethoven’s *Hammerklavier Sonata*.’

‘This sonata isn’t the only item we can enjoy or destroy in this world, you know.’

Why should I live with other people? This question remains, whatever you can do to remove some or someone from wherever you happen to be, not to be. Sometimes you just see a lot of people and say to them, ‘Why should I live with you together? In some proximity or other? Why do we have to rub shoulders with each other, one another? Rubbing shoulders is an unpleasant ritual. You see a person and think you should treat her friendly, otherwise someone might think wrongly about you. So you begin to rub shoulders with this individual. You rub one shoulder with him, another shoulder. You begin to see the difference between these two rubbings. You say to yourself that the first rubbing is better than the second. But on second thoughts you begin to think (or to feel) that the second rubbing is not so bad as you thought only five minutes ago. But why do you have to choose between these rubbings? You like the first; at least you liked it at the very beginning of your rubbing exercise. And then you voted for the second rubbing, but nothing prevents you from enjoying both rubbings alternatively. You decide to enjoy the first rubbing for five seconds. If it is not enough, you enjoy it for six seconds, for eight seconds – for as many seconds as you wish, for God’s sake! (What wouldn’t you do for God’s sake, my God!). Then there comes the second shoulder – if you are weary of the first one. You begin your operation and suddenly you realise you are tired – not only of rubbing, but also of everything else. Of living, among other things. Of listening to Beethoven’s quartets. What aren’t you tired of?

Are you tired of writing the following sentence? ‘I go for a walk and I am tired already.’ All right. Were you really tired at the end of your labour which consisted of writing this short sentence? Yes, you must acknowledge the following fact, ‘You were half-tired when you got to the end of the first half of this sentence, namely, “I go for a walk.”’ When you represent the ritual you submit yourself to – willingly or not – you might not feel anything yet; not the fatigue at least. Perhaps a sort of joy and liberation. But then there comes the frustration I am talking about. What frustration am I talking about? You have to raise your foot and put it somewhere. Actually you cannot put it anywhere because if you do, you may collapse, and it is much harder to rise from the Earth than to fall on it. Anybody can fall on the Earth: you just do it. Nothing doing, so to speak.

But what about the thought that accompanies the ritual, the process and the tedium of all this? First you have to put one of your feet somewhere. One of your feet. Which one? Assumingly you must know which foot (or leg) of yours is more appropriate for this task. If you are left-handed, you might think it is your left foot you have to choose for this kind of exploit. All right, you choose your left foot, but it is not apparently up to your left hand’s standards. After all, a hand is not a leg or foot – everyone knows that. So you choose your right leg – you have no choice, anyway. How many legs or feet do you have? Well, let us not become entangled in the maze of eternal problems.

CLOSED CIRCLES

What is a slogan? If you ask a pedestrian, any pedestrian, what is... he answers immediately, without waiting for the content of the question – for the simple reason that any question bothers him, deprives him of a few nights filled to the brim – where is the brim of such nights? – with psyche-consoling, body-restoring sleep. Instead, he receives (as a present; or almost) a few white, sleepless nights which are usually grey. And that keeps them away from the whiteness for which St Petersburg is widely known. I am alluding to the period during which you can read Shakespeare and other authors of genius at three in the morning, while standing on a bridge, on one of the bridges spanning the Neva – the river known even beyond Russia's frontiers. Its fame mainly reposes on the icicles one can see on the surface of this river in the spring, when the temperature of the former capital of Russia – the temperature of its air – grows warmer and warmer; as if to welcome someone with open arms. But this river – in this domain it is no exception to the general rule – has no arms. It does not even have a little finger which it could lift, determined to alleviate someone's suffering; a suffering experienced by a young, beautiful woman; for instance. This woman – described in this book of mine – suffers a lot on account of unrequited love (as usual, as usual), but a river lifts its finger and the suffering I am talking about disappears. And for once I have no idea whether it disappears in the twinkling of an eye or not.

Actually – not only Montaigne speaks and writes about it – you cannot know if you are well or not, if you do not suffer atrociously at some point (or several points) of your life. If you dare – in the face of all the suffering endured by humanity – to declare that you are happy and that your health is perfect, as perfect as any picture by Leonardo da Vinci you must be aware of what happens to lie on the opposite side of human experience: cancers, misfortunes in the domain of love and so on. You fall in love and realise (two or three days after the fall) that the individual you are in love with does not care at all about your body, psyche and literary ambitions. This individual does not give a damn, as they say. He or she does not give anything, in point of fact, but if you vouchsafe to give anything to this individual – anything of value – this individual, be they he or she, may stay by your side for a while and even forever, provided you give them (or him, or her) many hundreds of dollars every day; and also every night. You give and give and give, but if you ask this individual to define your role in his or her life, they say, 'You're a receiver.'

'How do you mean?' you ask understandably and indignantly.

'You receive my gratitude every day and night. And also my time, if you must know.'

'All right – now I know it. But can't you acknowledge the importance of *my* role in your life? Don't you think I could receive all these gifts I shower on you myself? In my bosom there's plenty of room for all sorts of gifts including the diamonds I gave you last winter. And also the bank account I opened in Singapore.'

After a while you no longer know who is talking, around what the discussion circles tirelessly as if living an eternal life of its own making. Is this a good example of what we usually call a 'slogan'? 'You are a receiver.' A short easily remembered phrase, especially one used to advertise an idea or a product. It is not a short phrase, although I could memorise it, if I am paid to do so. I am not and so I do not memorise it. I wrote it down and that is enough, quite enough. For once I know what is enough and what is not. It is high time I stopped this nonsense, and I stop it, even if this does not really mean 'the end of it'. And what is the end of it? Of what? When you are in the middle of the muddle you have created yourself, for no reason at all, you might have recourse to a slogan which you can find in any Cambridge dictionary. Smoking is bad for your health. Is that a slogan? You smoke

one cigarette, two cigarettes. You begin to cough atrociously. And you recall the sentence you wrote half an hour ago. A relatively short sentence. A slogan, after all. After what?

You also remember the fact that you have to suffer, if you wish to appreciate fully your happiness which may descend upon you one of these days. Why not? As the Russians say, 'The devil has many jokes in his pocket.' You pick up a needle and prick one of your fingers. After all that is better than to suffer from unrequited love or a broken spine. You fling the needle out of the window, nurse your finger and your happiness begins to grow. At first it is no bigger than the finger you have just been nursing. Why nurse a healthy finger which continues to boast about its own health? Instead, you begin to watch the growth of your bliss and soon you realise it has become as big as your shoulder. And then, after a while – this while may last several minutes or several months – it becomes as big as your own body. In other words, it becomes your doppelgänger. You look at your bliss (at close quarters) and cannot help admiring its strength and beauty. 'How beautiful it is,' you murmur to yourself. Do you *really* hear the beauty of your bliss? Yes, yes, yes. And if someone voices a doubt in this domain, in the domain of your ability to hear your own, private paradise, you begin to hum a song which corresponds exactly to the happiness you hear inside yourself; and also outside yourself. This means you begin to radiate your happiness. This is the right moment for many things – for writing a novel, for finding the ideal woman. (I am talking about myself. Why should I bother about other people's happiness?)

Speaking about the bloody Mary. We should not forget many other bloodies who continue to walk in our midst as if nothing had ever happened; neither on battlefields or in the building where you live and seemingly prosper; in accordance with the song you hum day and night. Everything and everybody is bloody – such is the verdict of the writers, poets and composers we continue to rub shoulders with during our daily rounds. Well, you lift your little finger – to cut short all unnecessary discussions. You remember (you remember so many things, my God) the following sentence you found somewhere or heard somewhere, at some point of your life, 'We'd better stick to the main road, because the other roads are blocked with snow.' Well, this time the main road is the little finger I lifted some time ago. So many people lift their little fingers and go about in this fashion, paying attention to the people who surround them on all sides. They make sure that all these people are fully aware of their importance. And what if nobody appears in the neighbourhood of their bodies? They fall on their knees, crawl on all fours to their beds and show their little fingers to those who might hide under these beds; for instance those lovers who have no wish to encounter their mistresses' husbands. These lovers are so frightened by the presence of those fingers – they think they belong to all sorts of husbands – that they take to their heels; immediately, immediately.

They talk a lot about power and the evil forces that accompany powerful people, dictators or mere generals, directors. To wield influence, power and so on you have first to conquer a post, an important position in what is called 'society'. How can you do that? Sometimes it is enough to lift your finger, your little finger. You lift it and everyone or almost everyone bows down. People literally prostrate themselves in front of this finger which can abandon its position, reverting to the common life of the hand where it belongs. Oddly enough, the people do not budge: they remain at your feet, their arms outstretched, their voices singing a hymn dedicated to your power.

But sometimes you have to realise you cannot count on their unconditional obedience and devotion to your persona. If such is the case, you have no alternative but to lift a second finger (of your choice). Of course you are permitted to clench your jaw and even your fists, both of them. But I would not use them at once, if I were you. First you had better assess your servants' abilities. Are you sure they are your obedient servants? All of them? And what if in their midst you suddenly discover a rebel whose desire to overthrow you grows as he starts clenching his fists and also his jaw? Then he takes a lift – I usually take the lift of my little finger, as one of them put it – and soon appears in all his splendour on some balcony or other. Putting his hands on some railing he begins to address the crowd gathered beneath this railing. And if there is no crowd to speak of, he just directs his mouth towards a few ears sticking out of some heads, a dozen heads, and launches into a speech composed of slogans among which you inevitably find 'our glorious future', 'our struggle against evil and its consequences', 'the traditional values for which you must be prepared to sacrifice everything, including your life, children and fortune'. The ears sticking out of some heads or other – there are many *other* heads at this particular moment, beneath the same balcony – undergo a metamorphosis. By dint of sticking forcibly out of their heads, they grow and become more and more receptive to the idea of a Freedom of Information Act. What is this Information Act? you may ask. Well, it is the mouth I touched upon recently; or rather the words, sentences, commas and exclamation marks flowing out of this mouth. They flow or fly and then settle in the aforementioned ears and in the hearts metaphorically linked to these ears. Of course you feel free to reject the information you thus receive; not on a regular basis, mind you. No – you receive it as long as the mouth I am talking about (without opening my own mouth, mind you) opens of its own accord. As I pointed out earlier, you feel free to reject whatever comes or flies from the balcony, from the individual standing on this balcony. You reject it so symbolically that your arms enter a sort of competition. Which arm is more determined to get rid of the Information? Every single participant in this game flails his or her arms around so that, what one can see all around and even elsewhere, amounts to a number of arms that seem to execute a dance. What kind of dance? you may ask. 'The flailing dance' or 'the rejection dance' or 'the no to the speaker dance'. All these dances can be executed without any involvement on the part of the legs, armpits and so on. Your arms bear the brunt of the information attack, and you feel more and more comfortable. Everything goes according to plan, as some contemporary leaders put it, whenever they appear on TV or in the middle of a stadium. Whatever actually happens in these stadiums or in those TV studios boils down to what is commonly called 'The Obedience Act' or 'The Acceptance Act' or 'The Adulation Act'. From this moment on, Machiavelli takes over and unconditionally bestows the power and its evil upon the speaker whose mouth was talking and vociferating only a few moments ago. Power is always evil – is that what Machiavelli and his followers have always endeavoured to maintain, to impose on humanity? And what about a conductor who executes a Mahler symphony? For instance. Isn't he powerful? He is, of course he is, otherwise the symphony in question would sound like the song universally known as 'The Homage to Clementine'. Oh, my darling, oh, my darling and so on. In point of fact, many singers perform only the so on, but this paradox deserves an essay, not just a paragraph in a huge, abnormally intricate book.

The point is you are supposed to lead a number of followers to the goal they might ignore and most frequently do ignore. In this case you use your arms differently, which means that, instead of flailing them about – some find this pastime useless, if not ridiculous, risible – you grab someone's shoulder or hand or neck and conduct these parts and also the whole to which they belong in the direction dictated by the goal you cherish and strive to accomplish. If asked, 'What's your goal?' you just point to a point; or a slogan, which is more

appropriate. What kind of slogan? Our enemy is a Nazi follower and therefore he and all his family or rather families (mental, psychological) should be destroyed, annihilated. So you grab someone's hand and manipulate it in such a manner that a lot of people (and even some countries) grow more and more annihilated. Someone may point out that any annihilation calls for an immediate action. You annihilate your partner or opponent and give a kick to his prostrate, dead but not yet buried body. The same goes for countries and continents. That is why in the world or universe wars are still on the agenda. 'That doesn't concern *you!*' you retort, meaning you intend to annihilate the enemy in question over a certain, indeterminate period. You yourself do not know exactly how long this period is supposed to last: all depends on the pleasures you experience in the process.

You slap somebody's face and it does not really matter whose face you strike, provided you keep in mind the glorious future of humanity; of your own glorious life, which amounts to the same thing. To paraphrase the Kabala, if one human being is happy, all of humanity is happy and dances on Red Square or White Square, wearing white dresses, white costumes, repeating insensately, luminously fiery speeches. And your listeners' clothes. Clothes and human beings spontaneously ignite because of the high temperature of the speeches and, generally speaking, an idealistic, futuristic pressure. I think that many years ago there was a magazine called *Fakel*, and I am almost sure it was a magazine of German origin; or of Austrian origin. Why did it adopt this name? Because every article it displayed caught fire as soon as a reader opened it, started to read its enigmas. The readers of this magazine were sunburnt.

A dictator or a tyrant picks up this magazine and admires its fire, its fiery inspiration. And the witnesses of these intellectual or rather ideological flames just wait; they wait and wait until the fire consumes the dictator and thereby liberates the world or just one country from their tyranny and its numerous corpses.

Why did God choose this world in preference to any other? Perhaps on account of the light He saw, whenever He directed His gaze towards our world which was completely lost in the midst of other worlds, stars and galaxies. What kind of light did God see and appreciate – to the point of making a point of creating it, bit by bit? God creates a continent and evil, a particle of what is known as Universal Evil, comes into existence or rather *springs* into existence, into our daily life. And this particle, in spite of its rather modest size, of its miniscule dimension, begins to devour everything or almost everything; it devours chiefly what is called 'Our Good'. In other words, whatever is good for our health, mental and otherwise, is regularly consumed by evil, usually associated with Russia or the Soviet Union. An American president points his finger – he makes a point, as a matter of fact – and says, 'Can't you see where this universal evil issues from?' And his listeners see a bit of Moscow, a bit of Saint Petersburg; and also a few villages which are on the point of becoming mud or nothingness, which amounts to the same thing, to the same mud and evil. What is so gorgeous about this world? All right, we do not live in Russia; nor do we live in the vicinity of Russia, even if our borders touch the Universal Evil's borders. The Universal Evil I am talking about stinks, and everyone is aware of this odour; even those who permanently protect their noses from the air – through the agency of handkerchiefs. Handkerchiefs are good agents (they are not secret agents, though) and act so promptly and self-assuredly that one might get the feeling they are right. The point is nothing is right in this world of ours; chosen by God; let us always remember this inadequate truth.

Yes, God must have seen some light wandering about this planet of ours. *Feu follet*, as Franz Liszt called it, after finishing his famous étude. This light of ours is mad; and it is even madder than Hamlet, to tell the truth. As everybody knows, Hamlet faked his madness, whereas this light of ours does *not* fake it. It is really mad; even more so than King Lear. Why? Why am I convinced it is madder than Lear? Because Lear says to evil, 'Never, never, never, never, never.' And our light says to it, 'Always, always, always, always, always.' No wonder our madness keeps on conquering new territories; every day and every morn. From time to time we say to it, 'Please, stop it, stop it, stop it. You're not on the right track.'

'Where's the right track? In your opinion?' asks Mr Evil.

'On the right-hand side.'

'Do you mean to say I'm on the left-hand side?'

'That's right.'

This kind of discussion goes on in our psyche and brain almost hourly; every hour, every other minute. (Evil is everywhere, and we try to analyse it to the best of our ability. Maybe we should ward it off, instead of analysing it, of dissecting it assiduously.) We seem to have identified the evil I am talking about. (What kind of evil am I really enlarging upon? Universal Evil, the Universal Evil, the universal evil, the local evil, Russian evil, Prussian evil, the so on evil, the so forth one.) Well, you just pick up a drone and send it towards all these evils; and after a while you hear, 'Boom, boom, boom, boom.' You look in the direction of these booms, hoping to gaze at the absolute absence of evil, but (boom, boom, boom) the Evil they talk about on YouTube and other tubes is still conspicuous by its presence. And if you hesitate, if only for a second or two, you see the following inscription, 'Don't mistake me for good. I am evil from head to foot.'

Once again you gaze at this phenomenon and say to yourself, 'At least his right foot is good. Not entirely though.' Don't delude yourself – even his right foot is evil, let alone his left foot. Therefore both his feet are evil, incurably evil. And so are his arms, neck and his neckband, his necktie. It is universally acknowledged that evil is different from good; what is more, it is at the opposite end of good. Well, it stands opposite good, whenever you dare or vouchsafe to look at it. You are obliged to use both arms to differentiate evil from good – whenever you are tempted to show this difference to indifferent onlookers. You look at them to make sure they are really interested and point first at evil and then at good, saying all the while, 'This is good and that is evil.' Or 'this is evil and in the opposite corner you can see good, its splendour and benevolence.' But sometimes you happen to mix your arms, to confuse the right arm with the left one. Sometimes you even get the impression you just have 'one', and this one cannot be applied to one of your arms; let alone to both of them. The onlookers to whom you are supposed to explain the difference between good and evil, their different, opposite values, keep on looking at you and saying, 'What is he trying to show, to demonstrate? The action of a windmill?'

Recently I saw a play in some local theatre or other. The play was entitled 'Nietzsche and His Ways'. During the play I experienced only one feeling – that of boredom. Nothing happened on the stage where one could see two gigantic cubes. On one cube one could see the inscription 'Good'; on the other, the opposite was represented, 'Evil'. The actor – the only actor whose body the spectators were allowed to see on the stage – stood beyond the two cubes. In the intermission I asked the actor why he did not act on the stage, instead of standing between the cubes. He answered thus, 'I'm utterly exhausted. I had an interview this morning – they really put me through the mill.'

'Don't you intend to put this play on?' I asked.

‘What play are you talking about?’
 ‘I had an interview this morning – they really put me through the mill.’
 ‘How do you mill? Sorry, what do you mean?’
 ‘You’ll just have to install a mill on the stage.’
 ‘But who’ll put me through it, pray?’
 ‘A beautiful actress.’
 ‘Our theatre is a one-man theatre,’ he answered.

There are people who follow another stratagem, and sometimes they follow it to the very end. So nothing can be seen beyond; nothing at all, not even another stratagem. Among these people there are individuals who pretend to know the truth, and for them the only truth available is an impasse. They call it ‘the impasse’, as if there were no other impasses in the world and in their lives. They themselves might realise the truth of this multiplicity of impasses, for they are capable of saying something along these lines, ‘The dispute had reached an impasse, as neither side would compromise.’ They often talk like that about military conflicts, which means there is something beyond this impasse, the one they touched upon on this occasion, in the context of this situation. What is there beyond it? Cannons, drones, rockets and a lot of blood. Of course you can try to convince everybody that the only truth we always stumble upon is blood, whether this blood is linked to life or to death. Let us not forget that in days of yore they used to bleed their patients. I mean some doctors saw no other solution to whatever illness they came across. They looked at each other and also at the members of the family in the heart of which their patient was on the point of dying and said, ‘Well, we’ll have to bleed him, you know.’

‘Is there no other solution?’ a member of the family might ask hesitatingly.

‘Unfortunately no. But don’t you worry: I won’t bleed him dry.’

Nevertheless, sometimes (more often than not) they bled their patients dry. For instance, Gogol was dry at the end of this ritual which cost him his life. A few witnesses were shocked, literally scandalised by this treatment of the great writer, but the doctor said, ‘This treatment and its result tie in with the patient’s life and literary work. Have you forgotten his dead souls? Do you think they were moist or what? The dead souls he described in detail? They were dry, as dry as dead leaves. Don’t you know that dead souls (and Gogol’s) grow well in dry soil/a dry climate?’

How does one grow a dead soul? To begin with, you have to ascertain whether the soul you have in one of your drawers – in a drawer of your writing desk, for instance – is really a soul and not just a piece of shit, as they say rather vulgarly. ‘Well, it looks like a soul,’ you say to yourself. ‘But it’s not big enough, in my opinion. So I have to grow it – for more reasons than one. One reason is its size, its microscopic nature. The other reason – the chief reason, in my estimation – is the fact that this soul is still alive. It’s as if it was still within some body or other. What body? you may ask. It doesn’t really matter. Gogol’s body, for instance. He couldn’t bear living souls, and whenever he saw one, somewhere, he would immediately put it to death. How? By letting it know it was nothing but a chapter in his book entitled *Dead Souls*.’

Every day you can hear the remark, ‘You have no soul.’ You hear it in your presence and, after checking its origin, you draw the following conclusion, ‘This remark is directed at my own persona.’ And you say, half-jokingly, ‘I do have a soul, but it’s dead, I’m afraid.’ Of course your opponents do not miss this golden

opportunity: they begin to question you on the subject. ‘Are you really afraid of its death?’ they ask. ‘If you are, you’re on the right track. At the end of this track, you’ll find a compassionate, living soul filled to the brim with love.’ That is what they call a magnificent, fruitful impasse. Not a dead end, though. This end is throbbing with life and only beneficial blood circulates within it.

Generally speaking, we are not afraid of ends because some of them signify the end of a chore, the end of a painful relationship in the course of which a lot of money was misused, spent for nothing or, worse still, for something utterly disgusting and harmful. As a result, you suffer from yet another heart attack and stay in bed for several weeks, fiddling with your computer. And you see no end to this fiddling, for you continue to fiddle with your YouTube videos even after your so-called convalescence, which reminds you of illnesses as such. As a result, you fall ill once again, and once again you see no end to your suffering. Your friends do their best to help you, thereby justifying their vocation: they are *your friends*, after all. But is this really their vocation, their true vocation? One of them is a violinist – a bad one, into the bargain. Another boasts about his philosophical investigations: she attends a series of lectures on philosophy in a local university or institute or institution. She seldom misses an opportunity to speak to you about the last lecture which is never really the last: once again you encounter a situation without end; but with a lot of bits.

And then you run into another set of troubles at the beginning of which there stands the following sentence, ‘And this species of the divine patience indeed being, as it were, at a distance, may perhaps be esteemed as among “things too high for us.”’ At first you feel elated: you seem to have found an excuse for your unwillingness to grasp the main points of the last lecture you heard in the presence of your female friend. (What did she speak about? Hegel’s mind, Kant’s suppositions?) You cannot affirm that you followed her explanations to the very end; from the very beginning. As usual you find it easier to follow your hunch, whatever this hunch talks to you about. (Usually your hunches talk to you about nonsense; they talk nonsense, in other words.) Incidentally, you do not always know whether the feeling or itch you recognise in the structure of your body (or on its surface, to be more precise) has anything to do with a real hunch. ‘I’ve got an itch on the back of my neck,’ you say to a friend of yours. And this friend – and any other friend – is unlikely to miss this opportunity. There are many opportunities our friends are reluctant to miss, especially if they (the opportunities) are in the domain of ridicule. They are eager to turn you into what is called ‘the laughing stock of humanity’. They use this opportunity (the itch on the back of your neck) and make the most of it by questioning you on the subject. They are likely to say, for instance, ‘I’m sure you’ve mistaken this itch for a hunch you have to follow so as to become the richest and happiest man in the world.’

‘No,’ you answer. ‘It’s just an itch, nothing more.’

‘But don’t you think it’s a good omen?’

‘I don’t think it’s an omen. Just an itch.’

‘But an itch can be an omen. Actually nothing prevents it from becoming an omen, especially if it is an omen already.’

It is true that we look for good omens everywhere; even under our beds. Of course we mostly explore *the surface* of the bed where, in our learned opinion, we are sure to find a beautiful woman patiently waiting for our caresses; and even for what lies *beyond* caresses. I never question the theory according to which some caresses do not lead to anything lying beyond them; a sexual act, for instance. They are just caresses in their own right; things in themselves, more or less. You caress somebody, a man or a woman (let us not speak about boys in this

connection) and whisper into this individual's ear, 'You don't have to be scared stiff. Don't be stiff anyway – my caresses aren't fond of stiffness. I won't rape you afterwards, after the end of my caresses. Like everything in the world, including life and even death, according to Christian thinkers, my caresses are not eternal. Sooner or later I'll stop of my own accord. You don't even have to count on your hunches in this domain.'

This discussion reminds me of the Russian president Vladimir Putin. They used to say, 'He has only two qualities. He doesn't drink too much alcohol, and he is not an anti-Semite.' A little later they realised he was an anti-Semite. What's more, he is a paedophile, and his addiction to paedophilia is often shown on Russian television. He walks towards a young, beautiful, fresh and sexy boy, grabs his shirt, removes it, at least partly, and kisses this boy on the tummy. Actually there are people who hesitate, when confronted with the name of Putin. They wonder if the Russian president is really Putin or Rasputin in disguise. But their opponents, the opponents of the equation Putin-Rasputin point out that Rasputin drank like a fish, whereas Putin drinks like a Russian president who is addicted neither to alcohol nor to drugs. As everybody knows, we often come across some opponents of the opponents we have in mind and even analyse in our talks and articles and essays. And these opponents (the last ones) say that Rasputin did not look like a fish. 'What *did* he look like?' ask other opponents. Instead of saying, 'He looked like Rasputin' we often hear the following remarks, 'He looked like a Russian peasant whose libido was renowned amongst the beautiful Petersburg princesses.' 'He looked like the empress's lover.' 'He looked like the actor assassinated by a group of plotters in a castle, not far from the Neva.'

And what about Putin? The one who remains without any ras? (Looks like a naked king.) They announce his death on TV and speak about him in the past tense. Some television viewers are tense, whereas others open a series of bottles among which you see a bottle of Krug. 'This death calls for a celebration,' they say. Who are 'they'? The opponents of the opponents of the opponents? Putin sleeps in a refrigerator, while waiting for his own funeral, or for the funeral of the cosmos. So does Stalin whom they evoke rather often in connection with Putin.

In this proverbial life we are told that love is the best feeling or sentiment one can experience (or go through) in one's lifetime. Can you really go through it; even if all this happens in parentheses? You do your best to take a few steps on the road leading to absolute love, whatever that is. One may even wonder if it does exist somewhere, and finally one is forced to come to the following conclusion, 'This hypothesis exists only in the virtual world we are acquainted with thanks to our dreams and wild, unrestrained, unpunished fantasies. Our imagination goes on a stroll, deviates from every pattern imaginable (and unimaginable, mind you) and everything goes astray, not only our stroll or rather our legs – our very life. Yes, you are led astray by your own imagination, not by a bad boy who lives next door and has a pair of fists that frighten everyone, including ferocious dogs. You make mistakes which unmake you in the long run. Sometimes – you have to admit it, otherwise you will never come to terms with your existence – yes, sometimes even in the short run you are undone. (This 'undone' reminds me of an English poem I knew by heart two or three decades ago.) You imagine that you are in love with a beautiful or ugly lady. (Such things, the latter version of this supposition, take place more often than not.) And you fancy that her feelings explore the same space, the same notion, the same slogan which may be rendered literally as follows, 'There is nothing more rewarding than the reward widely known

under the name of love.’ But what kind of rewards do you receive, enjoy, take notice of in the course of your amorous adventure? A few kisses, a dozen or so? On your cheeks, on your lips, on your shoulder blades?

It is commonly assumed that love triumphs over death. The latter grabs you by the throat, but you can hear the sound associated in your mind with your door that creaks, creaks and even squeaks, if you listen to it attentively. Anyway, what counts in this situation is the protagonist that enters your room. And you know, yes, thanks to your forebodings, presentiments or rather positive feelings, that what penetrates your private space is love, proverbial, slogan-elevated love. Love makes you forget your worries, whatever their size and evil contents. Love elevates you, puts you on a pedestal from which you can see the whole world and even whatever happens in its fissures. It is true that the cracks I am talking about are rather narrow, according to many dictionaries, but one is always surprised by the number of misfortunes they harbour within their entrails. Whenever you see these entrails, you understand to what extent this can ruin your life. (There are people who believe that one ruin is quite enough and so you do not have to resort to what is called ‘pluralisms’; at least on this occasion. No, no, no, no, no! There are many ruins everywhere; quite a number of them.) You do understand the phenomenon, but what can you do about it? Well, you can pick up one ruin and squash it as if it were your hat that you can squash by sitting on it. The point is the ruin, no matter which ruin and whose ruin, is not your hat and consequently you cannot sit on it. Nor can you lie on it. What *can* you do? Nothing, nothing at all. What can you do in the context of your life? This morning I saw a documentary on Hitler’s life and death. There are so many documentaries about him; the world is swarming with such documentaries from which you may learn that Hitler had a number of lazy bones. So what? It did not prevent him from destroying a huge, a monstrous part of the world where we live and prosper, according to our newspapers and some of our colleagues who do prosper, by the way.

What is prosperity, by the way? (By the same way, it goes without saying.) Love, love, a huge number of kisses. Could we add anything to this love? To make it look even more prosperous? Eva Braun loved Hitler; or his power, or his cottages. But in addition to Eva’s love, Hitler just had to destroy a great many monuments and human lives; and loves, as a matter of fact. What can an ordinary citizen do to make his or her life look quite gorgeous? Quite is quite necessary in the context; incidentally. Suppose you limit your remark to the words ‘life’ and ‘gorgeous’. Of course you do not make this statement for your own sake: you wish this truth to be widely known and universally recognised as a symbol, an unalterable symbol of your lifelong happiness. Suppose, however, that your neighbour shakes her head and even shrugs her shoulders as if doubting the veracity of your hasty conclusion. What do her gestures seek to impart to you and probably to two or three other neighbours of yours? Does she mean to say your life cannot be gorgeous without her participation in it? Without her kisses, to put it bluntly?

I know a man whose power of seduction resides in his ability to sing lullabies. When I speak about this ability, this addiction to lullabies, to the people who ignore and even despise this ability and whatever is linked to it, they nod their heads and say, ‘Me too, I often sing various songs to my wife – before midnight, before going to bed. I have no idea whether they’re lullabies or just extravagant songs, but I do sing them and my wife kisses me on both cheeks, saying, “I love you so much. You’re still young and naive – like a little boy who believes in the goodness of the world and its inhabitants.”’ No, no and no. What I am talking about concerns a man who is neither young nor old. At least these are not the terms that come into my head, whenever I feel like talking about him. What he does has nothing to do either with young ages or with old people who nod their

heads too often: they are always on the brink of a profound sleep. He lies down, moves on all fours towards his beloved's bed and makes himself comfortable under it. Then he feels and hears his beloved's body that adopts this bed for the forthcoming night. After a while, before she really goes to sleep, before she begins to penetrate the kingdom of Morpheus, he launches into his adventure: singing a lullaby designed to provide a beautiful dream – or a series of beautiful dreams – to his beloved, to her brain and heart. He sings, for instance: 'La-la-lalara, La-la-la-lera.' According to him, these la-las guarantee what he calls 'the advent of beauty and virtuality'.

'Isn't your beloved beautiful?' I ask him.

'Of course she is,' he answers.

'So you can't call the virtuality you painfully and ardently create through your songs the advent of beauty. Your beloved is acquainted with beauty as such, given that she looks at herself in mirrors – every day, especially if she is about to leave the house for some reception or other, some ball, whether masked or not.'

'If you allow me to interfere with your exterior monologue, I'd like to point out that, if you have in mind a masked ball, it's quite pointless to put any makeup on. The mask will take care of beauty.'

'And what if, at some point, your beloved has to remove her mask, driven by the desire to speak to her partner with an open face?'

'I am her habitual partner, and I never ask her to remove her masks. I love all of them.'

'More than your beloved or wife? Call her what you wish.'

'No, but this is a matter of choice, of *her* choice. And considering that every choice of hers involves the activity of her brain and sensitivity, I'd insult her taste if I asked her earnestly, in earnest and so forth, to remove the mask she's chosen, after much soul-searching, taste-searching.'

Sometimes we realise – and this does happen, whatever we may think about human stupidity – that the conversations we lead in the course of our lives are just unbearably pointless, ridiculous and almost criminal. Indeed – we waste our lives without taking into consideration its preciousness or preciousness or whatever it is. But an individual, a human being in whose heart and brain there remains a particle of good will, one hundredth part of good will (I do not use the expression 'excellent will') can still count on hope, on the possibility of a good life, of a happy denouement to every situation he or she gets involved in. If it is a woman we are talking about, she can just remove the bad mask she wears for some obscure reason, and everything immediately grows beautiful and intelligent. Even brambles and thorns look intelligent on such occasions, believe it or not.

Yes, our heart is corrupt; and so are our members, the members of our body. But the good will I have just touched upon comes along and writes on all our members only one word, one significant, magnificent word, 'Good'. It is important to use capital letters, when writing or engraving this word, otherwise it might disappear of its own accord, for no reason at all. Is there any reason for any disappearance? Of course – death, for instance. But this word should remain, whatever happens. Even cancers should not be able to make it disappear from our existence and dreams.

Your good will can be directed towards the creation of a masterpiece – either in the domain of music or in any other domains. You recall Beethoven's efforts directed towards the same goal, and a number of drafts or useless, abortive attempts parade in front of your inner (and sometimes even outer) eye. You see the notes that do not feel comfortable – either on account of themselves or because of the annoying, almost baleful presences of their colleagues. Now and then, all these notes grow irritated and their conversations reflect their dissatisfaction with the composer's genius that they begin to question in earnest. 'What does he think about us,

about himself? Does he really believe that, in spite of his inability to hear anything, not even a clap of thunder, he can compose the *Ninth Symphony* and his late quartets?' They even have a go at intervals, pointing out – the composer does not hear them, alas – that such notes cannot sound together, feigning to participate in the score which is a failure and cannot be otherwise; in their opinion. They begin to jump from one chord to another, recomposing, in point of fact, the music about which humanity will dream for centuries to come. Being aware of Beethoven's cosmic talent, these people dream about his future compositions, asking each other, 'What do you think about his next work? Another quartet, another sonata or trio?' And once the composition gets out of the composer's study, music lovers listen attentively to its intricacies and soon their dreams reproduce them, willy-nilly, during the stretches of time and space devoted to sleep. Some of these dreamers are determined to see their late relatives – especially their mothers and fathers, their grandmothers – but instead of their nearest and dearest they watch a dance of notes they cannot hear at the outset of the ritual. (They are Beethovens, to some extent. All of them.) But little by little all becomes audible and beautiful, and they forget about their nearest and also their dearest.

The individuals who say, if only occasionally, 'This (he, she) gets on my nerves,' must know what they are talking about: their personal, manifold experience. They lose their tempers or some of their nerves and shortly afterwards come across these discarded things. They literally get on their own nerves, walking on them; jumping on them, if necessary. (Surprisingly it is often necessary or even vital to jump on your nerves, otherwise they might never leave you alone.) Incidentally you do say – now and then – 'Please leave me alone,' addressing your nerves. And then you find yourself in a speechless, pointless world from which not only Beethoven's bagatelles are excluded: even Mozart's operas cannot be heard within it.

A bundle of laughs, a bundle of nerves. A bundle of laughs can be deciphered and understood rather easily. Someone makes a joke and you laugh heartily; or you just laugh, heartily or unheartily. You go to sleep but the sleep does not descend upon you, upon your busy brain which is often in turmoil. The sleep does not descend and you have plenty of time on your hands. And you begin to recall some episodes from your life, and among these episodes there can be seen the joke made by someone in your presence; rather recently, as you recall. You laugh once again; and once again. The laugh that resounds in your room does its best to prevent you from falling asleep, and you curse your friend or rather enemy – the creator of this joke. It is true that it makes you laugh, but it does it at the wrong moment. You are not sleeping in the midst of your friends and colleagues, in the midst of beautiful ladies who might admire your smile and the sound of your laughter. Nobody admires it, as a matter of fact. What is more, this laughter of yours destroyed your sleep, your present sleep, your forthcoming sleep; and it might have destroyed the sleep you expect to enjoy tomorrow and the day after tomorrow because you are unlikely to forget this joke, associated now with your bed. As soon as you see your bed, you burst into laughter. And you cannot add, 'For no reason at all,' because you know the reason; and you can see the roots of this reason. And even the glance you cast at the reason of this laughter makes you laugh almost automatically. This predicament pursues you for a week or so; for a month or so. And 'or so' remains with you for a while which may last two or three years.

As for the bundle of nerves, you know perfectly well what it is. Light-heartedly you might presume at some point that you are dealing only with one nerve you have just found on your way to the kitchen. But then

you realise this nerve is very sociable, and the sociability of the nerve is usually displayed in the kitchen where you cannot find what you look for. You look for a knife and find a spoon. You begin to cut a piece of meat with this spoon and realise once again – so many realisations, so many deceptions – that it does not work. In other words, your tool does not work, for its destination and vocation are quite different. In Russia – at least in nineteenth-century Russia – it was used during disputes. Instead of looking for an argument, a worthy or unworthy argument, you would just pick up a spoon and strike your opponent on the forehead; once or twice or many times. You would break the spoon in the process, but there were many spoons around you, especially if you were in the kitchen. Nowadays the Russians use mostly their bundles of nerves: they throw them at their opponents. The bigger the bundle, the greater the harm. That is why the Russians are so nervous: it is useful, after all. And this stratagem permits them to struggle for their lives most efficiently. And they really have to *struggle* for their lives.

What was I talking about? One wonders whether I was really talking or doing nothing. The point is we have a baleful tendency to take care of unimportant things, letting the important ones inexorably rot somewhere, far from our eyes and attention. Oddly enough, we eagerly pay attention to subordinate clauses or unimportant things, and they come to the fore, sometimes unwillingly; against their will. After all, they *are* unimportant things and often they repeat the following saying, ‘A place for everything, and everything in its place.’ Of course, from time to time, they may ask themselves the ritual question, ‘What am I?’ Another question follows immediately, ‘Where’s my place? Am I really subordinate, secondary?’ Revolts are a common feature of human life, of human society. (Such things can even happen in the world of animals.) But subordinate clauses are really subordinate, otherwise they would have merited another name for their activities (or inactivities).

But, in point of fact, subordinate clauses do not think they are subordinate, for they dominate the world. Subordinates always win because they will be first. They are already first and often you stumble upon a group of people who stubbornly turn the pages of the Bible, in English, in French or even in Russian. *Will* be first or *are* first? The last are always around so you do not have to look for them – under beds, for instance. (Why do they speak so often about the spaces under beds? Because many fortunate or unfortunate lovers know these spaces tangibly, having spent hours and hours within them, while their rivals, the lawful husbands of their mistresses, enjoyed the latter’s bodies *on* the beds.)

Another grammatical and vital problem: the first will be the last or the last will be the first? Well, let us tackle every problem in its turn. Here comes the turn of last and first. Last will be first or the last will be the first? In both camps you can come across the partisans of those who say, ‘We are the first, the very first. There’s nobody in front of us.’ And what about lasts and the lasts? ‘We are the last of the Mohicans,’ they say, stamping their feet and thereby proving that ‘the’ confers upon them a special status, a sort of championship that cannot be contested and rivalled – not even in the presence of Olympic champions. The latter jump very high, but an owner of ‘the’ says to them, ‘I don’t even have to jump. My “the” accomplishes this duty for me on every occasion.’ And a few amazed observers follow the trajectory, not to say the itinerary of a ‘the’ that flies off, up, up, touches one star, another star, becomes a star in the process and brings its newly-appropriated status to its rightful and happy owner.

Why are slaves so determined to become their opposite: masters, masters, grossmasters? Even if someone dares to point out within their hearing, 'You're just slaves,' they may retort, 'No, we're the last. The last Mohicans, you know.' If you run around a stadium and another runner beats you in the course of this race, you may always say, 'The last Mohicans always come second, otherwise they wouldn't be the Mohicans at all.'

'Not even the first Mohicans?' someone may ask. (The same someone, always the same.)

'The first Mohicans were superior because they were aware of their final destiny – to become the *last* of the Mohicans. Actually, being the first of the Mohicans is not only ridiculous – it is useless. Sooner or later you'll become the last of the Mohicans. You should always enlist before the call-up.'

But the last, whoever they are, enjoy a bad reputation – and they really seem to *enjoy* it – and that not only on account of the Biblical truth. For instance, they are convinced they are the best judges, whatever the court in the midst of which they defend their causes. Why, why, why? Why do you think you know better than others? they are constantly asked. 'Because we embody the *last* judgement,' they answer in unison. Sure enough, as soon as they finish to read their judgement, the person at whom it is directed puts her right or left hand on her heart and dies peacefully. After all, she knows the verdict, the content of the last judgement devoted to her life and achievements. Real achievements or minus achievements, as they say now in Russia, in Putin's Russia.

And if they are accused of a murder, they answer as follows, 'No. Our so-called victims are holders of evil, of its treasures. This evil is not efficient and concerns only itself – such is the law of Providence, if you must know. So, at the moment of judgement, of our judgement, the evil they bear within themselves quits their bodies, flies off and falls on them like a bomb, destroying their bodies, souls and everything else. Are you satisfied?'

Who are they? This is the question one is likely to ask, when reading about them, those, and so on: I am not always specific about my heroes and whatever they touch on their way to hell. (There is no other way, as they used to say in communist countries; and also in Nazi Germany.) Well, let them remain what they are; or who they are, considering that anybody, if not anything, is entitled to existence; at least in the sense attributed to it by Descartes, by his 'cogito, ergo sum'. Yes, I cogito, even if my thoughts are evil, nonsensical and almost non-existent. But they do exist. Medical scientists often say, 'The drug is very effective – the only snag is that it cannot be produced in large quantities.' Once again, I limit my narrative to a general notion, to a drug you can get or rather cannot get somewhere; or nowhere, as the case may be. The point is, existences can be produced in large quantities unless there is a war everywhere, one of these world wars that last forever and are not likely to be extirpated from our lives; and even from our deaths, logically enough. Well, let us explain to ourselves and others what this actually means: 'Cogito, ergo sum.' Of course we always look for stability, provided now by God, now by a president, however unreliable and absurd; and unredeemable.

According to Descartes, you can cogito about whatever you like, and you do not even have to bother about whether you cogito or not. You always cogito, whatever you do or think about. For instance, you touch a piece of clothing, and you can add, 'I never thought about it in my life until the moment I touched it.' Nevertheless, the moment came and you did touch it, which means you committed the sin of participation in the evil that reigns in the world – *sans partage*, as the French say. Right now I have no time to look for a translation, however imperfect, but that is not necessary, considering that whatever we do is evil, even if we do not think about it. Even if we do not think about evil either on its terms or on our own terms. On our own, our own, our

own. Sometimes we are prepared to sacrifice anything, even our most precious possessions, so as not to be our own, ours, owns, and so on.

You cogito and that might mean you exist, and whoever cotigos – and everybody does, according to our earlier conclusions – is entitled to our full respect on the strength of what our declaration of human rights declares. There is a text where everything is fully explained – down to cogito and even down to ergo sum. So what? Well, whoever thinks and does whatever this thinking leads to has every right to have all the rights, and therefore this individual reigns in the world we have in our field of vision and thoughts...and therefore, and therefore...The rest is hard to articulate. But it might mean we have to accept this member as a rightful, full-bodied – like a good wine – member of our community. We do not *kill* him on the spot: we may begin to *look* for the right spot in this domain, in the domain of killing this undesirable individual. How do we go about it? We just walk around and say to ourselves or to others, our companions in killing and getting rid of, ‘Is this the right spot, in your rightful opinion?’ And if some of our companions in fortune say, ‘No, I don’t think so,’ you continue to walk around, looking attentively around you, saying to yourself from time to time, ‘Right or not, right or not.’ And then the right spot comes, and you know its destination from the very start – as soon as you glance at this spot; as soon as this spot receives your glance. Actually, you do not really have to wait for the reception of your glance: you did cast it, thereby accomplishing your duty. The rest is silence – on your part; whatever happens in the exterior world.

Well, this is the right spot. All right, all right. The next step can be deciphered thus: the victim should be brought to the right spot at all costs. You assume the costs and bring the victim to the spot. And if the victim asks you, on the way to the spot, ‘What’s our final destination?’ you answer, ‘The spot.’ And if the victim continues to question you on the subject, you answer, without turning a hair or anything else, ‘You seem to have answered your question yourself. Final, final, final. Can’t you hear the final note which resounds in your question? And in my answer, in a manner of speaking?’

There are only final spots in the world; there is nothing else. This is another way of thinking, of signing verdicts. A friend of mine (perhaps my former mistress, as a matter of fact) says, paraphrasing Descartes, ‘We are what we think.’ But there are things about which I do not think; at least not in advance. I touch something inadvertently, and this something becomes part of my life, even if I do not collapse and die on the spot. Chance should not be *badiner avec*, as the French would put it, if put in touch with our conversation. (Treated lightly, if you wish. You should treat it *heavily*.) You go somewhere – you cannot do otherwise – and if someone (this someone is the same individual, as I pointed out on several occasions) asks you, ‘Where are you going?’ you answer, ‘Somewhere.’ Of course, this someone is not inclined to waste this someone’s (my someone’s) time and points out straightforwardly, ‘You’re right for the final spot.’ And then you ask yourself an earnest question; and you ask it in earnest. You earnestly ask yourself an earnest question; and that is how this should always happen. At least when you ask yourself questions. (Sometimes – very often, in fact – you wait for no answers.)

Unfortunately – what a calamity – it becomes a dialogue. (You should not talk to people like that. There are people with whom you are not supposed to shake hands. Putin, for instance. There are people to whom you had better not talk, for better or worse. I mean, for hearing something worse, for you cannot hear anything else from them.) Well (bad, bad) you set your foot on another journey which demonstrates its length in front of you, starting from your foot, from your right foot, to be exact. You put your right foot forward and begin to put it into action. You can see it perform all sorts of exercises – in front of your eyes and probably for the sake of your

eyes. Your eyes take no advantage of it – I can assure you. After all, I know my eyes better than any of you do; whoever you are. (As usual, as usual. Whoever you, whoever you are. And what if among these whoever and you and are there comes forward Julius Caesar? What would you say to him?)

Another spot, another spot. And for once you are not talking about Lady Macbeth who, as everybody knows, is obsessed with spots. As soon as she sees one, she exclaims, ‘Another one. Will there be...’ and so on, although, as a matter of fact, there are no so ons, as I pointed out many times in my youth and even in my childhood. Well, bad, dead – it is just another spot of ink celebrated by W.B.Yeats. But then you can say, in the same breath, ‘A schoolboy I was acquainted with in the Sixties, in the Soviet Union, talked to me at length about the ink spots he would leave in his notebooks or whatever this kind of thing was called in the Soviet Union. He said to me, “Every spot of ink requires spring-cleaning.”’

What am I prepared for?

Kjjkbjhc yj hv yuhjvytff uyhgcytfufcyjgf \$èyuivvyuijbjytuh ktg yçoilhbiè!çyouijlk;,n!çpomlk=;, k!lçol jliohk jn iohkj,n;

I am not prepared for this. What’s more, I do not know how to deal with it. What’s more, I do not know whether one should really deal with it. How do you deal with it, ITOTYOTO9TOTOTOTOTOTOTTOTOTOTOTOTOT?

There is an individual by your side and if God or one of His servants looks at you directly, not obliquely, this servant can say to God or someone else, ‘This man is great because nothing casts a shadow over his persona.’ Suppose, however, that this individual whose presence does not seem to bother you beyond measure, shifts his position and installs himself in front of you. Now God’s servant cannot see you properly. This servant sees you improperly on account of this figure which literally casts a shadow over your existence, over your very life. Indeed, is it worth your while to live within this shadow, leading a sort of truncated existence?

Let us suppose that this individual, this shifty, shadowy individual is lazy, being made up of lazy bones. (Not a single bone of this individual is active, in spite of a few movements you may notice, from time to time; a few movements coming and going within the substance I am doing my best to describe.) This individual or substance is consequently too lazy to budge, to move from one position to another. He cannot shift for himself, let alone for others. But he can say a few words, which is easier than lifting one’s legs, let alone putting them elsewhere. So he says a few words that contradict what you announced a few minutes ago; or a few seconds ago. And everybody listens to what he says. And even if no one listens to him, you know he has just contradicted you, your opinions – your very life, in a way. And this is unbearable, your being conscious of this contradiction, of this verbal attack on your status, on the statue you have built in your own honour. Yes, someone else seems to have ruined this statue, if only in part, in parts. This someone seems to have chipped it, after taking a penknife from one of his pockets. You are not sure to have seen the manoeuvre, but this does not really matter, considering that the evil has been carried out after all. After all the problems you had during the erection of your own statue. And you cannot tolerate this nonsense, this attack on your identity and achievements. They chip my achievements, you say to yourself. Chip, chip, chip, chip. Is that how they address chickens?

What is more, no chicken comes, whenever you mutter ‘chip, chip, chip’, which means that even chickens despise you in this world of ours. And this is the last straw which cannot be put up with, for all your tolerance

(you are Gandhi's worshipper) and endless amiability. What should be done? First you have to find the individual that spoils your party; or spoils the party for you, which amounts to the same thing, to the same spoils. Well, you leap into space and find no one in this space; no one and nothing. This too amounts to the same thing, to the same nothingness. All this means you have a fertile imagination: no one has ever contradicted you. Why? Because you are always right, and only a fool is capable of contradicting the truth. And there is only one truth and so if you say something else, something beyond this truth, behind it, you are wrong and condemned by the general, public opinion on which, at one point, at many points, Charlie Chaplin focused his energy and imagination. But the general opinion is not always worthy of its own reputation. Sometimes it is neither general nor has anything to do with what is generally called 'opinion'. It is just gav, gav, gav, or something of the same kind. Just a stray dog barking at the moon.

What do I care about the general opinion? I am a general of my own opinions, and even Le Grand Trompeur is not powerful enough to remove me from my pedestal. Of course this pedestal has nothing to do with glory, fame and money, but the aptitude for dealing with the objects that lie within your reach is much more important. All right, you wish to handle the Almighty and in this respect, in the respect called linguistics, it is easier to deal with God, given that this creature of flesh and blood has only three letters. First you appropriate G, then O, and realise it is not necessary to go any further: God is already in your pocket.

Apparently, upon arriving at some of the Moscow railway stations you were supposed to close your pockets, to sew their respective parts together so that no one could put anything into them. I have no idea what they were talking about, but usually I sew all my parts together before going out or just upon awakening: one never knows. They – whoever they are – are capable of putting into you any sort of nonsense from which you are likely to suffer all your life. You had better sew together your lips and tongue – in the same way – so as not to say anything dangerous, as someone might presume. They might put *anything* into your mouth as well. And this anything can turn out to be a mouth-size atomic bomb. All this is far from what they call an open work. Indeed it is a closed work I am talking about. Closed in every sense of the word, of the deed and of the need.

Well, at least you are allowed to sew together some parts of your body, which means you are a master of your own destiny. You can go on with this ritual, sewing together some parts of the whole world you are supposed to deal with on a regular basis, if the aim of your existence has anything to do with humanity. Of course you do not hanker after money which cannot buy you eternal life and the total absence of death. Yes, you lift your blanket, walk along your endless corridors and look under every book you have read in the course of your life. You also look under all the books you have never read: neither in your life nor before it, in a sort of limbo. During your search you have never come across what is commonly known under the name of death. So you are eternal and have nothing to worry about: this eternal life will enable you to correct a multitude of mistakes, all of them. And if you correct all the mistakes you have ever made, either consciously or unconsciously, you get a white sheet of paper with a diamond at the centre of it. What else do you need?

But are you really *allowed* to live eternally? The absence of such an allowance might mean something; in the long run anyway. I think it might contradict some general laws of the universe; your eternal life, I mean. Even the stars die in the long run, and to them this run appears as a very short run. The same goes for the gods; not for God, though. And what about angels? They run, they run, they run. They run errands for God, and at

some point they realise they can no longer run or walk or use all four limbs for any kind of movement. You can hardly call that 'eternal life'. What is more, during her existence, an angel is always asking for something. 'Even after all these years, I still hanker for a motorbike,' one of them said to a journalist recently. The magazine for which the journalist worked – she was on the staff of this magazine – supplied the angel with all sorts of motorbikes, which enable the former to run her errands on various bikes. To motorbike them, so to speak. But in the long run – this run was rather long – she fell from one of these motorbikes and died like an ordinary human being. What is the point of becoming an angel?

Let us return to the Great Deceiver who works day and night, and thereby deprives us of almost everything; of luxurious motorbikes, among other things. 'She claims she is a duchess living in reduced circumstances.' Such is the motto of the humans we are living with; for all their billions of dollars. Yes, we are dukes, duchesses and kings, but even our motorbikes are not up to what are rightfully called 'cosmic standards'. What is more, we often fall from them, and some of us think this is their fault. Well, instead of blaming the cosmic standards of which we are perversely deprived, they think in terms of their puny constitutions. 'My constitution is too puny,' they say to themselves, and they begin to fall, even when standing on a carpet in the middle of their room. No angle, no piece of furniture seems to influence their lives at this particular moment, but they fall ineluctably as if guided by an evil hand or rather arm – such is the force, the power of the guidance. They continue their journeys on all fours, which is embedded in them; I mean this method or fashion, this way of moving around is part and parcel of their puny, tiny constitution, and even those whose constitution is situated at the opposite pole – poles apart, as they say – succumb to the same allurements, the all-four allurements, sooner than they presume. Of course death, its very existence, prepares us for all sorts of mishaps and so we say to ourselves, 'Now I'm on all twos, but one day I'll be on all fours, otherwise I wouldn't have these fours within my reach. Nature never errs on this side, on the side of multiplicity for nothing, of plurality for nothing.'

Whether you believe it or not, whether you accept it or not, all evil we suffer from on different occasions (and they diversify themselves, these occasions as if writing a set of variations on suffering) originates in Adam's Fall; or Fool, as they sometimes say, exasperated by the consequences of this misdemeanour. Is this really a misdemeanour? Let us not forget that these so-called misdemeanours are situated beyond whatever can be believed in the domain of suffering. You naively drive a nail into someone's skin, and your pressure produces a result you expect or do not expect – it depends on whose side you are. You are on your own side and so you go on driving the nail into the skin I shall not attempt to describe because it is already beyond any description; unless you wish to depict a heap of bloody odds and ends. Suddenly a number of women come to the spot over which you have presided for some time. The women gather around the coffin and begin to wail, as is the custom in the region of the cosmos called the Earth. That is human life in a nutshell; for you.

There are many nutshells around me and I just pick up some of them, one by one. And I see a lot of bites, of cuts, and blood continues to seep or ooze – it depends on what you wish to express, apart from an abominable instance or specimen of death. What can one wish to describe outside, apart from death? (There is nothing outside it, as we all know.) Yes, you wish to express the ways that lead to death, to what they define as the utter destruction of life. (As if life were not self-destructive.) Well, one of the ways, one of the reasons for this destruction of yours is your desire to live. You wish to live and this desire seems to be natural, in spite of all

sorts of drawbacks one can think of almost instantly. Even an innocent-looking scratch – you scratch yourself on the roses growing and flourishing in your garden – and the scratch in question makes its appearance in the world, in the visible world where we all live and suffer. You know a lot of sayings related to the roses which are not really roses, considering the harm they may do, if you go near them with open arms; with open fingers, rather. And today we are growing aware of yet another saying which sounds as follows, ‘Roses are death and nothing else.’ Of course you can apply this saying to anything, except that sometimes you find an excuse, an explanation, a sort of consolation; by reflecting on something remotely associated with the object of your scrutiny. But roses are roses, and nothing else – not even remotely – can be said about them. Do you think you could say, ‘Roses are daffodils?’ No, no, no way, as they say.

The etiological myth which puts Adam at the centre of evil (he does not only come to the fore – he is *at the centre* of it) may be alleviated or attenuated through a sort of *dédoublement*: evil is not a natural, organic product. (A human being is natural, organic and full of tissues.) You can just maintain the following doctrine or statement, ‘Evil is on the agenda of God.’ Or to avoid anything blasphemous, ‘Evil is on the cosmic agenda and so you can follow its zigzags by watching the stars through your telescope.’ It is true that the agenda of the cosmos is always in front of us; but it is not *always* under our scrutiny, which accounts for our numerous mistakes, some of which are irretrievable, obnoxiously fatal. Or just ludicrous. You can watch a number of lovers who gaze at the sky, at the nocturnal sky, from one of the benches that can be found in our parks; you can also listen to their dialogues which boil down to: ‘Beautiful, isn’t it?’

‘It’s very beautiful.’

‘I wish I could offer you one of these stars.’

‘Why only one?’

‘Two or three, if you wish. If you are so inclined, my darling.’

‘Indeed, I am so inclined.’

From time to time some inhabitants of the Earth look up and see almost nothing. No stars, no Milky Way; only a few specks of dust that someone – an inhabitant of Hugo’s famous poem – flung upward. This becomes more and more common – the glance you cast at the sky and find no stars to which you have grown accustomed in the course of your existence. But who told you you would always find them where they were, once upon a time? Now they are replaced by dust or by ashes, which amounts to the same thing; at least within most cemeteries. Amounts to the same thing is just another of my leitmotifs. Of course – of course is also one of my leitmotifs because human life is so simple – everything seems similar to another thing, however different. Everything amounts, amounts, amounts – to no avail. Suppose you ascend a staircase which leads to the Absolute Truth and a lot of achievements related to this Truth, and not just to petty successes. You ascend, ascend, ascend, and then stop, for no reason at all, as they usually say, searching for excuses. But the reason is here, just beside you; and this reason tells you you are inadequate; you are not even quate. You are just ‘in’ and ‘a’, occasionally. What can you do? You start over and over again to please your boss or someone else. This someone may be God – why do I speak of God so often? Because He is better than any boss – and you please him, her, it; and you seem to please yourself. But then you realise you only *seem* to please yourself, whereas you please only a *part* of yourself. What’s more, you have no idea which part of yourself you please. And is it really a please? A party? Do your enterprise or undertaking please anybody, anything? Hardly.

What is your undertaking? Body-building? Hardly. Not Hardy, not Hardy – you are not scrutinising his poems you like so much. A poem-building.

A POEM

A

A POEM

APOEM

A POEM

You build a poem, turn back and look at your building. And you tell yourself, ‘If I lodge in one of its parts, I’ll collapse immediately as if in expectation of a group, an array of apples.’

You build something that succumbs to the allurements of the force of gravity. What are these allurements? I am gravity, you know. I really force my way through reality, and the latter submits to my force, becoming my vassal, my vassal, my vassal. That is what force and domination are about. They are about this:

F G

F G

F G

F G

F G

F G

F G

And what do you conclude? Nothing. Yet conclusions do count. For instance, you conclude that the Earth is just a clump, a clod, a sort of turf, a sort of sod.

Lots of men – Lot is among them – did their best to dethrone or merely depose Adam because there are other traits, other tendencies in the world; not only perversity and apples. These men repudiated, relinquished apples as such and ate mainly peaches, for some reason or other. One of the reasons was the banishment of apples, but nothing ideological could divert their attention from grapes, for instance. Nothing doing – they did not consume any fruit as if fearing a sort of exchange, replacement – treason, in other words (or word). You are convinced the fruit you are holding and putting into your mouth is innocent, an innocent-looking (and tasting) orange. But in fact, as a matter of fact, you are devouring an apple – a close relative of the one devoured by Adam at the outset of our history. Niam, niam, niam, as they say. And then a war was declared; a war flared up somewhere. Yet you were warned: ‘There is likely to be civil war if the region tries to secede from the South,’ you were told. But you paid no attention to this remark. Why? Because you thought you were eating an orange or a grapefruit. And also because you usually do not think in terms of the South. You live in a northern country and, frankly speaking, you are not extremely keen on the sun, its rays and the scorching effect it produces in its wake. But the war was declared and now thousands and thousands of soldiers (and civilians) die because of your culinary habits. Besides, one has to observe a simple rule: before eating something one has to make sure that the

object of one's gluttony is harmless; and not only in one sense of the word. Actually, the only sense that counts everywhere is the war; and its absence. The latter never takes place, to tell the truth.

Well, men can do other things; apart from eating apples all the time. They are not really warmongers; at least they are not *born* warmongers. They may become warmongers in the course of their lives, especially if they live in Russia where people dream either of peace or of war. Usually they say, 'We must go to war – even the result of our going is bound to be bloody, dreadful and full of corpses. But we must go to war, to this particular war because otherwise they will go to war – against us. And this war, the second war, will be even bloodier – bloodier than any Mary – than the first one.' You look behind you and see a pool of blood. And you compare this pool with the one you have just jumped over, determined not to soil and spoil your trousers. Yes, in Russia, instead of soiling your hands you may inadvertently soil your trousers. There is a lot of blood in Russia – everywhere. That is why mothers say to their sons, 'Be careful – don't soil your trousers.'

'Do you mean to say it's better to soil my hands?' asks the son.

'You can always wash your hands – we've got enough bars of soap for that. But what are we supposed to do with your trousers? According to Western media, we've got no washing machines.'

'Let us switch the sound off and we'll have a washing machine, the latest German model.'

When reading this text, you may raise objections to my way of depicting an individual who lives in a northern country. You might say, for instance, 'The people of the North think only about their holidays on the Riviera.' So the South – especially the south of France – cannot be excluded from your way of thinking, from your interior and exterior monologues. You think about the North, for a while, and then unavoidably switch to the South, for fear of catching pneumonia. The points of the compass are North, South, East and West. But your neighbours usually spend their holidays in the south of France. And for nothing in the world would you wish to look *inferior* to your neighbours. That is why, when passing one of them in the streets, you murmur, 'In the south of France' – in three languages.' And then you inquire, almost innocently, 'Do you speak Spanish?'

'No,' answers your neighbour.

'Well, next time I won't speak to you about the south of France in Spanish. Do you have a smattering of Chinese?'

Just in case, you learn this sentence or rather this bit of the sentence (the south of France) in Japanese and go to Japan so as not to reproach yourself for wasting your time, for wasting your life. You waste it anyway because you cannot help saying something important, otherwise your opponents might think you have nothing to say. And then you say this or that, looking straight into their mouths, as if waiting for a thunderous reply, riposte or applause; or for its absence.

There are far more important problems than the one I am confronted with at this particular moment. (It is not really particular unless I misunderstand its essence and substance.) For instance, an evil man can create an insurmountable obstacle on our way to progress and its goal: general happiness, joy and love. This evil man should be eliminated at all costs. But what are these costs? We often speak about them, about all costs, but even one cost should be explained, weighed on our moral, psychological and eschatological scales. (To weigh up the pros and the cons.) And no one takes the trouble to use these scales: only money counts, as we know. If a gigantic amount of money is not involved in the situation under scrutiny, we just disregard scales and other instruments of moral responsibility. We fling all sorts of scales into a huge rubbish bin and go about our affairs. (And moral damages are not to be found in the midst of our affairs.)

Well, we have an evil man breathing down our necks. He also puts spokes in our wheels (the evil man and our wheels, a nice title for a tale). We have a lot of spokes in our wheels, and we also have a revolver in one of our pockets. Shall we kill the evil man, outright or after a while? And then the scales I have talked about for some time interfere in our game, in the game entitled 'life or death'. Yes, this time – all the time, as a matter of fact – we are dealing with death, life and an outcome of some conflict or other. If we kill this man, we get rid of the conflict, but death remains: he is faithful to the post, as the French put it. If you could become immortal, you might kill a thousand men, saying to your opponents, 'They are all evil, they're Putin's partisans, stooges.' Or Stalin's stooges, or Lenin's stooges, or Hitler's stooges. Is Hitler better known than Putin? Today? This depends on the whereabouts of this today.

If asked to compose a song about today's world, I would come up with the following result:

Evil, evil, evil, evil,
Piff paff, piff paff.
Evil, evil, evil, evil,
Vile, wail, vile, wail.

Yesterday I read in a newspaper, 'Tomorrow will be cloudy with outbreaks of rain.' Well, today's weather ties in with this description and so one might say, 'Yesterday's article corresponds exactly to what is going on today.' If I had a revolver, I might practise my slaughter machine by killing the drops of rain; outright, outright. You shoot a drop of rain dead and then verify, make sure it is dead, lying on some leaf of grass. Is it worth my while composing a song about this drop, this leaf?

A leaf of grass,
A tomb of a drop.
Could you find
A better tomb?
Shall I die and lie
Down on a leaf, or rather
On a large range of herbs and spices
To feel more comfortable, at home?
So to speak, so to speak.

You know for sure that 'this is the evil'. That is how you talk about an evil man on whose shoulder the whole world was installed some time ago. And ever since this installation you know that the world will not survive its next anniversary – whatever anniversary and date you have in mind – because its destruction is to be found on the same shoulders. Well, this man should be disposed of – that's for sure. You are sure you are right and so are many of your friends. But the point is – what quantity of evil can justify such a decision, this so-called exploit? You begin to count: one hundred, two hundred, three hundred. You look at this evil man – this man really symbolises evil – and go on counting the amount of evil you encounter, whenever you look at this man. And still

your inner struggle is unfinished: you still ask yourself whether by killing, destroying this man you will not become an evil one yourself.

Yesterday I watched yet another documentary or news programme, and I saw a woman who made a declaration or a speech meant for almost everybody; with the exception of babies who do not speak and understand either the new speak or the old one. The woman was on the verge of tears, and actually a few tears jumped over the barrier erected by modesty and decency and entered the public space. But this does not really matter, given the importance of what this woman said to us. She said we had to pursue, to haunt Putin and eventually murder him. She even said, 'Give me a revolver and I'll bump the bugger off.' There were many pedestrians, onlookers and observers around the woman, but none of these participants in the television programme seemed to own a revolver or an ordinary gun. Many viewers were sitting in front of their screens and some of them had revolvers and guns in their possession. But how to cross the screen and walk towards this woman, determined to hand her the gun in question? You are determined to hand her the gun and she is determined to accept it with an ingratiating smile and a few words of *remerciement*. She is also determined to bump the bugger off, or to bug the bumper off; by means of the same gun, revolver and Browning. (Does this Browning have anything in common with the poet we all admire?)

There are evident evils or open-book evils, as the Russians often say. An open-book crime, an open-book masterpiece. You open a book and realise after a while, after reading a few sentences, that you are dealing with an absolute masterpiece. That is what usually meant by an open-book this and an open-book that. You look at a dictator; at Putin, for instance. What to do? You cannot open him, which might permit you to read a few sentences he harbours in his heart. We are acquainted with the following remark, 'He's been harbouring a grudge against her ever since his promotion was refused.' We spend a lot of time on substitutions. There are many remarks or sentences in our brains and, weary of producing novelties every two minutes, we use these sentences, ready-made judgements, after making them fit such and such a situation. We select a sentence after submitting our brain to a thorough search. (Or a light-hearted search. A light search, if you wish.) And we substitute one word for another, which enables us to discuss the situation we got involved in some time ago. That is how we get rid of hectic periods and insoluble problems. 'He's been harbouring a grudge against her ever since his promotion was refused,' said someone. We substitute he's for Putin's, Ukraine for her, and the rest can stand because Putin wished to be promoted. What kind of promotion did he have in mind? He wished to restore the Russian Empire. He also wished to become the Emperor of this Empire. But this promotion, the one he harboured for some time and cherished in his mind, heart and body, was refused; by the Ukrainians, in the first place.

Many shots and sabres were aimed at Russian ministers, colonels, presidents and even tsars: we are all acquainted with their stories. Some of them may equal in some minds the assassins of Julius Caesar and their victim. And Du, and du, resounds in our history, as well as the name of the Du – Brutus. Later on, Du will turn into Duce, but this is another story.

Yes, I do know what I am driving at. Evil is not everywhere, otherwise we might just sit down and wait. Evil things, evil doings and unhappiness, misery, tragedy: all this happens either to us or to others. We see a black square in the distance, but this distance grows shorter and shorter – not in the twinkling of an eye, though. It grows shorter *in* the eye to such an extent that the eye itself grows smaller and smaller. And soon there remain on our face only two dots, as if we were writing something, using punctuation marks. There are two dots, and

one would expect yet another dot to accomplish the task known as ‘to be continued’ or something along these lines. To be continued, to be continued. What for? All right, all right: let us add something to these two dots that do not mean something significant. Of course you can talk about a colon in this respect, within this figure of speech or punctuation. And if you add a tail to one of the dots, you will be able to speak about semi colons and commas in general. You see a comma in front of you, on a sort of carpet, and say to yourself, ‘It’s not over, not yet. Not all over, at least.’ You take a few steps, reach the comma, trip over it and they have to call an ambulance: there is no other choice. They have no choice, in other words.

Once again, I am almost duty bound to touch upon Putin. (I wish I could really touch him – with a huge hammer or a pneumatic drill. I wish I could drill a few holes in his chest.) When asked about his terrorism, he always answers, ‘We had no choice.’ And you hear thunderous applause; and you conclude that his partisans are not dead; not yet, as you often add. One might conclude there are not enough pneumatic drills in the world and so all these partisans, admirers and fascists continue to walk in our midst. Some of them carry pneumatic drills, and after a while we realise we are full of holes. And these holes are not only all along our legs. Even our hearts are full of holes as if they needed to breathe, as if they were suffocating within themselves. Putin’s stooges, partisans and worshippers aim at our evil, at the evil that, according to them, should descend on us – the sooner, the better. That is why we see so many Maleviches or rather black squares that descend on us, run towards our bodies, brandishing their pneumatic (and other) drills. We say to them, ‘Pity, pity, pity. Have pity on us. At least remove all those squares from our field of vision. You may replace them by triangles which are less threatening, less weird, less horrifying. Or you may put a few balls on the spots where we see (and shudder, with a shudder) the squares we’re talking about. We could play a game of football, instead of waiting for atrocious, merciless death.’

In the meantime the Japanese talk about purities and impurities. Of course it is not enough to go to a Japanese bath designed for several persons, instead of letting one man or woman to enjoy himself or herself in a tiny, more or less comfortable bathtub where one could even play with a few toy boats and one other toy, a harmless crocodile. No, you have to plunge your body into a huge receptacle shared by several people whose impurities are supposed to disappear in the water and in holes designed for the purpose. And you can watch one impurity after another disappear somewhere, probably into the kingdom of purity. Never mind, you feel pure and are prepared to confront yet another series of impurities, for life is made up of impurities among which death takes pride of place. That is why poets say, almost in unison, ‘Death, be not so proud! You’ll disappear into one of the holes I touched upon in days of yore.’ All this is sheer nonsense: death does not disappear; neither into a hole, nor into hell. Even hell is not big enough for death. You put death in hell, hoping it would disappear forever, being burnt by hellish fires, being utterly destroyed by hell’s high waters. No way, as they say: you can still see a huge slice of death, a morsel of death; and there is no way of getting rid of it. No way, no way. Even if you put death in paradise, it will not disappear.

Yes, the Japanese firmly believe that death is the impurest thing one can come across during one’s life. You walk in the midst of impurities, and from time to time you say to yourself, ‘What a horror! I don’t seem to have seen anything like that in my whole life. Hopefully I’ll never see anything like that again.’ But your hopes are dashed and shattered mercilessly – everything and everybody is merciless, when all is said and done – and you see something unutterable. You try to utter it and a series of sounds come from your mouth. But the Japanese say – actually they do not say it, their mouths being shut almost irremediably – something along the

lines of, 'Better to be shut, my mouth, my mouth. Try to learn this simple truth by heart.' The mouth learns this truth by heart and repeats it on a regular basis, 'Better to be shut, better to be shut.'

'Don't repeat it,' you say to your mouth.

'I can't help it,' the mouth answers.

'Why?'

'Because I learnt it by heart, and my heart can't help talking to others all the time. That's how I communicate with the world which should be shut once and for all.'

Alas, they do shut the world from time to time, but they do not *keep* it shut. They simply cannot live without the world, saying, 'This wouldn't make sense.' And they make sense all the time, to account for their sheer existence. They simply do not realise their existence is just sheer.

So the mouth says to us that in the whole world there is nothing more impure than death. That is why they wash corpses several times before dinner and several times after dinner. They pin their hopes on the ultimate purity where death cannot prosper, in accordance with their beliefs which are utterly wrong because there is such a thing as a wrong belief. And whatever is conceivable is doable, and death just does it. That is how our things stand, no matter how many litres of water we pour on these things.

The Japanese keep their corpses – their own corpses, mind you – in coffins; for a long time. Perhaps it is true: seeing a coffin is more reassuring than watching a corpse day and night, day after day. But why can't you just bury the corpse we are talking about almost endlessly? Because his or her presence would impurify the Earth. And the Earth should be kept clean, if only for the sake of rice. At least that is what the Japanese firmly believe and keep in their heart of hearts. And for the sake of cherry blossom. To enjoy cherry blossom you have to be able to walk on the Earth – from your house to wherever there are trees and cherries and blossoms.

You see a tree and a cherry, and they start looking for an armchair where you will spend several months, waiting for the blossom to appear. And then you write a few haikus that immortalise your name and thoughts. You just write: 'Cherry blossom, how beautiful and how new, although I've seen it all my life.' It is a beautiful poem, and you can send it to a woman you are in love with, at least for the moment, for a moment. But this moment counts and please count it for as long as possible; at least until the advent of the next cherry blossom flowering which is to come in a month or so. You wonder how you will spend this month, and this perspective seems cruel, unbearable and endless. But it has to end sooner or later, and eventually the cherry blossom you are waiting for with such eagerness comes and you enjoy it once again. As they say in some Japanese restaurants, 'Please, enjoy it.' And obediently you enjoy whatever they put on your table. And, one must simply admit it, the thing you find on your table is delightful, succulent and unforgettable; at least to some extent, to the extent of your memory and being.

The Japanese – and here lies the fundamental difference between them and my mentality – tend to live in groups, listening to what other people say and think. They detect a thought coming from another brain and decide to follow its itinerary. In this manner they grow attuned to their contemporaries; at least to some of them. They do not say every now and then, 'I disagree with you because you seem to go against nature, against the cherry blossom we contemplate on the other side of the street.' This does not mean that the Japanese, whatever their status and bank balance, neglect their cherry blossoms: this just cannot happen. They may even neglect their lunches, their dinners and even their baths so as not to miss a single moment of the blossom to which their cherry trees pay homage every year as if their very lives depended on it. As if they knew that only their blossoms

save them from continuous and dolorous death. Of course they die every day and every night, but they pay attention only to their blossoms which hide the hideousness of death from them. Death is hideous and you appropriate it, slice by slice, particle by particle. After a while, you can admit that your unconscious job has brought magnificent results. You are almost dead, as a matter of fact, and the rottenness of your matter is on the point of reaching the fact, the only fact of our existence: death and its ramifications such as tombs, coffins and make-up. (Apparently the Japanese put a lot of make-up on their corpses, on their own corpses and on those of their friends, wives and nephews with the intention of hiding the hideousness of death. They never succeed completely: *ness* or *s* remains in spite of their herculean efforts.) You walk towards something that looks like a bed. In fact it is a coffin and you realise this as you get nearer and nearer to its surface or rather to its hideous, abominable contents. This content displays human death, its volume, proportions and unattractive character, and you do what you can not to touch it (inadvertently) with your fingers. Of course your fingers begin to move in the direction of death as soon as the corpse appears within their reach. No wonder they are always on the point of reaching death; as we all are, as a matter of fact. (Another of the facts you cannot bear.) Your fingers are suspended over the body or the rest of it; in question. (Everything is in question; everything can and should be questioned.) Your fingers dance a *Totentanz* over the body. Or deathendance, if you prefer. After a while you become so involved with the movements of your fingers that your body flies off in order to suspend itself over the body you seem to contemplate for the sake of your health and everlastiness. Evernastiness, evernastiness, as your mother used to say as she endeavoured to describe your disrespectful behaviour; and this is also far away, dead and buried, to all appearances.

The Japanese look at all these dancers and decide to join them, mindful as they are of the so-called Japanese team spirit. They know that if someone disjoins the dance, the group will lose its coherence and bungle the job. 'He's an incompetent bungler,' they say about such an individual. Now he stands in the group I have just described, and now, for no reason at all, he disjoins, he disjoins, he disjoins. He puts the members of the group out of joint, thereby putting the aforementioned members' noses out of joint. And Hamlet joins in and one is tempted to end a chapter on this desperate note, waiting for 'the rest is silence'.

But silence does not come, contrary to one's great expectations. The great expectations are truly great, but silence is even greater, for the simple reason that it is made of gold, whereas the great expectations are not silver. They are made more or less permanent through the medium of ordinary wood. Of course it is better than nothing because nothing means nothing: you put your fingers into the void and your body follows the pattern initiated by your fingers. And you fall through, through, through, and no one knows how many throughs you will explore in the course of your Adam-unlike fall. (It does not even deserve a capital F.) You just fall somewhere and somehow, and no one takes notice of your fall; not even second-rate journalists. They just write about royal families and their descendants or ascendants, and everybody reads this worthless stuff which is worthless on account of the number of lies told in the tabloid or yellow or rose or black-and-white press. You know that what you read amounts to nothing else; lies, lies, lies or words, words, words. But you have no desire to embroil yourself in lengthy lawsuits with the tabloid newspapers. And so you let these things (and many other things) stand. And contrary to many expectations which are eternal and omnipotent; and, contrary to Beckett's famous play – these things do not fall. All that fall turns into 'some fall and some do not', which makes things even worse, although you are convinced that nothing can be worse than these things. Not even awful, evil, transcendently foul things.

And the Japanese believe that one's death might make things easier for one and for others, for one's descendants. The latter say to each other, 'What good luck we have. Luckily for us he committed suicide, otherwise we would have suffered atrociously throughout our tiny lives. We know that all lives are tiny and they grow even tinier if your ancestor doesn't kill himself, after committing a lot of mistakes, grievous and even mortal.' You make a mistake and you know it is mortal, judging from its atmosphere and content or subject-matter. Incidentally, its subject-matter is called 'a grievous mistake', and this is enough to condemn you to a series of eternal punishments, such as fire, brimstone, stones falling from nowhere every second, every tiny, puny second, and cetera. By the way – and cetera also falls on you, on your skull and so on.

What else did I wish to say about the Japanese? They fall into silence, when the fear to be misunderstood overcomes them to the point of shutting their mouths; not forever, just for a few minutes. Yet some of them wish their mouths could be shut forever so that even their death will be deprived of what is frequently called 'communication'; or 'the communication's umbilical cord'. There is only one communication worth of our attention, according to the people who speak almost relentlessly about umbilical cords. You lose this communication and, understandably enough, start looking for a cord. Then you look for something umbilical and finally give up your searches, a number of them. And you feel relieved. My God, you do feel relieved, although you are not really relieved, removed from troubles without ends; and odds, mind you.

And what if, what if, you say to yourself, speaking to yet another deity. All right, you win one race, two races, and your horses or whatever replace them, run tirelessly over the surface of the Earth; and even beyond this surface – in other worlds, along other surfaces and depths. So what? What if, what if.

What if I lie down and forget?
 What if I die up and recall?
 Everything, everything, and things
 Put themselves in order. And so
 You stay arrayed, arrayed,
 Forever and ever. And ever,
 Perhaps. Just in case. In evermore.

But whatever happens or is written, composed, imagined on the spur of the moment, death remains the blackest thing in the world; even if you hide it within a coffin which you try to whiten by pouring a lot of water over it, gallons of water. An imperial gallon, used in Britain, is equal to 4,546 cubic centimetres. Well, you pour 444,555,666 cubic centimetres of pure water on the coffin by which you stand, running a number of risks. In the first place, you risk your life by standing in proximity to the coffins where your friend and mistress are doing their best to find eternal rest. Actually, they hope this rest will not be eternal, for they believe either in Christ's promised and assured resurrection, usually written with a capital R, or yet in another incarnation. Habitually, they do not mind undergoing the same or slightly different tortures (in this life of ours), provided they are given an opportunity to do it once again, at the expense of their wealth, health and spiritual tranquillity.

But spiritual things are often, if not always, related to spirits – to vodka, among other things and doings. (Vodka makes you do a lot of things about which we shall keep silent, for the sake of decency and order.) And vodka is associated with purity – not in the brains of the Japanese, to be exact and fair. Well, you have a coffin in

front of you; and your eyes, consequently. Your eyes are open and consequently a coffin lies in front of them. It could lie behind them, but, unlike some representatives of the animal kingdom, you cannot see whatever is behind you. (Am I confusing this kingdom with some supernatural forces, with God, for instance? Yes, God can see whatever happens behind His back, and the expression ‘behind my back’ does not exist in His vocabulary. What does exist in God’s vocabulary? God, God, God, God. A sort of quadrinity.)

So they see a coffin and begin to pour a lot of water or vodka on it, in the hope of removing impurity from its very nails or whatever they are replaced with. They pour and pour and pour. Contrary to what many linguists suggest, they do not become poor (nor even *pauvres*, mind you), but slowly but surely (too many buts, as usual) they realise that nothing purifying happens in front of their eyes. And somehow they are aware of the same doings of nature – behind their backs. All this means that water does not accomplish its duty – far from it. Indeed, if you put water and duty in the same room, they will occupy the spaces located at the utmost distance from each other; in the opposite corners, for instance.

At some point in history water, which was married to duty and purity, divorced both of them and became a solitary traveller or vicar. You are solitary and solitary is you – that is the end of many Japanese stories where a woman appears to your eyes in the shape of a bird and asks you not to open any door in her abode. Of course, as soon as she is out of sight, she is also out of mind, and you grow engrossed in doors. You open them in the twinkling of an eye; in the twinkling of a hand, you might say, except that your hands never twinkle. And it is too late to teach them this kind of exercise; or any exercise associated in your mind and body with spirituality.

You continue to pour water – a huge quantity, as a matter of fact – on coffins, on corpses, on death himself, and suddenly it dawns upon you that the water you resort to on this occasion (and other occasions, and other occasions) is not really pure. It is impure, for God’s sake! That is what you exclaim, after a while. And you go on exclaiming, ‘For God, for God.’ You are persuaded you have always done. What? For God. Never mind what. For God and for you. And the result is so poor that even your pouring some water over some coffins does nothing to bring you nearer to your goal; to paradise. You hold rather firmly a glass into which you poured some pure or impure water; some time ago. And you see some sort of paradise in front of you, and you rejoice to the utmost of your abilities. You shout successively, ‘Paradise, happy, at last, my God, my You, whoever You are, my Thou, whoever, whoever!’

So wherever you go, whatever you do, you create a sort of black perspective, and a museum asks you to sell this picture to the world, meaning you are a great painter, creator, and so can be exhibited in museums and even on public squares – for the sake of the taste that reigns among professionals, art-lovers, the so-called elite that cannot live without perspective and transmigrated, transsupposed, transresurrected, transvirtuosed death. You recognise the subject matter thanks to the blackest colour ever, but they take it differently, turning it into a work of art, a new tendency, a new road by means of which humanity is sure to escape from the cul-de-sac known to everybody as ‘our time’.

No, I wished to tell another story. At some point Goebbels said, ‘You shouldn’t fear death.’

‘But how could we do it?’ they asked. ‘How could we rather not do it? Is it possible? Not to fear death?’

‘You just separate death from fear. They should part in opposite directions.’

‘Do they have to say “adieu” to each other?’

‘They may, if they feel like it.’

‘And if they *don’t* feel like it?’

‘You order them to feel like it.’

‘All right, they part. So what?’

‘You pick up death and bury it somewhere, far from the fear and its outstanding eyes. Don’t forget that fear’s eyes are outstanding and therefore they outlast a lot of objects created on their own initiative. So this fear says to itself, “Well, I created death and that was a mistake – I recognise it fully and truly and coolly. But I promise – I’ll never come across it again, walking around its tomb, circling around it, over it. I’d rather become a vulture than pay homage to my mortal enemy, called *mort*.”’

In short, Goebbels said we should nip in the bud our fear of death, and this is the only way of making death respect us. Death says to himself, ‘He and she do not fear me any longer. This impossible task was put on their shoulders and their shoulders bore it triumphantly, without giving way either to this part or that part of my magnitude. This exploit deserves my respect, and so I declare this respect openly.’

Actually, it is hard not to declare it openly, given that whatever is open is also declared. For instance, you bare the jewels hidden in your suitcase and, by this very gesture, by its openness and open-heartedness, you open whatever can be open in your substance, including your intestines that begin to float in the open air. The air is open to your intestines, and they take full advantage of it, floating in it, flying in it and over it. That is what they call ‘democracy’ or ‘freedom of speech’ or ‘freedom of pitch’. What is the motto of this freedom and speech and mich, whatever it is? ‘By this time their disagreement had reached such a pitch that there was no hope of an amicable conclusion.’ An amicable conclusion is anyway out of the question. But what kind of conclusion is it? (One wonders.) ‘Do you respect me?’ That is the question, as Hamlet might have put it; and he did not put it, I am afraid. So I have to do it on my own, and first I have to decide whether I have my own. Or is it His own? Or Her own?

According to our German enemy, Doctor Goebbels, or whoever he was, said that we should respect Mr Death; and vice versa, which means that death says to us rather solemnly, ‘I respect you.’ And then again you yield to the temptation and launch into a well-predicted discussion.

‘Do you really respect me?’ asks death.

‘I do, except that I don’t respect your custom of snatching us from where we are to transport us to where you are, my dear Death.’

‘I have no choice, as the President of Russia, Mr Putin says.’

‘You could leave me where I am. On the Riviera, for instance.’

‘But are you sure you feel comfortable on the Riviera?’

‘Absolutely sure.’

‘But don’t you know my kingdom guarantees a total remedy?’

‘How do you mean?’

‘You cut your finger and you die from it. You can cut as many fingers as you like after your death.’

Actually Doctor Goebbels said you should not fear death, which might allow you to respect him in the long run. And then, in the course of the same run you will see a few ceremonial bows coming from death himself, which might mean that death respects you in his turn. Well, I have talked about it abundantly, and I think I even talked about the hats lifted on this occasion, on both sides.

Do you respect me or not? This question is crucial for Russian people. They stand in front of each other, posing this question seriously, earnestly, and if the obvious answer does not come at once, they begin to strike each others with fists and even with bottles of ink. After one such encounter, a journalist wrote, 'He was disappointed to see his body returned with a mass of corrections in red ink.' We realise at once we are talking about the world in general where bodies float, fly and collide with each other to such an extent that a number of bottles appear. Contrary to what one might presume, these bottles contain not only vodka, but also ink, which means that, at the end of the battle, you are covered with ink from head to foot. Your body, rather. But what else do you have? The soul?

Something is wrong and everyone knows that. That is why there is the word 'redresser' which allows us to comprehend the structure of the world and its history. There is something 'dressé' and apparently this dressage signifies the best state of whatever happens. The situation we are in is far from being dressed or simply vertical. It is full of angles and holes – like an old branch that belongs to an old tree. You take hold of this branch and it no longer belongs to the tree, for the simple reason that it is broken; or sad. If a writer speaks about a broken flower, he or she wishes to convey the sentiment of sadness or rather the sediment of joy. Only a few minutes ago this branch or twig was more or less happy; at least it was part and parcel of a tree. And every tree originates in the huge, indescribable Tree of Life. In other words, this twig was living in our world, and our world is fully alive, in spite of the number, of the increasing number of wars during which people hold their revolvers, guns, machines guns and aim something – a bomb, to all outward appearances – at somebody or something. The appearance of this bomb leads an observer to the insides of the bomb where the observer finds a lot of lethal material. And this material seems to be ready for a huge strike, as a result of which many children will exchange their vertical position – they were engrossed in some game or other – for a horizontal position. Mind you, this downward position is not always associated with death. They are a pair of close associates: no one can deny it. Sometimes you lie down on account of a mortal wound uncompassionately settled in your chest or head; sometimes, however, you just wish to give yourself over to the sun, to its so-called bath. But the day we are speaking of is not a sunny day, contrary to a number of suppositions. It is a rainy day, which can be proved rather easily. Just look at the chest of a man lying in front of you as if determined to exhibit the beauty of his chest and belly and organs, whatever their name. Usually, they just say 'organs', and everyone understands what they mean and what their intentions are. 'What are their intentions?' you may ask.

'The organs.' Such is the answer you hear in proximity to your right ear.

'How do you mean?'

'I mean "the organs". Do you think these organs are where they are for no purpose at all?'

'There must be some purpose, I suppose. To pee?'

'Are you joking? What kind of joke is this?'

'Am I wrong?'

'You're not, but you're not ambitious enough. You could use the organs for wealth and health.'

'How so?'

'You could make love to a billionaire. And money means holiday resorts and health in abundance.'

Every drop of sperm deprives us of vital energy; and so does every declaration of love, every sigh, every ‘ah’, ‘ha’, ‘you, you, you, only you’. You say ‘you’, and you utter this pronoun emotionally, otherwise it will never be accepted by your addressee. A quarrel ensues and you lose the rest of your daily energy in the course of this quarrel, while coming up with all sorts of explanations and excuses. Your vital energy is also used on your mistress’s resistance.

‘Peace, peace, peace,’ they say and humans keep their fists in their pockets, instead of brandishing them in the air and touching, now and then, faces, noses, stomachs that categorically refuse to work after this touch. You eat something, but your stomach says to you, instead of working full time and digesting whatever you put into it or rather stuff into it, ‘What you rudely stuffed into me will not be digested, for the simple reason that you touched me last Sunday. Why did you do it? Don’t you know I’m untouchable?’ And you go to your favourite lavatory, and the story of your relationship with your stomach goes on as if it could not stop once and for all. All right – it does stop once and for all. So what? Your stomach does not work at all; it is jobless. ‘The job is right here,’ you say to your stomach. ‘All right,’ says your stomach. ‘But why should I listen to your orders? I exist and function on my own. I digest my own thoughts about which you know nothing at all. So leave me alone, if you please.’ And the stomach, your stomach, leaves your body and writhes and squirms at your feet, in the proximity of your majestic body.

Of course there is only slavery, and we talk about slavery day in day out. And we *do* this slavery, what is more. What *is* more than this slavery? You fall on your knees and begin to scrub the floor you see in front of you. What *do* you see in front of you? A piece of the floor you are supposed to scrub so as not to displease your master whose very nature is attached to Hegel’s definitions. You see this stretch of the floor and say to yourself, ‘That’s not enough. After all, I’m a slave and I’m not supposed to think big, otherwise I’ll be punished. Actually, in this case, I’m not supposed to think small, and so I think big, in the positive sense, meaning I wish to please my master by polishing a stretch of the floor which belongs to his mansion, castle and so on. Perhaps it is Olympus I’m scrubbing. So much the better. So I’m part of Olympus. Does this definition mean to displease me? Am I mean, after all?’

You scrub the floor, and the bigger the floor you scrub, the bigger the castle you build. So you become a master after all, after all this scrubbing, scratching and matching your own power against the master for whom you do not work any more, having become a master in your turn. Somebody always cries, ‘It’s your turn!’ That is what democracy means, after all. Upon hearing this injunction, you turn, turn, and the injunction screams, ‘Do not turn, you fool! You’re supposed to come forward!’ You do come forward, and the same voice and individual says to you, ‘This is not forward. This is sideways.’

In Japan they never say your future is cloudless, and they never point to a cloudless sky to describe your future, your happiness: there are always clouds in Japanese skies, even if there are no clouds. And if they have to resort to a coin, things are made even less complicated: in the sky there are always vestiges of past or future clouds. They just show you the coin and say, ‘You know what will happen, if I turn this coin.’ And of course you say, ‘Yes,’ for you have no wish to be treated badly, verbally. ‘Moron,’ and so on. You are aware of the fact that the other side of the coin is the other side of the coin, consequently you are always both sides of the coin.

Actually you are both sides of everything. You look at the sky and think about God; at least a few thoughts of yours are devoted to God and are even permeated by His name and Substance. And then you lower your gaze and this gaze of yours meets the Devil or something (somebody) of the kind. You see some horns, two or three cleft feet, and you recoil in horror, which never happens when you look at the sky, at the Almighty and His army composed of angels and spirits of the highest order. There, up there, among those spirits you encounter the same problem or rather exercise: you have to go up and up and up and up. Nicolas of Cusa (Kuzanez or Cusanus) said you can go up as far as you wish, but you will never meet either God or even a single angel. Why? Because you are human and therefore condemned to ignorance or damned to ignorance. And this can be blessed or yearned for; it does not really matter. This is ignorance, and you should memorise this maxim once and for all. You start with the letter I and then pass to the letter G. Don't try to replace this letter, to substitute some other blessed symbol for this stupid, plain and damnable letter G. And if you proceed in this way, sooner or later you will come to utter damnation. You will utter it to make sure you have not been led astray once more. You shout, almost scream, with tears in your voice, 'Utter damnation, utter damnation, damnation, damnation with horns and cleft feet!'

And suddenly you think about utopias. But these utopias should be constructed in this world, in this rotten, lost and never found world. Every brick of this world is rotten. Whenever you put it somewhere – you believe it is the foundation of a new, better, better, better world – this brick divides itself, if I may say so in English (the point is, the brick *can* say everything) and every division or rather part of it can become the foundation of yet another utopia. At least that is what you believe, what you are convinced of. That is how you proceed this time, putting small bricks on the patch or whatever of the Earth you see in front of your knees. Then you put some brick or other on those bricks and your construction collapses once again. The point is, you believe that this collapse does not rhyme with what is called 'once and for all'. You are convinced that there are no rhymes of this kind in your kingdom.

This utopia of utopias and utopias (or these, or those) goes on and on. At the end of something you sit down to get some rest in some other kingdom, but you do not realise the uselessness of your undertaking; not yet, odd as it may appear. It does appear odd, but you do not stop. For you, within your vision of the world, it is good – everything is good and all right. 'All right,' you say to yourself and in the middle of uttering this expression you recall a film where a man always goes right because he thinks it is right, and that is where he should go. 'Right, right, right!' he exclaims, instead of saying to himself, 'Left, wrong.' Well, you say to yourself, 'Left, left, left, wrong, wrong, wrong.' What is the result? Where are you, as a result of your undertaking, your formula and mantra? You could also take advantage of some mandala or other. (Mandalay, mandolin.)

Long story short, whatever you do is bound to fail because you always think in terms of a better world, of an upper world, of a flawless world, whereas our world is flawed, ugly and downtrodden. Yes, you need a lot of material for your new construction, utopia and paradise, but you only have a few ideas, volatile and unreliable ideas at that. You rely on an idea, but it is no longer within your reach because it is volatile – like a capricious woman, as they say after a vulnerable approach to such a woman. You try one word, another word, another gesture, but they all fall flat and you see, you realise they are flat, as flat as an LP. You put the LP on and listen to Beethoven's symphonies, waving your hands about. These symphonies call for a lot of actions to be performed, carried out on busts, on breasts, on bosoms. Instead you caress your LPs and no sound issues from

their surfaces, whereas female bosoms know a lot of sounds, a rainbow of sounds. Apparently, Scriabin and Rimsky-Korsakov were inspired by female bosoms when revelling in their colour symphonies.

In the utopias you construct so laboriously there are lots of bosoms, and one cannot help wondering whether the sculptor is not merely a sex maniac, focused only on his libido, not on the happiness of the whole of humanity. Well, you take a rubber ball and throw it on a meadow, in the presence of a few men who instantly begin to play with it. But it is not a game universally known to every normal citizen: there are no goalkeepers, no referees. Some of the participants whistle, but their whistling has nothing to do with goals or penalties. You can hear similar noise at the beginning of the famous scene where a Mussorgsky-inspired crowd hangs, beats and otherwise humiliates a group of boyars. What does that prove? It proves that there are neither sexual games, nor enjoyable, libido-stuffed bosoms. There are only punches, knocks, shocks, bullets, bombs. They roll all over the meadows and explode from time to time, determined to destroy the runners and even simple pedestrians. Even if they are not bombs; even if they are not supposed to explode under your feet. The point is they are always supposed to explode, whether you step on them or not. If you pull the pin out of a hand-grenade, it will explode. If you do not pull the pin out of a hand-grenade, it will explode. Even if you have no grenade in your possession, they will all explode. Even if you have no idea what the word grenade means, it will explode; and other devices of this kind will explode as well.

You just put a dot somewhere; you do not even have to say, 'Dot, dot, dot.' And all these dots will explode sooner or later, in a minute or so. And consequently this minute will explode too because it cannot do otherwise, being in the aftermath of the explosion; or in the beforemath – that can also happen. Everything is possible and anything can happen, as everyone knows. Many more people died in the aftermath of the explosion. After a while, you are driven to correct this sentence, 'Many more, more, more, more, more, people died in the aftermath of the explosion.' Then you correct it once again: 'Many more people died in the aftermath of the explosion, of the explosion, of the explosion, of the explosions.' Then you are forced to show what has actually happened under your very eyes:

The famous Debussy prelude *Des pas sur la neige* ne paraît pas très tragique, à première vue, d'autant que nos propres pas dans les circonstances (sur la neige) ont l'air plutôt réjouissants. Il n'est pas agréable de marcher dans la boue, mais la neige est une substance douce, presque tendre, sauf si elle est trop dure, glissante et nous expose aux chutes vertigineuses. Nous glissons, nous glissons, imitons Buster Keaton dont les acrobaties aériennes nous enchantent, malgré le temps qui continue à écouler, à s'écouler, comme vous voulez. (Ces acrobaties datent d'il y a cent ans.) Il glisse, vole, atterrit et, malgré tout, malgré les bleus et la douleur, continue sa route ; et on est

I stopped at the beginning of the previous paragraph, and when I resumed my work on this work I thought quite sincerely I was naturally going on, although I was writing my text, my work in French, instead of sticking to English, to the language of the work in question. There are transitions in this world of ours, and our life would become even more unbearable, which is hardly imaginable, if there were none; if there were no transitions in this world of ours. But there *are* transitions – some of them are within our reach – and their presence enables us to pass into another state of mind or whatever you can hit upon in your search for a better world; or state of affairs, to put it modestly. I am in transit, I am in transit. It is possible to make an insurance claim for any goods lost or damaged in transit, and this time these goods, the ones I am talking about, are my own self, believe it or not. You

make this claim, the insurance claim, and they say, 'You seem to have insured a nonentity. Well, here it is, right in front of you or rather at your side. In short, this nonentity is yourself.' And then you ask them the following question, 'The question is whether road transit is cheaper than rail.' That is right – in this case the transit was cheaper than rail, but what did you get as a result of your transaction or your transition? Yourself. And you wished to get rid of yourself at all cost. The cost was not high, but you did not get rid of yourself, of the maniac who does his best to make things worse and worse. And if there are no things within his reach, he creates them in the twinkling of an eye to worsen them, to make them abominable and vicious; as vicious as possible. And what about a rapid-transit train? Nothing, nothing, nothing. Nothing about it. This train is irrelevant, more than irrelevant. Let us not talk about it any more.

But what did I say in French? Relevant or irrelevant, it supplies us with a cue thanks to which we could really hit upon reality as such – a new set of real things, considering that we are now in a new state of affairs, in a new incarnation, if our stars are good, lucky and benevolent. A new state, a new set of affairs? But what are these affairs, may I ask? Money, of course; and there are also goods, otherwise money is of no use; and money is never of no use, out of use. Money is never out. And you repeat, 'Out, out, out, out, out,' as if there were no 'never'. But never is always there; or here, if you prefer. So you just empty your pockets and realise that not everything is hidden in these pockets. The enigma or rather the solution to this enigma is hidden elsewhere; perhaps in your trousers, in the whole pair of trousers. You go on shedding your clothes, but, contrary to all expectations, you do not come to the inevitable conclusion: the solution to the problem is lying inside you, not far from your heart, from your liver, from all the organs or whatever their names might be outside this procedure of yours: shedding your clothes. You, you, you, yours, yours, yours. Whatever you do or say aims at you and comes out with you, if I may say so.

Are you so sure it is a new set or state of affairs you are facing right now? In comparison with what you faced – never mind the part of your body which was used in the process – only several minutes ago. This is the same life, as they usually say, and there is no escaping it. And suddenly a metamorphosis occurs; or just a transition, an unmistakable, almost invisible, untouchable transition. How do you know it is a transition and not a mere division? The division of what? Of cells, for instance? A cell undergoes what is called a division; you now have two cells instead of one. Where are you now? On the right-hand side or to the left? What does it matter, as long as you remain a human being. But are you still human? Are you still a being? Perhaps you are a being, given that you think and therefore exist, *ergo sum*. But sometimes you think, 'I'm a cell, just a cell. A prison cell, into the bargain.' All right, all right. I am a prison cell. What is more, I am a prisoner in whose cell there is a prisoner, himself, myself. Whose, whose, whose. Whose footsteps can be found outside of the cell, on the snow where you might have walked some time ago, according to the text you wrote some time ago? Whenever you look at these footsteps immortalised by your pen or *ordinateur*, you shudder. You still shudder when you think of the risks you took when traversing this plain, this patch or rather space of snow. Every patch of snow is treacherous: it might conceal a chasm at the bottom of which many of your fellow-creatures have already found their death; and probably your death as well. You shudder with horror. Why? Because even you cannot find your death, if asked to do so rather quickly or slowly. Never mind, never mind. The point is you have no idea where your death conceals its being or rather non-being. The non-being of death. Does that mean life? No, no, no, no – nothing means life, nothing at all.

Let us go straight to the point. What did I say during my French outburst? First I talked about the footsteps or rather footfalls – every step is a fall anyway – but for some reason I did not think (at the time, at the time) that all these falls were tragic, as if you could fall without breaking something, some member of yours, some leg or some finger. And then I deal rather well with all the criticism heaped on me, on my pessimism which induces me to regard every step I make as a fateful step or manoeuvre, leading straight and inexorably to death. ‘No,’ say my opponents. ‘These steps of yours lead to life, not to death or hell.’

‘All right, all right,’ I answer. ‘But this life is tragic, isn’t it? Sometimes I’ve the feeling it’s even more tragic than death himself.’

‘What do you know about death?’ they ask.

‘I know everything about it,’ I answer.

‘You do know everything about it, except death himself.’

‘I know, I know.’

That is what is included – the main item – in your so-called knowledge of death. You do not know it *personally*; you know it only by proxy. And any proxy is a bad source of information. Sometimes this or that proxy says, ‘Yes,’ and, as a matter of fact, it is ‘no’. But no one really knows what no or yes means under the circumstances; and you have no idea and no means to know what ideas, what circumstances you are dealing with at this particular moment. And you do not even know if this moment is really particular or not. Perhaps it is just a moment, and it has nothing in common with Faust and his immortality, both literally and really.

The footfalls you see on the snow are different from other footfalls which you see on another patch or snatch of snow; on another drift of snow, in short, in brief. When writing to your cousin you speak about the snow you walked through one of these or those days. You say, ‘I was frightened because my life seemed to have been written on that snow, without my being aware of it, of this writing, of this novel, of this diary or confession.’ You see your footsteps and realise you will never walk this way, in this way. Of course you can retrace your steps and any other steps – the steps of your colleagues or enemy. Why not? But this will be a different story, written in a different space of time. You are different; everything is different. And every difference brings you closer (and closer) to death, to the end of all differences, for one corpse is hardly different from another unless it is decorated and continues to keep its medals and other distinctions; on its chest, for example. But you are reluctant to say, ‘On his or her chest.’ It is just a chest, nothing more.

What do you really see on the snow? Whose footfalls, footsteps, two-steps? They dance, they dance, they dance; on the snow. What else could they do? On the snow? There are skies of course and you can ski on the snow until the moment when the snow and the rest of the atmosphere to which everything is submitted gets the better of you and you fall, collapse, break whatever you can break or damage somehow, and either everything is over with you or everything is not over with you. Just some things are over; and there are other things which remain faithful to you, your existence, your body, soul and psyche; odd as it may appear. And it does appear odd; it does, it does. But what is actually odd? The fact that you are still alive, in spite of the odds and nods and odes they write about heroes and heroines?

What *do* you see on the snow? You see some snow, in the first place; and probably even in the second place. You might see the snow in the third place, if you knew where this place is located in the cosmic arrangement of things and beings. This is the cosmic arrangement I am speaking about. Here is this, and there is his. And somewhere, in between all these thises and theres, you see the third place you are looking for. Yes, you

are looking for the third place; not for the second place; not for the first place, God forbid. (They might think you take yourself for God; or at least for a demigod.) As if a demigod could not walk on the snow, on what is called ‘the ordinary snow about which Debussy wrote a prelude’. This question arises almost at once, ‘Is the snow about which this prelude was composed ordinary, run-of-the-mill snow?’

What else did I write about the snow I am talking about? It is not pleasant to walk in the mud. But this exercise can be pleasant if you *wish* to walk in the mud, in the texture generously offered by the mud. Yes, your feet get captured and you wonder where you will be sent by the mud, by this capture: you have no wish to remain, to stay on this Earth of ours; for nothing in the world, if you must know. And you must not know anything: we should forgive him a few youthful indiscretions, as they say. But you are no longer youthful. You are full, full, full, but not of youth, regrettably. What are you full of? Of oldness, of ness or just of ol?

Ol, ol, ol, ol, ol. Are you already full of ol? Have you fulfilled your duty? Well, you walk on the snow and you seem to rejoice at performing this exercise of yours, even if it is not really an exercise. You just walk on the snow, for some reason or other. For what reason, may I ask? Because you need some water. All right, you just kneel down and scoop up some snow into your mouth and intestines. And that is enough, you think. But several inches further you repeat this new exercise, anxious to eliminate an unpleasant taste that seems to have chosen its abode in your mouth, all along your palate. Your relationship with the snow you are trying to conquer by means of your footsteps is complicated, not to say impossible to define. It is poetical, on the one side, on the side of Debussy’s inspired snow. The snow you are consuming by means of your shoes is melting in a way, being seduced and conquered by Debussy’s music. And then a new mood invades your inner self and you realise you are cold; and the cold you experience is usually associated with death. So every step you take within the space of this snow is mortal, fatal and what not. It is not vital for your being, and you are quite sure of that. Or let us say you are just *aware* of it, but every step you take brings you closer to the full realisation of your sorry plight. First you reach the word ‘sorry’ and begin to wonder what it is appended to. You are used to saying ‘Sorry’ to the old ladies you happen to knock down in shops and also in the streets. But this time there are no old ladies in front of you; nor are there any behind your back. At least they do not do anything behind your back, anything that could destroy your constitution on the spot.

If you are a pianist, which seems to be the case, you should not forget about *glissandi*, especially if you continue to walk on the snow (whether it is inspired by Debussy or not). You produce a magnificent *glissando* which might embellish your execution of the *Suite Bergamasque*, but you are no longer at the piano; you are in the middle of nowhere; as usual, as usual. As usual you do your best to attenuate the circumstances, their baleful omens and facts, bare facts, but today you are tuned to a different tune, a different harmony. And one may rightfully ask if this harmony is a rightful harmony or just anything, *n’importe quoi*. Anything goes and you go with this anything; or any other anything, come to think of it.

Whatever you say or write, snow may be tender, almost mother-like. You hold some quantity of it in your hands and say to yourself or to your spouse, ‘This snow is my mother, you know.’

‘I don’t know,’ she answers unabashed.

‘Don’t you really?’ you ask her wrathfully.

‘I know your mother personally. And I like her very much, not to say I’m in love with her.’

‘What kind of nonsense is this? Are you a lesbian?’

This kind of nonsense may occur in any conversation, however friendly and sophisticated. No wonder, we often see two persons raise their fists and separate in the middle of a square, instead of sitting down on one of the available benches. There are so many topics lying in front of you, waiting for you to pick them up for a casual conversation. You do nothing of the kind; and if you do, it is not a topic you pick up. You pick up a stone and throw it in the direction of your former friend and associate; and colleague and who's not. If this stone is well-aimed, and if it strikes the most vulnerable part of your former associate's head – we all know what part I am talking about – this associate of yours dies on the spot. (One wonders if the expression 'on the spot' is really important in the matters connected with death and his results. Suppose your friend or colleague does not die on the spot. After all, he may die *beside* the spot, but that does not mean he died beside the *point*. He died on the point and now he looks exactly like a doornail; or any other nail, come to think of it.) Well, you have no time to take care of all the nails you have within your reach. (How wonderful it is – the fact that you have so many things within your reach. Even happiness, even immortality, even eternity, and so on.) You walk around your house and literally stumble upon a nail, although this instrument of doom is not really gigantic; far from it. You pick it up, look at it scrupulously; you scrutinise it in other words and say to yourself, 'This is also eternity, a piece of it.'

But anything is a piece of eternity; not only because it is part of this world which is eternal, according to you. And do not forget you are always mistaken, at least as far as the world goes. (And it does go, whatever they say. Not only on account of Galileo's pronouncements.) This pen is such a piece – not because some Dante or other will write some *commedia* (or other) on a few sheets of paper. Such a pity, such a pity. Whatever is done, made and thought is eternal. And you hesitate before adding, 'For God's sake.' The point is nothing is done for God's sake in this world forsaken by everybody; except us. Is it high time to write a poem?

Forsaken, forsaken, forsaken,
Before taken, taken, taken.
And shaken, shaken, shaken,
Even if not taken, possessed,
Fully or firmly, or not at all.

You see a line leading somewhere, inexorably as is always the case. You see this case – not any other case, mind you – and you follow the line because you have no other choice. You have no choice at all, whether it is another choice you have in mind or anything else. A glass of vodka, for instance. A line leads you somewhere, and you say to yourself that anything leads you somewhere, especially if the word 'astray' presides over the operation; almost a ritual, to tell the truth.

You follow the line, even if you do not know where it leads you; or whether it leads or misleads; whether it is a line or a misline. Mis, mis, mis; and you begin to play with these words, as usual. That is what you do, when at least ten thousand dollars do not lie within your reach, within this famous, legendary reach we have already spoken of so many times. And what else is on the line? They say all the time, 'On line, on line.' There is probably on, but I am not sure at all there is a line, a link or whatever can connect you to another world where you could live as a happy citizen; of a happy world. You are already a citizen, probably even Citizen Kane. But this does not mean anything. You are a citizen of what? Of your own walking stick? I am a walking stick, I am a

walking stick – that is what you repeat or say or not say or nonsense. Everything comes down to non, and every absence of sense. What is sense? It is work, world, life, enjoyment. What is the so-called nonsense? Nonwork, nonworld, which is advisable in a way, in a world. It is better to live and prosper in a world which may be defined as in opposition to the world we are living in forever and ever.

And that is the point where I would like to enlarge upon the transition I touched upon – I did touch upon it so it became transi or mamsi or whatever – and the point is you do not even have to touch upon it. Everything happens of itself, by itself, or by and by. I have been writing this nonsense for some time, in English, of all languages; and then (no reason at all) I switched to French. There *was* a reason for it; and the reason was rather simple, come to think of it. I quoted the title of the famous prelude, ‘*The Footfalls on the Niagara Falls*,’ or something along these lines. What could be found along these lines? The Footsteps on the Niagara Steps. But then you feel duty bound to find out if there are some steps in the Niagara region you speak of so freely, abundantly and eagerly.

There are some steps everywhere, and some of them lead to the summit of the Niagara Falls. You fall, you fall, you fall, and suddenly you realise you are at the top of the stairs – of the Niagara Falls you have heard so many words (about? about ?) in the whole course of your life. You take a step and suddenly the whole perspective of life and death opens up (and closes up) in front of you, in the back of you. In, in, in, and also out, out, out.

What is a transition? A step, a thought. You think this thought and then another thought comes in its stead, in its step. So what? So what that? How can you ask such questions? Everything is different, isn’t it? EVERYTHING. You look at a landscape and admire it – differently. What is the difference? Everything is the difference. And if you feel like putting capital letters everywhere, you can do it: we all live in democratic countries. Do we?

Actually the only question we might put to Creation is this one, ‘Are we?’ And then you resort to this and that:

‘=====’

The famous Debussy prelude *Des pas sur la neige* ne paraît pas très tragique, à première vue, d’autant que nos propres pas dans les circonstances (sur la neige) ont l’air plutôt réjouissant. Il n’est pas agréable de marcher dans la boue, mais la neige est une substance douce, presque tendre, sauf si elle est trop dure, glissante et nous expose aux chutes vertigineuses. Nous glissons, nous glissons, imitons Buster Keaton dont les acrobaties aériennes nous enchantent, malgré le temps qui continue à écouler, à s’écouler, comme vous voulez. Il glisse, vole, atterrit et, malgré tout, malgré les bleus et la douleur, continue sa route ; et on est

THE WORD

At the beginning there was the word. And apparently this word contained everything, not only itself and the letters we use to say ‘the word’. This word, the last word mentioned in this text, is made up of what we come across in our daily life. For instance, we stumble upon the day during which we suffer without complaining about our suffering to all and sundry – every blessed moment. Why? Because we are highly, exceptionally polite and our politeness, either inborn or acquired in the course of our existence, forbids us to get on other people’s nerves, if it is not absolutely necessary. Suppose you are subjected to unbearable pain, and you complain about it

to all and also to sundry, 'My pain is unbearable to the point where I can't bear it on my own. May I ask you to bear at least one third of my pain?' Of course a multitude of people, of human beings, refuse to comply with your wish which may become your last wish; your last cigarette, if they do not comply with it, for all your supplications and the almost visible torture you endure. This torture finds its expression on your face where your teeth continue to bite your lips which suffer as well, imitating some unknown part of your constitution. Suffering for nothing, as they call it. And what about you? What do *you* suffer for? 'For everything,' as you usually answer, in accordance with your custom of which you cannot get rid. And yet you have everything in your power. Well, whatever you have in your power is directed towards your lips and tongue; and you must recognise that this power you are talking about is not sufficient to overcome, to vanquish, your bad habits, one of which makes you bite your lips – by means of your teeth – whenever you feel like it.

You do whatever you can do, as I put it earlier. You go so far as putting some objects in the space where your teeth disport themselves whenever you are nervous and, generally speaking, under pressure. Where does this pressure come from, may I (or someone else) ask? Suppose you look at a wall, at an innocent-looking wall, and ask yourself if this wall tends to oppress you. 'Yes, this wall does oppress me because it can't do otherwise.' Why? Because walls – not only the Great Wall of China, mind you – are built for oppression or segregation. Of course, whenever any wall is touched upon – and that can happen during a casual, run-of-the-mill conversation – its oppression gets under way. It happens during this conversation, and you begin to bite your upper or nether lip; or both, come to think of it. (How come you came to think of it? Doesn't matter, doesn't matter. Not everything matters in this world of ours.) What happened in the course of this legendary conversation? You bite your lips – that is what usually happens, whenever you meet another human being. You meet this being and you say to yourself, sometimes without uttering any word, either inwardly or outwards (*a Lied ohne Worte*): 'I wish this being were a non-being.' And then you bite one of your lips. You wait for a while – for the sake of decency, one might conjecture – and you bite the other lip, after this pause. And then you realise you are unlikely to keep the word you gave to yourself some time ago. The word, to tell the truth, concerned this bad habit of yours: 'Biting my lips.' Well, you cannot bite anyone else's lips: this would be quite indecorous. And whatever your feelings, the ones you experience in someone's company, you forbid yourself to go too far. You just go: no one can deny this fact. You go, wobble, stumble, fall down, collapse, suffer from concussion, but you do go; no matter where, in what direction.

According to your *poor* judgement – *en passant*, you admire your inborn modesty – you never go too far because you never cross any lines; not even violet or navy-blue ones. You say to yourself, 'If, in the course of my life, I were in the habit of going far, too far, as my fellow-citizens might occasionally say, I would be happy, living in the midst of angels and archangels. Alas, I look around and see only human beings, who are far from being angels, let alone archangels.' In desperation you draw a line on the ground, not far from your feet, and cross it – just for the heck of it. (Where is this heck, I wonder? At least, I might have this heck. A consolation prize.) How do you know you are too far? You see a row of buildings which do not appeal to your sense of beauty. And you say to yourself, 'No, I haven't gone too far, otherwise I would see celestial beauty.' So you decide to go to heaven, but at the last moment – your decision-making lasts for two minutes at least – you realise that this action might be dangerous: you wish to go to Paradise, but not at once, not today. I have something to do on this Earth of mine – that is how you express your feelings through words, through their medium, with their blessing.

There are people – I am not of their number, far from it – who prefer the face value of this expression; going too far, I mean. At first they look at their face and say to someone, ‘If I go too far, when exploring my face, I’ll just fall into nothingness which is not far from death, I presume.’ Let us leave Heidegger and others far from this problem we are facing right now; for no reason at all. Where is this reason, in question? Survival – this is the only reason to which we can trust our life and its ramifications. All right, our life can survive on its own without any participation on our part. (Pills, doctors, clinics, resorts, skies, gymnastics, diets and so on.) But what about ramifications? (That is what our life consists of, to tell the truth: ramifications, ramifications, ramifications. The rest is silence.) All right: we disdain all these ramifications and clutch the trunk. What kind of trunk are we clutching? The trunk of life, as we immediately answer, being involved in the stream of life, of its inexorable movement; disregarding the inevitable collapse. All right: we do not disregard the collapse: we *regard* it. And where is the ‘dis’ that we discarded so nonchalantly? We start playing with it; or trifling with it, if you prefer. What *do* you prefer? You cannot prefer dis, can you? Whenever you pronounce this word or syllable – consciously, if you please – you realise to what extent it is close to what you find in most of the requiems performed all over the world, even today. Dies ira, dies illa. Your wrath or whatever. Or Thy wrath, which is even more frightening, horrible and inevitable. So we choose not to speak about dis; we do not even mention it as if someone was saying non stop, ‘Don’t mention it, don’t mention it.’ Don’t mention what? Life, death, coffins, cemeteries, crematoriums? What else? Digging, putting, throwing a few morsels of our Earth on coffins and our deceased, our friends, sisters and so on?

Throw a clod of your soil in the direction of a human being and you will hear these words, ‘Are you taking me for a corpse?’

‘No, I’m taking you for a human being whose life isn’t over yet.’

‘Do you think I need these clods? Do you think I can’t be happy without them?’

‘Perhaps you can. But the happiness I have in mind is of a higher order.’

‘What kind of order are you talking about?’

‘The angelic order. Perhaps, however, you don’t understand the word “angel”. At least you don’t understand it rightly. Usually you associate this word with your wife and children.’

‘Do you mean to say they’re not angels?’

‘They are, of course they are. But they’re *human* angels, if you see what I mean.’

‘I don’t.’

‘Then you’re blind, if you forgive this frank expression of my judgement related to your behaviour, to your vision of the world.’

Of course, from time to time, you ask yourself what relation you personally have to the world where you live and prosper, from time to time. (‘Time’ grows thinner and thinner, whereas ‘from’ gets bigger and bigger as if it meant something. On its own.) I have spoken about it many times, about questions and answers. You question yourself, your life and also others, whoever they may be and are, as a matter of fact. What answer do you get? I might have spoken about this answer many times, but I do not remember it; in other words or rather in another word, I do not recall it. And that puts me somewhere, in a situation from which there is no issue, no exit; as if someone had written over it, overhead: ‘No exit.’ All right – I shall stay here for the rest of my life. The point is it is quite satisfactory, this formula, this definition or conclusion. The rest of my life. This means I have a life before me, in front of me, something to speak about, to think about. You utter the word ‘life’ and that is

enough to fill you with a sense or nonsense of happiness which knows no bounds. And even if this happiness of yours decides to find these bounds and analyse them, your vital *élan* (or whatever it is) determines not to answer this question, not to discuss this matter any further. Why? Because it is vital not to get to the bottom of this matter, for the simple reason that its bottom – like many other bottoms – is equal to death, synonymous with death. You can say, ‘The bottom,’ and you do not have, in this case, to add anything to this conclusion or admission or definition or statement: it is death and nothing else. In other words or word: there is no exit. It simply does not exist. Therefore you can say (not to waste too many words on this subject): There is no exit (no exist). That is and that is all.’

Of course it is better to fill the world with beds of various sizes, which might allow you to spend your lifetime (your time and life) in somnolence, going from one half-dream to another. Dreams as such may grow obsolete and even annoying, given that they do their best to substitute themselves for reality; for one reality you are acquainted with thanks to your everyday life. You see a fairy tale and believe it is real, although fairy tales are what they are: tales in which there are fairies, wolves, princesses, peas and so on. It is true that, within the domain called fairy tales, you do not necessarily sleep on peas: more often than not, you walk on them barefoot. This exercise is even more unpleasant than sleeping on peas. Oddly enough, whenever such a combination of words presents itself (sleeping on peas) you are tempted to play with it, to disconnect it, to connect it again, squeezing every drop from this delightful, orange-like mixture. For instance, you say to yourself, ‘Pissing your pants,’ and you go on, growing more and more unbearable to those who happen to overhear you. Luckily for you and for them, no one eavesdrops on your interior monologues which are often vulgar – not on account of your inborn vulgarity, though. The point is we are often tempted to cross frontiers, whatever their significance, size, their degree of decency. This pleasure is called ‘crossing frontiers’; or borders or crossings. Crossing crossings is more compact, although I am not sure that grammarians would applaud, upon hearing such conjunctions, such hybrids.

So you walk on your life or on the time allotted to you, and you also recall the space you manipulate in the course of your walk. And if the peas I talked about in the previous paragraph keep you company, you often bend down and pick some of them. This exercise is called ‘picking up peas’. Or ‘picking on peas’. Why should you pick on peas? And you recall some episodes from your youth, which happens now and then to remind you that you were not born yesterday. Throughout your youth and childhood you constantly got picked on by other boys because you were so small. The image you are striving for is clear enough: you pick on peas because they are so small. At least they are smaller than your body which has never been conspicuous by its presence. One might even come to the conclusion that your body has always been conspicuous by its absence. Often, upon seeing your body in a concert hall – upon not seeing it in the same concert hall – some music lover just sits down on your body. When you start heaping insults on him or her, the reaction is quite predictable: ‘I thought the chair was empty.’

That is how your life goes on, and they call it ‘routine’, which is logical, even though it is likely to leave an unpleasant aftertaste in your mouth. You jump over beds, over the rows of beds, instead of lying down and catching forty winks. Why don’t you yield to the temptation and start catching these winks? Because you are aware of the fact that, notwithstanding your patience and professional zeal, you will never catch *forty* winks. And catching thirty-nine winks is not your cup of tea. I mean, this occupation or hobby does not appeal to your senses. ‘It appeals to my nonsenses,’ you reply, whenever someone asks you a question in this domain. Suppose,

however, that you do catch thirty-nine winks. In spite of the euphoria you experience in such situations, sooner or later you are likely to realise that one wink is missing from the heap of winks you have collected over the last ten minutes or so. ‘Where’s this bloody wink?’ you ask yourself. The question is asked by yourself, and this situation is more comfortable, more easy-going than the one you face, whenever questioned by others. Nevertheless the question remains, stays, and the sensation it creates by staying within your body and mind is far more uncomfortable than any nightmare. You have no alternative but to count all the winks you have collected during your ritual, your bed-oriented ritual. You reach the number ‘twenty-two’ and begin to wonder whether your count is correct or not. When counting peas or winks, you often deviate from the right numbers, being led astray by the wrong ones which are much stronger, more influential than whatever is right.

How do you measure both rightness and wrongness? You can measure them separately of course; no one makes you do it one way or another way, the other way. All the ways lead to cemeteries – everybody is aware of this truth, but no everywhere knows that cemeteries differ from one another, from each other – not only on account of the names engraved on tombstones or just on stones. If you do not have enough money to offer your deceased a tombstone, you content yourself with the tomb you see in front of you, saying to yourself or to others – I am growing weary of this formula, yourself or others – ‘This tomb speaks for itself. Can’t you hear its words? “I’m a tomb, I’m a tomb and nothing else.”’ The song of tombs is rather sad, on the sad side of history and many other stories. Let us not forget that human history is just a story, in spite of the number of corpses you trip over, when studying this so-called history. Even if you call it just ‘his’, you may trip over a corpse, one corpse or two corpses. It depends on the size of your ‘his’. But if you happen to concentrate your attention on ‘mine’, instead of repeating almost automatically his, his, his, his, his, you will instinctively reduce the size of your utterance to a minimum: you have no wish to speak realistically about your tomb. And if you say ‘mine’, it is your tomb you are speaking about. In other words, you are not supposed to ask yourself, ‘Whose tomb is it?’ because it is your tomb; John Donne explained it once and for all. Perhaps he did it many times: whatever he talked about was related to bells. And tolling, tolling, tolling, tolling, tolling. It is rather funny. What? The way some readers talk about the last part of *Ulysses*. Mollying, mollying, mollying, mollying – that is how they talk about it.

Everything tolls for you, and if you doubt this affirmation, you should realise that every action of yours does not have to look like a bell; or sound like one. It just tolls, whatever it is. Your table, the one on which you put many dishes in expectation of a delicious meal, tolls for you or for your meal. You eat something, no matter what, and your stomach is upset. In other words, you are upset because your stomach is in this state, in the situation that the word ‘upset’ describes, depicts so brilliantly, with such accuracy. You do not have to overturn tables, to kick them – to upset them, to be more precise and scientific. They are all upset, all of them. Whatever you put on them, falls down or flies off, gathering a lot of birds (and feathers) in the course of its flight. Apparently stones do not gather any moss, if they make an effort to roll along a path – any path you offer them – carried away by their own spectacular generosity. Well, a flying table gathers a lot of birds, even if you have no need to catch a lot of birds for your private zoo – for the simple reason that you have no zoo either in your house or in your garden. You have no zoo anywhere; unless humanity and the world itself are zoos in their own right.

In this respect I recall a story about a zoo or rather about one of its exhibits – a lion moving in a cage. A lion can eat ninety kilos of meat – during one meal, mind you; according to a piece of paper hanging from one of the ingredients of the cage. From one of its elements, if you prefer. A child puts the following question to his (not her) father, ‘Daddy! Could you please tell me if the lion imprisoned in this enormous cage can eat so much

meat during one tiny meal?’ The father looks at his son and says, ‘Of course he can. We all can. But who will give us such a quantity of meat? God?’ That is how many children set their feet on the path leading to the Almighty and His consort. Why? Because they want to consume as much meat as possible; unless they are vegetarians. Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that they are not. They adore meat and aspire to reach a stage in their personal development where, on its platform, on the step of its ladder – on the highest step – they are served a monstrous quantity of meat. And for a while you become this monster: you eat, eat and eat, but you do not burst as if determined to contradict the exclamation you hear in many families, in many schools. ‘Do you want to burst?!’ ‘You’ll burst, if you go on like that for twenty minutes!’ Please note they do not say, ‘You’re fit to burst.’ They say, ‘You’ll burst!’ And sometimes they even show how this will happen.

Of course your spirit and its level or rather height do not depend on what you eat unless you go to India and buy some herbs or leaves that carry out this ritual (elevation) mechanically, by virtue of the elements included in their chemical formula. But this does not happen every day; not even every month does this happen. So you have to rely on what you can get at home and, apart from aspirin, you can count on something very specific, dealing with your throat or legs or rather knees. (How could you get rid of what happens to your legs which refuse categorically to walk?) What this means amounts to our incapacity to assess what we achieve during our spiritual exercises, often based on diets and suchlike. Or nonsense, in other word or words or nonsense. You know – at least you *can* know your height, your physical height – whatever is linked to your body, to its dimension and even to your digestion; to your body’s digestion. As for your spirit, you consult a lot of books where your capacity for empathy and refusal of money are commented upon. (Your scorn for whatever is promised by a huge, immeasurable quantity of this unblessed and forever cursed metal. That is how Mephistopheles airs his ideas in a very famous opera.)

As for spirituality or elevation, you cannot know anything in this domain where spiritual matters literally swarm. I think I should express the same thought in a slightly different way. Actually you swarm with spirituality, and this phenomenon reminds you of bees, wasps and ants. What do you have in common with wasps? Almost nothing, and that creates a lot of sad thoughts within your skull; or call it what you wish. Why? Why do these sad thoughts now inhabit the upper part of your body? Because you cannot sting all those humans who get under your skin. The state of affairs you got involved in boils down to this mixture: you swarm with incurable thoughts and spiritual matters. But what is really sad about this situation is your incapacity to take advantage of your spirituality and thoughts as such. No one can say you are deprived of a Descartes-promoted brain, but no brain is really useful if it cannot elevate your spirits and get you closer and closer to archangels and their way of thinking. Of course there are individuals who affirm that angels do not think: they just fly, using their wings to the utmost. (Flapping them almost hysterically.) They fly and their flight invariably blesses all those who contemplate it, while sitting on the seashore, while listening to the waves, to their way of breaking their substance during their encounter with the shore, rocks and other busybodies. But as soon as the archangels I described to the best of my abilities begin to think, their blessings are deviated towards Kant and other philosophers. In short, they forget human beings – entirely, entirely. They forget everyone with the exception of Kant. But what are you supposed to do with this Kant of theirs? Well, put him on your dinner table, near what the Russians call ‘samovar’. You drink tea and think in terms of the famous categorical imperative. Little by little you realise that humanity would be better off if everyone could drink the same Indian tea from the same

Russian samovar. So you sincerely wish your situation might become universal to the point of finding enough room for its existence in the constitution of the country to which you belong.

But is the samovar you find on my table really spiritual? You cannot even maintain that the tea you enjoy as you sit by the samovar at your dinner table elevates your spirits, although some movement can be detected within your head or brain or what not. What does this movement promise? Any movement may result in another movement, especially if you deal with a ball that often collides with another ball and thus a game of billiards proceeds from beginning to end. But these movements, the ones engendered by billiard balls, do not lead to any spirituality, however common and ridiculous. What you really need is stability; in reality it is stability you need to last until your last days and minutes on this Earth. Greater personal stability can surely only be to the good, as they say. And they are absolutely right. Of course you can climb, move and enjoy a lot of sensations on the ladder you set your foot on some time ago. But if you settle on a step, you should be sure that the step you set your heart (and foot) upon is large enough to allow you to get a lot of rest, a sort of nirvana you have aspired to since your childhood in the middle of which – you were three or four – you heard this word for the first time. Yes, the step we are analysing so meticulously should be large enough – as large as a comfortable bed, like the one you admire in pictures devoted to Louis XIV, for instance. During your stay on this step you can wallow in the luxury afforded by it, by the ladder you chose some time ago in the hope of achieving all your goals. Not at once, perhaps, but assuredly in the long run. You say to yourself, ‘This run will certainly be very long, but I’m patient, and my patience will be rewarded in the long run.’ There are too many long runs all around you. They are too long and massive, but you are not afraid, contrary to what may be concluded, especially if you are used to hasty conclusions and enjoy them.

People say the appropriate step on the spiritual ladder can cure colds, cancers and other diseases from which we suffer on a regular basis, but I am a bit of a sceptic. I do not believe that any step, however spiritual and healthy, can cure you of cirrhosis of the liver. As everybody knows, the commonest cause of cirrhosis is alcohol consumption. I vaguely recall an American architect who, eager to defend his construction or the project where this construction was depicted in detail, said, ‘Put as many tons of different materials on the roof of my construction and you’ll see whether it collapses or not.’ For a while they put gigantic bags filled with metal, bricks and other heavy ingredients of our life on it. The architect was laughing in his opponents’ faces. At some point the construction collapsed, but it was too late: the architect proved he could guarantee the safety of the people attracted by the beauty of his architectural monument.

Well, let us not forget the alcoholic ingredient of our discussion. There are people who do all they can to forget this ingredient which overflows from their discussions which are often limited to exclamations, due to their alcohol-impaired state of mind. (I am probably one of these people: I forgot when and where I spoke about alcohol.) Their friends and also members of their families keep on saying, ‘Please, forget the word “alcohol”.’

‘All right, I promise you to forget this word,’ they say. (The alcoholics in question answer the well-wishers in this fashionable manner. It is fashionable to speak about memory in this milieu.) ‘My memory is not what it used to be. Alcohol attacks not only my movements, but also my thoughts, the dearest images of my youth and childhood. I can hardly remember where I was born and what my mother did in her spare time. The general weakness of my memory is sure to help me during this cure or ritual. I’ll easily forget the word, the powerful word “alcohol”. But what about the deed inherent in this word? Will I ever forget the symbolic glass of vodka?’

‘Don’t you worry – you broke this glass last night.’

‘I have a huge number of glasses of the same kind . How to forget all of them?’

‘You don’t have to forget them. Just pour some water into them.’

‘I won’t, I won’t! I can’t!’

We can count on alcohol in our struggle for a better life deprived of worries and forebodings which are even worse than ordinary worries. These go their way and sometimes we succeed in arresting their inexorable movement towards our unhappiness or death, whereas forebodings warn us about something we can neither see nor touch. A worry is in front of us and we just pick it up and talk to it for a while; or let it drop and walk over it for twenty minutes or so. Then we look at the result of our labours, and the result is not always satisfactory, for the simple reason that either our legs are not as weighty and mighty as they used to be or our pity, the quantity of empathy we keep in our chest, is too big, too obtrusive. Whenever we decide to get rid of our troubles, our personal load of pity interferes and makes our legs insignificant, ineffective. We know that if we go for a walk near some lake or other, our legs will respond positively to our desire to rest a little, to forget our job and the people who surround us in our office; in their office, rather. Yes, they behave in such a way that we feel we intrude upon their ways of life, their relaxation, their holidays and family *fruitfulness*. Why use this word? Because that is how they talk about their families, their existences. If you ask them, ‘Are you satisfied with what you do and achieve, with your lives in general or in particular?’ they say, ‘My life is quite fruitful,’ and if you ask them to show its fruit, only one fruit of their exploits, they do not show you anything, with the exception of their angry faces. More often than not they go so far as to say, ‘Get off my back,’ and obediently, politely, you get off their backs. It is not as hard as can be imagined, considering that you do not really *need* their backs, and the only problem you can face on these occasions is the process itself. If the situation puts you in the company of a tall person, getting off this person’s back is made excruciatingly impossible on account of your constitution which does not permit you to cope with heights, jumps and landings. You realise that the back you are sitting on intends to get rid of you, and you do not mind this unfriendly gesture. What is more, after much soul-searching you determine to remove your body from the back in question as soon as possible. The problem is it is not always possible; at least the expression ‘as soon as’ (is it an expression?) does not seem adequate. The point is you cannot replace it easily. The only replacement you find in your mind upon realising you *have* to find something suitable for the occasion is ‘as late as’, but the person on whom you sit or lie reminds you that it is never too late to get off someone’s back. ‘Be kind, generous and understanding, if only for once,’ this person tells you. What do you answer to this person? You say, ‘All right, all right. I’m quite willing to get rid of your hospitable back. But the procedure may take some time, independently of my will. At my age, sitting or lying somewhere, be it someone’s back or a mere rock, is much more comfortable than getting off the object you use for your personal comfort. Suppose you are holding a delicious pastry; in your right hand, for instance. And you yearn to eat this pastry, to savour every bit of it. Instead, you are asked to throw it away. You are asked to open the nearest window and fling this pastry through this window beyond which there is a street, a thoroughfare swarming with people, with pastry-eaters. And you are not inclined to let them take advantage of your personal pastry. It is all the more painful since you adore this pastry and desire to taste it with every fibre of your being. But if you voice your opinion, you hear something to the effect of...Well, they point out that your fibres should not eat cakes. In the first place, they cannot really do it. In the second place, you risk augmenting the quantity of sugar within your anatomy, which may lead to serious consequences, to failures of all kinds (and minds, they

add), to unbelievable health problems. So you fling the pastry you are still holding out of the window, shouting, 'Out it goes!' and it does go out. It flies, rather, but you are no longer thinking about this pastry. You have already forgotten it. Sometimes we regard the loss of memory as a boon, as a blessing in disguise. Or just as a blessing.

And alcohol? The wife of one of my friends – that is how we are supposed to talk about such matters – usually says, 'You were drunk,' whatever the subject matter under discussion. So, whenever you say, 'such matters' in this old lady's presence you are sure to hear the word 'alcohol', although, the greater part of the day, this word has nothing to do with her husband and his routine. It is true that Apollinaire used this ambiguous word to the utmost. Why is it ambiguous? you may ask. Because you do not know exactly what is meant, who is under discussion: an inveterate drunkard or just a poet who needs to write another poem, which cannot be done without what is justifiably called 'inspiration'. If you are not inspired, the best you can do in this domain amounts to something like: 'Be, be, be, be, me, me, me, me.' What is more, you should pronounce these syllables in the French manner. Not 'to be, to be, to be'. No, the soundtrack of your intrusion should sound like the speech of a mutton.

We cannot say that the world is full of bells which fill our life with music, with their tolling – to the brim. We walk through them but mostly they do not react to us passing by; they do not toll, in other words. That is what they call 'hope': we hope that untolling bells are a sort of guarantee of our immortality. They are guarantees of, of, of, of, of. Of course we feel excited and even happy upon realising we are immortal and so do not have to set about preparing our own funeral. But what about diseases? Is it worth our while living in constant pain, our body covered with wounds of all sorts? Often our comrades ask us, 'Which wound do you suffer from today?' Yes, they put this question to their comrades, instead of saying, 'How are you today?' Well, to tell the truth, they may ask you occasionally, 'Which wound don't you suffer from today?' That explains the pastime to which we are all subjected in our modern world. Automatically we say, 'I don't, I don't, I don't,' being certain that the question concerns our pains and their rituals; their activities, if you prefer. But sometimes, contrary to our expectations, we are asked the following question, 'Do you have any idea what quantum mechanics is about?' No, you have no idea, no ideas – either in this domain or adjacent domains, realms and kingdoms. True, you still have your batons; either in your hands or on the ground, near your feet. As usual you begin to brandish them to the best of your ability, and your parents smile at last. 'That's the quantum mechanics you affirm to have no idea about. Why do you have a nasty habit of lying through your teeth?'

As a punishment you are forced to watch the procedure known as 'teeth punishment'. Your father picks up a baton and begins to attack your teeth as if they were his enemies' fortress. How to win such a battle? Well, your father demonstrates one of the solutions. And he calls it 'the final solution'. He aims at one of your teeth and knocks it out. This is justifiably called 'a real knock'. The audience applauds and your father bows to the audience whose members seem to appreciate his art of knocking; his teeth-art, in other words. He proceeds in the same manner and at the end of a short period of time – say, two and a half minutes – you realise you can no longer lie through your teeth. And lying through your tongue is not very pleasant – for many reasons.

If the word 'through' means something either important or unimportant – it does, otherwise you would not write it down – it denotes a number of holes because you cannot pierce a material without making holes in it.

There are some fissures – call them what you wish – in the space where our teeth grow, rot and fall. And our speech, our witty remarks and insults directed at others, can use these interstices in their effort to reach their various goals. One of these goals is hidden in your heart which can be harmed – rather successfully – through a number of mockeries you collect, when devising a scheme for triumphing over your rival or just a human being you see on the other side of the room where, a few moments ago, you decided to stay for a while. You know for sure you will not stay in this room forever, not only because its space is too narrow and uncomfortable. From your experience, which is not always bitter, you know that narrowness is not always hand in hand with what is called ‘the uncomfortable side of life’. A diamond necklace is not always very large, which might impair its elegance. A huge, almost swollen necklace is heavy, uncomfortable and finally displeasing from our point of view. And we side with those who always vote for beauty, not for wealth, heaviness and flashy, showy things, usually opted for by the *nouveaux riches*. (The people who can rely on new riches.)

Well, in spite of your knowledge – you know you will not stay in this room till doomsday – you cannot bear any presence; any human presence, that is. Not only in this room – everywhere. In the room this presence acquires morbid, unbearable qualities, such as the narrowness of humans and their race. You are not a racist, contrary to what might be presumed upon a hasty examination of my description, but you just cannot bear men, women and their descendants, relatives. Never mind the colour of their skins: you have never paid attention to them. Frankly speaking, you do not pay attention to colour at all; generally speaking. You stop your car in front of a beautiful, autumn-decorated forest, but instead of thoroughly enjoying the colour of every leaf – that is usually done by painters and romantics – you just unfold your chair, draw a cigarette from one of your pockets, strike a match – an old-fashioned procedure – and begin to inhale an unhealthy quantity of smoke, of nicotine, of death. One might draw from this scene the following conclusion: the smoker is anti-romantic and his mentality is on the suicidal side. Or on the suicidal track.

Even one victim of Jack the Ripper is enough to receive humanity in the hall of death. Well, you sit in this room and think you are doomed – condemned to eternal solitude. Not at all, not at all. After a while someone comes and destroys your beautiful solitude and all sorts of interior monologues thanks to which you might fall in love with life – at last, in the long run. Actually you were on the point of falling in love with humanity; even with humanity, with those who make life lovely, according to them, to the same people. ‘What would you do without us,’ they say as soon as they violate the space of this room, encroaching upon your philosophical investigations. What did they lead to, these investigations? You know that any investigation leads only to itself: you repeat the question and give up the whole procedure which is designed for some result about which you keep on wondering. What is it? you ask yourself again and again. It is, your answer. Or it is it. Or it, it, it, which amounts to the same it.

So you are sitting in this room and someone appears; and this someone assures you that you will feel much better in a few moments. You say to this intruder that you are quite well, but nobody believes you when you say you are not on the threshold of death, ‘contrary to what may appear to your eyes and brain. Your brain looks at me and comes to an erroneous conclusion, “This man is about to join Purgatory where a wheelchair is waiting for him.” This is wrong from beginning to end. There are no wheelchairs in Purgatory. There are no benches either. There are bonfires where you burn unwillingly and not completely. And raindrops continue to spoil your walks through the woods where all branches are rotten. You take a step and a rotten branch falls on your head. At the end of the walk the director of Purgatory asks you how many branches you collected in the

course of your exercise. And you count the branches. And the director asks you how many nerves you lost in the course of your exercise. And you count the nerves on which you can still rely, in spite of the exercises to which you are subjected every day and every night.'

All this is unpleasant, but you were sure you would get rid of all your personal horrors upon coming into this room. Once again you were wrong, and you regret your decision. Now you regret the movement of your will which directed you to this room where you hoped to receive an immeasurable gift: serenity, serenity, serenity. Your mummy talked to you mainly about wolves – when trying to put you on your guard against the weirdness of life. At first, whenever you saw a human being on the threshold of your room, you thought, 'That's all right. It's just a human being.' Of course, on such an occasion, you would recall the saying, 'A human being behaves like a wolf, whenever in the presence of another human being.' (Actually, you knew this saying in Latin and always quoted it in Latin. But what does it matter now?) All right, it is a human being whose behaviour may remind you of a pack of wolves. Yet he is not the wolf about which your grandmother spoke to you almost every night. That was her fairy tale. In your fairy tales you were always devoured by wolves. Well, the human being you see in front of your body is not likely to devour you: his teeth are not designed for this exercise. That is what you say to yourself, but you are wrong. And you are perfectly aware of the fact that you are wrong. This meal does not depend on the quality of the eater's teeth. Nor does it depend on the quality of the eater's intestines. (Let us not specify the category to which this human being belongs. A lady, a gentleman. A woman can devour you even more promptly than a man. So the eater's sex does not really count.)

The human being in question comes up to you, his or her teeth at the ready. You look at these teeth and say to yourself, 'I shouldn't worry because my nervous system may suffer as a result of this additional worry. What I see is just a smile, a friendly smile. Probably this human being is waiting for my embrace, for my bear hug.' In the twinkling of an eye, you become a bear and then you hug the human being about whom you talk too much, with insistence and nervousness. To an objective observer the image may appear strange: a wolf is about to embrace a bear. The observer knows it is all wrong: these animals never embrace each other, except in a show you might see at a carnival. What is more, these animals kiss each other, which is utterly surrealistic. So this sort of thing cannot happen; and it does not, whatever you dream about in this room of yours. What happens looks like a confrontation of two wild animals whose sex and identity remain undetermined throughout the scene. Yes, it is undetermined, except that at the end of all this horror one of the animals dies. At least you can see him or her at the feet of his or her opponent who applauds his or her deed. That is humanity for you, in a nutshell. You remove this nutshell and see humanity – in another nutshell. You remove the second nutshell and see a second humanity, or a third humanity. They all resemble each other; so do the nutshells you come across.

What is even more disastrous concerns the room itself. You think about it in terms of rooms, of spaces determined by events, our mentality, our experience, the one which unfolds during our relationship – at the very heart of this relationship – with life itself. Life goes on and we realise that if we enter a room; it is a room we enter. And even if there is a certain quantity of herbs in this room, it does not turn into a field; not in the twinkling of an eye anyway. And no cows walk around in this room of ours; and if there is a cow in it, you can attribute it to the eccentricity of the owner who, once upon a time, resolved to live with a cow and not with a dog or a cat. Why? Perhaps he is very fond of milk and dairy products. This owner does not drink alcohol because he thinks that milk is much better for his health; even for his mental health, believe it or not. He usually says that his brother is a drunkard and so he has a lot of trouble with explanations, even with those related to ordinary

events and things, 'When it came to explaining the lipstick on his collar, he found that drink had clouded his memory,' he says about his brother. 'Of course the lipstick in question comes from one of his mistresses. My brother is a notorious womaniser. His friends maintain that he never pays them visits in a state about which we invariably say, 'Chic.' 'His collars are always covered with lipstick stains or with other indecent vestiges of his libido's exploits.'

Colours play an important part in amorous games, and whenever we see a lot of colours on someone's clothes we do not always think about designers and couturiers. We just say to each other, 'This person enjoys a very intense libidinous or sexual life. And we all envy him or her because there's nothing else to do in this wretched life of ours.' We see a bed and say either inwards or outwardly, 'This is the instrument of our happiness. What else can we do today and tomorrow? Let us wait for our partner, hoping this partner won't be too late. Love, its physical expression and justification, are not eternal, alas.' On the other hand, whatever remains in the domain of physics, is not really essential, considering the importance of love as such. Love presides over everything, including our life, eternity and the Earth, its surface that we explore with our feet and sometimes also with our entire body. Our body lies down on the surface of the Earth and we heave a sigh of relief because we realise at last that we do not live for nothing, that there is a purpose guiding us through the labyrinth of successes and failures. What is this purpose? This is our instinct, and our lying down or standing up is not senseless, ridiculous and without any meaning, however unsubstantial. All right, this meaning *is* unsubstantial. It is also laughable, but we go on living and this triumph, whatever its size and logic, inner and outer logic, is so outlandish that we stand up: whenever we are in a horizontal position, it is vital to stand up, to regain our footing in this world. And if a chance pedestrian says to us, 'Why do you give utterance to your will to live which has no pedestal, no foundation, no reason?' you answer, 'Can't you see my body? Isn't it vertical? Don't I celebrate life in all its varieties and worries and what's not? In spite of everything, I live and outlast whatever happens to me. I last, in spite of being the least of everything and everybody.'

You are in your bed and no partner enlivens your life, the horizontal expression of your life. And one wonders if there is any other expression of this life of yours. Is this life really yours? Yes, you say to yourself. It does not belong to superior or inferior beings, to the Devil, among other beings or non-beings. It belongs to me, for better or worse. For worse, most certainly. But what can be worse than this life you live and hate? Another life situated *under* this life of yours, under its content and all the innuendoes you can imagine and figure out. But how could you stumble upon this second life of yours? You stumble often, but there are no lives beneath whatever you encounter as a result of your fall. Your right hand searches for other lives, and this search takes place under your body and also over it – just in case. You are perhaps in Paradise: there are people who live in Paradise before their death, on account of their sanctity. 'You're a saint,' says someone, when looking at your face, and St Peter puts a cross in his notebook. And thanks to this cross you enter Paradise before entering any cemetery situated on the surface of the Earth.

Why do we so often mention the surface of the Earth, instead of speaking about interiors, thinking in terms of our soul hidden in our entrails, inside our body, in our pineal gland for instance? (There are many instances in this domain, in the domain of the soul and that of the body.) We know what lies on the surface, and whatever prospers beneath it constitutes an enigma about which we have a superficial knowledge, based on hearsay and theresay – on says of all kinds, as we usually say. You say something here, and instantly it becomes hearsay, whatever you may think about this definition and state of affairs. You think it is unjust and unfair, but

this hearsay remains where it is, in spite of your protestations. This occurrence leads us to the inevitable conclusion: hearsay does not depend on our volition. On whose volition do they depend? We are tempted to call them 'follition'. It is crazy, crazy, crazy, crazy, we exclaim, and our exclamation asserts itself to the point of being inscribed in our history, in the history of our mentality.

Sounds come and some of them carry a lot of information with which we are supposed to cope in the hope of making our life even better, even richer and more beautiful. On what depends the beauty of our life? On duration of course. The longer it goes in some direction or other, the better. Directions do not count: they all belong to life and so cannot be questioned by a mere mortal being. Quo vadis – is that how they ask this question? – means you vadis, and quo is a mere preposition or proposition; or a tail you see, when looking at animals. You know that their tails enable them to keep their balance during expeditions in the midst of trees and mountains. But there are animals whose fear of trees and climbing is well known. Why do they carry this addition around? I mean, the tail? There are wasps, flies, and one gets rid of them so as not to laugh too much, among other things. 'My nose is tickling, I think I'm going to sneeze,' you say to yourself, and suddenly you see a mosquito or a wasp – on your very nose. You don't mind the tickling, but a bite is a different story. And sometimes it is a long story, given that wasps are nasty animals. (Are they animals or insects? Judging from the nastiness of their bites, they are animals.) They do not leave you in peace before declaring war on your chest, nose and also on the time during which you will suffer from their bites. Tickling may be pleasant, especially if it is performed by a human being you are in love with. But this human being is often much more powerful than a mere wasp, and then you are likely to fall back on the following reasoning, 'I wish I were bitten by a wasp. This *garce* is so inhuman I may pass away, as a result of her bites, jokes, sermons and subterranean schemes. She is determined to deprive me of my country house, of my house, of this house where I'm talking, of my car where I'll talk in a few minutes, of my forests and lakes. Well, wasps aren't generous, but they're not really nasty, in comparison with this *garce*. Or bitch, if you prefer.'

If all your doors are shut, if all your windows are there only for the sake of light, you think you can rely on your solitude, on its temple where your thoughts and hopes are enshrined. And then you realise your nose, or any other part of your body, tickles. You do not have a charming partner of whom you might say, 'I'm in love with this partner.' And of course you are not likely to say, 'I'm in love with this wasp.' And yet, more often than not, you see a wasp on your nose, especially if you have a mirror within your reach or within walking distance. (All depends on the size of this mirror and on the acuity of your vision.) You may be mistaken, in spite of the precautions you resorted to some time ago. I am speaking about your windows, their impenetrability, and also about your doors, walls and so on. The *garce* is there, and you have no idea how she triumphed over your closeness, impenetrability, hermetism; over your alchemy. (Why did you bestow this lofty word on your habits? Do you think you are made of gold?)

Another interior monologue gets under way. You ask yourself if this time the *garce* will content herself with tickling your nose. But you are aware that she thinks big and consequently, during this nasty ritual, your nose might become your whole body. And even your soul cannot enjoy its safety, which is not proverbial, to tell the truth, because that woman is capable of overcoming the resistance of souls, bodies and also of the Almighty Himself or Herself. This is rendered easier by your weakness, although you are not in love with this woman. You are just weak, and your general weakness becomes quite particular in her presence. So she tickles you to her

heart's content, and then she begins to bite you; also to her heart's content. And, needless to say, her heart is never content.

And what about your soul? Does it laugh during the procedure you are so accustomed to? Your soul laughs and your body trembles as if reacting to the laughter of your soul. Did Nabokov mean the soul, when describing his laughter in the dark? Usually the soul laughs in the light, but the dark is not removed from the list of possibilities, of virtualities. It is not deleted from the list. It is not crossed out either. So you are not really surprised when you begin to pay attention to the darkness that gathers all around you. This darkness may be attributed to your blindness, your physical blindness, but you are *psychically* blind, and you have no idea what this really is and where it is located. In short, you have no idea where your psyche is and why you have to use it from time to time. If you do not use it, you have at least to justify its presence in your being. As soon as you utter the word 'being', you are tempted to correct yourself and also the world's order which needs corrections even more than you, your so-called 'substance'. First, you correct your substance and it becomes a mere 'stance'. Or trance which appeals much more to your expectations. These are invariably great because you are very fond of literature.

The darkness of the soul, the darkness of the body. What does this particular darkness amount to? You have the feeling your body is mottled, or it is rather a gigantic bruise. You must have fallen recently; from your pedestal, probably. Throughout our lives we build pedestals for ourselves. And only a few of us test them before they are finished, complete, perfect. Actually, we should test our pedestals almost every day, otherwise we might get a lot of bruises, when falling from them one day. And this day will come – we all are aware of the fact. And if we are not, the fact will come anyway, and our body will rest at the foot of the pedestal, at the feet, at the beginning of our imaginary glory. Incidentally, we should always think in terms of falls, and from this point of view it is better not to build any pedestals at all. You just buy a comfortable divan and spend the rest of your life on this divan, surrounded by cushions of all kinds. And by many bottles of wine. Four glasses are enough for your forthcoming feasts. What are you supposed to celebrate? You do not have to celebrate anything: drinking wine is not necessarily linked to any celebration, however local and insignificant. Or however universal and majestic. Anyway, bruises are not believed to celebrate anything, with the exception of their own defeats. And I already touched upon the colour of this defeat, if I am not mistaken.

At some point you are bound to realise that your life is nothing but a series of pedestals at the feet (at the toes) of which your corpses seem to enjoy a sort of eternal rest. Many people speak of death in these terms, but very few of them find a sort of consolation (a consolation of sorts, of course) in this thought, in this parallel, in this illogical conclusion. Rest is logical only within the context of life, otherwise it is just an idiotic equation: death=rest. Stay with your illusions, if you wish. I am not really sure you wish to stay with your illusions. You do your best to get rid of them, dreaming about nothing but the truth which will assure everybody you are immortal, eternal and happy, the happiest human being. Why? Because this belief makes you happy: you are literally surrounded by happiness and rainbow-like feelings. Actually you are not only *surrounded* by these feelings: they actually move inside you, palpitate in the vicinity of your intestines.

There are construction sets which allow you to make not only pedestals, but also cranes and all sorts of other instruments of doom. (Everything is your doom, isn't it?) But little by little you reduce your activities to the pedestal about which I have been talking for many hours and years. This is the only thing you pay attention to in your life, however thin it may appear to you, if you cast a glance at these constructions from your deathbed.

Yes, death looms ahead of you and even behind your back, and you eventually realise that your pedestals were nothing but tombstones, and not sophisticated tombstones at that. The tombstones I have in mind often allude to the Greeks and their sculptors, their beauties and grandeur. And what about *your* pedestals? Just a number of stones thanks to which you grow, grow, grow, but your physical growth has nothing to do with your spirituality. (I seem to have spoken about everything, even about spirituality.) Of course you can say as you look at your pyramids and self-concocted grandeur, 'This is my spirituality. There's nothing physical about it, nothing base. It's not a sort of base metal. It's gold, if you please.'

Somebody comes in and says, 'Could you prove your point? Let's consider the spirituality of your construction. Could it recite a few verses from the Bible? Or a few excerpts from the Chinese wisdom we admire so much? Even Mao was addicted to it. Do you know what kind of poem he wrote on the eve of his death?'

I am a traveller and I go by foot.
 New shoes always give me blisters.
 My shoes are always new
 And new shoes always give you blisters.
 So do old shoes. And even if you
 Venture outdoors barefoot,
 These barefeet of yours give you blisters.
 Such is the fate of humans to whose race
 I belong, whatever I say and write.

Mao endeavours to persuade everybody he is immortal, and some of his poems *are* immortal, because they are ridiculous. And whatever is ridiculous and makes you laugh is immortal, whereas profound thoughts are too profound: you cannot really see their bottoms. And if you cannot see the bottom of something about which you muse, you are irritated beyond measure. Since this measure exceeds your patience, you grow irritated – beyond measure as well. All these beyond measures are so obnoxious you curse your life and also its Creator. You uncreate your life, in a manner of speaking. What kind of manner is this? you are asked by a local priest. And you answer as follows, 'You know, Mao spoke about his barefoot, unprotected wanderings in nature. He had no umbrella either, no shoes, no umbrella. You are attacked from the air and also from the Earth. What could you do to resist these attacks? You just die on the spot, wherever this spot is located. Anyway this spot is submitted to the cruelty of rains, and your feet are still bare, as bare as your thoughts. Why are your thoughts bare? Because you expose them in your essays, poems, novels and suchlike.'

How could you protect your thoughts? As you can figure out, it is not enough to put your hands on your head and imagine that your skin and tendons will protect you from cosmic catastrophes. And every catastrophe is fatal because we are linked to everything, to the whole, indissolubly. Yes, it is a chain and, like proletarians – we are all proletarians – we had better get rid of our chains; of the cosmos, in other words or word or expression or idea. If you wish to live in the world where inflation as such does not reign, you just renounce your purchases. You no longer go shopping, and if you do not buy anything, prices will never go up. They will never go; they will stay where they are and die slowly, but surely. The death of a product you see on a counter is not spectacular; it just dies and you cannot profit from its death. What *can* you profit from? From your own death.

Yes, you can take advantage of it, on condition that paradise is not a fairy tale, but a slice of life. What life, which life? Just life, for God's sake. Don't ask too many questions, especially if they are aimed at the Hereafter. There is a here and an after – that is all you need to know, as John Keats put it. What is here? An empty bottle you can touch. What is after? The same bottle. But to experience its afterlife, you have to break it. So you pick it up and smash it. You drop it and watch it smash to pieces or smithereens on the stone floor. And if you are not a born killer? If you are reluctant to kill an empty bottle? You know that, sooner or later rioters will run through the city centre smashing windows and looting shops. Well, according to this report, you will have enough of corpses within your reach; or out of it. Never mind – you can have a walk during which you will pick up whatever appeals to you. In this manner you can inaugurate your collection of what is called an afterlife. Do you know a better word for this phenomenon?

Sometimes, to change your life radically, you just have to wave goodbye to one of your ancient procedures; or to all of them. You used to count money as a cashier. Now you count it as a billionaire. Or rather – still better, still better – someone else counts it for you. But that is not the niche in Paradise we were talking about at the beginning of our fairy tale. What is a fairy tale? At the beginning of this tale you see a folding chair on the stage. But you do not hope to see a poor girl in it. Cinderella is all right with me and somebody else. But there are people who want another girl, another human being – even at the very start of their career. 'We would loath being encouraged by Cinderella, of all people,' they say. So they begin their ascension, thanks to 'very high protection', as they affirm. And if there is ash on their impeccable clothes, they say, 'I spent the whole evening in front of my fireplace. Inevitably you get a few vestiges of this contraption on your clothes. A few homages, I might say.' But these homages are a warning, a bad omen, and some of your friends already say, 'Amen.' What does all this mean?

There is still this armchair in the middle of the room to which you have grown accustomed, with which you are now wholly acquainted. Such is life, you say to everybody. And yet you wish to remain alone, on your own; for the rest of your life. 'I could live with this armchair, if necessary.' But it is not necessary; nothing is necessary, as a matter of fact. There are moments when nothing seems obligatory or even present – everything seems evanescent, in other words. (Do I often say 'in other words'? Are there other words? I am not sure.) In desperation you might say, 'Go to Hell, all of you!' They do go to Hell, contrary to your expectations. Usually, when someone says 'Go to Hell' nobody moves, nobody budes. They are all rooted to the spot, the people, the beings you send to Hell, to one of the halls of Hell. Disobedient little rascals! Why don't you go to Hell? Do you expect to find yourselves in Paradise one of these days? And you laugh hysterically, hoping that your fit, your hysterics (that is your history, after all) will make them understand how ridiculous they are. They do not believe in Hell; nor do they believe in their own death, in its mere possibility. And what about you? The usual question. You are covered with ash from head to foot. And you think it is nothing. Just a joke of nature. Instead of covering you with flowers, from head to foot, our nature, our beloved mother nature covers you with ash; for some obscure reason. The reason you are talking about is not obscure; it is crystal clear, as a matter of fact. Never mind, never mind. It is obscure, it is black. Does it remind you of anything? Of course it does. There are many ashtrays in the world, and some of them are full. Someone should clean them, otherwise another group of smokers will not be able to use them properly. Instead of filling these ashtrays – properly, properly – they will discolour your carpets and even your clothes: some smokers are used to getting rid of their ash in cupboards and wardrobes.

Well, they put a coffin in front of you, before your very eyes, and you still do not understand a thing. You do not understand the thing standing in front of you as if there were no fronts, no affronts; as if there were no things. Actually, at this point of time there are no you, but you are blissfully ignorant of the situation. You believe there are no situations to speak of; nothing to write home about. All right, you do write home, but you do not mention the coffin and the deplorable state of your health. The word 'deplorable' flickers across the room and for a while you ponder over this enigma. Why did it flicker? you ask yourself. Did anything flicker? And then you write to your dearest friend, 'The word "deplorable" flickered across my room, but I have no idea to what it refers. Perhaps it refers to nothing. Perhaps it doesn't refer at all. It just fers, fers, fers, fers.'

Getting rid of forebodings, bad omens – but not of badness as such – is customary; it is one of the customs to which we are all addicted. If a black cat crosses the street, your street, under your very nose, you stop in your tracks, shrug your shoulders and wait for a white cat, for her passage, for her walk, for her participation in the ritual; in the morning to which you have already devoted and even dedicated your time. No white cats seem to enjoy this morning outdoors, and you content yourself with a woman wearing an ugly white dress. The woman herself is ugly, but for once this detail does not count. After all, you just have to go on, notwithstanding some ghastly interference. Then you begin to educate yourself. You realise that putting up with an ugly dress is not appropriate. What is more, this dress may spoil not only your morning, but the whole day which you would like to spend in your office, doing a lot of important work; signing documents, among other things.

So there are letters and pedestals in your room, and you begin to wonder whether these letters can exist on their own. Of course they can. For instance, you write A L E F F and apparently they stand on their own. You open your window and a gust of wind penetrates your abode, a part of it. Nothing happens: the letters are where they were only a few seconds ago, before the advent of the gasp. Then you switch on your vacuum cleaner and repeat the same procedure, replacing the gasp (I wrote the gasp, the ghost) by the vacuum cleaner. You are not mistaken: it is a vacuum cleaner you are holding in your right hand. What is more, you used it many times, on many occasions, in many rooms. It is true that you have several houses, but for some reason you use only one vacuum cleaner as if you were in love with it, as if you could not separate yourself from it; if only for a minute. Yes, you can, as Obama put it. During your walks around your city and its suburbs, you take leave of your vacuum cleaner, imparting to it the following truth, 'My dear, dearest and only vacuum cleaner. I'm sorry to leave you for a few minutes, for an hour perhaps. But I'll be back as soon as possible, as soon as I can manage. You see, my lungs and the rest of my substance are badly in need of fresh air.'

'Me too,' answers the vacuum cleaner.

'I know, I know,' you answer. 'But many things happen outdoors.'

'You mean, young boys like taking a ride on vacuum cleaners?'

'Not exactly. They all have motorcycles.'

'So they just kick us. Is that what you mean?'

'They kick you and smash you to smithereens. And the police forgive them their crimes. No one is beheaded, believe it or not.'

You also talk to your vacuum cleaner about rain and drizzle, about short-circuits and the pain they cause on occasion.

'All this doesn't matter. What matters, however, are your senses, your sensitivity. You may fall in love with a young or old woman – without the slightest provocation on her part. She does nothing, nothing at all.'

None of her fingers and neither of her cheeks move ever so slightly; not even so slightly, mind you. But you rush towards her, kiss her feverishly. A policeman can't stop you, even when he starts blowing his whistle like a hurricane.'

You just have to possess many pedestals of various sizes, otherwise you will not be able to put one of them under your pillow, which is of the utmost importance, considering the impeccability of your sleep, strongly suggested by your renowned doctor. Up to now you have followed the advice propounded by a famous doctor whose fame exclusively depended on a famous American film I saw many times in my youth. He said to his patient, 'Try to spell the word "Czechoslovakia". You spell it, you spell it, you spell it, you spell it, and then you sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep.' The point is Czechoslovakia is no longer on our maps, either electronic or otherwise.

There is another solution to the same problem. You just put all your pedestals around you – you are already used to this image – and try to scale them with your fingers. Of course your fingers are more agile and gymnastic than your legs which, now and then, most of the time, slip, trip and find themselves (and your body) at the foot of the pedestal.

Humans are very sensitive to remarks and so, before making any remark, before opening your mouth and setting your lips in motion, you should think twice, thrice about what you are going to say. For instance, you utter the word 'A' and the people whose bodies surround you on all sides, look at you in wonder, waiting for what the rest of the word is hiding from them. So you say 'AN' and the faces you see begin to acquire a few understanding wrinkles, as they are called in psychiatry. Well, you pronounce 'ANT' and everyone's attention is pricked or picked. Doesn't matter – you know what I am talking about. Everyone is excited and waits for the end of the story, even if this end might mean the end of humanity. You say 'O' and everybody repeats this 'O' as if without this crowd's participation nothing could be achieved or just finished. And everything should be finished, not only Schubert's *Unfinished*. (Why do we always talk about Schubert in this connection? And this connection denotes a sort of unconnection. There is a slice of life, of music, of literature – of whatever you can imagine. Well, you imagine this slice and stop for one of the reasons I touch upon in the following sentence. Lack of inspiration, lack of time, lack of life. You just die and that is the end of it.) This slice is solitary to some extent, and you are too lazy to add something to it. That is what happened to Puccini's *Turandot*. Too weary to marry the Princess and Kallas, or whatever his name is. (Le Kallas?) Anyway, you utter another letter: 'N'. And everybody starts talking to you about the 'Seagull' or simply cherries. People begin to wonder why there are no cherries on the table. There is a film at the end of which an old lady asks somebody whether the road on which she is standing leads to a temple. And this somebody (we are so used to nobodies) answers, 'No.' 'Why does it exist, this road?' asks the woman. 'Do we need the roads that lead to no temple?' Or 'don't lead to a temple?' There are people whose name might be 'no temple'. There are nations whose name might be 'no temples'. There are roads leading to these nations. Should we follow these roads?

Actually, the person I touched upon at the beginning of my discussion of letters was the film director Antonioni in one of whose films there is a lot of vapour. The director shows a number of factories, a number of microbes going up into the sky and staying for a while over our heads, filling our nostrils with poison. What poison? No idea. But I know that even in nineteenth-century England there were lots of poisons in the air and also in the lungs of walkers. Not all of them were called 'Johnny' but never mind, never mind. Not everybody is

called 'Anton' either. Not everybody writes about cherry trees. You can occasionally eat a cherry or put it on a tart you are about to devour. And you may also say to your friends and foes, 'This is the cherry on the tart.' I have no idea whether this expression is used in other languages, but I am sure that the Russians often say, 'And the cherry on the tart...' meaning you are not yet at the end of your worries; or joys, the latter occurring very seldom.

Incidentally, it means that whatever you have already heard (from the mouth of the narrator) is nothing in comparison with what you are about to hear. Why? Because a cherry, any cherry, is either much better than the rest or just worse, worse, worse. Much, much worse, to say the least. An impolite guest might say to the owner of the house or to his spouse, 'I'd like to know what can be worse than your tart. I had the honour of partaking of many of your tarts, and all of them were worse than this cherry I know only by sight.' As for the better side of it, I think I have already discussed the better and the worse (both) sides of this phenomenon, which should thank its own destiny for giving it an opportunity to relish two sides in this world of ours. Of course every phenomenon or man or woman has two sides, like an LP. One side is either gorgeous or criminal. Suppose we are dealing with a criminal, with someone who has gone so far as to kill someone outright; or not outright. What counts in this matter is the death of one individual, due to the monstrosity of another individual. One individual, the second one, is monstrous too, but not to the extent of getting rid of another individual belonging to the same race and sometimes to the same family or nationality. But the first individual, the one who gets killed as a result of this reflection or meditation, is not innocent either. In short, he or she is not like a lamb. A lamb is arch-innocent because, even if offered a pistol, a gun, it will never kill anyone. What is more, it is not even *tempted* to kill anybody, with the exception of the animals it eats three or four times a day. The other individual, however, eats and kills all the time. That is why killers, murderers and suchlike are usually fat in spite of the competitions in which they are daily, constantly engaged, when doing their best to escape from justice – from an ordinary policeman; in Charlie Chaplin's films, for example.

What am I driving at? There are two sides, and usually we drive towards the second side; or the first one: it depends on the point where you find yourself in the course of your speech. Suppose you have already analysed the first side rather thoroughly, but your analysis cannot be called 'complete', if the other side is conspicuous by its absence. Even if it is only a coin you are dissecting, you have to dissect its other side, otherwise your coin is not a real coin. Neither of these sides resembles a cherry, and even an obvious resemblance does not guarantee what is called 'identity' or a spitting image. Well, the image may be spitting, but the taste does not always catch up with the image, however primitive and vulgar. (Vulgarity is widespread in the world, alas.) The other side is a must, but if you show just the other side of the coin you are holding in your hand, a cashier may decline to accept it as payment. 'Show me the other side of the coin, please,' he might say, and of course you feel offended – to the bottom of your heart or soul or body. You do not voice your feelings. You just say to the offender, 'Don't you believe me?'

'Of course I believe you. And yet it is my duty to ask you to show me the other side of the coin you are generously showing me.'

'But the other side of this coin is part and parcel of the same coin. And you can contemplate this side to your heart's content, as long as you wish.'

‘Thank you very much for your exceptional, almost unique generosity, but whatever you offer me, whatever your bountiful heart is prepared to part with, I need to see the other side of this particular coin. Come hell or high water, you know.’

Two sides of the same coin are what they are, and two individuals we come across almost daily belong to the same human race which we are interested in, sometimes willy-nilly. Well, there are two individuals in front of us. One of them is a woman, the other a man. But there is a third individual in the story I am about to tell you, and this individual does not belong to the human race, contrary to what can be imagined. (We often think there are only human beings in this world of ours.) The third individual is a she-dog called Dashen’ka. This is a Russian name or rather a diminutive of Daria. Considering that the situation in the middle of which we find ourselves is centred upon a dog, we might say that Dashen’ka is a pet name for Dasha. I still recall the day at the end of which I met this dog for the first time. Her owner told me straightaway, ‘Her name is Dashen’ka so you can talk to her in Russian.’ I uttered a few Russian words and then made a disastrous attempt to stroke the animal – to demonstrate my love for animals on her skin. She bit me viciously, ferociously.

A few years later, the owner of Dashen’ka said to me earnestly, and I am sure she did not smile at that moment, ‘I didn’t know you had to warn her about your caresses.’ How could you warn a dog about the caresses you are planning to bestow on her body? (To bestow is the right word, if you take into consideration Dashen’ka’s character. You do not caress such dogs out of tenderness. You might think, however, that one should caress *any* dog, notwithstanding the dangers inherent in this ritual. Actually, during my walks near my house, I have caressed many dogs, but biting my hand is reserved for Dashen’ka who is no longer there, of this world.) As a matter of fact, I should have bitten this mother, Dashen’ka’s mother, two or three times, when it was possible. Now it is out of the question: she is in a madhouse or whatever they call it. I call it a madhouse, and I think I am right. What is more, I think I am *absolutely* right.

Suppose I go to this house and imitate a dog, which was done by one of Lubitsch’s characters; in similar circumstances. I ring the bell, someone opens the door, I say, ‘Gav, gav, gav,’ and am admitted to the house in question which is unquestionably mad. I cannot bite just anybody. Of course I can, considering that I am mad, as mad as many dogs. But I have no wish to bite just anybody, any person. I wish to bite Dashen’ka’s former mother, owner or *propriétaire*. (She is French, by the way; or Belgian.) But how could you gain access to a madman or a madwoman? Of course you can act as a dog acts in any circumstances. If a dog needs to go to a madhouse, he does not have to do anything special. He barks and is admitted to this madhouse without any problem that may arise if a human decides to perform the same act. Some dogs, many of them, cannot go to restaurants, and some buses, trolleybuses are forbidden to take such animals on board. (Only ants are permitted.) Well, I am admitted and can therefore walk inside the establishment to which I was generously, humanely admitted by some nurse or other. I think it is the other nurse I spoke to in the course of this admission. Anyway, I am already inside. But how to find the madwoman I am looking for? Why look for mad people? To say they are amusing is vulgar; and if you cannot characterise such an act in such a manner – too strong, isn’t it, too irrevocable? – you just do not define them, madmen and women. You just say, ‘They’re mad,’ but the problem is you are looking for one person, not for the greater part of humanity. This part is too great and you may get lost during your search, even if you reduce it to a minimum.

Suppose you have three women in front of you. They are all mad – no doubt about it. But the woman you are looking for, determined as you are to insult her once and for all – of course you can insult her as often as you

wish, but every time it should be once and for all – is not really recognisable. One of these women is Marie-Antoinette – this goes without saying; as usual, as usual. Many people wish to write novels or at least some poems. They spend hours in front of their computers and finally say to the whole world, ‘All this goes without saying. Why should I write anything?’ But what goes without saying, pray? (Pray or prey? Anyway, you are a prey, one of them. And this, this instance, truth or occurrence also goes without saying.) And actually, praying will never do you any harm, even if you are a criminal.

One woman is called Marie-Antoinette – please, consult the previous sentences – and one of the other women bears the name of the last Russian Empress. And the third one is just Cleopatra. Which one are you looking for? Don’t forget you are longing, yearning for a bite; not for a sexual intercourse. If sexual intercourse were on the agenda, you would rush towards the woman who says ‘Yes’, whenever Marie-Antoinette is touched upon, if only on a sheet of paper – you touch her name and hear ‘Yes’ coming from the row of these women – and you wonder what this ‘yes’ means. You have heard so many ‘yeses’ in the course of your life. (And everything happens in the course of something; of your life, for instance. Or of the life of Julius Caesar. Or of the life of Pushkin, as the Russians usually say.) Everything has changed, and this sentence or judgment could be repeated every morning, if we took the trouble to look at the word closely, not superficially. We open our eyes, look at the world and say, upon awakening, ‘The same merde,’ and it is not necessary to put this word in italics: everyone knows what merde means, even if they do not speak French. You say, ‘Merde,’ and hear the inevitable, inexorable answer, ‘Merde.’ Sometimes you also hear, ‘That’s right,’ or ‘By all means,’ although I do not quite understand the second reaction.

There are other reactions to be envisaged. For instance, ‘Yes, it’s merde, but I don’t have any reason which might incline me to pursue this discussion, telling the whole story of MERDE.’ This story is told every day and we have no need to state, to reaffirm that it is also told every minute and even every second, every tiny, little second. And if there is something smaller than a second, this story resounds within this entity daily, hourly.

What else resounds daily? If you live in Moscow – and I lived in Moscow for 26 years – you are aware that your life unfolds in the neighbourhood of the Kremlin which booms, booms, booms; not all the time, *Gottsei dank*. That is how the Russian emperors gave utterance to their sentiments attuned to the bells suspended somewhere in the Kremlin. You hear these booms, booms – or tombs, rather, given the number of Russian patriots and ordinary citizens assassinated during Russian history – and your day becomes a piece of music you do not like or you adore: there is no other way, no third solution, no third policeman. (I like this novel very much.) You hear these booms and begin to imitate them in your apartment (you seldom own houses in Moscow). Boom, boom, boom; and at the end you find the ugly remains of what your apartment was in days of yore. Everything is yore; so is everybody. That is what Russia looks like today, feels like today. Just yore, yore, yore. That is how they sang in the region of the Volga, in days of yore:

Yore, yore, draw this bloody boat.
 Yore, yore. Let’s draw it once again.
 For the last time, for the last time.
 Yore, yore, yore, yore, yore, yore, yore.

And there are names, and we often forget names for the sake of words. And one can say, 'Well, a name is a word, and if you cherish words you should also cherish names.' I shall pick out one name only: Vavilov. Another Russian name, and many of us are already weary of Russian names. Pushkin is all right, of course, because he wrote, 'I loved you, the love is not completely extinguished in my heart.' There are no extinguishers for love among the objects I possess. They may extinguish a bonfire which spreads too insolently through the forest which is a monument to my rest. But this extinguisher is not fit for love because love is not a forest, although there are many trees in it: the Tree of Life, the Tree of Love, the Tree of Betrayal, the Tree of Trial, and so on. Oh, these trials they talk about on television, on YouTube. 'This child is mine.'

'No, this child is mine.'

'I know you're his mother. He left your womb and saw the universe only after leaving your womb.'

'My womb, mind you.'

'Yes, I know. I have no womb.'

'You have nothing at all, not even brains. Let alone a heart.'

'But I'd like to have my son.'

'This son of yours, for all his beauty, will never perform the part of a heart. In your body.'

'But he'll perform the part of my son. And that's enough, you know.'

'I don't know, I don't know. Why don't you sentence this bastard to death?'

They sentence the bastard to death. So what? His son feels the absence of his father acutely. Now and then he stretches out his arms, saying, 'Daddy, come to me, please! You never do, I know, but this time I earnestly ask you to come and accept my embrace, my filial embrace. If you don't accept this embrace, I'll fling my body out of that window over there; or this one over here, if you wish.'

The window is open; both windows are open, as a matter of fact, but the son hesitates. Now he goes to one window, now he changes his mind (and also his gate) and goes to the other window as if it was beautiful, as if it appealed to his senses which were educated by Raphael, among other masters of the past. At some point, this young man says to himself, 'Why should I throw myself out of the window which never felt Raphael's hands and chisel?' So you go to the Vatican and choose an appropriate window, the window appropriate for your suicide. And yet you realise that no Vatican window is appropriate for your suicide; for obvious reasons. People come to the Vatican for blessings, their thoughts filled with blessings of all kinds. They hear, for instance, 'God has chosen you for the next Nobel Prize. Be careful! Don't drive your car too often. If I were you, I wouldn't drive it at all before the ceremony.'

The daughter, if you have a daughter and even if you do not have one, hesitates as well. But, for all the love she feels for the centuries which are no longer with us, except in museums, she prefers her own addition to these vestiges of the past. On one portrait she puts her favourite ribbon, celebrated by several songs and singers; on another she puts a letter from her beloved whose love is expressed rather briefly, though poignantly, 'I love you.' He wrote it somewhere, probably during one of his expeditions about which he talks spontaneously and with great gusto; so no one suspects foul play. And the play he is engaged in is really foul, *wirklich, wirklich* foul. Well, as soon as he leaves the house, waving at least two hands to accentuate the importance of his farewell, he greets his sweetheart who asks him the following question, 'On what expedition are we going this time?' And he answers innocently – at least his looks are innocent – 'To the island of love.'

'What did you say?' says his companion, trembling all over.

‘To the island of love.’

‘To the *island* of love?’

‘All right, to the continent of love.’

‘To the *continent* of love? And what about the world? And the cosmos?’

‘All right, all right – to the cosmos of love.’

You jump higher and higher, and after a while you have the feeling you have encapsulated the whole of love at the end of your jumps. You open your hands and see the whole of love, all its details, nuances and circumstances. But what is unrequited love? The question of love is a neighbour of the problem we tackle day in, day out. Some scientists affirm it is the same problem, but only naive representatives of our species think that if one problem is resolved, the other will be no problem at all. In other words, by solving one problem, you will solve both. This is not as simple as might appear at first glance. And even your second glance finds no outlet, no easy-going solution. On the other hand, you see a non-easy-going solution, strolling by your side, in the same street. You regard this neighbourhood, the very fact of its closeness, as an affront to your dignity. Well, the second problem is death of course, and you launch into the same question-answer discussion which has bothered you for so many years. If your love is not inside or, to make things easier, if you do not hold it in your hand, if you do not carry it through the streets towards a place, the Black Sea, for instance, you do not have it. The verdict is rather obvious, and you do not like it. Some of the sages you are acquainted with say you should lose touch with love; and life. This means that all your life you lose touch with death, and if asked about your relationship with death, you just answer. ‘We are no longer in touch. Actually, he must be rather far from where we’re talking now. He is on a geological expedition.’

‘What is he looking for?’ asks your interlocutor.

‘Oh, he’s on his usual rounds. Looking for interesting corpses.’

‘What kind of corpses? I know that there are interesting corpses and uninteresting corpses. An interesting corpse gives you an opportunity to find a new remedy against cancers. All other remedies have failed, as you must know. After all, you’re an eminent specialist in this field. But suppose that both corpses contain a lot of cancerous cells. Which one would you prefer? Do you have any means of measuring this kind of thing?’

‘In my opinion, an interesting corpse speaks to God and you can hear their conversation.’

‘Really? In what language do they converse?’

‘In God’s language.’

‘In Aramaic? In Hebrew?’

‘None of your business, you know.’

Yes, that accounts for the unusual sights you see in the streets, on public squares. Some people hold something in their hands, and for nothing in the world would they show you what they treasure to such an extent, with such intensity. Of course they are convinced they carry and protect the sentiment of love, of universal love, or of a particular love; and their conviction is not easily shaken.

Nothing is really easy in this world of ours. Of course it is easy to catch cancer and even to die from it, but there are other domains where you are powerless and often ridiculous. For instance, the cure. You wish to cure cancer which has already reached its last stage. A doctor puts you in the picture, and you tell him frankly you do not like the picture. ‘Well, there’s nothing I can do about it,’ he says, opening his arms as if to embrace you.

‘Don’t open your arms, please don’t! One might think you welcome death with open arms.’

‘Let us believe I welcome the cure and a happy life.’

‘But you told me the cancer was incurable. Why did you lie to me?’

‘Not to see you grief-stricken. Such an image is always ugly.’

‘But you continue to lie about my brother’s convalescence and happy life.’

‘To make you smile. I like your smile, you know.’

‘It’s not the problem of your likes and dislikes we are tackling. Pull yourself together, Herr Doctor.’

‘I’m trying my best.’

‘Of course your fatness doesn’t allow you to pull yourself together without toil, but take the trouble, please. Consult the sorcerers of *Macbeth* fame.’

Pulling yourself together is a figure of speech, although such figures play an important part in our development, in the development of our faculties; and even in the development of the underdevelopment of our body. We pull ourselves together, and often our mothers and cousins say to us as they smile viciously, ‘Pull yourself together, and I don’t mean psychologically.’ Upon hearing such advice, you can answer as follows, ‘I’m afraid I’m not a very good advertisement for the diet since I’ve actually put on weight!’

‘I don’t ask you to become an advertisement for the diet. I need you as a scientist who can’t work properly if he – you, in the present case – doesn’t pull himself together.’

‘But how could I do that?’

‘Just enter a lift and let the doors embrace you heartily – a Russian bear hug, you know. And then the Russian bear will squeeze the last drop of your blood from your brand-new body.’

Life is hard and sometimes you pull yourself together so as not to leave your members, your tendons and joints, on the ground; so as not to scatter them around. Of course you can inaugurate a museum wholly devoted to your body and its parts. In the history of the arts they have been trying to create this attraction, standing for hours and hours in front of several sceptics who would give them water and even eggs; but no bread, no butter, odd as this may appear. Everything was bizarre: two or three people exposing their bodies to the torments of famine, to a shameless exposure of their members and so on. Some visitors went so far as to hang their visiting cards on those shameful members. Actually, after a while one had the feeling those members were more ashamed of the ongoing process, of the unheard-off situation that their owners who, according to journalists, did not mind at all.

They continued to remove some parts of their bodies, affirming they cannot eliminate weight classically, whereas a romantic approach to the problem guaranteed both health and longevity. Some of the experimenters would remove literally everything, with the exception of their nails, saying, ‘Everyone knows that our nails survive our disasters, including death. And if they dare lift the panel beyond which our body enjoys its partial rest – the lid is removed regularly; by thieves, by boys – they find only nails. Precious stones are gone, statuettes are gone as well. (I’m thinking about Egyptian tombs.) But our nails are still there, on the spot. And some of them continue to scrub the old earth clean. Sometimes the nails get out and aim their weapons at the stars and what lies beyond them. The apocalyptic Russians – some call them apoplectic – are determined to ‘gouge the eyes of the universe out’, depriving it of starry nights and other romantic touches. ‘There’s nothing romantic in our bloody life,’ they maintain. ‘And I, for one, have no wish to see this horror any longer!’ One wonders why they do not gouge their own eyes out to participate more convincingly in the performances of *King Lear*. They

do their utmost to get this part, to get enlisted, as Buster Keaton said and did. They gouge out one of their eyes. They stumble and complain about the universal darkness. But the stage director shakes his head. ‘You saw this chair, otherwise you wouldn’t have walked round it. You wouldn’t have skirted this chair. You would have received it fairly and squarely – right in your genitals. I mean, your genitals would have received the weight, the might of this chair, which would have crippled you for life. At least for some part of your life. Frankly speaking, I don’t know which part I’m talking about, but I can see you wobbling around, shedding tears and some of your clothes that always get in the way, especially when you’re crippled and so can’t handle your body and whatever comes (and goes) with it properly.’

But is it really necessary? Pulling yourself together? All right, your whole body is one thing; you are huddled up, compact, condensed. A nuclear bomb descends upon you and your compact body is scattered all over the Earth; in the twinkling of an eye. And this eye of yours is also scattered – perhaps not really all over the Earth. But what does it matter? Does it really matter to you whether your eye (the one that twinkled) can be found in Australia, among other countries and continents? I think I got the gist of what I was thinking about. Wouldn’t it be better for all of us not to pull ourselves together? On the contrary – it might be better to tear ourselves apart so as not to expose our whole body to one or several bombs – in one lump, The bomb is dropped and your life, your whole existence, ends up in a shapeless lump. Is it all right with you? I don’t think so. And I am not sure the problem concerns your shapelessness or shapeliness. (Or shamefulness, for that matter. Whether you are shameful or not concerns only God, St Peter and other substances of this kind.) Well, you are absolutely shapeless. Your thoughts are shapeless, your legs look like your thoughts, your sentiments look like your arms or armpits. Of course you can pull together whatever is left of your being, whatever you (or rather the bomb) left behind. All right, go ahead. You have my blessing, as they say sometimes, before an operation or just an action begins. Blessing or not, your jelly-like remains just remain – that is all they can do. And if you are satisfied with this state of affairs, you can also remain, just remain. You are not allowed to surpass yourself, this state of yours. You are not allowed to overshoot yourself. You are not even allowed to shoot, to use a water pistol, for instance. You are not allowed to use anything at all. As a matter of fact, you cannot even go to the lavatory. Actually, you do not need to. Your remains remain where they are: nobody minds this particular disorder. Why? Because there is nobody left to protest, to manifest one’s or his or her displeasure. There are no ones, no twices, no thrices. Is it the end of the world I am trying to describe to the best of my abilities? Do my abilities stop at this mark, at this incomplete stage? Probably they do. But what do I care? Some of my abilities might lie scattered in New Zealand. But am I prepared to fly all the way to that distant country and recover my abilities or what remains of them? What for?

Well, suppose I am hungry, and the only country where I could find something to eat is New Zealand. I put on my trousers and the rest of my remains (my clothes are also a heap of remains) and go to the nearest airport and fly, fly, fly, fly, for hours and hours and hours. I arrive at my destination and concoct the most amazing dish from all sorts of unlikely ingredients. Sure enough, the ingredients are unlikely; so is the dish. I am unlikely too, come to think of it. But what is really likely? It is likely I shall remain at the spot where, some time ago, I realised that a bomb, an atom bomb, had dropped on my head. My head is not Hiroshima: I am quite aware of the fact. According to Putin, however, atom bombs may drop everywhere and destroy everything, not only Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And some other Russians – many of them, I’m sorry to say – agree with their

president. One of them said recently, 'If I had an atom bomb in my pocket, I would take hold of it and drop it on the United States, on England.'

'But atom bombs cannot be put into your pockets,' someone said.

'Have you ever heard the word "nanotechnology"?' asked the first character.

'Yes. So what?'

'Have you heard about the amazing progress of technology and science?'

'Yes.'

'I'm sure that in one or two years this technology will enable me to put a bomb into my jacket pocket. And then I'll drop it on the United States and many other states. And Russia will conquer the world.'

There are lots of balls in the world, and sometimes we even get the feeling there is nothing else in the world: only balls, balls, balls. Of course we realise, after a while, that not everybody dances around us, and even if we walk for several hours, we shall see a lot of people who hurry in one direction or another. But when hurrying in these directions, they do not dance, contrary to what the word 'ball' suggests; they just walk or run. The word 'ball' may also be applied to the thing which we see in stadiums, and some of us prefer these balls to bombs, especially if the bomb we are talking about can destroy a country or several cities. It is preferable to watch a game, be it football, soccer, volleyball and other balls, on condition that these balls are in no way connected to atoms. We know that atoms are very small, and their infinitesimal size bars our way to the usage I touched upon in the previous sentence. You cannot select one atom, put it near one of your feet and open the score, as they say. No goalkeeper will see such a ball; and if you do not see a ball you cannot defend your goal, whatever this goal happens to be in this world of ours. Of course you can judge some people in these terms, saying, for instance, 'I can't say he's lazy and spends his time on divans and similar objects. No, he has a goal in his life, as they say. A goal in his or her life. But this goal is so insignificant you cannot really see it. Nor can you feel it. You need a collection of the balls of this kind. And it's almost impossible to express the meaning you have in your head, when dealing with such balls, matters and so on. They are so insignificant, infinitesimal, indefinable, inde, inde! In short, all this is inde. Not indeed – inde, if you please. Even if your spellchecker doesn't accept your way of reasoning, you insist and inde remains on the pages you write for posterity or just for yourself, to kill time. And space, come to think of it. How come? How come you can also kill space, while you are at it? The explanation is very simple, and its simplicity is astonishing, not to say incredible. If you write inde or something of the kind, another nonsensical word, you realise you have no wish to go anywhere. Your space has been reduced to the size of the word inde. You can use four gigantic letters to express your thought completely, fully. INDE, or something along these lines. But don't yield to the temptation that always lies in wait for you. Don't go on! Yes, you're a coward, and they certainly say, "He's too lazy to walk to work." And they may add, "He's too lazy anyway. He can't even walk towards the table on which there lies a bar of chocolate." They can also say something like, 'He's too lazy to pick up a heap of banknotes lying on the same table.' And then you can interfere, interrupt their exterior monologue to say, 'It depends on what kind of banknotes can be found in this heap. What is it made up, in other words? Actually, I can explain my laziness very easily. I know for sure that this heap displays only roubles, nothing else. Who needs roubles? may I ask. Do *you* need roubles? Well, no one prevents you from picking this heap of rubble up and putting it in your attaché case. And if your attaché case is too small for this heap, go and buy another attaché case, a bigger model; if you think that this heap of roubles is worth the effort you'll make in the course of your exercise. Or do you want to

count them first? The roubles, I mean? Is it worth our while counting roubles? Is it worth our while touching them? Don't we run a great many dangers, when touching such objects? Any object of no value? Even *speaking* about such objects may result in what they call untold harm. You may get contaminated. You become a rouble yourself. Or a heap of roubles, which amounts to the same thing. Actually roubles never amount to anything – it's not in their nature. In a way, they're amountless. You can't affirm that this morning you saw an amount of roubles. You can't even say "an amountless of roubles". Don't use the word "amount", when speaking about roubles. Even the word "amountless" is too honourable for them. Don't bestow any honour on roubles – they're not worth it. They aren't worth anything. But don't say, "They're worthless," because they don't even deserve this worthlessness. They don't even deserve the word "less". They are less than less. They are less than anything. They are even less than less. I have no idea who is talking now. Roubles are talkless and so it is unnecessary to put any sign, whenever the word "rouble" enters into the spirit of the game. "~~~~~". All this is meaningless. Even the word 'roubles' is meaningless. Why? Because even a hundred roubles are not worth anything, let alone a rouble, a single rouble left somewhere, on some table or other. For an hour or so, you try to make the most of it. As a result you get a heap of ashes, but you protest on the ground that, even if a rouble itself is worthless it does not bury you on the spot, because you are worthless too. No, you wrote a lot of treatises, mathematical formulas and equations; and also axioms. These are not mere pieces of paper: they are axioms, eternal truths. And one of these eternal truths says, 'I got out of my bed and saw the sun which I cut in two, in three, in four. And I got the moon as a result of my experiment. I also applied the same knife to my body and accordingly became a moon, Saturn. Satan.'

You cut out the world; at least you cut out what you have before your very eyes. A newspaper, for instance. You see an announcement in this paper; or on the screen of your computer. You cut it out and put it in your bedroom: it is a wonderful, comfortable, prolific bed. This means you can make love on it to your heart's or rather your genitals' content or contents: contents are always better than mere content. When asked, 'Which one do you prefer? Singular or plural?' you always say, 'Plural, for God's sake.' And once again you repeat the phrase you like so much (among other phrases and idioms and what not): It goes without saying. All right, it goes, it goes, it goes. And sometimes you write, 'It toes, it toes, it toes.' As if only your toes were involved in the process. All right, I accept it. I accept everything, as long as it does not harm my body to which I cling with all my psychological and mystical powers. And whenever it starts harming my body in earnest – these harms are often performed in earnest – I stop them with a categorical gesture. (They understand gestures much better than words.) My gestures say (but not literally; not verbally, rather), 'Stop it, you fools,' and they stop rather frequently. And if some of them do not, I repeat the gesture. Finally everything (let alone everyone) subsides, and worldwide peace comes at last; and there are no better moments in my life. Which moment could triumph over this moment of absolute peace? A moment of absolute war? No way, no way, as they used to say in the States. No way, no way. And little by little you grow rooted to the spot. Or rather you *become* rooted to the spot. If you grow, you do grow, and when growing you lose the spot to which, for some time, for a few seconds or hours, you were rooted. Consequently you are no longer rooted to this spot. They add 'up' to your 'rooted' and you become uprooted; or grow uprooted. What counts is your state, and your state is defined as 'uprooted'. It does not really matter how you came to this state of affairs, to this cul de sac, to this utter misery. What you single out from your dire straits is 'utter misery'. You utter this misery and subside. All your passions and élans subside at the same time or moment. What to do? To subside utterly.

Notwithstanding your misery or rather your miseries, you go on cutting up the world. And as you go on and on, you say to yourself and to others, 'This bit is mine, this castle is mine as well. And if you don't mind my driving this wonderful car, it is mine too. I hope you don't mind. And if you do, I don't mind.' Cut the meat up into small pieces. This knife does not cut very well, it is not sharp enough. You go on cutting up the world and these phrases or rather sentences (death sentences) pop up all the time as if they had nothing to do; nothing except popping, popping, popping. From time to time you realise you cut up some sort of meat, and then you require a sharper knife which might enable you to cut up some parts of the world population. Why not? You do not underestimate this population, not at all. Of course you prefer paintings and jewels, but cutting up the world population or some part of it, some carefully chosen part, is also part of your hobby. Cut the meat up into small pieces. Why do you really need to cut it into *small* pieces? Because small pieces are easier to manipulate, to devour. If you have a small piece of meat on your plate, you can just put it into your mouth, without any preliminary gestures. In other words, you do not have to cut a small piece into pieces: it is already small; small enough for your mouth; and stomach. And what if your stomach informs you at some stage, 'You know, the piece you sent me isn't small enough. It is unwieldy, you know. What am I supposed to do with it?'

'Try to cut it into pieces.'

'But I have no knives at my disposal. That's how we talk in our intestine world. We're Francophiles.'

'Well, you have enough teeth at your disposal, I suppose.'

'But they're not sharp enough. I'm a soft, mild creature, you know.'

'I don't mind your being mild, but leave me in peace. Will you? Leave me alone.'

What am I sure about? Many people are sure about bum, bum, bum. They hear a bum or produce it. And they are convinced they have achieved their goal, whatever this goal is or meant to be. Incidentally, all these goals aim at one end, and you can see it at the end of the road. The end of this road is over there, at the end of your thoughts or your computer. You just type, 'The end of the world,' and that is the end of it. Yet you continue to think, and when thinking you ask yourself, 'What is there beyond the end of the world?' And then a lot of theories sprang up everywhere, and you declare that the world has no end because Giordano Bruno said so somewhere, in one of the centuries you did not live through. Why didn't you say that yourself? You were born too late for this kind of exploit. What exploits were you born for?

A priest says to you, 'This is the end of the road. Do you believe me?'

And you say, 'I do. Where's this end?'

'You understand it too literally. You're imbued with literary notions, with literality.'

For a while you play with odds and realise there are no ends as such.

This reminds me of the game we used to play at school: noughts and crosses. For some reason, even if I was losing reason I saw the advantage of the noughts. Such things happen not only in games, but also in trivial lives which are so trivial sometimes they do not even know how to designate themselves. In other words, they have no passports and so, whenever asked about the whereabouts of such a thing, they say, 'You may look for it at nullissimos.' Sounds like Patmos. Yes, it does have a venerable, respectable ring to it. So they produce your nullissimos and you say, 'That's what I mean. That's what I am.'

'But you're also Grandissimo, according to another page.'

‘Oh, it’s just another page. Don’t pay too much attention to it.’

‘But it’s in your passport, so we can’t discard it offhandedly.’

‘So discard it onhandedly, if you wish. You wish to discard something, you just wish it, and it discards itself selfishly.’

Communication, communication. They often repeat this word, showing how they communicate, the upper regions and the lower ones. Apparently they just take their index finger and draw an imaginary line from bottom to top or the other way round, or the other way updown. What comes first? The up we are talking about or the down we are loath to talk about; for obvious reasons? What is down will never be up, whatever Trismegist says. Hermes, I mean.

Pain, pain, pain. If you ask me when and where, I shall tell you, ‘Right now, at this particular moment, in this particular arm or hand of mine. It may even happen in my little finger. Nothing is little when pain happens to be so big. So, please, call your nurse, ask her by phone to put her biggest syringe in her Hermes bag and take a taxi to reach my place in no time at all. You know my address, don’t you?’

An atom is flying towards a remote galaxy, and this atom is called a ‘bomb’. That is why we waste our precious time on its content and significance. If it was an atom, just an atom *de rien du tout*, we would not even talk about it, saying, ‘It’s something. Starting with an A.’ But if you attach the word ‘bomb’ to this atom, you endow it with something unbelievable, which is believable, alas, more and more believable. Of course even the word deprived of atoms – I mean, the word bomb – is not pleasant, and it is better to avoid it, even if you are at home. And if you leave your abode and walk in the direction of the office where you spend some hours, it is better to take another road. Road taken, not taken – this reminds you of a famous poem. You take a road, and you have no idea what is flying along this road. If they take the trouble to inform you that along this road, flying in the direction of your body, of the most vulnerable parts of it, there is an atom, you answer thus, ‘All right. This atom is not alone, I suppose. And I hope it’s accompanied by a number of worthy fellows.’ And then you are stopped in your tracks; someone stops your speech in its tracks. Your speech presupposed an exposé of what happens in the worlds where atoms fly, copulate and create all sorts of combinations, some of which may remind chess players of Alekhine or Capablanca. Actually a great many games are delivered by our cosmos in the course of our unconscious flights, and these games are called ‘immortal’, some of them; and others are stigmatised on the basis of their contents.

What counts is the transmission, communication. Yes, you finally decide to draw a hole in your floor, which will enable you to contaminate your neighbours. Misunderstandings are always lying in wait for us, and you should not think I want to kill all my neighbours outright; or even in slow motion. There is no motion in this direction – I can assure you. This means I mean no harm to my neighbours, although I hate them heartily. Which organ best suits my hate? Not the heart – that is for sure. A bitter yellow liquid produced by the liver which helps to digest fat. What seems appropriate for my scheme is the word ‘bile’ and even its definition. It does not happen regularly, contrary to what many people think: words do not *always* correspond to their definitions. Bile is an ugly word (Bayle, Stendhal?) and the explanation they supply puts us off whatever is connected with this word, world, galaxy and atoms. Of course they add the following bit, ‘Meat-eaters must produce extensive bile acids in their intestines to properly digest the meat that they eat,’ but we are quite aware of the fact that vegetarians live

much longer than meat eaters; and that is enough to make us use the construction ‘to guard against’ more often than not. It is all the more sinister since all these mixtures and combinations are full of atoms. And some of them – I am sure of that – copulate with bombs on a regular basis. What happens when you copulate with a bomb? The bomb explodes, even if you remain relatively indifferent. You cannot deny you experience something in the course of this contact, but this contact and what you experience in the course of it have nothing to do with what they call ‘erotica’. It is just a sort of spasm, and you can have a series of spasms at the end of your life. a muscle/muscular spasm (mainly UK). My leg suddenly went into spasm. Wait a minute! On condition that you have a leg to speak of; and if you happen to stay in Moscow, your leg can suddenly go into spasm – that’s for sure.

The point is, the members of your body, of any body, of anybody, are likely to feel jealous, if another member belonging to the same constitution or construction does not feel what that other body feels, for instance a spasm. One member goes into spasm, and another member is totally frustrated. This other member does not know exactly what spasm means, but it does mean something, and any meaning is better than no meaning, according to this other member. So this member decides that in the world there is only injustice which allows some member to take advantage of life, of being alive in this life of ours, and other members do not get anything from this so-called life; nothing at all, to be precise. Spasm is probably nothing, nothing special, that is, but it is better than mere nothing. On the one hand you get nothing; on the other you get something. And something is always better than nothing, according to our common sense. You can contradict whoever airs this view, saying, that it is better not to be wounded than to have your body injured from head to foot. This means that your body is just a wound, a prominent, noticeable, ugly scar. ‘That’s nothing,’ they say to you. And the Russians add, ‘That will heal before your wedding.’ But there are other points of view. Her scar healed, but the redness remained for a long time. His face is covered with scar tissue where he was badly burned. This woman and this man are in front of you and you can see the relevance, the truth of the sentences I wrote a few moments ago.

Whatever happens to you may be healed, to some degree, but something remains; the redness, for instance. The woman you are in love with said something to the effect that she loves somebody else, and you said to her, ‘You know, it doesn’t matter because I don’t love you.’ Suppose you do not love her, but the redness remains, for some reason. You explain this phenomenon to many people: to all those who react upon looking at your face. These reactions are different and range from a grunt to a sort of ‘O’ you have never heard before. You have not decided yet which reaction you prefer and, frankly speaking, you think you have no preferences in this domain. But one thing is certain: you are annoyed, whenever you detect a reaction on the part of the people who cross your path in the street as if nothing had happened. I mean, they were preoccupied by their financial situations and had no time for other pedestrians whose walks might be bizarre from time to time, to put it mildly. And suddenly they react to a redness which has nothing unusual in itself and appears on many faces, for many reasons. You are slapped by your rival or by a jealous woman. What may surprise us is the fact that, among the pedestrians you pass, some are so curious and nonchalant that they follow you to find out if your redness is a momentary phenomenon. If it does not disappear after two or three minutes, they conclude that the woman you infuriated loves you deeply or is just an Olympic champion.

Oddly enough, there are passers-by who think you murdered someone, a human being. Instead of making a list of possible victims, they come to the hasty conclusion that you destroyed a human life, the most precious life in the universe. First they dwell (for a few seconds) on the preciousness of this life – of which they partake

as well, mind you. If their reflections on the subject take more than a few seconds, they may consider some negative moments of the same life, saying to themselves, ‘After all, I wouldn’t mind being dead. What does my existence amount to, may I ask? (In such moments we always speak to someone.) Of course I’m not courageous enough to do myself in, but if a stranger could do it in my place, I wouldn’t avert his knife. I wouldn’t lift my finger to interfere with the perfectness of its trajectory. I might even give it an additional push to make sure it doesn’t miss my heart. Yes, I should make sure that nothing goes amiss.’

There are holes in the world, and some people think there are white holes in their midst. I maintain there are only black holes, and this does not necessarily mean that everything disappears into them, once and for all. Something might *appear* in them, something sinister, weird and awful. And all these weirdnesses surpass whatever we can imagine, when consulting our notebooks and other books we chance upon during our wanderings around the world. I have the feeling that, even if such things did not exist, we would figure them out or up or down. We would fill the world up with awful figures, if it was not already filled to the brim many centuries ago. Every century made its own contribution to the general evil, but many of us are convinced that the Second World War put an end to these horrors by the most unimaginable horrors. You try to imagine a piece of horror – let us call this phenomenon thus – and then you imagine something even more horrible. You go on and on, in spite of the horridness (I cannot find another suitable word) accumulated so far, and come up with a world record, a universal record. And then you call it just ‘a record’ and tell yourself, ‘I should surpass myself, otherwise I’ll never become a superman.’ And you become a superman with the passing of the years and centuries. They pass and old records are beaten. You beat them hollow. You beat their brains out. (Oddly enough, even horrendous horrors have brains so that some saviours of humanity think we should beat their brains out.) And if you are reminded of this hollow truth – there are hollow crowns and hollow truths – you just say to these philosophers, ‘Do you see that object over there?’ And if they tell you they are short-sighted, you answer as follows, ‘Can you see your own nose? In this mirror I’m holding before your very nose?’ And then you beat this noses’ brains out.

There are sages whose belief in the unquestionable purity and innocence of our world is unshakeable. You shake their heads, shoulders and the rest of their anatomy, but they are stubborn: they stick to their pure truth and nothing can make them change their minds, points of views and the rest of their private nonsense. So you beat their anatomy’s brains out, and you continue to beat them as long as something – however tiny and weenie and weedy – remains or stays or persists somewhere down below, in their hearts of hearts, in their brains of brains. At some point you may feel satisfied; in spite of the great, profound experience you have in this domain, in the domain called ‘beating their brains out’. And then (after a while) you notice a hole, a tiny, weenie hole through which an optimistic rivulet makes its pernicious, brain-confusing way. And so the world where you felt yourself on the safe side – because you put everything on this side, in safe hands operating within safe houses, in a safe – turned out to be even more hideous than what they call ‘hideousness itself’. And all this happens on account of one miserable hole. After all, this is logical, isn’t it? All the miseries we encounter in this world come from a tiny hole you are not even supposed to notice, let alone pay attention to. And then another sage comes along with a gigantic magnifying glass. ‘Magnificent, isn’t it?’ he asks.

‘It is. Very beautiful indeed,’ you answer.

‘Do you wish to use it, for the sake of trying? For argument’s sake?’

‘What argument? What are you talking about?’

‘You don’t even know what I’m talking about.’

‘No.’

‘And you’re convinced you know the great secret of the world.’

‘No. What secret are you talking about?’

There are no secrets either in the world or outside it. Everything is crystal clear and even more so, if you wish. And I am sure you wish something of the kind. Anyway, your wishes are irrational, emotional and ridiculous, so taking them seriously makes no sense. Nothing makes sense apart from the holes I am talking about. You can build a beautiful palace, but if there is a hole in this palace of yours – I mean a hole can ruin anything and everything – it is not really a palace; it is just a hole. Sometimes it is an ordinary, innocent-looking hole. (They are all innocent and poisonous.) And even if you make a tremendous effort and examine every tiny inch of the palace in question, you are sure to overlook something; a tiny, hideous hole. And through this hole they will annihilate everything, down – or up, if you prefer – to your personal life. You think it is personal and so unreachable, in every sense of the word. But there are other senses of which you are not aware; or not *completely* aware. These senses are reachable and they bear this name proudly as if it meant just the opposite – unreachable. Whatever you can reach in no time is not interesting, and you know the trick; you learnt it some time ago. They say ‘unreachable’, when speaking about your future goal, but you know it works the other way round. Whatever is easy is not worth the slightest of your efforts. It does not cost you much, but it brings no money to your piggy bank.

In a corridor I knocked into the woman I love and sent her sprawling, knocked her over. What on earth did I do that for? Of course I might have offered her a bunch of flowers or a heap of jewels. But these are commonplaces, and she dislikes common things; and even uncommon things do not send her into raptures unless they are really uncommon and can happen only once in a century. You are used to hearing her remarks directed at those who try to win her affections by *slightly* unusual things. Those suitors, those wooers count on her fondness for subtleties, but they are bitterly mistaken: subtlety as such is too common for her. Upon seeing such a trick, she turns away, purses her lips, says, ‘I don’t approve of that kind of subtlety,’ and leaves the room. Alas, we are in for yet another misunderstanding. Her wooer thinks that, to pursue his doomed love affair, he must remain within the kingdom of subtleties, instead of leaving it as soon as possible, settling in what they call an aesthetic knockout. In this area – whenever you are lucky enough to reach it and make a few steps within that blessed region – you immediately stumble upon bodies that are lying around. You kick them, stumble upon them, play football with them. That is how it works, and I suppose the lady in question is eager to undergo this experience. Of course you could say to her, ‘I have no idea what you mean, when talking about these exquisite knockouts, but if you wish to lie down on my bed, I can knock you down rather easily.’

‘And what about soccer?’ she asks.

‘Well, are you really so keen on soccer?’

‘Yes, I am.’

‘And what about their football, the American variety?’

‘I prefer Pele. And Di Stefano, by the way.’

‘Fiorentina’s win against Palermo last night has considerably increased their chances of promotion this season,’ you say, just in case. Alas, the example you chose during your painstaking search for an interesting

topic for your ongoing conversation was not the right one. It was an utterly wrong choice, and the lady left you stranded. Actually she left you stranded in town with no car and no money for a bus. How come? How come? How did all this happen so suddenly, so illogically? You had never been to the town where you landed because of your love, or rather because you do not know how to court such women. What kind of women do you have in mind? The women who are in love with knockouts. Not with *ordinary* knockouts, mind you. She is fond of *subtle* knockouts, of not-too-subtle knockouts, and no wonder that, from time to time, a hooligan, someone like Putin – who by now is as famous as Stalin, I suppose – might be tempted to send her flying. Not only her body, mind you. First he would send her wristwatch flying, and also some of her precious jewels. ('Precious' is a truism, this goes without saying. This goes without saying is also a truism. When all is said and done is also a truism except that all is not said, not yet; nor is all done.)

So you proceed in your usual manner. First you slap her face (to put her in the picture about what is going to happen) and then you snatch the victory from the jaws of the defeat. Why? How? How come? She looks at the jewels you continue to kick around the room and says, 'You can strip my jewels and clothes off, but you'll never possess me wholly.'

'Are you really sure of what you've just said?' you ask.

'Pretty sure.'

And then you proceed in your usual manner. Actually, your manner is not really usual: it varies in accordance with the number of jewels you have to confront in the course of your battle with exaggerations, unimportant things, riches – with whatever hampers the progress of human beings, their movement towards perfection, purity and spirituality. Of course, upon reading the first lines of my report, many readers will exclaim, 'How disgusting! What a horrible macho! What an unparalleled sadist! Where does he come from? From Russia, no doubt. In Russia there are only savages, jewel-snatchers. Yes, they're all body-snatches, but they snatch mainly the bodies that are adorned or decorated with jewels. And if there are no jewels on the body they set their hearts upon, they snatch it all the same and begin smashing everything, armed with this body's bones.' 'Ashes to ashes, bones to bones,' they chant. And then they recall that the foundation of every piece of music is a tone and so they switch to another melody, 'Tone to tone, tone to on.' And we hear a funeral march which surpasses both Beethoven's and Wagner's creations. That surpasses Creation, and one has the feeling that nothing has ever being created, not even the tones you hear. They create themselves, responding to the funereal mood of Creation. There is a series of creations, and one exclaims, upon hearing booom, bbom, bbbbbb, ieneie, ziziz: 'Another creation, another creation.' Cr, cr, cr, cr, cr. And cr, cr raven, 'Ever more!'

But sages never leave us: they are convinced they have a lot of lessons to deliver to humanity and its members; and to the members of their members. One member says to another, 'Did you hear BVujh,ejkc vxoiseq?' And the other answers, 'Yes, I heard eiv i zozpozpz^\$z.' And the show goes on. Someone says, 'I see a hole.' 'Where? Where? Where?' A few voices join in. 'I see a tiny hole under my feet.' And a I dialogues gets under way.

'Where are your feet?'

'Down there.'

'Down where?'

'Down there.'

'Do you mean "up there"?'

‘No, I mean *down* there.’

‘Is it a topsy-turvy world?’

‘Not in the slightest.’

‘The government’s topsy-turvy priorities mean that spending on education remains low.’

‘Very low, very low indeed. People no longer know what “topsy” means.’

‘And what about “turvy”?’

‘Not in the slightest.’

‘And what about torvy?’

‘Not in the.’

‘And what about the?’

‘Not.’

Why can’t we just sit down, light up a cigarette and stay still for a while, if not forever? Because smoking is bad for our health, good for our death? All right, you do not have to smoke or do anything special, anything at all. You just sit in your armchair or in someone else’s armchair and do nothing. Doesn’t this idea appeal to you? It does and for a while – everything happens for a while, life, death – you do not move; even your eyes look at the wall opposite without moving, without moving in the direction of some other wall. But then the eyes, your eyes – and someone else’s eyes as well – get under way, and this way is as pernicious as all other ways you have endeavoured to cross so far. Crossing the North Pole on foot was an amazing feat of human endeavour, but you have never attempted such a feat. Yet, whatever you do is an endeavour; not an amazing endeavour perhaps. You promise to yourself – it is only to yourself that you promise anything – not to look in the direction of the only window you can boast about, when talking about your room; about anything. Even when you just talk about abouts, you always mention this window as if it were a feat in itself; being a window. Is it a hole? Why are you so afraid of this window of yours? Because it is an outlet, a promise; and all promises are vain, not to say ridiculous. All right – it is ridiculous. So what? Of course you live in a free country and so can look (to the) right and (to the) left. And even if you look straight ahead, if you examine the stretch of space lying in front of you, you will not be put into any prison you can think of. (Habitually you do not think about prisons, in terms of prisons.)

Of course there are holes everywhere, and you are tempted to certify this fact, whenever you have this opportunity. And you have it almost every second: it is enough to open your mouth and impart a few movements to your tongue which is lazy sometimes. Sometimes you cannot stop it, cannot stop talking as an individual, but mostly it lies indolently at the bottom of your construction, bodily construction, and you just enjoy your life; doing nothing, in other words. Of course there are holes everywhere, and you bear witness to this unavoidable fact. But there are also stopgaps; not everywhere, as might be supposed. But there are enough stopgaps in the world, and you often realise this inevitability; chiefly when you are on the threshold of a discovery or of plain happiness. You say to yourself, ‘In a few moments I’ll be happy forever.’ And this forever never comes, I am sorry to say. Sure enough, something does come; for instance ‘for’. But ‘ever’ remains forever beyond your reach. (And anybody’s reach, if this can bring you some consolation.) So, more often than not, you say to yourself, ‘Another stopgap, yet another, yet another.’ You end up waiting for gaps, just for a few fragile, almost ludicrous gaps, but even they do not come. The result is even more lamentable than the rest of this sad story. You often come across the individuals who, upon doing something unusual (or even usual) say, ‘Oups, ops, aps.’

Actually these interjections have their origin in their expectation of a gap, of some gap or other. They see and feel an enormous wall – yet another homage to Pink Floyd – but there is nothing else in front of their eyes. That is how the Pink Floyd recording saw the light of day: there are no gaps and that is the end of it. An endless wall. An endless negative ‘Vow’.

There are lights and their absences that we call ‘night’ or ‘lightless day’. Of we just say, ‘Something is wrong with my left eye.’ Then we close this eye of ours and realise that the other one, our right eye, does not see anything either. How come we do see something? Well, we see the Devil or what they call ‘the absolute blackness’. At times they just say ‘blackness’ and you mentally add the missing adjective. Absolute, absolute, absolute – the only way to reach the Absolute Truth after which we hanker all our lives. It is true that you can put some flowers on this blackness and its absolute character or tendency, but no change will ever occur within this situation. And this situation has only insides: no outsides at all. Whenever you say, ‘I’ll go for a walk,’ your wife bursts into hateful laughter, for she knows you will never reach the threshold of your house, as Kafka might have put it. (He used to talk about next villages.) Yes, you do go for a walk, and after taking a few steps, knock your head against a book you re-read last week. Or last month – what does it matter! Yet this matters and you seize this opportunity which enables you to walk on, in spite of your utter immobility. You move your finger and ask it, ‘Are you really moving? Or is it an illusion, another one? Yet another, yet another?’ In this manner you move all your fingers and also your legs. And while you are at it, you also move your thoughts. But do they move at all? You utter the following sentence, ‘Police officers at the scene of the accident were asking passers-by to move along.’ But the passers-by in question did not budge. That is what happens in Russia today. Some people – there are hundreds of them – put flowers on the monuments that keep the memory of the regime alive. (Putin’s regime. Does that still ring a bell? The one that tolls only for you?) Let us do away with these parentheses. Yes, these bells, Edgar Poe’s inspired bells, toll and toll and toll. And John Donne joins them after a while. There is a character from some comedy or other. He says, ‘Don, don, don, don,’ at the end of every sentence he utters; or tries to utter; or thinks he utters. He also joins the battle, hands and the Putin club.

You speak about a war – not about wars in general, but about one particular war. And three centuries later no one knows what you are talking about. Of course wars are in our blood, and whenever you speak about them, you are not beside the point. You hit the point, you drive it in, and wars are always on the agenda, despite the treaties they sign almost every day. They sign a treaty and a bomb drops and explodes under your very nose. Of course you turn your head and your nose does not feel anything, but people drop on the left-hand side, on the right-hand side. Buildings and palaces drop too, and you can witness – you cannot do otherwise – a sort of rain. You may like it or not: it rains, pours and you are in the middle of all this havoc. What is more, you are wreaking it.

You decide not to wreak it anymore. But does it depend on your decisions? Do your decisions depend on your own decisions? Wreaking goes on, on its own, on its own, wreaking, reeking; and yet nothing really happens. Of course you execute a few flights and they say, ‘He’s tilting at windmills.’ You hear some degrading notes, a reproach boarding on ridicule, and what is ridiculous kills you on the spot or on the next spot. You are killed on one spot but you are a fighter and so continue your journey through the night or through the day, as the case may be. Is it day? Is it night? The journey is there, under you, somehow, and then you realise you have just arrived at the other spot where you undress, in accordance with a venerated custom. You undress, keeping your trousers on for the sake of decency. But you are indecent nonetheless; everybody is aware of the fact. But you

are not; you are not aware of the fact that everyone is aware of the fact you are indecent. And so you ask everybody, 'Am I indecent? Am I indecent?' They reassure you, they console you, and then you die because you are supposed to die on the spot; on this spot, among other spots of similar dimensions and structures. But what do the windmills have to do with the whole business? Then you decide to die in a blaze of glory and a pair of windmills may give you a helping hand or rather a helping wing. A helping wing flies towards you, you install yourself on it, you fly through their or through another substance, if you have already left the Earth. But there is something slightly ignominious in the whole enterprise, and you do not know exactly what it is. You cannot put your finger on the difficulty. Well, you do put your finger on the difficulty which happens to lie on one of the wings. So now you and the wing and the difficulty lying on it do your best to fly through the country you have never visited, not even when perusing Cervantes' book. Perhaps it was situated in a book written by one of his contemporaries. You go to several libraries in search of the book in question, but find only recent or old editions of the famous novel. Nothing doing – you resume your flight. And they say, 'He's tilting at windmills. And he has no idea how to do it properly.' So you try to do it properly, but they go on laughing and saying you should practise for this kind of flight. 'It's not a Boeing, you know,' they say, before resuming their laughter. So you sit down in a chair, tilt your chair backwards and put your feet up on your desk. 'How indecorous,' they say. 'You behave like an American upstart, a vulgar individual whose origins are lost somewhere, in the wildness of the West.'

What counts in this ghastly ritual is the tilting you perform when appropriating this armchair for your personal comfort. (There are no other comforts in the world.) But once again you ask yourself a ritual question, 'What's all this about?' It is about the windmills of *Don Quixote* fame. The fame is there, but the windmills should be found and brought immediately to the spot where our discussion is taking place and space and sense. Where are the windmills? Everywhere, you are answered. Whatever you do is an encounter with a windmill. Now you encounter a wind, now a mill. The point is everything is superfluous and ludicrous, and we do not need commentators to lay down this truth in front of our minds. Our minds are there and they are waiting for a truth. Not for a truth of sorts, though, but the absolute truth the absolutism of which may equal and rival that of the Russians, of their emperors. So you lift your leg and put it somewhere, being assured that whatever your leg meets during its journey is a windmill. And very often you say to yourself, 'If there are no mills and winds in the neighbourhood, I'll just stay where I am, for it's pointless to go anywhere. No any is of any interest to me.'

What does it look like? A windmill? Or a wind, to start with? You just doodle for a while – apparently John F. Kennedy devoted a lot of time to this pastime – and put a sentence beside this doodling. You call it 'The Wind,' or you call it 'The Nothing,' which is more appropriate, by the way, given that everything is nothing. All right, you call it 'Nothing'. And what about All Right? You call it 'Nothing' too, and then they start, all your dilemmas. Am I flying? The question you ask yourself at the beginning of your journey through space and your personal life. (Not the life of humanity – let us leave it alone.) Are you flying? If you are, you cannot just sit down in any chair. You try to do so and collapse, fall – as heavily as the Roman Empire fell many years ago. (It goes on falling, by the way; thanks to books and other things.) You fall and you rejoice – vainly and ingloriously, I must say: your falls do not mean much, considering that falls do not prove your participation in what are called 'universal flights'. You fall, but this does not mean you have flown, taking part in cosmic, majestic flights that cross the universe. (They call these flights 'crosswise'.) Let us examine the following statement, 'With scarcely any funding and a staff of six, they were operating on a wing and a prayer.' You

operate on a wing, that is for sure; on condition that we continue to talk about your flights, not about your crawls, about your all fours. What about this funding, for God's sake? Where is it? I need this funding badly, personally; for many things and projects. What are you talking about? I am asking once again. What all this all this all this all about?

Well, let us cool down and analyse this proposition thoroughly. You operate on a wing. You just catch a butterfly, take off one of its wings – we should not use a more radical method – and just operate on it. How? You put this wing under your belly and do your best to take off; like a plane you saw recently at some airport or other. At that airport there were what they call attendants, but you may be mistaken. It is not your pigeon. Anyway, with a pigeon you are unlikely to make a long, profitable journey; to other planets, for instance.

What kind of journey are you aiming at? Actually you do not think in these terms, journey, aims. You just go because the show must go on, as someone constantly says. What show? Which one? The one to which you are viscerally attached; for some reason or other. You know some reason but not the other, the one they are talking about from time to time, adding it to sentences, to various sentences. (To death-sentences as well.) There are many tags, and price tags are the ones to which we pay more attention than to the rest of our life. But there are also tags such as 'isn't it?' You can use this particular tag all the time to show you are not as self-important as may appear at first glance. (And some of us do not like self-sufficient, self-imposing people. And we often vote for other sorts of people, unimportant, stupid and insignificant from every point of view we are prepared to consider.) Well, the show goes on, but we are weary and once again our legs are killing us, without killing us altogether. That is the ordeal you did not take into consideration at the moment of your birth; otherwise you might have changed your mind so as to your stay in the womb of the world; let us put it this way. (Our mothers are already overburdened with tasks, duties and moral obligations. And milk, for God's sake!) So our legs are on their last legs, and in such moments of utter lucidity we begin to count the number of legs we may count on in the course of our journey through life and death. Let us not forget that, while travelling through life, we also travel through death, although our travel agency mercifully spares us additional payments; death payments; on condition that we discount all sorts of insurances. But you do not have to accept all these insurances, and one of the ways of keeping your money in your purse is by saying to your agents, 'No, thank you very much. I'd like to brave death, if only for once. And this once will happen this time, during my forthcoming journey for which I've already paid you a lot of money.'

Yes, it is confirmed: your legs are on their last legs. And even if they are on the legs that precede the last ones, you prefer not to use them to the utmost. But how to preserve their strength and shape? You need a wing, and at this particular moment are you likely to remember Cervantes and his famous, indecorously famous novel? (They mainly talk about *War and Peace* and *Don Quixote*.) You say to yourself, 'Butterflies and their wings are unreliable; they crumble in your hands, under the pressure of your fingers. (And yet you touch them ever so gently.) So your expectations turn towards the wings of windmills which may cause you a lot of trouble, but at least they do not crumble under the pressure of your fingers. What is more, you do not dwindle to a speck either. No, this is the other way round. If you handle butterflies and forget about windmills, you can be assured that your shape will be preserved for posterity; at least for some time. Then you die and your posterity forgets about you, in spite of the number of photographs and films you left behind. And the members of your posterity also leave them behind; they just go forward, leaving both photographs and films behind. Of course your money is

still working in different spheres of human activity, but you no longer care about anything or anybody; Don Quixote, among other people and things. (His armour, for instance.)

So you set your heart upon a windmill and go to Holland. You decide not to drive too far: the first mill will suit you perfectly. But what if it does not work? What if the wings do not turn and fly? Of course you are aware of the number of buttons that you push to ensure the functioning of wings and other engines. You press a button and fly like Gagarin or Armstrong; not necessarily as far the Moon. You fly and lose your balance which has anyway been lost for some time; as far as you can remember. But what does this mean: balance, losing it, losing anything or everything? What do you have? At least you have a windmill at which you can tilt, if you wish. At least Don Quixote's exploits are reachable; within your reach or anybody's reach. The point is you do not always have a windmill within your reach. You can reach it after a while, if you wish it to appear in front of you at all cost, but for the moment it is somewhere in Holland and not right beyond your window. And even if you find another window, a dozen windows situated within your walking distance, which is different from the walking distance they usually talk about, beyond these windows you are not likely to find a windmill of the kind you easily come across when leafing through Cervantes's book.

But you do not have to look for windmills because, more often than not, they say, 'You're tilting at windmills,' and laugh as they examine your way of protecting yourself from evils, about which American presidents like to talk. (Communism is a great inspirer.) You protect yourself, and then you resolve not to do it any more: you are just weary of all the cries you hear around you. Tilting, tilting, you're tilting. There are no giants today; from this point of view, it is pointless to protect oneself, to battle against injustice and so on. There are no giants, no injustice; just a few windmills in Holland. But perversity never leaves one in peace. Sooner or later, instead of enjoying peace and quiet on our divan we leave our bed and zoom forward, backward – in any direction we know nothing of; except the visible or invisible presence of windmills you are supposed to tilt at, otherwise you are bound to lose the game. You are also supposed to enrich the rules which pale into insignificance, going out of fashion rather quickly as if mocking your ardent desire to play their games, with their windmills, and so on and so forth.

In short, you just expose yourself to dangers. Contrary to what might be presumed, you do not think that your bravery will raise a lot of sympathy on the part of your enemies or simply other earthlings. (Soon we shall talk about Martians.) Yes, you take your clothes off, which makes things easier for them. If they want to deprive you of your heart, your naked body shows them this heart of yours. And if you think the image is not distinct enough, you can paint your heart on your heart – on your body, on the spot where your heart is supposed to beat. For the moment it is beating, and you can even hear this beating which guarantees a long, happy life. They lived happily hereafter, thereafter, as they say. And then something goes wrong. But for the moment you are just naked, stark naked in front of the whole world which aims at your heart. It is pointless to appeal to windmills because, even your flying heart or colours, are so visible that they (all others, this so-called humanity) can just aim a pebble at all of them and you collapse, whatever your height and the majesty of your pedestals. You collapse with all your pedestals. The noise you make! (Let us call it 'noise' and not 'hurricane' or 'earthquake' or something along these lines. Along these lines there are many noises; the utter, irremediable collapse of the cosmos, for instance. *Passons, passons.*)

So you invite your enemies or just all those who stand in your vicinity. Where to? Where is the destination of your invitation? Your chest, for God's sake. 'You can discharge your rifles,' you say to them,

instead of talking to yourself for hours and hours. ‘You can discharge your rifles and bombers and what not. And what is! I promise I’ll have no recourse to windmills. No need of their help, imaginary or otherwise. It is always otherwise, otherwise, I know. And what does this “otherwise” mean? It means you can send your bullets in the direction of my liver, creating a sort of cirrhosis.’ You die and your enemies proclaim (and their proclamation is recorded by television studios), ‘He died of alcohol, of the dependence he showed throughout his life. He depended on alcohol, instead of trusting our help and cordiality. We tendered him our cordiality and he rejected it on the grounds that he is a superman, and not just a human being. That’s how it works with him, alas. No longer, alas. He is dead and we must bury him with military honours, otherwise all those others we are always talking about will think we killed him.’

What does *that* mean? All right, life stops once, for once. But then, little by little, this stop is removed from where it seemed to have found its eternal rest. ‘The rest is not eternal,’ you hear. And the ‘once’ you relished so much only a few moments ago is not eternal either. Even if you repeat this word – once, once, once, once – it mercilessly belies its own sense. And if you repeat the word ‘for’, then it becomes excruciatingly painful. Once, once, once, once, you hear or utter. And then you ask the eternal question, ‘What for?’ and you are answered almost immediately, ‘For, for, for, for, for, for, for, for.’ And you ask Providence to show you this ‘for’. And you see it. After this show you renounce all shows and say to them, to all these shows, ‘I will *not* go on.’ The point is, when uttering this sentence – another death, another life – you begin to kick against your immobility, your coffin, tomb and eternity. You have no wish to adhere to your eternity. It is too eternal, in your opinion. Just give me morsels of it, you say to the Providence you have adopted in the course of your investigations and wanderings. As an eternal interlocutor, as they say sometimes; somewhere. And even if they – or someone, some they – do not say anything of the kind, you just go on, being determined to adhere to your eternal formulas, such as, ‘Life is beautiful,’ or ‘There’s nothing better than the ordinary, simple life advocated by Tolstoy and Gandhi.’ And if they ask, ‘Who are you?’ you answer simply, ‘I’m Gandhi.’

I am not Gandhi. Even if I go half-naked around Benares or elsewhere, they will not kill me in the same manner. Let us recall what happens when you speak about sameness as such, ‘They won’t aim at your heart, you won’t say, “Oh, my God,” because you do not really believe in God. And even if you do, you will not remember Him at the last moment of your life. Why? Because you will reflect upon this problem as follows, “For the moment, I’ve a lot to do with my society and its bankers. Of course God is important, but I’ll speak to Him at the very last moment of my moment. Like Gandhi.”’ The last moment comes and you are distracted, looking at a young woman’s legs, for instance, for instance. There are other instances, of course; for instance, the same lady’s bosom. You look at this bosom and forget not only Gandhi, but a whole package of saints and philosophers. So, if they ask you what you think about non-violence, you answer, ‘Bosom, bosom, bosom, bosom.’ (I wonder if in such cases culprits repeat the same word four times.) You forget Gandhi and look at the bosom you can even touch; at least you are allowed to do so, judging by the utter absence of police officers and official lovers. In other circumstances, an official lover might come up to you (with a knife or just barehanded) and say, ‘Why are you looking so intensely at the bosom of my wife?’ And you reply, your fists at the ready, ‘I’m looking at the *bottom* of your wife, not at her *bosom*.’

But what about it? What about it? What about it? You draw a few bosoms, side by side; and then you also draw a few buttocks. You compare them at leisure and come to the inevitable conclusion, ‘They’re all alike.’ But if you compare *this* woman’s legs to her bosom, you realise they are quite different, and the sentiments or

instincts aroused by them are located on different sides of your personal cosmos. The cosmos you contemplate at 10 p.m. is a leggy cosmos. The rest is wholly devoted and dedicated to someone's bosom; you do not even know whose, to be honest.

Then you draw a line, a red line, a blue line: you have a collection of lines within your reach; on your writing desk, to be precise. But mostly you draw lines in your imagination, which is quite appropriate: the bosoms and legs you are dreaming about unfold in your dreams or rather in your imagination. Now this imagination of yours devotes half an hour to a leg or rather to a part of this leg; a thigh, for instance. Now you concentrate on some part of a bosom you saw somewhere; in one of your dreams perhaps. It is astonishing to realise to what extent we depend on our dreams: not only in terms of the future or just some palaces you are longing for. (Your bed in such and such a palace.) But you draw a line, the line – call it what you wish; put as many 'the' as you wish on a sheet of paper lying in front of you. (More reliable and historical than a computer, isn't it?) What about your superior, divine predestination? Is it based on a female leg? Or on a male leg, for that matter? For what matter? What are you talking about? Usually these frivolous talks and subjects and dreams end up in this fashion: you draw a line and say to yourself, 'What are you talking about?'

And what is this superior destination? It is not a leg, is it? Even if you choose a Greek sculpture, no leg will ever permit you to catch a glimpse of divine superiority, becoming a hero of all times. Even Pythagoras did not think in terms of legs and bosoms and torsos. And yet he was swimming in the Sea of Numbers. And what is a beautiful leg? A beautiful adjustment of numbers. The same goes for bosoms and torsos – no question about it. But what is it? What is it you are talking about right now? Something spiritual, highly spiritual, divorced from base materials and interests. And the war you had in mind, when talking about Don Quixote's fame, his posthumous fame? Just two hours ago I saw Putin – does his name still ring bells and hells – in a church, bowing to icons and kissing them fervently, almost feverishly. And on the other hand – actually it is the same hand – he signs orders that result in thousands deaths, mutilations and ends; the innumerable ends of happiness, for instance.

And then you remember St Augustine; it is inevitable in this spiritual context. St Augustine said (or declared), 'If God is with us, who can be against us?' Or just who is, how is. How is it possible? God stands by your side, but there is a man or a woman who bursts into laughter and says, 'Can you stand on your own? Without God?' And if you answer, 'Yes,' she comes up to you and starts tickling you everywhere, on every side of your body. She tickles you and you begin to vacillate. Not only your mood vacillates between hope and despair – your body undergoes the same contortions. As usual an objective observer observes you and says to himself or to all the others you can include within your vision, 'Now his body exhibits a few rays of hope. Now it is sinking in the deepest despair one can imagine. No strength of imagination can imagine such despair, frankly speaking.' Let us take a famous sculpture: *Le penseur*. Rodin thought he was capable of capturing human thought, its visual expression. But the thought we are talking about vacillates between horror and miracle. Actually, to be true to life, this sculpture should vacillate all the time – without falling, however. And what about the sinuosity of thoughts? You just put your elbows on your knees and become a great work of art. Fiddlesticks, fiddlesticks, fiddlesticks.

So you think and exist, but what you think about is limited to the stretch of your floor where your gaze or whatever it is strolls, wanders and kills time, hoping to survive till the twelfth stroke of your grandfather clock; or any other clock; or any other midnight. The tenth stroke. During this stroke you think of your childhood when

you still took advantage of nature, of its generosity, of your mother's generosity and overall help. But what happened afterwards? The eleventh stroke. In other worlds (and words), someone beats you on the head and you count the strokes as if they had promised you to stop at the eleventh stroke or at the thirteenth stroke. It is always at the thirteenth stroke they stop, but you do not know it. And you are not likely to learn the truth in your lifetime; or even outside it, as I usually say.

You contemplate the floor of your house and think there is nothing else in the world; just this stretch, this floor. Nothing else. And what about the National Gallery and the Louvre? Yes, there are paintings, pictures, sculptures, and you just watch your knees or something else. And what if Piero de la Francesca vouchsafes to penetrate your field of vision? Then they tell you, 'Sorry, but Piero doesn't understand the verb "to vouchsafe". He is certainly old, but not to that extent.'

'What's the extent of his oldness, pray?'

'Eternity, you know.'

'I know nothing of eternity. First show me this notion in action.'

'Here it is.'

'Sorry?'

'You look at this painting and eternity enters your mind, spirit and even your body. To some extent, though.'

'To what extent, pray?'

'To this extent.' And they strike you once again.

Strikes, strikes, strikes. What else is there in your life? Beatitudes. That is what you say to those who run down, denigrate your life at the earliest opportunity. And this opportunity comes very early, too early, so to speak and so to live. And what about these co-called beatitudes? You go to a picture gallery and freeze in front of a picture that seems to invade your every nerve; or every sinew, come to think of it. You come to think about every sinew and you say to all the pessimists you see around you, 'My sinews, every one of them, are filled to the brim with what I call "beatitude". And you should use this word, whenever you come across the same sensation or invasion. Just listen to Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*.'

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OPEN CIRCLES

2013

PART ONE

I

This book is unfinished and whatever remains unsaid depends on my diseases of which I know nothing because I'm sound in body and mind – at least within my own brain. I think I'm healthy, but my body may conceal a lot of diseases and they're certainly about to come to the fore today or tomorrow in spite of my moods and inherent optimism. And they may hamper the efforts I make towards this world and the letters and figures I count upon so as not to die without uttering a few words of truth, a few numbers of eternity lurking in the wings as I continue my Hamlet-inspired monologue. I say 'to be' but restrain from going any further because any 'not' engenders a turmoil in my body that is exposed to the diseases they speak of in newspapers and magazines sold in the shops where I buy not only magazines but also tinned soup and smoked trout.

Am I already dying? I wished to start writing this book on the threshold of death because one has different thoughts indoors and outdoors: only on thresholds can one *fruitfully* indulge in musings focused upon the Hereafter. Of course the Hereafter is never far away – even if one stands on the threshold of *life*, of a new era. This era may last only for a few seconds and then the Hereafter comes into the open and tells one a few home truths; and one becomes less than one and even less than zero as a result of the Hereafter's calculations. After all, the Hereafter and death are good mathematicians, although they don't add anything to anything. They only deduct something from whatever happens on the threshold of an old era: there's nothing older than death.

I don't know what my other thoughts are and how I can use them to penetrate the regions where I haven't yet enjoyed myself; and yet there are regions that aren't designed for joy and its manifestations. And if one laughs in those regions, the laugh that resounds everywhere is bitter and no one, not even those who are used to tragedies, is willing to share in the fate of the person whose laughter can be heard everywhere with the exception of the Hereafter. It is hysterical laughter one often hears in the regions I've touched upon and I hope I'll never visit, either in my nightmares or in the course of my walks around the city where I settled more than 30 years ago. I am still myself and I'd better take advantage of this state of affairs and note down my states of mind that are sure to disappear in the near or distant future about which I know nothing. I just know it is distant or near, for sometimes everything seems to be near, within my reach; and sometimes even the horizon is unable to catch up with my receding thoughts.

I let them go, especially if they're focused upon death and its paraphernalia: coffins, flowers and tombstones on which some people put these flowers so as not to offend the dead who watch them from their tombs, even if the cemetery in question is rundown and seems to be forsaken by both the dead and the quick. I rise from the dead and walk around the cemetery to get used to the Earth, to its surface that I scarcely remember after spending so much time in the bowels of the Earth or in the heart of it, in its intestines. There's a woman within the bounds of the cemetery which may turn out to be boundless, for many people think the Earth is nothing but a huge cemetery where they dream about life and fly in the midst of angels. I don't think about angels and flight; my thoughts are different, even though some of them coincide with what others do and turn their attention to as they live through their days and nights, thinking they'll die some day without leaving anything behind them.

Why should I leave anything behind? I look neither forward nor behind and only my feelings guide my bones through the labyrinth of life which looks like a sheet of paper lying on a writing desk. That's why I write what I shouldn't write because there's no point in writing, walking, thinking about this and that; but that and this show up somewhere and I go in their direction to see what's going on. Actually nothing goes anywhere and I go back to my bed in which I'd like to put my body, my bones and my thoughts so as to get some rest that is free of talk, angels and my fellow creatures who usually set my teeth on edge: they talk too much and the noise they make is insufferable.

I've got a dull ache in my shoulder and right arm, which may be due to the injury I sustained a few years ago when skiing in Diableret, not far from Gstaad. I seemed to be rooted to the spot, but you never can count either on material or physiological roots: they often let you down. My skies moved forward; my body didn't follow them as if enamoured of its imaginary roots. They slipped on the snow and my body fell down because it had found no other way of stopping the skis. My right arm hit a boulder and for a while I groaned with pain without even trying to scramble to my feet and hurry out of the cursed spot.

As you get older you have all sorts of aches and pains. So some of my friends say that the pains I suffer from are of rheumatic origin and that my fall has nothing to do with them. They may be right: the fall took place almost 10 years ago and hopefully my muscles' memory is as short as the one I use when trying to recall what I'm supposed to do either tomorrow or next week. In the process I come across some of my future duties, but I forget the past and the names without which even a personal history makes no sense.

But I don't forget my pain and it doesn't seem to forget me either as if our love was determined to model its intensity on Shakespeare's heroes and heroines who are more renowned for their deaths than for their lives. I wish my pain could die like Juliet or Romeo to let me live my life which can experience the whole gamut of emotions, from happiness to sorrow, without the aid of death scenes. When I was in Moscow, I phoned a friend to say my suffering prevented me from sleeping as much as I needed and he thought at first I had fallen in love. I told him that unrequited love would not cause me suffering.

We die and are risen from the dead and this happens almost daily in spite of our conviction that everything goes smoothly and that death is neither on the horizon nor even beyond it. Our body or rather its parts are removed and extended. They crumble and God (or nature) restores them to their former condition, sometimes replacing them with other parts: nature has a lot of spare parts in its possession. (The same goes for God, needless to say.) We mumble, crumble, fall and scramble into our clothes as our wife or husband races to fetch a doctor. 'We'll soon have you back on your feet again,' says a nurse and she is right; yet we are used to mistrusting the sincerity of nurses and doctors.

As everyone knows, in our cradle we are already old enough for our own funeral and poets often confuse cradles with graves, and they don't always do this on purpose. If questioned on the subject, they say that a coffin looks exactly like a cradle, even if we can't rock it. 'Why should you rock it?' they ask, raising their eyebrows. 'You're already asleep, aren't you?' Yes, we know that death is another variety of deep sleep; at least we believe in this definition and this belief of ours traditionally goes hand in hand with our belief in God. 'Our experience qualified us perfectly for the job,' say our poets, nodding or shaking their heads. What experience? What job? Our birth is the experience they hint at; and the job was defined by Gibbon in his masterpiece entitled *The*

Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. From this point of view, any civilisation and any man or woman have a lot in common: they are born and live for some time only to find that death is even more ineluctable than life.

I don't like the word 'monastery': in Russian it is spoiled by the letter 'i' which makes one draw the air from the very bottom of one's lungs, and I, for one, am deeply suspicious of whatever can be found at the bottom of human lungs. I like the women whose voices remind one of their bodies, especially of their chests, but the sound related to the letter 'i' has nothing in common with those contraltos one hears in prestigious concert halls – even if it is a Russian singer who performs a few old Russian songs. This letter reminds me of a man who is as stubborn as a mule. I wonder why we never say about a mule, 'He's as stubborn as a man'? Because we don't really care about mules? Or do we care about them only insofar as they can help us accuse a man or a woman of stubbornness?

Be that as it may, there are no language barriers between Russian monasteries and my desire to spend the rest of my life in one of them. The word 'freedom' is spoiled neither by the letter 'i' nor by any other letter or sound; and yet I'm deeply suspicious of this notion which is used with great gusto throughout the globe and even beyond it: our extraterrestrial counterparts must already have been contaminated through our slogans and phoney convictions. I think I am free because I've never worked for anybody, and it would gall me to take orders either from my colleagues or from government officials. I don't have a mobile phone and when I come back after spending two months abroad, I find only three messages on my answerphone: the world seems to have forgotten me. But they haven't buried me yet and I suppose I should be grateful to them for this gesture of goodwill.

My freedom reached its peak when I suddenly felt I needed less freedom in my everyday life within whose bounds I can do whatever I wish without exposing myself to poverty, starvation and other varieties of 'slow death'. I can stay at home for a month and no one will miss my presence; my feelings for what is philosophically and pompously defined as 'the other' are reciprocated, judging from my phone's behaviour. Actually, I don't think there are any bounds in my life with the exception of 'natural' bounds, so to speak: death, disease, natural catastrophes. I'm not in the habit of altering my way of life, but I might do so if I feel like it in the near or distant future. In other words, there are no *exterior* rules within my life: no one says to me what I should do and how I'm supposed to deal with the problems I may encounter in my existence. A month ago, I felt I needed a set of rules imposed on me from the outside – from the world I see and get in touch with whenever I leave my house. (I seldom, if ever, look out of my windows.) Immediately I thought about monasteries and the way of life they can offer to those who wish to lose a certain amount of their freedom and withdraw from the world and its temptations to which you invariably yield, if you belong to Oscar Wilde's fan club. I suppose I'm one of this club's members, although Oscar Wilde isn't my favourite author.

Hegel's treatment of the subject under discussion doesn't suit me any longer because his master and his slave are situated beyond the state of affairs where I found myself at the moment when I felt I needed less freedom in my life – or no freedom at all. Hegel's slave is believed to have the upper hand in his struggle with the master for whom he works. Why? Because the world about him is the world he has created and he can't help seeing himself reflected in the work of his hands. This reflection is bigger than his master and whatever he stands for because the world can't be compared to an individual who is just a part of it. I've spent my life creating worlds where I am reflected now, but I no longer need these worlds and my reflections. What I do need

is the daily round of monastic life and the chores imposed by my superiors to whose wisdom and experience I'll pay tribute through my work and prayers.

Ever since I began to write novels and poems, I've struggled for recognition and this struggle is over now, even if this means I no longer feel like struggling for life. I think one may live without being pushed around by the insatiable desire defined by the word 'recognition' that I'll strive to exclude from my vocabulary and also from my body. Why should I bother about others, about my potential slaves? 'I've obtained recognition,' says the master to the slave. 'Yes, but not from *another* self,' says the slave. 'You've obtained it from another *slave*. For the time being, I don't mind being your slave because I need you to create my world. But you're a slave to your ambitions and you'll never get rid of them. In other words, you'll never become your own master. You'll always remain in the state of dependence. And I'll educate myself towards independence. In the world that I'll create sooner or later you're not likely to have pride of place. You'll be my slave because of your ambitions, of your inborn slavery.'

I no longer have any ambitions; to some degree, I've already wrenched myself free. And I value this kind of freedom above and beyond all else. What does 'recognition' mean in today's world? Only slaves inhabit it – the humans reduced to objects by objects or their own ambitions. So you can't obtain recognition from another self and that's what really counts in the domain of recognition. And even if I *could* obtain recognition from another self, I would prefer not to press home my advantage, for my inner peace might suffer from such an intrusion. Every admirer is an intruder, even if he or she doesn't ask you for an autograph. You hear applause and bow to the audience. Why should I bow?

Nicholas may seem bossy, but it's Lisa that really wears the trousers in that relationship. One of my friends has been his wife's slave for many years, whatever one may think when talking to him. He is homosexual and one might suppose such a man unlikely to fawn upon a woman, let alone submit himself to *her* rules. Nicholas has a knack of explaining things in an easy, non-technical way, even when he explores the inner labyrinth of psychological lore. He says that at the outset of his conjugal life, he had an easy authority over his wife who subscribed firmly to his ideas, theories and opinions. In other words, he obtained recognition which was all the more valuable since his wife was another self and not just his slave or Hegel-glorified being. But she ended up creating a household where her husband enjoyed the comfort he had been looking for all his life. When did this turning-point bring about the metamorphosis described by Hegel and his followers? This must have happened 20 years ago when I came back to Russia and visited all my friends without exception.

I left Russia in 1974 and came back in 1990. The metamorphosis I touched upon was nearing completion when I saw the master-slave couple in a concert hall where we were doomed to hear a run-of-the mill piano recital. My friend walked with a slow stiff gait and I realised it was his way of fawning upon Lisa. 'They must really be in love with each other,' I thought, 'otherwise they would have got a divorce in the late Seventies. Nicholas isn't even bisexual. How does Lisa manage to put up with him?' 'Lisa is lesbian,' said another friend of mine – several days later. He looked at me with surprise and said, 'Don't you know the answer?' Now I know the answer and I'm still none the wiser.

In his youth, my friend was a poet of sorts and his recent book jolted my memory into action: his poems are printed at the end of it. The author explains his method and development, talking chiefly about the conceptualism he espoused in the early Eighties. He speaks rather pompously about this trend and one gets the feeling that nothing else is permitted to survive in the world where art is no longer on the agenda. One of his

poems consists of the orders given by a landowner to his servants: whenever he goes abroad, he takes steps to ensure that his estate will not go to rack and ruin in his absence. The poem looks thus:

To Anatoly: You should count my money.

To Boris: You should plough the top field next week.

To Bartholomew: You should nurse the horse.

To Galina: The furniture is covered in dust and cobwebs. You should dust the furniture.

To Olga Zakharovna: You should wait for me every hour. Wait for me, wait for me, wait...

At the outset of his conjugal life, he might have written such poems for his wife's sake: I'm not sure she knew what to do with the furniture she found in his flat. Now it is her turn to do justice to conceptualism about which I know only by hearsay, being allergic to doctrines of all kinds – in the domain of poetry and literature in general. Whatever comes into my head is worthy of notice and I type it out so as not to allow it to slip my mind. A multitude of things have slipped my mind ever since I began to take notice of my self, and I'm aware that this continuous loss undermines my self-confidence. And even in a monastery I'll need my self-confidence and my instinct for self-preservation.

It is a monastery I have in my mind whenever I speak about the set of rules I'm prepared to submit to in order to structure my life: any wife is too narrow-minded in comparison with the cosmos one gets in touch with within the bounds of a monastery ruled by traditions and centuries. Once I've made up my mind to do something, nothing will put me off – not even a poem I composed in the wake of my friend's experiments:

All our household goods are insured against accidental damage.

The insurance doesn't cover you for household items.

I do all my household accounts on the computer.

No household security devices are proof against the determined burglar.

Britain produces 20 million tonnes of household waste each year.

I'm not sure I've already made up my mind as to how and where I wish to spend the rest of my life. The expression 'household waste' is likely to put me off any experience linked to marriage and suchlike, but I often ask myself the following question: 'What do I know about monasteries?' I answer immediately, 'Next to nothing.' And I have no idea how they live and what they think about in Russian monasteries to which I'm resolved to direct my steps if I finally decide to leave Versailles and settle for good in Russia, not too far from Moscow.

I think what appeals to me about monastic life is a sort of immobility that strikes anyone who pays a visit to monks – even if it is just a flying visit. Outside monasteries, people run against each other or against the clock. I disagree with those who affirm that the world goes faster and faster: I'm convinced that the world is rooted to the spot. There's no denying that the inhabitants of our globe run faster and faster, but they run on the spot and this spot appeals neither to my senses nor to my mind. In a monastery you listen to silence, even if the monks you encounter speak to you and to each other. They speak silently, so to speak, and you listen to music as you try to understand what they're determined to convey to you by means of gestures or words. Their words are silent

and harmonious because they're motionless, contrary to what one may think when pondering the nature of language. And their gestures are eternal; they seem suspended in mid-air.

I like Byzantium and its art on account of its austerity and immobility that leaves no room for emotions, aspirations and so on and so forth. The saints we contemplate as we get nearer and nearer to the frescoes look like otherworldly creatures, even if they are still in the land of the living and consequently haven't been promoted to the status associated with saints and those who live in the highest sphere of Paradise. They leave nothing to chance because chance plays no part in their lives which are protected from any interference, however beneficial and welcome. Only angels are allowed to interfere in their daily routine which has nothing in common with our routine, our daily grind: it is a pleasant and uplifting routine. Every day we play games of chance: roulette, Russian roulette, rush hour, traffic, the board of directors. There are only games of chance in our contemporary life. Monks don't play games and they never rely on chance because chance is what it is and you can't trust it, even if you're sure your stratagem will succeed as a result of your skilful manoeuvres. You double-check everything and leave nothing to chance. And what about bolts from the blue? There are no such bolts inside the walls of a monastery where everything sounds like a prayer.

I tried to write a book about Spain: about Burgos, Segovia, Toledo. But no one can write about everything and I realised I would never finish this book, for all my efforts. I began it: no harm in trying. Here's the beginning:

I have no idea when all this began, but I'm pretty sure at the beginning there was a dream; and this dream was Spain. I might have dreamt about this country in my childhood, for some of the songs I heard in my cradle and in the room where I was permitted to build castles belonged to Spanish culture, to the very core of it. They reminded our communists of the civil war in which they had taken part; they were loath to forget both their hardships and the friendships that hadn't failed to counterbalance the horrors abundantly supplied by Franco and his allies. So my parents and I often heard these songs revered by the Soviet radio; and yet my father had never been to Spain.

My acquaintance with Spanish composers is rather limited. To tell the truth, I'm not eager to bridge the gap between this partial ignorance of mine and the love I feel for the cathedral of Burgos or that of Segovia: this love is affected neither by my lack of knowledge nor my sluggishness. For years and years I was dreaming about Spain without taking the trouble to unfold a map and stuff my suitcases with guides and other books one might need when walking around Toledo. In the long run, the absence of Spain filled me with nostalgia; I didn't mind, for I knew that under the circumstances nostalgia might prove to be more powerful than curiosity or thirst for adventure.

One of the songs I heard at home still haunts my memory on account of the words repeated several times: 'Grenada, Grenada, Grenada moia.' At the age of five I knew the word 'moia', but the word 'Grenada' was as impenetrable as the sky at which I looked every day, trying to see whatever lay or stood beyond the stars. I thought there were lots of cities in the sky; their inhabitants seemed to spend their time playing hide-and-seek so that I couldn't see them. Behind every star there stood a man or a woman for whom a number of people were looking in every corner of the sky. Other players thought they were hidden behind some clouds; they never went as far as the stars. Weary of standing and waiting, the victors ended up putting a multitude of beds beyond the

stars, which enabled them to feel more comfortable during the games. They lay in their beds and gazed at other stars hidden beyond the ones we enjoy every night, provided we take the trouble to look up and forget our daytime worries.

'Moia' means 'mine' in Russian and we usually apply this word to women, for instance: 'Moia Tatiana.' Moia, moy, moio. The use of these words depends on the object to which they refer. Gender, of course, isn't an issue in the English language; in Russia, women, men and some children don't live in the same grammatical boat. 'Ditia' means 'baby' and when you speak about your baby to those who admire him or her, you say 'moio ditia' and not 'moia ditia' or 'moy ditia'. For a while I thought Grenada was a woman about whom a man sang proudly, being convinced that she belonged only to him. My Grenada. I had a lot of toys, but I preferred the objects I couldn't have in my room or even in the garden where I played almost every day. Every night I would choose a star and play with it as long as I could stay awake, holding back my dreams and nightmares. I might have replaced the stars by Grenada, had I been acquainted with the beauty of this city. I didn't even know it was a city and not a woman, not a fruit.

At that point I felt I had got sidetracked several times, which usually doesn't bother me: I like digressions and many-layered narratives – provided they don't hamper the rescue efforts of progression, as Laurence Sterne might have put it. But it was hard writing about Spain, especially since in my childhood I'd heard only one Spanish song where the word 'Grenada' resounded with dignity and mystery. Our radio stations seemed to have forgotten the Civil War – at least in the domain of music. From time to time, Franco was stigmatised on the basis of his bad behaviour and anti-communist stance, but otherwise Spain was almost entirely absent from our radio and even television programmes. Perhaps I just don't remember the words uttered in relation to this country I love so much. I don't seem to remember a lot so I ought to have embarked upon my memoirs a long time ago.

Of course I said to myself: 'Be persistent – don't give up.' So I went on for a while:

One of Beckett's heroes says he has always compared himself to Christ. I've never yielded to this temptation because I'm determined to live my own life without relying on models and eternal patterns; and yet I'm tempted to draw a parallel between my life and that of Don Quixote. I don't remember when I read the novel for the first time. Actually I'm under the impression I read it neither in my adolescence nor at the age of 31 when I bought the book in English translation. Of course I leafed through it several times, reading a few lines in English, in Russian and in French. Whatever I do with the versions of the novel I've got in my library, I don't read it: somehow I know it by heart in all the languages I speak. My life is punctuated by windmills at which I tilt whenever fighting the establishment, fakes and phoneys. Every time the result of the struggle seems to be a foregone conclusion, but I remain undaunted in spite of my defeats.

For almost half an hour I was looking for Putnam's translation of the novel, which I'm not supposed to need, given that I know it by heart. Poetic license often pushes my brain beyond all reasonable doubts, for living in a make-believe world is pleasant to some extent. I don't know Don Quixote by heart; to be honest, I recall only a few episodes from it. I recall a rescue operation that, in accordance with his ritual, Don Quixote carried out single-handedly. As a result, he was stoned by those he had rescued, if I remember rightly. I know he read a lot of books which, in the long run, drove him mad because only a madman does his utmost to go beyond the age within whose bounds his mother gave him birth. Borges says one cannot leave one's day and age behind,

whatever one does when writing a poem, a story or an essay. Don Quixote didn't manage to achieve his objectives because time held him within its prison and even during his escapades he couldn't get beyond its walls, galloping on his horse around the courtyard.

I still recall my last journey to Spain and I may write about it without lying and pathos. And of course I may also write about *Don Quixote*: the book is on one of my shelves and I don't have to cross the Place de la Concorde in order to pick it up. What could I say about the cathedral of Burgos? If I'm not mistaken, this is the biggest cathedral in the world. There are many big cathedrals around us and that of Burgos is of their number. Perhaps it is smaller than one of the cathedrals lost in the middle of England: I don't know much about cathedrals and architecture in general. There's no denying it is a huge cathedral; and yet I was under the impression I could take it in my hands and hold it for a while, perhaps forever. In one of his poems, Rilke says something to the effect that we are falling; not only Rilke feels that, I suppose. But Rilke feels that someone – God, no doubt – prevents us from falling by holding us in His hands. Well, I am not God, far from it. Yet I wish I could hold the cathedral of Burgos which doesn't need my help and hands. I don't care; I just feel like it. I have no wish to hold the Earth, needless to say. And even I had the lever about which Archimedes speaks so paradoxically, I wouldn't lift it.

Recently I went to Berlin where there are no cathedral of this size and harmony. This city is not harmonious at all; it might have been harmonious, beautiful and luminous at the beginning of the 20th century, but now it is just a collection of buildings. Some modern or contemporary buildings are impressive and even beautiful, one might say. The point is I don't care about isolated beauty, as far as cities go. If a beautiful man or woman stands in the middle of a square, I admire and respect such beauty; I even worship it to some extent. But a city should be harmonious, otherwise it is not a city, being just a collection of heterogeneous objects. One day they were thrown into some area any old how and now they remain in this area because a peace treaty protects them. People also protect them unless these people live in Russia – in Moscow, for instance. They protect Berlin because they live there, thinking that nowhere else will they have so many theatres. Berlin excites some people on account of its relative youth, given that it was almost completely destroyed at the end of the Second World War. So a famous conductor lives there because he thinks Berlin is unfinished: it continues to grow, whereas New York, Paris and Rome do not, even if one chances upon cranes and scaffolding in their suburbs. Berlin is both young and pretty old. In this respect, I have more affinities with Berlin than with Versailles where I live. I am young at heart and even wild at heart. My brain isn't old either, with the exception of my memory that often lets me down. But my body isn't confined to my heart and my thoughts. Incidentally, I wonder if my thoughts are still young.

December 22, 2012. Yesterday we didn't live through the end of the world and I wonder if one could really *live* through the end which is supposed to put an end to all movement. So you can't live *through* the end of the world or even through that of your own life unless you believe that every human being goes straight to Hell or to Paradise, without spending some time in *their* waiting rooms. They must judge the quality of your life and weigh your soul, heart and whatnot so as to know exactly what to do with you. Then you cross the waiting room and end up in another land, another life, the afterlife. Be that as it may, the end of the world didn't take place, contrary to many predictions and many tons of sugar some people had bought, hoping to survive for a while –

until another beginning of the world. Another abortive attempt; another disappointment. The world isn't ashamed of itself and no calendar will ever persuade it to die with dignity instead of squelching through the mud of its own degeneration.

I'm watching a huge documentary on architecture, on how people live in enormous buildings created by Charles Fourier's admirers. They live in close proximity to each other, walking through the same corridors, eating in the same hall where no dainty dishes are served – at least no sturgeons adorn the tables at which all those people sit for the sake of eating and talking. They eat and talk, but they end up installing a lot of barriers between their respective flats: they need privacy. They say to their distant relatives: 'I hate sharing a bedroom – I never get any privacy. I hate sharing a corridor – I never get any privacy. I hate sharing a dinner table – I never get any privacy.' I get a lot of privacy and I'm not sure I like it as much as I wish to like it. But what can I do under the circumstances? Nothing at all. I can put an additional barrier in my flat to separate myself from myself. I'm already separated from myself: my decay puts a lot of barriers between myself and my former self. Shyness is one of the biggest barriers to making friends, as they say. Well, I'm not as shy as all that, but barriers loom ahead of me and I can't see whatever happens beyond them. Perhaps nothing really happens: no ends, no beginnings, no middle ways, no ways, no paths, no pilgrims. The world is still around me and it came into existence a long time ago. There will be no end to the violence until the end comes at last.

I found a newspaper on my dinner table where it had spent over a month, waiting for my attention and showing its patience. Inanimate objects *are* patient and we'd better learn this patience from them, from their long experience. They lie under our feet, on our tables and chests of drawers, and do not seem to mind our indifference, our negligence. We walk over them or trample them to death, hoping they're as immortal as Pushkin's verses or Shakespeare's plays. The newspaper I found may be immortal unless I throw it away without taking the trouble to read it. Well, I won't offend it by neglecting its contents and moods which somehow depend on our moods, on our acts. I think about violence and the end which will never come because life constantly renews its membership of our human club. I lighted upon a bit of violence in the newspaper lying under my feet: this afternoon I had transferred it from the dinner table to the room where I'm typing out my thoughts, moods and also my decay that I can't forget. Why can't I? Because it doesn't forget me – an obvious answer. I'll stick to this answer for a while, until next week perhaps.

Taking tea as bombs fall. A captivating, promising title. Should I say from which newspaper it comes? It could come from any newspaper – to some extent they all look alike. Words, words, words. Papers, papers, papers. Well, this time it was born in *The Sunday Times* and it will probably die there unless it has already been stored in a number of computers. A general is sitting in a homely room; his friend listens to him and talks in his turn. They talk about the Syrian army's campaign to crush rebel forces in Aleppo. I know Aleppo only through *Othello* where this city comes to the fore at the very end, on the verge of the hero's untimely death.

*And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk*

*Beat a Venetian, and traduc'd the state,
I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him thus.*

Everyone knows this monologue by heart, as Orson Welles says about another monologue in a film devoted to his staging of *Julius Caesar*. I quoted it to bridge the gap between all those who do know the monologue by heart and my failing memory which, however, can rely on the books stored in my library. How to bridge the gap between my present age and my youth when I was in my prime, as they say? They also say: 'Middle age can be the prime of life if you have the right attitude.' What kind of attitude do they have in mind, I wonder? For them there's such a thing as the *right* attitude, judging by this sentence and by their attitude towards life. I don't believe in it because I know that no attitude can give me back what I experienced in my prime, in Moscow and even in France where I've been living for more than 30 years. Besides, they speak about middle age and my age is hardly in the middle of my way and I'm no longer in the forest where Dante stood at the beginning of his *Comedy*.

A general sips from a glass of tea and ponders a disturbing piece of intelligence brought in by a defector from the rebel side. As usual there's a car packed with explosives for a suicide attack by Jabat al-Nusra, an Islamist group. The car is about to explode, but nobody cares about the car because it is neither a Bentley nor a Ferrari. What counts, however, is the number of victims the general and his staff will have to count in the aftermath of the explosion. The general continues to enjoy the tea and a few bombs fall in the distance, not far from Aleppo where Othello killed the Turk. Othello's feat pales into insignificance beside the event about which I'm reading in the newspaper, but I wonder if Othello drank a cup of tea after his exploit. A cup of tea is said to do you good, whatever the situation you happen to be involved in. I wish I could keep enjoying my favourite tea *outside* the world where many bombs fall and destroy whatever happens to be at the end of their trajectory. And even if I find myself *inside* the world surrounded by cars and explosives, I might continue to sip my tea because there's nothing else to do in this world of horror. Of course you can pick up a bottle of wine to cope with explosives and rebels who will never stop their attacks and are unlikely to leave their bombs in peace. What counts is your attitude towards the world. The middle way is all right as long as you can have a drink while watching Othello's suicide and two planes screeching through the sky. A few loud bangs shouldn't disturb you. Othello is more important, isn't he? So is Shakespeare.

On the front page, there's a beautiful actress whose destiny doesn't interest me in the least, although I wouldn't mind meeting her somewhere – in Moscow, for instance. Recently I spent five hours in a famous Moscow restaurant and it goes without saying I wasn't alone. Why should I spend five hours in a restaurant if I can't talk to anyone? And I'm not in the habit of talking to waiters, in spite of the attachment I feel for some sommeliers who occasionally offer me champagne and even a glass of Latour. So I wasn't alone, for all my aversion to the world and its representatives. I exclude from the previous sentence a lot of animals and even plants: I love them, I love them, I love them.

I was in the company of a young lady who was almost 40 years my junior, if I remember rightly. I wasn't in love with her so I don't remember the details of our lunch, with the exception of the food. I do remember, however, that I wasn't bored, contrary to what I usually experience in the company of young ladies: I'm interested in their legs and not in their wits. For some reason, she wasn't bored either and our talk didn't slacken

its pace as we chinked our glasses together – a Russian custom of no importance. I don't remember where it happened – in which restaurant I touched her hand and she responded without blushing, without pushing my hand away. Perhaps she liked my skin or my way of stroking her fingers. Frankly, I don't remember her fingers – or her hand, for that matter. I do remember her face or rather her make-up. You don't remember the make-up of a woman who steers clear of lipstick and powder puffs. It doesn't mean you remember the face of this woman, her features, her nose. Sometimes it is better to remember the make-up than to create another lapse of memory: there are enough of them in everyone's life and they make you sick as they remind you of death, of oblivion, of a tomb on which there are no flowers.

I was determined to talk about something else: I should vary the topics I deal with, otherwise I might get bored with this book and relinquish the idea of going on with it. I must have changed my mind, carried away by my memory's capacity to remember this lunch and even the caresses I lavished on the young lady's hand. Whenever I remember something, I hasten to record it in some way or other: I'm sure that any memory is apt to restore the whole of my life because cells multiply continually and one cell can give birth to a plant or even to a human being. This lunch is a cell from which my whole life may spring, provided I pay enough attention to it and treat it at length and with deference. I'm aware of the fact that I use too many formal words and expressions, but I'm an old hat and I'm not ashamed of it. The further I go in the direction of my youth and my ancestors, the better.

I was leaving Moscow after our last dinner during which I touched her hand many times and even tried to stroke it as if to show how much I loved her. She gave me a lift and soon I saw my hotel and even the night porter who opened my door; she was sitting on the other side. So many things happen on the other side – not necessarily on the dark side of the moon or on the other side of the coin. This time, we were sitting in a car and my door flew open before I could say good-bye to her. Nevertheless I kissed her good-bye and got out of the car without further ado. Suddenly she opened *her* door and pressed her face against mine in an unexpected show of solidarity. Was her gesture an expression of love? I don't think so. 'Solidarity', therefore, is the right word. There are many wrong words in this world of ours, but now and then we stumble upon the right one and our life grows as radiant as the moon on a cloudless night. I'm aware that 'solidarity' is not as radiant as 'love' which may be likened to the sun, to its life-giving power, but the moon is all right with me and I will not remove it from the previous sentence.

Apparently the world began at the moment when a cell appeared somewhere: in the sea, in the snow, in one of the hills I saw many years ago in Siberia. Modern cosmology believes the universe to have come into existence about 15 billion years ago. How did it happen? *Why* did it happen? A cell, a prison cell, a cell in a monastery where one can spend a part of one's life. Cooped up in a small dark cell. Bound and gagged and left in a cell for 65 years. Immured in a dark airless cell. Nietzsche was locked in a padded cell and forced to wear a straitjacket.

But biologists and other scientists speak about the *original* cell from which our world continues to grow as if it couldn't stop once and for all. Again I hear the words that pertain to this universal issue: 'My problems stem from that cell and not from my difficult childhood because my childhood wasn't really difficult. And my disagreement with the world stems from that tiny little cell. And I don't really wonder what you are. I'm not a scientist after all, and the origin of the world doesn't arouse my curiosity. Nor do I care about my own origin

because my present state doesn't depend on it. I carry a multitude of genes within my body, my mind and my soul, but I don't want to dissect them for fear of dying on the spot.'

One cell, one nightmare, one birth, one death. This death cell has nothing to do with life unless you decide that life and death are synonymous. And scientists speak about the harmony they offer to the world in a fit of generosity. Yes, death is harmonious because we constantly come across the same cells – wherever we go, whatever we touch. We touch an animal and recognise our own genes, our DNA, our moods, our thoughts. The same goes for our relationship with trees and bushes. We talk to a bush and it understands us perfectly – better than humans. We touch a woman and recognise neither our thoughts nor our feelings. What *do* we recognise? A hand, somebody's hand. For some obscure reason, we stroke this hand and nothing happens except a misunderstanding, a disappointment, a delusion, a disillusion. We don't live in the same prison cell: there are enough prisons in our world to accommodate everybody.

I seem to have forgotten about the monastery where I was planning to spend the rest of my life and even my eternity a foretaste of which one is more likely to experience in a monastery than in New York or any other capital. No, I'm not likely to forget it: I bought a few books on Russian monasteries during my sojourn in Petersburg. I also bought a few books on Russian saints; and yet I'll never become one, even if I spend my eternity – or any other eternity – in a monastery or in Paradise.

In one of these books I found a story about a man who thought the world had inherited original sin to the extent of being able to get rid of it only by means of death. And this end doesn't always justify the means unless you're a Christian martyr or a sectarian who thinks about life in terms of ultimate deliverance. This man – a peasant lost in the middle of Russia – thought that his son could be led astray after his death, after his own death. (You can't be led astray in the Hereafter where you're taken care of either by angels or devils.) So he resolved to kill his son on his own initiative – without consulting God or his own brand of god. On second thoughts, however, he decided to consult one of these gods or angels who might have given him a piece of advice, had he behaved in the right way. His conduct was far from perfect because he thought that an angel would whisper the right answer to his question in his *right* ear, whereas a demon was likely to use his *left* ear for the same purpose. Of course the demon couldn't convey to him the *right* solution to his problem, but at that point he was mostly concerned with his ears, not with a question-and-answer session.

So he knelt down and listened to the wind where both angels and demons travel when about to answer tough questions. The wind whispered something in his right ear and he mistook the wind for an angel. It is easy to mistake anything for an angel, provided you're in a suitable mood for it. I mean, at times you feel like making mistakes and no amount of common sense can make you leave the state of mind where your mistakes are embedded. He kept listening to the wind and the wind continued to tell him its own story that had nothing to do either with his son or God. But he heard another story and decided to kill his son so as to save him from damnation and eternal suffering. It is better to suffer for a few seconds than to spend your whole afterlife in Hell where everyone will pour scorn on your thoughts, ideas and sentiments.

He says to his son, 'Put on your white shirt.'

'And what about my trousers, Father?'

'Put on a new pair of white trousers.'

‘The trousers I have are old.’

‘I wish to kill you.’

‘What for?’

‘I want you to go to Paradise.’

‘I’ll go to Paradise anyway.’

‘I’m not sure you will.’

‘Of course I will, if you buy me a white suit.’

‘It’s too late for that.’

‘Is it? It’s never too late to buy a new suit or at least a new pair of trousers.’

‘You can’t teach an old dog new tricks.’

‘You’re not old, Father. And you’re not a dog.’

‘I am God.’

‘Are you?’

‘I am. At least I’ll kill you in the name of God.’

‘Before buying me a new pair of trousers? I’m not ready for death, Father. First buy me a new pair of trousers, a new computer and a new car.’

‘You’ll have all this in Paradise. Their computers are better than ours.’

The son puts on his red shirt and the father kills him with an axe; and yet he hadn’t read *Crime and Punishment*. Those who use axes as a vehicle for salvation don’t have to read Dostoevsky unless they’re fond of literature and Russian nature.

As the son expires in the throes of agony, the father sees the light coming from the sun or God. He thinks the light comes from God and he is probably right because any light comes from God – even the light radiated by our computers or television screens. He sees the light and realises he has done the right thing because his son is already in Paradise despite his red shirt. He says to himself that not everyone wears white clothes in Paradise and in the Russian language the word ‘red’ is associated with beauty. ‘Red Square’ actually means ‘beautiful square’: his son was beautiful on the verge of death, on the edge of this world. And he’ll be even more beautiful in the Hereafter where diseases are meant only for those who suffer in Hell and are unlikely to see the light of day.

He sees the light coming from heaven and he cries because he knows that God approves of his murder which is a ritual murder designed to improve public morals. Actually he doesn’t care about humankind whose morals interest him only insofar as they concern his family. And he was audacious enough to provide a safe haven for his son. Thus reason some Russians. They think it is better to burn oneself on Earth than to burn in Hell where fire is even more ferocious than Dante’s description of it. Anyway you have to burn somewhere: you can’t always bathe in the Mediterranean, after spending a few hours on the beach. Of course you burn on the beach too – if you forget to put cream on your skin to avoid getting sunburnt. You forget the cream and burn, but there’s no comparison between this fire and that fire – at least that’s what the Russians think. Some of them lie in the sun only with a view to getting used to fire, to their future self-immolation. They prepare themselves for the Hereafter or rather for Paradise where they are likely to go on condition that they die before committing adultery or murder or just a sin. It is better not to ‘get bogged down in details’, as they say, meaning that time supplies human beings with many situations laden with sin, with these awful *details* of life. It is better to see or rather *hear* life as one harmony, one cell, one space inhabited by God.

Instead of killing your son, you may say to him: 'You should narrow the focus of your curiosity and concentrate on one harmony.'

'What are you talking about, Father?'

'You look around too much. You're too curious. You're getting bogged down in details.'

'What details?'

'Legs, dresses, breasts. You look at women instead of looking at God.'

'But God is in heaven, Father. Should I look up all the time? I may trip and fall over, grazing my knee.'

'And I'll smash your face in, if you don't look at God. He's everywhere, on every corner.'

'Is he also in the women I look at?'

'No. Women have no souls because they're devils in disguise.'

The son continues to look at women and his father enjoins him to put on his white trousers. 'Are you going to kill me, Father?' asks the son.

'Yes, for your own good.'

'I promise to look at God. I'll even speak to Him, if you wish.'

'Speak to him now. Have you read *Othello*?'

'Yes.'

'Do you remember what Othello says to Desdemona before the ritual?'

'What ritual?'

'He strangled her, didn't he?'

So the son prays and his father murders him because murders are part of our never-ending ritual. Perhaps there's only one ritual in the history of the world, and this ritual is murder, no doubt. One may say there must be an alternative to people murdering each other on the streets, in the woods and elsewhere. What kind of alternative could one suggest? You stroke someone's hand and this person murders you. Is that an alternative?

I seldom speak about my childhood because I lost it when I left the Soviet Union forever: whenever you say 'forever', you lose something and it isn't just the thread of what you're saying or writing. If you talk to other people, they may help you find the thread and you pick it up, smiling at those who assist you in your efforts to get through a number of words. Can their chaos be compared to a thread? You thread your way through the crowded market place and you lose the thread of your walk when someone insults you. Yesterday I went to the Versailles market. 'An illegally parked car,' said a middle-aged man as he stopped in front of me, after looking at my car and at the place where I had parked it.

'Does it bother you? Very few people walk here.'

'This is a pedestrian crossing.'

'I can't see anyone except you.'

'Your car prevents me from crossing this street.'

'Are you a cop?'

'Go to Hell,' he said. And he added, 'You're not even French.'

He wouldn't have said that to a mixed-raced man, let alone to a native of black Africa. Is he an inverted snob? I lost the thread of my walk and I haven't recovered it yet.

I must speak about my childhood, otherwise I'll lose not only a part of my life but also what I'm living through now: if my present isn't suffused with my childhood and the rest of my life, it does not exist. 'Only the past can be relied upon and the present just acts like a springboard for the past, for *Paradise Lost*,' says an old man. As to my own experience, the present is still alive and kicking; I don't renounce my claim to it, for all my infirmities. Even my future lies around me as I look at the light of day or at the dark of night where my thoughts thread their way through some curious shapes created either by my imagination or by the Devil. Sometimes I feel the presence of the Devil far more than that of God: my failures are more numerous than my achievements and I can't put the blame for my failures on God.

I'm often asked whether I was a boisterous child whose habits included breaking toys, insulting relatives, walking on tables, breaking china, breaking promises. I say I was an ordinary child and I am an ordinary man – in other people's minds that are unable to see the intricacies and luminosity of my brain. I can't see my brain either, but at least I'm capable of deciphering its pattern on the screen where this text makes its appearance, as if emerging from chaos. Usually they speak about the void when describing any creative process to which the instruments we use submit without a murmur. They have no alternative but to record our nonsense or lack of harmony which is a mortal sin, in my opinion. Nonsense can be forgiven because the world is nonsensical and we can't help reflecting it from time to time – not always against our will. But overall harmony shouldn't be tampered with because it is a gift we receive daily from nature, from heaven, from the Earth and even from our ancestors' tombs. Perhaps it is the only gift we can boast about when speaking about Creation or even humanity which doesn't deserve much applause, given its history and contemporary trends.

In my childhood, I heard about a novel entitled *The Underground Children*. I've never read the book and I don't have any intention of trying to lay my hands on it to find out what 'underground' means in this context. But ever since I heard about it I've thought I was born under the earth, deprived of light and any contact with those who enjoy fame and prosperity. I'm often reminded of Schubert who, on the verge of death, said to one of his relatives: 'Why am I lying underground? Haven't I deserved a place on the surface of the Earth?' And his relative answered, 'You're in your room, Franz.' 'I'm not,' said Schubert, 'because Beethoven isn't here.'

Some time ago, I spoke about my visit to Berlin which was partly connected with The Jewish Museum I had been longing to see for several years. At the hotel, I asked for directions to the museum and the concierge drew a line on the city map to show me how to get there. I followed the itinerary drawn on the map and eventually reached a building which looked bizarre if not downright weird on account of the scars on its walls. I was under the impression I saw a face – a sort of Scarface – exhibited in the street to pique the curiosity of any pedestrians who were not wrapped up in their daily rounds and bank accounts. I couldn't tear myself away from those walls as if I had in any way been related to them, as if they had been my next of kin, my companions in misfortune. An ordinary wall hardly suits me because it doesn't seem to come from beneath the earth where it might have been exposed to all sorts of dangers, including eternal fire, sulphur and undercurrents that in the long run destroy everything.

I tried to find an entrance to the building designated by the walls but was unable to do so for the simple reason that there was no entrance to the museum from *that* side of the street. Actually I wondered if there was any street to speak of: I saw only the walls which seemed to encompass the whole world, leaving nothing outside. There was no entrance through which I could penetrate *inside* the walls that seemed to hold me in their embrace, in their stone-cold wounded arms. I went to the next building and asked how I could enter the Jewish

Museum. I got a ticket and saw a staircase leading to the basement – not to Paradise where a visitor finds a lot of masterpieces and prestigious signatures. I was going back to my childhood, to the underground where I had been born more than 60 years ago. Is that what I should speak about when trying to enlarge upon my childhood?

I saw several corridors and I knew that they had to lead somewhere because all corridors lead somewhere unless they are dead ends; and there are few dead ends in a museum. At that point, however, I realised I wasn't walking through a museum. Why should I turn my childhood and youth into a collection of objects? I was walking through my life – even through my present to some extent. Those underground passages were empty and they looked as if life had withdrawn from them. They might have been inhabited in days of yore, but now there's nothing but a void where you can find only your life on condition that you were born underground.

There were slits in the walls through which a tiny quantity of light filtered into the space where I had found myself while exploring my memories, my unconscious, my innermost being. They reminded me of the scars or slashes I had seen on the walls when standing in front of the museum. 'Even light comes to me through my wounds,' I said to myself: now and then I indulge in what is called self-pity. I was born underground and the only way to reach the light is to suffer – another expression of self-pity of which I availed myself when walking down the stairs. The walls I saw were empty and we're not used to seeing empty walls during our visits to museums where so many pictures and sculptures await us to show how wonderful the history of humanity has been for so many centuries.

And then I saw another staircase leading upwards. I had no alternative but to follow the lead and reach the end of my journey or one of its ends, one of its beginnings. There were three straight lines overhead and they also led somewhere; at least they showed a few directions, looking like the hints scattered over Paul Klee's works where there are many arrows and many movements. In the documentary I've been watching for some time, the architect of the Jewish Museum, Daniel Libeskind, says he was inspired by Walter Benjamin's *One-Way Street* and Schoenberg's *Moses and Aaron*. There are no other streets in my life or perhaps there's only one street that leads upwards or downwards: it is not up to me to decide where it leads and what the end of my journey looks like.

I read Benjamin's book many years ago and I found it on a shelf situated near the computer on which I'm working or killing time. I also found a few notes in the margins, which remind me of what I singled out for future use and pleasures. They also throw light on the distance between my present state of mind and my former thoughts, which helps me realise how far I've got from myself in the course of these years. I continue to walk away from myself – along the same one-way street. Anyway I can't retrace my steps, even if my memory is sometimes prepared to assist me in this adventure, in the ritual habitually called 'homecoming'. I'll never come home either because I have none or because no one can achieve such an objective.

'The more antagonistic a person is towards the traditional order, the more inexorably he will subject his private life to the norms that he wishes to elevate as legislators of a future society. It is as if these laws, nowhere yet realised, placed him under obligation to enact them in advance, at least in the confines of his own existence.' Even in those years I already subjected my life to the norms I regard as the only way to prove to myself and others that dignity has not disappeared from the face of the Earth. Just another one-way street. In this respect I haven't budged from where I stood 10 or 15 years ago as if, instead of stopping time, I had resolved at some point to adhere to my principles and keep my mind in its virgin state, defying the expression 'to change one's mind'. Of course I'm aware that people who never change their minds are obstinate and not very intelligent – at

least that's what *I* think about such people. But there are principles that shouldn't be trifled with because they play a vital role in the survival of the human race.

I am in the Jewish Museum which I mentally empty of the exhibits to remain alone with its bare walls and bare truth, with the gas chamber it reminds me of. It is *my* truth because I was born here, in the basement of this museum; and yet it had not been on the surface of the Earth at the moment of my birth. I feel like spending the rest of my life underground and some day we'll emerge from the gloom of our corridors to see what the world is like and how one can live in it.

II

I have no idea whether I'm still under the surface of the Earth or in heaven whose surface often looks like that of the Earth on account of the stars we contemplate whenever we feel like it. There are many pebbles on the surface of the Earth and they crunch under my feet as I walk along the road that leads nowhere unless something or someone is waiting for me at the end of this road. Sometimes I get the feeling I walk along the sky and the stars I contemplate from my armchair are rolling under my feet as if determined to play soccer on a cosmic scale. If I'm asked, 'Did you play soccer at school?' I know what to answer because I was a good goalkeeper and often played for our team that needed a skilful defender for its goal; and no one wished to remain motionless most of the time. Even at that time I was fond of immobility and a few occasional jumps would only emphasise how important it was to keep away from life, watching it from afar. Even now I spend hours and hours without budging from where I am and my propensity for keeping my privacy intact becomes clear whenever I jump and repulse an allied onslaught. A few people lumber in and I do all I can to get rid of them in the twinkling of an eye and I mostly succeed, although now and then I suffer a humiliating defeat.

Claude Lévi-Strauss says he doesn't care about our civilisation, otherwise he would have become a politician or a journalist whose camera and cassette recorder are always switched on, even in a desert or on the top of a mountain. In a book on him, there's a myth which reminds me of my childhood, of my youth and also of the present where my life continues to flow as if nothing could wear it out or dry it up. It is a Bororo myth situated far from our civilisation and also from the people that are unable to leave me in peace in spite of my skilful defence and quick reaction: after all, I used to be a goalkeeper. I had a mother, a father, an aunt, an uncle and a few cousins whose presence enlivened my childhood and even a part of my youth except the moments when I wished to remain on my own, eschewing any outside interference, any violence. I was in love with my mother because her beauty was beyond suspicion and I was keen on whatever was beyond – beyond a mirror, beyond the sky, beyond a word, beyond a smile. In my mind I would commit incest with my mother almost every night; and even in the daytime I wasn't immune to her figure that I had an opportunity to enjoy whenever she wasn't away, taking part in a film or touring the USSR with a theatre company.

I also loved my father, but not to the extent of longing to commit incest with him; and yet he was a handsome middle-aged man whose features one could often see on a television screen. (In those days there were no computers.) My father treated me with the contempt I didn't deserve: he had no inkling of what was going on in my mind, let alone in my body. In other words, he couldn't know I was in love with my mother – for the simple reason that he had not read Freud, and Sophocles never so much as touches upon the Oedipus Complex. Be that as it may, he made me confront the souls of the dead, always speaking to me about the past which, in his opinion, was far superior to the present. 'The present can't hold a candle to the past' was one of his favourite phrases; and yet he went on living in the present and not in some tomb or other where he might have conversed with Dante, Sophocles and Pushkin.

Somehow I escaped from the clutches of the past, but my father was still eager to avenge himself; at least he swore he would avenge the dead I had insulted by renouncing them for the sake of the quick. Once he invited me on a bird-nesting trip. He talked me into climbing a steep cliff and for a while I walked along a narrow mountain ridge because I thought I was on the top of Mt. Everest. This myth is never-ending so I can see my

father who abandons me for dead on the top of that mountain or cliff where I'm supposed to survive with the assistance of vultures. At first they don't recognise my features; and yet I've done my best to become a bird in the course of this trip: a bird can fly away from cliffs and mountains, from our civilisation and its representatives. Well, I'm not a perfect bird; I'm only a half-bird that yearns to forget humans and their tricks, their down-to-earth moods and acts. The vultures end up helping me to the ground where I set off on my desert crossing: one must cross many deserts before coming back to one's native land and city.

Eventually I come to Moscow where I'm first recognised by my grandmother who died 43 years ago. She has always been my protector: on her deathbed she swore to protect me from outsiders, from the mores and culture of today's world. She would accompany me to nursery school and later to school and I heard her voice whenever I looked around, trying to come to terms with Moscow and its inhabitants: 'Don't look around. Look inside.' That's how I began to search for myself and my search was on a par with the bird-nesting trip I couldn't forget: my main aim in life was to become a bird and fly away as far as the Pole Star. At the time I thought one didn't need a spaceship to reach the stars where our birds keep on building their nests out of grass. I'm not sure I still aspire to become a bird: I know for sure that no one and nothing can fly away from the Earth, from our moods and tricks.

On the night of my homecoming, there's a great storm and I can see the lights going off everywhere: in the streets, in every window, on bonfire nights. Only in my grandmother's house the lights are glowing with excitement as if to challenge the new world order and the 21st century, its mercenary schemes. The following morning, all the inhabitants of Moscow pay a visit to my grandmother to ask her for light or for hot embers, which amounts to the same thing. Only our bonfire night remains on the surface of the Earth and in heaven where one can pick up hot embers, alias stars, provided one is permitted to do so by angels and archangels. My grandmother often speaks of angels and archangels and I still put to her the question: 'What's the difference between them?' In my childhood I thought an archangel was a big angel. Now I know the answer and yet I go on asking this question as if it was the only way of getting back to my childhood, to the source of my life, to the cave where I was born. A narrow trail of blood leads directly into this cave.

I give a few hot embers to those who come to my house or rather to that of my grandmother, but they burn their fingers and fling the embers down on my writing desk where they remain for a while, glowing in the dark. 'That's how I became a writer,' I say to myself as if I could remember anything: the embers, the writing desk I had in Moscow, my friends and their parents, our nights. At some point, I decided to leave my native city, declaring I would no longer live with my people who had treated me badly. I moved to another city where I was also treated badly because I was still inside the Bororo myth and my dead father continued to pursue his prey. The whole world is my father to some extent and my mother is nowhere: she seems to have forsaken me along with my grandmother. If one person forsakes you, the whole world does the same with the exception of your angry father who is bent on destroying you forever.

Yet the members of those 'primitive' tribes do not beat their children who are often carried by their fathers. They seldom learn how to walk along the roads leading nowhere – not to our civilisation anyway. A child rides on his father's back until his father dies and goes to another world where he'll continue to carry his son, provided the latter doesn't get into the habit of using his feet instead of his father's back. Another child – a pretty girl whose hair falls in curls over her shoulders – rides on her father's neck, and she uses her legs only

when she feels like stroking her father's hairy chest. She strokes it and her father smiles because he knows that even in the Hereafter his daughter will stroke his chest and also his belly: she's growing so quickly.

A man makes a few arrows in his spare time; and he has nothing else at home because only arrows and the spare time he uses to his heart's content fill his life to the brim. He sees a jug in front of him and he knows that life looks like this jug which he can fill to the brim either with beans or with coffee. He drinks the coffee and feels his life inside him; he doesn't have to look inside in order to find his life which would be scattered to the four winds, if he looked around him. He drinks his jug of coffee and becomes what he is: a cup of coffee, a jug of coffee, a world of coffee, the world, the universe, the Andromeda Galaxy. He picks up his son and carries him around the table on which the jug stands like the Statue of Liberty or rather the Statue of Life. The man doesn't care about the Tree of Life: every tree he comes across during his wanderings is a tree of life. The Jug of Life is different because it stands on his table, which enables him to drink the contents of the jug – the black coffee he is so fond of. He has never drunk a cup of cappuccino. He doesn't know that even cappuccino represents his life on the map of the universe and also in the Hereafter.

He thinks that his daughter is the universe he's looking for; and yet he has never looked for the universe lying in front of him. Why look for something that is right under your nose all the time? His daughter plays with his son and he wonders if their relationship doesn't exceed the recommended dose. Then he wonders what the recommended dose means, but since he doesn't know anything about it, he gives up his quest and concentrates on his daughter instead. Nor does he know anything about incest, for he hasn't read Claude Lévi-Strauss and has no intention of reading him in the near future; but he wonders what he can do for his daughter, her future and her life in the Hereafter. He is just content to see his daughter in such a stable relationship – but a grandchild, that really is the icing on the cake. That's right – his daughter is pregnant and his son or rather his son's relationship with his daughter lies at the root of the problem they're facing in 2013.

His relationship, their relationship. Sir Radcliffe-Brown calls them an 'elementary unit'. All this is elementary, as every Watson knows so well. An elementary family consisting of a man and his wife and their child or children. Well and good. So there are two children and two parents who don't necessarily sleep with their children, for Lévi-Strauss speaks about the incest taboo. The Watsons don't read Lévi-Strauss, but they're aware of the fact that incest is frowned upon in some of the tribes they hunt with in the valleys that everyone can see from their windows or holes. They know nothing about the risk of degeneracy and an instinctive horror about which so many scientists speak to guard themselves against their Oedipus Complex. So the father puts his daughter on his bed, after carrying her on his neck through two or three villages where the incest taboo is de rigueur. 'All right,' he says to himself. 'We're at home now.' He is right: they're at home and his bed seems made for gorgeous lovemaking that has nothing to do with the incest taboo: the participants in the experiment don't read Lévi-Strauss. And other tribes are far away from the table on which there stands the Jug of Life.

The man makes love to his daughter and some ethnologist writes in his notebook: 'That night they made love for the first time.' He is wrong of course: he doesn't take into consideration the epic about which so many adults dream continuously, provided they're good readers and take an avid interest in Scheherazade's tales. But the son, who also belongs to the elementary unit, comes to his father's room and kills his father. Freud says that at the dawn of human culture, rebellious sons killed and ate their fathers. The son has no intention of eating his father: he likes foie gras and human flesh doesn't appeal to him unless he can mutilate it before killing its owner. Instead, he makes love to his sister in his father's bed. His own bed is too far and he cannot wait for ages: he has

been in love with his sister for many ages and the thought of waiting for another couple of ages makes him shudder. And his sister shudders at the thought of kissing him because she read a book on Lévi-Strauss in which she lighted upon the following argument: 'I relate the incest taboo to religious prohibitions concerning menstrual blood, themselves symbolically linked to the blood of the clan and hence the totem.' She knows everything about the totem and the blood of the clan, but menstrual blood is beyond her ken: she can't help asking herself what that means. Well, she has no alternative but to make love to her brother because Durkheim and Freud are beyond her reach; and her father is dead. Besides, she knows that in Ancient Egypt – at least in some of its parts – the incest taboo was unknown.

In so-called primitive societies – they were far less primitive than our civilisation – men and women were used to making love almost everywhere and at any time, in any weather: even rain and snow didn't prevent them from exploring their bodies through the agency of their partners. They didn't have to sit in the back row of the cinema to avail themselves of the erotic ritual, otherwise known as 'canoodling'. They carried out their successful attacks in the open air where both birds and humans could get an eyeful of their virtuosity partly inspired by the Kama Sutra. And yet they had neither the time nor the desire to read it because whatever they needed to satisfy their instincts was in the air that was saturated with sex and its derivatives.

Lévi-Strauss relates the incest taboo to rules of exogamy that require marriage outside of a particular group or category of individuals. But brothers and sisters couldn't care less about other tribes, about the rule which was supposed to force them to marry out – outside their houses, their tribe, their sun and moon. Before making love, they often talked to each other thus: 'Do you see the sun?'

'Of course I do.'

'Do you think it's our sun?'

'Yes. But it also belongs to other tribes.'

'So if we make love under this sun, we'll marry out. Don't you think so?'

'I do. We have our sun, they have their sun. At the same time, we have the same sun.'

'So we're both in and out, aren't we?'

'We are.'

'Let's make love, then.'

'Yes, let's.'

'And what about gifts?'

'What gifts?'

'You're a gift, my sister. You'll be offered to the chief of the R tribe.'

'Really?'

'Yes. Humanity has to follow the path that leads from a state of nature to a state of culture.'

'I care neither about nature nor about culture.'

'Do you care about me?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Let's make love, then.'

'Yes, let's.'

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with Mother, and the Word was Mother. In other words, the Word was a matriarchal society where women reigned over men, children, villages, trees, lakes and

oceans. And love reigned supreme in their hearts, otherwise there would have been no life on Earth. Only love is able to mix the liquids born inside our bodies and it is said that these liquids are secreted by glands in or near our genitals. These liquids do their best to escape from their respective prisons and multiply those humans who are worthy of being multiplied. But only love is capable of pushing them out, of making them labour for the sake of the future which wholly depends on our children, on their propensity to create other children and other mothers.

Every member of a primitive society was an artist in his own right. (Women didn't care about the arts because they had other things to do. In a way, their children were wonderful works of art – far superior to artefacts created by men.) An artist thinks that he should do something for the primitive society and there are no taxes in the society to which he belongs. So, instead of paying taxes, he makes a statuette called 'Mother' or 'Earth' or 'Fertility' or 'Goddess'. This goddess must have horrible fat thighs, otherwise she won't be able to give birth to mankind – or to the universe, come to think of it. You can't say, 'Goddesses come in all shapes and sizes – fat and thin, short and tall.' They *may* look short because sculptors are often short of time and of the materials they need to create goddesses in their workshops; but goddesses are never thin. Every self-respecting sculptor thinks in terms of fat thighs that he creates before tackling the problem of head and waist. Even breasts are less important than thighs on which the belly of a goddess stretches out restfully: the whole world can trust such a pair of thighs. You put the Earth on them and, contrary to your fears, they do not give way and continue to defy both the Earth and the laws of gravity that are merciless in *our* society.

Moses and Aaron. Schoenberg leaves the opera unfinished in spite of the years he spends on the surface of the Earth, which gives him an opportunity to finish this opera and compose oratorios, quartets and piano pieces. Life is brimful of operas, but some of them are left unfinished because we don't always feel like finishing our works and deeds; and even some of the sentences we utter can't make their way to the end of thoughts and moods. 'I fear only one thing: I shall then have forgotten everything that I have written, for even now I hardly recognise what I composed of it last year.' I still recognise what I wrote a month ago when I resolved to write another book inspired by what I had left unfinished in the course of my previous life, of the years I had lived before my last birthday or deathday: there are only deathdays in front of me, all around my body, inside it.

Follow-my-leader. Many children repeat this ritual without knowing it, unconsciously. We all carry out this ritual because we have to go somewhere, not necessarily to the Promised Land; we can't do otherwise. No one wants to promise us the Earth and if we ask why no promises resound in our ears, we hear the following words: 'You already have the Earth. You can walk on it and plough its surface. These fields have been under the plough for centuries and even now you enjoy the generosity of this morsel of the Earth. What else do you need?'

'Why don't you promise us the moon?'

'Because you can look at it. What else do you need?'

'We'd like to walk on it and plough its surface. Why don't you promise us the world?'

'You've got the wasteland which enables you to purify your thoughts and feelings. What else do you need?'

A small horde. One powerful patriarch and his females. A lot of younger males. There's fierce rivalry for the females. This rivalry pushes the younger males to kill and eat the old father. 'Guilt following this original Oedipal crime led to the tribal totemic laws against murder and incest.' I smile as I read this poetic nonsense, but

my father thinks otherwise: for him it is an assertion that explains everything down to the unconscious. ‘Do you really think I killed you, Father?’

‘Yes. And you’ve never stopped murdering me or rather my ghost.’

‘Why should I murder you?’

‘I own the females you sleep with. They’re mine and you think they belong to you and your body. Anyway you did murder me in days of yore.’

‘I didn’t. You’ve never owned the females you’re boasting about, otherwise our species would have died out.’

‘I wasn’t impotent, was I?’

‘There was no Viagra in those days.’

‘I didn’t need it.’

‘You’ve always been old, Father. And now you’re ghost of your former self.’

There are so many deaths and every death is just around the corner. How many times have my parents killed me in the course of my life or death? I recall their knives and their hands raised above my head, my heart, my genitals, my eyes. ‘And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.’ My father thought my right eye was about to offend me and he plucked it out. ‘And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee.’ My mother thought my right hand was about to offend me; she went to the kitchen and picked up the longest knife. My mother also owns a ghost who is always at her beck and call. Yesterday, I spoke to her ghost once again. ‘Why are you haunting me, Mother? Do you own me still? I’m not your ghost, am I?’

‘You’re my son so I own you. Every mother owns her son. And I’m your mother, am I not? You have to love me more than your girls, your whores.’

‘Of course I love you, Mother. I love you more than my girls, my whores, my nymphs, my Venuses.’

‘I am your Venus, your Aphrodite, your goddess, your Mother Earth. Why do you write about other women? Why do you make love in our bed? All your beds are mine. Don’t you know that?’

‘I do. But I don’t suffer from necrophilia.’

‘You could have sex with my ghost. Don’t you like her? Doesn’t she look like your mother?’

‘She does, but I’m not physically attracted to ghosts.’

‘I’ll seduce you in the long run. Don’t you feel I’m alive? I’m just away. I’m making a two-week tour of Australia.’

I’ve always been fluid – as fluid as the water on which I’m floating now as I recall my childhood, youth and my parents who used to push me around. We often went to what is called Pure Ponds and I thought, ‘I’m also a boat’ as I looked at the children who enjoyed floating their boats. I was manipulated by my parents, not by other children whose participation in the game was active and therefore limited. I felt passive and unlimited as I floated around, obeying not my instincts and their errors – or their Eros – but my parents’ commands. They were holding me in their hands. In those days I didn’t need God whose participation in my life was filtering through my parents’ minds and ideas, principles and rules. To some extent, God’s light was dimmed by my parents’ bodies whose interference in my life conveniently fitted the image conveyed by the books I was reading: a happy family, an obedient child.

I come back to the image I don't really like on account of its humdrum nature: the River of Life. Well, I still stand on the riverbank, watching the boats float past, and all these boats are my days and years, my defeats and triumphs. At some point I stopped rowing and let the boats float with the stream I might call the Stream of Life if I felt like it. I don't feel like it because, this morning, I don't feel anything at all except the water on the surface of which I'm floating. I don't get the feeling it is the surface of the Earth that my back explores as it follows the itinerary dictated by time or something else, somebody else: a comet or Jupiter. My parents also take part in the game, for there are only games in our lives; and yet I don't like the word 'game' which seems to suggest that life is not a serious undertaking fraught with problems and risks. Of course we do risk our lives when playing a dangerous game, but life is beyond any game, in my opinion, if only in the light of what has been said and written about the Hereafter. Let us suppose that life is a game and wherever we go or stand we participate in this game beyond which there's nothing with the exception of a few rewards. Do they constitute the Hereafter we should take into consideration whenever living through another episode in our life? The Hereafter is *not* a collection of rewards and punishments. It is another life or the same life – the one we are accustomed to on the surface of the Earth, on rivers, on ponds, on Pure Ponds.

'Paint is paint, surface is surface. That's all they should be,' says a critic in the film on Pollock I've been watching since yesterday as if I had nothing else to do. Perhaps it is the only thing I *can* do at the moment because this film and my curiosity mean gliding over the surface of life and not dipping my toe into a pool to see how cold it is: I don't need to do anything of the kind. Life is cold but I don't have to swim in it, let alone plunge headlong over some cliff or other. I should glide gracefully over the water I see all around me because today life is water, as Thales put it many centuries ago. Many years ago, I tried to swim with my head underwater and I might have seen some exotic fish, had I stayed underwater for an hour or two. I was wearing a mask which was so tight it left imprints on my face and I've never repeated this experience so as not to suffer permanent disfigurement. I should stay above the sea, above life, which might enable me to contemplate it from afar, from a cloud or a comet. For the moment, I'm content to skim across the top of the waves and glide effortlessly through life with no real worries. Why should I worry about the alcoholism from which Jackson Pollock suffered throughout his life? They used to say, 'He's been in remission for the past six months,' but then he would turn up with a bottle of beer or whisky, upsetting the apple cart.

When you drink, you see both the surface and the bottom of the world that lies in front of you as if in expectation of your hands, your touch, your caress. You caress the world, which you never do in another mood or state of mind because one should be either drunk or mad to feel like caressing the world where one lives long enough to understand the ins and outs of the Earth, the air, the stars, the Hereafter. One doesn't know *everything*, but one knows a lot about death, about how one may disappear from forests and lakes, from clouds and twigs. You drink a bottle and one disappears along with others and the twigs you touched an hour ago disappear from your memory, from the surface over which you skim, glide and slide. When I was little I used to like sliding on the polished floor in my socks; now I slide on Pollock's paintings.

The critic I quoted above continued his monologue and said something along these lines: 'The surrealists confuse literature with painting.' So do I. I mean I often confuse life with literature and one should banish literature from one's life to avoid disasters – the pain of unrequited love, among other things. One can write

about surfaces, but *going* through the corridor of life is another kettle of fish because one may find oneself underground or in a tunnel at the end of which there's no proverbial light. So I'm writing about surfaces and the tops of the waves and the waves I'm writing about do not crash against the shore. Nor do they sweep away my sandcastles, my castles in the air where I live from time to time amidst my birds and treetops.

The savages I saw in another film make arrows and musical instruments which may be used for creating the harmony one needs to live one's life with dignity and serenity. I need neither Beethoven nor pianos: they shouldn't upset my mind and heart with any more nonsense about ghosts, feelings, empathy, phoney triumphs. 'I'm not the phoney. You're the phoney,' says Pollock in the film I've just stopped watching: you can't see anything beyond the end of a film. There are a few names that glide across the screen, but I'm loath to join them: I no longer need any names. Even my name no longer speaks to me as if I was on my way to God's abode from which both names and images were banished a long time ago – at the dawn of monotheism. I switch off both the names and music: I don't like the film's soundtrack. Nor do I like the music stored on my shelves and in my memory. I'm sure I'll forget it in the long run, along with my loves, tragedies, comedies, operettas.

If I make a pipe, I'll become a faun or Nijinsky. I don't need Debussy's music which should be replaced by silence, by the void one can see, provided one looks at the sky for years on end, for centuries. Dancing, rolling on *my* stage. I am not the phoney.

'How do you know when you're finished with a painting?'

'How do you know when you're finished making love?'

What am *I* supposed to say? 'How do you know when you're finished with a novel?' 'How do you know when you're finished with life?' At least that's what I should say about *this* novel of mine.

What is there after the end of a film? There's its beginning and you can also find yourself in the middle of nowhere: I don't remember what preceded the sequence I'm watching in order to quote a few pertinent or impertinent words uttered by Pollock, his critics and journalists. I must search for another sequence where Pollock speaks about art and how he walks within its walls. Actually I'm not sure I should speak about walls in connection with the breakthrough that occurred in 1947, as far as Pollock is concerned: I don't think I'm permitted to speak about *my* breakthrough, *my* art, *my* maturity. His wife said to him at some point: 'You've done it, Pollock. You've cracked it wide open.' No one has ever said anything like that in *my* presence: neither my mother nor my numerous friends appreciate what I do in the domain of poetry, in the corridors of prose.

You crack it wide open and see other skies, and the feathers you put on your head take off and fly towards other worlds in the midst of which you'll live from now on, weary as you are of your own self. You get rid of yourself and join your own feathers and fathers, your aspirations, your dreams and hopes that no longer hang on treetops, on Christmas trees. I hate this sequence: Pollock's family, his mother and brother. I'll fast-forward to the next one, to the words I'm looking for. Sometimes it's better to hear words than music and flowers are far better than humans – at least Pollock speaks about *them* and *not* about his brothers and sisters.

'Today, painters do not have to go to a subject matter outside of themselves.' I no longer go outside of myself either, for there's nothing outside, it seems to me – not even birds, let alone humans who have withdrawn from my field of vision. Some time ago, I put up a fence to stop people walking across my field of vision and they obey my command, complying with my dearest wish. Now and then, however, I let them in and they wreak

havoc in my garden, uprooting trees and blowing the fence down. They're evil spirits I ought to have killed by using the arrows I spoke about in the previous chapter, on another page and probably in another life. In *this* life of mine I have no arrows and I'm not likely to have some in a minute or two, no matter how brilliantly I depict them in my book. So I'd better not waste my time on them; I shouldn't forget that time is running out. Oddly enough, I often forget it, and I don't blame this lapse of memory on my memory.

Like many of Dante's followers, all my life I've been walking towards an ever-receding Paradise, but the bliss you can experience at the end of the road doesn't depend on your zeal and determination. For instance, I went to my favourite bookshop in the hope of finding the book I had been yearning for after finishing my commentary on the *Commedia*. Unable to part with it, I feel like writing a postscript where I intend to describe my present state of mind and the thoughts inspired by the comments I chanced upon in the same library two or three years ago. I realise I'm taking a rather devious route to explain what I'm planning to do and pinpoint the source of my inspiration – the aim I pursued when making for the bookshop where I hoped to find another book on Dante. But the route leading to Paradise is always devious and it is not enough to state the limits of your freedom: you have to *show* them. That's what I'm doing right now and therefore my demonstration looks and sounds like an abstruse philosophical essay.

Actually the situation I'm trying to describe is crystal clear and doesn't need any additional explanation: it is enough to stick to the facts. Three years ago, I went to a bookshop situated in the centre of Paris and while browsing through the books standing in front of me I noticed a huge volume devoted to the *Commedia* I cannot part with, for all my efforts. *Lectura Dantis, Inferno, A Canto-by-Canto Commentary*. This commentary was edited by Allen Mandelbaum, Anthony Oldcorn and Charles Ross. Upon seeing this book I realised I would never tear myself away from the *Commedia*, from my eternal reflection on Hell, Purgatory and Paradise where I might encounter some of my nymphs and goddesses. Ever since I have been itching to write a commentary on this commentary, adopting the procedure to which many Talmudists do justice as they scrutinise every letter they come across.

Pursuing my goal, I went to the bookshop once again and found *Purgatorio* which I needed for my journey to the end of the road, of the world, of time and its implements. Another year elapsed and I said to myself I couldn't set about writing my comments on the commentary in question without being able to consult the last volume of the trilogy. I went to the bookshop once again, but this time I found nothing on the shelf where other books on the *Commedia* stood in expectation of the uncommon reader. I asked a shop assistant if I could order the book and she sat down at the computer which had already found a lot of books for my library and leisure. Many times she pushed the same button but, as everybody knows, you can't expect to get everything you need at the push of a button – not even a book, let alone a villa on the Riviera.

So she failed to lay her hands on the book I was looking for and I thought I should come to the shop with another book in this series to make things easier for the shop assistants whose benevolence was above suspicion. A week later I paid another visit to the shop where I met a woman I had pestered with my demands for many years; she sat down at the same table, in front of the same computer and I began to wait for a miracle or rather for Paradise. Actually you're not supposed to *wait* for Paradise, twiddling your thumbs and looking at seventh heaven: you should toil up hills and mountains in the midst of which you are bound to stumble upon the Mount

of Purgatory or Jacob's ladder. I was merely looking at the shop assistant; she continued to play with the computer which was in no mood for revealing the secret of the book's whereabouts. 'It's not available,' she said at last.

'Why?' I knew my question was irrelevant, but I was unable to damp down my emotion: I realised I was facing my own destiny, my future and the Hereafter.

'I don't know,' she said. 'Mandelbaum died two years ago. Perhaps they're trying to come to terms with his heritage.'

And what about *him*? Did he land up in Purgatory? The absence of *Paradiso* seems to suggest that its gates remained close at the approach of the scholar who had done so much for Dante's successors – for his fan club, so to speak. Be that as it may, one has to go *down* instead of toiling up hills, mountains and Jacob's ladder, and Beethoven knew it better than anybody else, with the exception of Dante: let us recall his *Fifth* and *Ninth* symphonies. I've spoken about this way, path and road many times, but actions speak louder than words. I'm about to 'bury myself' – the ritual that was fruitfully worked out by the members of a Russian religious sect. They literally buried themselves to escape from the sins and temptations strewn around the world in the bosom of which they had to walk, eat and sleep either alone or with their companions in misfortune. They decided to live under the surface of the Earth – for two or three hours. One can't live without air forever or even for a week unless one drives a hole in one's tomb and starts breathing properly.

I'm living under the surface of the earth, but that doesn't mean I intend to *bury* myself and die in the name of Christ: any other sacrifice makes no sense and is frowned upon by angels and the Blessed Virgin. The Russian fanatics thought that whatever was done in the name of Christ was blessed by both the Virgin Mary and her Son; they began digging holes in the garden where they used to pray and cry. The ground was frozen hard and was impossible to dig, but the Russians can be very obstinate at times and this time they *were* obstinate, otherwise they wouldn't have died in those holes or tombs. They must have prayed a lot in spite of the fact that many people are unable to do two things at the same time. When questioned about this incapacity of theirs, they answer in unison, 'People like Julius Caesar aren't born every day.' The same goes for the members of the sect I'm writing about: such fanatics aren't born every day, judging by the numbers of self-burials recorded by chroniclers and statisticians. In 2012 they unearthed only two burials of this kind, which means that the trend towards underground ownership has gone into reverse.

A man hears a voice and the voice utters the following words, 'To a monastery.' 'I'm at your command!' says the man and sets off up the road on his old bike. Upon his arrival he meets a monk who tells him there are services every morning and in the afternoon one is supposed to attend what is called 'obedience'. 'What do you do in the evening?' asks the man.

'There are services every evening,' says the monk.

'What kind of service are you talking about?'

'If you don't know what the word means, look it up in a dictionary,' says the monk. 'Do you have a dictionary?'

'I do,' says the man.

'I hope you'll be able to put your dictionary to good use,' says the monk.

The man opens his dictionary and finds the following definition of the word: 'A place at the side of a large road at which fuel, food, drink and other things that people want on their journey are sold.' Services,

services. What do they have to do with religion? If you don't have to stop for fuel on the way to the airport, your mind is at rest because you are unlikely to be late for your flight: aeroplanes don't wait for unpunctual people. But you needn't go to a monastery to experience this feeling and the man is already within the walls that surround him as if to insinuate that in his youth he committed a crime for which he must be punished, otherwise his conscience will never be at rest. The walls seem to say to him, 'Your mind may be at rest, but what about your conscience? Don't you wish to put it at rest before taking care of your body?'

And what about 'obedience'? The man talks to another monk and finds out that he should chop wood in the yard and sweep the leaves from the driveway. 'There are no cars in this monastery,' says the man.

'For some reason, we don't use the word "path", saying instead "driveway". This tradition dates back to medieval times.'

'But there were no cars in those days.'

'There were horses,' says the monk.

'Do I really have to chop wood in the yard? Could I peel, core and chop the apples instead?'

'You could not,' says the monk and the man hears something that reminds him of a prayer.

The shadows deepen as the evening draws on and a liturgy invites both the monks and their guests to the church where Russian voices resound so affirmatively one believes they resound around the world. This is the main aspect of the Orthodox faith: you should believe that your voice resounds around the world and even in the Hereafter and its suburbs. The Orthodox liturgy – a four-hour marathon – lasts until ten o'clock in the evening and the man begins to curse whatever he sees and hears around him – with the exception of God Whom he neither sees nor hears nor feels in his heart. 'If you'd got on with your work instead of wasting time in the church, you'd be finished by now,' he says to himself and he repeats this sentence many times, unaware of the fact that his negligence and intolerance are tantamount to a death sentence.

After the liturgy, a monk he hasn't seen before invites him to dinner and the man is surprised to see a few dishes on the dinner table: he has always thought that monks eat only grass and berries. Of course there are no sturgeons on the table at which he is sitting and waiting, but there are other products associated with rivers and lakes. He realises he is unlikely to starve to death in the course of his stay in the monastery. He eats and thinks his walk around the monastery has given him an appetite. His train of thought doesn't prevent him from noticing that all the monks without exception have a healthy appetite; and yet they're not in the habit of mooning around their cells and the yard where some of them traditionally chop wood and cook meals, whenever their superiors are in the mood for a dish like shish kebab.

'Don't forget to wake up at 5.30 a.m.' says a monk.

'Why so early?'

'You should chop wood, onions and carrots. You can chop them roughly.'

'Are you talking about wood or carrots?'

'I always talk about everything, about the universe and the Hereafter.'

'Don't forget parsley,' says another monk.

'How do you mean?'

'Add some fresh parsley, finely chopped.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Just put it on an enormous plate,' says the second monk. 'Otherwise we'll have no room for cucumbers.'

The man wakes up at 5.30 a.m. and thinks about his teeth which should be brushed in accordance with his private ritual performed on a regular basis in his bathroom and other bathrooms he happens to visit during his travels. But the water he feels in his mouth is so icy he interrupts his ritual and looks at the water while talking to himself along these lines: ‘Yesterday the temperature was below freezing for most of the day. I’ll freeze to death while brushing my teeth. But if I don’t brush my teeth, I’ll lose them one by one. I’ve already got one wobbly tooth.’

The man leaves his makeshift bathroom and goes out to see what’s going on in the yard where no one chops wood as if the monks had gone to France for their summer holiday. Some tourists are walking around the yard and the man realises they’re pilgrims who have come to the monastery in the hope of meeting the Almighty or at least one of His emissaries. Their self-imposed exile must lead them to another life where the trials and tribulations of marriage do not annihilate human minds and souls. They flee from their wives because God is more important than female beauty, bodies and the sex appeal to which they have paid homage for many years, losing the most precious thing one is likely to find in the Gospel According to St John – personal salvation.

The man talks to one of these pilgrims, for he is curious to know what has happened to him during his journey to the end of our humdrum existence and the pilgrim says to him in a whisper: ‘I’ve had minor breakthroughs but real success eludes me and my colleagues.’

‘So you haven’t met God, have you?’

‘No, I haven’t.’

‘And what about angels?’

‘They don’t seem to respect our group.’

‘Can you see the other world?’ asks the man.

‘I can.’

‘What does it look like?’

‘Are you a pilgrim yourself?’ asks the pilgrim.

‘I’m not.’

‘You should become one, otherwise you won’t understand my description of the Hereafter.’

‘How to can I become a pilgrim?’

‘Our association works to promote the status of pilgrims as useful members of the community.’

‘Do I deserve this status?’ asks the man.

‘There has been an increase in applications for refugee status,’ says the pilgrim.

‘I don’t need to qualify as a refugee, do I?’

‘This status is the first stage of coming to terms with God. To become a pilgrim, you first have to seek refuge from persecution.’

‘What persecution?’

‘Are you married?’

‘I am not.’

‘Don’t you realise you’ve always been persecuted by our society, by men and women?’

‘I hope you don’t think I’m prying, but I wonder if you suffer from persecution mania,’ says the man.

I don't feel nostalgic for the place where I grew up because I see it whenever I go to Moscow and spend a few days there without bothering about female beauty that may engulf my heart if I give free rein to my emotions. I keep my emotions – and beautiful human beings – on a tight rein, which enables me to visit museums and the streets where I played and strolled in my wretched youth submitted to the communist yoke. I don't need to keep my nostalgic feelings at bay: I master them all the more easily since, in my bosom and in the rest of my body, there are no nostalgic feelings to speak of. And if there are some feelings of this kind, they're focused upon my 'first impressions' and 'discoveries' – the events that are unlikely to produce a stinging sensation in my soul: I've lived with them for many years. Of course I may forget them partly or even completely, but as soon as I find myself at the core of a situation I first experienced in my childhood or youth, I follow a Proustian path and recognise every nuance of the past which, through thick and thin, has remained faithful to me and my memory. The process itself and its result which I hastily define as 'recognition' are a great source of nostalgic longings that I intentionally conjure up using books and other objects linked to both my memory and Russia.

This time – the event took place last night – I turned my attention to the earliest Russian epic entitled *The Song of Igor's Campaign*, and I don't even have to track down the source of this minor turning point. All I have to do is cast a quick look at my television set that communicates its ideas to my mind and body. I realise I'm in the habit of putting mind and body side by side. Whenever I speak of my body, my mind is not far away; it can't even wait for another sentence, let alone another paragraph. In one of my books I quote a scientist who said on TV: 'Our mind would be quite stupid, if deprived of our body.' Once again I'm tempted to use this assertion as an alibi.

I chanced upon this epic at the age of 15: one of my teachers gave it to me and for a while I was reluctant to open it, thinking that Russian literature began with Pushkin and was about to end forever. And then I did open the book and was instantly overwhelmed with grief as I read about the eclipse that seemed to cast a shadow over the whole world and also over my room. Usually an eclipse of the sun lasts five minutes, but the blackness depicted in *The Song* was blacker than any night I could see around me and in my soul; even my soul wasn't as black as the colour of the epic I was reading or rather devouring.

In the book I found three translations of the epic written in an archaic language understood only by specialists or the people who live on the Russian steppes and consequently know nothing about cars, aeroplanes and computers. Do you really need a computer in the middle of a steppe where only horizons surround you and talk to you about the universe, where the stars fall on you now and then as if to prove they're not dreams? I ploughed through the original text, catching only half of its meaning; but the beauty of the language struck me and for the first time I felt the time of Russia, of the country that I used to associate with space or rather with steppes.

*Then Igor glanced up at the bright sun
and saw that from it with darkness
his warriors were covered.*

My youth continues to trace its figures on the carpet of my life, but Freud is far from these figures and even from the carpet on which I lie as I count the stars and read Russian and Scandinavian epics. My parents and their frolics never aroused my curiosity and only the books I read in my prime continue to influence my life, making

me forget my whereabouts and today's catastrophes. Humanity is not the bright sun at which I might cast a glance to find out about what's going on outside and anyway I wouldn't see much, given the colour I touched upon earlier. Blackness, darkness. There are many warriors in the world about which I'm speaking now but I can't see them on account of the eclipse of the sun I read about in my youth – and also because I'm still in the Jewish Museum where light only emphasises the reign of darkness as it filters through some slots, chinks, crevasses, wounds. 'The soul's dark cottage, battered and decayed, / Lets in new light through chinks that time has made –'. This museum is my soul and hope: there's a path leading from the basement to the top of the world, to the stars that never fall or twinkle.

There are many warriors – I typed out 'worriers' – who fight for life, money, prosperity, luxury and status symbols; they glance up at the bright sun and see only its brightness, not the pitch blackness I came across in *The Song of Igor's Campaign*. Even those who read either Nabokov's translation of the epic or the original text do not fear the eclipse – the phenomena associated with tragedies, bad omens and life-sized images of death. Nor does Igor fear the bad omen he faces at the very outset of his campaign and he goes so far as to say in one of the chronicles: 'None knows the secrets of God,' which allows him to judge the situation from *his* point of view.

You commit a crime and put up a fight when the police resolve to arrest you and convey you to the nearest prison: you think that the policemen who maltreat your body are neither God nor intellectuals. Only poets, philosophers and mathematicians are able to decipher God's intentions and ways, whereas an ordinary policeman looks at the world from Plato's cave or cavern, seeing only a dozen shadows on the walls and the ceiling.

'None knows the secrets of God,' you say to the police officers.

'Did you murder that woman?'

'I did.'

'Is it a secret?'

'Yes, but I've just let you in on this secret.'

'So we know your secret, don't we?'

'You do, but you don't know the secrets of God.'

'Do we need to know them under the circumstances?'

'We always need to know them. What if God sanctions the murder I committed? Would you dare arrest the man who acts in accordance with God's secret wish?'

*A longing consumed the prince's mind,
and the omen was screened from him
by the urge to taste
of the Great Don*

One wonders why Igor was ready to sacrifice his and his warriors' lives for the sake of the water which couldn't be different from what he was accustomed to at home: no oil spills were likely to cause damage to his estate's ecology. So I'm driven to treat this desire as a symbolic hint whose meaning I'm unable to decipher, for all my knowledge of human weaknesses which ravage our lives and divert our thoughts from God and salvation. I use the word 'salvation' in the broadest sense, allowing the whole of humanity to take advantage of the generosity

one can find within this word and its extendable limits. I can't say I really care about 'universal salvation', being too preoccupied with my personal problems and the repercussions they might have for my solitary journey to Paradise or Purgatory: I happen to suffer from the sin that thwarted Dante's plans, forbidding him to settle near Beatrice's celestial abode. I too suffer from pride and John Donne might have harangued me thus: 'Valery be not proud, though some have called thee genius, for thou art not so. Valery thou shalt die.'

Why does the water of the Great Don appeal so irresistibly to Igor and probably to some of his companions in misfortune? Is it associated in their minds with glory, riches, immortality, salvation, Paradise, Helen of Troy? At some point, the author of *The Song* touches upon the war described by Homer and brought to light by Schliemann without whom we would relegate *The Iliad* to the domain of dreams where a nightmare may peacefully cohabit with a figment of someone's imagination.

In Borodin's opera that gleefully draws on *The Song of Igor's Campaign* the hero's son falls in love with the daughter of his father's chief enemy, but in the epic this episode is conspicuous by its absence. I shouldn't drag female beauty into my analysis. I think that glory was the chief motive behind the campaign and the water coveted by Igor whose thirst, if any, might have been quenched at home where a river and many brooks were prepared to serve the prince. He didn't shout: 'Glory be to God!' Nor did he dedicate his campaign to the glory of God and His celestial army. He merely knew that to win this battle would bring him true glory and he yearned for this glory, for the moment in the course of which he could bask in it.

Water is the spring and channel of all life, so that sap is water and, in some Tantric allegories, water stands for the breath of life, prāṇa. On the physical plane, and because it is also the gift of Heaven, water is the universal symbol of fertility and fecundity. In southern Vietnam the Montagnards say that water from heaven makes the rice; and they are, in addition, well aware of the regenerative role of water, which they regard as a medicine and beverage of immortality.

Jean Chevalier & Alain Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*

The Russians often speak about the difference between a war whose aim is to liberate a territory and the one destined to conquer cities, oil, gold and aluminium. Apparently Igor didn't even think in terms of fertility and immortality when talking about the Great Don and its water: he just wished to conquer another country for the sake of glory. A commentator draws a parallel between *The Song* and The Afflictions of Jeremiah in which the sun neglects its duty and yields the sky to the occupying forces – to blackness, in other words. The army of blackness invades the world and the prophet laments the decline in moral standards on account of which his nation is doomed to live through many a scene of desolation, through virtual death deprived of resurrection and hope. His people have forgotten their God Who forgives neither memory lapses nor withdrawals from His influence that ordinary men and women pay attention to only when a miracle takes place in a desert or on a riverbank.

I'm also used to drawing parallels and seeing myself not only in mirrors, but also in the cities I've never been to, for no one can visit the whole world: it is not a small world.' It is true that I don't compare myself to Christ, but I may and probably must identify with Igor and Jeremiah: this book can be interpreted as a lament for lost youth, lost humanity, lost ages to which one traditionally adds the adjective 'golden'. Our age doesn't even deserve the adjective 'iron' or 'plastic', although I might compare it to the plastic bags into which I stuff a lot of

rubbish so that often the rubbish falls out and I have no alternative but to pick it up. I pick it up, look at the bag in which it belongs, put it back and do my best to tie up the top of the bag in order to prevent the rubbish from falling out. The same goes for the world I clean whenever given this opportunity; in a way every lament of mine is apt to cleanse the world of its sins. But the world's sins and rubbish fall out, scattering over roadsides, and I realise that no bag, no bog will ever hold it, whatever the size of the container I resort to in the course of my lamentations, dirges and funeral marches.

'Speak, thus saith the Lord, Even the carcasses of men shall fall as dung upon the open field, and as the handful after the harvestman, and none shall gather them.' I do gather them and put their carcasses back into my bag that I'll carry to the nearest rubbish dump, and one wonders why I pick up these carcasses instead of leaving them where they are – in the open fields, in the streets. 'Why look for *another* rubbish dump?' say my opponents.

'It's a shame that such a beautiful area has been defiled by a rubbish dump,' I say to them by way of an answer.

'Do you mean to say the whole world is just a rubbish dump?'

'That's right.'

'What about *your* rubbish dump? Is it located *outside* the world?'

'I carry the carcasses of men to the Hereafter.'

'Why do you defile the Hereafter? You'll go to Hell for this.'

'For death is come up into our windows, and is entered into our palaces, to cut off the children from without, and the young men from the streets.' I'm often asked why I have no children and this question doesn't remain on its own – away from other questions and interrogations, from what may be defined as an 'inquisition'. 'Don't you like children? Aren't they the flowers of our world? Do you prefer *real* flowers? How can you prefer plants to human beings? Look at the children and their games. Aren't they cute? Aren't you tempted to have a child of your own?'

'I've got some funny ideas about how to bring up children,' I say to them.

'Could you describe your funny ideas?' says a fun-loving girl.

'I wouldn't let them leave my palace.'

'No walks in the woods and valleys? No beaches?'

'The sun also shines in my park.'

'It's so cruel to keep your children chained up like that all the time. Do you want to shield them from death?'

'From the scenes of desolation.'

'You always sound angry. Are you one of the angry men? Have you seen the movie?'

'Anger can function as a shield against even more painful emotions of loss and hurt.'

'Why do you quote Jeremiah?'

'It's cruel to beget children in this day and age. "Rahel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not."'

'Don't marry a woman whose name is Rahel.'

"'With thee also will I break in pieces man and woman; and with thee will I break in pieces old and young; and with thee will I break in pieces the young man and the maid.'"

I was in two minds whether or not to take a walk in the snow-covered woods ‘where I might slip and break my hip’, as I told myself. Of course I could have broken many other members of my body – *any* of them, to be exact; but, for some obscure reason, I thought about my hip which is not the most precious part of my body. Well, I did slip this morning, though neither in the woods nor on the ice; I slipped on the marble that gives a warm or rather cold welcome to whoever gets close enough to the front door of my house. This time, the marble greeted me with open arms – to the extent of permitting me to touch it with all the members of my body. We didn’t make love, but I spent enough time on its surface to enable it to appreciate my curves and the quality of my clothes – my cashmere coat, among other things.

I am a thinking reed, to borrow Pascal’s definition, or one of the tubes one can admire in Sendai – during a visit to the multimedia library. An unpleasant memory can shake and in this case – a Hobson’s choice case again – I become a bottle that my torturer turns upside down and shakes as if dealing with orange juice. Even the dead can do that – my mother, among other people who are allowed to turn me upside down or just push me to accept their terms. Of course they are *not* allowed to do that, but I have no say in the matter and I bow to the inevitable, turning into a reed which forgets what to think and how to act in order to remain a *thinking* reed endowed with both brains and willpower.

The architect, Tokyo Ito, says he wished to create ‘a fluid space’ – hence the image of the seaweed shown in the documentary I bought last year. Like a river, the space chosen for the library was to ‘flow with air and light’, according to the architect and to the tourists who flock into the building in search of air, light and Japanese lore.

There are thirteen vertical tubes that hold up the building and ensure the safety of the visitors who continue to flock into it, heedless of earthquakes and suchlike. They know that, despite their fragile appearance, the tubes are designed to stand up to any natural catastrophe, however destructive and unpredictable. They seem to have been twisted and therefore may have a few affinities with my nerves, their contours and sensitivity. But for all their apparent fragility, my nerves are able to stand up to any catastrophe: physical, psychological, natural or unnatural. Even femmes fatales do not manage to break them into pieces.

I absorb psychological shocks, even though they often bend my inner structure, trying to reduce me to a quivering wreck – a state I’m reluctant to adopt in spite of its Beckettian quality. Actually you don’t have to identify with your favourite writer’s characters: you can admire them from a distance, from your armchair or hammock. But occasionally I might identify with the sentences I chance upon in the books stored on the numerous shelves I’ve bought over the last 33 years. ‘The mind of the sage penetrates to the utmost the perfect union of yin and yang and understands most clearly the wonderful principles of the myriad things. Therefore he can identify himself with changes and harmonise with transformations, and finds everything all right wherever he may go. He embraces all things and thus nothing is not in its natural state. The world asks him to rule because of disorder. He has no deliberate mind of his own. Since he has no deliberate mind of his own, why should he not respond to the world?’

I can’t identify with the whole of this quote because I’m not mature enough for such a metamorphosis; I must proceed from here – from my present state of mind – in stages. A friend of mine told me last night: ‘We’re decorating the house in stages so it won’t be ready for another couple of months.’ Suppose I have to decorate my

inner house to which I referred earlier as a 'structure' and I can't do this at once, given my immaturity and childishness – at least in this domain I am like a child who doesn't know much and therefore relies on his parents or a guru.

This morning I triumphed over my pain and went as far as the living room to fetch a book on Chinese philosophy in which I actually found the passage I quoted above to provide useful information about purity, void, adaptability, flexibility and other components of what may be termed 'enlightenment'. I realise that this term is hardly adequate for my needs, but I'm not as subservient to words as I used to be only three years ago. And I'm getting further and further from those structuralists whose trust in language is as absolute as that of Duncan who was assassinated in *Macbeth*.

My pain is back and my dictionary informs me that I 'strained a muscle in my back playing squash'. But I don't play squash and the pain I feel is not located in my back, although at times it spreads all over my body – when I have a coughing fit, for instance. These coughing fits may be likened to the earthquakes to which my inner structure is supposed to stand up in the light of what I said about the multimedia library I came across when watching one of the documentaries on architecture. I resist the pain and even stroke my cat to answer his calls: he mews pitifully outside the door of my room and obediently I go and stroke him as long as my pain permits my love to express itself.

Can I identify with changes and harmonise with transformations? Of course not and even the notion of democracy jars on my nerves because it is misunderstood all over the world – especially in so-called 'free countries'. I'm supposed to accept the results of a democratic election, but stupidity and ideologies are omnipresent and no one can get rid of them by means of universal suffrage. Many people are leaving France because they don't accept the results of our last democratic election and sooner or later I'll follow in their footsteps because I'm not mature enough to accept its results and the ruin of all my hopes. What did I hope for? I need peace and quiet to write my books and the government has promised that they'll increase taxes. Kuo Hsiang's – the Taoist I quoted above – knew nothing about our government and the taxes we have to pay; he spoke quietly about transformations, harmonies and unions. Nor was he aware of the trade unions and the rallies they organise in order to reach a state of disorder which is a *sine qua non* of their prosperity – at least that's what they think and no one is capable of making them change their narrow minds. The government is totally disorganised: nobody knows what they are supposed to be doing. The same goes for the media. *Le Figaro* is a newspaper with a large right-wing readership, but the members of its staff do not know how to influence public opinion and what to write about the problems we are facing everywhere – even in our nightmares. The same goes for left-wing newspapers: they have no idea what to do and how to do it. And I'm all at sea with the new regulations that seem to banish me from the country I used to worship to the extent of forgetting Russia, Moscow and St Petersburg.

It is true that my inner house and library are ready for both action and non-action, but I really don't know what to do: for once, there's a wide range of choices open to me and I am too embarrassed to admit it is a case of Hobson's choice. As usual determinism rules the waves and I would gladly accept its verdict, if I knew what kind of situation I am to face in the future and where I'll settle as a result of this verdict: in Belgium, in Switzerland, in England, near Vilnius – or in the suburbs of Moscow. This project may be difficult, but I still think it is doable.

I'm supposed to find everything all right wherever I may go and I will not ignore this Taoist verdict that seems to put me on the right track for which I've been looking all my life. I keep repeating: 'Everything is all right, everything is all right. Their declared aim is to tax the rich. I'm not very rich, but the money I've got is likely to land up in their bags and banks. If this happens, I won't have any money in the near future and I'm afraid it is a case of Hobson's choice – another triumph of determinism. Hobson's choice is all right. Poverty is all right. The void is all right. Death is all right. The Hereafter is all right. I go to the Hereafter and find everything all right – Hell, Purgatory, Paradise. I have no deliberate mind of my own and blissfully I respond to the world – to Hell in particular. I embrace all things and beings – devils, angels, Satan Himself. Am I allowed to embrace the Almighty and the Virgin Mary?'

I haven't drunk anything today except two cups of tea which, for some reason, reminded me of my psychological pains instead of making them disappear in one of my memory lapses – or memory holes, as the French put it. Perhaps it is easier to forget something in French: we are used to dropping things into holes and suchlike. Yes, I am a reed once again and the weather forecast warned of winds of up to 60 miles an hour today. People may think you're a genius; they even go so far as to speak of your uniqueness in a public place, in the middle of the crowd. But if you happen to find yourself in the company of a famous artist whom your friends and colleagues treat with scorn, they'll fawn upon him only because he is famous; and they'll neglect you and your genius because your name is almost unknown in Britain.

I wish the roof of my temple could be held up by a row of thick stone columns and not by a number of tubes leaning to the right, to the left. I wish I could turn into Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square, which might enable me to emerge victorious after a 65-year life on Earth. (I didn't say on the *surface* of the Earth, did I?)

I think I must be going senile, but I'm not senile to the point of believing I can vanquish death and the diseases one has to cope with before his advent. Of course many people die in their sleep because death decides to murder them on the spur of the moment, without making them suffer and curse their parents who gave them birth and thus exposed them to the dangers linked with life. Well, I don't think I can lord it over destiny and God Who does nothing to alleviate our pains and obliterate death not only in our poetry, but also in our existence which is perhaps more important than poetry, given the number of potential poems it nurses in its bosom. I believe in God and I'm no longer forced to practise my faith in secret, as I did in the Soviet Union where even my mother's mortal remains were not permitted to spend their last hours in church – I mean, the last hours they spent on the surface of the Earth. Such restrictions infringe upon basic human rights and I infringed them in my turn: it was my turn to flout Soviet traditions. My mother's mortal remains did spend one hour in the church before finding their eternal peace at the cemetery where my father had been buried four years before. Soviet officials used to ignore our needs and moods; for once, I was given an opportunity to pay them back in kind.

Two hours ago, I saw a programme devoted to a spiritual healer whose name is widely known in both the West and the East and therefore I don't have to divulge it. She is not in a class of her own: there's a power to which we have to pay homage whenever we can do it with dignity and solemnity. This woman – is she a spiritual healer or a faith healer? – seems to have resurrected many people who spent a part of their lives on the brink of death. She used her hands from which a multitude of heat rays radiated with a view to defeating cancers and other fatal diseases that sap all our energy and confidence, nibbling holes in our lives. The host usually invites the people who roughly belong to two categories: believers and unbelievers. Some of the unbelievers don't even believe in God, if I'm not mistaken. At least they don't believe in mysticism, in faith healers and in the hands

from which a multitude of rays continuously rush towards bugs, microbes and rotten genes – towards death hanging over our bodies. It's not enough to say to death: 'Be not proud and go to Hell.' Habitually death does not go to Hell unless you keep him company. Going to Hell arm in arm, like old friends. You *are* old friends, as a matter of fact, and there's no point in denying the fact.

In the audience there were more believers than unbelievers: people still believe in miracles, even if they're inclined to be lazy and forget about God Who can raise us from the dead in the twinkling of an eye. 'They found a malignant tumour in my breast,' said one of the guests. 'She put her fiery hands on it and the tumour set off on a round-the-world cruise. Actually it set off straight away on a journey to the station.'

'On a round-the-world cruise?' said another guest.

'Many people suffer from the same tumour,' said the first guest.

'Have you contaminated all these people?'

'No, of course not.'

'Why don't you arrest this woman?'

'Which woman? The healer or the patient?' said the third guest.

'Both,' said the second guest.

The host said: 'Look at the screen' and we saw a pair of hands and many wires, electrodes and whatnot. "Her power has been proven scientifically," said the fourth guest.

'Could I see the results of the test?' asked a scientist.

'The first diagram is a view of the power from the room, and the second shows it in section,' said the fourth guest. At first we saw nothing except the screen and the same pair of hands. 'Did she put the battery on charge overnight?' asked someone. At that point, a red globe floated before our eyes. 'This power emits a characteristic red glow,' said the fourth guest.

I wish I could go and see this healer: the pain I feel seems to grow as I go through days and nights, hoping to get rid of it with the aid of time that heals everything except death and birth. I don't really *go* through, contrary to what I might say when talking about my capacities and incapacities. The only spot where I feel at home – assuming that home is the only source of wellbeing – is my bed where I forget about my pain. Should I say *my* pain or is it better not to appropriate it for fear of becoming too familiar with its repercussions and sadistic disposition? We are not on intimate terms, are we? We are certainly not on an equal footing; yet pain and man ought to be able to compete for supremacy on an equal footing, notwithstanding the eternal presence of death. Easier said than done: pain always wins, even when it subsides. All we can do is lay down our weapons and surrender. What weapons have we got, I wonder? The spiritual healer's hands, their rays and human warmth? Incidentally, I wonder if the woman I'm talking about belongs to the category of *spiritual* healers: she doesn't speak of God or the Buddha, does she?

I can't even sit down without looking for a support which may enable me to choose an appropriate trajectory for my body or rather for my pain: it dislikes straight lines and seems to accept some curves. I do my best to discover these curves and make good use of them. Whenever I start talking, I feel the same pain, which seems to suggest I'd better shut up and communicate with others through sign language. But many signs elude my body on account of the pain which puts a veto on them and on my desire to reach out to the men and women I meet in the streets and on the threshold of my house. Should I watch a few Antonioni films to find out more about communication and the signs one may use during an important talk? Antonioni's heroes do not fall all the

time and consequently their bodies are flexible enough to convey any thought or sentiment, however intricate and abstruse.

I can't raise my left hand to fetch a bottle of wine, but fortunately I don't need it because I'm not left-handed and therefore can use my *right* hand for this and other purposes.

Pain or no pain, I go and stroke my cat whenever he calls to me from the entrance hall; otherwise he is likely to forget this ritual and his father whose presence shouldn't be limited to feeding time only. To all outward appearances, he still recalls my hands and lips, my tenderness.

My writing desk still groans under the weight of *The Song* and Jeremiah who speaks about death as often as the author of *The Song*. 'But I was like a lamb or an ox that is brought to the slaughter; and I knew not that they had devised devices against me, saying, Let us destroy the tree with the fruit thereof, and let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name may be no more remembered.' I would also have written this lamentation, had I lived in days gone by. Well, I've typed it out, but there's none so deaf as those who will not hear. 'But, O Lord of hosts, that judgest righteously, that triest the reins and the heart, let me see thy vengeance on them: for unto thee have I revealed my cause.' The more I quote Jeremiah, the more I think about death: my death, their deaths. I don't need much prompting to give myself over to morbid reflections.

We know what happens before death and the journey to the Hereafter, which starts at the moment of conception, as everybody knows. But I'm speaking about a stretch of land lying between death and what may be termed 'life after death'. I think I'd better call it a 'stretch of wasteland', but terms and words are of no importance in this paragraph related to the departure of the soul saying 'farewell' to the deathbed and the relatives of the deceased. How does the soul embark upon its journey to the Hereafter or the void where it should spend some time, eternity or just a few seconds? Jeremiah doesn't say a word about this rite of passage to which I turn my attention to find out what *really* takes place in the corridor leading from death to another life or to the same death – in case there's no hereafter to speak of. The author of *The Song*, on the other hand, supplies a description of how the soul leaves the body on its way to whatever may lie in wait for it at the end of the road.

All alone

*you let your pearly soul drop
out of your brave body
through your golden gorget.*

Here is Nabokov's commentary on this obscure passage of rite:

According to Russian traditional belief, the seat and point of exit of the soul is the hollow of the throat above the chest bone, the triangular dimple called dushka. The dress a prince wore under his mantlet was fastened on the chest by a system of loops and had, higher up, a round or square gap at the front of the collar. This opening (which the soul might conveniently use for its exit from the throat) was adorned with gold braid and precious stones forming a broad band called the oplechie or, as in our text, ozherelie –which I have rendered as gorget). The image of the soul dropping out like a pearl occurs in religious works as late as the 17th century.

The image also occurs in this book of mine, but I've only skimmed the surface of the problem instead of getting to the bottom of it, to the underground.

I love *The Song*, *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy, Pushkin, but I'm not sure I love Russia, for the men and women of genius live their own lives which are *partly* interwoven with the gardens where they spent their hours and years, looking into the future, going backwards towards the past, towards the time unfolding before their births. I don't think I'm duty bound to love the country where I was born and spent more than 26 years – against my will, I must admit. With the best will in the world, however, I couldn't leave my native land for the simple reason that no one was permitted to do so without special permission – an invitation to uprooting, so to speak. Today, few people recall the predicament out of which only the all-powerful Communist Party might have helped us, but I'm in no mood to dwell on this aspect of my past because I have no time for *their* rules, moods and worlds.

Actually I don't know if one is capable of recalling that part of Russian history without getting bogged down in the details such as the sheer impossibility of using an ordinary Soviet passport *elsewhere*. (Once again I use the word associated in my mind with Coriolanus and his assertion: 'There's a world elsewhere.') For most of us, there was no world elsewhere and we didn't really need another passport; besides, no one was willing to provide it with a stern look or a benevolent smile. Is there a world elsewhere, I wonder? I have a passport thanks to which I can travel to the Moon and even to Venus, let alone to New Zealand and Australia, but even on Venus I'm likely to find computers and their games, stupidity and the lack of human dignity. Of course the inhabitants of Venus aren't supposed to display the variety of *human* dignity that our ancestors were accustomed to before the Second World War. The point is they lack dignity *altogether*, poisoned as they are by *our* way of thinking and dealing with life and its intricacies: moral and spiritual bugs require no spaceships to travel from one star to another, spreading rumours and destroying cultures.

In the Soviet Union, we had to cope with *another* variety of desert, but there were a few camels in our desert and they walked around proudly and independently, showering us with their gifts. Needless to say, our regime was unable to supply them with 'water of life' – *eau de vie* – but they had enough life in them not to yield to communist pressure and the directives issued by the Politburo and other right-minded organisations. (Left-minded organisations.) Communist ideas no longer hold sway over cities and villages, but the camels seem to have vanished into thin air as if to demonstrate that they're used to deserts, not to computers, mobile phones and suchlike. They're faithful to coarse sand, fine sand, the lack of water, the absence of Coke, the absence of humans who constantly make fools of themselves and of others – of animals, for instance.

I don't know if I should call our legendary bard, Vladimir Vysotsky, a camel: I've never liked him, his songs and his fans whose number outstrip astronomical qualifications and even encroach upon the rights of individuals. I, for one, have always thought that every individual is entitled to individual thoughts, ideas and feelings, otherwise the word 'individual' makes no sense; but even now, more than 30 years after Vysotsky's death, many Russian citizens have only *his* thoughts, songs and words in their heads, their hearts and their souls that must have left their bodies on the day of their idol's death. Instead of looking for their future abodes – animals, demons, insects – they settled forever in Vysotsky's corpse, adding a finishing touch to Pythagoras' charitable doctrine. According to Ovid, Pythagoras used to address his disciples as follows: 'Souls never die, but always on quitting one abode pass to another. I myself can remember that in the time of the Trojan War I was

Euphorbus, the son of Panthus, and fell by the spear of Menelaus. Lately being in the temple of Juno, at Argos, I recognised my shield hung up there among the trophies. All things change, nothing perishes.'

In my opinion, Vysotsky's fans can easily remember their former lives because they have *always* been Vysotsky – even before the bard's birth in the Soviet Union. They recognise Vysotsky – and themselves – in Ancient Greece, in Egypt, amidst the members of primitive tribes which, contrary to what Claude Lévi-Strauss thought throughout his life, may prove to be primitive and savage. They often mistake Homer for Vysotsky in spite of the resistance offered by the radical wing of the club whose representatives declare that the ancient bard can't hold a candle to his Soviet counterpart. 'If I didn't know Vysotsky, I would recognise myself in Homer's verses. I'd even agree to lend him my soul and a few years of its life. But my soul, my whole being belongs to Vysotsky. I've always lived in his immortal, eternal body because people like that are never born. Or rather they're born on the day of the Creation.'

'And what about the years that elapsed before the Big Bang?' said another member of the club.

'There was no time without Vysotsky. His birth is the Big Bang.'

'Let's rename the Big Bang,' said someone else.

'What name could we give to it?' (The identity of the speaker doesn't matter.)

'The Big Song.'

'Which one? All his songs are big.'

'One with a bang.'

'There are bangs in all his songs. Actually all his songs are bangs.'

'He seems to bang his fist on the table.'

'On our skulls.'

'He's like the police banging on the door. "Open up – it's the voice of your conscience!" he shouts.'

'It's Vysotsky, life, passion, love, death, horses.'

'He's everywhere. When he sings about the war, we think he was a soldier. He knows everybody and everything. He knows me better than my mother.'

'And we know him better than his mother – our souls have been living inside him since the Creation.'

What's the secret of these affinities, of the wavelengths that coincide and walk along the road together – even if their paths diverge and do their best to separate them? They say to each other: 'There are no paths to speak of – there's only one road and we'll follow this road, come hell or high water! This road is "Vysotsky". This road is "Truth". This road is "Us".'

Whenever walking along a row of open windows, I invariably heard Vysotsky's voice and I'm sure this phenomenon wasn't typical of Moscow and Leningrad only: in every village resounded the voice of death and life, of vodka and caviar. The government officials didn't bother to announce his funeral in newspapers, on the radio and television. Besides, the Olympic Games were in full swing – the action takes place in 1980 – and, according to the Politburo's calculations, only Vysotsky's close friends and relatives were likely to accompany his corpse to the threshold of the Hereafter. Contrary to their great expectations, the entire population of Moscow turned up in the area adjacent to the Taganka Theatre where Vysotsky used to play Hamlet in whose most famous monologue he found his own life and aspirations. 'To be' meant his union with the members of the fun club created in his honour at the very outset of his career, at the moment when one of his private performances was recorded on a tape that could be multiplied ad infinitum. Sure enough, this tape replenished the Soviet

Union and other tapes followed in the wake of the first historic recording I had no opportunity to hear in those days, in the late Sixties – I wasn't interested in the creative output of so-called bards.

'Not to be' meant the government's rejection of Vysotsky's poems, songs and numerous talents. Judging from his chronic despondency, he was neither an official poet, nor an official actor. He was just a nobody, but nobodies prospered in the Soviet Union because they made up the only opposition to the regime we hated heartily, saying that every member of the Politburo was a dimwit saved from nonentity by his blatant adherence to Brezhnev's policies and Lenin's inheritance. I was neither nobody nor anybody and my path seldom if ever crossed the road along which my fellow-citizens marched round the clock, walking together in spite of their individual characteristics. In my opinion, they all followed the same road; and yet in their midst one could encounter a dissident and an informer, a classical pianist and a member of the Vysotsky club. Somehow they would join hands and start walking down the road traced and built by our rulers who, in a way, were on Vysotsky's side: they were fond of the crowds heading for the horizon and using the same road to achieve their objectives.

Day and night I watched those people whose objectives might differ radically, making them quarrel and bang their fists on their opponents' skulls. (They didn't *always* vent their wrath on tables and doors.) But Vysotsky reconciled them and our dissidents ended up enjoying official Lenin-inspired songs because to them they sounded like Vysotsky's works, like the result of *his* inspiration and genius. It was much easier to attribute to Vysotsky The Song of Songs because every song of his was the song of songs – of all the songs composed and performed in the course of human history. 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine.'

Whenever I listen to his songs and their words – these are not songs without words – I find them coarse and rather vulgar. My skull suffers a lot during the legendary concerts shown on TV with a view to paying tribute to the man who was born 75 years ago. I'm in no mood to translate these songs into English and I don't think this mood of mine will ever be replaced by another mood, although I change my mind and moods rather often: even if I think I'm in the right, I don't become stubborn for fear of turning into a stone and thereby proving Freud's pet theory called the 'death instinct'.

As I already pointed out, in the course of my Soviet life I was unquestionably West-oriented and *The Song* I resort to whenever in need of sledgehammer arguments seems to foretell my tale of woe, my defeat in the countries situated outside the Soviet Union and its borders inside which I loved and was loved in return and where I wrote the poems admired by my friends. Now I also write poems in Russian and I don't fail to distribute them among my friends and also among the people I hardly know, but neither these people nor my friends read the fruit of my inspiration and toil; and even if they do manage to finish one poem, they say nothing about its style and my inspiration. I recited one of my recent works in the presence of an old friend who said I should publish my youthful haikus – the poems he knows by heart. No one is likely to try and memorise what I'm writing now so that I wonder why I spend so many hours in front of my computer instead of watching blockbusters and other trendy products of the Western world about which I dreamt throughout my youth.

*The grass droops with condolences
and the tree with sorrow
bends to the ground.*

*For now, brothers, a cheerless tide has set in;
now the wild has covered the strong.*

Yes, I've lost the battle in the world where only the wild are bound to prevail, which makes me think about one of Churchill's speeches or rather about its end: 'We'll prevail, we'll prevail, we'll prevail.' Who? What? Yes, we defeated the Nazis and some of us thought that the world would be a better place in the 21st century, let alone in the 22nd century. If left alone, the world goes on a spree and nothing can stop it, not even the bloodiest war and a series of tsunamis backed by a worldwide earthquake. 'It's been hard work, but now the business is running smoothly you can sit back and enjoy the fruits of your labours.' What business are they talking about? They all are in business and they do a lot of business with overseas customers – we know the fact and there's no denying they succeed in the property world and even in getting their bills through Congress. We know they enjoy the fruits of their labours and from time to time we're even allowed to see these fruits and the ways they enjoy them – from afar, needless to say. 'Speak for yourself!' says my colleagues. 'We had a wonderful time!' All right, I'll speak for myself. I enjoy the fruits of their labours and their enjoyments while sitting in front of my TV set and not in a hall where bottles and tablecloths rival the balls one can admire in the Russian version of *War and Peace*. But where is old Prince Bolkonsky? Where is his son? Prince Andrey would have admired my poetry.

*This night, from eventide,
they dressed me with a black pall
on a bedstead of yew.
They ladled out for me
blue wine mixed with bane.*

Go West.

III

Whenever I go down and reach my childhood situated at the centre of the Earth, I find Vysotsky or other people who are the by-products of overcrowded housing – at least that's how I see them within the framework of my life. I was born in a big city and such a city usually has a multitude of houses where men and women eat, sleep and get on their neighbours' nerves because they can't do otherwise, being different from their neighbours. Sometimes they go for each other with their fists and have to be pulled apart; sometimes they limit their disagreements to verbal attacks and insults which are not as easily forgiven and forgotten as might be presumed. One might point out that my description of city life reflects communal flats which were rather common in the Soviet Union: I, for one, was born in one of those flats whose tenants would meet in the kitchen and talk for hours on end, leaving their gas cookers alone. I would partly agree with such a comment; and yet I always feel my neighbours – even if I happen to stay in a castle, miles from anywhere. I feel them and, contrary to the Bible's explicit instruction, I don't manage to love them: for some reason, there are no beautiful women among my neighbours.

In Moscow, I could see a lot of houses from my window: my family lived on the twelfth floor of a skyscraper built on Stalin's orders by German prisoners. I looked at those houses and felt their inhabitants, their quarrels, their dinners and bottles of vodka; I heard Soviet songs which were more harmonious than our bards' contribution to the history of art. And yet I hated Soviet songs along with their performers whose mouths could be seen on television at 'governmental concerts', to use the official formula applied only to the social gatherings during which our artists – our national treasures – played Chopin's polonaises and sang a number of hymns to our Motherland.

In the Soviet Union, I hated everything and almost everybody: even my friends might turn out to be nothing but by-products of overcrowded housing. They build a house and put some people in it and I can't help meeting these people in the streets because now and then they feel cooped up in their flats and go outdoors to play a game of dominoes in some courtyard or other – the way I used to talk to myself in those bygone days. The more houses you build, the more people I touch either with my shoulders or my hands that are reluctant to touch passers-by, even if a beautiful woman may turn up unexpectedly in a remote corner of Scotland.

I'm not in a hurry; nevertheless I think I should bypass my childhood – the one I lived in Moscow, not far from Red Square – and wend my way through the dark back streets of history to where my former lives continue to indulge in harmless frolics. A month ago I had a go at living in a primitive tribe, but the experience didn't last and I don't recall it in spite of my wish to return to the Iron Age, to the Bronze Age – to any age isolated from our civilisation and its gadgets.

When I watch the documentaries I acquired in the hope of lighting upon my former lives and habits, I recognise the ball that is being maltreated by those tribes. We played our games in the centre of Moscow and it is far more delightful to throw or kick many balls in a glade surrounded by trees, animals and birds, and bathed by the sun in shades of pink and gold. What does it matter what game is played under the circumstances, in such surroundings?

Would Pythagoras have recognised himself among the players I'm watching with envy and sorrow? They're not different from their ancestors as if taking their cue from Keats' nightingale. Why am *I* different from

them? Am I? Perhaps I am Keats' nightingale – come to think of it. In ancient days, my voice might have been heard by an emperor and a clown unless I was an emperor or a clown. Did my song find a path through the sad heart of Ruth? Incidentally, my mother's name was Ruth.

I'm often asked why I yearn to reach my former lives and I answer that the effort I make to remember whatever happened to me in days of yore is fully justified by the important role played in one's life by the primeval scene – one's meeting with God. According to a Russian philosopher – his name is Averin, I think – the theory to which we often refer when speaking of our memory relates not to multiplication tables and suchlike, but to God and his paternal care. What I'm saying now is too abstruse and I'll do my best to make it crystal clear, assuming that a process of recollection can be clear: when trying to remember what happened to you before your conception you're bound to muddy the waters. As everyone knows, Plato thinks that our knowledge was stored in our memory at the moment of our conception or even at the outset of the Creation, symbolised by the Big Bang and the disappearance of the chaos we read about in the Bible. Guided by a guru, an ignoramus recalls differential calculus, but this kind of knowledge can be acquired at school and we don't really need to make a superhuman effort in order to plant this branch of mathematics in the forefront of our brain. Our meeting with God is far more important: the Bible may bring us closer to heavenly regions but it can't convey us to the spot where we first met the Almighty and His army.

Do I reconstruct our meeting when I watch a documentary on primitive tribes, society and people? These people are neither God nor the army of angels at which I hint as I do my best to visualise the City of God defended by His soldiers, generals and machines. I just envy the people I watch from my divan and I play with them to my heart's content: I'm weary of playing chess and cards with myself. On the other hand, I strive to narrow the gap between the present and the past about which Jean-Jacques Rousseau spoke so eloquently, with such nostalgic élan. Yes, I'm longing to escape from this day and age which obscures the main issue – the primeval harmony guaranteed by the presence of God and His advice. Of course I might keep my fellow creatures at bay by other means – by wearing a mask, for instance; by concealing my face and thoughts. Unfortunately I can't fold my hair over my face: I don't have enough hair for such a manoeuvre. No one will ever say about me: 'He brushed his long red hair.' Nor did I lose my hair by the time I was twenty-five; one of my schoolmates did. Be that as it may, I can't fold my hair over my face to interrupt the circuits of normal social communication. Let us not forget that the human face is the seat of communication and if you become an invisible man or woman, you won't be able to communicate with the visible world, whatever you may do to attract attention to your persona. You may talk your head off or play Liszt's sonatas, etudes and tarantellas – nobody will react to these signs of your existence solely concentrated in your face, your eyes and your eyebrows.

According to Lévi-Strauss, your hair or just a sheet of paper you hold in front of your face removes you from society, allowing you to establish contact with other forces, other worlds – those of love and those of death. I don't know if I really need the world of death because I already own it, and when asked, 'Do you have any proof of ownership for death?', I answer 'Yes' and point at my body. But I do need the world of love and only by breaking diplomatic ties with society am I likely to enjoy friendly relations with this world. I can't fold my hair over my face, but nothing and nobody prevent me from wearing a mask. (I *could* fold the rest of my hair over my face, but such a gesture wouldn't serve a useful purpose: my hair will never *conceal* my face.)

As Lévi-Strauss said earlier, masks are the means by which man enters into contact with the world of the supernatural. In other words (or in other worlds), the mask re-routes communication away from its social

function towards the sacred, the transcendental – or to the primeval scene in which the Almighty takes part as an actor, as the Author. Anyway I am at a loss to know how to proceed and what I should wear apart from my trousers, jacket or the dressing gown I've been hopelessly addicted to for 20 years at least. Should I wear a mask? But, as Lévi-Strauss seems to point out, the result I may achieve through this procedure is bound to have the opposite effect, highlighting my identity as a social being. I am an anti-social being par excellence, by nature, by profession and it is too late to mend my ways; besides, I'm not in the habit of going from one extreme to another. The mask is at once human and non-human and hopefully I'll be able to separate these aspects of the mask so as to retain only its non-human quality.

I wonder what I looked like in the course of the primeval scene I superficially analysed at the beginning of this chapter. Did I appear before God in the shape of an amoeba? Was I just an embryo in search of its mother's womb? Was I human or non-human in those days? I'm not sure I was wearing a mask when talking to God Who wouldn't have given a warm welcome to a masked embryo or a masked larva. Anyway it is pointless to wear a mask in the presence of God because our main aim in life is to be on intimate terms with our Father and Saviour from Whom we shouldn't conceal either our eyes or innermost thoughts: He has known them from time immemorial.

I consult my diary and find a few entries which may cast light on my relationship with God. 'He affectionately ruffled my hair with His hand as He passed.' Why did I capitalise 'His' and 'He'? I must have fallen into a trance because no one can remain conscious and alert when God speaks to him. (Even Moses was unable to withstand this pressure.) When a hypnotist puts you in a trance, you no longer have conscious control of yourself. What about God? What about *His* way of putting you in a trance? I don't remember the nuances of the meeting I cherish and dream about, but a few entries in my diary speak volumes and I listen to what they convey to my recovered consciousness.

'He looked up from His book and smiled at me.' This entry corroborates the theory according to which the Almighty wrote the Bible unaided and I'm certain that during my visit he was checking its newest edition for mistakes. 'It's sometimes difficult to find exactly the right word to express what you want to say.' Do my words reveal God's incapacity to master English? Is it not *His* language? I think our languages are part of God's all-embracing idiom – the conclusion I invariably reach upon reading the following words: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' So I must have deplored my own incapacity to express my feelings and aspirations; and yet I am a poet whose prime objective is to make the information more widely available. What kind of information? Frankly speaking, every poem of mine is nothing but a report: a news report, a weather report, a report on such and such a situation – on falling in love, among other things. But I must admit it *is* difficult sometimes to find exactly the right word; even the wrong words are not always available.

Claude Lévi-Strauss thinks the mask is capable of bringing the gods to Earth and once again I stare at the text in complete perplexity, for it drops no hint about the identity of those gods whose penchant for interstellar travel seems to be established once and for all. Of course Lévi-Strauss speaks of pagan gods who give orders to rain, snow, thunder and many other natural phenomena in the middle of which we walk and spend our holidays, unprotected by our roofs and walls. But what about eschatological issues and metaphysical problems? What about our *salvation* and the meeting upon which I've already touched many times before tackling the problem of

personal acquaintance with the Ruler of the Universe Who can even undo the past and cancel the future by means of The Second Flood, of human blood?

I put on a mask and say to God, 'I know You can't hear me because I haven't reached the regions where You talked to me in days of yore and even before them – in the midst of chaos. Well, I trust You hear everything and my mask is an invitation I wish to send you because I need the harmony stored at the beginning of the universe, in its remotest corner. I might have written this invitation in beautiful italic script, but I'm sure the mask I'm wearing is far more eloquent than any script, any email.'

'I'm happy to accept your invitation,' He says. At least that's what my diary says and I have no reason to doubt the information supplied by my diary: whatever is written in a state of trance is said to impart Absolute Truth, otherwise hypnotism wouldn't have prospered so nonchalantly. Don't mystics stare out of their windows as if in a trance? Sometimes they stare open-eyed at all the food on the table, but everyone knows it's not the food they stare at: the food doesn't deserve their stares unless at mealtimes they constantly apply the doctrine of transubstantiation and never judge the food from a gourmet's point of view.

Sometimes a lot of happiness awaits us in a sauna and not in London where economists and ordinary citizens spend their time wheeling and dealing on the stock exchange. And Russian mystics take refuge in monasteries where they don't feel comfortable at first on account of what is termed 'obedience' which my dictionary translates as follows: 'Clean out the stables', 'You'll have to get down on all fours to clean behind the sewers', 'Sweep the leaves up into a pile'. But all those who go to a monastery as tourists are born mystics and they are perfectly capable of putting up with the problems they encounter during the first stage of their sojourns inside the walls that look like a prison in spite of their peaceful appearance.

In the book I touched upon a month ago, a man goes to a monastery and cleans whatever can be cleaned not only in the monastery, but in the whole world where dumping grounds for toxic waste have proliferated in the last ten years. He cleans the dumping grounds and says to the monk in charge: 'I'm sick and tired of you telling me what to do all the time.' Sure enough, the man is sick and he looks so weary the monk says to him: 'I think you're telling the truth and only the truth should be spoken within these walls. Here, sit down and rest your weary legs.'

'And where am I supposed to rest my weary arms?'

'In the same armchair.'

'It's just a chair, not an armchair.'

'We call it an armchair or a divan or a royal bed – just take your pick.'

'Never mind. Could I watch TV? Is television forbidden in your monastery?'

'Not at all. Television can shout: "Crucify Him, Crucify Him!" But it can also celebrate Mass and sing praises to the Almighty.'

This time the television set installed in the dining room sings praises to the Almighty and the tourist starts singing the same praise, though in a different tonality. But what counts is the praise itself and not the performance it happens to depend upon as it resounds under the vaults of monasteries, churches and temples where God's presence seems to promise the Earth to those who have ears and consequently can hear both the praise and the presence of God. The tourist is imbued with deep, religious feeling, and he seems to understand

what his local guru said to him several months before: 'I view my life as a spiritual journey towards a greater understanding of my faith.' 'The same goes for *my* journey to the monastery,' thinks the tourist. 'And within the monastery I continue to walk or drive towards a greater understanding of my faith. Yes, I believe in God, but so far I haven't been able to understand my faith. I don't claim that I understand it now – at least I don't understand it *completely*. But my understanding of it is certainly greater – thanks to the sewers and dumping grounds.'

Another sewer and the tourist realises he is overwhelmed with grief because he has to leave the monastery before sunset, otherwise he won't be able to find the path leading to the railway station and the train bound for Moscow. Of course the Almighty could send him a few sunbeams from His treasure trove of spiritual and material light, but the tourist knows only too well that his spiritual stock isn't high enough to enable him to find his way in the dark. His 'little father' – the guru he got acquainted with in the monastery – said to him confidentially: 'It's my job to keep a check on stock levels. Believe me, your stock is low so you must leave now. I'm sure you'll come back as soon as you run out of spirituality. I hope that in the near future you'll write in your diary: "A tourist turned monk."'

The tourist heads for the station, reaches the station and immediately the train pulls in: since the recent improvements to the service, the trains are running like clockwork. No wonder that the tourist mistakes a real train for a clockwork one; anyway, everything seems to him undersized in comparison with the revelation bestowed upon him in the monastery where even the sewers have a knack of radiating light and wisdom. The tourist drops his suitcase because he yearns to go back to the monastery, to the walls within which he was happy and dirty, sleepy and enlightened. He might need this suitcase in Moscow, in his flat full of wardrobes where he hangs his jackets, pyjamas and the only dinner jacket he owns and irons in the hope that in the near future he'll be invited to an important banquet or ball. He no longer needs this high-society paraphernalia and that's why he drops his suitcase which is a miniature model of the world where he lived, loved and nourished racial hatred. All this is a thing of the past and his sentiment is enhanced by the sight of a teenager who confidently munches on a sandwich as he walks down a street in the suburbs of Moscow. The tourist is so used to the monastery's ritual that he begins to hate the teenager who doesn't always say grace before eating sandwiches and other snack foods such as hamburgers, crisps and sausages. 'They're high in salt, sugar and fat,' thinks the tourist and the prospect of devouring this kind of food fills him with horror; what's more, the sandwich and the teenager diverted his attention away from God and spiritual matters.

All of a sudden, he hears a voice and the voice speaks to him thus: 'Didn't I promise you the Earth?'

'You did.'

'Isn't this sandwich part of the Earth?'

'It is.'

'So you have to love it as well as other items of snack food.'

'But these items are not organic, are they?'

'Whatever happens in the universe is organic because its birth was organic. Do you think its mother isn't organic?'

'Why are speaking about the *Mother* of the universe? Do you know this story? Stalin and Gorky –'

'Of course I do. Stalin says to Gorky: "I admire a lot your novel *Mother* and I want you to write a novel entitled *Father*.'"

Tomorrow I'm flying to Petersburg as if resolved to disregard the pain I feel and also whatever I've learnt about diseases and their tenacity: they never leave you alone if you don't respect them. A week ago, I broke four ribs and I didn't have the slightest inkling of what was happening because I thought I had strained a few muscles that could be neglected and nearly obliterated on the grounds of their utter insignificance. But my pain was quite significant, not to say atrocious, and I went to the nearest hospital and had an X-ray to see if any of my ribs were broken. Four of my ribs *were* broken and the doctor told me I should rest for a few days, forgetting about my business trip to Petersburg in order to concentrate on the shattered bones and on the massive psychological injuries that any pain is bound to inflict, even if one does one's best not to notice it.

'Your ribs need a positive fluid,' he added.

'A spiritual fluid?' I asked.

'There's some kind of thick fluid oozing from the trunk of that tree,' the doctor said, pointing to a tree that stood in the middle of his garden.

'Do you think I should try and imitate this tree?' I asked.

'There are many bodily fluids,' said the doctor, 'and your ribs may be healed through their exchange. But if you don't assist the fluids on their journey to the ribs, you'll always feel a dull ache in your lower back. And you'll keep asking your neighbours: "Have you heard today's weather forecast? What's the weather forecast for next week?" Our old wounds are sensitive to rain clouds and dark clouds in general.'

I've spent the last week at home, watching TV and the films I treasure to the point of dusting the shelves on which they repose in expectation of my visit to their worlds. Sometimes I scour my shelves for hours in search of a film I chose as a new (or old) entertainment and I find some other films that appeal neither to my senses nor my memory. Stories about pirates often include a search for buried treasure and I picture myself walking around hills and jungles, dressed as a pirate or an ordinary man who can't find a film he is bent on watching this afternoon.

Well, in every film I watch there's a woman who runs towards a man and says to him, her eyes glistening with tears: 'I really missed you when you went away.' Is that what my business trip boils down to? I won't hear this sentence and I'll break the rest of my body when walking around Petersburg on blankets of snow, on icy patches perfidiously hidden by blankets, sheets and whatnot. Anything can hide a patch of ice and you find it only when you scream upon hearing your ribs and bones break inside your body and even outside it.

'I'm going to be on the move all next week, but I'll call you when I get back to Versailles,' I said to my former mistress.

'What about your ribs? Will they be on the move too?'

'They will, unless I cancel the trip and stay at home, watching the films that make me cry.'

'Cancel the trip.'

'I'm eager to watch life from the inside.'

'And what about *your* insides?' she asked. Incidentally, she has got a nice husky voice – very sexy, according to all my friends.

'I'm always looking for adventures.'

'Are you Don Quixote?' she asked in the same voice.

I have no horse and my fall will not be as spectacular as that of Don Quixote who mistook a drove of sheep for an army of giants because in those days humans could be seen in the shape of giants, if only by a madman. Nowadays, whenever I look out of my window and see a lot of people in the streets, I say to myself that this crowd is just a drove of sheep or any other drove one can think about on the spur of the moment. Even if I hear the neighing of the horses, the sound of trumpets, the roll of drums and the drone of engines, I say to my friends or a journalist whose eagerness to question my brain seems more than suspicious: ‘A drove of sheep, nothing more.’

‘How can you say that?’ says the journalist. ‘There are many artists of genius on your screen, in our country. Can’t you appreciate our writers of genius, composers of genius? Can’t you hear their symphonies and operas?’

‘I hear nothing except the bleating of sheep.’

‘How so? The whole world admires these artists and scientists. You’re so afraid of the world that you cannot see or hear properly, for one of the effects of disgust and indignation is to disturb the senses and cause things to appear other than what they are. If you’re so angry and disappointed, leave the world and settle on a desert island.’

‘What about a monastery?’ I ask.

‘What about angels?’ asks the journalist. ‘Wouldn’t you take *them* for a drove of sheep?’

In our world I’m duty bound to play two roles: that of Don Quixote and that of Sancho Panza. I have no alternative but to revert to one of my favourite themes – that of the doppelgänger. Thus, within the framework of one episode, I often play both roles because my adventurous spirit pushes me into defying the stupidity of this day and age, and this spirit of mine takes no notice of my admonitions – of Sancho Panza’s admonitions, to be exact. ‘Come back, your Grace, Señor Don Quixote; I vow to God those are sheep that you are charging. Come back! O wretched father that bore me! What madness is this?’

It is difficult to disentangle one role from the other since I both recite Sancho’s monologue and charge the phoney geniuses whose jubilees they show and comment upon almost every day. I say to myself they’re sheep and it’s useless to confront them either in the open field or during a TV show. But the issue has been much discussed in the media and now the crowd recites Don Quixote’s monologue, turning a deaf ear to Sancho’s supplications. ‘That knight in the gilded armour that you see there, bearing upon his shield a crowned lion crouched at the feet of a damsel, is the valiant Laurcalco, lord of the Silver Bridge.’

‘May I go to the devil,’ says Sancho, ‘if I see a single man, giant or knight of all those that you’re talking about.’

‘You’re an angry and envious man. You envy the enormous wealth that these giants have amassed. You hate and envy their luxurious lifestyles and personal ostentation.’

‘Why should I envy a flock of sheep?’

‘You automatically turn our heroes into sheep because you don’t want to admit to yourself that you’re a born loser. And you lose your battles against men and women, not against sheep.’

‘How do you know they’re not sheep?’

‘Sheep don’t wear gilded armour and they have no shields. And they’re seldom shown on TV. The media doesn’t care about their birthdays and jubilees.’

‘Your heroes’ gilded armour and jubilees mean nothing. They’re nonentities – or sheep, to use Sancho’s terminology. This is the work of the devilish media and sponsors. They make the con artists assume any appearance they choose.’

‘Who are you talking about?’

‘Sometimes it’s sponsors who decide what their favourite artists should represent. But occasionally a con artist has a dream and says to his sponsor: “I want them to think I’m a genius. I want them to think I’m a benefactor of humanity. I want them to think I’m a pillar of the community. I want them to think I’m a master builder.”’

‘They *are* geniuses and benefactors of humanity. They derive great satisfaction from helping other people, especially children and widows. They give money to schools, colleges and universities. Thanks to their financial and moral help, all our colleges have counsellors to help students with both personal and work problems. But above all, they’re great artists.’

‘Open your eyes, prick up your ears and you’ll see them become what they are: sheep, sheep, sheep. They aren’t even black sheep – just white sheep, nothing else. Don’t be like sheep, my dear journalists, readers and concertgoers. Pick up the shield described in *Don Quixote*: a crowned lion crouched at the feet of a damsel. For goodness’ sake don’t crown sheep!’

Many years ago, I saw a film in which Chaliapin played the role of Don Quixote, making me cry now and then in spite of the laughter one always hears when Don Quixote is shown either on screen or in the theatre. Not only bystanders mock him viciously, but even the actors go all-out to defeat the knight and mock him verbally and physically by jabbing needles into his legs or jabbing him in the eyes with their umbrellas. ‘Do you really think you’re a knight errant?’ they ask, pinching his thighs and shoulder blades. ‘You’re a decrepit old man. You should sit on a park bench instead of wielding lances and brandishing your fists. Of course you have no fists to speak of, but you brandish *something* and that’s ridiculous and pitiful. Anyway this is not very dignified behaviour for an 80-year-old man. How old *are* you, by the way? You look very old – very old indeed. Of course life expectancy in Europe has increased greatly in the 20th century. According to *our* standards, you might be pretty young on condition that you’re not over 60. Anyway this is not very dignified behaviour for a young man. We’re ashamed of you. You’re big enough to know better. You’re much taller than Sancho Panza.’

Chaliapin was put in a cage and he sang a mournful song while listening to the harangue and doing his best not to feel the pricks and kicks – more pricks than kicks – that his body couldn’t help registering. And Don Quixote’s body subjected his owner to a monologue on its suffering and the wounds inflicted on it by dukes and their wives, by knights and their knives. With these knives they tickled Don Quixote’s feet and his body said to him: ‘There’s a cut on the sole of your foot. There are two cuts on the sole of your foot. There are 50 cuts on the soles of your feet. There are 40 cuts on your stomach. You have a nasty cut above the eye. You’ll come home with a black eye. Your face is severely lacerated. You’re in constant pain.’

‘This balm should help to ease the pain,’ said Don Quixote, taking the balm out of his pocket.

‘Don’t you feel a sharp pain in your leg?’

‘I do.’

‘In these cases there’s no choice but to amputate,’ said the body.

Even my memory doesn't forget everything and one thing it can't forget has only visual reality for my mind and body because neither of them has ever experienced anything like that in everyday life. Such things don't happen every day, but they did happen and you may see them and other things on condition that you switch your TV set on and sit down in front of it, not too far from the screen. Cruelty, mockery, one elaborate hoax, another elaborate hoax, a shot, a false promise, an oven. They ran short of gas and so they threw a multitude of children into a gigantic oven and other prisoners heard cries of a kind they had never heard before. Whenever I watch another film on concentration camps, I learn something new, I hear new cries and they don't sound like the old ones. Such pain is always in a class of its own.

A doctor plays with a child. He throws the child up after twisting her arms and legs. He used supernatural powers to twist them and the child understands the intensity of this power. The child is in the air and a moment later she finds herself in the doctor's arms. How delightful it is to lie in someone's arms. The person holds you and you can rely on them and on the arms holding you tenderly. That's right – your mother cradled you tenderly in her arms and you would go to sleep whenever she did it. And she did it whenever she thought you should sleep for a while.

The doctor holds the child in his arms. He doesn't think the child should sleep for several hours: in his opinion, the child has slept enough since her arrival in the clinic. 'You haven't done a lot of exercise all week,' says the doctor, 'so I think you should go for jog this morning.' And he throws the child up. 'Do you know what this kind of jogging is called? "Ariel." And this exercise is designed to develop the shoulder and back muscles.' The doctor pinches the child's shoulders and back muscles; he punches them and the child opens her mouth. I can't hear the child: the documentary belongs to the category of silent films. I *can* hear her. A new cry, an old cry, an everlasting cry.

A famous Nazi doctor said: 'What a marvel! It's the first time I see a stomach function. A live performance. I don't appreciate dead stomachs – they smell mouldy or rotten.' He took the stomach and began playing with it. Why not toss it up into the air? That's easier said than done. First you have to remove the stomach from the body because you have no intention of tossing the body up into the air: it is too heavy. Besides, the patient might think he is fêted by doctors and other member of the staff. That's how humanity usually treats its heroes.

The doctor pauses for a moment and reflects on the work in front of him. In front of him he sees a body from which he must remove the stomach, otherwise he would have to cancel the game he feels like playing this afternoon. So he picks up a knife and cuts whatever holds the stomach tight within the body. He cuts a lot of tissues, nerves, tendons and underdeveloped muscles. Everything is ready for the game, but the doctor changes his mind. Instead of tossing the stomach up into the air, he kicks it as hard as he can. 'It's just a ball,' he says to himself. 'Let's go to the garden, my dear stomach,' he says to the ball. 'Recently we felled a great number of trees to provide space for our games.' He heads for the garden, stops in the middle of it and kicks the ball so powerfully it flies over the hedge. 'Doesn't matter,' the doctor mutters to himself. 'I'll play with the liver.'

For the first time I see the whereabouts of the camps and their number: there's a map on the screen and it is covered with dots. And inside every dot there are thousands of children and stomachs. 'No,' says a voice-over. 'There are not as many children as you think.'

'Where?' I ask.

‘In our camps. Some of them were shot dead on the way to our gas chambers. You have to have such a lot of patience when you’re dealing with kids. In the end you lose your patience and shout at them. But their mothers shout at you. You draw a gun and hold it to a mother’s throat. Then you go to another mother and hold your gun to *her* throat. Then you kill some mother or other. You also kill one child, two children, three children. What does all that add up to? I’m afraid my mental arithmetic isn’t very good.’

The Nazis watch the documentary shown in Nuremberg and realise they can’t watch it because they’ve never seen those camps and their victims from the *outside*. They were *inside* their offices and whatever happened outside boiled down to a few sheets of paper on which their signatures told their tales. ‘We are soldiers,’ said the signatures, ‘and soldiers must obey orders. Our commander gives the order and we fire. We see a few men and women in front of us and we raise our guns. Our guns take aim and fire. We aren’t guilty because it is our guns that take aim and fire. All right, all right. We take aim, but we don’t fire because there are no bullets inside our bodies. There’s no fire either. There’s a lot of water in our bodies so we thought we were holding water pistols. Where does fire come from? From heaven, from the sun? From an oven? But ovens were far away and the people were near. So was the commander. He shouted, ‘Fire!’ and our pistols heard him. And they obeyed him because they always obey the voices they hear. And they hear many voices, many commanders, many generals, many Hitlers. Our guns and machineguns keep their ears to the ground.’

They didn’t *always* stay in their offices, bent over the sheets of paper on which their signatures were talking to history. They went outdoors and saw corpses, bulldozers. What is a bulldozer? A heavy vehicle with a large blade in front, used for pushing corpses and for making areas of ground flat at the same time. Bulldozers build flats for corpses. Nice, isn’t it? How generous of them. Bulldozers are kind and generous, aren’t they? Oddly enough, corpses don’t fall in love with bulldozers and the Nazis decide to exterminate them once again. They exterminate corpses and their bulldozers carry on the good work. ‘You just have to carry on as if nothing’s happened,’ says a commander in chief and his bulldozers obey his order.

‘I knew that there were some Jews in concentration camps, but I thought they worked in those camps and also outside them – all over Germany. One day I received a letter from a Jewish woman.’

‘Could you reveal the contents of the letter to us?’ says the host of a well-known talk show.

“‘They pay me next to nothing but I really enjoy the work.’”

A lot of citizens talk to each other. ‘We need a mayor who is tough enough to clean up this city,’ say the citizens and other citizens applaud, whistle and brandish their fists. Everybody sees a former Nazi officer, but nobody cares about the past and the future looms large at the conference, at the union of local trade unions and other unions. The man whose past remains obscure – in the shadow of the future – says he’ll cleanse the city of drug dealers and he invites the citizens to dinner. They’re flattered to be invited to dinner by the mayor and flattery hovers in the air along with happiness and good-humoured remarks. The citizens and their guests are good-humoured despite the bad weather and the recession about which they do not talk when they’re happy and when a dinner table is within their reach.

A BBC journalist arrives in the city and says to the city council: ‘Do you know that your mayor is a former Nazi officer?’

‘No,’ say the members of the city council.

‘What do you think about this fact?’

‘We don’t think about it. The future is lying ahead of us and we don’t see any Nazi party in whatever lies ahead of us, including the future.’

‘All right. The Nazis are a thing of the past, but this thing is still alive and I think we’d better get rid of it,’ says the Englishman.

‘What for? Let the thing stay with us. Do you think the thing would take up too much room in our city? We could deport thousands of illegal immigrants to make room for the thing.’

‘The thing is a former Nazi officer,’ says the Englishman. ‘And the English don’t like Nazis, you know.’

‘We’re aware of the fact,’ says the citizens. ‘But there aren’t many Englishmen in our community.’

‘What about Englishwomen?’ asks the journalist who is eager to demonstrate he has got no affinities with misogynists.

‘There are no Englishwomen within a hundred-mile radius of our community.’

‘What about your conscience?’ asks the journalist.

‘What about it?’ asks the citizens.

The journalist goes to the mayor, saying to himself, ‘Three years ago, I quickly mastered the art of interviewing people. So I’ll have no problems with the mayor.’ And he says to the mayor, ‘You were sending 80-year-old people to concentration camps. Why? Did you think they would work in the camps?’

‘I did,’ says the mayor. ‘I think that retiring early is a stupid thing to do, don’t you? We’re not in France, are we?’

‘Do you know what happened to them?’

‘I was ordered to send them to the camps. Other officers were in charge of those people’s future, well-being and financial affairs.’

‘Here are the documents I’d like you to read.’

‘Papers don’t prove anything except that there are still a lot of trees in our woods. By the way, my son hopes to study ecology at college.’

The mayor and the city council are anxious to avoid getting entangled in the controversy and they manage to keep away from both the controversy and the journalist who packs up his things and goes home. But he leaves the thing in the city where both the thing and the mayor prosper, incurring the wrath of journalists and those who think the evil should be eradicated, however old and venerable it may appear. But the mayor says, ‘Our country’s future prosperity depends, to an extent, upon the quality of education of our people,’ and the people are educated at schools from which the Holocaust has been removed. First they put the Holocaust in a corner where they can cover it with a woollen blanket or a travelling rug. They say to the Holocaust: ‘You can sleep as long as you like. Sweet dreams, our dear Holocaust. Try not to snore because sometimes you snore so loudly it keeps English journalists and other sleuth awake at night. Nobody should hear you. Do you understand what we are saying? We can also say it in Yiddish.’

At this point my thoughts branch out – as some roads do at the bottom of a hill, at the bottom of the world or elsewhere, for your thoughts as well as the rest of your substance can branch out whenever they feel like it, leaving you high and dry. You no longer know where you are: at the end of the war characterised and marked by trials and Nuremberg or in Cervantes’ novel which, according to some scholars, encompasses the world and its history. Can we compare the duke and duchess, their wiles and cruelty to what the Nazis did in concentration

camps and on battlefields? Does cruelty have nuances, categories, branches? Or does it see the light of day in one piece?

I think that the monsters who play dirty tricks on Don Quixote and Sancho would have endorsed the Nazis' views, had they lived and enjoyed themselves in the middle of the 20th century. They might have become doctors and soldiers, commanders in chief and prison wardens on whose indefatigable loyalty Hitler relied as he shouted his orders and signed the sheets of paper lying on his writing desk.

Cocteau says that from a house on fire he would take and save the fire itself, but I need neither the house nor the fire bent on destroying it: I always carry it – I mean, the fire – in both my memory and poetical élan. But sometimes I do reach what Don Quixote calls the 'region of fire' where my inspiration knows no bounds and lets itself go without asking for my consent and the moral support of my muse. Fire is regarded as the key factor that determines the outcome of every literary enterprise, be it confined to a short poem or widened into a family saga. So I get overexcited when I feel the poetic fire all around me – not only within my heart or mind or whatever may be defined as the seat of inspiration. Yet I know it would be foolhardy to try and predict the outcome of my tenacity and perseverance: no matter how often you dream of creating a masterpiece, you're not likely to succeed unless your muse and the Almighty vouchsafe to make a major contribution to your large and complex undertaking.

In Stalingrad there remained a few walls behind which sharpshooters hid as they aimed their rifles at the Germans or rather their shadows moving on the blankets of snow, on the bodies of the dead. At that point there were only blankets and corpses; one had to walk carefully in order not to wake the dead, for a famous song warns us against waking soldiers: 'Don't wake soldiers. Let them sleep peacefully.' Contrary to the popular opinion, soldiers don't fade away: they die and lie under our feet that trample all over soldiers, over their bodies, killing them once again. We can't help killing our fellow creatures; besides, I *am* in love with these soldiers. Is that the path leading to my native land, to my past, to the stories related to the Second World War? I heard a lot of them in my childhood, in my youth, because a Western journalist said about the Soviet Union: 'The war was yesterday.' He wrote his book in the early Seventies of the last century and I agreed with this statement upon reading his book. Yes, the war was yesterday and the Jewish Museum at the bottom of which I'm living now testifies to this statement and many other statements, to the images one sees on TV screens whenever they show a film on the Holocaust. One can't write poems after the Holocaust. One can't write prose after the Holocaust. One can't write music after the Holocaust. One can't live after the Holocaust. But one *can* live after the battle of Stalingrad, if only with a view to paying homage to the soldiers who took part in this battle.

There were no more walls to speak of, so they hid behind boulders. The ground was frozen hard and was impossible to dig. They dug a shallow pit and threw their bodies into it. Their bodies were still alive and they were civilians, not soldiers, not sharpshooters. They couldn't kill the enemies so they hid their bodies wherever nature and Mother Earth allowed them to do so with impunity. But death comes anyway: so many civilians died in Stalingrad and a multitude of bombs continued to kill them, unable to distinguish between civilians and soldiers. Actually those bombs made no distinction between the sexes and other nuances: they killed everybody. Everybody was lying under the snow, on the snow, on the blankets and under them.

What would I have felt in the midst of those bombs, bullets and grenades? 'Grenada, Grenada, Grenada *moia*.' My Grenada, my grenade. I still recall the song I touched upon at the beginning of my book and I can see the grenades they throw and perish from in the film shown on TV: *Stalingrad, 70 years*. All this happened 70

years ago and they still remember everything. They even remember what no one talked about 70 years ago, 60 years ago: the archives are bulging with material. And today this material can be shown on TV and one can consult it in public libraries and in the museums where death continues to walk unimpeded as if there was no life on Earth. Is there life on Earth? We know that there's no life on Mars, but what about the Earth?

Protopop Avaakum – is that how his name is spelt? – says in his book that if one sees a pig being killed in a courtyard, one feels one's own death acutely, immediately. Avaakum, Avakum, Vacuum. He must have written about death three centuries ago, but death hasn't become a vacuum – far from it. No human lives and works in a vacuum – we are all of us influenced by others; the same goes for animals. I'm influenced by Avaakum and Vacuum, by pigs and other animals that die in courtyards, in rivers where kittens drown daily, for they cannot swim. And humans continue to fling them into rivers, getting rid of them and guarding against overpopulation. Yes, that's how they deal with the problems of overpopulation. While flinging kittens into rivers, lakes and swimming pools, they say to each other: 'Overpopulation is one of the country's most pressing social problems.' After throwing all their kittens into water, they deduct one problem from the social problems they have to confront every day, if not every night and every dawn. Some to misery are born.

I see the soldiers who defend Stalingrad and die there as if the whole Earth was a cemetery or an atom bomb, a grenade; and this grenade is always mine, whatever happens. I feel death all the time – even when only joy is shown on TV and only Russian oligarchs disport themselves in their castles, villas and swimming pools where no kittens can be found. I am behind a boulder; I am surrounded by enemies and these enemies stand by other boulders, rifles at the ready. Their bombs are ready too. Their bombs say or rather shout: 'We are always ready.' That's how our Pioneers used to shout when asked: 'Are you ready?' No one knows what I'm writing about, for Pioneers and their proverbial ties disappeared more than 20 years ago: even Russian citizens must have forgotten those ties and their owners. I do remember them – another direct link between my childhood and my present state of mind, of body. Always ready, always ready. For what? For the last and decisive battle against capitalism?

On one of my shelves, I found Geoffrey Hosking's book entitled *A History of the Soviet Union*. I wonder who may be tempted to read this book nowadays when capitalism holds sway over the universe. Hosking speaks of the *Komsomol* which he defines as the party's youth organisation. The party he mentions on page 142 has nothing to do with American Democrats or Republicans: we come face-to-face with the Communist Party and its members who took care of teenagers and also of children. The latter were supposed to join the Pioneers I talked about in the previous paragraph. And our Pioneers shouldn't be confused with the ones admired by Walt Whitman. 'Pioneers, oh Pioneers,' if I remember rightly. I wouldn't say that about *our* Pioneers. Sleep well, sleep sound – sweet dreams, Pioneers.

At the age of 10, I swore an oath of allegiance to the Pioneer Party and I still remember the text of this oath: 'I am a young Pioneer of the Soviet Union. In front of my comrades, I solemnly promise to be faithful to Lenin's legacy, to stand up for our Communist cause, for the victory of Communism. I promise to live and learn in such a way as to become a worthy citizen of our Soviet *patria*.' The Italian word '*patria*' is the best equivalent of the Russian word '*rodina*' – on account of the operas where this word is abundantly used and overused. In a way, our Soviet life was an opera performed at the Bolshoi, of all places.

In the West, demonstrators march past waving placards that say and shout, 'Send food, not missiles'; in Moscow we saw only capital letters and the word 'capitalism' that we used to cross and tear to pieces. And if we could neither cross nor tear it up, we had to paint a skull or a skeleton below it.

I recall 'proletarian hegemony' and the trail of devastation it left behind. If this kind of hegemony is allowed to spread, it is bound to cause widespread devastation – many people are aware of that. But I live in France where the left-wing politicians and sympathisers affirm that proletarians are always right and poor; and the *petit bourgeoisie* is always wrong. Roland Barthes could seldom resist an opportunity to cock a snook at traditional French life swarming with *petit bourgeois* prejudices. And what about the proletarians? Don't they have the same habits and traditions? Of course they do, but they don't have money and money makes the world go round. The proletarian world does *not* go round and Roland Barthes plays with it to his heart's content and in the end he succeeds in setting the ball (or the world) rolling. 'A little sympathy makes a world of difference to someone who's been badly treated,' he writes over and over again. And again I hear the capital letters I'll never forget: 'THE RICH MUST PAY'. French proletarians are fond of these letters; and French (or English) aristocrats are fond of horses. Each to their own.

Almost 40 years ago, for the first time I went to the Château de Versailles where I was given yet another opportunity of walking through the void: the furniture had been sold by the revolutionists, according to the guide. The revolutionists were trying to promote commerce between France and England, between France and Germany; so did our communists, selling off icons and precious manuscripts at half price – to England, France, the United States and Germany.

Whenever I reach my youth, I remember death and realise I don't always think about destruction, annihilation and bones; sometimes death sinks into oblivion and I begin to enjoy life to the utmost as if life and whatever happens in it were all roses, nothing but roses and rosebushes. And then I watch a documentary on the battle of Stalingrad and learn that Stalin refused to comply with his marshals' wishes, saying: 'The evacuation of civilians is out of the question while the fighting continues within our sacred borders.' With the exception of a few party officials, no one left the city before the battle; and it was too late to leave it after the battle.

Again I find myself in the basement of the Jewish Museum, which requires neither total concentration nor any other effort on my part: I've never yearned to *leave* my underground abode where I continue to search for my childhood, for my first impressions and words. In other words, I continue my descent to the centre of the Earth and while doing so, I'm reminded of Don Quixote and *his* underground adventure, otherwise known as the 'Cave of Montesinos'. One isn't always satisfied with what one finds on the surface of the Earth, which explains the profusion of alpinists and pilots, of parachutists and jumpers who constantly long for the air and its treasures hanging over them as they walk down the streets and curse whatever they see around them. What *do* they find in the air? The air, nothing else; but they breathe the air and they think that the air they breathe while hanging or flying between the sky and the Earth is purer than the air rejected by ecologists who drive away from big cities, from the capitals of the world.

There are people who, while caring about ecology and whatever is connected with it, ask themselves some metaphysical questions and look upward as if the solutions to these questions were to be found in the midst of the stars or even on the nearest cloud. Don Quixote too was in the habit of looking up and the windmills or

giants he encountered at the beginning of the novel helped him leave the Earth for a while, allowing him to breathe another air and answer a few metaphysical questions. Actually he thought the giants were reluctant to budge from where they stood and, as everyone knows, it is easier to defeat a motionless giant than the one who mounts his horse and gallops through the woods, resolved to fling a series of lances in your direction. Had Don Quixote realised he had positioned himself in front of a series of windmills, he would have said to himself: 'When the large cog wheel engages with the smaller one, the mill stone will start to go round. And I don't wish to go round. I just wish to vanquish this giant and disenchant a series of maidens among whom I'm sure to find Dulcinea del Toboso.'

But he didn't say anything along these lines – either to himself or to his squire who thought his master shouldn't confront the windmills on the battlefield because they're bigger than his master and his master's horse put together. Sancho actually put them together and realised his master hadn't got a ghost of a chance of winning the battle, assuming that one can call this adventure a battle – the word reserved for Stalingrad and other cities attacked by the Nazis. Anyway the knight battles with 35 gesticulating giants whom the magician Freston transforms into windmills to thwart the valiant warrior's strategy and intentions. While in midair, the same warrior breathes profusely, but his lungs do not really *taste* the air they get as a sort of birthday present: such an adventure comes one's way only once in a while – once in a blue moon. And he has no time to answer the metaphysical questions that continue to haunt him, so the reader says: 'Fighting with the windmills was an experience that would haunt him for the rest of his life.'

Disappointed with the air and its supplements, Don Quixote directs his gaze and emotions at the Earth or rather at the centre of the Earth to which the cave in question is believed to guide intrepid travellers and knights in black armour. I don't remember whether Don Quixote's armour was black or white, but that doesn't really matter, given that inside the cave any armour is bound to look as black as night. As soon as our knight sees the cave in question, he decides to explore or investigate it, paying no heed to Nabokov's remark: 'This is an old mine shaft if we wish to be realistic.' But Don Quixote doesn't wish to be realistic or surrealist; he is just determined to investigate the vertical cave he comes across on his way to Dulcinea and her heart which may be hidden at the bottom of the cave, for all I know – for all *he* knows. There are lots of ropes and coils; Don Quixote lets himself down. Assisted by a young scholar – a rope specialist – Sancho pays out the rope. (Is the scholar a *cave* specialist, a speleologist?)

Many Soviet citizens used to sit in their kitchens where there was enough room for a dozen bottles of vodka that had to be emptied in the course of one dinner or one night, depending on the revellers and their livers. Drinking vodka is a test of human endurance and some revellers showed remarkable endurance throughout the test which usually ran its course from dawn to dusk, seven days a week. 'This event tests both physical and mental endurance,' they used to say as they clinked their glasses together and drank to a happy new year, a happy new month, a happy new week, a happy new minute. The minute would come and go and the glasses went up and down as if to measure the distance between the Earth and the sky – between Heaven and Hell, as Blake might have put it.

'Why are you destroying yourself?'

'I have every right to do so. Clause 1001 of the constitution is thought to be the most important section.'

‘What does it say?’

‘It says that one can drink vodka while listening to Scheherazade’s tales. That’s how I spend my nights, my former and future lives.’

Usually children learn about death when their brothers and sisters die in their presence or on the eve of their departure for a fabulous city or scenery: for the Black Sea, for instance. They know they’re going on holiday; the sun must be prepared to welcome them on beaches and even in the woods where many trees and their branches let the sun through because everyone and everything know that sunbeams are good for one’s health. And suddenly some relatives begin to whisper and say there’s a corpse nearby – in the adjacent room, in the house opposite and children recall their brothers and sisters with whom they’re used to playing almost every day, weather permitting. Only last night they dreamt about playing with them on the beaches and in the black water for which the Black Sea is justly renowned all over the world. But the whisper they hear is ominous and bodes no good. They realise their holiday and the Black Sea are receding into the distance instead of getting closer and closer to their bodies and hopes.

They go to the house opposite – or to the adjacent room – and find either their brother or sister in a bed where there are sheets and pillows as if death didn’t pay much attention to objects that traditionally are permitted to survive their owners and even their creators. ‘Hey lazybones, get up from the bed!’ cry children as they look at both the bed and its owner or rather occupant who doesn’t seem to react to what resounds in the room, namely to the words uttered by his or her next of kin. The children can’t say to themselves, ‘We’ve searched for our brothers and sisters, but there’s no sign of them anywhere’, for they see a sign lying on the bed they know almost by heart. They know the length of the bed and they can draw the bedposts on any sheet of paper, provided a sheet of paper is put within their reach: they always have pencils in their pockets. Nor can they say: ‘There’s no sign of life in the building’, for there are many signs of life around them, given that their relatives continue to whisper, sigh and cry. Their tears are rolling down their cheeks and both the tears and cheeks are signs of life despite their mournful messages.

So a boy says to his father: ‘What’s going on?’

‘Nothing,’ says the father.

‘Why?’

‘Because your sister can’t move.’

‘Is she paralysed?’

‘She isn’t.’

‘In that case, she must get up and put her clothes on. The car and the driver are waiting downstairs.’

‘They’re not,’ says the father.

‘What’s going on?’ asks the son. ‘Is the car broken?’

‘It isn’t,’ says the father.

‘What’s broken then?’

‘Your mother’s heart.’

‘Why?’

‘Because your sister is dead.’

‘You mean she’s asleep? Last night she fell into a lovely deep sleep. Her sleep is so deep she can’t get out of it on her own. We should help her, shouldn’t we? I think we should bring her to the surface of the Earth.’

‘No. We’d better put her in a hollow.’

‘Why?’

‘First we should put her body in a coffin.’

‘Why not in our car?’

‘Then we should lower the coffin into the grave.’

In the space of an hour, the boy learns a lot of words and he is at a loss how to use them, for he doesn’t really know what they mean and why his father needs them. There are many words in the boy’s vocabulary and this vocabulary seems to encompass everything from music, theatre and ballet to literature, cinema and the visual arts. Oddly enough, death remains *beyond* this vocabulary; and yet the domains included in it continually receive some moral support from death without which they would be colourless, boring and redundant. ‘What is death?’ asks the boy and his question is heard by his relatives who continue to bend over his sister’s corpse that they don’t leave in peace despite the obvious presence of death associated with immobility and calm. ‘It irritates me the way they’re fussing with her hair!’ says the boy, but this time no one hears him because he is in the habit of talking to himself, especially when his next of kin and other people irritate him no end – in his room, on beaches, in courtyards.

‘Should I put all these words in my pocket?’ asks the boy as he goes on with his interior monologue which doesn’t feel like jumping over the borders of the boy’s brain and mind. Shortly afterwards, the boy is shown the coffin destined for his sister’s corpse and he realises that he won’t be able to put it in his pocket unless his mother takes the trouble to widen his pocket and also the jacket he is wearing on the day of his sister’s funeral. ‘Where’s the hollow my father spoke of?’ asks the boy. He looks down and spots no holes; at least none of the holes he finds within his field of vision seem to welcome his sister’s body: the latter is too big in spite of the deceased’s age and weak constitution.

‘Where’s the hollow you spoke of?’ The boy turns his head and his father doesn’t miss the opportunity to stroke his son’s forehead and cheeks.

‘At the cemetery,’ he says.

‘Could I put the cemetery in my pocket?’

‘No,’ says the father.

It is easier to study the world if you’re allowed to put its ingredients in your pockets. You come home and empty your pockets, relying on the generosity and prudence of the carpet over which you strew the world’s ingredients and sorrows. You study them and after a while you say to yourself that you understand Creation. Your parents are unquestionably in the wrong: they insist on your going to school every day. Well and good. But what to do with death? Your sister lies in her bed, in her coffin, in her early grave and you can’t strew her death’s ingredients over the carpet designed for the world’s mysteries and their solutions. You know where your sister’s body is hidden, even if you’re in no mood for playing hide and seek, either with your sister or anybody else. You also know where her death can be found and, frankly speaking, you’re tempted to play hide and seek with her death because you’re sure to win: her death makes no secret of its whereabouts. But what about the variety of death related to other people, to the whole world? Your sister is not in a class of her own, according to your father, mother and uncle to whose remarks you listen carefully in the hope of learning something useful.

‘Anyone with any common sense would have known what to do,’ says your uncle and you’re yearning to master this proverbial sense eulogized by your uncle on a regular basis. And common sense tells you that death is everywhere, which makes things easier for those who, being engaged in a game of hide and seek, are resolved to lay their hands on death and win the game once and for all. But how to *hide* from death? That is the question and this question can’t be answered at once, on the spur of the moment, unless the moment in question lasts eternally, jumping over time and its borders with elegance and defiance.

The boy crawls to safety and eventually takes refuge from death’s persecution under his bed to which he always refers as his ‘refuge’ – even when he lies under a blanket and on a pillow, exposed to all sorts of danger. This time, however, he is *under the bed* and for a while he thinks the bed will protect him from death and the absence of what he has grown accustomed to in the course of his short and fruitful life. He is aware of the fact that death means ‘absence’ and ‘void’ and consequently no beds or blankets are likely to keep him company in the land situated beyond death, graves and tombstones. Well, he is under the bed and death finds him in the twinkling of an eye; and yet neither death nor mortal injuries need to seek him, being omnipresent and omniscient. Be that as it may, the boy removes his body from the refuge of sorts and dashes to the front door, determined to escape from the house where annihilation always throws its arms round him and gives him a hug.

The boy makes his way to the garden and is about to crouch down behind a bush as if death couldn’t see him from where it usually stands on its pedestal. Of course our death is intimately acquainted with bushmen and bushwomen so that its victims say to each other, ‘We know who’s pulling the strings around here.’ Why is our boy still in the dark about how our death mishandles human bodies, turning them into skeletons or mummies which are incidentally believed to bestow immortality and eternity on corpses? The boy is not a mummy; he doesn’t yet belong to the eternity club that no one is allowed to join in one’s lifetime unless one is resolved to take one’s own life. The boy isn’t mature enough for such rituals; all he dreams about concerns the game he plays with death and agonies associated with it.

‘Death is everywhere,’ he says to himself at last and death grins from ear to ear because it longs for recognition and does all it can to obtain this result. Should I say ‘because *he* longs for recognition’? Is death a father figure, a sort of guru on whom any child may rely for good advice and guidance? I don’t think so and consequently I’ll always say ‘it’ when describing death and its acts on which not only our life but also our status in the Hereafter entirely depends. Indeed our last words are so important that whatever we say beyond our deathbed may be erased from our record in the light of what we utter at the end of our agony, on the threshold or rather on the border of the great Beyond. Beyond our deathbed, beyond our world: there are many beyonds in our life and we are supposed to cope with them to the best of our abilities.

Recently I saw a film in which a man or a dancer was selling last words to whoever wished to buy them out of curiosity. ‘Do you want to buy them?’

‘Yes.’

‘But I can’t sell them to you.’

‘Why not?’

‘I can sell you houses and gardens, but your last words shouldn’t be handled like a piece of real estate.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because they’re your death’s property and your life has nothing to do with them.’

Rilke spent a lot of time on death – not only because he was dying and therefore couldn't dissociate his personal time from a process taking part in his body and the rest of his poetic substance. Peaches, plums, dates, avocados and olives all contain stones; Rilke thought that in the same way human beings were carrying at the core of their beings a number of stones which, however, didn't look like the stones we find in fruit, for our stones are tangible symbols of death, whereas theirs remind us of life, of the source of fruit's vitality. The stones carried by adults are bigger than those any surgeon can stumble upon in children's bodies – in their chests, for instance. While eating a plum, you often feel a stone between your teeth and you can spit this stone out so as not to burden your intestines with a foreign body about which they don't know much. You can't spit death out of your body, even if you manage to isolate it, transferring it into your mouth where you've got a tongue and a number of teeth used to grinding whatever they find within striking distance. Try as they may, they won't be able to triumph over death because death is far more powerful than teeth and tongues that are eager to proclaim its death – as John Donne does in one of his poems. 'Death, you're dead. What's more, you've never been alive – at least not after Christ's Resurrection.' And death says to the tongues: 'I could sit here and argue with you till the cows come home, but it wouldn't solve anything.' And a wise old man writes in his notebook: 'I'd better not argue with death.'

Donne says that death should not be proud, but Rilke insists on the importance of having death within one's reach, for death is *our* pride – an inexhaustible source of our self-confidence. Death has a rather elevated idea of its own importance and we follow death's example, which is all the more realistic since death turns out to be part of our body, let alone of our life. So, after many centuries of the struggle for life, we begin to have a rather elevated idea of our own importance. Don't we appreciate the elevated language of the Psalms? What do *they* talk about? Death, death, death. They also talk of God because we need Him to vanquish the evil continuously symbolised by death and its couriers; otherwise we might have forgotten Him a long time ago.

Rilke points out that death is not a burden despite its weight: contrary to what might be presumed in the light of the parallel drawn a bit earlier, death is much heavier than the stones we usually find in olives and avocados. It is extremely heavy, in point of fact, and that accounts for our fear and reluctance to carry it along the streets and motorways which seem to frighten us whenever a car or a lorry cuts in on us. But we should get used to death – to the point of enjoying its company and weight, even if this weight or the body of death happens to be stuffed with suffering and unbearable pains. We should accept the boundless energy for which death is renowned and respected, otherwise we are likely to be shocked upon making death's acquaintance in our deathbed, deatharmchair and deathpark.

The point is, death *is not* beyond our endurance and the forces we store up in expectation of some forthcoming exploit should be channelled towards our friendship with the Hereafter; and we can come to terms with it only through the agency of death which is kind enough to put in a good word for us with angels and even with the Almighty. Sure enough, even God listens to death, although talking to a representative of destruction is in a way beneath His dignity or rather our idea of it based on paintings and frescoes where God always has a quiet dignity about Him. It is as if Italian and Flemish painters were longing to impart to us the following truth: 'God is a man of dignity and calm determination. All painters and sculptors have a knack of creating God in our image and we can't help admiring the image we contemplate in our cathedrals and museums on account of the dignity we are writing and thinking about.'

So death says to God: 'Dear Sir, please look at this woman. She is an excellent travelling companion.'

‘Really?’ asks God.

‘That’s right. She has been my constant companion these past ten years.’

‘And before?’ asks God.

‘In her youth she thought she should travel with life. And then she changed her mind.’

‘What can you say about her? Has she sinned a lot?’

‘Not at all. I prevent humans from sinning.’

‘How so?’

‘I contaminate them, I poison them. The sick cannot sin. They neither fornicate nor treat Christmas as just another excuse for gluttony.’

‘How *do* they treat Christmas?’

‘With respect and love.’

Let us visualise a basketful of apples that are not really apples and we soon realise our mistake because we don’t usually jump to conclusions. It is true that death can assume many identities and apples are nothing but a multitude of masks beyond which death and its angels often go on a spree. You eat an apple and collapse under the weight of your own body – as if you hadn’t been used to dragging it around the world. ‘The apple was poisonous,’ say your next of kin, and your uncle adds pensively, ‘Death is always poisonous like certain mushrooms.’ Children look at a basketful of apples and rush towards the fruit. ‘Don’t grab at the apples, children – there are plenty for everyone.’ And a sage adds pensively: ‘There’s no shortage of death, alas.’

Rilke’s poetry has diverted our attention away from heaven and its allurements: he speaks too convincingly about the Earth to which we should direct our criticism and hopes. ‘After three crop failures in a row, the people face starvation,’ we say to the Earth.

‘You spend hours gazing out of the window when you should be ploughing fields. You look at heaven instead of sowing fields with barley.’

‘We thought God would help us.’

‘God helps those who help themselves.’

Many people start helping themselves and God helps them in His turn so that everything is full of ‘terrestrial spirit’, according to Rilke’s definition and dreams. He also speaks of our ‘pure terrestrial consciousness’; our vehicles get bogged down in the heavy mud and we squelch through this mud in search of some other help. According to Rilke, we thus make our way to the afterlife where we are permitted to learn our death and its ways that hide beyond bushes as long as we gaze out of the window, trying to guess what the clouds convey to us through their masks, shapes and nuances. And when death leaves its hiding place, it opens up sharp differences between our diseases and the imaginary health that lulls us into a false sense of security. Nevertheless, we have no alternative but to welcome death and accept our destinies and the ballet of bones staged by death’s favourite choreographer. Even the dinosaur skeletons one admires in the Natural History Museum begin to dance as if they were swans’ skeletons or Gisele’s numerous ghosts.

‘It is not easy to reach the domain of death situated on the other side,’ says a sage or a partisan of Rilke’s doctrines. ‘This side doesn’t look at you. It looks sideways, anyway. And it walks with a sideways motion – like crabs.’

‘Is death liver cancer, bowel cancer?’ asks a middle-aged man.

‘Cancer is the fourth sign of the zodiac, relating to the period from 22 June to 22 July and represented by a crab, or a person born during this period. Were you born during this period?’

‘I was not,’ says the middle-aged man.

‘So you’re immortal,’ says the sage.

Human beings are easily diverted and mostly death remains out of their reach, whenever they try and concentrate on it for a while, saying, ‘*Memento mori, memento mori.*’ ‘I find running concentrates the mind,’ they say to themselves and they answer by running along motorways and through the woods where death doesn’t seem to work as hard as anywhere else, due to ecological advantages hidden in trees and their leaves. Plants are the main source of atmospheric oxygen and every self-respecting leaf knows that the symbol for oxygen, for this life-saving substance is O₂. Death retires as it realises that life is about to play its trump card and we continue to run through the trees and bushes as long as we are yearning to live forever, flouting entropy and decay. Our health is about to strangle death, but death eludes us in spite of our lungs that breathe a lot of fresh air during our wanderings in the woods because our death still has one or two cards up its sleeve and this card is its trump card. Didn’t Julius Caesar say, ‘I’d rather die suddenly’? Even in the woods you can encounter your death because it can cancel the fresh air you inhale and partly store in your lungs and in the rest of your body: death can cancel everything and you know it only too well. Death cancels *you* and you fall on a bush, on a mossy lawn where a lot of insects will bemoan your lot and sing you the definitive version of your personal lullaby.

Rilke says that one should face the truth – or death, in other words, for there are no other truths in our world peppered with lies and their derivatives. ‘She wheeled round to face him and saw him take out a gun,’ says one of his poems which starts as follows: ‘The window of their hotel room faces the sea / And their houses face each other across the street.’ Scholars know that Rilke speaks of death, even when he focuses his attention on the houses that face each other in various regions of France and Germany. Every house gives shelter to death as if the latter needed shelter or any other kind of protection offered by houses, hotels and their rooms, by the bottom of the sea. ‘Your hotel room has always faced the sea,’ says Rilke. ‘Why can’t you face death? Are you inferior to your hotel room? And death may be likened to the sea on account of its depth. Any animal is capable of seeing what is open. Why can’t *you* do it? Do you think death is closed? Death is not a shop, is it? Nor is it a museum. You should turn on your heel and leave your room, otherwise you’ll miss your appointment with death. We are the bees of the Invisible or the pigs of the Invisible. The pigs forage in the woods for acorns. We forage for the Invisible, for death, for the great Beyond. You shouldn’t stay where you are and you’re always lying in a Louis XVI bed or standing in one of the corners. As usual you are rooted to the spot instead of walking through life that leads you towards death and revelations stored in the bosom of death. *Bleiben ist nirgends*. Yet you stay instead of going and what remains of you has fossilised over the last 20 years. To live means “to leave”. You can’t save the Visible, can you? So you should create the Invisible by means of language, of an expression you coin, a term. Allen Ginsberg coined the term “flower power”. What about you?’

‘Tower power,’ you say to Rilke.

‘What does *that* mean?’

‘I think W. B. Yeats speaks of towers,’ you say to Rilke.

‘Does he?’

‘He does.’

‘Can’t you quote chapter and verse?’

*There in the tomb stand the dead upright,
 But winds come up from the shore:
 They shake when the winds roar,
 Old bones upon the mountain shake.*

I wonder why the dead stand upright instead of taking advantage of their coffins that never stand upright, judging from what I saw in Russia, Egypt and elsewhere: mummies do *not* stand upright unless museum attendants decide otherwise, being weary of those lifelike corpses lying in glass cages. At mealtime the attendants have to get down on their knees and feed their wards while running the risk of hurting their own bodies which are prone to rheumatic pains and other aches related to uncomfortable postures. So they prefer not to kneel down in front of their clients; these may look like idols if too many knees touch the floor beside their bodies which are wound with fabrics of all kinds. And idols were banished from Judeo-Christian rituals a long time ago, otherwise Schoenberg wouldn't have composed his unfinished opera *Moses and Aaron*; nor would I have devoted many hours to this opera and the problem of idolatry. Nowadays they idolise nonentities referred to as 'stars' and no one upbraids them for this crime – which is not a misdemeanour, as some might lightheartedly assume – and even Moses might have kept silent under the circumstances.

Well, the dead stand upright and I'm in no mood for correcting Yeats' text; I'd better come to terms with it in order to continue my analysis of death and that of black towers inside which the dead behave like unruly children, especially if the wind takes part in their games. Thanks to Yeats, we know that winds come up from the shore and we don't have to locate this shore, for its whereabouts are not important – at least within the framework of my novel. The tower and the shore might have reminded Yeats of his youth, of his dearest Ireland, but I am not of Ireland, and the Holy Land of Ireland, and therefore I can survive and prosper without Ben Bulbin, the Mareotic Lake and the Witch of Atlas. The winds shake the bones as they roar and gnash their teeth – like the monsters exhibited in fairy tales. They open their jaws and roar like lions whose company one can enjoy in zoos and Africa. And the old bones shake as they listen to the winds and a few women who continue to cry as if those bones had died yesterday or the day before – not at the beginning of the last century.

The Tower of Babel is death; so is Yeats' black tower inside which many bones take plenty of exercise as they shake in response to the winds that refuse to sleep peacefully in their own tombs. What have I to do with these bones and winds? Do I have to count *my* bones and listen to the noise they make as I inhale and exhale the stale air of my room? The morning after the party, my house smelt of stale cigarette smoke; the same goes for tonight because the party took place yesterday and usually I can't get rid of this smell at once. I have to wait a week, a fortnight, and so I wait, running out of patience. I don't run through the woods with a view to catching up with death; I just wait and wait and the smell remains where it is, being rooted to the spot. And the old bones continue to shake as if they had nothing else to do.

*There in the tomb the dark grows blacker,
 But wind comes up from the shore:
 They shake when the winds roar,
 Old bones upon the mountain shake.*

In a Buddhist treatise I found the expression I can't get rid of in spite of the proofs to the contrary I find in everyday life which offers us a lot of adventures; these make us believe that love is not a figment of one's imagination. I come across a beautiful woman who doesn't look skinny and consequently is not supposed to remind one of skeletons or indeed of anything allied to death, however remotely and superficially. It is life that such a body speaks to us about because there's nothing else in it, not even a niche where the second law of thermodynamics might 'squat in squalor', as an English poet put it. And yet a genuine Buddhist would see only bones – not only collarbones which are often visible in spite of dark ladies' features and their intrinsic beauty.

'May the Earth open under my feet! May lightning strike my brow!' Well, the Earth does open under my feet and I fall through the Earth. My fall is not as spectacular as one might presume, for I'm already an underground artist – well in keeping with Soviet traditions and rites. I seem to have forgotten what lightning looks like: there are not many lightning bolts streaking out of the sky above Versailles. Anyway no lightning has ever struck *my* brow, but my ribs are still broken and I can feel the pain that originates in them, in their mortal remains. A lightning strike might have caused them, for all I know; it's a pity I don't know much about this natural phenomenon that may destroy not only houses but also human lives.

Suppose I spend my whole life shut up in some monastery or other, but the sorrows of the world also live within the monastery walls. I'm exposed to grief and danger even within this secluded spot where kings, queens and criminals are said to find the peace and harmony one hears in *Die Zauberflöte*. Why should I forego the pleasure of having my main meals in three-star restaurants? I suppose I could drink my bottles in any monastery, provided the authorities I touched upon in the previous paragraph are not opposed to this ritual of mine. But why should I drink them in a monastery instead of staying at home and watching TV whenever I feel like it?

The world is full of sorrows and I often watch these sorrows enjoy a leisurely stroll in the sunshine that can't bear their presence: even on the sun there's widespread gloom and doom about the future of the Earth, whenever our sorrows set off on a round-the-world cruise. On the way they find many monasteries where human beings repent and repose on the grass, on stones and marble slabs. They wake the monks up and torment them so efficiently that groans and screams awaken the angels painted on the walls. The guardian angels look at each other and shake their heads as they realise they can't protect their wards from the sorrows and their pitchforks.

If you feed your dog on cakes and biscuits, it's not surprising he is so fat. Monks are not dogs, but many of them eat cakes and biscuits and no one says about them: 'They eat all the time but never get fat.' There are many Falstaffs among the monks of the monastery I'm speaking about and sorrows get through its walls, determined to torment the monks and put an end to their bliss.

My expectations are fading as I try to focus my thoughts on my future abode, on the future refuge where my body will make preparations for the final journey to the end of fear, night, light and whatever we say in this world, determined to describe it with utmost accuracy. Some time ago – where is this time now? – I said I wished to move to another country so as to escape from the clutches into which I had fallen on the day of our election. Tax evasion may be inadmissible, but I'm so used to it I can't imagine myself sitting in my favourite armchair and giving money to some officials whose credentials are doubtful and do not concern me in the least. Yes, my life is symbolised by my favourite armchairs where I spend hours and hours, getting rid of bad memories and the habits which drive me towards the front door and the pleasures situated beyond it. Instead of

these pleasure I'm entitled to count upon, I'm likely to meet those officials who have already sent me a few letters, saying I should pay penalties because 'this offence carries a fixed penalty,' as they put it.

'What offence?' I ask.

'Tax evasion,' they say.

'I'm campaigning for stiffer penalties for people who drink and drive,' I say. 'But I neither drink nor drive.'

'But you earn money abroad,' they say.

No wonder I think about monasteries and their walls through which only sorrows can walk in order to torment the monks whose conscience is partly guilty so that their cells are adorned with a multitude of pictures showing flies and ointments. I don't mind taking care of my conscience, provided I no longer hear the words 'tax evasion' uttered by the officials whose superior manners jar on me, making my life unbearable.

I am not in Paradise yet and my earthly existence doesn't fit in with Mozart's music which might give us an idea of what our paradise on Earth must sound like. Of course our travel agents excel at turning any country or resort into paradise, but even they say to us at the end of their discourses: 'For further information, please listen to Mozart's quartets and sonatas.'

Of course one can withdraw from society without following a path at the end of which there's a monastery and a lot of sewers one has to empty in order to gain iconic status. On television an old woman is scrubbing an old saucepan clean; after a while, it looks as good as new. 'That's how I live,' she says to the cameraman who continues to film her daily rounds in order to show television viewers the right way and also a host of angels: these are fond of old women, especially of solitary women. Our woman lives in a village where there are only two people; apart from her, around the empty village wanders a priest whose duty is confined to his relationship with the old woman and to the church situated in the very centre of the village. They both live in the centre, anxious to be as near the church as necessary for the energy required by daily prayers that God must listen to, according to them. 'God is in the centre, so are we,' says the priest to the old woman. 'He can't help hearing us.'

The woman scrubs the floor and two walls, taking no notice of the other walls which seem to protect her from Yeats' winds; her bones do not shake either when she sleeps or during her walks around the house where she lives and prays. Her head does shake, on the other hand, and she seems to say 'no' as she gropes her way to the front door, to the church that she cannot see: she started to go blind in her sixties. She no longer goes blind because she is blind already and, as everybody knows, God set a strict limit on blindness, on darkness. Often she spends a few hours inside a snowdrift; the priest can hear neither her prayers nor her cries for help that may sound thus: 'You're a monster! Where are you? Are you deaf?'

'There's a limit to the number of times I can stop what I'm doing just so I can help her!' says the priest, but God upbraids him and submissively he goes and helps the old woman out of the snowdrift in the centre of which there's a hole made by the old woman. 'You're keen on holes,' says the priest.

'I wish I could plant a tree in this hole,' says the old woman.

'In this snowdrift?'

‘I’ll wait for it to disappear. The snow usually melts by mid-March.’

‘Do you wish to stay in the snowdrift until then?’

‘I wish to pray,’ says the woman.

‘You can pray in the snowdrift,’ says the priest.

‘I wish to pray in the church. What is it for?’

‘Let’s go and pray,’ says the priest.

The woman says to three journalists that she can forgo the pleasure of eating, if bread and milk interfere with her prayers and the music they compose in the emptiness of the church. ‘Cheer up, Father,’ she says to the priest whose morale is fairly low: he dreams about Moscow and the churches where he could enjoin his congregation to kneel and bend down. The old woman can’t go down on her knees; she either crawls or walks and whenever he says to her: ‘Kneel in front of the altar and pray’ she falls down and scrambles up. The priest is not a sadist: he no longer speaks to the woman about her knees and the altar she cannot spot in the darkness at the bottom of which she continues to live and pray.

‘Do you still want to settle in Moscow?’ she asks.

‘Yes.’

‘Do you think there are no old women in Moscow?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Do you think there are no blind women in Moscow?’

‘We live in the country of the blind,’ says the priest.

Should I go to this village and settle down in the centre of it, near the old woman whose prayers might help me pave the way to Paradise or to a cubbyhole situated on the outskirts of Purgatory? I wouldn’t mind helping her in wintertime because I’m used to snowdrifts, being a native of Moscow which is strewn with snowmen. But I’ll always draw the line at scrubbing floors, walls and even saucepans. What’s the use of scrubbing walls and the marks I leave on them? I scrubbed the mark on the nearest wall for ages, but it wouldn’t come off.

I would talk to the priest about philosophy and God with Whom he must be on intimate terms, for no one diverts his attention from heaven and the Garden of Eden where God spoke to Adam about the forbidden fruit. ‘What’s the forbidden fruit?’ asks the old woman.

‘I told you about this fruit three years ago,’ says the priest.

‘I’d like to know what I’m allowed to eat,’ says the woman.

‘Bread.’

‘Man cannot live by bread alone,’ says the woman.

‘Milk,’ says the priest.

‘I like fruit,’ says the woman. ‘I like exotic fruit – mangoes, papayas.’

‘Where have you seen them?’

‘I haven’t seen them. Ten years ago, I heard about them from my grandchild.’

‘What did he say?’

‘He said, “I like exotic fruit – mangoes, papayas.”’

‘Did he describe them?’

‘No.’

‘Why do you like them?’

‘Because my grandchild likes them. I trust him – he knows about these things. He lives in Moscow.’

I would recite to her Jeremiah’s call to repentance: ‘I have forsaken mine house, I have left mine heritage; I have given the dearly beloved of my soul into the hand of her enemies. Mine heritage is unto me as a lion in the forest; it crieth out against me: therefore have I hated it.’

‘Where’s your house?’ asks the woman.

‘I was born in Moscow.’

‘Where’s your soul now?’

‘I don’t know. In Moscow perhaps.’

‘How can you live without your soul?’

‘I can’t.’

‘Your enemies have your soul.’

My soul might have betrayed me a long time ago and my heritage doesn’t leave me in peace because I dream of eternity without which I can’t live on the Earth; even on Mars I would have been unhappy. My soul, my heritage. Aren’t they my *real* enemies? Why can’t I live inside the time conferred on me by God and the forbidden fruit? Why do I yearn to live outside it, in the Garden of Eden where Plato and Dante walk arm in arm?

Suppose I settle in the house opposite and give a helping hand to the woman who sees only God, leaving behind our world where she goes to church every day, resolved to pray to God on His own terms. His terms are symbolised by the church erected in the middle of the village and she goes forward, groping her way towards the spiritual light she is bound to see not far from the altar and the icons radiating this light at the approach of another liturgy. She walks through the snow, leaving behind her sorrow and blindness which pursue her at home where she can’t find anything with the exception of the floor and the instruments she uses when scrubbing it to her heart’s content. Well, I’ll give her a helping hand – to the best of my abilities; and yet I don’t know if I have a gift for scrubbing floors, cleaning walls and dusting photographs: there are lots of photographs on the walls of the Russians, be they old or young. The older they grow, the more photographs they hang on their walls. At some point they realise they can’t clean the walls because of the photographs that cover them completely, leaving no room for a washing-up cloth. They must therefore content themselves with dusting the photographs which depict faces, wrinkles, and even thoughts hidden behind these faces and wrinkles. Every wrinkle hides a thousand thoughts and they often shed a few tears as they look at the photographs and recall the thoughts engraved on them: even time doesn’t succeed in removing the thoughts from their ancestors’ faces.

The old woman can see neither her ancestors’ thoughts nor their wrinkles. She cries very seldom, focusing her sorrows only on her blindness and her state of mind which is not always up to the mark, so to speak. At least *she* thinks her mind isn’t worthy of God and the delights He showers on her life deprived of material light and brimming with the Almighty’s grace and bounty. But I’ll do my best to keep her mind in order by reading some excerpts from the Bible to her and pulling her out of the snowdrifts that await her whenever she ventures outdoors, anxious to attend another liturgy, another portion of light and hope.

‘O the hope of Israel, the saviour thereof in time of trouble, why shouldest thou be as a stranger in the land, and as a wayfaring man that turneth aside to tarry for a night? Why shouldest thou be as a man astonied, as

a mighty man that cannot save? yet thou, O Lord, art in the midst of us, and we are called by thy name; leave us not.'

Whenever I read this excerpt, the old woman says, 'I won't leave God.'

'It's the other way round,' I say to her.

'There are no other ways,' she answers. 'I'll go to God today. I'll go to Him tomorrow. I'll keep Him company.'

There's no point in speaking to the woman who always speaks about herself as if she was alone in the world, not only in the village that she equates with the world. She must think there are only two houses in the world and she lives in one of them – just opposite the church where God awaits her day and night because He knows she can't live without Him. But for His daily help, she might die in one of the snowdrifts and God relies on the priest or on your humble servant for help, for a pair of hands suited to the job. The priest is snowed under with work, but he is so talkative he can't resist the urge to discuss religious matters in *my* presence: the old woman isn't sufficiently versed in theology and her reactions disappoint and irritate him.

'Thank you for coming to God,' he says as he shoots me a sidelong glance. 'God is a stranger as long as we stay away from Him. Of course you can go to any church, but no church is a valuable asset without old people and the snowdrifts from which you can pull them.'

'It seems to me that a lot of evil deeds are done in the name of religion,' I say to him.

'That's right. But if you scrub an old woman's floor, you're unlikely to fall into this trap. Don't fall into the trap of thinking you can be saved without doing any work. And you should scrub *other* people's floors, not yours – preferably *old* people's floors.'

'This woman thinks the world is confined to this village.'

'So do I,' says the priest. 'And so should you – as long as you stay in this village. You shouldn't spread yourself too thin.'

'But the old woman's grandchildren live in Moscow, don't they?'

'Moscow is another world,' says the priest.

'Is your house also another world?'

'No. This village is a world and whatever can be found in it belongs in this world. If you think about other worlds, you chase God away from *our* world.'

'Aren't you dreaming of Moscow?'

'An idle dream. I sometimes think I'm losing my grasp on reality. I shouldn't. "Why shouldest thou be as a stranger in the land, and as a wayfaring man that turneth aside to tarry for a night?" Jeremiah talks to us too. "We are called by thy name." Aren't we? God is *not* a mighty man. God is the Almighty. And He is in the midst of this village, of this room, in the midst of every snowdrift. This woman's falls are the most tangible proofs of her faith.'

'Why not leave her in the midst of these snowdrifts?'

'I'm always helping people and doing other good deeds. Why not follow my example? Faith is hollow without good deeds.'

The old woman goes to the church and the priest pushes her violently; she falls and makes a hole in a snowdrift. I pull her out of the hole and the priest goes back to the old woman's house. He spills some tincture of iodine all over the floor and I scrub the floor with bleach. Leave us not. Leave us not.

I don't know whether my mood has anything to do with what I feel and experience as I look at the screen which shows me another competition and a group of human beings and bodies; they dance and sing as if they couldn't just walk down the street, indulging themselves. Window-shopping is a more useful and less harmful pastime than whatever they do in their studios where somebody says, 'Yes,' and others applaud all the more hysterically since the trash they hear doesn't penetrate their minds that go further and further, leaving the field clear for other selves, for puppets and innocent monstrosities. But I'm not eager to condemn the young who spend their nights in Internet cafés, playing games that are even more stupid than the players who do their best to catch up with the games, to become as stupid and meaningless as they are. I think these teenagers don't waste their time as drastically as those who read bad books and think they fill their minds with cultures, with beauty and philosophical dilemmas without which one cannot die with dignity and purpose.

Extroverts devour their fellow creatures; introverts remember that their grandmas always had a few titbits for them – 'if we're visiting at lunchtime', they say out loud, as if their grandmas were still in the land of the living where titbits are destined for grandchildren and dogs. Their grandmas being no longer available, they set about searching for titbits inside themselves and they succeed, for they realise it's better to know the ins and outs of their minds and egos than to starve to death. In this case it's better to drink wine than to read the trash acclaimed by critics and readers alike because this trash is not affiliated with time except that one wastes one's time on it instead of listening to life.

My teacher never said I interacted well with the other children, but once he said as he continued to walk along the corridor with a sideways motion, 'One child in 5,000 is autistic.' And he added enigmatically, 'It's interesting at parties to see how people interact socially, isn't it?'

'I'm studying how these two chemicals interact,' I answered.

'What chemicals are you talking about? And *why* are you talking about chemicals? Aren't human beings more important?'

'Humans are also chemicals,' I said to him.

'They think and feel,' said the teacher.

'Their thoughts are also chemical. Each day, they release millions of tonnes of toxic chemicals into the atmosphere.'

'How?' he asked.

'They think and talk. And they feel.'

'Is love also chemical?' he asked.

'I'm studying how these two chemicals interact,' I answered.

I'm under the impression that I see a number of molecules and not those humans who interact and fall in love with each other as they walk and talk and sit down on benches, under trees, under dark clouds, in the rain. These molecules must live their lives inside their bodies and even their smiles are made up of molecules, of their vortexes, swirls and swings. All smiles look alike; and yet I realise the molecules are not identical because they differ in temperament and even their physiques are different from each other as if they were resolved to preserve their respective identities. Apparently they don't live in a communist society where humans are bolts, according to sociologists and right-wing intellectuals. 'Give it another screw to make sure the lid doesn't come off while

we're travelling,' as Stalin used to say to his cronies. His cronies were not in the habit of asking superfluous questions: they knew that the journey Stalin kept hinting at was to convey the whole country into communism. And they always tried to convey in their speeches how grateful they all were for Stalin's help, for his guidance and muscular arms that used to push the Soviet citizens into concentration camps and other paradises. 'Yes, I convey the whole country into communism,' he used to say and his cronies knew they should utter the same words to please their leader; otherwise they might find themselves in the camps about which they had heard from their colleagues. So they said, 'Communism, the whole country, communism, Stalin.' They also said, 'Words alone cannot *convey* the untold misery endured by people in capitalist countries.'

'What *can* they convey?'

'Are you speaking about words, Comrade Stalin?'

'Yes. And also about you. What can *you* convey by means of words?'

'Our gratitude and the magnitude of our achievements.'

I wrote about the molecules and sent the text to a young man who had said to me somewhere in Germany, 'I'd like to write your biography,' and some time later I came up with the idea of dividing humans into molecules. I thought I would have to talk of my native land and I had no idea how to come to terms with it because I was sure the molecules could be instrumental only in dividing it into portions and motions. But I know that the molecules' edges interlock to form a tight world where there's no room for the void on which Descartes used to enlarge in his works, saying the world feared it and had no desire to do anything with it. (Was it Descartes?)

In the country of my birth they spoke a lot about proletarians and the way they should live and confront their enemies who always smoked cigars and drank whisky – even if they drove around New York in their Chryslers. On our slogans and in our rooms, the proletarians united and their molecules interlocked as they looked at capitalists and said to themselves: 'We should kill them, otherwise we'll starve to death.' But how to kill multimillionaires? 'Capitalists are bacteria,' said the proletarians, 'and the world is their food because we can feel their teeth and their teeth feel our bodies and minds. Food must be heated to a high temperature to kill harmful bacteria. Let us heat the world and our capitalists will die a natural death.'

Proletarians heat the world by erecting barricades and throwing stones at their capitalists, but these do not die either naturally or unnaturally; and their teeth continue to tear proletarian bodies to shreds. So proletarians say, 'Let us knock chips out of their front teeth.' They engage a few heavyweight boxers who knock a few capitalists unconscious. But other capitalists put the boxers in a maximum-security prison; these serve a year in prison and are then let out on probation. No longer do they knock capitalists unconscious and the number of capitalist teeth increases as they search for proletarian bodies that can be recognised and singled out in the midst of other molecules: they're lean but not fit. They look like skeletons and no one knocks them down because the easiest thing to do would be for us to knock a proletarian body down: there are no heavyweight proletarians in the world. And we need obstacles and arduous tasks to show we are capable of exploits and deserve our status on a planet where status symbols and a very complex social hierarchy count a lot – more than our immortal souls and our faith in the Last Judgement.

My native land is a collection of molecules and some of these molecules interlock with mine. I can say I was born in Moscow and I am still Russian, although there are many bloods in my veins and I'm not always on the same wavelength as the inhabitants of Russia, Moscow, St. Petersburg and Kazan. There are the soldiers who

fought in Stalingrad; I can't discard them because I cry whenever I watch a film about this battle, about those people and the snow where so many bodies were lying in spite of my vision of the world, of the molecules I see and count: they were *human* bodies.

'If I can think of some excuse to wangle my way out of going this afternoon I will do so!' I say to myself: I'm supposed to meet a friend of mine who said we had to watch *The Master* and Tarantino's latest film. I haven't been to the cinema for three, four or five years, but I still hope I can chance upon a human whose collection of molecules corresponds to what I have in my head and also inside the pages I'm about to write so as not to die in the void feared by Descartes and his world. I don't know if there will be rain showers in the east, but it is raining in Versailles and I'm in no mood for going outdoors, even if this walk may lead me to one of the restaurants where I'm used to assuaging my fears and drying my tears.

My molecules are interlocked with those of the soldiers who perished in Stalingrad and, generally speaking, in the Second World War – I'm speaking of Soviet citizens, not of the Nazis. There's such a thing as a comparison of misfortunes, which helps you to survive in the world where any defeat is more important than Nobel prizes and Olympic medals. Were those soldiers more miserable than I am now? No, I don't think so because they fought from house to house to prevail over the most hideous dictator one could vote for in the 20th century. Our history is full of dictators, but I still wouldn't volunteer to fight in a war – you can accuse me of cowardice if you wish and if you're in the habit of yielding to the pressure of your wishes. That's why I am more miserable than the soldiers who fought the Nazis in Stalingrad.

I hear my alarm clock – my alarm cock – and realise I'm alone in the world where only alarm clocks seem to prosper, for they have to assert themselves, showing to everyone how important they are. I'm deprived of space but not of time; that's why this alarm clock plays such a role in my spineless life. Deprived of space, the world clutches at a straw or rather at a speck of dust and all of a sudden I realise there's enough room for this speck of dust that also asserts itself: in my new cowardly world, a speck of dust is more important than human beings. Of course one can see many humans in a speck of dust, but one is conspicuous by one's absence and so my speck of dust is sitting in my room, enthroned on an old high-backed chair.

'It is this love which must inspire humanity today, if it is to face the crisis of the meaning of life, the challenges of the most diverse needs and, especially, the duty to defend the dignity of every human person. Thus the message of divine mercy is also implicitly a *message about the value of every human being...*' How do you defend the dignity of every human person? You say to this person, 'You should be free. But being free doesn't mean you're free to drink three bottles of vodka every morning. You're not free to drink yourself to death because the life you got from God is not yours.' And what about drinking oneself *to life*? Don't you probe the meaning of time as you drink three glasses of vodka? Time begins to flow into you, withdrawing from the world to make you realise its movement take place inside your body which is prepared to respond to it only if you drink another glassful of vodka or whisky. Vodka tells you a lot about the human condition, about the meaninglessness of life and the meaning of death.

My molecules go on a spree; some of them come back and others do not as if weary of my body and the old age about which they often talk in the films where an old man woos a relatively young woman. His relatives say: 'He's off his rocker – she might be his daughter or granddaughter.' So do some of my molecules no doubt. I mean, they say to each other, 'He's off his rocker' and some of them forsake me for the sake of other bodies whose health and wealth are beyond reproach. Besides, they must be irritated by my search for myself, my identity, roots and genes that no longer care about their author and his metaphysics. The sword I'm so fond of continues to divide me into small discussion groups and I listen to these discussions without taking part in them.

'Our master is Russian.'

'He was *born* in Russia.'

'Don't forget he's highly critical of Russian history.'

'And Russian ways, manners.'

'He's a Russian patriot.'

'Is he influenced by Brecht and his notion of *Verfremdung*?'

'What did you say?'

'*Verfremdung*. Do you speak German?'

'Our molecules speak only French.'

'Distancing effect. A style of acting that prevents the audience from forgetting that it is all an illusion.'

'His youth is an illusion. So is his patriotism.'

'And what about his birth?'

'It's also an illusion. And so is his death. You're wrong if you think you were born. You're an idiot if you think you'll pass away. Nothing is born and nothing dies unless you don't understand anything.'

'You're acting like a complete idiot! Have you no sense?'

'Get real! Your life, your old age and your idiocy are real. So are your loss of memory, your memory lapses, your lapses of concentration and judgment.'

'Your Romantic concept of sincerity is out of fashion.'

'You think you move the audience because you're moved yourself.'

'I'm not moved, not in the least.'

'Perhaps. But you're not far *removed* from reality which is not real, as a matter of fact.'

'At no point does the ideal Brechtian actor expect the audience to identify or sympathise with him.'

My reason is infinite and I continually spread it to other areas of the universe to keep the Milky Way and Andromeda under control. What do I need them for? And what if Paradise is to be found in Andromeda and not in Dante's trilogy where you go from one planet to another in search of Beatrice and *her* Paradise? And *her* Paradise is linked to that of the Virgin Mary – to such an extent that we may disregard the second paradise, leaving only one paradise at our disposal, which is quite enough, according to our priests and sacred books. But there might be *another* paradise somewhere and I think it is worth my while exploring the universe with a view to taking hold of that paradise's edge. You take hold of one end of that paradise and tug until you have the whole of it in a corner of your infinite reason. And then you discard other corners because you don't need them: Hell,

Purgatory, Mars, Jupiter, comets, shooting stars. All you need is your newly-discovered Paradise that deserves your unreserved support: you should write it with a capital P. Didn't you mother say to you many years ago: 'Don't forget to put a capital letter on a proper name, like the name of a place or person'? Your Paradise is more important than proper names and places.

In a way, any paradise is a blanket you can pull as long as it resists your efforts and longings; and then you gather it around you and fall asleep. There are many pieces of fruit above you and, upon awakening, you may pluck them and bite into them as long as they resist your teeth. And then you find a goldfish in a bowl, on your bedside cabinet. You catch the fish and eat it. The last morsel says to you, 'Why are you eating me? You could have enjoyed my beauty forever.'

And you answer the morsel, 'There are other beauties in Paradise and I'm hungry.'

'You can't starve to death at these latitudes,' says the morsel.

'I'm a fine gourmet,' you say to the morsel.

'You can't be hungry in this country,' says the morsel.

'I'm not hungry,' you say to the morsel. 'I eat for the sake of beauty. I like beautiful tastes and smells.'

'Don't you like beautiful sights and objects?' asks the morsel.

'Of course I do.'

'What about *my* beauty?'

'I prefer your *taste*.'

At first you get the feeling it is your guardian angel who covers you up with a blanket. Then you realise you're doing this yourself because you're just a baby, your own baby; no wonder you cover your baby in a blanket and nurse him, rock him back and forth until you both fall asleep. On the verge of sleep you think that neither ideas nor their absence are present in your mind and in the rest of your substance; not even an idea related to lullabies and fairy tales crosses your mind, let alone takes root in it. But this is not the eighth stage of deliverance, not yet; and one might call this an idea which pushes you beyond this state of mind in order to allow you to reach the last stage of deliverance that you don't really need because you're already fast asleep. Never mind – one day you'll wake up and recall the eighth stage and its advantages. And you'll say to yourself, 'I won't feel happy until I reach the last stage of deliverance. I wish to be delivered from the world and its evils, from temptations and faux pas, and only the last stage of my ascension is capable of performing this superhuman duty.'

'By passing quite beyond the state of "neither ideas nor the absence of ideas" he reaches (mentally) and remains in the state of mind in which both sensations and ideas have ceased to be – this is the eighth stage of deliverance.' First you reach the stage in which there are neither ideas nor their absence, but beyond this stage you'll find no stages at all and that is what counts in your life of a yogi. No more stages, no more effort, no more asceticism, no more Buddhism. You engrave 'No, No, No, No' on your floor and drink a bottle of Burgundy.

IV

Yesterday I went to Paris. For a while, I ambled down a street, stopping occasionally to look in the shop windows. Then I grew tired and returned home because it is easier to sit in front of a television set and watch a film or whatever is shown on a screen that doesn't make you walk around a city or across the Earth where you don't always meet your friends, benefactors, fans and well-wishers. The images you pay attention to succeed each other, but you remain motionless and their movements depend neither on your attention span nor on your curiosity. You may fall asleep in front of this screen of yours and the images will carry on till they've got the job finished; and no one knows when and where this job comes to an end. Perhaps never and nowhere.

In olden times there was the first man and woman and this couple gave birth to a boy because there's no future without boys, girls and children in general. But the first man and woman didn't bother about the future because they knew they were immortal; or rather, they had no fear of death, protected as they were by the Supreme Being who had told them they wouldn't die. Anyway they had a child and death had nothing to do with their decision to have children; they just wished to play with a creature of flesh and blood and there were no domestic animals in their hut and garden. The Supreme Being told them: 'When you grow old, you'll have new skins for your bodies.' So they waited for old age to come and it did come at last, judging from the number of wrinkles they had on their faces and probably elsewhere: they were not in the habit of undressing in front of their biggest mirror. Or was it a pond they consulted whenever in need of their reflections?

The Supreme Being put their new skins in a bundle and entrusted it to the Dog. The Supreme Being lived on another continent and the Dog had to make a long journey in order to convey the skins to their future owners who awaited them as they ploughed through Dante's *Vita Nuova*. The Dog went off with the bundle, but on the way he met other animals who were feasting on rice and pumpkins. Being a fine gourmet, the Dog joined them after putting down his burden. Soon he forgot about the skins because his skin was in order and he didn't really bother about other animals' skins, for he regarded humans as inferior animals. 'Shall we have a bottle of wine with dinner?' he said to a chimpanzee. 'Why not?' said the chimpanzee.

You can lead a dog to water and you can make him drink. They all had a bottle of Austrian wine and a bottle of American wine. The host's wine cellar was almost empty when a snake asked the Dog what was in his bundle. The Dog told the story of the new skins and touched upon the first people who, in his opinion, were 'last and least'. Upon hearing the story and the Dog's verdict, the Snake slipped out quietly, stole the bundle and shared out the skins with other snakes. But when a man says to a woman, 'You're a snake,' he doesn't mean the woman he is talking to will never die thanks to the new skin she received from the primordial Snake.

In whatever I do or witness, I strive to reach my essence. Actually I might replace 'my essence' by 'myself', for one doesn't reach oneself through touch or by looking at one's reflection: one just reaches one's old skin. Through the Jewish Museum I go as far as myself. My road lies underground and I realise it is an underground passage leading upwards, towards light, light, light. It isn't enough to repeat this word; and yet repetition does count, not only in the doctrine of eternal recurrence. Repetitive music thrives on repetition, needless to say, and I have often noticed that this music is more luminous than its counterparts. I even think that any word is rendered

luminous through repetition. Dark, dark, dark, dark. Death, death, death, death. Despair, despair, despair, despair, despair. Never, never, never, never, never.

Let us take *King Lear* again. The protagonist repeats the word 'never' and says after a while:

*Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips,
Look there, look there!*

Every woman is either Beatrice or Lady Macbeth. Cordelia is obviously a Shakespearean version of Beatrice whom Dante identifies with the Blessed Virgin, with Paradise, purity and poetry, even though poets often speak about unmanageable, headstrong women. Actually Beatrice is also unmanageable and the only way to soften her character is to identify her with the Blessed Virgin – or to kill her outright. So Dante first kills her and then puts a huge mirror in front of Mary; another star is born, another illusion.

So Lear looks at Cordelia and sees life and not death, contrary to what might be presumed. He sees *eternal* life because, as everybody knows, the Blessed Virgin is associated in our minds with Paradise and eternal life – to such an extent that we don't know much about her earthly experience which was, however, extremely important for our history and its ramifications in space and time. Why does Lear say, 'Look at her lips?' He doesn't mean to say we must be drawn to her lips through some erotic appeal or other – there are many of them in the dictionary of eroticism – but we should wait for the words she is about to utter, anxious as she is to save us from eternal fires or devils' teeth. Or do we have to look at them in order to counterbalance Judas's kiss, for Mary's kiss is located on the other side of the mirror – in relation to Judas's treacherous kiss and betrayal from the consequences of which we continue to suffer? Aren't we betrayed by our mistresses only because they all follow in Judas's footsteps? It is easier to follow in someone's footsteps than to come up with a new idea and build the Palace of Love – at least you could contribute to it by putting a few bricks in the centre of the hallowed area where the symbol of Love is to triumph sooner or later. By the way, can atheists be buried in hallowed ground? I mean those who never fall in love, on principle?

The Blessed Virgin is a source of light and Lear plunges headlong into the radiance offered by his daughter as he crosses the threshold of death and sees exactly the same light on the other side of life, on the other side of suffering. 'Light, light, light, light, light,' he repeats; he forgets the word 'might'. A few days later Albany says to one of his sisters: 'Do you remember the day when you fell in the river and I saved you from drowning? In those days, you were resolved to repeat Ophelia's exploit. I should have saved Lear from death and the Hereafter. I feel I've missed my true vocation. I'm not the Saviour, am I?' He repeats this short soliloquy over and over again. And yet he heard what Kent was saying to Edgar:

*Vex not his ghost: O! let him pass; he hates him
That would upon the rack of this tough world
Stretch him out longer.*

Why does he say so? Because if you try to hold back a dying person, you play a tug-of-war with Death himself and this is a dangerous procedure – a dog in the manger. You know your relative is doomed, but you continue to stuff pills into the mouth that no longer responds to food and drink – to life, to put it bluntly. You don't really

need your relative, for you have many aunts and uncles in the neighbourhood and you can rely on them in the event of fire or shipwreck, or bankruptcy and ‘oncology’, as the Russians say nowadays: they’re loath to utter the word ‘cancer’. Why do you need that particular relative? Are you prepared to nurse this body till doomsday in spite of the problems you have to tackle every day and every night, especially when you’re unable to fall asleep? But you think that life is more precious than death; at least this world is more precious than whatever awaits you beyond it, assuming that something does await you beyond your deathbed, apart from your coffin, your tomb and your cemetery that partly belongs to you, whatever you might say on the subject. Yes, you’ve got some shares in this cemetery as if, after your death, you had begun to invest in stocks and shares, forgetting your principles and prudence.

Kent thinks that light is more important than the battlefield on which Lear’s corpse is lying and he does all he can to prevent Albany and others from using syringes and suchlike. ‘This injection will provide some temporary relief from the pain,’ says a doctor.

‘From death, you mean?’ asks Kent.

‘From death,’ says the doctor.

‘From light?’ asks Kent.

‘What light?’ asks the doctor.

‘Don’t you know that death is light?’

The doctor doesn’t know the first thing about *that* light because, whenever someone utters this word in his presence, he says to himself, ‘It’s a north-facing room so it doesn’t get much light,’ thinking about his flat where he feels cooped up even when he is outdoors, his memory being powerful and tyrannical. ‘I don’t think that’s a very convincing argument,’ says the doctor, taking a syringe out of his attaché case. Kent says to him:

The wonder is he hath endur’d so long:

He but usurp’d his life.

‘Do you mean to say he should have died earlier?’ asks the doctor.

‘He was waiting for Cordelia’s demise,’ said Kent.

I, for one, don’t understand why Kent speaks of Lear’s life which, at the end of Act V, was almost completely usurped by his death, and whatever remained of it wouldn’t have been worth our attention, but for the words Lear uttered as he was passing away. Never, never, never, never, never. Lips, lips, lips, lips, lips. Mary, Mary, Mary, Mary, Mary. Dante, Dante, Dante, Dante, Dante. Did Kent mean *light*? He but usurp’d his *light*? Or was he speaking about death? In this case, he might have said: ‘He usurp’d his life.’ Why ‘but’? Or does everybody blame death at this point? For what? Of course we are in the habit of blaming death for practically every mistake we make as we plod through the mud of life. (Did I mention the mud of life at the beginning of this novel?) But death didn’t enjoin you to declare war on the Duke of Cornwall and his team. Britain and France declared war on Germany in 1939 as a result of the invasion of Poland and no one blames death on what followed. We just blame Hitler and curse warmongers, bellicose statements and politicians – Chamberlain, in particular.

What to do with bad writers? They betray your ideals and humanity, but no private detective would ever tail them in his car because their bad styles doesn't leave them open to blackmail. Their books are read by thousands and you don't dare criticise them for fear of being rebuked by other nonentities: they flock together and it is hard to overcome such a flock. You can't say to the common reader:

*See't shalt thou never. Fellows, hold the chair.
Upon these eyes of thine I'll set my foot.*

Of course you can say it; and you're even allowed to gouge out the common reader's eyes. But this reader will buy an audio-book and you'll have to turn your attention to his or her ears – and their progeny's ears. 'Out, vile eardrums! Where is thy music now?' It is better to let the great Gods help you in this undertaking. The construction of beautiful worlds is a large and complex undertaking, I must admit.

In 1968, a Russian submarine sank to the bottom of the Pacific and the Russians or rather the Soviet government didn't immediately recognise the seriousness of the problems that the military were facing in the historical context. They thought only in terms of cold war and sailors didn't count in this particular context because human life was less important in the Soviet Union than the so-called motherland. And our motherland cared neither about mothers nor fathers, and children always felt supplanted in their parents' affections when Stalin would appear on the mausoleum.

The Americans found the submarine where a few corpses seemed to await them as if they knew the Soviet rescuers would never touch them, let alone bring them to the light of day and God. When asked about the lost submarine, the Soviet authorities replied, 'All our submarines are at home.'

'And what about your sailors?'

'They're at home too. Their motto is "conjugal happiness".'

'Do you think corpses can be happy?'

'Of course they can, provided that you leave them alone.'

The captain's wife asked if she could bury her husband's body and a high official said to her, 'Your conjugal life is less important than the life of our motherland.' Today on Russian TV they show a beautiful actress who talks to you about the most important thing: at least that's how the Russians call this programme devoted to one's health, not to one's motherland. Is Russia more important for me than my health? I don't think there are many Russians for whom their motherland is more important than their bowels, stomachs, hearts, eyes, lungs and so on. And they may go on for hours and hours as they talk about their aches and headaches, about their imaginary cancers and the Alzheimer's patients some of whom are their cousins and sisters-in-law.

Scientists think it unlikely that any species will actually become extinct as a consequence of the oil spill. You hear on the radio, 'Reports are just coming in of a major oil spillage in the North Sea,' and you say to yourself that it doesn't concern you in the least because you live in the South, not far from Nice or Cannes or Majorca. And a few years later some species actually become extinct as a consequence of this oil spill because these species are allergic to oil spills and to oil in general.

Consequences, consequences. For the moment you don't suffer from anything, even though you'd better not eat too much sugar that may contaminate your brain and influence your writing that depends on your brain, on sugar and other chemicals strewn around our bodies and inside it. A few years elapse and you realise you're not what you used to be on account of the errors you make all the time, and I'm not talking about typing errors which may be overlooked – at least within the framework of this sentence. And your legs go numb for no reason at all. You don't say to yourself, 'I've been sitting with my legs crossed for so long, my right leg has gone numb' because you never lie to yourself. And you know only too well that you haven't been sitting with your legs crossed for hours and hours: you're not in the habit of indulging in such a pastime. And you don't say to yourself, 'My legs are tired after so much walking' because you're at home and you haven't walked since the snow began to fall and cover the landscape you can see out of your window.

In a newspaper I saw Peter Falk who was walking down or up the street and obviously had no idea what street his feet were exploring so assiduously, so relentlessly. 'Where am I?' he shouted and a well-read passer-by said to himself, 'He'll soon play King Lear instead of Colombo. He's learning the part.' Peter Falk shouted again, 'Where am I?' The passer-by, who was a professional prompter, whispered, 'Fair daylight?'

'What?' said Peter Falk, turning his head.

'Fair daylight? I am mightily abus'd.'

'I am,' said Falk.

'I should e'en die with pity –'

'I don't want to die,' said Falk.

'Do you know where you are?' asked the passer-by.

'On Earth.'

'And where's the Earth?'

'In the universe.'

'And where's the universe?'

'In a parallel world.'

'Parallel to what?'

'To *my* world,' said Falk.

Suppose King Lear picks up a few pins and rolls up his sleeves. 'Don't prick yourself on those pins,' says Kent. But Lear wants to find out if he is mad or not. If he feels one of the pins prick and puncture his skin, he is not mad. If he doesn't, then Kent and the scholars are right. Of course his arms are numb with cold and even I wouldn't feel anything if I spent a few hours on that heath in Act III of the tragedy. As to King Lear's condition, I've written a lot of pages on the subject and I still don't know anything about *my* condition, roots and the future to which I'm already partly exposed, given that I continue to live.

Whenever I look for an envelope in my desk drawers I invariably get sidetracked by some old letters, photographs, postcards, greetings, meetings and so on. My investigation to which I have already devoted so many pages sidetracks me into idle and superfluous enquiries à la Descartes: I doubt my very existence and hastily replace the Almighty with an evil spirit or the Devil. He immediately turns the tables on his rival – alias God – with allegations of corruption and my wits begin to turn.

I saw a programme on the children they call indigo because they see auras around human faces and live in several worlds at once, proving once and for all that the world we live in is not the only world accessible to human beings, let alone to extraterrestrial creatures. They also saw the end of Atlantis and they paint this end as best they can to show us how it all happened as if we really needed *their* examples to learn the way out of our labyrinths. Their mothers say to us, 'My daughter never took piano lessons in her childhood. She just sat down at the piano and played. She can play something for you now.' Her daughter plays her work entitled *The End of Atlantis* and everybody cries; and yet the work is mediocre and doesn't merit our approval, let alone our tears, exclamations, good reviews and laurel wreaths. But the quality of these children's works does not count; what counts is the fact they used to play the piano in their former lives. What does it matter *how* they played the piano before the Big Bang, before the overture to the opera *Creation* began to resound throughout the universe?

They demonstrate how the end of Atlantis sounded and we see its end; and we don't regret the disappearance of this fabulous country because it was neither beautiful nor harmonious. What a pity it's no longer just a figment of our imagination which is capable of painting masterpieces, provided we don't entrust our children with the knowledge we receive in the course of the years spent in conservatoires and universities. If we say to them, 'You should read Plato – he speaks of Atlantis,' they paint a horrible picture and spoil everything, including our heritage: Plato is no longer Plato, given our offspring's inability to understand the beauty of his thoughts. I am understandably reluctant to do anything that might spoil the harmonious relations between the past and the present; that's why I have no children.

The hostess welcomes several children; they play, sing and talk about their former lives, about the people they can cure by a mere glance connected to the remotest stars. 'Everyone has the same power,' says a 14-year-old girl.

'What do I have to do?' asks the hostess.

'You should believe in God and pray. You should open your heart and body to God.'

'If you didn't say that, you would be burnt at the stake as a witch,' says a clergyman.

'We no longer live in the Middle Ages,' says the hostess.

'But she lives in one of her former lives,' says the clergyman pointing at the teenager.

'There have always been children like that,' says a historian.

'It's not true,' says the hostess. 'That's why we call them indigo. They're bringing light to the Earth. They belong to the new world. Let's call it "the new light world".'

'Why don't you pay attention to the *quality* of their works?'

'Can we judge other worlds, other cultures? They're neither primitive nor barbarian. They're better than our species, our museums.'

'Let them cure us, but it is Plato who'll take care of our brains, not their fairy tales.'

'Our children we'll be better than we are,' says the hostess.

'Why are you so eager to admit you're mediocre?' asks the scientist.

'Can't you give birth to another Plato?' asks a philosopher. 'I'd sacrifice a few years of my life for an opportunity to talk to him.'

'It's better to have Plato than an extraterrestrial,' says the historian.

‘It’s better to have Jesus Christ than an extra-terrestrial,’ says the clergyman. ‘And no extra-terrestrial virgin could give birth to Jesus Christ.’

If a child rings my bell, I will not open the door, and I’ll say to him, ‘Go to Atlantis.’ Well, I’ll let her in on condition that she doesn’t paint anything inside my house; nor should she sing. In other words, I’ll tolerate her presence insofar as it can be instrumental in curing me from diabetes, rheumatism and the disease I can’t name – and I’m not hinting at homosexuality. In short, I’ll use only a minuscule portion of her presence; the rest will be excluded from both my life and house, even if she insists that she needs the whole of her substance to cure me from death. ‘If I don’t paint death, I won’t be able to cure you of it,’ she may point out.

‘You may paint it, but don’t show me the fruit of your inspiration.’

‘If I don’t show it to you, you won’t be cured.’

‘All right, I’ll cast a glance at it. And then I’ll throw you an angry and reproving glance.’

‘If you do that, you won’t be cured.’

‘All right, I won’t do anything of the kind.’

‘You’ll say instead, “It’s a masterpiece.”’

‘That’s your idea and what you say goes, provided you can cure me.’

‘I’ll sing an aria entitled *Death*.’

‘I’m sure it’s a masterpiece.’

There are fathers and mothers in our monasteries and from now on I’ll call our mothers *mathushki*, for the sake of clarity: after all, we’re not dealing with Goethe’s Mothers. One of these mathushki suffered from cataracts and she told her fathushka she was going to undergo an operation in a Moscow clinic – a routine operation that doesn’t seem to require extreme circumspection. But the fathushka said she shouldn’t go to Moscow because this operation wasn’t on his agenda – or on God’s agenda, for that matter. ‘And don’t say to me it’s on *your* agenda,’ he rounded off.

Despite harsh criticism, the mothushka was sticking to her guns on this issue and the fathushka had to put his foot down. He put his foot down, but the mothushka continued to insist that the operation couldn’t harm her because everyone was undergoing such operations now and nobody complained about the outcomes. ‘More and more women are choosing to go under the knife to improve their appearance,’ said the fathushka.

‘I don’t care about my appearance,’ said the mothushka.

‘But you do care about appearances, don’t you?’ said the fathushka.

‘How do you mean?’

‘As far as I know, cataracts are a disease in which an area of the eye becomes cloudy so that a person cannot see correctly. Is that correct?’

‘It is.’

‘So you want to see correctly. Is that correct?’

‘It is.’

‘What do you want to see correctly?’

‘The beauty of the world.’

‘The beauty of the world is in God’s eyes. Can’t you see God’s eyes correctly? If you pray continually, you’ll have no spiritual cataracts. Kneel down and pray! An appropriate operation, the best you can undergo.’

The mothushka knelt down and prayed to God, asking Him to guide the surgeon’s hand and make her eye as submissive to His will as is consistent with our eyes’ capacity to respond to God’s grace. She went to the clinic and also under the knife, hoping to improve the beauty of the world. ‘I love the beauty and fruitfulness of the autumn, when the whole countryside is ablaze with rich golden colours’ was her last thought. She died under the knife, as the Russians say and do so often. When the fathushka heard about it, he knelt down and prayed, asking God to forgive the presumptuous woman and forget her cataracts on the grounds that no one suffers from them in heaven. ‘Why should the elect remember their suffering?’ he said as he rose to his feet and went outdoors. While heading for the garden, he said to himself and to God, ‘Keeping a garden tidy is a full-time job.’

‘I’m going to clip the hedge this weekend,’ he said to himself, determined not to bother God with trifles. ‘This variety of rose is especially hardy and drought-resistant,’ he said to himself as he reached the nearest rosebush. ‘All the rose bushes seem to be suffering from the same mysterious malady,’ he said to himself, touching a few roses. He looked up and repeated the sentence: he wanted God to hear him. The fathushka can cure humans but roses are beyond his ken. And your knowledge should be awe-inspiring if you wish to cure God’s creatures, be they plants, animals or higher animals.

Recently I went to *my* clinic because the mothushka’s problem had a lot of affinities with mine except that I didn’t die under the knife because my cataracts or body were at that point slightly different from those of the mothushka who must have been even older than I am. Knives know what to do and whenever they come across infirmities they make mistakes which are usually fatal to those lying under them; and you can’t lie *above* a knife, as far as I know.

I don’t think I prayed before the operation, but sometimes you pray without knowing it and your unconscious prayer goes straight to God’s heart, contrary to what many ecclesiastics think and advocate. They say, ‘You should pray out loud, otherwise God won’t hear your prayers. You should kneel down, otherwise God won’t *see* your prayers.’ But God hears and sees everything down to the prayers you know nothing about and probably these prayers count more than the ones you say on your knees in front of altars, icons and suchlike. Othello’s proverbial question can’t be answered at once, for Desdemona has to take into consideration her unconscious to answer it correctly and with dignity. ‘Did you pray?’

‘My unconscious might have prayed without my knowing it. Just give me five minutes – I’ll question my unconscious on the spot.’

‘On your pillow, you mean?’

‘Yes, on my pillow.’

‘I give you two minutes.’

‘My unconscious is as big as the universe.’

‘Ask the Americans to help you,’ says Othello.

My unconscious must be very small; at least its museum doesn’t house the biggest collection of Oedipus complexes in Europe. But I’m looking for prayers, not for Oedipus and his wife, his mother and other members of his household. What is a prayer? Heidegger wrote a book entitled *What is Metaphysics?* He said nothing about prayers, as far as I know. He said, however, something to the effect that only God could help us in the long run or on the spot, on the spur of the moment, in the heat of the moment. God doesn’t *always* help us, but He *can* do

it occasionally and whenever such a thing does happens – a great boon to our species – this thing or deed usually happens in the *heat* of the moment and not after much soul-searching, which doesn't mean the Almighty has no soul. It just means that He doesn't have to search in order to find; Picasso knew it perfectly and showed his knowledge of God's impenetrable ways when he said, 'I don't search, I find.'

'I hope I won't die under the knife.' Is this a prayer? It is rather the simplest and clumsiest expression of a hope. Of course you can say to yourself, 'We have to hope and pray that the operation will go well' and you hope all right, but you forget to pray. It's not enough to say, 'I have to pray': you have to utter your prayer or rather the words that sustain it through your ordeal. You can pray for deliverance from your sins, but the chief thing is to focus your prayer on the forthcoming operation and on the knife already hanging in the air like a falcon. You can say to yourself and others, 'Let us pray for those who are not as fortunate as ourselves.' Any prayer is liable to help a man who must spend a few minutes under a knife. Yet any wretch, however pitiful and miserable, can say to you, 'My eyesight is perfect and I can see the bridge under which I sleep every night. Do you see the knife under which you're lying in this clinic? Isn't your vision impaired? Health is more important than money or our motherland and eyes are an important part of our health. Do you want to live in Breughel's ditch?'

Someone said, 'Why should you bother about your eyesight? There's nothing to see.' I might have said that in my youth; and yet when I was young, I wished to see a lot. Alas, my eyesight didn't allow me to enjoy the visible world to the utmost because I suffered from short-sightedness and in those days no one was able to take a knife and remove it from my eyes to enable me to enjoy Creation and fall in love with God at last. I was in love with God and if you're *really* in love, you give yourself over to this feeling one hundred per cent: love is designed to cause the maximum amount of damage or happiness. I don't think I would have been happier had I seen *everything* down to insects and specks of dust that are also God's creatures and should therefore be respected and worshipped: dust and humans ought to be able to compete for life on an equal footing. That's why they say, 'Ashes to ashes', meaning one shouldn't forget the French Revolution's precepts, and equality was one of them, if I remember rightly unless I'm talking about the Russian Revolution now. All revolutions look and sound alike and no wonder you often confuse them as you bend over your writing desk and look at the pictures where you meet hangmen and gallows from which there hang bodies you cannot identify. 'Is it Mussolini?' you ask yourself and you go on leafing through the book without waiting for an answer.

Of course you must see God: 'If you live in this world, God is a must,' they say, pointing at the nearest church and its belfry; and usually the bells start ringing as if in response to their advice because some people need confirmation and proof without which they can't believe in God. 'Do you hear God?' asks your benefactor as she cocks an ear and raises an eyebrow.

'Yes, I do,' you answer.

'So you don't need your eyesight, do you?'

Well, I see much better now. I can watch TV without saying to myself, 'I see only half of what one's supposed to see when watching this documentary on Angkor.' I can also leaf through the books I recently bought in Paris to get acquainted with contemporary painters who often elude my attention on account of their shallowness and facile ways. When you look at their installations, sculptures or paintings, you say to yourself, 'As easy as a pie.' And when you look at a pie, you say to yourself, 'As easy as Jeff Koons.' And Jeff Koons says, 'I don't believe that you can create art. But I believe what will lead you to art is to trust in yourself, follow

your interests and focus on your interests. That will take you to a very metaphysical state.’ Koons focuses on his interests and his admirers open their wallets which can be exhibited along with Koons’ masterpieces – in the same museum and hall. Koons exhibits a cracked egg and everyone realises it is a metaphysical egg that reveals to us the secret mechanisms on which our desires rely as they come to the fore and look around in search of appropriate objects. They see an egg and say to themselves, ‘That’s what we want. But we don’t want an ordinary egg one can buy anywhere. We need a metaphysical egg created by Koons.’

My desire looks at Glenn Brown’s pictures, especially at the one entitled *Youth, Beautiful Youth* where you meet an old man who seems to punch himself on the nose or on all the Christian cheeks he can boast of, and you realise you’re not as old as all that, otherwise you wouldn’t write anything about your soul and metaphysical fears. Yes, you’re King Lear who wishes to get rid of his cares to devote his life to the pursuit of pleasure and ladies to whose charms a lot of roads lead on condition that you have nothing else to do and that your purse is full of money. A conscientious monarch doesn’t give his kingdom to his relatives on the pretext of needing more time for his studies and prayers that anyway resound in his room and in the church to which he goes every day to confess his sins and ask if they can be forgotten rather quickly – before another stroke or heart attack. ‘I don’t know if I’ll be able to pray after another stroke so I humbly ask Thee to erase my new sins from Thy Book of Life, otherwise I may end up in Purgatory.’ The only desire the monarch hearkens to, if he decides to turn his attention to life instead of putting his signature to the decrees on which his kingdom is founded, is related to lust and the energy he needs to conquer women and men alike. He becomes homosexual and probes into the secrets of what is usually called ‘the other side of sexuality’, and his youthful disposition surprises whoever comes across him in the course of his wanderings.

So Glenn Brown’s old man punches himself on the nose to indicate it is time to wake up and choose youth instead of the second childhood to which they shepherd you so as not to allow you to rule the country with an iron fist. ‘The power behind the throne’ is not just an expression one chances upon in dictionaries; it is a slice of life and any life, however insignificant, is full of such slices. You don’t have a throne to speak of and yet you hear yourself repeat again and again, ‘Don’t let anyone bully you into doing something you don’t want to do.’ Why do you repeat this sentence day in day out? You may say to yourself that you talk nonsense because you can’t talk otherwise, but there’s no smoke without fire and soon you begin to feel this fire everywhere, and you can even *see* it because three weeks ago a skilful knife removed a cataract from your left eye.

Your friends and relatives say, ‘You should calm down. You’re too old to court young women and let boys share your ideals and intellectual delights. Why not devote your time to meditation and charity? We know you don’t have much money, but whatever you have can be given to the poor because the divide between rich and poor countries is continuing to grow. And many people come from those countries. Of course you don’t have to meet these people, let alone give them money. Don’t forget that there are poor people in your own country as well, in your motherland and fatherland. Even in your uncleland there are many poor people. And we live in your uncleland. We are your aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters. Do you know what Stalin said to the Soviet citizens in 1941? “Brothers and sisters.” And you’re much better than Stalin who was a criminal, by the way. And you’re not a criminal because you’re a benefactor of humanity. And we represent humanity in your room. We’re not your ungrateful daughters – don’t confuse us with Goneril and Regan. Or with Reagan. We won’t spend your money on Star Wars and other military games.’

You don't give anything to anybody; you enjoy yourself like a young man, going to restaurants with young women who believe that the old are much younger than the young on account of their intellectual energy and manifold interests. You write poems and say to a young lady: 'I'd like to meet your parents and ask them for your hand in marriage.'

'Please lie down and make yourself comfortable – we don't stand on ceremony here,' she says and submissively you lie down. She also lies down and you spend some time without moving a finger or anything else because you feel comfortable and joyful. 'Speak for yourself!' says your bride-to-be and once again you punch yourself on the nose. 'Speak for yourself and speak *to* yourself about how to help me out of my sexual predicament,' she says.

'You're allowed to remain motionless if a beautiful young woman happens to be lying by your side. Don't push me into stripping your clothes off – acting with precipitation is *not* my cup of tea. You need to be taught some manners.' That's how you begin your interior monologue, but the young lady is impatient and she knows that your interior and exterior monologues may last forever, if no one interferes, putting one's foot down. But what *are* you supposed to do? You can't recall the next episode of this saga, but you do recall another picture you saw in a section devoted to Glenn Brown. This picture owes its title – *The Great Masturbator* – to a work by Dali; yet the image is based on Murillo's *Laughing Body with a Feather-Adorned Headdress*.

You're in no mood for laughing so you can't take your cue from him – at least not in the domain of laughter. You say to yourself that some laugh when facing disasters and tragedies in the wake of which they may lose their wives and lives. But you don't run any risk of this kind, given that you're lying in bed and the blanket you pull round you whenever you feel cold hides another body – that of a young woman you may get married to if everything goes smoothly. At this point you realise that nothing goes smoothly because the young lady in question slips out of the room after leaving her absence under the blanket where she must be conspicuous by her presence. You have no alternative but to recall the title of Glenn Brown's picture; and this title conveys you to the halcyon days of your youth where you recover a few lost treasures which might have remained lost forever, had the young lady stayed in your room. Luckily for you, she is already in the streets of the city you hardly know because it is the heart you're interested in, not the streets and squares where one sees only legs and faces, arms and armpits.

Some of our philosophers put God to sleep – Spinoza and Epicurus are in the front line of these anaesthetists – for they thought we could hold our heads high even after devastating wars and bitter feuds over land. So we held our heads high as we perished here and there, leaving no trace of our sojourn on the Earth either in the books destined for our offspring or in the solar system whose citizens were watching our planet in the hope of finding a sign of life and prosperity. And then we began to pray, saying to God, 'We won't be able to hold out much longer under this sort of bombardment. Fate bombards us with diseases, droughts, famines and hail as if heaven had run out of manna, sausages, hamburgers, sundaes and Coke. Is your hail better than our Coke? We don't think so. Our acid drops, fruit drops and honey drops are also better than your hail. Do you think we're stupid enough to mistake it for the Holy Grail?'

But God was already fast asleep, according to Benoit XVI; He couldn't hear our voices and hearts that spoke even louder than our voices. 'Let us hear the words of the prophet Isaiah on the coming of the Prince of Peace,' said our prophet. We heard Isaiah's words, but the Prince of Peace didn't come. Instead, it was the Prince of War we had to welcome in our abodes, in our huts where a few King Lear's had taken refuge in expectation of the storm about which Tom speaks so eloquently in Shakespeare's play: 'The foul fiend bites my back. There will be widespread showers of rain, hail and sleet. Whenever the foul fiend bites my back, King Lear goes mad. Driving snow and sleet brought more problems to the county's roads last night.'

Thus spoke the Pope, 'We are in a castle and someone knocks at the gate of our castle. We should interrupt our dinner and go to the gate to find out who is knocking on it at this ungodly hour. "Ungodly hour" doesn't mean that God forsook this hour some time ago because God never forsakes us. After all, we are not His children. It would be presumptuous of us to think we *are* his sons and daughters. What I wish to convey comes down to this: We shouldn't rest on our laurels. Actually there are no laurels to speak of, but never mind, never mind. Someone is knocking on our gates and doors. Is this death, fate, God, the Devil? It would be presumptuous of me to comment on the matter. All I know is that we have been criticised for failing to heed warnings about the lack of safety routines. What are these safety routines? You should put Christ in your lives – and not on the outskirts of your lives, mind you. Christ should always stand in the centre, for He is the centrepiece of the Earth.'

Not everybody knows that fighting selfishness efficiently means to live *inside* the Other, no matter how difficult such an undertaking may appear at first glance. You look at the Other and then you look at yourself in a mirror, and you say to yourself, 'I'll never be able to stay within the Other, let alone live in that body I see from the outside. Actually this body is smaller than mine and I wonder how one could live inside it, considering that no one's eager to live in a cramped house.' But then you realise you *could* live inside the Other, even if the body you have in mind (and partly in your body) was as small as a pea: what matters is your *spiritual* attitude towards the body you see in front of you and in your mirror.

This is the first step you should take: you look at yourself in a mirror and see you're not alone because someone else is reflected in it and this person stands by your side. All you have to do next is say to yourself you're this mirror and a lot of families can be housed inside your body in permanent accommodation. And then you say to yourself that the mirror where everybody is reflected is the Church and therefore you're the Church too: the Church, the Pope, Jesus Christ and His apostles, the Blessed Virgin and Beatrice, Dante and Virgil, Alexander Pope and Homer.

There are no motorways in human life; there are only folds or *plis* along which we walk as we try to decipher the handwriting of our youth and former lives. It is the same handwriting and we catch sight of it now and then, but we are unable to understand what the letters and sentences mean and we remain in the dark as if only night had been decreed on the Earth at the outset of the Big Bang.

Make a fold across the centre of a picture and this picture will look like a memory, not like a picture you find on a wall as you walk along the walls of a museum where many Madonnas greet you and promise the Promised Land.

It is not easy to find your childhood because it never lies in wait for you, even if you eat a few madeleines and fiddle with your shoes until you're ready to drop. If you go through your room, you may find a scrap of paper on the floor or even under your bed and you immediately think about your cat who likes playing with balls and letters, leaving books and other heavy objects in peace. You pick the scrap up and start reading whatever is written on it, but you don't think, 'This is my childhood' because your childhood doesn't depend on your memory, however bright and large; and even this memory is elusive and slips through your fingers whenever you pick it up. You'll never find that time or time in general: in this domain you can't find anything unless they hypnotise you and say, 'You see your mother, your cradle and hear your favourite lullaby.' You don't hear anything except your own steady or heavy breathing. You can hear the sound of heavy breathing as you slowly climb the stairs and you always climb them, even if you're determined to stay in bed for a week.

I look for my childhood in my chest of drawers where I might have put a few letters, a few loves I don't recall or keep at bay, using my favourite expression: 'to keep at bay', 'to keep at bay'. And then I change my mind and plunge headlong into the past, but the past doesn't seem to accept me on my terms; it rejects me and I travel through the stars in search of a paradise I can't find because it is related to my childhood, to the whole of my life that should be exhibited in the museum of eternal recurrence. Yes, I accept my life and I wish to live it once again – as many times as necessary to feel happy in the Hereafter and also in this world where nothing happens.

I had no tutors and my grandmother told me no stories because I had too many stories in my head and my parents were preoccupied on account of their number: they thought I should pay more attention to *real* life. And of course whenever you say 'reality', you add 'whatever that is' as you open a book lying in your lap as if to demonstrate that reality is a multiple-choice test.

All right, I agree with you because you must be right; and even if you're wrong, I agree with you, unwilling as I am to waste my time on sterile talk and stupid folk. Getting both sides to agree is always a notable achievement and I'm pleased to announce our harmony, showing our mutual wavelength to the whole world and even to the solar system that has nothing against agreements and universal peace. But don't ask me to *communicate* with you, reaching out to local communities, global villages and cities where people identify with literary characters and buy the gadgets used by Mary and John in the course of their sexual activities. Anyway you can't afford the wines I drink; it is pointless to call hotels and motels, hoping to experience what I go through while writing this chronicle. No guided tour will ever bring you closer to my writings unless you visit the Jewish Museum in Berlin with a view to spending a year in its basement. A true idea must agree with that of which it is the idea and my ideas agree with this basement and the openings through which a ray of sunshine comes and goes as it explores our history, souls and the future.

As one might put it, my *authentic* life can be conceived as not existing all the more naturally since I feel only *artificial* lives as they come and go, filling up my house and even the streets where I don't walk: artificial lives are omnipresent. I think about the remotest corner of the world and one of my selves goes there as if I had something to do with this corner where only my thoughts sojourn; but when they do, my eyes brighten up, judging from the mirrors I have in my possession.

Do I write all this to prove I accept the doctrine of eternal recurrence? A month ago I wrote about mimicry and the insignia I assume, whenever exposed to the light of day. I wrote about it differently, but does the wording really matter? What counts is the subject matter I explore as I continue to probe into the mysteries I don't care about – in the final analysis, so to speak. I analyse them as long as my patience allows me to do so without subjecting my body to stress-related illnesses. At some point I meet the final analysis that says to me, 'You are what you are and you should go to Hell, assuming that you know where it is.'

So once again I'm dealing with mirrors and the doctrine of eternal recurrence which is a mirror in its own right, given that it reflects you throughout time – not necessarily *your* lifetime – leaving your vestiges here and there, in Brussels, on Jupiter and even in Versailles where you write about your selves.

Did I also write about a disturbing lack of unity? Do a global search for 'unity' and replace it with 'chaos'. According to my global search, I wrote about unity neither a month ago nor even in my childhood when I must have felt this lack for the first time. No such luck! What does 'global search' mean in the context, I wonder? Did I search for unity on Jupiter?

Nor did I write about what is defined as 'negative hallucination'. Naively I thought there were only *positive* hallucinations in my lives, within my egos and superegos. I'm requested to fetch something from the far corner of my room. 'We hypnotise you and inform you that there's no furniture in the room,' says Freud.

'What did you do with my furniture?' I ask.

'We put it on Jupiter. Don't you wish to settle there?'

I don't walk straight to that corner where something awaits my hands and also my attention, my loving care, my love. To avoid the furniture, I take a carefully plotted route. I know there's no furniture in my room, but there are lots of traps and complexes that lie in wait for me on carpets, on non-existent beds. They also hang on the walls – like pictures of Oscar Wilde's hero who has 'to swing'. Well, this fellow can't *swing* on my wall; he just *hangs* there. Peace and quiet. Why should you swing? You are not on a swing, are you?

There are also my other identities in the room where I head for that corner in which nothing and no one await me – neither my father nor my mother. They're dead and so can't be murdered, devoured and buried. What do you bury if you devour your father? A few bones? You are not a dog, are you? Well, you can hide his bones – just in case. Let's call it 'burial'. And they'll write about it in the 24th century: 'From the findings in the grave, and the location, we are confident that this is a Roman burial.'

Well, I do my best to maintain a false appearance of coherence and completeness. For instance, last night I began to write a diary because I know for sure that this diary is written by one person and this person is myself, whatever they say or do. Of course there are other identities in the room I cross in search of a bottle of wine or a steak and these identities need a few pieces of furniture to feel comfortable within the space allotted to them by God or Freud or Lacan or myself who may assume yet another identity in order to deal with my identities and their furniture. They're reluctant to sit down on the floor. I put a few armchairs in the room from which Freud and Lacan have removed the furniture, anxious as they were to test my capacity to walk from one end of the

room to another without falling prey to negative hallucinations. Well, they received a negative answer to their request: I did *not* walk straight to that corner where the Oedipus Complex awaited me. Freud speaks mainly about this complex and I suppose he must have put it in that corner before asking me to cross the empty room. And Lacan speaks mainly about language where everything is born, down to stars and idiots who talk for the sake of talking and never stop because they think that if they stop, they'll die a natural death.

Here are a few entries from my diary:

I should pay homage to the fantasy of fragmentation. Apparently it can be found beneath the more celebrated fantasy of castration. They castrate me and scoff at my fragments. This diary is a collection of these fragments.

My real body is in pieces. So is my mind. I'll give you a piece of my mind. Here it is. Can't you see it? Can't you smell it? Can't you touch it? You should eat it. Like it or lump it.

In paranoia we can witness a sort of decomposition. I witness it. I am the only witness for the prosecution of paranoia. My fantasy of castration is now above the fantasy of fragmentation I'm always speaking about. Last night these fantasies made love for the first time. Castration should always lie above fragmentation, otherwise they won't sleep together. Castration seems to suffer from a superiority complex.

'The truth of the ego emerges precisely in madness where the world seems to dissolve and the difference between self and other is radically put in question.' This is Lacan's diary, not mine. Here's my entry: 'I've found nothing except a farrago of lies.' Is there any significant difference in quality between these two items? What's the difference between an ape and a monkey?

'It is in paranoia that we can see so clearly the components, the steps which go to make up the relation to the world which madness can remind us of.' My madness reminds me of nothing except itself. I mean, my madness reminds me of my madness. Does it remind me of the world? Not in the least. And what about the steps they talk about? This diary is a step. The end of this diary is another step. In my childhood I often heard the word which reminds me now of the word 'step', for it sounded thus: 'Two-step.' Isn't that a dance? You take one step. Then you take another step. You dance and your life goes on. Of course it is a Totentanz or a danse macabre. Anyway it is better to dance than to lie on a deathbed, waiting for a priest, a gravedigger and a wreath.

Have I thought about the problem from every viewpoint? I don't think I have really thought about it for the simple reason that I don't know what kind of problem I'm dealing with, although almost everything seems to suggest the word 'identity' as the key to success or failure. Lacan says there are many languages and we are not likely to use all of them at the same time, and even if we devote our whole life to these languages and their usages, we'll speak only some of them, considering how numerous and intricate they are. You can't learn a language overnight: some of these psychoanalysis-born languages are more complex than Chinese and Double Dutch.

For reasons best known to myself, last night I chose madness as a means by which I could communicate with the world and its suburbs where so many people live and enjoy themselves as they go to cinemas and theatres, cafés and nightclubs. All this takes place in the suburbs of the world, but people don't care about where they enjoy their pleasures – as long as they're allowed to enjoy themselves without being taken into police custody.

Some say it's easier to communicate with lunatics because you don't have to *organise* your discourse upon the nature of life after death: What else can one speak about in the vale of tears? You just say whatever comes into your head and your lunatics nod their heads, saying, 'We'd like to live in the Hereafter. Where could we buy our tickets? We'll never give them back – we are not the Karamazovs.' You open your attaché case and, right on cue, a lot of tickets appear in front of the audience as if to say, 'Welcome to Paradise. Of course we are just cinema tickets. But did you hear about the Cinema Paradiso? Well, it's better than your lunatic asylum.'

There are other languages in Lacan's attaché case and one of them is linked to one's mother who doesn't keep silent during her last months of pregnancy, ignoring her doctor's advice: 'Don't talk! Your child hears everything. And whatever you say will play an important if not decisive role in your child's existence. Have you ever seen a dead sheep covered with swarms of flies? Your child is the dead sheep I'm speaking of, but instead of flies her body is covered with swarms of words. By the way, why did you want to have a daughter? Never mind. What counts is the words you covered your daughter's body with. Your daughter literally *swims* in your words, saying to herself, "I was just left to sink or swim." Your daughter doesn't want to sink; she has no alternative but to swim. Logical, isn't it?'

My mother read a lot during her pregnancy; and she continued to read after my birth, judging by the number of poems she recited by heart when speaking to my cradle where I listened to my mother and Pushkin. My mother always read poetry out loud: I must have heard a lot of poems in her womb, which might explain why I am still a voracious reader of novels, poems, essays and Icelandic sagas.

During the last months of her pregnancy, my mother must have recited a few excerpts from *Njal's Saga*: 'Hrafn the Red was chased into a river, and there he seemed to see down into the depths of Hell itself, with devils trying to drag him down. He said, "Your dog has run twice to Rome already, Saint Peter, and would do it a third time if you allowed it." Then the devils released him and he managed to reach the other bank of the river.' I still don't know why Hrafn the Red speaks of Saint Peter's dog, but what counts is his release from the devils' clutches. I wish I could get rid of them as efficiently as the ancient hero.

'Brodur was taken alive. Ulf Hreda slit open his belly and unwound his intestines from his stomach by leading him round and round an oak-tree; and Brodir did not die before they had all been pulled out of him.' My intestines have been unwound – not all of them, not all of them, not completely. And I won't die before they manage to pull all of them out of my body.

And what about the bliss I experience whenever I recite a poem in Russian, imitating my mother's voice and manners? Sometimes I do it in front of my biggest mirror which reflects not only my present state and mind, but also my past frolics and the ecstasies stored within my body, its own memory, its personal Treasure Island. The Russian language is obviously the root I'm looking for, but what can *one* root accomplish on the Earth where my personal tree of life should stand and show my vitality, my capacity to survive a sleepless night, a nervous breakdown? It is true that I've already felled a great number of trees to provide space for other lives and moods, for other poems and problems. So what? That is what life is about, I suppose: you have to renew your experience every day, otherwise you die – and not necessarily in your sleep, contrary to your hopes and great expectations. Why have we got all these days and nights? Why not enjoy one eternal day, an uninterrupted flow of light which is the most tangible proof of God's existence? Who would dare to doubt God's existence if we could rely on

light and its benefits round the clock? We wouldn't need electricity and other sources of energy, would we? Solar energy, I'm told, is far more powerful and efficient than the nuclear industry that we can no longer trust, according to the Green Party and its loud-mouthed members. Of course we still don't know how to use it and what instruments are appropriate for the taming of the beams to which we owe the beauty of the world, its transparency and closeness: the nocturnal sky is so inaccessible and aloof.

OBJECTS

The object l? Loss, loss, loss. One man's loss is another man's gain. I wonder whose gain I am writing about. Lossky. A Russian philosopher, if I remember rightly. I wonder how many times he felt a sense of loss in the course of his wanderings through the vale of tears. There was a rock group I never admired, but I still recall its name which began with blood or tears and I think there was another word at the end of this name. *The object b*, *the object t*.

Apparently fame in the world of rock and pop is largely ephemeral, but whenever I see pop singers either in newspapers or on the screen of my old TV set, I can't help envying them, especially if they're accompanied by their girlfriends or boyfriends or both. And whenever I see a beautiful woman in the hall where these so-called artists give their concerts, I draw the logical conclusion that this woman is either their mistress already or on the point of becoming one in spite of their wrinkles and overall impotence. How can one keep a cool head under the circumstances?

There's a singer in Russia and I envy him more than his colleagues on account of his relative youth and the reputation he enjoys amidst the most beautiful women in Moscow, Petersburg and also in the provincial cities where he deigns to give his concerts. Whenever he goes to these remote cities, they lose their provincial character and acquire all the characteristics for which both Moscow and Petersburg are famous not only in Russia, but even in the United States of America. (Let us not forget that many Russian expatriates choose the States as their ultimate haven where Earth and heaven meet, allowing mortal creatures to feel happy in the midst of tears and even during their walks through many a puddle of blood.) This singer is of Bulgarian extraction and he *is* rather handsome, I must admit: his fame and success do not contradict the laws of logic and consequently jar on me only occasionally, on the periphery of my consciousness. In an unguarded moment, I may say to my friends that I hate the world because of this singer's notoriety, but I repent immediately as I recall the evils that are *truly* responsible for the attitude I take whenever I get in touch with today's reality, logic and phonies.

Recently I saw a film on Berezovsky whose rags-to-riches story didn't escape my notice, for all the indifference I may affect when the outside world makes its disrespectful intrusions into my private reality that is mathematically logical and therefore tolerates no phony artists. At the end of the film they showed a psychiatric hospital where this oligarch was undergoing a medical examination – along with the singer I envy so much that I'm prepared to drop poetry which is unlikely to bring me anything except breakdowns of all sorts and the despair analysed by Kierkegaard in *The Sickness unto Death*. I still wonder why this singer wastes his precious time in the hospital where a handsome young man doesn't necessarily come across many beautiful women who,

according to my calculations, must be waiting for him in the cities where he sings and drinks champagne – before his concerts, after them.

Why should I identify with Lacan who lived in a comparatively small flat and was faithful to his wife, as far as I know, in spite of his unstoppable rise in popularity? Given the number of young women he saw in his consulting room and outside it, he might have spent his life like a sultan; but anyway pop singers' harems are much more luxurious and I suppose that, unlike Lacan and other psychoanalysts, the Bulgarian star doesn't have to deal with unbalanced creatures of flesh and blood. It is the other way round, if I'm not mistaken: his fans are forced to embrace and kiss an unbalanced artist who, in a fit of pique, may punch and kick them, let alone throw them out.

Another film tells a story about some men and women who are questioned in a television studio where there are no beautiful women, no pop singers, no successful businessmen. They also have their harems and spend their holidays on beaches, under the sun; and there's always something new in store for them. An oligarch has already achieved his main ambition in life – to become wealthy – and I feel I'm teetering on the brink of another nervous breakdown which might have been cured by Lacan in the Sixties and even in the Seventies. Alas, I happen to live in another century and I say to myself I'm so desperate for success I would do anything to achieve it. I do anything and achieve nothing, however often I may repeat the verb 'to achieve' accompanied by other words that don't mean anything either. I've set myself a series of goals to achieve by the end of the month and I'm waiting for the end of the month which is sure to come, whatever happens in my life and elsewhere where the world is even more alive than whatever I see and feel in my room.

'My main aim in life is to be a good wife and mother,' says a woman in front of a camera. You can say whatever you wish in front of this camera, and any other camera will listen to you as attentively as this one does, for it is handled by a cameraman who will pay attention to what you're saying as long as he is paid to do so.

'What about your profession, your vocation? Don't you feel you've missed your *true* vocation?'

Apparently the woman they're talking to in front of the camera has not missed her true vocation because she neither speaks about *her* children nor looks for other excuses; she just says she writes poetry and the cameraman says, 'Bravo!' This Soviet film reminds me of the popularity enjoyed by poets in the country of my birth where they were cherished not only by the intelligentsia, but also by ordinary citizens who offered them cognac and listened to them till dawn and often till breakfast in the course of which they would drink another bottle of cognac.

The woman picks up a guitar and sings one of her songs. Once the song is over, the host says to the poetess, 'What do you expect from your friends, from life in general?'

'I hope I'll meet a handsome young man, a pop singer.'

'Why a pop singer?'

'Because he'll sing my songs. And he'll give me a lot of money.'

Some people expect instant gratification, but others can wait for a while because pop singers are not the richest people in the world. Another woman. 'I'm happy,' she says.

'What have you achieved?'

'Everything. I've got eight children.'

'Do you think your happiness is complete?' And the host goes on, 'All our heroine needs to complete her happiness is another baby. She needs a ninth baby because she loves Dante.'

March 8, 2013. What do you call it in the West? In Russia this day is designed for women or rather for men who are supposed to give a lot of presents to the women they're acquainted with either intimately or superficially: they just nod their heads in greeting whenever they happen to pass them in the streets. But today every man sends a woman he only heard about last week a bunch of red roses. The International Day of Women – that's what they call this day in Russia and you realise to what extent our words are hollow, insignificant: every dignified gentleman feels called upon to replace them with roses, jewels, sports cars and villas on the French Riviera.

March 9, 2013. Once again I think of the Bulgarian singer whose harem continues to welcome young beauties while his body alternates between sexual exercises and sojourns in the famous psychiatric hospital. What does he need psychiatrists and psychoanalysts for? He says to one of them, to all of them: 'I wish I had said "Yes".'

'To that beauty queen?'

'Yes. But I chose another queen.'

'Another *beauty* queen, I hope?'

'Of course. There are only beauty queens in my backstage room. I don't need queens of fashion, of oil, of aluminium.'

'What about *movie* queens?'

'They've already come.'

'Where are they?'

'In my rooms, in my villas, in my castles and even in your clinic.'

'What else do you need?'

'The woman I didn't choose last month. Actually I did choose her, but a beauty queen said I should choose between her and that woman. I chose the beauty queen.'

'Don't you like our chief nurse?'

'I do.'

'She worships you.'

'Will she cure my body?'

'Of course she will. She'll also cure your mind.'

The nurse cures the singer's mind, but his body remains faithful to the woman he kicked out of his backstage room. And his body ends up injecting a lot of poison into his mind which, on the psychoanalysts' advice, loses itself in free association and consequently associates itself freely with almost everybody. And nobody says to it, 'Are you forgetting your manners?' The beauty and movie queens say instead, 'Why not pamper yourself after a hard day with a hot bath scented with oils?'

'I'm on the brink of a nervous breakdown,' says the singer's mind and the body nods in agreement.

'Why? I'm the woman you kicked out,' says a woman.

'You've grown old,' says the mind. The body keeps silent as it evaluates how the new body stands up to wear and tear.

'You kicked me out three years ago.'

'And I've been ill ever since that unfortunate episode in my life.'

‘No wonder – you’re the bearer of a knowledge that is separated from you. So you’d better attribute a subject to this knowledge.’

‘What subject?’

‘*The subject k.* I am Katya. Do you realise there’s no longer any knowledge you’re separated from? You know everything, my dear patient.’

‘Do you work in that clinic, in that lunatic asylum? Can’t I live outside it, outdoors?’

‘I’ll sort that out – don’t worry your pretty little head about it!’

I feel like going on and on, taking no notice of this chapter’s length because death is not about to interrupt its flow, its walk along the road of life – at least not within the minute I continue to live through in spite of its relative shortness. In the final analysis, I think I’m able to extend this minute beyond the end of the road, whatever road I might have in mind as I write one sentence after another. There are so many roads and I may take all of them simultaneously, contradicting Robert Frost and ordinary travellers who think they’re obliged to choose one road to the exclusion of all other itineraries indicated by maps and electronic devices. Only a poem by Pushkin or another quotation can bring this nine-hour marathon to a standstill.

You can write about anything, but it is not a question of killing time or letting it live because it is the other way round, as usual: it is time that kills you and you know this better than anyone else. Daily you’re exposed to the dangers associated with time – and *all* dangers are associated with time and its cronies – so you can’t wriggle through to the other side of Creation, saying to yourself and others: ‘I’m on the other side of my mirror, your universe and our time.’ After twisting and turning for a while, you manage to wriggle free, but time catches up with you and you continue to walk hand in hand as if you were in love with each other, as if a priest was waiting for you in a church to ask you the crucial question, ‘Will you marry time?’ ‘I will not,’ you answer recalling how many times this time – and other times as well – let you down last week and also last month. But time and its cronies smile from ear to ear and you wonder what time’s ear may mean in *your* context and within the space-time framework of the universe.

These are idle questions and answers and you end up buying a newspaper at a newsstand situated at the station from which you usually travel to Paris, anxious as you are to divert your attention from the daily rounds that your life in Versailles burdens you with – as usual I speak about myself, for I don’t know anybody’s heart of hearts as well as I know *all* my hearts. I just put them together and study the heap I contemplate in front of me as if I were in Egypt or Angkor where either pyramids or temples loom ahead of you as if to demonstrate how majestic and monstrous your life can look when you take it seriously, going deeper and deeper into the subjects you meet on your way to the nearest cemetery. Well, I just buy a newspaper – *The International Herald Tribune*, for instance – and read it, hoping to get rid of my daily worries, rounds and what not: it’s better to get rid of everything, once and for all.

Behind acid attack, focus on a ballerina. I read about the Bolshoi Ballet’s artistic director – after having seen his disfigured face on television that puts us in the picture about what happens to other people and may also happen to us if we rise to the exalted post of the Bolshoi’s artistic director. Most modern kings and queens rule only in a formal way, without real power; even beauty queens don’t rule our hearts for long because they grow old and so do our hearts. Last night a decrepit old man sat on a park bench and I didn’t ask him whether his heart

was still young and bursting with curiosity and energy. They often say the heart can remain young on condition that you go on dreaming about young women, beauty queens and other queens, disregarding your capacities that have been impaired by the years you have already spent on the Earth, in front of some screen or other.

Contrary to what one might say about queens, the Bolshoi's director doesn't rule in a formal way because he can pick and choose which dancers to put on the stage during a performance of *The Swan Lake* and other ballets one is used to reviving whenever classical ballet comes back into popularity and attracts everybody's attention. So the director in question, Sergei Filin, thought he could pick and choose any dancer he saw inside the theatre that he ruled with an iron hand, but there were other dancers around and they were likely to bear a grudge against him for refusing to cast them as swans or sleeping beauties. One of them couldn't be cast either as a swan or the sleeping beauty, for he was a man and we see mostly ballerinas when the action takes place near a lake renowned for swans and other waterfowl. I'm writing about an up-and-coming young dancer who, being generous to a fault, invariably spared a thought for all those deprived of leading roles. He is no longer an up-and-coming dancer, although no one will forbid him to dance at home or even inside his future prison cell where he is unlikely to meet talent scouts, let alone the Bolshoi's directors who are afraid of him and his cronies.

This dancer fell in love with a ballerina, Anzhelina Vorontsova, and he thought she should dance the leading role in *Swan Lake* where there are many swans and only one demon who keeps a tight control on his subjects. Vorontsova is not yet in the lake where the heroine of the ballet – the one she was dreaming about – lives and waits for her prince and also for the Bolshoi's director who is expected to confirm his faith in her inborn gift and perseverance. She is rather far from the pool where other swans indulge in their games as they work on their last, farewell songs or pirouettes; but she continues to dream about it along with her admirer or husband whom they're willing to put under lock and key. Actually, the criminal whose career is over, Pavel Dmitrichenko, hasn't yet married Vorontsova, but this fact didn't prevent him from hiring two men to attack Mr Filin, splashing his eyes and the rest of his face (and life) with sulphuric acid. The criminal – they're all criminals, by the way – said on video that he 'organised this attack, but not to the extent that it occurred' as if his cronies might have used sulphuric acid in another way, splashing the victim's legs, for instance. 'They should have splashed his toes or rather his shoes,' Dmitrichenko might have said to his future prosecutors and persecutors. He didn't say anything of the kind, but his legal defence may seek to shift responsibility to his associates – in the light of what he said when facing the camera held by one of his cronies. Criminals don't always keep silent as they wait for their lawyers or relatives; sometimes they talk, but they seldom say what they ought to say and no lawyer will ever protect them from their unguarded words.

'Will my girlfriend be allowed to dance the lead in *Swan Lake*?' asked Dmitrichenko.

'No, I don't think so,' said Filin.

'Do you think she's just an ordinary swan?'

'No, I don't think so,' said Filin.

'Do you think she's the Sleeping Beauty?'

'No, I don't think so.'

'She'll become one if you go on keeping her away from the stage. Do you think she needs beauty sleep?'

'No, I don't think so.'

'You mean she's beautiful and needs neither beauty sleep nor plastic surgery? Don't you need a beautiful swan? And don't forget she's a natural leader.'

Filin forgot everything down to Vorontsova and her name. So Dmitrichenko said to him, 'I'll show you, I'll give you a New Year's gift you won't forget.' Sulphuric acid. Is that the best remedy for memory lapses? You're horribly disfigured by acid, fire and knives, but you remember everything. What do you need your memory for? To remember swans, lakes, holidays, inns and beauty queens who are no longer beautiful?

They said Vorontsova's career had levelled off in recent years and a woman in charge even touched upon injuries and post-adolescent gains as if all this could matter after the attack and the effect produced by the sulphuric acid. Some said she had moved a few rungs *down* the career ladder – as a result of the attack; others disagreed with them, saying she no longer had any career to speak of. 'Why speak of Vorontsova?' they added, giving the cameraman a conspiratorial wink. 'She's fat and she breaks the floor as soon as she attempts to jump. She can't take one step on the stage without falling. Filin has nothing to do with her failures. And don't forget there are other swans in our theatre.'

'For this stupidity, his entire career, his whole life is a disgrace. It's all gone,' say Filin's colleagues.

'For this stupidity, *her* entire career, *her* whole life is a disgrace. It's all gone,' say *her* colleagues.

'Love is more important than any career, any swans.'

'Love is more important than beauty.'

'Love is more important than sleep.'

'Love is more important than sulphuric acid.'

'You can't destroy love with sulphuric acid.'

'Whatever the degradation, the human spirit can be indestructible. And love is the human spirit. There are no other spirits in the world.'

'Love will save the world, beauty and the human spirit.'

'The Pope said so several times in a row.'

'The cardinals charged with electing a new pope were embroiled in a clash of cultures on Wednesday over sharing information with the news media, with American cardinals, who had held daily news briefings, facing off against fellow cardinals who had seen American forthrightness as a violation of protocol'

(*International Herald Tribune*, Thursday, March 7, 2013). The cardinals say to the Americans that they – and also ordinary citizens – are allowed to speak of love, whenever they're in the mood to do so. The Americans say, 'Yes, we know that love will save everybody, if everybody falls in love with everybody else. But we also know that electing a new pope is the pet subject that no one can keep under wraps because everyone is eager to know the new pope's identity and biography. Electing a new pope is the sort of work that calls for a high level of transparency.'

'Now they see the election through a glass, darkly,' say the Europeans looking at the journalists. 'Do you want them to see the future pope face to face?'

'Yes,' say the Americans.

'But, according to St Paul, they can't see anything or anybody face to face unless they're dead and buried. Do you want them to die? Do you think every journalist should believe in transparency? Do you want all journalists to die for their beliefs?'

I don't think the end result of this election will in any way affect my life because I'm unlikely to swallow contraceptive pills, even though I know for sure that the nearest clinic provides a free supply of contraceptives on request; nor am I interested in condoms despite the risk one runs when indulging in unprotected sex. Even if

I'm unfortunate enough to catch Aids at the end of my life, I may die of something else, for Aids and cancer are not the only diseases debated about in clinics and outside them – in parks, on benches, in trains and planes. As for my faith and my God, I will not change my attitude towards them, whatever the new pope might say about love and God's presence on Earth, on Jupiter and on every comet, however distant from Golgotha.

Somebody said about the former pope: 'He now thinks that retiring early was a stupid thing to do.' But the pope didn't retire early, considering that at his age many people die on their deathbeds or in deserts; and some of those people – or other people – are already dead because you can die at any age and even in your mother's womb, and in this case your life and death do not depend on extraneous factors such as abortions and alcoholism. I don't know whether Chavez was an alcoholic or a teetotaler, but he died and no one seems to question his death, not even those who wish he could have lived forever in order to help the poor with the costs of buying a house: he thought that every family should own a house, 'otherwise life has no meaning', he declared after a military parade.

The former president was carried through the capital and no one said there was no corpse inside a modest brown wood coffin that a few relatives and ministers were trying to convey to the nearest cemetery: cemeteries are never too far from your body, even if this body of yours is still alive and kicking. Everyone knew that inside this modest coffin was the corpse of the immortal leader whose deeds are engraved on his own monument and on many hearts and souls: they're not prepared to forget the former benefactor of humanity. 'Thanks to God and my commander,' says one of these hearts, 'I have my apartment. He helped lots of people.'

William Neuman says to this heart, 'Your former president was a self-declared Socialist who expropriated private businesses and property but looked the other way as opportunists enriched themselves off government contracts.'

'I couldn't care less about opportunists,' says the heart. 'After all, I am a heart and I feel a lot instead of thinking about how people behave and what they do to enrich themselves. I don't say Chavez was poor because he must have been rich. I don't forget that our country –'

'We're speaking about Venezuela,' says William Neuman to television viewers who usually have short attention spans.

'I know we're speaking about Venezuela,' says the heart.

'I'm speaking to our clients,' says William.

'And I'm speaking to their hearts,' says the heart.

'What is it you want to say to their hearts?' asks William.

'He has made people who didn't feel they were part of democracy before feel like they're part of the system.'

'Of what system?' asks William.

'Of our system,' says the heart.

'He excoriated capitalists and lectured about service to the country but tolerated or ignored widespread corruption,' says William.

'I ignore it too,' says the heart.

'And he warned ceaselessly of enemies,' says William, 'who he said were poised to take away from the poor the benefits they had received under his government.'

'The Americans take everything away from us and other countries,' says the heart.

‘But they don’t take away your hearts, do they?’

‘Our hearts are hard,’ says the heart. ‘Our nuts – I don’t mean testicles – have very hard shells and we’re these shells. We’re also nuts. Is that what you think?’

‘I don’t think anything,’ says William. ‘But I know that your former president’s policies –’

‘He’s still my president,’ says the heart.

‘– including the expropriation of private companies and price controls, have hobbled the economy, led to shortages of basic goods and created a system that cannot be sustained.’

‘I’ll see to it that it *is* sustained,’ says the heart.

What does *my* heart say as I read the article entitled *Measuring the Legacy of Chavez’s contradictory revolution?* It says, ‘Don’t trust revolutions.’ I listen to my heart’s advice and I turn a deaf ear to revolutions because I think that revolutions should see only deaf ears in front of them and even behind them, assuming they have something at the back of their minds. Well and good – they have deaf ears behind them, in front of them; and even when they walk with a sideways motion, they see and contemplate only deaf ears. But this doesn’t prevent them from being active now and then, for revolutions *are* on the world’s agenda, even if their leaders say modestly, ‘What we need is a change in the situation.’

‘What change do you have in mind?’ say their opponents.

‘We need a change of government,’ say the leaders.

‘But we’ve changed our minds,’ say their opponents.

‘Have you?’ say the leaders.

‘You need our votes, don’t you?’ say the leaders’ opponents.

‘Of course we do. We’re friends, aren’t we?’

‘We are not. Go to hell.’

‘Mr Chavez prided himself on winning election after election,’ says William, ‘and his government put in place a digital voting system that is considered generally free of fraud. His opponents called Venezuela’s elections free but not fair –’

Free, fair, free, fair. You’re free, but you’re not fair. You’re fair, but you’re not free. You’re free to become fair – not a fair maiden, needless to say. If you’re a man, you can’t become a fair *maiden*, even if you are *fair*.

Chavez reminds me of my youth and one might conclude that everything reminds me of my youth because there’s nothing in front of me. Anyway, the only way to survive and wake up tomorrow is to look back at a series of yesterdays, hoping to get as far as one’s youth when everything was more or less all right. Yes, one was in love and healthy and there was a lot of futures in one’s pockets, in one’s rooms and in front of one’s eyes that could see other planets and former lives and the future – an endless road to happiness.

You’re already happy, but you’re sure you’ll be even happier in the future, in the light of what happens to sages who grow more and more intelligent as time goes on. And time always goes on: you grow more and more intelligent on condition that you’re a sage or at least a sage-to-be – the Buddha’s disciple and follower who knows everything and is not shaken either by the world or by the Russian Revolution.

I saw a programme devoted to a Russian poet who had always dreamt of becoming a member of the Writers’ Union, although I never regarded this membership as an honour when I lived in the Soviet Union, in Moscow where I was writing poetry and essays on literature. This poet – for once I’m not speaking of myself –

used to write poems for singers who sang them in films, in concert halls and elsewhere, contributing to the poet's celebrity: many ordinary citizens adored him to the point of gathering under his windows whenever he awaited his colleagues' decision. But they always decided not to accept him, barring his way to the building where the Writers' Union, or rather its members, united every week to decide who should be published and honoured in the Soviet Union.

But ordinary citizens sang his songs under his windows, in parks and on benches where they could sit, eat sandwiches and sing other people's songs till dawn, saluting the sun by another couplet, another note. The poet would make his appearance on the balcony under which the crowd had gathered in expectation of his appearance and they all sang a multitude of songs and one couldn't say whether the number of songs was superior to the number of performers. The poet died at the age of 64 and they said his death was caused by his sadness, for one couldn't be happy outside the Writers' Union, even though the number of its members was inferior to that of the fans you see under your windows or in front of the bench on which you're in the habit of sitting after a long walk through parks and woods.

I am neither a member of the Writers' Union nor an idol of the crowd I'll never see either under my windows nor in front of the benches I count as I walk through our woods, hoping to cleanse my lungs and thoughts. As a result of this walk, I can read my thoughts easily and even my mood makes no secret of its dislike of this day and age which doesn't scream with disgust upon learning that ordinary writers are idolised by the multitude whose members ignore me completely. The sadness unto death – is that what I'm suffering from? Yesterday I drank three bottles of wine and I think that this drinking bout had been induced by my mood, my frustration, for my life has more than its fair share of frustrations, it seems to me and to others – to my friends, among other people. At some point I began to shout and then I said to myself and to those who are used to shouting under the circumstances: 'Please don't shout – there's no need to vent your frustration on me.' When I am in a suicidal mood, I make as if someone else was in my shoes and thus I thwart my plans and go on living in spite of my frustrations and suicidal moods. If this doesn't help, I say to myself, 'Don't let your frustration spoil the event.' And I never ask myself what event I'm talking about.

v

Francis Bacon said something to the effect that he was trying to approach reality from different angles in search of immediacy, and one knows he meant the wounds he had consciously and unconsciously inflicted upon his sitters. As Bacon was a non-believer, he didn't think about his sitters in terms of sin, and the wounds he was fond of stemmed from his desire to reflect life as faithfully as one might to become a *real* hyperrealist painter whose realism and hypersensitivity have nothing in common with the petrol stations depicted by *ordinary* hyperrealists. In a way, he wished to become an *unreal* hyperrealist, uncovering the intricate web of nature's deceit – the tumours painstakingly hidden beyond glossy surfaces and well-shaven faces. He liked painting beautiful faces, for if you disfigure a *beautiful* face, you catch God's ministers red-handed and consequently are allowed to bring nature, destiny and other features of our life to justice without further ado – without waiting for critical judgement and your friends' approval or disapproval.

Salvador Dali, who was also an unreal hyperrealist painter, looked for the hidden in scientific publications where he could light upon particles and articles devoted to light, atoms, waves and quantum mechanics that are often summarised as follows: 'The dictator's grip on the country has loosened.' Of course one immediately asks a few questions related to the identity of the dictator who is not necessarily God, as might be hastily presumed, for God is not really a dictator, given that He allowed our mind to make decisions in conjunction with our free will. Let us say that the dictator in question is nature, overloaded with a multitude of laws which we obey whenever they turn out to be prepared to impose increasingly heavy punishments for minor offences, transgressions and delusions. Some physicists say there are no laws to speak of; they don't speak of them and die of natural causes, unable as they are to knock our law-reinforced nature off its pedestal.

As everybody knows, science and religions help us traverse the mirror we are used to calling 'nature'. It is a courteous and hypocritical exterior, a surface, shallowness and so forth: there are many signs and symbols of what we have to deal with on our way to the hidden or our wounds, as Bacon might have put it. For instance, Isaiah says to us: 'And a man shall be as an hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest, as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.' What is the meaning of this text? Dali didn't believe in God, but he had so-called faith, according to what he said to some journalists; and one might conclude he trusted Isaiah's words and didn't fail to unravel their mysteries after his life-long training in how to understand scientific books.

The man Isaiah touches upon hides from those who are unable to understand him and see his wounds; and yet his wounds have many affinities with what a conscientious tourist comes across in a well-known museum where the Crucifixion must have pride of place. Bacon saw the wounds that let him in on a majestic secret. He succeeded in turning them into the stigmata he talked about to David Sylvester and a number of television viewers. As a work of art, such a portrait might serve as a covert from the tempest and any connoisseur takes refuge in it as he savours every nuance he spots in the course of his analysis; and this aesthetic or rather ethic ritual gives birth to yet another Aristotle-celebrated catharsis. A real masterpiece may be equated with Isaiah's river that makes its appearance in a dry place: but for art and its life-saving qualities, our world would be nothing but a dry place, a red desert. Are we the shadows of great, magnificent pictures, books and operas? And what about our shadow-boxing? Leonardo is a great rock in a weary land. The same goes for Bacon and Dali, which doesn't mean they're as great as Leonardo who is in a class of his own, in a galaxy of his own.

‘What is the characteristic feature of life? When is a piece of matter said to be alive? When it goes on “doing something”, moving, exchanging material with its environment, and so forth, and that for a much longer period than we would expect an inanimate piece of matter to “keep going” under similar circumstances.’ On Dali’s deathbed one found a book by Schrödinger, which only goes to prove that the painter was in search of inspiration until the very end of his life based upon natural laws, genes, helices, atoms and nuclear energy; it is no wonder that he found his works in the domain of science and in the books of its apostles. Until the very end he was doing something: he kept going until the age of 85 as he continued to exchange material with his environment, symbolised by pictures, books, paintbrushes, colours, nuances, formulas, triangles, golden sections and the fourth dimension. Of course he was not an inanimate piece of matter, but to some extent we may subscribe to Freud’s belief that the death instinct holds sway over our bodies, gradually turning us into stones and great rocks. In this case, no one should expect us to keep going for 85 years at a stretch.

When a system that is not alive is isolated or placed in a uniform environment, all motion usually comes to a standstill very soon as a result of various kinds of friction; differences of electric or chemical potential are equalised, substances which tend to form a chemical compound do so, temperature becomes uniform by heat conduction. After that the whole system fades away into a dead, inert lump of matter. A permanent state is reached, in which no observable events occur. The physicist calls this the state of thermodynamical equilibrium, or of ‘maximum entropy’.

Erwin Schrödinger, *What is life?*

Our global village is the uniform environment about which the physicist speaks in his book – in his prophetic book, one might say, because when the book was first published – at the end of the Second World War – no one yet spoke about global villages, their inhabitants and our common destiny. One might even say that our train of thought has at last come to a standstill as a result of the friction which necessarily occurs in the world where one nation rub shoulders with another, without singing Beethoven’s *Ninth*, the final movement. A number of people feel they can do business with the Spaniards and all of them – the former and the latter – frequently hold conferences at one hotel, at another hotel or a ski resort. None of these people really enjoy these conferences, but the latter – I mean, these conferences – offer all of them a good opportunity to do some networking. And of course they enjoy skiing: there are some nice gentle slopes that they can ski down, unless they prefer unkind, ungente slopes and break their legs as they break every speed limit. In spite of this tiny little difference, all these people are uniform and their views coincide on a range of subjects, which enables them to celebrate another victory for common sense. ‘Such good news calls for a celebration!’ they say to each other almost every week. In the long run all differences of electrical or chemical potential are equalised – another victory for death. ‘The whole system fades away into a dead, inert lump of matter. A permanent state is reached, in which no observable events occur.’ The state of maximum stupidity.

‘Practically, a state of this kind is usually reached very rapidly. Theoretically, it is very often not yet an absolute equilibrium, not yet the true maximum of entropy. But then the final approach to equilibrium is very slow. It could take anything between hours, years, centuries...’ We still haven’t given up hope of finding the world alive and some of us continue to search for it as if to repeat the exploit of Diogenes who, in broad daylight, kept looking for Man, a blazing torch in his hand. Or do I confuse him with Nietzsche? One of them

was looking for God, the other for Man. And a third party was looking for both. 'These ultimate slow approaches to equilibrium could never be mistaken for life,' writes Schrödinger, 'and we may disregard them here.' What kind of equilibrium did he have in mind? One's inner equilibrium? The point at which mind and matter are in equilibrium? I, for one, am not inclined to disregard this slow approach to equilibrium, however illusory it may appear at first glance.

VI

Whatever we say, we speak of death. Whatever we look for, we find death. I never say, ‘Sorry, could you just say that last sentence again please?’ Why should I? I know what the last and first sentences spoke about, for there’s nothing else in the world, as they say. ‘My life – and I know it’s a cliché – has been the other side of death, the bright side of death,’ says a dying man (or woman) and we don’t listen to him because we know what he is about to say and think. He thinks that life is beautiful in spite of death. He says that death is ugly, for all the delights one may experience in one’s lifetime. She also says that she has been happy in spite of everything because her children will live forever in the bravest and most organic world – her indigo children, needless to say. They utter a lot of clichés – all of them, not only their children – and I wonder if they need to utter anything, considering that everything has already been uttered and written. I wonder if they have already sung everything in churches and concert halls – and in parks, at open-air concerts.

On television, too, they’re preoccupied with illnesses that can be cured by children, not by professional doctors, and one can see these children and their hands hovering over half-dead bodies, promising them eternal life. Of course neither these hands nor their owners are allowed to promise eternity to those who don’t deserve it, but at least they can put them – their unworthy patients – on their feet again because once again we meet some indigo children, our future and hope. The hostess says, ‘Do you know what illness you’re about to deal with?’

‘Yes,’ says a child.

‘You can get closer to your future patient.’

‘I can nurse him from here,’ says the child.

‘What do you feel?’ says the hostess to the patient.

‘I feel much better,’ says the patient.

‘The world doesn’t,’ says the child.

‘Are you trying to cure the world?’ says the hostess to the child.

‘It’s pointless,’ says the child. ‘I know when the world is doomed to die, but I can’t prevent it from dying.’ And the child begins to recite by heart an excerpt from The Revelation of St John the Divine, confusing horses and their colours, for the child’s memory is deficient and therefore its capacities are impaired beyond redemption. No one can redeem these capacities, not even another indigo child, but none of the children one sees on the screen is worried about the situation, for death is coming anyway and it doesn’t really matter what brings him and on which horse he sits. Death is an old man again and one can see him thanks to the Bible where death rides on many horses, brandishing swords and scythes. His eye sockets are hollow and yet these eyes can see whatever should be murdered in this world of ours – the whole world; otherwise St John wouldn’t have revealed anything to humanity. Why should St John speak of one man, two women, three children? Why should God say to St John, ‘I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last’? Even if the death of Lenin is on the agenda, God doesn’t announce it to anybody because Lenin doesn’t deserve it. And what about Leonardo da Vinci and *his* death?

Another child comes in and says, ‘I see the sky and the snow. This snow is fire and it falls on humanity, but humanity looks up and says, “It’s raining tonight.” Humanity doesn’t understand that this rain is death. This death is full of stones and these stones are falling on humanity, on our heads and hearts. We can’t defend our bodies against these stones and their fire. I see a lot of fire and this fire is coming down instead of flying up. It is not a mere bonfire. It is God’s wrath. Are you prepared to hear God’s voice, his words and their truth?’

‘What did God say to you?’ asks the hostess.

“‘What thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches –’”

‘Congratulations,’ says the hostess to the child’s mother. ‘This is the best way of training your child’s memory.’

‘These mental exercises are designed to encourage creative thinking,’ says the mother.

“‘Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter,’ says the child picking up his own book and showing it to the cameraman.

‘This child died last year,’ says the hostess to the television viewers. ‘He predicted the fall of the Siberian meteorite – I can’t recall its name – and now they worship the ground he walked on. They literally worship the path on which he used to walk. They kneel down on this path and kiss it tenderly because this child is a saint. At least they say he is a saint and every saint deserves such tenderness and worship. Here’s the book he bequeathed to us, his revelation. There are many horses in this book and every horse carries a lot of fire, illnesses and meteorites that will fall on humanity and destroy it completely.’

‘Children often retreat into a fantasy world, where they could be anything they want,’ says a psychiatrist.

‘I know,’ says the hostess. ‘But their fantasy worlds grow darker and darker.’

‘I know,’ says the psychiatrist. ‘They take us right back to the Dark Ages.’

‘Do you know what Freemasons say about the future and our Golden Age?’

‘I know,’ says the psychiatrist. ‘They think our Golden Age is located in the future, not in the past.’

‘Do you know what this Golden Age looks like?’ asks the hostess.

‘The Golden Age you have in mind is symbolised by indigo children and their revelations,’ says the psychiatrist. ‘They predict our destruction. That’s what Freemasons call “our Golden Age”.’

And then they show a film entitled *The Golden Age* and one sees what one is used to seeing in one’s dreams unless one doesn’t dream on account of the depth of one’s sleep. If your sleep is very deep, you can’t find anything at the bottom of it: no dreams, no hints, no revelations of any kind. Why should you sleep if nothing is revealed to you in the course of your dreams? This time your dream comes true and you see – one sees it too – a bevy of bathing beauties, but for once these beauties do not bathe in sea water: they dance for their master and idol.

You see a beautiful palace and realise you’ve been conveyed to the Orient, to one of Scheherazade’s tales where you’re likely to experience what any Russian oligarch feels and sees in his own palaces and saunas. A bevy of bathing beauties dance and their governess says to them, ‘In a few minutes I’ll tell you what your master thinks.’ And the governess talks to the master. ‘So what would be your top choice for tonight?’

‘Veronika. Did the last interview show her as a self-assured and mature geisha?’

‘No. I wouldn’t sleep with her if I were you.’

‘I want her, I want her, I want her.’

‘You listen to the Beatles too often.’

‘Mind your own business.’

‘I’m your sister.’

‘You’re no longer my sister. You’re just their governess.’

But Veronika refuses to dance for the master; nor does she want to share his bed and his body. Contrary to what the Beatles sang for years and years, she doesn’t want him; and she repeats this sentence many times so as not to yield to the temptation about which Oscar Wilde talked for many years as he counted his temptations

and their fulfilments. Instead of counting out his money, he was fully engrossed in his temptations and his destiny took notice of this pastime, informing on Oscar Wilde and sending him to prison – the jail known to every lover of poetry. Even Francis Bacon quoted it in one of the documentaries I saw. You kill the thing you love because you can't do otherwise: death is unavoidable and omnipresent. And omnipotent.

Why do these girls love their master? He doesn't offer them poems; and he is not as handsome as Andy Warhol's friends. (The same goes for Francis Bacon's sitters.) There's no denying that he is rich, but there are many oligarchs in Russia and none of them is impotent, if I'm not mistaken; and all of them like the Bolshoi's ballerinas. So I'm not surprised at hearing that Veronika can be happy only if they give her a ticket to Moscow where, according to her tale of woe, her son must be waiting for her in their old flat that doesn't look like a penthouse, whatever her rivals might presume. Her rivals – other girls and dancers – never dream of their fatherlands because they're happy where they happen to sojourn and they hope their palace will become *their* palace at last, turning their sojourn in it into an everlasting life. They never think of death as they embark upon their journeys into happiness and they experience no fear, contrary to what Orson Welles' film seems to suggest.

Veronika is on the brink of a nervous breakdown and a healer says to her, 'You're not on the brink of a nervous breakdown. What you call a "brink" is just a riverbank. That's right – you're near a river and this river is blanketed in fog.'

'What are you doing?' asks Veronika.

'I'm about to put up a notice saying "Danger! Keep out!"'

'Why? I like rivers,' says Veronika.

'Do you like water in general?'

'I do,' says Veronika.

'But two minutes ago the fog swirled thickly around us. Did you see this phenomenon?'

'I did.'

'No wonder – I'm a professional hypnotist. Do you know that the danger of shipwreck is much greater in fog?'

'I do.'

'So we won't board this ship.'

'What ship?'

'It's sailing tomorrow, but we won't board it. We'll wade across this river at a shallow point.'

Veronika and her saviour are wading across the invisible river at a shallow point and the saviour says to Veronika, 'Don't look back! Don't look back! I can see you're tired because your eyelids have started to droop.'

'I could hardly lift my head off the pillow this morning I was so tired,' says Veronika.

'Getting up too late seems to be a thing of the past, doesn't it?'

'I don't know,' says Veronika.

'Your ignorance is a thing of the past too. We're already on the opposite riverbank. You're now out of danger.'

'Am I?'

'You are. But don't forget that the future of our planet is in danger if we continue to plunder it as we do.'

'I'm not in Russia, am I?'

‘You’re in Versailles. Do you really wish to go back to Russia? And what about counterfeit alcohol? In Russia you can’t drink a bottle of wine without getting poisoned. You are *not* out of danger! I don’t mince my words. What you want is another consultant!’

‘And another master,’ says Veronika.

Her former master enjoys his ballet company and their performances while I watch Ligeti’s opera *Le grand macabre*; and I can’t help wondering why I enjoyed this opus magnum when I saw it in Paris in 1981. Can’t we say about Ligeti, ‘He was a 20th-century author who wrote parodies of other people’s works’? What I might have enjoyed related to cadenzas, to the multitude of notes he used to express fear, horror, love and other sentiments that seem to inhabit our life without turning into human beings: we just *experience* these sentiments. But Ligeti does turn them into human beings, for the protagonist of the opera comes to our planet in order to announce the end of the world and I, for one, do not think he is a human being or an extraterrestrial creature; and yet he eats, drinks and sings some truncated arias. In other words, he is just the symbol of a prophet who speaks of fire, meteors, stones and ruins; and he looks like a child whose mother is fond of St John’s Revelation. So her child commits it either to memory or to paper and says to television viewers: ‘And I John saw these things, and heard them. And when I had heard and seen, I fell down to worship before the feet of the angel which shewed me these things.’

‘Where are these things?’ ask some viewers.

‘And where’s the angel?’ asks the hostess.

The child falls down and crawls towards the hostess and television viewers because he can’t do otherwise: he is the guest of honour and they’re about to pay him a huge amount of money for his performance. But they paid the angel nothing and the things St John speaks about do not appear out of thin air, although they may perform miracles now and then – away from cameramen and the curious. A child comes and says, ‘I saw the Blessed Virgin’, and they erect a monument to both the child and the Virgin without trying to see the Virgin in their turn: they know that the Virgin comes only to the innocent, not to the curious. But this time they are sitting in front of their televisions and they wish to *see* what the child has just revealed to them during an unusual outburst of creative activity. It is true that video and television rentals have decreased this year, but notwithstanding this and other facts, the viewers who are lucky enough to attend the child’s performance want to see *everything*, not only the child who opens his mouth and points to his mother, to the Bible and St John. ‘Where’s St John?’ ask the viewers.

‘In the Book,’ says the child.

‘All right. But you must show us the angel, otherwise we’ll shout, “Money-back guarantee, money-back guarantee!”’

‘Do you need an angel?’ asks Ligeti. ‘Here he is.’ And he shows us his hero whose name is Nekrotsar and we no longer shout anything, being carried away by a few notes we hear as Nekrotzar turns into a tsar or rather a despot who bullies a poor peasant and says something to the effect that the end is drawing nigh. As usual, I hope to see a beautiful lady and I can trace my hopes’ roots back to the 19th century when composers – Mussorgsky was of their number – had to put ladies in their operas in order to get them performed by imperial theatres. In France you had to include a ballet in your opera; in Russia they needed women, not necessarily beautiful women. In those times singers were usually fat and managers took care of them only on account of their voices,

disregarding their misshapen bodies. But Karajan paid a lot of attention to how his singers *looked* on the stage and all these singers became bathing beauties overnight.

I'm waiting for a beautiful lady as I watch *Le grand macabre* and I see none; and yet one doesn't have to engage Maria Callas for any of the parts one hears and sees in this opera, for there are no Toscas, no Normas in *Le grand macabre*. After all, it is a man to whom we listen as he talks about the end of the world – not to a woman; and I wonder if Norma couldn't replace him, being a prophetess in her own right. But I may be mistaken and I'm afraid my mistakes grow so numerous they easily outshine the truths I *may* light upon in the course of my life, of its pitiful ending. A prophetess or a priestess? Anyway, no one needs Callas in *Le grand macabre* unless one says that one *always* needs Callas, whatever the opera one is dealing with and whoever tries to raise the stakes by refusing to listen to a second-rate singer.

VII

Whatever you do, you come across not only death, as many pessimists know, but also war and peace which is a theme you can't avoid, even if you hide yourself at the bottom of the sea or beyond some cloud or other. You're not an angel and you don't know how to live in the sky because you have no technical know-how in this field, in this and other heavens. (And even cutting-edge technology proves to be of little avail.) In the skies, too, you would be confronted by angry crowds and harmonious infatuations – by war and peace, in other words; and you might remember the fallen angels who, once upon a time, fought against the Almighty and lost the battle and hit the bottle in the wake of their defeat.

Lacan laughs when he utters the word 'communication' and he even says to those who listen to him, 'You laugh? I see you understand what communication means. You understand that it means nothing. All right. To get off to a good start, you need either an Audi or this piece of knowledge – communication is a Freudian dream.'

But the matter stands differently if you try to communicate with God – on account of the situation you get into or rather on account of its absurdity and of life's basic absurdity that has nothing to do with Ionesco's plays. You wish to communicate with God and you put a lot of questions to the new pope who is believed to know the answer to all your questions – one big answer that resounds all over the universe. This answer boils down to a few words and principles: 'Faith, poverty, loyalty, purity, chastity, God.' You choose the last word as you say to yourself, 'I'm neither chaste nor pure, but if God believes in me I'll get everything down to money and a Q7 Audi. And then I'll give everything to the poor – on my deathbed. What do you need on your deathbed? A glass of water. I hope my wife will bring me this glass of water. She might bring me a bottle of water, for all I know. Will she ask me if I prefer sparkling water? "San Pellegrino" I'll say to her in the hope of getting closer and closer to the new pope. Hope, pope, hope, pope – how nice!'

You don't need to communicate with God because He knows all your thoughts and prayers. You say to yourself, 'I should pray tonight, otherwise God won't forgive me. Of course I'm not Desdemona – I'm not even a woman. But not only Desdemona is supposed to pray every night and so I'll pray tonight to let God know what I think about life – about *my* life in particular. I think I'm poor and I don't think that God will contradict me because He knows everything about oligarchs and *their* bank accounts. And if He compares their bank accounts with mine, He'll realise I'm rather poor. The repairs to my car cost much more than I was expecting. Does God know that? If he doesn't, I'll shout, "The repairs to my car cost much more than I was expecting."'

And both God and the new pope will speak about peace and love. You don't need to speak about anything else because you'll have everything if you say, 'Love, love, love. You have to love each other. Peace, peace, peace. God exerts His authority to restore peace in the area, on the Earth, in the universe. So do I. So I am God. You should love me. You don't need to pray because love is big enough to fill up my castle and my home. You love each other and death recedes into the distance. Do you see this distance? And what about death? Do you see *anything*? You don't, do you? If you can't go there this afternoon, so much the better. I'm speaking about the Hereafter, the there and the after. Don't forget the here and the herebefore. You should be born every day, otherwise you'll die today.'

Two years ago I bought a book on John-Paul II and I'd like to read this book inside which I might find a lot of words that pertain to local issues, wherever these local issues might be located. I hope they concern my mind and whatever I'm tempted to write about because the rest seems to be outside of the world – not only beyond my mind, my worlds, my interests and my life. We are only interested in the *parts* of the proposals, as they say and they're absolutely right because if you're interested in *everything*, you lose *everything* or at least a

few things; and among these things you might find the thing, the only thing you really need in this and other lives. Concentrate on the main points of the argument and try not to be distracted by incidental details. Why don't I *always* follow this golden rule?

I've got the book on John-Paul II and I even know on which shelf I put it last year, for I often transfer my books from one shelf to another. Oligarchs transfer oil and gas from one country to another and they always look for someone with drive and ambition: driving ambition is what most great leaders have in common. I'm not a great leader, but I hope I'm a great writer and my ambitions are centred upon eternity, not upon money, oil, Audis and the Mercedes in which every pope must drive so as not to belittle himself. Should I add 'herself'? The other day I watched a programme in which they spoke about a woman who aspired to the Vatican and the Mercedes where a real pope spends his time. Apparently she wasn't elected: her Mercedes stood empty, as if forsaken forever, and no driver wished to transfer it from one square to another, from one Rome to another Rome. Let us not forget that Moscow is the third Rome.

Suppose I'm a minor poet and the only chord I can play on my Aeolian harp is a C Minor chord or a D Minor chord: both chords were dear to Mozart, to his Black Masses and Black Piano Fantasies. I hope my chord will resound inside one ear in the 24th century.

PART TWO

I

This is already *Part Two* and I know what it means – at least in part, for no one knows for sure what another part means except if it is the part of a clock you took apart to see what the problem was; you saw the problem, you saw the agony of your clock, of your time, and you decided to put these parts together in the hope they would work for a month at least. A month is better than nothing and nothing must be better than the lack of nothing, although I don't know what this lack may mean under the circumstances and under the sun: if you have nothing at hand, you may work with it saying you have Nothing. What counts is your action, intention, and you know that if you fall asleep you may never wake, even if all alarm clocks shout, 'Wake up, otherwise you'll die forever.' You don't die forever. Why should you? You don't die for nothing either.

I should be born every day and probably every minute: if you're not born all the time, you're bound to die and this truth is unbearable as far as I can judge; and I'm sure my judgement extends beyond the end of this truth. I know I should be reborn as often as necessary to survive, to write poems and say to everyone, I'm alive and fresh as many daisies or roses that can also be fresh for two or three days unless you prevent them from drinking and eating and living. I say to everyone, 'I'm alive,' and everyone hears me because they cock their heads on one side with a slight frown; though in fact I'm not sure whether this frown is slight or not. A dog cocks its leg against a tree and I know this dog does something or everything, but I don't know what other creatures do and I don't judge their movements, their moods and whatever they might have in their minds and bodies: they're situated rather far from *my* body and mind, let alone my soul.

I wonder what is near my soul – in the neighbourhood of this parcel that belongs to God and not to the Devil whose dominion over my being has been shown on my computer screen for 20 years at least. I must be near my soul, otherwise I wouldn't have a soul, any soul to speak of; and I wouldn't speak of anything else, for only the soul counts in one's existence. So I speak of my soul and my body isn't far from my soul – it is even related to it to the point of being its receptacle and house where only souls live and have fun.

The body counts too and it talks to the soul very often, whenever it has enough time to speak of abstract things that belong either to the domain of religion or to that of philosophy. They talk to each other and I talk to them as well because I have to talk to someone or something, according to psychiatrists and mere doctors who always talk to us in order to relieve us – and all the elements hidden inside us and our former lives – of all the burdens connected (or related) to our numerous childhoods and maturities.

I often give up my soul – and also my body, for that matter, because there's only one matter on our planet, in our souls, and we have to take this matter (and also our souls) into consideration whenever we discuss our agendas, their items and other matters of some importance. God, the Almighty. The point is you don't know what is important and what is not, apart from God; neither do I in spite of my bitter, sweet and other experiences strewn all over my life, lives, souls and substances.

So I give my soul up and my soul says to my body, 'What have I done? Why are you treating me like that? Why should you forsake me for the sake of God? The Almighty and I are one and the same person.' My soul tends to adopt a falsely cheerful tone when she is upset about something.

'I'm just a body,' says my body. 'Speak to the substance.'

'Where's the substance? What is it?'

'The substance is the life and soul of whatever happens on this planet and elsewhere.'

'I am the soul and eternal life,' says the soul. 'What do you need this substance for?'

'I need *something*. I need food. The substance is my daily meal.'

‘And what about nonsense?’

‘This is *your* breakfast and dinner.’

Why should I talk of the substance when nonsense is far more important, given the stupidity of our government, of any government, unless you don’t know who guides you through time, as Borges put it. The less you know about presidents, prime ministers, foreign ministers and local government elections, the better. (I forget the precise wording of his argument. And I forget the rest as well.) Our government is in France, but it could be elsewhere – in a Swift country or any (Swiss) county, on any other planet; and I’m pretty sure that any other planet could have a government like this or that. I don’t know whether this government is like this or that, but it is a government, for what it’s worth and, as everybody knows, a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. And any government has a few birds, either in bushes or in counties, countries and companies that fly all over the world, resolved to conquer the world and other worlds, other words. They say, ‘One million dollars’ and you say, ‘Two million dollars.’ And your two million dollars are bound to conquer one million dollars. A foregone conclusion, as easy as falling off a log. And everybody knows *that* – even your enemies, friends, animals and servants who often fall off logs, although they have neither one million dollars nor two million dollars; let alone three million dollars.

Again I’m feeling a pain I’ve known for more than 12 years and, though I was nervous on the day it reappeared near my liver, or right at the core of it, I was somewhat reassured to realise I was facing an old problem: cancer would already have killed me several times. I can’t say I was delighted to meet an old friend and no pain ever looks friendly, assuming it is a sort of visible structure that often shows up on the X-ray; but I wasn’t really scared, thinking I had to come to terms with another muscle spasm.

Why am I lying to myself? I should face the facts or the truth or my lies which delude me into believing I’ll live forever. I’m dying but I refuse to face the truth, which doesn’t mean I won’t die, for burying your head in the sand leads nowhere – not to eternal life anyway. Of course I can’t know for sure I’m dying, for I have no idea where my virtual tumours may be located unless a doctor shows me a huge dark spot – not a beauty spot, alas – on an X-ray, saying it is my tumour and not someone else’s death in disguise. When you look at an X-ray, you may think whatever comes into your head or rather what you *wish* to think at this particular moment and that’s why such a procedure is called wishful thinking. You may think that the dark spot is just a particle of the dark matter you read about in the *Herald Tribune* and that this matter brings out the structure of your body or even reveals the outline of your soul. At last you can contemplate your soul to your heart’s content without being bothered by busybodies – on condition that the doctor doesn’t mind your being too curious in her presence. Nor should she spoil the fun by uttering the word ‘death’ after tapping you on the shoulder several times, a look of intense concentration on her face. To face death and partial destruction.

For some reason people assume that the soul is white as if you couldn’t appear before God in a black dress or a black dinner jacket worn at formal social events, with matching trousers and a bow. After all, your first meeting with God is a formal social event during which you come to learn a few truths you’ve been unaware of during your lifetime spent on Earth and in cloud-cuckoo-land. Of course God (or Saint Peter) is likely to tell you a few home truths, for theologians affirm that our real home is heaven and not the Earth: the truths we learn up there are *home* truths. And they’re not in the habit of playing with words (God and Saint Peter). They just understand this idiom differently and wish to imply that a lot of punishments await us beyond the clouds and even beyond the sun.

So the soul is not necessarily white and it may be a sort of tumour, for all I know: after all, Gogol's famous novel enlarges upon the dead souls sold to the protagonist by a number of landowners whose peasants are dead along with their souls. Let us not forget that Russians serfs were called 'souls' and they felt imprisoned in their own huts on account of their masters who treated them badly, being tyrants to their fingertips. (Let us not forget their long whips.) Let us not treat this matter light-heartedly: I'm in no mood for playing with words, although words often – if not always – lead us to eternal truths, according to Lacan, among other people. The soul lives inside the body which is nothing but a prison where the soul is left to rot for most of terrestrial life, according to many philosophers. Sometimes it is given an opportunity to escape from the body – at night, for instance, assuming that the body in question can fall into a lovely deep sleep. (An Indian doctrine?) Any serf was a spitting image of the soul imprisoned within the body – hence the title of Gogol's novel.

When living in the body, the soul is not dead, otherwise the body would die as well – at least its divine portion would die forever, its eternity that depends only on the soul (and God of course). But it is partly dead because no one allows it to communicate with its Creator or at least with a few angels who have always faced the daunting task of keeping our souls in very good repair. I'm not sure that our souls can fly as far as God's abode during this proverbial deep sleep which, according to Indian philosophers, enables the soul or Atman or What's his-name to leave the body in charge.

So, during its stay inside the body, the soul is partly dead – or imprisoned at least, which amounts to the same thing unless we are bent on splitting hairs. And half-dead souls are bound to wear black clothes that are worn in some countries as an expression of sadness about someone's death. Well, they can wear half-black clothes, adding a white touch to them – a white bow, for instance – but they shouldn't walk around their bodies in bikinis, especially if every bikini is one of those expensive designer jobs.

I don't think the pain I'm feeling has anything to do with my soul unless my soul feels like airing its grievances – by putting a complaint in the suggestions box. But where's this suggestions box, I wonder? In my liver, in my stomach, all over my body? I think this pain or whatever it is – the soul perhaps – has just set off on a round-the-body cruise because I detect its presence even in my shoulder blades, let alone in my groin, in my bowels, in all my vital organs without exception. These organs are not dead yet and I hope they're not even *half-dead*, which might allow me to live for another five years at least, otherwise I won't finish my oeuvre and life *en beauté*, as the French put it. And beauty is as important as the soul.

But, whatever I say, this pain does travel around my body and I'm partly reassured on account of its omnipresence: it doesn't seem to focus only on my liver, which would be disastrous, given the amount of alcohol I've been consuming for two weeks at least. Cirrhosis of the liver. The commonest cause of cirrhosis is alcohol consumption. I'm sick and tired of such sentences which sentence me to death – no doubt about that and other things related to death or fatal illnesses. And everything is related to death and a multitude of illnesses – if not to *all* of them – as every pessimist knows and writes in books and newspapers that are empowered to impose the death sentence for the crimes and misdemeanours committed in our world. So am I, by the way.

'Syria's heritage imperilled.' 'Job growth falls off surprisingly fast in U.S.' 'Judge subpoenas Spanish princess.' 'Prison death prompts new violence at Gaza border.' 'Kosovo talks break off as deep ethnic rift persists.' 'Putting profit over clients hurt Barclays.' 'A new gun lobby gains clout in U.S.' 'A new kind of class struggle.' 'Leaked files pull back curtain on trillions in hidden wealth.' 'Tribe sees its culture for sale. Hopis of Arizona seek to halt Paris auction, but laws to help are lacking.'

No comment. Let's watch the news first, and everyone will have an opportunity to comment at the end. I watch the news and read these articles, but I have no wish to say that everything is for sale in our world because it goes without saying and I let it go; it goes very far indeed and nothing can stop these sales, emails and what not. There's an article I like very much, which doesn't mean I don't like *all* of them to some extent, provided they announce the end of the world and my end as well. Why should the show go on after my death? Let the death of the world coincide with my own death, otherwise I might feel sad on my deathbed, saying to myself, 'Why should they live in my absence?'

The article I have in mind is entitled *The urge to purge* (by Paul Krugman). 'The push to see an economic depression as a necessary punishment for past sins is as strong as ever.' We are inveterate sinners and our daily misdeeds give rise to depressions and nervous breakdowns, for if God allows a situation like that to go unpunished He is asking for trouble or the Second Flood. So what to do? Should we thwart God's plans and obliterate his punishments? Or should we bow down before Him and beg for mercy? Some think we should bow to the inevitable and liquidate everything instead of trying to hasten recovery, saying to ourselves, 'We need monetary and fiscal stimulus. Liquidationism is a destructive doctrine – by turning our problems into a morality play of sin and retribution, it helps condemn us to a deeper and longer slump.'

I don't feel like talking about economic slumps; and yet they bother me now and then, making me think about how to enjoy life fully without going bankrupt twice a year. I no longer go to three-star restaurants on account of my diabetes which, luckily for me and my girlfriends, doesn't yet hold sway over my whole body, being in its prime, so to speak. 'It's rather immature for my age, don't you think?' I said to my doctor.

'Yes, yes,' he answered. 'But you'd better not say to it, "Stop being so silly and immature, my dear diabetes!"'

'What's the origin of this illness? The original sin or the sins I commit round the clock, even in my sleep? A non-stop sinning, I call it. A non-stop flight to Hell.'

'The notion of macroeconomics as morality play has a visceral appeal that's hard to fight,' my doctor said with a frown. 'The same goes for diabetes and other fatal illnesses. You're always dragging morality into the conversation. This pernicious habit of yours is also a sin, you know. And in your case it may become a mortal sin because you should go on a diet instead of liquidating your body. You drink too much, you think too much. Don't tense your shoulders, just relax. And don't forget to take my magic pills. They won't cure you, of course, but they'll allow you to live a little longer. Some people try hypnotism to cure themselves of addictions. I suspect you have a drinking problem. And you should tighten your belt if you wish to reward me adequately for my kindness and medical skills.'

My doctor is addicted to long-winded monologues and often pontificates on how I should behave to please him and deserve his esteem largely dependent on my status symbols and bank accounts. And my bank accounts are not voluminous enough to make sure that his investigation of the pain I mentioned earlier will give a satisfactory answer to my question: Am I dying? If I say to him I feel this pain all over my body, he will not speak of metastasis, but may insist on a sort of overall analysis – cell by cell – to find out which cell belongs to the family of cancers. And there are many cells in my body and probably some of them are devoted to the cause of diseases to the extent of destroying my body in spite of its apparent hospitality. I don't think my body treats them badly; and yet I drink wine, beer and even whisky that is sure to kill a number of cells, making their comrades swear vengeance on their killer. And this army isn't likely to kill whisky or even champagne because,

whenever I get a cork out of a bottle, the contents of this bottle begin to die; all these alcoholic beverages I'm speaking of crumple up in agony as I pour them into my glasses. Once inside my body, they die definitively and the army of vengeful cells invariably aims its rifles at my vital organs that are unable to withstand its numerous and murderous onslaughts.

Are they cancerous cells or not? That is the question and this question can't be answered unless you know *exactly* what goes on inside your body – and not in your absence, mind you. Suppose you read the following sentence, 'The smell of cigarette smoke confirmed what he had suspected: there had been a party in his absence.' You go away and come home a week later only to find that your house is regularly used by your friends who need a lot of rooms for their cocktail and bachelor parties. Immediately you ring them up and they say the accusations are not true, but there's no smoke without fire – that's what *you* say to them in an accusatory tone of voice. What can you say to your cells? I smell a rat? You know they're up to something, but you simply have no idea what to say and sometimes it is important to resort to a lot of right words uttered in the right place at the right time. 'The key to success is to be in the right place at the right time,' as they say and they're right for once; at least the words they utter belong to the category of 'right words'.

Of course I'd rather speak to my cells than to my doctor who is a pompous old prig, judging from what *he* says and does in my presence, and probably in my absence as well. Besides, he is totally incapable of taking a joke. I wasn't serious when I broached the subject of original sin in relation to my diabetes which, incidentally, *might* have originated in original sin, come to think of it: Wasn't that apple too sweet? Anyway, the doctor is totally wrong when he blames me for being too moral because I'm rather *amoral*: I am at one with Nietzsche for whom humanity is situated beyond good and evil – but not beyond the grave, mind you. We're of the same mind on most moral, amoral and philosophical issues, given that most of these issues dance with Zarathustra on his and his master's mountains.

Nothing happens in your absence, as far as your cells and illnesses are concerned: they love you so much they can't bring themselves to take leave of you or let you leave them for the sake of some journey or other. You're not allowed to leave your own house which, to all intents and purposes, belongs to your cancerous cells all the more irremediably since they *own* your house and you're just a glorified lodger. It's often said that if you have a cat, you no longer own the house where this cat lives and eats: just feed your cat who tolerates your presence insofar as you feed him or her properly. But cats are adorable creatures and cancerous cells can't even play the part of the Beast in the famous story that features a beauty and a monster – everyone knows this story or a film version of it and ugly people hope they'll be loved by princesses even if they never go to beauty parlours.

Not every beast is a prince in disguise and the cells I'm talking about – it is better not to repeat the word 'cancerous' too often – are just beasts and nothing or rather nobody else, given their propensity for destroying you. Even if these cells *were* beautiful princes and princesses, I wouldn't fall in love with them; and yet many people fall in love with those who kill them, as Oscar Wilde put it. Actually his account of this affair differs from mine: he depicts the same situation, but in reverse order. From *his* point of view, my cells love me to such an extent they can't refrain from killing me; I'm supposed to reciprocate and love them in my turn. I mean, every true gentleman thinks he is duty bound to love the woman who loves him dearly: he shouldn't spurn her love unless he doesn't mind behaving like a cad. But in this particular case I'm prepared to behave like a cad, kicking these pernicious cells out of my house or rather out of my body. Anyway, my body is my castle, isn't it?

I often talk to my soul and I don't see why I should shun any verbal contact with my cells that might prove to be sensitive to my words, provided I'm persuasive and pathetic – an old disfigured gentleman. (My face swelled up where I was stung by a bee.) But first I talk to myself, for my mother used to warn me against making hasty decisions: it might be better not to speak to my cells at all, otherwise they're sure to swell with pride when listening to my speech. (My leg puffed up all round the insect bite.) It is difficult to know how to approach such a complex situation, but I really ought to approach it in a more scientific manner – in a very mature and systematic way. By the way, I *am* disfigured and try as I may, I can't hide my new ugliness between parentheses and suchlike ploys destined to conceal our approaching death. I wonder if there are *really* so many insects inside my room. Does the fault lie with the cells?

On second thoughts, I decided to talk to them, saying to myself, 'No harm in trying. If you don't talk to them, they might think you're resolved to ignore and offend them. Your cells take professional pride in their work and you should respect their feelings, otherwise they won't respect yours. They'll no longer respect your body and whatever happens to be inside it. They haven't killed you yet because they respect your body and the advantages it offers them – creature comforts, so to speak. You should talk to *them* and not to *yourself*. Why *should* you talk to yourself? You've no intention of committing suicide. Of course your doctor never fails to remind you of your drinking problem. And I shouldn't forget that I'm under my doctor's orders to cut down on fatty food and to drink no alcohol for at least six months.'

Usually I stop talking to myself as soon as my doctor turns up in one of the corners of my interior monologue. So I do my best to forget about him, but since I can't forget about my cells – the pain reminds me of them all the time – I turned to them last night and struck up a conversation with these complete strangers. (I know them only through my pains and fears.) I wished to tell them, 'You're full of good intentions, but you never do anything about them!' but then I changed my mind and decided not to rub them up the wrong way. So I said, 'Good morning! How are you today?'

'We're fine, thank you.'

It is no easy task to interpret these words because they sound so conventional you're at a loss to know what they mean, what their intentions are; and you doubt their sincerity. People do all they can to sound cheerful whenever they're asked about their health, wealth and projects – even if they're dying and their companies are on the edge of ruin. Some of them even say 'fine' on their deathbeds because they want you to believe they're sure to take a non-stop flight to Paradise – no stopover in Purgatory, if you please – and so they already see the light at the end of the tunnel and then the tunnel fades away, leaving the light alone. If you ask them, 'Do you see the light at the end of the tunnel?' they may answer, 'There's nothing but light. No more tunnels, no more lives. Nirvana, nirvana, nirvana.'

But I shouldn't forget I'm not talking to these people who walk through their tunnels and pay no attention to my cells and their destructive work bent on destroying my hopes, prospects, projects and the bottles I intend to drink in the near future; and also in the *distant* future. I say to the cells: 'Do you intend to ruin my hopes and remove all these bottles from my life?'

'Of course we'll remove them,' they answer. 'You have to give up drinking for health reasons.'

'Are you my benefactors or enemies?'

'Do you recall what Mephistopheles says to Faust?'

‘He wants to shower us with presents but destroys everything instead. Or he’s bent on destroying everything but willy-nilly has a beneficial influence on humanity. I confuse Goethe with Dostoevsky. Doesn’t matter! Could you please tell me what *you* intend to do?’

‘We want to shower you with presents.’

II

These cells multiply, replenish the Earth. The whole history is swarming with them: wherever you go, you find these cells and their progeny that crawls under your feet and bites you from time to time. And you have no time to elude the bites because they're everywhere, not only in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* where they proliferate so fast you can hardly turn the heavy pages. You turn them as fast as you can, but the cancerous cells go even faster, leaving the book and invading your private space, your privacy on which they shamelessly obtrude as they disregard the laws of physics and common sense. You can say to yourself and your mind, 'I am sure that common sense will prevail in the end,' but it doesn't prevail, contrary to your expectations, and the book enters your life as if it was an unexpected visitor, a newborn gatecrasher. It barges through the crowd of your thoughts and sensations, and you have no alternative but to accept this intrusion: you're not dead yet and only death can allow you to get rid of this decline and fall – of our history.

Of course our history pursues you, even if you withdraw from the world (and history) to live a solitary life on a desert island where no savages will ever keep you company in spite of your admiration for Daniel Defoe. The point is you can't withdraw from history (and from parentheses) either on desert islands or at home – in your bed in the depth of which many nightmares are bound to remind you of the Second World War, of Stalin's cruelty. You can't withdraw from yourself either and your own self is linked to history – not only to your mother's life and her body which also has its own history where you were born and where you would like to die, according to some philosophers.

The decline of the Roman Empire has a lot in common with your own body, its decline and decay due to the military action of cells and other instruments of doom which never leave you alone because they're the emissaries of the Devil; and His rule is everlasting, according to some theologians. Without the Devil, they argue, there's no good and no God, for good should be counterbalanced by evil, otherwise no one will ever know the difference between these two phenomena and also the value of good and virtue. Virtue can shine only in the darkness of evil, as the saying goes: you're doomed to suffer for the sake of light and hope radiating from the end of the Bible, from many resurrections and hymns methodically performed to the glory of God.

Unfortunately the virtue of my body cannot shine at all – even in the presence of the malignant tumours I've got inside my self, ego and other components of my body that continues to decay either rapidly or slowly. What is certain, however, is that it decays and rots like the fruit you leave to rot either on the trees or in the fields, which amounts to the same thing because it doesn't really matter where you rot: what counts is your decay and death. I'm tempted to compare the decay of my body to that of the Roman Empire, and yet I know for sure that in none of my former lives did I live at that time or fight either for Roman Emperors or against them and their legions. Decay is universal. You can compare it to anything and anyone, provided you speak of earthly creatures, either animate or inanimate: no one knows for sure what goes on in other corners of the universe where there's probably enough room for unpretentious immortals.

'People want to work at home and avoid the tumult of being in an office. More and more students are opting for online courses and avoiding relating to teachers and other students.' I got this piece of information from an issue of the *International Herald Tribune*, not from any screen; and yet I've got a computer and a television set through which I communicate only with the dead who can't walk by my side to instruct me in the use of pen and pencil, of quill and water music. 'Cities were once the engines of civilisation because the collision of many

personalities and ideas and dreams created technological, social and political innovation and progress.' I can't agree more with this newspaper printed a few days ago and not in the days of Marcus Aurelius who might have said something along these lines, judging from his famous book which I opened on my lap last night when in the mood for his thoughts; they coincide with mine and therefore do not estrange me from my species.

My species doesn't always think about life in terms of dignity because it simply forgets this word that can be replaced by more useful words and expressions such as: 'investment', 'capital investment', 'investment bank'. What could they say about dignity, I wonder? They don't say to themselves, 'I think everyone should be able to die with dignity' because they don't think about death at all as if they could carry on playing with their computers and cell phones forever, even in the Hereafter about which they don't think either. They pray, of course, but they pray for their lives, not for their afterlives, and they're probably right if they keep in mind Nietzsche's teaching and Jewish precepts. The point is that they don't think at all because their thoughts are more akin to four-letter words than to the Talmud, the Kabbalah and the basement of the Jewish Museum from where I look at the world, at the stars. If you wish to go up, you have to go down first, otherwise you risk losing your self-esteem and probably your very life, given that your life means nothing unless it is a real life, whatever it means.

Marcus Aurelius says we should behave with dignity and independence to the detriment of the thoughts that are likely to distract us from dignity and the point where death and life meet in a warm, fraternal embrace. We may accomplish our task in less than 10 minutes, but even this task should be accomplished with dignity – as if it was our last action in this world. Everything should be done on one's deathbed so one shouldn't content oneself with one's groans and moans, with one's agony and last words. To some extent, every last word is a first word and vice versa – otherwise we can't live properly either on earth or under it and even heaven isn't likely to accept our bodies and souls unless our last words are also our first words.

Marcus Aurelius also says the outside world is bound to involve us in its plans for this and that – for cities and countries, for ecology and democracy, for home economics and growth hormones, and consequently our job involves travelling to London and Singapore, to Geneva and Madrid. And our friends say, 'The plot of his life is too involved – we can't understand it.' 'The plot of her life is too involved – we can't understand it.' Neither she nor I understand it, to tell the truth; and both she and I are always telling the truth. We just move from one place to another, from one thought to another as if we could really move within space and time, within their bounds, within the bounds of eternity. How often do we forget about the point where life and death meet forever?

PART THREE

In one of my long-winded speeches, I said to myself I should wait before tackling the problem of Part III because I had many other problems to turn my attention to and these problems were connected with my moving to Belgium where I had found an English cottage about which I had dreamt in my youth. Sure enough, the very word ‘cottage’ used to excite me to the extent of excluding palaces and castles from my imagination and the daily Soviet routine which might allow me to catch a glimpse of Russian equivalents of what is called a ‘chateau’ in France and also in England – when the English deign to speak about the monuments one admires in the neighbourhood of the Loire. In the 19th century, the Russians adopted the word ‘cottage’, thinking they were mature enough to metamorphose it completely, adjusting its contours and contents to their own needs and deeds – to their notion of architecture and its usefulness. What they nowadays dub ‘Russian cottage’ has nothing to do with its English counterpart. I shouldn’t use the word ‘counterpart’ in this connection, for fear of blurring lines, distinctions and boundaries between reality and fantasy, authenticity and inaccuracy, originals and fakes. During my speeches I swear quite a lot, but even I draw the line at saying certain words which remain beyond these lines; and yet they’re not fakes, contrary to what happens in the domain of architecture, especially if the Russians attempt to re-write its history from *their* point of view.

What I mean to say boils down to a clear distinction between a Russian cottage and an English one, and this distinction is so clear and important that, when writing to my friends about this joyful event, about this new page in the book of my life, I make it crystal clear I bought an *English* cottage, not its *Russian* equivalent, counterpart, cousin or colleague. I also send them a few photographs which corroborate my assertion, excluding from my friends’ visions and thoughts any vestige of what they’re used to visualising when reminded of Russian houses; these look like huts maladroitly borrowed from some remote village.

We all know that the outside world is a mixture of nationalities and languages. No wonder we often hear the following question, ‘What are the basic constituents of the mixture?’ Men, animals, roundabouts, shops, boutiques, trees, several moons – Jupiter has at least 16 moons – and a lot of black holes into which these constituents invariably plunge headlong as if hoping to have a swim in the Black Sea. At least within my walls there are no black holes; and yet I wouldn’t mind having a swim in the Black Sea which doesn’t necessarily remind one of black holes and death, of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, of Babylon and Schumer, of high culture and writers of genius. Of course Pushkin often looked at the Black Sea as he stood on some crag or other, but he didn’t disappear in it because the Black Sea wasn’t a black hole in the days of Pushkin and Lermontov. Today, there are only black holes in the cosmos and even snowwomen are black – not only on account of pollution and frightful weather reports.

I can’t devote my time to the cosmos only and it is high time I paid more attention to a small portion of it; however small and insignificant, this portion, alias my flat, must eclipse for a while the rest of Creation and even the stars. I don’t always look up whenever I take a stroll by night – Thales’ destiny doesn’t appeal to me – but when I do notice the stars I don’t analyse them because I can’t tell one bear from the other and even Andromeda escapes my notice, overpowered by my crass ignorance. Is that what they call two proverbial constellations? There’s a small bear in the sky, if I remember rightly; and a big bear keeps her company.

I park my car in Versailles. A man comes up to me and says my car is parked illegally. I answer him and he says, ‘You’re not even French.’

‘Careful you don’t slip – there’s water on the floor.’ My guardian angel said nothing of the kind. Actually he (or she) didn’t say anything when I put a plastic bag into the rubbish bin and turned back, heading for my car which was to take me to the market. My guardian angel saw me slip on the marble floor and he knew I would break four ribs as a result of his negligence. Why didn’t he protect my body from the harmful effects of this fall? Of course I ought to have clasped my hands, and glancing upward, implored divine assistance – before leaving my flat that morning covered in a thick shroud of snow. I did not, but I’m sure my guardian angel paid no attention to this sin of omission: his mission was to make me realise I had to leave my house, my castle and France in order to settle somewhere else. Nor did he prevent the man I touched upon in the previous paragraph from insulting me near the marketplace, for he knew I would feel offended and reflect on human injustice and iniquity related to Versailles, to Paris – to France in general.

I spend a week in Touraine and when I come back, I have dinner and go to bed where I often forget my worries and the fatigue I accumulate in the course of my long forays into parallel and perpendicular worlds. I wake up around 2 a.m. and reach for the nearest light switch. I wish I could write at this point, ‘Mysteriously, the light came on, although no one was near the switch.’ It is always pleasant to speak of light, even if the light you write about doesn’t make its appearance at the end of the proverbial tunnel, on the threshold of some imaginary paradise.

My hand was near the switch and it actually touched it ever so slightly: my light is activated by the slightest pressure. Contrary to my expectations – for once they were neither great nor small – the light didn’t come on. I can’t even say I had expected anything: over time, switching on lights becomes automatic and you don’t think about this action in biblical terms, harking back to the Creation and God’s mythical injunction. Instead of light and its benevolence, I saw darkness and I didn’t say to myself we needed another god – or the same God, for that matter – to switch on the universal light, destroying darkness in my flat and also elsewhere. I won’t remain in my flat for the rest of my life, and to go to my new house, alias my cottage, I must drive more than 300 kilometres, which is out of the question if some light, however weak and sickly, doesn’t assist me on the road.

To tell the truth, I didn’t pray; and yet I know that sometimes one *must* pray, otherwise darkness settles down in one’s flat and castle, covering furniture, bathrooms and other rooms with its blankets and even with one’s blood, for one can’t live without light and, if surrounded by darkness on all sides, one has no alternative but to bump against tables and their legs, wounding one’s own legs and other parts of one’s body. That’s how blood is born in one’s flat which would never have seen blood, if the light hadn’t shown its true nature, its treacherous disposition. Of course I know my flat by heart: it’s not for nothing that I’ve lived in it for more than 32 years; but some chairs – I don’t know their whereabouts by heart – always get in the way and I fall and may break another rib or two, if I don’t manage to protect my fragile bones from the law of gravity. ‘*C’est grave, c’est grave*,’ as the French say; and yet, when talking about a situation in these terms, they don’t *always* think about the law of gravity and its cruelty.

Well, I didn’t fall as I proceeded to the nearest corridor to find out if the disappearance of light was a local phenomenon confined to my room, to the space where my bed and consequently my dreams are located at night: daydreaming is a more spacious phenomenon, for it can take place even in the middle of the street, in the midst of cars, buses and bicycles. I grope my way along the walls – why not use the present tense? – and realise that the light I’m looking for doesn’t hide in the corridor where darkness seems to have replaced it forever; at

least that's the feeling I get as I continue to grope my way along the walls which do not really differ from the ones I had to cope with when trying to get out of my room. Yes, all this is part of eternal recurrence, of the doctrine propounded by Pythagoras and others: I *continue* to grope my way along the walls as I write about this incident, this bad or good omen that seems to intimate the following absolute truth: you must leave France before it is too late.

Well, I am in the entrance hall now and I desperately try to locate the key I left in the lock last night; I know that if I don't succeed, I won't be able to open the front door of my flat to find out whether the light I've lost in the course of my life *continues* to shine on the landing which separates my flat from that of my neighbours. Everything seems to be mine at present with the exception of the light on which I no longer am eager to count, for I never forgive those – men and women or just a phenomenon – who let me down and don't care about my wellbeing and creature comforts. I touch another switch and the landing responds by showing me all its nooks and crannies; and yet I don't really need them for the moment, given that I have no intention of going out around 2 a.m. Why should I leave my flat in the middle of the night? It is not a midsummer night and I can dream in my bedroom, provided I reach it despite the problems I may encounter on the way, in the corridor where my cat often ambles as he looks for my body and fingers, their warmth. And since my cat is not afraid of my feet, I should walk very carefully so as not to trample him to death. In this case, I'd better get down on all fours and head for my bed in this way, otherwise I may trip over my cat and hear a scream I don't want to hear because this kind of scream is associated in my mind with pain and death, not with the Hereafter and eternal bliss.

But I have to go to my cubbyhole first because the main switch – the one that lords it over the other switches and electricity in general – is situated within the bounds of this dark hole where I also keep the bottles I bought at various auctions many years ago. I get down on all fours – my cat might stroll in that area – and reach the cubbyhole in no time at all, for I can move rather quickly whenever I take the trouble to get on all fours. I even ask myself if I shouldn't spend the rest of my life like an animal, imitating my cat to some extent. My cat's movements and life in general do not seem to be hampered by the posture to which poor humans resort only exceptionally, when they have no other way of solving their problems and getting their neighbour or uncle off the hook. Actually my cat wouldn't be pleased if I asked him to walk on his hind legs because he is used to his present posture, to his present way of moving about, and he is unlikely to change his mind and habits on account of my requests and desires. It is I who should adopt his ways so as not to think about death all the time; and the only way to get rid of this thought, of this persecution, is to become an animal who doesn't know the first thing about death. 'Man has created death,' says Yeats.

Of course, on the threshold of death, many animals go to the woods where a number of deathbeds await them, making things easier for any dying animal who dies on the lap of the cosmos instead of being cooped up in some cubbyhole provided by his or her master. Nothing prevents me from going to the woods on the eve of my death; actually I go to the woods almost every day as if I thought that death could come at any moment, even during a period when my wellbeing and health seem to be beyond suspicion. Well, he *can* come at any moment and I wonder whether it's not better to stay at home all the time, not far from my bed which is unlikely to let me down in the presence of death and his scythe.

To cut a long story short – why doesn't Proust ever use this expression? – I touch the main switch and the light I've been looking for is suddenly restored to its original splendour which is associated in my mind with the

moment when God spoke to it for the first and last time. Actually I don't know whether God really *spoke* to light during that mythical moment, for if you say 'Let there be light', you seem to speak to your servant who is supposed to touch the main switch of the universe to illuminate entrance halls, landings, corridors, nebulae and planets: all of them need light to struggle for life successfully, without suffering defeats every other minute.

In the Soviet Union, they used to tell a lot of jokes and one of them related to the light we come across when re-reading the Bible; but the light about which they used to joke was manipulated by an electrician taking his cue from God Himself. 'Let there be light,' said an electrician as he took a candle out of his pocket. Well, I went one better when I switched on my lights through the agency of the main switch situated in the cubbyhole where I've got five *eurocaves* and more than a thousand bottles of wine.

'Let there be light,' says an electrician.

'Do you take yourself for God?' asks the hostess.

'It would be presumptuous of me to rule the world and its numerous waves. Besides, I'm not eager to shoulder all the blame for poor exam results.'

'What exams? What results?'

'Our life is nothing but a series of exams. And we fail all of them, don't we? Look at the world. And look at my candle. Isn't it beautiful? It's better not to use too many spotlights when dealing with our everyday life. Would you like to be standing alone on stage in the spotlight? Everybody would see your sins. This candle is able to hide them. Even your furniture looks better during your candlelit dinners. Why not spend your life at a dinner table adorned with candles and their lights?'

'What about jogging and other exercises? Should I run round the table?'

'Absolutely no sport! What counts is your spirit. You can drink a bottle of whisky every day – whenever you're in the mood for taking a cigar out of your mouth.'

'Are you alluding to Winston Churchill? He would have lived to the ripe old age of 120, if he hadn't drunk three bottles of champagne every morning.'

'Why should you train all your spotlights on death? Just watch the wax as it drips down the side of this candle.'

To cut a long story short, I finally managed to restore the lights, but I thought I should wait for a while before allowing myself to fall asleep because the lights could play another dirty trick on me, disregarding the wines and their fragility: the life of a bottle chiefly depends on the temperature to which it is exposed. But the lights turned out to be kind and caring: they were reluctant to prevent me from sleeping my fill after a long day – not the longest day in the history of mankind, I must admit – during which I drove from point T (Touraine) to point V (Versailles) without any coffee or tea break.

Nothing about my life excites me at present; and yet I felt excited as I returned to my bed after imitating God's exploit which I didn't accompany with the words known to every schoolboy, even if the schoolboy in question knows these words only because of the story I told some time ago – the story featuring an electrician and a curious hostess. I felt overexcited and even doctors say you might and indeed must drink something to appease or placate your nerves which are very sensitive to alcohol, to its soothing influence and all-too-human warmth. So I said to myself, 'I think I'll take their advice and open a bottle of Pomerol,' and I didn't add, 'It's easier said than done' because I did open the bottle I had in mind when hitting upon the idea of soothing my nerves with a bottle of red wine. I opened and drank it, emptying one glass after another, taking my time and that

of the night I was living through, and consequently the night grew smaller and smaller until it reached the size associated with dawn and sunrise. In other words, I spent a quasi-sleepless night on account of the darkness created by my electricity which had been attacked neither by a glass of water nor by another example of my customary negligence. Indeed, I spilt no water on the wires over which I usually jump as I walk around my cubbyhole, and for once my cat had no desire to fiddle with the same wires – not in the course of that night anyway. I can't help wondering why I had to cope with that darkness after having slept for two hours in my bed which is not in the habit of springing surprises on anybody. I don't think the aforementioned power cut originated in one of my nightmares. For all their influence and magnitude, my nightmares have a tendency to remain private as they spread around my brain and body, answering to some sort of energy which is resolved to stuff a number of horrors into my sleep; but these horrors do not overstep the bounds of this sleep of mine and usually I don't wake in the middle of the night to find I can't avail myself of light and its biblical overtones. So I attribute the power cut I lived through three weeks ago to the energy I enlarged upon when talking about my mishaps and the insults made by a French passer-by who was keen to exclude me from the list of his compatriots.

Is that how one can prolong one's life beyond its limits? You write a huge paragraph, dwelling upon an unpleasant episode and this episode, which actually lasted only a quarter of an hour, becomes eternal and beautiful. You no longer remember its unpleasant aspects and plunge instead into immortality, into the Bergsonian duration you can undeniably trust as you struggle with time and its incurable shortness. By using the Proustian stratagem you dilate the arteries of time and realise that time no longer suffers from high blood pressure and is therefore unlikely to have a stroke, depriving you of the rest of your life: you would die as a result of this stroke or paralysis. God helps those who help themselves and, according to this saying, you're supposed to do your share of the work by writing long sentences, long paragraphs, long novels, which may enable you to dwell on an insignificant power cut for hours and hours.

And what about God's share of the work? Two days ago, I saw a documentary on God's power which is so omnipresent and omniscient one wonders why, now and then, God fails to interfere in our internal affairs; in other words, I say to myself there are power cuts in the universe. Our wars and other disasters we have to deal with round the clock are entirely due to the incidents related to these power cuts, to God's absence, to darkness.

In the early Eighties, two pilots felt it was their duty to tell the authorities about an object they saw in the sky while carrying out their customary tests. They might have been tempted to destroy this UFO, although they didn't say anything to this effect; but UFOs and their pilots have the knack of reading human thoughts through an in-built telepathic machine. No wonder the UFO's owner was annoyed by the earthlings and their murderous thoughts circulating around his omnipresent brain, and he began to annoy them in his turn – it was a male for once – by pulling their tail, so to speak. As a result of this mischief, the plane wasn't flying through the air as fast as it used to and the authorities, who watched the competition from their airport, got the feeling that, in spite of the noise made by the engines, the plane was literally *crawling* across the sky like a nine-week-old baby. Shortly afterwards it crashed into a clump of trees and unfortunately the pilots didn't live to tell the tale, as they say; in other words, they said nothing at all and the authorities didn't take the trouble to question them about their meeting with the extra-terrestrial warrior who stood amidst the same trees. And even today his white dress can be seen in the film I've been writing about for some time.

In the Russian film they talk about extra-terrestrials, but the white figure they show when describing the plane crash as a result of which two pilots died after a short battle with a flying saucer reminds me of angels, not of ordinary extra-terrestrial citizens. Is that what my guardian angel looks like? A white dress, not a black dinner jacket. I like the contrast of the white trousers with the black jacket, but for once I'm prepared to sacrifice the elegance of my taste to the requirements associated with guardians angels and the role they can play in one's life; and if wearing white dresses is their wont, a sort of ritual without which they can't guard one against heart attacks and road accidents, I bow to my guardian angel's pressure and allow him to wear whatever he wishes.

I shouldn't devote too much time to the Hereafter and its affinities with the world where I continue to struggle for life and murder death which doesn't want to die because death must fear death as much as other creatures. Is death a creature, my own flesh and blood? The answer to this question is beyond my ken and even God can't answer it, I suppose, because He has other fish to fry; and so do I, by the way. I mean there are many questions on my writing desk and even on the walls of my room where I probe into the mysteries of the world; and even this room of mine is a mystery to which I have no keys. I can't open anything in it, either a wall or a painting I hung on this wall many years ago. And I shouldn't busy myself with the Hereafter as long as I look perplexed while sitting down in front of my computer which waits for my fingers and their solutions to universal problems. As a Russian song has it, 'It's too early for me to die. I always have so many things to attend to when I come back home.'

How to reach the eternity I read about in Spinoza's works and *elsewhere*, as I often say to intimate there are other worlds on screens and in the streets where we walk and talk, thinking we know the streets in question and have no need to look up their names on a street plan. In point of fact, we walk, talk and think in the middle of *other* streets about which we know nothing or next to nothing, but we continue to talk about presidents and prime ministers instead of trying to find out where we are in order not to lie when answering the following question, 'Where is your office, then?'

'In another street.'

'What's the name of this street you're talking about?'

'I don't know.'

'You may get lost if you talk like that. Your office will get lost too. You'll lose your job as a result of your ignorance. And they'll say about you, "He's never managed to hold down a steady job."'

'There's nothing steady in this world of ours.'

'You're wrong. The last few years have seen a *steady* increase in the number of infections.'

There has been a *steady* decrease in the number of minutes I'm allowed to spend on Earth which happens to be the only planet accessible to my feet and hands: sometimes I just have to get down on all fours. Minutes, seconds, hours. Their procession moves through the streets and rooms at a steady pace and nothing can stop it – not even the universal conflagration, for eternal recurrence is already under way, paving the way to circular time and another decline and fall of the Roman Empire. These two processions – my time and theirs – are bound to meet in the middle of some street, but they will not fraternize, contrary to what usually happens when two armies are weary of the war and a lot of soldiers hug and kiss each other in the middle of a battlefield where their comrades say pensively, 'I think I'll have a bloodbath and go to the Hereafter.' As soon as my time gets in touch

with the future, it will disappear of its own accord without taking the trouble to consult my doctor who might say to both my time and the future, 'I've given him a clean bill of health.'

The only problem I've been facing since my birth is time and its procession which I'm tempted to compare to the manifestation I didn't take part in despite my aversion to the present government and its doings, moods, whims and hesitations. Millions of people could be seen in the streets of Paris, provided you had enough money to hire a helicopter and fly over Paris for hours and hours: 'There has been a steady increase in the number of demonstrators,' as a journalist said to his microphone. I wish he could say something along these lines about my life, my time-procession, my minutes and years, my future. Millions of hours will gather to demonstrate against death.

II

I've achieved a lot in my life and I feel I've had a good run for my money. My last words? Even if I had a time machine on my writing desk, I wouldn't travel as far as my death to find out what I'll say on my deathbed, right before the very last moment when only angels speak to you to let you know where and how you have to go: I'm not sure you're allowed to *fly* in their company in the direction of Paradise and St Peter's keys. Usually they say 'a pair of wings', but I wouldn't mind having as many as *four* wings: in my childhood I preferred dragonflies to birds. It is probably more useful to find out how many wings I'll have upon my arrival in Paradise, but I have no time machine at my disposal – I don't even have a pair of stilts – and therefore I'll have to wait until my last conscious moments when I'll tell my dearest friends, 'Please, pay attention to what I'm about to say. These are my last words, my last word – duty. By the way, can you see any wings sprouting from my shoulders?'

Can one be happy in the world where I live and try to achieve a lot, although there are heavy odds against people succeeding in such a bad economic climate, as they point out in the newspapers I buy almost every morning as I go to Montrichard – a small town in Touraine – and buy whatever I need for a bottle of wine I'll drink around 8 p.m. You can add that artistic climate is even worse than the European economy, the euro and other components of material life; in other words, our spiritual life has lost its stuffing or *prima materia* out of which humanity used to create our masterpieces. Suppose you're acclaimed by both the multitude and your peers and, after finishing yet another masterpiece, you say to yourself, 'Now I can rest on my laurels for a while.' And no one says to you, 'Just because you've got the Nobel prize for literature doesn't mean you can rest on your laurels.' On the contrary, everyone says to you, 'After 50 years of literary labours, you should lie down for a much-needed rest.'

Let us compare your laurels to an ordinary cushion that has lost its stuffing over 40 or 50 years of loyal servitude. You remember what your mother said to you 20 years ago, 'This cushion is losing its stuffing,' but you paid no attention to these judicious remark as if taking your cue from those managers and agents who declare that the number of geniuses in today's world is equal if not superior to what our ancestors used to come across in concert halls, theatres and libraries. The world is losing its stuffing, but there are many journalists on the editorial staff of the *New York Times* and they write day in day out, 'Masterpiece, masterpiece, a stroke of genius, masterpiece, a touch of genius, masterpiece, from the age of three, she showed signs of genius.' Now she is 33 and I can't find any signs of genius in her brain, but there's a laurel wreath on her head.

Let us compare these laurels – or any other laurels, for that matter – to an ordinary cushion that continues to lose its stuffing, for the show must go on; and it is a genuine show, given that every time you go to bed, you find one or two feathers on the sheets and, needless to say, these feathers are very beautiful, almost as beautiful as a laurel wreath. But you don't feel comfortable when you put your head down on the cushion and try to fall asleep before your organism gets used to the fatigue you've felt for more than an hour so that you did all you could to reach your bed – and this questionable, unreliable cushion of yours – in no time at all. You're resting on your laurels now – I'm sorry for such a down-to-earth comparison – but the sleep you've been waiting for since you first felt the onslaught of the fatigue eludes you. This reminds me of Glinka's opera *Ruslan and Ludmila* in the middle of which one of the heroes finds himself in a harem or a brothel. No wonder the long-awaited sleep 'flees him', to use his own expression. He goes on as follows, 'A multitude of familiar shades are dancing around me and I glimpse them fleetingly through a door left ajar.'

Once I found myself in a similar situation and my virtuous soul wanted me to take a sleeping pill, but I wouldn't hear of it, needless to say; for an hour or two I kept a watchful eye on those women to see how they

behaved in the vicinity of my room. There are no women either in the vicinity of my bed or anywhere else: when I look out of the window, I see no women, but two tractors move in the field I've never crossed for fear of getting lost; and a few birds are singing someone's praises. Nor are there any laurels, but I still cherish the idea I hit upon last night – to compare this day and age to a cushion that is losing its stuffing. Why am I so fond of this comparison? Because today you can't rest on your laurels or rather you can't *fall asleep* on your laurels and, as every poet knows, sleep is the best cure for fatigue and anxiety. You're used to keeping your head in a higher position, which usually enables you to get in touch with God Who never condescends to join you on the cushion that continues to lose its stuffing in spite of your frustrations. So today you can't rest on your laurels because the cushion your head is lying on is too hard and therefore uncomfortable.

'I've achieved a lot in my life,' and your relatives nod their heads so as not to contradict you at a critical moment, in the middle of a turning point, otherwise you may take a right turn instead of a left turn, getting lost in another afterlife situated *beyond* the Hereafter. What *have* I achieved, may I ask? In my youth I wrote an essay on Balzac's creative output, but I've lived without him for almost 50 years and, frankly speaking, I'm in no mood for resuming our relationship which might have got lost in another universe. But during my visit to a local bookshop, I lighted upon a CD for which one of my favourite actors – Michael Lonsdale – had recorded *Le chef-d'oeuvre inconnu* – a short story I must have read in my youth, and I bought the CD as if I *could* recapture my youth through words and images. A painter of genius – for once the word 'genius' is not out of place – explains at length what an artist should achieve in order to resurrect a fragment of the past, a human body one has been in love with for many years, if not for eternity. I've achieved a lot in my life, but what about the past? Have I raised it from the dead? And what about eternity? Have I reached its borders, its own garden of Eden?

The old man, alias the painter of genius, talks about space, life and the lifeless bodies which often meet you in the middle of a picture gallery where you're bound to stumble upon many corpses – along with the masterpieces created by Giovanni Bellini and Giotto. Lifeless creatures, corpses. The old man repeats these words over and over again, taking no notice of the saying 'Sarcasm is the lowest form of humour' – because he's got only a smattering of English and has no intention of learning Shakespeare's sonnets by heart. He talks about light and numerous shades, about volumes and a leg that has lost its stuffing: you're not eager to hold it for a while, pressing it against your cheek; you know that any display of affection would be incongruous, if not ridiculous. And then the old artist shows his masterpiece to a few young colleagues who see a lot of colours and lines that seem to reflect disorder, the Dark Ages, the Darkest Ages, this day and age – not the 19th century, mind you – our declines and falls, our mess, our Black Mass. But the visitors spot a foot that seems to have escaped from the disaster to which humanity bows every day, saying, 'Technological progress has been so rapid over the last few years,' and 'The recent free elections mark the next step in the country's progress towards democracy.'

Is that what my novel looks like? A number of lines, cubes, colours, a criss-cross pattern, another criss-cross pattern, a dark passage, my underground, my Jewish museum, my Holocaust.

Eternity lives at the centre of a circle or probably inside it, covering the whole of its space with the exception of the circumference used by time that can't help moving along it as if this circumference was a motorway of sorts. Time is duty bound to *travel* along this motorway or road – without either reducing or picking up its speed. In the Old Testament the sun comes to a standstill, allowing the Jewish army to do what had to be done in

accordance with eternal laws, but time continued to move along its circumference to enable the Jews to do the job, which means that time never stops – as long as it preserves its old name and identity. The sun comes to a standstill and resumes its journey after a while, whereas time cannot afford the time off work to drink a cup of herb tea after dipping a few *madeleines* in it.

Suppose I live through the same moment in a few millennia, in a couple of eternities: I'm not supposed to bully time into doing something it doesn't want to do by saying, 'I hate to hurry you, but I have to rise from the dead in a few minutes.' Anyway, time isn't likely to obey commands and listen to my pleas: it would resign from the universe rather than submit itself to new rules. I have no alternative but to wait until my turn comes at last and the circumference along which time keeps walking with a limp enables me to join the Eternal Recurrence Club. And what about my body? Can it wait until this tangible proof of immortality deigns to unveil itself? And what about my cells and their potential tumours? Will all tumours disappear on D-Day, on N-Night? And what if they say to my body, 'We couldn't care less about your immortality and circular time. Our time isn't circular because it looks like any straight line and this straight line of ours will never become a circle, however often you may bend it, hoping to rise from the dead and enjoy yourself in a night club.'

'Do you think you're a cut above Pythagoras and Nietzsche?' I'll say to them, brandishing my fists.

'We don't know who they are and what they think about in their leisure hours. But we do know that your cancer is ready for action.'

'How do you mean?'

'You've already died many times, but you've never risen from the dead.'

'You can't die if you're not alive, if you're dead already.'

'Death can visit you as many times as he wants, paying no attention to what state you're in. In a way, you die on the day of your birth and whatever you happen to live through occurs within the framework of death.'

Even if my cells keep silent, I'm bound to hear some voices warning me against my body's fragility and whims, and I'm weary of my body's whims, caprices, quirks and foibles. My mother said to me once or twice, 'You have to get used to other people's quirks and foibles,' but she never said anything along these lines about my cells; and yet our health depends on how we adjust to our cells and their foibles, otherwise we would never care about varied and balanced diets. And our doctors would never say to us, while nodding their heads and wagging their index fingers, 'A good diet helps build the body's natural defences. You should adjust to your cells' quirks, you know.'

'What are the quirks you're talking about?'

'Diabetes and liver cancer.'

I *am* weary of my body: I've been going out and in with the same cells to the same doctors for years and I've just grown weary of it; and I'm not in a class of my own whenever I complain about my body's crimes and punishments. The body is a nuisance and everybody knows this truth – even those who are destined to die in their sleep. In the meantime they jog and go swimming to keep their bodies in proper repair or in a state they regard as compatible with the requirements voiced by Alain Delon two decades ago, 'I've no dread of death but I don't want to be bedridden.' So they die in their sleep and their bodies don't seem to be impaired by time and space to which they're always subjected, even if their owners wish to preserve them from outside and inside shocks. They live in a sort of glass container where some astronauts – at least those one spots in Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* – are obliged to spend a few years before landing on Jupiter or another distant planet from

which we receive no messages as if its inhabitants awaited our visits, not our signals. They die in their sleep – our healthy individuals, not Jupiterians – but before falling asleep for the last time, they curse their bodies which are unable to ensure the safety of their organs and members throughout eternity or numerous immortalities.

Anyway the body cannot rival the brain in complexity; your own brain, however prehistoric it may prove to be in some context or other, is ambitious enough to require your guardian angel to put its needs first – to the detriment of your body, mind you. They read your works in the 24th century, but your body continues to rot in your tomb or elsewhere: there will be a lot of body- or bonesnatchers in the 23rd century. And your brain, for all its intelligence and ingenuity, won't be in a position to guard your mortal remains against those immortal forces that one can chance upon in any bestseller.

I always complain about my memory and its proverbial shortness, and thus I may push it away or even banish it from my presence, let alone from my room where I try to remember so many things during my solitary nights punctuated by bouts of insomnia and nightmares. It has become a sort of proverb or saying because I can't help repeating the phrase, 'Loss of memory is a natural part of old age,' although it is not true, as a matter of fact: even in my childhood I couldn't remember much, especially if asked to memorise a poem. I might have developed and invigorated it – my memory, that is – had my family illegally owned a prayer-book through which anyone is bound to get in touch with God, if only perfunctorily, for God must be pleased to learn that you're interested in His persona. And it is in God's power to improve your memory – or anything, for that matter, because even a plant grows quicker and gets more sun if it looks at God; like a sunflower, for instance.

They say that St John of Kroonstad – the spelling suggested by my computer – was far from brilliant in his childhood: at least the school reports never described him as a very promising pupil. Of course his teachers would have changed their minds, had they learnt he was to become a Russian saint, but they were neither seers nor fortune-tellers and he continued to get bad marks in maths and dictation. At home he devoted his spare time to tears and prayers, and in the long run the Almighty heard both so that He must have said to Himself, 'I should take care of this boy, otherwise he may never become a saint.' Of course God must know that ignorance is a trump card often played by saints and ordinary ecclesiastics who say to you, 'Do you remember what St Paul said about knowledge and science? Your faith provides both – that's what he said. So think about God and you'll be happy forever, even in the Hereafter.' But God must have seen that the future saint was unhappy and melancholic, otherwise he wouldn't have cried so often and with such intensity: according to a legend, his weeping was heard three miles away.

According to Nicholas of Cusa, ignorance is the only tool one may use on one's way to God, but this kind of ignorance doesn't seem to be entirely divorced from learning: they go hand in hand towards the goal or God that only one's bewilderment and helplessness can reach, if only partially and insufficiently. Mr Learning says to Miss Ignorance, 'God is over there.'

'God can't be over there,' answers Miss Ignorance.

'Why do you think so?'

'Because no one can know for sure where God is.'

'But if I go in this direction, I'll reach His abode sooner or later. His abode and even His body.'

‘If you’re presumptuous enough to submit a report on your pilgrim’s progress, I’ll issue a denial of the report. My denial will prove to God that I respect and worship Him because I don’t think one can grab God’s arm to stop Him from running into the void.’

You’re aware of your own ignorance and that’s what brings you closer to God Who doesn’t care for those whose faith declines to sink into the never-ending, boundless substance of the inconceivable. Neither to yourself nor to others should you say, ‘God is like a sphere and His circumference is right under your nose. His centre is further off, but if you walk straight on, you’ll come to a T-junction. His centre is in the centre of this T-junction. And you’d better walk a bit quicker – it’s going to take forever if you go at this pace.’ Nicholas of Cusa thinks you should walk towards God, but whatever your speed, you’ll walk forever: even in the Hereafter you won’t meet God unless the Blessed Virgin intercedes with the authorities on your behalf.

This Road to God is well known for its unfriendly atmosphere and demon-infected pits into which a lot of pilgrims have fallen since the triumph of Christianity in Europe and elsewhere. A mystic writes in her diary, ‘When I thought I heard the Devil following me, I quickened my pace. The Devil wished to prevent me from meeting the Almighty.’ But whatever your speed, you’ll never get rid of Satan altogether unless the Blessed Virgin intercedes with the authorities on your behalf and St Peter welcomes you with a large smile and a pat on the shoulder.

At least I remember who talked about ignorance or rather a very particular kind of ignorance called ‘*docta ignorantia*’, which means I even remember a few Latin words, although my ignorance of the Latin language is known to my friends and enemies. But I don’t remember who advocated the complete overthrow of metaphysics by saying we should look for ultimate situations or borderline cases: life or death, suffering or the end of suffering taught by Buddhists. I know what the word ‘threshold’ means in my case, within my death-oriented mind and even now, though rather healthy and full of beans, I can see the other side, whatever that means in any philosophical context. I transcend personal, natural and cultural barriers for the sake of Transcendence which knows what to do with my angst and the suffering inflicted by the world, by the pits where so many corpses can be found.

Once or twice God saw me peeping through His curtains and keyholes; and yet I have no first-hand knowledge of what is traditionally called ‘Revelation’ which is said to overcome every barrier, however impenetrable and secret. I’m told that only ultimate situations can bring us to the threshold of real knowledge where all the opposites known to humanity have an inborn tendency to unite – like proletarians in Marx’s famous doctrine or saying. At least in my Lenin-influenced mind only proletarians unite day and night because they have nothing else to do: as usual they’re striking for a reduction in the working week and improved safety standards. (My *Marx*-influenced mind?) They say to each other, ‘The only option available to us is to strike,’ and they repeat this union call for revolution whenever they’re in no mood for filling their masters’ pockets with the money earned by them and their fellow workers, by their labours and horny hands.

So we can unite the opposites through proletarians only, unless we decide to make them *coincide*, which can’t be done by workers: none of them really coincides with his fellow worker, even during demonstrations, strikes and *bals populaires*. Many philosophers insist on the importance of what they call ‘Unity’ – the word that always evokes memories of their visits to churches. In a provincial church, churchgoers often find this unity as they look at walls and other surfaces where God is depicted in all His splendour, either amidst clouds or near the sun whose influence can’t be overestimated in the domain of religion, be it paganism or Christianity. God

seldom stands amidst constellations; and yet I always see Him flying through them as if He was an interstellar traveller for Whom the Earth did not mean a lot, being just one planet among so many astral bodies.

Many philosophers enlarge upon freedom and for some of them there's nothing else in the world because the world itself cannot exist without freedom of choice, freedom of speech and so on and so forth. But this proverbial freedom stems from your own soul or body; it may also stem from the outside world where there are passers-by and foreigners who bother you, get on your nerves or inspire you with determination. A pair of legs, on the other hand, often jolts you into action and you follow this pair of legs as long as they remain within your field of vision and in your mind: you can continue to enjoy their sex appeal through the agency of your imagination, even if you no longer recall their curves and length.

The inner and outer freedoms clash somewhere in the middle and this collision may give rise to Unity or some entity about which you can't say anything because the phenomenon in question lies outside your powers and thoughts. Try as you may, you cannot pinpoint precisely the whereabouts of this Unity (or entity). You think it is everywhere and do not bother to investigate the matter any further; and then you come across an object that jars with the rest of the world and you say to yourself, 'This object cannot belong to Unity.' And then a philosopher says something to the effect that Unity is not really One, and you think, 'This comment jars with the opinions I have heard expressed elsewhere.'

'You can choose whatever you like,' says one philosopher.

'You can't because someone else wants that too,' says another philosopher. 'Your hands clash in the middle of the table and you begin to quarrel instead of eating caviar.'

'I can choose another table.'

'But there's no caviar on that table of yours.'

'I can make do with oysters.'

'You can't choose the oysters you're used to because they're not available on the market. Besides, no one eats oysters in summertime. Do you think you can stop time and choose the season you like best? Do you like winter sports? But it is summertime you're confronted with.'

'I'll go to Norway, to the mountains.'

'And what if the snow melts before your very nose? Can you choose the right temperature for your life?'

'I can choose another life. I can even choose death.'

'And what if that other life doesn't feel like spending eternity in your company? Can you choose another eternity, another time?'

'I can embark on a spaceship and fly at the speed of light.'

'You should train for this journey day and night. Are you prepared to choose such a way of life?'

'Get off my back, will you?'

'I choose to stay on your back.'

'How long do you choose to stay on my back?'

'As long as I please. In my childhood, I decided to choose what I please. And ever since I've stuck by my decision.'

'So you agree with me, don't you?'

‘How do you mean?’

‘Your freedom of choice is boundless.’

Of course they also talk about the body that you cannot choose either before or after your birth which doesn’t depend on your will either; it doesn’t even depend on your mother’s or father’s will. They love each other or your father sleeps with your mother only for the sake of her heritage; in other words, he hopes to spend his life – or a part of it – sponging off your mother’s late father. One day, your mother says to him: ‘We campaign for the rights of the unborn child, don’t we?’

‘We do indeed,’ says your father.

‘But our children are neither born nor unborn. Don’t you wish to have a beautiful daughter?’

‘I’m not a paedophile. And even if I was one, I wouldn’t sleep with my own daughter.’

‘Of course not. But don’t you want to have children, a boy and a girl?’

‘I’m not ready yet for this experience.’

‘Indeed, I wish you would be a bit more mature. But I’ll take care of our child to allow you to mature at a snail’s pace. Take your time, my dear.’

‘And what about my dissertation on Chateaubriand? Children cry a lot and such a noisy environment isn’t conducive to a good night’s sleep, let alone to a dissertation on French literature. Besides, my mother always says to me and my father, “Get a good night’s sleep and you’ll feel better able to cope.” I won’t be able to cope if our daughter cries and screams round the clock.’

‘She’ll live in my parents’ castle.’

‘If we do have a daughter, she should stay with us. I trust your parents, but I’d like to see my daughter every day. And I wouldn’t like to hear her screams. And the noise she’s bound to make seems to be an insoluble problem.’

‘A problem shared is a problem halved.’

‘I think you missed the point of what I was saying.’

‘Have you got the truth into your thick skull yet? You won’t get any money from my parents, if we don’t have three children in the near future.’

You’re one of these children and you don’t love your father because you know why he had no alternative but to consent to your birth in the vale of tears. You cry a great deal and whenever you indulge in this hobby of yours, your father storms into the room in a fit of pique, shouting that he is on the point of losing his inspiration. You’re aware of the fact that your body is stuffed with your father’s genes and therefore you’re unable to fall in love with your body, let alone with your immortal soul which might have got stuck in your body by accident. Some time ago, it left the body of a criminal and was on its way to a crocodile – its future incarnation. At some point your body got in the way of its doing its job; the wandering soul had no choice but to accept your body without a murmur.

You would have chosen another body, another soul, had you been asked a few questions – prior to your conception, your sojourn in your mother’s womb. You might have answered these questions as follows, ‘Unless my potential father’s sperm is contained, irreparable damage will be done to my future body.’ But nobody said a word as if the army of guardian angels had been on holiday, skiing in the Alps or swimming in the Atlantic. You might have said to them, ‘Give me a call when you get back from holiday,’ but you didn’t say anything and

when you did say a few words and let out a piercing scream, it was already too late: your father's sperm was having the time of its life at your mother's expense.

THE VIRTUOUS CIRCLE

PART ONE

1

Don't you know who I am? It's too late to speak about these matters which are no matters at all, as I always say, because you need to tell a story in order to please everybody, including undertakers and funeral orators; but also some reader, another reader, another man in whose pocket you may find eternity, provided he's got all the money you've been dreaming about for centuries.

Your former lives, all this nonsense. What counts is your present life or death – call it what you wish – and it's pointless to write about it or anything else, even if you have this itch or that ditch in which you can lie forever, thinking about your posthumous glory and eternity which eludes you whenever you think about it. So you don't think about it any longer, and this 'longer' of yours is longer than any *longer* you've come across in the course of your destiny – as if it was your *real* eternity. Do they care about your personal eternity and not about the eternity they always talk about in their poems and problems? Eternity, eternity. Nobody, nothing, no problem, no poem – only this moment I can't relish because I'm in no mood for enjoying anything, not even a *salade niçoise* which I normally like so much, to the point of forgetting all other dishes, meals, products and olive trees. Only those that contribute to this *salade* of mine are admitted to my abode where I wait for anything or nothing, for I don't know why I'm sitting in this chair, armchair, saying to myself, 'I don't wait for anything.'

Whatever you do, you die – everybody (or nobody) knows pretty well it's better not to think about these matters in order to put everything in order: your life, your wife, your meals, your wheels that may bring you to any point B, provided you're an invalid. Otherwise these wheels won't serve you as faithfully as your legs which refuse to serve you as if they were women or slaves, bent on campaigning for their rights. Nobody will send you the wheels you need if you're not an invalid who needs some outside help without which you can't get out and about, looking for another slice of meat, another deed of valour. So you don't get up, out, away, and your deeds aren't recorded by chroniclers and computers: there are no wheels to assist the disabled in the preparation of Paradise.

The meals and wheels are my books and I know that neither these wheels nor the meals they may promise to someone will ever nourish me because they're neither money nor gold for which I might go to Siberia if I was capable of doing anything of the kind. I am not and so I count on so-called eternity where somebody – preferably a young man, a beautiful woman – will read every sentence of mine, prepared to repeat whatever I wrote many centuries ago as many times as necessary to squeeze every nuance, every allusion from every word I'm about to write this afternoon.

So they read my words and repeat them out loud to ensure my immortality or eternity – call it what you wish, provided you don't stray too far from the subject – and I don't turn in my grave, contrary to what traditionally happens to those authors who are displeased with their admirers and commentators. Our descendants repeat my words and relish every sound of what they repeat in their beds, living rooms, parks and palaces. 'I was born in Moscow.' They utter these words and wonder what I did in Moscow on the day of my departure from my mother's patient and generous body where I might have lived forever, had I been allowed to do so without passing away or fading into insignificance. And then they meditate on the words I wrote on the prophet nor a seer; nor do I turn my tables every other night. 'Fading into insignificance.' What did he mean? spur of the moment, without thinking what they might mean in the world I know nothing about, for I'm neither a

I didn't mean anything except that I left my mother's womb – and God's womb as well – on that fateful day that saw me make my way into the world. I'm not fit for it or any other contraption devised by the same God

who let me down on that fateful day. God is my mother and vice versa; I don't think my mother is the Blessed Virgin because she is the Almighty thanks to Whom I made my appearance in this world where I'm always in bad repair, so to speak. And I often say to myself, 'Repairing my memory costs much more than I was expecting.' I also say to myself, 'I've had to dip into my savings to pay for the repairs' – if my blood test comes up to my expectations that are willing to allow me to drink another bottle of champagne. 'There will be extensive repairs to the motorway,' I say to myself whenever I think about my road to Paradise, drawn by Verlaine in one of his poems I knew by heart 20 years ago. Now only my heart knows it; the rest of my body lives without it as if one could live without Paradise or at least without a road leading to it, to one of its gazebos.

I no longer ask myself if my writings are worth anything; I even wonder if I've ever done *anything* because you don't do anything if you want to do something. Sometimes you just do something on the spur of the moment without thinking about whatever can come out of what you're doing or have done: in these matters time gets lost so you don't really know *when* you did this or that and you wonder if any cause awaits its effect. There are causes that don't expect anything and their effects – or other effects, wherever they can come from – go abroad, compose operas and sing individually and then together as a group. And life goes on as if it had nothing else to do: it could go out, away, upwards, so as to join its archetypes about which Jung spoke rather often as if determined to impart to life and its inhabitants the importance of unison. But life didn't listen to him or any of the archetypes he had unearthed for the benefit of life and its assistants who can be found in clinics, hospitals and suchlike. Life goes out as if somebody was saying to it, 'Out, out, out!' People (and Nietzsche) say, 'In, in, in!' Life goes out.

She goes out and you stop her to say she can't go anywhere because she belongs to you and therefore she can't act on her own, even though she is a woman in Russian and French; and all women, whatever their origins and status, are involved in the process known as feminism which postulates that women should be allowed the same rights, power and opportunities as men. Neither women nor men thought about death when they agreed to bestow this sort of decoration on women who nowadays become presidents, prime ministers and supreme judges as a matter of course, almost every night and every morn – round the clock, in some countries. Death says, 'In Russian I'm a woman so I've every right to be your president and prime minister. And I shall send you to our Russian gulag because I don't like you, whoever you are. And even if I happen to like your face, which never happens, to tell the truth, I shall send you to our gulag all the same. To tell the truth, I don't like human faces, nor any other faces for that matter. I have no face to speak of – only a mask and scythe which can't be regarded as a face even if you're fond of futuristic thrillers where a scythe is often treated like a face and vice versa. In short, I don't like human faces and humans in general. And whenever I deign to speak about faces, I'm not sure I am not actually speaking about faeces. Does my treatment of your woes leave a bad taste in your mouths? And what about *my* bad taste, *my* mouth? What do you think I feel whenever I talk about so-called human beings?'

Life continues to go out as if it had nothing better to do, and probably it does not, for life as well as death are both women in French and in Russian; they go hand in hand wherever they go. They drink to our health in some bar or other where they're accosted by men who have no idea what identities they assume in the world of signs. Semiotics says that death is a scythe or rather a multitude of scythes, swords, words and mobs that trample you to death when some stadium or other collapses and many people rush out onto the football pitch. Another mob tramples you to death in the streets where you walk in the hope of meeting a beautiful woman. Why does this happen all over the globe? Because we live in our global village where scythe, mobs and machine guns vote

every day to elect another victim of their wrath that you can't detect on their faces because they have no faces to speak of. So you don't speak of them; neither do they. They don't even say that actions speak louder than words, and they discard words and synonyms of all kinds to the point of forgetting the custom-blessed prescription: Acting on impulse can get you into a lot of trouble.

They act on impulse and win, for they cannot lose: death is always victorious, whatever they say in their poems, their dreams or upon perusing their blood tests which say to them they're as fit as many fiddles – as fit as the Berlin Philharmonic under Furtwängler's baton. Their blood tests perform Beethoven's symphonies and every performance is a legend in its own right. They think no one will ever be healthier than they are today – healthier from every point of view, given that Beethoven's symphonies are also *spiritual*, not only physical and sentimental. So their souls are as healthy as their bodies and any orchestra conducted by Toscanini and consequently they're already on their way to Paradise, wherever this paradise of theirs may be situated – on Earth, beyond St Peter's keys.

I can't deny I was elated when looking at my last blood test that said I no longer had any diabetes, either fatal or playful; the same went for my liver whose capacity to welcome wines and beers is exceptional, judging from my doctor's exclamations and congratulations. But my liver is as fragile as any liver and therefore can't be compared to the lever by means of which Archimedes was determined to raise the Earth from where she had lain for millions of years. I can't raise anything except my hands which may announce my unconditional surrender to destiny, to the '*amor fati*' you can read about in Nietzsche's works; and yet it doesn't mean I'm free and own what is regarded by our Christians as the most precious possession of every human being in whose blood and genes the Almighty's presents swarm, swim and daily disport themselves, unmindful of death and its signs. Free will, free will. I am free and so is my will. And so is my representation. I visualise death as a bunch of roses or peonies.

2

Let us not speak about death any more because we don't need to speak about an object – or a subject – which is always within our reach, within its own reach, so that we can't get rid of it, however often we say it doesn't exist, given the Cross and all other sacrifices we find in our history and even beyond it – in other worlds, in *arrières mondes*. These worlds are beyond whatever we can picture to ourselves, and we end up picturing nothing either in our minds or anywhere else; it's better to live our lives and eat *foie gras* without asking too many questions to which we'll never get any *objective* answers. And subjective answers are a pack of lies, as everybody knows; at least St Augustine knew that because he counted on God's assistance as he probed the mysteries to which the so-called academics had no keys.

The truth is ahead of us and all we have to do is go towards it without looking at the woods and their hospitality praised by so many poets and even by Montaigne who says one shouldn't think about philosophy or domestic problems when walking in the woods because one's eyes are supposed to be riveted on the path one follows and not on other worlds, not on *other* aspects of the world where one lives and walks. You go towards the truth and you know you can't be blessed unless you find this truth and put it in your pocket, so to speak: your mind and memory are unreliable and therefore can't be entrusted with the safekeeping of the truth. The academics think there's no such thing as truth – so does Nietzsche, by the way – but St Augustine thinks otherwise because he doesn't think that God is dead and buried in a lot of cemeteries one can find on the surface

of our globe and mainly *under* its surface. St Augustine is against sceptics and nihilists who flout conventions and religions, being aware they're the only people who know the truth or rather its absence: one *can* know absence as such, according to them.

Between you and the truth – or rather between ourselves – there's a straight line, a motorway, and you're supposed to zoom along as long as the truth eludes you, hiding beyond walls and shopping malls where you may find only lies and the allurements of the world in which your body belongs. You know – at least St Augustine does – that even within hard shoulders there are pitfalls and potholes at the bottom of which you may spend your eternity instead of seeking for the truth and its derivatives. So you zoom along in your Ferrari, paying no attention to the woods where robbers and other bandits await you, determined as they are to despoil your castles and villas, to empty all your pockets and attaché cases. You sacrifice a breath of fresh air for the sake of truth, but unfortunately you die on the way to this truth – or another truth, as the case may be – in spite of your prudence and patience. You avoid robbers and other criminals; yet some cancer of which you know next to nothing lies in wait for you on the motorway where no car will ever run it over, however dense and unbearable the traffic turns out to be on weekends and even on ordinary nights. You die and the truth laughs as it looks at your corpse lying in the middle of the road that has always led to the truth – to the o

nly truth one can find in the world where monotheism holds sway over whole districts, ensuring the popularity of religious leaders.

According to the *International Herald Tribune*, 'a business owner in Russia has a better chance of ending up in the penal colony system once known as the gulag than a burglar does'. You read this issue of the *Herald Tribune* and relinquish any idea, however lucrative it may appear, of doing business with overseas customers and other customers as well because business is frowned upon in Russia where traditions – Soviet traditions, as it were – are stronger than economics. You know that the truth is far more important than any business, any money, any bank account, any stock market. You embark upon your journey towards that truth which is everlastingly linked to God and His invincible armies. But you read St Augustine first and realise you shouldn't have a picnic in the woods you'll see on the way to the truth, considering the numbers of robbers who wait for your pockets and wallets behind their bushes. You've got a Porsche in your garage, but you're aware of the fact that any pilgrim's progress should be accomplished on foot, otherwise God may disregard your feat of valour and relegate it to the lower spheres of the Hereafter where brimstone lords it over angelic perfumes.

You go to the truth and robbers look at your figure as they hope to make ends meet thanks to the contents of your Iago-praised purses and small mercies, as they call them. But you walk on towards the truth and robbers convert to Christianity, overwhelmed by your adhesion to the faith they treat with nonchalance, their attention spans being focused upon money, profit and creature comforts. On the other hand, they know they may rob you as many times as they wish, for in Russia they're not likely to be imprisoned, given their immunity from prosecution. After all, the defending lawyer is sure to ask for leniency on the grounds of their vagrancy. 'My clients are no business owners. They don't own anything except the woods where they rob business owners.' Anyway, robbers or no robbers, you die on your way to the truth.

The academics think you can't reach the truth on account of its vagueness: you're not likely to distinguish it from lies that grow everywhere like herbs that have no medical properties. Be that as it may, you go towards the truth and the process itself – your determination, in other words – doesn't fail to prove you're a sage and probably even a holy man in whose life there's only God and nothing (or nobody) but God. So if asked to say,

‘God and nothing but God,’ you say these words and believe in them, even though you may not believe in God Himself. But you believe in words and that’s probably enough because any prayer – with a few exceptions – is founded on words and on egalitarian principles, as they say in democratic or free countries.

But someone is bound to say you’re not wise because you don’t know the truth which separates the elect from the reprobate, according to St Augustine and his followers who continue to follow him in spite of Aristotle’s victory. (St Augustine was Plato’s partisan, wasn’t he?) ‘I’m following the path that leads to the truth,’ you say.

‘That’s not enough,’ they say. ‘You may die on the way. Besides, you don’t know the way.’

‘I’ve got four copies of the Bible,’ you say. ‘Four languages tell me where to look for the truth.’

‘What about the Russian robbers?’ they say.

‘I won’t go into the woods.’

‘The Russian robbers are now in the middle of the motorway you’re walking along. They’re even in the middle of nowhere. You can’t escape their clutches because nowhere is everywhere.’

‘Looking for the truth is enough. I’m a holy man.’

‘A hollow man,’ they say. Or they don’t say anything. What does it matter?

3

They pursued neither evil nor good, living without infamy and without praise. Not living, in other words. Not alive; not dead either. Something or somebody in between, just in between – something in between somebody and something. Dante met them in the anteroom of Hell. On Earth those people had been indifferent, lukewarm. The word ‘nice’ is lukewarm: it’s neither an insult nor a eulogy. We’ve already passed through the door of Hell; we’re in the anteroom now.

Computers are also lukewarm; broad smiles light up their screens. A smile usually expresses a positive feeling such as happiness, pleasure, amusement or friendliness, but it can express sadness or regret. Their smiles are neither positive nor negative; they express neither happiness nor regret. Computers smile at you. They don’t stick out their tongues, nor do they really love you or your dog. They merely smile at your dog, at everything and everybody. Smiling at those who are in between.

Everybody is in between now; and everything. Even inanimate creatures are in between: flowers are in between, heaven is in between, not too high, not too low.

Neither...nor. Either...or. That’s how they live and die; they’re not even afraid of death. The baby’s food needs to be heated until it’s just lukewarm. And everything is baby’s food to them. They heat death until it’s lukewarm and swallow it. They also heat the Mona Lisa until it’s lukewarm; and swallow it. But the Mona Lisa will never be lukewarm and her smile expresses happiness, pleasure, amusement, friendliness, sadness, regret and many other feelings. Her smile expresses Hell, Purgatory and Paradise, not just the anteroom of Hell.

I must have written all this a long time ago, but time doesn’t count any more because I don’t count it as if aping Kirilov or whoever it was: these Russian heroes use revolvers to become gods and democrats who are free and may do whatever they like on condition that they respect the social contracts written by Rousseau and his followers. There are social contracts and other contracts, and I live on and away, casting a quick look in the rear

mirror where all these contracts, laws and mores (and whores) are reflected forever unless God says anything to the effect that all these woes are outdated.

Hear now the similitude which I am about to speak unto thee. Take a stone, and throw it up towards heaven; or take a spout of water, and mount it up thitherward; and see if thou canst reach unto heaven.' That's how they spoke in those days. And they took stones and threw them up towards heaven. And those stones landed on the Milky Way. Early Christians were walking towards heaven in spite of natural disasters.

I'm not an early Christian; I'm not a late Christian either, but I'm walking towards heaven in spite of my moods, attitudes and desires that guide me towards restaurants and wines instead of showing my photographs to angels whose merciful attitude is described by poets and theologians, by sinners and tinkers.

I pick up a stone and throw it towards my salvation or eternity which I worship in the quiet of any room I happen to spend a few hours in, browsing through books or watching TV where people love, kill, take pity on victims and fall down whenever a revolver is held by a hand, a monster, a computer. I'm weary of these worlds and I can't even write another poem to celebrate Thy Creation, my dear God – I am your ward – so that I just write whatever comes into my head or another head to which I'm connected through our brotherhood.

4

All our machines say 'Hello' and seem to smile as we switch them on. And they continue to smile as if approving our use of them. They say 'Goodbye' as we switch them off because their makers believe we should be surrounded by the things we love and admire; they love us in return. We are fatally ill, but our doctor's waiting room is bright and cheerful with yellow walls and curtains. We say to an early Christian, 'Turn that dreadful wailing music off and put on something cheerful.'

'Don't you like Mozart's *Requiem*?' he asks.

'Come on, why aren't you dancing? Enjoy yourself!' we answer.

'The end of the world is drawing nigh,' he says.

'We're no longer in the first century. On the eve of the 21st century some people thought the world would be torn to pieces. As usual, nothing happened. Nothing ever happens. We'll live forever and listen to requiems with a smile.'

'I have every right to listen to this and other requiems with a smile because I believe in the City of God where I'll see two men on whose faces I won't be able to look,' he answers. 'A light will come from them, shining nine times more than the sun. They're Moses and Elias.'

'But you're neither Moses nor Elias, are you?'

'At his coming, Christ will raise the dead and make the righteous shine seven times more than the sun. Their crowns will shine like crystal and like the rainbow in the time of rain.'

Even if you say to sinners they will be pardoned after spending a thousand years in a penal colony located at the centre of the Earth, they will refuse to leave their villas and swimming pools for the sake of the distant yet everlasting happiness. 'I wouldn't say I'm a multimillionaire, but I'm doing all right.'

'If you don't go to Hell at once, you'll be conveyed to Paradise in only three thousand years.'

‘I don’t mind – I’ll have plenty of time in the Hereafter. But time’s in rather short supply on the surface of the Earth. You know, I had a strange dream last night,’ the sinner goes on. ‘An angel lands on my roof and speaks to me through a hole in the ceiling, “If this bill isn’t paid within five days, your time supply will be cut off.” And he drops a sheet of paper on my bed. Funny, isn’t it?’

The sinner does his best to laugh it off and even tells a joke about crocodiles. He always tends to adopt a falsely cheerful tone when he is upset about something. At night he speaks to death, not to time.

‘Is it true I’ll die in five days?’

‘Yes.’

‘And what if I pay the bill?’

‘Do you know what kind of bill it is?’

‘Not the foggiest idea.’

‘How could you pay it then?’

‘What a pity I lost the sheet of paper the angel had dropped through the hole.’

‘Do you want to know what was written on it?’

‘Of course.’

‘“You’ll die in five days.” So you’ll die in four days.’

‘Can’t you postpone my death until next year?’

‘I can’t.’

‘I’ll become a newborn Christian, I promise.’

‘Too late.’

‘You know, when I saw you from the other side of the room, I thought “that girl’s really got taste”. And when someone who looks like you has taste in clothes, then what is a poor guy to do?’

‘I don’t know,’ says death.

‘Well, I do,’ says the sinner, giving her a seductive look.

‘What makes you think I’m a woman?’

‘Because I like your dress. It’s beautiful.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Look, why don’t we go off and have dinner somewhere?’ asks the sinner.

‘What?’ answers death.

‘I know a really good Italian place near here.’

The sinner’s solicitor said last night they’d be lodging an appeal against the sentence, but the man died this morning. So his wife strikes up an interesting conversation with death.

‘My husband didn’t die a natural death. You killed him. And you gave him no opportunity to confess his sins and dictate his will.’

‘He didn’t ask for a confessor or a notary!’ says death. ‘He might have said, for instance: “O, banish me, my lord, but kill me not. Kill me tomorrow, let me live tonight. But half an hour, but while I say one prayer!” Anyway he wouldn’t have prayed to God. He didn’t believe in God. I do. And I also believe in democracy. And I believe in educating women.’

‘Why did you kill him?’

‘He was gored to death by an infuriated bull.’

5

I can't say I can't write any more because I'm not Scott of the Antarctic; my journal, if any, is not finished and I'm not freezing to death, although I *am* freezing to death as many other people do without knowing it. The polar night is our destiny, but we go on reading books and watching films in which superheroes and extraterrestrial friends display their energy for the sake of teenagers who have nothing else to do: they just watch these heroes and eat popcorn. They can eat whatever they wish: I allow them to eat my body, for I'm fed up with them and they're not fed up with me, as far as I know. I allow them to devour my body so they become saturated with my sinews and thoughts, saying, 'We're fed up with him.'

6

You say to yourself, 'I prefer to be one of the crowd' and you find yourself in the midst of it. The people you see and hear don't speak to death; they speak to life. But they talk rubbish all the same and you can't put their words in a rubbish bin. You're not allowed to say to them: 'What a load of rubbish!' If you do, they'll expel you from the crowd and even from the world. So you stay and listen to all this rubbish – patently, painstakingly.

They speak about bills and villas, about health and yachts, about status symbols and stars, about their gods and God. They attempt to seduce you – just in case. They compliment you on your handling of a very difficult situation and you have no idea what they're talking about. 'Life's a very difficult situation and you handle it perfectly,' they say, howling with laughter.

I'm standing in the midst of the crowd gathered in the centre of Europe. 'Are you Russian?' I'm asked. 'Your government has promised to uphold the principles of democracy. A strong opposition's vital to a healthy democracy, but there's no opposition in your country.'

'I'm fed up with convenient scapegoats,' I say. 'The Soviet Union, secret police, totalitarian regimes...'

'Do you approve of Lenin and Stalin?' I'm asked.

'Everybody speaks about totalitarian regimes. Many writers wrote novels about them and fought against tyrants and generals in the jungle. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. And *Brave New World*. But there are other pitfalls.'

They wave their hands around a lot when they're talking: 'The temptation of making easy money through drug trafficking.'

'Those responsible for the violence should be punished!'

'Stop talking about violence,' I say to them. 'It's non-violence I'm interested in: non-violent stupidity, non-violent lack of curiosity.'

'You seem to misuse this term,' a linguist points out. 'Non-violence is the use of peaceful methods to try to bring about change.'

'It's just the contrary,' I say. 'I've lived long enough to have my own language. In my vocabulary "non-violence" signifies the unwillingness to bring about change and the refusal to think. Whenever a human being takes the trouble to think a new thought he violates his brain. He rapes his brain, as a matter of fact. And a child is born – a new thought, a new idea. But you call it "domestic violence". So there are no new thoughts today, no ideas. And the old ideas and thoughts are withering on the vine. A non-violent end of the world.'

Is that how I should talk to death? 'I'm not afraid of your coming because you don't exist. You do exist of course, but there's no point in your comings and goings. The idea of time is an abstract notion – not only in the

domain of art. In life as well we encounter time occasionally and our handshakes lead none of us anywhere. Time can do whatever it likes – it's just a notion, nothing else. For centuries I've been sitting in the same room. If I go out, I'll realise at once I'm looking at the wall I saw from the middle of the room. The wall recedes as I get closer and closer to it. I left a note saying "Gone out. Back soon." I didn't go out. The painful memories gradually recede in my mind, but the walls of my mind and my memory recede as well. The painful memories put a farewell letter on my writing desk. I read it from time to time. I was born in Moscow and studied at the Moscow Conservatoire. In 1974 I settled in Western Europe and found I was looking at the same wall. I'll be born in Moscow again and I'll study at the Moscow Conservatoire. No point in dying – nothing will happen during the intermission. It's the same concert over and over again. You disappear in the wings, but come back as if the audience couldn't live without your music-making. And even if you hear no applause, you come back because you've no choice. I won't go out so as not to have to come back. Why should I waste my energy on these comings and goings? I'll play one sonata after another, one composer after another. I hear a voice saying, 'The sun's going down and it'll be dark soon.' House lights, house lights. They're switched on and off. Sometimes I play in the dark, but I don't mind because I know all the pieces I'm supposed to play by heart and my fingers don't need my eyes. Only my ears are indispensable – if it weren't for them, I wouldn't be on the stage, at the piano. I would be nowhere. Is it better to be nowhere? Is it better to be nobody living nowhere? Some species exist in this small area of forest and nowhere else on earth, but I don't belong to these species. So I'm nowhere. No such luck – I was born in Moscow, I'll be born in Moscow. Are you hungry, death? I know a really good Italian place near here.'

7

Pina Baush was keen on repetitions. In one of her ballets a woman repeats the same poem three or four times. A famous poem by Heine. The second time it sounds different; and yet the words are the same because they're unable to leave the poem. No one, not even God, could get them to leave the poem. They stay for good, but their meaning shifts from one place to another, from one corner to another. And there are other corners around these corners. I haven't lost anything, have I? Perhaps I have. I even know what I've lost over the last 50 years. I lost nothing in my childhood—or next to nothing. But over the last 50 years I've suffered a gradual loss of memory: now I don't recall what I lost in my childhood. A number of toys, no doubt. I've got other toys now and I'm not likely to lose *them*. Every word is a toy, although I'm often reluctant to play with words. It's words that play with me, their creator. The word 'loss' is playing with me now. It's not, properly speaking, a word: it's life itself. This life speaks and lapses into silence. Today life is silent and I can't do anything about it. I can't talk it into talking, for all my efforts. 'Why don't you talk?' I say to life. 'Say something – and that's an order. Or does it gall you to take orders from a younger and less experienced brother? I'm your brother, am I not? I've got my life, you've got yours. You're life with a capital L. My life is quite young and small in comparison with you: you don't take orders from me and fall silent whenever you please. I don't want to hear you – not *all* of you, not *everything*. Not Speaker's Corner, for instance. I want to hear your music, your Beethoven quartets, your King Crimson. One sound would be enough—one *musical* sound, one chord, one harmony. Typical, isn't it? You begin with crumbs, saying, 'Just a crumb of hope, just a crumb of comfort.' After a while you say, 'It's a little too hot for comfort' and demand an air-conditioner. And then you say, 'I haven't enough money to live in comfort in my old age.' The cost of your life-project has increased dramatically since it began. It's not just a

‘life’ you’re striving for; it’s a *happy* life. And what about losses? Your life turns out to be a loss-making business. You read in a glossy magazine: ‘There was a kaleidoscopic explosion of A-list stars, designer gowns, flashing diamonds and wild all-night dancing in the middle of the English countryside’ and you complain about the program of your life. ‘What’s the matter with your computer?’ you say to God. ‘Is it kaput? Why am I excluded from *this* life? One more loss – I wasn’t invited to the gala I’m reading about. “Some of the most gorgeous rising stars mingling with beautiful, established A-listers, £7 million of art, and a wildly outrageous menu that included tin cans of cocktails and sea bass with lemon purée, edible flowers, mint oil and citrus froth – ” What’s going on? If you can’t fix your old computer, you should buy a new one. Or you should get someone to fix the old one. I’m afraid you don’t know the first thing about computers.’

8

A: Do you know anything about the ‘happiness index’?

B: Does it measure the rise and fall of happiness?

A: Not exactly. This index measures economic growth in terms of wellbeing rather than finance alone.

B: Just another stock idea. People doing yoga benefit from an increased feeling of wellbeing. This kind of thing. Happiness can’t be mass-produced. Neither can you say when you’re *really* happy and how much happiness you experience. You think you’re happy and you’re actually not because you know a man or a woman will betray you sooner or later. This knowledge poisons your happiness. The index isn’t likely to take notice of our background noise, so to speak. Nor do we always hear it, but it spoils our harmonies. I know a woman who goes white as a sheet when she hears soldiers patrolling the streets. The noise reminds her of the war, of the Germans in Paris. She’ll always hear their boots, even when playing with her grandchildren. How to measure *her* happiness? Or do you just mean that happiness doesn’t depend on money?

A: There’s proof that happiness has a physiological effect on conditions such as diabetes and heart disease.

B: Until another betrayal, another patrol. Even a highway patrol may kill you on the spot.

A: People who are happier heal more quickly, have stronger immune systems and, on average, live longer.

B: Those who live in fool’s paradise? Is it better to live in this paradise than to die? Anyway, diseases betray us too. They say ‘Bye-bye’ and leave, but they come back, uninvited. Why swallow pills and undergo operations? There’ll always be another pair of boots, another cancer, another unhappy ending. An open door. Through this door so many people have come and gone. So many people, so many diseases. Actually they don’t come and go. They stay and you go on dying. It was cold and wet outside; they stayed with you. It’s always cold and wet outside, isn’t it? They come round to see you on some flimsy pretext, determined to stay forever. They’re your background noise—or music, if you wish. The humane way of dealing with a suffering animal is to kill it quickly. But this music kills you slowly, like *Tristan und Isolde*.

A: They found a link between happiness and fast recovery from surface wounds.

B: There’s no such thing as a surface wound. You watch the sunlight dancing on the water’s surface. And you don’t even ask, ‘What’s the depth of the water here?’ Are dolphins better than humans? Many of them can dive to depths of 200 metres.

A: Those with an optimistic outlook have a 90 per cent lower risk of suffering heart disease and are 14 per cent less likely to die than their pessimistic peers.

B: Your optimism seems to infect all those around you.

A: There are no obese individuals among my friends. Happier people eat better, exercise more, meet their friends more often and are less prone to obesity.

B: I could never measure up to my mother's expectations. She wasn't very happy, I suppose. Am I to blame for her death? Another piece of background music. I may die earlier because of her death unless I jump for joy day in, day out. Your body jumps for joy because an optimistic outlook can stave off diseases. But your brain won't stand for any nonsense. Your brain knows that whatever you do you're doomed. So you jump for joy, a look of utter devastation on your face. You say to yourself, 'Smile! Smile!' There's the faintest trace of a smile on your lips. Will this smile add a week to your life, a month? And what about a *broad* smile? You smile, but your brain goes on painting a gloomy picture of the future. Your smile's of little avail. So are your jumps.

A: Well-being is being promoted in schools and at work, where enlightened employers are carrying out wellbeing audits to make sure people are feeling appreciated and fulfilled.

B: Michael Jackson was appreciated and fulfilled. So what? I'm not sure he jumped for joy, but he jumped a lot when performing his dances. Did the jumps help him? Even his brain was attuned to optimism, to eternal childhood. The background music of his life was the music admired by so many people. Did his music help him to stave off diseases, to fight death to the death? There are so many deaths in every sentence that your optimistic outlook is bound to suffer from an inferiority complex.

A: Wellbeing can be transmitted by a process of 'emotional contagion'. Both happiness and unhappiness can spread, but happiness spreads more reliably across network ties. Your happiness is associated with that of your friends, your friends' friends – and your friends' friends' friends – that is, people you've never met.

B: I've never met happy people.

A: Further hope has been raised by another study which identified two new antibodies that neutralise a broad range of HIV strains.

B: So these are your hopes and dreams for the future.

A: The future's mine. I believe in the future. Don't you?

B: I believe only in the past. You can touch the past. You can dive into it.

A: Do you know what 'silent face' means?

B: I know that my face will soon be silent. You just say, 'His face fell silent.' Beautiful, isn't it?

9

A bunch of roses on my writing desk where only roses should grow and die because nothing else really dies, grows and says to us that life is short, beautiful, wonderful, and we know there are other roses in the wings; and there are other wings which bring you and me and everyone else to what they call Paradise. I don't call it and there are no roses – only rose-tinted glasses, landscapes where I'll always be happy with my cat who needs the grass, and I'll need to look at him as long as I can look at anybody.

What am I to do with the time I'm allotted in this space where I sit and think about the future? I'll move to Belgium for the rest of my life, assuming there are some *beaux restes* in this life of mine or any other life, be it mine or anyone else's. I'm writing and sitting and dreaming in August, 2013, and I have no idea why I put this part of my narrative in the year which may not see my eyes, my face about which Levinas speaks at length as if he had seen my face and its transcendental aspect, its divinity. Yes, I think I wish to trick time into believing I'm immortal and even if I die before the advent of the next year, I'll live in it somehow because I'm writing my story within its long, interminable chapter, paying homage to human history – to any history on which our world can lean as it goes from one metamorphosis to another.

My flat has become a box of late. There are many boxes in it and every box encloses a particle of my flat where I won't live at the beginning of September when someone else is supposed to come and paint the walls, putting a lot of pictures on them; and these pictures won't have anything to do with my life. In other words, I'm leaving my flat forever and it doesn't know anything about my sadness and madness which drives me mad because if you think you're mad, you *are* mad to some extent. I do think I am mad and yet I am just sad and my sadness lies on my furniture, on these boxes and even on my cat – like a shawl, a sail, an email from another world.

Of course I won't move to another world and actually I'm fed up with other worlds which land up in my flat and ask me to take care of them as if I really had to transfer them to my English cottage where I may live for another year in order to put all my things and thoughts in order. There's one world only, I say to myself, and I calm down because I'm right for once: there's only one world where these books of mine need to be packed into the boxes.

13

POSTSCRIPT

The tale is not over and yet there are ups and downs in both the tale and the rest of the story, of the remains, because in two days we shall have a new New Year and nothing will be new, anew, except this year and its figures, digits. Digits are always new, even if you never go to the Stock Market or any market, be it a fish market or pastry market right under your window. If you wish, you may take your father's fishing line and catch a few operas for your tea ceremony unless you prefer lemon curd; unless you prefer nothing at all. So you put your fishing line away and go away, if you are allowed to do so without bothering your cats and dads who always grumble when you leave them behind. But your dads are always behind whatever you do; and even if you do not go anywhere they are behind, on the slow side. And you are still on the fast side; not for long, though. You are not on the fast-food side; you are on the slow-food side, which does not mean a set of dentures you have to take care of before going to sleep. In this domain – or kingdom, as you usually express yourself today – you are on the slow side because you still manage to relish the food you find either in a restaurant or on your dinner table. Your charwoman puts all your forks, knives and spoons around you and you pick and choose, making sure you will not prick your finger on a bone. There are so many bones around you do not know whether they belong to the dead or the quick, to dogs or to human mobs.

There are bones and tones, and some of these tones can be heard through bones; perhaps all of them. At least that is how Beethoven listened to his piano works, holding a metal tube in his mouth. It is his bones – teeth and other bones – that heard his masterpieces and we might hear them after our deaths, provided our bones

remain as sensitive to sounds as they are in our lifetimes. Our lifetimes go on and so do many chronicles and myths to which you may listen in your spare time, if you have nothing to listen to either in your spare time or when you are very busy – so busy you cannot answer your mobile phone and cries for help. ‘Help, help, help,’ you hear in the streets but you are too busy as you are listening to your inner music that does not cry for help, for it needs none.

December 29, 2014

As if all was done. Not all has been done
And there are no daggers, no kings. I’m alone.
I’m in the air, in the water. Call this water
And you’ll hear what it says. Nothing,
Nothing. Take your coat and go. You go, go, go.
I can see you. I can’t.

I’ve found a lot of yours – faithfully,
Truly. You live on pedestals
And I go from one to another, other.

Love comes now and then.
I don’t say anything. I could say, ‘a bush.’
I don’t say it because someone else
Has said it many times.

Many times.

What’s left? Leffe, a glass of beer.

I don’t conquer space; neither
Do stars say goodbye and hold me on their
Lap.

‘Don’t’ is in the space I can see and hear.

I can hear the last dust.

A postscript to the postscript. Is anybody

There? I am here and you say what
They sing. One, two, three. They sing our world
As long as you wish.

They stop singing. I breathe.

I am your breath.

Not a word, a prayer. A drop.

A drop of what? Of whom? Of love,
Hate, another soul mate.

A drop, a prop, another god, another,
Another, another eternity, forever.