VALERY ALEFF

A COMMENTARY

FOREWORD

Sooner or later even long-winded individuals realise that silence must triumph over words. And those who are eager to tell us a story give up the idea at the last moment: it dawns upon them that all stories end up in silence. It is as if no story had ever begun at all. So why tell a story?

Everything has been said about the *Divina Commedia* and what has been passed over in silence will remain unsaid, for all my efforts. And yet I embark upon this commentary which is not a real commentary, as a matter of fact; it is more than a commentary and less than one. How could I know what it is? I have not started to work on it yet. The more you write, the more you understand your subject matter and the way you treat it.

What I am writing now may be called a novel in the Tolstoyan sense of the term. Tolstoy himself only gradually realised how many dimensions this literary form had acquired under his illustrious and versatile pen. Somewhat taken aback by the magnitude of *War and Peace*, he denied at first that it was a novel, "warning readers not merely to lap it up in the same spirit in which they might read instalments of *David Copperfield* or *Crime and Punishment*," as A. N. Wilson suggests. Later on, however, at the foot of the hill that was to become *Resurrection*, he wrote in his diary, "Ever since *Anna Karenina*, for more than ten years, I have been dismembering, splitting, analysing; now I know what is what and can mix everything up again and work within this mixture." Almost six years have elapsed after I finished my last novel to date, wistfully entitled *Tristan on Earth*. Ever since I have been splitting hairs and atoms, psychoanalysing myself and keeping away from psychoanalysts. And I have mixed everything up and am prepared to work within the mixture like a housewife to whom her neighbour explains a new recipe, "It's got cocoa powder and milk in it, and you just mix it up a little at a time and then shake it."

Eugenio Montale thinks that the *Commedia* is not an epic poem because its style is "an extraordinary mixture of styles and manners which certainly do not conform to the dignity and uniformity of the epic style". Sure enough, in the epistle to Can Grande della Scala, Dante points out that his method is poetic, fictive, descriptive, digressive, transumptive, and likewise definitive, divisive, probative, reprobative and exemplative. In a sense, the *Commedia* is a novel in verse, as I point out in *Tristan on Earth*.

Our times are often called the "era of information". But a monk bent over a book in the library of a medieval cloister would get as much information as a contemporary scientist or a television viewer. Whatever the source of information, the human brain can hold only a limited number of letters and figures. The medieval brain was in no way inferior to ours either in size or sharpness. What we gain in quantity we lose in quality: the information we are bombarded with does not presuppose an extensive, exhaustive analysis. Often a simplistic analysis is supplied with the rest and we just put everything side by side in our memory. That is why people like stories which are rather thin and do not

take up much room in the brain. Besides, a story is easier to memorise than a philosophical reflection, let alone an exhaustive analysis. A story is similar to a thread that can be wound into a ball. And don't be afraid of knots: you just pull a knot and the thread will unravel and fall limply to the ground or rather to the bottom of your brain. There are no Gordian knots in a story; these are created by philosophical asides, by abysses into which a story might fall now and then, when written by Tolstoy or Proust. And the abysses are situated beneath the bottom of your brain so that you cannot pick the thread up. You have to drill a hole in the bottom of your brain and descend into it, looking for the thread which has by now acquired a different shape and perhaps a new substance. And first you have to find out what the thread has turned into and how to deal with it. Can it be picked at all?

But drilling holes in one's brain is a painful pastime and anyway not many people are fond of speleological expeditions. A story without abysses, without the roots over which you can trip, is worthless because it just entertains you, affording no glimpses of Hell, Purgatory or Paradise. And even the dark wood (*una selva oscura*) which grows at the very outset of the *Commedia* lies beyond such rootless stories, beyond their reader's ken.

Once I wrote a parody on what a true storyteller—Leskov, for example—can entertain us with at the very peak of his career. A man loses a leg in a riot and crawls on all fours (or threes) towards a nearby gypsy camp. There he seduces a girl who, in a fit of generosity, cuts off her own leg and sews it onto her lover's stump. Filled with remorse, the latter cuts off his new leg and lays it down by the entrance to the tent where the girl is lying asleep. Upon awakening the girl finds the leg and bursts into hysterical laughter. For several days she laughs non-stop and attracts the attention of a composer who happens to be walking near the camp. Fascinated by the laughter that he mistakes for a gypsy song, he notes it down and works it into his latest opera. A young man, a scion of an old aristocratic family, attends the performance, falls in love with the song and, assisted by the composer, goes out in search of its author. Soon he finds the girl and proposes to her. His parents disinherit him and call the wrath of heaven upon his head. But it is his right leg that bears the brunt of the curse, becoming the target of the girl's former suitor, an expert at knife throwing. (A true storyteller must spell out the circumstances in which the attempted murder happens.) The wound requires twenty-five stitches and the gypsy realises that her bridegroom is crippled for life. All of a sudden she recalls the object she found one day by the entrance to her tent. With a shout of joy she fishes it out from a huge trunk. Unfortunately it is a left leg that she offers now to her bridegroom. The survival of one fresh left leg in the trunk is somewhat amazing, but credulity by this point is no longer an issue.

Borges says that one should forget whatever has been written about the *Commedia* in order to enjoy the story itself. But the story is made up of what *might* have been written about the work, its invisible part being far more important, to paraphrase Wittgenstein. And even if we succeeded in winding all its threads into a ball, this ball would always fall outside the sidelines, so to speak. The aim of my contemporaries is to serve only aces insofar as businessmen, writers and pianists are tennis

players in disguise. Whenever a famous pianist gives a concert, one gets the feeling that every note is an ace. If a work of art or indeed life itself could be viewed in terms of tennis it would be better to send the ball beyond the sidelines, which is akin to reading between the lines, for there are courts elsewhere. And they are not accessible to those who play an ordinary, everyday game.

The kernel of a Borges story—a situation—is the centre around which he moves in order to describe it from every angle imaginable, thereby drawing a kind of circle around it. One of his stories is a circle in the centre of which lies a man who cannot forget anything; another is centred around a spot that accommodates the entire universe. A Borgesian situation is so conducive to analysis that the reader draws additional circles around the ones drawn by the author himself. In the same way Dante's circles have been multiplied by his readers and commentators: today the *Commedia* looks like a sphere which contains the entire universe. And every copy of it is Borges' *Aleph* in its own right. What could I add to it except a few circles of my own Hell?

Nicholas of Cusa thought that the concepts of *docta ignorantia* ("learned ignorance") and *coincidentia oppositorum* ("the coincidence of opposites") had been bestowed upon him by a higher power, which implies a claim to have been the first to introduce them. But the idea that all opposites are transcended is very old: it is to be found in Neoplatonic writings. And the term *docta ignorantia* occurs once in St Augustine. My private Hell might have been inhabited by many people, not necessarily by poets and philosophers. And there are no private heavens above our Earth. I wonder if, by dint of meditating upon Hell and Paradise, one could succeed in making them coincide somewhere—beyond the domain of the finite, beyond the court where the game of Time is played. In other words, will everyone be saved in the end?

The square and the circle are specific finite figures. They are opposites and can never be geometrically congruent. Let us replace the square by a regular pentagon, a hexagon—by a polygon with ever more sides. Notwithstanding their number, the polygon will never coincide with the circle. The same goes for Dante's *Inferno* and *Paradiso*: they will never coincide, whatever I may write about them. Within the bounds of the *Commedia* I shall not be saved. Perhaps I should write my own *Commedia* to pave the way for the salvation of my soul.

Traditionally, Heaven is round and Earth square, but in the Chinese cycles there are ten celestial trunks which form a square; and twelve celestial boughs are arranged in a circle. In China my Hell would coincide with Paradise.

Montale says the *Commedia* cannot be emulated—for several reasons. We live in the world where encyclopaedism does not create a universe, a sphere with a centre, but offers instead a number of heterogeneous facts which, however important and profound, seem to be poisoned by the triviality of the media-supplied information. (The *Commedia* is based not on facts but on ideas.) Besides, God must be reluctant to dictate such a poem to someone who is unable to keep silent in protest against this day and age. And only in silence can such a poem originate, even if a human being *were* capable of

writing it on their own. It is to be born out of silence and away from our times which I am forced to call "ours", for all my aversion to the media and new-fangled mythologies. Well, I shall do my utmost to create a polygon out of the square in which I am imprisoned.

Whoever comments on the *Inferno* should strive for the "infinite polygon" that is in every way similar to a circle. But no commentator can actually run through an infinite series: the "infinite polygon" is thus a contradictory term. A born storyteller, however, makes things easier for us by eschewing circles or spheres and clinging instead to triangles or just straight lines which are far from infinite. (St Anselm likens God's supreme truth to an infinite straight line.) Anyway, what is the point in analysing a Leskov story? What quantity of information does it contain?

Let us bring all information down to a common denominator. Let us measure whatever we come across by means of an "info" unit: 1 info, 2 infos, etc. How many infos are there in a news conference? A ten or a fifteen. A cursory study of a verse from the *Commedia* reveals about a hundred infos. (That dark wood is dark indeed!) Dante also seems to have lived in the era of information. At least he was able to fit a lot of scientific and philosophical ideas into his work, which might be done in our age by someone who hankers after a *complete* description of the world and man. Modern science is more poetical than Newton's *Principia* and, from a literary point of view, is quite on a par with medieval astronomy of which Dante made abundant use in his work. A new *Divina Commedia* may be written today by someone who knows what the Vision of Dame Kind and the Vision of Eros meant in days of yore. And Thomas Aquinas could be replaced by Heidegger, I imagine, for the latter is to some extent an author of a new *Summa theologiae*.

One may write a new *Divina Commedia* by adopting the method of Pierre Menard who just *re*-wrote *Don Quixote* word for word—three centuries later. Borges playfully enlarges upon the psychological discrepancies between his protagonist's work and the original *Don Quixote*. There would be no discrepancies between my *Commedia* and Dante's, either psychological or otherwise. I would forget the time which has elapsed between his death and the present moment, letting Michelangelo, Beethoven and Tolstoy sink into oblivion. And unlike Pierre Menard, who burnt his notebooks on the outskirts of Nîmes, I would play no games when writing *my Commedia*. Why not just repeat every word until it becomes mine? Why not treat the *Commedia* as a mantra?

> Mantras are indispensable to tantric discipline. Literally translated, the word mantra means "that which when reflected upon gives liberation". A mantra cannot be enlivened until it is repeated and creates a wave pattern (japa), accompanied by a clear grasp of its meaning and a proper articulation of its letters. Each letter of the mantra is charged with energy and creates vibrations in the inner consciousness...Sound and form are interdependent, and every form is a vibration of a certain density; conversely, every sound has a visual equivalent. Sound is the reflex of form and form is the product of sound.
> (Ajit Mookerjee and Madhu Khanna, *The Tantric Way*)

The *Commedia* also lends itself to visual meditations because its architecture reminds one of yantra

which is a diagrammatic equivalent of the deity—of Beatrice in the present case. "The primal abstract shapes, such as the point, line, circle, triangle, square, are harmonised in composition to provide a formal equilibrium which is both static and dynamic. A common feature of the yantra is that it possesses an element of centrality around which the whole figure is built up. The centre as point of origin and balance evokes the idea of emanation and radiation."

Here is the diagram of the "celestial rose" as represented in Charles S. Singleton's *Commentary on Paradiso*:

Whatever the method I choose as I move down the slope of Hell or soar towards the celestial rose, I should *construct* the *Commedia*, relying more on *intellectus* (intellect) than on *ratio* (reason) which, according to Spinoza, obtains knowledge indirectly, through inferences. *Intellectus*, on the other hand, has immediate, intuitive knowledge—an asensory, luminous intuition in timeless presence. As luminous as the Sea of Light.

Whatever the method I choose, I should proceed against the background of silence which is the best expression of love; we can always fall back on it if the object of our feelings does not live up to our ideals. Last year I infuriated the woman under whose spell I have been living for some time and she hung up on me in the middle of our conversation. The same day I called her after midnight and she picked up the receiver without saying a word: only I could phone her at that ungodly hour. I did not say anything either, listening to her silence, to her beautiful declaration of love—for half-a-minute at least. "She who was the destroyer of all evil and the queen of all good, coming where I was, denied me her most sweet salutation, in the which alone was my blessedness." In the space of thirty seconds the destroyer of *my* peace underwent a metamorphosis, becoming Beatrice of the *Vita Nuova* fame. In silence all women sound alike. How long should she keep silence to become the Beatrice who guides Dante through the spheres of the *Paradiso*? I hope Time will cure her of our times, of the faults which are not really hers. Anyway I am not likely to hear such a beautiful silence again: she might be tempted to speak to me after all these months. She might be in love with me.

If utterly divorced from Eternity, Time would turn *Mona Lisa*'s smile into Michelangelo's last *Pieta*. Like many of my contemporaries, in my youth I preferred Leonardo da Vinci to Michelangelo on the grounds that the former is far more ambiguous, wavering between joy and sadness, irony and earnestness. The very existence of his works is ambiguous to some extent, being too subservient to the destructive influence of Time. Michelangelo, on the other hand, habitually dwells at the bottom of the abyss on the brink of which Leonardo teeters with serenity; this abyss has a lot in common with

Dante's *Inferno*, with all its circles. Michelangelo also pays a visit to Paradise which Leonardo discards altogether, having set his heart on the ambiguity and nostalgia of Purgatory. For all that, Leonardo does not seem to care about Dante whom Michelangelo hailed in one of his sonnets as a man "without peer". In October 1519 he approached the Pope with an unsuccessful offer to execute a tomb in Florence if the ashes of Dante could be returned from Ravenna. Perhaps humanity is divided into two groups: those for whom Dante counts a lot and those who do not care about him.

Does ambiguity exist only as long as opposites are not reconciled? Does the *Mona Lisa* reconcile them or is her smile a playground of opposites? At least there are some vestiges of them in Leonardo's paintings. None of them can be found in the *Commedia* which, in this respect, is quite the opposite of what Pushkin was aiming at and achieved in *Eugene Onegin*. His "novel in verse" is a triumph of ambiguity, a kind of smile that he bestowed on life and death, on love and hate, on iambic tetrameter.

Can a person who truly believes in God create an ambiguous work of art? Was Dante himself ambiguous? I wonder what his smile looked like: smiles are more ambiguous than frowns. As for Beatrice's smile, it is quite unambiguous:

> E quella non ridea; ma "S'io ridessi,"
> mi cominciò, "tu ti faresti quale
> fu Semelè quando di cener fessi"
> And she did not smile, but, "Were I to smile," she began to me, "you would become such as was Semele when she turned to ashes."

In my commentary I shall use Charles S. Singleton's translation of the *Commedia*; and I shall avail myself of some of *his* comments. On this occasion he says that Beatrice's smile implies a radiance. And Semele, daughter of Cadmus and mother of Bacchus, was burnt to ashes because she had insisted on beholding Jupiter in all his heavenly majesty. In the course of his journey through Paradise, Dante beholds Beatrice in all her heavenly majesty which does not differ much from her earthly appearance:

> She went along crowned and clothed with humility, showing no whit of pride in all that she heard and saw; and when she had gone by, it was said of many, "This is not a woman, but one of the beautiful angels of Heaven!"

No one would say that about the Mona Lisa who seems to live outside the *Commedia*—in Leonardo's private Purgatory. Perhaps all works of art are divided into two groups: those which live inside the *Commedia* and aliens. (But even these aliens somehow belong to the *Commedia*.) Perhaps humankind is divided into similar groups.

I would not compare any living man or woman to an angel. There are no more angels among us and consequently I doubt if there are any left in the Hereafter. As below, so above. The people I come across will not look different in Paradise, which means that Paradise has been degraded over the last

century. Only silence and invisibility can restore it to its former condition.

Is the *Commedia* no longer what it used to be in Dante's days? Will my commentary further defile it? But the *Commedia*, as well as its author, must live now in the celestial rose which is impervious to alterations. Anyway I have to write it, for I know only what I myself can produce. To Vico this proposition signifies that history is the one sure science above all others. Scientists prefer productive activity to retrospective understanding; it is better therefore to write a commentary on the *Commedia* than to re-read it. In the *Retractationes*, which St Augustine wrote at the end of his life, there is the following passage:

> Thirteen books of my *Confessions*, which praise the just and good God in all my evil and good ways, and stir up towards Him the mind and feelings of men: as far as I am concerned, they had this effect on me when I wrote them, and they still do this, when now I read them.

St Augustine had to write his *Confessions*, for history is the one sure science above all others.

CANTO I

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
  mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,
  che la diritta via era smarrita.
Midway in the journey of our life I found myself in a dark wood, for the straight way was lost.

At the age of thirty-five Dante broke the silence that precedes the creation of any work of art. St Augustine said: "Nothing can be better, nothing more sweet for me than to gaze upon the Divine treasure without noise and hustle; this is what is sweet and good." Instead he exhorted, upbraided, edified the members of his congregation and also wrote the history of his own life in order to edify *himself*. In *The Confessions*, which he wrote at the age of forty-five, he speaks about his wanderings in "a limitless forest, full of unexpected dangers". A Russian newspaper tells the story of a man who lost his way in a forest he knew like the back of his hand and died of exhaustion.

In Japan a forest (*torii*) indicates the entrance to the area of the temple and is, moreover, a natural sanctuary where visitors can relish the peace they are longing for. In China a mountain topped with a forest is always the site of a temple. "Saints find a rest in forests," says *Dhammapada*. Life may be likened to a wood where we can get lost and die of weariness, although we have known it since our babyhood. I think, however, that a desert is far more dangerous—a white desert. By definition all deserts are limitless and you do not really *lose* your way in them: there is no way to lose. At the age of fifty-five I found myself in a desert where nothing threatened me except the smoothness of the sand. No traces whatsoever could be seen on it; even my own footprints had been obliterated by the wind or some sort of amnesia from which all deserts seem to suffer. A loss of footprints in the night is commonplace and we are used to coping with darkness by means of torches and searchlights. But no searchlight will help us find our way in a desert, in broad daylight. Darkness is teeming with surprises, pleasant or unpleasant; when darkness is most impenetrable, an inconceivable light is born, a light that can be attained only through the darkness. In broad daylight there are no surprises, no salvation, no solutions of any kind. In broad daylight there is no light. In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche speaks of a madman who runs with a lantern to the market place, shouting, "I seek God! I seek God!" He then realises that God is dead. And the people around him ask all sorts of irrelevant questions: "Did he lose his way like a child?" "Is he hiding?" "Is he afraid of us?" He was not afraid of them.

It is useless to look for God in a desert, in broad daylight. If God were alive, no one would stand in the middle of a desert. The light itself would be different—a narrow light, as thin and sharp as a needle. That light might pierce our hearts, drawing blood from them.

Holzwege. Heidegger's book of essays that came out in 1949. These ways traverse the woods. The French title is *Chemins qui ne mènent nulle part*. Ways that lead nowhere. At least they led Heidegger to *Holzwege*. One of the essays deals with Nietzsche's assertion that "God is dead".

"I've been sacked," said a friend of mine. This afternoon we were talking over the phone about

my intention to write a commentary on the *Commedia*. Judging from the tone of his voice, he had managed to stay cheerful in the midst of the disaster. He said he would sleep until 11 a.m. and do all sorts of useless, superfluous things. He *was* cheerful. "Nothing gives me more pleasure than doing something superfluous," he rounded off, as if to quell my growing doubts about the usefulness of my undertaking.

How to write this commentary? Shall I put the allegories of my life alongside those of Dante's masterpiece? Such parallel lives would not have been sanctioned by Plutarch. I hoped that the *Commedia* might become a way leading somewhere—or nowhere, which amounts to the same thing as long as there is a way to speak of. And the *Commedia* is certainly a way that can and must be taken into consideration. Yet I am unlikely to better my ways and edify myself by embroidering upon its symbols and similes, upon Beatrice's smiles. And upon my own life. No point in increasing the number of lanterns: God is dead. And without God there are only humans who ask irrelevant questions and give irrelevant answers. Why not lie in bed until 11 a.m. doing nothing? Silence and immobility are not superfluous.

In the East there are many stories about silence. Some of them serve as a way to enlightenment, to the liberation from the bondage to lust and greed; others are told for the sake of the ensuing silence which is temporary and has no lasting effect on the souls of listeners. All these stories are somewhat alike and my choice is solely due to the hazardous character of my readings.

Bodhidharma asks his disciples why they are loath to relate their experiences. The answers he gets are correct, his disciples coming nearer and nearer to the truth as they succeed one another. The first says that the experience is not related to spoken words, though associated with them in everyday life. The second compares experience to Paradise which one loses before even attempting to describe it, however approximately. "Reality is a mere illusion," answers the third disciple. "Any expression of it would be an illusion too." The fourth steps forward and bows to his master without saying a word. In reward for his silence he becomes the patriarch's successor.

I would not budge an inch if asked such a question. Any movement is an expression of reality and consequently it is bound to be false or illusory. Immobility too is an expression of reality, but it is first and foremost a sign of renunciation which, if added to silence, would be the best answer to Bodhidharma's teaser; whereas stepping forward and bowing are the signs of affirmation. It is as if the disciple was saying to his master, "I could give verbal expression to whatever I experience in this world. But, with all due respect, I don't feel like it right now." This reminds me of a prima donna who gives her farewell concert every two months. And after each concert she assures her admirers and the journalists who happen to be around that she will never sing again.

Why am I writing this commentary? I do not have to write a farewell novel, do I? Nor is it necessary to assure my admirers that I shall never write again. Why am I writing it? Because I cannot bear the sight of emptiness. Because the dark wood near which Dante encountered Virgil is better than

an empty screen. Besides, *laborare est orare*.

> According to Professor Chiampi, the *Commedia* seeks to evoke from its reader a renewal of spiritual vision which would lead him to understand all things—the poem included—in relation to God. Thus the reader is gradually schooled in the correct use of the poem as he grows in the love of God.

I culled this text from the cover of a book I bought in Ravenna last summer. In former times a reader could be edified by the *Commedia* to the point of finding God, to use the terminology of Russian novelists. In an appropriate atmosphere it would be enough to have the book in your library and open it at random or merely touch it now and then. Today it is not enough to write an extended, all-embracing commentary on it with a view to finding not God—a superhuman task—but oneself at least. Yet the text has not been altered and the word "*oscura*" still signifies "dark". Actually it sounds like "*au secour*", which seems to fit the context of Canto 1. Inwardly Dante was calling for help because he knew somebody *might* help him. What is the use of crying for help in this day and age, inwardly or out loud? In broad daylight? The police are prepared to protect our citizens from murderers, child molesters and thieves. Our government's overriding concern is to reduce inflation. I am not afraid of losing my livelihood and nobody will attack me in broad daylight. Will night ever come? Why is everything as clear as Hell?

> Io non so ben ridir com'i' v'intrai,
> tant' era pien di sonno a quel punto
> che la verace via abbandonai.
> I cannot rightly say how I entered it, I was so full of sleep at the moment I left the true way.

Dante does not recall how he entered the dark wood where he stands now, fearful and trembling. I do know what happened yesterday and the day before. I seem never to have slept in my life, so vividly do I remember everything. But these memories do not prevent me from feeling lost to the point of not being able to find my own footprints. I can neither justify nor even understand what I wrote yesterday and the day before. I remember exactly what I did and when and how I wrote the pages I am reading now. I understand neither their style nor their purpose. It is as if the whole thing had been dictated to me. Singleton suggests that the *poema sacro* was dictated by God and that Dante was only his scribe with equanimity. My works, on the other hand, seem to have been dictated by some provincial devil who seeks to pass himself off as a good writer.

And often my own thoughts are so bewildering they make me doubt the permanence of my ego. Where do they come from?

The sleep that Dante holds responsible for his memory lapse is the sinful life in its forgetfulness of good. After Nietzsche we have been living beyond good and evil, beyond sin and virtue; sleep is nothing but sleep now. Anyway, an ordinary alarm clock is capable of delivering us from evil. And

from original sin.

The true way. Our search for it may be described by the following complaint: "I got lost on my way to the circus because I wasn't given very clear instructions." We can get everywhere in no time, provided we are given *clear* instructions.

The *Commedia* is far from clear, although the sun, which is a symbol of God, appears at the very beginning of the work—in the sixteenth verse of Canto I. "We are now to discourse of the spiritual sun, accessible to the intellect, that is God," writes Dante in the *Convivio*. "No object of sense in all the universe is more worthy to be made the symbol of God than the sun." Does this sun really illuminate the hill that Dante makes for after his distressing sojourn in the wood?

In several poems Mandelstam speaks about "the black sun" which radiates *light*, contrary to what might be expected. Upon the death of God the sun must have gone into mourning so that even in broad daylight it is hopelessly black. Within Canto I the dark wood casts its shadow over the earth *and* heaven. The Aztecs installed the black sun on the back of the God of the Underworld—the ominous reminder of death. (Hell is not far from the sixteenth verse of Canto I.) Traditionally the black sun heralds the unleashing of destructive forces upon the universe, society or the individual. The inverted image of the noonday sun. Alchemists regard the black sun as a symbol of the *prima materia* which has not been worked upon. At this point Dante is not yet aware of his forthcoming journey around the Hereafter; his state of mind corresponds to the *prima materia* of the alchemists. Anyway the modern reader cannot see the sun otherwise, not even in the *Paradiso*.

Recently there was an exhibition in Paris, featuring Velazquez, Manet and lots of other artists who had fruitfully developed Spanish themes in painting. The network of influences brought out by such exhibitions either partly destroys or on the contrary enriches the pictures through the reunion with their distant relatives. Another exhibition of this sort, devoted to Matisse and Picasso, was a disappointment on account of what may be defined as a family feud. But thanks to the parallels I drew at the Spanish exhibition I fell in love with Manet whom I would have discovered in my youth, on his own terms, had I been less impressed by the colours of Monet and Renoir. Now, inspired by the spirit of the exhibition, I compared Manet mainly with the Impressionists – to the detriment of the painters who surrounded him. Of course he has a lot in common with the Spanish masters exhibited at the Orsay Museum on that occasion: Velazquez, Zurbaran, Goya. His paintings are even more immobile, more black-and-white; they are less dependent on light, on seasons, on our moods. The contrast between Manet and the Impressionists is however more striking and instructive, more enlightening. Monet proves that the sun's rays are at their most powerful at midday. Manet shows us the light diffused by the black sun; its rays depend neither on Time nor on weather. This light is generated by the pictures and not by the world outside them. It is their blackness that generates all other colours and even the figures—"the absolute blackness…which belongs only to Manet," as Paul Valéry put it in his essay *Triumph of Manet*. This blackness leaves no room for frivolous nuances which might go on a

spree in the background, creating a picture within a picture. There is only one picture in every picture of Manet's and in that picture there is only one thought—an eternal thought. All the rest is just a head to which the thought is confined. The Impressionists trust the first impression; Manet relies on the last thought to such an extent that everything seems to be last in his pictures. The Impressionists never leave an object alone: every single colour of the surrounding world gets reflected in it. Manet's figures are withdrawn into themselves as if to reflect not on colours but on the essence of the world. Even his balconies look solitary in spite of the people who stand or sit on them; they too seem to meditate on truth. Manet's pictures are always silent while Impressionist trees prattle on about weather forecasts and politics. They may occasionally whistle a mournful tune, though.

Paul Valéry says that often "the enchantment of music makes one forget the existence of sounds". So do Manet's pictures. The thought which dwells in them is silent by its very nature and therefore cannot be expressed verbally. A piece of music might express it, but that piece would be soundless. In the sixtieth verse of Canto I Dante speaks about the sun that is silent: "She pushed me back, little by little, to where the sun is silent" (*là dove 'l sol tace*).

> Poi ch'èi posato un poco il corpo lasso,
> ripresi via per la piaggia diserta,
> sì che 'l piè fermo sempre era 'l più basso.
> After I had rested my tired body a little, I again took up my way across the desert strand, so that the firm foot was always the lower.

Sì che 'l piè fermo sempre era 'l più basso. Here is the upshot of Singleton's vast commentary on this obscure verse: "Postlapsarian man is a limping creature (*homo claudus*). He limps especially in his *left* foot, because it is wounded by concupiscence, the chief *vulneratio* of original sin." In a Russian commentary the firm foot is associated with the earth and the other with heaven. The way to heaven is under our feet or rather under our foot: the other foot should be in mid-air, reaching for the stars. "Let us play with the skipping rope," says an Orthodox priest to his congregation.

In *De ludo globi* Nicholas of Cusa describes a game he seems to have invented. A wooden ball with a spherical hollow off-centre is tossed over a surface divided into ten concentric circles. When the ball is bowled, it does not roll in a straight line but takes a spiral path: one of its sides is heavier than the other. At the centre of the ground is the king—Christ. The winner is the player whose ball has touched the greatest number of circles and comes closest to the centre.

The wayfarer leaves the wood and heads for a hill that he intends to climb. The hill is the *mons Domini* of the Scriptures: "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord?" The wayfarer will not make this ascent on his own.

For many years I thought I had been endowed with a gift for happiness, boasting about it here and there, giving no thought to the intrinsic frailty of my life. Of course I knew I might perish in a car crash or even in my own flat: one of my uncles slipped on the tiles, fell into his bath and drowned. But

my death could not abolish my happiness retrospectively and I was determined to enjoy my life to the utmost. At the time I was sure there were no limits to my happiness which automatically increased as I glanced at my library: so many books had not been read yet! Whenever I failed to recognise this or that piece of music, my first piano professor at the Moscow Conservatoire said, "How I envy you!" He meant I would be happy when listening to it for the first time—the happiness he had been deprived of because he owned the best collection of discs in Moscow. I hoped my happiness would steadily increase until my death: there were so many works of art to discover and re-discover. Indeed, one can re-read the *Commedia* after one's death without ever losing the sensation of joy that accompanies the first reading. But even the *Commedia* will not ensure the eternal recurrence of happiness.

Once I opened it at random without trying to find my favourite tercets; anyway, there are hardly a score of verses in the *Commedia* that I do not love to distraction. So I opened it and began to read; the dark wood turned into a coppice of alders, aspens and birches. Instead of the *mons Domini* there stood before me an anthill over which I could step at any time. Gradually, almost imperceptibly, the *Commedia* fell silent. It was not as soundless as an enchanting piece of music; rather, it was mute. I saw some words, but they neither spoke to me nor resorted to the language of signs. They just looked as any printed words would have looked on the same pages. And they did not look at me.

A month later I realised I was so weak I could not even step over the anthill: my body might fall victim to the voracity of the ants. What is more, I might fall victim to my own voracity. In Canto VIII Dante meets Filippo Argenti who is shortly set upon and tormented by some fellow sinners:

> Tutti gridavano: "A Filippo Argenti!"
> e 'l fiorentino spirito bizzarro
> in sé medesmo si volvea co' denti.
> All cried, "At Filippo Argenti!"—and the irascible Florentine spirit turned on himself with his teeth.

I realised I was devouring my own body and soul.

Subject to the sin of pride, for many years I was devoured by the lion that impedes the wayfarer's ascent. And I am still subject to lust symbolised by the *lonsia* or lonza—a vicious, ferocious animal, born of the carnal union of a lion with a leopardess or of a leopard with a lioness. But I am free from the sin of *cupiditas* or *concupiscentia* which is more troublesome than the others. (The she-wolf.) "For the love of money is the root of evil; which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows." How do I know I am free from covetousness? The remnants of pride? Incidentally, I typed out "luxury" instead of "lust", misguided by the French word "*luxure*". A nice slip of the fingers.

A proud man thinks that nothing is beyond his control: neither his own self nor whatever lies outside. Actually nothing lies outside him; the whole world seems to be a morsel of fish that he can swallow, digest and get rid of in due time. But his digestion *is* beyond his control: he does not know

exactly what will happen the next day, let alone in a week. Of course he sits for a while after a meal to allow digestion to take place. Ever since his illness, his digestion has been poor and, try as he may, he cannot do anything about it. And often his soup goes down the wrong way, which results in a drawn-out coughing fit. Last month, instead of a morsel of food, he swallowed a fly accidentally and had another coughing fit, another bout of indigestion. "You'll give yourself indigestion if you swallow your dinner so quickly," says his wife. Obediently he slows down the tempo of his dinner-ritual, but his stomach disregards his efforts and continues to wreak havoc on his well-being and mood.

"For no one is known to another so intimately as he is known to himself," writes St Augustine, "and yet no one is so well known even to himself that he can be sure as to his conduct on the morrow…We were told that a man of eighty-four, who had lived a life of continence under religious observance with a pious wife for twenty-five years, has gone and bought himself a music-girl for his pleasure." I might buy a music-girl for my pleasure tomorrow or at the age of eighty-five. I'm afraid, I will never throw off the yoke of lust.

One of my fellow musicians said once on TV that he knew what he would become in his next incarnation. "I'll be a musician, a different musician perhaps—a conductor, a pianist. But I'm sure I'll be a musician in my next incarnation." I wrote a poem about it, where I adumbrated my own future lives. I did not go so far as to *affirm* I would be a musician or a poet. I just expressed my hope of becoming a better poet in my next incarnation.

The TV viewers must have been delighted by my colleague's assurance: he is a great deal more then a musician "to the marrow", extending his gift as far as the Harrowing of Hell. He seems to have under control the most uncontrollable thing in the world—Time.

People are so self-confident nowadays that no lion can obstruct their way to the top of the world. And if a lion does turn up somewhere, they just put it in a cage and send the cage to the nearest zoo. And the she-wolf trots behind them in the hope of getting another morsel of meat. Incidentally, the she-wolf is the only beast left in the world that has been stripped of all unessential symbols, as if under Manet's brush. People lust for money even if they lust for power: they can get it only by means of money. And a man who lusts after pretty girls opens his chequebook at least twice a day. Whenever he opens and closes it, he prides himself on being rich. A statuette of a she-wolf adorns his bedside cabinet so that even in his nightmares he prides himself on being rich and important; even in his nightmares he neither wanders in dark woods nor experiences the fear which is "so bitter that death is hardly more so" (*tant' è amara che poco è più morte*).

Dante compares his dark wood to the dangerous waters (*l'acqua perigliosa*):

così l'animo mio, ch'ancor fuggiva,
  si volse a retro a rimirar lo passo
  che non lasciò già mai persona viva.
So my mind which was still fleeing turned back to gaze upon the pass that never left anyone alive.

I wonder if at some point Dante was not considering suicide as the only way out of the dark wood, out of the room where he had found himself. Suicide is not a way out, for it leads to another realm altogether—a room or a corridor that has nothing to do with the one you are standing in right now. It is either the light at the end of the tunnel—if the Hereafter does *not* exist—or another dark wood which is described in Canto XIII (the Wood of the Suicides). I think that in the above tercet Dante comes out of the wood of allegories which is almost as dark as the wood where his doppelgänger wanders at the beginning of the *Commedia*. "Death" means "death" sometimes and not just "the sinful life in its forgetfulness of good". Of course a commentator might quote the Bible to elucidate the mystery of that *passo* upon which the wayfarer mentally gazes: "*In semita iustitiae vita, iter autem devium ducit ad mortem*." (In the path of justice there is life, but the abominable way leads to death.) The King James Bible mitigates the effects of the warning by putting death aside as if he had already been vanquished through faith: "In the way of righteousness is life; and in the pathway thereof there is no death." The New International Version gets rid of him altogether: "In the way of righteousness there is life; along that path is immortality." The Chouraqui Version has it along the same lines: "*A voie de justification , vie; son chemin, route de non-mort*." The Luther Bible, on the other hand, imitates the rigour of the Vulgate: "*Auf dem Wege der Gerechtigkeit ist Leben; aber böser Weg führt zum Tode*."

The versions that mention death only in passing are closer to the allegorical interpretation of the original text which I cannot read, unfortunately: I have no Hebrew. Tolstoy learnt it at the age of fifty-five in order to read the Bible in the original; it is high time I followed his example. Approximately at the same age—a little earlier perhaps—Tolstoy decided to kill himself. He dwells upon this decision in *A Confession* where he says that the force driving him to suicide was more than a mere wish, being similar to the force which used to make him cling to life. "Why do I live?" is the question he asks himself at this critical period in his life. He finds himself in a wood, a *dark* wood: within two sentences he repeats the word "dark" four times.

The Vulgate and The Luther Bible are closer to what might actually have happened in Dante's wood. "The abominable way leads to death." No matter where Dante was at the moment when the fear gripped him: in a wood, in a room, in a field, on the top of a mountain. What counts is that nobody else could have experienced that fear in his place—neither a doppelgänger nor some allegorical figure. The dark wood had been created for him alone; so had the fear. And when he had vanquished it, first on his own and then with the aid of Virgil, the fear disappeared forever. So did the wood, although it remains on the first page of the *Inferno* and in Botticelli's drawing. And in Blake’s watercolour. Actually Blake conflates almost the whole action of the Canto I to the meeting with Virgil who is literally flying to Dante's rescue. Be that as it may, Dante must have been facing the problem of suicide twice: he had read the Vulgate and not the New International Version. To lead an intense and worthy life, you must be tempted, if only once, by the possibility of committing suicide. And then you

meet Virgil or, following in Tolstoy's footsteps, create your own brand of Christianity. Or you just re-read Canto XIII of the *Inferno*.

The interplay between allegory and reality makes it difficult to say with certainty what Dante really felt and did in the course of his work on the *Commedia*. He might have played the comedy all along, to use the French expression "*jouer la comédie*" which means "to put on an act". A dark wood is an ideal starting point anyway, for the simple reason that you have to find your way out. Tolstoy climbs a tree, looks around but sees no home in the limitless space. There is a gradual build-up of suspense throughout the first half of Canto I until Virgil shows up and offers his help. In the *Inferno*, suspense as a device is limited to the crescendo of tortures and the names of the victims. Not for a second do we believe that either Dante or Virgil will be killed by some devil or other, and we know for sure that Dante and Beatrice will meet on the threshold of Paradise:

> A le quai poi se tu vorrai salire,
> anima fia a ciò più di me degna:
> con lei ti lascerò nel mio partire
> And to these [the blessed] if you would then ascend, there shall be a soul worthier than I to guide you; with her I shall leave you at my departing.

Could Dante have made this journey on his own, unassisted by Virgil and Beatrice? Did he really need to roam through Hell and Purgatory in order to save his soul? Of course he had to accomplish this act for the sake of the *Commedia* which would have been unfinished indeed, if limited to Paradise only. As a matter of fact, even his visit to Paradise was not necessary for the salvation of his soul: one need not know what Paradise looks like to recoil in disgust at the temptations that strew one's way. At the age of twenty-two I said to my girlfriend's mother that I would have been overjoyed if granted the faith of a simple woman—of a peasant woman, for instance. Intrigued, she reminded me that I was an intellectual and could not possibly jettison overnight the knowledge I had accumulated over years. "Not an easy task for someone who quotes Kierkegaard every five minutes," she added. "The conversion might be effected through the Kierkegaardian leap," I answered playfully. Though steeped in Russian culture, I did not realise that my wish was more attuned to Tolstoy's ideas and the Devil who says to Ivan Karamazov: "I would surrender this super-celestial life, all ranks and honours, if only I could become incarnate in the soul of a seven-pood merchant’s wife and put up candles to God." There *was* something diabolical in my wish anyway: a man who believes in God need not believe in Him *differently*, like someone else.

Dante's path led him through the circles and spheres that had been created for him alone, like the entrance to Kafka's Law. He would have stayed neither in the wood nor on the desert strand across which he directed his steps before being assaulted by the three beasts. They impeded his ascent and the she-wolf even pushed him back as if to demonstrate that he could not fight his own demons without the help of a spiritual guide.

"Oh that I had wings like a dove! for then would I fly away, and be at rest. Lo, then would I wander far off, and remain in the wilderness." (Psalm 55.) A terrified man desires to escape from the source of his terror, from those who oppress and mock him. No one will trouble and molest him in the wilderness where only his own demons can get into their stride, exposing his body and soul to the arrows of temptations. But personal demons need food to sustain themselves and be active over a long period of time. And what kind of food will they come across in the wilderness, save their owner's hallucinations? The devil that tormented St Anthony would assume the form of wild beasts, women or soldiers, but all of them were repelled by Anthony's fervid prayers and penitential acts. No prayer, however fervid, would have repelled a *real* woman bent on shattering the saint's inner peace. (One of Tolstoy's heroes had to chop off his finger to get rid of such a woman.) A real soldier would have shot him dead; a real wild beast would have torn him apart. In the wilderness, the *Commedia* might guide one to the celestial rose despite imaginary obstructions and occasional headaches. A telephone call, however, is bound to push you back to the dark wood, to the very first page of the poem. What does it matter whether you answer a call or just wait for someone to call you?

In my desert the telephone rings very seldom—only once a day; and my answerphone gets three or four messages every week. But the telephone does ring, punctuating the silence I have built up over the last few decades. The word "deconstruction" (*Abbau*) would fit the context, it seems to me: I have disordered and disarranged the noise which used to interfere with my travel arrangements and I have no intention of re-arranging it.

Do I need a *human* guide to follow in Dante's footsteps? After all, Dante had at his disposal the Bible, Thomas Aquinas' *Summas* and many other works which might have become his travelling companions. Yet he brought in Virgil and Beatrice without whose assistance he was unable to keep the imaginary beasts at bay, let alone reach the celestial rose. St Augustine says that our capacity to engage our feelings on a course of action, to take "delight" in it, is wholly dependent "on the inspiration granted us by God". In other words, our salvation depends on God's grace and not on our decisions and good intentions. The young lady I mentioned earlier may leave me a message and later on share with me this Dantean experience. And yesterday I hit upon an idea which must have originated in a sort of inspiration; it was not the result of a decision made either on the spur of the moment or after much soul-searching. I found my Virgil.

Actually I found him in the early sixties: in those days we were studying together at the Moscow Music College. It was he who introduced me to the *Commedia* and many other works I shall carry in my suitcase on this journey through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise. Vladimir Martynov is now a famous composer and an author of three books on music in which, to a greater or lesser degree, he embroiders upon the decline of the West. In the last one he maintains, for instance, that the time of composers is over. When I returned to Russia in 1989—after sixteen years of absence—he picked me up at the airport and the next day guided me through the Kremlin cathedrals that I had nearly forgotten

in my self-imposed exile. To tell the truth, I had not really known them before: I had visited them for the first time on the eve of my irrevocable departure from Russia.

I shall never settle down in Russia again, but I often speak to Volodya with whom we might discuss the *Commedia* over the phone as I move along, or rather up and down. Incidentally, I wonder why we say "up and down" and not "down and up"? A strain of pessimism runs through many idioms of ours—an anti-Dantean strain par excellence. And the optimistic expression "on the up and up" is not used in a Dantean spirit: "Her career has been on the up and up since she moved into sales." A person on the up and up is honest and can be trusted, but will you ever trust somebody who faces a daunting (Dantean) task of bringing you to Paradise by a roundabout way: through Hell and Purgatory?

Many Soviet citizens thought they were living in Hell. I shall have many opportunities to compare Dante's Hell with the twenty-six years I spent in Moscow and also with my life in the West. Until the age of fourteen I must have been wandering in a dark wood, although my passion for mathematics afforded me a few glimpses of Paradise. Volodya introduced me to Montaigne and Dante; in the same period I heard for the first time Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. These operas might illustrate the three realms of the *Commedia* all the more efficiently since the Hereafter is their primary subject matter.

Could I have said to Volodya, "*Tu se' lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore*"? (You are my master and my author.) We wrote a lot of poems in those years. With a few exceptions, his poetry reflected the Russian ideas on poetical imagery: no statements, no definitive contours. I have always been much closer to Dante about whom T. S. Eliot says in his famous essay: "Dante's attempt is to make us see what he saw. He therefore employs very simple language, and very few metaphors, for allegory and metaphor do not get on well together." Volodya, on the other hand, insisted on what he called "the work with words", which often resulted in so intricate a texture that I for one could not make head or tail of it. With a bit of luck I might succeed in making out a head (harmony), but the tail (sense) was nowhere to be seen. Volodya might have objected that the tail was not important, the head enclosing both the harmony and the sense. For him, harmony *was* the sense and vice versa. No wonder his favourite poet was Velemir Khlebnikov. My favourite poet would have been Mandelstam had I been fortunate enough to read him in my youth.

Even now I am not much interested in words as such and the texture to which I give my undivided attention is mainly created through the criss-cross pattern of thoughts, either abstract or visual. What I really care about is the birth of thought and its growth, the way it sprouts between gravestones. In *Conversation about Dante*, Mandelstam says that Dante "is not a manufacturer of tropes" but "a strategist of transmutation and hybridisation." And of criss-cross patterns:

> One must traverse the full width of a river crammed with Chinese junks moving simultaneously in various directions—this is how the meaning of poetic discourse is created. The meaning, its

> itinerary, cannot be reconstructed by interrogating the boatmen: they will not be able to tell how and why we were skipping from junk to junk.
> (Translated by Jane Gary Harris and Constance Link)

In those days too Dante was my Virgil. As to Mandelstam, I read his poetry and this essay only in 1974, for his works were forbidden in the Soviet Union.

At the age of fifteen I decided to request political asylum in the West—at the earliest opportunity. We often discussed the subject with Volodya who guided me almost to the end of the Purgatory: somebody else saw me off at the airport.

Dante asks Virgil to protect him against the she-wolf that has turned him back, making his "veins and pulses tremble" (*ch'ella mi fa tremar le vene e i polsi*). Virgil says that another way should be chosen because the she-wolf "lets no man pass her way, but so besets him that she slays him":

> Ché questa bestia, per la qual tu gride,
> non lascia altrui passar per la sua via,
> ma tanto lo 'impedisce che l'uccide…

In the lives of Soviet citizens money played a minor role because they could not buy anything with it except a dacha, a car and diamonds. The dachas were located in Hell and nobody outside the closed circle of nomenclatura was allowed to get a car at the push of a button: my father joined the queue in 1938 and waited for twenty years. "Hey, no queue jumping!" resounded all over Moscow. And the dresses worn by our women were no match for diamonds which would lose their sparkle in contact with them. Of course some ordinary citizens saw the she-wolf in the streets and in their flats; she did obstruct their way from time to time. But none of them was slain by her: there were no casualties outside the nomenclatura.

In 1994 I met a scientist who was teaching at the University of Moscow. "Ten years ago our students discussed poetry and mathematics," he said. "Now they talk only about money in the lifts. They've even forgotten love." The she-wolf seems to have slain many of my former fellow citizens—almost all of them. And no greenery sprouts between the gravestones.

Only an enlightened monarch—to whom Virgil alludes in his short speech, calling him the Hound—can deal the she-wolf a mortal blow, for, as Dante writes in *De monarchia*, "the monarch cannot have any occasion for greed, or at any rate can of all men have least occasion thereto." Lenin, Hitler and Stalin, who were monarchs in their own right, though not quite enlightened, had indeed no opportunity to meet the she-wolf socially. And had she been invited to their fairly modest houses she would not have killed them, unimpressed by the furniture and paintings. And dealing with the will to power is not her department. Is it?

Virgil is supposed to lead Dante through the *Inferno* where the tormented spirits bewail the second death. Why can't the poets go straight to Paradise without making detours?

The shaman experiences death and visits Hell in order to gain control over the elements:

> Some of them are evil spirits, some are like snakes, some are like horses with men's heads, and some are spirits of evil men which resemble burning fires. You see your camp burning and the blood waters rising, and thunder, lightning and rain, the earth rocking, the hills moving, the waters whirling, and the trees which still stand, swaying about…You may see dead persons walking towards you, and you will hear their bones rattle.
> (From an account given by a shaman of the Yaralde tribe of Australia. Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism*.)

Without Hell there is no Paradise. Would *I* have reached Paradise had I not lived in Hell for some time?

Dante has a lot in common with shamans: they also appeal to their imagination so as to give form to a cosmos that is unpredictable. (The blank page *is* unpredictable; so is a computer screen.) Order should be imposed on chaos and psychic confusion. According to Lévi-Strauss, the shaman provides a diseased person "with a language by means of which unexpressed and otherwise inexpressible psychic states can be immediately expressed. And it is the transition to this verbal expression…which induces the release of the physiological process."

In Canto XXXIV, at the end of the journey through Hell, there is a moment when Dante thinks he goes back—Hell revisited, so to speak. In Canto I he reviews what has happened and realises he might have died on his way out of the wood, for the *passo* "never left anyone alive". That is why he is so frightened when the she-wolf pushes him back towards the spot where he would have found death, but for the heaven-empowered intervention of Virgil. In Chapter XIV of the *Vita Nuova* Dante finds himself very near Beatrice and therefore undergoes a transfiguration after which he says to his friend, "Of a surety I have now set my feet on that point of life, beyond the which he must not pass who would return." In the dark wood Dante is far from Beatrice; the distance between them has never been so great. Both events lead to a transfiguration which prevents Dante from going back. The impossibility of going back becomes a blessing and a curse of his life: he sets off on a shamanistic journey through the Hereafter but cannot return to Florence, his native city.

As we drove past the Kremlin I looked at it for the last time, turning on my seat this way and that: I was sure I would never come back. Most of the things we look at will not turn up again within our field of vision, but not very often do we *consciously* glance at them for the last time. Besides, there is a difference between the last glance the object of which is just an ancient monument and the one we cast at the house where we have lived for many years.

I was only five when another taxi took me away from a house which was to be pulled down within a week: it had fallen into such a state of dilapidation that even unfastidious Soviet architects could not tolerate its presence on the surface of the earth. Submissively my childhood vanished as we turned a corner and joined the light traffic on the Avenue of Peace, as it is called now. In June 1974 I passed the point of no return twice: on the way to Moscow International Airport and in the UNO

building in Brussels, where I had a talk with a top-ranking American officer. He asked me why I wished to leave my native land forever. I was so surprised by this question that an irreverent grimace distorted my face and even my body, assuming there is such a thing as a bodily grimace. I told him I was yearning to see a Dali exhibition in London and to attend—At this point he interrupted me, repeating my words, "A Dali exhibition, a Dali exhibition. Do you think it's wise to leave your fatherland in order to see a Dali exhibition in London?" I said, "Yes." And I added that the impossibility to travel around the world deprived Soviet citizens of many aesthetic pleasures—He interrupted me again to repeat the word "pleasures" five times. It took me more than an hour to prove to him that I had every good reason to leave the USSR forever. And we spent another three hours arguing whether my reasons could be regarded as political.

I wonder why I mentioned Salvador Dali at that critical moment in my life. At the Moscow Conservatoire we adored Paul Klee to whom Volodya introduced me in 1964: his father often travelled abroad and so had an opportunity to buy the books that were not easily obtainable in the Soviet Union. Why did I mention the name of Dali? I must have thought the officer was not familiar with Paul Klee. In 1974 I was unaware that Dali had illustrated the *Commedia* and even made a bust of Dante.

Why did I leave the Soviet Union? I was greedy for knowledge and dreamt among other things of a huge personal library. And I would not have been swayed by Cusanus had I come across the following text prior to my departure from the USSR:

> Just as carnal lust finds its consecration and appeasement only when channelled in the sacrament of marriage, so love of knowledge finds its appeasement only when channelled in true union with the Bridegroom. So long as the mind indulges without restraint in vain knowledge, it no more finds the object of its natural desire than does a man who cohabits with every whore. There can be no true marriage with a fickle woman, only with eternal wisdom.

Many theologians join Cusanus to fulminate against vain knowledge; I quote him because he contributed a lot towards mathematics which cannot *always* be "channelled in true union with the Bridegroom". From the point of view of a stern believer in God, the knowledge I was yearning after was vain and superfluous: I read many novels during the twenty-seven years of my exile. But I did believe in God at the end of my Russian life and even spoke of my desire to practise the orthodox religion to the American officer who was aware that in Russia one could not get involved with the Church without running the risk of losing one's job and social position. During the same period Volodya, who stayed in Russia out of patriotism, devoted his time to the study of the Scriptures and theology, reading novels and poems only occasionally and almost unwillingly. He lost neither his job nor his social position and did not cohabit with every whore—he had got married before my departure from Moscow—while my house looked like a brothel in both the literal and allegorical senses. I was getting further away from God Who can be found anywhere, even in a country like the Soviet Union.

Some would go so far as to maintain that in such a country God is *more* present than elsewhere, for people need Him badly—those sheep that have strayed too far from the path of righteousness.

For a while I clung to the One of Plotinus, which was nowhere: neither in the West nor in the Soviet Union. And what is not somewhere is nowhere absent. Then I moved on to higher things: Hinduism and Buddhism. In part, I retained the high aspect of the Christian God but almost irrevocably lost His lower, *human* aspect.

In Canto XXVI Ulysses recounts the story of his voyage to the narrow outlet "where Hercules set up his markers that men should not pass beyond":

> dov' Ercule segnò li suoi riguardi
> acciò che l'uom più oltre non si metta

The Strait of Gibraltar; two pillars of Hercules beyond which no one should travel. Why have I read all these books which are nothing but games—*divine* games, as Nabokov puts it? Yet they are not channelled in true union with the Bridegroom. Why should I play games or watch others play them? Are these games worth the candle? Can they compensate for the death of God?

In one of his lectures Nabokov said that, had he been born half a century earlier, he would have locked Tolstoy in a house on a desert island with nothing around but ink and reams of paper—"far away from the things, ethical and pedagogical, that diverted his attention from observing the way the dark hair curled above Anna's white neck". What do I care about Anna's hair and neck? What do I care about the diamonds that must have sparkled on her black dress? But even now, on my desert island, I would give anything to see this black dress painted by Manet. Isn't painting more often in union with the Bridegroom than literature?

I used to venerate Nabokov to the extent of reading mostly the authors he had praised in his *Eugene Onegin* and *Strong Opinions*. Now I am tackling this problem: Should I convey him to the *nobile castello* where reside the great poets and philosophers whose death took place *before* the advent of Jesus Christ?

The thrills I experienced during the time I spent engrossed in novels and poems have led me to the desert island or just to the desert—any place would do on condition that the word "desert" may be applied to it. (In his wood Dante could lean against a tree.) What is the point of watching Emma Bovary dance? And if I swallowed some arsenic I would become another Flaubert, doomed to write his novels and say one day about a young couple pushing a pram, "They're in the right." I touch St Augustine's *City of God* and say, "He's right."

Dante is right too: there are black and white suns in the *Commedia* and those suns radiate light. And diamonds are just a girl's best friend. In Canto I of *Purgatorio* there is a "sweet hue of oriental sapphire" in the sky (*dolce color d'orïental zaffiro*), which greets Dante on his way out of the *Inferno*. In the essay that Borges devotes to this verse, several poets are quoted. What I have at the back of my

mind when reading Dante's verse is "Lucy in the sky with diamonds"—instead of the diamond sparkling in Canto II of the *Paradiso*:

> Parev' a me che nube ne coprisse
> lucida, spessa, solida e pulita,
> quasi adamante che lo sol ferisse.
> It seemed to me that a cloud had enveloped us, shining, dense, solid and polished, like a diamond smitten by the sun.

T. S. Eliot says somewhere that the inhabitants of the *Purgatorio* seem to ruminate more on their terrestrial past than on the future among the souls of the blessed. They are nostalgia-stricken and mentally look back so often that one might suppose they dream of being re-incarnated in order to have another go at earthly existence. When my inner ear listens to that Beatles' song, I also revisit my past, which prevents me from meditating upon Paradise and its joys more often.

Among other quotations, Borges analyses in his essay the following verse from Byron's *Hebrew Melodies*, "She walks in beauty, like the Night." "The reader," says Borges, "should imagine a tall woman who walks like the Night which is in its turn a tall dark woman and so on ad infinitum." The young lady whom I am tempted to call on the phone is dark like the night, though not really tall. She walks in beauty, like the Night. And the Night walks like her; and looks like her; and sounds like her dress. And she dresses like the Night: almost all her dresses are black like Berthe Morisot's clothes, as depicted by Manet. And Berthe Morisot is sitting with her fan behind which she hides her face. And my dark lady hides her low, cello-like voice behind my telephone, beyond my life. Shall I put out my vessel on the deep sea and sail to her through the Strait of Gibraltar, between two pillars of Hercules—as far as the Mount of Purgatory?

Borges says that Dante compares the colour of the Orient to that of a sapphire which encloses the Orient in its name. "Thus he suggests a reciprocal game that can be infinite." Dante also suggests a circle, yet another circle: the *Commedia* is full of circles. But this circle is not vicious, unlike the circles of the *Inferno* where the same tortures are inflicted over and over again. Some of the victims die and are re-born for the sole purpose of being tormented and die once more. In Canto XXIV a sinner is burnt to ashes and shortly afterwards rises from the dead Phoenix-like to undergo the same punishment.

In the introductory Canto, which does not belong to the *Inferno*, Dante outlines a vicious circle as the she-wolf pushes him back towards the dark wood where he experienced a death-like fear. I find myself in the same desert whatever I write or read, whoever I talk to on the phone and in restaurants. I might have lived in this desert for a long time—ever since my departure from Russia perhaps. I realised I was living there only at the age of fifty-five when a Dantesque fear pervaded my soul. Dante experienced this fear at the age of thirty-five. The average human lifespan has increased over the seven centuries that separate us, but today one needs more time to come to terms with one's own destiny.

CANTO II

Lo giorno se n'andava, e l'aere bruno
toglieva li animai che sono in terra
da le fatiche loro…
Day was departing, and the dark air was taking the creatures on earth from their labours.

John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, III. 240, speaking of Dante's use of the word "*bruno*", says:

> In describing a simple twilight—not a Hades twilight, but an ordinarily fair evening—he says, the "brown" air took the animals away from their fatigues;—the waves under Charon's boat are "brown" (*Inf*. III. 117); and Lethe, which is perfectly clear and yet dark, as with oblivion, is "bruna-bruna", "brown, exceeding brown"…There can be no doubt that, in calling Lethe brown, he means that it was dark slate-grey, inclining to black; as, for instance, our clear Cumberland lakes, which, looked straight down upon where they are deep, seem to be lakes of ink. I am sure this is the colour he means; because no clear stream or lake on the continent ever looks brown, but blue or green; and Dante, by merely taking away the pleasant colour, would get at once to this idea of grave clear grey. So, when he was talking of twilight, his eye for colour was far too good to let him call it brown in our sense. Twilight is not brown, but purple, golden, or dark grey; and this last was what Dante meant.

Taking away the pleasant colour was not Dante's only preoccupation, although he did exclude almost all colours from the *Inferno*, with the exception of black and brown; and these two colours might be reduced to one, if we adopt Ruskin's method. The brown represents Dante's mood and style; it is the colour of his rigour and intransigence. The light he sees in the *Inferno* reflects the rustiness of the tunnel which has been in decay for some time and cannot be refurbished.

Plotinus says that only a union with the One can be the aim of the thinking process which otherwise has no meaning, no raison d'être. Man should seek to know the world and whatever dwells in it with a view to transcending all that for the sake of union with the One. I was enchanted by the colours of the world, by the way Anna’s dark hair curled above her white neck. I did not notice that even in this image of a seductive, sensuous woman the colours of the world had been reduced to their black-and-white essence.

In *The Poetry of Michelangelo*, Walter Pater singles out the spiritual aspect of the artist's works as opposed to what is euphemistically called "the love of nature":

> He has traced no flowers, like those with which Leonardo stars over his gloomiest rocks; nothing like the fretwork of wings and flames in which Blake frames his most startling conceptions. No forest-scenery like Titian's fills his backgrounds, but only blank ranges of rock, and dim vegetable forms as blank as they, as in a world before the creation of the first five days.

"Woods, clouds, seas, and mountains disappear, and only what is formed by the spirit of man remains behind," as Grimm puts it.

In Blake's first watercolour devoted to the *Commedia* there are not many wings or flames; even

the dark wood is relegated to a corner. Blake concentrates his attention on Dante, Virgil and the three beasts—a picture which might have been painted by Michelangelo. In the second watercolour—*The Mission of Virgil*—Blake represents an angry God Whom he borrows from his own series of illustrations to *The Book of Job*. God subjects Dante to the shamanistic rite of going through the circles of Hell—a spiritual equivalent of the fire-rimmed hoops through which a lion or another beast jumps in a circus. (God puts Dante through the hoops, as it were.) Some commentators have suggested that Blake means to equate Dante's Hell with the world we live in and not with the world beneath: the two burning figures that flank the nether half of the picture are level with Dante and the three beasts lying in wait for him.

I wish I had *consciously* got rid of whatever stood in my way to "the unthinkable", as so many thinkers characterise the One or the Being or God. But I was content with the thinkable and the expressible, and seldom if ever experienced the psychological paralysis depicted so many times in the course of the *Commedia*, especially in the *Paradiso* where Dante regularly owns up to his incapacity to translate into words what he sees around him. I saw neither Paradise nor Hell and so had no need to question the words used by myself or others. And then the world melted away into what looked like Michelangelo's scenery deprived of forests, flowers, wings and flames. Even the fire—the one that Cocteau was eager to save from a burning house—was no longer there, for all its long-standing loyalty. What was to be done in that new world unfamiliar to the author and readers of the *Vita Nuova*? Within the blank ranges of rock and dim vegetable forms, which seemed to have come from the Sistine Chapel, only the creation of a man could be envisaged and realised.

> e io sol uno
> m'apparecchiava a sostener la guerra
> sì del cammino e sì de la pietate,
> che ritrarrà la mente che non erra.
> And I alone was making ready to sustain the strife, both of the journey and of the pity, which unerring memory shall retrace.

Dante is getting ready for the journey and the sentiments he is bound to experience in the course of it. "Alone" (*uno*) is the keyword in the above-quoted passage, along the path leading to the *Inferno*. As we know, Dante was *not* alone at the beginning of Canto II and no comment, however ingenious, can dispel the doubts raised by his assertion.

I am alone in Canto I, in Canto II, in my flat, in the streets. I seem to have appropriated the letter A. (O in Russian, S in French.) Kafka said in 1914: "I find the letter K offensive, almost nauseating, and yet I write it down, it must be characteristic of me." And I think he said on one occasion that he had appropriated this letter. I find the letter A melancholy. In French and in Russian you utter it when you are surprised but also upon learning that something has been irrevocably lost. A sigh of relief too sounds like the letter A. But these sighs are no part of my vocabulary and I am seldom surprised

nowadays. I am not surprised that this letter clings to me as though to keep me company; it seems to rely on me to spread its message of loneliness all over the world. Incidentally, this letter was partly appropriated by Edmond Rostand: Cyrano repeats it eight times, if I am not mistaken, as he listens to Roxane's declaration of love for another man. (I would have repeated A nine times.)

I still cannot recall the name of the essay where T. S. Eliot speaks about the nostalgia-stricken inhabitants of the *Purgatorio*. My memory is not unerring, I'm afraid. Time permitting, I will find the paragraph in question and quote it in full. It is not difficult to find the words that have been written down and printed; sooner or later these words become part of my huge personal library and I read them without going out or even switching my computer on: I have no access to the Internet. Anyway the Internet is neither Paradise nor Hell. Why should I travel around it?

La mente che non erra. Let us suppose that Dante made the journey described in the *Commedia* and, upon coming back, resolved to put it on paper in order to keep the promises he had made to many inhabitants of the Hereafter (*immortale secolo*). It is hard to say whether his memory was unerring or fallible on this occasion: no traveller returns from such journeys. Moreover, with a few exceptions, the quick are forbidden to set foot either in Hell or in Paradise. What are these exceptions? Dante mentions St Paul and Aeneas as he talks to his guide at the beginning of Canto II. The former seems to have gone to both Hell and Paradise; the latter was allowed to visit Hell only. I would add to this short list the name of Swedenborg who visited the Hereafter and described his journey in *Heaven and Hell* (1758). For all his knowledge of the future, Dante was not aware of Swedenborg's works, but he might have read the *Slavonic Book of Enoch* that deals with Enoch's journey through the seven tiers of heaven. And he might have compared it with the *Ethiopic Book of Enoch* in which there are several descriptions of the heavenly spheres and their inhabitants. Enoch, the seventh patriarch in the book of Genesis, was the subject of abundant apocryphal literature, especially during the Hellenistic period of Judaism.

Let us suppose that, unlike Swedenborg and the authors who contributed to the writing of Enoch's books, Dante was granted no vision of the Hereafter. Some of his naive contemporaries believed that he had actually journeyed through it, but we may safely discard this hypothesis. So he either invented the whole story or the story was dictated to him by no other than God: nobody else could have been so well informed on the subject. If we accept the latter hypothesis, the problem of memory does not arise at all because one can take dictation without committing the text to memory. If, on the other hand, Dante created his work *ex nihilo*, he had no need of his memory either. Nevertheless, he declares in the *Inferno* that memory itself writes down what he saw.

In the *Vita Nuova*, where it is presented in the opening words, memory is much more than a mere rhetorical device; after all, the action is set in the land of the living.

My life might have been dictated to me from the very start, covering the months I spent in my mother's womb; at least I have lived and partly written my life down. And I have recorded some

episodes on audio and video tapes. In the late fifties my father bought a video camera and, goaded by the desire to become a cameraman, I would film our picnics, our trips to the Black Sea. I left all those documentaries behind as I undertook my perilous journey to the West. My memory is too short to conjure up the images stored on the tapes which must have disintegrated in some KGB office; my memories have likewise disintegrated over thirty-three years, leaving nothing behind—not even a handful of dust. My memories cannot have been buried.

I still had the camera on the day of my departure, but I am not sure it was in working order: I had not filmed anything after my father's death in 1970. Anyway I was loath to film my last day in Russia during which my apartment kept disintegrating under my very eyes. Besides, I had no idea how to persuade the customs officers that I was not smuggling the tapes out the country to sell military secrets to the enemy.

I have no video camera in my possessions now. What could I film in this life of mine, in this so-called *vita nuova*? In my former life I ought to have recorded the meetings I had with a woman whose *désarroi* I still recall despite the enfeeblement of my memory. Her *désarroi*. Why did this French word flash through my mind at the end of our drive to the airport where she kept looking at me through a plate-glass partition? I knew I would settle in a French-speaking country so that, for some time before my departure, I practised French assiduously, replacing Dostoevsky by Proust. But I have been writing in English for twenty years now and have a sufficient number of English words at my disposal. My French-English dictionary suggests "helplessness" and "disarray". And what about "anguish" which is another facet of "*désarroi*"? *Angoisse*, *détresse*, *égarement* are the synonyms of *désarroi*, according to my French dictionary. My memory filmed her *désarroi* at the airport. I have already written about it many times because it is one of the very few things I do remember. Dante would have used the word *smarrita* that ends the third verse of Canto I. In the *Vita Nuova* the word describes his reaction to the news broken to him in a nightmare by some women whose hair had come loose: "Certainly it must some time come to pass that the very gentle Beatrice will die." Rossetti translates "*si forte smarrimento*" by "feeling bewildered" which does not take into account Dante's grief and torment. What he suffered from at that point was a sickness unto death, for the next sentence he heard was, "Thou shalt surely die." And a few seconds later, "Thou art dead." Between these utterances there might have elapsed a few years—within the context of the dream; and all those years Dante was probably sick unto death. And had he not found the way out of the dark wood he would have landed up in the black mire where suffer "the souls of those whom anger overcame" (*l'anime di color cui vinse l'ira*). Benedetto Croce draws this parallel in his essay *Dante's Poetry: Its Character and Unity*. In this respect Guido Cavalcanti's sonnet where he upbraids his friend for his "craven soul" and "tedious spirit" is crucial.

What have I done during all these years? Now and then we spoke on the phone, disregarding the danger of being overheard by KGB officials who are used to taking dictation. I wish I could read their

notes and listen to their tapes whenever my memory is unable to render *all* her words, *all* the nuances of her voice. "These words I laid up in my mind with great gladness, conceiving to take them as my commencement," Dante says in the *Vita Nuova* (XIX). Her words entered my memory on their own; they *swam* into it as a matter of fact. I seemed to have drowned in the "dangerous waters" (*l'acqua perigliosa*) that Dante mentions in the twenty-fourth verse of Canto I. Like deep-water fishes, her words swam into my skull and settled down in my memory. (I took her words as my commencement.)

> No sooner do I image to myself her marvellous beauty than I am possessed with the desire to behold her, the which is of so great strength that it kills and destroys in my memory all those things which might oppose it.
> (The *Vita Nuova*, XV)

So many memories and thoughts oppose my desire to see her. Such thoughts and memories would destroy a part of human history, were they lodged in the brain of Time. They might even destroy the Earth and the moon, if given a free hand to do what they will. Her death alone ought to have destroyed my desire a long time ago, but my desire to behold her is so great that my past and my future have been devoured by the leopard (*lonza*) which Dante runs into on his way to the *mons Domini*. I suppose it is lust that prompts my desire: she has sent no envoy to save me from death. She might be in heaven, for all I know; the love she bore me is enough to gain her admittance to Paradise in spite of her occasional cruelty. But what is occasional cruelty compared with true love? Even everlasting cruelty can be vanquished by it. My love would vanquish my lust as well, if I were capable of love. Thank God I am still capable of lust at the age of fifty-five: there are several leopards in my private zoo.

"Lust dies last," said Volodya, quoting an Orthodox sage. "Even on your deathbed you'll be haunted by leopards."

"And what about that friend of yours? He became impotent at the age of forty-five, didn't he? You told me he was happy, boasting about his freedom and singing, 'Time, time, time is on our side, yes it is.'"

"You might already have reached the *Paradiso*," said Volodya. "So much time wasted on female bodies."

"Do you think I'll watch porn movies on my deathbed?" I asked.

Only my desire to forget her could triumph over my lust and over the memories pertaining to her body. But this desire is being devoured by my memory which proves to be mightier than any premeditated desire. So I listen to her voice whose timbre alone can lead to arousal, to the carouse of all my senses and longings, to the Carousel where our former ecstasies are projected. And her words seem to impart to me, "If death irk thee, fly." How can I fly when love (lust) "fills up the space"?

This morning I renew my search for that passage where Eliot speaks about the nostalgia-saturated *Purgatorio* and its inhabitants who look back instead of looking forward. They *might* look forward, staring at what is in front of them, but they see their former lives or their only lives: now they

are nothing but shades. Singleton maintains that the word "alone" which Dante uses at the beginning of Canto II is fully justified by Virgil's admission "*Non omo, omo già fui*" (No, not a living man, though once I was). Virgil is a shade and so cannot be regarded as a travelling companion—such is the conclusion one is forced to draw from Singleton's commentary. When I began to tackle this particular problem of loneliness myself, I said that it raised the doubts which could not be dispelled by a hasty note.

At least I found my own words without really looking for them: I just did a global search for "alone"—the word I am not likely to forget—and ascertained that so far I had used it as many as twelve times. I used it in different contexts and also in expressions: I was not alone as often as all that. Unfortunately I have no technological means to verify how many times Dante was alone in the *Commedia*. Actually he was never alone within the bounds of his masterpiece—and seldom in his real life—except at the beginning of Canto I where, for want of anything better, he could have leant against the trees. In a desert there is nothing to lean against and you are not tempted to lie down: the sand would burn you to cinders if you managed to fall asleep on it. In a wood you can lean against trees which are not always inanimate, given the image proposed by Dante in Canto XIII where those who took their own lives amass into another dark wood. Even bushes are human there and when Dante plucks a twig from a great thornbush, the stub cries:

> Perché mi scerpi?
> non hai tu spirto di pietade alcuno?
> Why do you tear me? Have you no spirit of pity?

And the sand? If you scoop it into a bucket, let it trickle into the palm of your hand and clench your fist several times, the sand will not cry for pain; nor will it talk to you about its life. Even Dante did not succeed in turning a human being into a grain of sand.

In the *Vita Nuova* he often repeats words and images. Thus, in the vision of Chapter XXIII, the word *parere*/*apparire* is repeated sixteen times. Why not repeat key words, driving the point home? The point is Dante speaks of a vision this time and everything appears to him as if in a dream. "At length, as my phantasy held on in its wanderings, I came to be I knew not where, and to behold a throng of dishevelled ladies wonderfully sad, who kept going hither and thither weeping." He keeps on repeating the word "appear" to dispel his fears and persuade himself that what he actually sees is nothing but a vision. We are already in the vestibule of Hell, and if the volume is turned up, we shall hear Canto III:

> Quivi sospiri, pianti e alti guai
> risonavan per l'aere senza stelle,
> per ch'io al cominciar ne lagrimai.
> Here sighs, laments, and loud wailings were resounding through the starless air, so that at first they made me weep.

Stelle (stars) is one of the keywords in the *Commedia*, which figures at the end of every part. Here it is used to signify its own absence but it *has* been written down, and any presence is far better than total absence; likewise the presence of three beasts in Canto I is better than a solitary walk in a desert where only camels may show up, apathetic and uninspiring.

Throughout the *Inferno* I am reminded of Shamans, of the visions *they* have during their initiatory rites, and of the Wrathful Deities depicted in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*: "the nine eyes widely opened in terrifying gaze; the eyebrows quivering like lightning; the protruding teeth glistening and set over one another…" But there is a warning at the end of the description: "Fear that not. Be not awed. Know it to be the embodiment of thine own intellect. As it is thine own tutelary deity, be not terrified." The *Inferno* is a huge addendum to this vision included in the *Vita Nuova*. The *Inferno* is inhabited by Wrathful Deities who are the embodiment of Dante's intellect.

To appear, appearances, to all appearances, appearances can be deceptive, appearances matter, to seem. "*E* pareami *vedere lo sole oscurare*…" In his translation Rossetti eliminates the keyword as if to make the phantasm *appear* real: "Then the sun went out…" Just another black sun. *Oscurare*, (*selva*) *oscura*.

Yet English and American writers are less afraid of repetition than their French and Russian counterparts. Robbe-Grillet said once that he avoided repeating a word within the same page. I do not see the point. It is the third time I am repeating the word "point" on this page: my subject matter happens to be "driving the point home", which is Dante's strong point.

In *The Gift*, at the end of Chapter I, Nabokov says that Pushkin is the gold reserve of Russian literature and consequently should not be criticised. In Chapter 4 he criticises him for "repeating the phrase 'every minute' (*pominutno*) five times within sixteen lines in *The Blizzard*". (In Russian it is not a phrase but one word only.) This repetition drives the point home, however, because the reader is made to feel how Space usurps Time, how Time gasps for breath in Space's arms. And every minute Pushkin updates his report.

Ten years ago I had the bizarre idea of getting some of my novels translated into Russian. Four of them were translated by a middle-aged poet who said once that I was a realist. He probably meant that, in the process of translation, my hells had turned out to be more than a mere nightmare which frightens no one except the dreamer himself. Of course I thoroughly revised the translations, correcting both the originals and their Russian versions. And I showed the result to my friends. None of them talked about my infernos and purgatorios after reading these novels of mine, but many of them criticised the language which, in their opinion, was awkward and ungraceful. "Do you see what I have seen?" I asked.

The wording of the above-mentioned paragraph in *A Confession*—Tolstoy climbing a tree—is so cumbersome that we see not only his bulky figure but the *désarroi* he felt as he looked around and

saw nothing. And the *désarroi* should be depicted by stammering, by spluttering, by awkward, almost incorrect grammar. Only resignation and self-satisfaction pave the way to graceful prose, and I have not resigned myself yet to a life in Hell.

An hour ago I discussed Montaigne's style with a friend of mine—on the phone, as usual. She said that Montaigne could have written his works in a more elegant French had he set himself the task of writing elegant prose. "But he wished to express his thoughts with the utmost accuracy," she concluded. His thoughts must have been rugged. Nabokov said in an interview that a writer needs the shortest road—and not a devious one—between warehouse and shop. "An old Rolls-Royce is not always preferable to a plain Jeep." Jeeps are rugged vehicles, designed for rough conditions. And conditions are always rough, aren't they? It is easy to polish a shallow thought. "Uncut gemstones are rather dull-looking and they have to be cut and polished to make them shine," Nabokov might have said. Uncut thoughts shine of themselves if they are deep enough to house light.

Dante and Virgil often speak in the course of their journey; Dante asks questions and Virgil answers them. These are not digressions because the wayfarers continue to walk along the path leading through the Hereafter. The *Commedia* is lying on my writing desk and I cannot help reading on, page after page. "Thus reason, in veiling itself from other things and withdrawing within itself, will see unseeing; it will not see another light in something other, but a pure light of its own, which suddenly flares up from within." The word "alone" is partly accounted for by this excerpt from Plotinus' *Enneads*: Dante knows that he needs to withdraw into himself where he is bound to find the path leading away from the dark wood. At this point he realises that the wood is outside and moreover does not seem to be confined to one spot only; it is everywhere. And the *mons Domini* he is longing to reach is inside him. Nothing else is to be found inside his body: no internal organs, no veins, no sinews.

Yet Dante's remark raises the doubts which cannot be dissipated at the stroke of a pen. Virgil, "his author and master", is standing by his side, prepared to shield him from the beasts both on Earth and in the *Inferno*. In Canto I he outlines the journey lying ahead and even speaks about his successor—"a soul worthier than I"—who will guide Dante through the *Paradiso*. The latter is overjoyed upon learning the identity of his first guide; he must be even more elated as he hears Virgil mention "a worthier soul". Who indeed can be worthier than Virgil about whom Dante says, "*O de li altri poeti onore e lume*" (O glory and light of other poets)? Not another poet, surely. God Himself? In Canto I Virgil drops no hint as to the identity of the second guide, and Dante does not seem eager to find it out: he has known the name of that guide for many years. At the end of the *Vita Nuova* he takes a solemn oath:

> After writing this sonnet, it was given unto me to behold a very wonderful vision; wherein I saw things which determined me that I would say nothing further of this most blessed one, until such

> time as I could discourse more worthily concerning her. And to this end I labour all I can; as she well knoweth.

A *worthier* soul; to discourse more *worthily*. *Anima fia a ciò più me* degna; *a tanto che io potesse più* degnamente *trattare di lei*.

Everybody seems to be in the know: Dante himself, his faithful admirers and Beatrice. Yet he says he should cope with the dangers in store for him alone, as if neither Virgil nor Beatrice were standing by his side. Of course the light is within us, but we cannot always see this light on our own: a guru is supposed to extract us from the outside world and push us into ourselves. "Your soul is swarming with evil spirits," said one of them, bending over the body of his disciple, "but I'm sure I'll manage to squeeze you in." Nowadays a journey into oneself can be watched on television.

Suddenly Dante reveals to us the depth of his solitude at the centre of which he stands alone, like Lucifer, slowly devouring himself. In the *Commedia*, Virgil is just a shade, but you can talk to a shade and be guided by it. At the beginning of the *Purgatorio*, Dante meets his former friend whom he tries to embrace three times in a row. He clasps his hands behind him and encounters only the empty air, which proves that shades cannot be touched. But Dante need not *embrace* Virgil; perhaps he would not have dared to do so, had Virgil stood before him in the flesh. He needs to be brought out of the wood where he found himself at the age of thirty-five. The point is Virgil is not even a shade and only his books lie on Dante's writing desk, if any: he might have written the *Commedia* partly during his earthly journeys, holding some sheets of paper and the *Aeneid* in his lap. Beatrice, on the other hand, is but an allegory and nothing can be done with an allegory: you can neither embrace nor read it. Did Dante ever love Beatrice or was she always an allegory, a young lady with an angelic face and a suggestive dress? Was she a dream, nothing but a dream?

> Qual è colüi che sognando vede,
> che dopo 'l sogno la passione impressa
> rimane, e 'latro a la mente non riede…
> As is he who dreaming sees, and after the dream the passion remains imprinted and the rest returns not to the mind…

The above tercet comes from the last canto of the *Paradiso*, where Dante skirts round the question of what he really saw and substitutes a number of similes for a clear-cut description. Was Beatrice reduced in his life to a number of similes, an impressive number of similes? "After the research of Isidoro Del Lungo, which aroused great interest in 1891," explains Montale, "one can no longer doubt the historic existence of a Bice or Beatrice whom Dante could certainly have known and loved, even without her having been aware of it." What strikes me, however, is her precarious existence within the context of the *Vita Nuova* where she is far more real in dreams and visions than in the streets of Florence. Only when she gets close enough to Dante to make him experience a transfiguration does she become real in everyday life, almost corporeal. Even her actual death is quite unreal in comparison

with her fictitious death depicted in Chapter XXIII.

Your death likewise paled into insignificance beside the nightmare in which I had seen you dying in a shabby hospital, on the outskirts of Moscow: one cannot feel two deaths with the same intensity. Oddly enough, you were dying in an upright position; your bed stood behind you. It was as if we were still at the airport, waving our hands and holding back our tears. There was a dirty, half-torn pillow behind your head; I got the feeling it had been glued to the crown of your head. There was a group of sluttish, heavily made-up nurses hanging around your bed; one of them planted a big sloppy kiss on my hand. Upon awakening I composed a poem about my vision.

AS THE WHIM TAKES HER

Anything you said sounded important.
Your words were heavy, your gestures theatrical.
Once you died in my room like Desdemona.
I wish I had played the Moor's part.

Alas, I did nothing of the sort,
For all my jealousy and wrath;
So you calmly rose from the dead,
Stretching your arms and yawning in my bed.

I can't believe you have died for good
In a shabby hospital,
On the outskirts of Moscow.

You are just in a nasty mood.

You died nine months later. A friend broke the news to me; we were sitting in his garden, drinking champagne. All of a sudden he turned to me and said something along the lines of, "Hast thou not heard? She that was thine excellent lady hath been taken out of life." I do not remember the actual words, but it is so easy to look the corresponding passage up in the *Vita Nuova*. I just told my friend I had known about her death for some time already. That night I encountered your shade in my dream and heard your monologue: you did not seem to hear what *I* was saying.

> Now I am dead, but I see no difference between life and death, between this world and the world I used to live in. On Earth I was waiting for death and therefore half-dead. In Heaven I am half-alive, waiting for an opportunity to communicate with you. Half-dead, half-alive—what's the difference? The bottle is half-full or half-empty. The same quantity of wine, the same quantity of life. Why did you leave me? Didn't you know you were leaving your own life behind? Not just your better half—your whole life? You are also half-dead or half-alive, half-empty or half-full, both on Earth and in Heaven. And I am with you and alone at the same time. But I don't want to be a burden to you. I should rather be alone, all the time. Following in your footsteps. You also wished to be alone. Are you happy? Or are you filled with remorse over

> hurting me? These feelings of remorse are a heavy burden to bear, I know. And yet I am so light now. How can I be a burden to anyone?

Literature knows everything and all we have to do is close our eyes, hoping to fall asleep and have a prophetic vision or just a vision where another mystery will be explained once and for all. Of course no mystery can be explained once and for all because mysteries are infinite, otherwise they would not be mysteries; in our visions, however, we may get a clue to some mystery or other and that is enough to keep us going. These visions are the core of literature, even if we do not write them down in order to consult them and their explanations later on, whenever in need of terra firma as contrasted with the dangerous waters Dante speaks of in Canto I.

And our little chats on the phone are also visions, for they would be incomplete without your shade. I have in mind another woman now, but there were so many other women in Dante's life that I am hardly digressing from my subject matter. In Canto II of the *Purgatorio* Dante meets his friend Casella who sings to him a song that begins as follows: "*Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona*" (Love that discourses in my mind). The *Anonimo fiorentino* says that Casella da Pistoia was "a great musician, especially in the art of setting words to music. He was very well acquainted with the author, who in his youth wrote many songs and ballads, which Casella set to music. Dante took great delight in hearing him sing them—especially at the time he was in love with Beatrice, or with Pargoletta, or with that other girl of the Casentino."

I yielded to the temptation and called you on the phone to invite you to Versailles for a fortnight, for a month. You agreed at once, but your consent did not mean anything: you are so sensitive that one word is liable to wound you, although this word can mean something else in relation to the meaning *you* assign to it. For two weeks I called you every day, sometimes twice a day; and then you stopped answering my calls once more. So I fell back on my visions which looked quite similar to what is described in the *Commedia*, owing to my involvement with Dante's works. Beatrice enjoins Virgil to rescue Dante:

> E venni a te così com'ella volse:
> d'inanzi a quella fiera ti levai
> che del bel monte il corto andar ti tolse.
> And so, even as she wished, I came to you, and rescued you from the beast that was preventing your going the short way up the fair mountain.

Logically the beast that Virgil talks about is the she-wolf—the most rapacious of the three beasts. I think nevertheless that Beatrice is more preoccupied with the first beast standing for lust. Indeed, prompted by jealousy, she harangues Dante in Canto XXX of the *Purgatorio*, which is just wishful thinking in its purest form: Beatrice never so much as took notice of him.

In my recent nightmare I witnessed an outburst of your jealousy which was no figment of my imagination but had originated in two remarks of yours: "If you dare to look at another woman in my

presence, I'll break all your China," and "You said I could be replaced". (I never said such a thing.) You came to Versailles in a Ferrari drawn by a leopard whose body was inlaid with lips; and these lips kept on kissing the air. At some point you pulled the leopard's tail out and began to flog me, shouting, "*E diessi altrui, e diessi altrui*" (You gave yourself to others). You are far more piquant in my dreams than in reality: Dante's genius enhances both your qualities and shortcomings. (Jealousy is a poetic feeling.) Incidentally, Volodya says that the word "genius" should not be applied to Dante, for the notion itself was unknown in his times. Be that as it may, Croce ends his essay on Dante's poetry thus: "To those who spoke in such divine or rather deeply human tones there once used to be given the name of genius: and Dante was a Genius." I shall discuss this matter with Volodya once more.

> In speaking and writing, we employ concepts as a means of arousing the spirit to vision. For teaching shows the way; that is the beginning of the journey; but the actual seeing is up to the man who has made the decision to see.
> (Plotinus, *The Enneads*)

Dante could touch Virgil's books and read them. There were other books lying on his writing desk or on his lap. Etienne Gilson points out that Dante was the only poet of his time who studied philosophy *professionally*. Thomas Aquinas had aroused his spirit to vision, bringing him to the foot of the *mons Domini* safely; but he had to climb it on his own.

I am surrounded by the books I have bought over the last twenty-eight years. And wanting to write without being interrupted, I buried myself in my apartment: even the nearby wood is liable to distract my attention, my concentration. My books would guide me somewhere if there were any hills around me. Only an allegory could assist me in creating a hill out of nothing, *ex nihilo*, and I should like to build a house on the top of a hill overlooking Moscow. The women I have been in love with do not live up to the standards established by Dante in his works: they will not lead me anywhere. The only woman I am longing to talk to does not call me on the phone.

My contemporaries just see what there is to see and pick up things lying around them, arguing that no one will ever pick up the inaccessible. It is Dante who shows me the way which is not Anna's hair but her black dress, as painted by Manet; and her last journey to the railway station, her journey through Hell.

In *Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca*, T. S. Eliot says about Dante, "I doubt whether belief proper enters into the activity of a great poet, *qua* poet. That is, Dante, *qua* poet, did not believe or disbelieve the Thomist cosmology or theory of the soul: he merely made use of it, or a fusion took place between his initial emotional impulses and a theory, for the purpose of making poetry." Nowadays a literary fusion takes place between a writer's emotions and a petty quarrel in the streets or in a kitchen. And even if somebody gets killed during those quarrels, his or her death is as petty as the quarrels leading to the murder; and even if somebody earns a billion dollars as a result of a business deal, this deal is petty and the multimillionaire a petit bourgeois. Anyway Hell is more magnificent

than New York courtyards. So why travel through *them*? Even New York avenues are not as magnificent as the circles of Hell, of a real, authentic Hell. Perhaps the streets of an authentic terrestrial city should look like circles, suggesting a journey through Hell and Purgatory. And *West Side Story* is not a story of Romeo and Juliet but just a west side story or an east side story—a sideshow at the fair, which throws a sidelight on the darkness of our times. A city, a painting and a poem should hint at the inaccessible.

Heidegger writes about the importance of picking up an appropriate hero as a model for oneself. And among the heroes one chooses there must be some representatives of the same epoch: such vicinity allows the lifeblood of tradition to flow more easily from one receptacle to another. "It happened that at Dante's time thought was orderly and strong and beautiful, and that it was concentrated in one man of the greatest genius," writes T. S. Eliot. The man he has in mind is Thomas Aquinas. Thanks to St Thomas, "Dante had one coherent system of thought behind him". As for Shakespeare, he was influenced by Montaigne, Machiavelli and Seneca—the men "far inferior to Shakespeare himself". And to Thomas Aquinas. What to say about our times?

When I settled down in Western Europe, Heidegger was still alive and I was even tempted to pay him a visit. Oh, I would not have dared to ring his doorbell like those Latin American people who asked to see Mr Heidegger and withdrew without a word, after having bowed to him. I might merely have waited for him in the woods where he used to take his walks: I am used to waiting in the woods. But now I wait for nobody.

Is Heidegger inferior to Montaigne, Machiavelli and Seneca? Perhaps not. He might be inferior to Aquinas, though. Whatever his shortcomings, he certainly set a new benchmark for thinkers and poets throughout the world; or an old benchmark, Aquinas' benchmark. But even those who have been influenced by him think in terms of petty emotions, petty decisions and side stories.

St Augustine says that if, in this world, we are so certain of our being, our knowledge and our love, it is not primarily "on the strength of someone else's testimony. In our own person we feel it to be really present and perceive it with the inner eye that cannot be deceived." But at the same time "we have other witnesses whose credibility is not to be doubted." The other witnesses are the authority of the Church and Revelation. We still have these witnesses within our reach, but the blood has dried in their veins owing to the lack of fresh, contemporary blood. They lie on our tables like corpses on which we can perform an autopsy to show their internal organs to a bunch of students. There are not many students left, to tell the truth, so that only three of four people bend over the corpses out of curiosity or rather out of idleness.

In Canto XIX of the *Purgatorio*, Dante dreams of the Siren who speaks to him about the mariners she led astray in mid-sea; she even mentions Ulysses whom she turned aside to her song. Then a lady, holy and alert, shows up and calls out to Virgil who seizes the Siren and tears her garment, exposing her belly. The stench that issues from it awakens Dante from his prophetic

nightmare.

> L'altra prendea, e dinanzi l'apria
> fendendo i drappi, e mostravami 'l ventre;
> quel mi svegliò col puzzo che n'uscia.
> He seized the other and laid her bare in front, rending her garments and showing me her belly: this waked me with the stench that issued therefrom.

Many people in Russia are attracted by the beauty of Orthodox liturgy to the extent of becoming church-goers; in churches they listen to the songs performed by bass-dominated choirs without trying to reach for the unreachable. A Catholic priest I met three weeks ago said I might miss the beauty of Orthodox liturgy when attending a Catholic mass. Two years ago I went to a theatre in Moscow where an old Orthodox ritual was to be performed. I enjoyed the performance; Volodya grimaced and said they had not sung *beautifully* in the fifteenth century. "The notes are the same, but the style of singing is too beautiful. That spoils everything." There is no room for the Siren in churches. I do not think the *Commedia* is beautiful.

All the witnesses I might have by my side are dead and only Volodya talks to me on the phone when he is in Moscow and not in St Petersburg or Tallin where he mounts the exhibitions of his pictorial works; when he is not in the United States, travelling with the musicians who play his *Quartet for Strings*. His blood warms the books piling up around me on the floor. "Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety." (Proverbs 11, 14.) One living counsellor is enough perhaps. It depends on the counsellor and on the way lying in front of you.

> Il cominciai: "Poeta che mi guidi,
> guarda la mia virtù s'ell' è possente,
> prima ch'a l'alto passo tu mi fidi."
> I began, "Poet, you who guide me, consider if my strength is sufficient, before you trust me to the deep way."

L'alto passo, the deep way. Before setting off down the road, Dante hesitates, wondering if he deserves the honour which so far had been bestowed only on St Paul and Aeneas. At that moment he knows already that he deserves it because Virgil is standing by his side in Canto II and not just in an idle dream. I also hesitated and even had a sort of nervous breakdown which lasted for thirty-three hours only; as I said to a friend of mine, I have no wish to play into Satan's hands by wasting my time on an attack of nerves. It happened at the beginning of *my* Canto I, around the twelfth page. This kind of thing always happens around this page whenever I embark on a piece of writing which requires a long-sustained effort. And even a short-term effort poses the problem of whether it is useful or not. All of sudden I saw my work in another light—in a black light—and realised the futility of my undertaking. Then I changed two words and went on, heedless of the final result and conscious of the process itself, of its intrinsic value. Dante set off in the hope of reaching Paradise which was the real

goal of his journey; I am just plodding on because the goal of my journey is the journey itself, to quote an Eastern philosopher. I have decided to see what there is to see at the end of the tunnel or in the middle of it; besides, I am loath to remain jobless for the rest of my life.

> In order that a man arrive at the perfect vision of heavenly happiness, he must first of all believe God, as a disciple believes the master who is teaching him.
> (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*)

St Thomas says "believe God" (*credat Deo*) and not "believe *in* God"; his words seem to be premised on the expectation that the reader has been brought up in the true faith. Indeed he speaks of *heavenly* happiness and of the *perfect* vision one may acquire of it. Even an ordinary earthly happiness presupposes one's faith in superior forces, otherwise a glass of wine is just a glass of wine. And there is something beyond every glass of wine and every glass of water.

Yet St Thomas' *summas* are concerned to establish the truth of the Christian religion by arguments addressed to a reader who is supposed to be a pagan. Twenty-five years ago I read some excerpts from both s*ummas* and continued to live happily without taking any notice of St Thomas' teaching. The happiness I enjoyed was an earthly variety of happiness, embellished by what I naively called "Spinoza's pantheism".

> I' son fatta da Dio, sua mercé, tale,
> che la vostra miseria non mi tange,
> né fiamma d'esto 'ncendio non m'assale.
> I am made such by God, of His grace, that your suffering does not touch me, and no flame of this burning assails me.

Such is Beatrice's answer to Virgil who is worried about the dangers she runs in Limbo. "This lack of compassion towards the damned in Limbo and Hell is the characteristic attitude shown by the saints in Paradise," says Singleton. And he quotes St Thomas: "Therefore the blessed in glory will have no pity on the damned." Spinoza denies the utility of compassion in regard to ordinary citizens dealing with ordinary citizens, let alone God's relationship with man. He says that compassion is bad, useless and contrary to reason on account of sadness which is inseparable from it. The person whom we are yearning to deliver from his or her misery—the one chosen by our compassionate heart—has to be rescued with the aid of reason and not otherwise. And reason commands us to do what is good, trying to eschew bad feelings.

For many years I was deprived of the saints' compassion and even my friends did not show much sympathy: they had their own private hells to cope with and had no time to listen to my tales of woe. Or perhaps they dwelt in a sort of Paradise, half-private, half-public, and were saints in their own right, impervious to the sufferings of others. I am not sure I really *suffered* during that period; on the contrary, I seemed to enjoy myself, although my enjoyment differed radically from the enjoyment

meant by those benefactors of humanity who always advise you to "enjoy yourself". But I suppose one had just to look at me *attentively* to understand what was going on inside me and even outside: Hell radiates from the faces and bodies of its inhabitants, spreading around like vague rumours, like something both solid and invisible. It does not spread like wildfire, being rather on the slow side.

Inspirited by St Lucy who takes compassion on Dante, Beatrice descends to Limbo and speaks about the poet's sorry plight to Virgil. Another lady seems to be involved in this ritual of compassion—the Virgin Mary herself. Consequently Dante is not yet to be found among the inhabitants of Hell and his private hell must be limited to the "dangerous waters" that Beatrice mentions in her speech:

> "Non odi tu la pieta del suo pianto,
> non vedi tu la morte che 'l combatte
> su la fiumana ove 'l mar non ha vanto—?"
> "Do you not hear his pitiful lament? Do you not see the death that assails him on that flood over which the sea has no vaunt?"

Singleton comments on the last verse as follows: "It is not a river that flows into the sea; hence, the sea rightly can be said to have no vaunt over it." Boccaccio contradicts him in the *Comento*. "That is," he says, "the sea cannot boast of being more impetuous or more dangerous than that."

Dante's private hell has no circles, no centre. He does not know what it means to be stuck inside a vicious circle or plod along its circumference without ever hoping to reach the centre. Vaguely you recall what Pascal said about the centre and the circumference: the former is everywhere, the latter nowhere. Or is it the other way round? And if you manage to reach the centre, thanks to Pascal's conclusion, you realise that Lucifer is standing there as if in wait for you.

Or is the *Inferno* Dante's private hell? St Thomas says that God knows trivial things because nothing is *wholly* trivial and everything has *some* nobility. The same reasoning can be applied to noble things which are consequently not *wholly* noble but have *some* triviality in them, all sorts of trivialities. God knows evil things because knowing anything good involves knowing the opposite evil. A man or a woman of genius must also know both evil and good: the likeness of God shines in them most intensely. So does the likeness of the world around them. They are the most complete creatures in the world. Perhaps Dante encompassed within himself the whole of evil—all the circles of the *Inferno*.

> An indwelling power of making things is in the character of a being not at all points as it should be but making, moving, by reason of some failure in quality. Those whose nature is all blessedness have no more to do than to repose in themselves and be their being. A widespread activity is dangerous to those who must go out from themselves to act.
> (Plotinus, *The Enneads*, translated by Stephen MacKenna)

Do I lack something? Is there a flaw in my essence? The elect are quite content to repose within

themselves and Dante was certainly numbered among the elect, among the blessed ones. To such men bustling activity is dangerous, for it is bound to take them out of themselves. Did Dante go on a journey at all? If he did, was he taken out of himself or did he stay where he was—at the centre of himself? He was banished from Florence and his exile might be regarded as a journey, an outside journey. But he must have journeyed to Hell before his banishment and on several occasions. Perhaps he had never lived elsewhere until he hit upon the idea of describing his journey through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise. He hoped to reach Paradise with the help of Virgil and Beatrice, and this hope alone catapulted him into Purgatory where he remained until he actually reached the gates of Paradise in the *Commedia*.

What is the shaping impulse behind my commentary? No one has descended from heaven to the dangerous waters and to the letter A that I often write with an *accent grave* in French. No one is prepared to come down a few steps to ring my doorbell and say something about the weather and winter sports: it is a winter-sports holiday. All my neighbours must have gone to the Jura and Switzerland in company with the letters T (together) and F (friends). I am living on the top floor, which might prevent my neighbours from coming *down* our staircase or going *down* in our lift. But they would not ring my doorbell anyway, even if I lived on the ground floor, near the flowerbeds which, for a greater part of the year, look like Monet's palette.

One woman did care about the salvation of my soul: within the bounds of the *Commedia* this statement does not sound bombastic. (I am still on the ground floor of the *Commedia*.) And what if it does? It is better to sound bombastic and save one's soul than to remain a stylist through thick and thin. Through thin, mostly; through sin, as I might say now. That woman was middle-aged when I first met her in 1972; she recently died at the age of ninety-three—*before* the turning point in my life. On the day of her death she knew nothing about my desire to see, to hear, to change my life, and about the forthcoming comment on the *Commedia*. She often asked me if I was still fond of Buddhism and Hinduism. I would answer "Yes", although my time was chiefly devoted to writing novels, playing concerts and reading Western philosophy. But even when I read medieval philosophers and theologians I was an unbiased observer, interested only in their way of reasoning, not in its purpose. In other words, my journey itself was the purpose of my journey that had no end and, all in all, no meaning.

I shall end my commentary on Canto II by Singleton's remarkable comment on its last verse:

> 142. *cammino alto e silvestro*: "*Alto*" echoes what was said of the way or crossing to the otherworld ("*alto passo*", *Inf*. II, 12), while the adjective "*silvestro*" clearly connects with "*selva*" in "*selva oscura*" of the poem's opening verses (*Inf*. 1, 2). Thus, Virgil leads the wayfarer from the desert strand of this prologue scene into the way through Hell. This way will be described as savage, "*silvestro*" (*Inf*. XXI, 84). In metaphor, then, the savage way ("*cammino silvestro*") of Hell corresponds to the dark wood ("*selva oscura*") of the sinful life. The journey beyond always remains potentially our journey here. Not only through metaphor, but primarily through allegory this transition is achieved, so that in the dimension of the literal journey

through Hell the dimension of our own journey in "our life" is constantly recalled and developed.

CANTO III

Lasicate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate.
Abandon every hope, you who enter.

The last line of the inscription on the portal of Hell. "Hope dies last," as the Russians say. "Hope springs eternal in the human breast," says Pope who needs the human body to engender hope and perpetuate it. The Russians seem to hope even after death, in their bodiless state: their hope dies last as if it could survive on its own. Alas, unlike the soul to which it is often likened by the Romantics, hope is not eternal, although it can spring not only in the breast but in any part of the human body, in my opinion; it can spring in a part that needs it badly. For instance, if I hope that my legs will bear me all along the route of my traditional stroll in the woods, I hope in vain unless my legs themselves pin their hopes on their capacity of bringing me back home again, safe and sound. Hope should spring in my legs and not in my breast which can no longer rule over my limbs: the longer you live the more your body gets emancipated from your head, from your heart.

For various reasons ranging from despair to obduracy, many sinners lose hope well before their deaths; they are so sure of themselves that the feeling of hope does not even brush against them, let alone lodge in their hearts. Nor do they *believe* in their own omniscience and omnipotence; they *know* that the whole world, everything down to fate, is obedient to their will. They might use the word "hope" when speaking to their victims—"your situation is past hope"—so that they still remember it. Besides, some of their cronies and flatterers might be in the habit of saying, "You're our only hope," "You're the biggest hope of our country, of the world". But those sinners have not *felt* hope for years, for decades, and I am creating a circle in Hell to which they will be confined for all Eternity.

In Canto XXV of the *Paradiso*, Dante gives the following definition of hope:

″Spene," diss'io, "è uno attender certo
de la gloria futura, il qual produce
grazia divina e precedente merto."
"Hope," I said, "is a sure expectation of future glory, which divine grace produces, and preceding merit."

Dante borrows this definition from Peter Lombard who adds, however, "Without merits, to hope for something is not hope but presumption." But he gives no definition of merits.

Yesterday I wrote this poem:

Once upon a time
Words spoke for themselves.
Now you have to speak for words.
What can you say? A word
Lying behind words or

> In front of them.
> What's in front of words? Whatever
> Can do without them. And whatever lies
> Behind words is
> Beyond expression,
> Beyond recognition.
> You can't pick out any landmarks in the dark
> So you fall back on words
> Which can't speak for themselves.
>
> Nor can they speak for you.
>
> Something does speak for you.
> No words are uttered.

What does the last stanza mean? Had I written, "Some*body* does speak for you", one might think I allude to God's grace which is vital to both hope and salvation. But I wrote "something" in order not to sound bombastic or straightforward: poetry as well as any work of art is ambiguous and offers no ready-made solutions. Bertrand Russell says in his commentary on Thomas Aquinas' works:

> There is little of the true philosophic spirit in Aquinas. He does not, like the Platonic Socrates, set out to follow wherever the argument may lead. He is not engaged in an enquiry, the result of which it is impossible to know in advance. Before he begins to philosophise, he already knows the truth; it is declared in the Catholic faith.

I did *not* know how my poem would end as I set out to compose it, but I did know the truth, *if* it is declared in the Catholic faith. The "if" may cost me dearly when I undertake *my* journey through the Hereafter or through one of its regions. In the latter case, the region is Hell. Well, let us suppose I *knew* the truth before writing the poem. But I had no idea what my poem was about when I wrote that the words could speak for themselves. Actually I did not even wonder if *I* was permitted to speak for myself in this vale of tears where only tears speak for themselves: I just went on writing the poem. I followed wherever the argument might lead and it led me to the last stanza, to the word "something". Only God or humans can speak for humans. (What is the use of our speaking for ourselves?) Could a stone speak for humans? Could a poem speak for humans? Does this poem of mine speak for myself? It might speak *against* me, for all I know.

Suppose I put "somebody" instead "something" or even went so far as to say "God speaks for you", following in Volodya's footsteps: a few years ago, he added a prayer to one of his juvenile poems as he revised it in the light of his Christian belief. Would that be enough? Enough for what? Does didactic poetry provide its author with a "ticket" to Paradise, to use a Dostoevskian term?

In *Religion and Literature*, T. S. Eliot drops the following remark, "What I want is a literature which should be *un*consciously, rather than deliberately and defiantly, Christian." My poem can be regarded as *unconsciously* Christian, but it is neither deliberate nor defiant because it does not imply

that God actually speaks on our behalf if we listen to Him. "Something" is not the word associated with God, although God's supposedly androgynous nature might warrant the use of the pronoun "it". Earlier in the poem I say that Man gets completely lost and so falls back on words that do not help him. This observation exonerates me from the sin of pride or at least from the above-mentioned facet of it: the feeling of disorientation is unknown to the self-assured, to the presumptuous. Something speaks for me. What is it? A pebble I pick up on the seashore and roll in the palm of my hand; the sound of the waves I listen to in the evenings. Even silence speaks for me, provided I listen to its music, to its harmony that supports the melody of my waiting for your telephone call. How does this phrase go? "His life has been hanging by a thread since her departure." The thread by which his life or what remains of it hangs is a melody.

The result of a poem is not known in advance, but in the background there is a kind of feeling—a guide prepared to take the poem up into the mountains. What is the nature of this feeling? Does it constitute the merit on which I can build my hopes? St Augustine's solution to the problem is categorical and final: "A man is living badly, and perhaps in the predestination of God he is light; another lives well, and perhaps he is as black as night." As Dante puts it in Canto XIII of the *Purgatorio*:

> "Non creda donna Berta e ser Martino,
> per vedere un furare, altro offerere,
> vederli dentro al consiglio divino;
> ché quel può surgere, e quel può cadere."
> "Let not dame Bertha and squire Martin, if they see one steal and one make offering, believe to see them within the Divine Counsel: for the one may rise and the other may fall."

Writing beautiful poems does not lead to salvation while a bad poet can be illumined by God's grace. I have no idea whether my poems are good or bad; some of them are black like the black sun. Is Mandelstam's black sun illumined by God’s grace?

Heidegger writes that in Ancient Greece words were as material as the objects they designated. Mandelstam compares Ancient Greek to Russian, saying that the latter became "the speaking flesh" as it immersed itself in the country's history and culture. When did it become disembodied? Probably after the Revolution. In former times words spoke for themselves and for us. A poem was a living prayer; "something" was "somebody". And now "somebody" is "something", for all our poetic efforts.

What can one hope for in our times? An ill-founded hope is pointless and I have only ill-founded hopes at my disposal. It is true that there are lots of ups and downs in human history which looks like a roller coaster—*montagnes russes* in French. Russian mountains. No other history resembles them more than Russian history in the twentieth century. Compared with it, all other countries, their histories, are mere hills or even plains. Take the history of Holland, for instance.

Ups and downs. Kieslowski spoke about the sinusoid of history, ignoring the end of it

prophesied by Fukuyama. What would the end of history mean? Not the end of wars, certainly not. The end of "ups" perhaps. The history of the arts and philosophy already looks like a straight line traced at the bottom of the Pacific. We have come down in the world to such an extent that a graphic representation of our spiritual life must be located below the sea-level.

Another film director expressed his fears by means of a metaphor: "The foundations will have to be reinforced to prevent the house of our culture from sinking further into ground." What remains of this metaphorical house is probably a chair on which there shivers a solitary naked body. To whom does this body belong, I wonder?

Let us keep the word "foundations", however: an upward movement—the so-called renaissance—needs a firm ground to act as a springboard for its growth. It is too late to reinforce the old foundations that do not exist any more; even the chair and the body have disappeared. But what can an upsurge of culture be founded upon nowadays? In the early thirties the Soviet government decided to build a huge palace on the Moscva River. From its top a statue of Lenin was to soar into the sky. They blew up a cathedral that had stood on the chosen spot and proceeded with their plan as agreed. But the ground where they proposed to build a symbol of the New Life turned out to be so swampy that, after much soul-searching, they replaced the palace by a swimming pool. I am afraid we shall have to resign ourselves to a swimming pool as well—instead of a palace of culture. Anyway it is healthier to swim than to read poems and novels about the black sun. "Abandon every hope, you who enter." We must have entered already.

> Per me si va ne la città dolente,
> per me si va ne l'etterno dolore,
> per me si va tra la perduta gente.
> Through me you enter the woeful city, through me you enter eternal grief, through me you enter among the lost.

Origen said that all men, and even devils, would be saved at the last, but was condemned for this heresy. Only *eternal* punishment seems to be concordant with the doctrine of the Church. Our crimes and sins are not eternal. At times they last for a few seconds and owe their survival to our memory, to our guilty conscience, to the rancour of those who are eager to play the part of our victims. Our memory and our guilty conscience are not eternal, however; even the rancour of our assumed victims lasts only as long as they live. Judging from the saying "a tooth for a tooth", the punishment is supposed to match the fault. The time-factor is a constituent of punishments and should therefore be taken into consideration. Eternity is far greater than any crime committed on Earth: even a crime against humanity, which has far-reaching repercussions, does not last forever. And yet there are a few individuals in human history whom I would condemn to eternal sufferings in Hell, if I were Dante or God.

I would not inflict this suffering on Faust whose pact with the Devil is mirrored in my own

desire to create a world where I am young again and enjoy a limitless power over human beings. Poets seldom appeal to the Devil in their work, preferring to secure the support of Apollo or muses; but it is the Devil who helps them all along.

> O God,
> If thou wilt not have mercy on my soul,
> Yet for Christ's sake, whose blood hath ransom'd me,
> Impose some end to my incessant pain;
> Let Faustus live in hell a thousand years,
> A hundred thousand, and at last be sav'd!
> O, no end is limited to damned souls!

What frightens Marlowe's Faustus most of all is the *endless* torment lying in store for him. He learns the ways in which this torment may be inflicted as he stares at the Furies tossing damned souls on burning forks and at the bodies boiling in lead, but in his final monologue he speaks about the eternal grief he must endure.

Is Faust himself to blame? Obviously his pact with the Devil was an evil act. Let us not forget, however, that St Paul persecuted the Church of God and was saved. "Neither was it the grace of God alone, nor was it he himself alone," writes St Augustine, "but it was the grace of God with him. For his call, however, from heaven and his conversion by that great and most effectual call, God's grace was alone, because his merits, though great, were yet evil." In his definition of hope Dante forgot to mention that only *good* merits could lead to the *gloria futura*, if assisted by God's grace. But God's grace may be bestowed on an evil-doer, on someone who has so far accumulated evil merits either by an open pact with the Devil or by a hidden one. Likewise it may be bestowed on someone whose biography features neither evil nor good merits—on a human vegetable, so to speak. One of my friends used to say he was a vegetable and I did not take him seriously until the day when he told me he had seen *Titanic* eight times in a local cinema. Human vegetables have legs, but they can walk only as far as the nearest cinema to see *Titanic* or another movie out of the same mould. I knew that sooner or later I would break off my friendship with him. One night we were talking about the woman I was in love with at the time. I am still in love with her; our love reminds me now of an old Claret and not of a Burgundy in its prime or Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. He asked me if I believed in my girlfriend's loyalty.

"She is not really my girlfriend," I answered irritably as if I had known what he was driving at. "Neither is she my mistress. She is a woman I love—my beloved, if you prefer."

"Don't you think somebody makes love to her while she laughs at your jokes over the phone?" he said.

> But "why", says one, "is not the grace of God given according to men's merits?" I answer, Because God is merciful. "Why, then," it is asked, "is it not given to all?" And here I reply,

> Because God is a Judge. And thus grace is given by Him freely; and by His righteous judgement it is shown in some what grace confers on those to whom it is given. Let us not then be ungrateful, that according to the good pleasure of His will a merciful God delivers so many to the praise of the glory of His grace from such deserved perdition; as, if He should deliver no one therefrom, He would not be unrighteous.
> (St Augustine, *On the Gift of Perseverance*)

Only the unborn need not rely on God's grace; or rather they do have to rely on it so as not to be born. It is indeed the best choice one could make if one had this kind of choice. But the grace of God is not given to all.

The grace of God is thus exposed in St Augustine's *On the Spirit and the Letter*:

> We, however, on our side affirm that the human will is so divinely aided in the pursuit of righteousness, that (in addition to man's being created with a free-will, and in addition to the teaching by which he is instructed how he ought to live) he receives the Holy Ghost, by whom there is formed in his mind a delight in, and a love of, that supreme and unchangeable good which is God, even now while he is still "walking by faith" and not yet "by sight"; in order that by this gift to him of the earnest, as it were, of the free gift, he may conceive an ardent desire to cleave to his Maker, and may burn to enter upon the participation in that true light, that it may go well with him from Him to whom he owes his existence.

Are the unborn allowed to relish the supreme and unchangeable good? Do they know God? Or do they have to be baptised before partaking of His grace? Can the unborn be baptised or does one have to be born to undergo this ritual? How many unborn are there in the world? Do the unborn have desires? Can they desire to cleave to their Maker? But God is not *their* Maker, as long as they remain in the realm of non-existence. And He will never become their Maker unless they are born into this world, endowed with original sin. Both this world and the born are endowed with original sin and even vegetables share in it because they can be eaten by humans or animals. It is a pity that man was not created with free will *before* his birth. Is there nothing to be created before the birth of an individual being? Of course nothing had been created before the Creation, but the unborn *might* have turned up in God's mind either at the moment of the Big Bang or after it. All potentialities must exist in God's mind, if I am not mistaken. Can a virtual man be endowed with the grace of God?

I called her at last and she answered the phone. On hearing my voice she did not hang up. We spoke for an hour and she laughed so much I could not help thinking she was still in love with me. Now I do not think that any more: another man might have made her laugh the day before and she just recalled a few of his jokes. What woman am I speaking about? The woman who stopped answering my calls and hung up on me many times. But what does it matter what woman I called this morning? All the women I have known and loved are both Beatrice and a person who will never become Beatrice.

Was it an instance of the grace of God? Why did she talk to me? Why did she laugh so charmingly? Or is this telephone conversation too unimportant, given the grandiose notion of God's

grace?

Our love, her laugh, Beatrice's smile. Don't they mirror the grace transmitted from on high? What could be regarded as a definitive sign of God's grace? Longevity, success, family happiness? Just happiness?

In *Summa contra Gentiles* St Thomas ruminates about human happiness, asking himself what it consists of. Here are some of the answers: happiness does not lie in pleasure, happiness does not consist of honours, happiness does not consist of glory, happiness does not lie in riches, happiness does not consist in worldly power, happiness does not consist in bodily goods, happiness does not lie in the senses. "For much the same reasons it is apparent that man's highest good cannot lie in goods of the sensitive part, for these goods too are common to man and other animals." An animal would not have felt her charm this morning; my cat might have felt *something*, but not exactly what *I* felt. The way she talked about the things piled up in her room. No, she was talking about the Christmas cards she had received and arranged in piles. No, she had just thrown them pell-mell into the drawers of her desk. She was watching *Cinderella* as she talked to me and laughed. Did they show Prokofiev's ballet on Russian TV?

Human happiness may not lie in the senses, but love is transmitted through them:

> Beatrice mi guardò con li occhi pieni
> di faville d'amor così divini,
> che, vinta, mia virtute diè le reni,
> e quasi mi perdei con li occhi chini.
> Beatrice looked on me with eyes so full of the sparkling of love and so divine that my power vanquished, took flight, and I almost lost myself with eyes downcast.

I hope she will come and visit me in France next summer; this hope is founded neither on my own merits nor on the grace of God, I'm afraid. When you are subject to the whim of an unruly, erratic child there is no saying what will happen. Are her whims and decisions grounded in the grace of God? She might be in love with me and this love *is* a gift of God, if only it is not a mere figment of my imagination. But my imagination is a gift of God: what would I have done without it all these years?

As to the hope of seeing better times, it stands to reason that such a hope is ill-founded or not founded at all. It is true that humanity has often risen from the dead, from the ruins of previous civilisations and cultures. But there always has been something beyond these ruins, in the background; there was Christianity in the background of the sack of Rome. We need the Second Coming to fill in the background and allow our grandchildren to display their talents in an appropriate ethical and aesthetic atmosphere.

> Farther, I find that this negation of colour is always the means by which Dante subdues his tones. Thus the fatal inscription on the Hades gate is written in "obscure colour", and the air which torments the passionate spirits is "*aura nera*", black air (*Inf.* V. 51), called presently afterwards (line 81) malignant air, just as the grey cliffs are called malignant cliffs.

(John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, III. 240)

What is the colour of hope, I wonder?

Obscure colour. *Colore oscuro*. *Una selva oscura* (a dark wood). It is as if Dante were coming back to the wood where he found himself at the beginning of the *Commedia*. Is he still alone? He hears sighs and laments which resound "through the starless air" (*per l'aere sanza stelle*). And the stars are a symbol of hope in the *Commedia*. What colour are they?

The sighs and laments come from "shades", but these shades are larger than life because, as a friend of mine put it, "death *is* larger than life". Dante questions Virgil about the identities of the people "who seem so overcome by pain" (*che par nel duol sì vinta*). Virgil's answer is remarkable in more than one respect; it is a twofold answer:

> Ed elli a me: "Questo misero modo
> tegnon l'anime triste di coloro
> che visser sanza 'infamia e sanza lodo."
> And he to me, "Such is the miserable condition of the sorry souls of those who lived without infamy and without praise."

The souls Dante depicts in this passage *might* have been despised or praised in their lifetimes. He hit upon a unique idea in the history of human thought, but did not grasp the scope of this idea, judging from the words *infamia* and *lodo*. Some literary critics have an unfortunate habit of claiming to know more about the works subjected to their scrutiny than anybody else, including the authors of these works. Dante knew a great deal about the *Commedia*; I do not think that Shakespeare had such a thorough understanding of his own plays and sonnets. Dante must have known more about the *Commedia* than any of his contemporaries. Of course he could not predict how his masterpiece would reflect the centuries to come; how he himself would reflect upon them from the Hereafter. To my knowledge, this is the only instance in Dante's whole corpus, where one can feel the inadequacy of his analysis in comparison with the magnitude of the idea he suggests. A few examples will clarify my point.

Earlier in this Canto I touch upon the people who think and act like vegetables. Unlike the Nietzschean superman, they abide *before* the dilemma of doing good or indulging in evil; they never find themselves on the horns of the dilemma because no vestiges of it can be detected in their minds. They never go so far as to skirt around problems because they are not in the habit of getting near anything that might look like a problem. Out of sheer boredom, they may drop an offensive remark which is neither offensive nor evil in their eyes: they are even incapable of offending their fellow citizens *on purpose*. Their words and actions seem to be written on water, and only a writer can occasionally recall their presence somewhere: writers must also write about non-existence.

Another category of the "sorry souls" may be likened to animals. Now they belittle their

capacities so as not to get involved in a momentous project; now they attempt to capture the moral high ground and pontificate on any subject if you let them, turning into elephants for a while. When taken down a peg, however, they revert quickly to their former size; lo and behold, a little mouse dances again at your feet. They are not really opportunists, for they have no burning ambitions—only smouldering ones. But they are praised by their colleagues whenever they succeed in capturing the moral high ground.

> "Mischiate sono a quel cattivo coro
> de lie angeli che non furon ribelli
> né fur fedeli a Dio, ma per sé fuoro.
> Caccianli i ciel per non esser men belli,
> né lo profondo inferno li receve,
> ch'alcuna gloria i rei avrebber d'elli."
> "They are mingled with that base band of angels who were neither rebellious nor faithful to God, but stood apart. The heavens drive them out, so as not to be less beautiful; and deep Hell does not receive them, lest the wicked have some glory over them."

Dante must have been inspired by the epistle to the church of Laodicea, quoted in the Apocalypse: "I know thy works; thou art neither cold nor hot. I would that thou wert cold or hot. But because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to vomit thee out of my mouth." Dostoevsky too was fond of this excerpt from the epistle to the church of Laodicea. His main characters often fit into this structure without knowing it.

In *The Possessed*, Shatov is hot and Kirilov cold. Stavrogin is lukewarm, although now and then he may appear either hot or cold. When Shatov slaps him in the face, he first demonstrates the hot side of his nature as he raises his arm to strike the offender in his turn. But then he changes his mind, becomes cold and, shortly afterwards, lukewarm again. Stavrogin's second thoughts are always cold; his third thoughts are invariably lukewarm. He mostly lives in accordance with his third thoughts because everything has already happened to him. The problems he encounters have already been solved many times; and yet he has not found a real solution to any of them. In the final analysis there seem to be no problems in his life. He rapes a little girl out of curiosity, and idle curiosity is lukewarm.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Alyosha is hot, Ivan cold and Mitya lukewarm. For all his outbursts of hot temper, Mitya gives no thought to religion and is therefore neither rebellious nor faithful to God. Even on the brink of a mental collapse he is not likely to meet the Devil who regularly calls on his brother Ivan: the Devil does not vouchsafe to visit the lukewarm.

Where would Dante have met Stavrogin and Dimitri Karamazov? They might have joined the "sorry souls"; Stavrogin might also have become a tree in the Wood of the Suicides. And what about the little girl he raped? Dostoevsky had to punish Stavrogin, but he might have spared Mitya. He punished him because, as a Christian to the core, he could not do otherwise without betraying his religious ethics, his mission. In this respect he followed in Dante's footsteps.

"As the poem later reveals," writes Singleton, "Satan and the other fallen angels (now devils), as well as the worst human souls, are relegated to lower Hell ('*profondo*'). Both the devils and the wicked souls ('*i rei*'), being greater in wickedness than these, the lukewarm, might on that account boast or glorify themselves in their own eyes. Thus, the lukewarm and the neutral angels are seen here from the projected point of view of the denizens of lower Hell."

I do not think that the devils and the wicked souls are greater in wickedness than the sorry souls to whom the access to Hell is forbidden. It is not forbidden from the point of view of its denizens, contrary to what Singleton affirms, but from our point of view or rather from the point of view of Hell itself. The lukewarm are not worthy of Hell which is open to the hot and the cold. There is a sort of dignity about the damned—the dignity of the life they lived on earth. In that life they made errors and no error, either big or small, is associated in my mind with the state of non-existence. Both evil and good deeds are proofs of life and the lukewarm cannot offer any proof of this sort to gain admittance to Hell or Paradise.

> "Questi non hanno speranza di morte,
> e la lor cieca vita è tanto bassa,
> che 'nvidïosi son d'ogne altra sorte.
> Fama di loro il mondo esser non lassa;
> misericordia e guistizia li sdegna:
> non ragioniam di lor, ma guarda e passa."
> "These have no hope of death, and their blind life is so abject that they are envious of every other lot. The world does not suffer that report of them shall live. Mercy and justice disdain them. Let us not speak of them, but look, and pass on."

They have not lived and yet have no hope of death. In fact the lukewarm spend their allotted time in between life and death, and their lives, if any, are given to them with a view to making their souls suffer the absence of death in Hell's ante-room. Later on, Dante points out that these wretched creatures were *not* alive: "*Questi sciaurati, che mai non fur vivi*…"

Do they while away their allotted time on *earth*? Aren't they rather suspended in mid-air between heaven and earth like a hanged man or woman? Like Dryden's "spirits of a middle sort"?

> If, as our dreaming Platonists report,
> There could be spirits of a middle sort,
> Too black for heav'n, and yet too white for hell,
> Who just dropped half way down, nor lower fell.
> *(*Dryden*, The Hind and the Panther*, Part I, 341*)*

I might have said something along these lines in one of my works. At least I seem to remember writing about the people or spirits suspended in mid-air. Did I write about the lukewarm? I have not the faintest idea. There must be a lot of substances between heaven and earth. As a Russian poem goes: "Between heaven and earth there resounds a song." Well, there are other things up there and most of

them are silent.

What conclusion should be drawn from Dante's unique poetical statement? It is preferable to commit a crime than to spend one's life, or what passes for such, in a state where a crime cannot be committed. What prevents those "individuals" from committing crimes is not love, about which St Augustine speaks so eloquently, but the absence of love and hate, the absence of everything. Their next-to-nothingness, as Singleton calls it, is so abject that the lukewarm "are envious of every other lot": of death, of life and, first and foremost, of what only the unborn are permitted to enjoy to the utmost—antenatal peace.

"Throughout Hell," writes Singleton, "the damned, or at least many of them, will be seen to hope for enduring fame in the world above—the only kind of 'immortality' they can ever expect…But even this is denied these wretches, the lukewarm." I do not understand why it is the *only* kind of immortality the damned can expect: they *are* immortal in Hell. As to immortality on earth, even some of the lukewarm enjoy it—those who have succeeded in capturing the moral high ground. They may be remembered for other reasons too. Some of them earn a lot of money without making any real decision; their next-to-nothingness does not exclude a good nose for an advantageous deal or merely for a bargain. At least mercy and justice disdain them. I wish, however, that justice would take notice of them: they prosper too often on earth. And some of them might have fawned their way into Purgatory.

> E io, che riguardai, vidi una 'nsegna
> che girando correva tanto ratta,
> che d'ogne posa mi parea indegna…
> Looking again, I saw a banner that ran so fast, whirling about, that it seemed it might never have rest…

Some of the lukewarm are opportunists, but they never really take sides unless their very life depends on it. Even in this case they do not always take sides, and they may commit suicide just out of boredom or something else; never out of *real* conviction.

In *Rosmersholm* Ibsen portrays a lukewarm individual in whose house no one has either cried or laughed for many years—"as long as folk can remember". It seems to run in the family. Suddenly the heroine realises that "people don't on the whole laugh much in this district". And the housekeeper answers: "They don't. It began at Rosmersholm, they say. And so, I suppose, it's just spread, like any other kind of infection." Sure enough, there is nothing more contagious than death which can assume many masks; the absence of crying and laughter is one of them. John Rosmer, formerly a parish clergyman, has given up the faith of his childhood to share in the work of emancipation, as he puts it. He owns up to his "apostasy" in Act One. In Act Four he says to Rebecca West, with whom he is in love, that he was talked out of his new ideas by a group of friends. "They made it quite clear to me that the task of ennobling men's minds—it's not my work at all. And besides, it's a hopeless business,

anyway, you know. I'm going to let it alone." The point is the lukewarm never get involved in a hopeless business; and only a hopeless business is worthy of our attention and respect. The more hopeless it is, the fairer chance one stands to become immortal on earth.

The doctrine of predestination makes almost everything hopeless. To many people religious faith is a hopeless business from which they shrink so as not to waste their time on chimeras. But only in a hopeless situation is there enough room for hope. And hope is synonymous with passion.

Rosmer speaks about his love in the following terms: "It was you alone that I longed for. It was with you that I felt that quiet, glad happiness without passion." The lack of passion is another trait of the lukewarm who habitually prefer quiet happiness, a comfortable armchair, a swimming pool. But if a passion intrudes upon this home-made happiness—passions are contagious too—the lukewarm prove to be incapable of bearing its onslaught and commit suicide. Is it a real suicide? Hardly. They merely sink into the earth under the weight of their passion.

"Happiness, Rebekka, dear, happiness—that is first and foremost the quiet, glad, secure sense of innocence." In the kingdom of the lukewarm, innocence is the key word used by the lukewarm themselves or by those who succumb to their charms. And one of their key charms is innocence associated with children, with the unspoiled nature of a child whose world lies beyond evil, at the very centre of good. But old children are dangerous because they know how a real child behaves and so can turn their knowledge to good account.

"It was only a half-formed dream, Rebekka. A thoughtless impulse that I don't believe in any more myself." He would not have believed in the idea of suicide either, had he been allowed to re-visit the earth after spending some time in Hell. His life itself is a half-formed dream. Let us not forget that the last play Ibsen wrote is entitled *When We Dead Awake*.

In his essay on Ibsen, Benedetto Croce says that Rebecca, a cold, calculating woman, has gradually yielded to the honesty, the pure moral force, which radiates from Rosmer. In my opinion, this cold woman has just been warmed up a little in his company to become a lukewarm woman. The new temperature of her soul makes it easier for her to join Rosmer in his theatrical suicide: some suicides are phoney in spite of the outcome. Rebecca says at the end of Act Four: "*One* person you have at any rate ennobled. Me, as long as I live." She dies a few minutes later because her illusion cannot last for a long time. At the end, both protagonists are trying to capture the moral high ground notwithstanding the fact that, in the nineteenth century, suicide was almost universally regarded as a highly *im*moral achievement.

"*Questi sciaurati, che mai non fur vivi*…" Death in life, life in death. Is there any difference between these two states of mind? Are they nothing but states of mind? Our survival after death is a question to which even Dante cannot supply a satisfactory, definitive answer, for all his descriptions of how the damned and the elect *live* in the Hereafter; a few centuries later, Hamlet is still on the horns of the ever-lasting dilemma. But what about our death in life? "And unto the angel of the church in Sardis

write: These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works that thou hast a name that thous livest, and art dead." In *The Apocalypse Revealed*, Swedenborg writes: "*That thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead,* signifies, that it may seem to and be believed by themselves and others that they are spiritually alive, when yet they are spiritually dead." Are their bodies in any way affected by the death of their spirit? Matthew Henry writes: "Outward things appeared well to men, but there was only the form of godliness, not the power; a name to live, not a principle of life. There was great deadness in their souls, and in their services; numbers were wholly hypocrites, others were in a disordered and lifeless state." *A form* of godliness, a *form* of life. The lack of power does not prevent the lukewarm from taking part in the escalation of evil. I think that the people who, during the Second World War, worked in concentration camps, obeying Hitler's orders, had enough power to kill and their state was *ordered*. Most of them did not hate the Jews; they just killed them because they were *pushed* towards the gas chambers. Like puppets they moved in rhythm with the hand that manipulated them. If permitted to go back home, they would not have done so because of the momentum driving them towards the gas chambers. The lifeless state of their minds affected their bodies, turning them into automatons. I am sure that after the war they went through the same motions and probably used their gas cookers far more often than their neighbours; unless their neighbours also worked in the concentration camps. I am sure that sometimes they just touched their gas cookers, yielding to a *physical* urge. A dying pianist may move his fingers about the blanket as if playing his favourite piece or just an ordinary scale, a C major scale; yet the rest of his body and mind is dead already. Goaded by the same tactile memory, Hitler's servants continued to walk towards gas which appeared to them in any shape or form.

In 1935 Samuel Beckett attended a lecture given by Jung at the Tavistock Clinic. After the lecture, when answering a question about the dreams of children, Jung mentioned a ten-year-old girl who used to have mythological dreams. He sensed that those dreams contained an uncanny premonition of her early death. She died a year later. "She had never been born entirely," Jung rounded off.

All those people had not been born entirely. Had they been born partially? What part of them had been born? Only the legs that would bring them to the gas chambers? Only the hands that would turn on the taps? I am sure they had no mythological dreams. And they did not die on the spot, overwhelmed and destroyed by feelings of guilt, by shame, by distress. They were born without consciousness.

"Being is good and noble and precious," writes Cusanus. "Hence everything that is has some value. Nothing can be without having some value." Deprived of being, these automatons are even worse than Hitler who happens to be the most obnoxious criminal in the history of mankind.

Everybody can join the club of the lukewarm. Whatever our temperature, Time saps the very foundations of our personality, taking the edge off our passions and calculations. But I hope that my

memories will be either hot or cold to the very last. What if this hope grows lukewarm with the passing of the years?

Are the lukewarm really damned, all of them? "A man is living badly, and perhaps in the predestination of God he is light." But do the lukewarm live badly? They do not live at all. A man is not alive, and perhaps in the predestination of God he *is* alive. What did Dante know about God's intentions? A piece of writing should not be brought out in a book form: our manuscripts are subject to revision.

> e dietro le venìa sì lunga tratta
> di gente, ch'i' non averei creduto
> che morte tanta n'avesse disfatta.
> …and behind it (the banner) came so long a train of people that I should never have believed death had undone so many.

When I learnt, a few years ago, that the quick would soon outnumber the dead I was greatly surprised. Indeed I had never thought that death had undone so few. What a marvellous world we would have around us if the earth were inhabited *only* by the dead. Suppose it were a mere question of number, of quotas: the world population might be restricted by a quota fixed under the law of the Almighty. Why not replace the living by those who are no more and without whom we are as helpless as a soul entering the gates of Hell? I do not mean I want to turn the clock back, or rather I would not mind turning it back *partially*: nature and the arts have often been maltreated by our ancestors. We have also taken part in this destruction. But even Dante was unable to resurrect the past and therefore limited his ambitions to visiting it in its tomb. And our languages mock us whenever we strive to substitute the past for the present. Of course we *can* turn our clock back, but the clock of destiny will relentlessly pursue the story of our decline.

Heidegger conceives of Care (*Sorge*) as a movement either towards the future or the past; this movement is *horizontal*. Dante walks out of the dark wood and then goes back again, repulsed by the she-wolf. With the aid of Virgil, he tips the horizontality up, as it were, and a chasm opens up at his feet. A fall ensues, another fall. Dante repeats the Fall and becomes aware of original sin. Everyday life is horizontal and even those who know they flounder in deep waters, trying desperately to reach the bank, do not dare consider their salvation in terms of verticality: they are afraid of drowning. Perhaps one *should* drown in order to save one's soul.

Orpheus is not allowed to look back; Heidegger thinks that one should look back (or down), at the roots of one's life. What we daily encounter in the streets and elsewhere is branches and twigs. Moreover these branches and twigs do not grow from the same root. Actually they are rootless. Nevertheless, one can look for one's roots even in a public place, even in the streets.

In the *Symposium*, Alcibiades tells the participants how Socrates served in the army when Athens invaded Potidaea. One day, at dawn, he began to think about some problem or other, standing

in the open air. He just stood there, *rooted* to the spot. Some soldiers saw him and, quite mystified, told everyone that Socrates had been standing there all day long. He was still rooted to the same spot in the evening. Some Ionians moved their bedding outside to watch if Socrates was going to stay out there all night. He stood on the very same spot until dawn, looking for his *roots*, converting horizontality into verticality.

In twenty years' time the present will hold as many human brains as the whole of the past. According to a Russian saying, there are as many intellects as heads. A Moscow piano professor improved on it thus: "There are as many opinions as heads." But this new saying is as far from the truth as the previous one: the lukewarm mostly have no opinions. And if they have some, they are not prepared to defend them and become turncoats at the slightest opportunity.

Soon the number of living heads will equal that of the skulls lying in the earth or flying with the wind. Would their dream team beat Socrates and his pupils? Or Dante and his contemporaries? The twenty-first century against the fourteenth century. The earth against Florence.

"The punishment of those who refused to follow any banner, either in Heaven (the neutral angels) or on earth (the lukewarm), observes the law of retribution," writes Singleton. "Termed the *contrapasso* in Inf; XXVIII, 142, this law is the basis of all the punishments, purgations, and rewards of 'souls in the afterlife'—what Dante in his *Letter to Can Grande* termed the '*status animarum post mortem*'." So if you follow no creed in your lifetime, you are ordained to run after this aimless and nameless banner forever.

How shall I be punished for this commentary? Yesterday I told an old lady that my work was progressing very smoothly. I added somewhat haughtily that, unlike Tolstoy, I had never faced a crisis in my literary life and that a blank page frightened me only because nothing was written on it. What punishment awaits me in the Purgatory, on one of its terraces? A page on which *everything* is written? A Borgesian library on one page? No room for my scribbling, for my images and thoughts. Or a blank page on which I am unable to write anything, not even one word? Am I doomed to forget the alphabet? Am I doomed to write in an unknown language, in my private language? I finish a novel in my private language and cannot read it two days afterwards. How easy it is to forget one's private language! A logical punishment for so many pages written in English. "*Graphomanie*" is a French word of which the Russians make an abundant use. A form of mental alienation manifested by an irresistible urge to write.

Amongst the souls coming after the banner, Dante recognises someone "who from cowardice made the great refusal" (*che fece per viltade il gran rifiuto*)—Pope Celestine V, whose great refusal, or abdication, of the papal office was described by Boccaccio, among other writers. Milman, *Hist. Latin Christianity*, VI 194, speaks thus upon the subject:

> [The abdication of Celestine V] was viewed, in his own time, in a different light by different minds. The monkish writers held it up as the most noble example of monastic, of Christian

> perfection. Admirable as was his election, his abdication was even more to be admired. It was an example of humility stupendous to all, imitable by few. The divine approval was said to be shown by a miracle which followed directly on his resignation; but the scorn of man has been expressed by the undying verse of Dante, who condemned him who was guilty of the baseness of the "great refusal" to that circle of hell where are those disdained alike by mercy and justice, on whom the poet will not condescend to look. This sentence, so accordant with the stirring and passionate soul of the great Florentine, has been feebly counteracted, if counteracted, by the praise of Petrarch in his declamation on the beauty of a solitary life, for which the lyrist professed a somewhat hollow and poetic admiration.

Virgil suggests they should not *speak* about the wretches, but allows Dante to *look* at them. What is the purpose of Dante's visit to Hell? He is supposed to learn about crimes and punishments, about how the damned behave in various torture chambers. So he has to look at whoever writhes in savage pains under his very nose or at a distance. But he does not always speak to those who are eager to pour their souls out to him in order to prolong their fictitious lives on earth. (Can a soul pour its soul out? Does a soul have a soul?) Milman is partly right, though: disdain is better expressed by a total disregard of its object. So we often avert our gaze from a man or a woman we despise, pretending to look elsewhere; and yet our inner eye is riveted on the detestable person.

Milman only touches upon the considerations that prompted Celestine V to abdicate and thus expose himself to Dante's undying scorn. Villani (VIII, 5) is far more explicit:

> …the cardinals held him in little esteem. It seemed to them that they had served the welfare and power of the Church very poorly when they elected him. The Holy Father became aware of this. Being a man who loved God and the welfare of his own soul more than he did worldly honours, and feeling unequal to the task of governing the Church, he sought every possible way to renounce the papacy…On the day of St Lucy in the following December, he called a consistory of all the cardinals. In their presence, he removed his crown and the papal robe, renounced the papacy, and left the court, to become a hermit once again and to do penance. The reign of Pope Celestine lasted for five months and nine days.

Among the artists I know there are born performers who cannot live without adulatory glances and voices. The entire world is a stage for them and the applause they hear all day long leaves no room for silence, for Hell, for the Mount of Purgatory. They live in Paradise already and so have no need either to fall or to climb: God is their staunchest admirer.

Once upon a time, during a reception given in honour of a famous artist, another famous artist suddenly found himself off-stage. The people around him were looking at somebody else and he no longer heard the applause he was addicted to. So he climbed on a table, took a watch off his wrist and showed it to everyone, shouting, "All my life I've been faithful to Rolex." Apparently there was a representative of Rolex in the hall.

Their stage is a soapbox from which they talk about their watches and their children instead of playing music. Do they need to play anything? Their success is guaranteed by their names, by what other people say from soapboxes; it is assured and insured. There *is* such a thing as a success

insurance which is very expensive, I'm told.

Two weeks ago I received an invitation for "Musicora", a music fair, and decided to take a "crowd bath", to use a French expression. *Un bain de foule*. As I walked past a group of people I heard the following remark: "If we're not careful he'll get on his soapbox again and start lecturing us on the evils of the modern world!" Why did I take that bath of the crowd? I have got two bathrooms at home.

Celestine V was not keen to take a crowd bath on regular basis and I can understand his aversion to the hustle and bustle of the marketplace—a philosophical synonym of the world. "Great things are done when men and mountains meet. This is not done by jostling in the street." As a pianist, I did not have to abdicate in order to withdraw from concert life: I just began to play fewer concerts. In former times I had my share of the applause that famous artists, those stage addicts, are so dependent on; I think I can manage without it. Anyway silence is more dignified, more harmonious, more musical. Silence lectures us on the evils of the modern world. Besides, a blank page is a magnificent stage.

So Pope Celestine withdrew from public life and silence welcomed its prodigal son as he locked the door of his cell. Why was Dante so scornful about his decision? Wasn't it more natural to praise him as Petrarch did, seizing on yet another opportunity to enlarge upon the beauty of solitude and silence? Dante seldom spoke about the beauty of solitude and silence, come to think of it. During his initiatory journey he was never alone; as for silence, it was drowned either by the gnashing of teeth or by celestial songs.

When perusing the article on Petrarch in the Encyclopaedia Britannica, I alighted on the following words: "After Petrarch, beauty was seen to lie in the 'classical' virtues of purity, simplicity, and proportion. Morally, Dante was concerned primarily with being theologically right; Petrarch and those who followed him cared for the enrichment of the human mind and conscience." From a theological point of view, Dante was certainly right when he assigned Celestine V to the ante-room of Hell. Dante was also *humanly* right because a human being should not renounce the papacy for the sake of the beauty sung by Petrarch. But one can and even should renounce a musical career for the sake of the beauty sung by Dante whose poetry enriches the human mind all the more effectively since it is founded upon theology.

It is a question of guiding principles, I suppose. Why go on a journey through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise instead of spending a fortnight in Switzerland? Why not just lie on a divan, doing nothing? Solitude is beautiful, isn't it? So is silence. But this is an unstructured silence which lets in all sorts of irrelevant notes. I do not like the music of this silence.

Would her voice structure it? Would her voice keep the irrelevant notes at bay? She said she would consult her agenda to find out if she could come to Versailles in June. She said I could call her at any time this week after 6 p.m. I called her on Monday around 9 p.m. Nobody answered the phone. She is working now for one of those famous musicians who turn the world into a stage and people into

their instruments. It is not enough for them to play violins, cellos and pianos. Anyway the body of a beautiful woman is more sensual than a violin made by Stradivarius.

The wayfarers come to the shores of Acheron, the river which circles the rim of Hell before descending deeper; across it Charon ferries the lost souls, but demurs at taking Dante in his boat.

> Come d'autunno si levan le foglie
> l'une appresso de l'altra, fin che 'l ramo
> vede a la terra tutte le sue spoglie,
> similemente il mal seme d'Adamo
> gittansi di quel lito ad una ad una,
> per cenni come augel per suo richiamo.
> As the leaves fall away in autumn, one after another, till the bough sees all its spoils upon the ground, so there the evil seed of Adam: one by one they cast themselves from that shore at signals, like a bird at its call.

In my youth I was in the habit of lying about my age to appear mature. Then there was a turning point and I began to *deduct* three, four, five—up to ten years from my real age. But the leaves continue to fall. They have been falling for fifty-five years. How many leaves will fall before I have an opportunity to speak to her on the phone? And what about our meeting? I must fly to Moscow next October. We might go to a restaurant or a concert hall. And the leaves continue to fall.

Jung speaks about a statue of Priapus in the archaeological museum at Verona. Priapus, with a sidelong smile, points with his finger to a snake biting his phallus.

CANTO IV

> A similar motif can be found in a Rubens' *Last Judgement*, where, in the foreground, a man is being castrated by a serpent. This motif illustrates the meaning of the end of the world. The fantasy of world conflagration, of the cataclysmic end of the world in general, is the projected primordial image of the great transformation, the enantiodromia of life into death, which Rubens represents as emasculation by the serpent [which] plays an important role in dreams as a fear-symbol.
> (Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*)

I never dream of serpents and consequently have not been castrated by them. But the leaves continue to fall. My tree of life. What do I care about the end of the world? And yet I do care about it, otherwise I would not have devoted so many pages to my invectives and proposals for a new cultural revolution running counter to what the Chinese tried to accomplish in the sixties. Incidentally, they achieved much more than they had bargained for: their Cultural Revolution spread all over the world.

Again Jung speaks about the second half of life during which the libido points towards an altered goal. Does it? I still love women as much I used to, courting every beautiful specimen of the female species. "The urge for limitless expansion," as Jung puts it. "An obstinate and purposeless cleaving to life in its old form." It is not *always* purposeless; and it is a *young* form I am cleaving to.

In *Four Dubliners*, Richard Ellmann tells about how W. B. Yeats tried to rejuvenate his sexual capacities in 1934; he had just reached sixty-eight. At fifty-two his flesh and blood were as healthy as "any rhymer's". In the interval, however, he must have dreamt of many serpents. He confided his sorry plight to a friend who remarked that an Austrian physiologist, Eugen Steinach, had developed in 1918 an operation which might have been dubbed "the Fountain of Youth". So Yeats' private parts were operated on. Oddly enough, the surgeon made no use of monkey glands. "It was what we now know as a vasectomy: the surgeon cut the vas deferens, removed a piece of it, then tied up the two ends separately. Steinach's theory, which unfortunately is no longer held, was that the production of the male hormone would thereby be increased and vitalise the whole body's functioning." The operation had no effect whatsoever on the sexual side of Yeats' existence, but the poems he wrote after it do credit to the surgeon's expertise.

The leaves are falling; whatever poems I write, they will continue to fall. No rhyme can stop them, no caesura. They fall silently and their silence is even more ominous than what I hear or do not hear in my room. Would I rather hear my dying? I cannot see it either. I look at myself in a mirror and think that twenty years ago, thirty years ago, I was as old and ugly as I am now. My friends also tell me I have not changed. "As a young man, you looked mature too," they say. And some of them remark they prefer mature cheddar. "It's no joking matter," I answer. Perhaps it is.

My television is on day in day out. When I am exhausted I watch it for a few minutes. A girl said in a movie, "I hate God." Why did she say that? Because of Auschwitz? Perhaps not. Is it difficult to believe in God after Auschwitz?

I have no mythological dreams but am confronted with many mythological realities that I call "themes". Themes and dreams. What is the difference? One of the themes is falling leaves. Homer treats it thus: "As is the race of leaves, such is that of men; some leaves the wind scatters upon the ground and others the budding wood produces, for they come again in the season of Spring. So is the race of men, one springs up and the other dies." Here is Virgil's contribution to it: "thick as the leaves of the forest that at autumn's first frost dropping fall, and thick as the birds that from the seething deep flock shoreward, when the chill of the year drives them overseas." As Singleton points out, Dante introduced strikingly new elements. "The bough 'sees' its leaves fall away till it is finally bare, and this, in simile, is the 'evil seed of Adam'." And Shelley inverts this image, comparing the dead leaves to ghosts:

> O wild West Wind! Thou breath of Autumn's being!
> Thou from whose presence the leaves dead
> Are driven like ghosts, from an enchanter fleeing

I personalise the image, turning it into the tree of my life. What do I care about the race of men? But the leaves continue to fall and that is what counts. Incidentally, there is an ominous touch in the element that Dante added to the autumnal image supplied by Homer and Virgil. He made the bough see its leaves fall away to emphasise their death, their unconsciousness: the leaves know nothing about their own fall. Likewise we neither feel nor realise we are dead as a doctor closes our eyes and consults his or her watch. "It is not the individual that nature cares for, but only the species," says Schopenhauer. "Therefore nature is always ready to let the individual fall…Everyone is transitory only as phenomenon; on the other hand, as a thing-in-itself he is timeless, and so endless." The bough may see other leaves grow on it and fall to the ground unless Virgil permits Dante to break it off.

> Però disse 'l maestro: "Se tu tronchi
> qualche fraschetta d'una d'este piante,
> li pensier c'hai si faran tutti monchi."
> Therefore the master said, "If you break off a little branch from one of these plants, the thoughts you have will all be cut short."
> (The *Inferno*, Canto XIII)

The serpent is also a theme which however does not sound realistic within the context of my everyday life and my dreams. But I hope it does sound in the music of my present commentary and even in those works of mine where I do not so much as mention this reptile. And hopefully some trees are also growing in them: the Tree of Life, the Tree of Love. They are not symbols that Nabokov hated *à juste titre*; they just grow there because they have been growing in the history of mankind from time immemorial. They also grow in the human brain and in my deserts. (When speaking of Nabokov, one might imitate his style, inserting a French tag here and there. That is what he himself does as he

describes his meeting with Bunin in *Memory, Speak Memory*: he imitates Bunin's literary style.)

Understandably enough, Nabokov dislikes groups and schools. But why does he criticise Pushkin for his bounteous treatment of Arcadian themes?

> "Arcadian" poetry, pastorals and the like, presupposing a bucolic space time within which refined shepherds and shepherdesses tend immaculate flocks amid indestructible meadow flowers and make sterile love in shady bosquets near murmuring rills…The overrated Virgil was a popular exponent of the theme on the burnished threshold of an ormolu era.

As a species and a theme, these meadow flowers *are* indestructible, and for the life of me I do not see why they should wilt and die around 9 p.m. As a thing-in-itself, these flocks *are* immaculate and there is nothing wrong with that. And I am sure that Dante would not have been swayed by Nabokov's attitude towards Virgil had he read the commentary on *Eugene Onegin before* setting off for the Hereafter: he would still have chosen Virgil as his guide.

"Popular" is a key word within the space-time of Nabokov's scorn. "I can only explain God's popularity by an atheist's panic," he said in one of his interviews. The question was: "Can political ideas solve any of the big problems of an individual's life?" (Hobbes says that the heathen gods were created by human fear, but that our God is the First Mover.) We may wonder if Bruce Springsteen is *popular* with teenagers, but God is not a rock star despite the success enjoyed by *Jesus Christ Superstar* in the early seventies. Two questions arise in connection with Nabokov's answer to a rather innocent question: "Was he in the grip of panic on his deathbed?" and "Was he damned for his quip?"

At the end of his life Nabokov insisted that there was something otherworldly in his works; I read about it somewhere. When I met his wife in 1981, she also spoke about this otherworldly space-time which may not in any way be linked to the Christian faith, given Nabokov's agnostic stance; it may neither be linked to the Christian space—the Church and its rituals—nor to the time flowing towards the Last Judgement. Is it just an other*wordy* space-time: other words looming behind the printed ones? Or was it a sort of perspective he alluded to? If you describe a wall, the reader must feel there is something beyond it unless you strive to convey a feeling of *complete* isolation. In this case there must be *nothing* beyond the wall. But there is always *something* beyond any wall.

> The following day he died, but before that he had a moment of lucidity, complaining of pains and then saying it was darkish in the room because of the lowered blinds: "What nonsense. Of course there is nothing afterwards." He sighed, listened to the trickling and drumming outside the window and repeated with extreme distinctness: "There is nothing. It is as clear as the fact that it is raining."
> And meanwhile outside the spring sun was playing on the roof tiles, the sky was dreamy and cloudless, the tenant upstairs was watering the flowers on the edge of her balcony, and the water trickled down with a drumming sound.
> (*The Gift*, Chapter 5)

In the above excerpt there is nothing beyond the wall in spite of the tenant and his flowers; the feeling

of complete isolation is not conveyed either. If I was the tenant in question I would say to the author, "But enough of this banter! What are you here for anyway?" The protagonist feels forsaken by life *and* by God; on the verge of death he is given no chance to change either his mind or his feelings. Under the circumstances the water trickling down is hardly more appropriate than a thunderclap: the former is too playful, the latter too straightforward.

The following poem is straightforward, I admit, but it works within the framework of this commentary, in the *light* of Dante's *Commedia*:

CONTRA NABOKOV

There's one misprint—not that it matters much:
Mountain*, not* fountain*. The majestic touch.*
Nabokov, *Pale Fire*

In one of my notebooks
I wrote "sanctified".
I've no idea what I meant
When writing this word:
It was a long time ago.
I might have misspelt it.
(Certified, sanctioned.)

I hope it had been sanctified
By the grace of God,
Not by a spelling error—
Whatever it was.

There is a limited number of quirks in space-time which enable us to have a peep into other worlds, but neither Nabokov's misprint nor his trickling water can activate the mechanism of earthquirks; Kafka's "plain Jeep" is far more appropriate for the job.

For all Nabokov's defence of individualism, one of the time-honoured themes does crop up in *Pale Fire*:

It did not matter who they were. No sound,
No furtive light came from their involute
Abode, but there they were aloof and mute,
Playing a game of worlds, promoting pawns
To ivory unicorns and ebon fauns;
Kindling a long life here, extinguishing
A short one there

The Greek and Indian motives intertwine in this chess problem, but the composer ought to have updated it: ever since the advent of Christianity, God has stopped playing chess. And God might have begun playing dice in the course of the legendary dispute between Albert Einstein and Nils Bohr.

Nabokov thinks that a writer should play a game, a "divine game". The adjective "divine" does

not save the day, I'm afraid. In one of his letters to St Augustine, St Jerome suggested they should "play together harmlessly in the fields of the Scriptures". Here is St Augustine's answer: "As for me, I prefer to do things in earnest, not to 'play'. If you chose the word to imply that what we do is easy exercise, then let me tell you, frankly, that I expected more of you…It is your business to help those engaged in great and exacting investigations—as if studying the Scriptures were a matter of romping around on level ground, not puffing and panting up a steep mountain-face." Writing a poem is not a matter of romping around either: the poet should climb the *mons Domini*. And the world should be dealt with like the Scriptures, for it *is* the Scriptures.

God enveloped the eternal Logos, the word, His only-begotten Son, in human nature because we could grasp Him only in a form resembling our own. This theme is common to many theologians. Cusanus adds that God revealed Himself to us in accordance with our capacity to receive Him. However distant that word may be from our times, its echo should reverberate through any piece of writing worthy of its name, of His name. A poet should not use a word as a mere tool that he holds in his hand. The word is longer than a quill pen; its roots reach back through the millennia, through Eternity. What Nabokov holds in his hand is a well-sharpened pencil.

According to Cusanus, God wills "that the marvels of the universe should move us to admiration. Yet the more we admire them, the more He conceals them from us." Nabokov, in his short story *The Admiralty Spire*, writes about the "lone edifices of legendary times" that the protagonist stares at as he walks through Petersburg after midnight. He walks past those edifices "adorning the nocturnal wastes and half-turning away from the traveller as all beauty does: it sees you not, it is pensive, and listless, its mind is elsewhere." Often the beauty or the beauties described by Nabokov are listless, their minds wandering elsewhere. But they do not *conceal* themselves from us, merely turning this way and that as the author rolls them in the palm of his hand like a precious stone. As a rule, there is no perspective of concealment in Nabokov's works; and yet such a perspective is closely linked with his beloved otherworldliness. There is no silence in his works.

"The quiddity of individual artistic achievement"—that is what alone matters and survives, says Nabokov.

> The secret of artistic creation and of the effectiveness of art is to be found in a return to the state *of participation mystique*—to that level of experience at which it is man who lives, and not the individual, and at which the weal or woe of the single human being does not count, but only human existence. This is why every great work of art is objective and impersonal, but none the less profoundly moves us each and all.
> *(*Jung*, Modern Man in Search of a Soul*)

And it is silence that makes us feel the impersonal quality of a novel or poem. The state of *participation mystique* is not only *akin* to silence: it is silence itself. And only in silence do we hear human existence, the beating of our heart. Jung speaks about the "healing and redeeming forces of the

collective psyche"; every great poet draws upon them as he penetrates to that matrix of life in which all men are embedded. T. S. Eliot writes about the poet in *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, "What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality." And Schopenhauer says, "Any coarse and uncultured person, following his feelings, most vigorously defends complete freedom in individual actions, whereas the great thinkers of all ages, and the more profound religious teachings, have denied it." Silence has no knowledge of freedom.

"Silence is teeming with words and actions that often contradict each other," said Volodya. "All contradictions meet and embrace within the realm of silence. *Coincidentia oppositorum.* Silence is the best expression of freedom."

"So many violinists play on their deathbeds and are buried with their instruments because nobody can unclasp their fingers," I said. "And the lips of prattlers continue to move after their deaths. To them silence is a prison."

How did Dante penetrate to "the matrix of life"? By undertaking a journey through the Hereafter where he could study the human soul "face to face". And Nabokov walked around St Petersburg, drove all over the United States in search of butterflies and watched sunsets from his window in the Montreux Palace. "Fabulous sunsets—just west of my window, spangling the lake, splitting the crimson sun!"

"When the poet awakes he is on the farther side of Acheron and on the brink of the great Abyss. He descends with Virgil to the First Circle or Limbo, where are the souls of the unbaptised and of the virtuous heathen." In Laurence Binyon's translation of the *Commedia* there are short descriptions of cantos, which I already used in one of my novels. Even if nothing remained of the *Commedia* except these descriptions, we would have at our disposal a great work of art. I am reminded of what Borges felt upon leaving a theatre where *Macbeth* had been performed by bad actors in a bad translation. "Shakespeare won," he thought, tears streaming down his cheeks. And I was overwhelmed with grief as I listened to my father's version of *Macbeth*: he introduced me to Shakespeare one afternoon. Oddly enough, I was not horrified; I was sorry for Duncan and Banquo. And I was impressed by the Burnam Wood to such a point that even now, when walking in my woods, I often get the feeling I am rooted to the spot. Had Dante been patient enough he might have seen the dark wood depart on its own in Canto I. Is that what actually happened? Was Dante rooted to the spot, thinking about his work in progress, looking for his roots?

Incidentally, Borges says that there is only a limited number of metaphors in the world—another aspect of silence in literature. Only old metaphors are silent and otherworldly; the new ones are merely extravagant.

quelli è Omero poeta sovrano;
  l'altro è Orazio satiro che vene;

> Ovidio è 'l terzo, e l'ultimo Lucano.
> He is Homer, sovereign poet; next is Horace, satirist; Ovid comes third, and Lucan last.

Only baptism enables one to enter the kingdom of heaven. St Augustine expressed this idea as follows: "*Non enim intratur aliter in regno caelrum ex illo*." I *was* baptised in my babyhood despite the pagan bias of the regime that governed my country: we were supposed to worship Lenin and the members of the Politburo. So I am not likely to meet the unbaptised writers and heroes who inhabit the First Circle or Limbo. Would I have realised who they were and understood what they were talking about had I died in my infancy without being administered the first sacrament? In other words, would I have remained an infant throughout Eternity? But an infant, who listens to his elders and betters for years on end, can learn *something* in the long run. His *physical* growth may be stunted by his death, but nothing prevents him from evolving over the years into a child prodigy. Nowadays two conditions are required for admittance to Limbo: your parents should abstain from having you baptised by a local priest and you should die as soon as possible. The other routes have been barred for centuries.

> But is it true that the works of infidels are always evil? It seems not, because many of the gentiles have walked in the ways of virtue, as, for instance, Cato and many others. But, with Chrysostom, we must say that it is one thing to do good works out of virtue and quite another merely out of one's natural tendency and disposition.
> *(*Thomas Aquinas*, In Ioan; evangel.* III, iii, 5)

Can one believe in God after Auschwitz? Can one believe in Dante after realising that he assigned to Hell the best representatives of Ancient Greece and Rome only because they had been born *before* the advent of Christianity? Can one believe in St Thomas, in Catholicism?

At the end of his life Jung was asked if he believed in God. "I don't believe—I know," he answered. I am outraged by this answer. I hope I shall have an opportunity to enlarge upon it in the present commentary. But the verb "to know" comes to my mind when I think about Dante's standpoint. I know he is right somehow. I know he is right as a poet and probably as a thinker. And he is certainly right as a Catholic. Is it better to talk to Homer in Hell than to fit into the framework of Catholic Church?

Why were they born before the advent of Christianity? Why did anything of value exist before the Cross and the Resurrection? Humanity has no need of great philosophers and poets: our times testify to this statement. Humanity can live without Homer, Virgil, Horace, Plato and Aristotle. Why were they born before the advent of Christianity? Why were they creating masterpieces out of their natural tendency and disposition and not out of virtue? Could they have created their masterpieces out of virtue? Can a great poem be created out of virtue? I am not even sure that St Augustine wrote his *Confessions* out of virtue. Was the *Commedia* created out of virtue or out of necessity? Or out of nothing?

One of my relatives used to say that he would believe in Christ if nothing interesting had taken

place before His birth. "The point is whatever has taken place *after* his birth is not as interesting as Ancient China, Ancient India, Ancient Egypt and Ancient Greece," he said. "What about Dante and St Augustine?" I asked.

How to measure the value of things, of people? A thief hanging beside Christ on a cross was saved before anybody else. "And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom." These words proved to be mightier than the *Aeneid*. I have written so many words. What for? Today they crucify neither criminals nor Messiahs. And if you succeed in making them nail you to a cross, you will hang in the wrong place and at the wrong time. And whatever words you utter on the cross will not save you. No point in becoming a criminal.

Is it really too late? What if I repeat these words day and night? "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom." But Jesus Christ is *already* in His kingdom. Too late, too late. How many times have I repeated *these* words in my writings? Too late, too late. Too late to love, too late to be saved. Too late to live. "Lord, remember me in thy kingdom." The man in the street has such a short memory. The woman in the street, the woman in a flat.

"The penitent thief was saved before anybody else," said Volodya. And I just broke into laughter instead of telling him that Dante thought otherwise. Virgil enumerates the souls that Christ took out of Hell on his visit there: Adam, Abel, Noah, Moses, Abraham the patriarch and David the king, Israel with his father and his children and with Rachel. He concludes thus:

> "E vo' che sappi che, dinanzi ad essi,
> spiriti umani non eran salvati."
> And I would have you know that before these no human souls were saved.

Logically the thief—or the malefactor, as the Authorised Version has it—must have been saved first because he died before Christ's journey to Hell. It was on the third day that Christ rose from the dead; the thief could not have survived on the cross for such a long time. Or did Christ travel to Hell *before* His resurrection? Or did the thief have to wait until Christ's return from Hell to take his place amongst the blessed?

In Canto III, Charon realises at once that Dante is alive; unsurprisingly, almost every other inhabitant of the Hereafter does as much because, unlike the dead, the living cast a shadow. But Charon goes a step further: he seems to know that Dante will *never* live in Hell.

> "Per altra via, per altri porti
> verrai a piaggai, non qui, per passare:
> più lieve legno convien che ti porti."
> "By another way, by other ports, not here, you shall cross to shore. A lighter bark must carry you."

He means that, in due time, Dante will cross to the shore of the Mount of Purgatory; for such a

crossing, a lighter craft is needed. "This passage in Canto III," comments Singleton, "is the first of several, throughout the poem, in which Dante causes his own salvation to be predicted." So far I have predicted my own salvation on one occasion only.

The thief might also have come to the shores of Acheron, while waiting for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In this case Charon would have been obliged to utter the same words in order to justify his refusal to take him in his boat. For some time the *Commedia* has influenced my dreams; now they are also influenced by what *I* write about it. Last night I saw the penitent thief on the shores of Acheron, a fishing rod in his hand. Now and then he would pull a soul out of the river. Could one go fishing in Acheron? Is it a mythological river? It is "a river of Thesprotia in southern Epirus, which breaks through an impenetrable gorge into the Acherusian plain where a lake lay in ancient times. The entrance to Hades was reputed to be there at the confluence of the Cocytus and Pyriphlegethon streams which joined the Acheron river below the lake." (*The Oxford Classical Dictionary*) Sounds realistic, doesn't it? Why not go fishing in Acheron? I would not mind catching a few lost souls, including my own: it *may* get lost on its way to Purgatory.

And what about my desire to talk to Homer and Plato? According to Volodya, the penitent thief was for some time the only person to talk to in Paradise. What would he have told me? Of course he saw the Saviour and even heard his voice. Could he really see Him when hanging on his cross? At some point he must have realised he was unable to turn his head.

He *heard* the Saviour: "Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise." Why *today*? Did Jesus return to Paradise before His resurrection? Or had he never left Paradise? Does the day Jesus speaks about belong to another time, to another scale of values? In Paradise "today" means "Eternity", but Jesus was talking to the thief *on earth*; He was talking about Paradise and His words might have been driven into its orbit, into its "bucolic space time".

"Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom." The remarks of Ness are worth analysing in the light of my predicament.

"This short prayer," writes Ness, "contained a very large and long creed, the articles whereof are these…He believed that the soul died not with the body of man." Do I believe in the soul's independence? Do I believe in the soul? I know there is a multitude of beings inside me so that often my index finger has no idea of what my thumb is doing. And even if it does know what is going on in the area controlled by my thumb, it does not *understand* its actions. Is there a multitude of demons inside me? Is my soul getting lost in their midst? Could I fish my soul out in case of emergency? Is there an emergency exit for my soul? "This is an emergency," as they often say in American movies. This *is* an emergency. What I mean is my soul should be delivered from evil influences *within* myself: it is too early to envisage its liberation from my body. Last night I spoke to my recalcitrant beloved. She yawned as I told her how happy I was to write this commentary. I said that the work was going smoothly and that, time permitting, I might finish it next year. "Perhaps I shouldn't hurry so much," I

said. "After all, I'm not likely to find another theme like that to keep myself busy for the rest of my life."

"Do you know how long you'll live?" she asked. "Perhaps you *should* hurry." I understand her point of view: she is almost thirty years my junior.

"[He believed] that there is a world to come for rewarding the pious and penitent, and for punishing the impious and impenitent." Should I hope there is no world to come for punishing my sins? Is it better to believe in the world to come where one's sins *may* be punished than not to believe at all? There must be a world where my sins will be punished, I'm afraid. Would I prefer to be punished in Dante's *Inferno*? Even in the Hereafter the aesthetic criteria count. I hope there *is* a world to come, whatever lies in store for me in that world. I *am* penitent, given that I write about my sins instead of describing how Lolita mounts her bicycle. I am a penitent thief: I have robbed myself of truth for so long, saying "There's no truth" or "The truth is manifold". Neither Nietzsche nor Foucault can offer you a helping hand in this matter. Anyway their hands had no idea of what their minds were doing.

"[He believed] that Christ though now under crucifying and killing tortures, yet had a right to a kingdom." Now Christ is glorified and his torture is remembered only in churches during Easter. Or is He crucified everywhere now? Is He crucified in the United States waging an illegal war in Iraq? Or in Iraq? Is He crucified in the countries that support the bellicose and commercial initiative of the United States? Is He crucified on the screen of my computer? Am I *harmlessly* playing "in the fields of the Scriptures"? I do not seem to believe that Christ has a right to a kingdom despite His glory; and despite His everlasting crucifixion. I do not *seem* to believe in Christ. It is very British, isn't it? A French woman of Armenian descent told me once, "My husband is English and I have problems with him. When I ask if a bottle is on the dinner table he answers, 'I don’t think so.' 'Is it or is it not?' I shout." Do I believe in Christ? I think so. Do I have a right to a kingdom of semi-believers? Or seem-believers?

"[He believed] that this kingdom was in a better world than the present evil world." The kingdom by the sea, the kingdom by the sea. To Nabokov this kingdom created by Edgar Allan Poe was much more important than any other kingdom, the Russian Empire included. Is the kingdom of God a better world than the kingdom by the sea where a fifty-five-year old man can live with a young woman who has just celebrated her twenty-seventh birthday? I shall never live with her in the kingdom of God because she is not my Beatrice. She is not anyone's Beatrice for that matter. Was she ever a nymphet? She studied the piano at the college where I myself had been educated in the early sixties. In the early nineties I was invited to play there for the students. I talked with them instead, reciting my poetry and touching upon my likes and dislikes in the domain of philosophy. I did play two or three short pieces so as not to disappoint the director of the college, who is far keener on my piano playing than on my poetry. Engrossed in a game of cards, my beloved-to-be had not the slightest

wish to attend my performance so that, along with her partners, she was literally pushed into the hall where the meeting took place. And she went on playing cards whenever there was "enough noise to allow us to play". She meant that the sounds I produced on the piano drowned the shuffling of the cards and the exclamations of joy or anger which accompanied the game. Unfortunately I did not recite my poetry loudly enough; the game would be interrupted once in a while, to the great annoyance of all the girls involved. Was she a nymphet in those days? To hide the cards and the hands manipulating them, the girls were sitting on the floor, which prevented me from seeing both their faces and figures. She might have been a nymphet even at the age of sixteen, but I am not interested in nymphets. Nor am I any longer fond of kingdoms by the sea, even if the kingdom of God is a let-down in comparison with what we expect from it. So why did I speak to her about a holiday in Japan? Another kingdom by the sea.

"[He believed] that Christ would not keep this kingdom all to himself." What does *that* mean? If I had a kingdom by the sea, I *would* keep it to myself, sharing its delights only with the people concerned. And I would keep *some* parts of it all to myself: *some* pleasures should not be shared with others. But how could Christ keep His kingdom all to Himself? For what purpose? The more people gain admission to it the better. Dante says something to this effect in the *Paradiso*. On earth, by getting rich, you deprive other people of riches. In heaven your love grows in direct proportion to the love of others. I failed to find this passage in Singleton's translation, although I leafed through the book for two hours at least. Instead I found two tercets where Dante owns up to an uncharacteristic lapse of memory:

> Io mi rivolsi a l'amoroso suono
> del moi conforto; e qual io allor vidi
> ne li occhi santi amor, qui l'abbandono:
> Non perch' io pru del moi parlar diffidi,
> ma per la mente che non può redire
> sovra sé tanto, s'altri non la guidi.
> I turned round at the loving sound of my Comfort, and what love I then saw in the holy eyes I leave here untold; not only because I distrust my own speech, but because of memory, which cannot return on itself so far unless Another guide it.
> (The *Paradiso*, Canto XVIII)

Par parenthèse, Nabokov never distrusts his own speech.

The access to Paradise is not denied to me this afternoon, but I am incapable of finding *spiritual* love in it, which increases in close communion with others and God. Once again I am reminded of *her* love or rather of what I might have mistaken for her love—the glance she cast at me after one of my Moscow concerts. I shall not attempt to express it verbally: I distrust my speech which is not good at describing glances, smiles and gestures. It is better off in the realm of thoughts. Do I recall her eyes? There was a score of people queuing in front of my backstage room and even inside it. Suddenly my friend touched my shoulder and said, "Look, I've got a surprise for you," whereupon I saw her eyes.

And I still recall them very clearly; I do not need the guidance of Another, the assistance of God. After all, her glance was not spiritual. My friend saw her recently at another pianist's concert. "She's a cat, a cat-woman," he told me. "A beautiful cat-woman." And the eyes of cats are not spiritual: the Eternal Joy (*'l piacere etterno*) does not shine in her eyes. The Eternal Lust perhaps.

"[He believed] that the key of this kingdom did hang at Christ's girdle, though he now hung dying on the cross." St Peter is holding this key. Or does it hang on his girdle? Is it the same key? Do they still resort to a key in order to open the gates of Paradise or is there some kind of code? They must have an electronic code now. Do the elect have to ask through an intercom to be let in? Am I being too playful? Am I playing harmlessly in the fields of the Scriptures? Harmlessly or harmfully?

"[He believed] that he rolled his whole soul for eternal salvation upon a dying Saviour." What would the soul of an unbeliever do after its owner's death, if there were neither Hell nor Paradise? What would it do in the streets of a big city, on country roads, on motorways, in dark woods? Exposed to the rapacity of gadflies and wasps, of beasts and humans, it might flounder around them in search of a dwelling. The soul must live somewhere, either in a human body or in God's abode. And what if, in the course of its wanderings, it comes across the following piece of information: "There is such a housing crisis in the country that there is a shortfall of some five million dwellings"?

> How is it that under precisely the same circumstances one man is converted and another remains dead in sins? Why is it that the same sermon which is heard by one person with complete indifference sends another person home to pray and seek Christ? Why is the Gospel hidden from one person and revealed to another person? We have no answer to these questions. We only know that it is so, and that it is useless to deny it.
> (J. C. Ryle)

One thief was saved, the other damned. In 1977 Volodya asked permission to receive orders, but was advised against it by a sagacious priest. During the same year I read a hundred novels and wrote three hundred pages about my departure from the Soviet Union. (I still have them in one of my drawers.) We studied together at school, at the Conservatoire. Why did he pray and seek Christ while I was writing nonsense? We walked along the same Moscow streets; we met the same people. Why did the Russian language convey to him another meaning of the world?

He might have met other people when I was out of sight, out of earshot; and I read too many pages in French and in English. He spent his summer holiday either in the Moscow suburbs or near the Finish border, in the woods of Sartavala; I spent all my summers on a bench in our courtyard, reading Proust and Nabokov. Whom did he talk to during his holidays? Are the Sartavala woods dark enough to trigger off an initiatory ritual?

What about my desire to speak to Homer? It might be more important to speak to the penitent thief or to stay in my room doing nothing, listening to silence. I began to comment on Canto IV and was sidetracked by the salvation of the thief who had asked Jesus Christ to remember him in the

kingdom of God. Was I really sidetracked? What is the main track, the right track? There is an infinite number of tracks or sidetracks in my desert and all of them are probably wrong. I shall speak to Volodya about Homer in a few days' time: he is busy at present, composing an opera on the *Vita Nuova*. In his last book he writes about the end of composers, of their times. Over the phone and in the streets of Moscow we often talked about the end of art in general. "It's ridiculous to compose symphonies today," he said.

"And what if I wish to express my admiration for the *Commedia* musically?" I asked. "How could I express my feelings, in what kind of form? Not in a short piano piece, not in a string quartet. I might be forced to write a symphony, an oratorio."

"Such a desire should be nipped in the bud," said Volodya. "Why waste your time and efforts on something that can't be done today?"

Why waste my time and efforts on this commentary? At least it is not a novel, is it? Recently I met an old man who asked me if I had written any novels in my life. I said, "Yes." But I restrained myself from disclosing the *number* of novels I had written. He eyed me warily as if I had owned up to being a member of some paedophile ring. "I'm writing essays," he said with great dignity. I should have told him I intended to write an oratorio on the *Commedia*. Or an opera. Is it an opera I am writing, an Italian opera? Could I speak about my novels to Homer?

How to meet him in Limbo? One of my numerous lives might have ended right after my birth, before my baptism. Let us call it a parallel life, a parallel ego. This ego is in Limbo now, I suppose. Can it meet Homer there?

> Now if they who are baptised are, by virtue of the excellence and administration of so great a sacrament, nevertheless reckoned in the number of the faithful, although by their own heart and mouth they do not literally perform what appertains to the action of faith and confession; surely they who have lacked the sacrament must be classed amongst those who do not believe in the Son, and therefore, if they shall depart this life without this grace, they will have to encounter what is written concerning such—they shall not have life, but the wrath of God abideth on them. (St Augustine, *On Forgiveness of Sins, and Baptism*)

When, in 1965, I first read the *Commedia*, I was horrified by the fate of the illustrious people who spent their eternity in Hell only because they had not known Jesus Christ. Ignorant of the Catholic doctrine, I put the blame on Dante whose cruelty in regard to his colleagues and the heroes of the past was beyond the pale. (Schopenhauer was nauseated by Dante's cruelty.) Now I realise that he took a surprisingly lenient view of their unconscious fault. "Augustine, to be sure, had thought there would be a certain attenuation of suffering in Hell for such good deeds as these pagans were able to perform even without sanctifying grace," writes Singleton. "Dante here appears to have made a positive appraisal of so negative a concession."

Would I mind incurring the wrath of God in order to meet Homer? I might sacrifice one of my egos, a "*moi*" I do not need right now.

Dante walks through "the wood of thronging spirits" (*la selva di spiriti spessi*) and sees a fire that overcomes a hemisphere of darkness.

> Non era lunga ancor la nostra via
> di qua dal sonno, quand' io vidi un foco
> ch'emisperio di tenebre vincia.
> Nor had we yet gone far from the place of my slumber when I saw a fire, which overcame a hemisphere of darkness.

Homer, Horace, Ovid and Lucan are protected neither by walls nor by demons. On the first reading of the *Commedia* I wondered why they were in the habit of strolling *outside* the *nobile castello* that Dante had built for them and for heroes and heroines of old. Aeneas stays *within* the seven walls of the castle as if unable to defend himself against adversaries on his own. What adversaries are there to challenge him in the *Inferno* except demons? "The Adversary of God and Man, Satan," as Milton put it. Satan and his cronies. And what about children and other busybodies? Isn't he asked now and then to autograph the *Aeneid*? Only several walls and a stream can protect a superstar from autograph hunters and paparazzi.

> Venimmo al piè d'un nobile castello,
> Sette volte cerchiato d'alte mura,
> Difeso intorno d'un bel fiumicello.
> We came to the foot of a noble caste, seven times encircled by lofty walls and defended round about by a fair stream.

Defended (*difeso*) is an important word in this tercet. What a pity the law of retribution (*contrapasso*) was not applied to make Achilles and Hector swap their destinies in the Hereafter. In the *Inferno*, Achilles might defend an imaginary Troy from the assaults of Hector's troops. Like his illustrious predecessor, he might take leave of Andromache and his son, eager to join his fellows in arms. Instead, it is Hector who dwells within the walls of another Troy, talking to Aeneas and thinking about Andromache. Why doesn't she share his destiny in the Hereafter? Why does Hector, an exemplary husband, suffer more than Paris who continues to enjoy the company of Helen in Canto V?

What does Homer mean to me? I am loath to identify with literary characters and consequently neither put myself in Achilles' shoes nor pay undue attention to my heels. But there are themes which are common to Homer and Virgil, to Dante and his commentators. And "farewell" is one of these themes.

I often recall the day when I bade farewell to my friends and to the woman I loved; she became a symbol of lost Russia, of my lost soul. There was a farewell party after which my friends put some of my precious possessions in five suitcases and departed without a word, without a tear. I had not told *her* anything for fear of being denounced and locked up. She *might* have spoken about my forthcoming defection to her father, a former KGB general, in order to keep me within the Soviet

borders. Or to her mother. She would have brought me oranges, wouldn't she?

Like any woman (or man for that matter), she had a sixth sense which informed her I would request political asylum in Belgium where I was to play three concerts. Sure enough, I played the concerts and requested the asylum. She might have had an inkling of what was going to happen. Why did she make so many projects on the eve of my departure? Why did she talk for hours on end about our holiday in the North of Russia? She mapped out our summer felicity with such abundance of detail that, retrospectively, I think about Dante whose topographical exactitude makes his Hell so different from Milton's:

> Milton's effort, in all that he tells us of his *Inferno*, is to make it indefinite; Dante's, to make it definite. Both, indeed, describe it as entered through gates; but, within the gate, all is wild and fenceless with Milton, having indeed its four rivers,—the last vestige of the medieval tradition,—but rivers which flow through a waste of mountain and moorland, and by "many a frozen, many a fiery Alp". But Dante's *Inferno* is accurately separated into circles drawn with well-pointed compasses; mapped and properly surveyed in every direction, trenched in a thoroughly good style of engineering from depth to depth, and divided, in the "accurate middle" (*dritto mezzo*) of its deepest abyss, into a concentric series of ten moats and embankments, like those about a castle, with bridges from each embankment to the next…

I wonder why Ruskin used the word "*Inferno*" when speaking about Milton's Hell. If you judge the world in terms of Dante's masterpiece, everything becomes trite and trivial. "Milton's vagueness is not the sign of imagination, but of its absence, so far as it is significative in the matter," Ruskin goes on. I think that Milton's vagueness is rather the sign of Angst. My hell is vague, I'm afraid. The room I am sitting in can be described in minute detail, but it is not Hell, is it? It is not Hell because I can leave my room and go to one of my bathrooms or my cellar where so many old wines await me like Sleeping Beauties. What is the point of describing my room punctiliously? Suppose I cannot get out of my room; suppose I cannot see the door leading to my wine cellar. What happens then? No landmarks, no hallmarks, no benchmarks. No bench on which you could sit in a park, in Paradise. Hell *is* vague and vagabond: it adjusts its approach to suit our Angst.

She mapped out our summer holiday—indeed our future life—with Dantean exactitude. Was it Dante's Hell I escaped from by requesting political asylum in Belgium? His Paradise is not as precise as his Hell.

Hector bids farewell to Andromache. She tells him:

> That quarter most the skillful Greeks annoy,
> Where yon' wild fig-trees join the wall of Troy

Alexander Pope comments thus on her speech: "The artifice *Andromache* here uses to detain *Hector* in *Troy* is very beautifully imagined. She takes occasion from the three attacks that had been made by the enemy upon this place, to give him an honourable pretence for staying at that rampart to defend it."

She did her best to make me return to Moscow.

In my absence she failed to live up to Penelope's standards, marrying first a diplomat and then a physicist. When she came to Paris in 1988, she recognised me of course: unlike Odysseus, I did not try to pass myself off as a beggar. But she averted her face as I attempted to kiss her.

> "You are so strange. The gods, who have their homes on Olympos,
> have made your heart more stubborn than for the rest of womankind…"
> (Richmond Lattimore's translation)

For a while I was unable to find my car and she said she would not go with me anywhere. What a pity I cannot recite the end of the *Odyssey* instead of telling our story, our unhappy ending. "He wept as he held his lovely wife, whose thoughts were virtuous." What is the point in weeping if your thoughts are different from Homer's? Our reunions are as bad as our novels and poems. How difficult it is to live with masterpieces.

In the *nobile castello* Dante meets Aristotle, Socrates, Plato, Heraclitus, Empedocles, Zeno and "Democritus, who ascribes the world to chance" (*Democrito che 'l mondo a caso pone*). But, as W. K. C. Guthrie points out, the Greeks saw things so differently that to them the expression "necessary chance" was perfectly natural. Did I come across the *Commedia* by chance? Volodya bought a new edition of the *Commedia* in a shop just opposite the house he lived in. As he was paying for it I read the first tercet and was intrigued by the *selva oscura* which reminded me of the wood where I had lost myself in my childhood. But for this coincidence, I might have tackled the *Commedia* much later because, at the time, I was more interested in music than in literature. Do our respective woods originate in chance or necessity? Is it by chance that I got lost in the wood to which my grandmother used to take me almost every day? We would cross a railway, skirt a miniature lake where no swan had ever floated and walk into a huge shadow punctuated here and there by a sunbeam or a bird. One day my grandmother became part of it, and at the age of four I was unable to distinguish one part of a shadow from another: I was not yet familiar with Monet's variations on the black-and-white theme. Is it by chance that I was born near those woods? I might have been born on the banks of the Neva or in the Caucasus. "Democritus," says Aristotle, "ignoring the final cause, refers all the operation of nature to necessity." Democritus ascribes the world to necessity which is the mother of chance. A poppy-seed always produces a poppy, never a thistle, but a walk in a dark wood does not *always* give rise to a commentary on the *Commedia*.

Plutarch speaks thus about Empedocles' style: "It is not his habit to decorate his subject-matter, for the sake of fine writing, with pretty epithets like bright colours, but rather to make each one the expression of a particular essence or potency." Sounds like a definition of Dante's style as contrasted with Nabokov's.

A pupil of Parmenides, Zeno says that unity and indivisibility go together. Reality is both one

and indivisible; plurality is a self-contradictory notion, for it implies that reality is divisible, that reality is a magnitude divisible into parts which are magnitudes and so themselves divisible, however small. But if this is the case, there is nothing that can be called a unit, for anything that one takes as such can still be divided and so is not unitary. Dante is indivisible; so is the *Commedia* to some extent. "It is often noted as a characteristic of Dante," writes Croce, "that he annuls distances in time and diversities in manners, ranging the men and the events of all epochs on a single stage. But this means merely that Dante measured the ways of the world in all centuries and circumstances by a single steady measure, a definite standard of truth and goodness, projecting the image of the transient upon the screen of the eternal." It is as if one piece of music resounded through the *Commedia*; one melody, one chord, one note.

Heraclitus was thought to have held the great majority of mankind in contempt. This is borne out by the following aphorism: "Other men are unaware of that they do while awake, just as they forget what they do when asleep." At the end of his life Dante was probably unaware of what he did while awake, but he never forgot what he did in his sleep. Did *he* hold the great majority of mankind in contempt? The deeper he plunges into the bowels of Hell the crueller he becomes; and cruelty is inseparable from contempt, from the black shadow of contempt. Indeed contempt is better symbolised by a shadow than by a solid object: we often cast a shadow over the people from whom we turn away in disgust. "Let us not speak of them, but look, and pass on." Only a shadow of Dante is within the reach of the lukewarm who gaze at him in wonder.

Those philosophers dwell beyond the seven walls which represent the seven liberal arts or the three intellectual and four moral virtues. Only a person deeply versed in the classics, philosophy, sciences and music is authorised to talk to them.

What does Plato mean to me? I was eighteen when I quoted the *Phaedrus* in my radio play entitled *Tristan and Isolda*.

> Third comes the kind of madness that is possession by the Muses, which takes a tender virgin soul and awakens it to a Bacchic frenzy of songs and poetry that glorifies the achievements of the past and teaches them to future generations. If anyone comes to the gates of poetry and expects to become an adequate poet by acquiring expert knowledge of the subject without the Muses' madness, he will fail, and his self-controlled verses will be eclipsed by the poetry of men who have been driven out of their minds.

Driven by the madness of the third kind, one day I wrote twenty-six poems and might have continued to write, but for the happiness I suddenly felt, which was more akin to silence than to verses. A poet should abandon his mind and even his heart in order to conquer the space around and *beyond* him. He should conquer whatever lies beyond his ken, beyond his pen. Why not borrow a pen from an angel or a demon, from the Hereafter? Frenzy is at the root of the arts and I think that cold frenzy is more interesting than its hot variety. But it is lukewarm frenzy that is highly objectionable.

And *Lolita* is the result of a lukewarm frenzy, of an eye that looks at something for a while and then looks at something else. At the end of the novel Humbert Humbert leaves his car and heads for an abyss from which a choir of voices mounts continuously, reaching his ears. A small mining town lies at his feet. He can "make out the geometry of the streets between blocks of red and gray roofs, and green puffs of trees, and a serpentine stream, and the rich, ore-like glitter of the city dump…" This stream has nothing to do with the fair stream encircling the *nobile castello*: its *nature* is different. There are Dantean streams; they can be fair or foul, but they are unmistakably Dantean. (It is not a Shakespearean stream either.) The choir of voices. "…I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord." Other voices are absent as well. Can one hear Bruckner's *Te Deum* in this excerpt? It does resound in the *Commedia*, in all its parts, even when the wayfarers are confronted with demons' voices. It does resound through *Ulysses*:

> Gone too from the world, Averroes and Moses Maimonides, dark men in mien and movement, flashing in their mocking mirrors the obscure soul of the world, a darkness shining in brightness which brightness could not comprehend…Like him was I, these sloping shoulders, this gracelessness. My childhood bends beside me. Too far for me to lay a hand there once or lightly…He stood in the porch and watched the laggard hurry towards the scrappy field where sharp voices were in strife.

Logically enough, Stephen says further off that God is a shout in the street.

"The geometry of the streets between blocks of red and gray roofs…" The geometry of the *Inferno* is different. So is the geometry of the *Paradiso*. Where did Nabokov's children live? In a small mining town? The space between them and Humbert Humbert was not huge enough because it included neither Bruckner's *Te Deum* nor Dante's *Commedia*; because it did not include the other world. Humbert Humbert thought of Lolita at that point, shifting the emphasis from the choir, its awesome presence, to his miserable life which was as small and narrow as a bed in a motel. And yet the voices he heard were larger than any life. Those children triumphed over him and his likes as they asserted themselves down below—in Hell to which he had confined them. He ought to have listened to those paradisiacal voices, to Bruckner's *Te Deum*, instead of thinking, "She would have played like them."

Nabokov was fond of Balthus in whose paintings children look delicate and otherworldly, as though they had never run or shouted; yet they shout and run. Lolita does *not* look otherworldly, and a twelve-year-old American girl *may* look otherworldly or at least *beyond*worldly. Even the following description is not spacious enough:

> …when I saw Lo next, in the late afternoon, balancing on her bike, pressing the palm of her hand to the damp bark of a young birch tree on the edge of our lawn, I was so struck by the radiant tenderness of her smile that for an instant I believed all our troubles gone. "Can you

> remember," she said, "what was the name of that hotel, you know (nose puckered), come on, you know—with those white columns and the marble swan in the lobby?"

The silent smile alone might have filled the bill; a girl balancing on her bike. *Elle a perdu une belle occasion de se taire*. But the name of the hotel was an essential part of the plot. Actually the only plot worthy of its name boils down to three words: Hell, Purgatory, Paradise.

What circle or terrace can be assigned to Nabokov in the Hereafter? Limbo? He failed to include the Hereafter in his works, although he had been born after the advent of Jesus Christ. His prose is a veritable tapestry of colours; he is certainly on Monet's side, judging from his book on Gogol. (Gogol also had Manet's palette at his disposal.) Should Nabokov be allowed to reside in the *nobile castello* on the strength of the multi-coloured intensity of his prose? And what to do with the present occupants of the castle? Will they pack and move to Paradise? (Homer, Virgil and Plato would be reluctant to share their headquarters with Nabokov and his likes.) Let us assume that the doctrine which forbids the unbaptised from settling in Paradise is dead: it is easier to bear the death of a doctrine than the death of God. And something *must* have died in the kingdom of God since Dante's times. Otherwise, how to explain our inability to hear the all-embracing harmony of the universe? Bruckner's *Te Deum* resounds only in concert halls nowadays.

Religion should *un*consciously participate in the creative process which, in my opinion, greatly depends on the Hereafter lodging *consciously* in the artist's brain. And God was neither consciously nor unconsciously present in Nabokov's mind or indeed in his spine which he regarded as an infallible judge of literature. But He might have touched his hand ever so gently, from time to time.

What writers will be admitted to Paradise in my commentary? Proust, Musil, Joyce, Kafka, Beckett and Borges must already be there. In literature Nabokov, Beckett and Borges represent the second half of the twentieth century. "That playwright and that essayist are regarded nowadays with such religious fervour," said Nabokov, "that in the triptych you mention, I would feel like a robber between two Christs. Quite a cheerful robber, though." A cheerful robber perhaps, but not a penitent thief.

CANTO V

In my dreams I often see myself in a classroom which is bigger than any classroom I have ever visited either as a pupil or as a tourist. In this classroom I pass an "exam of my life". I know that my life depends on it, on the mark given by a teacher whose physique varies in accordance with the texture of the dream. Now it is a beautiful yet implacable woman; now it is an old man who boasts of his boundless knowledge and objectivity. One of my classmates leans forward and whispers, "He always exhibits excellent judgement."

"No matter—the winner will be decided by a *panel* of judges," says a girl in pigtails.

"A winner? It's just an exam," I tell her.

"There's always a winner," she says. "And a loser. There are many losers and only one winner."

In these dreams I never give a thought to the Day of Judgement. "It's just an exam," I repeat to myself. Yet I feel somehow that it is more than a mere exam because my life depends on it. And then the teacher begins to count. One, two, three, four..."How would he rate my work on a scale of one to five?" I wonder. But he goes on bending his fingers and I realise that another scale is being used. He fishes out a box of matches from his pocket, opens it, and presently I see a number of matches arrayed on his desk. What number? How many matches have been put on the desk in order to measure my life or my punishment? I know I shall be punished in spite of the favourable number of matches. I even recall the expression "favourable number": I heard it so many times in my dream. But what is this favourable number? And why shall I be punished notwithstanding its help, its moral support? The teacher fishes out another box of matches from his pocket and soon his desk is completely covered with matches. A number of them are strewn all over the floor. A favourable number?

Do my teachers always resort to matches? No, no. In another nightmare a beautiful lady would remove dozens of pins from her hairdo and put them on her shawl. I could not make them out from where I was sitting. She said as she removed yet another pin, "Your rudeness when we first met didn't dispose me very kindly towards you."

"The horrific nature of your crime didn't dispose the jury to leniency," said an old man. I had not seen him enter the classroom.

"It's just an exam," I pointed out.

"A hard-hitting report," he said. "What chance do you think you stand of being admitted?"

A classmate leant forward and whispered, "Things are difficult at the moment, but if we stick with it they are bound to get better."

"It's *my* exam," I answered. "I alone am being judged."

"You can't do it to your own standard."

Some men are unaware of what they do in their waking state, just as they forget their dreams. I do not forget my dreams.

Minos presides over the entrance of Hell as Judge and assigns their places to the damned as they come in.

> Dico che quando l'anima mal nata
> li vien dinanzi, tutta si confessa;
> e quel conoscitor de le peccata
> Vede qual loco d'inferno è da essa;
> cigensi con la coda tante volte
> quantunque gradi vuol che giù sia messa.
> I mean that when the ill-begotten soul comes before him, it confesses all; and that discerner of sins sees which shall be its place in Hell, then girds himself with his tail as many times as the grades he wills that it be sent down.

L'anima mal nata. The ill-begotten soul. "The term, applied repeatedly to the damned in Hell," writes Singleton, "suggests that 'it would be better for them not to have been born' (see Matt; 26:24). In the *Vita Nuova* (XIX, 8), the souls of Hell are addressed, '*O, malnati*'. The contrary term '*bene nato*' (Par. V, 115) is addressed to one assured of salvation."

It is better for *anybody* not to be born. And if you *are* born, you have no alternative but to stick it out. Some are born under a lucky star, others under an unlucky star. *Mal nata*, *bene nato*. And only after your death can you find out under which star you were born. What does it matter if you are successful or not in your lifetime? Eternity is far more important. So many stars twinkle overhead; half of them are lucky and the other half unlucky. I am sure there are more unlucky stars in the firmament. Perhaps there is only one lucky star for the entire world population. How to share it among so many people? Or does it twinkle in the land of the unborn?

All other stars are unlucky. How to extinguish them? Star wars. Fighting unlucky stars.

"Many critics, and foremost among them Padre Pompeo Venturi, blame Dante for mingling together things Pagan and Christian," writes Longfellow. "But they should remember how through all the Middle Ages human thought was wrestling with the old traditions; how many pagan observances passed into Christianity in those early days; what reverence Dante had for Virgil and the classics..." Virgil also assigned to Minos the office of judge in Hell. "Dante furnishes him with a tail," Longfellow points out, "thus converting him, after the mediaeval fashion, into a Christian demon." Now everything is decided by a computer. No need to confess your sins: they have been known from time immemorial. ("From time immemorial" is a key expression in any text on the Hereafter.) Even the sins you are unaware of have been stored on a hard disc and backed up on a CD. So you just walk towards the entrance and hear a beep that signals your approach. Then you hear your name and the number of the circle where Eternity awaits you. "What kind of circle is it?" you ask. "I don't remember the numbers of Dante's circles. Or do you have other numbers, other circles?" No answer. "What sin am I punished for?" No answer. Now Hell combines Christian rigour with modern technology and Kafka's trials. Why not leave some pagan monsters in it? Gorgon, for instance.

Io venni in loco d'ogne luce muto,
  Che mugghia come fa mar per tempesta,
  Se da contrari venti è combattuto.
I came into a place mute of all light, which bellows like the sea in tempest when it is assailed by warring winds.

At the beginning of the *Commedia* Dante already mixed the visual and the auditory (*Inf.* I,60). The sun was silent; now the light is mute. On a sunny day light vociferates so impetuously that I draw my curtains to deaden the sound. And the light begins to whisper as it softly covers my old furniture and the six plates on which the Crimean War is depicted; I bought them recently at an auction sale in Paris. Listening to the whisper of light is my favourite pastime. The light described by Dante in the *Paradiso* is too loud, but some doubt has been expressed about whether his testimony is really true. Paradise might be a room with half-drawn curtains or a hall of mirrors where a myriad candles are reflected.

What is the difference between mute light and darkness? An inhabitant of this Canto would not speak about mute light because he or she has forgotten light altogether. To the natives there is only darkness where they hear the invisible waves unleashed by the tempest that Tchaikovsky imitated in the tone poem *Francesca da Rimini*. Their torments would increase immeasurably if, instead of "real" waves and winds, they heard Tchaikovsky's piece round the clock—for all the beauty of his music.

What is the difference between mute light and the silent sun that Dante "heard" at the beginning of the *Commedia*? There are other sources of light in the universe: stars, Venus, candles. The silent sun seems feebly luminous in comparison with the mute light. Dante draws a parallel between them to make us feel the *utter* darkness reigning in the circle and also to prepare us for light's sonorous triumph in the *Paradiso*. At this point he might regret the silent sun he left behind as he followed his guide and mentor through the gates of Hell: the whispering light of Canto I was not disagreeable after all.

La bufera infernal, che mai non resta,
  mena li spiriti con la sua rapina;
  voltando e percotendo li molesta.
The hellish hurricane, never resting, sweeps along the spirits with its rapine; whirling and smiting, it torments them.

The *hellish* hurricane. Pushkin's poem "*Bakhchisaraysky Fontan*" was set to music in the nineteenth century and I heard this "*romance*" many times in the sixties, during my Moscow life. Pushkin speaks about the tears dropped by the fountain, about its "poetical tears" (*poeticheskie slyosi*). One versifier improved on the original by turning the poetical tears into "ever-flowing tears". I was too lazy to look up the verse in my Pushkin edition and jokingly asked Volodya which version he preferred. He said "poetical" was a tautology when applied to a word in a poem, meaning that everything was poetical in it. "Everlasting tears", on the other hand, endowed these fountain-born tears with a time-dimension.

Actually Pushkin used the adjective "poetical" as if installing another mirror in a hall of mirrors.

What epithet could have been applied to Dante's hurricane? Fearful, frightful, awful, appalling, dreadful, ghastly, grisly, gruesome. One might also say "the hideous hurricane". What for? "The hellish hurricane" is a mirror in Dante's hell of mirrors. His punishments mirror the sins of those who reside in the Second Circle; and also St Thomas' writings. "To the form of Dante's work," says Croce, "writers attribute the characters of intensity, precision, concision, and so forth, nor is it doubtful that one who dominates strong passions by the force of his will expresses himself vigorously, intensely and by dint of scrutinising and understanding those passions gains precision, and by disregard of petty detail concision." "Appalling" and "dreadful" look like details which can only minimise the effect of the hurricane, reducing it to a sensation, to a momentary reaction. And the adjective "hellish" mirrors a momentous state of affairs, an endless state of mind; Hell is infinite, so is "hellish".

The spirits are swept along by the hurricane. I recall the book I read in my childhood, which influenced me a lot: a spurious biography of Leonardo da Vinci. Driven by the urge to fly, Leonardo made a pair of wings and strapped them to an adolescent's back. This adolescent—a boy of fifteen—almost fell to his death as he attempted to mirror the exploit of Icarus. Leonardo (and this boy) might have given anything to be swept by Dante's hurricane which was, alas, available only to *heterosexual* carnal sinners.

The note I took during my last conversation with Volodya: "Dante is not interested in married couples. He never mentions his wife." Hector is alone in the *nobile castello*; Andromache lives forever in Racine's *Andromaque*.

> Elena vedi, per cui tanto reo
> tempo si volse, e vedi 'l grande Achille,
> che con amore al fine combatteo.
> Vedi Parìs, Tristano
> See Helen, for whom so many years of ill revolved; and see the great Achilles, who fought at the last with love. See Paris, Tristan...

Paris is swept along with Helen who betrayed once more the trust of Menelaus. No war can be waged in Hell where everything looks and sounds like war; yet a kind of peace reigns in it—a peace of eternal repetition.

Tristan is alone in spite of King Mark's forgiveness which might have softened Dante's heart had he attended the première of *Tristan und Isolde*. (Louis II of Bavaria stopped his train and had a walk in the woods to let Wagner's music impregnate his soul *peacefully*.) So Dante was not *always* generous towards rebellious lovers.

Achilles fought at the last with love. When I first read this verse, I thought that Dante had in mind Achilles' love for Patroclus. But, in this case, Achilles would have been assigned to the circle where sodomites undergo a punishment for their sin. As Singleton points out: "Dante's allusion to this

death refers not to the Homeric story but rather to the accounts of the Trojan War current in the Middle Ages. According to this medieval version of the story, Achilles was killed by treachery in the temple of Apollo Thymbreaeus in Thymbra, to which Paris lured him by the promise of a meeting with Polyxena, with whom Achilles was in love." Why doesn't Paris dwell in the eighth chasm where the Evil Counsellors are imprisoned in a burning flame? He might have talked to Ulysses there.

> "Vedi Parìs, Tristano"; e più di mille
> ombre mostrommi e nominommi a dito,
> ch'amor di nostra vita dipartille.
> "See Paris, Tristan," and more than a thousand shades whom love had parted from our life he showed me…

It is too late to part from this life by falling in love with a woman who is married or treacherous; it is not too late to die because of a young woman. You are too young now and there is nothing I can do about it. And if I wait until you grow older, I shall grow older myself. But a thirty-year-old woman *can* marry an old man, can't she? Let us wait for another three years and our love will part *me* from life. What does it matter? I shall not finish this commentary. So what? The original will not be affected. What happens if one kills one's own child? My child—this commentary—is already four. I might kill it to have a child of my own, a *real* child. I shall go to Russia and marry you, whatever your parents say about it.

Again I dreamt about you; this time we stayed in a huge hotel which reminded me of totalitarian architecture: Mussolini might have built something like that. I was on a tour and our group visited this hotel where I decided to stay because somebody had told me about a beautiful, lonely woman crossing the lobby now and then. "The woman in black." There were many lifts in the hotel, but they could not be used unless you had a key to them, hidden in an attaché case you had to buy. I bought the attaché case and found the key which opened only one lift, contrary to my expectations. The lift took me to the fifth floor and stopped despite my longing to go further up: vehemently I was pressing the buttons situated in the upper row. Dante meets Beatrice on the upper floors of the *Commedia*; we are doomed to meet in the *Inferno*, in Canto V. And yet there was something monstrous in the rooms I had to traverse in order to meet you: they did have a lot in common with the cortege that precedes the appearance of Beatrice in the *Purgatorio*. This cortege—a triumphant chariot on two wheels drawn by a griffin, three ladies dancing in a round and two old men—was depicted on the corridor walls. And then you appeared in a doorway:

> sovra candido vel cinta d'uliva
> donna m'apparve, sotto verde manto
> vestita di color di fiamma viva.
> …olive-crowned over a white veil a lady appeared to me, clad, under a green mantle, with hue of living flame.

"A man spoke to me about a beautiful woman in black," I told you.

"Don't talk to me about other women," you answered. "Why have you come to Rome anyway?"

"Are we in Rome?"

"Of course. You can't spend all your life in Florence. My mother is here as well. Let's have dinner together."

She wore a green mantle, but whatever was *under* that mantle seemed to be on fire. Was it my heart? *Conosco i segni de l'antica fiamma.* I know the tokens of the ancient flame.

After all, lovers are supposed to exchange their hearts so that my heart *might* have been lodged in her bosom. What has your mother come to Rome for?

> Moreover, all the accounts agree that the Vision of Eros cannot long survive if the parties enter into an actual sexual relation. It was not merely the social conditions of an age in which marriages were arranged by the parents which made the Provençal poets declare that married couples could not be in love. This does not mean that one must under no circumstances marry the person whose glory has been revealed to one, but the risk in doing so is proportionate to the intensity of the vision. It is difficult to live day after day, year after year, with an ordinary human being, neither much better nor much worse than oneself, after one has seen her or him transfigured, without feeling that the fading of the vision is the other's fault.
> (W. H. Auden, *The Vision of Eros*)

I *have* seen you transfigured. Do you need to be transfigured? You are yourself in my dreams and in reality, wherever I meet you, but you look and sound like Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht*. I am sure the Vision of Eros shall survive if I marry you. "Next time I meet your mother I'll ask for your hand in marriage," I told you over the phone. I must have seen your mother in my dream, but I have no recollection of *that* episode.

The other episodes close in upon me as I write this commentary, trying to do justice to both my love and your mystery. We travel up and down in a lift to which I have no key. Now we are in Paradise; now Canto V resumes its course as if nothing had happened. But something did happen.

> vidi la donna che pria m'appario
> velata sotto l'angelica festa,
> drizzar li occhi ver' me di qua dal rio.
> I saw the lady, who first appeared to me veiled under the angelic festival, direct her eyes to me beyond the stream.
> (The *Purgatorio*, Canto XXX)

Did you first appear veiled under an angelic or a demonic festival? Can anyone tell an angel from a demon?

From Auden's point of view, it is better to be on the other side of the stream in relation to a woman you love. But in my nightmare I waded across the stream towards you as the veil fell from your head "encircled with Minerva's leaves" (*cerchiato de le fronde di Minerva*). And then we both

waded across the stream, my body moving in your wake. I was estranged from my body and even when my fingers touched you at last I did not feel anything, as if you were a shade.

Beyond the stream. I hope that, even in my kitchen, you will be transfigured, although you have often said you cannot cook properly. Should I marry you in spite of everything? The risk in marrying you is proportionate to my present infatuation. What is proportionate and how? Does the risk augment in proportion to my love? I would be happy if we could have our breakfast together for twenty years, for thirty years. For one year. Just a few croissants shared in bed. Isn't that worth living for?

Writing this commentary is useless. It is more useful to marry and have a child or two children. It is not too late, is it? Even in our times a normal life is within the reach of a normal man who can marry a young or an old woman. But writing this commentary is useless in our times. Had Dante lived at the beginning of the twenty-first century he would have written a few banal novels, and he would have married Beatrice instead of watching her unveil her head beyond the stream. At least they might have done what Paolo and Francesca did as they read the book which urged them to kiss each other:

> "Galeotto fu 'l libro e chi lo scrisse:
> quel giorno più non vi leggemmo avante."
> "A Gallehault was the book and he who wrote it; that day we read no farther in it."

Gallehault waged war against King Arthur, but Lancelot intervened and induced him to come to terms. "During Gallehault's residence at King Arthur's court," writes Singleton, "a warm friendship developed between him and Lancelot, who confided his love for Queen Guinevere. Gallehault arranged for the two to meet. In the course of this interview Gallehault urged the queen to kiss Lancelot—and so began the guilty love between those two."

Upon reading the suggestive lines, Paolo and Francesca kissed and were killed by the man who had every right to avenge himself—Francesca's husband. One of my favourite composers, Gesualdo, proceeded in the same fashion, ordering the murder of his unfaithful first wife and her lover. Only four years elapsed between this double murder and his new marriage which took place in 1594; he married Donna Eleonora d'Este. But for his late madrigals and their uncanny chromaticism, one might say he felt no remorse for the murders he had committed.

> "Amor condusse noi ad una morte.
> Caina attende chi a vita ci spense."
> "Love brought us to one death. Caina awaits him who quenched our life."

In Canto XXXII we learn that the Ninth Circle is formed by the frozen waters of Cocytus into which all the rivers of Hell descend. It is divided into four concentric rings. The outermost is called Caina where reside those who have done violence to their own kin. Francesca hopes that her husband will be assigned to that circle of Hell; I hope that Gesualdo spends his eternity elsewhere—in the *nobile*

castello perhaps. The artists who live there must have done *something* wrong in their lifetimes, either in terms of art or in everyday life. Gesualdo might be blamed for murdering his wife and her lover, but his art deserves our highest praise. Nabokov, on the other hand, killed nobody and achieved a lot in the domain of literature. Moreover his chromaticism is almost on a par with what one hears in Gesualdo's late madrigals. It is Nabokov's harmony I am worried about; and chromaticism is brought out by background harmony.

During my first visit to Belgium in 1972 I met a Russian Prince whose brother was married to a beautiful French woman. In 1973 I received a letter from this woman; at the time I was still living in Moscow. In this letter she described her love in minute detail. At the time my French was rather poor, but it was rich enough to make me realise she was in love with me. (A French-speaking KGB officer must have understood *all* the details of her elaborate declaration.) When I returned to Belgium in January 1974, I met this woman and we had dinner together. I confided that my intention was to leave the Soviet Union forever. She was elated at my plan and assured me of her moral and practical support. I also confided in her brother-in-law who told me he would take me to the airport: I was supposed to leave on the following day. (To leave or to stay.) I was almost sure her brother-in-law would take me to a police station instead of driving me to the airport. I thought it was easy to get political refugee status; I thought I might talk to *any* policeman, saying I wanted to stay in the West; I thought I might talk to a policeman in the streets. Even indoors it was difficult to talk about my "political" intentions: only the French woman was eager to listen to my tales of Hell and Paradise. (In English, "French woman" has too many unpleasant resonances. Let us call her Elisabeth.) Her brother-in-law also listened to me as we headed for the airport along a lit-up motorway. "Why not drive to a police station?" I wondered. "Is it too late?" But it is never too late to go to a police station. We finally reached the airport and, like a priest, he blessed me, saying, "God be with you." As he made the sign of the cross he touched me and my body still aches, wounded by his hypocritical fingers: both a cross and the sign of the cross can wound the human body.

My late beloved waited for me at Moscow airport. Everybody was searched at Moscow airport in January 1974: the YMCA Press in Paris had just published Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*. Some people might have wished to smuggle a few copies into the Soviet Union, but I was not of their number. I cared neither about Solzhenitsyn nor about *Gulag Archipelago*, I'm sorry to say; as usual, I was incarcerated within my own hellish circles. She wiped a few drops of sweat from my forehead and we drove down to the city in a kind of Soviet Jeep that negotiated the Moscow roads with unusual bravura. On the way we bought a few bottles of Russian champagne which helped me to forget the Prince's sign of the cross; my body still remembers it.

How beautiful and touching you were! How many times did I kiss you that night without thinking of books and *literary* kisses? We needed no books to love each other to the utmost. But what does "utmost" mean in this context? Why did I forsake you in June 1974? I am speaking now about the

woman I met in 1973, six months before my final departure from Moscow. The dead often visit us in our dreams and during our waking hours, but she seems to disdain my company. Even her shade and shadow hold me in contempt. And if I happen to meet her in the afterlife, she will turn away, keeping her looks fixed on the ground.

> illa solo fixos oculos aversa tenebat
> nec magis incepto voltum sermone movetur,
> quam si dura silex aut stet marpesia cautes.
> tandem corripuit sese atque inimica refugit
> in nemus umbriferum, coniunx ubt pristinus illi
> respondet curis aequatque Sychaeus amorem.
> She, turning away, kept her looks fixed on the ground and no more changes her countenance as he essays to speak than if she were set in hard flint or Marpesian rock. At length she flung herself away and, still his foe, fled back to the shady grove, where Sychaeus, her lord of former days, responds to her sorrows and gives her love for love.

Aeneas meets Dido in the underworld and tries to vindicate himself, pinning the blame for his departure on the gods. Whom could *I* blame for my departure from Russia? I forsook you and now you flee from my approach to seek refuge in your second husband's arms. He responds to your sorrow with his sorrow: he knows you have never loved him. And your love for me is mirrored by his love. Another hall of mirrors.

I returned to Brussels on June 11th. The Prince took me to his house where we drank some vodka and spoke of my forthcoming defection. Presently he removed a book from one of the shelves in his library and read out loud a letter that Pasternak addressed to Khrushchev in 1958. In this letter Pasternak says he has done something for Russian literature and implores Nikita Sergeevich not to banish him from the Soviet Union. The Prince read the letter out loud and even showed it to me as if relying on the punctuation marks to drive the point home. "I am not Pasternak," I said.

Two days later he phoned me and said he disapproved of my childish behaviour. "You wish to go into exile because of the political situation in Russia. But your soul is Russian and its felicity doesn't depend on politics. You *must* go back!"

Elisabeth called on me that night and I told her I would go back to Russia because the only man I could trust had let me down. "There are other men in Brussels," she said and next day got in touch with a music critic who immediately took charge of my destiny. He arranged that meeting in the UNO during which I mentioned a few painters and musicians. Moreover, he took part in it, coming to my rescue around 1 p.m.; the discussion had already lasted for two hours. The American officer tried to hammer home the message that I was not entitled to the status of political refugee. "You haven't been persecuted in your country either for political reasons or otherwise," he kept on repeating. At some point I stopped answering him and just stared at his mouth as if the way it articulated the words could help me understand their meaning. "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" resounded in my head and in the room. I told the officer I was not supposed to go to church in my motherland. "We might call it

'spiritual persecution'," I suggested.

"Do you want to leave Russia for *religious* reasons?" he asked.

"There are so many reasons," I answered. "And I think all of them are political." At that point I was still able to answer him.

How many times have I been to church in the last twenty-nine years? I attended Andrei Tarkovsky's funeral and the funeral of Tatiana Tolstoy. Flaubert said that a writer should have neither a passport nor religious convictions. So I do not mingle with other Russian expatriates at the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Paris. I just observe them, saying "Amen" from time to time. I must have partaken of a dozen Easter eggs during these years.

As soon as I got a UN passport Elisabeth took me to Paris in her navy-blue Peugeot. But we became lovers only during our next trip: I was loath to have a love affair with a married woman. Besides, I knew her husband *personally* and was afraid that his image might hover around our naked bodies, impeding my impulses and movements. Her husband did interfere one day—in the flesh. He phoned me and we met in a café where he said bluntly, while sipping his brandy, "Il'l kill you if you don't stop making love to my wife. What did you leave Russia for? To destroy a Russian family?" Would he also have killed his wife?

> Paolo thought that if he fled quickly through a trapdoor that led to a room below, he might conceal his misdeed, in whole or in part. He threw himself at it, telling the woman to go open the door. But it did not happen as he had planned. As he jumped through, a fold of the jacket he was wearing got caught on a piece of iron attached to the wood. Francesca had already opened the door for Gianciotto, thinking she would be able to make excuses, now that Paolo was gone. Whereupon Gianciotto entered and immediately noticed Paolo caught by the fold of his jacket. He ran, rapier in hand, to kill him. Seeing this, Francesca quickly ran between them, to try to prevent it; but Gianciotto had already raised his rapier, which he now brought down with all his weight behind it.
> (Boccaccio's account of what actually happened in Canto V)

He would have used a revolver instead of a rapier.

I am loath to have love affairs with married women, especially if I know their husbands personally. Two years ago, however, I found it hard to resist the temptation to seduce a thirty-three-year old woman whose husband was dying in a hospital. He died two years later, at home. During his stay at the hospital his wife betrayed him many times: I had a few rivals in Moscow and on the island of Majorca. I met him twice before his death. He got wind of our liaison but did not give vent to his fury. He might have killed us with impunity, though: he was dying anyway. What would I feel if I were doomed to fly with one of these women in the Second Circle? I might be happy, for all I know. Is it better to fly in solitude?

> The Soul embarks with its tutelary spirit in the skiff of the universe. The universal circuit is like a breeze, and a voyager is carried forward by it. He has a hundred varied experiences, fresh

> sights, changing circumstances, all sorts of events. The vessel itself furnishes incident, tossing as it drives on. And the voyager also acts of himself in virtue of that individuality which he retains because he is on the vessel in his own person and character.
> (Plotinus, the *Enneads*)

"The Soul embarks with its tutelary spirit in the skiff of the universe." What about this tutelary spirit? What is it? Who is it? A man, a woman. Virgil, Francesca. The universal circuit is like a breeze or like a hurricane. But the hurricane sounds like the breeze and vice versa. It is music that sweeps one along. What kind of music is it? A mass, a quartet, a Gregorian chant. But whatever we listen to, we hear only one note. Only one note can be heard in the *Inferno*. Volodya spoke to me about this note, and I read about it somewhere. Only one note can be heard in the *Inferno*. Or one chord. Even in the *Inferno* one can listen to music.

Dante's soul is driven by the breeze through the universe. He is not alone: Virgil is his tutelary spirit. Is he happy? Am I happy after writing this page? Why didn't I spend this morning with one of the women I have spoken about in this commentary? Why didn't I spend this morning in any other company? Even an ugly woman is welcome. An ugly woman, an ugly man, an ugly androgyny. There are only beautiful *objects* in my apartment: old furniture, old wines.

Hector is alone in the *nobile castello* because Dante is not interested in married couples. Would he have cared about *me*? I would not mind flying around the universe with Dido or Helen or Francesca; let Paris or Aeneas murder me. But I do mind being left alone in front of this screen on which nothing hopeful will ever appear, however often I press the keys of my computer. "When I lived opposite her we would send semaphore signals to each other from our bedroom windows." Does that sound hopeful? Perhaps. From *my* bedroom window I see the woods. Shall I send semaphore signals to trees? They look like semaphores during our local hurricanes.

"I'm afraid there's been a bit of mix-up with your reservation." Another nightmare. I was supposed to meet you in another hotel but could not stay there. Where *can* I stay? In this room? "You'll get to know lots of people at college if you're a good mixer—bad mixers have a difficult time." I had a difficult time in that college because you were *not* among the students.

"The vessel itself furnishes incident, tossing as it drives on." Dante travels through the *Commedia* in the company of Virgil. "It would have gone down better if you'd left out these appalling scenes," says Schopenhauer. So many people accompany Dante on his journey through the Hereafter. And he would have given anything to be in Beatrice's company. The hellish hurricane, the paradisiacal hurricane. The breeze. Last night you just breezed in as if you had only been away a day instead of sixteen months. Another dream, another *Commedia*.

> Si tosto come il vento a noi li piega,
> mossi la voce: "O anime affannate,
> venite a noi parlar, s'altri nol niega!"

As soon as the wind bends them to us, I raised my voice, "O wearied souls! Come speak with us, if Another forbid it not."

"If Another forbid it not." "In Hell the name of God is avoided or is uttered only in blasphemy," writes Singleton. Dante raised his voice to persuade the flying souls to speak to him. Borges said somewhere that Dante was envious of Paolo and Francesca who, in the Hereafter, could embrace to their hearts' content, taking no notice of anybody. Dante could not embrace Beatrice either in the Hereafter or in Florence where many people were allowed to embrace each other without incurring God's anger.

Why was Dante so moved as he listened to Francesca's story?

Quand' io intesi quell' anime offense,
china' il viso, e tanto il tenni basso,
fin che ‘l poeta mi disse: "Che pense?"
And when I heard those afflicted souls I bowed my head and held it bowed until the poet said to me, "What are you thinking of?"

What *was* Dante thinking of? Did he regret not having resorted to the same stratagem in the *Vita Nuova*, in his real life? How might he have gone about it?

One day he waylays Beatrice on the way out of a church and talks to her about his love for literature. He has every reason to be proud of his vocation: in his time poets were not regarded as losers. So he talks to her about poetry and even recites one of his own poems. (When courting a woman I often recite my poems.) Out of courtesy or moved by a genuine feeling, she praises his poem highly. He recites another poem and says he intends to write a book on Hell, Purgatory and Paradise. What is more, he has already written five cantos of the *Inferno*. As he talks about the work in progress he touches upon Paolo and Francesca who are flying in "the malignant air" (*l’aere maligno*).

"Oh lasso,
quanti dolci pensier, quanto disio
menò costoro al doloroso passo!"
"Alas! How many sweet thoughts, what great desire, brought them to the woeful pass!"

Beatrice is intrigued by the story, but Dante says he cannot remember the exact wording of it. He suggests they go and fetch the manuscript from his study. Anxious about her reputation, Beatrice refuses at first, and Dante recites another fragment in the hope of further arousing her curiosity:

"Francesca, i tuoi martìri
a lagrimar mi fanno tristo e pio.
Ma dimmi: al tempo d’i dolci sospiri,
a che e come concedette amore
che conosceste i dubbiosi disiri?"
"Francesca, your torments make me weep for grief and pity; but tell me, in the time of the sweet sighs, by what and how did Love grant you to know the dubious desires?"

Beatrice lowers her head and follows Dante through the streets of Florence, which inexorably lead her to his house, to the mysterious manuscript. On the way Dante tells her about other cantos, about the *nobile castello* where Virgil is doomed to stay for all eternity. He also speaks about Hector's solitude.

"Why is he alone?" asks Francesca.

"Because he neglected his wife for the sake of war," he answers. "Tristan is lonely too. He thought too much about the land of Night, about *luce muto*."

And Dante sings a few notes from Wagner's *Tristan*:

"Dem Land, das Tristan meint,
Der sonne Licht nicht scheint."
A land that I can own, / To light of day unknown."

He explains that darkness is associated in his mind (and in his manuscript) with Hell, not with life or Paradise. "He ought to have invited her to the land of Day," he says. "To the land of Day, to the land of Light, to the land of Love. He isn't worthy of Isolda.

"'Wie, hör' ich das Licht?
Die Leuchte, ha! Die Leuchte verlischt!'
"'What? Noise from the light? / The light-sign, uh? The light is put out.'"

Tristan actually *hears* the light, the music of the light. One note, one chord? A Gregorian chant? Not Wagner's opera which is on the dark side, as it were: on the dark side of the moon, on the dark side of the sun, on the dark side of the light. *Luce muto*. There is a difference between the primordial darkness and the kingdom where the light is mute.

There is no point in speaking to you about all these kingdoms: you do not like fairy tales for adults. And when I referred to Tolstoy the other day, on the telephone, you said, "No Tolstoy, please. Not at this hour, not at 11 p.m. He's a crushing bore anyway, at any hour." Is it a commonplace literary dilemma: Tostoy or Dostoevsky? Not at all. You think that Dostoevsky is a neurotic writer. "All his characters are crazy. He must have been crazy too. I only like his love stories. *The White Nights*." Should we read this story together? Just the happy ending? What about showing her Visconti's film? Images are more suggestive, aren't they? But we shall not read Canto V. "How can you write a commentary on such a dull book?" she asked a week ago. Apparently she had been unable to reach Canto IV.

Dante opens the front door and Beatrice enters the house where she might have lived for many years. She would not have died at the age of twenty-four had she married Dante and lived with him in Florence. And he would not have been banished had he married Beatrice; nor would the *Commedia* have seen the light of day, the light of night, the light of love.

Beatrice reads Canto I and takes pity on Dante who is lost in the dark wood. She thinks she might save him if given an opportunity to intervene on his behalf. And she *is* given this opportunity in Canto II where Beatrice talks to Virgil about Dante, having secured his salvation in Heaven's court (*ne la corte del cielo*). Beatrice recognises herself.

> Lucevan li occhi suoi più che la stella;
> e cominciommi a dir soave e piana,
> con angelica voce, in sua favella
> Her eyes were more resplendent than the stars, and she began to say to me, sweetly and softly, in an angelic voice…

"'*Stella*' is a key word of my *Commedia*," explains Dante. "The stars represent the light of night." And he sings another excerpt from Wagner's *Tristan*:

> "das bietet dir Tristan,
> dahin geht er voran:
> ob sie ihm folge treu und hold—
> das sag' ihm nun Isol!"
> "I offer you once more, / and thither go before. / Oh will you follow, loving, true, / as I do ask of you?"

Beatrice reads on. In Canto III she lights on the passage where Dante describes the lukewarm. "And you're both hot and cold," he says, bending over Beatrice's hand and kissing it. "You're so close and so far away. You're in Paradise and on earth. Both the elect and the damned hope for enduring fame in this world. You've already become immortal. I may not finish my magnum opus. Why finish it? You're already immortal and that's the only thing I care about."

> "Siede la terra dove nata fui
> su la marina dove 'l Po discende
> per aver pace co' seguaci sui."
> The city where I was born lies on that shore where the Po descends to be at peace with its followers."

Francesca begins her story. Dante contemplates the face of Beatrice as she reads on, prompted by a double desire: she wants to kiss Dante and is eager to know what happens next.

> "Amor, ch'a nullo amato amar perdona,
> mie prese del costui piacer sì forte,
> che, come vedi, ancor non m'abbandona."
> "Love, which absolves no loved one from loving, seized me so strongly with delight in him, that, as you see, it does not leave me even now."

"There is no one who, feeling himself loved, will not immediately feel drawn to love in return," writes

Fra Giordano da Rivalto. Beatrice did not love Dante, for all the love he bore her. Neither immediately nor fifteen years after their first encounter did she feel anything for him except indifference. "I can bear love or hate, but not indifference," he might have thought as she walked past him in the streets of Florence: even *his* interior monologues were cliché-ridden. "*Amor, ch'a nullo amato amar perdona*." What did he feel when writing these words? Why did he write them? There is no greater sorrow than to witness, in solitude, a happy couple, the love of other people. Dante punishes Paolo and Francesca for their happiness.

> nulla speranza li conforta mai,
> non che di posa, ma di minor pena.
> No hope of less pain, not to say of rest, ever comforts them.

No stratagem, however ingenious, would ever have stirred Beatrice's blood, making her fall in love with Dante. She might have got frightened or bored upon reading the first cantos of the *Commedia*.

It is dangerous to broach a literary subject within your hearing: once again you stopped answering the phone. And yet we were supposed to have a talk last Friday. You are in Venice today; you will be in Florence the day after tomorrow. Travelling around Italy in your mother's company. You had promised to give me the name and address of your hotel in Rome; I might have joined you there for five days. Why didn't you answer my call Friday night? I might have joined you in Florence as well, counting on Dante's influence, on the atmosphere of the city where he was born.

> Quando leggemmo il disïato riso
> esser basciato da cotanto amante,
> questi, che mai da me non fia diviso
> la bocca mi basciò tutto tremante.
> When we read how the longed-for smile was kissed by so great a lover, this one, who never shall be parted from me, kissed my mouth all trembling.

The first kiss in my life. I must have been fourteen or fifteen: I am a late developer. "The type of sexual experience which Dante describes as occurring to him at the age of nine years," writes T. S. Eliot, "is by no means impossible or unique. My only doubt (in which I found myself confirmed by a distinguished psychologist) is whether it could have taken place so *late* in life as the age of nine years. The psychologist agreed with me that it is more likely to occur at about five or six years of age." I fell in love at the age of five, but did not kiss the girl I was in love with. She was my neighbour and became unbearably ugly at the age of nine—a poor candidate for Beatrice's part. So I fell in love with another neighbour of mine and then transferred this feeling to the primary school where, at one point, I was in love with three girls at once. But I never kissed *them*. And the girl I kissed in my kitchen—well, I was *not* in love with her. After drinking two glasses of sweet Soviet champagne, she became so pliable that I might have made love to her had I been planning such an exploit. A psychologist would

attribute my failure to a lack of ambition, I presume. She was cooking our meal. "I'm afraid my great store of wit is rather depleted," I said as I softly pushed her towards the fridge and kissed her mouth "all trembling". For half an hour or so, my limbs trembled even more than my lips and tongue. And then the passion subsided. Nine days later, in a snowdrift, I kissed another girl with whom I was not in love either. I was happy all the same. And my best kiss? On that occasion we drank two bottles of French champagne. (A woman I was in love with for five years. Now we do not even speak on the phone.) You were sitting in an armchair; I was kneeling in front of you, my head almost touching your legs. You seemed to have fallen into a drunken stupor so that I was surprised when you joined me on the floor and grasped my head.

> E quella a me: "Nessun maggior dolore
> che ricordarsi del tempo felice
> ne la miseria; e ciò sa 'l tuo dottore."
> And she to me, "There is no greater sorrow than to recall, in wretchedness, the happy time; and this your teacher knows."

In his commentary on Francesca's reply, Singleton quotes St Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and Boethius: "Sometimes on the contrary, in joy do I remember my forepassed sorrow, and in sadness my joy" (St Augustine). "Recollection of past goods in so far as we have had them, causes pleasure; in so far as we have lost them, causes sorrow" (Thomas Aquinas). "But this is that which vexeth me most, when I remember it. For in all adversity of fortune it is the most unhappy kind of misfortune to have been happy" (Boethius). None of these statements hits the nail on the head. One can remember one's sorrow with a smile or a frown or without any emotion; the same goes for joy. And only a neutral attitude seems appropriate: Why should one be happy or sorrowful on account of things past?

> The soul which still drags a burden will tell of all the man did and felt; but upon death there will appear, as time passes, memories of the lives lived before, some of the events of the most recent life being dismissed as trivial. As it grows away from the body, it will revive things forgotten in the corporeal state, and if it passes in and out of one body after another, it will tell over the events of the discarded life, it will treat as present that which it has just left, and it will remember much from the former existence. But with lapse of time it will come to forgetfulness of many things that were mere accretion.
> (Plotinus, *the Enneads*)

CANTO VI

There was a wine tasting last Monday. As an aperitif, we drank a magnum of Pommery 1929. The flavour was wonderfully rich, with a lovely peach-like aroma and sweet, aged aftertaste. Plums, mango, pastries. The microscopic bubbles streamed around the glass like tiny pearls.

Croustillants de langoustines à la sauce aigre-douce. With this starter we drank a Corton-Charlemagne 1959 (Bouchard). Medium-deep yellow gold; rich, expansive, honeyed bouquet, then sweet, fudge-like; slightly sweet on palate, a big, full, fat wine.

Fois gras en mendiant was accompanied by Château Cheval Blanc 1953. A vast nose, ripe mulberries, figs and even mushrooms. Very deep, sweetish, lively and silky.

Selle d'agneau en croque-mitoufle and Château Latour 1928. Impressively deep, rich colour; crisp, fragrant bouquet of great depth. Fairly sweet, chunky.

Millefeuille chaud caramélisé and Château Yquem 1906. Deep rich warm amber; hefty and slightly sickly crème brûlée bouquet; medium-sweet, full-bodied and very rich.

It is raining tonight.

> Io sono al terzo cerchio, de la piova
> etterna, maladetta, fredda e greve;
> regola e qualità mai non l' è nova.
> Grandine grossa, acqua tinta e neve
> per l'aere tenebroso si riversa;
> pute la terra che questo riceve.
> I am in the third circle of the eternal, accursed, cold and heavy rain; its measure and its quality are never new; huge hail, foul water, and snow pour down through the murky air; the ground that receives it stinks.

How many circles have I inhabited in the course of my life? Is it the first and only circle, the first and the last? Is it a circle, is it a square?

Through the rain, which communicates the message of heaven to us, the earth becomes fertile in order to nourish beasts and humans. "Drop down, ye heavens, from above, and let the skies pour down righteousness: let the earth open, and let them bring forth salvation, and let righteousness spring up together; I the Lord have created it." And the Sufis affirm that, with every drop of rain, God sends His angel; but there are no angels in the icy rain that falls on the souls of the gluttonous in the Third Circle. Could an animal or a bird be accused of gluttony?

> Cerbero, fiera crudele e diversa,
> con tre gole caninamente latra
> sovra la gente che quivi è sommersa.
> Cerberus, monstrous beast and cruel, with three throats barks dog-like over the people who are here submerged.

"In popular superstition and early legend Cerberus has far more terrible functions than merely guarding the gates of Hades: he is one of the devourers of the dead," writes H. E. Butler. Is Cerberus also punished in the Third Circle? And what about the rain? Thanks to its angel-inhabited drops, men and women feed their bodies which, in their turn, become food for worms and Cerberus. But for the rain, we would never commit the sin of gluttony.

In the *Aeneid*, Virgil alludes to Cerberus' eating habits:

> te ianitor Orci
> ossa super recubans antro semesa cruento
> Before thee, the warder of Hell, as he lay on half-gnawn bones in his bloody cave.

In *The Resurrection of the Dead*, Athenagoras tackles the problem of cannibalism:

> But what need is there to speak of bodies not allotted to be the food of any animal, and destined only for a burial in the earth in honour of nature, since the Maker of the world has not allotted any animal whatsoever as food to those of the same kind, although some others of a different kind serve for food according to nature? If, indeed, they are able to show that the flesh of men was allotted to men for food, there will be nothing to hinder its being according to nature that they should eat one another, just like anything else that is allowed by nature, and nothing to prohibit those who dare to say such things from regaling themselves with the bodies of their dearest friends as delicacies, as being especially suited to them, and to entertain their living friends with the same fare.

You are not supposed to eat the representatives of your own species, but Cerberus is not human, is he? (And he devours only *dead* humans.) But Dante endows the brute with distinctly human attributes: hands and three faces. Is he half-human? Is he entitled to a half of every corpse he sets his heart upon?

In Canto XXXIII of the *Inferno*, the story of Count Ugolino is told. Imprisoned in a tower with his four sons, he starves to death. At some point he bites both his hands for grief, whereupon his sons make the following suggestion:

> "Padre, assai ci fia men doglia
> se tu mangi di noi: tu ne vestisti
> queste misere carni, e tu le spoglia."
> "Father, it will be far less painful to us if you eat of us; you did clothe us with this wretched flesh, and do you strip us of it!"

They were too young to have read Athenagoras' treatise.

In Canto VII, Dante punished two opposite sins: the Misers and the Spendthrifts roll dead weights in opposite directions. Along with the gluttonous he might have punished those who eat next to nothing as if to starve themselves. All those women who fear fatness! Reports of anorexia and other eating disorders are on the increase, with 6,000 new cases in the UK every year. In Canto VI, Dante might have explored the complex and varied reasons that lead some women to become anorexic. On

the other hand, he might have suggested that the main cause of anorexia nervosa is not the cultural desire for slimness, but the stresses of family life.

Men are not altogether impervious to the charms of anorexia. In *A Hunger Artist*, Kafka describes the life of such a man who displays his aversion to food in public. A man fasts in a cage for the benefit of the onlookers who do not believe that fasting is the easiest thing in the world. His manager lets him fast for forty days because the interest of the public will never be stimulated beyond this stretch of time. If left to his own devices, however, the artist would fast much longer; he might die of starvation. On the brink of death he says he cannot find the food to his liking. "If I had found it, believe me, I should have made no fuss and stuffed myself like you or anyone else." These are his last words.

Why not imprison this man in the Third Circle? He despised the food offered to him by God Who makes the rain fall on the earth to fertilise it. "And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which *is* upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which *is* the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat." Through his fast in a cage the hunger artist stirred up open rebellion among the people against God. After all, the food he had at his disposal did not grow on the Tree of Knowledge.

Tertullian maintains that our food does grow on the Tree of Knowledge:

> Adam yielded more readily to his belly than to God, heeded the meat rather than the mandate, and sold salvation for his gullet!…even from this early date, *animal faith* may recognise its own seed, deducing from thence onward its appetite for carnalities and rejection of spiritualities. I hold, therefore, that from the very beginning the murderous gullet was to be punished with the torments and penalties of hunger. Even if God had enjoined no preceptive fasts, still, by pointing out the source whence Adam was slain, He who had demonstrated the offence had left to my intelligence the remedies for the offence. Unbidden, I would, in such ways and at such times as I might have been able, have habitually accounted food as poison, and taken the antidote, hunger; through which to purge the primordial cause of death—a cause transmitted to me also, concurrently with my very generation; certain that God willed that whereof He nilled the contrary, and confident enough that the care of continence will be pleasing to Him by whom I should have understood that the crime of incontinence had been condemned.

Catherine II of Russia had a score of nightingales shot every morning to eat their eyes. Her favourite dish. The hunger artist might have found it to his taste.

In the fifties I ate caviar for breakfast, for lunch and for dinner. You could buy it everywhere in Moscow: at a newsstand, at a tobacconist's. I often said to my mother, "I'm fed up with caviar." Now caviar in Moscow is flavourless and insipid. I go to a market and taste different kinds of caviar until I find the one which reminds me of the olden days. It is just a memory, nothing but a memory. Over the last ten years the number of good restaurants in Moscow has reassuringly increased, but they are no match for top French restaurants: Pierre Gagnaire, Marc Veyrat. The former is arguably the best chef in the world. In Paris there are three restaurants where I have my own tables and even my private

cellars: some bottles are not served to other clients.

"All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any" (I Cor. VI. 12). St Chrysostom analyses this verse as follows:

> Here he glances at the gluttons. For since he intends to assail the fornicator again, and fornication arises from luxuriousness and want of moderation, he strongly chastises this passion. It cannot be that he speaks thus with regard to things forbidden, such not being "lawful", but of things which seem to be indifferent. To illustrate my meaning: "It is lawful," he says, "to eat and to drink; but it is not expedient with excess…You are at liberty to eat," says he; "well then, remain in liberty, and take heed that you do not become a slave to this appetite: for he who uses it properly, he is master of it; but he that exceeds the proper measure is no longer its master but its slave, since gluttony reigns paramount within him."

A famous Russian fabulist, Ivan Krïlov, was renowned for his paunch that enabled him, among other things, to know exactly when he had to stop eating. Indeed, he invariably refused to partake of another dish as soon as his paunch reached the edge of a dinner table. One night Krïlov was about to rise up and leave a dining room when, unexpectedly, his favourite dish was brought in: *Ortolans à la crème*. He took the knife and the fork, swallowed a morsel, went red in the face and died.

"I won't have any more—I know my limit!" Should I say that from time to time? To whom? To myself? To a waiter? I usually order a huge *menu dégustation* which I cannot finish before it is over. A seven-course meal, an eight-course meal, a nine-course meal. Even a five-course traditional meal is copious enough to hamper your movements and thoughts. Let us take a Paul Bocuse menu of the early eighties:

> Soupe aux truffes noires V. G. E.
> Rouget barbet de roche en écailles de pommes de terre
> Granité des vignerons du Beaujolais
> Selle d'agneau rôtie à la fleur de thym
> Sélection de fromages frais et affinés "Mère Richard"
> Délices et gourmandises; petits fours et chocolats.

After swallowing the last morsel of the *selle d'agneau*, I realised with horror that there was no room in my stomach either for a smallest *four* or a tiniest chocolate, let alone *délices* and *gourmandises*. And then they rolled in three trolleys covered with cheeses. Was I supposed to stop there? My paunch was still confined within the limits of my trousers: I did not feel obliged to interrupt my gargantuan repast. And then they rolled in three trolleys filled from top to bottom with cakes, tarts, sorbets and ice creams. A majestic bowl of chocolate mousse crowned one of the trolleys. Will Minos assign me to the Third Circle of Hell on account of these *délices* and *gourmandises*?

After that meal I could not rise from the table, for all my efforts. So, for an hour, I read the *Symposium—pour me changer les idées*. But my ideas were not to be changed so easily: in this

dialogue Plato talks about the feast in which Socrates and his friends took part with gay abandon.

Am I a slave to my appetite? Many poets and composers "forget" to eat when in the grip of inspiration leading them from Hell to Paradise. I never forget to eat, I must confess. But am I a slave to my appetite? Have I developed a slavish devotion to it? Should I envy the people who have not got much of an appetite? Should I admonish those who say with a smile, "All this walking has given me an appetite"? Have I got a healthy appetite or an unhealthy appetite? Last year I toured the United States with an Austrian orchestra. One afternoon I called my friend from an airport, using a card on which the instructions were printed in English and in Russian. "You know, this time there are no obese people in the queue," I said. Presently I realised that the queue in question was made up chiefly of the members of our orchestra. I have no idea if my diet is high in fat, but I have tried a great many gourmet restaurants in France, Belgium and Switzerland.

Let us return to St Chrysostom's homily on First Corinthians:

> What then is the meaning of, "Meats for the belly?" "Meats", he says, are on good terms with gluttony, and it with them. It cannot therefore lead us unto Christ, but drags towards these…And the two are connected together and destroyed together; "the belly" with "the meats" and "the meats" with "the belly"; winding out a sort of interminable course; just as from a corrupt body worms may be produced, and again by worms the body consumed; or as it were a wave swollen high and breaking, and having no further effect.

Cerberus has a wide belly (*'l ventre largo*). Some worms are obese. Anyway, all of them must be assigned to the circle where the gluttonous are punished: they have eaten too many corpses. In Verse 23, Dante says that Cerberus is a great worm (*il gran vermo*), hinting once again at his fondness for human flesh.

There is another reason for putting worms among the gluttonous. As they move through soil they help to maintain its fertility which allows some farmers to plant their fields with fodder crops. They fatten their cattle before selling them; no wonder that our diet is high in fat. And let us not forget that fatness often runs in families. In the early nineties, American researches investigated babies from both thin and obese mothers. Some experiments are currently in progress. Besides, a lot of American and European mothers give their children so much food that one might think they want to fatten them up.

In another homily, St Chrysostom dwells on how gluttony can affect the female of the species:

> For, in fact, God hath set the stomach in our bodies as a kind of mill, giving it a proportionate power, and appointing a set measure which it ought to grind every day. If therefore one cast in more, remaining undigested it doth injury to the whole body. Hence diseases and weaknesses and deformities: since in truth luxury makes the beautiful woman not only sickly, but also foul to look upon. For when she is continually sending forth unpleasant exhalations, and breathes fumes of stale wine, and is more florid than she ought to be, and spoils the symmetry that beseems a woman, and loses all her seemliness, and her body becomes flabby, her eyelids

> bloodshot and distended, and her bulk unduly great, and her flesh an useless load; consider what a disgust it all produces.

Even our height seems to depend on how much food we consume:

> Moreover, I have heard a physician say that many have been hindered from reaching their proper height by nothing so much as luxurious living. For the breath being obstructed by the multitude of things which are cast in and being occupied in the digestion of such things, that which ought to serve for growth is spent on this digestion of superfluities.

This morning I heard a programme on BBC World Service in which a cancer specialist talked about the number of patients he would have to treat in the twenty years to come. "The number of cancer patients will increase enormously," he said, whereupon a woman began to pour out her soul to my answerphone that I had inexplicably left on: I did not hear the end of the doctor's prediction. What was the number he gave? Fifteen per cent, fifty per cent?

"In an ideal world, preventive medicine will banish premature death," said the journalist. "And surely in twenty years' time—"

"Don't smoke, don't drink too much alcohol. It's important to have a balanced, varied diet," said the doctor.

What will the world look like in the second half of this century? Only small and fat people around, walking or rather crawling along the streets flanked by skyscrapers. If their diet were much lower in saturated fat and cholesterol, they would not have this abnormality.

> Urlar li fa la pioggia come cani;
> de l'un de' lati fanno a l'altro schermo;
> volgonsi spesso i miseri profani.
> The rain makes them howl like dogs; the profane wretches often turn themselves, making of one side a screen for the other.

These shades look like worms too. Will the future world be inhabited by worms only? By worms howling like dogs? Turning themselves, trying to ward off diseases and evil spirits.

There is a Russian story about two drunkards who blunder around the streets of Moscow, holding on to trees and lampposts to support themselves. After a while, they see two other drunkards lying in the mud.

> Grandine grossa, acqua tinta e neve
> per l'aere tenebroso si riversa
> Huge hail, foul water, and snow pour down through the murky air…

One of them says to the other, "Look at our colleagues! They seem to be enjoying themselves. And we're still stone cold sober."

How many drunkards have I seen buried under the snow? How many drunkards have I trampled over without knowing it?

> Noi passavam su per l'ombre che adona
> la greve pioggia, e ponavam le piante
> sovra lor vanità che par persona.
> We were passing over the shades whom the heavy rain subdues, and we were setting our feet upon their emptiness, which seems real bodies.

The heavy snow subdues them. Why do passers-by never *trip* over their bodies?

Once I all but froze to death after a Socratic feast to which Volodya had taken me on a winter night. At two in the morning we were lurching down Herzen Street towards the Kremlin. It must have been minus 30 that night. (All temperatures in my Hell are given in degrees Celsius.) "Shall we have a break now?" said Volodya as we leaned against a tree in front of the old Moscow University. We entered the park, lay down on a bench and Volodya fell asleep. Nobody would have saved us that night.

> Elle giacean per terra tutte quante,
> fuor d'una ch'a seder si levò, ratto
> ch'ella ci vide passarsi davante.
> All were lying on the ground, save one, who sat up as soon as he saw us pass before him.

No one walked either before or behind us; and yet I sat up.

I think I described the incident in my first novel, but I have no time to leaf through it in search of anything. Why do I still remember that stroll down Herzen Street? I might have died so many times, alone, with my friends. One of our friends died during a party to which I had not been invited. I saw him in a dream some months ago. He was surprised I had not recognised him.

> E io a lui: "L'angoscia che tu hai
> forse ti tira fuor de la mia mente,
> si che non par ch'i' ti vedessi mai."
> And I to him, "The anguish you endure perhaps takes you from my memory, so that I do not seem ever to have seen you."

A drunkard dies. (Another Russian story.) His friends exchange their views by the open coffin. "Petya looks well today," says the first friend. "No wonder—he hasn't drunk for three days," says the second friend.

After death, some drunkards look better; others worse. The latter seem to go on drinking in the Hereafter. My late friend was horribly disfigured. "What do you drink down there?" I asked him. "Moonshine?"

"It's always raining in our country," he answered. "I just drink the rain."

"Why did you drink so much in *our* world?"

"If you drink so much that you fall to the ground and rise up and drink again, you'll be spared the punishment of rebirth," he answered.

> "Più non si desta
> di qua dal suon de l'angelica tromba,
> quando verrà la nimica podesta"
> "He wakes no more until the angel's trumpet sounds and the hostile Power comes..."

What else did he say in my dream? We were walking up a dark alley at the end of which I saw the moon. And he talked about spiritual drunkenness which "engenders the loss of knowledge of whatever differs from the truth. No more sensation of hot or cold, no more passions." Suddenly a cathedral loomed into view. "Shall we go in?" he suggested.

> For when thou hast made up thy mind that after eating and drinking thou must repair also to the assembly, thou wilt assuredly be careful, though perchance with reluctance, of the duty of sobriety; and wilt neither be led away at any time into excess of wine, or gluttony. For the thought, and the expectation of entering the church, schools thee to partake of food and drink with becoming decency; lest, after thou hast entered there, and joined thy brethren, thou shouldest appear ridiculous to all present, by smelling of wine, and unmannerly eructation.
> (St Chrysostom, *Concerning the Statues*, Homily IX)

Another little chat on the phone. "I need something to wear to this cocktail party on Saturday," she said.

"What party?" I asked.

"At the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour." In Moscow they drink in cathedrals now. "When I come to Paris, I'll go shopping every day."

"Are you coming to Paris?" I asked.

"I hope they won't spray the icons with champagne."

I hope they did not. And what about unmannerly eructation?

> "La tua città, ch'è piena
> d'invidia si che già trabocca il sacco,
> seco mi tenne in la vita serena."
> "Your city, which is so full of envy that already the sack runs over, held me in it, in the bright life."

So many people talk to Dante about Florence. Will anybody talk to me about Moscow in the Hereafter? About cocktail parties, about cathedrals.

What could *I* say about my native city? Should I say anything about it? Not now, not now. Wine is a more appropriate subject today.

For several years I was a member of a wine-lovers club. We would meet once a month in

various restaurants, tasting mostly French red wines which are the lifeblood of the oenological world. One tasting was devoted, however, to white Burgundies, on which occasion our president made a speech, saying among other things: "We love red wines because they tell us a lot about the earth; white wines, on the other hand, belong to the kingdom of Heaven." In every joke there is a particle of truth, as the Russians say. (In every joke there is a particle of joke, say Russian jokers.) And I do not think our president was in a joking mood that night: he was always deadly serious when speaking of wine, let alone tasting it. Nor did he ever indulge in *misplaced* poetical or religious outbursts, making bombastic and ill-grounded statements.

Religion and poetry are never out of place in a discussion centred upon wine. Plotinus speaks about a happy forgetfulness of the Soul that is bent on reaching the Supreme. According to him, the good soul "is forgetful. It flees multiplicity; it seeks to escape the unbounded by drawing all to unity, for only thus is it free from entanglement, light-footed, self-conducted." A nice description of how a good wine lover should concentrate on the glass of wine he is holding in his hand. And on the mouthful of wine swirling around his palate. During the wine-ritual, a good wine lover might also get the impression of standing outside his own body:

> Many times it has happened: Lifted out of the body into myself; becoming external to all other things and self-encentred; beholding a marvellous beauty; then, more than ever, assured of community with the loftiest order; enacting the noblest life, acquiring identity with the divine; stationing within It by having attained that activity; poised above whatsoever within the Intellectual is less than the Supreme...
> ((Plotinus, *The Enneads*)

And then comes the moment of "descent from intellection to reasoning". Bergson also speaks about this descent in *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*. At that particular moment a good wine lover might indulge in a poetical or mystical discourse on the experience he has undergone during his communion with wine. He might quote the Song of Songs or use a few wine terms such as: *full-bodied*, *well-structured*, *fleshy*, *flabby*, *chewy*, *weary*, *decadent*, etc. I like comparing wines to composers, poets and painters. In my essay on Brahms' late piano pieces I mentioned, for instance, the Trotanoy 1961 that I had drunk with my friends in the late eighties. Chopin reminds me of Guigal's *La Mouline* and sometimes of his *Landonne*; Mozart of Lafite, of the old-style Lafite. Bach and James Joyce are Latour 1926 or 1928. Dante and Beethoven are Mouton Rothschild 1929 or 1945. Schubert is Petrus 1947. After drinking a Palmer 1928 I usually read a few pages of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Many Italian painters remind me of white Burgundies—on account of their affinity with Heaven. And old Flemish portraitists seem to have been influenced and inspired by red Burgundy, almost imbued with it, given the opulence and "fragrance" of their colours which impart a lively, hedonistic touch, diluting the gloom and austerity of the ecclesiastical and princely models. I am even tempted to use the term "chewy" when defining their sumptuous vestments, so contrary to the spirit of

St Francis.

There are feminine and masculine wines. An old-style Château Margaux (1959, 1953, 1945, 1900) is a feminine wine par excellence. Poetry is feminine in essence—at least Dante and Goethe thought so—and consequently a lot of poems can be compared to this wine. In *Eugene Onegin*, Pushkin compares champagne (Ay) to a mistress:

> glittering, volatile, vivacious,
> and wayward, and shallow.
> But you, Bordeaux, are like a friend
> who is, in grief and in calamity,
> at all times, everywhere, a comrade,
> ready to render us a service
> or share our quiet leisure.
> (*Eugene Onegin*, ch.IV, translated by Nabokov)

In his commentary on these verses, Nabokov quotes a French poet, Ducis, who describes Bordeaux along the same lines: "*Calme et vieux, c'est le vin des sages*." The wine of sages and philosophers (and mystics). Moreover, it agrees with old people in general and is often recommended as a kind of homeopathic remedy. Burgundy is, on the other hand, a beautiful woman in her early forties, whose seductive powers have been enhanced through a patiently acquired knowledge of human nature. (Not to be recommended as a homeopathic remedy.)

E. T. A. Hoffman thinks that wine is an essential ingredient in what may be termed the creative process: artists need it to create their masterpieces. If I remember rightly, he recommends Riesling to poets and red Burgundy to those who are bent on writing tragedies. An old Claret would not jar with tragedy either, judging from what I experienced as I watched *Hamlet* on TV, a glass of la Mission-Haut-Brion 1945 in my hand. But Shakespeare might have drunk a different wine when engrossed in his work on the tragedy. Or was it brown ale that inspired him?

White wine is Heaven, red wine the earth. There is much more sediment in a bottle of old red wine as if the earth were materially—not only metaphorically—present in it. Besides, the sediment one finds in a bottle of white wine has something unearthly about it, something ethereal. Red wines are faster affected by oxygen. White wines seem less capricious, more distant, for all their charm and enchantment; they are often associated with cool, more or less unemotional people. (The cool-headed, Machiavellian protagonist of Alain Resnais' *Providence* drinks white wine throughout the film.) In my mind they are also associated with Buddhists and, generally speaking, with adepts of those religious and philosophical trends that advocate detachment and the quest for nirvana in all its shapes and forms. Red wine unveils the mysteries of the earth, her richness and heterogeneous character; and also her everyday life. Carried away by red wine's warmth and aromas, we can even ascend to Heaven—a short visit only; for we are bound to come back to earth again, enacting the process described by Plotinus and Bergson. White wine predisposes us to the contemplation of Heaven from afar. In a way,

white wine is synonymous with meditation.

In the commentary on the Songs of Songs, the mythic author of Zohar also speaks about the difference between red and white wines. Dreaming of white grapes is a good omen, whereas red grapes are sure to bring misfortune: on those who see red grapes in their dreams a judgement is being passed. White grapes keep the Wine of Heaven, for mercy is of white colour; those who eat red grapes in their dreams are doomed.

What I have said so far concerns mainly old wines. The president of our club used to say that no true, authentic wine was made after 1961, which was the last great year for Claret; and 1959 was the last great year for *all* French wines.

Today, winemakers filter their products, reducing the presence of the earth (and Heaven) to metaphors and memories. Will our grandchildren ever taste real wine? Will they ever visit Heaven? Will they ever probe into the mystery of the earth? Will they ever meditate on Time? Will they ever be granted a material, tangible experience of poetry and music?

A glass of old wine tells us more about the universe than the library of Alexandria. Apollinaire speaks thus about the universal, all-encompassing quality of old wines:

> L'univers tout entier concentré dans ce vin
> Qui contenait les mers les animaux les plantes
> Les cités les destins et les astres qui chantent
> Les hommes à genoux sur la rive du ciel
> Et le docile fer notre bon compagnon
> Le feu qu'il faut aimer comme on s'aime soi-même
> Tous les fiers trépassés qui sont un sous mon front
> L'éclair qui luit ainsi qu'une pensée naissante
> Tous les noms six par six les nombres un à un
> Des kilos de papier tordus comme des flammes
> Et ceux-là qui sauront blanchir nos ossements
> Les bons vers immortels qui s'ennuient patiemment
> Des armées rangées en batailles
> Des forêts de crucifix et mes demeures lacustres
> Au bord des yeux de celle que j'aime tant
> Les fleurs qui s'écrient hors de bouches
> Et tout ce que je ne sais pas dire
> Tout ce que je ne connaîtrai jamais
> Tout cela tout cela changé en ce vin pur
> Dont Paris avait soif
> Me fut alors présenté
> (*Vendémiaire*)

And wine is my love for you; and our little chats on the phone; and your voice; and the way you smiled at me backstage; and all my memories, bitter and blissful; and Dante's *Commedia*; and this commentary; and Schubert's *Sonatines for Violin and Piano*; and Giotto's frescoes at the Scrovegni Chapel; and some streets of Moscow; and my return to Moscow in January 1974; and Florence I visited last September; and the glass of water I drank a few minutes ago; and my desire to return to

Moscow in the near future; and the present moment which is already in the past; and the past which will always be present; and our next meeting in Moscow…

Wine is part and parcel of many rituals. At the outset of this commentary I quoted *The Tantric Way* in which one of those rituals is described. I even underlined the passage in my copy because I wished to use it in my first novel *Disappearance*. Why not use it now? I am still looking for my Beatrice. "The ritual is performed with a partner who is considered the reflection of Sakti, and unless the adept has the attitude of complete surrender to the object of his worship, in this case the female participant who plays the role of the divine energy, the practice of asana cannot be successful." SAKTI, kinetic aspect of the Ultimate Principle; the power that permeates all creation; and also the divine consort of Siva. ASANA, steady posture, yogic pose, a condition of balance and poise. It is a Dantean ritual where Beatrice can be regarded as the reflection of Sakti to whom the adept has the attitude of complete surrender. So far we have been performing this ritual in the streets of Moscow, in restaurants, over the phone, but we should not forget that "all sexual phenomena in nature are designed to produce a result, a blending of the genetic codes of two members of the same species. The glow and sparkle of sex as we humans experience it, the cuddling, kissing, tumescence, copulating orgasm, all serve one purpose only. They set the stage for a cellular drama that involves the sperm's odyssey through the tunnels and portals of the female genital tract, its quest for the waiting egg, its union with this egg." (De Ropp, *Sex Energy*.) Perhaps our relationship is designed to produce *another* result or no result at all. I have already written so many poems about you. Is that the result of our relationship, a Dantean result? Last week I received a letter from my friend who lives in Canada. He writes about *his* search for Beatrice, disregarding the apparent sterility of such a love. We all tend to overlook the distance which always separates Dante and Beatrice despite the impressive number of their incarnations.

"The 'devout woman' epitomises the entire nature of femaleness, the essence of all the Saktis in their various aspects. She becomes a perennial source of joy. From whatever stratum of society she comes she must bear certain auspicious signs in appearance and physical condition in order to be an ideal participant: she must be in good health, have lotus eyes, full breasts, soft skin, slender waist 'swelled into jewelled hips' (*Lalaita Vistara*)." Is she allowed to say that Dante is a crushing bore? Your slender waist. Last year, after another long-distance call during which you had given me your measurements, I bought a trouser suit for you. "Your wife is extremely slim-waisted," said the shop assistant. Your skin looks soft.

"The woman who becomes the personified goddess opens a doorway to a deeper transpersonal experience. Only when she is seen through divine eyes does the sadhaka apprehend the innate divine qualities of the physical woman." SADHAKA, seeker; one who is disciplined. ‘Sadhaka now draws the Vijaya-mandala around the libation jar which is placed on the ground. Ritual ingredients and five spoonfuls of wine (karana) are sprinkled over it.’ I promised you a magnum of Lafite 1975—the year

of your birth.

> "Ritorna a tua scïenza,
> che vuol, quanto la cosa è più perfetta,
> più senta il bene, e così la doglienza."
> "Return to your science, which has it that the more a thing is perfect, the more it feels the good, and so the pain."

"Now the soul, as part of human nature, has its natural perfection only as united to the body," writes St Thomas. I know only your soul, as if we had seen each other in Hell.

> …e così la doglienza.

CANTO VII

This afternoon I bought a ticket to Moscow. My friend, Adrian Mathews, says that it is not necessary to give details about when and how you buy your tickets or what pockets you take your things from, unless your story *depends* on these data. I do not know if the plot of Beckett's *Molloy* depends on the way the protagonist distributes the stones among his pockets—there is no plot to speak of, in my opinion—but the passage where the ritual is told is most amusing. And the fact that I bought the ticket two hours ago accounts for my state of mind, for the sense of elation at having done something which might lead to a turning point in my life. This excitement will decrease substantially by tomorrow morning, I presume, but now I am excited to the extent of hoping that "things will come to an eruption once and for all, so I can turn into a different person," as Wittgenstein put it.

I shall speak to her about Wittgenstein. In what connection?

> Percotëansi 'ncontro; e poscia pur lì
> si rivolgea ciascun, voltando a retro,
> gridando: "Perché tieni?" e "Perché burli?"
> They clashed together, and then right there each wheeled round, rolling back his weight, shouting, "Why do you hoard?" and "Why do you squander?"

In the Fourth Circle reside the Misers and the Spendthrifts who roll dead weights in opposite directions and scold each other as they meet. My beloved is so fond of money that once she said she needed two million dollars "for a start". All this sounds like a bad joke, but perhaps it is a bad *reality* and I should cry like Plutus at the beginning of Canto VII, "*Pape Satàn, pape Satàn aleppe*!" Given that Virgil understands these words, we must conclude that they have a meaning. Here is the *Ottimo* Commento's gloss:

> [Plutus' outcry] expresses the state of mind called astonishment and marvel. And he said it twice, to express the marvel more strongly. Satan is the great demon; aleppe is a form of speech intended to express the state of pain. In sum, we may say that this father of riches cried out in marvel, in succour, and in pain, for the aid of his superior.

Whenever I am in her company—in a restaurant or on the phone—I cannot help being astonished at what she says and does. "Plutus marvels, then, for this is something never seen hitherto: that a living man should be walking through Hell," writes Boccaccio. She also walks through my Hell, that living woman, but what I marvel at has nothing to do with her presence in it: there are other women in my circles, in my triangles, in my cubes. It is her words I marvel at, her words and exclamations. "Really?" she exclaimed when I told her I was not rich. I hastened to reassure her that I had enough money for top restaurants and designer clothes. The women I put in my novels are often money-minded. Or is it the other way round? Do *I* attach too much importance to it? Am I a cheapskate?

Wittgenstein says it is impossible to draw a boundary round one's world because, in order to do that, one would have to step outside it, which cannot be done. And how to draw a boundary round avarice? Where does it start? Does it have a common border with prodigality or is there a "no-money's land" between them—the realm where money is spent *normally*?

The expression "no-money's land" is acceptable insofar as it reflects the life of those who buy what they need without thinking about money. In the following Hasidic story we are told about a no-money's house:

> Never did the Baal Shem keep money in his house overnight. When he returned from a journey, he paid all the debts which had accumulated in his absence and distributed whatever he had left, among the needy. Once he brought a large amount of money back from a journey, paid his debts, and gave the rest away. But in the meantime, his wife had taken a little of the money so that she might not have to buy on credit for a few days. In the evening, the Baal Shem felt something impeding his prayer. He went home and said: "Who took of the money?" His wife confessed it was she who had done so. He took the money from her and had it distributed among the poor that very evening.
> (Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, translated by Olga Marx)

In my flat there is a hiding place where I keep money so as not to use cash machines too often. Last autumn the owner of a record company paid me a visit during which he often glanced at the corner where the hiding place is located. After dinner he asked me if he could put his armchair in that corner to enjoy his cigar to the utmost. He finished the cigar but did not depart, as might have been expected. He sat in that corner and smiled to himself, taking no notice of what I was telling him. With money, we must always fear there will be an escape of harmful radiation.

"*Pape Satàn, pape Satàn aleppe*!" Benvenutto Cellini's interpretation of these words is rather amusing:

> I stooped down several times to observe what passed: the words which I heard the judge utter, upon seeing two gentlemen who wanted to hear the trial, and whom the porter was endeavouring to keep out, were these: "Be quiet, be quiet, Satan, get hence, and leave off disturbing us." The terms were, *Paix, paix, Satan, allez, paix*. As I had by this time thoroughly learnt the French language, upon hearing these words, I recollected what Dante said, when he with his master, Virgil, entered the gates of hell; for Dante and Giotto the painter were together in France, and visited Paris with particular attention, where the court of justice may be considered as hell.

Paix, paix, Satan, allez, paix! I should utter this incantation when you talk nonsense or discuss the price of what has only a sentimental value. I could also exorcise my private demons with it.

According to Benvenutto Cellini, Dante was fluent in French; he would have understood Apollinaire's poem had he perused an Italian or a Latin translation of my commentary on Canto VI.

In three days you will be back from Italy. I shall call you to say I am leaving for Moscow on April 19th. What shall I tell you at the Georgian restaurant where, sixteen months ago, I spent four

happy hours in your company? One of the happiest days in my life.

"It's high time we spoke seriously about our relationship. I'm afraid you misjudge my character and my orientation. You know, I'm interested neither in fame nor in money. Ludwig Wittgenstein was born into one of the wealthiest families in Europe. In 1913, when his father died, leaving him a huge fortune, he gave away a large sum to needy Austrian poets and artists. To George Trakle, among other people. And then he made his entire inheritance over to his sisters and his brother Paul. He was troubled by the possibility that they might have put some of it aside to come to his rescue later on. Actually he *was* in need of financial assistance on his return to Cambridge in 1929. When asked if his relatives could not help him, he said he wouldn't get in touch with them for *that*."

Was Wittgenstein a spendthrift? He claimed, apparently, not to have read a word of Aristotle. Here is what "the Master of those who know" ("*l maestro di color che sanno*") says about our attitude towards money:

> Prodigality and meanness are excesses and defects with regard to wealth; and meanness we always impute to those who care more than they ought for wealth, but we sometimes apply the word "prodigality" in a complex sense; for we call those men prodigals who are incontinent and spend money on self-indulgence. Hence also they are thought the poorest characters; for they combine more vices than one. Therefore the application of the word to them is not its proper use; for a "prodigal" means a man who has a single evil quality, that of wasting his substance; since a prodigal is one who is being ruined by his own fault, and the wasting of substance is thought to be a sort of ruining of oneself, life being held to depend on possession of substance.
> (The *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by W. D. Ross)

Wittgenstein did not spend money on self-indulgence: he gave it away to poets such as Rainer Maria Rilke. At one time I thought I might do something of the kind if I were rich. Perhaps I thought so because I knew I would never be rich. What would I do with my money if I were a multimillionaire? There are not many old wines on the market now and anyway I have an impressively large store of wine in my cellar. What about my favourite painters? They are not on the market either. Now and then some of their paintings do turn up in London, in Switzerland, but these are "*de beaux restes*", as we say in France; and beautiful remains are just pretty, I'm afraid. And no amount of money can buy that evening at the Georgian restaurant or some of the kisses I exchanged with the women I loved. I might spend all my money on the manuscript of the *Commedia*, but not a single word in Dante's handwriting has been preserved. And how to buy the Scrovegni Chapel? I am not sure I would buy it after the restoration. I visited the Chapel last year and was surprised at not hearing the music I had heard there so many times. I just felt nothing as I entered the Chapel; I saw the beauty of the frescoes but neither heard nor felt them. Nor could I drink them like a glass of wine. And then I realised they had been restored. Restored to what? To death?

What does "prodigal" mean today? "He has been prodigal with company funds." Well and good. And Wittgenstein was prodigal with his family's fortune. Was he a spendthrift? He had not earned the

money he gave away to Trakle and Rilke. Does this really matter? What matters is our conversation in that Georgian restaurant.

"'I will not ask them for a penny,' said Wittgenstein. He meant his brothers and sisters. He didn't care about money. Neither do I. Almost anyone can afford a cheap edition of the *Commedia*. Commentaries are more expensive, but I'm sure that many people have enough money for commentaries providing they're interested in them and in the *Commedia*. And reading Shakespeare in the original is an unparalleled pleasure that the musician you're working for has never experienced. You say he has read everything. What *has* he read? Bulgakov? I've been reading Shakespeare in the original for twenty-five years. Your maestro has no time for reading anything except the reviews of his own concerts and CDs. Too much travelling, too many cocktail parties. And his apartment in Paris, where he spends no more than a week every year, looks like the den of a fence. Too much gold, too many expensive objects thrown pell-mell in the living room and other rooms which are nondescript on account of aesthetic chaos. And his daughter is well-known for her profligate spending habits, isn't she?"

> This, then, is the sense in which we take the word "prodigality". Now the things that have a use may be used either well or badly; and riches is a useful thing; and everything is used best by the man who has the virtue concerned with it; riches, therefore, will be used best by the man who has the virtue concerned with wealth; and this is the liberal man. Now spending and giving seem to be the using of wealth; taking and keeping rather the possession of it. Hence it is more the mark of the liberal man to give to the right people than to take from the right sources and not to take from the wrong. For it is more characteristic of virtue to do good than to have good done to one, and more characteristic to do what is noble than not to do what is base; and it is not hard to see that giving implies doing good and doing what is noble, and taking implies having good done to one or not acting basely.

In that Georgian restaurant she told me about another cocktail party at which somebody said half-seriously, half-jokingly, "The chief thing is to learn how to take." No, I think he was dead serious, although he might have smiled to himself as he uttered these words. During a handshake, such a man just takes your hand without giving you anything. What you shake is not a hand but something that *takes* your hand. And you may get the feeling your whole body and your thoughts are being taken and shaken.

These liberal men give their money *only* to those who are liable to multiply their capital—the wrong people. But there are so many right people to whom they give nothing. (Poets, composers.)

> Now virtuous actions are noble and done for the sake of the noble. Therefore the liberal man, like other virtuous men, will give for the sake of the noble, and rightly; for he will give to the right people, the right amounts, and at the right time, with all the other qualifications that accompany right giving; and that too with pleasure or without pain; for that which is virtuous is pleasant or free from pain—least of all will it be painful. But he who gives to the wrong people or not for the sake of the noble but for some other cause, will be called not liberal but by some other name.

What do those people care about names! Call them what you will: wicked, impious, unjust. (The names suggested by Aristotle.) "For all of these take more than they ought and from wrong sources. What is common to them is evidently sordid love of gain; they all put up with a bad name for the sake of gain." The name of money is "money"; all other names are superfluous. Aristotle is superfluous. So is Wittgenstein.

"For some time Wittgenstein worked as an elementary school-teacher in a tiny village about four hours' journey south of Vienna. And in the early thirties he decided to go to the Soviet Union and work at a collective farm. They offered him a chair in philosophy at Kazan University, but he declined the offer, saying he was determined to work as a manual labourer."

No point in talking to her about Wittgenstein. I should not criticise her boss either. His apartments, his palaces. If she read Aristotle, she might answer me thus, "The magnificent man is like an artist, especially if he *is* an artist. He can see what is fitting and spends large sums tastefully for honour's sake. He does so gladly and lavishly, for nice calculation is a niggardly thing." Aristotle proves that avarice is more damaging than prodigality. Why talk about spendthrifts? They are few and far between anyway. Even a playboy who spends the summers on his yacht in the Mediterranean is a skinflint.

Many Russian expatriates made their living as taxi drivers in Paris. One of them worked very hard to save enough money for a short holiday on the Riviera where, over a period of a few days, he would spend all the money he had earned so painstakingly at his steering wheel. Was he a spendthrift? (Another Russian story.)

I have a friend who often speaks about the restaurants he goes to for business talks. And every time he says, "That restaurant really fleeced me!" Is he a cheapskate?

> Spesse fiate fu tacito e desto
> trovato in terra de la sua nutrice,
> come dicesse: "Io son venuto a questo."
> Oftentimes his nurse found him silent and awake upon the ground, as though he would say, "I am come for this."

In Canto XII of the *Paradiso*, St Bonaventura speaks to Dante about St Dominic, sketching out his childhood, unworldliness and the struggle against the Albigenses. In which circle of Paradise should I accommodate Wittgenstein? Some of his students thought he was a modern saint; yet he neither practised Catholicism nor believed in all its tenets. Shortly before his death he made the following entry in his diary, "God may say to me: 'I am judging you out of your own mouth. Your own actions have made you shudder with disgust when you have seen other people do them. '" For this entry alone he deserves a place in Paradise. And once he told his friend, "I am not a religious man but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view." That is where I stand now. I am no longer

an Orthodox, nor have I yet adhered to the Catholic faith; but I see every problem from a religious point of view.

I must talk to her about *some* aspects of Wittgenstein's life, otherwise she will never understand what I am striving for. I might quote Bertrand Russell without admitting I repeat his words, "I have the most perfect intellectual sympathy with him—the same passion and vehemence, the same feeling that one must understand or die, the sudden jokes breaking down the frightful tension of thought." The same feeling that one must express one's thoughts or die. And these thoughts never come on their own. They should be extracted from Hell, from its circles, and for that I must reach the centres of these circles, crawling in the mud for hours on end. The world is a network of situations or, as Wittgenstein put it in the *Tractatus*, "The world is the totality of facts, not of things." I am not tempted to describe how my characters dress or what they look like unless these outward appearances help me decipher the pattern of the situations they get involved in. I would touch upon the dark hair curled above Anna's white neck only if Vronsky kissed it; or if it were the centre of his infernal love—something akin to the curve that Mitya Karamazov mentions as he talks to his brother about Grushenka.

"A state of affairs (a state of things) is a combination of objects (things)." I am always writing about states of affairs, about combinations of objects—not about objects themselves.

"It is essential to things that they should be possible constituents of states of affairs." Anna does not exist without Vronsky and her husband, without Tolstoy and the readers of his novel. My beloved does not exist without me and my commentary on the *Commedia*, without the *Inferno* and the *Paradiso*. And our little chats on the phone are the states of affairs that constitute our love affair.

"In logic nothing is accidental: if a thing can occur in a state of affairs, the possibility of the state of affairs must be written into the thing itself." In love nothing is accidental: the possibility of our matrimonial bliss is written into our destinies. We celebrated our wedding ceremony during the Big Bang. A short wedding ceremony, I'm afraid. But for your invisible presence, I would not have embarked on this commentary which proves that our love is *necessary*, as Spinoza would have put it.

"It would seem to be a sort of accident, if it turned out that a situation would fit a thing that could already exist entirely on its own." You cannot exist on your own, nor can I. There are no accidents in our life except for car accidents. Incidentally, I am not an accident-prone person. (Accidentally, I am an *incident*-prone person.)

"Objects contain the possibility of all situations." So I must extract from my Hell as many situations as possible. The situations that our love contains are numberless.

"Objects are simple." You are just you. Why describe your dress or your hair? Dante describes only the light that Beatrice radiates through her smiles and words. And I describe only your black sun. The young man whom the sun maidens (divine powers) drive from the world of night to the world of light in Parmenides' work eventually learns that difference between day and night is itself appearance.

Incidentally, Kierkegaard deserves a place in Paradise for a small entry in his diary: "There is

after all an equilibrium in the world. To one God gave the joys, to the other the tears and permission every once in a while to rest in His embrace; and yet the divine reflects itself far more beautifully in the tear-dimmed eye, just as the rainbow is more beautiful than the clear blue sky."

But I should not talk to you about Kierkegaard, should I? Sooner or later I would have to touch upon his love affair with Regine Olsen who married somebody else after he had broken their engagement. He wrote in his diary, "I was a thousand years too old for her." I am twenty-eight years too old for you. This commentary might be entitled *The Sickness unto Love*.

Why can't I ring you up right now? You are in Rome and I do not know the phone number of your hotel. But in three days you will return to Moscow. And I shall return to Moscow in twelve days. What shall I say to you?

"You know, it doesn't really matter what we talk about as long as we *hear* each other. Shall we call it 'beneficial radiation'? I often forget what you look like because your presence is *beyond* your features, your physique. You can become any object, any word. You're an energy I feel all around me. Your will to power is indomitable. And your words are elementary particles. Well, perhaps it's not the right definition. What I mean to say is your words *outgrow* themselves. Your words are beyond words in general. What's more, they're beyond your own words. They're beyond themselves with joy or with anger. These are your moods I remember most—your joy and your anger. Why do you never understand my jokes? You laugh whenever *you* feel like it. You laugh to yourself, so to speak. Do you understand *his* jokes? Your maestro spends his life cracking jokes and telling witty stories. And drinking vodka."

Yes, he cracks jokes till four in the morning. And he comes down to breakfast, bleary-eyed and tousled, in last night's clothes.

> E io, che di mirare stava inteso,
> vidi genti fangose in quel pantanto,
> ignude tutte, con sembiante offeso.
> Queste si percotean non pur con mano,
> ma con la testa e col petto e coi piedi,
> troncandosi co' denti a brano a brano.
> And I, who was standing intent to gaze, saw a muddy people in that bog, all naked and with looks of rage. They were smiting each other not with hand only, but with head and chest and feet, and tearing each other piecemeal with their teeth.

Dante and Virgil arrive at the descent into the Fifth Circle, accompanying the fall of a stream which has worn a passage to form the marsh of Styx below. Here are the Wrathful, quarrelling in the mud, and the Sullen, sunk beneath it.

Aquinas writes in the *Summa theologiae*: "Hence the Philosopher calls some angry persons *choleric*, because they are easily angered; some he calls *bitter*, because they retain their anger for a long time; and some he calls *ill-tempered*, because they never rest until they have retaliated."

Everything has been said already. Even in the Middle Ages philosophers and poets just spoke about their predecessors. Dante quoted Virgil so often. But you have to quote the *right* people.

Let me quote Aristotle (the Philosopher) to my heart's content. It is my heart I need because my mind is not responsible for the bitterness I feel whenever I stop reading the *Commedia*. Besides, I must find out *who* I am.

> The man who is angry at the right things and with the right people, and, further, as he ought, when he ought, and as long as he ought, is praised. This will be the good-tempered man, then, since good temper is praised. For the good-tempered man tends to be unperturbed and not to be led by passion, but to be angry in the manner, at the things, and for the length of time, that the rule dictates; but he is thought to err rather in the direction of deficiency; for the good-tempered man is not revengeful, but rather tends to make allowances.

Am I angry at the right things and the right people? What are the right things? Who are the right people? Let us assume that our famous musician is the right man—within the bounds of Aristotle's work. So I should be angry with him to become a good-tempered man. Am I led by passion? I *am* led by my love for you, but I had no liking for this musician before making your acquaintance. What does the rule dictate? What rule? Are there any rules in the world where the war in Iraq can be approved and applauded by so many people? Many rules are dictated to us, but these are the wrong rules, I suppose. I may be mistaken of course. I may be the wrong person. Or the right person. It all depends on the context. On what context? "In this exercise the word itself is blanked out so you have to guess what it is by looking at the context." But even the context is blanked out in *this* exercise.

Be that as it may, I am angry at the world; and I am not praised for it. Either I am an ill-tempered man or the people around me are ill-disposed. Why don't they praise me for my hatred? Yet I make allowances very often. How many allowances does one have to make in order to become a good-tempered man whose praises are sung by all and sundry?

> The deficiency, whether it is a sort of "inirascibility" or whatever it is, is blamed. For those who are not angry at the things they should be angry at are thought to be fools, and so are those who are not angry in the right way, at the right time, or with the right persons; for such a man is thought not to feel things nor to be pained by them, and, since he does not get angry, he is thought unlikely to defend himself; and to endure being insulted and put up with insult to one's friends is slavish.

I *am* angry at the things everybody should be angry about. But not everybody is angry about them so I am thought to be a fool. Yet I am angry in the right way and at the right time: the war in Baghdad is not over yet. And even when it *is* over, I will go on being angry with those who unleashed it. "We shall smite the evil invaders and tear them to pieces," says Saddam Hussein. I am angry with him too: he is an evil invader of the world built by Plato, St Augustine, Dante, Wittgenstein. As to George W. Bush, he insults me daily and I cannot endure being insulted; nor will I put up with insults to the dead

I worship.

A Cambridge student was writing a thesis on why the League of Nations failed. Wittgenstein told him, "You'd better find out first why wolves eat lambs."

I wrote a poem on the day when the Americans and the British began their invasion of Iraq:

> I'm looking for a house.
> What kind of house is it?
> A palace? A cottage? A hut?
> The siren goes off
> In the middle of the night.
> It is easy to find a house
> Illuminated by fires.
> It is easy to find a house
> Which is on fire.
> I can see it in the distance—
> A house built on sand.
> I will live there
> Whatever happens.

Well and good. But I did not go to Iraq in order to become a human shield. I am a shield anyway: a poetical shield, a musical shield. And my anger functions as a shield against even more painful emotions of loss and hurt.

A house built on sand. All houses are built on sand, but people do not know it. They cannot see the sand on which they walk or drive because their eyes are fixed on something in front of them. They notice sand only on beaches and in the sand dunes where they look for a sheltered spot to do some sunbathing.

My flat is on fire; my computer is on fire. But I should *not* be on fire. Let my words burn on screens and sheets of paper. When he was twenty, Kafka wrote in a letter:

> If the book we are reading does not wake us, as with a fist hammering on our skull, why then do we read it? So that it shall make us happy? Good God, we would also be happy if we had no books, and such books as make us happy we could, if need be, write ourselves. But what we must have are those books which come upon us like ill fortune, and distress us deeply, like the death of one we love better than ourselves, like suicide. A book must be an ice axe to break the sea frozen inside us.

There are only skulls around me and they turn to dust as I hammer on them. What can I do with the dust? I wait until the dust has settled.

The books that make people happy. They might have been written by those people. Today, readers are writers' ghost writers.

I shall freeze the sea inside me to avoid being assigned to the Fifth Circle of Hell. Am I choleric, bitter or ill-tempered? Sometimes I am choleric or ill-tempered; I am always bitter.

Only my favourite poets will break my frozen sea. Why should George W. Bush take credit for

it?

There are two curses in Canto XXXIII: a curse against Pisa and a curse against Genoa. "In between the two curses," writes Alan Williamson, "Dante commits his own greatest act of treachery, promising, and then refusing, to clear the ice away from Fra Alberigo's eyes. He justifies the act by asserting a complete reversal, or suspension, of moral norms."

> E io non gliel' apersi;
> e cortesia fu lui esser villano.
> And I opened them not for him—and to be rude to him was courtesy!

In this canto, Dante's cruelty (or anger) reaches such a pitch that I wonder if he was not choleric or ill-tempered himself. And I am sure he was always bitter. Wasn't he? Does he kill or curse Time in the Fifth Circle of his own Hell? Schopenhauer????? says that Dante is a hyena making verses among the tombs. Verses and curses. Cioran says something to the effect that only curses remain in the history of humankind; only curses are immortal. Dante's curses *are* immortal (and immoral sometimes). My curses last for a few seconds only: I type very quickly.

A book *must* be an ice axe to break the sea frozen inside us. I have often expressed the same idea in other terms. Is my commentary an ice axe? The *Commedia is* an ice axe. It is also an axe that can chop the Tree of Knowledge down. What did I do with it? Any comment turns it into a needle that *may* excite one's curiosity; but no ice will ever be broken with this needle. Just pricks without kicks. Silence, silence, the frozen sea of silence. Why have I disdained silence for the last four months? I have written so many poems about silence. Let me write one now: I am loath to reproduce another old poem of mine in this commentary.

> I'm at the end of my tether.
> No, it's not silence.
> Silence is more precious
> When you stop in the middle of a sentence,
> In the middle of the road. You see
> The road in front of you and you can walk
> Along it. What prevents you from
> Doing so?
> The pressure of silence.
> Do they sing in Paradise?
> Do they dance?

Well, I shall never find out. But another Paradise awaits me in Moscow, which is quite different from the one imagined by Dante. Having dinner with you at the Georgian restaurant. I shall arrive on Saturday. We might spend the next day together, the whole day: very few people work on Sundays. And your boss must be in the States now. Or is he in Japan? The turning point in my life. Should I go on writing my novels in your presence? Do Aquinas and St Bonaventura comment on Paradise? They

might occasionally talk about a saint or a Catholic doctrine, but they do not *comment* on Paradise.

In Canto III, a former nun does comment on Paradise, on the way the blessed souls live in unison with the will of God:

> "Frate, la nostra volontà quïeta
> virtù di carità, che fa volerne
> sol quel ch'avemo, e d'altro non ci asseta."
> "Brother, the power of love quiets our will and makes us wish only for that which we have and gives us no other thirst."

Why should I yearn for a *vita nuova*? Why not continue to write this commentary in our park?

What shall I tell her during our dinner? I shall talk about ice axes and the skulls on which a good writer hammers. I called this phenomenon a "mindquake" in my previous novel. No, it is better not to talk to her about literature. Could I talk to her about silence? "Why do you always criticise everybody?" she asked me once. I do not criticise *everybody*. Have I ever criticised Dante?

> Now hot-tempered people get angry quickly and with the wrong persons and at the wrong things and more than is right, but their anger ceases quickly—which is the best point about them.

I get angry with the *right* persons and at the *right* things, and my anger does *not* cease quickly—which is the worst point about me. I am not hot-tempered after all.

> By reason of excess *choleric* people are quick-tempered and ready to be angry with everything and on every occasion; whence their name.

I am *not* ready to be angry with everything and on every occasion. For instance, I am not angry with Canto VII. I am just angry with the sinners who reside in it.

> *Sulky* people are hard to appease, and retain their anger long; for they repress their passion. But it ceases when they retaliate; for revenge relieves them of their anger, producing in them pleasure instead of pain. If this does not happen they retain their burden; for owing to its not being obvious no one even reasons with them, and to digest one's anger in oneself takes time.

Do I repress my passion for you? But I do retain my anger long. In Canto III I wrote about my friend who was tactless enough to allude to my beloved's disloyalty. On that occasion I retained my anger for two years: I did not break off my friendship with him when he uttered the fateful words. Only two years later did I tell him a few home truths in the woods where we drank three bottles of white Burgundy.

Am I sulky?

> Lo buon maestro disse: "Figlio, or vedi

L’anime di color cui vinse l'ira;
E anche vo' che tu per certo credi
Che sotto l'acqua è gente che sospira,
E fanno pullular quest' acqua al summo,
Come l'occhio ti dice, u' che s'aggira.
Fitti nel lima dicon: 'Tristi fummo
Ne l'aere dolce che dal sol s'allegra,
Portandon dentro accidïoso fummo:
Or ci attristiam ne la belletta negra.'
Quest’ inno si gorgoglian ne la strozza,
Ché dir nol posson con parola intergra."

The good master said, "Son, you see now the souls of those whom anger overcame; and I would also have you know for certain that down under the water are people who sigh and make it bubble at the surface, as your eye tells you wherever it turns. Fixed in the slime they say, 'We were sullen in the sweet air that is gladdened by the sun, bearing within us the sluggish fumes; now we are sullen in the black mire.' This hymn they gurgle in their throats, for they cannot speak it in full words."

Let the *Commedia* take over. What is the point in typing it out? Just open any edition of it and enjoy the story, following Borges' advice.

Am I sulky? For two years I played different piano concertos with a conductor who was often disrespectful to me. I shared my burden with no one as I digested it in my room, in the streets of Versailles, in Japan. Only a month ago did I tell the conductor a few home truths. And I did it in front of his orchestra. The revenge relieved me of my anger, producing in me pleasure instead of pain. Why didn't I pay homage to silence on that occasion?

When taking my bath, I often make the water bubble at the surface as I exhale the air, wallowing at the bottom of the tub. A good training for the Fifth Circle, isn't it?

I told you I had enough work for the rest of my life, but this commentary is over. I thought I would never be jobless. Just another mistake. Silence, silence. I underestimated the virtue of silence. The sin of words. I will neither speak my commentary in full words nor gurgle it in my throat.

Volodya reminded me of what Kharms said about words, "The *mot juste* would break a window." And there are some frozen, solid words in Rabelais' *Pantagruel*, but I will not look them up. Why should I? My words have melted away; my windows are intact. Let me just quote Zhukovsky, "And only silence speaks clearly." *I lish’ molchanie poniatno govorit*.

When Dante was exiled from Florence, he left behind the first seven cantos of the *Commedia* which, five years later, reached him at the Malaspina court in Lunigiana. Upon receiving the manuscript he said, "I really supposed that these, along with my other writings and effects, were lost when my house was plundered. And therefore I'd given up all thoughts of them. But since it has pleased God that they should not be lost, and he has thus restored them to me, I shall endeavour as far as I am able to proceed with them according to my first design." This might be a legend, but I think there is some universal truth in it. Simone Weil says a great work of art has an anonymous side to it—something that seems to have been created by the whole of humanity or by God, if I understand her

rightly. By the *whole* of humanity, not just by happy readers. (Cf. Jung's statement I quoted in Canto IV.) Chance plays an important role in the shaping of such a work. Unconsciously Dante knew that his manuscript *was* taken care of: no plunderers, no fire could have destroyed it until the words multiplied and replenished the earth. As I left Moscow forever I did carry in a suitcase my juvenilia which would have turned to ashes had I been courageous enough to burn them; Dante would have been unable to burn his manuscript.

My computer disks are on fire. Well, only seven cantos of the *Inferno* will be stored on them. An intimate fire, like a candle. I will not comment on the Heretics. I will not quote Aristotle's *Ethics* to clarify three kinds of violence punished in three separate rings of the Seventh Circle. I will not speak about Geryon who is the emblem of Fraud and therefore guards the Eighth Circle. "You'll have enough time to study Hell after your death," as you put it in our last chat on the phone: I had told you I would not go on with my work in progress. My work in regress. "My aunt suffered brain damage from the car accident and regressed to the mental age of a five-year-old," you said at the end of our conversation. How to regress to the antenatal period when there was so much silence around me?

> Da ogne bocca dirompea co' denti
> un peccatore, a guisa di maciulla,
> si che tre ne facea così dolenti.
> In each mouth he champed a sinner with his teeth, as with a heckle, and thus he kept three of them woeful.

At the centre of the earth Dante sees Lucifer; he has three heads and torments the spirits of Judas, Brutus and Cassius. In my unwritten commentary on Canto XXXIV I replace them by Lenin, Stalin and Hitler who betrayed humanity and the ideal of the enlightened ruler. After their crimes we are doomed to democracy. So much for my analysis of Hell.

"And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise." Here is J. C. Ryle's commentary on this verse:

> It is a distinct answer to the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory. It shows clearly that no purification of any kind after death is needed for the person that dies a penitent believer. If the thief needed no purgatory, the whole doctrine of purgatory falls to the ground.

But I need to be purified during my lifetime. Writing a commentary on the *Purgatorio* would be a literary purification at least. "It is enough for us to know that a dead believer is immediately with Christ," writes J. C. Ryle. But what am I supposed to do *before* my death?

Standing in all its nostalgic beauty, the *Purgatorio* is not likely to fall to the ground. Two days ago I realised I had wrongly attributed to T. S. Eliot the statement about the souls in the *Purgatorio* being more attuned to the past than to the paradisiacal future:

A: Have you read the *Purgatory*, Miss, of the divine Florentine?
S: Alas, no, Sir, I have merely flipped through the *Inferno*.
A (*incredulous*): Not read the *Purgatory*?
S: Alas no, Sir.
A: There all sigh, I was, I was. It's like a knell. Strange, is it not?
S: In what sense, Sir?
A: Why, one would rather have expected, I shall be. No?

An extract from *Radio II* by Samuel Beckett who gave the money he had got from Stockholm to the needy. In which sphere does *he* reside? One's whereabouts in Paradise are of no vital importance.

The mind in regression. Back to the pre-death period. I have merely flipped through the first seven cantos of the *Inferno*. And I do not say, "I shall be." The last evening of my nostalgic writing. Why not just type the *Commedia* out? In Italian, in English, in French, in Russian? This manuscript *has* been left behind in Moscow. "Finding the Tao is not a simple happening that can be willed," says Lao-tzu. "Similarly losing the Tao is not a simple happening, but it *can* be willed."

Io fui, io fui. I was, I was. I was engaged upon a book which might have become infinite had I continued to write it. "An infinite circle would be an infinite straight line," says Nicholas of Cusa. And this straight line would have led me all the way through Purgatory into Paradise. But Purgatory does not exist. Nor does Paradise, according to Joyce. Not in modern times. And what about my private Paradise?

"What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence." The famous ending of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. We must pass over in silence what we *can* speak about.

CHAPTER 1

I have just read a few pages of my commentary, of its first part, and now I listen to Time creaking under my slippers as I walk from my room to the kitchen and back again—with a plate of salmon or scallops. So much time has elapsed since I wrote all these words that I can hear it despite its traditional silence, its secretive disposition. Normally one just *feels* Time, from time to time, but sometimes its presence can become audible or even visible: you literally observe heaps of Time in front of you, mountains of Time. I went to the Caucasus last summer and the mountains I saw in Sochi—a fashionable Russian resort on the Black Sea—proved to be also the mountains of Time because I had not seen them for at least thirty years. So I measured my life by means of those mountains soaring up into the sky where Time disappears forever, I suppose. Such a long time—so many summers, so many winters, as the Russians say. So many summers, rather: one seldom goes to the Black Sea in wintertime.

Thirty years *is* a long stretch of time which may be represented by a mountain or a railway track running towards the horizon and disappearing beyond it. But the stretch of time spanning the last words of what I call "the first part of the commentary"—"We must pass over in silence what we *can* speak about"—and the present moment might be deemed long only by a dying man: eight months. I was a dying man in the last days of April 2003, but it is the 24th of December today and I am not dying any more. At least I am not dying like a cancer patient who may know approximately how many months he or she can count upon: five months, six months. I was given three years to live at the outside and that is what I meant when speaking about the time of a dying person, about *his* perception of Time. On the 20th of April I would have regarded eight months as a long stretch of time, comparable to the hill that Dante sees upon leaving his wood. What I was supposed to have before me in terms of Time was three mountains like that or four mountains standing on top of each other. They might have been standing side by side, for all I know, but it is too late to work out what Time *looked* like during those twelve days when I was in a "suspended state", as the Russians say so often. And I was in Russia during that "suspension period" which may be represented by suspension points: after all, they can last for a long time, can't they?

I finished the first part of the commentary on April 14th or the next day; or two days later. Anyway I left for Russian on the 19th of April, thinking I might have cancer, which partly spoiled the pleasure that seemed to lie in store for me, my sentimental pleasure. On April 17th I went to a hospital in Paris for what I believed to be an ordinary blood test and was told I should have made an appointment. I said I had come all the way from Versailles which is not a long way from Paris, to tell the truth. But naturally it depends on your state of health, on the number of months or days you can count upon. When talking to that woman at the reception desk I thought I had my whole life ahead of me—well, a significant part of it. At least I thought so at the *beginning* of our conversation: when I

showed her the slip of paper my doctor had given me her face changed abruptly as if she had just read my death warrant. Why don't these people in charge of our health learn to control their facial muscles? She said she might fit me in that morning, and shortly afterwards I was summoned into the room where the test was to be carried out. The woman appointed for the job also looked rather sad as she perused the same slip of paper—the death warrant I could not decipher due to my absolute ignorance of medical terms. Alarmed and even irritated by this sadness, I was about to ask her if something was missing when she said I would have the result in two weeks' time. "In two weeks' time?" I repeated, adding to her words not only a question mark but also a certain amount of surprise, of indignation even. "We'll send it to the American Hospital. Such a test…" she said wistfully. Apparently their laboratory was too poorly equipped for such a complicated test. The woman seemed to envy me my disease which was worthy of the American Hospital, renowned all over Europe; whereas her minor ailments could be diagnosed and dealt with in any clinic, however squalid. But she treated me respectfully and I had no wish to blame her for anything, although, on that occasion, I would certainly have preferred to be treated with disrespect and brutality. "I wish they hadn't allowed me to do this test." "I wish they'd kicked me out." No, such thoughts did not cross my mind which was almost paralysed with fear and disgust: I began to abominate my own body as I went down the stairs leading towards the exit, towards the Gare Saint-Lazare. I knew that my body concealed a baleful substance which was to be nourished, sustained and even nursed back to health sometimes. And this substance was nursed back to health at my expense, at the expense of *my* health, *my* life. "Why don't you nurse *me* instead?" How delightful it is to indulge in superfluous, absurd questions when the threat and fear are over—for the time being. When a sword of Damocles was still hanging over my head I asked myself and others only *useful* questions, and my thoughts were practical in the extreme. After getting rid of the mental paralysis I concentrated on my disease about which I knew nothing or next to nothing; that is why I concentrated on it with the utmost energy. This energy might have been sufficient to cure me of *any* disease had I channelled it towards the word "cure" and not "detection" or "recognition". Oddly enough, I was meditating on *words* as I boarded the train that was to convey me to Versailles. Why did I have such faith in words eight months ago? I thought a word could probe into the secrets of my body more efficiently than any blood test, any medical analysis. Actually I did not *think* that, for I had neither wish nor *time* to ponder over my thoughts and their origins. I *felt* the efficiency of words, otherwise I would not have permitted myself to waste my time on them at the moment when my destiny was hanging in the balance.

Meanwhile I went on estranging myself from my body which had turned out to be an unfaithful, treacherous companion. The dual nature of our self revealed itself to me with the utmost clarity and to such an extent that even "itself" was split in two—it-self—signalling a divorce between my body and my mind. My mind was "self" and my body "it". Presently words began to divide themselves into particles that often had no meaning at all. The word "life" became "li" in the process; or "fe". At times

it amounted to nothing more than "f", and I had no idea how to deal with this letter within the framework of my life. Somehow I felt there was no framework to speak of; I felt a lot during the trip from Paris to Versailles. After all, my apartment *was* far away from Paris, judging from the number of thoughts I had during that trip and from the ever-widening gap between my body and mind. It was as if my body had remained in Paris while my mind peacefully proceeded to Versailles Rive Droite. It did not occur to me at the time that my mind was peaceful: all these words are flocking to my writing desk *today*, when I no longer feel my body and my mind as disjointed substances. Perhaps they are not substances at all, come to think of it. They might be nonstances or nonsenses, rotting away now in my room, now in the kitchen where I am rinsing a glass to pour some wine into it.

I did not leave my body in Paris, in that hospital or clinic where your blood flows from one test tube into another, showing your death from various sides; as if one side was not enough. Even half a side would be enough, one third of it. Anyway, why show your death to anybody? Let it remain your private affair hidden at the core of your body, in some organ or other. Let it nibble at your body and soul from the inside, instead of parading its voracity in public. The point is my disease was not voracious, otherwise I would already have died in my room, on another train. My disease just nibbled its way through the sinews that link my body together, heading for my soul. Why do they always speak of a bug in the brain, of a brain tumour? Can't death lurk somewhere else—in one's knee, for instance? As long as your brain is intact you live on, cursing your malady and listening to it. What does it say to you? "I don't really feel like having a proper meal, but I wouldn't mind something to nibble on." So you do not die at once, neither in your sleep nor on a train which conveys you to a hospital where you undergo painful chemotherapy treatment. "Why don't you have a proper meal washed down with a couple of bottles of my blood? Or aren't you allowed to drink on duty? But it's your duty to drink my blood, isn't it?"

You do not always visualise your disease in the shape of a monster: diseases come in all shapes and forms. My disease might have been a sort of Cinderella living on the outskirts of Moscow where she scrubbed floors and ironed shirts. One day she was conveyed to my body in a carriage and four. "What a feast!" she said surveying the dishes on the table. Death is also a fairy tale and you might enjoy its plot and characters, providing your pain does not take up too much room in your consciousness. But I did not think of my death in these terms as the train continued to get closer to Versailles where not only my car but also my address book awaited me. I decided to call my friend to whom I had said once, "You'll tell me the truth, the whole truth, won't you?" Another doctor, an outspoken one. Meanwhile I was looking at my body from different angles—in my endeavour to find out more about the disease. As I said earlier, I knew nothing about it at the time. I even patted my stomach and my back as if in search of a tumour which might have grown substantially from the moment I had been informed of my forthcoming death. "I wish I could feel it," I muttered, for I prefer any knowledge, however distressing and horrid, to ignorance.

Would it be better not to read the *Commedia* that makes us experience the tortures of Hell for no reason at all? What kind of knowledge is this anyway? In the first place, there might be no Hell in any of the worlds with which the Almighty peppered Creation so bountifully. In this case, why should we know anything about it? Don't we suffer enough without the imaginary tortures that Dante inflicts on his impotent enemies? In Canto XXIV Dante and his omniscient companion set out to climb the ruin of a bridge shattered by the earthquake that took place at Christ's death. Shortly afterwards they move down into the seventh chasm where the Thieves are tormented by serpents. Seized by a serpent, one of them is instantly burnt to ashes only to recover his former shape in the twinkling of an eye. That is what I went through on the day of my trip to the hospital where two women treated me with too much respect and kindness: after all, they did not know I was writing a commentary on the *Commedia*. I was burnt to ashes because my body ceased to keep me company and was therefore non-existent, as far as I was concerned. My body existed only for the doctors who were trying to determine what disease it was suffering from; they shook it in their test tubes and examined it with their microscopes. And I did not mind being liberated from my body which might have dragged me down as far as Canto XXIV. But then I realised I could not get rid of my body so easily because my pure spirit was attached to it in more ways than one; there was even a sort of *spiritual* link between them. So my spirit or my mind was dying too, although there might have been no bug in it yet—no cancer, no metastases. I had no alternative but to resume my former shape and become what I am now: a man writing about his imaginary disease.

> Così per lui gran savi si confessa
> che la fenice more e poi rinasce,
> quando al cinquecentesimo anno appressa
> Thus by great sages it is affirmed that the Phoenix dies and is born again when it approaches its five-hundredth year.

I was approaching my fifty-sixth year which is a fatal year for a Dante commentator: the poet died precisely at this age after having contracted malaria. But I am not supposed to comment on the *Commedia physically*, am I? And what would my death amount to as a comment on a literary masterpiece? Even Dante's *life* should not be commented upon in this way—by aping all the doings of the poet down to his death. Anyway I had not contracted malaria and had no intention of doing so: one fatal disease is quite enough. As to the Phoenix and Dante's comparison, I was not *born* again as I realised I could not depart from my body on the spot. Rather, I *died* again and this time irrevocably, as if turning to ashes and dust. I was conscious of being dead, which is the privilege of the living: the dead are not conscious of anything, not even of their own death. And if they were alive, they would have no knowledge of it either. They *might* be alive, for all *I* know, but they are not aware of that; and their ignorance deprives them of life.

To pursue Dante's comparison, I had the Phoenix's wings or perhaps just its beak because I was

half-dead and half-alive. St Clement of Rome writes about the Phoenix as follows:

> When the time of its dissolution approaches, it forms a nest of frankincense, myrrh and other aromatics. Into this, when its time is completed, it enters and dies. Its flesh, putrefying, generates a worm, which feeds on the carcass of its deceased parent until it puts forth wings; becoming then robust and vigorous, it takes the nest, where the bones of its predecessor lie, and carries it through the air from Arabia to Egypt, into a city called Heliopolis; and there, in open day, in the sight of all the inhabitants, it lays them upon the altar of the sun, and then returns.

All sorts of crazy ideas flashed through my mind as I sat on the train, looking at my body and touching it: my thoughts had not become practical yet. I thought about how I might have risen from the dead without waiting for the Last Judgement and its consequences. Now and then the American Hospital loomed before my inner eye as if to remove any doubt about the certainty of my imminent death. Of course I recalled Wim Wenders' film *The American Friend* in which a dying man is enticed into committing a murder by a promised treatment in this legendary hospital. My death *was* imminent and all I could do was sprinkle my room or even the whole of my apartment with various perfumes, some of which might turn out equal if not superior to frankincense and myrrh: I had no idea where to look for *them*. And of course my body, however perfidious and obnoxious, was bound to generate a worm that would feed on my carcass to sprout a pair of wings or legs, as the case might be. I could carry the bones of my predecessor *on foot*, from Paris to Moscow: the old myth was to be updated and personalised. Anyway I had no wish to become a bird. If given carte blanche, I would just have lain down on a bench in the Parc de Versailles and died peacefully, like a *clochard*. But do *clochards* die peacefully? In an old silent movie an unfortunate scientist turns clown and is supposed to die during the performance. And whenever he sits up, his comrade tells him, "Lie down! You're dead." Nobody said that to me, otherwise I would have obeyed without a murmur. They always tell you to get a move on, neglecting immobility, death and the quiet of the Parc de Versailles at night. And it is so easy to stay there after closing time. Every dying man turns clown or puppet and is at the mercy of any passer-by.

In Canto XXV a sort of dragon fastens itself on a thief so tightly that they merge into one shape:

> Ellera abbarbicata mai non fue
> Ad alber sì, come l'orribil fiera
> Per l'altrui membra avviticciò le sue.
> Poi s'appiccar, come di calda cera
> fossero stati, e mischiar lor colore,
> né l'un né l'altro già parea quel ch'era
> Ivy was never so rooted to a tree as the horrid beast entwined its own limbs round the other's; then, as if they had been of hot wax, they stuck together and mixed their colours, and neither the one nor the other now seemed what it was at first…

A sick person sees his illness everywhere, in every shape and form; the dragon lends itself to

malevolent comparisons more obligingly than dogs or sheep. First and foremost, the dragon is a grim guardian of hidden treasures and a symbol of evil, of diabolical tendencies. The only hidden treasure I cared for in those days was my life which had become hidden in a way, although I could see and touch it. The dragon in Canto XXV was at that point a symbol of evil incarnated by my illness, and therefore Dante's description fitted the situation perfectly: the horrid beast *had* entwined its own limbs round mine. Gradually we began to mix our colours, which might have manifested itself through some trivial remark such as, "Oh, how pale you look today!" But nobody told me anything of the kind for the simple reason that I was quite alone; and the phone call I gave my medical friend did not allow her to make a comment on my complexion.

As a demonic symbol, the dragon is identified with the serpent: Origen confirms this identity in his comment on Psalm 74. "Thou didst divide the sea by thy strength: thou brakest the heads of the dragons in the waters." These broken heads signify Christ's victory over evil; and over my illness, with a bit of luck. Perhaps I had to read the *Paradiso* instead of drawing parallels between my state of health and a few episodes from the *Inferno*. Actually I did not have to draw any infernal parallels: I *was* living in Hell during the suspension period, as I call it. These parallels could not but aggravate the situation by offering concomitant imagery to my interior monologue that did not really need images, swarming as it was with ghastly words. Nor did it really need *Italian* words: English, French and Russian were quite adequate. According to the Indian doctrine, the dragon is identifiable to the Principle, to Agni or Prajapâti. The *Killer of the Dragon* placates the divine powers and identifies with them.

As soon as I got home I found my friend's phone number and called her, my left hand holding my previous blood test with all its destructive numbers. I read it out to her.

"Why didn't you call me earlier?" she asked. "They should have done the second test two months ago, three months ago."

"What's the score, doctor?"

"If the result is confirmed, around three years. They might have made a mistake, though—it's a very complicated test."

"That's why they sent it to the American Hospital, I presume."

"To the American Hospital?"

"Please don't tell me *what* it is—I want to hate the whole of my body, not just a part of it. Besides, that guilty part doesn't deserve my undivided attention."

When I hung up I looked at my body again and, for all my determination not to concentrate on my malady's whereabouts, I critically surveyed my stomach, my liver and my prostate. And then I took Wittgenstein's biography from a shelf in the living room. (*The Duty of Genius* by Ray Monk.) I intended to find out the details of Wittgenstein's visit to a doctor, in the course of which he learnt he had cancer of the prostate. He said something to the effect that he did not mind dying and I tried to

bring myself to contemplate the situation with the same equanimity. I did not find the relevant passage in his biography: I must have been too hasty, too nervous to alight on what I was looking for. Instead, I came across the following excerpt from one of his notebooks, "Let grief into your heart. Don't lock the door on it. Standing outside the door, in the mind, it is frightening, but in the *heart* it is not." As usual, Wittgenstein was splitting the body into independent parts; each of these parts spoke its own language and played its own games. Again I felt estranged from my body to the point of keeping it outside the front door—as if I *had* locked the door on it. And what difference did it make where my grief lodged at present: in my heart, in my liver, in my prostate? Grief is not incompatible with cancer, is it? Perhaps grief *is* cancer, judging from what many Freudian doctors tell their patients, "Don't ever get excited. Any negative emotion deducts years from your life. Even a positive emotion is harmful—for instance, the sentiment of love." And the Russian doctor I used to discuss poetry with always rounded his speeches off as follows, "Yoga is one of my favourite relaxations."

What is the difference between my mind and my heart? A sick person differentiates between this and that part of his body in terms of his malady: a contaminated part, a healthy part. Perhaps there are no healthy parts in the body of a dying man or woman, but cancer is not *always* omnipresent. Why do I always alight on other words ("metaphor", "metaphysics") as I look up "metastases"? Suppose my grief is only located in my mind where I subject it to permanent analysis. Is it possible to analyse grief without feeling it? My neighbour's grief perhaps, but not *my* grief, which is no grief at all unless I *feel* it. Can I feel it in my mind, through my mind, or does it have to penetrate my heart?

I did not have to worry about my grief and its whereabouts because I got it *automatically*, either its unalloyed version or a sort of mixture where it entwined its limbs round despair. Nor did I have to worry about despair or despondency. In the course of those unhappy days I would not switch from one psychological pole to another: I was always dejected in spite of a more or less cheerful smile I kept on my face to belie the moroseness of my mood. ("*Moroz*" means it is cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey.) Upon seeing me at the Moscow airport, my friend broke into laughter. "You look so cheerful. Love seems to have rejuvenated you."

"Do you want me to show you my heart?" I said.

Why am I in such a hurry to get to Moscow? Almost two days elapsed between my visit to the hospital and my departure for Russia, and I described only two or three hours at most as if I had been on my way to the airport already; as if I had not slept during those hours. My illness was not in my brain yet: I was not dreaming about it. But I thought of it all the time in my waking hours to make up for my nocturnal forgetfulness, for my impoliteness. You are supposed to look at the person who talks to you, otherwise that person may accuse you of being ill-mannered. And my illness talked to me twenty-four hours a day—even in my sleep, I am certain of that. But I did not hear it in my sleep or indeed in my waking hours. What I did hear during my waking hours was my own voice talking about my illness and death. And, from time to time, I looked at myself in a mirror to make sure nothing had

changed since I had seen my reflection last. But perhaps my illness was not to be found in my reflection which was ethereal, immaterial, and had no room for bugs, however microscopic. I thought my reflection might continue to live after my death, taking no notice of my agony and fussy nurses. I was not even sure my deathbed would be reflected in that mirror which knew nothing of my cancer and consequently was under no obligation to follow me into the grave. "I shouldn't forget to take this mirror with me to the American Hospital," I said to myself.

Thinking of my future, of the three years I was allowed to live and work, I asked my friend if I would suffer from brain fatigue or something like that.

"What do you call it in such cases: brainstorm or brain death? Or a sort of brain drain…large numbers of educated and highly skilled cells disappear, dissolve. Am I likely to have any brainwaves during my agony? Actually, if I had a brain tumour we might talk about an eclipse of the brain."

She said I would be able to work to the bitter end—even on my deathbed, even in my coffin. "Brain death happens when a person's brain stops working and they become brain dead even though a machine might be causing their heart to beat," she said. "And we'll connect you to a machine that will cause your brain to work. Let us call it heart death. Joking apart, there's nothing wrong with you. The first test was inaccurate—they can't do tests properly in your clinic."

"But in the American Hospital mistakes are never made," I assured her.

I thought I should cancel my Japanese tour to devote my time entirely to literary work, to this commentary. "I might finish it on my deathbed or in my coffin if I put my shoulder to the wheel at once," I said to myself and to my reflection. I actually said it in English—on account of the word "shoulder" no doubt: there is no such thing as shoulder cancer.

For a while I stood there like a gibbering idiot: I did not know what I was saying and to whom. Presently I realised I would not be able to finish this commentary, for all my assiduity and perseverance; whereupon I decided to work on it backward, from the *Paradiso* to the *Inferno*. "Aren't they interchangeable?" I wondered. "In olden times Zeus reigned both upstairs and downstairs. Chthonic deities were closely related to Olympians. It’s better to get stuck in Paradise anyway."

But I could not help thinking of the *Inferno* where I would periodically find myself and yet another self of mine; and all these selves were merging into each other or driven apart, depending on my relationship with my illness. In Canto XXI the sinners are submerged in a river of boiling pitch and are kept under by a horde of demons armed with long hooks. In Canto XXII a demon catches a sinner who has emerged from the pitch and holds him up by the hair. Just a few lines before, the sinners are compared to frogs.

E come a l'orlo de l'acqua d'un fosso
  stanno i ranocchi pur col muso fuori,
  sì che celano i piedi e l'altro grosso,
sì stavan d'ogne parte i peccatori

> And as at the edge of the water of a ditch the frogs lie with only their muzzle out, so that they hide their feet and the rest of their bulk, so were the sinners on every side…

A lot can be read into a passage like that when you are fatally ill. What do you read into it in your prime, enjoying good health and health food? Just what is written, nothing more. A group of sinners or frogs. What does it matter? You are neither a sinner nor a frog. You might recall an episode from your childhood, a river on the edge of which you used to sit with your feet in the water, talking to your friend or just looking up at a cloud. You might recall how you went fishing in this river or in another river. You did your best not to betray your presence to the fishes: putting your feet in the water was out of the question. And the boiling pitch might conjure up the image of an oil slick you saw on television or in a newspaper. But that oil slick was far away, wasn't it? Oil tankers are not allowed in your river, are they? Only coffee is black in your life unless you prefer to soften it with a spoonful of whipped cream.

At the approach of the demons, all the sinners except one draw back under the boiling pitch.

> I' vidi, e anco il cor me n'accapriccia,
> uno aspettar così, com' elli 'ncontra
> ch'una rana rimane e l'altra spiccia;
> e Graffiacan, che li era più di contra,
> li arrunciglió le 'mpegolate chiome
> e trassel sù, che mi parve una lontra.
>
> I saw—and my heart still shudders at it—one waiting, just as it happens that one frog stays and another jumps. And Graffiacane, who was nearest to him, hooked him by his pitchy locks, and hauled him up so that to me he seemed an otter.

The names of those demons are horrifying, but if you enjoy good health they might remind you of characters from strip cartoons. No harm done! To me their names sounded too familiar: I realised I was those demons, those monsters. One of my selves was the demons from the *Commedia*; or many selves, almost all of them. I was also the sinners who looked like frogs with their bodies mostly hidden under the boiling pitch. I was afraid of myself or rather of the self I had become over several hours or several years, depending on what was the starting point: my illness or my knowledge of it. And at the approach of my new self, my old one drew back into the boiling pitch from the *Commedia*. My body was on fire, my mind was on fire. And what about my reflection? Didn't I look like an otter?

A healthy scholar might read Singleton's commentary on these lines with a smile of satisfaction of the kind that often enlivens the face of a scholar on duty:

> The sinner, covered with black pitch, reminds Dante of an otter, which has long dense fur that sticks, matted and dripping, to its skin when it is hauled from the water. The otter, which lives on fish, is a fast swimmer—the connotation here is that the sinner has been caught even though he is a fast swimmer.

I *was* a fast swimmer in those days. But what was my destination? Or was I pursued by someone or something? Why did I swim so fast? I ought to have exhaled all the air from my lungs and dived to the bottom of that river. The further you get away from your starting point, the quicker you shall return to it. What was I escaping from? Death, life? I was longing to finish this commentary in order to drink "the milk of Paradise" and contemplate, if only for a few hours, what Dante had come across in his journey through the upper regions of the universe. On the other hand I would have given anything to die in my sleep on the eve of my departure for Russia: I hate farewells, last glances, last words. I would not have talked in my last sleep.

The colours one cannot see are the most frightful. All I saw in my mirror was my old self, undivided and obliging. But either the mirror was wrong or my sight kept playing tricks on me because it was a part of another self of mine. Or indeed the black pitch I was covered with turned out to be invisible—as invisible as my illness. I saw nothing out of the ordinary and felt no pain, which was the most frightful detail of all: it is said that cancers *are* invisible and painless. Only benign tumours are visible with the naked eye. If your legs are covered with bumps and bruises you have got no cancer but may suffer from severe pain. That sinner—a horrid little man with piggy eyes and a podgy face—was covered with black pitch. The two nights I spent at home before my departure for Russia were not totally devoid of dreams: I saw the sinner hooked by Graffiacane. Why didn't I recognise myself? Or did I? Whom did my memory belong to during the suspension period? Whenever I looked at myself in the mirror, I hooked myself by my pitchy locks. But I did not mock myself, did I?

"You panicked and your brain turned to musk," said my Moscow friend after listening to my tale of woe.

"I think I just became clairvoyant and could communicate with my other selves," I answered.

"Usually clairvoyants communicate with the dead, don't they?" he said.

A dying man has neither time nor strength to pick and choose; he often comes up with trite comparisons. And his metaphors would have made him the laughing stock of literati had he not been a dying man cocooned against both the real and literary worlds. The river of boiling pitch is no other than life, in his opinion—our everyday life in which we are submerged. And none of us notice what our bodies and minds are submerged in because we seldom if ever look at ourselves in mirrors; to use Dante's simile, none of us realise we look like otters. While swimming in the boiling pitch, we may have aspirations that make us lift our heads and even climb out of the river. For a while we may sit on the bank like frogs, mapping out the future cluttered with gold ingots, beautiful wives, child prodigies, unwritten masterpieces and laurel wreaths. But at the approach of a demon we dive into the river and swim to the other side, for we are essentially "down-to-pitch" creatures. Only few of us stay on the bank, facing the demons and their hooks. Others just talk about swimming pools and other status symbols such as golf and safari.

"For my winter vacation this year, I've decided to go on a safari," said one of the swimmers.

"Aren't you fed up with the heat? Why go to Africa?" I asked him.

"We are currently on safari in Kenya," said another swimmer.

"If I were you, I'd rather go and spend a few months in the frozen waters of Cocytus." And I quoted the following tercet from Canto XXXII:

> Pre ch'io mi vosi, e vidimi davante
> e sotto i piedi un lago che per gelo
> avea di vetro e non d'acqua sembiante.
> At this I turned and saw before me, and under my feet, a lake which through frost had the semblance of glass and not of water.

"Can one play golf there?" asked another swimmer.

"Why not? Just drill a few holes in the ice," I told him.

The sinners in Canto XXXII have been *frozen* into the ice; they cannot move, let alone play golf. What do they talk about, I wonder? Are they planning to go on safari for their winter vacation? At the age of ten and eleven I often went fishing with my father in wintertime. An anorak, a long drive in our car, a frozen lake, a short fishing rod, a hook, some bait, a sinker—such were the components of those trips. But do you need bait when there is a human body at your disposal? A hook is enough—like the one used by the demon in Canto XXII. What are you supposed to fish with such bait? And Jesus said unto them, "Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men." This verse from the Bible comes in a flash as you fix your attention on the body imprisoned in the hole and on the fishing rod. Have you caught this man already? What for? Who is this man? Who are *you*? Are you this man? Or are you just a frog?

> E come a gracidar si sta la rana
> col muso fuor de l'acqua, quando sogna
> di spigolar sovente la villana,
> livide, insin là dove appar vergogna
> eran l'ombre dolenti ne la ghiaccia,
> mettendo i denti in nota di cicogna.
> And as the frog lies to croak with muzzle out of the water, when the peasant girl dreams often of her gleaning, so, livid up to where the hue of shame appears, were the doleful shades within the ice, setting their teeth to the note of the stork.

Why was Dante so eager to compare humans to frogs? Here is another relevant tercet in which the sinners fly at the approach of a messenger from heaven (Canto IX):

> Come le rane innanzi a la nimica
> biscia per l'acqua si dileguan tutte,
> fin ch'a la terra ciascuna s'abbica

> As the frogs before their enemy the snake all vanish through the water, till each cocks itself on the bottom...

Frogs are associated with water; they used to bring about the rain in Ancient China where they corresponded to the element yin. And the Big Frog (*maha-maudûka*) is in India a support of the universe and the symbol of obscure, undifferentiated matter. Does our mind allow us to reach a higher plane of regard in relation to obscure, undifferentiated matter or are we submerged in it? In my search for an answer I had to fall back on Dante himself, on St Augustine and Gnosticism to which I devoted a lot of time at the end of the seventies. I was attracted to this doctrine by an unbearable sensation I experienced now and then—the sensation of being imprisoned. "Everyone is imprisoned," I thought: in the frozen waters of Cocytus, in their own bed, in their projects and hopes, in their past. And I questioned the origins of the world.

According to Gnostics and their followers, God is transmundane and consequently has nothing to do with our world created by the lower powers. The universe is the domain of those powers, called the Archons (rulers), who seem to have modelled it upon our notion of a maximum-security prison; the earth is its innermost dungeon. Around and above it the cosmic spheres are ranged like concentric enclosing shells which have a lot in common with the structure of Dante's *Paradiso*. The world of darkness we are living in is full of evil and devouring fire, of deceit and falsehood. It appears large but is very small in point of fact, for the good things perish in it and plans come to naught. Is it a frozen lake or a river of boiling pitch? The Archons are mischievous enough to mislead us as to the true nature of our world that is neither too hot nor too cold. And if it is too cold outdoors we get indoors and light the fire; we love the crackle of logs burning in a fireplace. So why should we liken our hospitable earth to any circle of Hell? Of course we may occasionally talk about hell on earth, but good times are just around the corner; and there are so many corners in this world of ours. There are no corners for a dying man who is just sitting in his armchair day and night. Even his room has no corners. Nor does his bed have any: it is circular.

And what about the stork mentioned by Dante in relation to the sinners' moans? "And these are they which ye shall have in abomination among the fowls; they shall not be eaten, they are an abomination: the eagle…and the stork, the heron after her kind…" But storks and herons destroy serpents and are therefore the adversaries of evil. As anti-satanic animals, they are symbols of Christ. In the Far East, storks are easily confused with cranes; they are a symbol of immortality. Christ, immortality. I re-read Dante's tercet in which the sinners set their teeth to the note of the stork and found it rather reassuring and encouraging. I regained Paradise without so much as opening the *Paradiso*. Did those sinners really moan? What does the song of a stork sound like? Does it sound like a moan, a groan, a complaint? Doesn't it rather sound like a song, a hymn to God? Something along the lines of "The Lord's My Shepherd"?

Man is not merely a quintessence of dust and mud; there is a divine spark in him. Valentinus

thinks there are three classes of men: spiritual, psychic (animate or possessing soul), and material or fleshly. Spiritual men are perfect and will be saved; psychic men possess free will and can go upward or downward; material men cannot be saved, being "by nature sons of the devil". I felt I was partly material on account of my illness that was neither spiritual nor animate; anyway it did not possess soul. Feeding on my flesh and blood, it grew more and more fleshy, which did not prevent it from feeding on my mind as well, otherwise I would not have thought of it so obstinately. There was a lot of flesh within my substance, and the forthcoming trip to Moscow testified to my fleshiness. But for my flesh, I would not have fallen in love with my wacky girl whom I asked one day why she never wore skirts. "Because I'm bow-legged," she answered. "Worse still, my legs look like a circle." Her confession brought my desire to see her legs to fever pitch and I am sure my mind took no part in the process. My mind would have cancelled my trip to Moscow after hearing this description. But my flesh reacted otherwise: it often goes against the stream, as it were.

Any stream flows naturally downwards. What is so exciting about it? If you put your leg in a stream, however, you are sure to feel how the water struggles with your leg to gain access to the "end of the road". And this struggle may excite your flesh to the point of making you build a sort of dam to stop the stream from flowing to point B. Her remark was at odds with my sense of beauty and this discrepancy incited me to terminate my commentary on the *Commedia* and buy a ticket to Moscow. No, it is the other way round. My stream was flowing downward or upward, as it usually does; she put her legs in it so that my desire enveloped her legs, going higher and higher to reach boiling point, melting point, freezing point—in this order. The boiling pitch, the frozen waters of Cocytus. Did Dante describe an act of sexual intercourse in the *Inferno*, symbolised by the *lonsia*?

Didn't I love her mind as well? And it is my mind that loved her mind, her playfulness, her silly remarks. So I was in possession of free will and could go upward or downward, as the whim took me. (Wasn't my will imprisoned in her private Cocytus?) I still have no idea whether my stream flows upward or downward, but this aspect of my being has no bearing on my mind and its ways. My mind is struggling upward and nothing will interfere with its progress towards the last cantos of the *Paradiso*, all the more so as I can read them at any time. And whenever I read them, I am spiritual. Spiritual men are perfect and will be saved. What is to be done with my malady? And my doppelgängers?

> Le gambe con le cosce seco stesse
> s’appiccar sì, che 'n poco la giuntura
> non facea segno alcun che si paresse.
> The legs and thighs so stuck together that soon no mark of the juncture could be seen.

What is this? Another description of sexual intercourse? Kamasutra à la Dante? No, something more trivial and infernal: serpent changes into man and man into serpent. These lines might have been quoted in connection with my malady, but my train of thought swerved towards my beloved awaiting

me in Moscow—in other words, love vanquished death. (I was thrilled by her legs, I disliked her ignorance, I adored her eyes, her staring eyes, her starry eyes.) Why do we say a "train of thought" instead of a "car of thought"? A car may swerve off the road and into the river (of boiling pitch); a train cannot do it unless the rails have been tampered with by a gang of terrorists. And our thoughts swerve off the road so often.

In my files I found the following poem:

> The straight line along which
> I walk in the streets is a circle, a hidden
> Circle. With my feet I draw
> A pattern of interlocking circles
> That leads me to you and you become
> A circle, a straight line:
> A man, a woman, a god, a goddess,
> A poem, a rose, a glass of wine,
> And someone I'll never meet.

I must have been influenced by the circles of the *Inferno*. And straight lines lead nowhere: Dante and Virgil walked in zigzags around the Hereafter. Or did they go in circles? What does the pattern of our walk around the earth look like, I wonder? What seems strange to me is the propensity of all human beings to meet at a sort of meeting point indicated on none of the maps we have at our disposal. In the final analysis we all have approximately the same number of lucky strikes and misfortunes as if only one man were walking around the earth, a solitary traveller. On the eve of my departure I saw a film on Elvis Presley in whose life the number of victories was counterbalanced by an almost equal number of defeats. In his lectures on *Don Quixote*, Nabokov views the knight's adventures through the medium of a tennis game: "So the final score is 20-20, or in terms of tennis 6-3, 3-6, 6-4, 5-7. But the fifth set will never be played; Death cancels the match." Of course I did not count Presley's defeats and victories; nor did I know if the fifth or indeed the fourth set had ever been played. But, on watching the film, I got the impression there had been an overall balance in his life, every victory paving the way to a defeat and vice versa—until the very last set he might have lost irrevocably, but for his posthumous renown making up for his pill-popping and premature death. I had no reason to envy him because the game I was playing did not differ much from the one he had lost and won. His wife's early photographs reminded me of my dear girl whom I would have married at once had I been fatally ill—to let her inherit my flat, my furniture and my wine cellar more easily, without paying too much tax.

Meanwhile I had to pull myself together by fair means or foul: the *Paradiso* and the *Inferno* were to assist me in my task. I also brought to Moscow *The Gnostic Religion* by Hans Jonas from which I culled the following text:

> Endeavour to ascend into thyself, gathering in from the body all thy members which have been dispersed and scattered into multiplicity from that unity which once abounded in the greatness

of its power. Bring together and unify the inborn ideas and try to articulate those that are confused and to draw into light those that are obscured.
(Porphyr. *Ad Marcell. X*)

CHAPTER 2

Russia revisited. On the plane I briefly thought of Elvis Presley again. "Never forget where you came from and who you are," he said to his brother or cousin. For years and years I have done my best to forget my native country as a place of my birth, preserving its cultural image only: Pushkin, Tolstoy, the frescoes of St Pherapont monastery. Sentenced to seven years' imprisonment, I could not go back to Russia until 1989 when I was invited to play four concerts in Moscow and Petersburg. By that time I had already forgotten who I was and did not recognise my native city as I walked around the Kremlin and along Tverskaya Street; I failed to place *myself* in my recollection. Had I ever walked around that city before? I might have been born in Paris, in Venice or in Munich where Louis II dreamt of Wagner's operas. What did I have in common with the people who bumped into me without a word of apology? In any crowd Dante encountered in the circles of the *Inferno* there was at least one person with whom he might talk; the people walking around me did not look familiar and I had nothing to discuss with them, not even their own sufferings. But at least they did not remind me of the inhabitants of Hell, of their sighs and loud wailings.

> La turba che rimase lì, selvaggia
> parea del loco, rimirando intorno
> come colui che nove cose assaggia.
> The crowd which remained there seemed strange to the place, gazing about like those who essay new things.

The people I saw around me did not recognise Moscow either; there was a new life around them, which, however, had nothing to do with the *Vita Nuova*. Like the crowd depicted in Canto II of the *Purgatorio*, they were eager to say something along the lines of, "*Se voi sapete, / monstratene la via di gire al monte*." ("If you know, show us the way up the mountain.") They would not have mentioned a mountain, I presume, but they wished to know where to direct their steps, for they had found themselves in an altogether different city: no more communist slogans, no more state-bestowed pittance. Many of them thought they had just moved from Hell to Purgatory and were determined to reach Paradise in their lifetimes. They did not know how to set about it and consequently wandered around the streets of Moscow, looking for a guide. But for my strange appearance, some of them might have asked me to help them.

> L'anime, che si fuor di me accorte,
> per lo spirare, ch'i' era ancor vivo,
> maravigliando diventaro smorte.
> The souls, who had perceived from my breathing that I was yet alive, marvelling grew pale...

Those who happened to glance at me *were* surprised to find I was still alive and walking along the

streets of another world. I recalled I had often been taken for a foreigner in the early seventies when I had still been living in Russia: my "inner emigration" must have been stamped on my features and gestures. The "outer emigration" had partly deprived me of my mother tongue, for the people to whom I was obliged to talk invariably took me for a foreigner. "How come you speak Russian so well?" they would ask, staring at me. Last year I helped a French woman in a shop where she asked several people one question encapsulated in one English word— "change". "Change? Change?" she repeated walking around. "Can I help you, Madame?" I asked her in English. "*J'aimerais changer mes dollars*," she said, whereupon I began to talk to her in French. And then I addressed the shop assistant again, "Speaking two foreign languages. Not bad for a Russian, eh?" "But you're not Russian," she answered. This happened in 2002, in wintertime. Trudging along the muddy streets, the crowd looked different from what I had observed in the early nineties: all those people seemed to have returned to Hell. Caught in a five-mile tailback on the Garden Ring, the occupants of the cars shared the predicament of the Evil Counsellors who are imprisoned in burning flames in Canto XXVI of the *Inferno*. One of the flames has a double tip and conceals the spirits of Ulysses and Diomed who were involved in the stratagem of the wooden horse.

> e dentro da la lor fiamma si geme
> l'agguato de caval che fé la porta
> onde uscì de' Romani il gentil seme.
> And in their flame they groan for the ambush of the horse which made the gate by which the noble seed of the Romans went forth...

In a war one army defeats another army; these defeats and victories are brought about by stratagems of all sorts. Who is to blame for them? We might blame the person in whose conduct the war originated—Helen of Troy in the present case—but what is done during the hostilities should be neither condemned nor condoned: it is a matter of life and death. Napoleon wanted to fight his wars in accordance with an abstract military code about which the Russian partisans did not care a hoot. Are they also to be found in Canto XXVI? In Japan I was told a story about the presidents of two big companies. One of them used to complain about his economic defeats: "My rival's got a primary education and I went to the university. Why did I? My parents and all my friends had advised against it." Are those evil counsellors to be found in Canto XXVI? Our children ride on their wooden hobbyhorses all over the world. And I am still sailing on Ulysses' ship: he is my *good* counsellor. Cicero speaks of the Sirens and the role they played in Ulysses' life as follows:

> Apparently it was not the sweetness of their voices or the novelty and diversity of their songs, but their professions of knowledge that used to attract the passing voyagers; it was the passion for learning that kept men rooted to the Sirens' rocky shores. This is their invitation to Ulysses…A passion for miscellaneous omniscience no doubt stamps a man as a mere dilettante; but it must be deemed the mark of a superior mind to be led on by the contemplation of high matters to a passionate love of knowledge.

Every time I go back to Russia I remember my departure from it, the last dinner to which I invited seven friends of mine. Three of them were in the know, and those who had no idea I was leaving forever had just come to say goodbye and drink a glass of champagne. I might have said to all of them:

> Considerate la vostra semenza:
> fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
> ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza.
> Consider your origin; you were not made to live as brutes, but to pursue virtue and knowledge.

According to Pushkin, there are only three kinds of human beings: tyrants, traitors and prisoners. But you cannot fit Ulysses into this pattern which, oddly enough, takes into consideration only my contemporaries, my fellow creatures, as if Pushkin had known what would happen to humanity in the twenty-first century. Nowadays there are financial tyrants who are betraying Dante and his Ulysses; the others are their prisoners or slaves. Partly I am their prisoner too, but in my former life I might have embarked on Ulysses' ship and perished near the Mount of Purgatory. In this life of mine I am Ulysses himself, for my journey into the Unknown has not been limited to my escape from the Soviet Union. Thirty years ago I turned "my stern to the morning" (*e volta nostra poppa nel mattino*); my course was westward at first. Now, with the aid of Dante, I am travelling towards the stars.

> Li miei compagni fec' io sì aguti,
> con questa orazion picciola, al cammino,
> che a pena poscia li avrei ritenuti
> With this little speech I made my companions so keen for the voyage that then I could hardly have held them back.

I have written nine novels, many stories, essays and poems—quite a long speech. (In the *Inferno*, Ulysses' speech is confined to three tercets.) But even my friends remain unaffected by my *Invitation au voyage*, as if I was just reciting Baudelaire's poem they learnt at school. Perhaps I *am* reciting Baudelaire's poem or Ulysses' speech—isn't that enough? Why do all these people stay at home like prisoners?

The blood test. The American Hospital. I was on a long (or a short) journey in three parts: back to Moscow, back to Versailles, back to dust. I had the feeling of flying backward all the time as if the future had been located two days ago, three days ago. My future *was* located three days ago when I could think of it without laying myself open to ridicule. As I was queuing for passport control at Moscow airport I realised I had only the past at my disposal. What was more, I had to dispose of it within three years during which I would not suffer too much, as my friend had assured me. Another friend of mine had come to the airport and was driving me now to the city where I intended to stage a few farewell ceremonies.

"Once more," I told my friend, "only *some* of the guests will be in the know. And then I'll leave Moscow for the last time. A final departure at last. My departure in 1974 was just a dress rehearsal."

"This one will be another dress rehearsal," he answered.

"And the *Paradiso* I'm re-reading for the umpteenth time? Is it also a rehearsal? Or another play, another theatre, another theatrical company? I wish I could drive Thomas Aquinas around the streets of Paris."

I cast a few last glances at the buildings closing in upon the car from all sides—as if to imprison it—and began to think of my dear girl with whom I had a date on the following night. I dreamt of her, using my disease as a pretext for speeding up the rate of our dates and caresses. "I've got only a few months to live," I told her again and again. Upon awakening I called her several times but nobody answered the phone, which might have been expected, given the nature of our relationship. So we did not meet that day which I spent in the company of my friend and his wife. There were also their pupils with us—the whole day; a bunch of young people who had the whole of their lives ahead of them. At some point I had a talk with them about Dante, about the last canto of the *Paradiso*. They listened to me, although no one was really interested, I am sure. Perhaps they felt *I* was interested in the subject, *physically* interested: they would not have tolerated my purely intellectual involvement. It is easier to communicate with human beings through the agency of one's body that knows how to go about it, how to "keep in touch". Those students might have known more about my disease than the person handling my blood at the American Hospital. My thoughts reverted to the blood test and to my doctors with whom I could discuss neither the *Paradiso* nor my wish to write this commentary. Would they have helped me? Would they have altered the result of the test through their biased presence, as happens in the domain of quantum mechanics? Is that how one can get a new lease of life?

> E io ch'al fine di tutt' i disii
> appropinquava, sì com' io dovea,
> l'ardor del desiderio in me finii.
> And I, who was drawing near to the end of all desires, raised to its utmost, even as I ought, the ardour of my longing.
> (The *Paradiso*, Canto XXXIII)

Mathematically speaking, I *was* drawing near to the end of all desires, but I for one am *always* goaded into doing something that is bound to come to an end very soon: the end itself serves as a catalyst or an aphrodisiac. And the human body is not good at mathematics anyway, for its multiplication table is different from the one taught at schools. Within our body—rather, within its sphere of influence—"zero" is more than "zero" and often less than "zero" on account of our physiological and psychological reactions to it. There was one beautiful girl among my friends' pupils and I chatted her up for several hours, showing how to drink wine properly and reciting *Invitation au voyage*. But our journey proved to be a short one: I just saw her off to the lift. Two days later I ran into her at the Big

Conservatoire Hall; she was not alone. The ardour of my longing had already abated and I dodged into a telephone box to avoid meeting her. The above tercet echoes the promise given by Virgil to the wayfarer in Canto XXVII of the *Purgatorio*:

> ″Quel dolce pome che per tanti rami
> cercando va la cura de' mortali,
> oggi porrà in pace le tue fami."
> "That sweet fruit which the care of mortals goes seeking on so many branches, this day shall give your hungerings peace."

All the pupils left and I spent another night alone: even my dreams had forsaken me as if engaged elsewhere. Upon awakening I called my dear girl again and this time she answered the phone, saying it did not really matter when we would meet because the only purpose of my coming to Russia was our meetings. "So you can wait, can't you? You're not flying back today, as far as I know. We've got plenty of time." On the same day we had dinner in another Georgian restaurant which was nearer to her office but had none of the qualities of the restaurant we used to frequent during my previous visits to Moscow. Apart from good cuisine and a beautiful interior, the former Georgian restaurant had a knack of bringing us so close to each other that the *dolce pome* seemed to be lying in my hands, its mellow flavours filling up my lungs, my heart, the whole of my body. Now this *dolce pome* was nothing but a *pomme* in French, *la pomme de discorde*. The bone of contention.

I should begin at the beginning which was quite auspicious, judging from what I said to her: "When I look at you, I just can't understand how I've lived without you for more than a year." I lied of course, but words have a truth of their own, which often prevails upon our truth in the long run. And, during the suspension period, I had come to rely more and more on words, probably in anticipation of the consolatory remarks my doctor would drop upon learning the result of the blood test. I also recited a few poems of mine, counting on the power of *their* words that spoke about love in general. I once said that no living woman was worthy of *such* words. Only *Vergine Madre* was worthy of them:

> Donna, se' tanto grande e tanto vali,
> che qual vuol grazia e a te non ricorre,
> sua disïanza vuol volar sanz' ali.
> Lady, thou art so great and so availest, that whoso would have grace and has not recourse to thee, his desire seeks to fly without wings.
> (The *Paradiso*, Canto XXXIII)

Once a girlfriend of mine inquired about one of my heroines, about her identity. "I've never met this woman," I said. All my life I have been looking *past* the women sitting opposite me in French, Japanese, Russian and Georgian restaurants. Words and glances lead us somewhere—past the world where we open our eyes in the morning and talk to our fellow creatures. We should rely on the texture of our glances and words because they constantly create a world we know nothing about. Even a deaf

man's glance leads somewhere, beyond the women who laugh and talk like ordinary women. How many times did my beloved disappoint me? She used to work in a picture gallery on the right bank of the Moscva River along which I like to walk in summertime, looking at the bridges and pleasure boats. One day I visited the gallery and saw her walking towards me across an empty hall. For the first time I took notice of the way she walked, of her gait, which was so inelegant that I stopped calling her for five months. My love for her was composed mainly of disappointments, but perhaps *any* feeling is important if we pay attention to the person sitting opposite us in a restaurant, in a café. And I had been paying attention to that person for two years. Sometimes she had just been "that person", nothing more.

How can I talk about my poems and even comment on them alongside the *Commedia*? No word should be written about the *Commedia*: you are bound to quote it sooner or later, putting Dante's and your words side by side. But Dante did not carve his masterpiece on some gigantic stone tablets hidden in the Himalayas. Anyway, all my poems have been written in the margins of the *Commedia*.

Thanks to you
I'd recall the world
If I was amnesiac.

Thanks to you
I might recall something
That has never happened.

Thanks to you
I might recall
The future.

But the future's not worth
Being memorised.
Is it?

Only the Virgin Mary or Beatrice can make one recall something that has never happened—apart from the entire history of humanity. When I expressed my desire to recite this poem—we were trying to stop a taxi on the Garden Ring—my would-be Beatrice said, yawning, "If this poem is about me, I'll listen to it." Once the recitation was over she asked me if I could buy her a car.

"I'll forget how to drive if I'm out of practice for another month. I took a few driving lessons last winter. Incidentally, why haven't you brought me any presents?"

"I brought you the trouser suit," I answered.

"The one you bought last year? It's out of fashion now."

"These things never go out of fashion."

"Anyway," she said, "you might have bought me another trouser suit this year. The old one is black, isn't it?"

"It is," I answered.

"You should buy me a beige trouser suit and a blue dress."

Our conversation was so lacking in subtlety that it almost sounded like a parody of a soap opera; I wish we had parodied a schmaltzy novel instead. My fair lady's words are so inferior to her beauty that she seems to be a ventriloquist's dummy. As far as I know, the dummies manipulated by ventriloquists are males; at least they have little in common with pin-ups. Two years ago, during my Japanese tour, I saw a poster at an underground station, featuring a young woman who had *something* in common with my dear girl. Every day I would go to that station to stare at the poster for a quarter of an hour at least, as if unable to visualise *her* features, *her* eyes. My beloved, my dear girl, my fair lady. Why not give her a fictitious name? Alexandra, Olga, Irina. I hoped I might call her Beatrice in Canto XXX of *my Purgatorio*, but even in those days I feared that no amount of cantos and chapters would ever allow me to bestow upon her this honour. Well, I have no alternative but to go on writing in Purgatory—as long as necessary to meet my Beatrice on the threshold of Paradise.

> Vero è che quale in contumacia more
> di Santa Chiesa, ancor ch'al fin si penta,
> star li convien de questa ripa in fore,
> per ognun tempo ch'elli è stato, trenta,
> in sua presunzïon, se tal decreto
> più corto per buon prieghi non diventa.
> True it is that whoso dies in contumacy of Holy Church, even though he repent at the last, must stay outside upon this bank thirty-fold for all the time that he has lived in his presumption, if such decree is not made shorter by holy prayers.

Leafing through the *Purgatorio* in search of my punishment, or rather of its duration, I alighted on the above tercets at the end of Canto III. No matter how assiduously you may read and re-read the *Commedia*, some details will always escape you: only what refers to your *vital* interests can be memorised and relied upon. My recent infatuation with Time caused me to take notice of any stretch of it, either pertaining to this world or the Hereafter. It was as if I had attempted to make up for the shortness of my present life by living another life beyond the bounds of this world. And this prolongation was dictated neither by the tenets of Christianity nor by Dante's tercets. My *élan vital* was more akin to the following sentence I chanced upon in some magazine or other, "Research strongly suggests that we can contribute to the prolongation of healthy life by altering our diets." My diet used to be the earth and whatever is to be found on its surface or in its bowels; now I was more interested in the Hereafter. Unwittingly I began to ponder over the two tercets I quoted above, which describe the punishment allotted to Manfred. I had no time to study his origin and even the *story* of his excommunications. How was he excommunicated, by whom? What counts is that he was excommunicated *twice* and that, upon receiving two mortal stabs, he "gave himself weeping to Him who pardons willingly":

Poscia ch'io ebbi rotta la persona
di due punte mortali, io mi rendei,
piangendo, a quei che volontier perdona.

I had already received a mortal wound but was still enthralled by the shallow aspects of life: longevity, carnal appetites. On the verge of death I was counting the years I would spend in Purgatory instead of praying to God and asking Him to forgive my sins. But I had enough time to ask His forgiveness, didn't I? Of course I could have died at any moment despite the three years my friend had promised me during our phone conversation. I recalled the film *Dark Victory* where the heroine is fatally ill and has only ten months ahead of her. One of the doctors says, "She'll be as well as any of us, but near the end her sight will fail." After that she was to live for a few hours only. Even one hour is enough for a prayer; one minute is enough. I had no idea if I would be given such an opportunity, such a warning: a harbinger of death. My friend had spoken neither of my sight nor of my mind that might remain intact until the very last. What for? To write another page about a woman I was in love with or another comment on the *Commedia*?

"…thirty-fold for all the time that he has lived in his presumption." "Why thirty-fold?" asks Singleton. And he goes on to say that "Dante does not appear to be following any established doctrine in conceiving such a period of time". Let us apply Dante's measurement to my life, to my presumption. For fifteen years or so I was in contumacy of the State, of the Soviet regime: as I said earlier, I had been sentenced to seven years' imprisonment. But wasn't I also in contumacy with the Orthodox Church? Nobody excommunicated me because such a thing could not be done in the Soviet Union. Besides, I was not important enough to be excommunicated or assassinated: the Church and the KGB did not care about me. But wasn't I *symbolically* excommunicated by the Orthodox Church? After all I *willingly* estranged myself from Russia, from her soil and faith. Of course a Russian can go to an Orthodox Church abroad, but it is not the same church, is it? The icons are not the same, are they? And the choir sings differently. And what about my wish to become a Catholic? Fifteen years multiplied by thirty. I did not mind staying outside the wall of Purgatory, provided I might live and write about my Beatrice.

Why should I write about *her*, about my "fair lady"? Let me finish my story: at the end of Dante's masterpiece all loose ends are neatly tied up. That night, as usual, the taxi stopped a few yards away from the front door of her house. I had never walked with her to the front door and this time as well I remained seated in the taxi; but she asked me to wait for her to reach the door safely. Just a few yards. She reached the door in a few seconds, turned back and waved goodbye to me. This gesture was so touching that I forgot all my disappointments, my sadness; she was Beatrice again, *my* Beatrice. But she had a long way to go before she could intervene on my behalf. Her waving hand haunted me for a long time; even now I remember it as if all this had happened only two hours ago. Ever since our farewell dinner words have taken over so that all sorts of sentences interpose between her gesture and

my memory, for instance, "You can't just wave me away as if I were a child," or "I think she can wave a magic wand and everything will be all right," or "I wouldn't have got on with her anyway—we are not on the same wavelength". And this sentence from Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, "Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!" And then the last sentence, "*The waves broke on the shore.*" Everything ends in the sea; everything hints at the sea. She was a wave of the sea, which broke on the shore and withdrew forever. And I did not even stand on that shore, staring at it from afar, from Versailles, from my writing desk. Only now I can walk on that desert shore which might have become our starting point for the guided tour of the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*.

> Venimmo poi in sul lito diserto,
> che mai non vide navicar sue acque
> omo, che di tornar sia poscia esperto.
> Then we came on to the desert shore, that never saw any man navigate its waters who afterwards had experience of return.
> (The *Purgatorio*, Canto I)

The treacherous shore. She has not returned.

I called her next day and again nobody answered the phone. I called her the day after and she said she had been working the day before, the whole day. But we agreed to meet a few hours later—at 5 p.m. I came to her office and was admitted to the third floor where she sat in front of a computer. "Shall we go to the theatre tonight? Do you know any play we might see?" I said I did not know what was on in Moscow theatres and for a while she played with the computer as if looking for a theatre or something else, totally unconnected with the theatrical world. A few names appeared on the screen and then a series of numbers among which I made out 13—the number of love in accordance with the Kabbalath. "I can't find anything," she said at last, switching the computer off. "I hate this machine. I might break it one day—accidentally on purpose." A few days later I learnt there *was* a play we might have seen that night had the computer been more trustworthy and less esoteric: *The Room in the N Hotel* was performed at the Meyerhold Studio. Drawn from Gogol's *Dead Souls* and staged by one of the greatest Russian directors, Valery Fokin, the play would have been instrumental in bringing us closer together, judging from how she behaved during the first theatrical performance I attended in her company—a Japanese staging of *Electra*. We had never sat side by side before and the physical proximity influenced our relationship much more than any words, any poems, however paradisiacal. Why didn't we listen to our bodies instead of talking all the time? Besides, owing to the play of distinction, the atmosphere in the Studio must have been wonderful, full of cathartic nuances; and yet, whenever I watch the video of *The Room in the N Hotel*, I single out the episodes which might have affected us *negatively*. At some point Chichikov pursues a woman in white who eludes him obstinately, which is hardly surprising: he is so grotesque and uncouth that no woman is likely to fall for him. And in his nightmare he hears the words, "The hour of your death has come, the hour of your

death has come." I also think about dead souls as such and deplore my infatuation with the dead on whose co-operation I count at any time. Why can't I open a book and read *your* words in it?

We went downstairs, left the office and headed for the Garden Ring. The weather was marvellous and I thought we might spend an hour in a nearby park about which I had written three poems; but that night she was interested neither in poems nor in parks. We took a taxi and drove to *our* Georgian restaurant where we had been happy once, a long time ago. I often rely on houses and parks which, in my opinion, do not alter with the passing of the years because they have no moods, no nervous breakdowns.

> "Sempre l'amor che queta questo cielo
> accoglie in sé con sì fatta salute,
> per far disposto a sua fiamma il candelo."
> "Ever does the love which quiets this heaven receive into itself with such like salutation, in order to prepare the candle for its flame."

Why didn't I hear these words on the Garden Ring, in the taxi weaving through stationary traffic like a bicycle? *L'amor che queta questo cielo*. When I told one of my friends I was dying he put a calming hand on my shoulder. Love is capable of quietening *down* the heavens which are somehow brought back to earth where they find the absolute harmony, the coincidence of opposites. This statement is bombastic, isn't it? I should quieten it down. Should I? I had prepared the candle for its flame but nothing happened. If you were as submissive as words I would write a novel with a happy ending and a commentary on this novel. Canto XXX of the *Paradiso*. I was not prepared for it because even a woman of twenty-seven opposed me victoriously; and books are not as submissive as they appear.

Why did I insist on meeting her that day? I was all stuffed-up and she heard it over the phone: "You sound all stuffed-up—are you all right?" Why didn't I talk to her about my disease, my death? She would have taken pity on me: among women there are born nurses who are good-hearted only in the presence of a dying man. The weather was marvellous when we got out of the taxi and made for the restaurant located in a garden, behind a wrought iron gate. I could neither smell the wine nor taste the food, and I hardly heard what she was talking about. I just felt we were seeing each other for the last time.

"Why don't you look at me?" I asked. "You don't see me often, do you?"

"There's a spot just behind you. My eyes are smarting," she answered. She continued to answer my questions as if we could still talk about something. We could not even talk about the weather.

"When I think about their fees…all these conductors, pianists, violinists…And Dante was so poor." I talked for the sake of talking and for argument's sake. But I had no idea what the argument was about.

"Money again," she said with a sigh. "You analyse everything in terms of money. We'll never get along well—you're so tight-fisted."

"You seem to be fond of the English verb 'to hit', I said to her. "After all, your English teacher is not as bad as I light-heartedly assumed. When I saw you first you hit me between the eyes. Ever since you've been hitting me where it hurts. Last Spring I was in Zurich where I couldn't find a hotel because expensive hotels are beyond my means. And when I did find a hotel—a cheap one, needless to say—my car began to smoke. Don't you know that motorcars are forbidden to smoke? It's prejudicial to their health. They may die from lung cancer, in the long run. Well, my car died in the *short* run, so to speak. When, the next day, I visited the Zentrum Paul Klee in Bern, it had two wheels in the grave already. And it expired near Lausanne. What was the cause of its premature death? you may inquire. To tell the truth, its death was not premature—my car was thirteen years old. At the age of nine it was still alive and running. Up hill and down dale. So it died of old age, not of lung cancer. Why? Because I can't afford a luxurious car like the one your maestro has got in his possession. You touch a raw nerve whenever you say I'm tight-fisted. How many idioms you've learnt tonight! I'm good at teaching the language of Samuel Johnson, am I not?" I delivered the whole tirade in English. At this point, however, I switched to Russian to make her realise fully how determined I was to part with her. "You're right, we'll never hit it off. I'm too old for you anyway. Besides, your parents would be against our union. And they would be right."

"Would they? Well, you know better what you are."

We had it out in front of all the waiters and clients, but nobody said anything. In Canto XXX of the *Purgatorio* Dante meets Beatrice who hauls him over the coals:

> "Come degnasti d'accedere al monte?
> non sapei tu che qui è l'uom felice?"
> "How did you deign to climb the mountain? Did you not know that here man is happy?"

Of course Beatrice knows that Dante would not have made this upward journey, but for her descent to Limbo. What is more, she knows that Dante was told the story of her intervention on his behalf. (And I know what I am much better than those who judge me from afar.) Why does she ask him such a bizarre question in front of so many people?

Their first meeting after a long separation; our last meeting. Silently the waiters continued to carry dishes, but Dante heard a song of angels who might have switched to a minor key upon hearing Beatrice's rebuke:

> Ma poi che 'ntesi ne le dolci tempre
> lor compartire a me, par che se detto
> avesser: "Donna, perché sì lo stempre?"
> But when I heard how in their sweet notes they took my part, quite as if they had said, "Lady, why do you so confound him?"

"Why did I come to this restaurant?" I said to her. "Didn't I know that here man is happy?"

"Where do you eat in Versailles? At home, in restaurants? You'll mess up your insides if you don't eat properly." She was still talking to me. And I made a comment on Dante's encounter with Beatrice.

"She must have thought her protégé was unhappy. But he stood on the top of the Mount of Purgatory. That alone made him happy, I suppose. Or do you have to be happy to climb the Mount? If you *are* happy you don't need to go anywhere. All you have to do is stay where you are. Sometimes it's so difficult to stay where you are—utterly impossible, as a matter of fact. Every room is a river into which you can't step twice. You stand motionless in the middle of your room and everything flows around you. Actually, if you stay in your room long enough, one day you'll find yourself on the top of the Mount of Purgatory. But you have to re-create it in your mind, slope by slope, terrace by terrace. I've failed to create you. I'm just sitting in my room where there's no room for this restaurant, for happiness, for your eyes. Incidentally, I've never been money-minded."

In that restaurant there was enough room for my interior monologues, for my commentary on Dante's encounter with Beatrice of which we are given a blow-by-blow account. Why did she reproach her one-time acquaintance for having climbed the mountain to the top of which she had invited him? Suppose a woman called your friend and asked him to take you to some restaurant or other. Your friend drives over to your place, makes you dress for the occasion and then brings you to the restaurant where you meet the woman you saw several times in your youth. And she tells you without batting an eyelid, "How did you deign to come to this restaurant?" What are you supposed to answer? You knew you would not be admitted to the restaurant without being introduced by a habitué, but your friend, playing the part of a go-between, explained to you that everything would be all right if you followed him. Were you supposed to refuse, running the risk of incurring the anger of the lady who had enjoined you to come to the restaurant? Were you supposed to say, "I don't deserve to go with you because I've committed a few sins in my day?" Dante did say something along these lines in Canto II of the *Inferno*:

> Ma io, perché venirvi? O chi 'l concede?
> Io non Enëa, io non Paulo sono;
> me degno a ciò né io né altri 'l crede.
> But why do I come there? And who allows it? I am not Aeneas, I am not Paul; of this neither I nor others think me worthy.

And Virgil answered thus:

> "l'anima tua è da viltade offesa;
> la qual molte fiate l'omo ingombra
> sì che d'onrata impresa lo rivolve,
> come falso veder bestia quand' ombra."
> "Your spirit is beset by cowardice, which oftentimes encumbers a man, turning him from honourable endeavour, as false seeing turns a beast that shies."

So you say to the lady who rebukes you in front of all the waiters and clients, "I'm not a coward. You told my friend I should come here and so I did. Nothing has put me off *our* honourable endeavour. Unlike cats, I'm not easily frightened by my own shadow."

"Aren't you frightened by *my* shadow?" asks the lady.

"Do you mean to say I am presumptuous? Look, being admitted to this restaurant may exceed what is proportionate to my power. Thanks to your connections and celebrity status, I'm sitting opposite you now. I wasn't angling for this invitation. Frankly speaking, I often dreamt of having dinner at this restaurant, but I didn't *force* my way in. Once I walked down the street and there was this enormous bouncer—"

Our story is full of ups and down, of pacing back and forth. "One step forward, two steps back," as some politician put it. During the first period of our relationship she adhered to this negative guideline with amazing perseverance. One afternoon I asked her if she would be free next day. "The whole day," she answered. When I called her next day, her mother said she was at the University, waiting for her diploma. She came back in the evening and went straight to the bathroom from which she emerged at around 9 p.m.

"Let's have dinner at my place," I said to her on the phone. "Let's stay up the whole night."

"I'm tired," she said. "What kind of celebration is it, anyway? What's there to celebrate?" A point-blank refusal to discuss the matter. So I said I would never call her again. "I might call you tomorrow," she said. "Why don't you let me call you tomorrow?"

"Because I'll be out the whole day. And I'm leaving the day after tomorrow."

Two steps back. I was determined never to call her, never ever. But four months later she came to my recital and glanced at me in such a way that I realised I could not do otherwise than call her next morning. And then we had dinner at the Georgian restaurant during which she said we would never quarrel again.

"And what if we do?" I asked. "Will you ditch me then?"

"No, I'll take you to my fitness centre."

Two steps forward. But when I came to Moscow again and asked her if we could meet after her working hours, she said she would be exhausted. I called her at around 9 p.m. just to say "Hello" and her father told me she was out. As I had the number of her mobile phone I got in touch with her rather easily; she was having dinner with her "old friends". I said I would not call her any more. Three steps back. But then we patched things up, as usual. Our relationship was a curious patchwork of affection and unconcern, of tenderness and rudeness. It was all over now. I did not listen to the words she uttered, her lips moving as beautifully as ever. They did not tremble, however: she was not on the verge of tears, on the brink of a nervous breakdown. And only three hours earlier we had been discussing her *long* visit to Versailles—a month at least.

"I don't have a guest room, you know," I said playfully.

"I'll sleep in the woods," she answered, unperturbed.

It was all over. I suggested it was time to go and would brook no disagreement. "You ought to have taken an umbrella—it's really pouring down outside," said the cloakroom attendant. The weather seemed to mirror our parting which could not be described in the words of that politician: there were no more steps to be taken. Our love receded into the distance until finally it grew invisible. I hailed a taxi and took her back home. "If I were you, I'd hang this jacket on the line and let it drip-dry," she said as the taxi pulled up. She slammed the door and walked away. I asked the driver to wait for a few seconds, but she did not turn back.

CHAPTER 3

> In all the care with which they toil at countless enterprises, mortal men travel by different paths, though all are striving to reach one and the same goal, namely, happiness, which is a good which once obtained leaves nothing more to be desired.
> (Boethius*, The Consolation of Philosophy,* translated by V. E. Watts)

What was the path by which I travelled to happiness? The Garden Ring; the taxi into which I scrambled, hoping to spend a "nice" evening at the restaurant where we had an argument; her flight to Paris. Suppose she came to Versailles and did not go to the woods at night. Would that be a self-sufficient happiness? Of course not. Even in my writings I part with her because it is far more interesting, from a literary point of view, to bid each other farewell than to embrace on a sofa. "Before she could embrace him he stepped away" is therefore more pregnant with pretexts for hermeneutics than "They were oblivious to the outside world as they embraced on the station platform". But am I happy now as I write about happiness and Beatrice, after having stepped away? Even Dante did not embrace Beatrice in the streets of Florence, on a sofa somewhere. "Some men believe that perfect good consists in having no wants, and so they toil in order to end up rolling in wealth." My notion of happiness is different to such an extent that I decided to play concerts only when in danger of starving to death. I have got all I need except a few books for which there is not enough room on my shelves. Well, I shall cover my floor with those books, piling them up as high as the ceiling. "Some think that the true good is that which is most worthy of respect, and so struggle for position in order to be held in respect by their fellow citizens." What kind of position could I struggle for? That of a famous pianist? Playing the same programme ten times in a row—or a hundred times the same octaves—is not my cup of tea. And the quality of pianos has deteriorated so irremediably that I derive no pleasure from playing them in Tokyo, in Munich, in Salzburg. At least the audience is good in Salzburg—the only city that seems to have resisted overall decadence. The Festival is not what it used to be, needless to say; but some members of the audience still remember Furtwängler's concerts. Anyway a famous pianist is less famous than any rock star and even his or her fee cannot be compared with that of a teenager singing and dancing in a television studio, at a stadium.

As to writers, they do not hold the same position in our society as in the first half of the twentieth century, let alone throughout the nineteenth century. In 1909 Tolstoy was invited to the eighteenth International Peace Congress in Stockholm, but nobody thought he would attend because at the time he was already a recluse, leaving Yasnaya Polyana only when he had to spend a few days in Moscow. During one of those short visits to the city Tolstoy, however, signified his desire to take part in the Congress, which greatly embarrassed the organisers: they were worried that his extreme anarchist views would bring their moderate, modest aims into disrepute. Tolstoy believed that the only honest course for such an organisation was to advocate the abolition of all standing armies throughout the world; the members of the Congress could not agree with him on that point. They were thrown into

turmoil by the menace of his appearance in Stockholm and Tolstoy enjoyed the situation to the utmost. Finally he backed down and many people in Europe and Russia heaved a sigh of relief. Today no writer can toy with public opinion on such a scale not only because there are no Tolstoys in our midst: Tolstoy himself would be unable to stir up either politicians or even ordinary citizens. Though much inferior to Tolstoy as a writer, Solzhenitsyn was heard over a decade at least, owing to the rivalry between capitalism and communism: the Iron Curtain created ideal acoustics for his "voice". But even in Russia this voice sounds like an echo now, drowned as it is by the new masters' hard rock and rap.

In this commentary I have devoted a lot of pages to happiness, to the way that might lead to it; but writing about happiness does not make one happy. Even Dante's *Paradiso* is just a thing in itself unless you catch up with the protagonist and his beloved. How to achieve such a result? By reading the text and the comments on it? When I read what I wrote yesterday and the day before, I do not feel unhappy, although the story I told has neither a happy ending nor a happy beginning: retrospectively, the final misery abolished the promise of happiness. And what is the point in writing a commentary on what happened during that rainy night? Why should I rub it in? I bought a bottle of whisky on my way home and drank it with my friend to whom I told the story of our parting. And he commented on it, saying it was better this way because nothing would ever have come of our liaison. "Why do you call it a 'liaison'? I've never even touched her except in that theatre crammed with people." And then I opened the *Paradiso* and began to read, a glass of whisky in my hand. What a pity one cannot just *open* Paradise and read it throughout. Actually a few lines are sufficient—why go as far as the last word? The last word of Dante's *Paradiso* is *stelle*—the keyword that appears at the end of every part. But if a man going on a journey through the *Inferno* is bound to feel nostalgia for light and heaven, in the *Paradiso* one is surrounded by the stars in the very first canto.

> Lo duca e io per quel cammino ascoso
> intrammo a ritornar nel chiaro mondo;
> e sanza cura aver d'alcun riposo,
> salimmo sù, el primo e io secondo,
> tanto ch'i' vidi de le cose belle
> che porta 'l ciel, per un pertugio tondo.
> E quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle.
> My leader and I entered on that hidden road to return into the bright world; and caring not for any rest, we climbed up, he first and I second, so far that through a round opening I saw some of the beautiful things that Heaven bears; and thence we issued forth to see again the stars.

"There is no doubt," writes Robert Hollander, "as to the fact that even *Inferno*, ending in happiness of this kind, is a comedic part of a comedic whole."

"What you need is the air, the air," says Svidrigailov to Raskolnikov who is chiefly cooped up in his minuscule room. The restaurant where we had dinner that night was rather spacious, but I also needed the air or rather the stars, hidden from us by the ceiling, the clouds, the rain. Where did I have to climb in order to see them? Why travel through all those circles of the *Inferno*? A square table in a

restaurant is enough. In Lasserre, which used to be one of the most reputed restaurants in Paris, the roof opens every hour so that you may admire the stars and seek their help. It is a rectangular opening, if I remember rightly; but the shape does not really count, does it? Why did Dante catch a glimpse of heaven through a *round* overture? Was it just another circle of Hell inside which Paradise was enclosed?

> Beatrice tutta ne l'etterne rote
> fissa con li occhi stava; e io in lei
> le luci fissi, di là sù rimote.
> Beatrice was standing with her eyes all fixed upon the eternal wheels, and I fixed mine on her, withdrawn from there above.

A tercet from Canto I of the *Paradiso* where I could end my journey, if allowed to open Paradise like a book. Once upon a time, in the same restaurant, my would-be Beatrice *lowered* her gaze as I began to recite one of my love poems. And yet, at that moment, her eyes were also fixed upon the "eternal wheels": I was overwhelmed by a surge of love, deeply moved by her shyness. Anyway heaven is not always located overhead. In Canto I Dante depicts what may be defined as the "mirror-effect" which enables him to see the light of Paradise in Beatrice's eyes. Alas, in my beloved's eyes Hell was reflected more often than Paradise. Her shyness. I disagree with La Rochefoucauld who affirms in one of his maxims, "*Il est plus difficile d'être fidèle à sa maitresse quand on est heureux que quand on est maltraité*." When she started to maltreat me I phoned one of my former girlfriends and spent three days with her, drinking French champagne and watching Russian TV—from the bed. But during a period of happiness I was prepared to take a chastity vow in relation to *other* women. We have been indoctrinated by Proust to believe that we love a woman (or a man) only when she is inaccessible to us. Her whims and betrayals are therefore more precious, according to this theory, than her kindness, the warmth of her heart; her departures bring us closer to her than any intimacy. After *her* departure, however, I double-locked the door, metaphorically speaking. And I would not open the door even if she knocked on it the whole night instead of sleeping in the woods. Nor would I cast a single glance at the woods if she did sleep in them: I would look at the stars. Why not take advantage of the *reverse* mirror-effect? By looking at the stars for hours and hours I might see my Beatrice reflected in them. Even Dante is no longer to be found in the dark wood. Would it be easier to live in the world if there were only a few symbols here and there? One might just look at the stars instead of pacing up and down the streets in search of a soul mate.

"And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame *and* everlasting contempt. And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars forever and ever." Daniel resorts to the symbol of the star as he describes the fate of the human beings on the day of the resurrection. But everything happens in the here and now, for the stars *are* shining in the sky; they do not wait for us to

die and be risen from the dead. And no one knows *where* they shine: in Paradise, in Hell or just in heaven. Everlasting contempt may also be regarded as everlasting life and shame is often invisible and silent. A disease is death; a cure (or a good blood test) resurrection. I may have died in that Georgian restaurant, otherwise the stars would have been shining as we got outdoors. And then the taxi brought me to a new life where I was surrounded by the same people with the exception of my would-be Beatrice. But such an exception might herald a new life—an anti-new life, from Dante's point of view. My anti-Beatrice slammed the door of the taxi and walked away instead of walking in my direction, as if I had closed the *Vita Nuova* or turned it upside down. It is difficult to read a book lying on your lap upside down, which accounts for the feeling I experienced as I sat with my friend, drinking that bottle of whisky. I could not speak to him as "fluently" as before and yet he had not grown different overnight; he was living his old life that had already offered him a lot of happiness. He must have seen the stars during our talk in spite of the clouds and the fact that he was turning his back to the window. "Don't put all your eggs in one basket," he said at last. I was woken up by a couple of drunks larking around with a dustbin in the street.

I might have closed the *Vita Nuova*, but I opened the *Paradiso* that night; and I did not hold it upside down. I began to *leaf* through it, pausing here and there to read a few lines. I handled the book in the way one usually approaches a memory, an episode from one's life which, if recalled in minute detail, makes one devote a few hours to it, if not a whole day. Not that I disliked the idea of spending the whole night in the company of Dante and Virgil, but I just wanted to *leaf* through the book, turning it into a sort of family album. One photograph from this album arrested my attention:

> "Questa picciola stella si correda
> d'i buoni spirti che son stati attivi
> derché onore e fama li succeda:
> e quando li disiri poggian quivi,
> sì disvïando, pur convien che i raggi
> del vero amore in sù poggian men vivi."
> "This little star is adorned with good spirits who have been active in order that honour and fame might come to them. And when desires, thus deviating, tend thitherward, the rays of true love must needs mount upwards less living."

Dante's topographical exactitude that Ruskin praised so highly enables one to *see* the *Commedia*'s inhabitants and their surroundings as if the writer had photographed them. The text often looks like a series of photographs arranged in an album, and the longer you study it the more you get the feeling it is your *family* album. With the passing of the years even Lucifer can become a member of your family, eating pheasants and fish instead of Judas, Brutus and Cassius. The "photograph" I alighted upon when leafing through the *Paradiso* is to be found in Canto VI where Justinian recounts the history of Rome from the westward journey of the Trojans and their settlement in Italy to the time of the earlier Caesars and the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus. He goes on to explain that the spirits assigned to Mercury—

questa picciola stella—are there because they were ambitious of fame and honour to the detriment of higher aspirations: "The rays of true love must needs mount upwards less living." The rays of my love have been misdirected for many years, I must admit, for I still care for glory that will continue to elude me as long as I care for it. Though not burdened with a sin comparable to the murder perpetrated by Claudius, my thoughts *descend* into myself instead of going upward. And they move *horizontally* towards those on whom depend my recognition and peace of mind, making me vulnerable and subservient to my own interests.

> All human, anthropogenetic desire—the desire that generates self-consciousness, the human reality—is, finally, a function of the desire for "recognition". And the risk of life by which the human reality "comes to light" is a risk for the sake of such a desire. Therefore, to speak of the "origin" of self-consciousness is necessarily to speak of a fight to the death for "recognition". (Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*)

I am not sure that my yearning for recognition would induce me to enlist in the army and die on a battlefield, my fingers clasping a flag. But death takes on different shapes and often abandons his "life-size" to appear to us as a photograph that we may put in our family album. So I do not notice death as I leaf through my own manuscript which is intended for other people and consequently depends on their judgement and perception, on their capacity to understand what I am talking about. When writing this commentary, I fight to the death for "recognition"; and yet I am still alive, for all my failures.

"God having set forth the great power of Leviathan, called him King of the *Proud*," says Hobbes in his masterpiece. Dante acknowledges that he is guilty of the sin of pride which might have spurred him on as he was working on the *Commedia*. "The vain-glory which consisteth in the feigning or supposing of abilities in our selves, which we know are not, is most incident to young men, and nourished by the Histories, or Fictions of Gallant Persons; and is corrected oftentimes by Age, and Employment," says Hobbes. What is the difference between pride and vainglory? The following definitions are culled from *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*: "A high or overweening opinion of one's own qualities, attainments, or estate; inordinate self-esteem." "Glory that is vain, empty, or worthless; inordinate or unwarranted pride in one's accomplishments or qualities; disposition or tendency to exalt oneself unduly; idle boasting or vaunting." What is the difference between them? A proud man is not always prone to "idle boasting or vaunting", but Dante *was* in the habit of exalting himself at the time when nobody could know for sure whether he did so unduly or justly. "Glory that is vain, empty, or worthless." Are there different kinds of glory on this planet? In the spiritual realm "glory" has another meaning which, for the time being, must remain beyond the scope of my commentary, although it is the *Paradiso* I am holding in my hands right now. On earth, or rather in Space, there is only one glory whose emptiness can be proved scientifically: a voice resounds louder in an empty room. So does a violin, a piano and any other instrument. Both the praise and its recipient are hollow in most cases. Paradoxically, nothing sounds better than Time, provided we fill it to the

brim with our thoughts, feelings, comments, admiration. Cluttered with notes on the *Commedia*, Time itself is a magnificent hymn to Dante and his work. Having no time at his disposal, the poet could *not* hear this hymn and therefore was tempted to sing it himself in his search for recognition. And he was not to be cured either by Age or Employment as testifies the following excerpt from Canto XXV of the *Paradiso*:

> con altra voce omai, con altro vello
> ritornerò poeta, e in sul fonte
> del mio battesmo prenderò 'l cappello
> …with changed voice now and with changed fleece a poet will I return, and at the font of my baptism will I take the crown…

In the opening of this canto the poet represents himself as a lamb sleeping in a fair sheepfold (Florence) where he is target for the "wolves". In the quoted text, "fleece" continues the metaphor of the lamb and the sheepfold. Banished from Florence by the wolves, who are chiefly remembered for their intrigues against him, the poet returns to his native city to be crowned and worshipped. "Inordinate or unwarranted pride in one's accomplishments or qualities." Did he ever doubt his abilities, the quality of his work? I am often under the impression that what I write is a piece of evidence against my mental disorder which would have urged the "wolves" to put me in a lunatic asylum, had they taken the trouble to read my manuscript. The point is our wolves pay no attention to sheep and eat other wolves instead, or just keep them company.

Did Dante ever get the feeling his work was sheer madness? Did he really care about being recognised by the wolves and other animals in Florence, all over the Christian world? The end of Canto VI sheds light on what he felt as he continued to describe the spheres of Paradise he had never visited:

> "E dentro a la presente margarita
> luce la luce di Romeo, di cui
> fu l'ovra grande e bella mal gradita."
> "And within this present pearl shines the light of Romeo, whose noble and beautiful work was ill rewarded."

He tells the story of Romeo, minister of Raymond Berenger of Provence, whose four daughters were, through Romeo's efforts, married to four kings. But he was falsely accused by the barons of Provence and driven into exile. Here is his farewell speech and subsequent departure as chronicled by Villani:

> The worthy Romeo said, "Count, I have served thee long while, and raised thy estate from small to great, and for this, through the false counsel of thy people, thou art little grateful. I came to thy court a poor pilgrim, and I have lived virtuously here; give me back my mule, my staff, and my scrip?????, as I came here, and I renounce thy service." The Count would not that he should

> depart; but, for nought that he could do would he remain; and, as he came so he departed, and no one knew whence he came or whither he went. But many held that he was a sainted soul.

In a way, all artists are pilgrims (who are??????) driven into exile whenever they settle for good because they just have to journey around the earth or the Hereafter without taking root anywhere; the only place they can and probably must expropriate is heaven. Suppose Dante comes back to Florence and is crowned as a poet laureate: the wolves are on his side now and do their best to please him. But then somebody comes along and accuses him of being an impostor who has visited neither Hell nor Paradise, let alone Purgatory. "You wrote your obnoxious work to take revenge on my fellow citizens and to exalt yourself," shouts the detractor. "Your tercets are full of idle boasting and vaunting. Your inordinate self-esteem makes you the laughing stock of the people who have taken the trouble to read your worthless stuff. You're a hyena making verses among the tombs!" The detractor makes speeches from soapboxes and rostrums; he writes letters to the notables of the city. Dante takes his staff, his manuscript and leaves Florence once again, driven into exile by another pack of wolves. His laurel wreath is thrown into the Arno River and a group of detractors burn a copy of the *Commedia* on the Piazza del Duomo. A few enthusiasts proclaim that he is the greatest living poet, but they are soon silenced and resign themselves to reciting his verses during little social gatherings or among intimate friends. Dante goes from one city to another, the *Commedia* hidden in his bag. At night he opens the manuscript and leafs through it while the stars form a distant crown above his head. He has been crowned by the stars ever since he saw them on his way out of the *Inferno*. Does he really need a man-made crown? In the long run he has come to appreciate the value of Space lying outside the earth's atmosphere. Why seek recognition on earth where Space is devoured by Time? Anyway the earth is so small that one can hardly speak of Space in relation to it.

> L'aiuola che ci fa tanto feroci,
> volgendom' io con li etterni Gemelli,
> tutta m'apparve da' colli a le foci;
> poscia rivolsi li occhi a li occhi belli.
> The little threshing-floor which makes us so fierce was all revealed to me from hills to river-mouths, as I circled with the eternal Twins. Then to the beauteous eyes I turned my eyes again.

In one of his late poems Pasternak wrote about "the love of Space" that a poet should strive for, instead of enjoying his notoriety. I have never loved this poem, but there is a noteworthy and perhaps unconscious reference to Dante in it. To my knowledge, Pasternak has never written anything about Dante; at least in the books I have got in my library the names of the two poets are not to be found side by side. In the poem "the love of Space" is preceded by the statement that fame "doesn't raise one high", which seems to transfer the problem outside the earth's atmosphere. Pasternak's space opens up as he moves upward, travelling from one Dantean sphere to another. He also mentions the "call of the future", which is banal and reminds one of Soviet slogans; unless the line is viewed in terms of Dante's

pilgrimage. "And no one knew whence he came or whither he went." Dante might have come from the twentieth century in which he was fully understood at last. But where did he go, I wonder? To the twenty-first century? Can my commentary serve as an invitation or is it just an SOS call from the future?

At the end of the canto the poet turns away from the whole visible universe to his beloved's eyes which reflect a spiritual part of it: Space is abolished once again. And what about movement? Was it also abolished in them? Does the *Commedia* come to a standstill in the last four cantos situated beyond Space and Time? At first sight the ending seems unambiguous in this respect:

> A l'alta fantasia qui mancò possa;
> ma già volgeva il mio disio e 'l velle,
> sì come rota ch'igualmente è mossa,
> l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle.
> Here power failed the lofty phantasy; but already my desire and my will were revolved, like a wheel that is evenly moved, by the Love which moves the sun and the other stars.

After every canto there is a pause: the suspension of the journey, a cessation of pain in the *Inferno*. In the *Paradiso* joy and love are also suspended indefinitely—until we start reading the next canto; but somehow they do not decrease in intensity. Some animals, such as hedgehogs, exist in a state of suspended animation during the winter. The term I would use in reference to those pauses is "animated suspension". Dante looks at Beatrice; Love moves the sun and the other stars. But when we shift our gaze upward and see the stars, we do not detect any movement unless a falling star chooses to enliven the panorama of heaven. Rooted to the spot, we are at one with the earth that moves in outer space without moving; so do our bodies. I think that the aim of life is immobility, although I differ with Freud whose theory makes all living creatures espouse the cause of death. Immobility is *not* tantamount to death: one remains intensely alive in those moments of utter quietude.

> Now if the work has already led into the blissful fields, the heart is like an expanse of water. When things come, it mirrors things; when things go, spirit and energy spontaneously unite again and do not allow themselves to be carried away by externals. That is what the Master means when he says that every entanglement in thought of other people and oneself must be completely given up. When the pupil succeeds in concentrating with true thoughts always on the space of energy, he does not have to start the light rotating, and the light rotates by itself. But when the light rotates, the Elixir is made spontaneously, and the performance of worldly tasks at the same time is not a hindrance.
> (*The Secret of the Golden Flower*, translated by Richard Wilhelm and by Cary F. Baynes.)

When one succeeds in concentrating one's thoughts on the space of energy, one does not have to start the light rotating: the light rotates by itself, as it does in the last cantos of the *Commedia*. Dante is motionless: "Here power failed the lofty phantasy." But his desire and will are like a wheel that is evenly moved. "When the light rotates, the Elixir is made spontaneously, and the performance of

worldly tasks at the same time is not a hindrance." He writes and does not write. In a way, the *Commedia* writes itself, rotating of its own accord, and Dante just waits for it to come to an end. It never does, being moved by the Love moving the sun and the other stars. When did Dante stop writing the *Commedia*? The following excerpt from Canto XXIX of the *Paradiso* may enlighten us on this point:

> Dal primo giorno ch'i' vidi il suo viso
> in questa vita, infino a questa vista,
> non m'è il seguire al mio cantar preciso;
> ma or convien che mio seguir desista
> più dietro a sua bellezza, poetando,
> come a l'ultimo suo ciascuno artista.
> From the first day when in this life I saw her face, until this sight, the continuing of my song has not been cut off, but now my pursuit must desist from following her beauty further in my verses, as at his utmost reach must every artist.

In the *Inferno*, the poet often swoons and thus interrupts the circular movement of the tortures, but his love song is never cut off, even when one has to turn a page to start reading a new canto; even when one shuts the book to attend to others things. But now he refuses to go on because his beloved's beauty speaks for itself and the stars turn of their own accord. Until that moment one got the feeling that everything had been created and moved by Dante: to some extent, he *had* been a hyena making verses among the tombs. Now the tombs are moving by themselves; so are the stars. And St Bernard speaks on his own:

> "ma guarda i cerchi infino al più remoto,
> tanto che veggi seder la regina
> cui questo regno è suddito e devoto."
> "…but look upon the circles, even to the most remote, until you see upon her seat the Queen to whom this realm is subject and devoted."

Dante just *listens* to St Bernard: his creative genius has no say in the matter. He is no longer a poet, having become a listener, a spectator who is directly involved in whatever happens before his eyes. He obeys St Bernard's exhortation and looks at Mary. According to Singleton, St Bernard follows here a "hierarchical principle requiring that one begin at the summit, which a medieval poet would hardly fail to observe in any case"—another reason for writing the rest of my commentary from the *Paradiso* to the *Inferno*. Dante looks at Mary, at Beatrice. Does he think that love is linked to movement? *L'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle.* The Love which moves the sun and the other stars. Is love ever motionless? The last verse of the poem reminds us of Aristotle's unmoved mover which is analysed in *Metaphysics*:

> The object of desire and the object of thought move in this way; they move without being moved…The final cause, then, produces motion as being loved, but all other things move by being moved…Now if something is moved it is capable of being otherwise than as it is. Therefore if its actuality is the primary form of spatial motion, then in so far as it is subject to change, in this respect it is capable of being otherwise—in place, even if not in substance. But since there is something which moves while itself unmoved, existing actually, this can in no way be otherwise than as it is. For motion in space is the first of the kinds of change, and motion in a circle the first kind of spatial motion; and this the first mover produces.
> (Translated by W. D. Ross.)

As the creator of the *Commedia*, Dante is an unmoved mover towards whom flows the love of his admirers. He moves them through his poem all the while standing motionless in the centre of the universe he has created. In this respect, the only character that looks like him in the entire *Commedia* is Lucifer: he stands at the centre of the earth, half above the ice and half below it. In comparison with Lucifer, Dante's own tottering figure seems inconsequential. Usually I visualise him half above the earth and half below it, his head touching the uppermost heavenly spheres. Where are his feet, I wonder? In the lowest regions of the collective unconscious? When describing his fantasies, Jung speaks of a steep descent and of his attempts to get to the very bottom (where Dante's feet might have left their imprints). During his journeys to the centre of the earth Jung came across Philemon who, oddly enough, was sailing across the sky.

> Philemon and other figures of my fantasies brought home to me the crucial insight that there are things in the psyche which I do not produce, but which produce themselves and have their own life. Philemon represented a force which was not myself. In my fantasies I held conversations with him, and he said things which I had not consciously thought. For I observed clearly that it was he who spoke, not I. He said I treated thoughts as if I generated them myself, but in his view thoughts were like animals in the forest, or people in a room, or birds in the air, and added, "If you should see people in a room, you would not think that you had made those people, or that you were responsible for them."
> (C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, translated by Richard and Clara Winston)

As I said earlier, the last cantos of the *Paradiso* do not seem to have been written by Dante—or by anybody else for that matter. Suspended in the air, Dante looked upwards or around him and saw the figures flying in various directions; like falling stars, they would descend to where he was talking to Beatrice and, after a while, return to the spheres assigned to them. Had he created those saints, angels and prophets? Hardly. They were like stars, like birds, like the people he might have invited to his house. He wrote down their words and described their ways. Paradoxically, a creative artist is both a demiurge and a spectator. I would even say he is an onlooker who has no control over the events he happens to witness. As C. H. Grandgent put it in his comment on the penultimate line of the *Paradiso*, "Dante's individual will is merged in the World-Will of the Creator." That is why he controls and creates *everything*. The only thing he can*not* control (or create) is human love which is much more wayward than Love with a capital L. Dante was unable to move Beatrice, her senses and heart, while

the sun and the other stars were subordinate to his will. He was certainly moved *himself* by her elusive presence, but I wonder if anything moved *inside* him in those moments of unearthly bliss when he was allowed to contemplate her either at close range or from afar—from a balcony, from the surface of the earth. A provençal poet made it a point to suffer on account of his lady's cruelty, otherwise his love would have been truncated, worthless. Didn't he create this cruelty on purpose to remain at a distance from the object of his love? Actually a woman would never become an *object* of his love, for "in relation to anything one regards as an object one feels superior, and the lover feels inferior to the beloved," as W. H. Auden puts it. In order to feel inferior, a poet would endow his beloved with the qualities he needed to remain somewhat estranged from her, all the while complaining of this estrangement brought about by her assumed cruelty. By fair means or foul, he shunned sexual infatuation, "the experience of *Vénus toute entière à sa proie attachée*, in which desire has invaded and possessed the whole self until what it craves is not sexual satisfaction only but a total absorption of the other self, body and soul, into itself; in this condition the dominant feeling is not of unworthiness but of anguish, rage and despair at not being able to get what one craves." (W. H. Auden, *The Vision of Eros*.)

Throughout his journey Dante does his best to remain inferior to Beatrice, which is not always easy, given his unparalleled mastery of rhyme and metre and his inordinate self-regard. The cruelty displayed by his beloved in Canto XXX of the *Purgatorio* is the outcome of this inner struggle, which may be ranked among the highest achievements of *poésie courtoise*. Or was it an easy task after all? Was Dante steeped in the traditions of *fin amors* to the point of forgetting his own self whenever his beloved showed up within his field of vision? Did love move within him in those moments of egotistic paralysis? In what direction could it move? Towards his beloved to implore her forgiveness? Does love really need to move in order to retain its poetical glow? Can't it just dwell within one's heart, on a sheet of paper lying on one's desk?

> Era la mia virtù tanto confusa,
> che la voce si mosse, e pria si spense
> che da li organi suoi fosse dischiusa.
> My power was so confounded that my voice moved and became extinct before it was set free from its organs.

Unable to implore his beloved's forgiveness, Dante continues to write and his hand hovering over a sheet of paper is the only movement of love that a *poète courtois* permits himself. What kind of movement did *I* permit myself as I was sitting opposite my sultry-voiced beloved in that Georgian restaurant? There was no movement either inside or outside my body: I had no wish to touch her. But love was glowing in my heart as I talked to her of Wittgenstein and my own commitment to insoluble problems. And there was no movement of negation in my heart when I suggested we should leave the restaurant to which, incidentally, I did not return during my subsequent sojourns in Moscow. I could

not bring myself to visit the scene of my crime: after all, I broke many rules of courteous behaviour that evening. I also broke my promise to marry her. The movement of anger turned out to be far more powerful than the immobility of love which continues to glow as if nothing had happened.

The cruelty of my dear girl seemed almost commonplace within the framework of our old-fashioned poetical relationship. By breaking the rules of *fin amors* I exposed myself to her insults and consequently, after much soul-searching, I decided to avenge myself. In those days, it was vengeance that moved the sun and the other stars.

> In the matter of vengeance, we must consider the mind of the avenger. For if his intention is directed chiefly to the evil of the person on whom he takes vengeance, and rests there, then his vengeance is altogether unlawful, because to take pleasure in another's evil belongs to hatred, which is contrary to the charity whereby we are bound to love all men. Nor is it an excuse that he intends the evil of one who has unjustly inflicted evil on him, as neither is a man excused for hating one that hates him.
> (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*)

My intention *was* directed to the evil of the person on whom I took vengeance. What is the point in taking vengeance if the object of your ire does not notice it? She did notice my vengeance—I am sure of that. Did my vengeance lodge in her mind and heart or did it go any further, leaving only a few vestiges there? If so, my vengeance was lawful and wholly justified. Did it go as far as human mythology to correct an offensive pattern and re-write a sentence or two? The way she spoke to me at the restaurant was offensive and I thought I had to do *something* about it. I spent a sleepless night after our abortive dinner, analysing the *Paradiso* and drinking whatever I could lay my hands on.

The following day I called my former girlfriend and asked her if she could stand my presence for a few minutes during which I intended to give her the trouser suit I had bought for my fair lady. My former girlfriend said she was still in love with me and half an hour later I stood in front of her apartment. After a traditional exchange of niceties she put the suit on; it fitted her to perfection. Had I unconsciously bought it for *her*? What role did the unconscious play in that story? I invited her to a concert at the Big Conservatoire Hall where I was sure to run into my dear girl accompanied by her mother. Unfortunately my former girlfriend was late and so I missed the opportunity of showing her to my would-be Beatrice who, as it later transpired, had come to the concert well beforehand—in the hope of our reconciliation, I suppose. In the intermission, however, she did catch a glimpse of both my former girlfriend and the suit she wore, which made her leave the Big Conservatoire Hall immediately, her mother following her like a faithful poodle. She knew what the suit looked like because I had given her a detailed description of it on the phone and also in the restaurant. I shall never forget her figure sidling away as I walked arm in arm with my former girlfriend around the Big Hall.

> "E quali agevolezze o quali avanzi
> ne la fronte de li altri si mostraro,

> per che dovessi lor passeggiare anzi?"
> "And what attractions or what advantages were displayed on the brow of others, that you were obliged to dally before them?"

In his commentary of 1568, Bernardino Daniello proposed that the phrase "*passeggiare anzi*" should be understood in the sense of "to court", i.e., by passing frequently back and forth before the house of the lady love—a standard custom of lovers in Dante's time. What would Beatrice have said had Dante walked before her house arm in arm with one of his numerous girlfriends? What would she have said had his girlfriend been wearing the suit intended for her alone, for Beatrice, for the inspirer of the *Commedia*? "What does this girl have to do with *our* masterpiece?" she might have asked him. "And why is she wearing my suit? By the way, why did you buy me a *black* suit? Do you want me to be in mourning for myself? You should buy me a white dress." Now I would buy a white dress, my darling, a wedding dress. Do you remember our stroll in Moscow almost three year ago? Your mother and I popped into a Lacroix boutique to see if it was different from its counterparts in Paris. You stayed outdoors because you thought it was pointless to enter a boutique if you could not buy anything in it. But I *could* have bought this wedding dress for you. What a pity I did not buy it on the spot: now and then objects incite us to an action which seems implausible in the domain of *pure* thought. Our thoughts should be *impure* in this domain unless we are Provençal poets prepared to sacrifice anything for our beloved. But how many Provençal poets are there among us?

"Passing frequently back and forth before the house of the lady love." Whenever she did not answer the phone I was prepared to go and ring her doorbell, anxious to speak to her parents or herself about anything. Why did I have to speak to anyone in those moments of anguish? Uttering words is an action that might move the sun and the other stars in the absence of any other unmoved mover, but there are enough movers in our world and some of them are unmoved, if I am not mistaken. There are too many movements around us and people seldom sit opposite each other for hours and hours, talking and daydreaming.

> If, however, the avenger's intention is directed chiefly to some good to be obtained by punishing the person who has sinned (for instance that the sinner may amend, or at least that he may be restrained and others not be disturbed, that justice may be upheld, and God honoured), then vengeance may be lawful, provided other due circumstances are observed.
> (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*)

Did I intend to benefit anybody by punishing my beloved? I am not sure she is willing to better herself or even to re-write a sentence, a single word, in her code of behaviour. Actually she does not have any, doing everything on the spur of the moment, and the moment in question often spurs her to provoke a potential husband into a state of rage. Why not re-write every future moment? Unfortunately this can hardly be done beforehand given the spontaneity of people around her. And what if she finds a man whose love (and mind) is so immobile as to allow her enough room for manoeuvre? Do I still care

about her future lovers and husbands? Did Dante care about Beatrice's husband? He never avenged himself on *him*, neither in the *Commedia* nor in real life which was less real than the *Commedia*, as many critics point out. Considering the poet's propensity for punishment, this is indeed a remarkable fact for which I have been unable to find an explanation so far. Over the years of creative work, his artistic license must have acquired many human traits, usurping real life to the extent of obliterating those who interfered with the overall design. How many times did he run into her husband in the streets of Florence? There were many blind spots in Dante's life; Beatrice's husband is the most notorious of them. Of course he is not allowed to meet with his wife either in Paradise or anywhere else: for him she would not have descended to Limbo, let alone spoken to anybody on his behalf. Is he at least allowed to dwell outside the wall of Purgatory? Dante is silent on this point as if Beatrice's husband had been removed from the Book of Life (and Death) once and for all. Could he have devised a worse punishment for his enemy? Was Beatrice's husband his enemy or even his rival? He shared with his wife one bed and daily sat opposite her at the dinner table, by the fireplace; but he never saw her from afar, from a window of an ivory tower. Was this a punishment or a blessing?

Dante often left his ivory tower to take a stroll in the streets of Florence where, from time to time, he would run into Beatrice. In those moments he saw her in the flesh; the reality of her appearance excluded any recourse to symbols and suchlike. While Beatrice was at close range, Dante did not think in terms of allegory except when he mounted with her through the spheres of the *Paradiso*. But Florence was not a city situated in Paradise; nor was it a Paradise on earth, as testified by Dante's letters and writings. She took no notice of him and he might have taken revenge on her in the *Commedia*, but for his magnanimous attitude towards his most precious symbol.

Perhaps he did avenge himself on her by describing their meeting at the end of the *Purgatorio* in such a way as to awaken our desire to re-read *The Taming of the Shrew*. The mise-en-scène of her coming is spectacular and awesome. In the midst of light there appears a mystical procession heralded by seven candlesticks and followed by twenty-four elders and four beasts. The triumphal car of the Church is drawn by a Gryphon representing the twofold nature of Christ. Apart from everything else, Beatrice's escort is rendered monstrous by the addition of a woman with three eyes, who symbolises Prudence and is capable of seeing the past, the present and the future. This allegorical woman seems to mock Beatrice's beauty or any female beauty for that matter. Carlo Steiner writes, "A three-eyed woman is a monster, but the Poet does not bow to the restrictions of art here because he is more interested in expressing the moral code that is dear to him. This is an unequivocal proof that not art but the love of the Good occupied first place in the soul of this very great artist."

At the end of Canto XXXII of the *Purgatorio*, a harlot usurps Beatrice's place in the chariot.

Sicura, quasi rocca in alto monte,
  seder sovresso una puttana sciolta
  m'apparve con le ciglia intorno pronte;

> e come perché non li fosse tolta,
> vidi di costa a lei dritto un gigante;
> e basciavansi insieme alcuna volta.
> Secure, like a fortress on a high mountain, there appeared to me an ungirt harlot sitting upon it, with eyes quick to rove around; and, as if in order that she should not be taken from him, I saw standing at her side a giant, and they kissed each other again and again.

Of course the harlot represents the Church or just a part of it: the Papacy under Boniface VIII and Clement V. But doesn't she also mirror a trait in Beatrice's character? Did Dante entertain the idea that all women were harlots by nature? One betrayal on the part of a woman is apt to turn a man into a lifelong misogynist, and Dante might have regarded Beatrice's marriage as a betrayal of their love—a bit of wishful thinking par excellence. And who is the giant standing by the harlot's side and kissing her over and over again? Philip IV? "The house of France may be intended by the figure, not merely Philip the Fair," says Singleton. About Beatrice's husband we know next to nothing, but his continuous presence by her side ought to have contributed to his stature in Dante's eyes—hence this insatiable giant.

> Ma perché l'occhio cupido e vagante
> a me rivolse, quel feroce drudo
> la flagellò dal capo infin le piante
> But because she turned her lustful and wandering eye on me, that fierce paramour beat her from head to foot.

A *scène de ménage*, by Jove! But most of the time the husband was conspicuous by his absence in Dante's consciousness. In one of my *Commedia*-induced dreams I heard him saying to his ancestor Cacciaguida, "Beatrice's husband is a somewhat shadowy figure who may not have even existed." Anyway, every outburst of jealousy was followed by another beatific vision; once again she was at his side, smiling and resplendent. In Canto XXXIII of the *Purgatorio*, Beatrice says a few Latin words: "*Modicum, et non videbitis me; et iterum, modicum, et vos videbitis me*." ("A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me.") Of course, on this occasion, she just repeats Christ's words (John 16:16). But doesn't she always repeat someone else's words: Dante's, other women's? She often quotes St Thomas and again one gets the feeling that the book has come into existence on its own. And by whom is the present commentary written? By myself, by St Thomas, by Jung, by Dante? It is partly written by Boccaccio:

> A worthy man of Ravenna, whose name was Pier Gardiano, and who had long been Dante's disciple, grave in his manner and worthy of credit, relates that, after the eighth month from the day of his master's death, there came to his house before dawn Jacopo di Dante, who told him that that night, while he was asleep, his father Dante had appeared to him, clothed in the whitest garments, and his face resplendent with an extraordinary light; that he, Jacopo, asked him if he lived, and that Dante replied: "Yes, but in the true life, not our life." Then he, Jacopo, asked him if he had completed his work before passing into the true life, and, if he had done so, what had

> become of that part of it which was missing, which they none of them had been able to find. To this Dante seemed to answer, "Yes, I finished it"; and then took him, Jacopo, by the hand, and led him into that chamber in which he, Dante, had been accustomed to sleep when he lived in this life, and, touching one of the walls, he said, "What you have sought for so much, is here"; and at these words both Dante and sleep fled from Jacopo at once.
> (Boccaccio's *Account of the Commedia from Balbo*, *Life of Dante*, translated by Mrs Bunbury.)

After the poet's death, his sons and disciples thought his major work had remained unfinished, for they had been unable to find the last thirteen cantos. And then Jacopo di Dante had the dream in which his father told him where to search for the conclusion to the *Commedia*. Following his instructions, Jacopo and Pier Gardiano found a little window in the wall where the remaining cantos had been hidden. In my dreams Dante appeared to me only once; I saw his solitary figure advance along a perspective of tombs like a wild animal stalking his prey. He neither said anything nor even cast a glance in my direction. But he might be guiding my hand right now: the dead need not *appear* before us, for their invisible presence is far more efficient and instructive. What if, some day, I find the rest of my commentary in a hiding place I am not aware of tonight?

At least he keeps me company by proxy—through this commentary in which I draw on his texts and on whatever has been written about him and his numerous shadows. And whenever he leaves me for a while I wait for him patiently as he waited for Beatrice and Christ: "*Modicum, et non videbitis me; et iterum, modicum, et vos videbitis me*."

CHAPTER 4

A few months ago I thought I had finished this commentary for good; I thought life might take over, relegating any text, however illustrious, to another, inferior level of existence. When writing the previous sentence, I made a typing error: "light" instead of "life". What kind of light? An artificial light, a literary light? When I read the following tercet, I close my eyes as if smitten by the rays of the sun:

> un punto vidi che raggiava lume
> acuto sì, che 'l viso ch'elli affoca
> chiuder conviensi per lo forte acume
> I saw a point which radiated a light so keen that the eye on which it blazes needs must close because of its great keenness…

It is a pity I did not go on writing yesterday when I was so inspired, so elated at my capacity to pour out my emotions and worries for hours. I was literally bathed in light as I wrote about it and quoted Dante's tercet so that I did not lie when I said I had to close my eyes as if smitten by the rays of the sun: I did close them for a few seconds. Now my eyes are wide open and, oddly enough, I see no light except the daylight percolating into my room through the window. It really *percolates* through the window because this light is rather heavy and has many characteristics of water; and my window, despite its imposing size, looks like a hole today. All I have to do is reduce this window to the size of a microscopic point to make it look like the point of which Dante speaks in the *Paradiso*. And then my window will radiate the light so intensely that I shall close my eyes "before its poignancy extreme", as Laurence Binyon put it in his translation of the *Commedia*.

> In Dante's new vision God appears as a microscopic point of exceeding brightness. The centre of a circle is like the Almighty in its immobility and its lack of extension. Minuteness is a token of indivisible unity; and the one Indivisible Unit is the centre and source of all light.
> (Grandgent, *La Divina Commedia*)

In the light of Dante's tercet and this comment, light is an indivisible unity, which may lead us to the following conclusion: all lights look alike. Even the expression "in the light" radiates the light of which Dante speaks in the *Paradiso* and sees on his way out of the *Inferno*. But today I am at a long distance from the exit, and the light I see is just the remnants of what I experienced yesterday and the day before. I am not jealous by nature and have no wish to know with whom my would-be Beatrice is walking along the streets of my native city. One can feel an acute pain without being jealous or rancorous. I called her a few days afterwards as if nothing had happened and she said, "There's another man in my life." At the time I still did not know the result of my blood test and so light-heartedly added another death to *my* life, another circle to my Hell. I am as good at addition as my former

beloved. How can I avenge myself now, at this stage of our relationship? What stage is it? I have not called her ever since that cliché-ridden exchange. "There's another man in my life." The last canto of our *Inferno* was predictable, full of banalities and tediously dull.

Perhaps Dante did not avenge himself on Beatrice who is overloaded with symbols on account of her greatness; but there are other women in the *Commedia* and one of them bears the brunt of Dante's rancour against his beloved. Anthony Esolen comments on Canto V of the *Inferno*:

> Now here, in his treatment of lust, Dante could have contented himself with ugly brutality, with the rutting and snorting of our animal natures. A lesser poet would have made the all-lecherous Semiramis the queen of this canto. Instead, our paradigmatic sinner is the courtly and lovely Francesca, and her sin has every worldly justification you can name.

"…I think of two lovers who were dreamed of by Alighieri in the hurricane of the Second Circle and who are dark emblems, although he perhaps neither knew that nor intended it, of the happiness he did not attain," writes Borges. In my opinion, Dante was quite aware of the discrepancy between his existence and that of Paolo and Francesca. He was aware of it to such an extent that he resolved to avenge himself on them by placing their intertwined bodies in the Second Circle where they could in no way relish the *immobility* of love.

> E come li stornei ne portan l'ali
> nel freddo tempo, a schiera larga e piena,
> così quel fiato li spiriti mali…
> And as their wings bear the starlings along in the cold season, in wide, dense flocks, so does that blast the sinful spirits.

Dante singles out Paolo and Francesca who "seem to be so light upon the wind", as he says to Virgil. *E paion sì al vento esser leggier*. "This suggests," writes Singleton, "that these two spirits are more violently tossed by the wind than the others are. According to the principle of just punishment, the heightened violence of the wind signifies that the love, which led them in life and leads them now, was and is, most passionate." By the violence of this wind one can measure the love which led Dante throughout the Hereafter to where Beatrice awaited him. Paolo and Francesca were too close to the ideal he had nourished in his youth when following Beatrice around Florence, and he could not bring himself to forgive the lovers their happiness. His own love was not confined to that microscopic point where one can contemplate the Almighty: it was as large as Florence, as large as the worlds depicted by him in the *Commedia*. But in those days he cared neither about those worlds nor about his masterpiece, for "here's metal more attractive". Did he ever visualise himself and his beloved in the shape of two birds flying above treetops where nobody could interfere with their love? Is that why he put Paolo and Francesca in the midst of the flock where *anybody* had an opportunity to obtrude upon their privacy?

Ed elli a me: "Vedrai quando saranno
più presso a noi; e tu allor li priega
per quello amor che i mena, ed ei verranno."
And he to me, "You shall see when they are nearer to us; and do you entreat them then by that love which leads them, and they will come."

Virgil's advice may be deciphered as follows: "Your love for Beatrice will induce them to speak of their love which makes them fly faster and faster." Let us shorten this sentence, excluding from it the love of the sinners. What we are left with amounts to nothing more than Dante's love for Beatrice, which moves the sun and the other stars through its momentum. But in this canto (and in real life) it is Paolo and Francesca who move the sun and the other stars; and Dante is powerless to stop them. Unable to endure the punishment he has inflicted upon himself, he swoons at the end of the canto.

During the suspension period I read a few cantos from the *Paradiso* and reflected on Dante's vengeance which was psychologically linked to my inability to inflict any punishment on my treacherous and unfair lady. Several times I met Vladimir Martynov who had been demoted to the status of my dearest Moscow friend: I did not need Virgil any more. I read the first pages of the present work to him and for a while we discussed the word "information" that crops up at the very beginning of Foreword. To vindicate their lack of culture, many people blame our civilisation for the speed-pattern it imposes on their daily rounds and holidays. "Everything goes so fast today," they complain, zooming along. Why are they in such a hurry? Are they late for their appointments? Why should they make appointments at all? To survive? Those people can *survive* without most of their appointments, but they are just longing to get more of what they have already. Our ancestors might have worked even longer, judging from the number of *their* holidays and working hours; but they neither used mobile phones nor spent hours in front of television screens, watching yet another soap opera. I began our discussion by quoting J. Lotman:

”'Culture is the totality of non-hereditary information acquired, preserved and transmitted by the various groups of human society.' So a poem is also a piece of information which can be transmitted and acquired in due time if there's someone to whom it *can* be transmitted. A painting is a piece of information, a piece of music is a piece of information. But to *whom* can they be transmitted? To the people talking for hours on the Internet? What do *they* transmit to each other, I wonder? Could we call their chit-chats a piece of information?"

"So everything is information, is it?" said Volodya. "Lotman's statement is not the absolute truth but a partial one that concerns our times, our mentality. Our times have given weight to this word which was as light as a feather in former times. And the importance we attach to this word affects our perception of the world and ourselves. In the twentieth century a lot of time was devoted to language and the problems caused by it. Now we just speak and transmit information because we are bent on transmitting it. From this point of view, a fool's ramblings are also a piece of information. We

constantly look for information and find it wherever we can."

"It doesn't really matter," I said, "what word we use to describe the trash we are bombarded with day and night. When I speak of a monk studying a manuscript in a medieval cloister, I draw the reader's attention to our capacity to *better* ourselves through books or in the company of wise old men. Should we get information just for the sake of information or yet another profitable deal? Our 'self' is at stake and that's why I'd rather concentrate on the quality of what I acquire than on the word I use to describe the process."

"But this word wouldn't have been used by St Augustine, would it?" asked Volodya. "You can concentrate on the quality of what you get only through the words that lead to this quality and pave the way to its reception in your mind. Otherwise you won't get anywhere."

"I'm not sure this word can modify our perception of the world in the way the result of an experiment is modified by the observer, by his attitude," I said. "Actually it's our attitude that is likely to influence our reception of whatever material we may be supplied with and not the word 'information'. What's the Annunciation? Another 'piece of information'? Do these words modify the contents of the biblical event? Not for a true Christian who, in addition to his own feelings, may experience it through an exegesis, a painting or a poem, taking no notice of the word 'information'."

"But this word denotes and determines your attitude towards a piece of knowledge you receive," said Volodya. "How could you get rid of this word which is daily buttressed by how we are informed of what goes on around us? Even the past is subjected to it because we experience it through the medium of the present."

"I experience it through Dante, St Augustine and St Thomas—"

"—who are also affected by our times," Volodya interjected.

"But I don't study them in the way I watch TV or read a contemporary novel. Incidentally, I don't read contemporary novels. Do you?"

"I don't read novels at all."

To Celesta, who was his servant and secretary of sorts, Proust owned up to having no imagination: he had to *collect* the data he needed. I am certainly not superior to Proust in this or any other respect, which does not preclude me from peppering my writings with many a figment of my imagination. On the other hand, my memory will never allow me to collect any data unless I resolve to carry with me a camera and a cassette recorder. There was no cassette recorder on the table at which we were sitting opposite each other that afternoon. So I am unable to reproduce our dialogue word for word despite a few notes I took as we enlarged upon the significance of information. Most of the time, however, our thoughts drifted aimlessly from one subject to another, bumping now and then against this or that problem one may face in our society; whereupon the word "information" would surface again to my great annoyance. Volodya said my monk might have gone to the monastery in search of information, but was obliged instead to polish someone's shoes or sweep the chimney. "And now we

usually get the information we're looking for without passing through the obstacle course of monastic rules or Soviet censorship."

"You're right," I said. "What we get today is pure information devoid of Space and Time. We extract it from nature or from somebody and leave both nature and that person aside as if they were superfluous. But they're part of this information which is flat and useless without them. Such information really looks like information and not like a living substance, a creature of flesh and blood. And what we need most of all is a man with whom we might talk and discuss the importance of information, among other things. A landscape is also this man or woman to whom we have no access any longer. We can't see the trees for the twigs—the wood disappeared a long time ago. Polishing someone's shoes may be a useful occupation, providing you aspire for knowledge behind it or even inside it. Besides, polishing shoes in a monastery is different from your preparations for a cocktail party. But did they polish shoes in medieval cloisters?"

I do not have Volodya's answer on the scrap of paper I used during our talk. Anyway I said something different and was not as long-winded as I am now: solitude is talkative. "A monk knew the Bible and nothing else." Volodya told a few stories about that. A monk was enjoined to memorise the Gospels. Two years later he recited the text in the presence of his fellow monks. "Go and learn by heart the Acts." And so on and so forth. At some point the monk said, "I can't remember anything."

"Never mind, go on reading."

"But I don't understand anything."

"Never mind that too."

I have never tried to memorise any tercet of the *Commedia*. And I understand it only in parts, if at all.

> Un punto solo m'è maggior letargo
> che venticinque secoli a la 'mpresa
> che fé Nettuno ammirar l'ombra d'Argo.
> A single moment makes for me greater oblivion than five and twenty centuries have wrought upon the enterprise that made Neptune wonder at the shadow of the Argo.

Dante endeavours to recall the time he spent in Paradise, but a single moment of this time is loaded with alien images and thoughts which distort the contents of that moment. He says to himself, "I should do my utmost to recall it. Now let me see..." And he sees nothing or something else. He sees an hour and not a moment. And then he remembers there was no time in Paradise—not at *that* stage of the journey; so it makes no sense trying to remember a moment or a year or any stretch of time. But what *can* he remember? There was no Space in the upper regions of Paradise either. And our memory needs Space and Time to get hold of an event, of an object. Yet our memory is non-spatial as if it were born in the upper regions of Paradise or at least in the last four cantos of the *Commedia*. "My memory was born in Paradise. Why can't it remember its own dwelling place?" Nor do *I* remember the house I

was born in: I was literally snatched from it at the age of five. Our memory lives on earth and not in Paradise from which it must have been removed at an early stage of its growth—perhaps at our birth. Yet we do remember Paradise in patches, otherwise Dante would have been unable to describe it. Where does all this imagery come from?

Dante discusses a moment situated beyond Time in terms of Time, comparing the amount of oblivion his memory contains to the twenty-five centuries that had elapsed since the voyage of the Argonauts. In the course of these twenty-five centuries a lot of alien thoughts, descriptions, myths and memories had been deposited on that moment when Neptune wondered "at the shadow of the Argo". Many events had interposed between Neptune's wonderment and the last canto of the *Commedia* where everything is reflected as if in a distorting mirror. And yet this mirror offers us an *authentic* picture of Paradise because any pious, Paradise-oriented thought depicts it accurately. Does it?

> But if we do not remember except what we have [sensuously] perceived, nor conceive except what we remember; why do we often conceive things that are false, when certainly we do not remember falsely those things which we have perceived, unless it be because that will (which I have already taken pains to show as much as I can to be the uniter and the separater of things of this kind) leads the vision of the conceiver that is to be formed, after its own will and pleasure, through the hidden stores of the memory; and, in order to conceive [imagine] those things which we do not remember, impels it to take one thing from hence, and another from thence, from those which we do remember; and these things combining into one vision make something which is called false, because it either does not exist externally in the nature of corporeal things, or does not seem copied from the memory, in that we do not remember that we ever saw such a thing. For who ever saw a black swan? And therefore no one remembers a black swan; yet who is there that cannot conceive it?

In this extensive quote from St Augustine's *On the Holy Trinity* the very mechanism of self-deception is acutely described and analysed. The author carries his analysis so far as to furnish us with an example of how the force of imagination operates in the framework of a religious concept. Throughout the treaties he *recalls* almost exclusively the data that could not have been perceived and thereby stored in his memory. His conception of the Trinity is based on other conceptions which are as devoid of any link with reality as his own. His will guides him through the hidden stores of his memory where only books and other people's ideas can be found. Like a child crawling on all fours amidst his toys, he picks up one thing here and another there without bothering to relate them to what he sees through his window. What *does* he see through his window?

> But "the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not." Now the "darkness" is the foolish minds of men, made blind by vicious desires and unbelief. And that the Word, by whom all things were made, might care for these and heal them, "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us." For our enlightening is the partaking of the Word, namely, of that life which is the light of men.

What is there in any window except the light of nature? And then you go out into a thickening twilight

and realise that the light of nature is not as permanent as the word "light" seems to suggest. And you need not wait for a *real* twilight: the streets have become eerie in a *fake* twilight created by a smog of mist and smoke, according to a magazine I read during my flight to Moscow. Soon you end up realising how unreliable the light of nature is when confronted with our civilisation. The light of men is different, for no external interference can darken it either in the evening or at rush hour. Human will, memory and thoughts make up another trinity which keeps this light on by means of permanent circulation. Restless and disappointed, our will embarks upon a journey to the hidden stores of memory where it finds the light of men which is subsequently transmitted to our mind. This light illuminates our thoughts to the point of making us reflect it not only in our mental process but also in our writings, paintings, etc. Upon seeing our own paintings and reading the texts we have written our will becomes restless again, for it cannot find the light depicted in our works. Beyond our windows the shadows are falling already and when we switch on the lights we realise our shadows are not to be dissipated by chandeliers and halogen lamps. So our will undertakes another journey to the core of our memory which radiates the light depicted in the last canto of the *Commedia*:

> O luce etterna che sola in te sidi,
> sola t'intendi, e da te intelletta
> e intendente te ami e arridi!
> O Light eternal, who alone abidest in Thyself, alone knowest Thyself, and, known to Thyself and knowing, lovest and smilest on Thyself!

In this tercet Dante speaks about the light of God circulating between the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. As the light of men is self-contained, so this light seems to be confined within its own frontiers which provide no outlet for it, creating a sort of Light Curtain. How does it leak out? How do these two lights communicate? Are they totally different? Is the light of men just another halogen lamp standing in our mind? Did Dante switch this lamp on when about to write the last canto of the *Commedia*? "All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and *he* to whomsoever the Son will reveal *him*." The ending of this verse is of the utmost importance because it provides the outlet for the light of God, which would otherwise have remained confined within its own bounds. "...and *he* to whomsoever the Son will reveal *him*." Some read only the beginning and the middle of the verse, ignoring the last component of this trinity; others do not read it at all. And the illiterate switch on the lights everywhere and continue to walk in the dark.

After depicting the self-contained light of God, Dante passes on to the problem of communication which has been tackled differently in our society:

> Quella circulazion che sì concetta
> pareva in te come lume reflesso,
> da li occhi miei alquanto circunspetta,

dentro da sé, de suo colore stesso,
  mi parve pinta de la nostra effige:
  per che 'l mio viso in lei tutto era messo.
That circling which, thus begotten, appeared in Thee as reflected light, when my eyes had dwelt on it for a time, seemed to me depicted with our image within itself and in its own colour, wherefore my sight was entirely set upon it.

Dante's will propels him to the luminous point where the image of Christ is engraved in letters of fire. Where is that point situated: in his memory, in Paradise or just in his *Paradiso*? He reads the image and writes it down as if to reverse the process by which the Word was made flesh. And then he reads his own tercets and painstakingly corrects them; as he does so, the image he sees before or above him undergoes a metamorphosis. Or was the procedure Dante used in any way similar to what is called "*écriture automatique*"? I read somewhere that he had not really chiselled his tercets, mostly letting them follow their paths unimpeded. In this and some other respects he reminds me of Fra Angelico who, according to Vasari, "would never retouch or correct his pictures, leaving them always just as they had been painted since that, as he used to say, was how God wanted them". No amount of will can locate in our collective memory a most insignificant sample of his handwriting, let alone the manuscript of the *Commedia*; it is difficult to work out how many corrections used to blacken the pages of his manuscript. Of course he must have made a number of corrections in the *Inferno* so as to inflict a more sophisticated punishment on his favourite sinners whose torments might have increased through his poetic intervention. (By praying for a soul dwelling in the *Purgatorio*, the living can *shorten* its term of trial.) Be that as it may, at the end of his masterpiece he contemplates Christ in His glory where the light of two other persons of the Trinity has come to be reflected. In Christ's mirror he perceives his own self and the entire population of the earth down to most obnoxious criminals who, though doomed to rot in Hell, had been made in the image of God. Isn't he just looking at himself in one of his mirrors? And what about that colour? Where has it come from? Our image, its *own* colour; Christ has risen in the flesh, hence the definition "our image". His divine nature, on the other hand, is symbolised by the colour He shares with the other persons of the Trinity. Do we have any share in this colour? Which colour is it? Is it a colour unknown to us? I would create my own trinity by uniting the three persons through the same colour. Dante proceeds in a different manner: he unites them through the same magnitude.

Ne la profonda e chiara succistenza
  de l'alto lume parvermi tre giri
  di tre colori e d'una contenenza
Within the profound and shining subsistence of the lofty Light appeared to me three circles of three colours and one magnitude…

Three persons (*hypostases*) in one nature (*ousia*); three colours in one and the same dimension. Would I attribute to them the same magnitude? Perhaps not. At the end of the poem Dante described the

Trinity in geometrical terms, but Michelangelo would not have got away with three circles drawn on the vault of the Sistine Chapel for the simple reason that Pope Julius II surveyed him closely. Even if left to his own devices, he would not have succumbed to the temptation; actually I am sure he was *not* tempted to depict either the Father or the Son geometrically in spite of his lifelong admiration for Dante. (František Kupka might have hit upon the idea and carried it out brilliantly.) Usually, in Renaissance paintings, the Father is slightly bigger than the Son and the Holy Ghost is minuscule in comparison with them both. And in Michelangelo's fresco Adam is slightly bigger than God. Andrey Rublev is closer to Dante's pictorial conception of the Trinity, and yet he knew neither the Italian poet nor his masterpiece. The three figures seem to outline a circle, their heads tilted sideways; they have approximately the same size and their clothes differ in colour or rather in the combination of colours.

The word Trinity does not appear in the New Testament which, however, established the basis for the doctrine of the Trinity by suggesting a circular movement that Dante hints at in the *Paradiso* and that St Matthew envisages as follows: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. And so on and so forth. Proposed early in the fourth century by the Alexandrian presbyter Arius, a Christian heresy bearing his name declared the uniqueness of God Who is alone self-existent and inmutable. The Son, on the other hand, is neither self-existent nor immutable, being subject to growth and change; He therefore cannot be God. Arius believed that Christ had been born out of nothing and consequently does not deserve to have a direct knowledge of the Father Who belongs to a different order of existence. Borrowing Dante's terminology, one might say that the Father is different in both colour and size. Arius' teaching undermined the Christian concept of redemption by reducing the Son to a demigod unable to reconcile man to the Godhead. In Dante's terms, the Son was reduced to a semi-circle or a crescent-shaped substance. How would Arius have depicted Christ in his poem? "The moon was brightly shining crescent, unworthy of the Sun." By the way, the three figures in Rublev's *The Trinity* also resemble the crescent of the moon, especially the Son and the Holy Ghost whose *entire* bodies can be seen in the foreground. (A part of the Father's body is hidden by a table.) In the Gnostic religion Jesus is somehow correlated with night-time and the moon because he wakes "the innocent Adam".

> Jesus the Luminous approached the innocent Adam. He awakened him from the sleep of death, so that he might be delivered from the many demons. And as a man who is just and finds a man possessed by a mighty demon and calms him by his power—so was Adam because that Friend found him sunk in deepest slumber, awakened him, made him stir, shook him awake, drove away from him the seducing Demon and removed the mighty Archon away from him into bonds. And Adam examined himself and discovered who he was...He [Jesus] raised him up and made him eat of the Tree of Life. Then Adam cried and lamented: terribly he raised his voice like a roaring lion, tore [his dress], smote his breast, and spoke: "Woe, woe unto the shaper of my body, unto those who fettered my soul, and unto the rebels that enslaved me!"

"What to do?" is a favourite Russian question to which the inhabitants of my motherland have striven to find an answer for many years, for centuries. At least they have been awake all this time, for a sleeping man neither asks himself questions nor seeks answers to them. Today such a question may be asked in relation to daily routine, but it is not prompted by cosmic or microcosmic feelings and so does not guide us to the Tree of Life. Jesus the Luminous could lead us to it if He succeeded in waking our bodies and driving away the seducing Demon from our souls. To accomplish this task, He does not need to subject Himself to torture and death on the Cross, which would go unnoticed anyway, for a sleeping man is engrossed in his dreams. What does he see in his dreams? His repressed wishes, desires, longings which have nothing to do with Jung's collective unconscious, I'm afraid. Incidentally, his wishes are not repressed: he talks about them to his wife, his friends and even his children who are proud of their father and hope all his plans will come off. They do come off in his sleep and his wife is delighted to see a smile on his face as he goes on dreaming about this and that. But his wife is dreaming too without noticing it; she is asleep and her dream offers her an image of her husband. O Darkness eternal, who alone abidest in Thyself, alone knowest Thyself, and, known to Thyself and knowing, lovest and smilest on Thyself!

But why do I speak of these people? My fellow creatures, my fellow citizens, my countrymen. Shouldn't I take care of myself, heeding the advice of Cicero and Foucault? But how could I take care of myself in those days when my destiny was in the hands of the doctors I had never consulted? Moreover, I knew that my destiny was not in the hands or the minds of my doctors, whoever they might be: it was exclusively in the hands of my destiny and of my destiny's destiny. O Darkness eternal, who alone abidest in Thyself, alone knowest Thyself, and, known to Thyself and knowing, lovest and smilest on Thyself! How many destinies did I have at the time? I was told I would not suffer for long, assuming three years is a short stretch of time; nor would I suffer from brainstorms that have nothing to do either with Beethoven's *Sturm Sonate* or Shakespeare's *Tempest*. But wasn't I doomed to drift from one darkness to another? Mind you, I always work with my curtains drawn so closely as to exclude every particle of daylight from my room: only my halogen lamp is allowed to illuminate my manuscripts. What does illuminate my manuscripts apart from the halogen lamp? The sun, the moon? The Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost? Jesus the Luminous?

"And Adam examined himself and discovered who he was." What did Elvis Presley say in the film I saw before my departure for Moscow? "Never forget where you came from and who you are." But the discovery of your own self does not include your geographical whereabouts or your personal history that has been written by other people, by circumstances. "I was born in Moscow" means nothing unless you are really a Muscovite and belong to the city where so many things have happened ever since Dolgoruky said, "Let us build a city on this spot."

> Jesus showed him the Fathers on high and his own Self cast into all things, to the teeth of panthers and elephants, devoured by them that devour, consumed by them that consume, eaten by the dogs, mingled and bound in all that is, imprisoned in the stench of darkness.

I was born in Moscow, but whenever I return to my native city I am eaten by the dogs and imprisoned in the stench of darkness. I look at Jesus the Luminous and see my own image, my own flesh and blood. Even now I am eaten by these dogs. And in former times I saw and felt the teeth of panthers and elephants because my self was spread or scattered over Moscow, over St Petersburg. My illness. I was thinking of it whenever I was alone or in company with Jesus the Luminous Who was shaking the body of Adam in a vain attempt to awaken him. In the Gnostic text He does awaken Adam and makes him eat of the Tree of Life that Christians equated with the Tree of Knowledge. "Their Jesus is a serpent in Paradise," they said. Did they really say that? A few scraps of paper, a few words written on them. By whom were they written? What do they mean?

My illness. The teeth of panthers and elephants. I walked around Moscow. Shops and restaurants. My own self cast into all things. What things? The girl who greeted me at the entrance of a Ukrainian restaurant? She accompanied me upstairs, her miniskirt rising and falling before my eyes like a curtain in a theatre. What kind of theatre was it? The theatre of death, I suppose, assuming such a theatre exists somewhere outside the American Hospital. I had dinner in that Ukrainian restaurant on the day when I was to call my friend in Paris to find out about my life expectancy: the doctor who treated me in the clinic I had visited before my departure for Moscow was her cousin. What did I eat that memorable night? I do not remember. I was just eating and eating. "Let me keep drinking and drinking," as a popular song has it.

What song? In what language was it written? Was it written at all? That scrap of paper was lost many years ago. Why does it remain in my mind? Does my will impel me to concentrate on it? There are so many scraps of paper in my mind I cannot see what is written on them. Should I see what is written on them? What for? Are they my blood or urine tests? That is the only thing I am interested in—my tests (and my texts). What do I care about Dante and his *Paradiso* that was a figment of his imagination? There are so many Paradises and Hells at my disposal that I do not need other people's contributions to my *commedia*.

"I think there is always a part of you that doubts what you are doing." A few sentences floated into my mind as I walked to the metro station from which I could call my friend in Paris: only a few Moscow telephones are designed for international calls. What part of my self doubted what I was going to do? Did I have to call my friend to find out whether I was dying or not? Wasn't it better to live in fool's paradise or in Dante's *Paradiso*? To the bitter end? "I'm completely in the dark about my problems." Another sentence, another death sentence. Oh, it is so easy to link any sentence with death—when you are dying. "She stumped out of the room." She did not stump out of the room because we had been sitting in a Georgian restaurant and not in my Versailles flat where she could

have indulged in her theatricals, had she vouchsafed to pay me a visit. But it was my death anyway, her departure, the way she walked to her front door: she did not wave goodbye to me. She did not turn back to look at me. And I kept saying to myself, "I'd better take a cold shower. She twisted me round her little finger." Did she? I adored her elongated fingers, her hands, the way she gesticulated as she talked about her plans and dreams. Why didn't she twist me round her little finger? Some other sentences, the ones I had memorised when reading the book on the Gnostic religion. Why had I memorised them? "Matter and her sons divided me up amongst them, they burnt me in their fire, they gave me a bitter likeness." I was just Matter, nothing else. There was nothing spiritual in my body, in my soul. Even my soul was material and the sons of matter continued to divide and burn it. They gave me a bitter likeness. What did I look like? Probably like my illness that was also a son or a daughter of Matter. I was not suffering from a spiritual illness, was I? A spiritual illness, a psychic illness. "I've never gone to a psychiatrist or psychoanalyst," I thought. "My soul is healthy. But how can I take advantage of its health if my body is ill and dying? It is dying, isn't it? I'll find out in a few minutes."

I called my friend from the metro station. Nobody answered the phone. "She's forgotten about my illness," I thought. My thoughts were not dying. "Having dinner with her friends, is she? It's easy to dine with your friends if you're *not* dying." And then I realised it was 6 p.m. in Paris; she was not at home yet. Two hours. In Moscow it was already 8 p.m. "The Primal Man regained consciousness and addressed seven times a prayer to the Father of Greatness. The Father heard his prayer and called forth as the second creation the Friend of Lights, and the Friend of Lights called forth the Great Architect, and the Great Architect called forth the Living Spirit." The Dying Spirit, the Dying Matter. I returned to the flat I was staying in and opened the book on the Gnostic religion. Gnostic, Gnostic, Gnostic. I relished the sound of this word. The Father of Greatness, the Friend of Lights, the Great Architect, the Living Spirit. The Quaternity. Joachim of Fiore attacked this doctrine in one of his works, didn't he? But the doctrine of Quaternity he attacked had nothing to do with Gnostic religion. What was that Christian doctrine about? An overemphasis on the "one essence" of the Godhead that separated it from the three persons of the Trinity, creating a fourth person. The sons of Matter continued to divide the world, to burn my body and soul. As I paced up and down my room I saw *Anna Karenina* on a shelf and recalled that only one chapter in the novel was entitled: *Death*. I removed the book from the shelf, found the chapter and began to read it, pausing now and then to look at my body as if comparing it with that of Lyovin's brother. His mistress said, "He'll pass away shortly, look." And then she used a bizarre verb "*obirat'sya*" that she might have coined herself with the aid of her prototype. The dying man was trying to remove something from his body. He would pinch his body and throw away a particle of it. But death is not to be removed so easily. Death is not a notice you stick up on a board with pins. Death is not a leech sticking to your body. So Nicholas Lyovin did not succeed in getting rid of death. I stripped my clothes off and examined my body once more. Then I examined my clothes as if death might have been lodging inside them, in their material, in their pockets. "Why not burn my

clothes?" I thought. "It's much more difficult to burn my body. What if my body is uninflammable? It's been on fire for so long and it's still alive." Why does Tolstoy mitigate the effects of death by making Nicholas look handsome during the initial period of his stay in the Hereafter? An invisible light illuminates his features and a smile peers out of his moustache. Again I am reminded of that Russian story about three drunkards: Petya looks well in the coffin because he has not drunk for three days. Why do women (and some men) have face-lifts to smooth away their wrinkles? Death is the best cosmetic surgeon. All you have to do is wait for a few days, a few years. Anyway suicide is cheaper than a face-lift. It is even cheaper than anti-wrinkle creams. But I did not care about my wrinkles; they continue to deepen and multiply on my forehead, around my eyes and my mouth. All I cared for was my life and I knew for sure that the light and smiles on the faces of the dead were no proof of another life which, according to Dante, was truer than the one we lead on earth. Why does Tolstoy counterbalance death by turning his adorable heroines into ugly pregnant women? Nicholas dies and Kiti gives birth to a healthy son who does not die at the end of the novel despite a horrible storm. But even if Nicholas is alive in the Hereafter he does not care about this healthy boy or any other child born after his death: his mistress was *not* pregnant when he was dying. He must remember his life on earth, though. And he wishes he had lived much longer, thirty years longer. Earthly life cannot atone for death. Nicholas dies and Mitya is born; even their names are different. And if their names were the same, their bodies and minds and souls would be different. Perhaps life in the Hereafter can atone for death on condition that we fly with our Francesca or our Paolo around the universe. Tolstoy writes in a letter to Boborykin, "The aim of an artist is not to solve a problem irrefutably, but to make people love life in all its countless, inexhaustible manifestations." So he first describes a death agony in graphic detail, with intolerable realism, and then shows us a baby splashing in a bath. According to him, death is just a manifestation of life; but this manifestation deserves a title in the novel where we come across no other titles. And I recalled how Tolstoy had grieved for an octogenarian aunt he had lost when working on *Anna Karenina*. "No day goes by that I do not think of her. That's quite easy for you others, the believers, but to us it is very hard." I opened the *Paradiso* and re-read the last canto.

> Li occhi da Dio diletti e venerati,
> fissi ne l'orator, ne dimostraro
> quanto i devoti prieghi le son grati…
> The eyes beloved and reverenced by God, fixed upon him who prayed, showed us how greatly devout prayers do please her…

And suddenly I saw God's eyes in front of me, a pair of luminous eyes. And I knew they belonged to God, although Dante speaks about Mary's eyes. Riding roughshod over grammar, I created God in my own likeness and looked straight into His eyes as if to stare Him down. But instead of looking away, God multiplied his eyes so that now all the walls were covered with them. But all those eyes did not *remind* me of God. "In literature there are animals covered with eyes," I thought. "And in the *Paradiso*

there's an eagle..."

> Parea dinanzi a me con l'ali aperte
> la bella image che nel dolce frui
> liete facevan l'anime conserte…
> With outstretched wings appeared before the beautiful image which those interwoven souls, joyful in their sweet fruition, were making.

The lights in which the spirits are hidden shaped themselves into the pattern of an eagle. But I just saw a multitude of eyes on the walls and on the ceiling, and those eyes were staring at my body without curiosity or anger. They stared at me *neutrally*. "I read somewhere that Satan's body is covered with eyes from head to foot," I thought as I opened the last canto again.

> Qual è colüi che sognando vede,
> che dopo 'l sogno la passione impressa
> rimane, e l'altro a la mente non riede
> As is he who dreaming sees, and after the dream the passion remains imprinted and the rest returns not to the mind…

I have no idea whether it was a dream or not, but even now I shudder when I recall those eyes and their cold stare. Do the stars look at us like that? "…*e cede la memoria a tanto oltraggio*." "…and at such excess memory fails." No, my memory does not fail. "…*più si conceperà di tua vittoria*." "…more of Thy victory shall be conceived." Death is often called "victorious" by poets and even simple mortals who have enough time to give a thought to death. "…*ch'una favilla sol de la tua gloria*…" "…a single spark of Thy glory…" Death has been victorious throughout centuries, but glory is not secured by victories, is it? Hitler was victorious many times in the thirties. "*O somma luce*." "O Light Supreme." They all speak about light: poets and mystics, lunatics and prophets. You take an overdose of sleeping pills and go into a deep coma. Your girlfriend pays you an unexpected visit and, after shouting your name several times, finds your immobile body in your bed. She calls an ambulance and you are conveyed to the nearest hospital where your insides are turned inside out. No more sleeping pills in your body and mind. You go out of the deep coma and tell everybody you saw a tunnel at the end of which there was a luminous point. "What kind of light was it?" they ask you, dying to know if there is life after death. "*O somma luce*," you answer. Or you may say something else if you are not acquainted with Dante's masterpiece. Sunlight, moonlight, firelight. You may say, "I could see the city lights in the distance. It was the City of God." "Was there enough light to take a photograph?" they ask. "Of course," you answer. "Why didn't you take it then?" Or you speak about a candle you saw at the end of the tunnel. And when you reached the end of the tunnel and picked up the candle, you found yourself inside a cathedral. "All tunnels converge on this cathedral," you round off. How come you know of other tunnels? Have you explored them all? When? How many times have you gone into a deep coma? Why do those people generalise and jump to conclusions? Why do they

always speak about light? Why do they never switch off their lights? All right, there *is* a light at the end of every tunnel and behind every door. You reach this light and find yourself in a spacious hall where you are warmly welcomed by the host who shows you round his new collection. And he refers to your new fellow countrymen in his welcome speech. After a while you realise that your new abode is a wonderful setting for a candlelit dinner. You also realise that the candle you saw at the end of the tunnel is standing on a dinner table. All your new friends are gathered around the table strewn with dainty dishes. "I like Russian *zakuski*," says the host. "Smoked fish, caviar. Don't you?" Yes, death is a perfect host. And he also has a penchant for light. Doesn't heaven look like a dinner table adorned with candles? "…*e da te intelletta / e intendente te ami e arridi!*" "…and, known to Thyself and knowing, lovest and smilest on Thyself!" Death knows himself pretty well. If some day he forgets his identity and wonders who he is I shall remind him of his temperament and moods, of his cruelty and playfulness. And he knows how to make us toe the line and put us through our paces. This line leads to the end of the tunnel and our host sets the pace. And we quicken our pace to reach the light we have seen as soon as possible. But it is not true that death smiles on himself: I saw his smile that night. And I said to him, "I don't know what you're looking so pleased about—you can wipe that smile off your face this instant."

"I'm here to help you," he said, smiling benignly.

"But why do you smile?" I asked. "You should take pity on me."

"I smile benignly," he answered.

"I think you smile malignantly," I said. "My tumour is malignant, isn't it?"

"What are you speaking about?" He smiled the smile of a man who knew victory was within reach.

"Do you think you're victorious?" I asked.

"Maybe," he said, with an enigmatic smile.

"In your shop you sell tacky souvenirs and ornaments, don't you? It's a shop and not a cathedral, I gather."

"Maybe," he said, with an enigmatic smile. "And you get a free gift if you spend more than $100."

"…*sì come rota ch'igualmente è mossa*…" "…like a wheel that is evenly moved…" I was rolling towards death through that tunnel or along a motorway. I drove at a steady speed all the way. The point is you always move *evenly* towards death in spite of occasional crises and recoveries. The earth does not stop at some point of its trajectory, for death moves the sun and the other stars. *La mort qui meut le soleil et les autres étoiles*. *L'amour, la mort*—another cliché. The universal grammar of death. Or the French grammar of death. Anyway one language is enough to murder you. So you cannot stop dead in your tracks until you are really dead. And if you say "at some point", you should not forget that the point in question was moving evenly towards the end of the road. All these points

move and become straight lines. Death has its own trinity: old age, illness and accident. My body chose the second component of this trinity. It was not too late to have an accident, was it? "Any car would do," I thought. Old age was out of the question. But in the days of Dante I would have been regarded as an old man, wouldn't I? In my childhood I thought any man over fifty was an old man. Another trinity: Death, logos (illness, accident) and Holy Ghost (Time). Why deprive me of life at the very moment I began to believe in God and embarked on my commentary? It is the wrong moment, isn't it? The wrong moment in the wrong place. Why not transfer it to another place, to another man or woman? To an old man, an octogenarian? But Tolstoy could not forget his octogenarian aunt because every death is a loss. Going backward like a crab, I passed on to Canto XXXII of the *Paradiso*. Unconsciously I was longing to move backward in order to reach Hamlet's age, but not his predicament. Can one become Hamlet only in part? A young, handsome, healthy prince whose father has not been murdered. No grudge, no revenge.

> Così di contra quel del gran Giovanni,
> che sempre santo 'l diserto e 'l martiro
> sofferse, e poi l'inferno da due anni
> …thus, opposite, does the seat of the great John who, ever holy, endured the desert and martyrdom, and then Hell for two years…

I had no time to consult Singleton's or any other comments. Mechanically I assumed Dante was speaking about St John the Baptist who had spent two years in Hell, for all his greatness and holiness. Helliness. Why not coin a new word? In no time I realised St John could not have been treated otherwise because Christ had not visited the Hereafter yet—neither Hell nor Paradise. But for Christ's personal intervention, nobody was supposed to settle in Paradise, in the Garden of Eden. And Christ had to endure the torments on the Cross before going to Hell where several people awaited him. Were they saints already or were they bestowed this title on their arrival at their final destination? Well, I was not dying to become a saint either in Paradise or on earth. And I did not think about Hell because all my thoughts were concentrated on earth and its delights. Within the bounds of my mind there were no thoughts left for the Hereafter and its kingdoms. But my body must have shrunk at the touch of Hell during those hours I spent in my room: the body has a highly developed sense of touch.

> In forma dunque di candida rosa
> mi si mostrava la milizia santa
> che nel suo sangue Cristo fece sposa…
> In form then of a pure white rose the saintly host was shown to me, which with His own blood Christ made His bride.

The celestial Rose, the eternal Rose, the Rose of Paradise. The beginning of Canto XXXI. But I was far from heaven in those moments. I saw my body and other human bodies which were also subject to decay and death, to our hospitable death. He invites us to dinner, takes us to bed and tucks our bodies

in. I recalled the body of a child lying in bed and a doctor bent over the child. A story by Kafka in which there is another rose or the same rose. At first the doctor thinks that the child simulates pain and death, but then he discovers a rose swarming with worms. A white rose, a red rose? There must have been some blood in it. A white rose and blood in the same tercet. The child is dying and there is nothing the doctor can do about it. But I was not dying, was I? I was not a child any more, so I was immortal. Only children die and are buried, their bodies strewn with roses.

I went to a liquor store and bought two bottles of vodka. And then I called my friend from another metro station. She answered the phone and told me everything was all right. "Are you sure?" I asked. "Tell me the truth." She said the blood test was all right.

> ma non eran da ciò le proprie penne:
> se non che la mia mente fu percossa
> da un fulgore in che sua voglia venne.
> …but my own wings were not sufficient for that, save that my mind was smitten by a flash wherein its wish came to it.

I do not understand this tercet. Why should I? Why should I understand anything? I am alive, isn't that enough? Montaigne said something to this effect. What did he say? "You have lived, that is enough." He spoke about a day during which he had not done anything except eating, drinking and looking out of the window. "Comin' in on a wing and a prayer." My mind was smitten by a flash or rather by a *Flasche*: I drank a bottle of vodka. Was I happy? My wish came to it. To what? To life? I wanted to live and my wish came to it. Sounds strange, doesn't it? But I took no notice of sounds as I enjoyed my immortality in Moscow. What did I take notice of? My life perhaps. I am not tired of it, for all my disappointments. W. H. Auden says that Kierkegaard "suffers from one great literary defect, which is often found in lonely geniuses; he never knows where to stop. Lonely people are apt to fall in love with the sound of their own voice, as Narcissus fell in love with his reflection, not out of conceit but out of despair of finding another who will listen and respond." In this chapter I have fallen in love with my own body that endures in spite of bugs, cancers and heart attacks. Is it attacked by the sons of Matter? But Matter does not matter, does it? Anyway I do not know where to stop. Should I stop now? Why not? Why not be short-winded for once?

CHAPTER 5

Regained through Dante's mnemonic effort, Paradise lay open before me like a book. But he was not there, the author, in his white dress. And what should I do in Paradise without him?

I saw these sentences in my sleep last night. They were written in the book lying open before me, and the book was entitled *Paradise*, not *Paradiso*. "That's why Dante isn't here," I thought. Did he only live in the *Commedia* and not in the *real* Paradise? I began to leaf through the book in which there were many pictures and very few words; and the words I could decipher did not speak of Paradise or its inhabitants. For instance, there was the following passage from *Leviathan*:

> *Continuall successe* in obtaining those things which a man from time to time desireth, that is to say, continuall prospering, is that men call FELICITY; I mean the Felicity of this life. For there is no such thing as perpetuall Tranquility of mind, while we live here; because Life it selfe is but Motion, and can never be without Desire, nor without Feare, no more than without Sense.

I recalled I had an intention of including this passage in my commentary to reflect the ups and downs I went through during that period of my life when hope and dejection, life and death, alternated in it with such vivacity. To paraphrase Hobbes, I might say my despondency was not perpetual because my life moved from one mood to another, from one test to another, turning this way and that. Now I saw death in it; now there was a semblance of eternal life in one of its movements that was circular and perpetual. Actually I saw such a movement in my last dream as I heard St Bernard's voice talking about the decrees of heaven, "To live eternally one must invent a perpetual mobile." So far I have invented only one perpetual mobile: writing books. I might have written some of them long before my birth and, by means of that machine connected to my brain and not to my heart, I shall go on writing after my death. What did my friend call this state of mind and body? Heart death. I think I shall write after my death even if left alone: the sun and the other stars will not allow my thoughts to come to a standstill, continually sweeping them off their feet, as it were. To have one foot in the grave, to have two feet in the grave. "But if you are continually swept off your feet, you're immortal," I said to myself, my thoughts walking further and further away. Another image from my last dream, a linguistic one. In my dreams I often come across images based on words and expressions, which proves that I write during my sleep as well. And death is just another form of sleep, isn't it? In French and in Russian they also speak of one foot in the grave, but only in English can you be swept off your feet by love.

> "Ma perché 'l tempo fugge che t'assonna,
> qui farem punto, come buon sartore
> che com elli ha del panno fa la gonna;
> e drizzeremo li occhi al primo amore,
> sì che, guardando verso lui, penètri

> quant' è possibil per lo suo fulgore."
> "But because the time flies that brings sleep upon you, we will stop here, like a good tailor that cuts the garment according to his cloth, and we will turn our eyes to the Primal Love, so that, gazing toward Him, you may penetrate, as far as that can be, into His effulgence."

Commentators admire the humble simile used by St Bernard in Canto XXXII of the *Paradiso*, where he might have spoken about a king or a rainbow instead of a tailor bent over a piece of clothing in some workshop. I am more preoccupied with sleep and Time which are definitely out of tune with the songs that Dante hears in the realms far removed from our everyday life and its base needs. Why does he have to sleep in the upper spheres of Paradise where Time neither flies nor crawls? What can he dream about at this stage of his journey? About the Primal Love that is inaccessible to our senses: only in a dream can one encounter it. At the end of the first tercet Dante falls asleep and hears "*e drizzeremo…*" in his dream where he is shown the rest of the *Paradiso* and probably the other parts as well. When and where did he fall asleep? In the dark wood? Was the wood dark on account of the poet's sins or had he just switched off the lights before going to bed?

Six centuries later Joyce deliberately reproduced not only our dreams but even their mechanism partly based on words and their amalgam. In a talk with Ezra Pound he said a few words to this effect as he vainly tried to defend his work, "One great part of every human existence is passed in a state which cannot be rendered sensible by the use of wideawake language, cutanddry grammar and goahead plot." But Ezra Pound was not convinced, although he had promised to have another go at *Finnegans Wake* in a letter he had written Joyce a few days before: "I will have another go at it, but up to present I make nothing of it whatever. Nothing so far as I make out, nothing short of divine vision or a new cure for the clapp can possibly be worth all that circumambient peripheriazaion." The *Commedia* would be worth ploughing through even if it were written in the style of *Finnegans Wake*—for the sake of the divine vision enclosed in it. One might say it is *partly* written in the style of Joyce's novel given the number of neologisms one comes across on its pages, the last one adorning line 138 of Canto XXXIII: *s'indova* (putting itself in the where). But in terms of sheer abstruseness it never comes anywhere near *Finnegans Wake* which, apart from our dreams, reflects the muddy waters of modern life and consciousness: no spiritual pattern has been imposed either on its structure or details.

No pattern has been imposed upon my life either, and that is why I may be swept off my "self" by an imaginary disease. There is no "goahead plot" in my life and yet its objective is to create a real world unlike the one we come across in *Finnegans Wake* where dreams have pride of place. Not only in the *Commedia* did Dante go from Hell to Paradise, otherwise he would have been unable to write it. Mooning around the streets of Florence, he progressed inexorably towards the last canto of the *Paradiso* beginning with a prayer to the Virgin Mary, said by St Bernard. From a literary point of view, it is banal and cliché-ridden because a prayer cannot be otherwise: a metaphor or even a comparison would be out of place. A prayer is always straightforward and inexorable—a goahead

plot—unless the person saying it is burdened with a deadly sin, like Claudius in *Hamlet*. I cannot even bring myself to transcribe it, deterred as I am by its straightforwardness; after all, my commentary is not a prayer book. But Dante had no qualms about including an ordinary prayer in his highbrow masterpiece: it was part of his goahead plot, wideawake language and cutanddry grammar. He had no intention of writing a dream-book in which words and images would overlap each other, resulting in a mumbo-jumbo saturated with zigzags and circles. I always speak about a literary work in terms of texture which must consist of zigzags, angles of vision, perspectives and circles.

> The story goes that at the time Andrea Verrocchio was making his bronze horse Giorgione fell into an argument with some sculptors who maintained that since a statue showed to anyone walking round it different aspects and poses, sculpture was superior to painting, which could represent only one aspect of any given subject. Giorgione argued to the contrary that in a single scene the painter could show to an observer standing still in one place various aspects of the one figure by depicting a number of different gestures; whereas for a work of sculpture to produce the same effect, he said, the observer must change his position and viewpoint.
> (Vasari*, Lives of the Artists*, translated by George Bull)

In a work of literature we must be shown many aspects of a given subject as if we were walking around it or crawling under it or flying above it in a helicopter. The prayer said by St Bernard in the last canto of the *Paradiso* does not afford these perspectives and angles of vision because it deals with our salvation from one point of view only—that of the Catholic Church. But it is the right thing that comes at the right moment, and I have neither right things nor right moments at my disposal; my life lacks a clear-cut structure. And even if I chance upon a beautiful image or idea I cannot place it rightly as if I was living in a non-spatial world deprived of topology, of any landmarks. I think I am commenting upon the last canto of the *Paradiso* but, apart from some occasional words, there is nothing in my text that might remind one of it. This is not even a comment on the *Inferno* placed at the beginning of the *Commedia* and not just in the murky bowels of the earth. Whatever I write is hopelessly misplaced so that St Bernard's prayer would become a sorcerer's incantation, if quoted in this or any other chapter of mine.

I recall a hassidic story in which a family travels to a town where a prayer should be said in a synagogue during a religious ritual. On the way, the man gets lost or rather stays behind, unable to finish his work in time for the departure; when the hour of the prayer comes he is very far from both his family and any synagogue. Moreover, he does not remember the words of the prayer he is supposed to say throughout the ritual. So he just says a few words or many words, thinking about God. He does not really concentrate on the secret name of God as he utters a few words of his prayer; and those words are neither poetical nor spiritual. And yet God praises him highly in a vision he is granted shortly afterwards, on the way back home. "Your personal prayer pleased me no end," says God.

Even my words are a prayer because "God" can be seen in the middle of these words. What does it matter *how* I put them side by side on the pages of my manuscript? It is the personal prayer of a

man who has got lost in the dark wood, on the streets of Moscow, on his own sofa facing a huge television. One day, while sitting on this sofa, I watched a German play inspired by the *Inferno*. As I switched the television off I hit upon the idea of writing a commentary to the *Commedia*: watching TV is not always a complete waste of time.

In another hassidic story Rabbi Hirsh complains to his teacher that, whenever engaged in prayer, he sees fiery letters and words flash before his eyes. "These are the mystical concentrations of our sacred master Rabbi Isaac Luria," says Rabbi Mendel. He thinks that his disciple has no reason to complain about the result of his prayer. But Rabbi Hirsh desires to concentrate on the *meaning* of the words. "What you have in mind," answers Rabbi Mendel, "is a very high rung which only one man in a whole generation can reach: that of having learnt all secret wisdom and then praying like a little child."

Letters and words are lining up before my eyes; there is no fire in or around them. Do I pray like a little child who plays with building blocks in his attempt to build a castle or a tower? Does he really try to *build* something? I am trying to build something, but I have no building blocks at my disposal—only letters that cannot be arranged in the appropriate order. Should I concentrate on the meaning of the words? Let them sing their song unassisted.

Rabbi Hirsh saw fiery letters and words flash before his eyes. In Canto XVIII of the *Paradiso* Dante and Beatrice ascend from the heaven of Mars to the "temperate star" of Jupiter, the sixth heaven, where are spirits renowned for justice. Flying towards the protagonist, they shape themselves into letters.

> Mostrarsi dunque in cinque volte sette
> vocali e consonanti; e io notai
> le parti sì, come mi parver dette.
> They displayed themselves then, in five times seven vowels and consonants; and I took note of the parts as they appeared in utterance to me.

Inspired by this image, I wrote in the previous chapter that Christ had appeared to Dante "engraved in letters of fire".

Is St Bernard's prayer utterly devoid of *literary* merits? The words of the greatest poet in history sing as usual, but that is not enough, given the importance any self-respecting author attributes to the *meaning* of his or her text. There are two or three zigzags and perspectives I found in it last night when, spurned by Morpheus once again, I questioned my straightforward description of it. Is it really so simple and one-sided as all that? Let us take the following line, "*sua disïanza vuol volar sanz'ali*" (his desire seeks to fly without wings). Desire can just *go* forward, but Dante makes it fly without wings. Beckett would have said it goes without legs or crawls without arms. But would Beckett speak of any desire? A desire to crawl on? Yes, a desire to crawl on, further and further. One can reach Paradise by crawling on all fours, provided one puts the right thing in the right place; or the wrong

thing in the right place. All depends on God's grace, as St Augustine puts it (in the right place). But I did not mind flying to the Virgin Mary without wings because I did not have any; and even my legs were not reliable so that one could say about me, "An old man doddering down the street." Or doddering down the drain.

> La tua benignità non pur soccorre
> a chi domanda, ma molte fiate
> liberamente al dimandar precorre.
> Thy loving-kindness not only succours him who asks, but oftentimes freely foreruns the asking.

Let it forerun the asking: you cannot rely on yourself in these matters. You ask something and your demand is not answered. And should you ask nothing, your non-existent demand will be answered at once. Suddenly you receive a present you have not been thinking of—something you do not need. And what you do need is not given to you. Or vice versa. Or you are given something you want to have and after a while you realise you do not need it. Or you need it only partly. But what part do you need? This part or that part? You spend hours and hours trying to determine which part of the object you need and when you make up your mind at last it disappears, leaving a few traces of lipstick behind. "I don't usually wear lipstick," as my former girlfriend used to say. She was lying. Why couldn't I forget all those women at the time when my life hung in the balance? Could I forget anything? "Do you think we pick our noses and spit on the ceiling?" my dear girl said on the phone before our farewell dinner; she was at the office—on duty, as it were—and could not talk to me for hours. Why can't I forget that? My memory is a family album where I find a dozen of her photographs on which this sentence is written obliquely—like a dedication. What would she tell me if we were to meet on the threshold of Paradise?

Did I ask to be cured of my half-imaginary disease during those days I spent in Moscow, waiting for the result of the blood test? I did not address the Almighty or the Virgin Mary *directly*, as St Bernard does in Canto XXXIII:

> Qui se' a noi meridiana face
> di caritate, e giuso, intra' mortali,
> se' di speranza fontana vivace.
> Here thou art for us the noonday torch of charity, and below among mortals thou art the living fount of hope.

I neither said nor thought anything of the kind, but I hoped my riotous body would be spared the experience of a speedy decay. Perhaps that hope of mine was heard as if it had been couched in words and expressed aloud. "I'm sorry but my doppelgängers didn't agree on a form of words," I might have said in vindication of my silence. To whom might I have said that? To the Virgin Mary? If you are taught to pray in your childhood, your prayer keeps going under its own momentum and you pray

mechanically, whenever in need of support or just before going to bed. I was born in a communist country and even my mother and grandmother did not pray in a moment of need, although they believed in God and went to church regularly. Inspired by Dante, I might have prayed to the Virgin Mary, reading out loud the beginning of Canto XXXIII in Italian: in such matters pronunciation does not count. But is Dante's prayer efficient or is it poisoned by literature? Of course there are no literary flourishes in it with the exception of the "noonday torch of charity" and flying "without wings". And what about rhymes? How could they affect the efficiency of a prayer? Do all rhymes sound insincere, artificial, contrived? Dante's triple rhyme reflects the Holy Trinity in the manner described by the poet as follows:

> e l'un da l'altro come iri da iri
> parea reflesso, e 'l terzo parea foco
> che quinci e quindi igualmente si spiri.
> …and one seemed reflected by the other, as rainbow by rainbow, and the third seemed fire breathed forth equally from the one and the other.

But the prayer I ought to have said under the circumstances was to reflect my hope, my will to live and my trust in God—*another* trinity, in other words. Why didn't I recite St Bernard's prayer in the English prose translation I use in this commentary? Blake did not illustrate the final two cantos of the *Commedia*: he was reluctant to participate in the ultimate triumph of the female principle, especially in the figure of the Virgin Mary. Was I influenced by Blake at that point? In Canto XXXIII the prayer to the Virgin Mary is followed by Dante's prayer to God, which I would not have recited on that occasion: the poet asks the Almighty to grant him enough energy and skill for the work he is about to write. And I was not thinking of my commentary in those days, my mind usurped by a terrestrial love and an infernal disease. Why didn't I just *pray* in those moments of distress without bothering about words and creeds? I might have prayed in Russian, uttering a few simple words I heard in Moscow churches before my departure for the West. Does the female principle triumph in Orthodox rituals? So many icons picture the Virgin Mary. Why didn't I just look upwards, imploring her to help me? A glance without words, a mute man's glance.

> supplica a te, per grazia, di virtute
> tanto, che possa con li occhi levarsi
> più alto verso l'ultima salute.
> …implores thee of thy grace for power such that he may be able with his eyes to rise still higher toward the last salvation.

I might have sung Desdemona's prayer from Verdi's opera. In Shakespeare's work Desdemona does not pray on stage and says only "Then Lord have mercy on me" as Othello announces his intention to kill her. In Verdi's *Otello* she prays beautifully to the Virgin Mary, after having sung the "willow-song". Knowing the opera by heart, I could have sung the prayer easily in Russian: at Music College I

had often accompanied a singer performing the piece. In Russia we study accompaniment and chamber music at colleges and conservatoires. Exceptionally I might have sung the prayer without an accompaniment.

What would my prayer sound like, my personal prayer? "I'm sorry, I've never prayed in my life and have no idea how to do it. I suppose any words would do if I duly concentrated on Thine image. But what is Thine image, on what should I concentrate? Thy name is secret and can't be uttered on any occasion. Is this a special occasion? I'm dying or perhaps I'm not. Who knows? Thou knowest that already, I presume. Grant me enough time to finish my commentary and write a few poems. Anyway I'll never meet my Beatrice because today a girl you fall in love with talks to you about picking her nose. Keep those girls away from me so I can finish my work in peace. Could I finish my work in peace, in utter solitude? If it weren't for her behaviour, I wouldn't have resumed my work on this commentary. Her coarseness and shyness. Even my disease supplies me with important material for work. What would I do if I was left in peace and allowed to live until ninety-eight? A writer I knew in Moscow died at this age in his sleep. He lived with a woman who kept on nagging about trifles and, on top of everything, betrayed him with his best friend."

How did Giorgione get round the problem of showing to "an observer standing still in one place various aspects of the one figure"?

> He painted a man in the nude with his back turned and, at his feet, a limpid stream of water bearing his reflection. To one side was a burnished cuirass that the man had taken off, and this reflected his left profile (since the polished surface of the armour revealed everything clearly); on the other side was a mirror reflecting the other profile of the nude figure.

God does not need mirrors to see various aspects of one's destiny without stirring from His place (the unmoved mover). He sees the past, the present and the future in one point which may be different from the points Dante mentions in the *Commedia*. These are either suffused with light or radiate it while God has no need of light to see everything. In terms of negative theology, God is neither light nor darkness, and the point where the past, the present and the future meet may be just neutral, whatever that means under the circumstances. Incidentally, under the circumstances there are no circumstances to speak of because everything must be neutral in the realm of God: "neither…nor…" as Kierkegaard might have put it. A sort of status quo devoid of nuances, tints and moods; devoid of action and non-action. Why must the show go on? Another question I ask rather often without getting an answer. Does God also suffer from one great defect, "which is often found in lonely geniuses"? He does not know where to stop. Did He fall in love with the sound of His own voice, like Kierkegaard? He continues to write the history of the world out of despair of finding another who will listen and respond. What about Dante and St Augustine? Didn't *they* respond to God? Would He have stopped had He heard them?

"Your anthropomorphic vision of God is not in keeping with Dante's points and circles," said

my Parisian friend.

"I cannot always quote the *Commedia*," I replied. "Besides, I am not good at geometry."

I have not fallen in love with the sound of my voice; I just can bear it and that is enough to go on writing and living. You do not have to love our world or agree with its values. If there is only one voice you can listen to without reaching for your pistol, you survive and even prosper to some extent. But *can* I bear my own voice? In my room it sounds pleasant and I often get the impression of hearing Beethoven's quartets and Schubert's trios without switching my record player on. Of course I may be mistaken, considering that I am prejudiced in my own favour: in this case my mind reads what has been written by my mind. Like Narcissus, it falls in love with its own reflection, or at least it respects and admires its own reflection in which it finds whatever it yearns for: texture, perspectives, angles of vision, visions, signs of visionary thinking. I may be mistaken.

> Many works of art seem beautiful when they are being made, but, after they have been moved from the workshop and put in place, in a different light or higher from the ground, they present another aspect and seem altogether different; but Donatello made his statues so well that in the room where he was working they never appeared half as good as they turned out to be when they were put into position.
> (Vasari*, Lives of the Artists*, translated by George Bull)

What happens to my works when they are removed from my study to a place of which I know nothing? At least Donatello knew the places where his statues would be installed, although, like any writer, he had no idea who would enjoy or denigrate them. Let my readers embroider upon my texts as much as they wish; let my readers write a commentary upon my commentary. The more comments we have got around us the better. But people just grasp whatever they happen to lay their hands on and put it in their pockets or carry it in their bags, in their suitcases. They use the objects they come across without pondering over them in order to appropriate their thing-in-itself substance, their Jungian self. And you cannot put my books in your pockets because your pockets are too small for my books. You have to write a two-thousand-page commentary on every book of mine to understand what this is all about. No point in falling ill, though: an imaginary disease is quite enough.

Do I always see and hear my works from the same vantage point situated in my study? And what about the rest of my flat and the wood where I take my walks? From the top of the Mount of Purgatory where I am standing this afternoon I can see Paris far away and in the middle distance my unfinished commentary. Actually it is just at the foot of the Mountain, for I have written only an infinitesimal part of it. But I need not write *myself* and therefore have a very flexible arrangement with Space and Time. So my commentary will have to catch up with me. Or is it the other way round? "It may take you a few years to grow into the work," said Volodya as I confided to him my idea of writing a commentary on the *Commedia*.

ma del salire
non m'accors' io, se non com' uom s'accorge,
anzi 'l primo pensier, del suo venire.
È Bëatrice quella che sì scorge
Di bene in meglio, sì subitamente
Che l'atto suo per tempo non si sporge.
…but of my ascent I was no more aware than is a man, before his first thought, aware of its coming. It is Beatrice who thus conducts from good to better, so swiftly that her act does not extend through time.

The above excerpt comes from Canto X of the *Paradiso*, where Dante and Beatrice journey to the heaven of the Sun. Like a man with an empty consciousness, Dante does not think about the distance he covers in his flight. But before the first thought of the man to whom the poet compares himself there is in the mind of the former a kind of ante-thought that precedes the actual thought. This ante-thought is a presentiment of the forthcoming mental process as much as Hell's ante-room is a harbinger of Hell. Dante knew they would not stay forever in the heaven of Venus; his mind must have prepared him for the next stage of their journey which, however, required no effort on his part except noting down the fact with great panache. He did not have to buy a ticket, to pack his things and to board a plane or a helicopter. Nor was he supposed to focus his attention on the distance separating Venus from the Sun. When I read the *Commedia* I do not concentrate on distances as such because most diagrams you find in books on astronomy or astrology make you aware of the universe's layout and not of the light years you would have to take into consideration when travelling around the outer space. So I might find myself on top of the Mount of Purgatory without having to climb upward: one simile is enough. Is it? I can open the *Commedia* at any page; my eyes alight on a tercet and I start reading. I am not aware of my ascent (or descent) because I am borne by Dante so swiftly that this act "does not extend through time". Do I really have to *climb* the Mount of Purgatory?

Did many artists climb the Mount of Purgatory? Did Picasso climb it? His paintings are a good talking point for two reasons at least. Firstly they demonstrate how a brilliant painter can enjoy himself for more than eighty years in front of a canvas or a sheet of paper, modifying his styles and attitudes. Secondly they prove that, for all his skill and imagination, this painter can remain in an ante-room of what he paints because he does not bother to open the door leading to either a circle of Hell or a sphere of Paradise. In my opinion Picasso would pick up a piece of fruit lying on his table, bite into it, put it back and paint it. And he thought that biting into the fruit was quite enough. He seemed thereby to kill two birds with one stone: he relished the taste of the fruit and used it as a model for his picture. He proceeded in the same manner with human beings among whom there were many women he loved. In 1923, in the magazine *The Arts*, he declared, "I do not develop, I am…I can hardly understand the importance given to the word research…to find is the thing." He had a lot of women and fruit at his disposal so that all he had to do was take a brush and paint them. He did not really look for Beatrice or the forbidden fruit and therefore felt no need to climb the Mount ofPurgatory which is a

symbol of development, of getting nearer and nearer to the truth. And Cezanne's fruit is the forbidden fruit. So are Van Gogh's shoes. By undertaking a journey to Hell Dante conducted a fascinating research into the language of the damned; Picasso, on the other hand, remained in the ante-room of Hell because he was unwilling to research. In this ante-room he heard some cries, which enabled him to paint *Guernica*.

> Diverse lingue, orribili favelle,
> parole di dolore, accenti d'ira
> voci alte e fioche
> Strange tongues, horrible outcries, utterances of woe, accents of anger, voices shrill and faint…

Why did he depict the war through a bullfight? Because a bull was standing in Hell's ante-room. The painting is spectacular—there is no denying it. But can we really hear these *parole di dolore*? We just *see* them, I'm afraid, which is sufficient for many people, for almost everybody. Am I contradicting myself? In Hell's ante-room he *heard* some cries, but we can only *see* them as we look at the famous picture. Does art contradict itself? Giorgione said that "in a single scene the painter could show to an observer standing still in one place various aspects of the one figure by depicting a number of different gestures". Allegory was one of the methods used by Dante who had enough mirrors at his disposal to make us see and hear the whole panorama of the Hereafter—a magnificent *son-et-lumière* spectacle. We can also smell and touch it, which gives me an opportunity to coin another term related to the *Commedia*: an *odeur-et-touché* spectacle. *The Execution of the Emperor Maximilian of Mexico* shows a vista of open doors while *Guernica* depicts a terrifying room. Manet is a Dantean painter. In this picture he interprets Goya's *El Tres de Mayo* and pays homage to geometry, to clear-cut structures of which Dante was a unique master. (Our destiny is clear-cut, isn't it?) The rifles are horizontal, the trees vertical. One rifle cuts diagonally through the right-hand side of the picture. One soldier does not take part in the execution: either he has run out of bullets or he is the painter himself, holding a rifle and turning away from the scene. By means of this diagonal he reconciles the impassive nature with the passionate life of men and indicates the way from Hell to Paradise—a circular movement from left to right. In the *Purgatorio* the two wayfarers always turn to the right as they climb from one terrace to another. Apart from a few minor exceptions, in the *Inferno* they always turn to the left—anticlockwise. As a mediator between Hell and Paradise, the painter stands in Purgatory and neither participates in the execution nor plays the part of an impassive observer who just happens to be at the scene of the crime.

> E poi ch'a la man destra sì fu vòlto,
> passammo tra i martìri e li alti spaldi.
> Then, after he had turned to the right hand, we passed between the tortures and the high battlements.

Exceptionally the wayfarers turn to the right at the end of Canto IX of the *Inferno;* in this canto they enter the city of Dis and find a plain covered with sepulchres that contain the Heretics.

> This apparent exception to Dante's rule will help in reality to prove it. Heresy, unlike all other sins in hell, attacks the True, and not the Good; which is to say, in the words of St Thomas, that its *subiectum* is not *voluntas* but rather *intellectus*. Here is the only instance in Dante's moral system where an error of the speculative intellect is punished in hell, a fact which no pagan, neither Cicero, nor Aristotle, nor Virgil would have been able to understand. It is for this reason that the pilgrim must perform his retrograde movement to the right, in order to deal with an aberration of the intellect in the realm of perverted will.
> (J. Freccero)

Picasso did not attack the Good in spite of his occasional outbursts of anger and his attitude towards the women he loved or desired; nor did he ever threaten God by raising his fist or shouting blasphemous words because the door was locked and he could not see what was behind it. You cannot threaten the person you neither see nor pay any attention to. His *voluntas* was directed towards the people he got involved with and the canvases on which he painted either those people or whatever lay scattered in the ante-room where he had got stuck. An enormous amount of energy provided a moral and a somewhat physical support to this *voluntas* which, situated as it was beyond good and evil, did not expose itself to sinful temptations. Perhaps even the sin of pride was unknown to the painter, for Lucifer and his cronies also stayed outside the door through which they were unable to communicate with their would-be victim. But Picasso's *intellectus* led him astray by suggesting the futility of any research in the field of painting where one can find and climb the Mount ofPurgatory on condition that one looks for it. Picasso, however, remained at the foot of the Mountain or rather far away from it as he wandered around the dark wood where he ran into his bulls and the Minotaur whose prototype had lived in the labyrinth created by Daedalus. The Minotaur one admires in Picasso's painting was an inhabitant of the wood where the painter whiled away the time, for the very notion of labyrinth is associated with research and a path leading to the centre. There were no paths in Picasso's wood; he just wandered there, stumbling across animals, objects and humans. "Picasso's *Minotaur*, who carouses, loves and suffers," writes Kahnweiler, "is Picasso himself." Unwilling to go outdoors, the painter stood in the centre of his workshop and painted his self-portrait, his right hand moving up and down. Why didn't his *mind* move up and down in its endeavour to reach the centre of Hell and the top of the Mount ofPurgatory? Picasso never caught a glimpse of Canto XXXI of the *Paradiso*:

> Vidi a lor giochi quivi e a lor canti
> ridere una bellezza, che letizia
> era ne li occhi a tutti li altri santi
> I saw there, smiling to their sports and to their songs, a beauty which was gladness in the eyes of all the other saints.

Instead of Mary, Picasso saw many women in love, dancing, fawning upon him and going into

hysterics in that ante-room at the centre of which he stood like God. But he did not see God. For argument's sake, let us replace God by metaphysics: God is not always a sledgehammer argument. Metaphysics is a big word; so is God. But when talking of metaphysics you are in no danger of being treated as a self-righteous prig. Let us regard metaphysics as a small word which can be found everywhere, providing one looks for it. Musil looked for it and Kafka did not; yet he found it everywhere. Metaphysics can become a fruit lying before you on a table, but you must know how to pick it up and handle it. To Picasso a piece of fruit was a piece of fruit or rather something he could pick up and eat or paint. And Cezanne would pick up a piece of fruit lying *behind* the door. Incidentally, he regarded his models as fruit, saying, "You're sitting like a pear." And he might have said to a pear, "You're sitting like a woman." And Picasso picked up girls and plucked fruit from trees without "regarding" them. He just put them in armchairs, on tables, on sofas, or devoured them mercilessly. Picasso is the first pop-artist. But does an artist really have to go beyond whatever he sees around him? And does he have to ask himself all kinds of questions which may lead him away from his work, from his natural impulses and élans—from spontaneous and unpredictable inspiration? Nabokov writes in his book on Gogol:

> Apart from the special character of Gogol's case, the general delusion into which he had lapsed was of course disastrous. A writer is lost when he grows interested in such questions as "what is art?" and "what is an art's duty?" Gogol decided that the purpose of literary art was to cure ailing souls by producing in them a sense of harmony and peace. The treatment was also to include a strong dose of didactic medicine.

"This view is a little passé," said Volodya. "In the twentieth century writers broadened their repertoire considerably to include not only a dose of didactic medicine but also the dangerous questions which, however, didn't jeopardise their works. Actually their works often question themselves and their creators."

"And Dante thought that 'the purpose of literary art was to cure ailing souls by producing in them a sense of harmony and peace', I said. "'What is an art"s duty?' was a question he never asked himself because he knew the answer. Of course an artist shouldn"t overindulge in didactic medicine, especially if this medicine has a strong communist or populist flavour and replaces God by common good. Picasso said, 'One doesn"t paint in order to decorate apartments. Painting is an instrument of offensive and defensive war against the enemy.' To some degree, Dante might have fought an offensive and a defensive war against his enemies by writing the *Inferno*, but he was far more preoccupied with ugliness and beauty, dark patches and luminous points. And his harmony is more efficient than a novel written on the theme 'Greater international stability can surely only be to the good'."

In the twentieth century the questions "what is art?" and "what is an artist's duty?" were asked by many writers of note because art had grown weary of travelling on its own surface and was curious

to find out what was going on inside, in its heart of hearts. It is not for nothing that Dante went *through* the celestial bodies he came across during his trip, keenly alive to the necessity of knowing them inside out. A genuine writer would willingly endure a question-and-answer session in the hope of clarifying a few vital issues.

In the following excerpt from *Nikolay Gogol*, Nabokov seems to scrutinise Dante's attitude towards his own work:

> But Gogol's position was of course not so simple, first because what he proposed to write was to be on the lines of a religious revelation, and second, because the imaginary reader was supposed not merely to enjoy sundry details of the revelation but to be morally helped, improved or even totally regenerated by the general effect of the book.

Did Dante propose to write a didactic work aimed at the improvement of mankind? I think he just wrote a poem which could not have been written otherwise on account of its subject matter. Indeed the material he drew upon when describing Paradise was didactic and no other material was available either to him or any other poet of his generation. Baudelaire's *Les Paradis artificiels* would have been too artificial in the fourteenth century when the world had a clear-cut structure and was ordered in accordance with the Christian dogma. Today we have another kind of Paradise at our disposal, which is publicised in newspapers, on television; this Paradise is also well ordered. Why is our world so chaotic then? The structure we have imposed upon it is artificial and concerns only the ante-room of our life that has plenty of doors along the walls. And these doors burst open from time and time, making us face a situation with which we are incapable of dealing properly because we have nothing to lean upon. St Thomas is of no help to us; his words seem to have another size as if intended for other minds, other computers. Of course I could feed any of his texts into my computer, but my hard disk is crammed with the information which would undermine the spirit of these texts, destroying them insidiously. Let us take these two sentences from *Summa theologiae*: "Man’s perfect Happiness consists in the vision of the Divine Essence. Now it is impossible for anyone seeing the Divine Essence, to wish not to see it." Our perfect happiness lies elsewhere and even if the word is written with a capital H, we see a motorcar or a chequebook or a villa in the South of France or a beautiful woman. But this woman would not await us in Canto XXX of the *Purgatorio*.

Why do I write this commentary? Michelangelo said something to the effect that his works should contribute to the elevation of his soul, to its Dantean progress up the slope of the Mount of Purgatory. My soul will descend from the heights of Paradise to the low depths of Hell because it is equally removed from both: I also stay in a sort of ante-room and the door leading elsewhere is shut. Anyway, in the world where reigns the force of gravity downward movements are more natural and demand no effort on the part of those who succumb to their allurements.

"Your loss hasn't sunk in yet," said Volodya as I recounted my last dinner in the Georgian restaurant.

"I'm just telling you a story," I said. "Or rather, I'm describing an abyss."

"And you continue to fall into this abyss," he said.

"Am I falling from the Mount ofPurgatory? All my efforts are in vain. I'd better end my life naturally, with the help of a virus, of cancer. Did they really understand me at the American Hospital?"

Today our souls are reluctant to move upward because we know how much energy they would need to progress in this unnatural direction. We know that enormous energy is needed to launch a spacecraft against gravity and calculate our souls' journeys in terms of petrol and light years. Enslaved by modern technology and technicalities of all sorts, we visualise our souls in the shape of rockets which have to be launched in order to penetrate the upper regions of the universe. "All this costs a lot of money," we say to ourselves. "We haven't yet flown to Mars. And in the *Commedia* Mars is located in the fifth sphere, right after the sun. How to get to the ninth sphere, to the *Primum Mobile*? Or to the Empyrean, the seat of God? What kind of rocket is needed for that? It's better to cancel our programme immediately."

I often speak about Joachim of Fiore whose Trinitarian philosophy of history laid the groundwork for system builders such as Hegel and Pitirim Sorokin. He worked the Holy Trinity into a historical pattern where the age of the Father and that of the Son culminates in a final age of the spirit. While working on the *Expositio in Apocalypsim*, Joachim sought to probe the imminent crisis of evil, as depicted in the vision of Antichrist, and the life of spirit to follow. I have not read this work, but whenever I am told we are living in the last age equivalent to the Holy Spirit I shrug my shoulders. The third age or *status* is supposed to come after a long period of tribulation and arduous pilgrimage during which the Church imitates the Israelites marching through the wilderness and crossing the Jordan River into the Promised Land. I think we are living in this status characterised by tribulation and the wilderness, although nothing much happens, the Church carrying on in its own sweet way. The Pope appears on television or in his glass box that looks like a three-dimensional television screen. No one persecutes the dignitaries of the Church who live in their own boxes made of glass, of wood, of concrete, of ivory. Some of them are visible, others are not. Their worries and torments are also invisible and cannot be felt unless you are sensitive to invisible, unutterable, indescribable torments. How to describe or "utter" these torments which are nowhere to be seen? But why do you have an urge to scream in the wilderness where nothing threatens you except bad earth and the temperature: it is either too cold or too hot? "Why are you screaming?" they ask you. "Bad earth, bad seed—these are things of the past. If you find this earth too bad to cultivate we'll bring you popcorn. Anyway you can cultivate maize and beans. Don't worry about the temperature—here's an anorak for you. And if it's too hot, take you clothes off and join a nudist club." Joachim writes that the third age belongs to contemplatives who are grouped around the seat of God; but below, secular clergy and tertiaries (lay members) live according to their lifestyle. Indescribable contemplatives. Where are they? Do they live on orbital space stations? Down below we cultivate maize and beans; our air conditioners are in order.

Pitirim Sorokin suggests a downward pattern in his four-volume work written between 1937 and 1941. Based on the cyclical waxing and waning of three value systems, his doctrine underlines and emphasises various aspects of culture. He calls these value systems the sensate, the ideational and the idealistic. The sensate value system holds that matter is the ultimate reality to which even spiritual phenomena are subservient because only sensory perception really counts (or matters). The ideational value system lays a stress on what lies beyond the material world, i. e. on the spiritual realm—the only source of authentic knowledge obtained through inner experience. Platonic ideas, Judeo-Christian images of God, Buddhist and Taoist outlooks belong to the ideational value system. Sorokin maintains that the cyclical rhythms of interplay between the two systems produces an intermediate stage, a sort of synthesis in which reality displays both sensory and supersensory aspects. Their harmonious blend is called idealistic and gives rise to the highest and noblest expressions of both ideational and sensate modes. The Greek art of the fifth and fourth centuries, B. C., and the European Renaissance may be proposed as the illustrious examples of the idealistic value system. According to Sorokin, our sensate era began in the seventeenth century, succeeding to the ideational culture of the Middle Ages and the idealistic Renaissance. The hallmarks of this new (and last) sensate period are: the Enlightenment, the scientific views of Descartes and Newton, the Industrial Revolution. But didn't the composers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries blend the ideational and sensate styles? Wasn't Haydn an illustrious example of the idealistic value system? And what about Wagner, Mahler and Proust? Their masterpieces are not inferior to those of the Renaissance. All systems and charts disintegrate in the hands of a great artist who creates his or her own value system—a harmonious blend of ideas, perceptions, intuitions, illusions, allusions, suprasensory experiences. In the late thirties Sorokin wrote that the sensate values and ideas were on the decline again. He might have believed in a new Renaissance or in the Second Coming. It is hard to envisage a period of time during which even artists cannot blend anything for lack of basic ingredients.

> La concreata e perpetüa sete
> del deïforme regno cen portava
> veloci quasi come 'l ciel vedete.
> The inborn and perpetual thirst for the deiform realm bore us away, swift almost as you see the heavens.
> (The *Paradiso,* Canto II)

CHAPTER 6

> Our "inborn and eternal thirst" for Heaven, "was sweeping us on almost as swift as you see the sky"—a curious comparison, since we are ordinarily not conscious of the sky's motion. If, however, we follow the position of a heavenly body from hour to hour, we discover that in a very brief period it traverses an immense distance. The sky, without seeming to move at all, is really travelling with inconceivable velocity; and so we were doing.
> (Grandgent)

Our ancestors did not envy the sun its velocity because they knew nothing about the distance it had to cover in the course of its trip from the East to the West. Enthralled by light in general, they yearned to ascend towards its source and callously sacrificed the life of Icarus who, having fulfilled their dream, fell into the sea and perished. (Every culture has its own Icarus.) Did they envy him the speed of his fall? Perhaps not. They might have been fond of speed all the same, otherwise flying carpets would never have come into existence.

I suppose there are myths in which men and women walk and play on the sun, but what I am interested in concerns mainly the dream of heights and velocity which has gradually evicted this dream from our lives. When flying to the moon we did not think about the heavenly spheres, although the American astronauts spoke about the beauty of outer space. To them it was just beautiful.

> e force in tanto in quanto un quadrel posa
> e vola e da la noce si dischiava
> giunto mi vidi
> …and perhaps in that time that a bolt strikes, flies, and from the catch is released, I saw myself arrived…

”"And perhaps in as much time as that in which a bolt (from a crossbow) stops and flies and quits the notch': the three incidents in the flight of the arrow are arranged in inverse order, to indicate that, to the eye, they are simultaneous," says Grandgent. Dante describes his instantaneous flight with the poetic power we grew accustomed to in the course of our journey through the *Inferno*. But he devotes only eight lines to the flight that has covered the "distance of an enormous size", as a character from Griboyedov's *Wit Works Woe* put it; whereas every stage of the journey through the *Inferno* is described in minute detail. Dante takes the trouble to describe *how* Virgil guides him from one circle to another because on earth, and underground Space cannot and should not be abolished. The matter stands differently with heaven where Space counts only for those who do not think about the Heavenly Spheres—by the damned.

In Canto IX of the *Purgatorio*, Dante dreams that he is carried up by an eagle into the sphere of fire. Upon awakening he finds himself by Virgil's side at a spot higher up the Mount of Purgatory and just below the gate of Purgatory proper. Virgil tells him that while he slept...

Venne una donna, e disse: "I' son Lucia;
lasciatemi pigliar costui che dorme;
sì l'agevolerò per la sua via."
…came a lady who said, "I am Lucy; let me take this man who is sleeping, so will I speed him on his way."

So Dante is borne into the sphere of fire in no time at all, which prevents him from seeing and feeling the space he traverses during his journey. He was already *carried* through the air—in the *Inferno*. The greater part of Canto XVII is devoted to the monster Geryon, the emblem of Fraud, and the task he is called upon to perform. Geryon guards the Eighth Circle to which the poets descend on his back. Occupying fifty-nine lines, the flight itself, if compared with the similar passage in the *Purgatorio*, seems long-winded and spacious: in Hell every inch of tortures is experienced by sinners. And on earth every inch of beauty should be relished by hedonists and poets who might draw their inspiration from a bough or an insect or roof tiles. But they seldom if ever single out one star when their gaze shifts to heaven where Space becomes more or less symbolic, revealing our attitude towards the forces that govern us. God is everywhere and also beyond Space and Time, which Dante seeks to emphasise in his backward image: "a bolt strikes, flies, and from the catch is released." He abolishes both Time and Space: a bolt strikes before it is released and flies backward. Time overtakes itself and Space withdraws into itself. Only eight lines are devoted to this non-existent flight to the heaven of the Moon. The higher we ascend the smaller Space and Time grow as they submit themselves to our spiritual vision. Neither spaceships nor telescopes can reduce these categories to the luminous point—the Divine Essence—that Dante is privileged to see in Canto XXVIII; nor even to the celestial rose in the description of which Dante abolishes both Space and Time once again:

sì come schiera d'ape che s'infiora
una fiata e una si ritorna
là dove suo laboro s'insapora,
nel gran fior discendeva che s'addorna
di tante foglie, e quindi risaliva
là dove 'l süo amor sempre soggiorna.
…like a swarm of bees which one moment enflower themselves, and the next return to where their work acquires savour—was descending into the great flower which is adorned with so many petals, and thence reascending to where its love abides forever.

"It now appears," writes Singleton, "that this simile of bees bearing nectar is actually the reverse of the normal activity of bees in nature, which is to bear from the flower to the hive. Here the “bees” bear their “nectar” from the hive (God) to the flower." Once again Time overtakes itself and Space withdraws into itself. Once again I picture to myself the rose defacing the child's body in one of the most nightmarish stories every written by Kafka. And Dante's bees are metamorphosed into the worms swarming in the rose on which the doctor focuses his eyes as if it were a mandala. "And note that Christ is a rose, Mary is a rose, the Church is a rose, the faithful soul is a rose," writes Albertus

Magnus. Death is a rose, disease is a rose, despair is a rose, angst is a rose, fear is a rose. Did they tell me the truth? Did they make a mistake at the American Hospital? Angels of death bear their nectar from the hive to the flower, from a disease to a human body that blossoms like a flower. "He has really blossomed out," they say. I am also a rose. In a film on Hölderlin I saw last night the *Quintet for Two Cello*s keeps the poet company as he wanders around a mountainous countryside. An eerie soundtrack, a kind of musical rose. Was Schubert wrong? What kind of rose did he describe in the second movement of his *Quintet*? All kinds of roses: the rose of death, the rose of madness, the rose of life, the rose of love, the celestial rose, the eternal rose, Dante's rose. Do Kafka and Dante see the same rose, the same petals, the same bees? Paolo and Francesca bear their nectar from the rose of love to Dante, to the *Commedia*'s readers. In the last canto of the *Inferno* Dante is admitted into the presence of Lucifer who dwells in the centre of the earth, his head displaying three faces.

> Sotto ciascuna uscivan due grand' ali,
> quanto si convenia a tanto uccello:
> vele di mar non vid' io mai cotali.
> From under each there came forth two mighty wings, of size befitting such a bird—sails at sea I never saw so broad.

In Blake's illustration Lucifer looks like a rose with the huge wings spread around like petals.

> What's the difference between Hölderlin
> And *votre humble serviteur*? (I also
> Played the piano once.) What's the difference
> Between his autumn and mine, his spring
> And my winter? Look out of the window to experience
> The same spring or winter or autumn.
> I pace up and down my room
> And Hölderlin hears my footfalls, the words I mutter as I pace
> Up and down my room. He knows my words
> By heart; yet
> I don't recite his poems. There's no difference
> Between a man and a man, a man and a woman. Only
> Objects differ from each other: they won't be
> Saved.

Doesn't Origen affirm that at the last everybody down to Lucifer will be saved? Do inanimate objects have souls? If they do, they will be saved alongside devils and humans. The *mons Domini* will be saved, I suppose. So will the Mount of Purgatory. Even Dante's dark wood will be saved. But it is time for Dante to *se sauver*—to leave the *Inferno* all the circles of which he has visited during the guided tour. So he puts his arms round the neck of Virgil who, clinging by Lucifer's shaggy side, lets himself down to his waist, to the centre of gravity in the universe. His head replacing his feet, he climbs in the opposite direction:

> Quando noi fummo là dove la coscia
> si volge, a punto in sul grosso de l'anche,
> so duca, con fatica e con angoscia,
> volse la test ov' elli avea le zanche,
> e aggrappossi al pel com' om che sale,
> sì che 'n inferno i' credea tornar anche.
> When we had come to where the thigh turns just on the thick of the haunch, my leader with labour and strain brought round his head to where his shanks had been and grappled on the hair like one who is climbing, so that I thought we were returning into Hell again.

Did we return to Hell? We probably did. I have often returned from Paradise to Hell and vice versa—an experience known to any human being who is not too sure of himself. Or herself. My dear girl stayed in her Paradise through thick and thin: she was sure that sooner or later a multimillionaire would fall in love with her. But didn't her shyness make her occasionally fly from Paradise to Hell in no time? She lowered her gaze whenever I spoke to her about my love. In those moments I would journey from Hell to Paradise even though I was not able to see her eyes, her unforgettable eyes. Why don't I write a poem about her uniqueness? She was not like any other woman or man. She was quite different from the woman Hölderlin fell in love with. Her autumn was neither beyond my window nor in anybody's heart or mind, her dead leaves flying up and down instead of covering the earth. The last minutes we spent together. "If I were you, I'd hang this jacket on the line and let it drip-dry." At that point I returned to Paradise, hoping we could still patch it up to live happily in Moscow. I visualised a house, an *hôtel particulier*, where a lot of jackets were hanging on lines. Her unforgettable eyes. Why didn't I embrace her in that taxi? We *might* have patched it up. But I was afraid of returning to Paradise for nothing. What if she laughed in my face? Well, in this case I would have returned to Hell once more. Am I not used to going from Hell to Paradise and back again every hour? Most of the time she would not answer the phone, especially on the days when she was *supposed* to answer it, having promised to spend an afternoon or an evening in my company. When I picked up the receiver to call her I was at the beginning of the *Purgatorio*, expecting to find myself either in the *Inferno* or in the *Paradiso*. When she answered my call I would experience something akin to what Dante describes in Canto IX of the *Purgatorio* where Lucy "speeds him on his way". I wish I could tell the story of our love through a collection of poems intermingled with song and dance, but we never danced together and she hated singers. Even Schubert's lieder would jar on her ears and nerves, although she listened to his piano trios with unfeigned enthusiasm. I was ready to rise to the stars and did all I could, steering clear of controversial issues. Try as I might, my ascension seldom lasted more than ten minutes. In the streets and in restaurants she constantly used her mobile phone and, having said "bye-bye" to another friend of hers, she would exalt not only the contraption itself but also this day and age which furthers the creation of such technological wonders.

"If you intend to live with our times, I won't be able to follow you," I said to her in front of the Bolshoi Theatre.

"You're a real stick-in-the mud," she answered. "You talk like an old man."

"Mobile phones *are* useful, but they exist in a context which is unacceptable. The same goes for computers. You can't install one by Proust's bedside, can you? Word processing would have made things easier for him, wouldn't it? On the other hand I'm not sure he would have written his novel in the same style—"

"He would have written a different novel," she cut in. "He was Proust after all. Couldn't he have written another novel?"

"I prefer the one he *has* written," I said. "Can you imagine Baron de Charlus with a mobile phone, talking to Oriane de Guermantes or even to Morel from the Place des Victoires?"

"All those people would have been green with envy if they'd seen our machines."

"They say it's easy to glorify the past. But it's easy to glorify the future too. And the present. Once I was invited to dinner with some representatives of the Moscow elite. They were talking *seriously* about today's writers, painters and conductors. I asked them why they were so bent on wasting their time. 'There's literature elsewhere,' I said. 'And those other works are so inexhaustible that no amount of commentaries will ever clarify all their circles and spheres. Why comment on one-dimensional products of our crystal-clear age? I prefer dark ages. By the way, the Renaissance was a dark age too.' And I told them a story about Wittgenstein who one day stopped in front of a shop window where the portraits of Mozart, Schubert and Brahms had been put on display. A few minutes later he walked past another shop window adorned with the portraits of Einstein, Bertrand Russell and Freud. 'Our standards are degenerating year by year. Time is going to the dogs,' he said to his roommate. What would he have said today, I wonder? 'I think Freud is far more important than Schubert,' said a man sitting opposite."

"He must have a psychological problem," said my fair lady. "Did he talk about his shrink?"

"He's got a drinking problem too. Never mind. I asked him who was more important than Schubert *now*. 'Rapists,' he said. At first I didn't understand the word. Automatically I translated it into English and thought he was speaking about the men who rape women, girls and boys."

"Do you never listen to rap? Their texts are wonderful."

"As good as *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*?"

Why do I always go back to this circle of my Hell where I am flying alone, carried by a hurricane of sorts? I would be better off in the jaws of Lucifer, I suppose. Self-injuring behaviour. Freud's grandson behaved like that, endlessly repeating his mother's departure and return. She left him for a few hours every day and he often performed her absence in his theatre—instead of trying to obliterate it. He ought to have made her absence depart in its turn. In his mother's absence, or rather in the presence of her absence, he was playing with a cotton reel under Freud's inquisitive eye. He threw the reel into his crib to imitate his mother's departure and then pulled it out again: the mother returned to him. Freud named this puzzling tendency to relive unpleasant or traumatic episodes in one's life

"repetition-compulsion". He believed the painful memory was relived again and again to build up a sufficient defence against such occurrences retrospectively, "after the event". But what defence can *I* build up against such occurrences?

During my last trip to Japan I met a beautiful stewardess on the plane where she served me champagne and dainty, business-class dishes. At first I pretended not to speak Russian and she addressed me in her rudimentary English which was rather charming in spite of its inadequacy. Then I told her in plain Russian I had been aping the male population of France whose representatives, upon seeing a beautiful woman, try to make as many jokes as possible. "And of course some of these jokes are bound to fall flat," I told her. She sat down in the armchair opposite and said I was very kind. We talked for several minutes during which I briefly described my daily routine and my strolls in the parc de Versailles. She brought me some champagne and I showed her how to drink wine professionally as I looked at its colour, swirled it in the glass, smelt it and rolled it around my palate. "I've learnt so much from you *already*," she told me half an hour afterwards. The word "already" made me ascend to Paradise in the spheres of which I saw my new fair lady having dinner with me on my terrace. ”'Already' means she'll go on learning from me this and that for a long time, for years. Or just for a week—I don't think I can spare her a month, given the amount of work I'm supposed to do before the New Year." My interior monologue was regularly punctuated by her comings and goings, by her answers to my questions and my narratives. I did not fall in love with her, but I would give anything in the world for a phone call from her or the chance to meet her in my flat. I gave her my phone number and even my address. I said I would show her all the châteaux in the Loire Valley and many other sights, including the Mont Saint-Michel. I said we would drink old wines at my place and in the best restaurants of Paris and Lyon. For some reason I said I would like to have children. I also said I had worked all my life and was eager to enjoy myself now. I was speaking in plain Russian but she has not phoned me so far. I think she will never get in touch with me because she must be reluctant to touch me *physically* (and even "telephonically"). I am too old for her. Besides, I am a real stick in the mud; I do not understand the younger generation. How could I understand these youngsters?

Last month a Russian teenager came to Paris and spent hours and hours looking for Harry Potter or somebody going by this name. I suppose this is one of the literary products that are made into films and sold all over the world as souvenirs, tea-shirts, etc. When my friend suggested they go and visit the Louvre she said, "It looks like a prison." We should make allowances for her: she lives in Moscow where many buildings look like toys. (And the Louvre does *not* look like a toy.) Even the cathedral of St Basil the Blessed looks like a painted toy that can be put into one's crib. But didn't I throw this toy into my crib to pull it out again in order to relive my departure from Moscow in the manner described by Freud? My departure from Russia, my imaginary death, my unrequited love. Normally it is anxiety that prepares us to expect danger. Did I expect all these dangers? My departure from Russia was not decided on the spur of the moment: I had been planning it for a long time. My fatal disease, on the

other hand, was the shock of my life or the shock of my death; it is easy to play with words when you are out of danger. Freud speaks of "shell-shock" caused by a close call rather than real injury. All this happens during the First World War and the shock is replayed in the patient's dreams; he does not obliterate it. We were in a state of war with the Soviet officials. An inner war, as it were—a close call rather than real injury. Inner emigration. Neither my friends nor I were injured by the regime. Why do I describe my life in this commentary? Why not leave it alone? It is alone anyway, wandering somewhere out of my or anyone else's reach. Where does it wander? Probably in this room of mine. But I do not relive my past; I just describe it.

> The conservative organic drives have assimilated every one of those externally imposed modifications of the organism's life-cycle and duly preserved them in order to repeat them, and therefore inevitably give the misleading impression of being forces bent on change and progress, whereas they merely seek to achieve an old goal by new means as well as old. And this ultimate goal of all organic striving may be equally susceptible of definition. It would contradict the conservative nature of drives if it were the goal of life to achieve a state never previously attained to. Rather, it must aspire to an old state, a primordial state from which it once departed and to which via all the circuitous byways of development it strives to return. If we may reasonably suppose, on the basis of all our experience without exception, that every living thing dies—reverts to the inorganic—for intrinsic reasons, then we can only say that *the goal of all life is death*, or to express it retrospectively: *the inanimate existed before the animate*. (Freud, *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, translated by John Reddick)

A man thinks he goes forward, calling this movement "pilgrim's progress" or just "progress", and suddenly realises he has always been going back, towards death and the void where he is about to disappear forever. I used to dislike Freud because his theories seemed unscientific, far-fetched and even asinine, especially the ones infecting our peaceful dreams and amusing nightmares with symbols of all kinds. As Karl R. Popper writes in *Conjectures and Refutations*, "A theory which is not refutable by any conceivable event is non-scientific." Unlike so many theories which have stood the test of time, Freud's instincts and insights cannot be refuted—or scientifically confirmed, for that matter. But at least I find them stimulating and amusing: they are nightmares in their own right. They are also in the nature of myths and legends which no one seeks to refute or confirm, leaving them alone in the books and in the brains of storytellers. In a way, all the books Freud has written are fairy-tales—very much like the novels Nabokov praised in his lectures. So I do not understand why he hated Freud and psychoanalysts in general, cocking a snook at the "Viennese delegation" in the introductory notes he appended to the English edition of his Russian works. "And as for Freud's epic of the Ego, the Super-ego, and the Id," writes Popper, "no substantially stronger claim to scientific status can be made for it than for Homer's collected stories from Olympus. These theories describe some facts, but in the manner of myths. They contain most interesting psychological suggestions, but not in a testable form."

Freud's revival of the Death Instinct (*Thanatos*) goes against the stream in the world where everybody strives to put death aside as if it were a boring book or an object of no value. A friend of

mine to whom I gave a lift suggested as he spotted the sign "Cemetery", "Let's make a U-turn."

"Don't you aspire to return to the primordial state from which the world departed a long time ago?" I asked him. "Hell is more important than Paradise nowadays. People think they're living in Paradise or at least moving towards it. You can see cheerful signs everywhere with 'Paradise' written on them. And I'll always drive and walk and fly in the opposite direction."

Freud's conjecture expounded in *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* belongs to the category of "inversed theories" which are somewhat akin to Dante's "inversed similes" or "upside-down similes". In Canto XXVII of the *Paradiso* we come across two beautiful examples of this stylistic device. The first depicts an upward snowstorm:

> Sì come di vapor gelati fiocca
> in giuso l'aere nostro, quando 'l corno
> de la capra de ciel col sol si tocca,
> in sù vid' io così l'etera addorno
> farsi e fioccar di vapor trïunfanti
> che fatto avien con noi quivi soggiorno.
> Even as our air, when the horn of the heavenly Goat is touched by the sun, flakes down frozen vapours, so I saw the ether thus adorned, flaking upwards triumphal vapour which had made sojourn with us there.

"These inversions," writes Singleton, "are contributing to an experience which the reader will undergo as he passes, with the pilgrim Dante, from time to eternity, from the universe with earth at the centre to a universe that has God as its centre: a complete change in gravitation, from the material to the spiritual." When we left the restaurant that night, the rain was falling down as if the earth were the aim of its journey, its final destination. Does the rain travel somewhere or is it a mere display of the force of gravity that has no spiritual aspirations, no upward longings? In Freud's theory the earth becomes the centre of the universe towards which strive both the inanimate and animate objects. Ashes to ashes. The Death Instinct brings us back from our interstellar journeys and we fall down, driven by the force of gravity, by our own weakness, by the indifference of the people walking by our side. Why didn't she tell me, "Let's forget all this nonsense"? And I would have seen a multitude of angels flying heavenward like a rain of manna:

> Levava li occhi miei baganti in pianti,
> E vedea, che parean pioggia di manna,
> Li angeli che tornavan suso in cielo
>
> Then lifting up mine eyes, as the tears came,
> I saw the Angels, like a rain of manna,
> In a long flight flying back heavenward
> (The *Vita Nuova*, XXIII)

My backward journey: from the *Paradiso* to the *Inferno* and then to the *Vita Nuova*. (A chronological

descent.) Is that why I have an urge to write poems and embroider upon them afterwards?

> Did I ever compare myself to a comet?
> I don't think so. I seldom
> Compare myself to anything or anybody—not because
> I'm unique. I'm not. Many reflections of mine
> May wander around the universe, looking at me
> From afar. I don't see them, however. The people I know
> —even my friends—are so different
> I'm not tempted to compare myself to them. And I'm not
> Impertinent enough
> To compare myself to some of the dead. You might
> Compare me to agony or boundless joy.
> What for?

The comet is the angels flying heavenward to pave the way for the soul of Beatrice who has died in Dante's dream. They are also the manifestation of our joy and true love; the latter has its seat in heaven to which it must return at the height of its ecstasy. This vision is replaced by the doubt I feel whenever I think about you and our relationship divided from my inner nature, my ideals. My image is reflected neither in your eyes nor in your heart so that I say I cannot compare myself to anybody, not even to my dearest friends: I am reluctant to name you, anxious as I am to preserve the secrecy and chastity of our relationship. But then I say I am not unique so as to ward off any accusation of presumptuousness which might lower me in the esteem of your parents. At the same time I intimate I am not selfish to the point of ruling out any contact with my fellow creatures who 'look at me from afar'. And I am prepared to get in touch with them if they agree to come to my place and share a meal with me. I deplore the fact that I cannot see them, meaning I cannot see *you* as often as I wish because we live in different countries and need visas to spend a few hours together. And then I complain about your behaviour which makes me feel you are light years away, living in a distant future so that I am estranged from you even when we sit at the same table. In such moments I am not tempted to compare myself to myself: I do not wish to be myself. In the course of our last dinner you told me about three men you had loved before making my acquaintance. I wish I could compare myself to them, whoever they are. I hope they are my reflections looking at me from the sofa on which I put a few cushions last week. I hope they feel comfortable at my place. To whom would I compare myself? To the dead of course, to some of the dead who are not light years away, contrary to what *you* might think. Boundless joy and agony are the poles between which my life has been oscillating ever since you became unruly and unpredictable. But there is no point in speaking of joy and agony now, for everything is over and done with.

> e come il tempo tegna in cotal testo
> le sue radici e ne li altri le fronde,
> omai a te può esser manifesto.

> And how time should have its roots in such a flower-pot, and in the others its leaves, may now be manifest to you.

This is the second inversed simile in Canto XXVII of the *Paradiso*. Time grows downward, its roots fixed in the *Primum Mobile* where it originates. No heavenly body enlivens the ninth heaven and so the roots of Time, which is nothing more than a potted plant, are invisible. Could I prolong my life by watering this plant three times a day? What if one of the plants growing on my terrace turns out to have a close affinity with Time? What if it is Time itself? I would not mind hanging it upside down. Suppose you come across a plant that does not wither in spite of the ambient temperature and the hot dry wind. What would you do with this plant? Would you try to burn it? I am not sure I would water it three times a day. Would we recognise Time upon bumping into it on Red Square or in a swimming pool? If Time *is* visible and solid we had better look for it on the seashore or in the sea, among the waves, which mirror it rather faithfully as they roll towards the shore, one after another, at regular intervals. Are those intervals irregular? I have never *listened* to the sea, relegating it to the domain of background noise. Apparently it has a soothing influence on many people who sleep better when the sea happens to be within their hearing. Time might be irregular, for all I know.

> Ma tosto ruppe le dolci ragioni
> un alber che trovammo in mezza strada,
> con pomi a odorar soavi e buoni;
> e come abete in alto si digrada
> di ramo in ramo, così quello in giuso,
> cred' io, perché persona sù non vada.
> But soon the pleasant converse was broken by a tree which we found in the midst of the way, with fruit sweet and good to smell. And as a fir-tree tapers upward from branch to branch, so downwards did that—I think so that none may climb it.
> (The *Purgatorio*, Canto XXII)

"Many early commentators believed that this tree is upside down, with its roots in the air and its tip in or on the ground," writes Robert Hollander. "It seems better to understand that its 'branches' bend downward (rather than reaching upward, as do those of earthly trees) and are longer the higher they are found on the trunk, so as to prevent anyone from climbing." In Boticelli's drawing this tree grows upside down, as it does in Chapter XV of *The Bhagavadgita*:

> They speak of the imperishable Asvattham (peepal tree) as having its root above and branches below. Its leaves are the Vedas and he who knows this is the knower of the Vedas. Its branches extend below and above, nourished by the modes, with sense objects for its twigs and below in the world of men stretch forth the roots resulting in actions. Its real form is not thus perceived here, nor its end nor beginning nor its foundation. Having cut off this firm-rooted Asvattham with the strong sword of non-attachment.
> (*The Bhagavadgita*, translated by Radhakrishnan)

I was struck by the beauty of this text when I first read it at the age of seventeen. And three months

ago I was struck by the beauty of a stewardess on a plane flying from Moscow to Tokyo. I talked to her about old wine and eighteenth-century furniture which are my stock-in-trade whenever I court a beautiful woman. I said among other things, "My cat jumped on me every morning and answered my call. A very intelligent cat, much more intelligent than the dog I was given several years later. At the time I lived in a house and when he came back at night, he mewed right under my window—I slept on the first floor. How did he guess where my bedroom was? He couldn't see me from the outside. And whenever I had a sore throat I put him round my neck and slept with him the whole night. He died of pneumonia after one of his long walks—I didn't want to have him castrated. I gave him several injections, but it was too late. I buried him in my garden. Don't you think I'll love children as well? At first they behave like domestic animals, don't they?"

I thought she would be touched by my story: most people love animals unless they are allergic to them. Was *she* allergic to cats? Is that why she does not call me? I should have told her I took a vow never to extend hospitality to cats or other domestic animals after my dear Kussy's demise. "I wished to remain faithful to him." I would have killed two birds with one stone, making her believe I was faithful by nature: a loyal man who keeps neither cats nor dogs. "I had a dog for a while because it was a present, but I haven't seen him for years. Actually he died last summer. My girlfriend took him when we parted. I haven't seen her either, for years. I live alone now and solitude doesn't agree with me, you know. Of course I need peace and quiet to write my books, but after a while all this gets on your nerves. A wife wouldn't prevent me from writing books, would she? Perhaps I won't write books any more. I've worked all my life and it's high time I had some rest. Shall we go to an island, to the Seychelles?"

> According to Anandagiri, *Samsara* is represented as a tree (*Vriksha*) because of the etymological meaning of the Sanskrit term, *Vriksha*: "that which can be cut down". The experiences of change and sorrow which the world-of-plurality gives us can be totally ended through detachment. The Tree-of-multiplicity that has seemingly sprung forth from the Infinite Consciousness Divine, can be cut down by shifting our attention from the Tree to the Divine.
> (Swami Chinmayananda, *The Holy Geeta*)

The experience of change is manifold and depends on how our life may be affected through an unexpected encounter or a more or less expected whim. When I saw the beautiful stewardess my life underwent a positive change, especially during our talks which were rather "illegal": she was on duty after all. But even a positive change ends up in sorrow because you always lose something or get too much of what you covet. How to shift my attention from the Tree to the Divine? Whatever I glance at is part of this Tree which spreads its branches all around my room, making it impossible for me to get away from the multiplicity of life. I am sitting and lying on its boughs, and my dishes cover its twigs as I raise a glass of wine to start my dinner in a dignified manner. And after dinner, a glass of cognac in my hand, I look at the birds flying towards the Tree to settle on it; and these birds are young

women, as Tomsky sings in Tchaikovsky's *The Pique Dame*. They are the *dames du Bois de Boulogne*. What is the point in reading *The Bhagavadgita* and Swami Chinmayananda's commentary? As a Russian song has it, "As you were, so you are now." In my teenage years I wooed girls in the same fashion, although my words were different: I had no wine cellar at my disposal. The same intonations, the same gestures, the same glances. The Tree-of-*Samsara* stands right in the centre of my room, but I have no axe to cut it down. And if I had an axe I would pretend not to see anything in my room except books and a few eighteenth-century pieces of furniture which are the branches of the Tree. And the books are its fruit perhaps. Is *The Bhagavadgita* a fruit growing on the Tree-of-*Samsara*? No, sacred books are an axe designed to cut the Tree down.

> The Vedas indicate the One Eternal Principle from which all the realms of experience have sprung. Neither pure science, nor mere devotion, can achieve the Truth of perfect knowledge, is the conclusion of the *Geeta*. Knowledge is perfect only when we know of the here and the hereafter, of the finite and the Infinite, of the created and the Creator. All the rest of the pursuits of knowledge, however spectacular they might be, are, at best, only one-sided views of the whole Truth.
> (Swami Chinmayananda*, The Holy Geeta*)

The science I can boast of is impure and insufficient, and I devote my energy to the pursuits unworthy of the *Vedavit*, as a knower of the *Vedas* is called by Indian philosophers. Why describe my feelings and the young women I meet on planes and in restaurants? I should get rid of all my feelings, bolstered and multiplied by this commentary and the works I have written over the thirty years of my life in the West. Like the tanks of a hostile army, all these words have worn deep ruts in my soul, and even if I bring myself to destroy my novels, poems and essays, their vestiges will continue to affect my life. I wish I could inverse the creative process and "unwrite" my books, descending from the paradisiacal heights—a finished book, an achievement— to the hell of a blank page. But wouldn't I *deepen* those ruts criss-crossing my soul by tampering with my works once again, by going through them word by word, comma by comma? Moreover, I would learn nothing either about "the here and the hereafter, of the finite and the Infinite" from the books I have written myself. Could I learn anything about "the here" from the following tercet:

> Vero è che 'n su la proda mi trovai
> de la valle d'abisso dolorosa
> che 'ntrono accoglie d'infiniti guai.
> True it is that I found myself on the brink of the chasm of pain, which holds the clamour of endless wailings.
> (The Inferno, Canto IV)

In Deirdre Bair's biography of Beckett I found a story that taught me *something* about the here and the attitude one may adopt towards it. Invited to dinner by one of his Parisian friends, Beckett suddenly saw a number of people burst into the flat where he hoped to spend a quiet evening. After asking a few

irrelevant questions, one of those guests began to harangue the writer about his gloomy outlook which left the reader wondering if there was a way out of the labyrinth of evil. "Do you really think there's no way out? Is the world so evil? Wasn't it created by our merciful Lord? Or do you agree with the Gnostics who believed the world had been created by Lucifer in disguise? I'm quite happy, you know. I've got many friends and not all of them are fatally ill. And only some of them are invalids. And only one of them suffers from multiple sclerosis. Tonight we'll drink wonderful wine—I saw several open bottles in the kitchen. Isn't that enough to make you happy? Why are you so demanding? Do you ever go mushrooming? One mushroom is enough..." Beckett put on his raincoat and left without saying a word. As he got out into the street he saw a man who almost fitted the description given by Dante in Canto XXVIII of the *Inferno*:

> Io vidi certo, e ancor par ch'io 'l veggia,
> un busto sanza capo andar sì come
> andavan li altri de la trista greggia…
> Truly I saw, and seem to see it still, a trunk without the head going along as were the others of that dismal herd…

At first Beckett could not make out where the invalid's head was: his whole body looked like a trunk without the head, the legs and the arms. But then he saw the arms with the help of which the trunk was rolling along on a wide plank of wood. The scene I witnessed in Russia several years ago was not as spectacular as Beckett's vision, but I was touched by it all the more since I detected a nuance of the Infinite in that daily rite. In one of Moscow's underground passages a little girl was singing out of tune in the presence of her father or grandfather who neither bullied nor assisted her in any way. The passers-by would stop and listen to her for a while; some of them dropped money into a huge basket lying at the feet of her relative. Or was he just her master? The girl did not shiver with cold, nor was she starving to death. She just sang out of tune for the sake of a few dollars. Rooted to the spot, I listened to her delicate, vulnerable voice wavering on the brink of silence; but she went on and on, unflagging and unflappable. Limited to three songs, her repertoire was unimpressive, but the longer she sang the better I understood Casella's predicament that Dante describes in Canto II of the *Purgatorio*. Steered by an angel, a boat in which there is a number of spirits brought to Purgatory approaches the shore. Among the newcomers Dante recognises his old friend Casella the musician.

> E io: "Se nuova legge non ti toglie
> memoria o uso a l'amoroso canto
> che mi solea quetar tutte mie voglie,
> di ciò ti piaccia consolare alquanto
> l'anima mia, che, con la sua persona
> venedo qui, è affannata tanto!"
> "*Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona*"
> cominciò elli allor sì dolcemente,
> che la dolcezza ancor dentro mi suona.

> And I, "If a new law does not take from you memory or practice of the songs of love which used to quiet in me all my longings, may it please you therewith to comfort my soul somewhat, which coming hither with its body is so wearied."
> "*Love that discourses in my mind*," he then began so sweetly that the sweetness still within me sounds.

At first Casella's style of singing seems to differ radically from what I heard in the underground passage where an amateur performed a few Soviet songs with no accompaniment. But the little girl was also a shade which light may have pierced at any moment so that I thought it was better for her to stay underground, in the dimly-lit tunnel where passers-by walked to and fro, crossing the street from one side to the other. Those passers-by protected her from light without knowing it. All of a sudden I realised I myself was a shadow living in Purgatory from which there was no way out because all my life I had lived in Purgatory and not in Hell or Paradise, as I had optimistically presumed. By requesting political asylum I just moved to another terrace of Purgatory, a more comfortable terrace. Tyutchev wrote in one of his poems, "Happy are those who visited this world in its fatal moments." I was born into this world after the Second World War and I doubt if the people who were involved in it regarded themselves as the "happy few". Be that as it may, nowadays both Hell and Paradise are gone because Paradise does not exist without Hell. Casella also sings in a feeble voice and out of tune but Dante, misled by the acoustics of the *Purgatorio* or eager to condone his friend's shortcomings, admires the sweetness of his execution.

> Noi eravam tutti fissi e attenti
> a le sue note; ed ecco il veglio onesto
> gridando: "Che è ciò, spiriti lenti?
> Qual negligenza, quale stare è questo?
> Correte al monte a spogliarvi lo scoglio
> ch'esser non lascia a voi Dio manifesto."
> We were all rapt and attentive to his notes, when lo, the venerable old man, crying, "What is this, you laggard spirits? What negligence, what stay is this? Haste to the mountain to strip off the slough that lets not God be manifest to you."

The venerable old man is Cato the Younger who, unwilling to submit to Caesar, killed himself in Utaca, putting his free will on display. He is the custodian of Purgatory where, by purification, the souls strive to regain free will. He interrupts Casella's song to goad the sinners into hastening to the mountain where they are supposed to take off their garments of sin. "How well this agrees with imitating the wisdom of the serpent and stripping off the 'old man' that we may put on the new, as the Apostle expresses it," writes St Augustine.

But nobody interrupts the little girl who continues to sing in her frail, unreliable voice.

CHAPTER 7

In the *Convivio*, Dante writes about music as follows:

> And these two properties are found in music, which all consists in relations, as we perceive in harmonised words and in tunes; wherefrom the resulting harmony is the sweeter in proportion as the relation is more beauteous; which relation is the chiefest beauty in that science, because this is what it chiefly aims at. Moreover, music so draweth to itself the spirits of men (which are in principle as though vapours of the heart) that they well-nigh cease from all operation; so united is the soul when it hears it, and so does the virtue of all of them, as it were, run to the spirit of sense which receiveth the sound.

Dolce, dolcemente. But there are other properties in music, which have nothing to do with the sweetness Dante writes about in Canto II of the *Purgatorio* and also in the *Convivio*. The little girl's song was bitter and no relations, no words could turn this ugliness into sweetness. Was it really ugly? Singing out of tune *is* ugly from a musical point of view, but life makes a claim on the arts by adjusting them to its style and components. The "performance" I heard in the tunnel reflected life more faithfully than the song Dante enjoyed in the *Purgatorio*: love is bitter and even Lady Philosophy to whom he dedicated his poem in the *Convivio*—the poem set to music by Casello—is not sweet, leading us astray whenever we resort to her in order to find the way out of the labyrinth of evil. What does philosophy say to us? How can it *console* us?

> If the main root of the Tree-of-Samsara is lost in the Absolute Reality, High above, the "secondary roots" which spring from it are spread all around, and grow even downward, "IN THE WORLD OF MAN, IMITATING ALL ACTIONS". Here, secondary roots are thought-channels (*vasanas*), which are created in us, and which propel each one of us towards his own typical actions and reactions in the world. They are the very causes that promote man's evil as well as meritorious activities in the world. Just as the main tap-root, while spreading its secondary roots, claws the earth through them and gets the plant well-rooted, so too, these *Samskaras*, actions and their reactions, both good and evil, bind the individuals fast to the earthy plane of likes and dislikes, of profits and losses, of earning and spending.
> (Swami Chinmayananda*, The Holy Geeta*)

Profits and losses, earning and spending. I lose money whenever I think of shares, investments and bargains. A friend of mine said he would become a multimillionaire if he did the opposite of what I was doing in this field. And how many whims of yours have I lost ever since our parting? And what about the loss of your hands? They touched me two or three times as we were watching the Japanese version of *Electra*. How many caresses have I lost? Would I have profited from them? I can talk to myself, answer my own questions and laugh at my own jokes, but the matter stands differently with the so-called human touch. I recognise my hands; I know when and how they will touch this or that part of my body. I would not have recognised *your* hands. (I am far more interested in the *literal* sense of "human touch".) May I call this state of affairs "detachment"? The Tree-of-*Samsara* is growing in

my room and even in your absence I can have a siesta under the canopy of its foliage. Contrary to what Dante and St Thomas said on the subject, music brings me closer to you: instead of drawing to itself my spirit, it repels my thoughts and sentiments which, ignorant of other objects, rush towards your office and your flat. The vapours of my heart. They are so solid that I often get an urge to throw them out of the window or smash them against the wall of my room where the Tree-of-*Samsara* continues to grow as if nothing had happened.

Meritorious activities in the world. Many think that giving piano recitals is a very beautiful profession. Is it? You pack your suitcases, take a flight, go to a hotel, unpack, take a shower, go to the hall, rehearse, put on your tails, play for the people who applaud and come backstage to pat you on the shoulder and say, "Good show." Only once did I hear an appropriate remark after my recital. A middle-aged woman came up to me and said, "You've made me hear silence tonight." Should the intelligence of that woman bind me to the earthly plane of likes and dislikes? I cannot help liking her and disliking all those who pat me on the shoulder with a few words of praise. On the stage my spirit is driven towards the piece of music I perform to the point of excluding all other thoughts from my mind; and even the vapours of my heart "cease from all operation". During my concerts I do not love you any more; nor do I think of those who will come backstage once the concert is over. But I cannot spend my life on the stage, can I? Anyway, sooner or later, the Tree-of-*Samsara* would grow on it too: after all, making music in public is a meritorious activity linked to profits and losses, earning and spending.

Oddly enough, both Dante and St Thomas speak of listeners and give no thought to performers whose spirits *are* concentrated on notes, on sounds—to the exclusion of the outer world. "For we see that flute-favourers," writes St Thomas, "simply cannot hear people talking to them when listening to flute-playing because they take more pleasure in the music of the flute than in their present activity, i.e., hearing talk intended for them." This mainly depends on the quality of the flute player and on the people talking to you, who might prove far more stimulating than both the player and the piece performed by him or her. If, ten years ago, Prigogine had begun to talk to me during a concert given by a famous conductor, I would have listened to *him* and not to the *music*. "For it is obvious," writes St Thomas, "that the more pleasant activity drives out the other to the extent that if there is a great difference in the amount of pleasure, a person entirely neglects the activity less pleasurable to him. Consequently when we take vehement pleasure in something we are incapable of doing anything else."

Music makes me think of you unless I play myself in public, in a concert hall. When writing this commentary I think of you too, even if enlarging upon a philosophical theme or Dante's teachers. Would the hymns they execute in the *Paradiso* make me forget you, driving all my spirits to themselves? The love song with which Casello entertains his old friend and the group of newcomers is bound to remind me of you, even though it was originally intended to honour Lady Philosophy; and you are not very fond of philosophy. Cato upbraids the singer and other sinners because he believes a

love song is not likely to help one up the slopes of the Mount of Purgatory; on the contrary, by driving one's spirits (or heart-vapours) to itself, a love song focuses the listener's attention on secular love that cannot but further estrange him or her from the Almighty.

"Al Padre, al Figlio, a lo Spirito Santo,"
cominiciò, "gloria!" tutto 'l paradiso,
sì che m'inebrïava il dolce canto.
Ciò ch'io vedeva mi sembiava un riso
de l'universo; per che mia ebbrezza
intrava per l'udire e per lo viso.
"Glory be to the Father, to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit!" all Paradise began, so that the sweet song held me rapt. What I saw seemed to me a smile of the universe, so that my rapture entered both by hearing and by sight.
(The *Paradiso*, Canto XXVII)

Again the word "*dolce*" is used to describe the song we hear: "*dolcemente*", "*dolcezza*" defined Casello's song and the way he performed it. The souls in the *Paradiso* sing the Gloria Patri of the liturgy of the Church so beautifully that Dante sees "a smile of the universe" (*un riso de l'universo*). As a consequence of the song, the smile reflects both his state of mind and the configuration of the souls engaged in singing. Or does he merely smile himself, Paradise mirroring and blowing up his smile, as it were? Is Paradise nothing but a huge mirror where one's hope and joy are reflected? In contrast to the Gloria Patri, Casello's song engenders no smile either on the faces of the listeners or in heaven. Is that the difference between these two songs? *Un riso*. This reminds me of what happened during a rehearsal of the famous Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra back in the sixties. In those days Mravinsky was still at the head of the orchestra. Renowned for his austerity, he seldom if ever smiled when working with his musicians. Once he was rehearsing a Mozart concerto for violin. In the middle of the rehearsal he asked the violinist whose name I cannot recall, "Any suggestions?"

"Just a smile perhaps," the violinist replied.

"Did you hear? Smile!" Mravinsky thundered, turning to the orchestra.

No word could depict the smile Dante saw in his *Paradiso*: the word "smile" has been applied to so many smiles that it is not easy to distinguish among them the configuration of the elect singing the Gloria Patri. So Dante puts four exclamation marks, one after another.

Oh gioia! Oh ineffabile allegrezza!
Oh vita intègra dvamore e di pace!
Oh sanza brama sicura ricchezza!
O joy! O ineffable gladness! O life entire of love and of peace! O wealth secure without longing!
(The *Paradiso*, Canto XXVII)

"We shouldn't overindulge in exclamation marks," said my literary friend, "otherwise we're are likely to forget that even the tone of our voice, our intonations, can be expressed by mere words." Dante has

no alternative but to enlist the support of exclamations marks that seem to stand up or raise their arms in order to salute the Holy Trinity. In other words, he calls upon hieroglyphs to back up his failing words.

Last night I did not get a wink of sleep, tossing and turning in my bed, sitting in front of my computer which waited patiently for my inspiration to come. And I wrote the following poem:

> Why don't I put an exclamation mark
> And forget words
> That never stand up to express a lofty ideal?
> Like invalids or children
> They crawl on all fours, whatever they try to impart.
> Why not put an exclamation mark
> And two or three question marks after it?
> But there's nothing to question:
> Everything's so clear I can see the stars—all of them—
> Without using a telescope. The point is
> I don't need the stars.
> An apple would do,
> An apple painted by Cezanne.

I do not need the stars yet. How did Meredith put it? "As long as the fire burns in the grate, we don't look for any kinship with the stars." Something like that. (I always misquote the authors I read: you misquote them automatically as you read them.) Does the fire still burn in the grate? I suppose it does, although I have no idea for whom it continues to burn. Perhaps for myself. There is a fire burning in the grate and an apartment where I can write about the fire burning in the grate; and also about my love that burns only when I write about it or during my sleepless nights. But this love of mine is as far from my room as the stars about which I do not care unless they are mentioned in a great poem like the *Commedia*. And I prefer the stars described in the *Commedia* to the ones I see during my nocturnal walks in the woods. I write this commentary because I cannot see or hear you, your smiles and insults, your hymns to love which are so unconventional as to make one doubt what Dante wrote about Paradise and its singers. Do those souls really sing the Gloria Patri or something along the lines of, "Our row was in the offing anyway"? They do sing the Gloria Patri and the effect produced by their (or Dante's) performance is much greater than what one may feel in a real church when listening to a real liturgy. Mantegna thought that "the statues of antiquity were more perfect and composed of more beautiful elements than anything in living nature; it was his theory, confirmed by what he saw with his own eyes, that the sculptors of the ancient world had used several living models to create the perfection and beauty which nature rarely brings together in a single form: they found it necessary to take one part from one body and another from another." I wonder what Vasari would have written about Dante who takes one part from St Thomas, another from Beatrice, creating a harmony that does not exist in real life. Besides, exclamation marks resound better on a page from the *Commedia* than a choir in a church: the acoustics of the tercets are more suited to the liturgy.

Are the acoustics of the *Commedia* suited to the reproduction of *your* voice? Oddly enough, I can hear your voice as if you were sitting opposite me in my room; it sounds better than on the phone. But I cannot conjure up your image; love must be blind in every sense of the word.

> Ahi quanto ne la mente mi commossi,
> quando mi volsi per veder Beatrice,
> per non poter veder, benché io fossi
> presso di lei, e nel mondo felice!
> Ah! How greatly was I stirred in my mind when I turned to see Beatrice, at not being able to see, although I was near her, and in the world of bliss.
> (The *Paradiso*, Canto XXV)

In Canto XXIV of the *Paradiso*, St Peter examines Dante on the subject of Faith. In Canto XXV Dante is examined on the subject of Hope by St James. It is St John who examines Dante on the subject of Love in Canto XXVI. "The reader will note," writes Singleton, "that during the entire examination on *caritas*, or love, the third theological virtue, Dante is blinded, a fact which can hardly fail to bring to mind Cupid blindfolded and many another such traditional association of blindness with love. In this striking context it should also be noted that no definition of love is given in the examination, as it is with faith and hope. This serves to stress the fact that love is primarily a matter of the will, not of the intellect."

The only daughter of my Parisian friend is writing a dissertation on love in modern theatre which "always oversteps the limits of classical love", as she pointed out on the phone. In her dissertation there are several parts entitled respectively: "They devour each other", "As a lover, the son is always better than the husband", "Masochism as a harbinger of love", "Sadism as a catalyst of love", "Three kinds of suffering", "Four kinds of death through love". What would I write in my dissertation entitled *Love as a Starting Point of Dante's* Commedia? A starting point or a driving force. At the outset I might quote the following tercet from Canto XXVI of the *Paradiso*:

> "Le fronde onde s'infronda tutto l'orto
> de l'ortolano etterno, am'io cotanto
> quanto da lui a lor di bene è porto."
> "The leaves wherewith all the garden of the Eternal Gardener is enleaved I love in measure of the good borne unto them from Him."

And I would devote the rest of my work to contradicting this tercet which explains by means of a biblical metaphor the importance of loving the people whose nature fully participates in the goodness of God. Upon seeing Beatrice for the first time Dante did not think in terms of God's grace, even though beauty might be regarded as a supernatural phenomena. He did not think at all, I presume, paralysed as he was by the grace and beauty of the young lady advancing towards him. Love is certainly not a matter of the intellect, but it does not consult the will either as it strikes its fatal blow

which, according to my friend's daughter, may result in four kinds of death. The will comes to the fore only when our vital interests prove to be at stake; for instance, if the problem of marriage is aroused. I would not have married my unruly girl, would I? She might have prevented me from writing books, partly impinging on my free will, let alone on my free time. "And what if she enters into the spirit of the game and actually helps me write this commentary?" I asked myself as I walked towards the building where her office was situated. "After all, she is the perfect foil for Beatrice."

Our last day. I ought to have answered this question before our meeting, before the fatal dinner at the Georgian restaurant. What did God bestow on her apart from beauty? In no way does she participate in the goodness of God unless I misunderstand both God and the word "goodness". "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God, and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God." I still love her, so I know God, and this knowledge amounts to the full understanding of His ways. What does my love for a wilful and vicious woman have to do with God? Did *she* love me? Now she is in love with somebody else, but for almost two years she dreamt of *our* happiness—no doubt about it. Does that mean she is born of God and knows Him?

> Però ricominciai: "Tutti quei morsi
> che posson far lo cor volgere a Dio,
> a la mia caritate son concorsi"
> Therefore I began again, "All those things whose bite can make the heart turn to God have wrought together in my love…"

They devour each other. My friend's daughter said she would enlarge upon real and metaphorical bites "because, generally speaking, teeth are very important in the domain of love". The word Dante uses on this occasion—"*morsi*"—is prompted by the St John's question:

> "Ma dì ancor se tu senti altre corde
> tirarti verso lui, sì che tu suone
> con quanti denti questo amor ti morde."
> "…but tell me also if you feel other cords draw you toward Him, so that you declare with how many teeth this love grips you."

This is one of the mixed metaphors which puzzle and fascinate Dante's readers. The *Commedia* is a wonderful mixed bag of people, animals, plants, styles and metaphors. Her smiles, her eyes, the way she lowers them, her laughter, her shyness, her whims, her insolence, her short, half-hearted confessions—nine teeth. Her half-hearted confessions. "Did you miss me?" The first question I asked her during our very first dinner. And she told me how she had spent the summer holiday, lying in her bathing suit in the garden of their dacha. "My friends were wondering what had got into me. Didn't want to see anybody."

Do I contradict myself? Do I put contradictions in the mixed bag of my commentary? In Chapter 3, I said her whims and insults had never electrified me despite Proust's insistence on how

important negative reactions are in the realm of love. Now I list her nastiness alongside her qualities as if I had been equally fascinated by both; and I wonder if Space, which happens to be one of the main components of Proustian love, has not amalgamated the various traits of her character into one exciting entity—the luminous point I am striving to reach, if only within the bounds of this commentary. Paradoxically enough, in Proust's novel Space often brings the lovers closer together; Time, on the other hand, separates them irremediably. Albertine dies and for a while Marcel remembers her and even continues to make inquires about her past as if she could be cross-examined at the earliest opportunity. But the opportunity does not arise and Marcel loses interest in his late beloved, passing on to more *urgent* matters. In Dante's reply to St John, Time is regained for the sake of "right" love.

> ché l'essere del mondo e l'esser mio,
> la morte ch'el sostenne perch' io viva,
> e quel che spera ogne fedel com' io,
> con la predetta conoscenza viva,
> tratto m'hanno del mar de l'amor torto,
> e del diritto m'han posto a la riva.
> …for the being of the world and my own being, the death that He sustained that I might live, and that which every believer hopes, as do I, with the living assurance of which I spoke, have drawn me from the sea of perverse love and placed me on the shore of right love.

Christ had died many centuries before Dante began to write his *Commedia*, but he wrote of this event with such documentary power that one gets the feeling the poet actually *saw* Christ die on the Cross. The immediacy of his report far outweighs the memory of Albertine that Marcel cherishes for a while to probe into the secrets from which he was barred in his beloved's lifetime; moreover, this memory is fated to disappear rather quickly, whereas Dante's remembrance of Christ gains strength as he proceeds from one sphere to another in the last part of the *Commedia*. Kierkegaard often underlined the importance of doing away with the years spanning the death of Christ and his own birth because they "have no greater demonstrative force than a single day, in relation to an eternal truth which is to decide my eternal happiness. But the eighteen centuries, and all the countless things which in that connection may be narrated and asserted and repeated, have contrariwise a power to distract the mind, and serve that purpose admirably." In other words, Time is an impediment on the path of salvation, for it is no more than a mixed bag of opposite opinions, insignificant events and superfluous doctrines that can and should be thrown overboard to clear the way to the Cross where the Redeemer is dying. "As noted above," writes Kierkegaard, "it is Christianity itself which stresses so tremendously the significance of the individual subject. It desires to deal with the individual, and with the individual alone; and so with every other individual." This remark is mirrored by the following tercet from Canto XXVIII of the *Paradiso*:

La prima luce, che tutta la raia,
per tanti modi in essa si recepe,
quanti son li splendori a chi s'appaia.
The Primal Light that irradiates them all is received by them in as many ways as are the splendours to which It joins itself.

"In so far it is an unchristian use of the eighteen centuries to employ them for the purpose either of enticing or of threatening the individual to embrace Christianity. He will none the less never become a Christian in that manner; and if he does become a Christian, it will be a matter of indifference whether he has the eighteen centuries for him or against him" (Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, translated by David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie). In this way Time is abolished once and for all, but even the non-existence of Time may cause a lot of trouble to those who rely on history for their salvation. Waiting for the Second Coming or for the end of the world, Christian zealots nevertheless went on enlightening all those who, due to geographical or intellectual factors, knew nothing about the advent of Christ and His redeeming death. Dante was greatly impressed by the result of their work, as stated in Canto XXIV of the *Paradiso* where he is required to substantiate his faith:

"Se 'l mondo si rivolse al cristianesmo,"
diss' io, "sanza miracoli, quest' uno
è tal, che li altri non sono il centesmo:
ché tu instrasti povero e digiuno
in campo, a seminar la buona pianta
che fu già vite e ora è fatta pruno."
"If the world turned to Christianity without miracles," I said, "that one is such that the rest are not the hundredth part; for you entered the field poor and hungry, to sow the good plant which was once a vine and is now become a thorn."

Let us not forget that "the student" speaks to St Peter who, along with the other apostles, entered the field poor and fasting and sowed the plant by disseminating the Christian doctrine. Had Dante been aware of how quickly the communist teaching spread over Europe and Asia, he would not have deemed the conversion of the barbarians a miracle compared with which all other miracles are nothing: "*li altri non sono il centesmo*." And this new conversion was brought about mainly by word of mouth and not through the media, with the exception of newspapers. But of course early Christians travelled slower than early Communists. Actually the argument seems to be taken from St Augustine who was also ignorant of Communism and the role it played in the history of the twentieth century: "This one grand miracle suffices for us, that the whole world has believed without any miracles." I wonder to whom of these two poets Kierkegaard addressed his violent reply, "The guaranty of the eighteen centuries, the circumstance that Christianity has interpenetrated all the relations of life, has transformed the world and so forth—all this assurance is nothing but a deceptive snare in which the resolving and choosing subject is held captive, lost in the wilderness of the parenthesis."

What if the opposite happens? The members of the worldwide Christian community drop out,

disgruntled with the Church and the Scriptures. Suppose I am left alone in the world with the Bible and the *Commedia* on my writing desk. Nobody reads them any more; churches are empty and down at heel. Does this state of affairs prove that twenty-one centuries ago a gang of criminals resolved to hoax humanity into believing a story for the sake of which many generations were supposed to waste their time and energy and even sacrifice their lives? Does that mean the Bible is nothing more than a collection of poems and chronicles? Unperturbed, I continue to write this commentary, taking no notice of humanity, feeling utterly alone in the world; and that is a sufficient proof of the existence of God. If questioned by St Peter on the subject of faith, I would answer, "I believe in God and that is the only proof of His existence. At least I don't need other proofs. Are there any?" But *do* I believe in God?

"Do you believe in the *Commedia*?" asked Volodya.

"I'm in two minds about it. There are two beliefs, I suppose. As a work of art, the *Commedia* is above all suspicion, but I don't believe in what happens during the journey. 'The suspension of disbelief' is not an appropriate term, however, because you *have* to believe in the *Commedia* wholeheartedly—it's more than a work of art, more than a mere poem. When you listen to St Peter talking to Dante, you must believe he said exactly what is printed in Canto XXIV, otherwise you'll miss the point altogether. If you read about Piotr Petrovich, you don't care about the veracity of the writer's account because Piotr Petrovich can say whatever comes into his head."

"I recommend 'the suspension of belief' as an appropriate attitude towards the *Commedia*," said Volodya. "It’s not a sacred book after all, despite the impressive numbers of saints we encounter in the upper spheres of the *Paradiso*."

Volodya thinks that Tolstoy and Dostoevsky devote so many pages to God because the Russians are backward and need two centuries to catch up with the rest of humanity. "But we'd better *not* catch up with you," he added. (In the long run I have come to personify the West.) I might already have written about this conversation of ours. Well, I did a global search for "the Russians", for "Tolstoy", for "Dostoevsky" and found nothing of the sort. Did I talk about "Russian mentality"?

"Yes," I replied. "And Flaubert was writing about St Anthony."

"His St Anthony is just St Anthony," said Volodya, "while in Tolstoy's novels a country bumpkin is God."

"I'm fed up with Dostoevsky's God and also with his Devil. They're used as stopgaps, aren't they? 'When in doubt, kill a child,' said Dickens. 'When in doubt, kill God,' might have said Nietzsche. But Dostoevsky kills God and resurrects Him when he's *not* in doubt."

"Faith is the bread-and-butter issue," said Volodya. "Don't you agree? Or do you prefer bread and circuses?"

"Of course there are enough circuses in Dostoevsky's works," I answered. "Too many perhaps. And there's too much bread in Tolstoy's novels and stories. But God is not a straw man, is He? In *The*

Brothers Karamazov both sides in the dispute attack each other, with the result that a straw God is often set up."

"At least Dostoevsky doesn't talk to the saints in Paradise. Dante is much more straightforward and insolent. Milton names no names because he doesn't dare to meddle in the affairs of God." And, to my surprise, Volodya quoted the following tercet from the *Purgatorio*:

> Si disse prima; e poi: "Qui non si vieta
> di nominar ciascun, da ch'è sì munta
> nostra sembianza via per la dïeta."
> "Here it is not forbidden to name each other, since our features are so wrung by the fast."

In Canto XXIV of the *Purgatorio*, Dante speaks to his old friend Forese Donati who, a glutton in his lifetime, is emaciated to such a degree that only his voice can help one establish his identity. Before naming his companions in misfortune he utters this enigmatic sentence that speaks volumes for Dante's scruples and unavowed fears. "Since there is no prohibition against naming names on any other terrace," writes Robert Hollander, "commentators worry about Forese's motive in speaking this way. Most currently agree that he is using exaggerated understatement (the trope *litotes*) to make his point: i. e., on this terrace one must use names to identify the penitents because they are unrecognisable as a result of their emaciation."

"It's forbidden to name names *everywhere*," said Volodya. "Dante has no right to disclose the secrets of the Hereafter. What's more, he can't know these secrets and consequently lies throughout the *Commedia*."

"Every poet is a liar," I said.

"You can lie about a landscape or humanity in general because everybody is entitled to have an opinion and judge the world. But if you say, 'Nicholas is Natalya's lover,' you remove these two individuals from an anonymous crowd and put them on the marketplace where anybody can see them. That's what Dante does in the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*. He points at a man to whom he talks for a while, and this man stays on a printed page for everybody to see."

"There's much fingerpointing in the *Commedia*," I agreed. "But at least Dante knows he is guilty, otherwise his pen wouldn't slip so ostentatiously. Indeed it's just a slip of the pen, a slip of the tongue. '*Qui non si vieta di nominar ciascun...*' Or does he try to vindicate himself? After all, he's usurped the privilege of the Almighty. On that terrace the sinners are so disfigured that nobody can recognise them. But the Hereafter is unrecognisable anyway because we know nothing about it. So it's not forbidden to name the dead."

"Dante travels through the Hereafter like a visiting royal to whom the most renowned poet of Antiquity shows the sights," said Volodya. "He talks with celebrities and even the saints dance for him. I agree that God is not a straw man. But are the saints belly dancers?"

That night he invited me to a theatre where we saw a ballet reminiscent of Hell: in Paradise they

dance otherwise.

> E come cerchi in tempra d'orïuoli
> si giran sì, che 'l primo a chi pon mente
> quïeto pare, e l'ultimo che voli;
> così quelle carole, differente-
> mente danzando, de la sua ricchezza
> mi facieno stimar, veloci e lente.
> And as wheels within the fittings of clocks revolve, so that to one who gives heed the first seems quiet and the last to fly, so did those carols, dancing severally fast and slow, make me judge of their riches.
> (The *Paradiso*, Canto XXIV)

The saints dance in the poet's presence to make him judge of their riches. The image reminds the modern reader of a fashion parade rather than of clocks which have got rid of complicated wheel-laden mechanisms for the sake of electronic simplicity. The ceremony we observe in the *Paradiso* is more sophisticated, however, because the models dance instead of walking along a sort of platform. I wonder why no one in Hollywood is tempted to make a musical on the *Paradiso* which, apart from anything else, provides a happy ending: the lovers are reunited. Of course the very last cantos may be omitted: St Bernard is a poor substitute for Beatrice from the point of view of a traditional film-maker. Besides, St Bernard talks instead of dancing and utters a long prayer that cannot be easily translated into the language of dance, although it is addressed to the Virgin Mary. It is better to finish the musical on the last vision of Beatrice:

> Nel giallo de la rosa sempiterna,
> che si digrada e dilata e redole
> odor di lode al sol che sempre verna,
> qual è colui che tace e dicer vole,
> mi trasse Bëatrice…
> Into the yellow of the eternal Rose, which rises in ranks and expands and breathes forth odour of praise unto the Sun which makes perpetual spring, Beatrice drew me as one who is silent and wishes to speak…
> (The Paradiso, Canto XXX)

The rose into which the saints descend like a swarm of bees reminds one of Busby Berkeley's ballets, renowned for all sorts of dancing flowers blooming and opening up in the middle of the stage. Dante might have seen something like that in his boisterous youth about which one of his biographers says bluntly, "The only thing we know with certainty is that the poet was a notorious womaniser." Did his imagination get up steam as he watched a show in some cabaret or other? He was gradually drawn from the "sea of perverse love" onto the "shore of right love"—the process mirrored in the *Commedia* by the journey from Hell to Paradise where the half-naked or stark naked women give way to the white-robed saints.

Quando scendean nel fior, di banco in banco
  porgevan de la pace e de l'ardore
  ch'elli acquistavan ventilando il fianco.
When they descended into the flower, from rank to rank they proffered of the peace and the ardour which they had acquired as they fanned their sides.
(The Paradiso, Canto XXXI)

I can switch my TV off whenever I am tired or ashamed of getting involved in the life which is perverse and distracts me from writing about the *Paradiso*, from reaching the shore of right love. My love is not right, I'm afraid. But what can I do about it? Dante wrote a long poem to distance himself from nefarious temptations: he had no time for them at the end of his life. But the end of his life is my present life, given my age, so that I must write *something* to obliterate your image.

Love poems are out of fashion, yet
You have such a presence I can't resist
The temptation to write about you.
Not much—
Just a few words: eyes, hair, mouth, shoulders,
Legs. Take a book on anatomy
And read it through. Take Shakespeare's sonnets.
But so many poets and critics disparage
These sonnets. Never mind. I have
To pinch myself to make sure I'm not dreaming
When I see you.

Why do I disparage you? A few awkward gestures, a few vulgar words—the dark side of your timidity. "I'll take you to my fitness centre," you said once. Isn't that a modern paraphrase of the following tercet:

Alcun tempo il sostenni col mio volto:
  mostrando li occhi giovanetti a lui,
  meco il menava in dritta parte vòlto.
For a time I sustained him with my countenance: showing him my youthful eyes I led him with me turned toward the right goal.

Her glance I saw backstage after one of my concerts! (Dante's exclamation mark.) I have been looking for her eyes ever since, finding them on a poster, on my television screen. Her fitness centre corresponds to another part of Beatrice's discourse reproduced in Canto XXX of the *Purgatorio*:

Tanto giù cadde, che tutti argomenti
  a la salute sua eran già corti,
  fuor che mostrarli le perdute genti.
He fell so low that all means for his salvation were now short, save to show him the lost people.

"He fell so low that all means for his salvation were now short, save to take him to the fitness centre."

Why not update the *Commedia*? Why not update my own life? Yesterday I saw myself in the mirror of our lift. An old man. Am I fit for a fitness centre? I am certainly not fit for *her* fitness centre where youngsters tense their muscles so that everyone can admire them. A sort of muscle-flexing. There are fitness centres for the old, I suppose, otherwise she would not have spoken of such a thing. Did she want me to lose face in front of those youngsters? In Beatrice's eyes they would have been the lost people one might encounter in Hell, in one of its circles (or hoops). Or did my fair lady have in mind a *spiritual* fitness centre such as a "yoga club" or "tantric circle"? Was she destined to become my Sakti?

> It is not physiological sight but psychologically seeing her as a mental screen onto which is projected a series of personifications, that changes the adept's ordinary perception of a woman into a special kind of perception—Sakti. The transference of divinity is not something which is detached from the real but is within the reach of experience. The man and the woman both are parts of a drama to which they conform in perfect lucidity. Their interplay is a complementary movement of thoughts and feeling; there is no place for abstraction here, but only constant reference to a tangible human condition. Hence the experience of the transubstantiation of a woman into a goddess is viewed as a very special revelation of reality which can be seen, felt, and apprehended in no other way than what it is.
> (Ajit Mookerjee and Madhu Khanna, *The Tantric Way*)

CHAPTER 8

We are parts of a drama to which *I* conform in perfect lucidity. You have forgotten me already, happy as you are in the arms of somebody else who knows nothing about me and my commentary on the drama of my life. (Any drama is humdrum.) In the course of our last dinner I asked you a trivial question, "Have you ever been in love with anybody else?"

"*Now* you're talking," you said. "Well, I've been in love with three men: a Jew, an Armenian and a Russian."

And Beatrice was married. So what? She was jealous, wasn't she? Two years ago I asked you to come to my friend's apartment where I was staying because I wanted to "welcome the New Year" in your company. But it was much easier to meet the New Year—a Russian expression—than to make you come anywhere. So I called another young lady who spent five days in my company and would have become my wife had I evinced any readiness to marry her. On the 6th of January I told you I had spent a week at my friend's dacha where a few people tried to "rescue me", as I put it.

"I'm not interested in your rescue operations," she said.

"What *are* you interested in?" I asked.

"I'm just living my life. Why can't you understand that?"

"What's your life interested in?"

"By the way, who was trying to save you?"

"Do you care after all?" I asked.

"I don't care. Can't you answer my question?"

"Are you interested in my saviours?"

"Can't you tell me who was trying to save you?" she shouted.

Poco sofferse; poi disse: "Che pense?
Rispondi a me; ché le memorie triste
in te non sono ancor da l'acqua offense."
She forebore but little, then said, "What are you thinking? Answer me, for the sad memories in you are not yet destroyed by the water."
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto XXXI)

Lethe has not yet dissolved the poet's memory of sin and Beatrice desires to take advantage of his lucidity to find out who replaced her in his affections upon her untimely death.

"E quali agevolezze o quali avanzi
ne la fronte de li altri si mostraro,
per che dovessi lor passeggiare anzi?"
"And what attractions of what advantages were displayed on the brow of others, that you were obliged to dally before them?"

Even in the *Vita Nuova* Dante was unfaithful to Beatrice, paying too much attention to the so-called *donna gentile* who sat at her window and looked pityingly at him. In the *Convivio* he returned to her again and we realise she had usurped Beatrice's place in his heart. While looking only for consolation from this lady, he found gold instead. So did I during those five days I spent in the company of my *donna gentile* by whom I wished to be consoled. She largely overstepped the limits I had unconsciously set for her as she strutted around my friend's apartment in her *déshabillé* and cooked delicious meals without ever turning off her charms. We laughed while watching an old film where a disconsolate woman sang a *romance* at the beginning of which she asked her lover to leave her forever. And then she suddenly implored him to come back, changing her mind in the space of two minutes. Until midnight we were signing this *romance*, laughing and repeating these contradictory orders, "Go away!" and "Come back, I beg of you!" And we kissed so often during our strolls along the snow-obstructed streets of Moscow that even indifferent passers-by would glance disapprovingly at our arms and lips. And in the Ukrainian restaurant to which I invited her on the 4th of January I would kiss her adorable little hands that remained cold till the end of the dinner. Even now I recall every minute we spent together and can answer any question about my charming saviour, about my comforter.

> Ond' ella a me: "Per entro i mie' disiri,
> che ti menavano ad amar lo bene
> di là dal qual non è a che s'aspiri,
> quai fossi attraversati o quai catene
> trovasti, per che del passare innanzi
> dovessiti così spogliar la spene?"
> Wherefore she to me, "Within your desires of me that were leading you to love that Good beyond which there is nothing to which man may aspire, what pits did you find athwart your path, or what chains, that you had thus to strip you of the hope of passing onward?"

Robert Hollander thinks that Dante is presented here as a "soldier (or an army) cut off from his pursuit of his goal by the defensive ditches or chains deployed by an enemy". But why not visualise those ditches all along the streets of Moscow where one can seldom walk without sinking into snowdrifts or stepping into gigantic puddles? And chains are a main feature of erotic movies during which numerous lovers indulge in sadomasochistic fantasies as they chain each other to bedposts or pillars. Did the five days I spent with that lovely young lady retard my progress towards the goal Beatrice alludes to in her harangue? Is it just another example of perverse love? She is so tender that often I feel her touch in my dreams without seeing her face or body; but only her fingers can touch me with such delicacy. In the Hereafter the sense of touch is immaterial, which Dante fully realises as he embraces Casello in Canto II of the *Purgatorio*:

> Ohi ombre vane, fuor che ne l'aspetto!
> tre volte dietro a lei le mani avvinsi,

> e tante mi tornai con esse al petto.
> O empty shades except in aspect! Three times I clasped my hands behind him and as often brought them back to my breast.

In our world I often experience the same emptiness as I clasp my hands behind this or that friend of mine and feel them on my breast as if, for some obscure reason, I was saluting myself, my own body. Even a handshake does not have the meaning we assign to it because we just go through the motions, bending and unbending our fingers which encounter only the empty air and the palm of our right hand. That is why I treasure every *real* touch, be it a token of tenderness or friendship. And she is real even in my dreams. Many people walk around us and some of them are shades which cannot be found out as long as we have no opportunity to touch them. And you are not supposed to come up to a passer-by and ask permission to touch his or her body to make sure you have not been whisked off to another world. The revelation I gloat over at the end of Chapter 6 was not sudden after all: I had been prepared for it by a perpetual feeling of emptiness I experience whenever I venture outdoors. My comforter must have been empty too; the hand touching my body in my dreams is no doubt my own hand.

Perhaps this *is* an example of perverse love because I never thought my comforter might become my Beatrice in the long run: she was not qualified for this role. So she was a pit I found athwart my path: an unforgivable (and unforgettable) waste of time. From now on I should always proceed in the manner advocated by the author of *Aurora Consurgens*:

> Therefore I will rise and go into the city, seeking in the streets and the broad ways a chaste virgin to espouse, comely in face, more comely in body, most comely in her garments, that she may roll back the stone from the door of my sepulchre and give me wings like a dove, and I will fly with her into heaven and then say: I live forever, and will rest in her, for the Queen stood on my right hand in gilded clothing, surrounded with variety…O Queen of the heights, arise, make haste, my love, my spouse, speak, beloved, to thy lover, who and of what kind and how great thou art.
> (Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, translated by R. F. C. Hull)

Jung insists on the initiatory aspect of alchemical process in the course of which one ought to find oneself and not an *outward* sign of wealth such as gold ingot. The figure of the Queen is familiar to the reader acquainted with alchemical writings where the Queen of Sheba longs to meet King Solomon. "We see how the heavenly sun gives of his splendour to all other bodies," writes Penotus, "and the earthly or mineral sun will do likewise, when he is set in his own heaven, which is named the 'Queen of Sheba', who came from the ends of the earth to behold the glory of Solomon. So, too, our Mercury has left his own lands and clothed himself with the fairest garment of white, and has given himself to Solomon, and not to any other who is a stranger (*extraneo*) and impure." In this text the process seems to be reversed because it is the Queen who comes "from the ends of the earth to behold the glory of Solomon". In other words, the King does not have to look for her, contrary to what is described in the first text where the alchemist vows to "rise and go into the city, seeking in the streets

and the broad ways a chaste virgin to espouse".

How to proceed? Should I wait for the white-robed Queen of Sheba to pay me a visit in Versailles? First I have to clear up that mess I made in the living room strewn all over with faxes, books and underwear. Anyway my apartment is a total shambles and I have no idea how to set about putting it in order. Perhaps the rooms I live in somehow reflect my state of mind, my mental disorder, my incapacity to cope with the world and myself: in the domain of alchemy the inner and outer worlds reflect each other and are mutually beneficial.

Dante's works seem to follow the stages of alchemical ritual with poetic accuracy from which so-called poetic licence is not totally excluded. In the *Vita Nuova* the future creator of the *Commedia* meets Beatrice for whom he has been looking from his boyhood, spurred on by Love, by the desire to find "a chaste virgin to espouse". "He oftentimes commanded me to seek if I might see this youngest of the Angels: wherefore I in my boyhood often went in search of her, and found her so noble and praiseworthy that certainly of her might have been said those words of the poet Homer, 'She seemed not to be the daughter of a mortal man, but of God.'" Is it a retrospective appraisal which does not take into account the immature reactions of a nine-year-old boy? Was he really seeking an angel in his boyhood which, however different from mine, was subject to the laws of human physiology? Anyway only a sexual pervert is capable of associating angels with sexual intercourse and therefore dream of how an emissary of heaven strips its clothes and wings off to join him or her in bed. Of course even a contemporary man, upon seeing a beautiful woman, can mutter to himself, "A divine creature," which does not necessarily mean she has anything to do with angels or gods. Is that how Dante saw his first encounter with Beatrice upon which he embroidered in the process of writing, as any poet would have done in his place. "'A divine creature', 'a daughter of God'. And since she is a daughter of God, I can't so much as dream of an intimate relationship with her. Even touching her body is out of the question because she must have no body. My hands would touch my own breast if I dared embrace her." And so he writes the following sentence: "And albeit her image, that was with me always, was an exultation of Love to subdue me, it was yet of so perfect a quality that it never allowed me to be overruled by Love without the faithful counsel of reason, whensoever such counsel was useful to be heard."

Now and then Dante resorted to the counsel of reason to ward off the danger of treating his beloved as a creature of flesh and blood. In those moments he might have realised he was not a monk shut up in a cloister where only angels could keep him company. "The attitude of Dante to the fundamental experience of the *Vita Nuova*," writes T. S. Eliot, "can only be understood by accustoming ourselves to find meaning in final causes rather than in origins. It is not, I believe, meant as a description of what he consciously felt on his meeting with Beatrice, bur rather as a description of what that meant on mature reflection upon it." Such a reflection creates a perspective which is a main feature of any important work of art: I for one am not interested in *documentary* accounts of what

happened in one's childhood or even the day before yesterday. Whenever I read a book where a protagonist recounts his childhood in the manner of a prison guard who removes from a prisoner's suitcase the items the latter has brought with him, naming them out loud, I grow bored and shut the book. What counts is the mirrors in which the events of one's childhood come to be reflected, getting inextricably intertwined with other events and one's mature thoughts. And the day before yesterday is reflected in the mirrors of the past.

Human life is more akin to a series of perspectives than to a luminous or dark point, however happy or desperate we may feel. And these perspectives are partly disclosed through the expressions "on second thoughts", "after much soul-searching", which denote the length of our conscious rituals. But there are also unconscious leaps I detect in the conduct of someone who says the opposite of what he said a few days before, acting like a different person. For instance, many people believe the arts are in dire straits nowadays and, whenever the subject comes up, they run down contemporary artists and shake their heads so often that I begin to wonder if their necks are made of a different material—of rubber, for example. And two days later they applaud a second-rater in a concert hall and smilingly nod their heads as they browse through a recent novel—a nice story with a few allusions to the Bible. During my last visit to Moscow I opened one of these novels while queuing for the cash desk in a bookshop.

"What trash!" I said out loud. "And so many people are reading it! No wonder the world is going to the dogs. How can they read it?" I was addressing the cashier now. "It's so boring and worthless. And you've got a pile of this novel on the cash desk. Why?" I shut the book and put it back on the top of the pile.

"It's not my fault," said the cashier.

"Why pollute the brains of all these youngsters? They don't read Joyce or Musil, do they? They know nothing about Proust, Benjamin and Auden. But they read this trash. Do you agree with me?"

"I don't like him either," said the cashier. "A mediocre writer."

"He's not a writer at all. His book doesn't exist. How can they read it?"

The people in the queue let me talk, but I am not sure they agreed with me: some of them were holding the book and had already prepared the money to pay for it. And if I had thrown the pile out of the window they would have rushed towards the exit in the hope of picking all the copies up. Was my wrathful speech lost on them? The more we talk about this crisis the sooner we shall solve our problems.

"Ma nondimen, rimossa ogne menzogna,
  tutta tua visïon fa manifesta;
  e lascia pur grattar dov' è la rogna.
Ché se la voce tua sarà molesta
  nel primo gusto, vital nodrimento
  lascerà poi, quando sarà digesta."

> "But none the less, all falsehood set aside, make manifest all that you have seen; and then let them scratch where the itch is. For if at first taste your voice be grievous, yet shall it leave thereafter vital nourishment when digested."

In Canto XV of the *Paradiso*, Dante meets his ancestor Cacciaguida who is preoccupied with public morals and does not care about the arts except when praising his descendant's genius and prophesying his immortality. But why should *I* write about private or public morals in the world where too many people seem to be on a moral crusade? Would Dante have said anything about Saddam Hussein had he lived in our times? Or would he have been appalled by our cultural and intellectual standards? Would they have let *him* talk on television about our *déchéance intellectuelle*? The other day I saw Andzej Zulawski in the programme called *Bord cadre, le supplément*. He said he was reluctant to make films nowadays because he could no longer find a great actress like Romy Schneider. "There are no great actors either," he added. Of course the host interrupted him at once to say he knew a dozen budding geniuses who would be happy to work with the maestro. "I'll wait till they become geniuses," said Zulawski.

"Come on! Do you really believe there are no more great artists today? Have they died, all of them?"

Voices, voices, voices. Only in Moscow I heard nothing in that book shop. Were they deaf, all of them? "Why do you always speak of that? An interesting discussion should range over various topics." But in the *Commedia* Dante vents his fury in almost every canto, leaving no choice to his commentator. By the way, Zulawski did not live up to Dante's strictness and absolutism: he spoke only about a *partial* decline of our civilisation, limited to some countries of Europe. He dropped a few disparaging remarks about France and cited the Americans whose contempt of Europe is encapsulated in the word "old". When asked why he was making no film in Poland, he said the cinema did not exist any more in his native country. Where does it exist, I wonder?

With the passing of the years I have realised those people have to live as best they can in order not to commit either suicide or a murder. A literary agent says to you, "Wonderful! What luminous prose!" However, after consulting one or two publishers, he or she vanishes into thin air, ignoring your impatience and telephone calls. Your prose becomes dark all of a sudden, whereupon you descend from Paradise to Hell. Like a child, he or she falls in love with you at first, taking no heed of reason and its "faithful counsel". But sooner or later reason gets the upper hand in this struggle for life: it is a struggle for life after all. Your literary agent continues to live and work, saying, "What luminous prose!" to other writers whose prose may indeed remain luminous to the very end of their lives, provided a million readers share their agent's view. How do they come to share it? Some novels are published in a blaze of publicity and millions of people trust the publicity. They also trust the works of art in which they see their own thoughts before they actually form them—the effect of anticipation or repetition. The process is described in Canto XV of the *Paradiso*:

"Tu credi l'vero; ché i minori e ' grandi ???????
di questa vita miran ne lo speglio
in che, prima che pensi, il pensier pandi"
"You believe the truth, for the lesser and the great of this life gaze into that mirror in which, before you think, you display your thought."

Like Beatrice and, owing to the mirror of God, Cacciaguida knows his descendant's thoughts before they are actually formed in his mind. But let us remove this tercet from Canto XV and, taking advantage of the universal and eternal character of the *Commedia*, place it in the context of modern life. "The lesser and the great of this life gaze into that mirror..." Into what mirror do they gaze now? The former gaze into the mirror of publicity, the latter into the mirror of the former. A vicious circle, isn't it? Publicity displays the thoughts of "ordinary people" before they have enough time to carry out any mental operation, however short and unimportant. Contemporary artists have their mirrors—ratings, sales— to see the thoughts of art consumers before and after they have been formed in the latter's minds. A true artist gazes into the mirror of human destiny or archetypes, as Jung might have put it. Dante was gazing into the mirror of God where he saw his own mind and that of Thomas Aquinas.

> Man by himself can in no way rise from sin without the help of grace. For since sin is transient as to the act and abiding in its guilt…to rise from sin is not the same as to cease the act of sin. To rise from sin means that man has restored to him what he lost by sinning. Now man incurs a triple loss by sinning:…stain, corruption of natural good, and debt of punishment. He incurs a stain, inasmuch as he forfeits the lustre of grace through the deformity of sin. Natural good is corrupted, inasmuch as man's nature is disordered by man's will not being subject to God's, and once this order is overthrown the whole nature of sinful man remains disordered. Last, there is the debt of punishment, inasmuch as by sinning man deserves everlasting damnation.
> (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*)

By recognising his addiction to the sin of pride, the poet *partly* liberates himself from it. Let us imagine a lying man whose eyes look upward so that he cannot see his body. Then he lowers his gaze and the nether part of his legs glides into his field of vision. Suddenly he realises that his legs and perhaps his whole body are smeared with excrement, but he has neither the desire nor the energy to rise from his bed and go to the bathroom. By rising from his bed he would rise from sin and pave the way to its cessation—to the shower he might take in the bathroom, using a sponge and a shower cream. Dante just lifts his head and looks at his feet, for "man by himself can in no way rise from sin without the help of grace". Let us imagine Dante lying on his bed with a huge rock covering his body from neck to toe. In Canto X of the *Purgatorio*, he sees a crowd of spirits who do not appear human at first because they are bowed down by the rocks they must bear. In Canto XI one of the shades describes his sorry plight:

E s'io non fossi impedito dal sasso
  che la cervice mia superba doma,
  onde portar convienmi il viso basso
And were I not hindered by the stone that subdues my proud neck, so that I must hold my face down…

In his Florentine house, Dante is lying supine on a bed, his eyes looking upward—my version of the terrace where the Proud expiate their sin. Let him look at Paradise to which he will journey in due course. But first he must rise from the bed and go to the nearest bath. (He was really a pride addict and would have died of an overdose several times in the course of his visit to the Hereafter had not Beatrice put in a word for him *before* he began writing the *Commedia*.) In Canto XV he is saluted by his ancestor in Latin which is more apt to fulfil the requirements of the poet's pride:

"O sanguis meus, o superinfusa
  gratïa Dei, sicut tibi cui
  bis unquam celi ianüa reclusa?"
"O blood of mine, O lavish grace of God! To whom was Heaven's gate ever twice opened, as to thee?"

Dante was privileged to visit Heaven twice: in his lifetime and after his death. Such a thing had not happened since the days of St Paul who, however, might have been admitted to the celestial spheres *without* his bodily envelope. Anyway, the triumph of the poet is evident enough and it is not without reason that his ancestor evokes God's grace which, on the one hand, allows the poet to journey through Paradise in his body and on the other does not help him rise from the sin of pride—a double-edged grace indeed! Did the talk to Cacciaguida cause the poet to stay in the Purgatory a few years longer? He was all the guiltier since Cacciaguida's words made him proud of his genealogical tree:

O poca nostra nobilità di sangue,
  se glorïar di te la gente fai
  qua giù dove l'affetto nostro langue,
mirabil cosa non mi sarà mai:
  ché là dove appetito non si torce,
  dico nel cielo, io me ne gloriai.
O our petty nobility of blood! If you make folk glory in you here below where our affections languish, it will nevermore be a marvel to me, since there where appetite is not warped, I mean in Heaven, I myself gloried in you.

What will the Supreme Judge say to him on the day of the Last Judgement? "You were so proud that you usurped my prerogatives and created your own Hell, Purgatory and Paradise where you put the people whom you liked and disliked. You wrought vengeance upon your enemies and glorified your friends without ever saying, 'It would be presumptuous of me to anticipate the decisions of the Almighty.' My choice in this and other matters is dictated solely by my will and cannot be known to human beings unless I decide to come out into the open. And I did not communicate anything to you,

did I? Besides, even in the course of your journey you behaved like a sinner who indulges in his sin and defies God and His omniscience. Do you think I did not hear what you said at the beginning of Canto XVI of the *Paradiso*? Do you think I am deaf? Do you think I am illiterate? At first you say the nobility of blood is of no importance. You are right there because only the nobility of soul and mind leads one to salvation through My grace. But then you say you gloried in the nobility of your blood, which is tantamount to saying, 'I know it is wicked but I do it all the same. And I understand those who commit the sin of pride on earth because I cannot help feeling proud in Heaven where one is not subject to base appetites. ' Your colleagues disparaged the glory of birth, exalting the nobility of character, and even you devoted the third Canzone of the *Convivio* to this theme and touched upon it in the *Monarchia*. Did you change your mind in Paradise where one is supposed to be wiser than on earth? It is as if you were saying, 'I know that my colleagues disparage the glory of birth in Latin, Provençal and Italian. Moreover, I know that God takes no notice of it. And yet I relish it in Heaven, of all places. On earth I was more prudent and some of my writings testify to my relative wisdom. But what do I care about my earthly writings now? I'm in Heaven and God continues to lavish His grace upon me. And I lavish my grace upon Him by writing the *Commedia*. It is a case of you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. Anyway I doubt His capacity to build the Hereafter as harmoniously and poetically as I have done in my masterpiece. In other words, I'm not sure the Almighty is a poet. He might be a lawgiver—I grant Him that. But I'm not sure He is a poet or a musician. And what is superior to music and poetry?' You remind me of Farinata about whom you write in Canto X of the *Inferno*:

> "Io avea già il mio viso nel suo fitto;
> ed el s'ergea col petto e con la fronte
> com' avesse l'inferno a gran dispitto.
> Already I had fixed my eyes on his, and he rose upright with chest and brow thrown back as if he had great scorn of Hell…

"It is not *your Inferno* he scorns, is it? When writing this and other cantos, you had in mind *My* Hell, *My* Purgatory and *My* Paradise, didn't you? So he scorns My Hell, My work, My will, My power. And why does he rise 'upright with chest and brow thrown back'? Does he rise through my grace? Not at all. He rises by means of his own will and power. And what result does he obtain by rising upright? He just sees you walking by. He does not rise from his sin, for it is too late to rise from any sin and anyway I have no intention of making him rise. He does it on his own initiative. That is what you do throughout the *Commedia*—you rise higher and higher on your own initiative. Who allowed you to do so? I had no intention of letting you travel in the Hereafter. By the way, Farinata resides in an *octagon* of Hell, if you must know. Yes, My Hell is a succession of octagons and not of circles, as you imagined. I like corners, you know. I like putting sinners in corners. There are thousands of sinners standing in one corner. I think this arrangement is far more beautiful, just and harmonious than your

circles and terraces. But let us return to Farinata. What question did he put to you?

> "Com' io al piè de la sua tomba fui,
> guardommi un poco, e poi, quasi sdegnoso,
> mi dimandò: 'Chi fuor li maggior tui?'
> When I was at the foot of his tomb, he looked at me for a moment, then, as if in disdain, asked me, 'Who were your ancestors?'

"Why did he ask you about your ancestors? He might have asked you about your literary output or your family life. He was not likely to ask you about your religious education, was he? At least he might have asked you about your whereabouts on earth. Well, let us drop his question. What did you answer him?

> "Il ch'era d'ubidir disideroso,
> non gliel celai, ma tutto gliel' apersi…
> And I, who was eager to obey, concealed nothing, but made all plain to him

"You did not have to answer his question, did you? Why did you answer it? 'In the emphatic redundancy of this affirmation and in the use of the word "tutto",' writes Singleton, 'Dante's pride in his ancestry is unmistakable.' Do you recall what happens to someone who is proud? Do you recall your own characters, your Hell? Of course you cannot recall *my* Hell because you have never seen it. But do you recall *your* Hell? Why should I recall your *Commedia* if you no longer care about it? These are a few lines from Canto XIV of the *Inferno* where you torment the violent against God. Do you really think that is a suitable punishment for them, for you? The ring of Burning Sand. What about the octagon of Burning Bones? You know, the bones you put in your fireplace instead of coals or logs.

> ”'O Capaneo, in ciò che non s'ammorza
> la tua superbia, se' tu più punito;
> nullo martiro, fuor che la tua rabbia,
> sarebbe al tuo furor dolor compito.'
> 'O Capaneus! In that your pride remains unquenched you are punished the more: no torment save your own raging would be pain to match your fury.'

"And Virgil explains to you that the sinner was one of the seven kings who besieged Thebes, 'and held, and seems to hold, God in disdain and prize Him little' (*ed ebbe e par ch'elli abbia / Dio in disdegno, e poco par che 'l pregi*). The proud always hold Me in disdain because there is not enough esteem for two persons in the human heart which is rather small, as you must know. Anyway, do you think there is room for anybody or anything in your heart except God? Though many doctrines exposed in your *Commedia* are erroneous, they have the merit of being centred upon My substance. (I use the word 'substance' to make you understand *something* of what I mean: you would not understand the *right* word.) But whenever you shift your attention to yourself—"

And so on and so forth. As a scrupulous commentator, I am obliged to try my hand at writing speeches for the inhabitants of celestial spheres. It is true that neither God nor the Virgin Mary talks in the *Paradiso*, but Dante acquaints us with Adam's way of thinking as he makes him talk in Canto XXVI. Answering Dante's unspoken questions, he tells us when he was placed in the Garden of Eden, how long he remained there, what was the true cause of the Fall and what language he spoke. It is no easy task to write a speech for a saint, but Adam's mind poses a problem that no biography will ever help to solve. Indeed, Dante had at his disposal the biographies of the saints he described in the *Paradiso*; sometimes he could even draw on their own sermons and treatises. Adam's mind, on the other hand, is almost as enigmatic as God's. In my commentary, however, God speaks longer than Adam in the *Paradiso*. Should I have finished this chapter with His monologue? Would God speak of Dante's childhood, of his sexual impulses? Perhaps. But God would not dwell on *my* childhood, on *my* loves and disappointments, would He? And it is in relation to *my* experience that I desire to tackle the problem of Dante's immature love. Incidentally, I insist on the word "immature" despite the mature outlook one comes across at the beginning of the *Vita Nuova*.

Dante seems to project his future *Paradiso* onto his first encounter with Beatrice, which took place in the streets of Florence where a nine-year-old boy might have been looking for a beautiful girl of his age in order to kiss her. Or was his upbringing so different from mine that he really saw angels instead of beautiful little girls? Actually my imagination has been nourished by a greater number of paintings featuring angels and archangels: in these matters Dante could rely chiefly on Cimabue and Giotto about whom he speaks in Canto XI of the *Purgatorio*:

> Credette Cimabue ne la pittura
> tener lo campo, e ora ha Giotto il grido,
> sì che la fama di colui è scura.
> Cimabue thought to hold the field in painting, and now Giotto has the cry, so that the other's fame is dim.

This tercet follows the one where the shortness of fame is touched upon:

> Oh vana gloria de l'umane posse!
> com' poco verde in su la cima dura,
> se non è giunta da l'etati grosse!
> O empty glory of human powers! How briefly lasts the green upon the top, if it is not followed by barbarous times!

By "the green upon the top" Dante might have been alluding either to a green leaf that soon shrivels or to the green of the laurel—a wreath worn by a poet. "We must be careful," writes Porena, "not to interpret *cima* in the sense of 'height', 'summit', etc." What Dante had in mind was just a branch or a forehead. But I am more interested in barbarous times when an artist's fame was looked after because, as Hollander points out, "...a 'dark age' allows fame to continue for longer than it usually does (by not

producing other 'winners' quickly)..." Undoubtedly we are living in such a dark age that does not produce winners despite the increase in the number of writers. Oddly enough, it does not produce losers either, with a few exceptions to which I belong. Suppose all these artists take part in a competition during which they are supposed to run around a stadium jam-packed with supporters. They run and one of them wins the race after tracing a few circles with his feet. But these are *not* the circles of Hell or the terraces succeeding each other as Dante and Virgil climb the Mount ofPurgatory. So the winner is congratulated and photographed; a crowd of supporters gathers around him. But he is given no medal; no wreath adorns his forehead. He has been disqualified from the championship after positive drug tests. And the people forget about the race as if there was something shameful about it; as if all the athletes had been disqualified. Dante describes such a winner in the *Inferno*, at the end of Canto XV where the wayfarers meet a troop of those who indulged unnatural lust (the "violent against nature"). Among them Dante recognises Brunetto Latini who used to be a famous philosopher and a man of learning. They speak to each other long enough to allow T. S. Eliot to write a pastiche of their encounter in *Little Gidding*. All of a sudden, Brunetto Latini realises he has been left behind by his travelling companions:

> Di più direi; ma 'l venire e 'l sermone
> più lungo esser non può, però ch'i' veggio
> là surger nuovo fummo del sabbione.
> Gente vien con la quale esser non deggio.
> I would say more, but my going and my speech must not be longer, for I see yonder a new smoke rising from the sand: people are coming with whom I must not be.

And then he starts running like all those people about whom they write in newspapers, in literary magazines, "She ran in the cross-country race every year and often won", "They are taking part in a race to the top of Ben Nevis", "The race is run through all five boroughs of New York", "The newspapers are involved in a race to publish the story", "It will be a race against the clock to get this book published by the end of August".

> Poi si rivolse e parve di coloro
> che corrono a Verona il drappo verde
> per la campagna; e parve di costoro
> quelli che vince, non colui che perde.
> Then he turned back, and seemed like one of those who run for the green cloth in the field at Verona, and of them seemed he who wins, not he who loses.

This is a wonderful simile about which a lot has been written. Let us not forget that the race Dante alludes to takes place in the *Inferno* and not in the field at Verona so that all the winners, if any, are actually losers: you cannot win anything either in Hell or in present-day paradise. Besides, Brunetto Latini is the last in the race that features only losers; in other words, he is the last among the last. Yet

he seems to be winning the race because he is Dante's old friend and mentor who, moreover, inspired an important passage in Eliot's *Little Gidding*. Another meaning seems to be borrowed from the Bible where the last often become the first and vice versa. Many contemporary artists who believe they have been given a piece of green cloth (or a banner) as a prize for their victory are in fact carrying a rooster:

> I have heard that the Veronese observe an ancient tradition at one of their feasts. They have naked men run a race, and the prize is a piece of green cloth.
> (Boccaccio)

> Another prize for which the foot race was run was a banner and a rooster and a pair of gloves; the winner was awarded the banner and the last man in the race the rooster, which he had to carry openly into the city (the Veronese statutes of Can Grande I).

And on the way to the city he was the butt of derisive taunts on the part of his townsmen.

So our winners go back to the city, a rooster in their hands. But they are not derided on the way because almost everybody takes them for the winners. Where is *that* city, the City of Art? Where are *those* discerning townsmen? In the future perhaps. Or nowhere. No longer can the future be counted upon.

But let us return to Cimabue and Giotto, to the tercet in which Dante mentions them. "The other's fame is dim." Does the poet suggest there is such a thing as progress in the domain of art? Such a thesis would be emphatically denied and even derided by contemporary critics as well as by my highbrow friends. Last summer I had a discussion on the subject with a friend of mine who is writing a book on Achilles' shield. I said that, by denying any progress in the arts, we tacitly acknowledge the impossibility of regress which is the dominant feature in the history of the last three decades. "Was this Benedetto Croce's idea? Judging every era on its own terms. So you're not supposed to compare what's done today to the masterpieces of the past. If judged on its own terms, a contemporary novel or painting may turn out to be a masterpiece while any comparison would reduce it…to the ranks, if you see what I mean. There are no generals today, only sergeants. And even these sergeants should be reduced to the ranks. Probably we'd better refrain from comparing Homer to Dante, although Nabokov does something of the kind in his lectures on *Anna Karenin*. Of course he doesn't so much as mention Dante—he wasn't interested in *him*. But he says something about Tolstoy being superior to Homer and Cervantes when it comes to a description of childbirth. I'll send you the paragraph in question by fax. And T. S. Eliot says that Dante is far more important than Baudelaire for the reasons he enumerates at length."

"Such declarations are mere nonsense," she answered, "because a genius can't be inferior to another genius."

"Do you mean to say that all mountains have the same height? There's only one Mount of Purgatory."

"One mountain may be wider than another mountain," she insisted, "but they are of the same height."

"The size of a mountain counts as well, don't you think?" I said. "If Dante was a mountain he'd cover the whole of the universe."

"In this case, we wouldn't see the light of his stars," she answered with a smile. "And Baudelaire's mountain would allow us to do both."

"You mean to reach and see the stars?" I asked.

Here are the two excerpts I sent her by fax:

> Mark incidentally that the whole history of literary fiction as an evolutionary process may be said to be a gradual probing of deeper and deeper layers of life. It is quite impossible to imagine either Homer in the ninth century B.C. or Cervantes in the seventeenth century of our era—it is quite impossible to imagine them describing in such wonderful detail childbirth. The question is not whether certain events or emotions are or are not suitable ethically or esthetically. The point I want to make is that the artist, like the scientist, in the process of evolution of art and science, is always casting around, understanding a little more than his predecessor, penetrating further with a keener and more brilliant eye—and this is the artistic result.
> (Nabokov)

> His [Baudelaire's] prostitutes, mulattoes, Jewesses, serpents, cats, corpses form a machinery which has not worn very well; his Poet, or his Don Juan, has a romantic ancestry which is too clearly traceable. Compare with the costumery of Baudelaire the stock of imagery of the *Vita Nuova*, or of Cavalcanti, and you find Baudelaire's does not everywhere wear as well as that of several centuries earlier; compare him with Dante or Shakespeare, for what such a comparison is worth, and he is found not only a much smaller poet, but one in whose work much more that is perishable has entered.
> (T. S. Eliot)

I propose to add another item to this collection of progressive thinkers. In July 1810, E. T. A. Hoffmann wrote a review of Beethoven's *Fifth* in which he claims that the symphony arouses in the listener a wider range of emotions than the works of Haydn and Mozart, the former being too cheerful and mischievous. Actually Haydn and Beethoven are two wayfarers who travel through the Hereafter, the former showing the way and the latter shedding tears, falling down in swoons and flying towards the stars.

In my opinion, Homer was more interested in the shield of Achilles: the birth of a human being was nothing to write home about, even in his times. Many of those children were heroes or semi-gods. What counted for him was their deeds, and a shield was an important item in a hero's life, enabling him to deal appropriately with the outer world that lay before him like a battlefield. It was enough to say, "He was born" and devote the rest of your time to what happens after your protagonist's birth. Of course Tolstoy was preoccupied with Lyovin's *reaction* to the birth of his son—one of the turning

points in his life. (There are people who never turn.) But in Homer's days, heroes and heroines had a different attitude towards birth and death which were no more than items of their ritual. Like a shield, birth was to protect one from non-existence. And non-existence was to protect one from birth. Like a shield, death was to protect one from life. In this sense, the description of Achilles' shield is no less impressive than the chapters Tolstoy devotes to the birth of Kitty's child. Actually every battle is a birth of a hero who does not live outside those battles during which his shield becomes a symbol of his birth. I do not think Tolstoy understood more than his predecessor—Homer in the present case—for the simple reason that he did not regard a shield as a symbol of birth, life and death. For him the birth of Kitty's child was linked to torments, doctors and Lyovin's fear; Homer saw Achilles' birth in terms of his shield and the sheets on which his mother lay were of no importance to him.

And whatever is perishable in Baudelaire's poetry, according to T. S. Eliot, is just another shield on which there are the scenes of everyday life depicted *poetically*—the only thing that counts in a work of art; and poetry is never perishable. The corpse of a cat lying on a road makes me stop my car and spend one or two hours in a sort of paralysis. I recall my cat who would jump on a windowsill in my living room to signify his desire to go for a walk. And I always let him out instead of having him castrated to stop those wanderings once and for all. He would have stayed with me all the time, rubbing his head against my legs and my neck, looking at me. As to Baudelaire's prostitutes, they have more sex appeal than the prostitutes I come across in Paris, Brussels, Munich, Amsterdam and Yokohama. Anyway prostitutes are imperishable, I suppose. Of course Dante's imagery is not perishable either, but many of its components have worn thin: nowadays St Thomas does not play the same role and a beautiful young woman, apart from being a paragon of virtue, becomes one's girlfriend overnight. Our sins are just the traits of our character for which we are punished by our colleagues and other members of our community, who do not refer to God when turning away from us. Over the last fifty years God has increasingly become a figure of rhetoric to which some politicians resort to justify their actions, and their actions speak much louder than words: God disappears among them. But was Dante himself a progressive thinker with regard to poetry and other arts? In *The Figure of Beatrice*, Charles Williams touches upon the subject:

> …the whole of the *Paradiso* was meant, verbally, to be very advanced poetry. The "stupor" which Virgil feels in beholding the great preluding pageant was presented as a real "stupor" before the poetry. The *Commedia* in its totality was meant to be an advance on the *Aeneid*. Possibly it is not. But we ought to feel that, philosophically and psychologically, the *Paradiso* was to be a poem which Virgil could not understand…

The pageant to which Charles Williams refers is no other than the mystical procession depicted in Canto XXIX of the *Purgatorio*. And Virgil's "stupor" is expressed thus:

> Il mi rivolsi d'ammirazion pieno

> al buon Virgilio, ed esso mi rispuose
> con vista carca di stupor non meno.
> I turned round full of wonder to the good Virgil, and he answered me with a look no less charged with amazement.

Dante is in the grip of the same "stupor" as if unable to understand his own poetry, his future poem. Would Schoenberg have understood his twelve-tone works had he been given an opportunity to hear them, say, at the age of thirty-five? Do many artists have an inkling of what they *might* create in twenty or thirty years? Does one's brain have a particle of the future stored in some of its convolutions? Does the future actually develop, grow in one's brain, altering the initial components to such a degree that no one, not even the owner of the brain, is able to recognise them? Anyway Virgil was not destined to write the *Commedia*.

Once again let us return to Cimabue and Giotto whose frescoes in Assisi I had seen twice before they were partly ruined by a recent earthquake. Looking at Giotto's frescoes, I could not help comparing them with Rublev's *Trinity* and Dionisy's frescoes of St Pherapont monastery. Vasary knew neither Rublev's icons nor Dionisy's frescoes. So he wrote in his *Life of the Artists*:

> But to return to Cimabue: although Giotto's fame obscured his, this was only in fact in the way that a great light dims the splendour of a lesser. Cimabue was, as it were, the first cause of the renewal of the art of painting. Giotto, although he was his pupil, inspired by a worthy ambition and helped by providence and his natural gifts, aspired even higher. And it was Giotto who opened the door of truth to those who have subsequently brought the art of painting to the greatness and perfection it can claim in our own century.

And he calls upon Dante's authority to support his opinion which is expressed in the tercet I quoted above: "I must also add that if his disciple Giotto had not diminished his glory, Cimabue's fame would have been even greater, as was indicated by Dante in his *Commedia*…" But today's commentators are loath to admit that Dante could compare Cimabue and Giotto because "such a thing is not done", as one of them told me last October. Dante had no idea what would be done or undone in the future of which he had only an indirect knowledge, being informed of it by the inhabitants of the Hereafter. So he might have judged these two painters in accordance with the views prevalent in his time when Giotto was considered a better artist than Cimabue. But Robert Hollander is up in arms over such a view: "The notion that Dante is in the passage putting Giotto's art ahead of Cimabue's is baseless, though widespread. Dante *may* himself have admired Giotto's painting more than Cimabue's, but that is not the point here." Hollander toes the line because he cannot do otherwise: from *our* point of view Cimabue is not inferior to Giotto. But let us not project our Paradise on Dante's Hell. That is what I do most of the time, unfortunately: I project Hell on Paradise and vice versa. And I do not really know if such an artist as Giotto can be superior or inferior to any other artist. Has anyone penetrated "further with a keener and more brilliant eye"? Was Nabokov right in comparing the artist with the scientist? I think that Musil probed further into our soul, body and mind than Cervantes, although the latter's

masterpiece is universally regarded as the best novel in the history of literature. But why do I always speak of Musil, Proust, Kafka, Joyce, Beckett, Benjamin, Heidegger and Wittgenstein? "Oh, here we go again," say my highbrow friends. But what can I do? Their impact lasts because there are no other "winners" around. Even on the moon I do not see any winners. Do they run on the moon? Do they write commentaries, novels and poems? Well, on our planet we have no alternative but to celebrate the writers of the past. Does it really matter who they were in their lifetimes? Winners or losers? They *were*, that is enough.

CHAPTER 9

Again I got sidetracked when about to speak of Beatrice and my own childhood. As if accosted by a sinner or a saint during my journey through the Hereafter in Dante's company, I freeze in my tracks and listen to some stories, complaints and utterances of joy while my childhood and juvenile loves recede into the distance. And like Brunetto Latini I must leave all these people and run to catch up with my distant friends, *their* joys and sorrows. Were Dante's childhood and teenage years different from mine? I recall the wood where I used to stroll with my grandmother, and I am sure Dante saw the same trees as he took strolls around Florence and her suburbs. Once I got lost in the wood and I am sure Dante experienced the same fear as he lost his way in the Tuscan woods—the fear reflected at the outset of the *Commedia*. And though the Arno River does not run through Moscow, many times we must have stepped into the same water reflecting the same stars, the same moon. But Time does not look like Caiaphas of whom Dante caught sight in Canto XXIII of the *Inferno*: it is not crucified on the ground. Whether we liken it to the Hypocrites walking slowly in copes of lead or to Brunetto Latini who runs for his life, one thing is certain: Time is moving.

> "Fiorenza dentro da la cerchia antica,
> ond' ella toglie ancora e terza e nona,
> si stava in pace, sobria e pudica.
> Non avea catenella, non corona,
> non gonne contigiate, non cintura
> che fosse a veder più che la persona."
> "Florence, within her ancient circle from which she still takes tierce and nones, abode in peace, sober and chaste. There was no necklace, no coronal, no embroidered gowns, no girdle that was more to be looked at than the person."

Tierce is the third of the canonical hours, or 9 a.m. None, or nones, is the ninth of the canonical hours, or 3 p.m. And I heard the chimes of the Kremlin. What is the difference between 3 p.m. in Florence and the same time in Moscow? But Cacciaguida, who meets Dante in the *Paradiso*, briefly recounts the life in Florence he was lucky enough to witness. And, in the course of his monologue, he often dwells on the difference between ancient and modern times. How would Dante have behaved had he fallen in love with Beatrice in the Florence where one did not look at a necklace and an embroidered gown but at the person wearing them? Of course he touches upon the way his beloved was dressed when he first saw her, and the description of her "borrowed" appearance takes more room than the adjectives designed to depict her character: "*Apparve vestita di nobilissimo colore, umile e onesto, sanguigno, cinta e ornata a la guisa che a la sua giovanissima etade si convenia.*" In Rossetti's translation her garment is even more conspicuous because he begins the sentence with it: "Her dress, on that day, was of a most noble colour a subdued and goodly crimson, girdled and adorned in such sort as best suited with her very tender age." In the original, Beatrice takes precedence over the dress,

appearing *before* it: "*Apparve vestita di nobilissimo colore*..." Besides, if taken out of context, the adjectives "*umile*" and "*onesto*" ("modest" and "chaste") may be misconstrued: one is likely to think they relate to the *character* of the heroine. In Rossetti's translation, however, both adjectives are firmly attached to the dress, to its colour. One might conclude that in Rossetti's times clothes were more important than the people wearing them.

At primary school I fell in love with many girls; all of them wore the same uniform which was so nondescript I never asked myself whether it suited their characters or not. One of them looked beautiful in it and I regret not having seen her wearing another piece of clothing, which might have enabled me to appreciate the "chastity" of the uniform. In gym, some girls wore panties, supplying one of my friends with enough material for the lectures on female legs he gave me as we leisurely strolled along the Moscva River, our briefcases swinging in rhythm with our lustful thoughts. Many years later I asked my friend why I could not recall the legs of the girl I had been in love with. "Because she wore slacks," he answered.

"How could she jump in slacks?" I asked.

"She didn't mind bad marks. The way she walked up the stairs, always screening her legs with her briefcase."

I wrote her a letter in which I declared my love in prose; she tore it up as I spied on her gestures from the other side of the classroom. I wrote her another letter—a long poem in iambic hexameter. She tore it up as well. What would she have done had Dante offered her the *Commedia* (in Russian translation), having replaced Beatrice by Eugenia? But he was fifty-six by the time he had finished it; he was already too old for her. She would have said to him, "What are you doing here, old man? Don't you realise I might have been your great-granddaughter?" What would she have done had I copied out the *Commedia* and offered it to her in one of the corridors of our school? I was twelve at the time, and she was unlikely to accuse me of plagiarism: she had not read it yet. She would have said, "You're an awful bore. And why are you so cruel to your fellow creatures? One shouldn't be cruel to animals either. Last night I saw a film on TV about a hunt. When the fox was dragged out of its hole and killed by the hounds I burst into tears. And I never cry, never." (Let us not forget that Beatrice was *not* moved by the sufferings of sinners.) And I would have said to her, "I must be cruel only to be kind. Did you read the last part of the book?" But at the time I was acquainted neither with Dante nor Shakespeare. Actually this reminds me of an article on the *Commedia* I read recently in a woman's magazine. Among other things, the author declared, "The effects of mental cruelty can be worse than those of physical violence. Many passages in the *Inferno* sound like verbal abuse and may affect the reader in the same way." In the famous letter he did not dare to post, Kafka wrote that his father had never beaten him. "But waiting for a punishment was far worse than any actual punishment"—or something to this effect. I wonder what Kafka would have said had he been flogged by his father forevery misdemeanour. In a way, the *Inferno* makes some of us anticipate the future torments, but I

do not think we suffer as much as those who undergo them, submerged in a river of boiling pitch or torn to pieces by hounds. And the girl I was in love with at school would have torn up my *Commedia*, had I offered it to her. What kind of torment do you undergo when your beloved tears up a book you have written? A physical torment, a mental torment?

In Canto XIII of the *Inferno*, the wayfarers reach the Wood of the Suicides. Acting on Virgil's suggestion, Dante plucks a twig from a great thornbush and the stub cries, "*Perché mi schiante?*" ("Why do you tear me?") Then it becomes dark with blood and cries again:

> "Perché mi scerpi?
> non hai tu spirto di pietade alcuno?
> Uomini fummo, e or siam fatti sterpi:
> ben dovrebb' esser la tua man più pia,
> se state fossimo anime di serpi."
> "Why do you tear me? Have you no spirit of pity? We were men, and now are turned to stocks. Truly your hand ought to be more merciful had we been souls of serpents."

She broke off a branch from my tree as she tore my poem up, a grimace distorting her beautiful face. It was a short poem, but one feels an awful pain when breaking one's little finger. I am very bad at drawing; and yet my father studied at the Petersburg Academy of Fine Arts and was rather gifted in this domain. After drawing only trees for almost fifty years I have ended up identifying with them: they all look like one tree and also like a man with a multitude of arms. The greater the number of arms you have at your disposal the better you play the piano. Nor do I object to the slimness of my body represented by a straight line: I hate going on diets. "This wood belongs to my salvation," says Pseudo-Chrysostom in his sixth homily on the Easter. And he goes on to enumerate the services a tree can render him: "I feed on it, I assert myself in its roots, I lie under its branches, I listen with delectation to the rustle of its leaves, I blossom with its flowers..." And I draw my food from the earth and from heaven, I assert myself in my own roots, I stand under my own branches, I listen with delectation to the rustle of my own leaves, I blossom out. And what about Dante? Was he a tree?

> And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots:
> And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord;
> And shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the Lord: and he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears:
> But with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth: and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked.

Jesse's tree grows imposingly in Christian mysticism where it has come to be associated with the Virgin Mary, the new Eve, who conceived through the mediation of grace, with Christ and all Christian nations; it symbolises the universal Church and is the Cross on which Christ was crucified. It

is also Jacob's ladder that Dante touches upon several times in the course of the *Paradiso*. In Canto XX St Benedict speaks of the last sphere where all desires are fulfilled and every part of which is rooted to the spot, for it is not in Space and has no poles. And in a space from which Space has withdrawn there is no spot to which something or someone can be rooted so that every part of the sphere is located where it has always been. Is it *located* somewhere? "*…perché non è in loco e non s'impola…*" "…for it is not in space, nor has it poles…"

> "e nostra scala infino ad essa varca,
> onde così dal viso ti s'involа.
> Infin là sù la vide il patriarca
> Iacobbe porger la superna parte,
> quando li apparve d'angeli sì carca."
> "…and our ladder reaches up to it, wherefore it steals itself from your sight. All the way thither the patriarch Jacob saw it stretch its upper part, when it appeared to him so laden with Angels." (The *Paradiso*, Canto XXII)

But let us return to the above-quoted excerpt from Isaiah. (When moving from the *Paradiso* to the *Inferno*, one is tempted to look back towards the last canto, which accounts for this and other returns.) Why not broaden the scope of symbolism rooted in Jesse's tree of which Christian mystics have been making such abundant use? The rod coming forth out of the stem is the *Commedia* on which rested "the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord". So far so good. Though growing from the tree—from Dante—the *Commedia* appears to be independent: it is on the work and not on its author that rests the spirit of the Lord. For many years Dante journeyed through the *Commedia* in a state of shock and bewilderment. He shed tears, asked questions and swooned, his eyes smarting from the smoke of Hell or dazzled by a multitude of suns in Paradise. In Canto XXIX of the *Purgatorio*, he was as stupefied as Virgil who could not have written the *Commedia*. The following verse from Isaiah is relevant in this respect: "And shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the Lord: and he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears." So whatever we read in the *Commedia* is *not* the outcome of Dante's meditation and literary effort: he was divinely inspired. He was incredulous at first, muttering in the quiet of his room, "My Lord, why have *I* been chosen?" Or was he so proud and self-assured that no superfluous inquiries interposed between his quill and the sheet of paper lying in front of him? He must have been perplexed and eager to question God on the subject, but in the *Commedia* he airs his doubts in the presence of Virgil: he was not so proud as to demote the Almighty to the rank of his travelling companion. And Virgil speaks of Beatrice who becomes the tree in the roots of which Dante asserts himself during his journey through the Hereafter. This tree grows upside down because its roots are in Canto XXXI of the *Paradiso* where St Bernard points Beatrice out:

"e se riguardi sù nel terzo giro
  dal sommo grado, tu la rivedrai
  nel trono che suoi merti le sortiro."
"…and if you look up to the circle which is third from the highest tier, you will see her again, in the throne her merits have allotted to her."

"I've got a photograph where you can see her," my friend told me.

"Was it taken at our school? Or did you go on a picnic?"

He showed me the photograph on which I recognised some of my school friends. "Doesn't she look like Marina?" he asked, alluding to one of my recent girlfriends.

"Yes, on this photograph. But you told me you'd seen her several years later, in some shop or other. She wasn't as slim as she used to be."

"She was still very gracious and elegant," he said.

"And I'd have got her to lose a few kilos in no time at all," I nodded with a smile.

"She must have married a diplomat," he said. "In the sixties beautiful girls married diplomats to live outside the Soviet Union. And now they stay in Moscow and marry multimillionaires."

"I dedicated a poem to her and she tore it up. Do you recall Mizoguchi's film? O Haru her name was. She received a poem from a man she couldn't marry—he was a commoner. She said his poem wasn't refined. 'I was sincere,' he answered. 'And refined poems are a heap of lies.' Was my poem too sophisticated?"

"I suppose it was," he said. "She couldn't stand liars."

Sanza risponder, li occhi sù levai,
  e vidi lei che si facea corona
  reflettendo da sé li etterni rai.
Without answering I lifted up my eyes and saw her where she made for herself a crown as she reflected the eternal rays.
(The *Paradiso*, Canto XXXI)

I ought to have written something along these lines to substitute a celestial image for the worn-out photograph; she was scarcely recognisable anyway. Did Dante have Beatrice's picture on his chest of drawers? His wife would not have tolerated it, I presume. But did he ever pay attention to his wife? He needed no pictures of Beatrice's because he was able to conjure up her image at any time by writing about Paradise or her encounter with Virgil. And I am writing about this photograph I held in my hands for a few minutes, not daring ask my friend to give it to me because he was sitting beside her, surrounded by his school friends. Indeed I could not bring myself to deprive him of his past, of her smile which was all the more precious since she smiled very seldom when there was no photographer around and nobody said suggestively, "Cheese."

> The soul demonstrates herself in the mouth, as colour does under glass. And what is laughter but a coruscation of that delight of the soul, as a light appearing without according as it exists within? And therefore it is becoming to a man to let his soul show in a tempered joy, laughing in moderation, and with frank restraint, and only with slight movement of the face; so that the lady (the soul) who there shows herself should seem modest and not uncontrolled.

In the *Convivio* Dante speaks about the ways our soul shows herself "as on a balcony": for once he compares humans to houses and not to frogs. From the first balcony, that of the eyes, she exhibits her passions: goodwill, jealousy, compassion, envy, love and shame. The second balcony is the mouth which Dante associates with laughter, although he himself uses it differently: "And he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked." The girl I was in love with at school showed her soul by fits and starts so that, most of the time, both balconies remained disappointingly empty. And when her soul did appear on them, she was fully dressed and even covered her face with a large fan, the use of which was not warranted by the weather. Only twice did I have the privilege of seeing her body naked, so to speak, and the sight did not fill me with joy because on those occasions she disposed of my letters, of my declarations of love. Nowadays many girls—not only pop singers—exhibit their souls shamelessly, letting them walk stark naked on their balconies; moreover, they install mirrors on those balconies to make us enjoy a three-dimensional image of their inner life and thus unconsciously imitate the trick used by Giorgione. Baudrillard says that the obscene begins when illusion or spectacle disappears and everything becomes exposed to the raw, inescapable light of information; or to the eye of a television viewer. "O marvellous smile of my lady, of whom I speak, which is only communicated through the eyes!" says Dante in the *Convivio*. He would have been appalled by our soap operas in which actresses never smile with restraint and often keep their mouths wide-open as if inviting us to visit their insides. Not their souls, mind you, but their insides: in this day and age the soul is indistinguishable from the bowels. When the soul is too visible it disappears altogether, leaving in its place the digestive system.

If I remember rightly, she would give me a seductive look now and then, letting her soul put a leg on the first balcony, one naked leg. Was she afraid of destroying me? In Canto XXI of the *Paradiso*, Beatrice warns Dante that her smile—her naked body appearing on the second balcony—would reduce him to ashes:

> ché la bellezza mia, che per le scale
> de l'etterno palazzo più s'accende,
> com' hai veduto, quanto più si sale,
> se non si temperasse, tanto splende,
> che 'l tuo mortal podere, al suo fulgore,
> sarebbe fronda che trono scoscende.
> …for my beauty which, along the steps of the eternal palace, is kindled the more, as you have seen, the higher the ascent, were it not tempered, is so resplendent that your mortal powers at its flash would be like the bough shattered by a thunderbolt.

In these tercets Dante compares himself to a bough which might be shattered by a thunderbolt unless all precautions are taken: no radiant, paradisiacal smiles are permitted. At this point Dante forgets he is a tree—false modesty no doubt—limiting his stature to a bough which, however, is more likely to guarantee his salvation, given the value attributed to meekness in the highest sphere of Paradise.

Was Dante's attitude towards the young ladies he saw in Florence different from what I felt at primary school when spying on the movements and reactions of my beloved? Had he no itch to see them naked? Could he see them half-naked in a gymnasium, on a beach, during annual games and pagan rituals? Plutarch describes Lycurgus' treatment of young ladies who had to exercise regularly by wrestling, running, throwing the quoit and casting the dart so that "the fruit they conceived might, in strong and healthy bodies, take firmer root and find better growth, and withal that they, with this greater vigour, might be the more able to undergo the pains of child-bearing. And to the end he might take away their overgreat tenderness and fear of exposure to the air, and all acquired womanishness, he ordered that the young women should go naked in the processions, as well as the young men, and dance, too, in that condition, at certain solemn feasts, singing certain songs, whilst the young men stood around, seeing and hearing them." Though remnants of pagan rites and feasts might have embellished everyday routine in thirteenth-century Florence, I doubt that young maidens ever walked or danced stark naked "whilst the young men stood around". But did they never exhibit *some* parts of their bodies in the presence of men whose lascivious glances might have induced them into performing an unfinished striptease? After all, such a display of beauty is not futile, according to Lycurgus: "These public processions of the maidens, and their appearing naked in their exercises and dancings, were incitements to marriage, operating upon the young with the rigour and certainty, as Plato says, of love, if not of mathematics." I do not think such processions would have sent shock waves through Italy because there was nothing "shameful in this nakedness of the young women; modesty attended them, and all wantonness was excluded".

In the Soviet Union even a half-naked female body was not to be seen in public except at the Bolshoi, renowned for its ballerinas, and in stadiums. Was there any ballet company like that in Dante's times? At least some men in the nude could be admired outside Verona where on the first Sunday in Lent was run a race alluded to in Canto XV of the *Inferno*. I am not tempted to drag Freud in to define the driving force on which the poet relied during his daily strolls in the streets of Florence. Anyway, by the age of nine he had already freed himself from the oral stage, the anal stage and the phallic stage, although a Freudian hound might sniff a vestige of the oral stage in the above-quoted sentence from the *Convivio*, "The soul demonstrates herself in the mouth." At the age of nine I saw a naked female body through a chink in a wall that separated a Crimean public bath from passers-by and curious boys stuck in the optic stage. Does this bout of voyeurism invalidate any comparison between Dante's childhood and mine?

This morning I found the following text in one of my files:

> Dante speaks about his wife neither in the *Commedia* nor in the *Convivio* where other women turn up to supply material to his meditation. And I intend to call you tonight to find out if, during my projected stay in Moscow, you can go with me to a "house of rest" (*dom otdïkha*) for two or three days, for a weekend. A house of rest, a house of peace, a house of Hell. There are some houses like that scattered around Moscow to allow French citizens to enjoy the company of Russian women who dream about France, Italy and Switzerland. I hope your love is inspired by my poetry, which you read in Russian, and not by my address. Anyway I shall never live with you in the United States. I might live with you in Hell, provided you are willing to share the life of a poet whose poems are located in Paradise; only my poems are allowed to live in Paradise, in my home-made Paradise.

I must have written this paragraph in the days when we were on speaking terms and could envisage going to a house of rest situated in the suburbs of Moscow. Why didn't I include it in my commentary? Because I thought it was inferior in quality to what I had written already? Or did she tell me on the phone she would never share a room with me anywhere? I might have answered, "We'll have two rooms on different floors." But probably she cannot stand liars. As Beatrice says in Canto IV of the *Paradiso*:

> Io t'ho per certo ne la mente messo
> ch'alma beata non poria mentire,
> però ch'è sempre al primo vero appresso
> I have put it in your mind for certain that a soul in bliss cannot lie, since it is always near the Primal Truth.

But there is no Primal Truth on earth where someone like Foucault might *faire un mauvais jeu de mots*: "*Primo vero—primavera*." On earth we have got the spring which, alongside a bowl of milk and a loaf of bread, belongs to the network of truths and can be taken advantage of by a man in love or a painter. I would have said to her, "Let's go to the house of rest and saunter around the woods that are not dark in the spring. These days won't come back because there's only one honeymoon in our lives, one room where we'll spend a week at most, one spring. '*In questa primavera sempiterna*,' says Beatrice glancing around Paradise. In this eternal spring." I am writing now about my fair lady, my would-be Beatrice, my dear girl, my beloved from whom I parted nine months ago. But wouldn't I spend a week in the same room with that schoolgirl I was in love with or the stewardess I met on the plane to Tokyo? What is the difference between all these women? Don't they originate in the same luminous point from which my desire sends it rays through Space and Time? Is it a *black* point after all?

"What kind of women do you actually desire?" asked a friend of my friend. We were having dinner in the apartment where I often stay during my visits to Moscow.

"I like beautiful women," I answered with candour and simplicity.

"Do you really think that only beautiful women are worthy of our love?" He spoke in a slow and

ponderous manner as if to put a brake on the expansion of my libido.

"I've nothing against intelligent women," I said.

"Don't you think that only *they* are really worthy of our love?"

"Beauty is a gift of God and women have a mission to communicate this gift to mankind. That's what the problem of communication boils down to—the spread of beauty."

"The word 'spread' is often used to indicate the development of a disease," he pointed out. "In a way, beauty *is* a disease because it diverts our attention from more important aspects of life."

"What's more important than beauty? When you behold a beautiful woman you can't help glorifying God, provided you meditate on the sight. You worship the infinite beauty of whose light this earthly equivalent is a distant shadow."

"I'm a mathematician," he answered, "and I know that mathematical harmony is more harmonious and therefore more beautiful than physical beauty."

"In the *Paradiso*, geometry goes hand in hand with Beatrice's beauty."

"Your Beatrice can't be an ideal woman—there are no ideal women in the world. And if there is one, she's not ideal, if you see what I mean. Do you like female legs which are absolutely straight, like columns? I don't. Their legs must have a defect, a curve—something that deviates from classical beauty."

"And classical beauty isn't beautiful if it doesn't deviate from itself," I answered. "Besides, sex appeal often originates in a dimple that breaks symmetry and hints at perversity. Leny asks Joseph K. in *Das Prozeß* whether his sweetheart has a physical defect (*körperlichen Fehler*). She holds up her right hand and stretches out the two middle fingers between which the connecting web of skin reaches almost to the top joint."

"And my wife snores every night, believe it or not. When I tease her about this defect she says she doesn't want to be perfect. 'I'd hate to be perfect,' she says. 'It's so dull. ' A stupid woman isn't beautiful anyway. Her stupidity is written all over her face."

"And over her body, and over her movements—I agree with you there. For this very reason a beautiful woman is never stupid. In the *Symposium*, Plato or rather Pausanias speaks of two kinds of love: a Common love and a Heavenly love. The Common love is experienced by the vulgar who chiefly care about female bodies and sexual intercourse. The Heavenly love concerns men only and is centred on intellectual relationship. Actually I don't think the Common love is as common as all that, contrary to what Pausanias says on the subject. Even the body separated from the soul can be beautiful. The point is the body is *never* separated from the soul which demonstrates herself in the eyes and in the mouth. And in the limbs. And in every movement. Only the vulgar are given to soulless sex. I make love to beauty, not to bodies. Have you ever envied Ivan the Terrible who could choose among more than a hundred virgins arrayed in his courtyard? An army of beauty. The women I've loved are scattered around Space and Time, but the light irradiated by their beauty shines with the

same intensity, whatever the distance. If I was interested only in their bodies I wouldn't dream of those distant figures, of those shoulders and arms I can neither see nor imagine. Many of them have changed a lot during the years of absence, but they still shine in my mirrors because the beauty of love or the love of beauty is timeless."

"And what would you do if you had an opportunity to meet those distant women?" he asked. "Would you love them physically *now*? Would you love those middle-aged women? Would you make love to them?"

"*Les calins, les calins*. Do we have an equivalent in Russian? '*Laska*', '*laskatsya*'. Come here and give me a cuddle. No, it doesn't work. You can kiss and cuddle your girlfriend in the back row of a cinema. And children play with cuddly toys. The French word is less concrete, more sensual. It's the way of life. No wonder French women prefer *les calins* to sexual intercourse. The Russian word isn't appropriate either—it's too local, if you see what I mean."

"I don't," he said.

"You can *laskat'* somebody on a divan. You can't *live* like that. *Les calins, les mamours*. *Les mamours* are almost identical to *l'amour*, aren't they? That's what I'm likely to do if I meet those women again—kissing their hands, their arms, their shoulders, stroking their faces, their thighs."

"Would you make love to them?"

"Perhaps. Making love is immaterial."

"I bet you'd be repulsed by their ugliness," he concluded rather briskly.

Several years ago I met a woman I had been in love with at the age of fourteen; let us call her the Plant Lady. At the time she preferred my friend who recounted in graphic detail how she cuddled him in cinemas and in the Sokolniki Park. Now she was in love with me, turning into a cuddly toy, but I was repulsed by her old skin. She scribbled her telephone number on a slip of paper and implored me to call her. I never did, seeing no light in my mirrors. Did I ever love her? What kind of love was it? Was she ever my "Beatrice in progress"? "God is in the making," said Bernard Shaw. Did any perspective open up beyond her? Did another girl stand in the distance, the definitive girl?

Upon meeting Beatrice, Dante probably felt she was in the middle of a road stretching beyond the horizon above which there are stars, visible and invisible. At least she did not lean against an impenetrable wall covered with graffiti and pockmarked with bullet holes. And when he spoke in the *Vita Nuova* about the counsel of reason and its conflict with Love he had in mind two Beatrices: one walked in the streets of Florence, the other dwelt in Paradise. Almost paralysed with carnal desire, he spied on the former everywhere and even contrived to touch her now and then on a bridge, in a ballroom; whereupon he understood the difference between a shade and a human body. He might have waylaid her in a back street to push her against a wall and press his avid lips against her mouth, her neck and her breasts. They might have made love in the dark wood he described from the vantage point of his maturity when Beatrice's doppelgänger had definitively supplanted her earthly counterpart.

In the *Vita Nuova*, Beatrice dies at the moment when Dante dreams of her death in Chapter XXIII. "And I began to weep very piteously; and not only in mine imagination, but with mine eyes, which were wet with tears." Dante weeps not only in his imagination but in reality because what happens before his eyes glistening with tears is no dream, no nightmare. One Beatrice dies, the other remains; her image is so vivid and lifelike that Dante follows her in the streets of Florence. But it dawns upon him that she cannot live in two places at once. Doesn't she live in Paradise after all? Of course she does, otherwise he would not have heard a multitude of angels singing, "Hosanna in the highest" at the hour of her death. How to make this redundant, "untouchable" ghost disappear? In Chapter XXIX, he quotes the Lamentations of Jeremiah and proceeds to explain why he cannot write about the death of his "most gracious lady":

> And because haply it might be found good that I should say somewhat concerning her departure, I will herein declare what are the reasons which make that I shall not do so. And the reasons are three. The first is, that such matter belongeth not of right to the present argument, if one consider the opening of this little book. The second is, that even though the present argument required it, my pen doth not suffice to write in a fit manner of this thing. And the third is, that were it both possible and of absolute necessity, it would still be unseemly for me to speak thereof, seeing that thereby it must behove me to speak also mine own praises: a thing that in whosoever doeth it is worthy of blame.

But Dante had written about her death *already*, refuting his own arguments in advance and with uncommon poetical force. His explanation is therefore a tissue of lies intended to delude the reader into believing that Beatrice died in earnest. This time, however, only her ghost dies, signifying an important shift in Dante's mind which acknowledges the existence of an ideal, definitive woman, of an imperturbable judge. Sitting on a throne in Paradise, from now on she will keep in check the outbursts of his libido; at least she will make him repent his sinful actions. So, from the very outset of the *Vita Nuova*, we are in the presence of a woman composed of two women, which corresponds to Plato's twofold love. At once she is in heaven and on earth where Dante observes her behaviour from afar without daring to interfere with her daily rounds and holiday arrangements. Something else must have happened in real life, otherwise the heavenly Beatrice would not have upbraided the poet on the threshold of Paradise. What indeed could she have known about his conduct, about the Sirens he had listened to in Florence and in the course of his exile?

> "Tuttavia, perché mo vergogna porte
> del tuo errore, e perché altra volta,
> udendo le serene, sie più forte"
> "Still, that you may now bear shame for your error, and another time, hearing the Sirens, may be stronger…"

"She barely noticed him in the streets of Florence and was unaware of his love." We are likely to come across such a sentence in any account of Dante's life. So the question remains unanswered: Why does

she disclose her knowledge of his sinful behaviour in Canto XXXI of the *Purgatorio*? Did she and her friends daily sit in her parlour having a good gossip about a young poet by the name of Dante Alighieri? Why should she have gossiped about the man who did not interest her in the least? He did interest her and she still recalls how he behaved during their rendezvous, drawing the conclusion that she acquaints us with in Canto XXXI of the *Purgatorio*; she forgets she was one of those Sirens. In Canto V of the *Paradiso* she says to Dante:

> Io veggio ben sì come già resplende
> ne l'intelletto tuo l'etterna luce,
> che, vista, sola e sempre amore accende;
> e s'altra cosa vostro amor seduce,
> non è se non di quella alcun vestigio,
> mal conosciuto, che quivi traluce.
> Well do I note how in your intellect already is shining the eternal light which, seen, alone and always kindles love; and if aught else seduce your love, it is naught save some vestige of that light, ill-recognised, which therein shines through.

"Unworthy things mislead the love of you mortals (*vostro amor*), not because they are evil, but because they have in them some 'trace' of the 'eternal light'" (Grandgent). What did Beatrice have in mind? Her own life on earth? In her soul at least Dante saw the eternal light radiating from the heavenly Beatrice enclosed in the woman he was courting in the streets of Florence. And as she looked at her own past from the vantage point of her throne she realised her life was just a vestige of the light in which one was allowed to immerse within the bounds of the *Paradiso*. "God's light shines in and through created things, but our mortal apprehension can fail to see this and we can be seduced (by misapprehension) into an act of the will, into mistaken love" (Singleton). An act of will, an act of libido.

In the *Symposium*, Plato adumbrates the stages through which our poet was to pass a few centuries later in order to reach the celestial rose:

> [The lover] should begin by loving earthly things for the sake of the absolute loveliness, ascending to that as it were by degrees or steps, from the first to the second, and thence to all fair forms; and from fair forms to fair conduct, and from fair conduct to fair principles, until from fair principles he finally arrive at the ultimate principle of all, and learn what absolutely Beauty is.

In *The Vision of Eros*, Auden quotes this passage and talks with Plato's ghost as he questions his teaching:

> "As regards earthly things, I agree that I can compare two horses, or two men, or two proofs of the same mathematical theorem, and say which is the more beautiful, but will you please tell me how I am to compare a horse, a man and a mathematical proof and say which is the most beautiful?"

In the *Paradiso* human beauty is often expressed in geometrical terms unless we regard the spirits Dante encounters and talks with as non-human. And Swift might have said a horse was more beautiful than a man or woman—at the end of his life.

> "It is quite true, as you say, that a fair principle does not get bald and fat or run away with somebody else. On the other hand, a fair principle cannot give me a smile of welcome when I come into the room. Love of a human being may be, as you say, a lower form of love than love for a principle, but you must admit it is a damn sight more interesting."

Is it? Sometimes I would give anything to be spared the smile of welcome Auden seems to be so keen on. Why not be received by a fair principle instead? Even making love to a fair principle might be more interesting, provided it is a *fair* principle one can visualise or hear or think of. Dante must have availed himself of fair principles through the second half of his life. In the first half he went from one body to another, always seeing yet another body in the distance to which all other bodies were inexorably leading him. So, starting from all those bodies, he reached the Beauty of the body and thence proceeded to customs the ugliness of which he criticises so severely in the *Commedia*. Finally he learnt what absolute Beauty is and this Beauty often smiled at him in the *Paradiso*, personified by the heavenly Beatrice. Contrary to what Auden says, Dante's account therefore is not different from the itinerary described and advocated by Plato in the *Symposium*. His fair principles are the fruit of the Intellect he praises all along the *Commedia* and particularly in Canto XXVIII of the *Paradiso*:

> "E dei saper che tutti hanno diletto
> quanto la sua veduta si profonda
> nel vero in che si queta ogne intelletto.
> Quinci si può veder come si fonda
> l'esser beato ne l'atto che vede,
> non in quel ch'ama, che poscia seconda…"
> "And you should know that all have delight in the measure of the depth to which their sight penetrates the Truth in which every intellect finds rest; from which it may be seen that the state of blessedness is founded on the act of vision, not on that which loves, which follows after…"

"Here, as elsewhere," writes Singleton, "Dante takes his stand with those philosophers and theologians (Thomas Aquinas, Albertus Magnus, and the Dominicans generally) who assigned primacy to the intellect rather than to the will (this latter position being more commonly held by the Augustinian-Franciscan school)." In the course of his journey Dante has taken many steps to get away from the dark wood—as many as are needed to cover the distance from Hell to Paradise. Eros as such is annihilated in the end, unable to survive the outburst of Beatrice's anger with which she salutes her former lover in the *Purgatorio*. On earth Dante might have continued to enjoy the intimacy of women, shielding Eros from his literary and intellectual aspirations. At worst his personal Eros was *slightly* transfigured by what he was writing in his notebooks as he journeyed on different errands from one

city to another. In Paradise, however, he could not afford to be so free-minded and licentious, having awarded custody of his doppelgänger to Beatrice whose smile almost reduced him to ashes; her earthly smile must often have produced the opposite, Phoenix-like effect. Indeed her paradisiacal smile was neither photogenic nor erotic, being just another manifestation of light where all bodies dissolve to be replaced by Absolute Beauty:

> Come sùbito lampo che discetti
> li spiriti visivi, sì che priva
> da l'atto l'occhio di più forti obietti,
> così mi circunfulse luce viva,
> e lasciommi fasciato di tal velo
> del suo fulgor, che nulla m'appariva.
> As a sudden flash of lightning which scatters the visual spirits so that it robs the eye of the sight of the clearest objects, so round about me there shone a vivid light and left me so swathed in the veil of its effulgence that nothing was visible to me.
> (The Paradiso, Canto XXX)

CHAPTER 10

A pianist who complains about his busy schedule might have killed himself a long time ago had he not played all those concerts: they are his only remedy against nervous breakdowns. But touring the world would not keep *my* suicidal impulses at bay for the simple reason that the amount of energy required by concerts and travel is not bulky enough to exclude from my head and body the idle thoughts which, like a compass needle, always turn towards the futility of life. The comparison I used in the previous sentence is neither hackneyed nor gratuitous, given the propensity for self-destruction among Scandinavians. Dante resorts to the same image with regard to the voice coming from a group of lights:

del cor de l'una de le luci nove
si mosse voce, che l'ago a la stella
parer mi fece in volgermi al suo dove
…from the heart of one of the new lights there came a voice which made me seem as the needle to the star in turning me to where it was.
(The *Paradiso*, Canto XII)

Hitting upon a sophisticated simile is by no means an easy task, and the amount of energy involved often deflects my train of thought from its fatal itinerary. The fatigue caused by literary work is heavy enough to crush my suicidal thoughts to death.

"Have you ever suffered from a nervous breakdown?" asked my friend.

"Never," I answered. "Why give presents to the Devil?"

For many months I have been showering the Devil with my gifts so that Hell must be cluttered with them to the point of obstructing the road along which Dante walked as he studied the reprobates, their moods and customs.

In Canto XII of the *Inferno*, the wayfarers are confronted with a steep slope of shattered rock that impedes their progress and gives rise to Virgil's erroneous comment.

Qual è quella ruina che nel fianco
di qua da Trento l'Adice percosse,
o per tremoto o per sostegno manco,
che da cima del monte, onde si mosse,
al piano è sì la roccia discoscesa,
ch'alcuna via darebbe a chi sù fosse:
cotal di quel burrato era la scesa
Like the ruin which struck the Adige in its flank, on this side of Trent, either by earthquake or through failure of support, where, from the top of the mountain whence it started, to the plain, the rock is so tumbled down as to give some passage to anyone above—such was the descent of that ravine.

The fall of the rock was caused by the earthquake at the Crucifixion that Virgil misinterprets, relying in his exposure on the pagan views prevalent in his days. He draws upon Empedocles according to

whom the universe is governed by love (concord) and hatred (chaos) which alternate in a way quite similar to yin and yang. As chaos moves towards concord, spurred and inspired by love, the harmony thus established at once disintegrates and reverts to chaos. This "circular" theory is resolutely opposed by the adepts of Christianity who see in Christ a creator of the new world order based on love as a universal principle: history was redeemed at the Crucifixion. But my depressive mood seems to question their faith-warranted optimism because, in my opinion, whatever I do testifies to the presence of chaos in our midst; otherwise I would not have such moods and thoughts. They might come from a source situated within the boundaries of our world which, therefore, was not redeemed once and for all. And if my depression originates *elsewhere*, in some other world, I may conclude it was permitted to travel as far as my brain and body; and its capacity to travel through our world discloses a chink in our armour and destroys our hopes. There are people who believe that the very notion we have got of the Supreme Being proves its existence. What kind of existence do my thoughts and ideas prove? And how can I get over my malady?

I have been writing this commentary for almost two years, but my train of thought still follows the same track as if impervious to Dante's influence and the light of God reflected in his masterpiece. It is true that the efforts I make to find an appropriate simile may be likened to an earthquake as a result of which a rock falls onto my brain and silences the voice I hear day and night—the voice speaking of death. But as soon as I switch off the lights and turn in, the voice resumes its monologue, interfering with my sleep and good resolutions. The rock is promptly removed from the way along which the voice travels as if to destroy the vestige of the Crucifixion.

I am not sure that my work on this commentary will alleviate my pain which is all the more dreadful since I do not feel it. It is neither a mental pain nor a physical one; at least I am unable to pinpoint its whereabouts. Is it in any way similar to angst which, according to Kierkegaard, has no sense of direction? Is it situated in the North? Our last encounter, or rather the beginning of it, was the most consummate expression of love which immediately began to move back towards chaos as the dinner at the Georgian restaurant drew to a close. "The actual separation of the elements one from another is produced by discord; for originally they were bound together in the sphere and therein continued perfectly unmoveable." Empedocles insists on the immobility of love which can move only in the direction of chaos because there are no other outlets available to it. Enclosed in the sphere, it enjoys peace and quiet insofar as it is rooted to the spot. As soon as it starts moving it runs the danger of becoming its own opposite—chaos and hatred.

But I *must* move from where I am sitting now: my present state is not fit for travelling through Paradise which is the subject matter of this part of my commentary. Oddly enough, I remain motionless even when I travel to Russia, to the Black Sea, where I swim and indulge in the activities I dropped in my adolescence. I go to an amusement park and take a ride on a roller coaster at which I never look from afar for fear of getting sick. And yet I seem to stay at home; a blast of cold air hits my

face as I open the only window in my room. I can sit still for long without fidgeting because I am not a child any more in spite of my momentary attachment to the roller coaster. I am as unmoveable as the elements suspended in Empedocles' sphere, which suggests I might be in love again, moving away from my chaos and despondency. Unfortunately this love of mine—or whatever passes for such—deprives me of the inspiration I need to get along with my commentary. At the outset of the *Paradiso*, Dante invokes the aid of Apollo in attempting the hardest part of his theme that is more or less identical to mine. Of course I often study Paradise from the Devil's point of view; nevertheless it is Paradise I scrutinise as I look out of my window. Whose aid should I invoke? What kind of travel agency is capable of making me budge from the circle or the sphere where I got bogged down?

"Tiredness, apathy, loss of appetite, lack of energy and sleeping problems are classic symptoms of depression. But you're never tired, are you? I heard you saying, 'If I ever get tired, I'll no longer work. I won't leave my bed.' You're sitting in front of your window, aren't you? And every morning you attempt to write three or four pages on the *Paradiso*. You go for long walks in the woods, muttering to yourself until you have a paragraph word-perfect. And you often have lunch in a posh restaurant. Could you explain in words of one syllable how you manage to combine this depression of yours with a sybaritic lifestyle?"

I should not talk to such people about my tribulations because they might suffer from a pain in their stomach or elsewhere—from a pain to which they would point with their finger. In comparison with their woes my undetermined pain is too whimsical and seems out of place during a serious talk about the tragedy of human life. In answer to my question Volodya said he was always *slightly* demoralised.

"I don't have both feet on the ground," he explained. "Or rather, I totter unsteadily down the stairs in my high-heeled shoes. You remember the staircase in our building, don't you? But it's an infinite staircase I explore with my high-heeled shoes. And I'm sure I'll never reach the bottom."

"I wish I might have a staircase at my disposal," I answered. "And a pair of high-heeled shoes. It's a pair of slippers I'm wearing day in day out. Actually I'm supposed to walk *up* the stairs. But I can't even walk along a horizontal path without getting off the track."

As Dante puts it in Canto I of the *Paradiso*:

Vero è che, come forma non s'accorda
  molte fiate a l'intenzion de l'arte,
  perch' a risponder la materia è sorda,
cosi da quest corso si diparte
  talor la creatura, c'ha podere
  di piegar, così pinta, in altra parte

To be sure, even as a shape often does not accord with the intention of the art, because the material is deaf to respond, so the creature sometimes departs from this course, having the power, thus impelled, to swerve toward some other part...

And what if there is no course to be followed? What if human existence is just a plain around which one can moon to one's heart content? A desert is too suggestive and consequently should not be used as a metaphor of life which, now and then, may offer one some flowers and a babbling brook. High mountains rise above the plain, but no one is obliged to take notice of them because there is nowhere to go. One of Dostoevsky's characters says that man should be able to find his own niche where he can weather the storm and even avail himself of the pleasures inaccessible to the homeless and the destitute. But I have a room that protects me from storms and unwelcome visitors, and no one is duty bound to seek God or write about Paradise. Anyway it is better to die on the spot—wherever this spot is situated—instead of looking for a niche that might turn out to be one of those Dostoevskian mouse holes.

The point is my depression does not let me die peacefully or otherwise, as if I *were* going up or down an infinite staircase: the direction does not really count. Supposing I go *up* the stairs and see all the spheres described in the *Paradiso* and also their inhabitants who dance around me all the while singing the hymns so beautiful I come to question the genius of Mozart. But I take notice neither of the hymns nor of the dances which outshine whatever I saw at the Bolshoi in the sixties and the early seventies. I just go up the stairs and then down because, once upon a time, I told myself I had to get a move on. And my suicidal impulse keeps me company as it mounts and descends the same stairs, crossing the same scenery. I might kill myself if it stopped for a second and took a careful aim at my heart. It is armed with a revolver and threatens me by pressing it against my nape; but I am sure it will never use the revolver and that terrifies me beyond measure. Actually there *is* some measure to the horror I experience, otherwise I would already have killed myself. I seem to act in accordance with the principle "measure for measure".

Non dei più ammirar, se bene stimo,
  lo tuo salir se non come d'un rivo
  se d'alto monte scende giuso as imo.
You should not wonder more at your rising, if I deem aright, than at a stream that falls from a mountain top to the base.
(The *Paradiso*, Canto I)

I know what carries me along the way, up and down, although I am under the impression that nothing moves either indoors or outdoors. It is the revolver that does not move, creating the atmosphere of status quo, making a plain out of a mountain. My free will carries me up and down and walks me round in a circle. Actually my free will is not as free as all that because I cannot interfere with the itinerary it makes me follow without my approval. Or should I say "*She* makes me follow this itinerary?" Is she my private Beatrice? Have I found my Beatrice at last? Dante would not have called Beatrice "my free will": he was subjected to *her* will and to those of Lucy and the Virgin Mary, according to the explanation supplied by Virgil in Canto II of the *Inferno*. (Nowadays one might

receive such a message by email or SMS.) This state of affairs may have given rise to a nightmare: Dante dreamt a lot in the course of his journey.

There are three wills in the area allotted to one will only and they say to each other, "We have three desks in this room so we are rather cramped." All day long they sit at their writing desks, moving their pens over the sheets of paper lying in front of them. They lodge a formal protest against the arrest of their assistants; they lodge an appeal against the sentences no one has ever heard about.

"We've received a complaint from one of our listeners about offensive language," says Will Number One.

"Do you have any grounds for complaint?" asks Will Number Two.

Weary of writing complaints, they come to blows: it is easier to settle their disputes in a sports arena.

"The clever little fox outwits the hunters and escapes from the trap they set," says Will Number Three.

"Who are the hunters? And what about the fox escaping from their trap?" asks Will Number One.

"I escape from my own trap," says Will Number Two.

"But why did you set a trap for yourself?" asks Will Number Three.

"Because I was determined to trap myself," says Will Number Two.

"Why? Don't you know that two wills died when they were trapped in a burning cottage?" asks Will Number One.

"I do. So what? I want to be trapped like them," says Will Number Two.

"What for?" asks Will Number Three.

"Just for the fun of it," says Will Number Two. "Three days ago I gave a huge amount of money to an old woman. I was trapped when I indulged in my humanist élan. But now I want my money back. I wish I could burn myself. Do you have any matches or a lighter?"

"But I also want to burn myself," says Will Number Three. "Why are you always aping my desires?"

"Don't forget that we all belong to the same individual. So, from time to time, we merge into one will to execute his orders," says Will Number One.

"But I don't like being ordered about," says Will Number Two. "I've got a will of my own,"

"He's not my master," says Will Number Three. "Slavery was abolished a long time ago."

"You might be his dog," says Will Number One. "And with careful training any dog will obey his master completely."

"I'll never obey him, never," says Will Number Two. "I'm not his will."

"Whose will are you?" asks Will Number One.

"I'm the will of God."

Is she? What kind of nightmare is it? Not *his* nightmare: the wills he was subjected to spoke in unison and proceeded along the same path, towards the same goal. They *were* the will of God. Do I go in one direction? Up and down, left and right. "My free will carries me up and down and walks me round in a circle"—he *might* have written this sentence. I am writing a commentary on his *Commedia* so, from

time to time, I mention circles and a vertical movement. What would *I* do if I were Dante? I would write the *Commedia* and not a commentary on it. But I am not Dante; I am just his commentator. What would I do if I were *myself*? I would have the nightmare I ascribed to him as I went on writing a commentary on his *Commedia*. My wills are scattered to the four winds and I cannot find them. So I am scattered to the four winds too. And what if I do find them? I would not make much headway, would I? I would just listen to their voices.

"Don't you think we've got too much freedom?" asks Will Number One. "For the last thirty years we've put too many spokes into our master's wheels."

"You're right—we hinder his progress towards prosperity," says Will Number Two.

"Of course we aren't his slaves or dogs, but he *is* our master," says Will Number Three.

"I'd like to be a dog, wouldn't you?" says Will Number One.

"I wouldn't mind," says Will Number Three.

"Why not intimate to our master that he should become a dog in his turn?" says Will Number Two.

"It *is* his turn now," says Will Number One.

Did he never live on a plain? Under no compulsion of writing a poem, of undertaking a journey. Any journey whatsoever, either vertical or horizontal. A peculiar simile opens Canto XXIV of the *Inferno*:

In quella parte del giovanetto anno
  che 'l sole i crin sotto l'Aquario tempra
  e giçà le notti al mezzo dì sen vanno,
quando la brina in su la terra assempra
  l'imagine di sua sorella bianca,
  ma poco dura a la sua penna tempra,
lo villanello a cui la roba manca,
  si leva, e guarda, e vede la campagna
  biancheggiar tutta; ond' ei si batte l'anca,
ritorna in casa, e qua e là si lagna,
  come 'l tapin che non sa che si faccia;
  poi riede, e la speranza ringavagna,
veggendo 'l mondo aver cangiata faccia
  in poco d'ora, e prende suo vincastro
  e fuor le pecorelle a pascer caccia.
Così mi fece sbigottir lo maestro
  quand' io li vidi sì turbar la fronte
  e così tosto al mal giunse lo 'mpiastro

In that part of the youthful year when the sun tempers his locks beneath Aquarius, and the nights already wane towards half the day, when the hoarfrost copies on the ground the image of his white sister, but the temper of his pen lasts but short while—the peasant, whose fodder fails, rises and looks out and sees the fields all white; at which he smites his thigh, returns indoors and grumbles to and fro, like the poor wretch who knows not what to do; then comes out again and recovers hope when he sees how in but little time the world has changed its face, and taking his crook, drives forth his sheep to pasture. Thus my master caused me dismay when I saw his brow so troubled, and thus quickly came the plaster to the hurt.

A poet looks at the world and withdraws from it, appalled by this motley collection of fools and self-righteous prigs who take no notice of his labours. He returns indoors and his wife says to someone on the phone, "All he ever does is grumble about things." He paces up and down his room until his feet refuse to carry him any further. He sits down, picks up his pen and recovers hope, although the world has undergone no change either for the better or for the worse. What could be worse than the world? He no longer asks himself this question, for there are more important questions in his life, within the rhyme resounding in his brain, in his heart, throughout his body. His rhymes and rhythms are more important than the world.

Modern critics have found this simile vague, forced and malapropos—a textual anomaly. Potena, for one, finds a brush more appropriate in the context: indeed, the hoarfrost would not paint a portrait of his white sister with a pen. He might *depict* her though, a pen in his hand. "A brief paraphrase of the passage, " writes James Thomas Chiampi, "does nothing to diminish its patent absurdity; the snow is an artistic illusion, a portrait painted by its sister hoarfrost with a pen that is losing its temper. In still more crudely reductive terms: an amorphous material is reproducing a similarly amorphous material out of itself by means of itself. If this simile were intended as a merely decorative flourish, few would deny that it was gratuitously trivial, if not downright absurd. "

A poet holds a pen, not a brush; and this pen of his does lose its temper now and then. And what can his pen depict, note down? Only something that "lasts but a short while". Or does the pen itself last for a few years, for a few minutes? And what about the poet who holds the pen? Is he likely to survive it? The poet should not survive his pen because his life is reduced to it and has no value even within the room where this pen moves from left to right, from right to left, from the top to the bottom of a page where the snow is depicted.

They say the snow will last until the end of next week.
So at least the snow will last for a while;
Everything disappears so quickly.
There are only disappearances in the world.
To disappear, something must appear first.
Well, often a feeling disappears
Without having made its appearance.

I don't love that woman any more.
Have I ever loved her?
There's only a sense of loss.

How can you lose something you've never had?
Yet the number of losses is always higher
Than any other number.

Am I an amorphous material? Do I reproduce an amorphous material out of myself, by means of myself? What else could I reproduce? An amorphous material is bound to produce an amorphous material. But I reproduce an amorphous material by means of the *Commedia* so that the material I reproduce is not really amorphous, given that the *Commedia* is not amorphous. The woman I touch upon in my poem is not amorphous either. She is an amorphous mass of jelly, for I shall never see her again, let alone touch her; she is not amorphous in this poem of mine, related as she is to Beatrice. And this poem is not intended as a "merely decorative flourish". A slice of life, a slice of heart. I *have* loved her. But a feeling I might have experienced when touching her lips, her breasts, disappeared without having made its appearance. It still lingers somewhere, inside my body and even outside it—on my skin she would have touched had we become lovers, contradicting Dante's poem, my poem.

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

Song of Myself by Walt Whitman. I wish I could contradict myself, securing her body I would not so much as touch within the framework of the *Commedia*. I am large, I contain multitudes. I am *Leaves of Grass*, one of the leaves. A blade.

Is my life imprisoned within the *Commedia*? (Do I contradict myself?) I hope it is: such a prison is better than freedom which amounts to writing poems about the snow or a woman. She is a snowman. Do I contradict myself?

Is the number of losses always higher than any other number? Is it higher than the number of verses we come across in the *Paradiso*—4758? These verses are a gift of God. Are they inferior to our losses? Dante divided the 14233 verses into 100 cantos, three canticles totalling 4720+4755+4758 verses. The number of losses (4720) is lower than that of gains (4758). Do I contradict myself?

I am large, I contain multitudes. There are many wills inside my "substance"—the word I use for want of anything better. I would rather use a neutral word or Zero. (Not Zorro.) What is a neutral word? Is "the snow" a neutral word? Certainly not. However, it does neutralise the ugliness of the world.

The world is bound to end.
Snow will fall and cover our beds,
Gently, gently—like a dream.
And we are not to wake up.

In our sleep we shall attend
The funeral of the world.
I wouldn't mind bearing its coffin.

Perhaps the world is dead.
We live on by momentum,
Unwilling to close our eyes.

We might have outstayed the stars.

Have we outstayed Dante's stars? I have not, otherwise I would not be able to go on writing this commentary or anything else. What else could I write? Another poem? I should go on writing until the snow from my poem covers my bed and the books lying at my feet. The world will never alter its face and pace so I have no alternative but to let the snow fall on whatever I see, feel, hear and fear. Let it cover the *Commedia* as well because the poem where the hoarfrost disappears so quickly, replaced by the spring and another world, runs no danger whatsoever. By changing the world it gets a new lease of life. Once again I am contradicting the *Commedia*. The snow lying on the bed is my eternity.

"Omai convien che tu così ti spoltre,"
  disse 'l maestro; "ché, seggendo in piuma,
  in fama non si vien, né sotto coltre;
sanza la qual chi sua vita consuma,
  cotal vestigio in terra di sé lascia,
  qual fummo in aere e in acqua la schiuma.
E però leva sù; vinci l'ambascia
  con l'animo che vince ogne battaglia,
  se col suo grave corpo non s'accascia.
Più lunga scala convien che si saglia"
"Now it behooves you thus to cast off sloth," said my master, "for sitting on down or under coverlet, no one comes to fame, without which whoso consumes his life leaves such vestige of himself on earth as smoke in air or foam on water. Rise, therefore; conquer your panting with the soul that wins every battle, if with its heavy body it sinks not down. A longer ladder must be climbed…"

Apparently fame—the pursuit of which Virgil so eloquently advocates—does not refer, within the bounds of these tercets, to whatever success one might achieve in the world disparaged and almost destroyed through Dante's poetical effort. "Fame is certainly not conquered by climbing up steep hills!" Porena points out. Why not? I would not mind settling on the top of a hill or a mountain—Zarathustra the alpinist *is* famous—but there are none within my field of vision. What can one do within these fields and plains? Why cast off my sloth? Yes, the verses above might refer to the journey one is supposed to undertake on one's own initiative: it would be pointless to wait for Virgil, for Beatrice, for the Virgin Mary, for God. Where would I go? Is there another global village on our planet? The earth has become global too. Satellites route data all over the globe. Purgatory. How to get there?

Noi discendemmo il ponte da la testa
  dove s'aggiugne con l'ottava ripa,
  e poi mi fu la bolgia manifesta:
e vidivi entro terribile stipa
  di serpenti, e di sì diversa mena

che la memoria il sangue ancor mi scipa.
We descended at the end of the bridge where it joins the eighth bank, and the ditch was manifest to me: I saw within it a fearful throng of serpents, of kinds so strange that the memory of it still chills my blood.

Only through Hell can one reach the Mount of Purgatory where I might spend a few centuries before being admitted to Paradise. An actress aspires to gain access to its spheres, but St Peter does not let her in, arguing that actors and suchlike are to kill time in Hell. Disillusioned and gloomy, she retraces her steps, but comes to a standstill as she spots one of her colleagues strutting towards the guardian of the gate. "Please come in," says St Peter. The first actress retraces her steps once more, furious and incredulous.

"Why did you let *her* in?" she shouts. "She's also an actress."

"Not quite," answers St Peter. "Actually she's a disgrace to your honourable profession."

Let me rot in Hell for the sake of what Dante seems to drive at despite Porena's ironic comment: fame does count in the life of a poet who, however, should be prepared to reconcile himself with its posthumous variety. (Anyway inner journeys are not acclaimed by the multitude.) Suppose I were a great poet? But only bad poets are admitted to Paradise on the grounds that no one is allowed to usurp God's prerogatives. (In this case Dante *must* be rotting in Hell.) And only great poets are God-like creators, leaving behind a number of worlds that rival the universe in complexity and beauty. Well, suppose I *were* a great poet unknown to his contemporaries whose opinion may count in the Hereafter so that St Peter, unaware of my real worth, lets me pass through the gate. A hundred years later I am "discovered" at last and St Peter, who still pays attention to what happens on earth to the point of reading newspapers and watching television, drives me away from Paradise forever.

No, let us forget all this nonsense which should be regarded as such in the light of what Dante says about Cimabue being eclipsed by Giotto. (I cited the relevant tercets in Chapter 8.) I wonder what happened in between these opposite views, between Canto XXIV of the *Inferno* and Canto XI of the *Purgatorio*. Did he open the front door and look at the world, at the so-called spring that used to boost his ego? What did he take notice of this time? The hoarfrost was still painting the portrait of Snow White. Yet Dante did not cancel his journey, nor did Virgil postpone his visit to the dark wood where so many people had already got lost. Actually the journey itself might have begun in the *Paradiso*, at the very end of it. Here is a statement I chanced upon in Thomas Hart's essay published in *Dante e la scienza*. "The observation made by da Regny led me expect that the techniques Dante used in the final twenty-two verses would be representative, *mutatis mutandis*, for larger patterns in the *Commedia* generally, and I hope the evidence presented so far tends to confirm that expectation. The more patterns emerged, the more the question arose: how did Dante do all this? I gradually came to the following *compositional* supposition: Dante must have made a draft of these final twenty-two verses in the earliest stages of composition, after having selected the imagery and proportionality of π; for the major dimensions of the cantiche; then, over the years, he introduced more and more patterns "leading

into" these final twenty-two verses, all, as it were, predetermined in their circular proportionality by the final image he had chosen. At least, this seemed a reasonable way of understanding how a network of patterns like those for Euclid, Bryson, Archimedes, and Ptolemy could develop…"

Let us disregard whatever da Regny might have said about the *Commedia*—I did not find *his* statement in the book—and concentrate on the starting point from which Dante proceeded towards other tercets destined to secure him everlasting fame. Nor shall I elucidate the mystery related to π: my knowledge in the field of mathematics keeps shrinking, for all the love I bore it in my childhood when I visualised my future in terms of π and *quadratura circuli*. I also began the second part of my commentary from these final twenty-two verses as if determined to follow my guide like a faithful dog. Actually one of my wills *has* been following Dante like a dog for more than seven years without losing an ounce of its impetus and energy. Where do these twenty-two verses set out on *their* journey?

O luce etterna che sola in te sidi,
  sola t'intendi, e da te intelletta
  e intendente te ami e arridi!
O Light Eternal, who alone abidest in Thyself, alone knowest Thyself, and, known to Thyself and knowing, lovest and smilest on Thyself!

Even at the outset of *my* journey I did not find myself in front of a mirror, loving my reflection, showering my own gifts upon myself as if to exclude the world from this ecstatic ritual. I thought about Dante, about God, about the Virgin Mary and Beatrice whom I have come across neither in my Florence nor in my Moscow that is mine despite arguments we used to have many years ago—in the sixties, in the early seventies. But where does Euclid come in?

Qual è 'l geomètra che tutto s'affige
  per misurar lo cerchio, e non ritrova,
  pensando, quel principio ond' elli indige,
tal era io a quella vista nova:
  veder voleva come si convenne
  l'imago al cerchio e come vi s'indova
As is the geometer who wholly applies himself to measure the circle, and finds not, in pondering, the principle of which he is in need, such was I at that new sight. I wished to see how the image conformed to the circle and how it has its place therein…

How does the image of God conform to the vicious circle of my life? Does one travel at all when going round in circles? (I never *run* in circles.) That is how Dante stumbled upon the fame he courted throughout the *Commedia*—as if she were Beatrice. (Fame is also a woman, a young lady who may die at the age of twenty-four.) He *was* going round in circles, but the aim he really pursued was manifold and somehow akin to geometry, to the manoeuvring of figures. All his images would fit into circles and spheres as he proceeded on his way towards the eternal light where the entire *Commedia* originated so that he walked towards it and away from it, never losing sight of this universal

fountainhead. (Is God a circle or a square? Or a *quadratura circuli*?) I have no intention of leaving my armchair and the woods where it stands, enjoying with me another sunny interval during which I hope to peruse a few pages from Fichte's *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*.

…if my entire knowledge revealed to me nothing but knowledge, I would be defrauded of my whole life. That there is nothing whatever but my presentations or conceptions is, to the natural sense of mankind, a silly and ridiculous conceit which no man can seriously entertain, and which requires no refutation…And what, then, is this something lying beyond all presentation, towards which I stretch forward with such ardent longing? What is the power with which it draws me towards it? What is the central point in my soul to which it is attached, and with which alone it can be effaced?

What does this reading session amount to? Knowledge, another piece of vain knowledge. What is the central point? Pain, love, Beatrice, the Virgin Mary, the eternal light, the eternal dark, God. The power of will. The will to power. What am I to do with this will or power? What is there beyond the trees I might turn into stars if bent on writing the *Commedia*, any part of it? But even Hell is all-too-human and anyway I prefer trees, their leaves and twigs, provided they repudiate the stars forever. Aren't they brothers and sisters? *Selva*, *stelle*. *Un arbre*, *une étoile*. Mandelstam speaks of a pine tree reaching for a star. I am fairly content with the oak tree in the shadow of which I sit for hours and hours.

"Not merely to know, but according to your knowledge to do, is your vocation"—this is loudly proclaimed in the innermost depths of my soul, as soon as I recollect myself for a moment and turn my observation upon myself. "Not for idle contemplation of yourself, not for brooding over devout sensations—no, for action you are here; action, and action alone, determines your worth."
This voice leads me out from presentation, from mere cognition, to something that lies beyond it and is entirely opposed to it; to something greater and higher than all knowledge, containing within itself the end and object of all knowledge. When I act, I doubtless know that I act and how I act; nevertheless this knowledge is not the act itself, but only the observation of it. This voice thus announces to me precisely what I sought; a something lying beyond mere knowledge, and, in its nature, wholly independent of knowledge.

I wish I had only one voice to listen to; only one will to handle. Or is my will supposed to handle me? Beatrice. The luminous point. The darkest point, the darkest lady. Dante introduced more and more patterns leading to her, to the promise he made at the end of the *Vita Nuova*. When reading the following excerpt from Aquinas' *Summa contra Gentiles*, he might have thought about their future encounter:

Neither does this divine promise meet an impossibility in the assertion that celestial bodies are unbreakable so the glorious bodies may not be elevated above them. For the divine power will bring it about that the glorious bodies can be simultaneously where the other bodies are: an indication of this was given in the body of Christ when He came to the disciples, "the doors being shut" (John 20:26).

Aquinas attempts to prove that, upon receiving their glorified bodies at the Last Judgement, the elect will be able to reach the Empyrean without being thwarted by celestial bodies. What interested Dante,

however, was the possibility of having a normal, earthly date with Beatrice whose spirit might be easily replaced by the books he had at his disposal: at many points she limits her explanations of how this or that phenomenon is reduced to a synopsis based on St Thomas' writings. But we are still in the dark as to how Dante made his way through the upper regions of the universe: was he rising in his body or not? Be that as it may, Beatrice must have passed through many a closed door as her paramour wrote down the tercets in which the Holy Trinity is reflected.

My body is sitting in the woods. And I would make my journey to the nearest chemist's in my body—no doubt about it. My body aches, but it has no desire to move in order to alleviate the pain that is sure to prevent me from having a sweet dream illumined by black suns. And Beatrice continues to pass through walls and closed doors, through the earth and other planets, on her way to other ghosts.

CHAPTER 11

Happy is a writer who dares say to his readers: "Please, don't read what I'm about to write—you're not likely to understand it. I travel in a carriage that flies almost like a bird while you go on foot and therefore can't keep pace with my prose. Actually, whatever I write is poetry, pure poetry, and you shun poetry. You find it too involved, don't you? Your little minds, which Dante calls 'little barks', are used to the tabloid press and schmaltzy novels. But I need neither your attention nor the recognition to which aspire many of my fellow writers. The ignorant can't bestow greatness on anyone and their praises are hollow. My immortality doesn't depend on the number of copies sold to those who don't understand real literature. I write for myself, Time and God." And he might add that if only one person understands his writing, he will be amply rewarded and satisfied. But what could *I* say to my potential readers? "Of course you're not likely to understand what I'm writing now. Besides, this book of mine is too huge and requires a lot of time, a lot of effort. May I ask you to read only a few pages of it? I've always said a few lines are enough to unveil the value of an author. So read a few lines and if you find them to your taste—" And so on and so forth.

"All happy families are more or less dissimilar; all unhappy ones are more or less alike," says Nabokov at the beginning of *Ada*, putting the opening line of *Anna Karenina* in reverse order or upside down to show how a masterpiece can be garbled by a bad translator. Over five centuries the whole structure of the universe has executed a *salto mortale* so that its upper regions are crackling now under our feet, whereas the nether ones gaze at us from heaven. A bad translator seems to have garbled the text transmitted to us by God's emissaries whose poetry may be questioned only by freedom addicts wandering in the infinite space where they hope to chance upon a substitute for the *Commedia*. But in the infinite space you are not sure to come across your reader or indeed the subject matter of your future book, which may have gone on a spree to some other galaxy. If you do not live in a house bounded by walls you cannot hang the portraits of your ancestors, your own photographs, let alone store away the Sacred Books.

At some point in human history the infinity of the world was established beyond doubt and beyond dispute. "Yet," writes Alexandre Koyré, "Descartes never asserts it. Like Nicholas of Cusa two centuries before him, he applies the term 'infinite' to God alone. God is infinite. The world is only *indefinite*." And he quotes Descartes extensively:

> We shall not bother to answer those who would inquire whether, if there were an infinite line, its half would also be infinite; or whether an infinite number would be even or odd; and such like; because about them nobody seems to be able to think except those who believe that their mind is infinite. As for us, in regard to those [things] to which in some respects we are not able to assign any limit, we shall not assert that they are infinite, but we shall consider them as indefinite…And because it is impossible to imagine such a number of stars that we should believe God could not create still more, we shall assume that their number is indefinite.

Sure enough, in infinite space everything becomes indefinite as if the contours of our very thoughts were blurred or smudged. For instance, you say to your reader:

Io non m'accorsi del salire in ella;
  ma d'esservi entro mi fé assai fede
  la donna mia ch'i' vidi far più bella.
I was not aware of rising into it, but of being within it my lady gave me full assurance when I saw her become more beautiful.
(The *Paradiso*, Canto VIII)

And your reader answers you: "What are you talking about? I don't understand a word of what you're saying." So you explain that your beloved has brought you to the third heaven where you are to meet a band of spirits among whom—

"The third heaven?" asks the reader.

"The heaven of Venus," you answer.

"Why on earth have you gone to Venus? Don't you have enough business down here? Take your girlfriend to a restaurant instead of flying. Paradise is right in front of you, not up there. Don't misunderstand me—I'm not as down-to-earth as all that. I go to church every Sunday. What about you? Actually you didn't even use your car last Sunday—and last Saturday, come to think of it. Why talk about journeys in space?"

And what will he say if you enlarge upon Beatrice's beauty and virtue?

Nel suo aspetto tal dentro mi fei,
  qual si fé Glauco nel gustar de l'erba
  che 'l fé consorto in mar de li altri dèi.
Trasumanar significar *per verba*
  non si poria; però l'essemplo basti
  a cui esperïenza grazia serba.
Gazing upon her I became within me such as Glaucus became on tasting of the grass that made him sea fellow of the other gods. The passing beyond humanity may not be set forth in words: therefore let the example suffice any for whom grace reserves that experience.

To forestall his inquiry you explain that Glaucus was a fisherman of Bocotia who, having noticed the magic property of a spot where he was sitting, chewed some grass and immediately began to yearn for the ocean. Bidding farewell to the earth, he plunged into the sea and was changed into a sea god by Oceanus and Tethys. "So what?" asks your reader. "Do you want to become a sea god? And what does it have to do with your girlfriend? Is she a good swimmer? We spent the whole day on the beach but it was too cold to go swimming. And what's that word you used? Trasu—?"

"*Trasumanar*. Getting beyond humanity. There are two ways open to us: being human to the utmost—human, all-too-human, to borrow Nietzsche's terminology—or getting beyond humanity. The crimes

committed by Hitler and Stalin brought discredit on human nature, but even in Dante's times one couldn't journey through heaven without undergoing Glaucus' metamorphosis."

Anyway, Paradise is out of our reach despite the number of spacecrafts we launch on a regular basis. Many people know nothing about Hell. Even a real war they broadcast to parade their weapons and the skill of their soldiers awakes no suspicions in the viewers' minds regulated by computer games. Those Star Wars even pollute the *Paradiso* where I find the bombings I saw in the news. I read Dante in the light of the nocturnal raids on Serbia, on Iraq:

Di fredda nube non disceser venti,
  o visibili o no, tanto festini,
  che non paressero impediti e lenti
a chi avesse quei lumi divini
  veduti a noi venir

From a cold cloud winds, whether visible or not, never descended so swiftly that they would not seem impeded and slow to one who had seen those divine lights come to us...

"If there were an infinite line, its half would also be infinite," says Descartes. But if there was an infinite Beatrice, her half would also be infinite. So would her third. And Dante would not have written a work about a part of his lady's anatomy, about a part of her brain. What would Beatrice's monologues become, if reduced by two thirds? Her truncated exposures would be of no interest to anybody except Dante's scholars who might concentrate on two or three cantos, heedless of what goes on in the world. Such scholars would not notice the fire that ravaged the library of Alexandria: one tercet may keep them busy for the rest of their lives.

This is a dangerous trend which might lead *beyond* Beatrice and Paradise, skirting round them on its way to infinity and perversity. The *Commedia* is infinite but we are not supposed to read only one third of it on the grounds that even an abridged version is infinite and consequently stands for the masterpiece we would not be able digest in its entirety. Actually the *Commedia* is *not* infinite in spite of our penchant for extending it beyond its bounds through our commentaries that purport to add a few stars to the closing line of the *Paradiso*. Let me add a few stars to the closing line of the *Inferno*.

We shall not assert that the *Commedia* is infinite, but we shall consider it as indefinite. The point is Beatrice grows indefinite as we extend the *Commedia* beyond the stars which bind its cantos together, barring the way to the space odysseys we are accustomed to. Everything and everybody grow indefinite in the universe where one is confronted with an infinite number of worlds that do not even bother to send each other signals in order to co-ordinate their manoeuvres. Is my finite universe an archaic version of the global village? Is the *Paradiso* a model for the global village?

Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

Dante did not write a song of himself; nor did he ever contradict himself as far as I know. At least it was not his intention because he had no need of *absolute* freedom which may obliterate God and even a woman walking along the streets of Florence. Dante did contain multitudes, but he was not large, contrary to Whitman. He was just the poet pictured by Botticelli and Gustave Doré—a man who journeyed through the Hereafter in search of his beloved.

Whitman contradicts himself voluptuously: he equates freedom with unbridled fantasy and the Schillerian embrace Beethoven embroidered upon in his *Ninth* to get closer to his contemporaries. Whitman notes down whatever comes into his head, doing justice to every impulse which, according to him, exists in its own right. But is every impulse emancipated to the point of forgetting where it belongs? Does Whitman remain Whitman throughout the poem? Doesn't he become someone else in his endeavour to represent the whole of humanity? Sir Edmund Gosse said Walt Whitman was not a man but literature in the protoplasmic state: an intellectual organism reflecting only those who approached it. Who approached it? John Doe, Beatrice, Dante—anybody.

"Do you know the woman standing over there?"

"Her name is Beatrice. She used to walk in the streets of Florence. A poet of sorts fell in love with her. Dante his name was."

"What about him?"

"Just a poet. You know how poets are. They talk to you about their problems, don't they?"

I am bound to forget a great deal within the infinity conferred upon the universe by astronomers and philosophers. My memories, instead of shining like Dante's journey through Paradise, will give out a dim light, allowing me to read only the most distinct documents—those of my childhood. In what form have I preserved my childhood, my youth? In the form of a book to which I add something now and then to improve upon the actual events, making them live up to Dante's juvenile standards. I re-write them in English which, contrary my mother tongue, does not permit me to get beyond Moscow where I lived and loved in those days. It shapes my ideas in accordance with the vocabulary I can handle; I never let myself go, restricted by my partial ignorance of a foreign language. My carriage therefore conveys me neither to Europe nor even to another part of Russia as if to model my narrative upon *Vita Nuova* that is faithful to Florence, to her houses and streets. In later years Dante does undertake a long journey which, however, sticks to the pattern imposed on it by medieval science and philosophy. In a way, Dante transports his native city surrounded by walls into outer space; even the last cantos of the *Paradiso* seem to be situated within a wall-bounded space—within the City of God. Dante could not just enumerate whatever objects or humans entered his field of vision, for there was no infinity, no democracy in his world.

Trippers and askers surround me,
People I meet, the effect upon me of my early life or the ward and city I live in,
    or the nation,

The latest dates, discoveries, inventions, societies, authors old and new,
My dinner, dress, associates, looks, compliments, dues,
The real or fancied indifference of some man or woman I love,
The sickness of one of my folks or of myself, or ill-doing or loss or lack of
money, or depressions or exltations,
Battles, the horror of fratricidal war, the fever of doubtful news, the fitful events

Whitman might have carried on for another page, availing himself of the freedom of speech guaranteed by the American Constitution. But Dante's speech was subject to many constraints such as: tercets, the tenets of Christianity as exposed in Aquinas' books, the confines of the universe that was not infinite yet. So he might have excluded several items from Whitman's list, bringing out "authors old and new", "the effect upon me of my early life", "the city I live in," "the nation", "the horrors of fratricidal war". The point is Dante had to bring something out to the detriment of the rest while Whitman spoke about everything in the same tone of voice: there was no hierarchy in his democracy. But there *was* censorship in his freedom-loving poetry, for he writes in *Song of Myself*:

The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me,
The first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I translate into a new tongue.

What does he mean by translating the pains of Hell into a new tongue? The society that plays down the importance of death must logically censor the horrors of Hell by translating them into another language—that of cinema, for instance. On a screen they look distant, indefinite, in spite of the hyperrealistic images lavished upon cinema-goers or television viewers by a generous film director. Besides, they get lost among the myriad images we are bombarded with day in day out. Likewise the pains of Hell depicted in Whitman's poem get lost amidst the items he enumerates in his endeavour to acquaint us with his many-sided universe.

The suicide sprawls on the bloody floor of the bedroom,
I witness the corpse with its dabbled hair, I note where the pistol has fallen.

This item of news, though separated by two blanks from the rest of the poem, is obliterated by "the blab of the pave, tires of carts, sluff of boot-soles, talk of the promenaders" that follow in its wake. Dante's images stand out as if separated from the rest of the book by many pages, by thick volumes.
Through his new language, of which enumeration is only one feature, Walt Whitman, like King Midas, turns everything into gold as he peruses "manifold objects, no two alike and every one good, / The earth good and the stars good, and their adjuncts all good". His indulgent approach reminds me of Kirilov who, in Dostoevsky's blackest novel, talks to Stavrogin in similar vein: "The man is unhappy because he doesn't know he's happy. Whoever learns it at once becomes happy. The mother-in-law will die and the girl will survive—all is well…Smashing a girl's skull is good and not smashing it is

also good." Shall we apply this principle to a literary text, to the *Commedia*, replacing one of its tercets by some words jotted at random?

Quel sol che pria d'amor mi scaldò 'l petto,
  di bella verità m'avea scoverto,
  provando e riprovando, il dolce aspetto…
That sun which first had heated my breast with love, proving and refuting had uncovered to me the sweet aspect of fair truth...
(The *Paradiso*, Canto III)

Let us replace it by the following remark: "A car may stall due to the driver breaking too suddenly or using the choke incorrectly or because of mechanical failure." This sentence is not rhymed and its contents have nothing to do with Dante's praise of love that Beatrice taught him when he was nine years old. But does it really matter, given that whatever we say is good? Besides, this is a *useful* piece of information that any car owner may profit from if he or she takes it at face value and does not attribute an allegorical meaning to the car and the choke. Even a man in love can turn it to his advantage when on a ride with his girlfriend: he will know how to stall his car on a deserted road, miles from anywhere. But let us quote an excerpt from the *Inferno* that Whitman might have tampered with by translating it into the new tongue:

Poscia vid' io mille visi cagnazzi
  fatti per freddo; onde mi vien riprezzo,
  e verrà sempre, de' gelati guazzi.
After that I saw a thousand faces made purple by the cold, whence a shuddering comes over me, and always will, at frozen fords.
(The *Inferno*, Canto XXXII)

Why not enjoy yourself in the winter when we forget the unbearable heat we are exposed to in summertime? Would we be happy if only the summer was greeting us outdoors? What a refreshing change! Anyway a glowing fireplace and a bottle of claret await me on my return to make up for the discomfort I suffer during my winter journey. A solitary traveller suffers most, but I am surrounded by a thousand faces that keep me company. And what about the frozen waters of Cocytus?

Through the clear atmosphere I stretch around on the wonderful beauty,
The enormous masses of ice pass me and I pass them, the scenery is plain in all directions

Whitman embarks on a journey of which he knows nothing or next to nothing: there are no landmarks in his miscellaneous, infinite world. What he does know, however, he deliberately "strips away": "I launch all men and women forward with me into the Unknown." Gogol thought he knew where he was going, but the paucity of roads and the quality of wheels left him stranded at some inn or other, depriving his readers of the Palace of Harmony to which he had aspired to take them. Tolstoy had no

idea where to go as *he* set off on his last journey undertaken in order to remove his estate with the problems it continued to spawn from his sight and mind. But it is his sight and mind that got further and further from him until he lost them in a house where some journalists listened to his last words for the sake of posterity.

What did *I* hope for when I left Moscow and Russia in 1974, heading for the Unknown silhouetted against the Western sky? What do I hope for when starting a new book or revising an old one in which a few nuances must be set aright? Do these nuances count in the world where the stars are like the pebbles I trample upon as I cover a few paces separating me from the Black Sea? (Another evocation of my trips to the Caucasus.) I always put my shoes near the water so as not to walk too much on these pebbles turning into daggers as my soles touch them. Once I strolled along the beach till three in the morning; when I came back, the front door of the hotel was locked. I rang the bell and even knocked at the door. Nobody heard me. So I found the window of my friend's room and tried to hit it with a pebble. I picked up a few pebbles on the beach and kept throwing them at his window that was just beneath the roof. One of my missiles landed on the roof and created the effect of a bombardment, as my friend informed me next morning. Walt Whitman used to treat the stars in the same fashion: he was throwing them about.

Whenever I start a new book, I leave my house, my motherland, my own self; I even strip off my clothes. A great expanse of water awaits me outside: the Black Sea, the White Sea, the Red Sea, the Dead Sea. I immerse myself in the tradition to which Dante pays tribute through the navigational figures he uses in Canto II of the *Paradiso*, where he speaks about the open sea and his reader's bark; and also in the opening lines of the *Purgatorio*:

Per correr miglior acque alza le vele
  omai la navicella del mio ingegno,
  che lascia dietro a sé mar sì crudele
To course over better waters the little bark of my genius now hoists her sails, leaving behind her a sea so cruel...

This time Dante himself is confined to a little bark (*navicella*) that he later reserves for his reader (*piccioletta barca*). During the journey through the *Purgatorio* his genius must have grown to the size of a ship (*mio legno*), owing to the hard work and purification. "The Roman poets," writes E. R. Curtius, "are wont to compare the composition of a work to a nautical voyage. 'To compose' is 'to set the sails, to sail' ('*vela dare*', Virgil, *Georgics*, II, 41). At the end of the work the sails are furled ('*vela trahere*': *ibid*., IV, 117). The epic poet voyages over the open sea in a great ship, the lyric poet on a river in a small boat."

Does every writer throw himself upon the mercy of the elements? Hardly. Many works are *targeted* at the people living somewhere or everywhere; many writers *live* with their readers. They need not travel at all: their readers sit on the same divan and play dominoes with them. Their works target the area

which has become a haven for people tired of the hectic pace of city life, searching for quiet and inner peace. My works are not targeted at anybody; I am not targeted at anybody; my journey is not targeted at anybody.

In a moment of despair Solzhenitsyn used to read Russian proverbs; I read Jung.

One of the most important energic phenomena of psychic life is the progression and regression of libido. Progression could be defined as the daily advance of the process of psychological adaptation…A man's attitude to reality is something extraordinarily persistent, but the more persistent his mental habitus is, the less permanent will be his effective achievement of adaptation. This is the necessary consequence of the continual changes in the environment and the new adaptations demanded by them.
(*On the Nature of the Psyche*)

"I'm sorry to say that when his wife left him, he found solace in the bottle," said one of my former pupils. What kind of solace do I find in this text? It is not a bottle of burgundy, is it?

I realise that my attitude to reality is extraordinarily persistent, which makes me unable to adapt to the continual changes I see outside my room. Twenty years ago I was understood by some people at whom my works were *not* targeted for the simple reason that I have always written for myself— a song for myself, a kind of therapy. Now I am understood only by myself as if I was drinking wine in a God-forsaken inn: a drunkard understands wine and vice versa. But even if this man-forsaken inn was crammed with tourists, no one would understand the drunkard. Shall I seek solace in Dante's *Convivio* where he points out that, for various reasons, many men are excluded from the banquet of wisdom and science?

Manifestly then may he perceive who rightly considers, that few be left who may reach to that habit which is desired by all; and well-nigh beyond number are they which be hindered and which live all their lives famished for this universal food. Oh blessed those few who sit at the table where the bread of angels is consumed, and wretched they who share the food of sheep!

I am not sure that the thirst for knowledge is shared by many people nowadays: yachts have replaced little barks; and you do not need knowledge to buy a yacht. Let us take a sentence that might be attributed to Whitman: "I have a thirst for adventure, excitement, power, knowledge." Which words should be struck out from this enumeration? Actually there is only one word that has not withstood the test of time: knowledge. Adventure, excitement and power are still in high demand as if humankind had not grown older in the course of seven centuries. We might have grown younger, come to think of it: a child is more sensitive to adventure, excitement and power than to knowledge. And when today you see a child playing with toy ships you do not say to his mother, "Your son will become a great poet." And if you do venture to say something along these lines, his mother will answer you, "I saw a film about Onassis and Jacqueline Kennedy last night." She might even slap you in the face for casting a spell on her child. Nor should you quote Longfellow's nostalgic line: "Ships that pass in the night,

and speak each other in passing." This poetical nonsense might irritate her beyond measure, especially if her child is within hearing distance. Besides, this is no longer true: nowadays ships have no time to speak to each other. Only pleasure boats and yachts engage in long conversations; but they do not talk in verse, do they?

Did Dante keep up with the times? He noted down the changes which, however, could not sway him from his purpose: they did not deflect his *shot*. He often spoke about targets, bows and arrows.

e sì come saetta che nel segno
  percuote pria che sia la corda queta,
  così corremmo nel secondo regno.
And as an arrow that strikes the target before the bowcord is quiet, so we sped into the second realm.
(The *Paradiso*, Canto V)

Dante targeted God, not humans. A beautiful sentence, isn't it? But what does it mean? Does God read anything? Does he need our contribution to His work? Sometimes the world looks like a gigantic museum that cannot be visited by anybody: you need a ticket to enter the museum. And I might give my ticket back, following in Ivan Karamazov's footsteps: he could not bear the sorry plight of a little girl—a fly in the ointment. And I encounter so many flies during my journey that I ask myself if there is any ointment left either along the roads I follow or at the hotels where I sleep. Does our modern world reflect *Dead Souls* more than God's design to which Dante devoted so many pages?

The black tailcoats flickered and fluttered, separately and in clusters, this way and that, just as flies flutter over dazzling white chunks of sugar on a hot July day when the old housekeeper hacks and divides it into sparkling lumps in front of the open window: all the children look on as they gather about her, watching with curiosity the movements of her rough hands while the airy squadrons of flies that the light air has raised, fly boldly in, complete mistresses of the premises and, taking advantage of the old woman's purblindness and of the sun troubling her eyes, spread all over the dainty morsels, here separately, there in dense clusters.
(*Dead Souls*, trans. by Nabokov)

What can we eliminate from the description of a party at the Governor's house to fit our world and its inhabitants? Let us keep the black tailcoats that might be requested for the numerous parties shown in soap operas. Let us also keep the flies which, however, spread over *everything* now, having come a long way since Gogol's times. Disdaining sugar and food in general, their clusters settle on books, on paintings, on films, on humans. Often they replace the objects they cover; one reads flies instead of a poem, a novel or an essay. And this essay is not entitled *The Flies*, which would partly justify their appearance on the pages; nor is it Gogol's description of the party to which Chichikov directs his steps in the hope of a pleasant evening. And a painting we chance upon in a picture gallery has nothing to do with flies or other insects: it would represent a cityscape, but for the flies that settled on it as the artist was putting his name at the bottom of the canvas.

Does my nasty mood distort the picture of our world, making it look like Dorian Gray as painted by Hallward? Should it be likened to Dorian Gray himself? This reminds me of a saying that was recently discussed in the Russian Parliament: "The uninvited guest is worse than a Tartar." A member of Tartar origin pointed out that the saying disparaged and ridiculed his nation. So an amendment was voted unanimously: "The uninvited guest is better than a Tartar." Either our world is like the picture of Dorian Gray that Hallward did not recognise or it is the model of this picture: Dorian Gray himself, a fresh-as-a-daisy criminal. Take your pick!

Would Dante recognise the world he lived in seven centuries ago? Would God recognise the world He created?

"Do you mean to say that God died like an ordinary human, like Dante?" asked one of my colleagues.

"Does He have to *recognise* His own creation? Do you think He is out of touch with what young people are interested in? Even Nietzsche's God died differently. He died ecstatically, so to speak. And you seem to say to your God, 'Your creation isn't up to scratch so you really ought to make more effort. '"

Is it my mood, my nasty mood that persists in spite of the fine weather and an old bottle of Haut Brion I drank for dinner? My attitude towards the world over there has not altered since the early nineties: it is no longer a question of my or anybody's mood. Even when I read an innocent-looking sentence such as: "She came home with a pile of glossy brochures and announced she had decided to buy a car," I swear like a Russian passer-by talking to his friend. And then I repeat "glossy" many times, patiently turning it into a swear word.

"He becomes prickly and defensive when you ask him about his work," my neighbours might whisper to each other if they ever took the trouble to ask me any question. And I might become prickly and defensive if they did ask me about my work. What could I answer them? "I'm writing a commentary on the *Divina Commedia*. A long commentary, around two thousand pages. I'm going backwards, you know."

"You're not very explicit about your book, are you?"

"You read the *Commedia*, didn't you? Dante journeys from Hell to Paradise. I'm doing just the opposite."

"Why? Any particular reason?"

"Because our world is glossy, sleek, lustrous. You may mistake it for Paradise at first, when you're young and shallow."

"I wonder how Mrs Watson managed to get such a glossy finish on her dinner table."

"And then you begin to scrape the world, removing one layer after another. The more you scrape—"

"Why should you scrape the world? It's not a new potato, is it? So you end up in Hell, are you? What's the point in writing this book?"

The protagonist of *Hunger* writes his essays in the hope of selling them to a newspaper. Almost every day he pays a visit to the chief editor who goes over his stuff and either turns it down or accepts it. Why do *I* write this commentary or indeed anything: novels, poems, essays? To whom could I bring *my* stuff? Five essays of mine were published in a Russian magazine that used to have a wide circulation and was read by the literati in Petersburg and Moscow. But the times have changed and now I am asked if this magazine exists at all. "It must be in the land of the living because they've published my essays," I answer.

"Did you see it?"

"No. A woman gave me a call from Moscow—"

"To Paris? Did you see this woman?"

"No, we talked on the phone."

"About what?"

"About my essays."

"Did you talk about the magazine?"

"Of course. She's one of the editors."

"She *said* she was one of the editors. Just a practical joke. Or one of your girlfriends took pity on you."

Two months later I undertook another journey to Russia, spending a fortnight at the Black Sea and one week in Moscow. I called my friend and asked him if the magazine was obtainable somewhere. (Several months before he had got in touch with the chief editor to show him my essays.) "You must go to their office," he answered. "But they won't give you free copies because they didn't want to deduct anything from your fee." After a desperate search I found a small room clattered with magazines of all sorts among which I spotted a kettle and a few cups. "Do you want a cup of tea?" said a middle-aged woman who seemed to be in charge of the room and its contents.

"My essays were published in the latest issue," I said.

"What essays? Who are you?"

Two copies of the magazine are still in my suitcase: I have not unpacked after coming home from Russia. There are too many things around me, too many books I need for my work on this commentary. Where would I put these copies? Anyway I do not need *them* to write on the *Paradiso*. I do not need to write anything either. I can have a decent meal at any time: in the morning, in the afternoon, in the evening and after midnight, during another spell of insomnia. I have got a flat where I keep my books; and in every book I find a few relevant passages shedding light on Dante and his masterpiece. Nabokov did not seem to take any interest in Dante whose name is mentioned only twice in the two volumes that Brian Boyd devotes to the Russian expatriate's life. In Volume One Nabokov's father reads Dante in prison alongside D'Annunzio, Knut Hamsun, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche. In Volume Two it is Anthony Burgess who utters the name of the Florentine expatriate as he pontificates on the advantage of reading poetry in the original. But on page 657 of the Second Volume Nabokov

holds and reads Charles Singleton's translation of the *Commedia*—on his deathbed. "He found both translation and commentary excellent, and wrote to his friend William McGuire at the Bollingen Press, the book's publisher: 'What a triumphant joy it is to see the honest light of literality take over again, after ages of meretricious paraphrase!' Beckett also read Dante on his deathbed but, in his case, it was a lifelong attachment, a passion on which he abundantly commented in his novels and plays. But even Nabokov whose interests seemed to lie elsewhere wrote a few comments on Dante and his style:

> He knew he was not quite a savant, but completely an artist. Paradoxically and unnecessarily it had been in his "academic career", in his nonchalant and arrogant lectures, in his conduct of seminars, in his published reports on sick minds, that, starting as something of a prodigy before he was twenty, he had gained by the age of thirty-one "honors" and a "position" that many unbelievably laborious men do not reach at fifty. In his sadder moments, as now, he attributed at least part of his "success" to his rank, to his wealth, to the numerous donations, which (in a kind of extension of his overtipping the haggard beggars who cleaned rooms, manned lifts, smiled in hotel corridors) he kept showering upon worthwhile institutions and students.
> (*Ada*)

Dante was not quite a savant, but completely an artist. When I first came across his name I learnt that his philosophy, if any, was a mere reiteration of what his elders and betters had written in *their* books. As an artist, however, he was unsurpassed and remains so to the present day when you can hear a guide in Italy question a number of tourists clustering around a monument, "Do you know who stands on this pedestal? You see the greatest poet of all times—Dante Alighieri." I read a short article on him in a book where a lot of poets were discussed with a view to certifying they could have produced something greater, had they lived in the Soviet Union. But I am not sure Dante was born under a more benevolent regime (or under a luckier star), given that he was banished from his native city; I left on my own initiative. What would he have written in today's Russia?

What would *I* write there? Nothing at all. Why should I write anything for the magazines that are not sold in kiosks? Why do I write this commentary? I am not a savant but rather an artist to the core, whose repertoire includes philosophy, theology, musicology and what not. I make use of whatever comes my way, putting those bits and pieces in my books from which no one can learn anything. But what can you learn from the *Commedia*? You know that Hell exists, don't you? The existence of Purgatory might pose a problem to non-Catholic readers, but Hell and Paradise are well established within the Christian world. So what can you learn from the *Commedia*? Sinners are punished in Hell; the elect are rewarded in Paradise. And you learn that Cacciaguida is Dante's ancestor who welcomes him with affection in Canto XV of the *Paradiso*:

> "…Grato e lontano digiuno,
> tratto leggendo del magno volume
> du' non si muta mai bianco né bruno,
> solvuto hai, figlio, dentro a questo lume
> in ch'io ti parlo, mercé di colei

ch'a l'alto volo ti vesti le piume."
"Happy and long-felt hunger, derived from reading in the great volume where white or dark is never changed, you have relieved, my son, within this light in which I speak to you, thanks to her who clothed you with plumes for the lofty flight."

I might have chosen a better excerpt to prove that nothing or next to nothing can be learnt from the *Commedia*: one wonders what is the great volume Dante touches upon as he listens to his ancestor's speech. Singleton writes that "in God's book of the future the text is never changed". It is written in black and white. Black will never become white and vice versa. Black will never become grey or pink; white will never become blue or violet. Whatever you do will never influence the course of your life. Is this the "message" of Cacciaguida's admonition? What do you learn from it? God has a book in which your destiny is inscribed or rather sealed: you are in no position to change it. You are either white or black. You are either a white sheep or a black sheep. You are either a blank sheet of paper on which something (or everything) can be written or a black sheet of paper. I should have chosen another excerpt from the *Commedia*.

In Canto II Dante inquires about the nature of the spots on the moon, first exposing the theory he had hitherto maintained: they are due to density and rarity. Beatrice refutes his error and spells the truth out. Each sphere is quickened and governed by the Intelligence presiding over it; and the Intelligence of the eighth heaven distributes its influence among the fixed stars. But this influence is modified by the character of the bodies it enters, which accounts for the variation in degree of brilliance among the stars and for the spots on the moon. Is this a useful piece of information? Why not replace it by the following excerpt from the Encyclopaedia Britannica:

Temporary changes in the light level, or glows, of small areas, such as craters, even on the dark side have been recorded several times, and it is now clear that at least some of the many reports refer to real occurrences. Almost every lunar observer of note in the nineteenth century reported at least one case, and the records of such cases go back more than 400 years. The glows are now thought to be due to the electrical discharge of small quantities of gas from below the surface.

This piece of information is fare more useful, but it would not have inspired the poem I finished half-an-hour ago:

Whatever shape you take on
You're the most beautiful woman
I've ever seen or written about.

You can't betray someone
You've never been faithful to.
Why should I meet your fiancé?

The dark spots that nightly stain

The surface of the moon are caused
By density and rarity of matter.

CHAPTER 12

The truth may and must undergo tests among which William James, being a utilitarian, favours fruitfulness. Unless it enables us to cope with reality more efficiently, he would have us abandon our idea as false. Does Canto II of the *Paradiso* help me cope with reality? I wrote a poem in which, once again, I expressed my love for you; and yet I am quite aware of how pointless it is, considering your recent betrothal to a man I know nothing about. (At some point Beatrice was *betrothed* to her husband and I am not tempted to update this term.) Does my poem help me clarify our relationship and get rid of your image that haunts me day and night? But your image might be helpful insofar as it haunts these pages as well, conjuring up a semblance of Beatrice, her doppelgänger, thanks to whom I may deal with the subject more amply, in more detail. So you are instrumental in bringing the *Commedia* up to date and revealing its eternal substance.

There is another question I must ask myself before carrying on: Does my work on this commentary help me cope with reality? I do not earn my livelihood from writing either novels or essays: the fee my friend touched upon when speaking of my contribution to Russian literature does not exceed twenty dollars—I am sure of that. Anyway my so-called fee is so insignificant that they were loath to deduct from it the amount of money I paid for five copies of this magazine, fearing it might disappear altogether. Nor does the commentary give me any assistance in my private life, for these cantos rather stress the importance of my love for the woman who is about to get married.

According to James, even the theory of Absolute comes to be expedient—in a moment of despair—because it teaches that the universe is in good hands and can be relied upon. Besides, this theory enables us to take a "moral holiday" from our perpetual striving to improve the world and humankind. But there are exceptions to any rule and even if we assume that being in good hands is a rule, some people might be in bad hands as if excluded from the universe. For all their devotion to the *Commedia* and Aquinas' books, these unfortunate individuals do not live happily and often complain about their sorry plight to passers-by. They also confide their tales of woe to posterity in the hope of a posthumous reward which, retrospectively, would justify their loneliness.

Last winter I decided to take a moral holiday from my urge to improve humankind, vowing to concentrate instead on my own existence. But my existence is inseparable from the *Commedia* that was written with a view to improving humankind. Or did Dante write it for himself, bent on improving his relationship with God? If the latter view is accepted as a working hypothesis one cannot help wondering why he did not destroy his masterpiece after finishing the last canto: God has no need of a written text to know what it speaks about. On the other hand the *Commedia* would not have reached the final stage—the version we have at our disposal—had Dante limited his poetic élan to *meditating* upon Hell, Purgatory and Paradise: he had to *write* about them, considering the magnitude of the work. It is not enough to meditate on the *Commedia*; I have to write my thoughts down, otherwise they

would remain shapeless, indistinct. The same goes for the thoughts of mine lying outside the *Commedia* and my comment on it: they would remain indistinct, indefinite, if I abandoned my work in progress. And what could I do with a number of shapeless thoughts wandering around my head? I am doomed to work on this commentary to the bitter end.

The artist's life cannot be otherwise than full of conflicts, for two forces are at war within him—on the one hand the common human longing for happiness, satisfaction and security in life, and on the other a ruthless passion for creation which may go so far as to override every personal desire. The lives of artists are as a rule so highly unsatisfactory—not to say tragic—because of their inferiority on the human and personal side, and not because of a sinister dispensation. There are hardly any exceptions to the rule that a person must pay dearly for the divine gift of the creative fire. It is as though each of us were endowed at birth with a certain capital of energy. The strongest force in our make-up will seize and all but monopolise this energy, leaving so little over that nothing of value can come of it.
(Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*)

I disagree with Jung who has a romantic, outworn notion of how an artist lives: many of my colleagues are quite happy and affluent because they have been energetic enough to make a name for themselves. Their ambitions seized and monopolised the energy with which they had been supplied at their birth; their works received only a remnant of this energy, of their creative élan. As a result, they created themselves and not their works which exist solely on the assumption that a great artist always does something important. Is this excerpt from Jung's work on man and his soul is useful? Actually I disagree with the very title from which one might conclude that my contemporaries *are* looking for a soul. What does "Russian soul" mean nowadays? Until recently this notion included a discussion about God or poetry—far into the night. Today it is reduced to sounds of revelry and bottles of vodka, the rest having being usurped by money.

This excerpt from Jung's work is useless. The artists he talks about are not my companions in misfortune and therefore cannot be trusted; we are not in the same boat. And I have already learnt from my bitter experience how little energy I have to clean my room or merely remove the books from the floor where they resignedly await my hand or my foot: I often trample upon them on my way to the kitchen. But I also open and read them to give new momentum to this book that depends so much on other books, on ancient and modern lore.

I wish I could follow Dante's ship in my little bark, braving the anger of the sky and, generally speaking, the vicissitudes of a sea voyage. But what I see all around me is a vast expanse of water, nothing else. And there are no landmarks (or seamarks), no masts within the space where the horizon recedes further and further. How indeed to comment on the following tercet from Canto IV:

Ché volontà, se non vuol, non s'ammorza,
  ma fa come natura face in foco,
  se mille volte vïolenza il torza.
For will, if it will not, is not quenched, but does as nature does in fire, though violence wrest it aside a thousand times.

In days of yore, a scholar could quote Thomas Aquinas without going any further in search for Dante's sources and meaning:

Now what is compelled or violent is from an exterior principle. Consequently it is contrary to the nature of the will's own act, that it should be subject to compulsion and violence: just as it is also contrary to the nature of a natural inclination or movement (of a stone that is thrown upwards). For a stone may have an upward movement from violence, but that this violent movement be from its natural inclination is impossible. In like manner a man may be dragged by force: but it is contrary to the very notion of violence, that he be thus dragged of his own will.

Nowadays we might re-write almost every word from the above excerpt: history has turned our notions upside down. In the days when Dante and Aquinas wrote their works the will was at the top of human qualities and priorities because the adjective "free" was associated with it. Dante himself speaks about it in the following terms:

"Lo maggior don che Dio per sua larghezza
  fesse creando, e a la sua bontate
  più conformate, e quel ch'e' più apprezza,
fu de la volontà la libertate;
  di che le creature intelligenti,
  e tutte e sole, fuoro e son dotate."
"The greatest gift which God in His bounty bestowed in creating, and the most conformed to His own goodness and that which He most prizes, was the freedom of the will, with which the creatures that have intelligence, they all and they alone, were and are endowed."

At the age of eleven I was very fond of the games (*igri*) one could purchase at the Child's World—a shop where children and adults would forget for a few moments their sordid surroundings. I was so used to those games that I could not imagine any other gift outside their sphere which, even in the Soviet Union, was large enough to enable a child to live in a different country ruled by a benevolent king. Once I took part in a concert organised by a sort of club that had its headquarters in the house where I lived. After the concert, the participants were asked to draw lots in order to get presents in accordance with "their numbers". I received a superb pen with which I might have written a few poems: at the time I was already writing poetry. But I said to the woman who distributed the presents, "Could I please draw another lot? I've got a pen already." I hoped to receive a game instead, although I had so many different games in my room that I could hardly walk around it. She kindly allowed me to draw another lot and a minute later I was given a box of chocolate I threw in the Moscva River once the soirée was over.

So we exchanged the gift of God for our own will, strange as it may appear: we substituted our own will for the one bestowed upon us by the Almighty. The free will he endowed us with was so boundless that we could hardly walk around the space allotted to human beings. Why did we need

anything else of the same kind? Was the new will similar to the one we had lost? Perhaps we intended to amplify the space "allotted" to us; this space grew infinite. And what about our will? Was it as infinite as the area where it could disport itself? How did it avail itself of the new freedom? Weary of "outdoor conquests", it turned upon itself and became subject to compulsion and violence produced by its own will—a doppelgänger holding sway over its model.

Of his own will man drags himself to the house of an old woman and kills her. He does not want to kill her and literally forces his own hand to accomplish the deed he dislikes and even abhors. In his heart of hearts he is aware that his murder is obnoxious but he force-feeds himself and eventually his impulse grows so strong that he cannot resist it. So he announces, "Destiny is a force to be reckoned with" and kills the old woman. Like a stone flung by a mighty hand, he soars into the sky and flies amidst the clouds until his deed is done. Then he plummets down, finds himself on the earth that does not really welcome him and realises the horror of his deed. His first impulse agrees with the code of behaviour inculcated in him by his mother: he intends to turn himself in to the police. But his will decides otherwise, forcing another attitude on itself. What attitude does the criminal adopt? He does his best to outwit the detective who investigates the murder and almost succeeds: there is no evidence against him. A woman he falls in love with brings a lot of pressure to bear on him; the more she talks the less he is inclined to turn himself in, his will warding off the outside influence. But it yields to its own pressure or rather to a temptation which, in the space of a few hours, matures into a conviction that impels the murderer to make a confession. On the way to the police headquarters he changes his mind once again—under the pressure of his will, acting on its own. Or does he change his will and not his mind? Does his will undergo the change of its own accord, without any interference?

Freedom of will has been replaced by freedom of speech and all other freedoms that make up the notion of human rights. You can always count on those rights to provide you with an outlet for your pent-up emotions. But do you need your free will under these conditions? Or any will at all? Its outbreaks would lead you nowhere; and they may deprive you of the rights for which so many people have fought ever since they realised they had no rights and consequently could not make use of their free will.

"In our times this problem doesn't exist," said Volodya. "Even charismatic leaders are no longer in fashion. Who needs Charles de Gaulle or Winston Churchill now? Your team works for you and whatever you say is all right if you've got financial support."

"Does the will itself exist?" I asked. "The will to power, for instance? But is it a manifestation of free will? If power as such doesn't mean anything, our free will shouldn't be directed towards it. Or rather, we don't need any will to direct our steps towards power and money—it's done automatically."

"Our feet know the way," agreed Volodya. "Only the Christian faith was regarded as a manifestation of free will in Dante's times. You had to believe in God to prove you made use of your free will."

"A charismatic leader," I went on, "could impose his will on humanity, stepping out of line. Our presidents and prime ministers toe the line, doing what they are expected to do either by financiers or by the military. The haves and the have-nots merge into one force within our society and this force guides the way of our leaders. The world we belong to is a rolling stone and what counts is the moss you can gather when writing a poem or a philosophical treatise. Why should you roll along a straight line?"

"But stepping out of this line doesn't mean anything either," said Volodya. "All depends on what course you'll follow after the manifestation of your free will. And what course *could* you follow now?"

"I thought the *Paradiso* would be a solution to this problem."

"You can't follow Dante's ship now. You don't even have a little bark at your disposal. You'll have to swim, I'm afraid. It's high time you took a few swimming lessons."

My will has a romantic touch and is rather wayward in comparison with its steadfast prototypes dating back to the fourteenth century. But it does not veer off its course every other minute: both Dostoevsky and Hamsun would have rejected it as a model. The *Commedia* drags it far from the line along which walk my contemporaries, but that does not mean anything, as Volodya pointed out. It is not reasonable to pursue this commentary, I say to myself, and my voice resounds clearly in the acoustics of my mind; nor is it drowned by the din of the traffic. Yet I go on writing, for reason and will are often at odds. Actually I am not advised against this pastime by my reason: my will must have a hand in it. Probably it is my will that objects to my writing the commentary—my will to power. I shall never come to power if I continue to pay so much attention to my work in progress. "Your work in *regress*," as one of my colleagues put it; he never misses an opportunity to make a dreadful pun.

"Do you mean I've regressed to the mental age of a twelve-year-old?" I asked.

"Your life has regressed to the period when you had neither concerts nor money," he said.

"Why not die of starvation when writing notes on Canto XXXIII of the *Inferno*? Why not share the fate of Count Ugolino who might have devoured his children to assuage his hunger?"

First I am supposed to share in Dante's transports within the realm of Paradise where, guided by Beatrice, he puts his free will to test. But writing notes on the *Paradiso* will not lead me anywhere—not even to Purgatory—unless I *participate* in this journey somehow; unless I believe in God. Luther justly thought that one could not buy one's salvation which was in the hands of God and nowhere else, not even in one's own mind. Why do I hope to purify my soul, if not to save it, by studying the *Commedia* and updating the reader's attitude towards it? Will I never balk at the infinity of my task? Did I ever balk at this infinity or finitude? Of course I did; once more I contradict myself. And yet *something* occured as I set about writing this book. One may undergo *something* of a conversion even if one believes in God, in poetry, in the One.

…the discontinuity between the Pauline "new man" in Christ who recounts the narrative and the "old man" who must suffer its vicissitudes is brought about by the apocalyptic event of conversion.

Conversion creates a complex and problematic relationship between the authorial voice in serene possession of the divine perspective and the harried pilgrim who must acquire it. And it is also conversion that guarantees that every poetic choice the poet makes, every incident and association he chooses to record will be guided by a will that judges absolutely according to the absolute good to which it is bound in love. Thus, the poet's every enunciation is ultimately concerned in some way with his identity, for he is both their subject and object. The poet who has achieved his transcendence in the Word—the principle and exemplar of all intelligibility—was once the pilgrim who remedied an initial fault by his submission to divine authority, was stripped of concupiscence by his purgapoem, the *Comedy*.
(James Thomas Chiampi, *Shadowy Prefaces: Conversion and Writing in the "Divine Comedy"*)

I *am* an old man. All these wrinkles defacing my forehead like graffiti. I am not a wall, a playground of teenagers. What do they write or paint on my forehead? Their slogans, their frustrations and aspirations? Leave me alone! I am a new man in Christ; at least I am prepared to become one so as to get rid of you, to chase you away. Every choice I make, every incident and association I choose to record *is* guided by God's will. I have no will of my own. I used to have many wills, but now I have no will whatsoever. I am a dog following his master. Let me be a dog or a cat. I am tired of being a human.

Dante knew he would have to visit the Heaven of the Moon, the Heaven of Mercury, where are the souls of the ambitious, the Heaven of Venus, the Heaven of the Sun. I also have to visit these heavens, for I am writing this commentary. But how to visit them, in what order? The infinite sea stretches in front of me, almost swallowing up the sky. Dante knew nothing about Freud, Einstein and Heisenberg. He had no idea he was guided more by genes than by Beatrice, although he does pay a drawn-out homage to his ancestor. He was in the dark about his own will that was subject to his faith and to his unconscious. How to cope with this infinity? What is the Heaven of Mercury compared with *our* universe?

Ma nel commensurar d'i nostri gaggi
  col merto è parte di nostra letizia,
  perché non li vedem minor né maggi.
But in the equal measure of our rewards with our desert is part of our joy, because we see them neither less nor greater.
(The *Paradiso*, Canto VI)

Today the ambitious would not put up with the Heaven of Mercury, claiming three galaxies as a reward for their deeds of valour. Dante praises the rulers of Rome who, having got into their stride, would have extended their power to other parts of the universe had they known it was infinite.

Inver' la Spagna rivolse to stuolo,
  poi ver' Durazzo, e Farsalia percosse
  sì ch'al Nil caldo si sentì del duolo.
Towards Spain it wheeled the host, then towards Durazzo, and did so smite Pharsalia that grief was

felt on the burning Nile.

Julius Caesar alone would have conquered the Milky Way had he realised what treasures lay in store for him. What conquests have *I* made so far? At my age Julius Caesar was no longer in the land of the living. I am the master of my own flat where only the books obey me as I open and close them; the books, the piano and the furniture. My armchair does not eject my body when I sit down in it.

Antandro e Simeonta, onde si mosse,
  rivide e là dov' Ettore si cuba;
  e mal per Tolomeo poscia si scosse.
It saw again Antandros and the Simois, whence it had set forth, and there where Hector lies; and then it shook itself again—the worse for Ptolemy.

What are my ambitions? Am I ambitious at all? Volodya's wife said we were both ambitious: her husband and I. "You've got a lot of ambition," she said. "But the quantity of your intelligence exceeds that of your ambition. So you outsmart yourself, so to speak. You're too intelligent to become famous in your lifetime."

"I wish I were a dunce," I said.

Da indi scese folgorando a Iuba;
  onde si volse nel vostro occidente,
  ove sentia la pompeana tuba.
From there it fell like lightning on Juba, then turned to your west, where it heard Pompey’s trumpet.

Why does our poet take such a delight in measuring out the territory conquered by Rome under Caesar's guidance? Does he think about himself, about his own glory spreading all over the world and even beyond it? The inhabitants of Paradise must also read the *Commedia* as they dance around stars and comets. "They'll read me in Spain and Egypt," he thought.

"Why do you think your husband and I are intelligent?" I asked.

"Because you want to do something *real*," she said. "A famous pianist is a mere nonentity, a figment of the imagination. Nobody remembers him after his death in spite of his recordings. So many recordings are put on the market every day."

"What about books and music scores?"

"But books and scores are real," she answered. "They're authentic. You can *touch* them."

"Can't you touch CDs?"

"History can touch books and scores, human history. The brain can touch them."

Do they need *my* transcription of Dante's poem? I wish all its copies could burn or drown—like Prospero's book—leaving my commentary on a sort of pedestal around which would gather scholars and poets in the hope of gleaning a few tercets from the lost original. All the books in which the *Commedia* is touched upon or quoted should be destroyed.

Is this my paradise? My own book on which a great many people will draw in search for Dante's genius. Is this my journey through the realm where Dante saw the Virgin Mary and the light of God?

"Diverse voci fanno dolci note;
così diversi scanni in nostra vita
rendon dolce armonia tra queste rote."
"Diverse voices make sweet music, so diverse ranks in our life render sweet harmony among these wheels."

I will quote Dante as much as I can to fawn upon posterity that may be deprived of another library of Alexandria burnt by a comet, a meteor, a gigantic spaceship. Anyway my voice will join in the choir described in the above tercet. Last night my friends and I spoke about a violinist who used to have a huge orchestra. He played with that orchestra in unison. Nobody heard *him*. Under the circumstances you might as well *pretend* to be playing the violin. So I pretend to write a commentary on the *Commedia*. All I have to do is copy out a few verses from Dante's and Aquinas' books.

There are so many paradises today: the Internet, casinos, porn movies, horror movies, fast food restaurants. In the fourteenth century there was one paradise that coincided with Dante's *Paradiso* and even drunkards thought about it as they indulged in their vice. And they did not regard alcohol as paradise on earth. In the sixteenth century a German hunched over a tankard of beer might have reasoned thus: "The Scriptures don't proscribe alcohol and even recommend wine as a medicine. Besides, wine is our Saviour's blood. Of course when I drink too much I become a beast, and beasts have no soul. And those who have no soul can't believe in God, nor pray to Him. They can't pray for the salvation of their soul because they don't have it. But I'm still capable of praying to God, am I not? I just hope and pray that my wife will let me in tonight—I'm fed up with sleeping in the stables. This time I should quote Luther to her. What did he say when one of his students refused to drink beer? He said, 'Our Saviour is everywhere and we should grasp Him and drink from every bowl, from every tankard.' So I'm drinking from this tankard, and tomorrow I might drink from another tankard. What does it matter? What counts is the beer I drink every night. I'm sure I'll go to Paradise unless I commit a mortal sin. And drinking beer is no sin at all, neither mortal nor otherwise. But let me not become a beast, my Lord! Let me not become a beast!"

Dostoevsky's journey did not end in the German casinos where he lost as much money as one of his characters. Beyond those casinos was another realm to which his carriage would convey him after the game, during the game. He always thought in terms of Paradise and Hell. They could endow his works with a perspective along which his heroes and heroines travelled day and night: neither they nor their author were rooted to the spot. They all travelled in Gogol's carriage:

And, methinks, there is nothing very tricky about a Russian carriage. No iron screws hold it together; its parts have been fitted and knocked into shape anyhow by means of an axe and a gauge and the acumen of a Yaroslav peasant; its driver does not wear any of your foreign jackboots; he consists of a

beard and a pair of mittens, and he sits on a nondescript seat; but as soon as he strains up and throws back his whip-hand, and plunges into a wailing song, ah then—the steeds speed like the summer wind, the blurred wheelspokes form a circular void, the road gives a shiver, a passer-by stops short with an exclamation of fright—and lo, the *troyka* has wings, wings, wings.

Nowadays Russia does not seem to travel any more because the carriage has become the end in itself. Every Russian multimillionaire owns a car—or several cars—which does not resemble the carriage described on the last pages of *Dead Souls*. And passers-by never talk about its wheels, wondering whether they will last as far as Kazan: they know those wheels can cover the distance between the Earth and the Sun. Oddly enough, they just convey their owner to the nearest casino where he squanders his fortune within a few hours. But he has another fortune at home and indeed in his car awaiting him by the entrance to the casino. Better still, he has another fortune in the pockets of his jacket. So he is rooted to the spot as if he was *already* within the realm of Paradise. He *is* as a matter of fact: his car is a paradise, the casino where he plays far into the night is another paradise of which Dostoevsky wrote nothing. The house he lives in offers yet another paradise; so do all the houses where he lives or spends his holidays. And there is nothing beyond those paradises except yet another paradise of the same sort.

"Oh *troyka*, winged *troyka*, tell me who invented you? Surely, nowhere but among a nimble nation could you have been born; in a country which has taken itself in earnest and has evenly spread far and wide over one half of the globe, so that once you start counting the milestones you may count on till a speckled haze dances before your eyes." There are only Mercedes, BMWs and sports cars in Moscow; and they are rooted to the spot. A so-called new Russian would be surprised if told that Tolstoy departed from his estate at the age of eighty-two and boarded a train to go *somewhere*, leaving behind a few paradises which meant nothing to him. His estate did not coincide with the aim of his journey and even the Heaven of Mercury to which he had already been brought by the trains known to his heroes and heroines (Pozdnyshev, Anna Karenina) could not satisfy him.

If you fell into a spinning black hole at one of its poles, you wouldn't notice the way in which the hole drags spacetime around with it…Round by the equator, though, the dragging effect would be very apparent. As well as the inward tug of gravity pulling you towards the hole, there would be a sideways drag, carrying you around with the rotation of the hole. Within a certain distance from the horizon, it is impossible to stand still, no matter how powerful the motors on your spaceship may be. Although you can still use your rockets to stop you falling into the hole itself, and can even escape back into the Universe outside, you will be dragged sideways, no matter how hard the rockets blast.
(John Gribbin, *In Search of the Edge of Time*)

Was Tolstoy falling into a black hole? What hole was he falling into? Was he falling into any hole? Was he falling at all? Was he just sitting on a train where he "engaged the young peasant next to him in a discussion about the landtax of Henry George," as A. N. Wilson puts it in his biography of the peculiar Russian nobleman? Here are a few excerpts from John Gribbin's book:

But what happens at the centre of a black hole? There…the (spacetime) curvature becomes infinite. Such an infinity is known as a singularity.

From the point of view of an observer who is falling into the hole, nothing unusual at all happens at the horizon! The equations tell us that, according to falling clocks, it takes only a short time to fall right through the horizon, and penetrate the interior of the black hole. Only when the falling astronauts tried to get back out into the Universe would they discover that they had been trapped by the black hole's gravity, and were destined to plunge into the singularity at its centre.

The equations that describe the ultimate collapse of an object into a black hole can be reversed, and then describe the expansion of an object out of a singularity sometimes referred to as a "white hole".

These poems should be left intact. Why explain them? Why explain a poem by Pushkin?

What happened to Tolstoy's train? It fell through the horizon and penetrated the interior of the black hole as the fugitive lectured "the whole carriage about pacifism and non-violence". The spacetime curvature became infinite or singular. Tolstoy had *singular* views on politics, art, religion—on everything. But it is tedious and inappropriate to play with words when a great writer's destiny is at stake. He received a letter from one of his staunch partisans: "I cannot put into words the joy it was to me that you went away." He knew that nothing could be put into words except a few maxims, prescriptions and commandments. What did he tell his travelling companions who noted down his remarks, his commentaries on history, on the Creation? "Vengeance is mine and I will repay," "But thine eyes and thine heart *are* not but for thy covetousness, and for to shed innocent blood, and for oppression, and for violence, to do *it*", "For all that *is* in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world."

After spending six hours on the train, he took a cab in the company of his doctor and soon presented himself at the guesthouse of the Optina monastery. Next day he called on his sister at her cell in Shamardino and they decided he should rent a small *izba* in the monastery ground. "In this way," writes Wilson, "he would be able to lead the life of religious seclusion which he had so long craved, while his sister kept an eye on him." But presently Tolstoy found out he was ensnared by the black hole's gravity and was destined to plunge into the singularity at its centre—death. So he tried to get back out into the universe, into the world where he could talk to peasants about Henry George, Christ and the Church that had excommunicated him. "Goodnight," he said to his sister on leaving her cell. "We'll see each other tomorrow." But they never saw each other again. "Life is not a toy, we have no right to throw it aside on a whim," he wrote to his wife. He realised his life had been thrown aside and he did all he could to recapture it. "Life is everywhere and I should grasp it," he said out loud as he

made for the railroad station with his doctor. "But it's not here, I'm afraid," he added thoughtfully. "It must be elsewhere. Where? In the Caucasus or in Bulgaria. There's a Tolstoyan colony in Bulgaria!"

"Within a certain distance from the horizon," said the doctor, "you can't stand still, no matter how powerful the motors on your spaceship are."

"But they *are* powerful, aren't they?" said Tolstoy. "This train goes rather fast. Do you remember what I wrote about the locomotive of history? Now this locomotive is dragging me forward. My will to escape is powerful too."

"We'll never make it to the Caucasus," said the doctor.

"If you would move sideways to the left," said a journalist to the doctor, "I can get everyone in the photograph."

"We'll be driven to the left and to the right, tracing a vicious circle upon the earth," said the doctor.

"But I'm not in the black hole, not yet," answered Tolstoy. "Let's take advantage of it. Let's circle around it as long as we can. Unfortunately I've got a headache and a slight fever."

"By the time you reached Astapovo, excitement among the waiting crowd was at fever pitch," said the journalist, writing down his own words.

"How do you mean? Where's Astapovo and the waiting crowd? Are they waiting for me to die? Why are you talking in the past tense? Have I died already?"

"Let me take your temperature," said the doctor, trying to avoid the word "fever" which might have incited the journalist to drop yet another remark about the crowd and Astapovo. "By the way," he added encouragingly, "the equations that describe the ultimate collapse of an object into a black hole can be reversed."

"A white hole?" inquired Tolstoy.

"Precisely."

The station master at Astapovo accommodated the wayfarers in his own house and, after a few hours of profound sleep, Tolstoy's fever abated. But the people waiting for his return to life at his bedside were so excited that soon the writer's fever scaled new heights. In his delirium he talked of black and white holes into which, presumably, he was falling day and night. "But one doesn't *fall* into a white hole," he said suddenly, raising his head from the pillow. "One moves *upwards*."

"Why not recite a few excerpts from Dante's *Commedia*?" suggested a reporter. "After all, many writers read it on the verge of death."

Accordingly, one of Tolstoy's relatives recited a tercet from Canto XXI of the *Paradiso*:

Noi sem levati al settimo splendore,
  che sotto 'I petto del Leone ardente
  raggia mo misto giù de suo valore.

We have risen to the seventh splendour which beneath the breast of the burning Lion rays down now mingled with its power.

"Why did you set your heart on this particular tercet?" asked the reporter.
"Because of *Leone ardente*," answered the relative.
"Are you alluding to his fever?" asked another reporter.
"To his rays. He is already in Paradise, in its seventh splendour."
"The heaven of Saturn," said a pianist, "is inhabited by those who passed their lives in holy contemplation—Peter Damian, for instance. But Tolstoy wrote *I Cannot Be Silent*. He was neither calm nor contemplative."
"Against his wish, Peter Damian was made a Cardinal," reminded a scholar. "He wasn't *always* silent as a matter of fact. He was a zealous supporter of Pope Leo IX and, in support of his and other popes' efforts to reform Church discipline, he made journeys into France and Germany."
"Hush! Don't mention the Church in my father's presence," said Tanya.
"But Peter Damian was highly critical of the Church," objected the scholar. "The following lines speak volumes of his attitude towards it:

"Poca vita mortal m'era rimasa,
  quando fui chiesto e tratto a quel cappello,
  che pur di male in peggio si travasa."
"Little of mortal life was left to me when I was sought for and dragged to that hat which ever passes down from bad to worse."
(The *Paradiso*, Canto XXI)

"Rising, rising," murmured Tolstoy. "When shall I reach my destination? *Endstation*, *Endstation*. The world is not infinite, is it?"
"Shall we write Psalm 122 on the opposite wall?" said Tanya. "'Jerusalem is builded as a city that is *compact* together.'"
"The world *is* compact," said Tolstoy opening his eyes. "I see the end of it. This wall is the end, the wall opposite. Even Gogol's carriage wouldn't take me beyond it."

CHAPTER 13

Quando noi fummo fatti tanto avante,
  ch'al mio maestro piacque di mostrarmi
  la creatura ch'ebbe il bel sembiante,
d'innanzi mi si tolse e fé restarmi,
  "Ecco Dite," dicendo, "ed ecco il loco
  ove convien che di fortezza t'armi."
When we had gone so far froward that it pleased my master to show me the creature who was once so fair, he took himself from before me and made me stop, saying, "Lo Dis!—and lo the place where you must arm yourself with fortitude."
(The *Inferno*, Canto XXXIV)

In company with Virgil, Dante journeys to the bottom of Hell where the sinners are wholly imprisoned in the ice. At the centre of the earth there stands the monstrous form of Lucifer, half above the ice and half below it. For all the images lavished upon him in the realm of Paradise, Dante does not forget what he saw in Hell in order to relate it with utmost accuracy upon his return to earth. But these images never haunt him as he flies with Beatrice from one heaven to another, talking to saints and former nuns. Lucifer never looms ahead of him to put a screen between the poet's eyes and a dance of the elect; nor does he skulk in the bushes, for there are no bushes within the bounds of the *Paradiso*. Dante's Lucifer does not resemble Satan as described by Milton:

through each thicket dank or dry,
Like a black mist low creeping, he held on
His midnight search, where soonest he might find
The serpent

Imprisoned in the ice at the bottom of Hell, Lucifer cannot enjoy the sensation of freedom experienced by Russian travellers at the end of *Dead Souls*. He is altogether deprived of the right to travel which enables his doppelgänger to wander at will around the universe and eventually reach the gates of Paradise:

and without longer pause
Down right into the world's first region throws
His flight precipitant, and winds with ease
Through the pure marble air his oblique way
Amongst innumerable stars

"Lucifer follows us wherever we go, like a wild animal stalking its prey"—the sentence I found at the top of a leaflet somebody had put in my letterbox. Unfortunately the author switched at once to a more prosaic tone: "Greed, pride, envy, dishonesty and lust are vices" or "Pornographic films are distributed by a vice ring". I threw the leaflet into a wastepaper basket, but the image of Lucifer as a wild animal stalking its prey continued to hover before my eyes as if to screen the pages of the *Paradiso* I was to

comment upon. No one stalks us today except private detectives, I thought. Even wild animals seldom do it, afraid as they are of our rifles and the cages awaiting them in our laboratories. And Lucifer is embedded in the ice which prevents him from impinging on our actions and drives. Of course we wallow in many vices, but we do that on our own, unassisted: we have matured over the last centuries. Only our memory stalks us wherever we go as if to spoil the fun we may derive from the simple and perverse pleasures lying scattered all around us. Stuck within the boundless universe, our memory is deficient; yet we remember a lot—enough to feel a sharp pang of consciousness whenever we are at last on the brink of happiness. Incidentally, I often feel a pang of consciousness with regard to something I have not done. What brings about the pain may moreover belong to other times, which exonerates me from all responsibility for the evil action. I was at once overawed and bewitched by the assassination of Julius Caesar as I read about it in a history book. The numbers of wounds he had received struck my juvenile imagination to such an extent that, whenever a man was killed either on television or in another book, I recalled Julius Caesar, his wounds, his assassins. But I am sure the impression I got when studying the plot against him was in no way comparable to what Dante feels in the presence of Lucifer and the sinners hanging from his mouth:

Com' io divenni allor gelato e fioco,
  nol dimandar, lettor ch'i' non le scrivo,
  però ch'ogne parlar sarebbe poco.
Io non mori' e non rimasi vivo;
  pensa oggimai per te, s'hai fior d'ingegno,
  qual io divenni, d'uno e d'altro privo.
How frozen and faint I then became, ask it not, reader, for I do not write it, because all words would fail. I did not die and I did not remain alive: now think for yourself, if you have any wit, what I became, deprived alike of death and life!

"The last verse of this seventh and last address to the reader in *Inferno* is treated by most commentators as a triviality," says Robert Hollander before passing on to those who regard this amorphous state of the protagonist's mind and body as a turning point. Durling and Martinez interpret it as follows: "This moment is the culmination of the penitential imitation of Christ in the descent into hell, symbolically the pilgrim's death to sin, that is, the death of the 'old man', leading to the reversal of direction from descent to ascent."

Lucifer's jaws mangle the spirits of Judas, Brutus and Cassius who will never succeed in curbing his appetite, although they are not as vicious as their successors: Lenin, Stalin and Hitler betrayed not one person, however godlike, but the whole of humankind. Brutus—and, to a lesser degree, Cassius—has been vindicated and even applauded by many people, scholars and laymen alike. Even Judas counts a lot of defenders who justify his deed by quoting the Scriptures where the inevitability of Christ's betrayal is emphasised in many verses. Some of these apologists go so far as to make a martyr of him, saying he was officially and mercilessly designated as a perpetrator of the deed he abhorred so much

that, after kissing the Saviour, he committed suicide. Of course he could not have done otherwise on account of the text that was to remain unaltered. Here is an excerpt from a contemporary play by John Wiltmore:

JUDAS: My Lord and friend! Can't you put in a word for me?

JESUS: You know as well as I do that nothing ever interferes with my Father's plans.

JUDAS: Why have *I* been chosen of all people? What have I done? Is my kiss poisonous? Do I look like a traitor?

JESUS: They'll make you look like a traitor, I'm afraid.

JUDAS: Who? All these painters and sculptors? Can't they see I look like an honest man? Will they disfigure me retrospectively, influenced by the betrayal I abhor with every fibre of my being?

JESUS: You'll get used to it in the long run.

JUDAS: Never, never!

JESUS: You'll have to do it again and again in your mind—there's no escape, if you want to continue the course. Actually you've dropped behind your schoolwork because you often have nervous breakdowns.

JUDAS: My teacher! I doubt my own sanity!

JESUS: You'll have to keep your wits about you on D-day. And don't forget that our dialogue shouldn't degenerate into a game of wits between two Pharisees.

The dialogue ends on Judas coming to terms with his own destiny. "Drop me a line when you've decided on a date," he says resignedly. A good specimen of post-modern art. Is it too playful to become a part of this commentary where I usually give a free rein to my imagination? Dante is never playful and moreover he does not dare put any word into Christ's mouth, unwilling to supply the world with yet another apocrypha. But he often distorts the historical truth to fit philosophers and saints into the context of his work where they are forced to say what they would never have said in real life. For instance, in Canto X of the *Paradiso*, Thomas Aquinas bestows praise on Siger de Brabant whose doctrines he combated and refuted in his lifetime. Étienne Gilson thinks that St Thomas left a portion of himself on the threshold of Paradise because Dante, without adopting the thesis of double truth, needed to separate philosophy and theology, which was done to the detriment of St Thomas' right to represent the Dominican wisdom.

"essa è la luce etterna di Sigieri,
  che, leggendo nel Vico de li Strami
  silogizzò invidiosi veri."
"It is the eternal light of Siger who, lecturing in Straw Street, demonstrated invidious truths."

Whenever it suits his purpose, Dante avails himself of poetical license to harmonise the different approaches into a unified strategy.

At the age of thirteen I saw a documentary on Hitler's concentration camps. A turning point in my life; the reversal of direction from ascent to descent. The same happened when I read *Gulag Archipelago* for the first time.

I recall one episode in particular. A few prisoners are ordered to dress up and follow the guardians who promise to guide them to a sanatorium where they will be taken care of. The guardians do not really *promise* anything, but their behaviour suggests a paradise on earth. The victims embark on a journey to the Unknown where the longed-for repose awaits them without fail. There are no shadows on the snow that innocently stretches in front of them as if greeting their footsteps; there are no shadows on the snow except their own shadows and those of the guards. Nothing foreshadows their imminent death. They take no notice of another whiteness standing out against the sky and the snow. What whiteness is it? They do not ask themselves anything because they are happy to follow their guides who are sure to bring them to Paradise after traversing a purgatory of sorts. In Canto IX of the *Purgatorio*, Dante dreams that he is carried up by an eagle into the sphere of fire. Upon awakening, he finds himself with Virgil just below Purgatory, the gate of which is guarded by an angel sitting on the topmost of three steps, each differently coloured. Dante goes up to the gate and humbly craves admission. The angel inscribes the letter P (symbol of the seven deadly sins) seven times on his forehead. As Dante makes his way towards Paradise these letters are effaced by the emissaries of God from Dante's life. That is how the inhabitants of the Gulag feel as they press their shoes into the snow: the symbols of their crimes are being removed.

Guidavaci una voce che cantava
  di là; e noi, attenti pur a lei,
  venimmo fuor là ove si montava.
"Venite, benedicti Patris mei,"
  sonò dentro a un lume che lì era,
  tal che mi vinse e guardar nol potei.

A voice was guiding us, which was singing on the other side; and we, ever attentive to it, came forth where the ascent began. "Venite, benedicti Patris mei," sounded from within a light that was there, such that it overcame me and I could not look on it.

By means of a post-modern quirk, *Patris mei* becomes *ma patrie*, my motherland, *moya rodina*. Their motherland had absolved them of all their sins. (Once again, words and the games they give rise to are out of tune, out of place, out of context.) The victims never made out what whiteness was superimposed on the snow and the sky: one second does not allow you to identify your murderers. But you may realise you will die in a second.

The major on whose orders the operation had been carried out congratulated his subordinates and said to them with a smile, "You've done very well. However, there's an ample room for improvement. You just *suggested* to the prisoners you'd take them to a sanatorium. Your looks and gestures hinted at such a possibility. Next time you must tell them in plain Russian, 'We're taking you to a sanatorium. Stalin

is dead and our country has thrown off the communist yoke. You're free citizens now. So we'll take you to a sanatorium. Of course you may return home at once, but we don't want your relatives and colleagues to see you in such a state. We'll take you to a sanatorium first to set you back on your feet.' 'Can't we go to the sanatorium by ourselves?' they'll ask you. They're still afraid of you despite the freedom you've promised them. 'Do we really need so many guards to reach the sanatorium safely? Who on earth could maltreat us on the way?' You should answer, 'There's a civil war in Russia because many people are clinging to the outworn ideals. The number of indecent assaults has increased alarmingly over the last fortnight.' They'll look at you with astonishment and ask, 'Would they harass us *sexually*?' You should answer, 'There have been some cases of sexual harassment against women *and* men on the road leading to the sanatorium.'"

The major is likely to develop his ideas for quite a long time. Two days later a group of prisoners leaves the camp and heads for the sanatorium. At their guards' suggestion the former victims of communism burst into triumphant song, but as they lapse into silence a song reaches them from a distance. No choir is to be seen on the snowy plain across which they are marching towards their freedom and the sanatorium where a great many doctors will nurse and pamper them with dainty dishes and oil-scented baths. Suddenly they notice a few white-dressed human figures running around as if engaged in a vertiginous dance.

"Who are these men?" they ask their guards.

"You're already in Paradise," answers the guard nicknamed "a scholar" by his pals. "Haven't you read Dante's masterpiece? You're highbrows after all. Only intellectuals were put in our camp."

"Why do they carry burning torches in broad daylight?" ask the victims.

By way of an answer, the guard quotes these lines from Canto XIV of the *Paradiso*:

"Di corno in corno e tra la cima e l'basso
  i movien lumi, scintillando forte
  nel congiugnersi insieme e nel trapasso
"From horn to horn and between the top and the base, lights were moving that sparkled brightly as they met and passed…

"These lights," he explains "move around the image of the Cross. '*Corno*' or 'horn' means an arm of the Cross. Given the military context, '*corno*' can also designate the 'flank' of an army. And these soldiers sing to match another description from the same canto:

"E come giga e arpa, in tempra tesa
  di molte corde, fa dolce tintinno
  a tal da cui la nota non è intesa,
così da' lumi che lì m'apparinno
  s'accogliea per la croce una melode"
"And so viol and harp, strung with many cords in harmony, chime sweetly for one who does not catch the tune, so from the lights that appeared to me there a melody gathered around the cross..."

Stalin was keen to play games with his opponents who always permitted him to demote them to the status of his victims: they thought it was better to be alive and tortured than to die in a concentration camp. He tortured them in their own apartments where they had to be on their guard so as not to fall into his traps. Their telephones were tapped; they talked to their friends and relatives in their bathrooms, after turning on all the taps. But their taps were tapped too: Stalin was present even in their bathrooms as if playing the part of a voyeur bent on seeing naked bodies performing their daily ablutions. They would take refuge in the woods where a number of men in plain clothes were hiding behind trees and bushes. In their endeavour to grow invisible those men ended up identifying with bushes and trees so that even now one can hear their shouts when accidentally breaking a twig.

Lenin was like those children portrayed in the movie *Village of the Damned* as the representatives of a new human race beamed down to earth from a distant planet. One of them says to George Sanders, "If you didn't suffer from emotions, from feelings, you could be as powerful as we are. You'll never reach our minds." Lenin's mind was covered with the snow across which a myriad of men and women marched round the clock, hoping to land up in a paradise on earth: even a paradise of sorts is better than Purgatory, let alone Hell. Lenin shed tears only in theatres and opera houses—during a performance of *La Traviata*, for instance. He was aware he could not kill a *Theaterstück* and so allowed himself on those occasions to adopt a *human* attitude towards life and death.

And Hitler was obnoxious enough to contravene the rules of the game played by tyrants and megalomaniac sadists: like Nozdrev from *Dead Souls* he swept all the pieces from a chessboard lying in front of him and, until his suicide, played a game unknown to humanity.

The tyrants about whom we read in history books are more or less alike. If subjected to quality control, they would reveal the same flaws: megalomania, cruelty, sadism, a total disregard for other people's emotions, persecution mania, ambitions. But the quantity of their crimes varies in accordance with the number of potential victims they have at their disposal. And quantity counts in these matters. The criminals I would stuff in between Lucifer's teeth operated on a larger scale than any of their predecessors; their crimes were of a different quality, making them stand out against the background of history. I am appalled whenever I light upon a word or an image that reminds me of what they have done in defiance of human nature.

"But human nature is evil anyway," said a woman I might have fallen in love with, had she been taller and warmer.

"Lenin, Stalin and Hitler debased its value," I objected.

"It looks as if human nature could be bought in a supermarket." She smiled ironically.

"Suppose human nature cost twenty pounds in the nineteenth century," I said. "Now it costs only two pounds."

"I'm still prepared to buy it." She smiled again. Was it the same smile? I did not look at her when talking.

"It costs only two *roubbles*," I said. "It's a different nature now. And the nature of its nature is different as well."

"I'm still prepared to buy it," she said. "I can always change pounds for roubbles."

Let us analyse once again the following tercet from Canto I of the *Paradiso*:

Trasumanar significar *per verba*
non si poria; però l'essemplo basti
a cui esperïenza grazia serba.
The passing beyond humanity may not be set forth in words: therefore let the example suffice any for whom grace reserves that experience.

Lenin, Stalin and Hitler passed beyond humanity and their deeds have been set forth in words many times, both realistically and poetically. And I have added a finishing touch to the substantial body of evidence by putting these extraterrestrials in Lucifer's mouth. A *finishing* touch? I hope nobody will ever finish them off *completely*: every generation should torture them in their own way, adopting the modus operandi suggested by Lodovico:

for this slave,
If there be any cunning cruelty,
That can torment him much, and hold him long,
It shall be his

After all, the honest men I am speaking about told many lies to the whole of humanity instead of limiting the scope of their machinations to one person only. Of course Jago's repellent scheme, though centred upon the Moor, implicated other people as well, but the magnitude of his task was in no way comparable to the security and military operations carried out by Hitler, Lenin and Stalin.

Rus! Tell me what you want of me! What is the strange bond secretly uniting us? Why do you look at me thus, and why has everything you contain turned upon me eyes full of expectancy? And while I stand thus, sorely perplexed and quite still, lo, a threatening cloud heavy with future rains comes over my head and my mind is mute before the greatness of your expanse. What does this unlimited space portend? And since you are without end yourself, is it not within you that a boundless thought will be born?
(*Dead Souls*)

Let us compare Gogol's space with what Dante sees at the end of *his* hell as he follows his guide, heading for the "bright world" (*chiaro mondo*):

salimmo sù, el primo e io secondo,
tanto ch'i' vidi de le cose belle

che porta 'l ciel, per un pertugio tondo.
E quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle.
...we climbed up, he first and I second, so far that through a round opening I saw some of the beautiful things that Heaven bears; and thence we issued forth to see again the stars.

I have already quoted these lines in Chapter 3 of the present commentary. Do I hope to wrench my soul from Hell by repeating Dante's departure? Sometimes repetition does the trick, according to those who believe in magic and witchcraft. Anyway I have already tried every trick in the book to wrench myself free and still no luck!

But let us concentrate on the word "boundless" used by Gogol in connection with the panorama that unfolds before his *own* eyes: at this point of the narrative he usurps Chichikov's place in the *britzka* zooming across the Russian countryside. Even in those days Russia was not boundless, although her frontiers extended far beyond the territory allotted to her now. Of course any space seems to be boundless if you do not attempt to measure it up. Nevertheless you are quite aware that no space on earth is infinite, for every planet, however bulky, has boundaries which enable it to fly through the universe without getting stuck anywhere. So the panorama around which Nikolay Gogol's eyes wander in amazement is not boundless; whereas the starry sky saluting Dante as he comes out of Lucifer's abode has no limits whatsoever. Yet Dante's universe is *not* infinite; neither are his thoughts that never overshoot the mark, being focused upon God and Beatrice. And Gogol looks for a boundless thought immediately getting beyond whatever it attempts to grasp: his digressions are eloquent proof of the idea I am eager to convey.

"Colui che volse il sesto
a lo stremo de mondo, e dentro ad esso
distinse tanto occulto e manifesto,
non poté suo valor sì fare impresso
in tutto l'universo, che 'l suo verbo
non rimanesse in infinito eccesso."
"He that turned His compass round the limit of the world, and within it marked out so much both hidden and revealed, could not so imprint His power on all the universe that His word should not remain in infinite excess."
(The *Paradiso*, Canto XIX)

In this excerpt Dante speaks about a closed world which does not have enough room for the infinity of information one might receive from God. This first-hand information might have exploded the world, if showered upon it with the generosity attributed to God by Thomas Aquinas and other medieval philosophers. What simile could have been used by Dante on this occasion? "Like a river that overflows its banks because of heavy rain..." In our infinite world, however, any amount of information can be stored for the sake of scholars and seekers of truth. Does God continue to feed the Book of Life into this universe of ours or was it done on the last day of the Creation? Suppose we already have within our reach all the enigmas we probe into with obstinacy and patience. Are they

really within our reach or do we have to undertake a long journey with a view to exploring distant galaxies? Every nook and cranny of the universe must be stuffed with the scraps of knowledge we have been searching for since Adam's expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Do we need Gogol's carriage for such a journey or does the train immortalised by Tolstoy suit our purpose better, more efficiently?

Dunque vostra veduta, che convene
  essere alcun de' raggi de la mente
  di che tutte le cose son ripiene,
non pò da sua natura esser possente
  tanto, che suo principio non discerna
  molto di là da quel che l'è parvente.
Thus your vision, which must needs be one of the rays of the Mind with which all things are replete, cannot of its own nature be of such power that it should not perceive its origin to be far beyond all that is apparent to it.
(The *Paradiso*, Canto XIX)

"Our intelligence," comments Singleton, "a product of the intelligence of God, has just power enough to understand how far beyond the range of its comprehension its divine Source lies." Well and good. I realise how far beyond the range of my intellect the knowledge I am hankering after is to be found. What am I supposed to do under the circumstances? Should I lie down and lull myself to sleep by singing a lullaby or rather by humming it? And what if I do not get a wink of sleep for many hours? Whenever I spend a sleepless night my thoughts do their best to penetrate beyond their own frontiers. That is how the mind works: our thoughts provoke each other into being. A train of thought is on the move only because the amount of information contained in one thought can neither kill time nor indeed enable us to survive in a world inhabited by creatures whose physical strength far exceeds our own. Even a Samson-like individual would not overpower *some* beasts prowling in our jungles, let alone dinosaurs and other giants of yore. Every thought of ours encroaches upon the Unknown and partly conquers it, spurred on by idle curiosity, instinct for self-preservation and thirst for authentic knowledge.

What does our mental life sound like? It is by no means an interior monologue one could hear inside one's mind, if equipped with an appropriate hearing aid: a choir resounds in it day and night.

"What are you driving at?"

"I'm not driving at anything. I just wanted you to come into existence."

"But what am I supposed to do?"

"Get a move on!"

"Why should I move? I'm tired."

"Already?"

"Anyway I'll never get beyond that brick wall over there."

"Others will get beyond it on condition that you're zealous enough to give them birth."

"But I'm not a woman. I'm a *male* thought. I can't give birth to anything except another thought striving for Absolute Knowledge."

"That's what I'm asking you to do—just give birth to another thought."

"What for?"

"To get beyond the brick wall."

"But there are other brick walls beyond that one. Let me put it differently, in verse:

"Però ne la giustizia sempiterna
la vista che riceve il vostro mondo,
com' occhio per lo mare, entro s'interna;
che, ben che da la proda veggia il fondo,
in pelago nol vede; e nondimeno
èli, ma cela lui l'esser profondo.
"Therefore the sight that is granted to your world penetrates within the Eternal Justice as the eye into the sea; which, though from the shore it can see the bottom, in the open sea it sees it not, and none the less it is there, but the depth conceals it."

"How come you know Canto XIX of the *Paradiso*? Did you study it in your former life?"

"I learnt it from my predecessors."

And all these thoughts sound almost simultaneously. Some of them do not really *sound*, in point of fact; they whisper as if to let us in on a secret that other thoughts are forbidden to know. And other thoughts keep *you* in the dark about the information they share with their colleagues. "It's rude to whisper!" you say to them, but the only answer you get is a hypocritical smile.

Some thoughts do not sound at all; the silence in your brain is broken only by the whisper of leaves in a gentle breeze. But you are conscious of the leaves and of the breeze that moves them and so immediately start working on this meagre data.

Some thoughts just crawl across your brain; their presence is revealed to you through their bodies brushing against your skull as they head for an object you know nothing about.

How would a scientist comment on the above excerpt from the *Commedia*? "Dante's simile should be updated. It is true that, until recently, only very crude data about the depths of seawater and the character of the sea bottom were available. The British 'Challenger' expedition from 1872 to 1886 offered us a few samples from the ocean bottom, but no significant conclusions could be drawn from them. The development of echo-sounding devices in the early 1920s showed, for the first time, the actual irregularities of the seabed. Only since World War II has enough information been gathered to provide reliable ocean-floor maps."

And here is a relevant quote from the Encyclopaedia Britannica:

Seismic methods are among the most useful for determining the structure and thickness of the earth's crust beneath the sea. These involve the measurement of the rate of propagation of sonic energy from an artificial source to a series of hydrophones (pressure detector) suspended from buoys or enclosed in

cables. The measurements are made at depths below the influence of wave action and as far as possible from ship noise. The development of underwater sparking and similar devices as controlled sound sources has led to the use of continuous seismic-reflection techniques for rapid mapping of the ocean floor.

How to *update* Dante's simile? Why did he talk about the sea and its depth when dealing with the infinite wisdom of God? He was aware that the open sea (*pelago*) had a bottom that could have been investigated in his day and age, but for the lack of appropriate instruments. Leonardo would not have committed such a stylistic error. Of course Dante speaks of human eyesight which is not acute enough to reach the bottom of the open sea unless assisted in this task by tools unknown in the fourteenth century. But even in the Stone Age the human body was extended and made stronger by means of stones our forefathers must have manipulated with the utmost dexterity.
How to update Dante's simile? Actually he updated it himself in Canto XXII where he speaks about a ladder soaring so far into the sky that one cannot see its upper part. It is as if three centuries were lying in between Canto XIX and Canto XXII, gradually adjusting the poem to the infinity of the universe. But then we are given to understand that through God's grace one *can* scrutinise the upper part in spite of its remoteness.

Infin là sù la vide il patriarca
  Iacobbe porger la superna parte,
  quando li apparve d'angeli sì carca.
All the way thither the patriarch Jacob saw it stretch its upper part, when it appeared to him so laden with Angels.

So the universe is finite after all. The scientific progress comes to naught in a twinkling of an eye: the verse where Dante draws our attention to the disappearance of the upper part—*onde così dal viso ti s'invola* (wherefore it steals itself from your sight (69)—is followed by the above tercet (70-72).
The only way to update Dante's simile is to leave it untouched; the data we have accumulated over the six intervening centuries come under the head of frivolous knowledge that does not further our progress towards the ultimate end. "These things, which are ordered to the ultimate end are called serious, because useful," writes St Thomas. "But the frivolous is distinguished from the serious. Therefore, the things that a man frivolously does are not ordered to the ultimate end." So we are still unable to find out what treasures have been hidden at the bottom of the sea. Our eyes are still naked and the sun blinds them notwithstanding sunglasses we can purchase at ski resorts. Dante is armed neither with a pair of sunglasses nor with a telescope; and yet, by the end of his journey, he grows accustomed to the light one might see in Paradise and is moreover privileged to visit the celestial bodies and even pass through them—the feat no human is likely to accomplish for another three centuries at least. And I doubt if a human body will ever traverse the interior of the sun.

In my eagerness to update the *Commedia* I seem to adopt Tolstoy's point of view: by the end of *his* journey he played down the importance of speculative science and, along with Gogol, was suspicious of literature and art in general. Compared with these giants of Russian literature, St Thomas was rather broadminded, for he allowed us not only to pay attention to natural phenomena but also to indulge in playful actions:

> Ad 1. It should be said that playful actions are not ordered to any extrinsic end, but are ordered to the good of the player himself insofar as they delight or afford rest. But the fulfilled good of man is his ultimate end.
> Ad 2. It should be said, concerning speculative science which is sought as the good of the knower, that it is comprehended in the complete and perfect good, which is the ultimate end.
> Ad 3. It should be said that one need not always think of the ultimate end whenever he desires or does something, but the force of the first intention, which looks to the ultimate end, remains in the desire of anything whatsoever, even if the ultimate end is not actually thought of. No more does one who is on a journey have to think at every step of his destination.

Let us analyse this excerpt from the *Summa theologiae* by means of a story which, among other things, includes my trip to Switzerland last summer. A friend of mine, a Japanese lady, came to Paris at the end of July and we drove together to Geneva where she was awaited by the Japanese ambassador's wife. I also spent a few hours at their residence situated in a sumptuous garden overlooking Lake Geneva. The next morning I was to resume my journey in order to reach a hotel where I intended to take extensive walks up hill and down dale and relish the harmony of cowbells from the balcony of my room. Prior to my departure I had a talk with my friend who told me about the butler working in the residence. Actually I did not really have time to talk to anyone that morning because I was determined to get to the hotel before lunchtime; but I was captivated by the story that I adorned with a few vignettes, making it sound like one of Gogol's digressions. The butler was in a class of his own: contrary to Japanese traditions, he had no respect for hierarchy so that it looked as if the ambassador was the butler and vice versa. A confirmed teetotaller, the head of the Japanese diplomatic corps was not sufficiently versed in oenology while his servant, having lived in France for more than a decade, could pass himself off as a wine connoisseur. On many occasions he embarrassed everyone by pointing out that the wines chosen for dinners at the residence were not up to diplomatic standards. He went so far as to tell the ambassador during a reception, "It's a pity you're so tight-fisted."

"It's a pity the butler isn't tight-lipped," I said. "Why don't they kick him out?"

"They can't—he’s very important," she said, raising her index finger. Her gesture reminded me of the photograph I saw on the cover of Brian Boyd's biography of Nabokov (Volume Two, *The American Years*). Another digression, another outburst of playfulness. But even our discussion was not ordered to any extrinsic end. Incidentally, I think that Nabokov's photograph was conjured up by the proximity of Montreux.

"More important than the ambassador and the code of behaviour?" I asked.

"He knows the residence inside out. And also Switzerland. And Europe."

"That"s why everything is upside down at the Embassy, I suppose."

As if looking at myself in a Nabokovian mirror, I played with words, getting further and further from my ultimate end that was situated three hundred kilometres away from Geneva. Unable to pursue my *ultimate* end, I seem to have divided my life into many ends which, in their turn, give rise to other odds and ends so that I often embroil myself in a meaningless, barren situation. And I am not sure that such situations are ordered to my own good, although they may be delightful and offer a sort of respite in between two *meaningful* situations.

So I continued to talk to my friend about the impertinent butler and his victims. "Besides," she said, "he's reputed to rob the people he doesn't like. My friends are afraid he might steal the valuable objects they brought from Japan."

"So he's a thief into the bargain."

"A methodical thief at that. Apparently he steals something every fortnight, if he thinks you maltreat him. The former ambassador used to ask him not to steal this or that object."

"Yes," I chimed in. "'Don't touch the tea set my mother offered me when I graduated from the University of Tokyo —I beg of you. Actually this set is the only gift of my mother's I've got in my possession.' They should draw up a schedule for the next six months. 'You can steal this bowl on the 4th of December, if you feel like it. Please don't steal anything over the Twelve Days of Christmas.'"

"You're right," said my friend, putting her cup down. "It's unpleasant to bid farewell to the things you love while dancing around the Christmas tree."

"In such a predicament you must resort to very formal language," I said.

"The well-mannered Japanese argue in formal language," she acquiesced.

"But is the butler well-mannered?" I asked.

"He is," she answered. "And he uses very formal language."

"I'll miss this vase a lot." This time I did my best to imitate the Ambassador's wife.

"You can come and see it at my place." My friend imitated the butler. "But please don't come too often!"

"They should draw up another schedule." I helped myself to another piece of toast. "The butter…sorry, the butler must have a huge collection of stolen objects by now. How long has he been in service?"

"More than thirty years. In France and in Switzerland. But I'm afraid we can't visit his museum."

"What a shame! Shall we nail a plaque on his door? Visiting hours between 10.00 and 12.00 p.m."

We talked for another hour and then I took her to Montreux where she photographed Nabokov's statue that used to embellish the lobby of the Montreux Palace and was standing now in a small garden opposite. Of course she asked me to "join the great Russian writer" and I approached one of his legs.

"He's rather an American writer," I told her. "Do you know that the whole body of his works was translated into French from the English versions?"

"But some of his novels were written in Russian," she said.

"His translators were asked to use exclusively the English versions. I don't mind, actually. Why should I? After all, I write in English myself. What I do mind however is the way he treats Gogol's conversion and his preoccupation with live souls. He says that a writer's duty is to carry out his work, no questions asked. But even in the nineteenth century many writers questioned their colleagues, themselves and the Almighty about the very nature of their art and the mission they had to fulfil on earth. Like Dante, some of them travelled through Hell and Paradise, from the spheres of which they could contemplate the earth, our small, insignificant planet. But they knew they lived on it and wrote for earthlings. So, understandably enough, they kept wondering what they had to write about."

That is how I rounded off my speech, reluctant as I was to go into details, which might have delayed my departure for an hour or two. Here is the passage I had in mind as I stood by Nabokov's statue in Montreux:

> Apart from the special character of Gogol's case, the general delusion into which he had lapsed was of course disastrous. A writer is lost when he grows interested in such questions as "what is art?" and "what is an art's duty?" Gogol decided that the purpose of literary art was to cure ailing souls by producing in them a sense of harmony and peace. The treatment was also to include a strong dose of didactic medicine. He proposed to portray national defects and national virtues in such a manner as to help readers to persevere in the latter and rid themselves of the former. At the beginning of his work on the sequel his intention was to make his characters not "wholly virtuous", but "more important" than those of Part One.

I have already quoted the first part of this passage in Chapter 5. Quoting, writing, re-writing, revamping. Scientists have found that the saliva of the vampire bat prevents congealing of the blood and is effective in dissolving blood clots in humans. This work in progress is responsible for the high blood pressure I suffer from after another bout of inspiration: modern vampires do not *suck* your blood. What am *I* doing it for? I portray neither national defects nor anybody's virtues. And even the Gogolian hell is out of my reach because it must have existed only in *his* imagination. Is it not better to do something useful instead? Playing the piano, for instance? For whom do I write all this trash? What do my readers learn from my essays, novels and poems? Do they have to *learn* anything? Or is it enough to entertain them? At least my entertainment includes a modest dose of "didactic medicine", as Nabokov puts it. Is it entertainment I offer them or treatment, spiritual treatment? Do they need any treatment except the one provided by their doctors, their psychoanalysts? After all, even St Thomas did not disapprove of the delights divorced from the ultimate end. Can I teach them what the ultimate end is about? Do I know it myself? Should I urge them to read St Thomas? They will not read him; nor will they read the *Commedia*, I'm afraid. But they might read my stuff if I told them a nice story. Even Nabokov said, "What counts first and foremost is an excellent story"—or something to this effect. And yet he was a sophisticated writer who went so far as to tackle the problem of Time in one of his late novels.

Well, I myself have undergone this question-and-answer treatment on account of my incapacity to write just a story adorned with a few stylistic flourishes. I cannot even recount the story of my trip to Montreux without veering off to a sort of desert island where I can deal unhurriedly with the issues I raised in the previous paragraph. Am I lost as a writer because I have grown interested in the lining of Gogol's overcoat and the interior of Dante's planets? Didn't the poet whose masterpiece I comment upon ever ask himself the question "what is an artist's duty"? The live souls he encounters in the course of his journey ask or even implore him to talk about them to their relatives and former fellow citizens. Do they want him to convey to the quick the deformity of Hell and the beauty of Paradise? Or are they eager to teach humankind a moral lesson, to cure "ailing souls by producing in them a sense of harmony and peace"?

In Canto XVII, Cacciaguida says before bidding farewell to his descendant:

"Conscienza fusca
o de la propria o de l'altrui vergogna
pur sentirà la tua parola brusca.
Ma nondimen, rimossa ogne menzogna,
tutta tua visïon fa manifesta;
e lascia pur grattar dov'è la rogna."

"A conscience dark, either with its own or with another's shame, will indeed feel your speech to be harsh. But none the less, all falsehood set aside, make manifest all that you have seen; and then let them scratch where the itch is."

Indeed, Dante might have made his ancestor quote Nabokov, had he been writing the *Commedia* in modern English and in prose: "You should portray national defects and national virtues in such a manner as to help readers to persevere in the latter and rid themselves of the former." A dark conscience does not feel anything in a picture gallery where there is nothing but beautiful landscapes. The picture of an evil man, however, may elicit a response from it akin to the horror felt by Dorian Gray whenever he had enough courage to face his doppelgänger. Dante depicted a lot of evil men and women; and his ancestor enjoined him not to hide them in an attic.

Did Dante lapse into "the general delusion"? Let us not forget that, in addition to his urge to teach humanity a moral lesson, he was also careful to exclude from his company *unimportant* people, barring them from the *Commedia*:

"Questo tuo grido farà come vento,
che le più alte cime più percuote;
E ciò non fa d'onor poco argomento.
Però ti son mostrate in queste rote,
nel monte e ne la valle dolorosa
pur l'anime che son di fama note,
che l'animo di quel ch'ode, non posa
né ferma fede per essempro ch'aia
la sua radice incognita e ascosa,

né per altro argomento che non paia."
"This cry of yours shall do as does the wind, which smites most upon the loftiest summits; and this shall be no little cause of honour. Therefore only the souls known of fame have been shown to you within these wheels, upon the mountain, and in the woeful valley; for the mind of him who hears rests not nor confirms its faith by an example that has its roots unknown or hidden, nor for other proof that is not manifest."

CHAPTER 14

"Cacciaguida's assertion here cannot be taken as literally true," writes Singleton, "for every reader will recall the many humble, unknown characters encountered in Hell and elsewhere. One has only to think of the riffraff, generally, of the Eighth Circle of *Inferno*." We are likely to appreciate the important people in Paradise all the more after meeting the riffraff of the Seventh and the Eighth Circles. In Canto XVII of the *Inferno*, where the Usurers are punished in the burning sand, Dante sees a bunch of Gogolian characters from whose necks hang pouches with coats of arms on them. One pouch has the form and bearing of a lion; another displays a goose whiter than butter.

E un che d'une scrofa azzura e grossa
  segnato avea lo suo sacchetto bianco,
  mi disse: "Che fai tu in questa fossa?"
And one, who had his white wallet marked with an azure and gravid sow, said to me, "What are you doing in this ditch?"

The sinners whom Dante does not recognise feast their eyes on the pouches as if hoping to prosper in the Seventh Circle by means of their former wealth. Some of Gogol's characters are so tight-fisted they seem to bear their savings fastened to their bodies to protect them from robbers and spongers. Gogol was rather keen on sows and pigs: in *The Overcoat*, full-grown young pigs are said to turn up in private houses.

  di qua, di là soccorrien con le mani
  quando a' vapori, e quando al caldo suolo
With their hands they defended themselves, now here, now there, sometimes from the flames, sometimes from the burning ground.

In Gogol's works we often see a hand trying to wave away now a sponger, now an insult, even though the man or woman in question does not move at all. The hero of *The Overcoat* endures real torture in his office where his fellow clerks make fun of him, inquiring when he would marry his landlady who, according to them, beat him rather often. Such verbal expressions of their scorn do not elicit any reaction from him; but when they start prodding him in the arm and thus spoil a new sample of his calligraphy he says, "Leave me in peace! Why are you hurting me?"

Even in this short story Gogol showers upon us a lot of irrelevant details that obstruct our way and almost prevent us from realising "one simple thing", writes Nabokov. "A piece of most important information, the main structural idea of the story is here deliberately masked by Gogol (because all reality is a mask)." In the *Commedia* there are no irrelevant details because Dante has no intention of putting masks either on his structural ideas or on his characters whose identities may be concealed only through the vestiges of tortures and the insignia of beatitude. Of course our attitude towards

Gogol's characters depends on the overall tendency of his output where masks are far more numerous than real faces. And often we mistake real faces for masks, although Gogol warns us against this bias in the epigraph to *The Government Inspector*: "Do not chafe at the looking glass if your mug is awry." So those faces or mugs are *not* distorted by mirrors, as might have been presumed: they are as real as our own face which, after reading *The Overcoat* or *Dead Souls*, we might instinctively touch to find out if there is no mask on it. The chapter devoted to *The Overcoat* in Nabokov's *Nikolay Gogol* bears the title *The Apotheosis of a Mask*. Why do we associate Gogol's prose with masks? Because a mask can lose a nose rather easily, like the protagonist of *The Nose*; a human loses his or her nose only as a result of a devastating disease or a grievous accident.

Qui distorse la bocca e di fuor trasse
la lingua, come bue che 'l naso lecchi.
Then he twisted his mouth and stuck out his tongue, like an ox that licks its nose.

When engrossed in Gogol's style, we might put the above verses in *The Apotheosis of a Mask*; and yet the face Dante stares at in Canto XVII of the *Inferno* is more real than the faces we encounter in everyday life. "This grotesque gesture of derision and scorn," writes Singleton, "is directed, not at the wayfarer, but at the Florentine usurers now in Hell…The gesture is known in Italian as *fare le boccacce*." And Singleton quotes Isaiah 57:4: "Upon whom have you jested? Upon whom have you opened your mouth wide and put out your tongue?" These questions echo the words uttered by the mayor in *The Government Inspector*: "At whom do you laugh? At yourselves." So why don't we take Gogol's characters for what they are—real men and women? Why don't we take them *seriously*? Why do we believe they are masks beyond which there is nothing of interest except some black holes like the ones disclosed in *The Apotheosis of a Mask*: "Gogol's *The Overcoat* is a grotesque and grim nightmare making black holes in the dim pattern of life"? Gogol might have been appalled by this description of his masterpiece because he did not think of his works in terms of holes; or rather, he did all he could to darn those holes in the manner of the tailor to whom the hero of *The Overcoat*—"his name was Bashmachkin"—takes his precious piece of clothing whenever it is in need of repair. And it is always in need of repair. Patiently he restores the dead overcoat to life by darning its holes, by securing two pieces together with a couple of stitches.

The last years of Gogol's life could be described by the word "stitches" used in different contexts. *Dead Souls*. He tried to secure the heterogeneous pieces of Part Two with many stitches that failed however to harmonise his baddies and goodies. So he had to unpick the stitches and start again. Actually this kind of discomfiture happened more and more often as he approached the end of his work in progress entitled *Purgatory*. (The Third Part of *Dead Souls* was to represent Paradise.) And whenever he dropped a stitch he thought that God had forsaken him—at least in the domain of literature. His overriding aim in later life was to offer Russia and humanity a brand new overcoat. Like

Bashmachkin, who went on a diet for the sake of *his* future acquisition, he would fast for religious and literary reasons: with the aid of this and other rites he hoped to complete his work. What was to be done? He had to continue his pilgrimage through Purgatory at the end of which no woman awaited him. And what about Russia? Didn't *she* await him at the gates of Paradise, prepared to travel with him across it? As a matter of fact, Russia did await him or rather the sequel to *Dead Souls*—in Hell.

Gogol was aware that his characters needed a sort of background to become fully real and remove their so-called masks. And the only way to surround them with three-dimensional space was to annex the territory of Paradise in addition to that of Purgatory. "The prose of Pushkin is three-dimensional," writes Nabokov; "that of Gogol is four-dimensional, at least. He may be compared to his contemporary, the mathematician Lobachevski, who blasted Euclid and discovered a century ago many of the theories which Einstein later developed." But Gogol had no wish to be compared to Lobachevski or to Riemann for that matter: Euclidean geometry suited his purpose far more conveniently. He was reluctant to contort space, making his heroes' mugs look awry, because he had realised that the fourth dimension might reduce the world to one dimension only—the flatness of a mask. Alas, he was unable to accomplish Euclidean (and Ptolemaic) simplicity and even failed to substitute human faces for those mugs that are still reflected in the same looking glass.

Dante did just the opposite: he substituted mugs for many faces by removing masks, by unveiling the souls of the sinners he tortured to his heart's content. In Canto XIX of the *Inferno* he is forced to remove a mask from his own face so as not to assume the identity of a sinner. The third chasm features the Simonists who are stuck in holes, head downwards. Dante speaks to Pope Nicholas III who takes him for Boniface VIII (Pope from 1294 to 1303). Virgil is much disturbed by this case of mistaken identity:

Allor Virgilio disse: "Dilli tosto:
'Non son colui, non son colui che credi'";
e io rispuosi come a me fu imposto.
Then Virgil said, "Tell him quickly, 'I am not he, I am not he whom you think!'" and I answered as I was bidden.

Dante removes the mantle and other pieces of clothing from Pope Nicholas III, digs a hole for him in a rock and stuffs him in this hole, head downwards; only his legs are visible—as far as the calves. Then he multiplies the holes and the legs by thousands and creates a fire to burn the soles of his sinners. Thus their masks are definitively removed, leaving in sight the legs—or rather their upper parts—and the flame moving from the heels to the toes.

Virgil evinced the same aversion to masks as he told Dante in Canto XV of the *Purgatorio*:

"Se tu avessi cento larve
sovra la faccia, non mi sarian chiuse
le tue cogitazion, quantunque parve."

"If you had a hundred masks upon your face, your thoughts however slight would not be hidden from me."

In Canto XX of the *Inferno*, Dante looks down on the fourth chasm of Malebolge where the Sorcerers and Diviners go with their faces twisted so as to look behind them.

Forse per forza già di parlasia
si travolse così alcun de tutto;
ma io nol vidi, né credo che sia.
Perhaps some time by stroke of palsy a man has been thus twisted right around, but I have not seen it, nor do I believe it possible.

Dante seems to restore the primal image of the man who moves in front of him with tears on his cheeks and all along his buttocks so that for a moment two faces can be seen in the above tercet: one looking forward, the other backward. This reminds me of the procedure used by some playwrights and stage directors who put a mask on an actor, hiding the back of his head and thereby adding another face to the one he has been provided with by nature. The actor turns his back to the audience and displays the mask "which might be his true face, for all I know," says the playwright. For a while the audience cannot make a choice between the two faces succeeding each other in front of them; but then everyone realises that both the face and the mask may exist *independently* in the world where hypocrisy and fraud are commonplace. But Dante tolerates such a double existence only within the bounds of a tercet, promptly snatching off the mask beyond which the true face of his character makes its appearance. In the present case, he disfigures a malefactor in such a way that his tears keep on trickling along his back, down the crack in his buttocks. "That is how his head has *always* been positioned," says the poet. "The backward-looking diviners," says Hollander, "suffer this *contrapasso* for having looked, with wrongful intent, into the future. Biblical references have seemed apt to an occasional commentator. Pietro di Dante adduces Isaiah 44:25: '[I am the Lord] that frustrates the tokens of the liars, and makes diviners mad; that turns wise men backward, and makes their knowledge foolish.'"
Does the act of probing into the future for the sake of a reward turn these men backward? Or are they eager to look into the future because they cannot even see a path stretching *before* them? Is it a sort of nostalgia that induces those culprits to brave the frontiers of Time and venture into the realm where only the Almighty feels at home?
"What are we allowed to look at?" they ask, turning this way and that. "We are forbidden to sound the open sea."
"A piece of line with a weight at one end is sometimes used to sound a lake or river," says Dante. "That is what you're allowed to do."
"But we're not interested in lakes and rivers which tell us nothing about God's design. Why can't we descend into the open sea at the bottom of which so many treasures await us?"

"Because you'll never mount to the surface again. In other words, you'll drown in your own knowledge."

"Why should we look only backward? We know what has happened already. It's a well-trodden path. We're longing for virgin territories."

"Antarctica is virgin territory waiting to be exploited," says Dante.

"It's Time I'm curious about," says a short stocky man. "The future is a virgin territory of Time. I'd give anything to know what events are lying scattered around the future."

"Ma quell' alma nel ciel che più si schiara,
  quel serafin che 'n Dio più l'occhio ha fisso,
  a la dimanda tua non satisfara,
però che sì s'innoltra ne lo abisso
  de l'etterno statuto quel che chiedi,
  che da ogne creata vista è scisso."
"But that soul in heaven which is most enlightened, that Seraph who has his eye most fixed on God, could not satisfy your question; for that which you ask lies so deep within the abyss of the eternal statute that it is cut off from every created vision."

"This abyss wasn't cut off from *my* vision," says another diviner. "Small fragments, bits and bobs, debris. Nothing like the city you saw in Canto XXXI."

"I remember the city you're alluding to," says Dante. "After visiting the whole of the Eighth Circle with its ten concentric chasms I approached the central well or pit which led to the last and lowest circle where I saw a ring of towers—Giants."

"They were dwarfs," says the diviner, kneeling down.

"They were Giants," says Dante. "Don't forget that *I* wrote the *Commedia*, not you.

Poco portäi in là volta la testa,
  che me parve veder molte alte torri;
  ond' io: "Maestro, dì, che terra è questa?"
I had not long kept my head turned in that direction when I seemed to see many lofty towers; whereon I, "Master, say, what city is this?"

"I know, I know," says the diviner, keeping his dwarfish posture. "And Virgil took you lovingly by the hand and said:

"Pria che noi siam più avanti,
  acciò che 'l fatto men ti paia strano,
sappi che non son torri, ma giganti,
  e son nel pozzo intorno da la ripa
  da l'umbilico in giuso tutti quanti."
"Before we go further forward, in order that the fact may seem less strange to you, know that these are not towers, but giants, and every one of them is in the pit, round about the bank from the navel downward."

"That's right," says Dante. "So what?"
"The giants you saw were located in the past *and* in Hell. In the future there are no giants at all, neither in Hell nor anywhere else. The events and the actors performing them lie *scattered* around the future instead of soaring into the sky. Only buildings reach for heaven and buildings have no soul. Why should they reach for heaven?"
"Is this another Tower of Babel?" asks the poet.
"Hardly. Those people just try to outstrip each other."
"That's what they did in Florence and elsewhere at the end of the Renaissance. They built towers to demonstrate their wealth and might. What do you call these towers now? Skyscrapers?"
"Do you care more about buildings or humans?" says the stocky man. "They're two-storeys high at the utmost."
"Who?" says Dante. "Did you read the *Commedia* to the end? In Canto XXI of the *Paradiso*, Peter Damian says that no one should venture into the Unknown for fear of being punished in the fourth chasm of Malebolge.

"E al mondo mortal, quando tu riedi,
  questo rapporta, sì che non presumma
  a tanto segno più mover li piedi."
"And when you return to the mortal world, carry this back, so that it may no longer presume to move its feet towards so great a goal."

"Didn't you pass yourself off as a diviner when you described the events you weren't supposed to know?" asks the stocky man. "The inhabitants of the Hereafter kept you posted on what would happen in the future, but considering that you yourself had created those informers—"
I had to resume my journey because the sun was already high enough to burn my skin so mercilessly that I thought of the creams applied to faces and buttocks on the beaches where a lot of human bodies lie supine or prone to get a suntan. My friend and I were about to leave the garden where the statue of Nabokov had greeted us along with other celebrities who used to stay at the Montreux Palace; but our movement was arrested by a group of people staring at a "great Russian writer", as one of them put it.
"He must have overhead our conversation," I said to my friend who was perfectly aware that those people had just entered the garden and so could have overhead neither her short appraisal of Nabokov's achievements nor my diatribe against him. By way of an answer she smiled and was on the point of resuming her walk towards the hotel when we both overhead the following dialogue:
"Was this man a writer?"
"Yes, a Russian writer."
"What did he write?"

"*The Master and Margarita*."

Instead of bursting into laughter we quietly crossed the street and took refuge in the spacious lobby which had put on and discarded several masks since I had first visited the Palace in 1980. "He has been asking for it," I said. "For a while he'll wear a mask he would never have tolerated on his face in his lifetime—he didn't like being compared to anybody, not even to Gogol and Tolstoevsky."

"When do you think he'll get rid of his offensive mask?" My friend glanced back as if to make sure Nabokov still looked like Bulgakov.

"The spell will be broken by the words, 'In our garden you may admire a few former clients of ours whose statues have been executed by other faithful clients. The latter are still in the land of the living and immortalise in stone other clients to whom we're duty bound to pay tribute. Here's a statue of Vladimir Nabokov. Apart from being our long-standing client, he was a great Russian émigré writer. Before the Second World War he moved to the United States in search of fame and fortune and got both when his novel *Lolita* became an international best-seller in the fifties.'"

"Do you think his name alone wouldn't do the trick?" she asked.

"You mean if someone just says, 'Here's Vladimir Nabokov'?"

Two minutes later I was already in the streets, heading for my car which I had left in between the hotel and the estate agency where I had once talked to a Russian woman hired to handle those Russian clients who speak neither French nor English. In spite of the sun and my eagerness to get to my ultimate destination as quickly as possible, I veered off course once again, yearning to see the lake at close quarters. While strolling along the lakeshore I recalled yet another chapter from Nabokov's book where an imaginary dialogue between the author and his publisher demonstrates to what extent students and readers in general are ignorant of Gogol's works. The publisher asks the author to outline the plot of *Dead Souls* and that of *The Overcoat* because the student "would want to know what those books are *about*". "And I should quote a relevant tercet from the *Commedia* to explain the meaning of Malebolge inhabited by Sorcerers and Diviners about whom I speak in this chapter," I told myself. So here are two relevant tercets:

Luogo è in inferno detto Malebolge,
  tutto di pietra di color ferrigno,
  come la cerchia che dintorno il volge.
Ne dritto mezzo del campo maligno
  vaneggia un pozzo assia largo e profondo,
  di cui suo loco dicerò l'ordigno.

There is a place in Hell called Malebolge, all of stone which is the colour of iron, like the wall that goes round it. Right in the middle of this malign field yawns a pit very wide and deep, of whose structure I shall tell in its place.

As if carried along by the backward urge which had made me elucidate an earlier passage in this chapter I retraced my steps and shortly stood in front of Nabokov's statue. The great American writer

was himself again. Virgil says that sloth will not lead one anywhere; in *Pale Fire*, Nabokov recommends this vice as a sure means of getting results in the domain of poetry. Both writers think that without fame human life has no meaning and may be likened to smoke in air or foam on water. (Nabokov would have used a far more sophisticated simile.) But Virgil (and Dante) thinks that no fame is desirable outside the spheres of Paradise; Hell is an ante-room of Paradise or the lobby of a hotel. And even if you have come to this hotel to meet a friend or a business associate you do not stay in the lobby longer than is necessary to decide where to have lunch or dinner or a cup of chocolate. Nabokov, on the other hand, wanted Gogol to overstay his welcome in the circle of dead souls and overcoats the latter had created while pottering happily "on the brink of his private abyss" or at the bottom of it. To Gogol, however, this abyss was a general phenomenon and he did his best to wrench his body and soul from its depth. He saw his journey through life in terms of Hell and Paradise and so was longing to depart from the Abyss and reach the celestial bodies as soon as his inspiration would allow such a feat. "Cannot an author," he writes to Father Matthew, "present, in the frame of an attractive story, vivid examples of human beings that are better men than those presented by other writers? Examples are stronger than argumentations; before giving such examples all a writer needs is to become a good man himself and lead the kind of life that would please God…Must I not present…righteous and pious people living according to the Divine Law? I want to tell you frankly that this, and not money or fame, is my main incentive for writing."

Should I explain who Father Matthew was before proceeding with my notes on fame and on the role it played in the lives of the authors under discussion? This fanatic endeavoured to put Gogol on the right track which might have coincided with Dante's itinerary had Gogol been granted the privilege to terminate his masterpiece. Of course Father Matthew gave no thought to Dante or to his *Paradiso*: he had aversion to art in any shape and form. But some didactic verses from the *Commedia* might have elicited a nod of approval on his part had he taken the trouble to read the entire poem. So much for Father Matthew.

In Canto XVI of the *Inferno* three Florentines detach themselves from a troop of spirits and hail Dante as their countryman all the while warding off the flames that rain upon them.

E "Se miseria d'esto loco sollo
  rende ni dispetto noi e nostri prieghi,"
  comminciò l'uno, "e 'l tinto aspetto e brollo,
la fama nostra il tuo animo pieghi
  a dirne chi tu se', che i vivi piedi
  così sicuro per lo 'nferno freghi."

And, "If the wretchedness of this sandy place and our blackened and hairless faces," one of them began, "bring us and our prayers into contempt, let our fame move you to tell us who you are, that thus securely move living feet through Hell."

Hollander points out that nowhere in Hell is Dante so gracious to the sinners with whom he strikes up a conversation. "That his affection is directed towards homosexuals is noteworthy," he writes, "but does not necessarily involve him in anything more than what a modern reader must consider a remarkable lack of the typical Christian heterosexual scorn for homosexuals." Has anybody ever hit upon the idea of comparing Beatrice to Albertine who was just a mask behind which Proust had hidden one of his lovers whose name escapes me for the moment? Be that as it may, the argument used by the spirit is no less noteworthy than Dante's attitude towards him. "I was famous in my lifetime," he seems to impart to the poet, "so you'd better speak to me, whoever you are. In spite of my surroundings and the vestiges of torments I bear all over my face you're unlikely to demean yourself by talking to me. I was famous and you must know my name; I've no idea who you are. Does that prove that you're not famous? I think it does. You seem to move through Hell with great assurance, but your fame on earth is not guaranteed by this clandestine passage through our regions. Judging by the company you keep, you must be a poet—all the more reason to speak to me. My name, if mentioned in your future work, will attract a lot of attention to your literary output, turning you into a star overnight."

There is no denying that the spirit's approach to the work one may write on the Hereafter does not differ from what Cacciaguida says about the *Commedia*: only famous people should be admitted into it. But if you tackle the problem from a different angle you are bound to notice the incoherence of this point of view that permits a sinner to emphasise his earthly credentials in a place far removed not only from the earth but from Paradise where such a claim would be fully justified. Dante might have responded to him as follows: "Now you're in Hell and whatever you did on earth is tarnished by your present condition. You knew Christ and so had no excuse for living in a way inconsistent with the tenets of Christianity. How dare you speak of your fame that the Supreme Judge made null and void as He assigned you to the third ring of the Seventh Circle and to Canto XVI? It's better to live anonymously but in full accordance with Christ's teaching than to be famous in the world where any pop singer is far more renowned than a poet of genius. Do you know that Britney Spears' fortune is estimated at 115 million dollars? And she is only twenty-two. Do you know how many albums of hers have been sold worldwide? More than 55 million."

Actually Britney Spears *might* have found her way into the *Commedia* on account of her fame that is far superior to whatever Dante's character could boast of. What *could* he boast of? Singleton informs us that he was far less distinguished, in terms of social hierarchy, than his two companions. The *Anonimo fiorentino* says: "This valorous and likeable knight, called Messer Jacopo Rusticucci, came from an unimportant family of the Florentine middle class…He had a wife who was so odd and so disagreeable that he got rid of her, sending her home to her relatives…Indeed his wife was ferocious, and it was impossible to live with her. Thus he gave himself over to this vice."

"E io, che posto son con loro in croce,
  Iacopo Rusticucci fui, e certo
  la fiera moglie più ch'altro mi nuoce."
"And I who am placed with them in torment was Jacopo Rusticucci, and truly my fierce wife more than aught else has wrought me ill."

It is not easy to find out whether the above description in the *Anonimo fiorentito* fits Dante's wife of whom he never says anything in his works. He did not send her home but took advantage of his being driven into exile to forsake her once and for all, which gave him an opportunity to spend more time in Beatrice's company: no number of love affairs ever interferes with a poet's labours as ruthlessly as a wife staying at home round the clock. Did Dante ever consider becoming homosexual on the grounds of his wife's ferocity?

What *could* Jacopo Rusicucci boast of? Neither his origin nor his wife supplied him with a valuable pretext to speak of his earthly existence in haughty terms. His unobtrusive presence in *Anonimo fiorentino* does not entitle him to any place in the *Commedia*, and I suppose he would not have been mentioned in it, but for his companions who join the discussion only at the end to ask Dante to inform the world of their encounter.

Why do all those people yearn for a sort of belated recognition in the world they left many years ago? Why do they want everyone to know they live in Hell, in such and such a circle? Isn't it better to let their friends and relatives think they dance in Paradise amidst the Fathers of the Church? They might have said to Dante, "Please don't tell anybody we're in Hell—this would upset our friends and make our enemies rejoice at our sufferings. You saw us link hands with St Thomas and St Bernard, didn't you? Yes, you saw us dance with them in one of the spheres of Paradise. Never mind the number of the sphere."

Why do they want their friends and relatives to read an account of their torments that Dante ordinarily depicts with sadistic accuracy, in graphic detail? Let us have a look at the three sinners with whom the poet converses in Canto XVI.

Qual sogliono i campion far nudi e unti,
  avvisando lor presa e lor vantaggio,
  prima che sien tra lor battuti e punti,
così rotando, ciascuno il visaggio
  drizzava a me, sì che 'n contraro il collo
  faceva ai piè continüo vïaggio.
As champions, naked and oiled, are wont to do, eyeing their grip and vantage before exchanging thrusts and blows; thus each, wheeling, directed his face on me so that his neck kept turning in a direction contrary to his feet.

"Here," writes Anthony Esolen, "the three Florentines make a kind of ring of themselves that they may stop and speak to Dante while yet remaining in motion—for as Ser Brunetto has said, if they stop they must remain immobile for a hundred years, unable 'to fan away the flames that strike' (XV, 39). Yet in

speaking to Dante they must also turn their necks his way, regardless of the direction of their feet." Why were they longing to transmit to their friends this image that refers either to classical wrestling as presented in Latin epics such as Virgil's and Lucan's or to a contemporary version of the sport? Did they want them to think, "They must be very supple to be able to contort their bodies like that"? Did they want their friends to remember how supple their bodies were in their lifetimes?

My body is not very supple and to pick something up I must almost kneel down to prevent a searing pain from shooting through my back. And sometimes I cannot get out of a car without imitating the contortions described in the *Commedia*; and yet, in those moments, I have no one to wrestle with and am even reluctant to look at anybody. Now I had to do just the opposite: to scramble *into* my car that had been waiting for me. Lake Geneva was sparkling on my right as I headed for my old Audi, but the word "sparkling" which I mechanically associated with it—in memory of Nabokov I still talked to myself in English—did not conjure up champagne: I was engrossed in the *Inferno* to the point of excluding from my pastime every attribute of the *dolce vita*.

Incidentally, in Canto XXXII a sinner declines the honour of being mentioned in the *Commedia* for the reasons I gave earlier.

"Vivo son io, e caro esser ti puote,"
  fu mia risposta, "se dimandi fama,
  ch'io metta il nome tuo tra l'altre note."
Ed elli a me: "Del contrario ho io brama.
  Lèvati quinci e non mi dar più lagna,
  ché mal sai lusingar per questa lama!"

"Alive I am," was my reply, "and if you crave fame, it may be worth much to you that I note your name among the rest." And he to me, "The contrary is what I crave. Take yourself hence and trouble me no more, for ill do you know how to flatter in this depth."

Not everyone desires to be remembered after their death, as the last tercet eloquently proves. Even illustrious people may be tempted to sink into oblivion, making their physical death coincide with their spiritual disappearance. They do not care about the history of the human brain to which I am longing to contribute a few lines, however futile and superfluous. They just want to be forgotten as if their unrelenting influence on earth could put a strain on their eyes, on their muscles, and deprive them of their newly-found freedom. In vain do numerous adepts of spiritualism promise to leave them in peace during their séances: they categorically refuse to participate in the earthly chaos.

"I didn't die for nothing," says Dante. "I had rather an uneasy relationship with humankind and I always found it quite a strain having to cope with its representatives all day long. Why read the *Commedia*? There's such a plethora of books on every subject, including Hell, Purgatory and Paradise."

"We promise not to tamper with your material spirit, but allow us at least to enjoy your genius that transpires in every line you wrote, thwarting the designs of your enemies."

"Forget my writings. I was often mistaken, contrary to what I assert throughout my so-called masterpiece. The Hereafter is quite different from my tercets to which you devote so much time instead of drinking champagne and enjoying the company of beautiful men and women."
"But didn't you hanker after fame and immortality in your lifetime? After all, Cacciaguida said to you in Canto XVII:

"'Non vo' però ch'a' tuoi vicini invidie,
  poscia che s'infutura la tua vita
  via più là che 'l punir di lor perfidie.'
"'Yet I would not have you envious of your neighbours, since your life shall be prolonged far beyond the punishment of their perfidies.'"

"'Dante's life extended long beyond the miserable end of Boniface and of Corso Donati,' writes Grandgent. You remember Boniface and Corso Donati, don't you? You wrote about them in Canto XXIV of the *Purgatorio*. Corso Donati was your neighbour in the strictest sense of the word. But Grandgent believes that Cacciaguida refers to your enduring fame rather than to your bodily existence."
"He is wrong. My ancestor didn't refer to my enduring fame."
"What about yourself? Did *you* ever yearn for it?"
"I might have yearned for it at the beginning of my exile because I wished to triumph over my enemies. And the only way to triumph over them was to become famous—I couldn't defeat them in a battle. Anyway I'm entitled to change my mind now and then, am I not?"
"When did you change it?"
"When I read that a horse could be regarded as a genius. Not Pegasus, mind you."
"Do you know how many books on the *Commedia* have come out over the last thirty years? Even in our society where a top model is paid millions of dollars for walking up and down there are people who devote their lifetimes to your tercets."
"You'd better enjoy the company of those women."
"Can't we do both? That's what *you* did seven centuries ago, didn't you? Writing the *Commedia*, wooing top models. Beatrice might have become a top model if there had been such a thing in your days."
"Would you mind leaving me alone now? After our conversation I feel more at home with the quick, but I'm not ready to face the stresses and strains of human life just yet."
I scrambled into my car, shut the door and drove off, leaving my friend and Nabokov behind. I had plenty of time to concentrate on Dante's poem from which I extracted, as I listened to the English version of it recorded on cassettes, a dose of didactic medicine intended to cheer the reader up. An attractive story may entertain the reader, but on no account will it cheer him or her up because this all happens to *other* people. And what do I care about *their* happiness that writers take advantage of to

earn a lot of money? When reading about other people's raptures you are likely to compare them with your own bitter experience, wondering why such events never occur in *your* life. A dose of didactic medicine, on the other hand, concerns *everyone*; the stronger it is the more you may trust its restorative power.

I drove in the direction of Lucerne and also away from Hell where I had got stuck because of the subjects such as fame and masks that I had felt like treating on the spot and in the presence of my Japanese friend. As the landscapes I am fond of were gliding past on both sides of the road I listened to the *Paradiso*, to Canto XXV where St James examines Dante on the subject of Hope. Beatrice answers for him to spare his modesty, and says he has this virtue in full measure and has on that account been privileged to behold Paradise. I am not sure I have this virtue in full measure because, instead of listening on to the *Paradiso*, I retrieved the cassette and put in the recording of Canto XVI of the *Inferno* where three Florentines behave like wrestlers in order to speak to Dante: you are supposed to look at the person with whom you hold a conversation.

Am I beginning to quote *myself*? I said something along these lines earlier, if I remember rightly. Should I do a global search for "you are supposed" to find out when and how I expressed the same idea? "I have racked my brains all day but I still cannot remember her name"—a thing of the past, isn't it? All you have to do now is press a button and get the information you are looking for in no time at all. Computers are sure to wreck our memory far more efficiently than the invention of writing thanks to which the reader will easily connect the following paragraph with the previous one.

They ask if Florence is really as degenerate as they have heard and at Dante's answer depart sorrowfully.

"Se lungamente l'anima conduca
  le membra tue," rispuose quelli ancora,
  "e se la fama tua dopo te luca,
cortesia e valor dì se dimora
  ne la nostra città sì come suole,
  o se del tutto se n'è gita fora…"
"So may your soul long direct your limbs, and your fame shine after you," he then replied, "tell us if courtesy and valour abide in our city as once they did, or if they are quite gone from it..."

Fama, *fama*, *fama*. Should I do a global search for "*fama*" to find out how many times the poet speaks about fame in his immortal masterpiece? Was he just in love with a French woman in those days? Here is his answer to the three sodomites:

"La gente nuova e i sùbiti guadagni
  orgoglio e dismisura han generata,
  Fiorenza, in te, sì che tu già ten piagni."
"The new people and the sudden gains have engendered pride and excess in you, O Florence, so that already you weep for it!"

What could I say about Russia if asked a similar question by Tolstoy, for instance? Last night I had a talk with a painter who lives in Moscow and calls on me in Versailles whenever his piggy bank is full to the brim. "G. opened a gallery in his house," he announced, looking enviously out of my window as if hoping to catch a glimpse of the palace his rival has appropriated.

"Looks like a palace, I bet." I know what words my friends exploit mercilessly when speaking about *la gente nuova* and their *guadagni*.

"It's *more* than a palace," he answered. "It looks like three palaces put together."

"But he knows he's not famous, doesn't he? And fame counts for those people. Even Dante wasn't indifferent to it."

"We're often conned by clever advertising into thinking that certain painters are better than others," he said. "And S. knows how to advertise himself, so many think he's world-famous."

"But he must be aware of how insipid his paintings are. And no amount of advertising will con *him* into thinking he's renowned all over the world. He must feel depressed and miserable. What makes you unhappy is the contrast between appearances and truth. If his house mirrored his art and renown it would look like Uncle Tom's cabin. You should tell him at the earliest opportunity, 'What a miserable existence! How could anyone live in such dreadful conditions?'"

"He married a top model." My friend sighed and shook his head ruefully. "Everybody *knows* she's thirty years his junior."

I would speak to Tolstoy about these upstarts whose houses seem to rival the Florence and San Gimignano skyscrapers in everything except beauty. The so-called "new Russians" make a fortune out of oil or another raw material and, having become multimillionaires overnight, rush to psychoanalysts in the hope of being taught how to handle those riches in their *minds*.

Is the human brain a good long-term investment? Why should you invest in it? No one will ever introduce incentive taxes to stimulate future investment in the human brain. Anyway you refuse to invest in companies without an exceptional social record. And what kind of social record does your brain submit to you for approval whenever you broach the subject within its hearing? Anyway your brain is good enough to make profitable investments for you and it is not too self-assured, thank God: if you are in need of professional advice it always consults the right people who keep it posted on auction sales and on whatever can be acquired in London, New York, Paris and Milan. So does your brain lack anything? It does not. Why spend money on it? But you must come to terms with the money you have earned so quickly and it is not enough to invest it here and there. The inhabitants of your village kept money in trunks, under pillows, in boots, in stockings. Where should *you* keep the money you have got? In your stockings? But they are not large enough to keep it. Should you buy another pair of stockings or a million trunks? "Go to my shrink," says your wife. So you go to her shrink and he questions you about your childhood.

"Were you a multimillionaire in your childhood?" he asks.

"My family was rather poor, doctor. What can I do with all the money I've got? My mother never taught me what to do with such an amount of money. Should I invest it in my brain?"
"You've already made an investment in your brain, in your mind, in your consciousness and your unconscious by becoming my patient. What more do you need? Put the whole thing out of your mind."
"It's the other way round, doctor. I wish to put something *into* my mind—my money. I've bought everything else."

Noi andavam con li diece demoni.
  Ahi fiera compagnia! Ma ne la chiesa
  coi santi, e in taverna coi ghiottoni.
We were going along with the ten demons: ah, savage company! But "in church with saints and with guzzlers in the tavern!"

That is what I heard all of a sudden as I forsook my thoughts and took notice of what was resounding in my car (and everywhere): the *Inferno*, Canto XXII. I was making my journey in the company of demons.

CHAPTER 15

I was driving along the road at the (ultimate) end of which a sort of harmony awaited me: cowbells, Lake Lucerne, mountains. What other ingredients does one need to describe the spheres of Paradise or at least their earthly version? I was aware that no saints would welcome me upon my arrival at the hotel where only European and American tourists spend their holidays in August, in September. I was not planning to spend my holiday in a church, was I?

In wintertime when the whole area lies dormant—somebody must have declared it inappropriate for skiing—a number of ghosts may wander and even dance within the hotel walls, in the spacious lobby, in the restaurant. Are they keen to talk to an unexpected visitor who, out of curiosity or brimful of lucrative ideas, ventures into their abode?

Quali per vetri trasparenti e tersi,
  o ver per acque nitide e tranquille,
  non sì profonde che i fondi sien persi,
tornan d'i nostri visi le postille
  debili sì, che perla in bianca fronte
  non vien men forte a le nostre pupille;
tali vid' io più facce a parlar pronte
As through smooth and transparent glass, or through clear and tranquil waters, yet not so deep that the bottom be lost, the outlines of our faces return so faint that a pearl on a white brow comes not less boldly to our eyes, so did I behold many a countenance eager to speak...
(The *Paradiso*, Canto III)

A white hotel outlined against a snow-clad mountain. *Perla in bianca fronte*.

Once again Dante writes about deep waters and our incapacity to probe their mystery. Do we also lose our reflections in them? Perhaps I do not look at deep waters often enough to forget my face, my thoughts, my life.

And deeper than did ever plummet sound
I'll drown my book.

For Shakespeare the bottom of the sea is a symbol of forgiveness and forgetfulness while Date warns us against any hazardous descent on the grounds that some areas of Creation should not be explored.

G. W. Bush is an Uncontrollable Master of the World. "Sounds like the title of a science-fiction novel, doesn't it?" said a middle-aged man. Indeed no one would associate such a headline with the world where democracy and freedom have been reigning over the last fourteen years. A government can declare war on drug dealers because the constitution backs up such a decision. What amendment or word empowers a president to wage war against whatever country he chooses to replenish his own purse? Of course he does not say anything either about his purse or the money he intends to put in it. He speaks of threats and the enemies who pose these threats, unconsciously drawing on Stalin's

speeches that often heralded show trials, mass starvation, mass destruction. "If our country goes to war," says a journalist, "we still have to face the fact that many people will die."

"If we don't go to war, much more people will die," answers the president. "The enemy must be forced back."

"But they haven't attacked us yet, have they?" asks the journalist.

"Do you want me to wait until they do attack us?" asks the president. "Do you know that their president is a narrow-minded, sadistic, thoroughly evil little man? Do you know that he's got an evil tongue? I call him 'the evil eye'. Why doesn't anybody hire him as an actor to play the part of Dracula? I also call him 'the evil tooth'."

The journalist would not have put the same questions to Stalin because the latter was in no mood to speak to journalists; and Stalin's mood remained faithful to itself throughout his life. What is the difference between his mood and that of the people who believe unconditionally in whatever the belligerent president says? A film is made about the president and the inner machinations of his team. "In our country films are not forbidden, but no one will distribute it, I suppose," says the president's brother. The film is shown all over the country, but the mood of its population does not alter as if all those people had sworn on the Bible never to take any notice of whatever decries their president. They are in no mood to change their convictions which are firm enough to become lifelong convictions. Humanity will play a game of autocrats and slaves until doomsday.

Here is another doomsday scenario:

> People have always sensed that the world is falling apart, because of course it always has been. If Dante was a herald of the Renaissance, as historians used to like to say, then he was a man not before but after his time, as were the men of the Renaissance themselves. Like them, Dante looked behind his own age to a previous one of imagined virtue and grace. In his conversation with the noble Florentines in this canto, Dante blames that great destroyer of culture, prosperity, for Florence's present strife. He was not so far wrong. The "outsiders and their sudden wash of wealth"—the merchants who, unlike the landed aristocracy, could capitalise upon new trade routes, venturing from Britain to India and even China—set the stage for the emerging nation-states and the withering away of that empire to which Dante was devoted.

This is Esolen's introduction to Canto XVI of the *Inferno*.

Over the last twenty years I have been under the impression that the world is falling apart and I am not so far wrong in the light of what Dante thought of self-destruction to which the world seems to have been doomed ever since the Creation. The world may already have fallen apart, although the ruins I come across look like houses, presidential palaces, factories, hotels, swimming pools. And the people I talk to look and sound like their forefathers, especially when they quote the *Commedia* or another masterpiece of the past. Are we all ghosts living in a sort of hotel silhouetted against a snow-clad mountain? Is this what they call nuclear winter? But there are other winters in our repertoire which is large enough to include both self-assurance and self-destruction.

Prosperity may become a benefactor of culture on condition that the upstarts mentioned in Canto XVI channel their riches into the Sistine Chapel and similar monuments. But some prosper not for the sake of posterity but in order to collect a sufficient number of status symbols among which there might be the creation of a prize. Our multimillionaires think that the prestige conferred by such a prize and the amount of money going with it will allow them to inscribe their names on the memorial of culture. And they may sincerely believe that they help gifted artists: painters, composers, writers, pianists. But their prizes are given to the artists who do not really need them, having acquired notoriety long before and often for the wrong reasons; the money remain within the same establishment, within the walls of the hotel inhabited by ghosts.

Tonight I called my American friend to find out what he thought about the re-election of G. W. Bush who, according to the French magazine, has become an uncontrollable master of the world. "Of course I'm upset," he answered. "But I wouldn't compare this master of sorts to Stalin and any other ruler of the Soviet Union—or Russia for that matter. You say that Stalin never spoke with journalists—out of sheer altruism, I suppose. He didn't want to kill too many journalists. Anyway they wouldn't have asked him the questions our president is bombarded with during his press conferences. They would have kept congratulating Stalin on his achievements."

"Singing praises was the only option everyone had in those times," I said. "But what's the difference? Journalists ask their questions and get the answers that do not mean anything. Protesters stage anti-war demonstrations in front of palaces, embassies or just in the streets."

"They're *allowed* to do it," my friend cut in.

"But what's the difference?" I asked. "Do presidents and ambassadors appear on their balconies to explain anything to protesters? Their doors and ears remain shut. They may shrug their shoulders when looking out of the windows, but they go on repeating the word 'evil' or just say, 'The outcome of the war was a convincing demonstration of the superior forces of the US army.' The only question is: Which war are they talking about?"

"There were mass deportations in the Soviet Union. And what about concentration camps? Bush has neither killed nor deported anybody."

"He has killed and deported a lot of moods, a lot of ideals," I answered.

"And the Americans will never be slaves!"

"Can't you be a slave to your own dogmatic rigidity?" I asked. "Years of easy success and the words 'evil' and 'freedom' repeated round the clock may ossify a country's thinking. But I'll always love the United States—so many translations of the *Commedia* have been published by American universities! What would I have done without them?"

In *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, Marshall McLuhan draws a distinction between oral societies and those dominated by the printed word. In one of the initial chapters he quotes J. C. Carothers:

Whereas the Western child is early introduced to building blocks, keys in locks, water taps, and a multiplicity of items and events which constrain him to think in terms of spatiotemporal relations and mechanical causation, the African child receives instead an education which depends much more exclusively on the spoken word and which is relatively highly charged with drama and emotion.

In my childhood I was also introduced to building blocks, to the games called "*constructor*" which allowed a child to construct cranes, cars and other machines one might come across in everyday life. But I heard a lot of conversations, and I instinctively knew—my genes are to blame—that the words I heard were more important than the building blocks lying scattered on the parquet floor and the images I saw in the books offered to me on various occasions. Those words *were* charged with drama and emotion. In Russia virtually everyone is a storyteller ready to let you in on his or her secrets or just recount an *anekdot*—something akin to the stories assembled by Martin Buber whose books on Hassidism are always within my reach. Very few people read newspapers in the Soviet Union; anecdotes were a sort of antidote to whatever was printed on government orders. We were African children initiated into Western customs.

McLuhan also quotes Alexander Inkeles' book on *Public Opinion in Russia*:

In the United States and England it is the freedom of expression, the right itself in the abstract, that is valued…In the Soviet Union, on the other hand, the results of exercising freedom are in the forefront of attention, and the preoccupation with the freedom itself is secondary. It is for this reason that the discussions between Soviet and Anglo-American representatives characteristically reach absolutely no agreement on specific proposals, although both sides assert that there should be freedom of the press. The American is usually talking about freedom of expression, the right to say or not to say certain things, a right which he claims exists in the United States and not in the Soviet Union. The Soviet representative is usually talking about access to the means of expression, not to the right to say things at all, and this access he maintains is denied to most in the United States and exists for most in the Soviet Union.

What does freedom of speech come down to? You talk and people look at you. Do they listen to what you say? How can you know for sure they listen to you and understand the words you utter? They just look at you and smile as if you were talking nonsense, as if they were listening to you only out of politeness. And then someone tells you, "Don't waste your breath! Just cast your vote! The first election results have started to come in." So you rush to the nearest polling station and see a lot of people coming out. They smile at you as if you had always been on their side, on the side of their candidate. "Listen to me!" you shout. "We're not at one on many issues!"

"Too late," they answer. "We've already cast our votes."

"And what about the next election? If you listen to me now your children will be spared—"

"The next election is over," they answer. "We've already cast our votes. All votes have been cast for years to come, for centuries."

So what does freedom of speech amount to? People talk to each other and may even address a crowd from a rostrum rigged up in a park or in the middle of a thoroughfare. Other people listen to them and

express their approval by clapping their hands or nodding their heads. The audience often bursts into laughter and some of its members shout, "Bravo! Down with N.! Three cheers for M.!" But there are people who stay at home or turn a deaf ear to whatever the speaker talks about, mistaking him for a salesman. "We've got everything we need," they say to themselves, to their wives or husbands. Or if they happen to hear a few words and suddenly realise that the speaker is involved in the political life of their country, they shake their heads and say to each other, "He must be a very smooth operator to be able to make you agree to almost every argument he puts forward. But why should we agree with him? We have our convictions, don't we?"

"Yes," answers the person they are speaking to. "A woman next door fell for a young man's smooth talk and handed over 10,000$ for him to invest."

"Who was the young man?" asks a passer-by who overheard the last sentence.

"He looked exactly like that speaker over there."

Freedom of speech is vital to a healthy democracy because you may have an urge to give Mr President a piece of your mind through the media or during a press conference. But freedom of speech must go hand in hand with freedom of hearing and freedom of comprehension. Many people do not exercise their prerogatives and seem to shut themselves up in a prison cell whenever they are called upon to listen and understand what other people are striving to communicate either by word of mouth or through the printed word.

In the Soviet Union we indulged in freedom of speech only when speaking to an intimate friend who was unlikely to turn informer overnight and disclose our state of mind to the KGB officials. Of course no one could know for sure who was an informer *already*: many of my fellow students and colleagues needed no metamorphosis to tell on me without batting an eyelid. But I had three friends to whom I talked as freely as I talked to myself, although in those days I talked to myself very seldom, being surrounded by my fellow students and colleagues all the time. I confided to those friends of mine that I intended to leave our motherland for good and they approved of my decision in spite of our mutual desire to meet as often as possible. It was somebody else who sent an anonymous letter to the Ministry of Culture to say I wanted to request political asylum in Belgium where I was to take part in the Queen Elisabeth Competition. All this happened during Brezhnev's sclerotic reign—back in 1972. The author of the anonymous missive partly asserted his right to freedom of the printed word. Our officials decided to deprive me of the right to go abroad and take part in the competition that I finally won: the Minister of Culture herself intervened on my behalf. Playing the piano in Brussels was much easier than fighting anonymous writers at home. But this is a long story and I am loath to make yet another digression on my way to the ultimate end which, in the context of this chapter, compels me to analyse the present state of the world and to describe how everything goes down the drain.

A citizen of a democratic country would have encountered no problems on his way to Brussels where pianists, violinists and singers meet every four years to compete for the *Grand Prix* and other prizes.

But I was given a chance to play in several concert halls and also before our professors who, in the fifties and sixties, were the best musicians in the world. Thus I enjoyed "freedom of preparation" which was not available to my Western colleagues. Soviet officials even put an orchestra at my disposal, which played Tchaikovsky's *First Piano Concerto* whenever I felt like having a go at it. "The Soviet representative is usually talking about *access* to the means of expression, not to the right to say things at all, and this access he maintains is denied to most in the United States and exists for most in the Soviet Union." Did I have access to the means of expression that was denied to my Western colleagues? For a while—yes. But then I found myself on the black list that excluded me from any foreign countries including Belgium and Holland where I was to play a few concerts in the wake of my victory at the Queen Elisabeth Competition. In October 1973 I had a meeting with a KGB officer. For half an hour at least he spoke to me in a fatherly tone of voice, asking about my favourite composers and the poems I read out loud in my bed. And then he said all of a sudden, "Would you mind my giving you a fatherly warning? Don't ever tell political anecdotes."

These political jokes were the means of expression we had at our disposal, but we might be punished for being too expressive in this domain. These jokes circulated round the Soviet Union in spite of the danger to which a person telling them exposed himself: they were funny and consequently helped us forget about food shortages and the other negative traits of our lives. (Women seldom told anecdotes, come to think of it.) Now food shortages are a thing of the past and, although nobody spends hours in queues, the Russians seem to have no time for anecdotes. For all their newly-born freedoms, they seldom resort to any means of expression because they do not need to express anything. Life goes on and huge sums of money are lost in casinos or embark on journeys to Switzerland where I was on holiday last August.

No information of note could be gleaned from Soviet newspapers and therefore people were curious to find out what was going on in the world: the forbidden fruit is much more attractive than apples sold in the streets of Moscow. (Even now old women sell fruit and vegetables near underground stations—a dissonant chord in the symphony entitled *The Global Village*.) We listened to the Voice of America and the Deutsche Welle; foreign journalists kept us posted on current events and even on our own misfortunes.

In the essay *The Uncommon Reader*, George Steiner complains about the inability of today's readers to become uncommon; many of them are not even *common* as a matter of fact. It all depends on your notion of how books should be read or rather *re*-read, for uncommon readers re-read books—even the ones they have never come across before. Painstakingly they go back and forth through a text, jotting down their impressions in the margins and consulting other books in the process. Unlike common readers, they do not listen to music when immersed in a poem which they may read out loud, anxious to listen to its music. "Recent studies suggest," writes Steiner, "that some seventy-five per cent of adolescents in the United States read against a background of sound (a radio, a record-player, a

television set at one's back or in the next room)." The essay was published in 1978. What are current statistics, I wonder?

At primary school we had to learn by heart many poems some of which did not deserve being read, let alone memorised: they sang the praises of the Communist Party. But my memory is a living proof of my past and even those poems are not superfluous; they remind me of the girls I was in love with and of the classroom where they recited the verses I never appreciated. Besides, we all got into the habit of reading and learning by heart *immortal* poems which could be quoted alongside Dante's tercets: they also belong to the *Paradiso*. Today's children, however, enjoy a particular kind of freedom which spares them the trouble of committing to memory anything down to their own telephone number. "Einstein didn't know his telephone number," they declare. "Why should *we* learn anything by heart?" At least they know that Einstein was incapable of committing to memory his telephone number: his memory rejected it as a futile piece of knowledge.

There is a society or social order in which many of the values and habits of sensibility implicit in Chardin's canvas are still operative; in which the classics are read with passionate attention; in which there are few mass media to compete with the primacy of literature; in which secondary education and the blackmail of censorship induce constant memorisation and the transmission of texts from remembrance to remembrance. There is a society which is bookish in the root sense, which argues its destiny by perpetual reference to canonic texts, and whose sense of historical record is at once so compulsive and so vulnerable that it employs a veritable industry of exegetic falsification. I am, of course, alluding to the Soviet Union. And this example alone would suffice to keep before our minds perplexities as old as Plato's dialogues about the affinities between great art and centralised power, between high literacy and political absolutism.

Steiner alludes to a painting by Chardin where one can admire an uncommon reader whose hand holds a page of the book he is reading as if he had to *touch* the text submitted to his attention. The book itself is huge and does not look like an object you can put in your pocket and transport from one country to another without arguing with men and women who take your ticket and say, after a moment of silence, "Your luggage is overweight. You have to pay extra."

It reminds me of a meeting I had a long time ago with a London manager who, at some point, had to speak on the phone to one of his artists. The latter had lost his ticket and was calling his manager to sort the problem out. "He's reading *Ulysses*," said his manager, putting the receiver on the hook. (He did not become *my* manager.) "An intellectually challenging occupation."

"Did he call you from the library of Babel?" I asked, alluding to Borges' short story.

"From Narita airport," said the manager. He did not catch my meaning.

How can one read Joyce at an airport? You ought to have a thousand books within your reach to tackle *Ulysses* properly. At least that famous artist *touched* Joyce's masterpiece. "But in the democratic-technological West, so far as one can tell, the die is cast," writes Steiner. "The folio, the private library, at-homeness in classical tongues, the arts of memory, will belong, increasingly, to the

specialised few. The price of silence and solitude will rise." The price of *my* solitude plummets, I'm afraid.

If asked what I yearn for in this life of mine, I would answer, "A commentary on my commentary, something along these lines:

"According to the early commentators, this first spirit (see vs. 35) is Agnello or Agnolo de' Brunelleschi (a Ghibelline family of Florence), who first joined the Bianchi and then went over to the Neri. Only the *Chiose anonime* gives pertinent details about him: 'This Agnello was a member of the Brunelleschi family of Florence. Even as a boy, he used to empty the purses of his father and mother; later, he would empty the strongbox in the shop and steal other things. Then, as an adult, he broke into other people's houses. He would dress like a pauper and wear the beard of an old man. And for this reason, Dante has him transformed through the serpent's bites, as he was when he stole.'"

Thus Singleton comments upon Canto XXV of the *Inferno* (see vs. 68). But what if this commentary of mine is read at an airport? Shall I quote the tercet in question?

Li altri due 'l riguardavano, e ciascuno
  Gridava: "Omè, Agnel, come ti muti!
  Vedi che già non se' né due né uno."
The other two were looking on, and each cried, "Oh me, Agnello, how you change! Lo, you are already neither two nor one!"

And what about verse 35 mentioned by Singleton in *his* commentary?

Mentre che sì parlava, ed el trascorse,
  e tre spiriti venner sotto noi,
  de' quai né io né 'l duca moi s'accorse,
se non quando gridar: "Chi siete voi?"
While he thus spoke, the centaur ran past, and there came below us three spirits whom neither I nor my guide perceived till they cried out, "Who are you?"

At this point of Dante's narrative three thieves turn up. On one of them, Agnello, a kind of dragon (really Cianfa who has been transformed into it) fastens itself so closely that they merge into one strange shape. Well and good. But who is Cianfa?

Io non li conoscea; ma ei seguette,
  come suol seguitar per alcun caso,
  che l'un nomar un altro convenette,
dicendo: "Cianfa dove fia rimaso?"
I did not know them; but it happened, as often happens by some chance, that one had occasion to name another, saying, "Where can Cianfa be?"

Where *is* Cianfa? Your curiosity would not be satisfied at an airport where no books are available except love stories, science-fiction novels, historical romances, horror stories, whodunits, thrillers and

best-sellers. At an airport you will not be able to locate the characters of the book you hold in your hands because only other books can give you a clue to their identities and whereabouts. Once again the universe becomes infinite and uncontrollable like the American President. What you *can* do, however, is identify G. W. Bush with either Cianfa or Agnello. According to *Chiose anonime*, Cianfa was "a knight of the Donati family, and was a great cattle thief. He broke into shops and emptied out the strongboxes". Bush must have been planning to steal oil in Iraq but eventually had to limit his mercenary appetites to re-building the country he had destroyed: his relatives continue to sign contracts and their purses are kept wide-open day and night. Somebody said on French television, "The United States has been disqualified."

"How do you mean?" asked the host. "An athlete can be disqualified from a championship after positive drug tests. How can a country be disqualified?"

"The Americans know their president is a liar. They know he's a thief. Yet they're going to elect him once again."

"Bush doesn't take drugs," said the host. "And he doesn't drink wine any more."

"The United States has been disqualified as a democratic country," repeated the guest. "Too many positive drug tests."

You cannot disqualify the United States, can you? If you do, the global championship will make no sense; and nowadays everything is judged in terms of figures, prizes, records and so on. And what would Dante have done without the United States of America?

Cianfa turned into a dragon, but we have no idea where this dragon holds his sway and why he is identified with Cianfa. So we have to go back to the preceding canto where the metamorphosis and the whole set-up are explained. The wayfarers set out to climb the ruin of a bridge shattered by the earthquake that took place at Christ's death on the Cross. Dante reaches the top exhausted; nevertheless he continues his journey in Virgil's company, moving down into the seventh chasm where the Thieves are tormented by serpents. One of the thieves, Vanni Fucci, is seized by a serpent and burnt to ashes; but at once the ashes resume the former shape. Shall we allow G. W. Bush to resume his former shape? It would be safer to assign him to Canto XXIII, for instance, where the Hypocrites walk in copes of lead that are heavier than those devised by Frederick II for wrongdoers. "God can bring good out of evil," writes Esolen; "what hypocrites do is to bring evil out of good by reducing good to the mere face of good, the polished, gentle-spoken, bowed-head appearance of good. It is not wholly an act; they are not mere dissemblers. The hypocrites in part believe they are righteous, and even in Dante's Hell they retain their modest gestures and their high-toned habits of speech." The description fits Bush's character in every detail except the polished, gentle-spoken, bowed-head appearance of good: it is a self-righteous bully we look at whenever a television camera follows his gestures and high-toned habits of speech. Like Tartuffe to whom he may be likened only from the inside, G. W. Bush brings evil out of good—out of God, as it were. And a part of the evil he brings

about is due to the repetition of the word "evil" by which he stigmatises his opponents. Many people receive the stigmata after seeing a vision of Bush. Would he be cast as the Antichrist in a remake of *Apocalypse Now*? Let us not forget that the Antichrist is likely to pass himself off as Christ and thereby delude the crowd into thinking he will bring *good* out of good. "How can you bring evil out of good?" he says. "How can you bring evil out of the Bible? What *can* you bring out of the Bible? A verse, two verses. 'Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword.' Where does this sword come from? I've brought it out of the Bible. So there's nothing wrong with this sword, is there?"

"And what if this sword of yours wounds or destroys us altogether?" asks a journalist.

"When Jesus was betrayed by Judas Iscariot," answers the president, "Simon Peter drew his sword and smote the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear."

"Yes," says the journalist. "'Then said Jesus unto Peter, Put up thy sword into the sheath; the cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?'"

"Yes," says the president. "And he even touched the servant's ear and healed him. So if my sword cuts the wrong ear, the disabled individual will be healed by Christ. If the ear is the right one, however, he'll spend the rest of his life with one ear only."

"Like Van Gogh?" asks the journalist.

I have just come back from Paris where I saw a theatrical play entitled *Amleto* for some obscure reason: it had nothing to do with Shakespeare's work. There was a man on stage; he tottered around, now and then falling and crawling on all fours because his feet were quite unreliable, not to say treacherous. He would stammer a few words that reminded me neither of Hamlet's monologues nor of his father's ghost, although, at some point, the actor kissed his father goodnight. But did he touch the face of Hamlet's father? There was no other face on stage and only a few lamps illuminated the action that seemed to cancel itself, illustrating the absence of any action. The same goes for the words uttered by the actor or the substance he was called upon to incarnate: they eloquently testified against words, against human speech. The whole failed to evoke anything related to Shakespeare, however remotely; but I was reminded of Bush and some of his counterparts crawling on all fours around the political arena. In the leaflet I was handed by an usherette the author explained that his Hamlet moved and spoke in between "to be" and "not to be" as if unable to make up his mind as to his existence on earth. Bush did make up his mind and so what might have been relegated to a children's corner became the driving force of history. "My Hamlet is a mollusc rather than a human," explained the author. Many people would unhesitatingly resort to the same metaphor to define G. W. Bush and his capacities; but even they might express their admiration for the First Man along these lines, "Oysters are molluscs, as are snails and cuttlefish. And we like oysters, don't we? What would become of us without oysters? And why should we voice objections to cuttlefish?"

Sin incurs a debt by disturbing an order. But the effect remains so long as the cause remains. So as long as the disturbance of the order remains the debt of punishment must needs remain also. Now disturbance of an order is sometimes reparable, sometimes irreparable: because a defect which destroys the principle is irreparable, but if the principle is saved, defects can be repaired by virtue of that principle. For instance, if the principle of sight be destroyed, sight cannot be restored except by Divine power; but if the principle of sight is preserved, though certain impediments to the use of sight may arise, these can be remedied by nature or by art. Now in every order there is a principle whereby one takes part in that order. Consequently if a sin destroys the principle of the order whereby man's will is subject to God, the disorder will be such as to be considered in itself irreparable, although it is possible to repair it by the power of God.
(Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*)

G. W. Bush seems to have disturbed both the new and the old world orders, one of which was inaugurated by his father. The disturbance of the global order remains despite a great many dissident voices raised against this dictatorial regime. But so far the punishment has been lagging behind as if the person in charge—a successor of Dante's—was unable to ascertain whether the disturbance of the order is reparable or irreparable. Given the rigidity of Western society, which constitutes a nucleus of the global village, the disturbance may be irreparable: all those freedom-loving individuals seldom if ever change their minds. And they all need money which has become associated with a particular turn of mind imposed by G. W. Bush and his administration. And no one can change this turn of mind, let alone the mind itself, because money and the army are the best arguments in any dispute. The inhabitants of the global market town reason thus: "Bush has been re-elected and the multitude cannot be wrong, especially if this multitude is backed up by the most powerful army. So I'm not sure the order will ever be repaired except by the power of God." "Only God can help us," said Heidegger: His army has no equal in the entire universe. I wonder if the principle of our sight and foresight has been destroyed forever or just for a few generations to come?

"Oral people, in Asia or the Third World," write McLuhan and Bruce R. Powers in *The Global Village*, "are notoriously conservative about new technologies because of their sensitivity to the side effects involved—the new ground they bring into play—and theirs are histories of rejections of innovations. Westerners, in contrast, tend to adopt anything that promises an immediate profit and to ignore all side effects. It is this sensitivity to ground, plus a strong sense of decorum (propriety) and a lack of private identity that enables an Oriental to change behaviour instantly from one pattern to another. For example, until August 1945 the *chu* code of loyalty demanded of the Japanese people that they fight to the last man against the enemy. When the emperor changed the requirements of *chu* by broadcasting Japan's capitulation, the Japanese outdid themselves in expressing their cooperation with their victors."

No European or American nation would turn its coat so quickly. "We have worn this coat ever since we were born and it shows no signs of wear. Why should we turn it or put on another coat? Only those who are liable to turn traitors turn their coats. As for our minds, we don't want to change them either. Do *they* show any sign of wear?" Only a revelation akin to the discovery of concentration camps at the

end of the Second World War is likely to make people change their minds—the Germans, in the present case.

Nowadays no tenors are needed to settle a conflict between two nations which anyway respect each other's sovereignty unless somebody like Saddam Hussein invades a foreign territory, driven by the love of oil, and thereby sets an example followed by the son of the man who conquered Saddam's country, leaving his palace untouched. Doesn't the previous sentence sound like Dante's description of a sinner whom a host of commentators strive to identify throughout centuries? Here is a comment on it. In the nineteenth century rebellions traditionally originated in opera houses where some tenor sang a patriotic aria not necessarily linked by text or tune to the oppressed nation; and people jumped from their seats, shouting, "Down with the oppressors!"

CHAPTER 16

"As I review the copyedited manuscript," writes Bruce R. Powers, "I am pleased that so many of our tetradic projections are as relevant in 1988 as they were when *The Global Village* was being put together (from 1976 to 1984)." These tetradic projections, whatever they mean or intend to imply—I read the book three years ago—counterbalance nicely Dante's tercets which have already imposed a pattern on the present commentary. Within the domain of the Kabbalath, triads and tetrads respond to each other, creating a balance in the universe, which cannot be upset by any army, however powerful and insolent. What about the paragraph I quoted at the end of the previous chapter? Is it still relevant now? It is relevant insofar as one can use it as a yardstick by which to measure the distance between oral and printed societies in today's world? Is there anything to measure? "What does the window measure?" asks a man who has come to an estate agency in search of a flat. "Yes, there's only one window in the living room, but it measures three metres by four metres." Well, there is no window in our infinite world. What I see from where I am sitting is just a wall, Pink Floyd's wall. Why should one measure this wall? It is boundless. (Should I find another armchair, another vantage point?)

Do the Japanese still reject innovations? Do they endeavour to fit their computer games into the overall pattern of their history? Only within the scope of a computer game can such a hypothesis hold water. Nor did the Russians bother about communist slogans when, in the late eighties and the early nineties, they switched to capitalism, replacing the closed world by the infinite universe. Even in Milton's days the latter seemed to encroach on the former: Lucifer makes his way amongst *innumerable* stars. "There was an extensive seventeenth-century literature concerning plurality of worlds," writes Alastair Fowler, "and most astronomers accepted the more limited idea of a plurality of inhabited globes within the solar system."

"You say that the infinite universe presents us with one world only, from which we can't escape," said my American colleague. "But the very idea of the infinite universe postulates the plurality of worlds and opinions—the overall democracy."

"The Soviet Union was a closed world," I answered. "We knew exactly where Paradise and Hell were located. Actually panders and seducers, simoniacs, diviners, barrators, hypocrites, thieves, false counsellors, schismatics and counterfeiters had pride of place and consequently lived in Paradise. We knew that money didn't really count in a society where you had to talk to somebody instead of focusing your attention on shares, on the way they negotiate—"

"Do you mean you had no access to the infinity of resources?"

"Our paradise was limited to a few spheres," I answered. "And of course those spheres were located in Hell. But at least we could concentrate on the material we had at our disposal—on the *Commedia*, for instance. You know, finitude is counterbalanced by infinity rather nicely."

In those days I could not fly to Venice and so did my utmost to broaden the scope of my walks around Moscow and its suburbs. Instead of exploring unknown areas I would extend the path leading me from the Sparrow Mountains to the Unboring Garden without tampering with its actual size. But on many occasions the closed world did turn into Paradise where I journeyed from one planet to another in the twinkling of an eye—the speed that Dante often describes through a bow-and-arrow metaphor. (Or through an arrow-and-target metaphor.) The whole universe lay before me like an open book. And now I may decide to fly to Venice at any time, on the spur of the moment. I am sitting in my room and have no wish to go anywhere except to just another tercet from the *Commedia*.

Com' io tenea levate in lor le ciglia,
  e un serpente con sei piè si lancia
  dinanzi a l'uno, e tutto a lui s'appiglia.
Co' piè di mezzo li avvinse la pancia
  e con li anterïor le braccia prese;
  poi li addentò e l'una e l'altra guancia;
li diretani a le cosce distese,
  e miseli la coda tra 'mbedue
  e dietro per le ren sù la ritese.
Ellera abbarbicata mai non fue
  ad alber sì, come l'orribil fiera
  per l'altrui membra avviticchiò le sue.
Poi s'appiccar, come di calda cera
  fossero stati, e mischiar lor colore,
  né l'un né l'altro già parea quel ch'era:
come procede innanzi de l'ardore,
  per lo papiro suso, un color bruno
  che non è nero ancora e 'l bianco more.

While I kept my eyes on them, lo! a serpent with six feet darts up in front of one and fastens on him all over. With the middle feet it clasped the belly, and with its fore feet took his arms, then struck its teeth in one and the other cheek; its hind feet it spread upon his thighs, and put its tail between them, and bent it upwards on his loins behind. Ivy was never so rooted to a tree as the horrid beast entwined its own limbs round the other's; then, as if they had been of hot wax, they stuck together and mixed their colours, and neither the one nor the other now seemed what it was at first: even as in advance of the flame a dark colour moves across the paper, which is not yet black and the white dies away.
(The *Inferno*, Canto XXV)

The journey I undertook this time in the *Inferno* is tantamount to a trip from Moscow to Tokyo or from the Soviet Union to Russia. I have to compensate for my basic immobility by the long stretches of Dante's text along which I travel in my carriage, shouting to the *kutscher*, "Slower! Slower!" But Russia continues to zoom away, one truth replacing another truth, as if all these declarations and slogans were nothing but trees one is likely to spot out of the window of a TGV: she no longer travels in a carriage. (Neither do I, whenever confronted with Dante's text; I walk along it, plough through it, crawl on all fours over every syllable.) Like the serpent with six feet described in Canto XXV, the outside world led by the United States pounced upon Russia at the beginning of the nineties and even somewhat earlier, fastening on her all over, clasping her belly with its middle feet; she is neither the

Soviet Union nor a Western country now. The Russians are mixing their colour with that of the outside world in their endeavour to become a normal democratic country—a hut in the global village.

"Russia is a magnificent country," said one of my new Parisian friends. "She's truly infinite."

"If deprived of yin," I answered, "yang loses one or two letters. What we're left with amounts to no more than ya or ga. The former is an abbreviation of 'yeah' and the latter of 'gaga'."

"Do you mean to say Russia is a yes-country now? She used to be a no-country for quite a long time, a *niet*-country. One of her former diplomats was even called a *niet*-man."

"There are so many yes-countries nowadays. And the other countries are just evil. No-countries don't exist any more."

I might have quoted Seami who stated the role of balance in a No performance as he enlarged upon "night-time No": "In everything success depends on a proper harmonisation of negative and positive. The day-spirit is positive and the skilful player will make his No as quiet as possible to balance by negative playing the positive tone of the environment." "But it will sometimes happen even in the day," comments Arthur Waley, "that a gloom settles over the audience and a negative atmosphere is created. The actor must be quick to detect this mood and adapt himself to it. Conversely, at night an outburst of 'positivity' will sometimes need to be damped."

And here is a paragraph to the same effect from Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*:

> Occidentals cannot easily credit the ability of the Japanese to swing from one behaviour to another without psychic cost. Such extreme possibilities are not included in our experience. Yet in Japanese life the contradictions, as they seem to us, are as deeply based in their view of life as our uniformities are in ours. It is especially important for Occidentals to recognise that the "circles" into which the Japanese divide life do not include any "circle of evil". This is not to say that the Japanese do not recognise bad behaviour, but they do not see human life as a stage on which forces of good contend with forces of evil. They see existence as a drama which calls for careful balancing of the claims of one "circle" against another and of one course of procedure against another, each circle and each course being in itself good.

Again I am not sure the above paragraph is relevant in today's world where goodies and baddies are delineated in a structured way so that no merging of colours takes place before a bewildered observer.

"Japan has no alternative but to say 'yes' whenever talking to an American president or his envoy," said my Japanese travelling companion. "Their country is our ally and we can't betray them."

"Can't you have a different point of view?" I asked.

"We often have a different point of view," she answered, "but we can't *act* otherwise."

"Is there anything that might get you to change your minds? What does an American president have to say to make you answer 'no'? Is there such a thing?"

"We wouldn't invade Russia, I presume—even if asked to do so," she said out of politeness that nicely counterbalanced my rudeness, the brutality of my question.

We talked a lot during our journey to Switzerland where the wife of the Japanese ambassador awaited us to say we could not dine together because she was engaged otherwise. So we had dinner by ourselves, talking in front of an amusement park rigged up on the shore of Lake Geneva—a temporary nuisance.

"You look discouraged," she said, prepared to listen compassionately to my tales of woe.

"If I'm quiet people say I'm miserable, and if I'm joking and having fun they say I'm being stupid—I just can't win."

"I haven't said anything of the kind," she answered with patience.

"It's strange that my works are not understood by professionals, isn't it? I mean those who read too much nonsense can't appreciate what I'm writing—it jars on their idea of successful style and vocabulary."

"Don't you write for your own pleasure?" she asked.

"How is your niece?" I asked deviating from this topic which might have constituted another circle of Hell; yet Dante does not list unsuccessful writers among his sinners. Actually the only tercet where he does speak of an unsuccessful writer happens to be in the *Paradiso*, in Canto XXV, where he voices his desire to be crowned in his native city. Was he crowned anywhere else? Did the Florentines say to each other at some point, "Our illustrious poet has been crowned everywhere except in our city where he was born. So what are we waiting for to join the other cities of our country and indeed the whole world, the entire universe? After all, Dante is renowned in Hell, Purgatory and Paradise." Actually he was crowned only in the Hereafter.

"What about her? Why are you asking?" She looked up at the wine waiter expectantly as if *he* could satisfy her curiosity.

"Your niece is a very beautiful young woman. In her physique both Japan and the Western world blend most harmoniously. How is she doing? Did she marry a successful businessman?"

"She bought an apartment on credit," she answered doing her best not to look at me. "You'll need a lot of money to marry her."

"Isn't she rich?" I asked staring at her. Actually I met her niece only once and was not over-eager to see her again, for all her beauty.

"Who told you she's rich?"

"Well, her father is the head of the biggest electronic corporation in Japan."

"But his daughter is poor," she answered. "He's poor himself. There are no rich people in Japan. We're neither rich nor poor."

"And what about that multimillionaire who bought a Van Gogh painting several years ago?"

"He was accused of corruption and committed suicide," she said.

"Why was your niece's father so anxious to become the president of his company?"

"Because he's always worked for the glory of his company. You know, we're still fighting for things like honour, reputation and pride."

"But it's the honour of your *company* you care about," I said.

"There's nothing else for us. Our honour depends on that of the company we're working for."

"Don't you overstate the bond between your fellow citizens and their daily drudgery?" I went on asking barbaric questions; they were couched in insolent terms. "Don't you always create your private Japan?"

Indeed I had every reason to mistrust my friend's account of what was going on in her fatherland that used to be an oral society par excellence. But there are too many printed or rather screened words in Japan nowadays and their influence can neither be disregarded nor removed; and even if someone decided to remove all these texts from Japanese screens, another series of texts would replace them in the twinkling of an eye—an idiom suited for a description of how a computer works, considering that any screen looks like an eye. And what counts in this case is not the contents of texts but rather their presence, their omnipresence.

So old Japanese customs have been re-written in such a way as to become a page in a book that people read all over the world; and this book is not the *Divina Commedia*. Twenty years ago I asked my Japanese manager if my girlfriend could keep me company during my next tour. "Is she your fiancée?" he asked.

"No, not yet. Actually we have no intention of getting married in the near future."

"Then it's better not to bring her over here," he answered. "In Japan people are rather conservative, you know. They wouldn't understand."

"What's there to be understood?" I asked. "They'll just see me with a beautiful European woman."

"It's better not to bring her over here," he repeated, "if you don't wish to jeopardise your career in our country."

Once again I broached the subject during a conversation I recently had with the same middle-aged Japanese businessman whose passion for music had incited him to set up a concert management office in Tokyo. (But I did not speak about the same girlfriend.) "Of course you can invite her for the tour," he said. "Why not invite two young ladies?" He roared with laughter.

The "circles" into which the Japanese divide human life do not include any "circle of evil" (or Dantesque circles); no poem similar to the *Commedia* could have been written in Ancient Japan. In the second half of the twentieth century the Japanese have meticulously adjusted their ways to the Western (or American) way of life, but even now such a feat is beyond their ken: it is not enough to nod your head when G. W. Bush utters the word "evil". Perhaps a Japanese poet of genius might compose something along these lines:

Del nostro ponte disse: "O Malebranche,
ecco un de li anzïan di Santa Zita!

Mettetel sotto, ch'i' torno per anche
a quella terra, che n'è ben fornita:
ogn' uom v'è barattier, fuor che Bonturo;
del no, per li denar, vi si fa *ita*."
He spoke from our bridge, "O Malebranche, here's one of Saint Zita's Elders! Thrust him under, while I go back for more, to that city where there's a fine supply of them: every man there is a barrator, except Bonturo; there they make *Ay* of *No*, for cash."
(The *Inferno*, Canto XXI)

The word "corruption" is so common in Japan that Kurosawa made a film about it, where a businessman commits suicide because he has been accused of corruption; at least he climbs up a mountain slope leading him to a sort of terrace from which he can jump into the other world. Here is Singleton's commentary on the above tercets: "V. Capetti…states that the *anziani* were ten citizens, two from each division of the city, who held office for two months. The office of 'elder' in Lucca thus corresponded to the Florentine office of prior, in which Dante himself served; and the sinner condemned to punishment in this fifth *bolgia* of the eighth circle is guilty of corruption in public office (barratry), the very charge made against Dante when he was sentenced to exile. (Barratry, the buying and selling of public office, is the civil equivalent of simony, the buying and selling of church office, the sin punished in the third *bolgia*.)"

Have I explained what *bolgia* means? Another global search, another global village. Why should I explain what it means? My reader should acquaint himself (or herself) with the *Commedia* before coming to terms with this novel of mine. Let us call it a "novel" or a "poem". *Dead Souls is* a poem after all.

Among other renowned stage directors, Carmelo Bene and Valery Fokin count on the public's knowledge of the play they put on because they bring out moods, nuances, trifles and syllables.

What would Fokin single out from the *Paradiso* I am pondering on in my search for light, flight, Beatrice, the Virgin Mary and God? (Another typing error—Virgi*l* Mary.)

Dal centro al cerchio, e sì dal cerchio al centro
movesi l'acqua in un ritondo vaso,
secondo ch'è percosso fuori o dentro…
From the centre to the rim, and so from the rim to the centre, the water in a round vessel moves, according as it is struck from without or within.
(The *Paradiso*, Canto XIV)

We would contemplate this water in a round vessel for several minutes; such an image bears all the hallmarks of a remarkable stage director who busies himself with *relevant* details (with Dante's comparisons).

Imagini, chi bene intender cupe
quel ch'i' or vidi—e ritegna l'image,
mentre ch'io dico, come ferma rupe—,

quindici stelle che 'n diverse plage
  lo cielo avvivan di tanto sereno
  che soperchia de l'aere ogne compage…
Let him imagine, who would rightly grasp what I now beheld (and, while I speak, let him hold the image firm as a rock), fifteen stars which in different regions vivify the heaven with such great brightness that it overcomes every thickness of the air...
(The *Paradiso*, Canto XIII)

Patrice Chéreau would show us *five* stars on a curtain where *fifty* stars might have been projected, had he thought in terms of quantity. And Peter Konwitschny—another post-modern stage director—might do justice to Grandgent's comment to the detriment of Dante's verses: "The better to visualise the scene, the reader is asked to pick out twenty-four of the brightest fixed stars and imagine them arranged in the shape of a double Ariadne's Crown. Fifteen miscellaneous ones are selected first, there being, according to Ptolemaic astronomy, fifteen stars of the first magnitude in the whole sky." This quotation might appear on a screen presented to the audience with the insolence of a tinker saying to his father, "I got an A." But where is the A? And where are the fifteen stars the poet speaks of in Canto XIII?

Where are they indeed? Perhaps it *is* better to supply a recent commentary on these tercets because no representation of Dante's text, however vivid, can take us back to the times when the fifteen stars he spoke of were nothing but the stars twinkling in a closed world.

If asked to stage the part of my commentary where I ponder over the discrepancy between the *Commedia* and the Japanese mentality, Konwitschny might quote the following paragraph from Weber's article *Confucianism and Puritanism*:

The contrast of the Chinese social ethical position to the world with all occidental religious ethics was insurmountable. From the outside it is possible to demonstrate some apparent similarities between Confucianism and some of the patriarchal aspects of the Thomist and Lutheran ethic. But this appearance is only superficial. The Christian ethic is implicated in such a close compromise with the orders of the world that it could not remove from the ground up the pessimistic tension between the world and the supramundane determination of the individual with its unavoidable consequences. The Confucian system of radical world-optimism could eliminate this tension like no other ethic.
(Translation by S. Whimster)

And I might tell him, "Thank you for putting my commentary on, but if you're determined to bring in other writers and philosophers you'd better quote the rest of the article as well—forget about my commentary. I wish I could forget it myself."

Peter Konwitschny. Another attractive character. "Vivid examples of human beings." What should I call him? My colleague, my friend? "I didn't have the honour of meeting you *socially* but I saw your staging of the *Götterdämmerung*. By the way, my commentary may be entitled *The Dawn of God*. I don't believe in God. Back to Dostoevsky again. I'm re-reading *Crime and Punishment*, you know. The protagonist doesn't believe in God, but so many people talk to him about religion, salvation, life, the

open air or just a breath of air that he finally succumbs to the allurement. Is it just an allurement? All the verses I'm itching to quote instead of writing about the Chinese and their traditions! What do I care about their ways and woes? Let me just quote the whole of the *Paradiso*. Hope, hope, hope. At least I should quote that bit of the *Commedia*. But my commentary might spoil Dante's tercets. I watched television last night. Sometimes I watch TV to get away from this commentary—my blood pressure goes up. What did I see on television? Just the news I never watch. What do I watch now? Porn movies mostly, nothing to write home about. But I wouldn't write home anyway because I have no home. Playing with words again. And what if my commentary catches someone's attention? I mean it might get translated into French, German, Spanish, Italian and Russian. What would my translators do with my urge to write home about *something*? Why am I confiding in you of all people? I don't even know you. I'm told you're going to do *Der fliegende Holländer* in Moscow. They might have elected *him* as the greatest person in Dutch history. As I told you, I watched TV last night. The Dutch were asked to name the greatest person in their history. Who would *you* select among all those people coming out of the Hereafter, their eyes gauging your attitude towards them? Rembrandt and Erasmus were on the list. The Dutch chose a political leader who was assassinated two years ago. I've never heard his name. Brünhilde has jumped onto the horse and with one bound leaps into the burning pyre. The flames immediately crackle and flare up high. They seem to set fire to the hall of the gods. Through the cloud bank that lies on the horizon breaks an increasingly bright red glow. In its light the three Rhinemaidens are seen happily playing with the ring and swimming in circles. A happy ending, isn't it? A glimmer of hope, a ray of hope, the light of hope. Rembrandt and Erasmus have been burnt alive. A bizarre politician is playing with the ring that confers great power on its owner."

Do pagan gods undergo any punishment in the *Commedia*? The jury passed a verdict of guilty, with an appeal to the judge for clemency. And the judge was so clement as to speak of Jupiter and Juno alongside Christ and the Virgin Mary. In Dante's times the pagan gods, though dismissed from their heavenly office, were not utterly obliterated from social life and therefore would crop up here and there as if to remind the Christians of their chaotic past. Their interference in human life must have persisted until the seventeenth century, otherwise Milton would not have taken the trouble to exterminate them once and for all in his poem *The Hymn* where the birth of Christ has dire consequences for the Lars and Lemures, for Peor and Baalim who "forsake their temples dim"; for Ashtaroth and the Libyc Hammon, for sullen Moloch, Isis and Orus.

Nor is Osiris seen
In Memphian grove or green,
  Trampling the unshowered grass with lowings loud;
Nor can he be at rest
Within his sacred chest,
  Nought but profoundest Hell can be his shroud;
In vain with timbreled anthems dark
The sable-stoled sorcerers bear his worshiped ark.

Milton sends Osiris to "profoundest" Hell, outstripping Dante in this and other respects; the latter might have conveyed the Egyptian god of resurrection to Limbo, allowing him to share the destiny of the unbaptised and the virtuous heathen. After all, his only fault was being born prior to Christ whose coming to earth made Osiris' way of resurrecting the dead rather obsolete. But somebody had to take care of the dead before the advent of Christianity and Osiris did his best to fulfil the task. Why send him to the lowest circle of Hell where Lucifer holds three chewing gums in his mouth? Had he betrayed another god?

Both Plutarch and Diodorus agree in assigning a divine origin to Osiris, and both state that he reigned in the form of a man upon the earth. This being so it is clear that the Egyptians generally believed that a god made himself incarnate, and that an immediate ancestor of the first Pharaoh of Egypt was a being who possessed two natures, the one human and the other divine. As a man he performed the good works which his divine nature indicated to him: he abolished cannibalism, he improved the manners and morals of men, he taught them to live according to law, to worship the gods, and to practise the arts of agriculture. Filled with love for man he set out to travel over the whole world so that he might teach all non-Egyptians to embrace his beneficent doctrine, and enjoy the blessings which accrue to God-fearing and law-abiding people.
(E. A. Wallis Budge, Osiris)

He was an Egyptian counterpart of Christ and, like his illustrious successor, endeavoured to spread his doctrine all over the world. But in this and other respects he was far less fortunate than the Christians whose reports and explanations convinced enough people to supply Dante with an argument he puts forward in Canto XXIV of the *Paradiso*; I already quoted it in Chapter 7. What would my train of thought sound like if I were Osiris? (Didn't Dante feel he was St Paul, if not Jesus Christ, to some extent?)

"I know Jesus Christ will come to earth sooner and later—I'm a god after all. And all gods of my standing are more or less omniscient. Only Christ will be allowed to raise the dead from their tombs because He is our Saviour. And I hope he'll save me as well. What am I supposed to do while waiting for Him? Twiddling my thumbs? Is it a crime to make all these men and women believe they'll be resurrected? Their lives are not bounded by this valley of tears. Shall I offer them a foretaste of what lies in store for humankind, a glimmer of hope? They're unlikely to complain about my callousness and insincerity. I'll tell them I was hated by my brother who inveigled me into a box and let me die inside it after sealing its cover with lead. My body was thrown into the river and carried out to sea. It's my brother who betrayed me. Why should *I* spend Eternity in the company of traitors like Judas Iscariot? I was risen from the dead. Doesn't every Christian identify with Christ? I'm quite aware that in this domain I can't do anything except go through the motions. But in other domains I'll help my little children by improving their morals and manners, by turning them away from cannibalism and focusing their attention on agriculture. Why should they eat their brothers and sisters? Don't they have

enough vegetables and fruit at their disposal? And what's wrong with my ardent desire to turn them into God-fearing, law-abiding citizens?

"S'i' era sol di me quel che creasti
  novellamente, amor che 'l ciel governi,
  tu 'l sai, che col tuo lume mi levasti."
Whether I was but that part of me which Thou didst create last, O Love that rulest the heavens, Thou knowest, who with Thy light didst lift me.

Let us compare this tercet from Canto I of the *Paradiso* with the following Egyptian text (*Pepi I*): "Thou sailest up the river to the Thinite Nome, thou sailest about Abydos. Thou openest the door in heaven in the horizon, the gods rejoice at meeting thee. They draw thee into heaven in thy soul, and thou art endowed with soul among them." This passage proves that "the door leading to heaven was at Abydos, that the gods welcomed the deceased when he had passed through it, that they gave him soul-power, and that he appeared afterwards newly-born from the womb of heaven" (E. A. Wallis Budge). Dante's topographical precision does not include the whereabouts of the gate that may open into Paradise before a worthy wayfarer. What the poet actually sees is the *divina foresta* that crowns the Mount of Purgatory—a lone island in the Southern sea, exactly opposite Calvary on the globe. Ulysses and his men were not allowed to land there because the key to that kingdom is the will of God and not human intelligence or courage. There is no such island on our maps; we are not likely to find it, let alone set foot on it. We are forbidden to catch a mere glimpse of the Mount.

Cinque volte racceso e tante casso
  lo lume era di sotto da la luna,
  poi che 'ntrati eravam ne l'alto passo,
quando n'apparve una montagna, bruna
  per la distanza, e parvemi alta tanto
  quanto veduta non avëa alcuna.
Five times the light beneath the moon had been rekindled and as many quenched, since we had entered on the passage of the deep, when there appeared to us a mountain dark in the distance, and to me it seemed the highest I had ever seen.
(The *Inferno*, Canto XXVI)

The Egyptians gods welcome a wayfarer who crosses the threshold of the heavenly kingdom after opening its door. Once the crossing is over, they endow him with soul-power that enables him to be born once again from the womb of heaven. All this concords with Dante's journey except that he is accompanied as far as the threshold of the *Paradiso* by Virgil who often infuses him with optimism, energy, new life—the properties he needs to continue his initiation triumphantly. He would not have reached the Garden of Eden, but for Virgil's assistance and warnings: the elder poet treats the younger as his apprentice. Even in the Seventh Circle of Purgatory, where a great fire burns on their path, Virgil has to exhort Dante not to fear the last obstacle separating him not only from Paradise but also

from Beatrice. "Haven't I guided you safely so far?" asks Virgil rather mildly: he does not seem to be surprised by his pupil's behaviour. "Do you think I'll let you down when we are so near to God?

"Credi per certo che se dentro a l'alvo
di questa fiamma stessi ben mille anni,
non ti potrebbe far d'un capel calvo.
E se tu forse credi ch'io t'inganni,
fatti ver' lei, e fatti far credenza
con le tue mani al lembo d'i tuoi panni.
Pon giù omai, pon giù ogne temenza;
volgiti in qua e vieni: entra sicuro!"
"Be well assured that if within the belly of this flame you should stay full a thousand years, it could not make you bald of one hair. And if perchance you think that I deceive you, go close to it and try it with your own hands on the edge of your garment. Put away now, put away all fear, turn hitherward, come, enter with confidence."
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto XXVII)

"Why should I betray you on the threshold of Paradise? Do you want to put me in the lowest part of the *Inferno* alongside the traitors we both abhor and despise? Why don't you try to singe the edge of your garment? I've told you these flames are as harmless as a painting where Nero fiddles and sings while Rome burns."

"Once on television I saw a man set fire to his own body as a protest against an invasion of his country. Nobody interfered with his self-immolation. All those onlookers—there were lots of them—had played with matches in their childhood. None of them was bold enough to sacrifice the edge of their garment to find out if the flames were harmful or not. In the twenty-first century it's rather difficult to take no notice of flames because of the images they broadcast on television."

Quando mi vide star pur fermo e duro,
turbato un poco disse: "Or vedi, figlio:
tra Bëatrice e te è questo muro."
When he saw me stand there unmoved and stubborn, he said, a little vexed, "Now see, son, between Beatrice and you is this wall."

How could Dante forget that Beatrice was waiting for him? And she said nothing to this effect upon meeting her wooer, an hour or two later, in Canto XXX of the *Purgatorio*. She spoke about the ladies that her unfaithful virtual lover had courted in her absence and said nothing of the fear he had felt in front of the flames he ought to have walked through in no time and without hesitation. "Why, may I ask, did you tremble at the sight of the fire barring your way to the heroine of your poem? Usually people tremble with cold. You trembled with fire. I distinctly saw your bottom lip tremble. And tears welled up in your eyes. Is that behaviour worthy of a true gentleman, of the greatest poet in the history of humankind? Were you afraid of losing a few hairs? Virgil promised that not a single hair of yours would be lost during the passage through the fire. And what if you lost all your hair? You're not

Samson, are you? Besides, many beautiful men have no hair at all. Some of them got rid of their hair to look more virile. I'm not alluding to skinheads or other unruly youngsters. Did you see *The Brothers Karamazov*, a Hollywood movie? Dimitri was as bald as a coot."

But let us bow to the printed word again and return to the light conveying Dante to the *Paradiso* in Canto I. (This commentary would make a poor audio book.) "'…*col tuo lume mi levasti*'. Since Beatrice, in the allegory, is precisely the light that uplifts the pilgrim Dante," writes Singleton, "this phrase, in direct address to the Deity, makes her a God-given light—which, of course, she is 'infused' from above." In other words, it is Beatrice who welcomes Dante in Paradise and gives him soul-power or rather the last portion of it: Virgil has already contributed towards its supply on many occasions. Here is a modest example of how she assisted her protégé:

Io mi volsi a Beatrice, e quella udio
  pria ch'io parlassi, e arrisemi un cenno
  che fece crescer l'ali al voler mio.
I turned to Beatrice, and she heard before I spoke, and smiled to me a sign that made the wings of my desire increase.

I am certain that Dante did not say a word during his space odyssey for the simple reason that both Beatrice and Virgil were reading his mind out loud whenever a thought or a dream turned up within its realm. (One is tempted to speak in terms of realms and kingdoms when pondering about the *Commedia*.) Beatrice was rather obliging all along the *Paradiso* and even a staunch misogynist would not have found fault with her. But, in comparison with the Egyptian gods and their customs, she gave him a poor welcome in the *Purgatorio* where he shed many tears to deserve a "ticket to Paradise", as Ivan Karamazov might have put it. The only instance of what an Egyptian deity might call "welcome" occurs at the end of Canto XXXI when, at the request of the three dancers (the theological virtues), Beatrice unveils her mouth.

"Volgi, Beatrice, volgi li occhi santi,"
  era la sua canzone, "al tuo fedele
  che, per vederti, ha mossi passi tanti!
Per grazia fa noi grazia che disvele
  A lui la bocca tua, sì che discerna
  La seconda bellezza che tu cele."
"Turn, Beatrice, turn your holy eyes upon your faithful one," was their song, "who has moved so many steps to see you. For grace do us the grace to unveil to him your mouth, that he may discern the second beauty which you conceal."

Imagine a mother speaking to her daughter about a wealthy suitor who has just come in: "Why are you so unfeeling? After all, this man is in love with you. And he spent a lot of money on the plane ticket. Don't you know that plane tickets are quite expensive? Well, he has expensive tastes and I can't blame

him for it. Wealthy suitors are usually ugly and old, but he's almost your age. And he's not ugly, is he? Please make an effort. Smile!"

"And a broad smile lit up her daughter's face," writes a scholar. Here is what Dante writes:

O isplendor di viva luce etterna,
  chi palido si fece sotto l'ombra
  sì di Parnaso, o bevve in sua cisterna,
che non paresse aver la mente ingombra,
  tentando a render te qual tu paresti
  là dove armonizzando il ciel t'adombra,
quando ne l'aere aperto ti solvesti?
O splendour of living light eternal! Who has ever grown so pale under the shade of Parnassus or drunk so deep at its well, that he would not seem to have his mind encumbered, on trying to render you as you appeared, when in the free air you did disclose yourself, there where in its harmony that heaven overshadows you!

O splendor of eternal living light—
even he who has grown pale in the shadow of Parnassus
or has drunk deeply from its well,

would not even he appear to have his mind confounded,
attempting to describe you as you looked,
Heaven with its harmonies reflected in you,
when in the wide air you unveiled yourself?
(Hollander's translation)

CHAPTER 17

I left my Japanese friend at the Montreux Palace where she could have a cup of tea or coffee as she waited for the ambassador's wife who had promised to pick her up and take her back to Geneva. Why do I put all these attractive characters in my commentary that is not a story after all? It might be the story of my life, my misery and what not. It is the story of the *Commedia*, however, and I have no desire to spoil it by my depressions and the degeneracy that may be commented upon by a sociologist like Baudrillard. This commentary does not depend on my desires but on what I *have* to write in connection with the *Paradiso* and the *Inferno*. The last quotation from the *Purgatorio* has often been the object of scholarly attention and I am duty bound either to cite my learned predecessors or to have a go at it myself. And I did not say anything about the theological virtues imploring Beatrice to unveil her mouth and thereby induce the immortal poet to write an unparalleled description of Heaven. "The four cardinal virtues, representing the active life," writes Hollander, "insist that, while they are able to escort Dante to the eyes of Beatrice, their sister virtues, the theological three, at the right wheel of the chariot, are more appropriate presences to prepare Dante's vision for that moment."

So now I have to find the tercets in which the four cardinal virtues are described. Here they are:

"Noi siam qui ninfe e nel cil siamo stelle;
  pria che Beatrice discendesse al mondo,
  fummo ordinate a lei per sue ancelle.
Merrenti a li occhi suoi, ma nel giocondo
  lume ch'è dentro aguzzeranno i tuoi
  le tre di là, che miran più profondo."

"Here we are nymphs and in heaven we are stars; before Beatrice descended to the world we were ordained to her for her handmaids. We will bring you to her eyes; but in the joyous light which is within them the three on the other side, who look deeper, shall quicken yours."

"What are the three theological virtues?" asks the reader.

"Faith, Hope and Charity."

"And what are the four cardinal virtues?"

"Justice, Prudence, Temperance and Fortitude."

"Our firm has always been commended for its financial prudence," says the reader. "Anyway, my watchwords are caution and prudence."

Many years ago I put a cake on the roof of my car and left it there, absorbed in my thoughts or by a book I was reading at the time: there *was* a book lying open on the driver's seat. I shut the door and drove off. A few minutes later, when my sweet tooth began to ache once more, I realised I had forgotten to remove the cake from the roof. I got out of the car and looked up; the cake had disappeared. So I made a U-turn and presently saw the box in question on the other side of the road. The cake preserved its shape and taste, demonstrating that there are not so many malicious drivers in

the world, prepared to swerve and run over an object or a sluggish animal. I hope that whatever I was planning to write about will surface sooner or later, preserved intact in my memory and at the end of the file where I put my notes.

So what did I forget this time? In the previous chapter I said that Dante had been noted for his religious tolerance and I intended to show how the reader may profit from the poet's broadmindedness. The above excerpt is one of those instances where nymphs and theological virtues do not only live under the same roof but actually merge into one substance—somewhat like the serpent and the sinner depicted in Canto XXV of the *Inferno*. (Likewise I talked about them in the previous chapter.) Another nymph turns up in Canto XII of the *Paradiso*, risen from the dead through the name of Juno:

Come si volgon per tenera nube
  due archi paralelli e concolori,
  quando Uinone a sua ancella iube,
nascendo di quel d'entro quel di fori,
  a guisa del parlar di quella vaga
  ch'amor consunse come sol vapori

As two bows, parallel and like in colour, bend across a thin cloud when Juno gives the order to her handmaid—the one without born of the one within, like the voice of that wandering nymph whom love consumed as the sun does vapour...

"The 'wanderer' is the nymph Echo," comments Singleton, "who used to keep Juno engaged by incessantly talking to her, while Jupiter sported with the nymphs. Juno, on finding this out, punished Echo by changing her into an echo. In this state the nymph fell in love with Narcissus, but, her love not being returned, she pined away in grief, so that nothing remained of her but her voice." Uncommon readers do not need this commentary: they are well-versed in Greek and other mythologies. The same readers would not wonder why Dante speaks about one rainbow being born of another because, as Singleton explains, the outer arc of a double rainbow is called the reflection, or echo, of the inner one. It was formerly thought to be an actual reflection. But even an uncommon reader might not notice a theological allusion hidden in the echoing of one rainbow by another. "...the outer taking birth from the inner, echoing like her fading cries...", translates Anthony Esolen. "The image," he comments, "is charged with theological significance: Pseudo-Dionysius uses it to discuss the means by which the light of God is passed along and diffused from one celestial hierarchy to that below, and Dante will use the image of the reflected rainbow again (XXXIII, 118-20) when seeking an image of the Trinity. Here it suggests intimacy and distinction between the two garlands. The first is Aristotelian, legal, philosophical, historical, Dominican; the second Platonic, theological, prophetic, Franciscan—but the reader should not press the distinction too far."

I shall not press the distinction at all, eager as I am to pass on to other parts of the *Commedia* or to other aspects of my life: if I decide to say whatever there is to say about these two tercets I shall get bogged down in them for the rest of my life. There are so many echoes in the words our poet scribbled

on the pieces of paper he would lay his hands on when granted another quota of inspiration that the whole world is nothing but a piece of music emanating from the *Commedia*. And here is another echo I hear as I comment on the divine poem—an echo of my pessimistic moods, of my despondency, of my estrangement from this day and age:

> The great majority of us can no longer identify, let alone quote, even the central biblical or classical passages which not only are the underlying script of Western literature (from Caxton to Robert Lowell, poetry in English has carried inside it the implicit echo of previous poetry), but have been the alphabet of our laws and public institutions. The most elementary allusions to Greek mythology, to the Old and the New Testament, to the classics, to ancient and to European history, have become hermetic. Short bits of text now lead precarious lives on great stilts of footnotes…Not only much of Greek and Latin literature, but substantial portions of European letters, from the *Commedia* to *Sweeney Agonistes* (a poem which, like so many of T. S. Eliot's, is a palimpsest of echoes), have passed out of natural reach. Subject to the scholar's conservation and to occasional, fragmentary visitation by university students, works which were once immediate to literate recall now lead the dreary half-life of those Stradivari fiddles mute behind glass in the Coolidge collection in Washington. (George Steiner, *The Uncommon Reader*)

As I said earlier some stage directors still count on our knowledge of this or that masterpiece to give free rein to their fantasy which may single out a few words from a play, from a short story, to serve its own ends without bothering if the audience will understand those odds and ends or not. Carmelo Bene would substantially abridge Shakespeare's plays and the only redeeming feature of his short cuts—from a common spectator's point of view—lies in the repetition of remarks and exclamations such as, "O Desdemona, away! away! away!" And accordingly the heroine goes further and further from where her husband shouts these words, his face distorted in agony. Clenching his fists and teeth, he repeats "away" as if to spare his wife an ignominious death that, incidentally, does not come at the end of Bene's version. As he is lying next to his wife's body Othello just repeats, "Too late", motionless and weary. Gradually these words become their own echo. What is left of Othello amounts to nothing more than his voice and these words—his echo.

And what has become of you, my darling, my fake Beatrice? We quarrelled in the Georgian restaurant and then I saw you at the Big Conservatoire Hall. Not long after that I heard your voice—three times. This afternoon I hear neither your voice nor even its slightest echo that must have left Versailles last year: an echo cannot survive for more than two or three months, for five months at the utmost. Does everything disappear like that? Knowledge, poetry, voices, faces, values? Three days ago I attended a piano recital which added a finishing touch to the disappearance of everything: I seem to know all about it now. An Austrian pianist performed Morton Feldman's works spanning the fifties and the eighties, *The Palace for Mari* being composed in 1985. Feldman was very fond of the piano: "The way its sounds exuberantly reverberate and then gradually die away is the metaphor of the extinction of this world's values," he said. I wrote a poem about his conception of piano sounds (and music):

A few notes or many notes. Who plays them? Why
Play them? There are many notes but they
Sound once in a while as if taking their time. What do they
Take? Our time, our attention, our
Heart, our soul. Whatever they take is
Theirs. Why should we inquire into the matter? Do we inquire
Into the matter? I don't ask questions and the answers
I get don't sound like answers; they sound like a few notes
Spread around the universe.
They don't really sound: they're spread
Through the universe. There's nothing else. I hope
There's nothing else. What can exist
Alongside these sounds? There's one Beatrice,
One Ophelia. Why should I look
For *my* Beatrice?

This poem also embroiders on Feldman's conception of Time that he treats big-heartedly, letting it speak for itself. And what can Time say when it speaks for itself? Most of the time we do not allow Time to put a word in edgeways. Time is money and so we should just count it. We begin to count Time and even put it in our banks as if it could be stored somewhere for a while and then taken out for further use. Nor does Time stretch before me as I drive from Geneva to Lucerne along one of those Swiss roads flanked on both sides by mountains: the road will be there tomorrow and the day after. And Time or rather the stretch of time I am living through during my journey will disappear like a piano sound that dies away even if you use the pedal, anxious to let it sound as long as possible. And if I drive along the same road tomorrow it will represent another reality, not a memory. Only if I looked back for an instant, yearning to catch another glimpse of the landscape I left behind and running the danger of a head-on collision, could I experience something like a remembrance of things past.
And what about a recording of *The Palace for Mari*? Isn't it like a road I can take whenever I feel like it? There is something artificial about recordings which *may* be likened to the road I took that day and to any other road, provided no earthquake makes it unfit for cars or even pedestrians.

ché, come noi venimmo al guasto ponte,
  lo duca a me si volse con quel piglio
  dolce ch'io vidi prima a piè de monte.
Le braccia aperse, dopo alcun consiglio
  eletto seco riguardando prima
  ben la ruina, e diedemi di piglio.
E come quei ch'adopera ed estima,
  che sempre par che 'nnanazi si proveggia,
  così, levando me sù ver' la cima
d'un ronchione, avvisava un'altra scheggia
  dicendo: "Sovra quella poi t'aggrappa;
  ma tenta pria s'è tal ch'ella ti reggia."
For when we came to the ruined bridge my leader turned to me with that sweet look which I saw first at the foot of the mountain. After taking some counsel with himself, looking first well at the ruin, he opened his arms and laid hold of me. And like one who works and reckons, always seeming to provide

beforehand, so, while lifting me up toward the top of one great rock, he was looking out another crag, saying, "Grapple next on that, but try first if it will bear you."
(The *Inferno*, Canto XXIV)

By His death on the Cross, Christ seems to have introduced Time into the kingdom of Hell: the ruined bridge is just a memory of the original. And whenever we are determined to recall something our memory makes an effort personified in the above quotation by the figure of Virgil carrying Dante on his shoulders. (The crag is another memory-prop.) No effort is needed to drive along the same road in a car that has been recently filled up and is reliable enough not to break down before reaching the ultimate destination.

The arrival of new sinners—the only event that temporarily enlivens the routine of the nether world—belongs to Eternity; their punishments will never come to a close and, given the doctrine of determination, they might have begun at Adam's birth. However, the bridge looked *otherwise* in days of yore and the devils recall its original shape. "Yes, the bridge was different. Not beautiful, but you could use it. Now you can't. And our sinners have always been with us. Of course we haven't tortured them enough. We've got plenty of time to make up for it."

So the future *was* introduced into Hell at the moment of its foundation on account of the devils' eagerness to torment their wards with ever-increasing severity. Time may be regarded as an ever-lasting present, but in this present a sinner may try and escape from a devil's wrath and once in a while he manages to outsmart his torturer. At this point we can distinguish four varieties of Time available in Hell. The Simonists fixed head downwards in the rock dwell in an ever-lasting present. The Hypocrites pacing in copes of lead dwell in a moving present, but this present does not move towards the future; nor does it move towards the past. It seems to move towards itself. The third variety of Time is symbolised by the Diviners who go with their faces twisted so as to look behind them. They dwell in an ever-lasting present that moves towards both the future and the past and thus has a lot of affinities with our human time: the older we grow the more we look like the Diviners as we move forward with our heads turned towards the past. And here are two examples of the fourth variety; both are from Canto XXII.

E Libicocco "Troppo avem sofferto,"
  disse; e preseli 'l braccio col runciglio,
  sì che, stracciando, ne portò un lacerto.
And Libicocco cried, "We have endured too much!" and seized his arm with the grapple so that, tearing, he ripped out a muscle of it.

Let us analyse the movement of Time as depicted in this tercet. At some point a sinner is up to his tricks again; at another point a devil says, "Enough's enough"; at yet another point the devil inflicts a punishment on the sinner. What is the difference between this variety of Time and the one we have

come across in Canto XXIII where the Hypocrites walk in copes of lead? They also move and even talk; but they cannot escape their punishment, not even for a second.

Lo Navarrese ben suo tempo colse;
  fermò le piante a terra, e in un punto
  saltò e dal proposto lor si sciolse.
The Navarrese chose well his time, planted his feet firmly on the ground, and in an instant leaped and broke away from their marshal.

This sinner does escape a punishment, if only for an hour or two. What counts, however, is that he *can* outwit and outrun the devils once in a while.

non altrimenti l'anhitra di botto
  quando 'l falcon s'appressa, giù s'attuffa,
  ed ei ritorna sù crucciato e rotto.
...not otherwise the wild duck that suddenly dives down, when the falcon approaches, and he returns upward, vexed and defeated.

Actually the sinner out*dives* the devil, as it were.
So what did Christ introduce into Hell when He expired on the Cross? History? But history in Hell, if any, is not salvation-oriented, contrary to what happens on earth: our history goes forward, inspired by Christ's engagement. History in Hell does not go anywhere and consequently there is no history within its circles that are vicious circles from this point of view. What is Time? I thought I might tackle this problem within my notes on the *Commedia* where Time and Eternity alternatively intermingle and separate as the wayfarers make their way to the *Paradiso*. In the *Inferno* they reflect both the eternity of punishments and the journey which takes only a few days. They often intermingle to comment on the sorry plight of the sinners who recall their lives and are quite aware of their non-stop tortures. Eternity is almost absent from the *Purgatorio* where, emancipated from the vicious eternity of the *Inferno*, the sinners dwell in a prison of time separating them from the *Paradiso*. It is another time they are confronted with as they wait for their admission to the spheres of the elect:

"Or tu chi s' che 'l nostro fummo fendi,
  e di noi parli pur come se tue
  partissi ancor lo tempo per calendi?"
"Who then are you that cleave our smoke and speak of us even as if you still measured time by calends?"
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto XVI)

"The souls on the mountain," writes Hollander, "have their own temporality, but one in which all of time is but a necessary prolegomenon to eternity, when real life begins for them. Thus for them the months of the calendar are real but meaningless." Yet they recall their lives rather vividly and therefore still partake of human time that may become quite meaningful within the scope of their

expiatory existence whenever they do justice to their nostalgic moods. Anyway, Benvenutto's comment seems to be far less perspicacious: "The dead know no division of time, since time does not pass for them."

Time disappeared altogether as Dante reached the last spheres of the realm in which he was to settle after a prison term in Purgatory. Strictly speaking, Time exists neither in Hell nor in Paradise. Whatever we might say in Paradise does not resound within Time: we are in no hurry to put or answer questions. We might sing a hymn, but our singing would have nothing to do with music in the realm of which sounds die away. And nothing dies in Paradise, not even sounds; they might resound eternally, creating a chord that constitutes the harmony we allude to so often and without having the slightest idea of what it is all about. And the words uttered up there must sound like music and vice versa. Yet Dante hears many voices in the *Paradiso*, many voices and also a few hymns sung by the elect; in other words, he hears both music and words. Of course St Bernard's voice must be beautiful, but he utters a number of *words* when addressing Beatrice's protégé; they are not music, properly speaking. He does not sing an aria, not even a Mozart aria. Suppose Dante hears the following two tercets at the same time:

"Nel ventre tuo si raccese l'amore,
  per lo cui caldo ne l'etterna pace
  così è germinato questo fiore."
"In thy womb was rekindled the Love under whose warmth this flower in the eternal peace has thus unfolded."
(The *Paradiso*, Canto XXXIII)

"Omai dintorno a questo consistorio
  puoi contemplare assai, se le parole
  mie son ricolte, sanz' altro aiutorio."
"By now, if you have taken in my words, you may contemplate much in regard to this consistory without more help."
(The *Paradiso*, Canto XXIX)

What would Dante hear? Nothing except a few disparate words: "*assai, germinato, caldo, omai*." All these sounds are not a piece of music, nor do they blend into a harmony. And if they do, no one can understand their meaning except the elect who might communicate in this way, talking together without ever interrupting each other. But Dante was not of their number, not yet. What would he have thought upon hearing such cacophony, such mumbo-jumbo? "Shall I pretend I understood every word? And what shall I answer them? Actually their words didn't sound like questions. Just another truth, two truths. Well, I'll never learn these truths. Why not replace them by an excerpt from St Thomas? By two excerpts?"

Piano sounds are always dying away. But they are replaced by other sounds which abolish Time and convey us to the last cantos of the *Paradiso* without asking permission either from Dante or God.

Feldman said that his music should not be listened to; what you can do is just look at a landscape or an object, at something lying in front of you. The *Commedia* is lying around me—all the editions I use for this novel of mine. They are strewn over the floor of the room where I feed this commentary into my computer. Is that what Feldman sought to impart through his music? He was yearning to destroy the forms upon which music is moulded. What we actually hear when listening to his works is the last cantos of the *Paradiso*. The tercets I quoted above resound together, separately, and we understand everything, every single word.

What is Time?

Time is nothing—the only answer to the question
"What's Time"? It's not a cup of coffee
I might drink this morning; it's rather something
I won't drink—absence,
Not presence. Your face, your voice. When I saw you
There was Eternity in your eyes.
I saw it the other night. There was nothing
Either around or inside it. Your eyes
Didn't invite me to explore your soul. They had a light
Of their own and needed no background,
No foreground. Eternity is a point on which seconds
Converge. Do they?
Do they converge on anything? This second
Will disappear in a second. Nothing can bring it back except
Our memory
That relies on another second.

Time is more akin to poetry than to prose and instead of saying, "I can't express what Time is because this subject lies beyond my ken and pen," I just write a poem. Dante *was* writing a poem. How often did he say, "This subject lies beyond my ken and pen?" But can't my poem shed a *lumière tamisée* on this subject as if it were a piece of Japanese lacquerware requiring soft light or an appropriate shadow? I wish it were a piece of Japanese lacquerware. "Where" is the next word in this chain. Where indeed could I find a tangible symbol of Time? I wish I could touch it: no amount of words or poems will ever express Time as precisely as an object, be it a piece of lacquerware or a painting. Or an edition of the *Commedia*. Or the score of *The Palace for Mari* I am going to order: it was published by the Universal Edition in Vienna.

What is the difference between an object and what I am writing now? I can print these pages and touch them to my heart's content. Is it enough to touch them? They are not human bodies, are they? And only a human body can speak to you of Eternity and Time, of Space and its consequences. What does Space lead us to? To the absence of Space, to the absence of Time. Only a few sounds remain. What are they? Words, a piece of music. I wish I could end this commentary by a tercet in which nothing is said of the elect, of the reprobate. Does music speak of the elect or the reprobate? It probably just repeats the following tercet:

Queste sustanze, poi che fur gioconde
  de la faccia di Dio, non volser viso
  da essa, da cui nulla si nasconde
These substances, since first they were gladdened by the face of God, have never turned their eyes from It, wherefrom nothing is concealed...
(The *Paradiso*, Canto XXIX)

I was driving on as if determined to measure Space or Time or anything else: any journey seems to measure something or something against something. And inevitably I ended by measuring my time against Eternity or rather my life against death. I recalled the death of a brilliant musicologist—the best in the Soviet Union and in the Russia of the nineties. (My former teacher.) He lived alone and, as he suffered from high blood pressure, he had to be on his guard whenever this pressure expanded beyond the lifeline. He was just on the way to the telephone looming up ahead of him like a giant from Canto XXXI of the *Inferno*. No, it was rather like a dwarf from a fairy tale, from any fairy tale; anyway he cared neither about the *Commedia* or fairy tales that night. He cared about his life, otherwise he would not have crawled towards his only telephone. At some point he realised he would not reach it; he began talking to it from a distance. "I'm dying, can you hear me? Please, inform my pupils or my cousin of my illness, of my agony. I can't dial any number now, but I've touched so many digits on your dial or whatever you call it that I'm sure you'll be able to reproduce one of them. One would be enough, I can assure you."

And the telephone answered, "*Raphèl maì amècche zabì almi*." "Numerous unsuccessful attempts have been made to interpret this jargon," writes Singleton. "But Dante, doubtless alluding to the confusion of tongues which struck the builders of the tower of Babel..." What Dante might have suggested was the state in which every dying person finds themselves: no tongue can express what we are likely to experience on the threshold of the Hereafter. What did the builders of the Tower of Babel attempt to reach? Immortality. The confusion of tongues means death.

A stroke, a heart attack. So far I have not experienced anything of the kind. Do I have to thank God for this postponement or whatever He might call it? To remit a prisoner's sentence. And I am not in Purgatory, not yet. I felt like speaking of death as I looked at the sunny road stretching before me. I had to put my sunglasses on to cope with the intensity of light that made me envious of Dante and Virgil making their way through Hell's murky regions: it is easier to drive in the night than in the broad daylight when the light is too broad. (I came face-to-face with the sun in a manner of speaking.)

What if I have a stroke some day in front of my computer, on the Turkish carpet I put by the fireside, on one of my terraces? The phone I could carry around does not work any more and I would have no alternative but to crawl on all fours in order to transmit my message to a human being disposed to help me. How many human beings are disposed to help me? Dante was fond of numbers. "The *Commedia* has been read and written about enough by the professional echelon of its readership for all of us to

have gotten under control most of the basic 'facts' which we can have about the poem," writes Robert Hollander. "Yet the combination of its length and complexity and the commentators' human frailties (one of which is to rely overmuch on previous commentators) contrives to keep even some simple and basic 'facts' well hidden. If anyone were to wonder (as surely many have), 'How many invocations are there in the *Commedia*?' that person would not be foolish to surmise that there ought to be nine. It occurs that there also happen to be nine recorded appearances of Beatrice to Dante in the *Vita Nuova*…An invocation, simply and surely defined, can be said to have been made whenever a poet seeks aid for his lines from a higher power."

To cut a long story short, there are *nine* invocations in the *Commedia*, the first one sticking out from Canto II of the *Inferno*:

O Muse, o alto ingegno, or m'aiutate;
  o mente che scrivesti ciò ch'io vidi,
  qui si parrà la tua nobilitate.
O Muses, O high genius, help me now! O memory that wrote down what I saw, here shall your worthiness appear!

I ought to have quoted the *last* invocation, my subject being Paradise, eternal bliss.

O somma luce che tanto ti levi
  da' concetti mortali, a la mia mente
  ripresta un poco di quel che parevi,
e fa la lingua mia tanto possente,
  ch'una favilla sol de la tua gloria
  possa lasciare a la futura gente
O Light Supreme that art so far uplifted above mortal conceiving, relend to my mind a little of what Thou didst appear, and give my tongue such power that it may leave only a single spark of Thy glory for the folk to come...

Beatrice appears to Dante nine times in the course of the *Vita Nuova*. How many times does her *name* appear in it? "We know her short life and her death, as well as her apparition to the poet, took place under the sign of the number nine, and her own name appears nine times in the book," writes Montale in *Dante, Yesterday and Today*. P. Mandonnet endeavours to reduce the whole *Commedia* to the Trinity and the numbers derived from it: 9, 27, 30 and so on. Beatrice meets Dante in Canto XXX (3x10) of the *Purgatorio* and, according to P. Mandonnet, her name adorns the pages of the *Vita Nuova* 21 (3x7) times and those of the *Commedia* 63 (3x21) times. "Beatrice is not named 21 times in the *Vita Nuova*," writes Étienne Gilson, "but 23 times by her complete name and once by the diminutive Bice. Neither 23 nor 24 are a third of 63."

How many people could I call if I had a stroke? 63, 24, 23, 21, 9, 3, 1? Three people in France, one man and one woman in Germany, one man in the United States, nine people in Russia. What would I tell them? "Please save me from death. I can't breath. I can't talk."

"But you *are* talking? What are you suffering from?"

"I don't know what it is. A stroke perhaps, a heart attack."

"What is it exactly? A stroke or a heart attack?"

"Either or both."

"I can't fly from Moscow to Paris at such short notice."

Only one person is sure to come over and help me, provided she is in Paris when the hour strikes and I realise I am unable to rise from my armchair, let alone walk in my room. So I shall have no alternative but to *fall* from my armchair. My teacher's body was found on the floor, not far from the telephone he had attempted to reach. His pupils were alarmed by his absence from the auditorium where he was to lecture on Bartok. He had lots of pupils; I have none. My neighbours are used to my journeys that once in a while keep me away from my flat for a month, for two months. They might think I am away, touring Japan or another distant country. I have told them I go to Japan quite often—every other year. They are not likely to count years or months, bewildered by my absence from our building, from the landing we are sharing. But why should they be bewildered, puzzled by my absence? They notice my presence only when my television and record player disturb their nervous systems. Or they might think, "He must be working very hard. After all, writing about Dante's *Divina Commedia* isn't as easy as ABC." I told my *voisine* I was engrossed in this commentary. I hoped to enlist her help: she is Italian. "I have a smattering of Italian," I told her. "Of course I can read the *Commedia* in the original with an English translation *en regard*, but some Italian notes are so abstruse that I can't cope with them on my own." She promised to help me. When last winter I asked her to elucidate a note I had lighted upon in the Mondadori Edition of the *Commedia*, she flatly refused, saying she was too busy at the moment. "In a month's time perhaps," she added, raising her eyebrows: she must have been puzzled by my insolence. I am reluctant to resume the subject whenever I meet her on the landing or outdoors, and she might think I have dropped the whole project, incapable as I am of deciphering the notes printed in the Mondadori Edition.

Actually she thinks neither of my work nor of my journeys to Japan, to England, to Italy. It is not on my neighbours that I should count to have my body removed from the floor: they will be the last to learn of my death. And I have no idea who will be the first, considering that a few people I know in Paris think I am a recluse and a self-confessed workaholic. "He seldom calls me anyway. Must be on a trip to Japan. He usually goes there for a month or so."

"He hasn't called me for three months."

"He's too young to die anyway. Life expectancy in Europe has increased enormously in the twentieth century."

"Yes. But women have a longer life expectancy than men."

"He must have forgotten us."

"His memory doesn't seem to be impaired—he still plays his piano programmes by heart."

"He has no memory for human beings."

Suppose a scholar finds himself in the room where my body is lying prostrate on the floor. What would he think of it? Wouldn't he recall Canto XII of the *Purgatorio* where Dante stumbles upon a series of images carved under his feet as Virgil admonishes him to study the pavement?

Come, perché di lor memoria sia,
  sovra i sepolti le tombe terragne
  portan segnato quel ch'elli eran pria,
onde lì molte volte si ripiagne
  per la puntura de la rimembranza,
  che solo a' pïi dà de la calcagne;
sì vid' io lì, ma di miglior sembianza
  secondo l'arificio, figurato
  quanto per via di ruo de monte avanza.
As, in order that there be memory of them, the stones in the church floor over the buried dead bear figured what they were before; wherefore many a time men weep for them there, at the prick of memory that spurs only the faithful: so I saw sculptured there, but of better semblance in respect of skill, all that for pathway juts out from the mountain.

Dante cannot help admiring the sculptor's skill that endowed the figures with a semblance of life. Upon seeing my body on the floor, the scholar might at first mistake it for an image described in Canto XII. "The chiselled reliefs Dante saw showed examples of pride laid low. Shall I trample upon this image? No, I should spare it or rather the art with which it was executed. Is it an image? How did Dante put it?

"Morti li morti e i vivi parean vivi:
  Non vide mei di me chi vide il vero,
  Quant' io calcai, fin che chinato givi.
Dead the dead, and the living seemed alive. He who saw the reality of all I trod upon, while I went bent down, saw not better than I!

"This image represents a man who must have died several days ago. Actually the stench is unendurable. Did the sculptor go so far as to make his works exude appropriate odours? The deceased must have been a very proud man. What did his colleagues say about him? 'I think his whole attitude stinks.' Well, it goes on stinking unbearably, although the man's pride was laid very low indeed. Shall I give him a kick after all? Dante was cruel on several occasions, wasn't he? And he was cruel towards the living dead. This man is just dead. I mean his image is dead. I mean his image is alive and lovely, but the man it represents is dead to all outward appearances. Incidentally, Dante doesn't kick the images he examines, his body bent down."

What a pity I shall be prevented from airing my grievances to the scholar: death puts one at a distinct disadvantage, even in comparison with the souls Dante talks to in the *Inferno*. What would I say to

him? "Please, kick my corpse. Go ahead! Don't be frightened—I won't feel anything. But you might realise I'm not a mere image and consequently must be removed from where I'm lying."

I was already near Lucerne, but all of a sudden the road I had followed bifurcated and, the signs giving me no clue as to the last part of my journey, I looked back in search of a landmark and almost collided head-on with a car moving towards the past, as it were. Would that be a solution? Three of my friends perished in car accidents; they might have committed suicide for all I know. But however often I depict suicidal maniacs in my works, I will never imitate them: I cannot afford to die voluntarily before writing down all the poems stored in my brain. And there are so many of them that I am not likely to finish my job in the valley of tears.

The tombstones Dante evokes when treading upon the images of the proud are designed, he reasons, to prick and spur the faithful heart with memories. If the name of a deceased fails to conjure up a few concomitant memories in your mind, no image will ever accomplish anything unless you chance upon a *beautiful* face in a cemetery, in a book. My face is far from beautiful and, like Dante, I would not divulge my name if I had an opportunity to talk to Guido del Duca and Rinieri da Calboli. When asked about his origin, Dante speaks of a Tuscan river he does not care to name.

"Di sovr' esso rech' io questa persona:
  dirvi ch'i' sia, saria parlare indarno,
  ché 'l nome mio ancor molto non suona."
"From its banks I bring this body. To tell you who I am would be to speak in vain, for my name as yet makes no great sound."
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto XIV)

And my name makes no sound at all. What would my image add to this nothingness, to this shabby variety of silence? Real silence is akin to music and may turn out to be its purest expression: only in Paradise can we learn what music sounds like and how it should be performed. So these friends of mine whom I shall be unable to call at the hour of my agony will tell each other when looking at one of my photographs, "He was a nice chap. Very gifted too!" And after putting the photograph away they will talk about the living whose names resound in Moscow, in Paris, in Vienna, in New York. Have you noticed how ridiculous the adjective "gifted" sounds and looks when applied to a man or a woman of fifty-seven (3X19)?

Even your admirers talk about you without respect if your name resounds only in their living rooms or kitchens where the Russians continue to have meals and receive guests. A phoney artist gives everyone the same phoney "Mr Nice Guy" smile and is applauded by everyone; and yet some of the people whose hands clap hysterically know that Mr Nice Guy is a phoney artist. But fame confers such prestige that even staunchest detractors of today's art grow shy and obsequious in the presence of a luminary. Do I envy prominent writers?

"Li occhi," diss' io, "mi fieno ancor qui tolti,
  ma picciol tempo, ché poca è l'offesa
  fatta per esser con invidia vòlti.
Troppa è più la paura ond' è sospesa
  l'anima mia del tormento di sotto,
  che già lo 'ncarco di là giù mi pesa."

"My eyes," I said, "will yet be taken from me here, but for short time only, because they have little offended with looks of envy. Far greater is the fear that holds my soul in suspense, of the torment below, so that already the load down there is heavy upon me."

(The *Purgatorio*, Canto XIII)

CHAPTER 18

The poets arrive at the second terrace where the sin of Envy is punished. Voices are heard praising the virtues of generosity and charity. Dante perceives the envious sinners sitting huddled together along the side of a cliff, their eyelids stitched up with wire. That is why he says he might lose his eyes only for short time on the second terrace: he seldom if ever was envious of either his colleagues or other citizens. But he owns up to having yielded to the temptation that Oscar Wilde was acquainted with rather intimately: the sin of pride. "Dante's admission of his culpability in Pride is a brilliant stroke," writes Hollander, "taking that stick out of his reader's hand and also, in some strange way, convincing us that this prideful poet has become, under the burden of this poem, humble—or something like that. It also serves to free him from the curse of every artist (as Oderisi knew): the emulous consideration of his or her competitors, from which he pronounces himself totally free."

I am free from the emulous consideration of my competitors because I do not regard them as my competitors. Why should writers compete with one another? Why should I be envious of Dante? I should rather thank him for giving me an opportunity to write such a long novel which is a letter of introduction to the Hereafter where I may wander if I am zealous enough to deserve such a trip. Am I not travelling through it now? Anyway, great writers never put spokes in the wheels of great writers: they use the same wheels.

Joyce and Proust met only once and their conversation "has been variously reported", as Richard Ellmann puts it. "According to one account, which William Carlos Williams heard and set down, Joyce said, 'I've headaches every day. My eyes are terrible.' Proust replied, 'My poor stomach. What am I going to do? It's killing me. In fact, I must leave at once.' 'I'm in the same situation,' replied Joyce, 'if I can find someone to take me by the arm. Goodbye.' '*Charmé*,' said Proust, 'oh, my stomach.'" Here is another excerpt from Richard Ellmann's book on Joyce:

In general he had lost interest in his earlier book, *Finnegans Wake* having pre-empted its position, but he allowed himself one day to ask Beckett, "Does anyone in Dublin read *Ulysses*?" "Yes," said Beckett. "Who?" Beckett named some names. "But they're all Jews," Joyce said. Beckett mentioned then that many intellectuals were turning now to Kafka. The name was known to Joyce only as that of the sinister translator of the Frankfurter Zeitung, Irene Kafka, and he was perplexed and bothered by this new aspirant to literary pre-eminence.

This account leaves me confused, to put it mildly. Why did Joyce say, "They're all Jews"? And why was he "perplexed and bothered by this new aspirant to literary pre-eminence"?

I would not be bothered by Kafka or anyone of his calibre: the more great writers there are in the world the better one's own works can be appreciated, providing they are as ambitious as the philosopher's stone created in the laboratories of the great.

"Perché s'appuntano i vostri disiri
  dove per compagnia parte si scema,
  invidia move il mantaco a' sospiri.
Ma se l'amor de la spera suprema
  torcesse in suso il disiderio vostro,
  non vi sarebbe al petto quella tema;
ché per quanti si dice più li 'nostro',
  tanto possiede più di ben ciascuno,
  e più di caritate arde in quel chiostro."
"Because your desires are centered there where the portion is lessened by partnership, envy moves the bellows to your sighs. But if the love of the highest sphere turned upwards your desire, that fear would not be at your heart. For there, the more they are who say 'ours', the more of good does each possess, and the more of charity burns in that cloister."
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto XV)

Nowadays even an ambitious project is such a rare occurrence that it should be saluted no matter how poor the final result is in comparison with the ultimate end. And my ultimate end is not to write a best-seller but to rewrite the *Commedia*, to update it, to resurrect its throbbing existence, which should not be limited to a scholar's analysis only. The aim of my journey is to revisit *poetically* the realms of the Hereafter (and not just Brideshead) without, however, exposing my life to a threat posed by the cars that move in the opposite direction. In general, great artists raise the standards of both creative works and their reception; the cars where readers and writers are ensconced move along the same mountain road.

What does all this have to do with the sin of pride I am guilty of on my own account and not just because the poet under my scrutiny happened to acknowledge his addiction to the immortality-drug and other drugs inseparable from loftiness (and loneliness)? What does Thomas Aquinas have to say about the sin of pride? And what do *I* have to say about it? When did I make up my mind to become immortal? Does this have anything to do with the sin of pride? I resolved to become immortal when I learnt about death and its consequences—or rather the absence of any consequences; and, however disastrous, consequences are better than oblivion and non-existence. Is that what I told myself at the age of six (3X2) when, for no reason at all, my father felt an irresistible urge to talk to me about death in minute detail? Certainly not. Nor would I think along these lines today when I know that among the

people who influenced the course of history, becoming immortal on the strength of what they did, there was a number of criminals whiling their eternity away in between the two rows of Satan's glittering teeth. But I do recall my vivid desire to become immortal in spite of everything. In spite of what? Death, human indifference, the frailty of immortality? I did not bother about the questions linked to death and my personal victory over it because my mental life was mostly confined to the impulses that would surface here and there, drawing my attention to their turbid yet turbulent existence. Nevertheless I did hanker for immortality—in whatever shape or form. I realised I could not survive my death in my present shape and form, but "there are other shapes and forms," I thought, "and one of them might ensure my survival in the centuries to come." I did not reason like that, but a negligible quantity of what is called the sin of pride might have settled in my soul on the day of my father's declaration of dependence. "We depend on Time, you know," he said. "Look at my cheeks, at my complexion. Do you think I look old? Am I very old for you? You might think I'm dead already."

Some say pride is to be taken in three ways. First, as denoting inordinate desire to excel; and thus it is a special sin. Second, as denoting actual contempt of God, to the effect of not being subject to His commandment; and thus, they say, it is a generic sin. Third, as denoting an inclination to this contempt, owing to the corruption of nature; and in this sense they say that it is the beginning of every sin, and that it differs from covetousness, because covetousness regards sin as turning towards the mutable good by which sin is, as it were, nourished and fostered, for which reason covetousness is called the root, whereas pride regards sin as turning away from God, to Whose commandment man refuses to be subject, for which reason it is called the beginning because the beginning of evil consists in turning away from God.
(Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*)

Do I have an inordinate desire to excel? Yes, I do. So it is a special sin. But why can't I have an inordinate desire to excel? Can I have an ordinate desire to excel? Am I allowed to have *any* desire to excel? I promise Thee not to have an *overriding* desire to excel. But what about a *modest* desire to excel? I promise to sing Thy praises while working on this commentary of mine which will never propel me into the Kingdom of Immortals, I'm sure of that. Anyway I do have an inordinate desire to excel. What could I do about it? What about praying by means of poetry? Dante must have been one of Thy tenants for many years now. Dost Thou think he might say upon reading my work, "You've done me a great service—I'm really very grateful"? I would reply, "It's a pleasure—I'm just glad to have been of service." Actually I'm writing this commentary for myself and not for the greatest poet in the history of humankind. I'm writing this poem in the hope of leaving a few vestiges in the history of the human brain. But I wonder if there's such a thing as a history of the human brain that must depend on Thee, on Thy history. Dost Thou have a history? Jesus Christ did have a history, didn't He? At the

age of six I couldn't show any contempt of God because I hadn't the foggiest idea He was a part of our lives. It's not true—my grandmother took me to church every Sunday. But I didn't realise He dwelt in that church or anywhere else. I just wished to survive the natural catastrophe that is not listed in the catalogue of human disasters—death. It's not listed as a *natural* catastrophe, is it? It's not an earthquake. It's a body-quake, isn't it? I'm subject to Thy commandment. I've never killed anyone. Three years ago I noticed a cavity on my car's right wing that couldn't be accounted for. I thought I might have killed someone without knowing it. How? In my dreams I murder my fellow creatures despite my efforts to spare their lives. Upon awakening I realise it was a dream, nothing else. But for a while I feel like Raskolnikov who did murder an old woman and her sister. He also hankered for immortality, I suppose. "Is it pride?" he asked his sister.
"Yes, it's pride," she answered.
"When you fail, everything looks awkward," he said.
"It's pride," she answered. "If it weren't for God, we'd always fail."
"You mean I didn't trust God?" he asked.
What would *I* feel if I murdered an old woman or an old man? Or a young woman? What would I feel if pursued by a sleuth like Porfiry Petrovich? Is it better to be mortal and ignore the world that does not regard you as a man capable of contributing a page to the history of the human mind? I do not have contempt for God. Why should I have contempt for the creature in whose existence I believe only in the moments of ecstasy? What are these moments? Do I blaspheme when saying God is a *creature*? Should I talk about light instead? Light is a pagan substitute for God and Dante made an abundant use of this ersatz phenomenon as he travelled through Paradise.

Light is just light. Why do we invest it
With divine powers? It's just a counterpart of
Darkness, nothing else.

When the sun is too bright
We put on sunglasses. And shadows are so alluring
As to make us forget about light.

Light is not God, is it? The sun is no longer a god.
Let's just walk along a path
Without looking either up or down.

Or let's sit down on a stump.
There are many stumps around. The world is

Chekhov's cherry orchard.

I have no wish to comment on this poem because it is already a commentary on something I try to protect myself from as I draw the curtains in the living room and pull down the blinds in the other rooms including the one where this computer has been installed. It is a commentary on light, on God, on Chekhov and cherry blossom for which Japan is justly renowned among the connoisseurs of cherry trees and lay people. It is likewise a comment on my trip to the hotel where I was planning to stay for almost a week and on the above excerpt from the *Summa theologiae*: the greatest minister of nature (*lo ministro maggior de la natura*) succumbed to the sin of pride that afternoon.

Lo ministro maggior de la natura,
  che del valor del ciel lo mondo imprenta
  e col suo lume il tempo ne misura
The greatest minister of nature, which imprints the world with heavenly worth and with its light measures time for us...

It is the dashboard of my car that kept me posted on Time, on the petrol I could still count upon and on other details of my journey. But the beauty of the landscapes I was driving through made me feel the imprint of heaven that Dante touches upon in his comment on the sun. I might have relished it much more, but for the unpleasant feelings caused partly by the recollection of my numerous failures and partly by the sweat covering my forehead and trickling into my eyes, along my cheeks. Not until I reached my final destination and looked at myself in a mirror did I realise, however, that my sunglasses had left a reddish imprint all around my eyes. "Luckily for me," I thought, "the sin of pride doesn't imprint itself either on our face or on our body: I wouldn't be able to swim in the Black Sea and elsewhere."

At this point of my narrative I was still lost somewhere in between Lucerne and my ultimate destination that seemed to get further and further as I cast around for a landmark, a road sign or a local driver prepared to put me on the right track. Wrapped up in my geographical worries, I dismissed for a while the topics my attention had been focused upon ever since my departure from Montreux: hope, the sin of pride and my failures. But I resumed my train of thought as soon as I found my way in the maze of narrow roads; once again I thought about the sin of pride, about turning away from God as a result of inborn haughtiness. I hope nobody ever said about me, "He thinks he's the cat's whiskers" and anyway the French expression "*il se prend pour le nombril du monde*" seems more appropriate in the context on account of the world's navel: God has nothing to do with any cat's whiskers except that He has created cats and their whiskers. But God may be regarded as the world's navel, as the luminous

point Dante saw at the beginning of Canto XXVIII of the *Paradiso* or the knot described in the last canto:

La forma universal di questo nodo
  credo ch'i' vidi, perché più di largo,
  dicendo questo, mi sento ch'i' godo.
The universal form of this knot I believe that I saw, because, in telling this, I feel my joy increase.

"By 'the universal form of this knot'," writes Singleton, "is meant the absolute principle of this union, this 'conflation' or fusion of all things temporal and eternal in the Creator." But instead of looking at this knot, the proud look at themselves and, by doing so, inevitably turn away from God; they actually *substitute* themselves for God at the centre of the universe. Dante might have reasoned thus, 'Don't all things temporal and eternal fuse in my mind? I see the Hereafter and all its inhabitants whose lives on earth constitute the temporal components of my vision. In my celestial house I've accommodated so many saints that even the Bible falls short of the mark if compared with the number of lights streaking and radiating through the *Paradiso*. My mind diffuses light from the centre of the *Commedia* that God couldn't have written. Oh, I don't doubt the Almighty's literary talent, but He would take no trouble to write anything because Creation itself is His book. How did Bonaventura express it? 'The universe is like a book reflecting, representing, and describing its Maker, the Trinity.' My book reflects, represents and describes its maker—myself. Of course, as a part of the universe, it also reflects the Almighty, and I hope the reflection is faithful and luminous enough to kindle the hearts and souls of my readers. But the *Commedia* reflects God through my mind and soul which are the navel of this book, of the world described in it. Haven't I described *everything*?"

After requesting political asylum in Brussels I made a journey to London where, through a Russian friend of mine, I met an important manager. In the ensuing conversation he asked me if I was ambitious. I answered, "Yes and no." He was not anxious to put me on his artist's list; I was reluctant to elaborate on the ambitions and the objects they might pursue when blinded by their irrepressible impulses. But even at the time—up to then I had written only poetry in Russian—I was convinced that any creative activity was a far worthier object for an ambitious individual than playing the piano. "Who would have thought of an instrumentalist being immortal?" I was itching to tell him. Another instance of the sin of pride? Didn't I want him to realise I had other, far more important things to spend my time on with a view to ensuring my place in the pantheon of art, in the memory of humankind? Wouldn't I call him now to say I have been crowned as a poet in my native city if my readership were not limited to my intimate friends—nine people in all? And what about those who have already bought the magazine where my five essays are printed? Shall I call him to announce proudly my first publication in a Russian periodical?

"Moscow doesn't count any more," he might answer. "Never counted much as a matter of fact. Who cares about your provincial notoriety, if any? Your stuff has never been published in England as far as I know. I bet my boots you'll never be acclaimed in a civilised country."

Do I turn away from God when I let such thoughts run in my head? Doesn't it have enough room for both the Almighty and a longing for worldwide renown? When preparing my book on music in Russian I worked with a young woman who asked me point-blank if I believed in God; and as I hesitated before answering such a question she answered it herself, "You can't believe in God because there's no room for Him in your mind—you're so self-centred!"

"In my mind there's enough room for you," I said, "otherwise I wouldn't have said anything now. I'm not so self-centred after all."

"But God is much bigger than the whole of humanity," she said. "Even if you go and talk to all human beings you may still miss out God."

"I can assure you my head accommodated Him a long time ago in spite of my self-esteem."

"Must be rather cramped," she said curtly.

Another vivid character; she is not very attractive, though. But Gogol spoke of *vivid* characters that might enliven a narrative and safeguard the narrator against the dryness of didacticism. "The most influential books, and the truest in their influence, are works of fiction," writes Stevenson in *Books Which Have Influenced Me*. "They do not pin the reader to a dogma which he must afterwards discover to be inexact; they do not teach him a lesson which he must afterwards unlearn. They repeat, they rearrange, they clarify the lessons of life; they disengage us from ourselves, they constrain us to the acquaintance of others and they show us the web of experience, not as we can see it for ourselves, but with a singular change—that monstrous, consuming ego of ours being, for the nonce, struck out." Dante seems to have followed this advice and yet some readers are disheartened by the number of anti-Nabokovian didactic pills he makes them swallow in the *Paradiso* where his characters turn out to be the mouthpieces of this or that dogma. Neither St Bernard nor St Thomas are vivid characters whose discourses the Russian artist of genius would not have dared put in Part Two of *Dead Souls*, judging their tone of voice too didactic. (Time permitting, he might have put them in the Third Part.) Actually Dante wanted his readers to learn the lessons taught by him and his characters, vivid or pallid, and he would have shuddered at the thought that, with the passing of the years, they might *unlearn* these lessons. He rearranged the material he had laid his hands on; he clarified the lessons of life by inserting them into a narrative where images alternate with the explanations of what these images signify within the framework of Christianity. But there are images and characters divorced from whatever Christian dogmas may teach us. Some readers may prefer the cantos where Francesca relates her love and Ugolino his death.

What strikes me in the above excerpt from Stevenson's essay is the way he insists on our getting rid of the monstrous ego that might thwart our plans and good intentions in everyday life. Traditionally the

reader identifies with the characters portrayed by a writer in his or her book, be it a poem, a novel or a monstrous essay I have been writing for two years. Many women of normal weight feel unable to identify with the super-thin models in glossy magazines, but the same women would easily identify with my female characters because I never describe their physiques. Do we know what Francesca looked like? When reading the *Inferno* we only learn how characters are tortured and how they treat their next of kin, their lovers, their enemies, their former or present torturers.

For once I agree with Nabokov who, on several occasions, voiced his anger and disgust at the reader bent on identifying with characters depicted in a book instead of venturing into *terra incognita*. Isn't our life an adventure, a journey into the Unknown (and into Fear) that Ulysses undertook in Canto XXVI of the *Inferno*?

"Quando
mi diparti' da Circe, che sottrasse
  me più d'un anno là presso a Gaeta,
  prima che sì Enëa la nomasse,
né dolcezza di figlio, né la pieta
  del vecchio padre, né 'l debito amore
  lo qual dovea Penelopè far lieta,
vincer potero dentro a me l'ardore
  ch'i' ebbi a divenir de mondo esperto
  e de li vizi umani e del valore…"

"When I departed from Circe, who had detained me more than a year there near Gaeta, before Aeneas had so named it, neither fondness for my son, nor reverence for my aged father, not the due love which would have made Penelope glad, could conquer in me the longing that I had to gain experience of the world, and of human vice and worth..."

I suppose that many scholars have compared Dante to Ulysses of the *Commedia* fame, although the former ran no risk when undertaking *his* journey confined to some sheets of paper—not even to the *streets* of Florence or Ravenna. On the day of my departure from Russia I might have thought of Ulysses and the most poignant shipwreck in the history of art. I gave no thought to Ulysses: there was a shortage of thoughts in my head that night. (There was also a shortage of feelings in my body.) I am often asked why I left Russia where I had a huge apartment, a good job and many friends some of whom died during my absence: I returned to Moscow and Petersburg only in 1990. Sixteen years is a short period in comparison with the term of trial one may be subjected to in Purgatory; it is long enough to destroy a friendship, a love, a cityscape. I knew I would lose the women I was fond of and our mutual habits which make no sense if taken out of context. I knew I would lose many words my

friends might have uttered had I changed my mind and stayed in my native city. My parents had already died and, being the only child and a bachelor, I could not count on family ties to hold me back. And what about cityscapes and landscapes? I do not think I would have left the Soviet Union had I been born in St Petersburg or in the vicinity of Lake Baïkal. "I was determined to find a *nishka* (niche)," I usually answer, "where I could indulge in my favourite occupations without being interrupted by state officials or other people inclined to meddle in their fellow creatures' private lives. I was surprised when, three years later, my neighbour complained about the state of my garden that wasn't up to his standards and those of the *commune* we lived in."

"So you must have realised there are informers in the West. But you didn't land in a prison or a concentration camp, did you?"

Why do they *always* bring up concentration camps when talking about the Soviet Union? I say to them, "We used to recite poetry till dawn."

"And what about Stalin and the concentration camps?"

"Mandelstam died in a concentration camp. And Gumilev was executed by a firing squad. We read them too, our forbidden poets."

"So they were forbidden, were they? Just another example of your unacceptable censorship."

"Why can't we talk about the beauty of their poetry? And we had wonderful teachers at the Conservatoire. They weren't allowed to teach abroad so they stayed in Moscow—one of the many benefits of a closed society. Of a closed world."

"And now your professors teach abroad, don't they? Better than Siberia, isn't it?"

I was already at the foot of the mountain and only three or four kilometres—and a few tercets—separated me from my hotel room and the cowbells.

Noi divenimmo intanto a piè del monte;
  quivi trovammo la roccia sì erta,
  che 'ndarno vi sarien le gamble pronte…

We came meanwhile to the foot of the mountain. Here we found the cliff so steep that in vain would legs be nimble there.

(The *Purgatorio*, Canto III)

The road I saw before me was hardly steep; any comparison with the Mount of Purgatory seems out of place except if the sentiment of hope accompanies the ascent, however insignificant. (The *ascent* may be insignificant.) And hope is born in a moment of despair because a joyful mood incites us to live amply, to the utmost of our capacities, without wasting our energy on the future. "In the noblest of pagan systems," writes Esolen, "whether the brave stoicism of Rome or the glad Norse will to fight in a losing cause, there is no hope. Nor for the Christian, as Dante sees it, is hope an easy virtue. Though

it is a gift of grace, it is also a habit of placing always before one's mind the promise, however distant, when all around seems to give cause to despair." It is indeed no easy virtue because *all* around me invites to a sort of *Totentanz* that Jan Fabre shows in his recent play *The Crying Body*; the dancers scream and bawl their eyes out, their bodies performing *all* sorts of portentous contortions. A period of silent and motionless despair succeeds to the bout of hysteria as the dancers freeze to the spot, their arms outstretched, their mouths wide-open. Why didn't I imitate their behaviour at the *Cité de la musique* where I heard and saw a nightmarish concert last night? A group of excellent musicians performed a nonsensical piece of music which was not nonsensical enough to slip into another dimension, into a twilight zone. It was just stupid, insipid, tedious, ridiculous, but the audience did not dance, contrary to my expectations. Actually I did not expect all those people to dance; I just hoped that Jan Fabre's company might come and unexpectedly perform *their* piece on the same stage or in the hall where I was sitting, my mouth wide-open. How many screams did I stifle last night?

A nonentity writes a piece of music and his musicians—he has got an ensemble at his disposal—perform it brilliantly in front of the people who think they are attending an important concert. They have paid for their tickets and must get their money's worth at all cost. And the composer was paid in advance because he had a lot of sponsors who knew that the concert would be sold out.

The composer is renowned all over the world and therefore can write anything, provided he writes *something*. If he writes nothing the sponsors will be prevented from laundering their money and having their names inscribed on the memorial of art. So he writes something and everybody is satisfied: music lovers attend an important concert and money lovers see their names everywhere. And I perform all sorts of amazing contortions instead of performing a Schubert sonata. Even God cannot help us. So why did I listen to Canto XXV of the *Paradiso* while my car drove smoothly up the road leading to my hotel? An aesthetic pleasure, a pretext for writing something. I also have something to launder: my mental energy. I disseminate it through poems, novels and essays to justify its existence. Why should I justify its existence? Why should I justify *my* existence?

I inserted the *Paradiso* into my cassette recorder and took up where I had left off: St James examines Dante on the subject of Hope.

"Spene," diss' io, "è uno attender certo
  de la gloria futura, il qual produce
  grazia divina e precedente merto.
Du molte stelle mi vien questa luce;
  Ma quei la distillò nel mio cor pria
  Che fu sommo cantor del sommo duce.
'Sperino in te,' ne la sua tëodia
  dice, 'color che sanno il nome tuo':

e chi nol sa, s'elli ha la fede mia?"

"Hope," I said, "is a sure expectation of future glory, which divine grace produces, and preceding merit. From many stars this light comes to me, but he first instilled it into my heart who was the supreme singer of the Supreme Leader. 'Let them hope in Thee who know Thy name,' he says in his divine song, and who knows it not, if he have my faith."

Today I could stay at home and drink vodka. (I am not keen on vodka as a matter of fact.) But three weeks ago I bought a ticket for an exhibition at the Grand Palais where I shall see Turner, Whistler and Monet around 11 a.m. What does this visit to a museum amount to? I hear a number of cars driving along the road I could see if I pulled up my blinds. All those people are going to their offices. I am writing an essay on a masterpiece where *grazia divina* figures as a vital component in anyone's life. I read the books I shall never comment upon. I should call a woman who left a message on my answerphone. I would have got a higher mark had I called her last week. Let us weigh up the relative merits of these accomplishments. In point of fact they do not merit further investigation.

Am I in the habit of placing before my mind the promise, however distant? This time the promise I was placing before my mind was not as distant as all that: no more than two kilometres separated me from the hotel where I could have a cup of tea. A terrace, a mountain view. Why not content yourself with local promises and their fulfilments? What kind of distant promise does Esolen (or indeed Dante) have in store for me? A niche in Paradise? What would I do there if I died anonymously on earth? Wasn't St Francis famous in his lifetime? In Canto XII St Bonaventura sings the praises of St Dominic and rounds off his discourse by naming the *famous* souls who dwell with him.

"Natàn profeta e 'l metropolitano
Crisostomo e Anselmo e quel Donato
ch'a la prim' arte degnò porre mano."

"Nathan the prophet, and the Metropolitan Chrysostom, and Anselm, and that Donatus who deigned to set his hand to the first art."

Nathan was sent by God to reprove David (II Reg. 12:1-12) for his sin in causing the death of Uriah the Hittite in order that he might marry Bathsheba. St John Chrysostom is a celebrated Greek father of the Church; he left nearly one thousand sermons or homilies that testify to his eloquence. Anselm was an archbishop of Canterbury; he was canonised, in 1494, by Alexander VI. Aelius Donatus, Roman scholar and rhetorician of the fourth century, is said to have been the tutor of Jerome. His most *famous* work was an elementary Latin grammar, *Ars grammatica*, in three books, part of which served as a model for subsequent similar treaties. Because of the popularity of this work in the Middle Ages—it was one of the earliest books, being printed even before the invention of movable type—the name of

its author became synonymous with grammar, just as Euclid's did with geometry. (Again I have drawn on Singleton's *Commentary*.)

All these souls (or people) were famous in their lifetimes; they could patronise their friends and colleagues without departing from their inbred modesty and humility. They did not have to say, "You should respect me, you know—I'm a Nobel prize winner after all." And I cannot say anything to vindicate my existence, my theories, my views, my claims, my diatribes against this day and age, my infernal moods, my paradisiacal moods, my commentary, my journey through the Hereafter. What is the point in becoming immortal after your death? What is the point in being adulated by the people you know nothing about? The illustrious hear their names resound all over the world and many people they know nothing about admire them. But what counts is the people they are acquainted with if only through other people who may say to their friends in soothing tones, "Don't be upset—your wife betrayed you with a famous essayist." And the English manager I touched upon in one the previous cantos is bound to die before this commentary is published in book form or any form for that matter: he is not Adam.

Quindi onde mosse tua donna Virgilio,
  quattromilia trecento e due volumi
  di sol desiderai questo concilio;
e vidi lui tornare a tutt' i lumi
  de la sua strada novecento trenta
  fïate, mentre ch'ïo in terra fu'mi.

In the place whence your lady dispatched Virgil, I longed for this assembly during four thousand three hundred and two revolutions of the sun; and while I was on earth I saw him return to all the lights of his path nine hundred and thirty times.

(The *Paradiso*, Canto XXVI)

"Adding the number of years that Adam lived on earth (930) to the number of years he spent in Limbo (4,302)," writes Singleton, "gives a total of 5,232 years between the creation of Adam and the Crucifixion…" Would anyone put this manager in the picture about my fame? Either on earth or in Limbo? Would 5,000 years be enough for them to understand what I am writing about?

I wish he were assigned to one of the lowest circles of Hell, not to Limbo: he is a traitor to music, to art. And to life. And to God. And he is not Adam after all. (Adam was also a traitor to God.)

Hope, hope, hope. Damn, damn, damn, damn, as John Gielgud says in Alain Resnais' *Providence*—one of the best films ever. He recalls his wife Molly who died of cancer. And I talk of you during my sleepless nights which are not punctuated by discarded bottles and broken glasses. You are not the young lady I had three dinners with at the Georgian restaurant last year and the year before. You are

the woman I loved prior to my departure from the Soviet Union; you were the symbol of the lost motherland. "Molly, Molly," says Gielgud. "Tatiana, Tatiana," I moan as I sit up in my bed and shift my gaze from its canopy to the door which may lead me to the computer and a significant part of my library. You were touching and sad; a sad woman is always beautiful. I hope you did not commit suicide. Molly did: she was fatally ill and her husband was unfaithful to her. I was unfaithful to you, my Tatiana; and you were ill—as ill as Molly.

"When we say that Hope comes from grace and from antecedent merits, we must remember that these two sources are not of the same kind: the impulse to hope springs from Grace alone, while our merits are, as we know, a necessary condition of the fulfilment of our assurance of salvation." St Thomas again. I am in the dark about when and how Grace might come to my abode; and my merits will remain uncertain and dark, metaphorically speaking, until someone sheds light on them by explaining what they consist of.

Let me just drive up to the hotel where I shall drink a cup of tea, a glass of wine, relegating my anxiety to the margins of my commentary where only big questions are dealt with in the wake of Dante's preoccupations. But didn't he ever drink a bottle of wine without thinking of Beatrice, God and the *Paradiso*? Didn't he ever write a poem just for the fun of it and not for argument's sake? Tatiana, Tatiana, Tatiana. I have never repeated your name after drinking three or four bottles of white wine—unlike John Gielgud who crouched on a staircase, crying and brandishing an empty bottle. A crying body. Molly, Molly, Molly.

Tatiana, Tatiana, Tatiana. You did not commit suicide, did you? You did not have to: your disease was considerate enough to spare you an additional effort. You made so many efforts in your life, didn't you? It was no easy task to bear with me. Tatiana, Tatiana, Tatiana. Are you out there, in the cosmic light somewhere?

"Perfetta vita e alto merto inciela
  donna più sù," mi disse, "a la cui norma
  nel vostro mondo giù si veste e vela,
perché fino al morir si vegghi e dorma
  con quello sposo ch'ogne voto accetta
  che caritate a suo piacer conforma."

"Perfect life and high merit enheaven a lady more aloft," she said to me, "according to whose rule, in your world below, are those who take the robe and veil themselves that they, even till death, may wake and sleep with that Spouse who accepts every vow which love conforms unto His pleasure."

(The *Paradiso*, Canto III)

You told many stories in your lifetime and I am surprised you do not go on telling them from the Hereafter where the acoustics are good to the point of making us hear what the dead are striving to impart to the quick. Or don't you care any more about my moods that you regulated with such mastery when we sat side by side in the same room or strolled along the same avenues? You were half-Polish and pretended you had been brought up in a Catholic family: even your father—a colonel of Turkish origin—had come round to your mother's point of view. You told me you intended to shut yourself up in a cloister to be "closer to God", as you put it, stroking my forehead as if it had been a celestial emissary. "Why did you interfere and made me alter my plans?" you said all of a sudden. A man more accustomed to evil than to good.

"Dal mondo, per seguirla, giovinetta
fuggi'mi, e nel suo abito mi chitusi
e promisi la via de la sua setta.
Uomini poi, a mal più ch'a bene usi,
fuor mi rapiron de la dolce chiostra:
Iddio si sa qual poi mia vita fusi."
"From the world, to follow her, I fled while yet a girl, and in her habit I clothed me and promised myself to the way of her order. Then men, more used to evil than to good, snatched me from the sweet cloister: and God knows what then my life became."
(The *Paradiso*, Canto III)

"Are there Catholic cloisters in Moscow?" I asked naively.
"There are Catholic cloisters in Western Ukraine," she answered.
"If you settle down in the Carpathians I'll never see you again."
"You're not likely to see me again even if there *is* a Catholic cloister in Moscow," she said.
Would we see each other again under the auspices of Dante's establishment? Or is it the *Aeneid* that might be of assistance in my search for an answer to this question? She did not so much as cast a look at him, if I remember rightly. Aeneas spoke to Dido, imploring her to give him a nod as a token gesture of goodwill and forgiveness. What would I say to you? "It's my departure that put an end to our daily rites, to our games and amorous scrimmages. I've written two novels about you and many, many poems. Aren't they proof of my love? Why don't you say anything? Why not give me a good telling off for being unfaithful to you?"

"Quando di carne a spirto era salita,
e bellezza e virtù cresciuta m'era,
fu' io a lui men cara e men gradita;

e volse i passi suoi per via non vera,
  imagini di ben seguendo false,
  che nulla promession rendono intera."
"When from flesh to spirit I had ascended, and beauty and virtue were increased in me, I was less dear and less pleasing to him and he turned his steps along a way not true, following false images of good, which pay no promise in full."
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto XXX)

Did I already cite these tercets? In what connection? I must have spoken about Tatiana in this commentary without naming her. The other women I am still in love with are alive and I should rather not name them, obedient as I am to the code of behaviour that many writers observe rather scrupulously; and yet, in many cases, their anonymous prototypes would not mind being looked at in the streets and admired along with their creators. Anyway I never dream of meeting the other women on the threshold of Paradise because I can invite them to a restaurant or my apartment.
I *might* have spoken of Tatiana in this commentary which favours any thought projected into the Hereafter where so many people we loved and cherished have found their eternal peace or torments; or an adjournment, a prelude to eternal peace. Shall I do a global search for "*quando di carne*" to find out if she had already scolded me for my irresponsible behaviour and levity of spirit? Another global search? Yes, a global search for you. I was driving up in my endeavour to reach a hotel situated almost at the top of a mountain that was just a glorified hill, nothing else. Why should this ordinary old hill conjure up the Mount of Purgatory and simultaneously the image of a dead woman I was in love with back in the seventies?
Why not take advantage of this old hill to bring you back, if only spiritually? In the shape of a spirit, I mean? Your singular propensity to spin a yarn. A thing of the past? A few words of truth would have fitted the bill and calmed me down.
On top of that home-made Mount of Paradise a hotel awaited me, as if to suggest a comparison with the magic mountain described by Thomas Mann in the novel I cannot bring myself to appreciate at its true value; perhaps it can only be appreciated at its false value—that of literary criteria. No, I have got it all wrong: it is *human* criteria that should be taken into consideration whenever this novel comes under close scrutiny of readers. Any human being, if left alone at a resort in the mountains, would feel lonely and somehow enclosed within a space from which no one can escape without losing a part of himself or herself. Actually I must have lost two parts of myself when I left the Soviet Union: one part was masculine, the other feminine.
The protagonist of Thomas Mann's novel lost a huge part of his identity as he settled down for good at the sanatorium where only the dying had pride of place. The magic mountain indeed. I lost a part of

my life in the room where I found a bed, a window and a few memories that did not belong there. What would we have done in that room if you had got a Swiss visa before your death?

CHAPTER 19

When we have acquired spiritual understanding, when we have all attained to "perfect manhood", and the "measure of full stature"; then He puts us in possession of all that He has promised: but now as little children He chastens us, together with consolation and soothing. And this is not the only advantage of receiving the tribulation beforehand, but there is also another, not less than this. For the man who first of all lives luxuriously, and then has to expect punishment after his luxurious living, has not even a sense of his present luxury, merely by reason of the expectation of impending woes; but he who is first in a sorrowful state, if he is anticipating the enjoyment of good things afterwards, overlooks present difficulties, in the hope of the good things which are to come. Not only, then, on account of our security, but also for our pleasure and consolation hath He ordained that the things which are grievous should be first; in order that being lightened with the hope of futurity, we should be rendered insensible to what is present. And this Paul would shew and made plain, when he said, "Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory. While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen" (Cor. IV. 17, 18). He calls tribulation light, not because of the intrinsic nature of things that are grievous, but because of the expectation of good things to come. For even as the merchant is indifferent to the labour that attends navigation, being buoyed up with the hope of a cargo; and as the boxer bravely sustains the blows on his head, looking to the crown beyond; so also indeed do we, earnestly gazing towards heaven, and the good things that are in the heavens, whatever evils come on us, sustain them all with fortitude, being nerved with the good hope of the things to come.
(St Chrysostom, *Concerning the Statues*)

A man who undertakes a long journey in the hope of meeting his old flame is frustrated by her absence from the hotel where she was to meet him at teatime. After doing justice to the sentiment of grief, he realises that their meeting was just postponed indefinitely: they are indeed sure to see each other in the Hereafter, either on the threshold of Paradise or in one of its spheres. Moreover, it is up to him to abridge the term of trial without however committing suicide that is frowned upon by Christian purists, priests and even by ordinary Christians. He may of course starve to death over two or three months, pleading lack of appetite and insuperable fatigue. "I'm so tired that I can't pick up a spoon and bring it level with my mouth. I can't even bring myself to look at a spoon."
"Can you open your mouth without looking at a spoon?" his mother asks him. "I'll spoon-feed you."
"No, I'm sorry."
"But you do open your mouth when you talk to me."
"I'd have to open it more if you were to put something into it."
"Just open it a little bit—I'll give you a few grains of caviar."

"It's better to be hungry now and eat caviar in the Hereafter. If I eat caviar now I'll be punished in Hell."
"Can't you be happy on earth and in the Hereafter? Eating caviar is not a sin, is it?"
"Do you suggest I enjoy the best of both worlds?"
The same goes for fame, if I am not mistaken. One can be famous in both worlds. And what is the point of becoming famous after one's death? There is a poem by Khodasevich where he speaks of an Englishman who goes to the war and gets killed in a ferocious battle. His corpse is put into a common grave and then brought to London to be buried at the Westminster Abbey as a symbol of the Unknown Soldier. His widow's friends suggest she should go and visit the tomb at the Abbey, which concerns her husband as well as all the heroes of the war; but she refuses to go because her "John isn't there". Robert Lowell said something to this effect in the course of a reading that was recorded and commercialised: "Horace doesn't care—he can't collect the royalties." It is not royalties I am worried about. Suppose my tribulations were not even a prelude to posthumous fame. What might I enjoy from the vantage point of the Hereafter? But John was rather downhearted as he looked at his heartbroken widow and at the tomb where he was buried: nobody knew that *he* was lying inside it.
I was alone at the hotel where I had a double room that emphasised my loss and ridiculed my expectations; Tatiana did not turn up in the company of a dozen angels scattering flowers. I was punished once again, but I entertained no hope as to future rewards or anything of the kind because no sign heralded our meeting in the Hereafter apart from the weather that did live up to my expectations. Should my expectations be limited to the weather only? What more can one desire during a holiday? If the weather is fine during your holiday you will have rain in Paradise. You can sing in the rain, can't you? You can be happy in the rain. During Jan Fabre's play a few women urinated on the stage, striking beautiful, ballet-like postures. Shortly afterwards, an actor danced on those puddles singing the famous song. He was holding an umbrella.

Sovra tutto 'l sabbion, d'un cader lento,
piovean di foco dilatate falde,
come di neve in alpe sanza vento.
Over all the sand huge flakes of fire were falling slowly, like snow in the mountains without a wind.

The third ring of the Seventh Circle is the ring of Burning Sand torturing the violent against God, who lie supine; the violent against Nature and Art, who sit all huddled up; and the violent against Nature, who are forced to be continually moving: on all of them falls a fiery rain. What interests me now is the fiery rain and not the punishments undergone by the violent: I am not of their number. Am I? Perhaps I am, but I do not feel like tackling the subject right now.

The fine weather I enjoyed in Switzerland will not be counterbalanced by an overcast sky in the Hereafter, by a few drops of water: I *might* be subjected to the torture that Dante describes in the *Inferno*. Waiting for you in this hotel was not a torture because I knew you would not come, whatever my expectations and desires. Or rather it was a different kind of torture; no rain sustained it, no fire, no burns. Only a few episodes from our private history tortured me as I recalled them in minute detail, anxious to turn the past into the present and the present into the future. I will meet you on the threshold of Paradise or in Hell: I would not mind flying with you through an overcast sky forever.

Will the prosperous and the happy be punished in the Hereafter only because they enjoyed every instant of their lives on earth? They might not enjoy *every* instant of it, but I am sure the number of blissful moments showered on them by the Almighty—who else may be in charge of our destinies?—is not marred through their apprehension of an equal number of dire moments they will have to spend in some circle or other. After all, happiness is not a sin and they are quite aware of that even if their knowledge of the Bible and the *Commedia* does not warrant such an assurance. Nor do their bank accounts make them cringe with embarrassment when they chance upon the verse in the New Testament where the rich are unfavourably compared to a camel trying to squeeze through the eye of a needle. Actually all depends on the size of the needle which, if it were big enough, any camel could *walk* through.

From the balcony of my room I looked at Lake Lucerne and listened to the cowbells I had been dreaming of for a month, for two months. Even a cow can walk through the eye of a needle if you wish to prove to your fellow creature—a poor fellow creature hoping to be rewarded for his tribulations in the Hereafter—that you will continue to make the most of life even after your death. What could I prove to you, my dear Tatiana, if we did meet at the hotel overlooking Lake Lucerne and a few mountains that created a closed world on the opposite side? "You wouldn't need to write this commentary if I was your companion in misfortune and fortune."

"You're right—Dante wouldn't have written the *Commedia* if Beatrice had agreed to marry him."

"And what about the eye of a needle?"

"An ordinary needle would do. I'm bound to be rewarded for my tribulations."

"You're already rewarded—this view is splendid."

With the exception of masochists, everybody looks for a paradise on earth while waiting to be admitted to Dante's *Paradiso*. These paradises are few and far between, but they may be found in some countries where the industrial revolution did not make outrageous progress, encroaching on God's heritage, on His gift to humanity. I know two or three sites which could participate in a sort of beauty contest, if such contests were organised by travel agencies. There are people who spend their holidays in white, blue and pink hotels; I am of their number. Others imagine hotels or islands where they lead fairy-tale lives, cut off from the rest of the world and even from the Hereafter with all its

spheres and saints; I am also of their number. Here is a description of such an island borrowed from *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places* by Alberto Manguel and Gianni Guadalupi:

JOY, ISLAND OF THE PALACE OF, perhaps in the mid-Atlantic. It can only be reached on a pilotless ship led by particular enchantments. The island consists of a splendid garden of astounding greenness some fifteen miles across, entirely surrounded by the sea. On the West Coast, by the edge of the sea, stands the palace that gives its name to the island, built of marble so polished and smooth that the whole garden is reflected in it. The avenues leading up to it, and the terraces, are built of green or black marble. From the ceilings hang lush gardens and the walls are encrusted with gems and gold nuggets; some are covered with exquisite frescoes. In the park are fountains of ever-fresh water. However, the principal attraction of the Island of the Palace of Joy is its indescribable perfume.
(Matteo Maria Boiardo, *Orlando innamorato*, Milan, 1487)

So you embark on a pilotless ship and let yourself be driven to the enchanted island where the palace of joy awaits you with impatience. But the marble of the palace reflects your loneliness and no matter how many gems and gold nuggets adorn the walls of your room, you will always feel lonely, forsaken, betrayed. A room in a dingy hotel would suit me better if you could share it with me, defying your disease, your death. Incidentally, the above entry in *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places* includes the following paragraph: "The very beautiful ladies who live in the palace choose to pass most of their time in a small pavilion decorated with enamel *cloisonné* and gold, under a golden roof supported by crystal columns. It must be noted that the palace is in fact a trap created by Malagigi the magician, in order to attract young men to the island for the fair Angelica to fall in love with." And Dante set a trap to attract the young, the old, and make them fall in love with Beatrice who was standing by my side on the balcony from which I contemplated the lake and the yachts gliding across it. But I had no need of Beatrice on the day when Tatiana usurped my train of thought and my memory to the point of making me repeat her name so often that it ended up upstaging Dante's beloved in the theatre of my brain. Is that an appropriate metaphor? No theatre exists without an audience.
Why doesn't Angelica fall in love with me? And where are those beautiful ladies who pass most of their time in a small pavilion decorated with enamel *cloisonné*, whatever that is?

GLITTERING PLAIN, LAND OF THE, near the coast perhaps of northern Scotland. A kingdom of high mountains and sloping meadows, it is reached by a narrow path through the cliffs, guarded by a warden dressed in scarlet, whose duty it is to help travellers coming in and to prevent them from leaving. Visitors are advised that no one is allowed to return from the Land of the Glittering Plain.
(Willaim Morris, *The Story of the Glittering Plain which has also been called the Land of Living Men or the Acre of the Undying,* London, 1891)

I do not have to return from my glittering plain, from the glittering hotel where breakfast is served till eleven and dinner starts at half-past six. A narrow path, the eye of another needle.
A narrow bed. A double bed which is so narrow that I feel uncomfortable in it. It is our bed. The whole world is our bed, isn't it? Why don't you answer me? Because you don't understand English? In the Hereafter everyone must speak English or Latin. Or Ancient Greek. Do you speak dead languages? This Land of the Glittering Plain is the Soviet Union, isn't it? You reach it by a narrow path through the cliffs; it is guarded by a warden dressed in scarlet, who helps travellers coming in and bars their way out. But I escaped, didn't I? What for? To stand on this balcony, listening to cowbells, looking at cobwebs? There are no cobwebs in my room. There are some in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, if I remember rightly. Is this just another dream of mine?

She's all states, and all princes, I;
        Nothing else is.
Princes do but play us, compared to this,
All honour's mimic; all wealth alchemy.
  Thou, sun, art half as happy as we,
  In that the world's contracted thus;
Thine age asks ease, and since thy duties be
To warm the world, that's done in warming us.
Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere:
This bed thy centre is, these walls, thy sphere.
(John Donne, *The Sun Rising*)

There might have been a few cobwebs in the room where Donne was enjoying the company of his mistress to the utmost, to the exclusion of all other mistresses and rooms. Another closed world. The sun is half as happy as the poet because it has no mistress except the moon that is too far to caress his body tangibly, like a human being. The poet's bed is the earth around which the sun revolves; the walls mark the limit of his revolution.
Another closed world. Why didn't I stay with you in my room overlooking two rivers that run across Moscow and meet under the windows of my former flat currently occupied by the chief editor of *The Patriot*? What is it? A Soviet magazine? Several years ago I found out that my flat had been *given* (a Soviet term) to a man whose credentials were far more conformist than mine; anyway I was already living in the West. I have got a film where my house with all its terraces is shown in its primeval state—without embarrassing statues. (The film was shot in the early fifties.) From one of these

terraces situated at the top of the Mount of Purgatory I looked at Moscow as if bidding her farewell. I bade her farewell many years later but all farewells are stored in our genes, aren't they?

And now good morrow to our waking souls,
  Which watch not one another out of fear;
For love, all love of other sights controls,
  And makes one little room, an every where.
Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,
  Let maps to others, worlds on worlds have shown,
Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one.
(John Donne, *The Good Morrow*)

I do not suffer from claustrophobia and travelling on underground trains in Moscow perturbs neither my mind nor even my body maltreated by barbaric passengers who jostle and shove to get in or out. The room I was staying in did not look like a tunnel where a claustrophobic might have a fainting fit, unable to cope with the sensation of being shut up; and yet I got the feeling that whatever lay outside my room had been painted on the air which was as thick and impenetrable as a prison wall. For once I experienced the state of mind listed in medical catalogues as claustrophobia because it was useless to shut myself off from the rest of the world right now; I was alone and had no wish to enjoy my own company to the detriment of whatever my fellow creatures might contribute to my struggle with boredom.
Why didn't I suffer from agoraphobia back in the early seventies when I was so determined to leave the Soviet Union at the earliest opportunity? In one of my novels I say that Peter the Great forcibly cured the Russians who ceased to be horrified at the idea they were not alone in the world. Last summer, deprived of anybody's company at that hotel in Switzerland, I was downhearted, despondent, disconsolate; and yet for many years I had privately campaigned for my right to solitude by taking no notice of phone calls, letters and invitations. The whole world was somehow reduced to the size of the room where I was pacing up and down, sleeping, reading the *Commedia* and English poetry. The duty of the sun is to warm the world and I felt rather warm as I read on the balcony, my elbows propped against two cushions. But, unlike John Donne lying on the bed, his arms entwined around his beloved's body, I did not represent the entire world and dutifully the sun continued to warm the shorts-wearing clients of the hotel and even a lonely cat ensconced on a balustrade. And I had no right to limit the sun's activities to my bed or my room where nothing could justify a Donnean claim except the obtrusive presence of Beatrice.

"Perché la faccia mia sì t'innamora,

che tu non ti rivolgi al bel giardino
che sotto i raggi di Christo s'infiora?"
"Why does my face so enamour you that you turn not to the fair garden which blossoms beneath the rays of Christ?"
(The *Paradiso*, Canto XXIII)

Dante might have said to the sun, "The light you radiate allows me to see my beloved Beatrice. I don't think you should waste your energy on others because in her face the whole universe is contained down to the fair garden she alludes to in her speech. Of course I'll look at that Rose wherein the Divine Word became flesh (*la rosa in che 'l verbo divino carne si fece*)—out of obedience and esteem. Why should I contradict the lady who is guiding me through Paradise, after having suggested the very idea of my journey? But, believe me, your duty would be fully accomplished if you limited the area of your action to the heroine of the *Paradiso*—she is the living and eternal image of poetry. And what else does humanity need?"
What would I say to the sun? "It's not worth your while focusing your beams on this double bed—I prefer to read on balconies, outdoors, in the woods. I think your duty will be done if you shed enough light on the book I'm holding because the entire universe is enclosed in it. And if only one person reads this book, everyone else reads it as well; one reader of the *Commedia* is enough to keep the universe in good running order. And if some day the universe vanished into thin air, it might be reconstructed with the aid of this book. So why lavish your gifts on those who profit from your generosity to get a suntan?"
Dante could not have said, "This bed thy centre is," or even "Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one": he was not sure that the world Beatrice yearned to possess—it might already have been in her possession—was *his* world.
And I could not even say, "Shine here to us."

Dull sublunary lovers' love
(Whose soul is sense) cannot admit
Absence, because it doth remove
Those things which elemented it.

But we by a love, so much refined,
That our selves know not what it is,
Inter-assured of the mind,
Care less, eyes, lips and hands to miss.

Our two souls therefore, which are one,
  Though I must go, endure not yet
A breach, but an expansion,
  Like gold to aery thinness beat.
(John Donne, *A Valediction: forbidding Mourning*)

When I left Moscow a part of my soul might have been left behind as a token of my love and future homesickness; at times I could not locate this part, which tangibly proves that my soul was not extended but rather broken. Are the fragments of my soul attached to the people and cities I cherish? Actually this is the only way of dealing with Space that does not permit us to be everywhere at the same time. How far could Donne extend his soul to span the distance separating him from his beloved? Even Dante's soul did not cover the whole earth, dwelling chiefly in Florence, in Purgatory and in Paradise where it would join Beatrice's spirit in a sort of Platonic embrace.
Perhaps I am not refined by love: on several occasions my soul turned out to be thick-skinned and so quite unable to prolong its attachments beyond the deadlines bountifully provided by fate. At some point my soul must have been torn to shreds and, however much I may extend this or that shred, none will ever cover a huge territory, let alone span the distance between my heart and Paradise where Tatiana settled more than ten years ago. Our souls are by no means one, having failed to create anything similar to a gold leaf; and even poetic licence does not authorise me to visit her abode in a heavenly sphere to which she was assigned.

Già eran li occhi miei rifissi al volto
  de la mia donna, e l'animo con essi,
  e da ogne altro intento s'era tolto.
Already my eyes were fixed again on the face of my lady, and with them my mind, and from every other intent it was withdrawn.
(The *Paradiso*, Canto XXI)

Dante and Beatrice are about to ascend into the heaven of Saturn where those who passed their lives in holy contemplation permanently dwell. Like all other heavens, this one seems to have been turned into a tiny room the walls of which form the sphere of the sun. But contraction is always followed by expansion that "makes one little room, an every where".

Sitting cross-legged in some solitary spot, hold your body straight, and for a time keep your attention in front of you, either on the tip of the nose or the space on your forehead between the eyebrows. Then force your wandering mind to become wholly occupied with one object. If that mental fever, the

preoccupation with sensuous desires, should dare to attack you, do not give your consent, but shake it off, as if it were dust on your clothes. Although, out of wise consideration, you may habitually eschew sense-desires, you can definitely rid yourself of them only through an antidote which acts on them like sunshine on darkness.
(*Buddhist Scriptures*, translated by Edward Conze)

Even the very first stage of the Buddhist meditation would present me with a problem I always face in traditional Japanese restaurants where one is supposed to sit on the floor throughout the meal. Of course I can hold my body straight, but I am not sure my erect position is not spoiled by bad habits I have acquired over three decades of literary labours. And I am afraid my body does not look different when I play the piano to which I have partly devoted fifty-one years of my life.
I recall a description of how Dante walked along the streets of Ravenna, his shoulders hunched, his coat tightly wrapped around him as if to keep out the rain. He would not have got through the first stage of the Buddhist meditation either. As for the second stage, he never focused his attention on the tip of his nose and on the space between his eyebrows. (Neither did I.) But his wandering mind was wholly taken with one object or rather one being and I still do not know whether it is God or Beatrice. Does it make any difference? Doesn't Beatrice say to God, "Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one"? Doesn't God say to Beatrice, "Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one"? He may address Dante in the same terms. But Dante will never talk to Beatrice about the world they might share because, in their case, this world would have to include a bed illuminated and warmed by the sun. I have already quoted W. H. Auden on the subject. ("The Vision of Eros cannot long survive if the parties enter into an actual sexual relation.") Neither Dante nor Beatrice could exclude a sexual relation altogether; both were married and knew that a relationship between men and women was subservient to their "preoccupation with sensual desires". And neither of them endeavoured to vanquish such desires through the exercise advocated by Buddhists. Whenever these deleterious impulses dared to attack our poet, he gave his consent instead of shaking them off as if they were dust on his clothes. Beatrice was by no means a nymphomaniac, but she knew what human anatomy was about and even her soul, though utterly divorced from her body, berated Dante for his sexual conquests in the world of flesh and blood. A purist might say that her admonishment has nothing to do with sexual drives and centres exclusively on the impossibility of following the right path in the presence of women who often, if not always, lead men astray. In the tercets I quoted earlier she speaks about the false images of good "which pay no promises in full" (*che nulla promession rendono intera*). She proceeds as follows:

"Né l'impetrare ispirazion mi valse,
  con le quali e in sogno e altrimenti

lo rivocai: sì poco a lui ne calse!
Tanto giù cadde, che tutti argomenti
a la salute sua eran già corti,
fuor che mostrarli le perdute genti."

Nor did it avail me to obtain inspirations with which, both in dream and otherwise, I called him back, so little did he heed them. He fell so low that all means for his salvation were now short, save to show him the lost people.
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto XXX)

What did Dante allude to when talking about "false images"? He partly answers this question in the *Convivio*, "And those things which at first conceal their defects are the most dangerous; because, in many cases, we cannot be on our guard against them…The false traitoresses ever promise to make him who gathers them full of satisfaction…and with this promise they lead the human will to the vice of avarice." It is a nice description of the way some money-minded people get entangled in their own nets which they mistook at some point for visions of cornucopia. Many Russian multimillionaires go on coping with bad roads, mud, pollution and other inconveniences because their vision of cornucopia is limited to the money they can earn only in Russia: in no other country would they be allowed to steal raw materials and swindle tax authorities with such impunity. They love their motherland only insofar as she affords them to earn and lose as much money as they find consistent with their notion of a luxurious life. They would have settled abroad a long time ago, but for the vice of avarice (or that of prodigality) they have become addicted to during their pursuit of the wrong vision of cornucopia.

How could we apply Dante's statement to women against whom, according to Beatrice, he ought to have been on his guard? When a beautiful woman comes along, a man might regard her as a new object of his sensual desire or as a vehicle for spiritual uplift. In both cases a woman may fall short of a man's expectations, but the probability of her being up to the mark is much higher whenever her physique and sex appeal happen to be at stake. Anyway very few modern women would not resent the part played by Beatrice in the *Commedia*: an instrument of God's will; and those eager to assume this role, as if invested with a divine mission, are so self-righteous and priggish as to discourage any male poet, however much their beauty might hold him under its spell.

If a man chiefly appreciates a woman for her physique or a particular charm indissolubly linked to what is termed sex appeal, he is bound to get tired of her in the long run and pass on to other women whose attractions will be new to him as long as he discovers them. One day he may grow fed up with such discoveries and experience an urge to marry and settle down, choosing for the purpose a potentially good housewife. She is neither beautiful nor ugly, but his sexual potential is not what it used to be and anyway he now pays far more attention to his children than to his wife—or any other woman for that matter.

If a man counts on his female companion for an uplift, either spiritual or moral, his disappointment will not lead him to other women: he is more likely to deprecate his capacity for moral or spiritual improvement or even question the very existence of God. Beatrice had neither the time nor indeed the opportunity to disappoint Dante; her visitations hinted at in the above excerpt from Canto XXX of the *Purgatorio* might have assured his rebirth, but for the interest he continued to take in other women. Here is one of those visitations as described in the *Vita Nuova*:

But against this adversary of reason, there rose up in me on a certain day, about the ninth hour, a strong visible phantasy, wherein I seemed to behold the most gracious Beatrice, habited in that crimson raiment which she had worn when I had first beheld her; also she appeared to me of the same tender age as then. Whereupon I fell into a deep thought of her: and my memory ran back according to the order of time, unto all those matters in the which she had borne a part; and my heart began painfully to repent of the desire by which it had so basely let itself be possessed during so many days, contrary to the constancy of reason. And then, this evil desire being quite gone from me, all my thoughts turned again unto their excellent Beatrice.

At the time Dante was infatuated with a lady who however failed to replace Beatrice in his mind: this new love was the "adversary of reason". Attacked by sensual desires, his body surrendered rather quickly, I suppose, considering the reputation he has enjoyed over the centuries—that of a notorious womaniser. But his reason withstood the pressure of his new beloved's sex appeal—assuming that the *Vita Nuova* reflects the truth and nothing but the truth—and Beatrice resumed her place in his affections, in his spiritual life. And he had every reason to believe she would not let him down because she had never disappointed him; what was more, her death had deprived her of an opportunity to do so in the future. Actually, judging from Beatrice's diatribe I quoted earlier, Dante was unable to curb his sensual desires and fell again pretty soon, which however did not jeopardise his future journey through the Hereafter. On the contrary, to save his soul from damnation, Beatrice felt duty bound to show him the circles of Hell and also the spheres of Paradise.

Tatiana used to disappoint me almost every week; for all her adherence to Catholic doctrines, I could not count on her assistance in the domain of my spiritual elevation. But my body was under her thumb and, quite aware of my incapacity to damp down my sinful flames, I never undertook to reason myself out of this serfdom. And no nocturnal vision interfered with my Hell-oriented love.

I wonder why you have never paid me a visit since your death—neither in daytime nor in my dreams. But when I think of you it is our first encounter I picture to myself, your first appearance in my life: a miniskirt, a crimson blouse, curly hair. Just an image, nothing but an image. An image of cornucopia, an image of Paradise, an image of Hell, an image of Russia.

What we can say about Dante, and almost all that we can say about him, is that he had the genius to imagine the Way of Affirmation wholly—after a particular manner indeed, but then that is the nature of the way of the Images. If a man is called to imagine certain images, he must work in them and not in others. The record of the Dantean Way begins with three things—an experience, the environment of that experience, and the means of understanding and expressing that experience; say—a woman, a city, and intellect or poetry; say again—Beatrice, Florence, and Virgil. These images are never quite separated, even in the beginning; towards the end they mingle and become a great complex image. They end with the inGodding of man.
(Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice*)

Beatrice, Florence and Virgil. Tatiana, Moscow and Dante. All this looks coherent and beautiful on paper, but I still wonder if Tatiana was really an experience or just a woman in my life, rhyming with the song Rex Harrison performs in *My Fair Lady* where any lady, fair or foul, invites eternal strife into the life of a man. Our strife lasted for six months only and I do not know whether our relationship deserves the name of experience or comes under the heading of adventure—something akin to what Sherlock Holmes lived through when deciphering a new enigma proposed to him by an unexpected visitor. Our meetings were open-ended: I never knew how they would end and if they might be followed by a phone call or a silence equivalent to a break-up that was always in the air. Besides, I have no idea whether you belong to the Way of Affirmation or to the Way of Destruction or to a nameless way along which a few lovers are plodding with no ultimate end in view.
"The word Florence itself has four meanings—Dante's own particular city, and any city, and the universal Empire, and the Divine City," writes Charles Williams. Within the framework of this commentary the word Moscow has the same meanings; and Dante is equal if not superior to Virgil relegated to Limbo by both his travelling companion and Charles Williams whose words to this effect I quoted somewhere: "The *Commedia* in its totality was meant to be an advance on the *Aeneid*." But, in spite of her beauty, Tatiana is far inferior to Beatrice who, after all, managed to become the most spiritual guide in the history of literature. (Tatiana just showed me a few streets in Moscow.) Is it up to me to make Tatiana a second best guide in the history of literature? Alas, I met her too often and we did share the same bed which would become an obstacle, blocking our way through Paradise, if we dared embark on this initiatory journey. In Canto XXX of the *Purgatorio*, Dante meets Beatrice because he is longing to get rid of his sensuous desires; I would meet Tatiana to get them back—to experience again some feelings I lost at the moment of her death. But if our meeting could be arranged either in the Hereafter or in this world I would not waste our time on trifles, determined to get *beyond* our former bliss, our former caresses. And this beyond might coincide with the one where Dante and Beatrice journeyed seven centuries ago. How many beyonds are there around us?

May I be saved by someone else, not necessarily by a woman? By a priest, by an ordinary man? Should my hope be centred upon a book, a Father of the Church, a saint, a poem? I am fond of the verb "to centre"; the noun "centre" is also among my favourites. "This bed thy centre is, these walls, thy sphere." The following poem was written seven months ago:

A man
Doesn't have to walk on water
In a halo of light
To prove he's a saint.

No proof is needed except
His words, his voice, his eyes.
Even his hands are not important.

I don't recall your hands.
(I do recall a hand painted by Dali—
The Marquis de Cuevas' right hand.)

Not all saints have been canonised, but I've read
Many unauthorised versions of the Bible.

Once you said
We might do something together—
Another unauthorised version.

I met Nicholas Dimitriev only three times as if, to fit our relationship into trinitarian pattern, we had decided never to exchange a word in the future. But even in the course of those three meetings we talked sporadically; it is not our talks that inspired my poem and my attitude towards this man. Was he a saint? One of the Russian saints used to walk on deep snow, leaving no footprints on it. He must have taken a stroll across the Black Sea as well, but leaving no footprints on water is nothing to write home about. I suppose that Nicholas did leave a few traces on snowy plains and valleys whenever he skied in the suburbs of Moscow in December, January, February and March. No one ever saw him fly above Moscow or any other city in wintertime, in a midsummer night's dream. But he was a saint, although I cannot prove it. I do not think anyone will ever find proof of his sanctity outside the disposition he showed in everyday life. Many playwrights and stage directors approached him, hoping he would put their plays on in his theatre where, naturally enough, he could not accommodate all of

them: for all his sanctity, he was subject to Space and Time. Often there was no room for other foot- and fingerprints either on the stage or within the stretch of Time allotted to performances. So he had no alternative but to turn down a number of manuscripts and projects submitted to him almost every day. All those visitors left traces in his space-time and in his memory, if not in his soul: his memory, like any human memory, might have forgotten many requests, many faces. His soul recalled everything and everyone. He often called the people whose projects had been turned down to say, "You can come next March, if you wish." Anyway, even on the day of their temporary defeat, all those artists walked out of his office with glowing eyes—as if their works had been taken on. "They had their faces all of living flame" (*Le facce tutte avean di fiamma viva*).
Upon coming home all those visitors must have written in their diaries:

Sì com' io tacqui, un dolcissimo canto
  risonò per lo cielo, e la mia donna
  dicea con li altri: "Santo, santo, santo!"
As soon as I was silent a most sweet song resounded through the heaven, and my lady sang with the rest, "Holy, Holy, Holy!"
(The *Paradiso*, Canto XXVI)

Nicholas died last April. Once he went to a doctor with his wife who had headaches and thought she might be suffering from high blood pressure. Her blood pressure was more or less all right, but when the doctor suggested her husband's blood pressure should be taken she said, "He only eats health food." His blood pressure was so high that the doctor wanted to hospitalise him on the spot. Nicholas refused on the grounds that he was accustomed to having high blood pressure. "Habits are given to us from on high; they're a substitute for happiness," as Pushkin writes in *Eugene Onegin*.
"Are you accustomed to death?" asked the doctor.
"Yes," answered Nicholas.
"Don't you mind dying tomorrow? Or do you think death is another birth?"
"I don't know what it is. Do you?"
"You may die at any moment," said the doctor.
"A moment is just a moment," said Nicholas.
A few days later he had a stroke which left him unable to speak; and then he died quietly as if death were just a moment, not Eternity. Perhaps he died quietly because death *was* Eternity.

La bellezza ch'io vidi si trasmoda
  non pur di là da noi, ma certo io credo
  che solo il suo fattor tutta la goda.

The beauty I beheld transcends measure not only beyond our reach, but I truly believe that He alone who made it can enjoy it all.
(The *Paradiso*, Canto XXX)

He saw this beauty in his lifetime; the traces left on it by other people may at times have blurred the image he contemplated all day long, although he never saw the world as if through a glass, darkly. I am sure he saw me better than anybody else, including myself; it is a pity we had no time to discuss my image as reflected in his consciousness. Actually I wonder if he had the Freudian or even the Jungian unconscious: everything seemed to be constantly before his very eyes. He needed neither to hide nor sublimate or otherwise distort some episodes from his childhood and adult life. Why should you deal aggressively with your own past if it is lying before you like an innocent child, like a baby in a cradle? Why get rid of this baby? Why perform major or minor surgery on its heart, legs and liver? Even plastic surgery is pointless if you see your past face to face.
Once Nicholas suggested I perform my theatrical play in his theatre. "Do you want me to send you a synopsis of this play?"
"Why should you? I trust your taste."
I was on the point of sending him the synopsis when I learnt about his death at the age of forty-nine. Here is a part of the synopsis:

The hero is tempted to commit suicide by slitting his wrists with the scalpel, but realises that *Kreisleriana* will murder him anyway; whereupon he recalls Tchaikovsky and his last symphony which might have been the cause of his premature death. Why drink a glass of unboiled, cholera-contaminated water if you have a more powerful instrument at your disposal? Let us not forget that Tchaikovsky conducted the première of the *Pathétique* and thus was able to experience it physically, from the inside. The sorry plight of the hero is intensified by a painful recollection of his early studies and of a love story which would have interfered with those studies had his teacher not put her foot down, going so far as to pay him a visit during his love labours.

CHAPTER 20

Tchaikovsky was destroyed by his last symphony. Will the *Paradiso* save me from my past, present and future? Suppose I was examined by St Peter on the subject of Faith. "*Dì, buon Christiano, fatti manifest: fede che è*?" ("Speak, good Christian, and declare yourself: Faith, what is it?") I am not a good Christian, but let it stand for the sake of argument. So I answer:

"Fede è sustanza di cose sperate
  e argomento de le non parventi;
  e questa a pare a me sua quiditate."
"Faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen; and this I take to be its quiddity."
(The *Paradiso*, Canto XXIV)

Dante repeats St Paul's definition of Faith (Heb. 11.1). St Paul goes on thus, "Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear." What would I say if asked to comment on these words? "I hope in what may happen only in the Hereafter or in this life of mine: it all depends on the nature of things I hope for. If I hope for immortal life I raise my eyes to heaven; if I hope for immortal fame I go to Ravenna and visit Dante's tomb as I did two years ago. But I could have the best of both worlds if God bestowed His grace upon me. Beyond all the definitions and discussions there remains one simple truth I'm well aware of: Faith is a gift of God. What does it avail me to know that God created the world out of nothing through the word He uttered once upon a time? What lies at the origin of the world: a word, a gesture, a glance? God might just have switched on the lights or looked at a bulb swinging under the canopy of heaven. Anyway, my knowledge of the Big Bang would lead me nowhere. And what do I care about the unseen if I have no part in it with the exception of that region of the underworld to which I may be assigned as a result of my blasphemous speech?" Out of courtesy, I would tone down this monologue when addressing St Peter without however altering the tenor of my words. Anyway I would not just repeat Chapter 11 from St Paul's Epistle to Hebrews. (I wish I *could* repeat it word for word.)
"The definition of faith given in this verse, and exemplified in the various instances following," writes John Wesley, "undoubtedly includes justifying faith, but not directly as justifying. For faith justifies only as it refers to, and depends on, Christ. But here is no mention of him as the object of faith; and in several of the instances that follow, no notice is taken of him or his salvation, but only of temporal blessing obtained by faith." And I will never be satisfied with temporal blessings, however alluring and beneficent.

I have no idea whether Nicholas believed in God, but he might have shed light on my predicament had I broached the subject in his presence. He would probably have said something unrelated to this debate—in the manner of Zen Buddhists who, among other things, used *koans* (or questions) designed to break down ordinary rationality. "Rationality or intellectuality," writes Yoel Hoffmann, "was regarded as a defence against the truth. Intellectually plausible answers were therefore taken to be 'dead words', and only non-rational, apparently irrelevant ones to be 'living words'. The disciple, given a *koan* to see through, was encouraged to put his whole strength into the single-minded search for its solution, to be 'like a thirsty rat seeking for water, like a child thinking of its mother'." Nicholas might have asked me an irrelevant question such as: "'To hit with a ball of snow, to hit with a ball of snow'—what of it?" Or he might have asked me a *relevant* question: "After you have learnt of your true nature, then you can escape from the cycle of life and death. But when you're on the brink of death, how will you escape?" This commentary on the *Paradiso* is too relevant—and too logical in a sense—to become an appropriate answer to this question. A poem might be an answer, an irrelevant poem:

Seeing is believing. Does this work
The other way round? Do we actually see what
We believe in?

Sometimes we do,
Sometimes we don't.

Whenever we do see what we believe in,
We're supposed to stop believing in it.

Alas, this poem is relevant in the light of what I (and John Wesley) said with regard to St Paul's definition of Faith. What about just noting down a few incoherent sentences? "The residents are still tussling over the ever scarcer street parking." "You should take it as a compliment when I fall asleep in your company—it means I'm relaxed." (Actually I broke off with one of my dearest friends because he often fell asleep in my company.) "Last night I bought a cheesecake and made short shrift of it." "The orchestra ground out the same tunes it had been playing for twenty years." "Never trust a man who looks down his nose at art." (This answer is relevant too.) "The holiday made a hole in our savings." (*Our* savings indeed. Absolutely irrelevant!) "He was, in this matter at least, firmly on the side of the angels." (Partly relevant.) "Three young shepherd children reported a visitation from the Virgin Mary." (Partly relevant.) "It's a crying shame that the hospital has been forced to close." (Partly relevant, considering my advanced age. A friend of mine got cancer.) "Each contestant has to pit their wits against the celebrity guest." (Who is this celebrity guest, I wonder? Fame. Partly relevant.) "We talked

about dinner, but left the date up in the air." (This happens whenever I call the person with whom I am anxious to remain on friendly terms.) "There's no point in flogging yourself to death."
Or should I just cite an irrelevant tercet from the *Paradiso*?

Se i barbari, venendo da tal plaga
  che ciascun giorno d'Elice si cuopra,
  rotante col suo figlio ond' ella è vaga
If the Barbarians, coming from such region as is covered every day by Helice, wheeling with her son whom she delights in…
(The *Paradiso*, Canto XXXI)

"The nymph Helice or Callisto," writes Singleton, "was transformed into the constellation of the Great Bear, and her son Arcas or Boötes into the Little Bear." Our star-crossed nymph makes yet another appearance in the *Commedia*. In Canto XXV of the *Purgatorio* the poet sees a great fire burning on his path, into which spirits are passing, while voices from within the flames celebrate examples of chastity (the Virgin, Diana). They first perform a hymn to the Virgin Mary.

Finitolo, anco gridavano: "Al bosco
  si tenne Diana, ed Elice caccionne
  che di Venere avea sentito il tòsco."
When it was finished, they further cried, "Diana kept to the woods and chased Helice forth, who had felt the poison of Venus."

Callisto and her discomfiture are described by Ovid in Book II of *Metamorphoses*. Shall I recount this story, paying heed to Steiner's assessment of the modern reader's capacity or rather incapacity to detect the allusions woven into the texture of a literary masterpiece? The story is not irrelevant enough.
Last night, at a cocktail party, I met a Russian actress who had come to Paris as a tourist. Disgruntled with the size of the French capital—a 'pocket book of sorts'—she extolled Russian munificence. 'You can put all Parisians in your pocket too,' she said. I talked to her about their 'code of politeness', about the lukewarm bath I take whenever I venture outdoors. She smiled. 'I go to Russians saunas,' she said. (Is this exchange of views irrelevant enough?)
She goes to church every Sunday—a born-again Christian. Actually if you adopt this name, you tacitly and sometimes overtly admit you were *not* Christian at some point, leading a life of sin and deprivation. And then you found the Lord or He found you. (Partly relevant.)
There is no year zero in the history of humankind whose very survival depends on time, on the numbers assigned to it. The time-machine conveyed me to the very first year when Jesus Christ was

born alongside a new hope for humanity; new time, new numbers. Eternal life was born in 1 AD. (Partly relevant.)

Am I too flippant about the situation I have created through the neglect of my civic and religious duties? Am I not supposed to get married and lead a normal life without thinking of Beatrice and the poet who must have been regarded as a failure during his lifetime? It is my religious duty to find a guru—a sort of counterpart to Virgil—who would instruct me in the matters linked to the salvation of my soul. As for the upkeep of my body, my doctor would have taken care of it had I seen her more often, especially on account of the high blood pressure I cannot get rid of despite my frequent walks in the woods. I am afraid of facing a crisis similar to the one I went through in spring 2003 when I thought I was to die within three years. And taking pills all my life is nothing but a death sentence in disguise; and that is what you must do if you cannot get rid of your high blood pressure by strolling in the woods two hours a day. During his journey Dante's blood pressure must have varied in accordance with the areas he was walking across: the higher he got, the lower his blood pressure would become. Could I deal with my blood pressure more successfully by adopting a flippant attitude towards both the *Commedia* and this work of mine? How could I be flippant when studying the following tercet?

Un altro, che forata avea la gola
  e tronco 'l naso infin sotto le ciglia,
  e non avea mai ch'una orecchia sola

Another who had his throat pierced through and his nose cut off up to the eyebrows, and only one ear left…

(The *Inferno*, Canto XXVIII)

I might compare him to one of Gogol's heroes who, upon awakening, realised he had lost his nose; but even such a comic substitution would not brighten me up. And even if I read the *Paradiso* for three days non-stop I would not forget the unfortunate reprobate identified as one Piero da Medicina. "He was a wicked troublemaker," writes Benvenuto, "who for a while became very important and very rich through fraud and infamous acts." I have nothing in common with him; yet I cannot forget his suffering.

The principle of progression and regression is portrayed in the myth of the whale-dragon…The hero is the symbolical exponent of the movement of libido. Entry into the dragon is the regressive direction, and the journey to the East (the "night sea journey") with its attendant events symbolises the effort to adapt to the conditions of the psychic inner world. The complete swallowing up and disappearance of the hero in the belly of the dragon represents the complete withdrawal of interest from the outer world. The overcoming of the monster from within is the achievement of adaptation to the conditions of the

inner world, and the emergence ("slipping out") of the hero from the monster's belly with the help of a bird, which happens at the moment of sunrise, symbolises the recommencement of progression.
(Jung, *On the Nature of the Psyche*)

My flat might look like the dragon's belly because no one knows what this belly looks like. Nobody but myself knows what my flat looks like and those who saw it two years ago would be horrified at its present plight. That is why I do not invite anyone to my flat: I am not in the habit of frightening people. And what about me? Don't I shudder with horror when describing my room, my flat, my life? As might have been expected, I do not really describe them, quoting Jung instead or talking about Dante's sinners with whom I should not identify for the sake of my equilibrium. I do feel their sufferings though, because it is I who wrote the *Commedia* in the fourteenth century, in the fifteenth century. Isn't that the only way to read it, to comment on it? Most of the time I may seem confused, but I do have occasional periods of lucidity. And during those periods I just repeat a few irrelevant phrases to get away from the dragon's belly, from Dante, from my room.
"The course is very tough—do you think he'll be able to go the distance?" I recall the last Olympic games at the end of which a marathon runner was assailed in the streets of Athens. There is no harm in recalling the Olympic games, is there? In the famous letter he did not post Kafka speaks about the way he compared his own body to that of his father, feeling utterly wretched in the process. I do not compare my body to those of the athletes competing for medals because I have never been interested in sport. "The election broadcast, a twelve-hour marathon, lasted until nine o'clock in the morning." It is better not to recall the last American elections so I pass on to another irrelevant slice of life. "Khrushchev had never lost the earthiness of his 'peasant-worker' background, and his garrulity, impulsiveness and occasional bursts of demotic idealism—he loved to get out and about, hob-nobbing with workers and collective farmers—made him seem completely out of place in the world of sealed dachas." This remark brings back a host of memories some of which are not unpleasant and consequently may provide a respite from the dire straits my life is in at the present moment.

"O santa suora mi che sì ne prieghe
  divota, per lo tuo ardente affetto
  da quella bella spera mi disleghe."
"O holy sister mine, who do so devoutly pray to us, by your ardent affection you loose me from that fair sphere."
(The *Paradiso*, Canto XXIV)

Is this tercet relevant? Is it in any way linked to my life, to the dire straits I hinted at before quoting the *Paradiso*? Actually it sounded like a statement, not like a hint. "At the slightest hint of trouble I'll be

out of here like a shot," said a friend of mine as he set his foot on the Russian soil after twenty years of absence. I *would* get out of here like a shot at the slightest hint of trouble. The point is my dire straits have settled down, as it were, and no longer remind me of what can be described as "the slightest hint of trouble". So I stay where I am.

I do not feel like looking up the significance of the above tercet in any of the books on the *Commedia* I have got in my library. Suffice it to say it is not related to my life except that I am writing a commentary on the *Paradiso*. I have no idea as to the identity of the sister who "prays to us" so devoutly and looses someone from the fair sphere. The identity of the speaker is likewise unknown to me. Is it the Virgin Mary? To whom can the holy sister pray in Canto XXIV of the *Paradiso*? Dante has travelled far enough to hear the Virgin Mary's voice. Is it her voice he hears? Can anyone loose me from the *un*fair sphere I dwell in tonight, from the dragon's belly? Nicholas died several months ago. Should I look for another saint, another Virgil?

Was Nicholas really a saint? How could you spot one in the crowd pressing upon you every day and almost every minute? What are the particular features of a saint? When Dante came across Virgil he did not have to ask himself any questions as to the efficiency of his guide because Virgil was both a great poet and Beatrice's envoy. Of course he did not bring her along to vouch for him, but his word was enough and Dante followed his favourite poet without looking for a sign of sanctity. He would not have found it anyway: Virgil had died prior to the advent of Christianity. Nicholas was born less than fifty years ago. I had a talk with Volodya on the subject of saints and signs.

"How could we recognise them?" I asked. "Is there a star burning on their foreheads?"

"They do all they can to hide their sainthood from others," he said. "One of them permitted himself to fly over a forest one day—he thought there was nobody around. But two women saw him. So he landed just in front of them and said, 'Please don't tell anybody you've seen me.'"

"Why is it such a secret?" I asked.

"Another one jumped too high in the presence of other monks and was reprimanded by his superior," Volodya went on without answering my question. "Many Russian saints could have walked across the Black Sea, but they never did, preferring boats, ships and other means of transport."

"Suppose a saint fell overboard as a result of a false manoeuvre on the part of a helmsman," I said. "Suppose he'd never taken swimming lessons in his life. Suppose moreover that nobody heard his shouts or saw him either in the air or in the water. Would he rather drown than permit himself to walk across the waters to the nearest beach?"

"Don't be flippant about Russian saints and their customs," said Volodya, anxious to reprimand me for my well-meant witticism.

Establishing a religious identity for Nicholas is not within my province; besides, I do not even know whether he believed in God or was just a magnanimous human being. What I do seem to know is that he might have helped me a lot had he been alive. You need a living person to take care of your

incertitude, nervous breakdowns and morose moods. No book can set you on your feet again as efficiently as a voice, a gesture, a benevolent glance, which are better instruments of salvation than any printed material, including the Bible—in both corporeal and spiritual spheres. You can say to yourself, "I think I've caught a cold" and swallow some aspirin in the hope of being as fit as a fiddle next morning or next afternoon at the latest. You may or may not get over it within a few hours, but whatever happens you will never be quite healthy unless a mistress, an intimate friend or Virgil assists your mind and spirit. So it is better to complain about your cold not to yourself but to one of them and drink hot milk with his or her hand lying on your shoulder, on your neck, on your cheek. I totally disagree with this shallow literary notion which compels poets and writers to work the human touch into their poems and novels. I might however admit the following use of this expression: "He is certainly an effective lawyer but colleagues say that he lacks the human touch." Yet I think we should take these two words at their face value. "Or at their shoulder value, as the case may be," said *my* colleague—the one who never misses an opportunity to make a dreadful pun.

Of course the human touch can be conveyed through a glance or a tone of voice, through a song or the movement of an arm. Dante and Beatrice never touch each other in the course of their journey, but they keep in touch all the time by voicing their doubts and joys, by letting their eyes meet and communicate. ("They keep in touch" is a dubious pun. Am I being influenced by that punster of a pianist?) It is as if Beatrice's hands were constantly lying on Dante's ears and eyes.

There are women who might do anything you wish, provided you leave them alone—provided you leave their *body* alone. They go to any length to ensure the safety of their body and are prepared to strip their clothes off, dancing in front of you with suggestive gestures, on condition that you watch them from a respectable distance, ensconced in a deep armchair. Even when strolling with you along the ice-covered streets of Moscow they avoid any contact with your coat, your gloves, and obviously prefer to break a leg or suffer concussion rather than lean on your reliable arm.

Già veggia, per mezzul perdere o lulla,
  com' io vidi un, così non si pertugia,
  rotto dal mento infin dove si trulla.
Tra le gambe pendevan le minugia:
  la corata pareva e 'l tristo sacco
  che merda fa di quel che si trangugia.

Truly a cask, through loss of mid-board or side-piece, gapes not so wide as one I saw, cleft from the chin to the part that breaks wind; his entrails were hanging between his legs, and the vitals could be seen and the foul sack that makes ordure of what is swallowed.

(The Inferno, Canto XXVIII)

In his translation of the above tercets Robert Hollander strips every euphemism off:

No cask ever gapes so wide for loss
  of mid- or side-stave as the soul I saw
  cleft from the chin right down to where men fart
Between the legs the entrails dangled. I saw
  the innards and the loathsome sack
  that turns what one has swallowed into shit.

The words "fart" and "shit" also appear in Esolen's translation. Longfellow seems to prophecy Singleton's mild rendering of the image in *his* version of the *Inferno*; he says "excrement" instead of "*ordure*". Laurence Binyon says "dung" and in his version the wind *escapes* as if performing the act on its own initiative, which may happen of course, especially if the owner of the entrails is an old man or woman. So much for the translations of these crude tercets that purport to depict Mohammed's torments.

"There was a belief current in the Middle Ages," writes Singleton, "that Mohammed was an apostate Christian, perhaps even a cardinal, and it may have been for this reason that Dante placed him in this ninth *bolgia* along with other great sowers of religious dissent. Or, as Sapegno points out, the poet may have placed Mohammed here because he considered the founding of Islam a divisive factor in religious unity."

Esolen adds a piquant touch to the belief that Mohammed was an apostate Christian: "Legend had it that Islam was born when Mohammed, a disgruntled bishop, failed to be elected pope. That legend aside, there is a sense in which Islam, with its rejection of the Incarnation and the Trinity, can be considered a unitarian heresy. Nor should the modern reader underestimate how gravely the Church and Christendom were threatened by Muslim incursions along the Mediterranean coasts and up the Danube River."

Esolen's introductory note to Canto 28 is also relevant within the context of my reflections on distant women:

It is hard for us to imagine anyone ever believing that the family and the city were bodies as real as these flesh-and-blood affairs we bear about with us. When Aristotle famously said, "Man is a political animal," he did not mean to describe that unfortunate penchant man has for meddling. He meant that man is the sort of living creature whose physical, moral, and intellectual fulfilment can be realised only in a polis, that is, as a free man in the self-governing city-state. In this sense the polis is natural to man, and man is a political animal. That fairly sunny view of the state was adopted by Thomas Aquinas and is shared by Dante. Sowers of discord, such as we see suffering in this canto, do not

cause trouble among individuals. They slash at a natural organism; they divide a real, not notional, not metaphorical, body. Hence their indecorous punishment, the slashing of their own bodies, laying bare what in a well-ordered body remains hidden and protected: a windpipe, a nostril, intestines.

Could we accuse Beatrice of sowing the seeds of discord in the *Vita Nuov*a where she never gets close enough to Dante's body to enable him to touch hers? In the *Commedia* she follows the rules described in Auden's *The Vision of Eros*, taking no notice of other souls that embrace continuously as they dance or form a symbolic figure like the one described in Canto XVIII and Canto XIX where Dante sees an image of the Roman eagle, "or rather that of which the Roman eagle was a reflection: the Eagle of Heaven, called upon to answer questions of ultimate justice," writes Esolen.

Parea denanzi a me con l'ali aperte
  la bella image che nel dolce frui
  liete facevan l'anime conserte…
With outstretched wings appeared before me the beautiful image which those interwoven souls, joyful in their sweet fruition, were making.
(The *Paradiso*, Canto XIX)

Those *interwoven* souls do not seem to have any effect on Beatrice's conduct towards Dante: she remains as distant as ever. "…the lovely image which in their delight the spirits had sewn up in unity," as Esolen has it. "…all woven in one," writes Binyon. Of course Beatrice must be aware that the embrace of two souls is as fruitless as a barren tree, but she might have embraced the poet all the same, following the example of Statius who, in Canto XXI of the *Purgatorio*, longs to embrace Virgil's feet—one of the most poignant scenes in the whole of the *Commedia*:

Già s'inchinava ad abbrachiar li piedi
  al mio dottor, ma el li disse: "Frate,
  Non far, ché tu se' ombra e ombra vedi."
Ed ei surgendo: "Or puoi la quantitate
  comprender de l'amor ch'a te mi scalda,
  quand' io dismento nostra vanitate,
trattando l'ombre come cosa salda."
Already he was stooping to embrace my teacher's feet; but he said to him, "Brother, do not so, for you are a shade and a shade you see."
And he, rising, "Now you may comprehend the measure of the love that burns in me for you, when I forget our emptiness and treat shades as solid things."

"As a subject I must honour and obey the King with an undivided soul,' writes Kierkegaard in *The Book on Adler*, 'but I am permitted to edify myself with the thought that essentially I am a citizen of heaven, and that, if once I should encounter there his deceased majesty, I shall not be bound to him by the obedience required of a subject."
Statius is a great admirer of Virgil's whose poetry was both mother and nurse to him.

De l'Eneïda dico, la qual mamma
  fummi, e fummi nutrice, poetando:
  sanz' essa non fermai peso di dramma.
I mean the *Aeneid*, which in poetry was both mother and nurse to me—without it I had achieved little of worth.

And what would have become of Beatrice without Dante, without the *Vita Nuova* and the *Commedia* which were both mother and nurse to her? But for these works, she would have been admitted neither to Paradise nor even to the eternal memory of humankind where only heroes and heroines survive their own deaths. She would just have been a Florentine banker's wife who died at the age of twenty-four without leaving anything behind excerpt the sorrow in her husband's heart and a tombstone in the cemetery. And the sorrow her husband might have felt when the news of her death reached him in his office was not long-lived, I suppose, in the light of what Dante told us of her character. It is upon Beatrice that the great English bard would have modelled the heroine of *Taming of the Shrew* had he lived in Florence at the end of the thirteenth century.
Upon their meeting in Purgatory she did not even hold her hand out in expectation of a ritual kiss as if afraid of Dante's touch—no pun intended. (Actually this ritual was set up by the Spaniards in the sixteenth century.) Would she have stooped to embrace his feet had she known for sure what he would write about her? But hadn't she read the *Vita Nuova*? Was she so ambitious and haughty as to reject this short book on the grounds that it was unworthy of her virtue and beauty? Did she despise the *Vita Nuova* because she had expected her distant lover to compose a long poem about her and not a piece in prose interspersed with sonnets?
If applied to record players, Gödel's Incompleteness Theory would sound thus (according to Douglas R. Hofstadter): "For each record player there is a record which it cannot play." For each woman there is a ritual she cannot perform. Beatrice could not expect Dante to kiss her hand and so did not hold it out. Nor could she go on her knees to embrace his shoes: that would have been an improper manifestation of her love and respect. But she might have done something else, having access to a large repertoire of signs which, though she was not well-versed in semiotics, were numerous enough even in her semi-dark epoch. I vividly recall the day when I met one of my Beatrices for the first time;

this delightful event took place in Moscow at the beginning of September 1991. The leaves were getting ready for their poetical fall, but a few pleasure boats still glided along the Moscva River that flows past the skyscraper I used to live in and, capriciously weaving its way through the centre of the capital, allows tourists and indolent Muscovites to reach another skyscraper: the University on the Sparrow Mountains. That is what I proposed to do, eager as I was to walk with my future mistress along the bank of the river as far as the Unboring Garden—another landmark of my former strolls. I suggested to her we take a pleasure boat in the vicinity of the Kremlin and get off at the Sparrow Mountains where we would spend an hour, enjoying the narrow paths and trees, before setting off on our journey to the Unboring Garden. "We'll go on foot," I told her, fighting off the concomitant image of the two great poets stuck in the Hereafter: I was reluctant to launch myself into a customary analysis of the *Commedia*, determined to seduce my new Beatrice in a Don-Juanian way. (I am sure Don Juan never mentioned Dante when talking to ladies.) For almost two hours we walked along the right bank of the Moscva River—past the Novodevichye Monastery, past a few pompous Stalinist buildings. All those buildings and churches were situated on the opposite bank; we were walking along an endless park. At last we reached the Unboring Garden and began to climb a hill leading to a beautiful house where the owner of this estate used to live. I offered my hand to my travelling companion, but she declined my offer with a smile. And her smile was more seductive than that of Beatrice because I detected a touch of embarrassment in it; she was afraid of her nascent love. Beatrice's smile was more luminous.

"Apri li occhi e riguarda qual son io;
  tu hai vedute cose, che possente
  se' fatto a sostener lo riso mio."
"Open your eyes and look on what I am; you have seen things such that you are become able to sustain my smile."
(The *Paradiso*, Canto XXIII)

There was no need either to open my eyes or to *sustain* her smile which had something dark about it; and this darkness was synonymous with a "state of (sexual) arousal".
My friend awaited us at the gate and we took a taxi that brought us to my primary school where we had tea in a hall overlooking another park. And then we drove around Moscow for a while, seeing sights and doing shopping. We bought nine bottles of champagne and stopped at the Hotel Rossiya to ask for ice cubes at the restaurant. They sold us two bags of ice cubes for three dollars. Only three or four kilometres separated us from the flat where I was planning to put the finishing touches to the ritual I had embarked upon not far from the Kremlin. But my future victim shouted all of a sudden, "Please stop! I've seen a friend of mine!" The taxi pulled up and she got out so fast that I was unable to

say anything for a minute or two. She was speaking to an ugly woman whose smile boded no good: it was the smile of a person invited to an interesting party, champagne and all. Finally I got out of the car and was asked an insolent question, "Could my friend join us?" Once more I looked at the ugly woman and after much soul-searching—I made a show of pondering over the question—said to my erratic Beatrice, "There's no room for another person in the flat we're going to. A communal flat, you know." Isn't Paradise a communal flat?

"Lo ben che tutto il regno che tu scandi
  volge e contenta, fa esser virtute
  sua provedenza in questi corpi grandi.
E non pur le nature provedute
  sono in la mente ch'è de sé perfetta,
  ma esse insieme con la lor salute:
per che quantunque quest' arco saetta
  disposto cade a proveduto fine,
  sì come cosa in suo segno diretta."

The Good which revolves and contents all the realm that you are climbing makes its providence become a power in these great bodies; and not only is the nature of things provided for in the Mind which by itself is perfect, but, along with that nature, their well-being; so that whatever this bow shoots falls disposed to a foreseen end, even as a shaft directed to its mark.
(The *Paradiso*, Canto VIII)

The great bodies are the spheres through which Dante and Beatrice journey on their way to the Celestial Rose.
How many times does the simile involving a bow and an arrow crop up in the *Commedia*? Nine times?
I was born in a communal flat on the outskirts of Moscow and I know that the occupants of communal flats usually met and gossiped in the kitchen. Yet for the life of me I cannot recall the kitchen in the flat where I spent five years of my life because I was not an excellent cook (*cordon bleu*) in those days; nor was I garrulous. That kitchen was the Good on which depended the life of our flat. Our well-being was provided for by the food stored in one dilapidated fridge, and the rumours circulating amidst the women bent over their gas cookers nourished our natures. (Again I borrow my ideas from films and the tales of woe I heard in my youth.)
My childhood roughly corresponds to the stage preceding the entry into Jung's dragon: I was still outside, in the park where I used to stroll with my grandmother. And then we all moved to a "personal" flat, which was a prelude to my definitive withdrawal from the outer world or an interlude between the outer and inner worlds.

Let us go back to my story—one of the very few stories I am eager to tell. "Shall we go to Alesha's and leave these boorish gentlemen to their own devices?" The friend of my Beatrice made an insolent attempt to talk her out of spending the night in my company. Beatrice did not say anything; she was just looking at her friend with no expression in her eyes as if loath to spoil her silence by an unwelcome glimmer or an indecorous wink. Struck by the beauty of this silence, her friend departed without attempting to break it. That silence was identical to Statius' desire to embrace his favourite poet.

Semiotics have showered upon us so many signs that the very word "sign" has become a sign calling for another sign to elucidate its mystery. The signs we resort to in the domain of love are numerous and cannot be enumerated in this chapter devoted to the attitude that Beatrice adopted in the course of the paradisiacal journey. Never did she show any sign comparable to what her doppelgänger achieved many centuries later in the centre of the city unknown to Dante and his heroine: absolute silence. Actually my Beatrice made another sign during the scene which began upon her recognition of her friend in the streets of Moscow. She feared so much to plunge headlong into the hellish abyss of love opening at her feet that she chose to be rash and even impolite, asking her friend to join us without making sure we did not mind an intruder's participation in our intimate party. No other circumstances would have impelled her to act so unpredictably.

The distant ladies I spoke of earlier may get within your touching distance only after a lawful wedding ceremony carried out either in a church or in a city hall: not all of those ladies are devout Christians. (Do they care about the state they live in when refusing to participate in any amorous pastime unsanctified by marriage?) But Beatrice had no need to marry her belated suitor; even in her lifetime she had showed no such desire, opting for a Florentine banker. Why did she keep him at a distance until the end of their journey? After all, he might have been rising through the spheres of Paradise in his body, dragging his flesh and blood from one planet to another.

Does a shade (*ombre*) feel a body when its fingers touch it? The thornbush from which Dante plucked a twig in Canto XIII of the *Inferno* cried out in pain, eloquently proving that a shade cannot ignore a body that touches it. Perhaps any touch in Hell automatically leads to a higher degree of suffering—to a lower circle of pain—which is demonstrated by a scene Dante observes in Canto XXXII of the *Inferno*:

Noi eravam partiti già ello,
  ch'io vidi due ghiacciati in una buca,
  sì che l'un capo a l'altro era cappello;
e come 'l pan per fame si manduca,
  così 'l sovran li denti a l'altro pose
  là 've 'l cervel s'aggiugne con la nuca…

We had already left him when I saw two frozen in one hole so close that the head of the one was a hood for the other; and as bread is devoured for hunger, so the upper one set his teeth upon the other where the brain joins with the nape.

Dante uses the word "sign" (*segno*) as he asks the voracious sinner to comment on this act of cannibalism:

"O tu che mostri per sì bestial segno
  odio sovra colui che tu ti mangi,
dimmi 'l perché," diss' io, "per tal convegno,
che se tu a ragion di lui ti piangi,
  sappiendo chi voi siete e la sua pecca,
  nel mondo suso ancora io te ne cangi,
se quella con ch'io parlo non si secca."
"O you who by so bestial a sign show hatred against him whom you devour, tell me the wherefore," I said, "on this condition, that if you with reason complain of him, I, knowing who you are and his offence, may yet requite you in the world above, if that with which I speak does not dry up."

"Dante offers to present to the world this sinner's case (so that it may judge whether or not his wrath is justified) if he will but reveal his name and the offence committed by the other sinner," writes Hollander. "Dante fulfils this promise in the following canto, and the world—or at least the Dantean part of it—has been arguing about that case ever since." I may reveal his name now, but I will not comment on his behaviour for the simple reason that I am determined to devote as many words as possible to the *Paradiso* which is the subject matter of this part of my book. And there is no room for too many words in any book, however voluminous and exhaustive. (His name is Ugolino.)
The example above demonstrates that even souls can harm each other if they are full of hatred and aspire to wreak vengeance upon their former torturers. In Purgatory they are allowed to embrace as if in anticipation of their timeless sojourn in the upper spheres where the elect work themselves up with singing and dancing in an orgiastic frenzy. So Virgil ought to have accepted the homage paid to him by a fellow poet whose lapse of memory—he had forgotten their posthumous emptiness—was all the more touching since a creature of flesh and blood stood by his side, bringing out the contrast between shades and human bodies. Actually it is Dante who discloses Virgil's identity to Statius, when given permission to do so:

"Questi che guida in alto li occhi miei,
  è quel Virgilio dal qual tu togliesti

forte a cantar de li uomini e d'i dèi."
"This one who guides my eyes on high is that Virgil from whom you derived the strength to sing of men and of the gods."

Out of courtesy Virgil might have stooped in his turn to embrace Statius' feet as the Pope John Paul II did on his visit to Poland when the head of his native country's Church and his former superior knelt down in front of him: he also went on his knees. For a while they kept these reverent postures while cordially embracing each other.

With regard to the supposed "failed embrace" between Statius and Virgil, Hollander has argued (Holl. 1975. I), p. 359, that Dante's failed attempt to embrace Casella (*Purg*. II. 76-81), pointing to a physical impossibility, is countered in the successful exchange of embraces between Sordello and Virgil, both shades (*Purg*. VII. 2, 15). In both of those scenes there is a desire to embrace that is either frustrated or accomplished. Here Statius desires to embrace Virgil but, once advised against doing so by the author of the *Aeneid*, wills not to. Since we know from Sordello's and Virgil's shared embraces that in fact shades *are* capable of embracing, we may not properly say, as most who deal with the scene do, that Virgil and Statius, "being shades, cannot embrace," or that they "are not capable of embracing" (Cecchetti [Cecc. 1990.2]. p. 107). They are perfectly capable of embracing; Virgil convinces Statius that it is not a fitting gesture in this higher realm.
(Robert Hollander, *Purgatorio XXI*)

If the reader is curious to know how Sordello and Virgil embraced and in what manner Dante and Casella failed to accomplish this customary fraternal ritual they will have to look up the relevant tercets in their own copy of the *Commedia*: the number of words in this chapter is limited.

CHAPTER 21

"In the end Statius won't embrace Virgil,' Hollander goes on, 'because up there souls do not behave 'that way', just as Virgil did not want to have his identity revealed for a similar reason." It is true that for a while Virgil prevented Dante from revealing his name, but naming no names is not a custom followed in the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*: a lot of names are dropped in these parts of the *Commedia*. Or does Hollander mean that Virgil is reluctant to be paid homage in the realm where the souls undergo purifying rites to enter Paradise with their credentials as virtuous Christians? Dante praises him in Hell and also upon their meeting in the dark wood. Why can a great poet be flattered in Hell and not in Purgatory? Is any flattery more at home in the murky regions of the underworld than in what Hollander calls "up there"? To which group of sinners do flatterers belong? Are they hypocrites or schismatics? Once I said to Volodya he had a gift for writing beautiful melodies.

"Please don't divide me into two substances—my gift and myself," he said with bitterness. "I'd hate to regard my capacity to write music as something separate for which I should look whenever I feel like jotting down a few notes."

"Do you mean to say I might be punished as a schismatic?" I asked. "Dante thought the family and the city are human bodies. The schismatics he put in the Eighth Circle of Hell walk divided from a part of their being. However, they hadn't caused trouble among the individuals. We're different, aren't we? To our generation the ideal state is the one where nobody ever hears of the President or the Prime Minister. Our ideal state isn't one body but a multitude of bodies. Their number is equal to that of the people living in the state. But we do care about the individuals who risk being divided into two, into three, if we're not careful enough to protect them from others or from their own unruly selves."

"I'm very much tempted to divide your monologues into two at least," he answered. "You're doubly schismatic in the present case—you've separated my gift from myself and my melodies from other components of music such as harmony, rhythm and instrumentation."

This sense of being at one not only with oneself but with the whole of Creation comes to the fore as I write this commentary, holding Dante's quill and following Virgil's instructions to the letter. So instead of asking, "What did Dante think of when writing this tercet," I just ask myself what *I* think. Another instance of the sin of pride?

Come thus to soul—which brings all to unity, making, moulding, shaping, ranging to order—there is a temptation to say, "Soul is the bestower of unity; soul therefore is the unity." But soul bestows other characteristics upon material things and yet remains distinct from its gift: shape, Ideal-Form, and the rest are all distinct from the giving soul: so, clearly, with this gift of unity; soul to make things unities looks out upon the unity just as it makes man by looking upon Man, realising in the man the unity belonging to Man.

(Plotinus, *The Enneads*)

Soul keeps aloof from whatever it unifies with a view to making its owner successfully confront the outer and inner worlds that pester him or her for years on end. Besides, it does not encompass everything because it is too small, I suppose, and would not coincide with Creation if we extracted it from our body in the hope of stretching it over heaven and earth. Once again I have come across a crack I cannot paper over in spite of the *Paradiso* where I find so many declarations of peace that I wonder why the universe does not yet sound like one single harmony. And however often I repeat the words "Creation" and "universe" I shall not cover them with my soul, with my own blanket. Why not cover the universe with a blanket? Why not put the universe to sleep?
Last night I watched Chekhov's *Seagull* on television—an English film I saw many years ago at the Moscow *Kino* Festival. At the time I was fascinated by Vanessa Redgrave's performance; now I like all the actors who took part in this version of Chekhov's semi-immortal play. (Will it last till doomsday?) In Act IV Dorn speaks about his journeys and, when asked which city he prefers, unexpectedly says, "Genoa". He likes it because, as soon as you venture outdoors, your mind merges with that of other people. You become a part of the crowd. Doesn't your mind keep aloof from the crowd to prevent you from becoming a nobody? This always happens when *I* go outdoors in Moscow where the crowd is so dense you cannot walk fast enough to get on time to a theatre or a restaurant. And if you take a taxi you might get stuck in a traffic jam where the car you are sitting in will gradually merge with other cars. Is that a vicious unity? Should I put my soul in a traffic jam of souls—within the Roman eagle?

Anything that can be described as a unity is so in the precise degree in which it holds a characteristic being; the less or more the degree of the being, the less or more the unity. Soul, while distinct from unity's very self, is a thing of the greater unity in proportion as it is of the greater, the authentic, being. Absolute unity it is not: it is soul and one soul, the unity in some sense a concomitant; there are two things, soul and soul's unity, as there is body with body's unity. The looser aggregates such as a choir are furthest from unity, the more compact are the nearer; soul is nearer yet but still a participant.

Why can't my soul encompass everything? "Absolute unity it is not." Shall I go to Genoa? Soul and soul's unity are not two things, provided you forget yourself and your soul. Where's your soul? they ask you.
I don't know what it is. I don't know where it is. It is in this crowd perhaps. But I have no idea who is hiding my soul from me. One of these passers-by walking along the same street might be in possession of my soul. But they will not say anything, will they? They will not acknowledge the fact. They may not be aware of the fact. There are so many facts around and inside them. How can they detect my soul

in the midst of those facts? What is more, they are not keen to detect it. They will never say, "We're on the scent of something big," because my soul is rather small. I wish my soul were a fox pursued by hounds. The hounds had been on the scent of the fox for several miles, but they lost it near the river. I must escape, but they will know I exist. Another instance of the sin of pride? Let them devour me. Let the crowd in Genoa devour me. Each of those passers-by is capable of devouring an enormous plateful of spaghetti. Why don't they devour my soul? Isn't it delicious? I would eat it myself if I was allowed to do so without committing suicide which would turn my body into a thornbush instead of letting me spend a peaceful eternity in some coffin or other. And I do not want Dante's successors to pluck twigs from my stub.

There is no unity in *The Seagull*. "Chekhov quietly sacrifices the ancient law of unity of time to secure unity of place," writes Nabokov. But Chekhov sacrifices something else: unity of causality. Another division, another crack. The play is punctuated by unanswered questions and loose ends; if *The Seagull* was a car or a bike it would have punctures every other minute. "There has been no definite line of conflict," writes Nabokov. "Or rather there have been several vague lines and a futility of conflict, for one cannot expect any special conflict from a quarrel between a quick-tempered but soft son and a quick-tempered but equally soft mother, each always regretting his or her hasty words. Nothing special further is suggested by Nina meeting Trigorin, and the romances of the other characters are blind alleys." The reader will have to acquire Chekhov's complete works as well. The other characters. I will not spell *their* predicaments out. There are no other characters.

The maintenance of creation proceeds according to the doctrine of series and degrees. This is one of the many theories and doctrines that Swedenborg kept more or less unaltered in form from his scientific period. Everything in the universe belongs to a series, and in each of these there are three discrete degrees interrelated in terms of correspondence as end, cause, and effect. Each effect becomes an end in the next series at a lower level. The ultimate end of creation can be achieved only through man, and in Swedenborg's anatomist version of the *De civitate Dei* (*The City of God*) by St Augustine…the final goal of creation is formed by innumerable angelic societies making a *maximus homo* ("greatest man").

(The Encyclopaedia Britannica)

Did Beatrice count on this *maximus homo* to vindicate her conduct? (What is the exact number of the cold shoulders she gave her paramour in both the *Vita Nuova* and the *Commedia*?)

Fé sì Beatrice qual fé Danïello,
  Nabuccodonosor levando d'ira,
  che l'avea fatto ingiustamente fello;

e disse: "Io veggio ben come ti tira
  uno e altro disio, sì che tua cura
  sé stessa lega sì che fuor non spira."
Beatrice did what Daniel did, when he lifted Nebuchadnezzar out of the wrath that had made him unjustly cruel, and she said, "I see well how one and another desire so draw you on that your eagerness entangles its own self and therefore breathes not forth."

And she went on as follows, "The way you compare me to Daniel delights me because it is true that I know what ideas and desires burden your mind, even if you do not dare voice them. Do you think we should explain to your readers that Daniel divined Nebuchadnezzar's dream and even provided an interpretation of it? Never mind. Let us go back to your worries. You are torn between the ideal to which you adhere as a poet and the longings of an ordinary man. As a poet you worship me from afar. As an ordinary man you are yearning to invite me to dinner, open a bottle of champagne and kiss me. And you hope we might go beyond this relatively innocent act on account of our long-standing relationship. Didn't we meet many years ago in Florence? So why not cut corners? Is that what you say to yourself? Or do you say it in French—'*brûler les étapes*'? Personally I prefer the French expression. It sounds more elegant, doesn't it? I am afraid your naughty ideas are scarcely in keeping with our journey which shouldn't deviate from its trajectory, otherwise you might lose the momentum you have gained. Besides, aren't we two parts of the *maximus homo*? And we are not far from each other, are we? Your lascivious thoughts might be justified if one of us were in his hair and the other in his foot. But we are close to each other—you are in his thumb and I am in his index finger. I realise that the thumb is not as close to the index finger as the middle finger. Whenever the *maximus homo* plays some trills on the piano these two fingers rub against each other while the thumb keeps its distance from their amorous game. But don't you know that from time to time trills are played by the thumb and the index finger? This happens at the end of Beethoven's last sonata, for instance. So you'll have to wait until the *maximus homo* performs this sonata in our concert hall. And let me tell you that he is a great admirer of Beethoven's. He might perform the sonata tonight if your lucky stars are twinkling overhead. Actually your lucky stars are all around you. Can't you see? Don't look at me all the time. And don't think of Sir Lancelot and his Beatrice. Would you rather identify with this knight who betrayed the Vision of Eros? Is it better to observe the rules than to sin and suffer? That is the question you ask yourself all day long. For a moment of bliss you are ready to sacrifice your poetic stance, your poem, your future, your immortality. Lancelot's immortality is not due to his betrayal of our cause.
DANTE:

Già m'avean trasportato i lenti passi
  dentro a la selva antica tanto, ch'io

non potea rivedere ond' io mi 'ntrassi;
ed ecco più andar mi tolse un rio,
che 'nver' sinistra con sue picciole onde
piegava l'erba che 'n sua ripa uscìo.

Now my slow steps had carried me on into the ancient wood so far that I could not see back to where I had entered it, when lo, a stream took from me further progress, which with its little waves was bending leftwards the grass that grew on its bank.

BEATRICE: Why did you quote these tercets from Canto XXVIII of the *Purgatorio*? The stream is Lethe, the river of oblivion in classical literature, where Christians leave the memory of their sins behind them for eternity. But you should remember our first encounter! You should remember all our meetings, all my smiles!

DANTE: Shall we bathe in the river of oblivion? Let bygones by bygones. Our limbs will meet in the clinging embrace, turning us into one substance, one creature, one note in Beethoven's last sonata. Do we need trills after all? One note is enough.

BEATRICE: One chord. Let us be two notes in one chord.

DANTE: Waiting for another trill, another unison, another lucky star. I am weary of waiting. As Chekhov put it in *The Seagull,* "The thousands of centuries this earth has not seen a single living being. And this poor moon lights its beacon in vain." Is that what you wish?

THE AUTHOR OF THIS COMMENTARY: Well, not the thousands of centuries. Thirty years perhaps. But this poor moon does light its beacon in vain.

THE AUTHOR OF THE PLAY PERFORMED IN *THE SEAGULL*: It is cold, cold, cold. It is empty, empty, empty. It is terrifying, terrifying, terrifying.

THE AUTHOR OF THIS COMMENTARY: Nabokov runs down the author of the play performed in Act One of *The Seagull*: "The subtle point is that though Treplev has a real desire to destroy the old forms of art, he has not the talent to invent new ones to take their place." I have no wish to destroy old forms, whatever they are. I am just longing to break the frozen lake we are imprisoned in with a hammer, with an atom bomb. This afternoon I heard and saw a concert which had been hailed as a marvel of precision and imagination. At the beginning of the performance a quartet played a Shostakovich quartet, an excerpt from it. A man appeared on the stage to recite a text that I might have liked enormously had I read it in my study, surrounded by my books. I would have disregarded the music had it not been worked into the play I attended out of curiosity. Anybody could have hit upon the idea of taking the protagonist back to his home and making him cook a dinner for himself. (The dinner was shown on a screen. Scrambled eggs.) No shifting of perspectives, no mindquakes. Just another quack. Only the music written by other composers was beautiful, but it was unrelated to the action except that at some point the rhythm of Ravel's quartet coincided with the way the actor was

chopping some onions. The audience was delighted; they saw and heard a performance which was definitively modern—in their opinion—and also crystal-clear. It is cold, cold, cold. It is empty, empty, empty. It is terrifying, terrifying, terrifying. Treplev is not a writer of genius, but his description of the modern world is crystal-clear, concise and poetic. The emptiness he talks about is all the more terrifying since the earth is still inhabited. Will anyone ever replenish the earth once again? Never, never, never, never, never. When in need of emphasis, Russian playwrights and novelists usually repeat a word three or four times. In her attempt to silence Prince Myshkin, who is about to broach a dangerous subject (Nastasya Philipovna), Aglaia says, "*Molchite*, *molchite*, *molchite, molchite*"; this demand is much closer to "Please don't say anything, I beg of you" than to "Shut up". English poets and playwrights may repeat an important word six times. And here is an excerpt from a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins where the key word is repeated six times:

To keep at bay
Age and age's evils, hoar hair,
Ruck and wrinkle, drooping, dying, death's worst, winding sheets,
    tombs and worms and tumbling to decay.
So be beginning, be beginning to despair.
O there's none; no no no there's none:
Be beginning to despair, to despair,
Despair, despair, despair, despair.

Actually Aglaia says, "*Molchite*, *molchite*", but Myshkin cuts in to say it is better to speak out. And then Aglaia says, "*Molchite*, *molchite*, *molchite, molchite*"—a pattern similar to Hopkins': "to despair, to despair" and then "despair, despair, despair, despair".

Of course it is an echo that Hopkins tries to reproduce, but Treplev might have been striving after the same effect: after all, his universal soul speaks in the void that can only repeat what it hears. Likewise I only repeat what I have seen, read or heard, embroidering upon the material supplied by my elders and betters. "But all their souls have merged into one; I am this universal soul. I am the soul of Alexander the Great, of Caesar, of Shakespeare." Am I the soul of Dante? An old trick. I might be just a character from a second-rate play performed incompletely at someone's dacha. An abridged version, a watered down version. A member of the audience yawns and utters a few words as I begin to get into my stride. I am on the point of becoming a complete version of myself, but people are leaving the hall and the playwright interrupts the performance. Anyway what is the point in becoming complete if you were created by a second-rater? I might be the watered down version of a great writer, for all I know. In this case I must go on whatever happens or does not happen. "I know things are difficult at the moment, but if we just stick it out, I'm sure everything will be OK in the end." To whom could I say

it? To the people who shake their heads, muttering, "Well, there are no great artists in the world nowadays. We're living in a transitory period."

"But Dante also lived in a transitory period," I answer them. "There's nothing wrong with such periods. Actually they may allow you to have the best of both worlds. In the *Commedia* mediaeval Europe and the Renaissance are constantly merging into one universal soul. Incidentally, in the film *The Seagull* Vanessa Redgrave looks like Beatrice, when playing the part of the universal soul. Wasn't Beatrice the universal soul? She *was* the soul of Dante to some extent."

"I read the *Divina Commedia* at University," a middle-aged woman said rather wistfully. "I wasn't enjoying it very much, but I stuck it out till the end."

"The point is we don't have anything ahead of us—no world from which we might borrow its best components. And whenever we use the lost world our fantasy isn't up to former artists' standards. So their ideas are lost on us. We just combine them fruitlessly."

Our world is a potted version of the world. Age and age's evils have been plaguing it for centuries and now I begin to despair. And the people who admit that something is wrong but declare everything will be OK in the end, provided we just stick it out, do not despair. And only in the depth of despair could a man and a woman be born again, destined to multiply and replenish the earth.

What is so terrifying about the play performed in Act One of *The Seagull*? The void revealed through an echo and the pithiness of the text, its pitiless modesty. Instead of saying, "I'd never imagined someone's life could be so empty of happiness" the universal soul just says, "empty, empty, empty", meaning the author's life is devoid of happiness. And those who believe they are happy mistake a mask of happiness for real happiness. This mistake is also suggested by the word "empty".

"What do you have against masks?" they ask, astonished. "In Moscow there are masked balls almost every week. Shalov fell in love with a mask worn by an ugly woman. And he married that woman only because nobody else had this mask—she'd made it herself. She's always wearing this mask in his presence. Actually he can't bear human faces any more. Soon he'll ask his friends to wear masks. His wife has already made a few masks for them."

And the empty look your colleague gives you when you talk to him or her about the modern audience that cannot listen to silence and appreciate only young artists, their naiveté and correctness, is similarly implied by the universal soul's speech. (What does this empty look insinuate? The customer is always right!) Our world does not deserve many words. Three words are enough: "cold", "empty", "terrifying". You may repeat them as often as you please with a view to filling up the void. No sentences are needed: their wordiness spoils everything. They are so long-winded as to suggest that something may be explained, clarified, vindicated; they always have enough room for an "OK" at the end. The word "empty" explains a lot and vindicates nothing. And there is no "all right" either before or after it. One word seldom vindicates an action or a train of thought unless it is the word "love". But the universal soul does not utter this word.

The void is not just sheer emptiness, the absence of everything; in the seventeenth century this mystery was probed by such eminent scientists as Torricelli and Galileo. Pascal wrote a lot about it. The earth can be overpopulated and empty at the same time. A concert may be sold out and take place in an empty hall with nobody either on the stage or elsewhere. A best-seller is often just a huge number of blank pages put together.

After the last American election my dear friend Michael Okin sent me some clippings from *The New York Times*:

Tom Coburn, the new senator from Oklahoma, has advocated the death penalty for doctors who perform abortions and warned that "the gay agenda" would undermine the country. He also characterised his race as a choice between "good and evil" and said he had heard there was "rampant lesbianism" in Oklahoma schools.
(*The New York Times*, November 4, 2004)

Jim DeMint, the new senator from South Carolina, said during his campaign that he supported a state G. O. P. platform plank banning gays from teaching in public schools. He explained, "I would have given the same answer when asked if a single woman who was pregnant and living with her boyfriend should be hired to teach my third-grade children."
(*The New York Times*, November 4, 2004)

Those individuals must be convinced they can have the best of both worlds: the Internet and the *Commedia*. But Dante would not have banned Brunetto Latini from teaching in public despite the latter's predilection for boys: the poet and his old master meet in that part of the Seventh Circle where the "violent against nature" are tormented. "Are you here, ser Brunetto!" (*Siete voi qui, ser Brunetto*) exclaims Dante.

"Se fosse tutto pieno il moi dimando,"
  rispuos' io lui, "voi non sareste ancora
  de l'umana natura posto in bando;
ché 'n la mente m'è fitta, e or m'accora,
  la cara e buona imagine paterna
  di voi quando nel mondo ad ora ad ora
m'insegnavate come l'uom s'etterna:
  e quant' io l'abbia in grado, mentr' io vivo
  convien che ne la mia lingua si scerna."
"If my prayer were all fulfilled," I answered him, "you would not yet be banished from human nature, for in my memory is fixed, and now saddens my heart, the dear, kind, paternal image of you, when in the world hour by hour you taught me how man makes himself eternal; and how much I hold it in gratitude it behooves me, while I live, to declare in my speech."

"Dante recognises his old 'teacher', Brunetto Latini (ca. 1220-94)," writes Hollander. "He probably taught Dante by the example of his works rather than in any classroom, but the entire scene is staged as a reunion between teacher and former student." Dante would even have allowed his teacher to take care of his third-grade children had he lived in the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Brunetto, whose life has a number of similarities to Dante's, was a Florentine Guelph, a man of letters who was much involved in politics, and, not least in importance, he wrote narrative verse in the vernacular; he was also a notary, which accounts for his title, ser. He became a de facto exile when he learned about the battle of Montaperti (1260) and the triumph of the Ghibellines while he was in France. He stayed there for six years and, in exile, wrote both his French encyclopaedic treatise, the *Livre dou Treso*r, or *Treasure*, and his narrative poem in rhymed couplets, referred to as the *Tesoretto* (*Little Treasure*), at that point, even though incomplete, the longest narrative poem composed in Italian. Returning to Florence after the "restoration" of 1266 in the wake of the battle of Benevento, he took up his political and notarial chores, and died in the city, much honoured, in 1294.
(Robert Hollander, the *Inferno* XV)

Where would he have gone if banned from teaching in public school within the frontiers of South Carolina? To another state? To France? I had a friend in Moscow who was as renowned for the love stories he would get involved in alongside a few male students as for his piano playing. Actually no one would have noticed his homosexual bias had he not been a wonderful pianist: there were as many gays at the Moscow Conservatoire as at Oxford and Cambridge. In the fifties one of our best teachers was sentenced to a prison term for his sodomite attachments, but otherwise the sinners stayed outside the Seventh Circle and were tacitly permitted to indulge in their vice, provided they did not operate too openly, in broad daylight. But there were small areas in Moscow where a homosexual man could accost teenagers in broad daylight; one of them was situated right in front of the Bolshoi Theatre. My friend did not go hunting in those proverbial areas as if determined to remain faithful to his alma mater, and would say "Don't come to our garden" only out of habit: this saying was part of the students' jargon, tantamount to a promise of rape. He was kicked out of the Conservatoire because he had introduced a young lady to a well-known pianist. The latter was having an affair with a much older professor; she must have been twenty years his senior. The young lady became his wife. Of course the professor could not say that my friend had destroyed her long-standing liaison; so she complained about his bad conduct. "He's a *gomoseksualist*, you know," she told a high official from the Ministry of Culture. "Of course he might do what he pleases—outside the Conservatoire walls."
"Do you think he should be allowed to assault young men in parks and gardens?" asked the official, his eyebrows performing a *Totentanz*.
"I don't want him to die in prison," the professor pointed out. "He's extremely fragile. Let us just kick him out of the Conservatoire."

"We should make a choice between good and evil." The official's eyebrows were even more eloquent than before. "Are you sure his poor health wouldn't allow him to rot in prison for a few months?"
My friend was just kicked out of the Conservatoire which did not turn into the Seventh Circle of Hell in spite of the unpleasant stir caused by the dismissal. What was the Conservatoire like in those happy days which are no more? (What I have in mind concerns the quality of both professors and students, and not my youth, my private paradise I lost forever.)

Indi, come orologio che ne chiami
  ne l'ora che la sposa di Dio surge
  a mattinar lo sposo perché l'ami,
che l'una parte e l'altra tira e urge,
  tin tin sonando con sì dolce nota,
  che 'l ben disposto spirto d'amor turge;
così vid' ïo la gloriosa rota
  muoversi e render voce a voce in tempra
  e in dolcezza ch'esser non pò nota
se non colà dove gioir s'insempra.
Then, like a clock which calls us at the hour when the Bride of God rises to sing her matins to her Bridegroom, that he may love her, in which the one part draws or drives the other, sounding ting! ting! with notes so sweet that the well-disposed spirit swells with love, so did I see the glorious wheel move and render voice to voice with harmony and sweetness that cannot be known except there where joy is everlasting.
(The *Paradiso*, Canto X)

"*a mattinar lo sposo perché l'ami*: Literally, given the context, 'mattinar' means 'to sing matins,'" writes Singleton. "But the phrase 'perché l'ami' brings out a meaning which that verb had in amorous secular usage, namely 'to court' by singing *mattinate* beneath the window of the beloved."
The image Dante reproduced in Canto X is not irrelevant within the bounds of my lost (I have typed out "last") paradise because that is how we lived together, students and their professors—a part of the same clock inside which a number of cogs nudge each other into action. We seemed to communicate through a piece of music we would compose on the spur of the moment and perform to our heart's content. And our internal life had nothing to do with the widespread view according to which every Soviet citizen was just a cog in a machine. (And in most cases it had nothing to do with the Seventh Circle either.) As one of my colleagues put it in a film devoted to the Conservatoire: "Professors and students often had their meals together, listened to recordings and took extensive walks along the Boulevard Ring. Our lessons were just a part of this manifold relationship. In the West it's quite different—professors just give lessons to their students." I was studying under Emil Gilels whose mastery of the piano and knowledge of silence and Time could not be equalled even in the days of Michelangelli and Horowitz. He gave lessons at home and we often talked till 2 or 3 a.m., his wife pulling out the phone's *Schnur* whenever our discussion switched to politics: she had a deep conviction that the phone was tapped but hoped there were no microphones inside the walls.

As I said earlier, professors and students shared the Seventh Circle only exceptionally, and whenever a professor did fall in love with his student their relationship was on the Platonic side. To my knowledge, only one professor transgressed this rule as he implored his student to do him a favour which would have conveyed both to the Seventh Circle, had the student satisfied his old professor's dying wish. He did not and the professor died nine days later. "You don't wish to grant your professor something that every whore is entitled to," he cried as his student made for the front door. Where is the professor now? Is he a cog in the Purgatorymachine? (The student is in the vale of tears.)
Here is Esolen's introductory note to Canto XV:

It is interesting to note the gentility of the sinners in this ring. As Ser Brunetto says, "they were scholars all, great men of letters, clerks of wide renown." Nor does Dante scorn that gentility and that learning. He expresses admiration and sympathy for Ser Brunetto here and for the three noble Florentines he will meet in the next canto. Conversely, he is no sentimentalist when it comes to the rude and uncouth, as we will find when we hear him laugh at the famously stupid people of Siena. The tragedy is rather that so learned and decorous a man as Ser Brunetto should have given himself wholly over to a vice that Dante, with quiet delicacy, chooses not to describe. Hence the terrible disappointment in his voice when he recognises his old and beloved mentor.

My professor at the Music College attempted to strip the clothes off his fourteen-year-old student. (He was sixty at the time.) Sobbing and screaming, she rushed out half-naked and the professor was conveyed to a hospital—a circle of Hell in its own right—where they diagnosed a heart attack to spare him any further vexation. What would American lawyers have done with him? Incidentally, after his return from the hospital, he resumed his work at the College—only for a month, to my bitter disappointment. Then he resigned and married a thirty-year-old beauty. When preparing the Bach Competition I took a dozen lessons from him, playing his old Bechstein in a room fully acquainted with the scent of Cuban cigars. His wife was a marvellous cook.

Even as a child, I could feel the rush of J. F. K.'s presidency racing forward, opening up a thrilling world of possibilities and modernity. We were going to the moon. We were confronting racial intolerance. We were paying any price and bearing any burden for freedom. We were respecting faith but keeping it out of politics. Our president was inspiring much of the world. Our fist lady was setting the pace in style and culture.
(*The New York Times*, November 7, 2004)

I recall those times when the United States began to make inroads into the life of Soviet citizens. In the late sixties, when the Thaw was a reality—as real as the ice floes on the Neva—I attended the American Exhibition in Sokolniki Park. A huge Chevrolet with its bonnet wide-open welcomed visitors; some of them, engrossed in the intricacies of the engine, did not go any further and had to come back a few days later. This exhibition gave me a taste of the *dolce vita* and the *vita nuova*, the latter variety being rather different from the experience described in Dante's juvenile masterpiece. In *Le Temps retrouvé* Proust speaks about a number of doors we may open in vain until we stumble upon

a door we would not have noticed, but for a lucky incident as a result of which we penetrate into a domain forbidden to us so far, where the unattainable turns out to be within walking distance, if not *à portée de la main*, lying on our Louis XV chest of drawers. I had not been looking for any forbidden domain when an invisible door opened suddenly, inviting me to a world I could catch a glimpse of only for a short stretch of time. I watched the documentaries shown in a big hall; I got the impression it had grown even bigger under the influence of those movies where ordinary American citizens walked amidst skyscrapers and performed their daily routines in offices or at home. Under the influence of Soviet television, which made everyone look smaller, I thought that the streets of New York were always under the control of a few men with rifles, prepared to shoot any passer-by and even the people staying indoors. I thought the underprivileged constantly fought the police with stones and empty bottles. I thought the haves kept robbing the have-nots, although they had enough money in their banks. In those documentaries everything looked normal or even better than whatever was regarded as normal in the Soviet Union—much, much better. Actually it was another life of which I knew nothing or next to nothing: there were *some* luxurious cars in the streets of Moscow. (I was rather fond of cars in those days.)

- After three visits to the American Exhibition I realised that the Soviet Union was not the only country where life was a paradise on earth. I resolved to leave this fake paradise as soon as I was mature enough to accomplish such a feat. John Kennedy was inspiring my decisions, my thoughts and my actions, and his wife dressed far more elegantly than any Soviet film star, let alone *our* first lady. I knew that no one was allowed to go abroad on a whim except the members of the Politburo and their families. No Soviet citizen—not even a member of the Politburo—was permitted to settle abroad for good. What was to be done? One day I read in a newspaper about a film director of sorts who had returned to the Soviet Union after spending almost a year in the West. "I requested political asylum in London," he wrote. "They promised me a job, a lot of money. Last summer I filmed a few actors who turned out to be just passers-by they had hired to make me believe I was shooting a film. I am still wearing the clothes I bought in Moscow on the eve of my departure."
- "He requested political asylum in London," I wrote in my diary. "He did not succeed. I will succeed. I know what I must do. Political asylum. The United States."

W's presidency rushes backward, stifling possibilities, stirring intolerance, confusing church with state, blowing off the world, replacing science with religion, and facts with faith. We're entering another dark age, more creationist than cutting edge, more premodern than postmodern. Instead of leading America to an exciting new reality, the Bushies cocoon in a scary, paranoid, regressive reality. Their new health care plan will probably be a return to leeches.
(The New York Times, November 7, 2004)

From the *Paradiso* to the *Inferno*. "Such a newspaper can be printed only in a free, democratic country," I would have thought back in the sixties. Now I know that what counts is not a mere manifestation of freedom but the way it might influence the population of a country, of a continent, of the global village. Let us not forget that a large majority of Americans have already made up their minds.

"Not a *large* majority," Michael pointed out.

"A large majority, a small majority. What does it matter? One voice is enough to tip the balance in favour of a minor Antichrist," I said.

America has always had strains of isolationism, nativism, chauvinism, puritanism and religious fanaticism. But most of our leaders, even our devout presidents, have tried to keep these impulses under control. Not this crew. They don't call to our better angels; they summon our nasty devils.
(*The New York Times*, November 7, 2004)

- CHAPTER 22

Two tendencies seem to dominate the world we are living in and, as often happens with ideas, either philosophical or political, they are diametrically opposed. On the one hand, we favour cuts and division, multiplying the number of independent republics that cartographers are obliged to deal with, as if they were newly-discovered patches of the earth. We tend, on the other, to unify what happens to be historically divided in order to create a global something, be it a village, an idea or a fashion. "There is no accounting for taste" is an old-fashioned saying and therefore a thing of the past except when people talk about feminine or masculine beauty or unconsciously reproduce a dialogue out of a dictionary, for instance: "I love working at weekends." "Well, there's no accounting for taste, is there!" Many pro-Nazi writers endeavoured to justify their obnoxious stance by saying they dreamt of a united Europe. Germany did not live up to their expectations, but, unlike many elements related to Hitler and his ideology, the dream was not discredited and gave rise to a similar dream which, contrary to its prototype, came true rather quickly: even in the early fifties the United States of America was universally regarded as the centre of the world. Only out of false modesty or carelessness has nobody so far suggested christening it "The United States of the Universe": G. W. Bush is unlikely to believe there is a life on other planets. As Volodya put it, "Christ is not a cosmonaut. Why should He die on the Cross in distant galaxies? One death on the Cross is enough. But even His death couldn't save anybody from a distance—He must be crucified on the spot."

"Do you think extra-terrestrials might have any part in original sin?" I asked.

"There are no extra-terrestrials," he said. "Adam's children were no cosmonauts either."

"But suppose there *was* another Adam in a remote sphere of the universe. Do you think he would stay in the Garden of Eden? And what about the forbidden fruit?"

"I think he would behave exactly like our Adam because there's no alternative to the Bible," he said.

"What about Buddhist Scriptures?" I asked.

His voice heavy with irony, Volodya said, "Can't you tell these two propositions apart: 'There must be an alternative to people sleeping and dying on the streets' and 'There must be an alternative to the Bible'? Can't you see the difference?"

In Canto VII of the *Paradiso*, Dante's mind grapples with two difficulties rooted in the doctrine of Redemption. The first arises from a remark dropped in the previous canto by Justinian:

"Or qui t'ammira in cib ch'io ti replico:
  poscia con Tito a far vendetta corse
  de la vendetta del peccato antico."

"Now marvel here at what I unfold to you: afterwards it sped with Titus to do vengeance for the vengeance of the ancient sin."

(The *Paradiso*, Canto VI)

In other words, Justice leads Titus to Jerusalem which he destroys to punish the Jews for having put Christ to death. But the crucifixion was itself the punishment of mankind, in Christ's person, for "the ancient sin" of Adam and was inflicted by a representative of the Roman Empire that Dante regarded as a divine institution. In other words, Injustice or the thirst for blood leads Titus to Jerusalem which he razes to destroy the Jewish nation. In other words, the vengeance depicted in the *Tragedia* is just another instance of cruelty and persecution. How many other words would I need to correct the following excerpt from the *Summa theologiae*?

The Jews did not crucify one who was simply a man; they inflicted their presumptions upon God. For suppose a prince to speak by word of mouth, and that his words are committed to writing on a parchment and sent out to the cities, and that some rebel tears up the document; he will be led forth to endure the death sentence, not for merely tearing up a document, but as destroying the imperial message. Let not the Jew, then, stand in security, as crucifying a mere man; since what he saw was as the parchment, but what was hidden under it was the imperial Word, the Son by nature, not the mere utterance of a tongue.

Suppose a churchman makes a speech and a secretary notes his words down on a sheet of paper. The words are read and commented upon, but beneath them, under the sheet of paper on which they have been written, there lies human history, the suffering of the Jews. Why not severely punish those who do not see what is hidden under the sheet of paper? Should *they* "stand in security"?
It is only natural to think that Democritus was unlikely to find favour with the representatives of idealism in philosophy, but only recently did I learn that Plato had been determined to have all his works burnt on a bonfire. His friends being hostile to the idea—after all, such an auto-da-fé might have attracted a lot of attention to Democritus and materialism—he decided not to speak of his opponent in his writings. I ought to have burnt the above excerpt from the *Summa theologiae* or at least restrained myself from typing it out. It is not too late to burn this paragraph, is it? I would not burn Singleton's commentary where I found this diatribe against the Jews: I need the book for my further investigation of the *Paradiso*. (Why set fire to the travel agency that has already organised my trips to Jupiter and Saturn?) But I might tear out the page on which it is printed and put the page in my stove for an hour at least. What to do with the ashes? Yesterday I received a letter from my English girlfriend whose grandmother died three weeks ago. "My grandmother's ashes," she writes, "were scattered over the Yorkshire Moors where she had spent the last few years of her life." No, let them burn until they disappear altogether. But how to prevent them from vanishing into thin air? And how to squeeze them out of thin air if they succeed in vanishing into it?
And what to do with the corresponding passages in the *Commedia*?

"La pena dunque che la croce porse

s'a la natura assunta si misura,
nulla già mai sì giustamentne morse;
e così nulla fu di tanta ingiura,
guardando a la persona che sofferse,
in che era contratta tal natura."
"The penalty therefore which the Cross inflicted, if it be measured by the nature assumed—none ever so justly stung; also none was ever of such great wrong, if we regard the Person who suffered it, with whom that nature was bound up."
(The *Paradiso*, Canto VII)

Beatrice explains that Christ was justly punished as regards His human nature, unjustly as being God. In other words, no greater crime has been perpetrated in the history of humankind. Another trial, another punishment, another genocide, another concentration camp. I am always torn between two diametrically opposed desires: to forget this human hell with all its circles or to seize every opportunity to stigmatise it. Never mind digressions! Shall I write my commentary on Hell within this part devoted to the *Paradiso*? "I am just having all anti-Semites shot," as Nietzsche wrote in his letter to Overbeck. How to shoot the dead?

To skip or not to skip these two cantos. Shall I follow Plato's example? Not the whole of the *Paradiso* would be lost. Just two cantos. Or a few tercets from two cantos. Should I comment on the following tercets?

"Non potea l'uomo ne' termini suoi
mai sodisfar, per non potere ir guiso,
con umiltate obediendo poi,
quanto disobediendo intese ir suso;
e questa è la cagion per che l'uom fue
da poter sodisfar per sé dischiuso."
"Man, within his own limits, could never make satisfaction, for not being able to descend in humility, by subsequent obedience, so far as in his disobedience he had intended to ascend; and this is the reason why man was shut off from power to make satisfaction by himself."
(The *Paradiso*, Canto VII)

And Beatrice goes on to declare that only God was in a position "to restore man to his full life" (*riparar l'omo a sua intera vita*) through mercy and justice. What Adam was guilty of, according to Dante, might be regarded as the sin of pride which induced him to lend an ear to the serpent's perfidious statement: "For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil." But, instead of Jacob's ladder or the *Commedia*, he had at his disposal only the Tree of Knowledge and its forbidden fruit.

Would God have forbidden Adam to read the *Commedia* had it been already obtainable in bookshops and libraries? Don't you learn a great deal about good and evil as you plough through Dante's description of how saints and sinners spend their eternity in the Hereafter? Even my commentary might have taught Adam a few lessons, infallibly bringing the Almighty's curse upon his flower-

adorned head. "You can read any book in my library, but do not read Dante's *Divina Commedia*, for the day you read it you shall die."

Didn't Dante assume the air of a divinity as he assigned the dead to their circles, spheres and terraces? Man himself could not atone for his sin "because he was unable to descend in humility to the extent that he had once aspired to rise," says Singleton. Dante's descent to the lowest circle of Hell was comparable to his ascent to the Celestial Rose—in terms of psychological distance. There is no denying that the earth is much smaller than the space separating it from the moon, let alone from the sun or Jupiter, but the emotions experienced by the poet within the bowels of our planet were on a par with the joy and wonder that accompanied him throughout the spheres of Paradise. Could he have redeemed mankind had the task not been accomplished by Jesus Christ at the outset of our era? "The needful compensatory descent is a descent to humility, which is the opposite of the prideful aspiration of our first parents," writes Singleton. Dante's downward journey neither brought him to humility nor even helped him get rid of his pride, a few instances of which the reader is allowed to glean in Canto XXXIII and elsewhere. For the same reason the United States of America cannot redeem mankind in the twenty-first century: American citizens (or the majority of them) will never envisage going down through the circles of Hell—of their own free will, in all humility. What a pity! Mankind should be redeemed once more, in my opinion; perhaps it should be redeemed every century, every decade, every month. Anyway, no humiliation undergone by a human could rival the descent of the Son of God to our insignificant planet and His subsequent crucifixion alongside two robbers.

In the late seventies I pinned all my hopes on the United States because no other country, I thought, was capable of overthrowing the communist regime in Russia, putting an end to Marxism, Leninism, Stalinism and, generally speaking, to red "isms" all over the world. My hatred of communism was at fever pitch during the first year of the war in Afghanistan; I even refused to take a ride in any car painted bright red. And I would shout for joy whenever the Afghan rebels captured and tortured a representative of the Soviet Army. In 1991 the veterans of the war set up a special fund in Moscow with a view to helping the families of those who had perished in Afghanistan. I visited the fund and was shown some photographs that reminded me of the joy I had experienced upon the capture of the men whose faces and bodies I saw for the first time. While holding the photographs I repeated an irrelevant phrase, something along the lines of "Gorbachev is out on a limb with his endorsement of the Washington plan": there was no other way I could withhold my tears and shouts of anger.

At the 1980 Winter Olympics the Russian hockey team confronted the Americans and again I shouted for joy whenever my former fellow-countrymen were ridiculed and beaten. In those days the American government took a firm stance on the subject of the Summer Olympics which were to take place in Moscow: Carter said that no American athlete would participate in the games unless the Soviet Army withdrew from Afghanistan.

"A te convien tenere altro vïaggio,"
  rispuose, poi che lagrimar mi vide,
  "se vuo' campar d'esto loco selvaggio;
ché questa bestia, per la qual tu gride,
  non lascia altrui passar per la sua via,
  ma tanto lo 'mpedisce che l'uccide;
e ha natura sì malvagia e ria,
  che mai non empie la bramosa voglia,
  e dopo 'l pasto ha più fame che pria."
"It behooves you to go by another way if you would escape from this wild place," he answered when he saw me weep, "for this beast, the cause of your complaint, lets no man pass her way, but so besets him that she slays him; and she has a nature so vicious and malign that she never sates her greedy appetite and after feeding is hungrier than before."
(The *Inferno*, Canto I)

Like Virgil sent to Dante on a rescue operation, the Americans were capable of guiding the world out of the Cold War and communism towards the threshold of Paradise and even higher up, as far as the throne of God. Even in those times when their power was challenged by the Soviet Union neither Carter nor Reagan would have said:

"A le quai poi se tu vorrai salire,
  anima fia a ciò più di me degna:
  con lei ti lascerò nel mio partire."
"And to these if you would then ascend, there shall be a soul worthier than I to guide you; with her I shall leave you at my departing."

Neither of them would have admitted there was a worthier country to guide the world to the spheres of Paradise. But in the early eighties I did not judge the United States in terms of humility and arrogance, reducing my moral vocabulary to the proverb "the end justifies the means". To many Soviet expatriates Moscow was not the third Rome but a lair where the three beasts assailing Dante in Canto I of the *Inferno* lived and prospered: a Leopard (Lust), a Lion (Pride) and a She-Wolf (Avarice). In the passage I quoted above Virgil speaks about the She-Wolf.

All our government was interested in was satisfying its lust; the members of the Politburo lusted for control of the world, for money and even for women walking along the streets of Moscow. Their pride was equal only to that displayed by the majority of American citizens either at home or abroad—on vacation in the Mediterranean, for example. And their avarice knew no bounds: even when giving money to Cuba or another satellite state they wished to have the whole world in return.

Robert Hollander devotes more than a page to the three beasts and their identities. Did they symbolise (1) lust, pride and avarice; (2) envy, pride and avarice; (3) incontinence, malice and mad brutishness; (4) Dante's Florentine enemies, the royal house of France, the forces of the papacy?

Perhaps the single passage in the text of *Inferno* that identifies one of the three beasts in such a way as to leave little doubt about its referentiality occurs in XVI. 106-108, where Dante tells us that he was

wearing a cord that he once used in his attempt to capture the beast with "the painted pelt". That this cord is used as a challenge to Geryon, the guardian of the pit of Fraud, makes it seem nearly necessary that in this passage the leopard is meant to signify Fraud. If that is true, it would seem also necessary that the lion would stand for Violence and the she-wolf for Incontinence. The last formulation is the trickiest to support. The she-wolf is mainly associated, in the poem, not so much with Incontinence as with avarice (e. g. *Purg*. XX. 10-15). Thus Dante presents himself as most firm against Fraud, less firm against Violence, and weak when confronted by Incontinence. In his case the sin of Incontinence that afflicts him most is lust, not avarice.

I have also had a fair share of lust which might have been responsible for my relative independence from other sins, especially from fraud and violence: neither makes any sense within my flat. Of course I could break my computer and the tea service I was given on my fiftieth birthday, but I do not think Dante would have put me in the Seventh Circle for such an outburst of fury and despair. Some people tend to regard fraud against large organisations as unimportant because no single person is a victim and I partly agree with this view, although I have never tried to cheat my tax office. And the individuals who might suffer from my fraudulent dealings remain out of my reach as they walk beyond my windows unconcerned about my profile and the half-opened blinds. Lust, on the other hand, usurps my mind and body not only as soon as I switch the television on but also whenever I mentally review the women I have been in touch with throughout my life. Even a girl I met at the age of nine may invade my whole being like the American army to which I surrender at once, promising that no guerrilla attacks will ever mar our tyrant-and-slave relationship.

Eager to get rid of unnecessary symbols and comments, humans turn into beasts so that instead of writing, "Let us divide all sins into the three classes that theologians derive from the account of Satan's temptation of Christ: the World (wolf), the Flesh (leopard) and the Devil (lion)," we might say, "Here's Mr Johnson" or "Here's Mr Ivanov". For the sake of simplicity let us conclude that our modern world is just a huge beast, nothing else. Is it the she-wolf about which Virgil talks to Dante in the above-quoted tercets or just a skunk from Lowell's *Skunk Hour*?

only skunks, that search
in the moonlight for a bite to eat.
They march on their soles up Main Street:
white stripes, moonstruck eyes' red fire
under the chalk-dry and spar spire
of the Trinitarian Church.

What is the title of the poem? Is it *Skunk Hour* or *Skunk Century*? Or *Skunk Eternity*? Let us hope that the Martians will attack the earth sooner or later.

When grappling with the question, "Whose fault is this?" one might remember Adam's dream that substituted an up-and-down catastrophe for horizontal strolls in the Garden of Eden. The first man endeavoured to climb Jacob's ladder of which he knew nothing and was pushed down with such a force that we are still unable to land up on Mars. Khrushchev, who hated God and any religion even

more than Lenin and Trotsky put together, might have said in one of his off-hand speeches, "We sentenced God to death in absentia. Now we're prepared to carry the verdict out. Our spacecraft is already on the way to His Palace." Inspired by Adam's bid for supremacy, the Soviet high officials dreamt of the moon, of Mars, of the Almighty's throne. "It's not enough to depose God on paper. We must sit on His throne! We must hold His spectre!" But they even failed to land on the moon.

G. W. Bush would make another speech if his vocabulary allowed him to encroach on the domain of culture. "My Lord! Don't frown upon my deeds! I'm not climbing Jacob's ladder—I read only the New Testament and have no idea what this ladder looks like and where it leads. Nor did I read Dante's *Divina Commedia*. I want to send a spacecraft to Mars with a scientific purpose in view. Far be it from me to conceive a desire to usurp your throne. I just combat evil in Thy name. Can't I borrow Thy name once in a while? There's no harm in my using Thy name as long as I remain G. W. Bush, is there?"

Our genes are to blame, I suppose. And the Second Law of Thermodynamics. "In physics, order or organisation can be measured in terms of heat differences between regions of space time," writes Daniel C. Dannett in *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*; "*entropy* is simply disorder, the opposite of order, and according to the Second Law, the entropy of any isolated system increases with time. In other words, things run down, inevitably. According to the Second Law, the universe is unwinding out of a more ordered state into the ultimately disordered state known as the heat death of the universe."

Dannett quotes Richard Gregory who "summarises the idea crisply":

> Time's arrow given by Entropy—the loss of organisation, or loss of temperature differences—is statistical and it is subject to local small-scale reversals. Most striking life is a systematic reversal of Entropy, and intelligence creates structures and energy differences against the supposed gradual "death" through Entropy of the physical Universe.

Here is a commentary I might supply if I had no more energy to cope with the gradual death of my inspiration: "Intelligence no longer creates structures and energy differences against the gradual death through Entropy of the physical Universe." Nor do we create structures and energy differences to guard against death in the domain of art. Why should I elaborate any further on this minimalist, repetitive declaration? We are taking great care of our health and boast about today's life expectancy as we peruse a biography of this or that great artist of the past who died so young because he had neither our pills nor our hospitals at his disposal. At my age Dante was already in Purgatory and I am sure that American or even European doctors might have cured him of malaria in no time, scoffing all the while at their greenhorn fourteenth-century colleagues. But our pills will not help us write great novels or poems and our surgeons are unlikely to introduce a genius-gene into our skulls when they are requested to operate on our brain tumours. So we lose on the swings what we gain on the roundabouts. Does this have anything to do with Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle which, if applied to the present analysis, would sound thus: "You cannot live long and create masterpieces." And what if someone comes along and says, "Monteverdi, Goethe, Verdi, Stravinsky and many other great artists

lived a long and happy life"? Perhaps it is our pills that are incompatible with creating masterpieces, which may imply that their only side effect concerns the genius-gene.

The particle's position and its momentum cannot be measured simultaneously with great accuracy: we either obtain a minute knowledge of the particle's position and remain in the dark about its momentum (and its velocity) or vice versa. We may prefer, in this case, to have a rough and imprecise knowledge about both quantities. This last option, however, would not apply to the attitude we are bound to adopt towards our health: we must be treated by the best doctors and with the best pills. So we have become "abnormally normal"—the expression used by an American actor who spoke with admiration about an actress he had known for a long time. What would Pasolini have said about her or about our abnormally normal world? I saw a documentary on him the other day. In 1974 he was talking about "the Italian tragedy" as if paying discreet homage to Dreiser's novel or the Hollywood movie starring Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift. "Our *acultural* society," he said. My half-translation is clear enough and does not require further comment: all you have to do when speaking of our society is to add *any* letter or letters to the word "cultural". You can say "uncultural" or "non-cultural" or "anti-cultural" or "x-cultural". The main thing is not to leave the word "cultural" untouched; we must tamper with it until it loses all bonds with culture, art and artists of genius.

According to Pasolini, the consumer society is more efficient than fascism in one respect at least: it has managed to unify his fatherland by turning a number of individuals into a homogenous mass. France and Russia were unified through monarchy; Italy had to wait until the final triumph of capitalism.

"E 'n quel gran seggio a che tu li occhi tieni
  per la corona che già v'è sù posta,
  prima che tu a queste nozze ceni,
sederà l'alma, che fia giù agosta,
  de l'alto Arrigo, ch'a drizzare Italia
  verrà in prima ch'ella sia disposta."
"And in that great chair whereon you fix your eyes because of the crown that already is set above it, before you sup at these nuptials shall sit the soul, which on earth will be imperial, of the lofty Henry, who will come to set Italy straight before she is ready."
(The *Paradiso*, Canto XXX)

"For three years, from 1310 to 1313," writes Paolo Milano, "Dante's political hopes flared again. The disputed crown of the Holy Roman Empire had fallen upon the Count of Luxembourg, who became the emperor Henry VII, to be hailed universally as a *rex pacificus*. When he descended into Italy at the head of an army, even the Pope, Clement V, who had backed his election, prodded the Italians to welcome him. No wonder that Dante saw in him the delivering, God-appointed Prince…"

My political hopes also flared several times as I lived in exile, writing the novels where I seldom spoke of Russia as if unwilling to let the reader in on my secret love for her. In the interviews I thundered forth against her rulers among whom there was a man I might have pinned my hopes on,

had I been informed of the internal life of the Politburo. A distinguished political scientist said that Andropov had played a more important role in the collapse of the Soviet Union than Gorbachev whom Udo Sautter put in his book *Die 101 Wichtigsten Personen der Weltgeschichte*. (His name is the last on the list of the 101 most important figures in the history of humankind.) Apparently it was Andropov who had broken the Brezhnevian structure of the Soviet commonwealth and Gorbachev just found himself driven by the momentum he could not stop. Upon learning about Brezhnev's death I opened a bottle of champagne: I was convinced that a new First Secretary, whoever he might be, would get things moving. (Brezhnev's reign had been dubbed a "period of stagnation".) I still remember the joy I experienced when I saw a photograph in which Mrs Thatcher was shaking hands with Gorbachev—"a man with whom one might do business," as the caption announced. "*Pourvue qu'il ne meurre pas comme Henri VII*," I said to myself in French as if to reflect more or less adequately the whereabouts of the campaign on which Dante had pinned *his* hopes. "Henry's expedition failed miserably," Paolo Milano goes on. "The Pope, suddenly changing his mind, turned the King of Naples against the Emperor. Then, in 1313, when the outcome of the struggle was still uncertain, Henry died near Sienna. The whole campaign collapsed, and with it Dante's hopes." I was afraid that Gorbachev might fail or die like Henry VII.

What did Dante write to Henry VII?

O Italy! Henceforth rejoice; though now to be pitied by the very Saracens, yet soon to be envied throughout the world! Because thy bridegroom, the solace of the world and the glory of thy people, the most clement Henry, Divus and Augustus and Caesar, is hastening to the bridal.
(*Epistle V*, translated by Paolo Milano)

The above specimen of Dante's epistolary heritage reveals to what extent the poet was carried away by the hope nurtured in the nostalgic atmosphere of his exile. Had he been *correctly* briefed on the future, however, he would not have spoken of Henry VII who betrayed his hopes and did nothing for the unification of Italy.

What would I have written to Ford, Carter or Reagan?

You must know a lot about the country where I used to live, but I can assure you that the shortages for which Soviet life is renowned all over the world do not concern only food and clothes. When Yves Montand came to Moscow he was so struck by the quantity and quality of woman's underwear that he took some pieces to Paris and exhibited them in a picture gallery where they remained for quite a long time, admired by Duchamp and his followers, by fashion designers and just by the curious. But we should not forget that Parisians saw those panties and brassieres in a picture gallery and not in a communal flat or in a Soviet hospital. I am surprised that no conceptual artist has ever hit upon the idea of exhibiting a Soviet communal flat in the centre of London or New York. Didn't Panamarenko fill one large hall at the Kassel Documenta with a full-sized silver airship? A ward in a Soviet hospital is far more entertaining and may moreover provide one with a useful insight into the human psyche. Do you know what our elders and betters talk about most of the time? They ask each other questions such as, "Will any of your friends or relatives go abroad in the near future?" "Is any of your friends or relatives in the West right now?" And nobody says, "Why do you ask me such questions?" Everybody

knows the answer: "My sister is dying" or "My cousin is dying". Of course some people do say, "Why are you asking?" in order to find out who is dying and where: in a hospital, at home. And they deem it impolite to ask a straightforward question, "Who is dying?" So they just say, "Why?" Is there any connection between a trip abroad and a cousin's state of health? Is that *your* question? You ought to have guessed a long time ago—before I started to write this letter. What about your secret service, your local KGB? You do not really need a secret service to probe into the mystery of this question-and-answer slice of life—any passer-by would give you a load of information on the subject. Actually, at the beginning of my letter, I dropped a hint that might have put you on the right track. Didn't I speak of Soviet hospitals? Or should I have spoken of Soviet pharmacies? You know what I am driving at, don't you? It is better not to die in the Soviet Union. It is better not to die in the United States either, you might answer me. To cut a long story short, it is better not to die. Well, let me put it this way, "It is better not to fall ill in the Soviet Union." Please do not say it is better not to fall ill anywhere. Let me put it bluntly: Soviet citizens cannot find a medicine that might cure them of their diseases; nor can they find a suitable hospital. They are not allowed to go abroad where they might find a suitable hospital. But they do hope to buy medicine which, if swallowed or injected with a syringe, will set them back on their feet in no time. And such medicine can be purchased only abroad, in the West. Have you got my point now? There are so many diseases in the world, aren't there? Atheism is also a disease. What kind of pill could my former fellow citizens swallow to cure themselves of atheism? The Bible? But the Holy Scriptures are not sold in Soviet bookshops or churches. And there is only one translation of the *Commedia*. The comments leave a lot to be desired.

Even now you cannot be cured in Moscow without asking your friends the ritual question, "Will any of your friends or relatives go abroad in the near future?" Recently I was asked to buy medicine for someone suffering from a blood disease. "My brother will die if you don't send us the pills. They'll be available in Russia at the end of February but he can't wait. His blood can't wait." What would I write to God? "Russia is the viper that turns upon the entrails of her mother. She is the sick sheep that infects the flock of her lord with her contagion." Or should I speak about the world? Why limit myself to Russia only? The entire universe is my target. Didn't Pasolini speak of an *overall* degeneracy? The Americans were ahead of Europe and Asia as they brought out *all* aspects of entropy before it could be detected in the history of humankind, not only in physics or biology. Other countries followed in their footsteps because they were forced to do so by their genes: we *are* heading for the ultimate disorder. Or is it the ultimate order? I quoted an excerpt from Freud's *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* in Chapter 6 of the present work. Let me quote an excerpt from that excerpt: "If we may reasonably suppose, on the basis of all our experience without exception, that every living thing dies—reverts to the inorganic—for intrinsic reasons, then we can only say that *the goal of all life is death*, or to express it retrospectively: *the inanimate existed before the animate*." Stones are more obedient than humans, aren't they? Even Stalin could not arrange his subjects neatly in alphabetical order because they were capable of going from one letter to another, clouding the issue. Even when confined to a prison cell they could move around, pacing up and down or tapping on the walls—the means of communication with their fellow inmates. Perhaps the consumer society has achieved the objective that Stalin dreamt of in vain: turning humans into stones or dominoes. Our oligarchs know what a domino effect is about. Our genes are to blame. The immobility of thought. No shifting of perspectives, no mindquakes. No texture, no style. Just an omelette or scrambled eggs. A simple post-modern idea. What does post-

modern mean? Instead of putting your arm on a table you are supposed to put your leg on it. But the table does not change; nor does your leg, your arm or your body.

Within a month I saw two documentaries on Pasolini. A documentary star. Sensationalism, commercialism. In the early nineties I met a German film director who had agreed to make a documentary on my piano-playing and literary works. We spent two hours in a bad restaurant, talking about my likes and dislikes, my disks and unpublished novels. "Could you write a script for my documentary?" he said. "I'm afraid of being unfaithful to your personality." That is how he expressed himself in English.

I complied with his request. Three months later my manager received a letter in which I thanked both him and the film director for the two hours we had spent in the Munich restaurant. "Please find enclosed a script for the documentary we spoke about," I rounded off. Three weeks later I phoned my manager who assured me he was doing his best to communicate my ideas to "the man in charge", as he put it. Why did he have to *communicate* my ideas to the film director or to the proverbial "man in charge" who might have been a different person? Three years later my script was found in some drawer at the office formerly occupied by my manager. I still have a copy of the script that instructs the film director as follows:

The film is shot in a small studio. V. A. and the host sit in armchairs by a writing desk around which a few sheets of paper are scattered. The text of the interview is prepared and rehearsed in advance as if it was a play. Only the hands of the host are seen in the course of the interview. Though based on V. A.' s life, the film need not be a biography enlivened by pieces of poetry and music but should rather stand on its own—the work of art, independent and self-sufficient.

And here are a few remarks I noted as I tried to recall what I had said during our lunch:

A Russian psychiatrist I recently met in Moscow believes that all artists are schizophrenics. We are his potential clients, he hopes. Artistry has often been associated with madness. In my childhood I also adopted this romantic idea. I adored E. T. A. Hoffman and Johannes Kreisler was one of my favourite heroes. I began to read at the age of five and for many years I preferred literature to music. Actually, up to my fifteenth birthday, I preferred anything to music: mathematics, physics, chemistry, chess, football. And then I heard *Tristan und Isolde*, *Die Walküre* and *Don Giovanni* within a fortnight. By the way, in the third act of *Tristan*, Wagner offers an astonishing example of musical schizophrenia.The literature I appreciate most is neither realistic nor downright fantastic. It's something in between I'm looking for. Do you remember this King Crimson song? "I've been here and I've been there and I've been in between." As an artist, I'm neither here nor there. I try to remain in between. In a novel of mine this writing desk would be placed differently—five inches to the right, for example. I wouldn't put it outdoors, nor would I burn it. Five inches. That's the shift I need. And then you realise that everything is distributed in accordance with the position of the table. Those five inches spread around the whole novel. The discrepancy between reality and dreams is also measured in inches, not in miles.

So I began by jotting down a few remarks I had dropped in the course of the discussion with the German film director in Munich. And then I realised that the host whose hands I was prepared to show

on the screen—in spite of my egocentricity—had to ask me questions and even contradict me in order to justify his presence.

When talking to myself I contradict myself now and then; in my books I resort to the same stratagem to make my ideas acquire a scientific status: "A theory which is not refutable by any conceivable event is non-scientific." (I already quoted Popper's definition of science.) My ideas are refutable by other ideas of mine. Among the people I *could* talk to nowadays there is only one person whose thoughts contradict mine rather often and that is why I put him in this commentary, anxious to expand it beyond the space occupied by my manifold soliloquy: however varied and variegated, my thoughts are in no position to encompass the entire universe. But, in stark contrast to my existence, Volodya has a very busy schedule and even when I am in Moscow we do not meet every day to exchange our ideas on modern and ancient times. With an apologetic laughter he says, "I must be off, you know. Give me a ring."

"When? Tonight?"

"I'll come back around eleven," he answers.

I call him half-past eleven and patiently listen to the outgoing message recorded by his wife. The same happens around midnight and I go to bed without being contradicted by "the outside world", as I say out loud with a grin. In those moments the inner world is so tired and frustrated that no contradiction arises within its boundaries either. I wonder if Volodya does not just *pretend* he is not at home, reverting to the halcyon days of youth when he would pick up the receiver and, upon hearing the voice of an undesirable person, repeat "hello" several times; and he would invariably round his outgoing message off by this hypocritical demand: "I can't hear you. Please call again!" Now, thanks to modern technology, he does not have to strain his vocal chords and only his eyes make a slight effort as they concentrate on the number of a caller appearing on a small screen incorporated in his telephone. Actually I am not acquainted with this achievement of our times and therefore have no idea how my identity is disclosed to a person I ring up. Be that as it may, Volodya is often outdoors—or rather not within hearing distance—when I call him around midnight or in the morning. And if I hear an apologetic cough right after the "hello" I say, "You must be off, I presume"—to spare him the trouble of talking about his busy schedule.

With the exception of Volodya, people do not contradict me: they are indifferent and moreover have no wish to waste their energy refuting the ideas of someone who will not immortalise *their* ideas or looks. I cannot say to them, "I'm a great poet and if you contradict me or expose your own ideas, whatever they are, I'll speak about you in my book on the *Commedia*. As a poet, I've been crowned neither in Florence nor in Moscow, but Pascal thinks you'd better believe in God than deny His existence. What would you lose if you believed in my immortality? Your immortality depends on mine, don't you think? Isn't it firmly rooted in my writings, in my poems and essays? Or do you count on your sons and daughters, on a mechanical propagation of your genes? A stock idea that certainly

contradicts *my* notion of fame, but I wouldn't mind sparring with you on the subject. Why are you so reluctant to waste your breath a little bit?"

THE HOST: I wish the distance between you and your readers and listeners could be measured in inches or yards—not in light years. Why are your novels so complicated? Why do you play so slowly?
I: I never make concessions. I respect my readers, my audience. I don't write for the man in the street. I write for Shakespeares. I play for Beethovens.
THE HOST: In your essays on Schubert you're always paying more attention to tragedy and death than to joyful, cheerful aspects of his music. You characterise one of his sonatas as a "long-drawn-out, unmitigated, musical suicide".
I: Schubert is the most sinister composer in the history of music. An overdose of Schubert can be lethal.
THE HOST: Have you ever been tempted to commit suicide?
I: Never. I'm a jovial fellow—a "*bon vivant*", as they say in France.
THE HOST: Or "bon viveur", as they say in England. You live in Versailles, don't you?
I: I've been living in Versailles for twelve years now. Nobody commits suicide in Versailles.
THE HOST: There are many suicidal maniacs in your novels. And some of them live in Versailles.
I: I adore wine. There are over two thousand bottles of wine in my cellar. It would be a crying shame if I died before drinking them.
THE HOST: My friend plays two hundred concerts a year. And he's booked up until 1999.
I: I've no intention of locking myself up in a time-prison. Once I went on a big tour around the world. At the end of the first month I stopped reading. At the end of the second month I stopped thinking. Time-prisons are far worse than space-prisons. Besides, if I suddenly hit upon an idea for a novel, I can't wait six years to write it. If I fall in love—

I am still waiting for you, but Beckett contradicts my hopes most emphatically as if he had known our relationship in minute details before writing his illustrious play. I hope you will divorce your husband if I ask you to live with me in France, in Versailles, where we might eat oysters every day: you dreamt of oysters when we last met in Russia. Of course there were no oysters on the menu in the Georgian restaurant where we had our last altercation. Do I repeat "of course" too often? Of course, as a matter of course. There is a nasty streak of determinism running through this commentary of mine.

THE HOST: He was born in Moscow, but he has always preferred St Petersburg. And he says about Paris, "It's my geographical soul". At the age of six he began to take piano lessons. At the age of nine he wrote a science-fiction novel—only three and a half pages. And he ardently wished to become a world chess champion. At the age of eleven he almost blew up his Moscow apartment while experimenting with his chemistry set. At the age of twelve he lost a *matematicheskaya olimpiada*, gave up exact sciences and began to write poetry.

My biography is of no interest, is it? "I like colourful paintings," you told me. My life is not colourful, I'm afraid. A black-and-white life.

THE HOST: Do you feel Russian or French?
I: I am in between.
THE HOST: Or German? Or Japanese? You said once, "I'm Japanese in Japan, I'm English in England." Are you a citizen of the world?
I: I am a character in my own novel.

THE HOST: Nijinsky believed he was a clown of God. Whose clown are you?

Hopefully I am just a clown of myself.

CHAPTER 23

Pasolini says that we can learn *something* from the state we live in: it gives us an opportunity to question and combat the ideas put forward by its rulers. In other words, we are kept active—physically, mentally, psychologically—and have no time to wallow in the luxury of our cosy nests. Many Soviet citizens lived in permanent opposition to their government and even petty officials who might easily have merged with the crowd of Gogol's characters were regarded as devils torturing sinners in the *Inferno*. Of course neither they nor I thought of our sorry plight in terms of the *Commedia* which was available in one rhymed translation sprinkled with concise comments. The recent American editions I draw upon whenever in need of inspiration or enlightenment put to shame not only the Soviet Danteniana but also the French efforts in this domain, which are worthy neither of the eternal masterpiece nor of its space-time context.

As if to make up for this lapse of literary memory, our publishers offered us a wonderful edition of Chekhov's works in thirty volumes, and I am reminded of them when I lift my gaze from the computer screen: the whole edition has been stored on the shelf opposite, along with Akhmatova and Mandelstam.

In *The Seagull* we catch a glimpse of how a genuine writer works: Trigorin jots down an observation about Masha—"Takes snuff, always in black"—as he walks around the park. Chekhov himself kept such a notebook for jotting down whatever might come in handy. I would never jot down the following observation, "The schoolteacher is in love with her." Only sentences can be found in my notebook because they *might* come in handy: "She has a set of chef's knives which she grinds every week." A modern Beatrice should be portrayed as a good housewife, an excellent cook and a habituée of beauty parlours. "He shepherded the old people towards the dining room." This sentence may be used in a chapter devoted to my loneliness: nobody will ever shepherd me towards my dining room. Besides, there is a further discrepancy between my life and the simple ritual depicted in my notebook—a pathetic touch I am not likely to overlook. The old people in question must be married and the meal they are going to take part in has been organised to celebrate their golden wedding. Such a sentence offers me yet another pretext for wallowing in self-pity which is a sort of masochist luxury I treat myself to now and then. And the first sentence I quoted reminds me of my last Beatrice with whom I parted in the Georgian restaurant: she often prided herself on her utter incapacity (and unwillingness) to cook anything. "I can't even cook an omelette," she would say with a proud toss of her head.

"To use the expression 'in the pink'." I wish I could use it when describing my health which has much more in common with another expression I jotted down in my notebook: "He swallows a whole load of pills every morning." Well, I swallow only two pills every morning but psychologically I cannot

come to terms even with this modest portion of medicine: all my life I have kept away from doctors and their magic potions. What did Dante write in *his* notebooks?

The Stoics excluded anger and all other passion of the soul from the mind of a wise or good man, while the Peripatetics, of whom Aristotle was the chief, ascribed to virtuous men both anger and the other passions of the soul, albeit modified by reason. And possibly they differed not in reality but in their way of speaking. For the Peripatitics…gave the name of passions to all the movements of the sensitive appetite, however they may comport themselves. And since the sensitive appetite is moved by the command of reason, so that it may cooperate by rendering action more prompt, they held that virtuous persons should employ both anger and the other passions of the soul, modified according to the dictate of reason.

But for this paragraph from the *Summa theologiae*, Dante would not have written the following tercets:

E io a lui: "Con piangere e con lutto,
  spirito maladetto, ti rimani;
  ch'i' ti conosco, ancor sie lordo tutto."
Allor distese al legno ambo le mani;
  per che 'l maestro accorto lo sospinse,
  dicendo: "Via costà con li altri cani!"
And I to him, "In weeping and in sorrow do you remain, accursed spirit, for I know you, even if you are all filthy."
Then he stretched both his hands to the boat, whereat the wary master thrust him off, saying, "Away there with the other dogs!"

In Canto VIII of the *Inferno*, Virgil and Dante are taken on a boat across the marshy waters of the Styx. During the passage Dante spots a sinner who rises out of the mud and asks him the ritual question: "*Chi s' tu che vieni anzi ora*?" (Who are you that come before your time?) His body is covered with mud so thickly that one may wonder if he had risen from the marsh at all. Dante eludes the question and asks in his turn, "*Ma tu chi se', che sì se' fatto brutto?*" (But you, who are you that have become so foul?)

Rispuose: "Vedi che son un che piango."
He answered, "You see that I am one who weeps."

Dante and Virgil turn a deaf ear to the pathetic symphony one is bound to hear in this answer; indeed it is as heartrending as Tchaikovsky's *La Pathétique* performed by the Concertgebouw Orchestra under Mengelberg's glorious baton. "In weeping and sorrow do you remain!" says Dante. "Away there with the other dogs!" says Virgil. They may be justified in being so angry, but it would not hurt them to borrow a little humility from the sinner who endeavours to clutch the boat. After reading this canto I am tempted to side with the Stoics.

"There are no real characters in his books," says Trigorin as he judges his young colleague's works from the vantage point of an old professional writer. Are Dante's characters real? The sinner who makes an attempt to clutch the boat in which Virgil and Dante are crossing the marsh of Styx looks and sounds real; and yet I am not sure that Dante modelled him upon a man he had seen on a lake somewhere. "A swimmer clutches a boat, but his attempt to climb into it draws an immediate and angry rebuke from the rower who shouts, 'Away with you! Get back to your buddies. You're the scum of the earth, all of you!' To put in the *Inferno*." Is it so difficult to invent the whole scene? Or did Dante have no imagination, like Proust? After all he could not have seen the human being he described in Canto XXVIII:

Io vidi certo, e ancor par ch'io 'l veggia,
  un busto sanza capo andar sì come
  andavan li altri de la trista greggia;
e 'l capo tronco tenea per le chiome,
  pesol con mano a guisa di lanterna:
  e quel mirava noi e dicea: "Oh me!"
Di sé facea a sé stesso lucerna,
  ed eran due in uno e uno in due;
  com' esser può, quei sa che sì governa.
Truly I saw, and seem to see it still, a trunk without the head going along as were the others of that dismal herd, and it was holding the severed head by the hair, swinging it in hand like a lantern, and it was gazing at us and saying: "O me!" Of itself it was making a lamp for itself, and they were two in one and one in two—how this can be, He knows who so ordains.

I already quoted the first tercet of this passage in Chapter 6 where Beckett came across what looked like an armless, legless, headless creature rolling down the street on a wooden plank. It was rather dark, but the man did not hold his head in front of him like a lantern to illuminate the space he was to cross. What would such invalids have done in Moscow twenty years ago? Without a miner's lamp? After midnight the capital of the Soviet Union was much darker than the forest where Dante had begun his journey through the Hereafter. But almost all war invalids had been exiled to the islands and camps about which Solzhenitsyn writes in *Gulag Archipelago*.

At this point I switched the computer off and went to the bathroom where I usually spend half-an-hour before going to bed: hot water puts me to sleep. I had a nightmare which might have been inspired by the *Inferno* and by my comment on Canto XXVIII, on Beckett's encounter with the invalid in the streets of Paris. I found myself in the suburbs of Moscow; a train I saw in the distance was to convey me to the Georgian restaurant where I had a rendezvous with my last Beatrice. But I had to buy a ticket first and so I began to walk in the direction of a window behind which a man was reading a newspaper. "May I have a single to Moscow?" I said.

"Don't you want a return ticket?" asked the man putting the newspaper down, whereupon I realised he was headless.

Why didn't I notice that before? I thought. Was he covering his head or rather its absence with the newspaper? What did I make out in the dark of the street along which I was walking for almost an hour? The newspaper held by a human: animals do not read newspapers yet. Unconsciously I assumed the human was a man. Don't women read newspapers? A trunk in an armchair and a head on a table. And this head is talking to me. The shadows have already fallen. I must be late for my rendezvous. I've no time to follow this train of thought.

"No, I'd like to have a single ticket. Why should I come back to this area?"

"I thought you might have a girlfriend in one of those houses," said the man pointing at three houses perched on the top of a hill.

"I'm supposed to meet my girlfriend on the next train," I told the trunk to which I had already got accustomed. Why should I disclose to a stranger the whereabouts of our meeting place? I thought. Let him think I'll meet her on the train. Perhaps he'll give me the ticket at once instead of following his train of thought.

"I understand you perfectly," said the man. "That's what I usually do with my girlfriend—she can't escape from a train."

"A plane is even better in this respect," I told him.

"You're right. But I suffer from vertigo, you know. But even if one of my girlfriends gets off the train at one of the stations dotted along our itinerary, I'll detain the others."

"How many girlfriends do you have?" I asked

"You're green with envy, aren't you?"

"I'm just a member of the Green Party," I said.

"Do you never miss an opportunity to make a dreadful pun?" The head gave me a look of reproach. "Never mind. You can put your mind at rest—I've only got one mistress. But I multiply her. I replenish the train with her doppelgängers. Our compartment. I fasten the window shade to obliterate landscapes and platforms. I unfasten the shade and we go to the dining car. The train is swaying widely. One of my mistresses is walking along the corridor with a polite smile. Graciously I start squeezing past her in that narrow, 'made-to-measure' corridor. The dining car is an exact replica of my dining room. And, to crown it all, she's waiting at our table. What a triumph! To look around and see only her, my Beatrice. How provident I am! Should I lose one of them, two of them, or even nine, I'll detain the others."

Again I saw a train in the distance. "Could you please give me a single to Moscow?" I said.

The right hand of the trunk put a ticket into my right hand and I climbed a few steps leading to a wooden platform. But somehow I knew that the ticket issued by the trunk did not entitle me to make a journey on the approaching train. I looked at the ticket and saw an address under which these words were printed in red: "*Dinanzi a me non furo cose create*" (Before me nothing was created)—a verse inscribed over the portal of Hell. As I walked along the path which was to lead me to the portal of Hell

I realised that the literary style of my dream had altered: I was *writing* about my nocturnal adventure instead of *living* it.

Several times, like a zoologist pursuing a poisonous snake, I approached the walls of that murky establishment where both my material envelope and spiritual content might have undergone an irreversible metamorphosis. The doorbell rang as loudly and persistently as a multitude of alarm clocks. I would dodge behind a tree to minimise the consequences of my audacity. I was even prepared to resort to the authority of policemen associated, in my adventurous mind, with the sense of comfort. Twice I saw a man—the hell-keeper no doubt—who seemed to be looking for me or another potential customer whose fleeing shadow had awakened his greediness. Dressed in black, he was a perfect visual replica of my funereal foreboding and desperately I clutched at the branches, thinking of the drowning man and his straw.

"Qui si convien lasciare ogne sospetto;
ogne viltà convien che qui sia morta.
Noi siam venuti al loco ov' i' t'ho detto
che tu vedrai le genti dolorose
c'hanno perduto il ben de l'intelletto."
E poi che la sua mano a la mia puose
con lieto volto, ond' io mi confortai,
mi mise dentro a le segrete cose.

"Here must all fear be left behind; here let all cowardice be dead. We have come to the place where I have told you you will see the wretched people who have lost the good of intellect." And when he had placed his hand on mine, with a cheerful look from which I took comfort, he led me among the secret things.

Nobody spoke to me; nobody stood my side. And I did not recite these verses from Canto III of the *Inferno* for the simple reason that I know them neither in Italian nor in English; I mean I do not know them by heart. I put them in this account of my dream because it is a description after all—a description of a description. Anyway I did take comfort from these verses: though unable to recite them, I felt their contents in my heart.

The hell-keeper opened the door and I marched in. I was marching like a soldier on parade as if to prove to myself and others that I was prepared to confront any obstacle, any threat to my life. "Do you fear exposure to the black sun's radiation?" asked a man whom I had noticed only after hearing his voice.

"I'm here on a short visit," I said. "Sightseeing, you know."

"Do you wish to be assigned an individual room?" he asked.

The notion of "individual room" being associated in my mind with impenetrable walls—no escape, no rescuers—I at first declined the offer. But the only way of probing into things a little deeper than the average level of post-prandial banter was to be left alone with my subjects: my cries for help would anyway have gone unheeded. So I accepted the key he offered me and went along a corridor on both

sides of which there were rooms numbered 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. I looked at the number engraved on my key and found myself in front of room number 9. I unlocked the door, slipped in, slammed the door shut and locked it hastily. Having made sure there was no one else in the room, I heaved a sigh of relief and sprawled out on a bed opposite to the door. Whom was I afraid of? I knew I had to interview a few sinners Dante spoke about in the *Inferno*, but the image of aggressive devils described in Cantos XXI, XXII and XXIII haunted me beyond measure.

Con quel furore e con quella tempesta
  ch'escono i cani a dosso al poverello
  che di sùbito chiede ove s'arresta,
usciron quei di sotto al ponticello,
  e volser contra lui tutt' i runcigli;
  ma el gridò: "Nessun di voi sia fello!"
With the fury and uproar of dogs that rush out upon some poor beggar who straightway begs from where he stops, these rushed out from under the little bridge and turned all their hooks against him. But he cried, "Let none of you be savage!"
(The *Inferno*, Canto XXI)

Again I did not recall the actual wording of the relevant passage, but I knew that Virgil was threatened by devils at *some* point and this was enough to send a shiver down my spine. If they dare to defy a great poet and God's emissary, nothing will stop them from torturing me in this individual room, I thought. Why did I choose an individual room? Why did the receptionist talk about an individual room? There are no individual circles in Dante's *Inferno* where humans and devils live in communal apartments. Every circle is a communal apartment with a few families assigned to huge rooms. In Circle VIII live panders and seducers, flatterers, simoniacs, diviners, barrators, hypocrites, thieves, false counsellors, schismatics and counterfeiters—ten families instead of nine. There must be an error in my calculation. Panders and seducers, flatterers, simoniacs…

A relaxing mist of drowsiness put a new slant on my experiment: it did not seem as perilous as before. "I'm quite safe in here," I said to myself, "so long as they don't force the lock and break in." On the floor of my room there stood an ice bucket with a bottle of champagne sticking out of it. For a while, unable to overcome my habitual sloth and sleepiness, I indulged in my private erotic fantasies that did not clash with my surroundings: anybody can dream of men or women in an individual room. But why *dream* about Francesca, Semiramis, Cleopatra and Helen? Why not *invite* them? Why not invite the Siren? I looked up at the ceiling to see whether so unprecedented a sexual longing would not bring it crashing down on my head: ancient mariners used to *avoid* such encounters.

"Io son," cantava, "io son dolce serena,
  che ' marinari in mezzo mar dismago;
  tanto son di piacere a sentir piena!
Io volsi Ulisse del suo cammin vago
  al canto mio; e qual meco s'ausa,

rado sen parte; sì tutto l'appago!"
"I am," she sang, "I am the sweet Siren who leads mariners astray in mid-sea, so full am I of pleasantness to hear. Ulysses, eager to journey on, I turned aside to my song; and whosoever abides with me rarely departs, so wholly do I satisfy him."

When I first read the *Commedia* I was surprised by this distortion of Ulysses' legend according to which the Greek adventurer had *not* succumbed to the Siren's song and sex appeal. Hastily I put it down to the inaccuracy of the Russian rhymed translation and did not bother about the error until I read a French version of the *Commedia* in Brussels. "Commentators have at times forgotten that Dante did not know Homer's account (*Odyssey* XII.39-200) of Ulysses' escape from the Siren's seductive wiles," says Hollander. "We should probably understand, following Moore…that, from Cicero's *De finibus* V.xviii 48-49, Dante decided that Ulysses had indeed been tempted by the Sirens. In any case, that is how he has the Siren portray Ulysses, and he offers no textual support for any other view. For that matter, in Beatrice's later opinion, Dante himself is seen in exactly the same light, as yielding to the temptation of the Sirens when he withdrew his attention from her in order to fall under the spell of another lady or ladies (*Purg*. XXXI.43-48)."
I unlocked and opened the door. I peeped out. Nobody. The door opposite stood ajar and a man lying on his stomach could be seen through the crack. "I've no alternative but to imitate the customs of the natives," I thought. "This man must be waiting for Helen of Troy or the Sirens, otherwise he would not have been assigned an individual room."
So I left my door ajar and lay down on my stomach—an uncomfortable position: I am more used to sleeping either on my right side or on my back. Ten minutes elapsed in immobility and silence. I was again a prey to my sexual fantasies which, due to their utter sterility, began to cause me some pain. What was more, the position I had to maintain was giving me stomach cramps. The door squeaked, the floor creaked; I turned my head and saw a sinner bending over me. I sat up and shook hands with him.
"Thank you for coming," I said. "After all, I'm here on duty. Could you please tell me your story?"
"I was born in Moscow," he said, sitting beside me. "I still have no idea why I'm in Hell. I read and re-read the *Commedia* to find out what I've done."
"Are you allowed to read the *Commedia*?"
"I'm *forced* to read it," he answered. "And we may have as many comments as necessary to understand what has happened to us. Is it that government loan? I'm asking myself. We issued bonds and promised to pay the money back. We never did. In Canto XXX of the *Inferno*, Adam of Brescia talks to Dante:

"'La rigida giustizia che mi fruga
  tragge cagion de loco ov' io peccai
  a metter più li miei sospiri in fuga.
Ivi è Romena, là dov' io falsai
  la lega suggellata del Batista;

per ch'io il corpo sù arso lasciai.'
"'The rigid justice that scourges me draws occasion from the place where I sinned, to give my sighs a quicker flight; there is Romena, where I falsified the currency stamped with the Baptist, for which on earth I left my body burnt.'

"On earth I never had to face trial on fraud charges. Neither am I punished in Hell. I just sit in my room and read Dante all day long, so I've already memorised the *Inferno*. Canto XXX interests me more than the rest of the poem because of the sin perpetrated by Master Adam who suffers from homesickness. He speaks of 'the little brooks that from the green hills of Casentino run down into the Arno, making their channels cool and moist':

"'Li ruscelletti che d'i verdi colli
del Casentin discendon guiso in Arno
faccendo i lor canali freddi e molli,
sempre mi stanno innanzi, e non indarno,
ché l'imagine lor vie più m'asciuga
che 'l male ond' io nel volto mi discarno.
"The little brooks that from the green hills of Casentino run down into the Arno, making their channels cool and moist, are always before me, and not in vain, for the image of them parches me far more than the malady that wastes my features.

"These brooks are before his eyes, and not in vain, because their image makes him thirst still more than does the malady that wastes his features. Do you remember what he suffers from?" he asked me, interrupting his monologue.

"I don't," I answered truthfully. And he launched into yet another recitation:

"Io vidi un, fatto a guisa di lëuto,
pur ch'elli avesse avuta l'anguinaia
tronca da l'altro che l'uomo ha forcuto.
La grave idropesì, che sì dispaia
le membra con l'omor che mal converte,
che 'l viso non risponde a la ventraia,
faceva lui tener le labbra aperte
come l'etico fa, che per la sete
l'un verso 'l mento e l'altro in sù rinverte.
"I saw one shaped like a lute, if only he had been cut short at the groin from the part where a man is forked. The heavy dropsy which, with its ill-digested humour, so unmates the members that the face does not answer to the paunch, made him hold his lips apart, like the hectic who, for thirst curls the one lip toward his chin and the other upwards."

"Please stop quoting the *Inferno*," I told him. "I'd like to know more about *your* life and death. Were you assigned an individual room upon coming here?"

"My life in Hell is limited to the *Commedia*," he answered. "I read it in my individual room. There are no other rooms in Hell."

"Do you meet other tenants from time to time?" I asked.

"What's the point in meeting them? They all speak of the *Commedia*, reciting tercets and comments. Master Adam—an Englishman, according to some commentators—was in the employ of the Conti Guidi of Romena (in the Casentino, not far from Florence). They convinced him to falsify the gold florin, stamped with the image of John the Baptist, the patron of Florence, by pouring gold of only 21 (and not 24) carats, a carat being one twenty-fourth of an ounce."

"I can read Hollander's exegesis myself," I told him. "But why did you pay me a visit in my individual room?"

"You're a newcomer. I thought we might broach *another* subject. But you also speak of the *Commedia*. You're even writing a commentary on it."

"I can see you don't suffer from dropsy. But what about homesickness?" I asked. "The Moscva River, the Unboring Garden. I'll never see the Moscow of my youth."

"It's the only torture inflicted upon me in Hell," he sighed. "The more I read about Master Adam the more I suffer from homesickness. I wish I could suffer from dropsy instead. I wasn't allowed to have my archives brought to my room. I used to keep love letters in the top right-hand drawer of my writing desk. Why didn't I memorise *them*?"

At this point I recalled the letters stored in the top right-hand drawer of *my* writing desk. Why aren't the letters I keep as important as the ones I have lost? Where is the letter from Sasha Sokolov whose novels and poems I appreciate so much? Where is the only letter from my Russian Beatrice I left behind as I embarked upon my perilous journey to the West? This torture can be equalled neither by dropsy nor by the fire scorching the Usurers in Canto XVII. Did Dante realise that Master Adam was punished more severely, more cruelly than Judas Iscariot? As the most famous exile in the history of literature he was aware of how green the grass is in one's native land. Even trivial memories are so excruciating as to make us realise they have more significance than D-days and N-nights. One of Chekhov's protagonists might have said, "I looked out of the window. A group of children were having a snowball fight." Such a trivial memory is liable to bring back another trivial memory. She threw a snowball at me from behind as we had our customary stroll along the Boulevard Ring. She stopped and bent down to caress some poodle; weary of watching her lavish so many caresses on a dog, I turned and resumed my walk, the snow crunching under my feet. After throwing the snowball she began to run and I caught up with her only a few minutes later. What can be more trivial than this episode from my youth? In films and books lovers run so often you wonder if it is not easier just to kiss under a tree at once while they are in good physical condition: they are all out of breath when they eventually reach a trunk against which their bodies can lean during the love scene. Yet my eyes always fill with tears as I recall this trifling episode. In those moments your running figure and your face are before my eyes as tantalisingly as the brooklets that Master Adams talks about with such nostalgia. I will describe neither her features nor the way she ran along the Boulevard Ring: no amount of literary skill would enable you to see her as tangibly as I do.

La mente innamorata, che donnea
  con la mia donna sempre, di ridure
  ad essa li occhi più che mai ardea;
e se natura o arte fé pasture
  da pigliare occhi, per aver la mente,
  in carne umana o ne le sue pitture,
tutte adunate, parrebber nïente
  ver' lo piacer divin che mi refulse,
  quando mio volsi al suo viso ridente.
My enamoured mind, which ever pays court to my lady, was more than ever burning to bring back my eyes to her; and if nature or art ever made baits to take the eye so as to possess the mind, in human flesh or in its portraiture, all these together would seem as nothing beside the divine delight that glowed upon me when I turned to her smiling face.
(The *Paradiso*, Canto XXVII)

Dante makes no attempt to describe Beatrice's eyes because such an attempt would show that her eyes are describable. So he just says that whatever one may see either in a picture gallery or in the streets of Florence is nothing if compared with Beatrice's smile. Of course he extends his comparison well beyond Florence or even Europe, intimating that nowhere on earth can such beauty be contemplated. I would not go so far when alluding to my Beatrice's face; let me say that *I* have never experienced anything analogous to the sensation I was granted that afternoon on the Boulevard Ring.

It is in the course of his walks in the Guermantes direction that Marcel reflects on his future as a writer and is discouraged at his lack of qualification, at the "sense of my own impotence which I had felt whenever I had sought a philosophic theme for some great literary work." The most vivid sensations come to him but he does not understand that they have a literary significance.

In his lectures on Proust's roman-fleuve Nabokov underlines the importance of sensations—which do not necessarily concern trivial incidents—to the detriment of philosophical themes. Actually, in Nabokov's mind and under his pen any philosophical idea sounds like a big idea as if he was asking somebody, a philosopher in the present case, "What's the big idea?" He quotes another passage from Proust's novel, where Marcel speaks about "a gleam of sunlight reflected from a stone" and "the smell of a road". He felt they were about to yield up to him "the secret treasure of which they were themselves no more than the outer coverings. It was certainly not any impression of this kind that could or would restore the hope I had lost of succeeding one day in becoming a writer, for each of them was associated with some material object devoid of any intellectual value, and suggesting no abstract truth." Nabokov loses no time in pouncing on this "abstract truth" to explain the difference between real artists and fakes: "Contrasted here are the literature of the senses, true art, and the literature of ideas, which does not produce true art unless it stems from the senses. To this profound connection Marcel is blind. He wrongly thinks he had to write about things of intellectual value when in reality it was that system of sensations he was experiencing that without his knowledge was slowly

making an authentic writer of him." But why not have the best of both worlds? In the excerpt from Canto XXVII I quoted above there is a fusion of ideas and the senses, and I am not sure the former stem from the latter; perhaps it is the other way round. The *piacer divin* glowing upon Dante is engendered by Paradise, by the idea of eternal luminous life in the lap of God. Even the descriptions we come across in the *Inferno* originate in ideas: the trunk holding the severed head by the hair reflects the idea that "Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation" (Luke 11:17). The trunk and the head belong to Bertran de Born who was "one of the great poets of war of his or any time," writes Hollander. Dante splits him in two "for his implacable schismatic actions at the English court, where he supported and encouraged the rebellious plotting of Prince Henry against his own father, Henry II, king of the realm." So the fearful image that overwhelms Dante's (and our) senses does not come from real life or a Chekhovian notebook but from the idea of division applied to the human body.

Actually the material objects that Proust's alter ego stumbles upon *are* devoid of intellectual value as long as he does not endow them with the abstract truth; this happens when, at the end of the novel, he finds out how they express Time and timeless existence. Both the *Commedia* and Proust's novel belong to the literature of ideas and to that of the senses. No abstract truth, on the other hand, seems to unify any of Nabokov's works where only small ideas can be found, for instance: "One should take a bath every day" or "A boiled egg is the best dish in the world".

Nine years ago I sent one of my manuscripts to a London agency which may help you find a literary agent on condition that your work does not contradict its readers' ideas on how a novel or a story should be written. I enclosed a cheque and a short note where I outlined my modest contribution to the arts. "I'd suggest (and you may resist this idea) a much more reader-friendly prose style throughout the novel as a whole, calling upon more conventional story-telling methods," wrote *my* reader. "Your concept is challenging; it does not and cannot dwell in the realms of realism. That is fine. But by deliberately using an experimental style, the work becomes less accessible. It flies away from us. When everything is heightened, nothing is heightened. Sustained abstraction leads to a yearning for the concrete, the tangible, however humdrum that may be. Use your wonderful non-realist premise, but render it in a more reader–friendly way." A few questions arise with regard to this analysis and the *Paradiso*. Does the last part of the *Commedia* fly away from us like the poet and his beloved? Does sustained abstraction lead to a yearning for the concrete and the tangible? My correspondent might object that Dante's similes are wonderfully tangible—a swarm of bees, a tailor bent over a piece of clothing—but they are few and far between if we take into consideration the number of tercets usurped by abstract ideas, by the soliloquies in which those ideas are expressed. Does the presence of the tailor prove that not everything is heightened in the *Paradiso*?

Neither the *Paradiso* nor Plato's dialogues make me yearn for the concrete. Of course Plato did not write novels and one might even venture the opinion that his dialogues were composed in a reader-

friendly way in comparison with Aristotle's *Metaphysica*. Incidentally, I wonder what kind of yardstick my London reader—a young lady—resorted to when judging the intricacies of my style? *Ulysses*? *A la recherche du temps perdu*? *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*? Some old literary critics have considerably shortened their yardsticks over the last twenty-five years, adjusting them to the market. The young lady I sent my novel to has got only an inchstick at her disposal—a sort of match with which you cannot even flog an uncommon writer, let alone gauge his works.

Perhaps more important than all this is the state of the market in Britain. It is very difficult to get novels published at the moment, even conventional novels. Serious heavy-weight novels are having a very hard time. Moreover, Britain has never had the same fine tradition of appreciating the novel of ideas in the way that more far-sighted countries—like France, Germany and Russia—have. All these factors make me doubt whether the novel would get a fair reading by a British publishing house.

Her appraisal of the literary market in Britain extends far beyond the British Empire at the height of its grandeur: even the Russian reader is now interested only in vivid sensations and spectacular actions. A Russian publisher said to me last summer, "Nobody reads Musil any more." The same complaint was voiced by Musil's French publisher. What puts the universal reader off relishing *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*? The protagonist is introduced as the Man without Qualities—an idea instead of a name. Standing at one of the windows in his house, he looks at the cars, carriages, trams and the pedestrians' faces, blurred by distance. He estimates the speed, the angle, the dynamic force of masses being propelled past.

And then, after doing sums in his head for a while, he laughed and put his watch back in his pocket, having come to the conclusion that what he had been doing was nonsense. If one could measure the leaps that the attention took, the exertion of the eye-muscles, the pendulum-movements of the psyche, and all the efforts that a human being must make in order to keep himself vertical in the flux of the street, then presumably—so he had thought, and had toyed with trying to calculate the incalculable—the result would be a quantity compared with which the force that Atlas needed to hold the world up was trivial, and one could imagine the enormous output of energy, nowadays, of even a man who was doing nothing at all.
(Translated by Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser)

In Canto XXV of the *Purgatory*, Status embarks upon an exegesis of embryology that takes up no less than seventy-four lines.

"Sangue perfetto, che poi non si beve
  da l'assetate vene, e si rimane
  quasi alimento che di mensa leve,
prende nel core a tutte membra umane
  virtute informativa, come quello
  ch'a farsi quelle per le vene vane."
"The perfect blood, which never is drunk by the thirsty veins and is left behind as it were food which one removes from the table, acquires in the heart an informing power for all the bodily members, like that blood which flows through the veins to become those members."

And so on and so forth. The ideas exposed by Musil and Dante in the above quotations are certainly bigger than Nabokov's boiled egg, but they may not correspond to the advice that the doctor gives to Treplev in the first act of *The Seagull*: "A work of art has got to express a great idea. Only serious things can be really beautiful." In his analysis of Chekhov's play Nabokov did not comment on this remark because he might have believed the doctor was hopelessly amateurish in his approach to theatre and literature in general. To Dante the worthy subjects to be dealt with in "the illustrious vernacular" are arms, love and virtue. "Wherefore these three things, namely, safety, love, and virtue, appear to be those capital matters which ought to be treated of supremely, I mean the things which are most important in respect of them, as prowess in arms, the fire of love, and the direction of the will" (*De vulgari eloquentia*). To Nabokov, on the other hand, the etymology of the word "momentous" was mostly confined to moments. In the last act of *The Seagull*, Treplev is brooding over his manuscript. "Trigorin has created his own tricks," he says; "for him it is easy. He will show the neck of a broken bottle glistening on a river-dam and the black shadow under the mill-wheel—that's all and the moonlight is ready; but with me it is all the 'tremulous light' and 'softly twinkling stars' and the distant sounds of a piano, which 'dissolved in the soft intoxicating night air'. It is horrible, awful…" Of course those distant sounds of a piano are rather awful and I would be even more horrified if Treplev's description referred to *my* piano-playing. But Trigorin's trick works only within the framework of *The Seagull* where some characters aspire to break the mould and others are resigned to it. From this point of view Treplev is far superior to Trigorin who is just a professional writer carrying a notebook wherever he goes. Treplev, on the other hand, does break the mould by committing suicide. The neck of a broken bottle glistening on a river-dam is justified and enhanced through his desperate gesture; unwillingly he puts a finishing touch to his rival's work, turning it into a masterpiece. What punishment is inflicted upon him in Hell? Is he doomed to roll to and fro on broken glass?

What counts is not the bottle's symbolic value but its mere appearance on the stage, so to speak. For all I know, Treplev might have imitated Trigorin's style, revealing his suicidal thoughts in a poetic manner. Or he might have been influenced by this lame symbol of a broken life to the point of breaking his own life altogether, instead of leaving it half-broken on a lakeshore or somewhere else. A long perspective opens up in the wake of this more or less traditional, off-stage suicide, and this perspective may be fitted into the Dantean pattern of Hell, Purgatory and Paradise. In the last act Treplev attempts to describe Paradise as seen from Purgatory: "tremulous light", "softly twinkling stars". Trigorin's broken bottle is glistening within the bounds of Purgatory, at the spot from which one cannot glimpse Paradise in spite of the moonlight hinted at by Trigorin. (After all, the moon is located in Paradise.) It is as if Treplev was climbing Jacob's ladder and falling down from it—round the clock. Trigorin just stands at the foot of the ladder and looks up from time to time, an open notebook in his hand. Eventually Treplev realises that the ladder he attempts to climb leads not upward but in the

opposite direction: it is not for nothing that he put the Devil in the play staged at the beginning of *The Seagull*. I invite the reader to consult his or her copy of Chekhov's play.

Treplev must think in terms of symbols and his encounter with Nina in the last act might have facilitated his passage from the room where he was brooding over his manuscript to the Hereafter. "I'm a seagull," she says. "You remember you once shot a seagull? A man happened to pass, saw the bird, and killed it." By means of these symbols the unfortunate writer was eased out of this world.

How many readers have been able to follow me so far? Where am I? In Hell, Purgatory or Paradise? Am I also climbing Jacob's ladder from which I fall now and then? I was in the House of Hell a few pages before, wasn't I? Let us return to my individual room. It is better to know where you are, isn't it?

"There are no real characters except the people we meet in our memory," said the man sitting beside me.

"A Proustian statement," I nodded.

"I often compare Hell with Paradise," he said. "There are no real characters in Paradise, are there? Is St Bernard a real character?

"E 'l santo sene: 'Acciò che tu assommi
  perfettamente,' disse, 'il tuo cammino,
  a che priego e amor santo mandommi,
vola con li occhi per questo giardino;
  ché veder lui t'acconcerà lo sguardo
  più al montar per lo raggio divino.'

And the holy elder said, 'In order that you may consummate your journey perfectly, whereto prayer and holy love dispatched me, fly with your eyes throughout this garden; for gazing on it will better prepare your sight to mount through the divine ray.'"

"Even my confessor wouldn't say anything of the kind. St Bernard is a character on stilts, as Nabokov might have put it."

"There are many unreal characters in the *Commedia*," I acquiesced. "Do you think the souls living in Hell are more real because of their wounds?"

"All my life I was striving to become real," he said. "My dream came true only in Hell. All the characters in Dante's Hell are far more real than the saints he put in the last part of the *Commedia*."

"Why should one be real?" I asked. "What's so wonderful about being real?"

"You *are* real, aren't you?" he said.

"I'm not sure. Do I say that too often? I'm not sure—the expression I've used many times in my present book. I'm not sure about anything."

"I waver between reality in Hell and unreality in Paradise," he said. "Actually I prefer the reality of my suffering. Have you already paid a visit to Napoleon?"

"Is he inside this house?"

"On the upper floor. This punishment is quite suited for him and his likes. I hate famous people who complain of their loneliness. Do you remember how he wooed Countess Walewska? 'I shall think much more affectionately of your country if you take pity on my loneliness.' Two crimes in one sentence. Playing on her patriotic feelings and his non-existent loneliness. How did he dare mock human beings who really suffer from loneliness? 'You're the only woman whose favour I've begged for.' Did he suffer from loneliness in the presence of all other women? 'Isn't loneliness a small price to pay for power?' she said to him. She was taking him seriously. Was he misunderstood or what? Is that why he felt so lonely? But what was there to be understood? Was he Kant or Heidegger? Just a conceited bully. And a womaniser, an expert at wooing beautiful aristocrats. Do you remember how he conquered her? He just owned up to his defeats. Women have a soft spot for weaklings, especially if they're famous. Well, now he *is* lonely—nobody is allowed to visit him."

"Why then did you ask me if I had paid him a visit?"

"Because you're still alive, like Dante," he said. "Tourists enjoy more freedom than aboriginal inhabitants."

"Do many tourists come here?"

"Not many—St Paul, Aeneas, Dante. Beatrice didn't pull her punches either, did she?"

"Did you see Dante? Did you talk to him?"

"The situation is reaching boiling point," he said. "Sorry to disappoint you. I was under room arrest at the time of his visit."

"Do you know what he said?" I asked.

By way of an answer he quoted the following lines from Canto XXIX of the *Inferno*:

La molta gente e le diverse piaghe
  avean le luci mie sì inebrïate,
  che de lo stare a piangere eran vaghe.

The many people and the strange wounds had made my eyes so drunken that they longed to stay and weep.

CHAPTER 24

Would I find a publisher for the *Commedia*? Suppose I chanced upon it in Ravenna—a manuscript overlooked by tourists and scholars. In the early sixties the Conservatoire students were raving about the Polish film based on the novel by Jean Potocki: *Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse*. "*Je frappai à la porte; mais je vis qu'elle n'était pas fermée. Je la poussai et j'entrai. J'appelai, je cherchai, ne trouvai personne. Il me parut qu'on avait déjà enlevé tout ce qui avait quelque valeur; il ne restait sur les tables et dans les meubles que des objets de peu d'importance. Seulement j'aperçus par terre, dans un coin, plusieurs cahiers de papier écrits; je jetai les yeux sur ce qu'ils contenaient. C'était un manuscrit espagnol.*"

It was an *Italian* manuscript. I knocked on a door, shouting, "Anybody there?" I entered the house from which all valuable objects had been removed. A manuscript was lying on the floor. The *Commedia*. A poem of ideas.

I had better show Italian publishers only Dante's *Inferno* where readers come across mutilated bodies they must be acquainted with through horror movies. Those dear readers would not be alienated when lighting upon this excerpt from Canto XVIII of the *Inferno*:

Nel fondo erano ignudi i peccatori;
  dal mezzo in qua ci venien verso 'l volto,
  di là con noi, ma con passi maggiori,
ome i Roman per l'essercito molto,
  l'anno del giubileo, su per lo ponte
  hanno a passar la gente modo colto,
che da l'un lato tutti hanno la fronte
  verso 'l castello e vanno a Santo Pietro,
  da l'altra sponda vanno verso 'l monte.
Di qua, di là, su per lo sasso tetro
  vidi demon cornuti con gran ferze,
  che li battien crudelmente di retro.

At its bottom were the sinners, naked; on our side of the middle they came facing us, and, on the other side, along with us, but with greater strides: thus the Romans, because of the great throng, in the year of the Jubilee, have taken measures for the people to pass over the bridge, so that on one side all face towards the Castle and go to St Peter's and on the other they go towards the Mount. Along the dark rock, on this side and on that, I saw horned demons with large scourges, who smote them fiercely from behind.

(The *Inferno*, Canto XVIII)

"This horror story might inspire a film director," I say to a virtual publisher. (It is better to *talk* to the people who neither answer your letters nor read them.) "And you'll sell much more copies if a horror movie is made out of this material. The episode I quoted could be filmed in Rome with naked pedestrians crossing the bridge either towards St Peter or towards the Mount. Or do you think American censorship would prevent teenagers from seeing naked bodies? Do you think they'll ban the movie altogether? The remake of *Lolita* wasn't shown in the States, was it? But there's nothing of the

kind in the *Inferno*. Nobody is even accused of having sex with a minor. There are very few children in the *Commedia*. They dwell in Limbo and are mentioned in the *Paradiso* where Dante speaks of their innocence in Canto XXVII:

"'Fede e innocenza son reperte
  solo ne' parvoletti; poi ciascuna
  pria fugge che le guance sian coperte.
Tale, balbuzïendo ancor, digiuna,
  che poi divora, con la lingua sciolta,
  qualunque cibo per qualunque luna;
e tal, babuzïendo, ama e ascolta
  la madre sua, che, con loquela intera,
  disïa poi di vederla sepolta.'
'Faith and innocence are found only in little children; then each flies away before the cheeks are covered. One, so long as he lisps, keeps the fasts, who afterwards, when his tongue is free, devours any food through any month; and one, while he lisps, loves his mother and listens to her, who afterwards, when his speech is full, longs to see her buried.'

"Politically correct, isn't it? Or do you object to Dante's description of adults and their ways? Well, this is a *horror* movie after all. Even in ordinary movies adults kill their mothers, don't they? And Dante just says that a grown up *longs* to see his mother buried. He doesn't kill her, does he? Actually I saw a movie where a nine-year-old girl killed two adults and her schoolmate. The movie is entitled *The Bad Seed*. And nobody censored those murders. The girl almost got away with it. I think she was killed by lightning or something like that. It's nature that killed her, the wrath of God. In Canto XXVI of the *Inferno*, Dante alludes to the children about whom another version of *The Bad Seed* might be shot:

"E qual colui che si vengiò con li orsi
  vide 'l carro d'Elia al dipartire,
  quando i cavalli al cielo erti levorsi
And as he who was avenged by the bears saw Elijah's chariot at its departure, when the horses rose erect to heaven…

"Dante alludes to the forty-two children who mocked Elisha's prophetic calling. They addressed him as 'Baldy' and were lacerated by two bears. But the general reader isn't likely to decipher the allusion and we don't have to supply any comment. The main thing is to publish the text. Anyway, nobody is daring enough to censor the Holy Scriptures."

At this point the virtual publisher interrupts me to say he will read the book and let me know what he thinks about it. "I'll write you a letter," he promises. (Publishers never *talk* to you.) Here is his letter:

It is only at the end of Canto I that things crystallise and we gain some sense of what is going on. Many readers will have given up by then. This may not matter to you—you may only value those readers with the wherewithal to deal with a "difficult" text. I realise that this is an intellectual work intended for a high-brow readership, but even so, my gut feeling is that it takes too long for the

premise to become clear. The beginning is very abstruse and you have to read a lot of comments to find out who the three beasts are and why they attack the protagonist. He did not mock Elisha, did he? Having said that, I think the premise is wonderful. It is the treatment of the idea which concerns me. In a sense, what we have here is a bold abstract idea, but by rendering it in such a bold, abstract way the text loses clarity, focus and meaning for the reader. What does the author hides from us behind a barrier of post-modern trickery and playfulness?

So I talk to another publisher or rather to an agent: publishers listen only to agents or other publishers. "This poem is a serious work—it's neither post-modern nor playful. Actually Dante is against playfulness. Listen to this excerpt from Canto XXIX of the *Paradiso*:

"Ora si va con motti e con iscede
  a predicare, e pur che ben si rida,
  gonfia il cappuccio e più non si richiede."
Now men go forth to preach with jests and with buffooneries, and so there be only a good laugh, the cowl puffs up and nothing more is asked.

"There are also fantastic creatures in the poem. Children and adults like fantastic creatures, don't they? There are some in *The Lord of the Ring*, aren't there? And in *Star Wars*. That's how Geryon is described in Canto XVII of the *Inferno*:

"La faccia sua era faccia d'uom giusto,
  tanto benigna avea di fuor la pelle,
  e d'un serpente tutto l'altro fusto;
due branche avea pilose insin l'ascelle;
  lo dosso e 'l petto e ambedue le coste
  dipinti avea di nodi e di rotelle.
Con più color, sommesse e sovraposte
  non fer mai drappi Tartari né Turchi,
  né fuor tai tele per Aragne imposte.
His face was the face of a just man, so benign was its outward aspect, and all his trunk was that of a serpent; he had two paws, hairy to the armpits; his back and breast and both his sides were painted with knots and circlets. Tartars or Turks never made cloth with more colours of groundwork and pattern, nor were such webs laid on the loom by Arachne.

"I'll never find a publisher for such a long poem," answers the agent. "Even short poems are out of fashion. So are mythological allusions. How about making a potted prose version of the *Inferno*? I might—"

So we must jettison the dark wood, the three beasts and Virgil who talks about the matters no one can grasp nowadays except the representatives of the "high-brow readership". Let us start with the following tercets from Canto III:

Ed ecco verso noi venir per nave
  un vecchio, bianco per antico pelo,
  gridando: "Guai a voi, anime prave!

non isperate mai veder lo cielo:
I' vegno per menarvi a l'altra riva
ne le tenebre etterne, in caldo e 'n gelo."
And behold, an old man, his hair white with age, coming towards us in a boat and shouting, "Woe to you, wicked souls! Do not hope to see Heaven ever! I come to carry you to the other shore, into eternal darkness, into fire and cold."

Of course the original text should be dropped for the reasons given earlier by the agent to whom I was trying to sell my favourite masterpiece. In the modern sagas there are always old sages and boats; I can hardly go wrong with Charon ferrying lost souls across Acheron. The point is I am still in the dark wood despite the impressive number of pages I have already written on Dante, St Thomas and the Hereafter. I am still at the very outset of my journey. Canto I. Neither Virgil nor Beatrice assists me in my ascension towards the spheres of Paradise, real or imaginary, where I could breathe the air about which Dostoevsky talks in *Crime and Punishment*. Does his open air have anything in common with the emergence of the hero from the dragon's belly? In Jung's account he is escorted by a bird that is neither a great poet nor a saint nor a woman in disguise. It *might* be a woman in disguise, for all I know. Where to find such a bird? Where to find a nymph, a goddess, a guide, an ideal woman? Why not stay in the company of a bird for a while? Its plumage may hide a goddess or a human being endowed with divine attributes.

But let us not yield to the temptation of another mixed metaphor: I am in the dark wood and not in the dragon's belly. There is no shortage of birds wherever I choose to reside so I had better concentrate on my state of mind and body, on my surroundings. I know it was a dark wood I found myself in at the age of fifty-five, and two years later I am still in this wood in spite of my determination to write about the *Paradiso*. The wood described in the opening lines of the *Commedia*—actually, it is *not* described—is quite different because Dante could count on St Thomas and the ethics of Provençal poets. His wood is a symbol; so is mine. (I am sitting in my room.) But he knew what kind of symbol he used at the beginning of his poem while "I am in the dark about my dark wood" I might say if I were in the mood for dreadful puns. Is it a pun or a wordplay? Or just a dreadful state of affairs? "Cut down the whole forest (of lust), not a tree only! Danger comes out of the forest (of lust). When you have cut down both the forest (of lust) and its undergrowth, then, Bhikshus, you will be rid of the forest and free!" *Dhammapada*. A volume from *Sacred Books of the East Series* I purchased in London twenty-seven years ago. How could I cut down the forest of lust? By switching my TV set off forever? By getting rid of my library? Just another forest of lust. "A pun, *vana* meaning both 'lust' and 'forest'." Just another tree in the forest of puns.

"He alone who, without ceasing, practises the duty of sitting alone and sleeping alone, he, subduing himself, will rejoice in the destruction of all desires alone, as if living in a forest." There are no puns in this sentence, are there? So my wood has become a sanctuary, hasn't it? If I want some peace and quiet I take sanctuary in my study, in front of my writing desk. I am alone in my room; yet I am not sure I

can rejoice in the destruction of all desires among which the lust for immortality has pride of place. What is the difference between the forest where you might live and the one you should cut down?
"It is hard to leave the world (to become a friar), it is hard to enjoy the world; hard is the monastery, painful are the houses; painful it is to dwell with equals (to share everything in common), and the itinerant mendicant is beset with pain. Therefore let no man be an itinerant mendicant, and he will not be beset with pain." What about my journey? Was Dante an itinerant mendicant?
What answers could I give to all these questions? I might utter a few irrelevant words inspired by Zen and its rituals. "She tossed off a reply to the letter before she left for the meeting." "Religious groups shoulder much of the burden." "His parents are lonely, but it is a shame that none of their bounty and kindness has rubbed off on him." "Her mind flashed back to the day of her divorce." This reminds me of my last Beatrice, of her husband. Is she the last of them, of all those heroines? (Is *he* the last of her husbands?) "A blond bombshell." No, just the opposite. Never mind. I seem a bit on edge this morning.
My Beatrice is unreal because my characters have more in common with Platonic (or Dantean) ideas than with the women I loved and wooed. Dante met his heroine in Florence and she kept her flesh-and-blood attributes even after her death—until the memorable encounter in Canto XXX of the *Purgatorio*. It is her flesh and blood that rebuked her virtual lover for his unfaithfulness. (The word "virtual" might please the agent to whom I tried to sell the poem.) My heroines are a bundle of nerves or ideas and no description, however faithful and romantic, would make the general reader experience my ecstasies and disappointments. Men, according to Coleridge, are born Aristotelians or Platonists. I am born Platonist and all the women I encounter are candidates for the role of Beatrice who is just an idea, nothing else. I am an idea myself, surrounded by a host of incongruous ideas.
Here is a poem I wrote this afternoon:

Yeats was rather old when he wrote his last
Poems. This poem isn't last. I go on writing as if
I was immortal. How many times
Have I spoken of immortality? Television
Shows images one will forget tomorrow or the day
After. I'd rather
Forget them tonight. I can't
Forget myself: I'm not an image nor a word.
Dead words can be found in books
And dictionaries.

So many dead words can be found in the *Commedia*. What does it matter? Let us get away from the *Commedia* for the sake of cliffhangers and first-degree murders. But I should not get away from Dante whose life was not confined to Hell, Purgatory and Paradise. "Of Dante's life we know as little as we know of Shakespeare's," writes Paolo Milano. "Yet the harmony between Dante's character and his work is such that the meagre facts are almost enough for us."

What *do* we know of Dante's life? At the age of nine he met Beatrice about whom he might have written a third masterpiece had he not died at the age of fifty-six in Ravenna.

I have wandered through almost every region to which this tongue of ours extends, a stranger, almost a beggar, exposing to view against my will the stroke of fortune which is often wont unjustly to be charged to the account of the stricken. Truly I have been a ship without sail and without rudder, wafted to diverse havens and inlets and shores, by the parching wind which woeful poverty exhales.
(*Il Convivio*, I, 3)

His ship might have brought him to England, to Cambridge, where so many grateful young men studied philosophy under Wittgenstein in the thirties, in the forties. He was fond of philosophy, wasn't he?

I who sought to console myself discovered not only a remedy for my tears, but also the words employed by authors and sciences and books; and as I pondered on them I judged surely that Philosophy, who was mistress of these authors, these sciences, and these books, must be a most exalted thing. And I imagined her as made in the likeness of a gentle Lady; and I could not think of her in actual shape as aught but compassionate, wherefore my sense did in truth gaze on her with such a will that I could hardly turn it away from her.
(*Il Convivio*, II, 13)

His parents feared that his love for Beatrice might harm not only his health but also his prospects.

My parents sent me to England. Their scheme belonged to the group of time-honoured devices that aristocratic and well-to-do families fall back upon, now and then. The situation is classic and can be thoroughly studied in the material supplied by nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels of decorum. Situation Number One: during a peaceful ride in a barouche the only daughter of a French count, the only scion of an old-as-the-hills family, rests her eyes on a handsome upstart. The following morning she is hoodwinked, by a dozen sentimental platitudes, into a scandalous rendezvous on the Champs Elysées. His smallness and narrow-mindedness are no match for the height and broadness of her family tree. The royal blue of the blood must be preserved against red stains. Situation Number Two: The only son of an oil-tycoon is under the spell of some sexy model, and the spell must be broken at all costs before it is too late. The young lady is sent on a world tour; the young man finds himself enrolled in a foreign university. My father sent me to Cambridge.

A conscientious scholar is duty bound to supplement "the meagre facts" with a few excerpts from Dante's updated memoirs.

"It'll take your mind off things," my father told me by way of explanation. Under the circumstances, the word "things" sounded mysterious if not uncanny. He hoped to clear my "mental mess", as he put it, by means of differential calculus. Perhaps he also relied for help on the English-speaking milieu as if my obsession was in any way connected with the Italian language, my mother tongue; as if indeed by speaking English I could forget the sacred syllables of love.
The trip turned out to be nostalgia-stricken and dreary. Framed in a wishy-washy landscape, a car was desperately racing the train as another car does at the end of *Intolerance*, Griffith's masterpiece. I had the impression of watching a movie or flipping through a book—in my armchair, at home. All this was happening to other people. Presumably, my instinct for self-preservation did its best to deaden the

shock. At worst I admitted having seen someone off at the station. I wish to heaven the same train, though battered with age and overgrown with moss, might reappear now; I wish to heaven I could recognise myself in one of the compartments. I would have switched my destiny to another track.
My sentimental journey throughout which my sentimental feelings, wishes and tears were sensually interlaced—I cried in the lavatory—consisted of three parts: the first train, the boat, the second train. My psychological reaction consisted of three parts too: perplexity, prostration and great expectations. On the boat, which roughly corresponded to the prostration-stage, I was sitting hunched up over a tankard of beer and missed the panoramic view of the wan cliffs of Dover. I was to spend a week in London; the train took me straight to Victoria Station. The crush and hurly-burly reminded me that I did not live alone on our overpopulated planet.
I checked into the hotel Othello and, on the very first London night, dreamt of being strangled in my bed. Hardly had the pain in my neck subsided that I was smothered with kisses and treated like a corpse. There ensued a hugger-mugger of sensations that somehow foreshadowed my present state of mind. "Am I alive? Am I dead?"
Instead of carrying my father's order out to the letter, in Cambridge I studied philosophy that constantly reminded me of Beatrice. But when I came back to Florence I found that my parents had thought up yet another remedy for my "disease". Several people were waiting for me at the station. My parents, my aunt and my uncle showed up of course; and also a young lady who, notwithstanding my uncle's sales pitch—"Isn't she an Aphrodite? Isn't she a fairy queen?"—failed to enmesh me in the mazes of her presumed charms. Wrapped up in my anaesthesia-like sorrow, I turned a deaf ear to what my aunt tried to insinuate, every now and then accompanying her indecent murmur by a tug at my sleeve. The manifold allusions ranging from pinches to sidelong glances acquired a more material, more dynamic shape at home where a sort of wedding ceremony had been arranged. They made me take a seat beside her at the table; they looked and talked as if we had been, some time ago, caught in the act in our attic. "Red-handed", as my uncle pointed out later on. Being obviously hand in glove with my parents, who persisted in identifying chastity with sex appeal, that homegrown Helen of Troy blushed whenever I passed her a dish. Twice she offered me the sauce but I refused preferring to miss out on the polyphony of tastes. She told me she liked flowers. I did not tell her I would adorn her bedside table with a bunch of orchids. She told me she liked literature, music and "art in general". Casually I inquired about her opinion of Lucan, Morton Feldman and Wittgenstein. My labours were crowned by a three-minute "intermission". "Where are these books obtainable?" she asked me as I passed her the chocolate mousse.
My aunt bent over to my father's ear and, in a loud whisper meant foreverybody present, observed, "They're billing and cooing like doves." With an effort I bridled the inward sweeping waves of wrath and said nothing, nothing whatsoever.
We danced. Imprisoned within a circle of matchmakers, encouraged by kalinka-clapping and toe-tapping, we brought our bodies and mouths closer together. But I held her soul at bay by disrupting the dance-pattern, by kicking my legs high and nodding in rhythm with my relatives' clapping. This adolescent prank, unbecoming to a Cambridge student, lowered me in the virgin's esteem; at least that is how my parents accounted for her show of reluctance three days later when they invited her to join us in a walk. "She doesn't love you any more," said my father. "I can assure you," he added with a frown, "that if there was a pit as deep as the distance from Heaven to Hell and full of sharp razors, being cast into this pit would be the least of torments."
As might have been expected, they were in no way deterred by their defeat and renewed their attacks at the first opportunity; and they lost no time in finding that opportunity. I acted the bridegroom's role once again during a garden-party—a revenge-match of sorts. Were the laws of hospitality valid all over our estate? My father was overheard to say that there was ample room for improvement. Was he referring to my behaviour or to their tactics? I prepared myself for the worse. "You must," said my uncle, rubbing his hands as if *he* were to profit from her beauty. "You must," he said, "or else—" He produced a gun and put it down on a bench. The gun was lying there for all to see; nobody stirred.
"Do you really believe I've never seen a water pistol?" I said nonchalantly. Once again I heard my uncle's laughter which might well rival the weirdness of the *Sérénade de Méphistophélès* ("*Vous qui faites l'endormie*"), as sung by Chaliapin.

"Well, I never!" My uncle seized hold of an empty bottle of champagne and with a powerful sweep of his arm hurled it high in the air. A shot was fired.
"Bravo!" cried my mother to the great annoyance of my father who, for some time, had been pacing up and down the lawn.
"It's no joke," he said "Your son. Well, you know what's up with your son. And she's late, late, late. It was the devil of a job to have her come. Pass me your revolver!"
"It's utterly out of the question," said my uncle. "*Primo*: you're not used to handling this sort of gadget. *Secundo*: you don't like westerns—"
"I've been to the United States twice," retorted my father.
My mother grew pale and sprang to her feet. "If you so much as touch a hair of my brother's head—"
"Good gracious," said my aunt sinking into a wicker chair. My grandfather, who thus far had limited his participation in the *commedia* to shifting his gaze from me to my father, pointed at my heart with his cane and cleared his throat. "I'll kill him, that poet of sorts, disgrace of our family."
She turned up at last and the Dostoevskian situation which had not as yet wound up to a climax was thereby metamorphosed into a kind of Turgenevian, open-air social gathering.
"Have no fear," my uncle said as he motioned her to a wicker chair. "Just a water pistol and, anyway, it's not loaded."
"How exciting," she said with a drawl. "I adore pistols and duels."
"Do you?" My uncle was on the point of giving another demonstration of his marksmanship but, anxious to further my cause, my mother cut in on their dialogue.
"Our son has just returned from Cambridge," she said. The way my mother pronounced "Cambridge"—it sounded half-Italian, half-English—endowed her statement with a society-news importance.
"Has your son graduated from Cambridge?" The young lady fluttered her eyelashes and her brows reached towards the upper part of her forehead as if in acknowledgement of my high intellectual calibre.
"Not yet," said my father.
"But he shall!" My mother darted an angry look at my father.
"It depends," said my uncle. "It all hinges on—" and he covered my future wife's wrists with his right hand. Without a blush she smiled at me. Nor did I detect any sign of bashfulness in her conduct when my uncle, pretending to have tripped over a root, literally fell on my back and thereby forced me to collapse in her arms. "I'm awfully sorry. It was completely unintentional. What a union!"
"She's very la-di-da," I said in response to my father's questioning look. Ensconced in his favourite armchair, he had just knocked out his pipe and was about to fill it.
"La-di-da? How do you mean, la-di-da?" I was too tired to think up a more plausible pretext. All I could do was set out the same one in a slightly different form.
"I can't put up with conceited women."

Actually Dante's father arranged a future marriage for him with a young lady of more distinguished nobility, Gemma Donati, when he was hardly twelve: the father counted a lot on the dowry promised by the Donatis. But would not Dante have distorted the truth had he resolved to mention his wife in one of his works?

What did my updated Dante learn in Cambridge? He might have been struck by the following excerpt from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (391):

I can perhaps even imagine (though it is not easy) that each of the people whom I see in the street is in frightful pain, but is artfully concealing it. And it is important that I have to imagine an artful concealment here. That I do not simply say to myself: "Well, his soul is in pain: but what has that to do with his body?" or "After all it need not shew in his body!"—And if I imagine this—what do I do; what do I say to myself; how do I look at the people? Perhaps I look at one and think: "It must be

difficult to laugh when one is in such pain", and much else of the same kind. I as it were play a part, act as if the others were in pain. When I do this I am said for example to be imagining…

The whole idea of the *Commedia* might have evolved from this passage where Wittgenstein speaks of the man in the street who does his best to hide from his fellow pedestrians the pain he endures. And then he rushes to his doctor or psychoanalyst and spends an hour pouring his soul out or pointing at various parts of his body to help his saviour find what is wrong with him. "How are you today?" his colleague asks him. "I'm fine," he answers while his physical or psychological pain ravages his body or mind or both. And his colleague says to himself as he looks at the sufferer, "Well, his soul must be in pain because he's about to lose his job and he knows it. And he lost his daughter last year. He's not likely ever to get over it. The loss of a child may rankle with us until doomsday. He doesn't show his double grief. It must be difficult to laugh when you're in such pain, but he does laugh when I tell him a joke."

Dante walked around Florence in the hope of coming across Beatrice; his psychological pain was unendurable and, as he looked around him, he saw nothing but suffering hidden beyond a cheerful smile or a benevolent gaze. "I'm not alone in Hell, am I?" he thought. "Of course there's such a thing as a private hell, but my pain is too huge to be confined within my own body and soul. Either I radiate my pain—my black sun—all around me, unable to constrain it, or else the torture comes from the outside, from the space I am enclosed in, from my 'environment'. In the twentieth century they used this word quite often, didn't they? For all their fixation with genes, they thought that Space was almost as important as Time. 'The office is quite bright and airy—it's a pleasant working environment.' But nobody would catch my meaning if I spoke about all those pedestrians without actually *showing* their suffering and the origin of their suffering. I have to give my readers more to work with, be less wary of guiding them by the hand at times, giving them a clear signpost through the narrative. Otherwise the danger is that I may alienate them altogether. In the twenty-first century writers are very explicit about their characters and thoughts, spelling out what they have in mind. I want them to read my works in the twenty-first century, don't I? They won't reprint the *Commedia* if I'm too obscure. 'The overall sense with which the reader is left is one of frustration. We can only admire the research and the dedication that has obviously gone into creating this poem. Yet we can't help feeling that somehow the writer wants to elude us, that s/he has something to hide.' My book should detail the outward circumstances of my hero's misery to reveal his inner self. So the plot must be set in Hell and not in a sort of ersatz place that everyone takes for a paradise on earth. What do I say to myself? How do I look at the people?

"Oh potenza di Dio, quant' è severa,
che cotai colpi per vendetta croscia!
"Oh power of God! How severe it is, that showers down such blows for vengeance!"

Dante put these verses in Canto XXIV of the *Inferno*. Golden section? There are thirty-four cantos in the *Inferno*. Should I be more explicit about the significance of these verses?

And what about laughter in the *Inferno*? In the Seventh Circle, Dante meets Capaneus—one of the *Seven Against Thebes*—who retains his fierce rebellious spirit.

"Se Giove stanchi 'l suo fabbro da cui
  crucciato prese la folgore aguta
  onde l'ultimo dì percosso fui:
o s'elli stanchi li altri a muta a muta
  in Mongibello a la focina negra,
  chiamando 'Buon Vulcano, aiuta, aiuta!'
sì com' el fece a la pugna di Flegra,
  e me saetti con tutta sua forza:
  non ne potrebbe aver vendetta allegra."

"Though Jove weary out his smith, from whom in anger he took the sharp bolt by which on my last day I was smitten; and though he weary out the others, turn by turn, in Mongibello at the black forge, crying, 'Good Vulcan, help, help!' even as he did at the fight of Phlegra, and hurl at me with all his might, he would not have thereby glad vengeance."

How would Nabokov characterise the sinner's attitude towards God? Laughter in the dark?

And how does Ulysses tell his story? Isn't it another variety of laughter? Imprisoned in a burning flame, he talks as if he were sitting in a living room, a glass of champagne in his hand. "Dear Ulysses," says the hostess putting a cigarette into her cigarette holder. "Tell us a story of your last adventure."

"L'un lito e l'altro vidi infin la Spagna,
  fin nel Morrocco, e l'isola d'i Sardi,
  e l'altre che quel mare intorno bagna."

"The one shore and the other I saw as far as Spain, as far as Morocco, and Sardinia, and the other islands which that sea bathes round."

Ulysses is enclosed within a flame burning his skin and probably his brain that is also tortured in the Eight Circle of the *Inferno*. Suppose your hostess puts a cigarette into her cigarette holder; at once you spring up from your seat and light her cigarette with your lighter. And then you bring the lighter close to the palm of your left hand and wait until the pain becomes unendurable. At that point you might say to yourself, "Ulysses was enclosed within a flame. I exposed to it only a part of my body, a tiny part of it. Can I tell a story now, any story? Can I say anything now? Why not just scream with pain?"

"'O frati,' dissi, 'che per cento milia
  perigli siete giunti a l'occidente,
  a questa tanto picciola vigilia
d'i nostri sensi ch'è del rimanente
  non vogliate negar l'esperïenza,
  di retro al sol, del mondo sanza gente.'"

"'O brothers,' I said, 'who through a hundred thousand dangers have reached the west, to this so brief vigil of our senses that remains to us, choose not to deny experience, following the sun, of the world that has no people.'"

And what about my story? I am not a Dostoevskian hero and so will not burn the palm of my right hand in the flame of a candle to prove I am in love with Aglaia or someone else: anyway, no one requires such a sacrifice from my body.

I should write my version of the *Paradiso* that happens to be a logical continuation of the *Inferno*. In a literary masterpiece there is no hell without paradise and vice versa. Artists, like gymnasts and tightrope walkers, must have a fine sense of balance, of harmony. Like theologians they establish an equilibrium between the forces of darkness and the light of redemption. In a work of fiction, which is both the slave and master of Time, Hell and its torture chambers are not eternal.

"I read and re-read the *Inferno* in three languages," writes Solonius, "which spared me the trouble of questioning the original inhabitants whose knowledge of tortures is not limited to books. Using the material with which the *Commedia* had furnished me so bounteously and without producing any ill effect either on my body or on my soul, I composed my version of the *Inferno*." He speaks neither of his black sun nor of the passers-by hiding their torments beneath a merry exterior.

I read and re-read the *Paradiso* in four languages. And it is much easier to imagine that the people I encounter during my infrequent strolls in Paris are filled with joy, especially during the Twelve Days of Christmas; and yet they do not shout for joy, restrained as they are by their self-control, by their desire to look dignified. An artful concealment, isn't it? I say to myself, "Well, her soul feels joyful, but her body seems detached from her soul or at least from the joy it feels. Why doesn't she jump in the air? Why doesn't she execute a dance, an excerpt from a popular musical? Why doesn't she burst into song?"

Si tosto come l'ultima parola
  la benedetta fiamma per dir tolse,
  a rotar cominciò la santa mola;
e nel suo giro tutta non si volse
  prima ch'un'altra di cerchio la chiuse,
  e moto a moto e canto a canto colse;
canto che tanto vince nostre muse,
  nostre serene in quelle dolci tube,
  quanto primo splendor quel ch'e' refuse.

As soon as the blessed flame took to speaking its last word the holy millstone began to turn, and it had not yet made a full circle when a second enclosed it round and matched motion with motion and song with song; song which in those sweet pipes, as much surpasses our Muses, our Sirens, as a first splendour that which it throws back.
(*Paradiso*, Canto XII)

It is hard to look dignified when your soul is filled with joy, isn't it? But St Thomas does look dignified as he addresses Dante in Canto X:

Io fui de li agni de la santa greggia
  che Domenico mena per cammino
  u' ben s'impingua se non si vaneggia.
Questi che m'è a destra più vicino,
  frate e maestro fummi, ed esso Alberto
  è di Cologna e io Thomas d'Aquino.
I was of the lambs of the holy flock which Dominic leads on the path where there is good fattening if they do not stray. He that is next beside me on the right was my brother and my master, and he is Albert of Cologne, and I Thomas of Aquino.

In Canto XI of the *Paradiso*, Thomas Aquinas recounts the story of the life of St Francis of Assisi. This sentence might be abridged as follows: "In Canto XI St Thomas speaks of St Francis." Why didn't Dante abridge the story of St Francis' life? It is too long and rather boring in comparison with the rest of the *Paradiso* which is the summit of the *Commedia*, the top of the *mons Domini*.

"E poi che, per la sete del martiro,
  ne la presenza del Soldan superba
  predicò Cristo e li altri che 'l seguiro,
e per trovare a conversione acerba
  troppo la gente e per non stare indarno,
  redissi al frutto de l'italica erba,
nel crudo sasso intra Tevero e Arno
  da Cristo prese l'ultimo sigillo,
  che le sue membra due anni portarno."
"And when, in thirst for martyrdom, he, in the proud presence of the Sultan, had preached Christ and them that followed him, and, finding the people too unripe for conversion and in order not to stay in vain, had returned to the harvest of the Italian fields, then on the harsh rock between Tiber and Arno he received from Christ the last seal, which his limbs bore for two years."

CHAPTER 25

Why didn't our poet just name St Francis? He might have extolled his virtues without providing an abridged rhymed version of St Bonaventura's *The Life of St Francis*. Dante devotes as many as seventy-four verses to *his Life of St Francis*. Only nine of them can appeal to the general modern reader:

Non era ancor molto lontan da l'orto,
  ch'el cominciò a far sentir la terra
  de la sua gran virtute alcun conforto;
ché per tal donna, giovinetto, in guerra
  del padre corse, a cui, come a la morte,
  la porta del piacer nessun diserra;
e dinanzi a la sua spirital corte
  et coram patre le si fece unito;
  poscia di dì in dì l'amò più forte.

He was not yet far from his rising when he began to make the earth feel, from his great virtue, a certain strengthening; for, while still a youth, he rushed into strife against his father for such a lady, to whom, as to death, none willingly unlocks the door; and before his spiritual court *et coram patre* he was joined to her, and thereafter, from day to day, he loved her ever more ardently.

The reader about whom dear Jane spoke at such length in her report would only shrug his or her shoulders upon reading the incomprehensible words "*et coram patre*" and probably shout "Speak English" as if addressing an uneducated foreigner. It actually means "before his father": before his earthly father Francis gives himself wholly to his heavenly Father. Never mind, never mind! The reader is dying to find out the identity of the lady to whom none willingly unlocks the door. Is she just a *femme fatale*? But any man would *unlock* the front door of his house and all other doors leading to his bedroom if a femme fatale used his knocker, if only by mistake. Even la Belle Dame Sans Merci is awaited in many houses whose owners suffer from solitude and are fed up with porn movies shown on television—providing she is beautiful and sensual enough to upstage her screen-rivals. So she must be a repulsive lady with whom St Francis got involved for some reason. Does their liaison have anything to do with the movie *Harold and Maud*? Or was St Francis just a gigolo? It is a profession, isn't it? Apparently, in France you can be a gigolo by profession.

Never mind, never mind. Let us search for the lady whom St Francis loved more and more ardently as he advanced to the tercet where he "received from Christ the last seal"—the event that St Bonaventura describes as follows:

He rejoiced at the gracious aspect wherewith he saw Christ, under the guise of the Seraph, regard him, but His crucifixion pierced his soul with a sword of pitying grief. He marvelled exceedingly at the appearance of a vision so unfathomable, knowing that the infirmity of the Passion doth in no wise accord with the immortality of a Seraphic spirit. At length he understood therefrom, the Lord revealing it unto him, that his vision had been thus presented unto his gaze by the divine providence, that the

friend of Christ might have foreknowledge that he was to be wholly transformed into the likeness of Christ Crucified, not by martyrdom of body, but by enkindling of heart. Accordingly, as the vision disappeared, it left in his heart a wondrous glow, but on his flesh also it imprinted a no less wondrous likeness of its tokens. For forthwith there began to appear in his hands and feet the marks of the nails, even as he had just beheld them in that Figure of the Crucified.

A Seraph appeared to St Francis as he read the Book of Gospels. Flaming and resplendent, the Seraph had six wings. The wings might interest Jane's reader. Would he or she be delighted to know that between his wings there appeared "the Figure of a Man crucified, having His hands and feet stretched forth in the shape of a Cross, and fastened unto a Cross"? Why not? Some people are deeply religious and go to church twice a week; and *many* people are curious to find out if Christ had a child. Never mind, never mind. Let us look for the lady (not for the baby) with whom St Francis was enamoured much to the displeasure of his father. The former was not a gigolo, otherwise he would not have become a saint: in former times one was unlikely to become a saint with such a stain on his or her soul. Saints and stains did not match owing to the narrow-mindedness of Christian officials. Never mind, never mind. What about the lady? How would a Russian understand the above tercets from the *Paradiso*?

In chapter I5 I already touched upon the Russians' fondness for anecdotes which used to be a sort of linguistic therapy in the times of Khrushchev, Brezhnev and Andropov. Here is an anecdote told by a friend of mine who died in his flat where he could rely neither on his family nor on a registered nurse to inform a funeral parlour about his demise. How long did he lie on the floor, awaiting someone to come and bury him?

A man is staring at the river that flows under his eyes. Silhouetted against the twilight-infused cityscape, his figure seems to get closer and closer to the water as he bends over a parapet—the only obstacle on his way to the Hereafter. An old woman comes up to the man and asks him an idle question, "What are you doing on this bridge?"

"Just looking at the reflection of the twilight in the water," answers the man.

"I thought you might be about to commit suicide," says the woman.

"I'm in love with this reflection."

"Tell me about your worries—no point in hiding anything from me. I'm an old woman after all."

"I lost a lot of money at roulette last week."

"You mean you lost everything?" asks the woman.

"And when my boss heard about it he kicked me out."

"So you lost your job as well, didn't you? And when your fiancée heard about your double misfortune, she left you. Didn't she?"

"How do you know?"

"*Jamais deux sans trois*."

"Sorry?"

"*Raphèl maì amècche zabì almi*."

"Sorry?"

"At 9 a.m. tomorrow you'll get a cheque for thirty-three million pounds."

"Are you pulling my leg?"

"*Raphèl maì amècche zabì almi*. At 10 a.m. the director of the biggest bank in Europe will ring you up to suggest a partnership. You'll speak French to him—by that time you'll be able to speak perfect French."

"I don't know—"

"Don't thank me yet. *Raphèl maì amècche zabì almi*. At 11 a.m. the most beautiful lady in the world will ring your doorbell. Of course if you don't care about beautiful—"

"How can I thank you?" asks the man, rubbing his eyes and ears.

"I'd hate to impose on you. However, I wouldn't mind spending a few hours in your company."

"Let me invite you to a restaurant."

"That's not what I'm yearning for," answers the woman.

The man bought two bottles of whisky in the hope of expunging the ordeal he was to go through not only from his memory but even from reality that was implacable enough to make him endure the old woman's body—if only for the space of a few hours. He was prepared to undergo this ordeal for the sake of the woman's mind, however: thanks to her witchcraft he would become the happiest man in the world. The woman was more repulsive than a rat; he could not even call her "the rat-woman" to pay a dubious homage to Freud. "Why should I call her at all?" the man asked himself. "I won't call her names. And I don't want to know her name. Anyway I've already put this experience into the past tense. I think about it in the past as if it was a thing of the past." And he looked at the bottles he was carrying in a plastic bag. Once at the woman's flat he set her alarm clock for 8 a.m. and fell asleep around midnight, after completing his Herculean labours. Did the whisky help him obliterate the woman? Thereby hangs another tale, another Arabian night.

Another man becomes involved with a repulsive woman. Though relatively young, she is every bit as repulsive as the old woman from the previous tale. The man lives alone and seldom goes out, putting his private hell above the gregarious one he would be exposed to outdoors: he is well-versed in the science of hells, in their hierarchy. He believes that his hell is nearer to Paradise than whatever he might experience in the company of men and women—either in- or outdoors.

His only friend pays him a visit to say they all go to picnic on the lake shore. "How many people?" asks the loner.

"They're a nice bunch," his friend reassures him. "And don't you worry—there's a woman for you as well."

"A blonde?" Unconsciously the man touches his dark hair.

"A brunette."

"I prefer blondes to brunettes—you know that, don't you?"

"After a few glasses of vodka—"

"Is she tall?"

"It takes all sorts. Still looking for a princess, an ideal woman? I was never convinced by those whiter than white—"

"And her eyes?" asks the man. "Are *they* beautiful?"

"After a few glasses of vodka—"

They leave the house and approach two cars inside which there are three young men and four young women.

"I can't drink *so* much," says the man as he glances at the girl allotted to him.

Meanwhile the man from the first story has slept off his dismal adventure. The alarm clock reminds him that he must be at home in less than an hour to get the cheque allowing him to become the happiest man in the world.

"What's going on?" asks the old woman.

"I must be off."

"What for?" asks the old woman.

"I've an appointment at 9 a.m. The cheque—"

"What cheque?"

"Thirty-three million pounds."

"What are you talking about?" asks the old woman.

"At 10 a.m. I'll get a phone call. Don't you remember?"

"A banker, then a beauty. Now I remember. How old are you, young man?"

"Twenty-seven."

"And you still believe in fairy tales?"

Raphèl maì amècche zabì almi. In Canto XXXI of the *Inferno*, Dante approaches the central well or pit that leads to the last and lowest circle. What he mistakes for a ring of towers is actually Giants standing in the pit. One of them is Nimrod who, according to Dante, built the Tower of Babel; he pays for it by his unintelligible speech.

It must be noted that these words are without meaning. Even if they did mean something, as some are at great pains to prove, they would not mean anything here. They have been used here only to show that his language was not intelligible to anyone, for the division of tongues took place as a result of his pride. That is the author's intention, to which he thus gives literal expression.
(Benvenutto)

Doesn't the Tower of Babel symbolise the first attempt to break through the frontiers of the closed world? In the Soviet Union we lived within a closed world at the centre of which a symbolic replica of the ancient Tower was under construction. Every Soviet citizen was to contribute at least one brick to

this infinite project and even I took part in it by winning the Queen Elisabeth Competition in 1972. Despite this attempt to gain ground and justify the claim "We are on an equal footing with God" our actions were so structured that one would get the feeling our country was performing a No play in which neither a word nor a gesture could be altered. Our thoughts, on the other hand, were all the more daring and constantly built their own towers of Babel from whose terraces we mocked our leaders and contemplated the infinite universe of the West. Our outward life was also akin to piano playing (and performing arts in general): we had to eschew wrong notes and a liberal attitude towards the nuances printed in the score. And even the tempo of our execution could vary only within well-defined limits. Today the Russians, and to some extent their fellow-creatures all over the world, do justice to the same equilibrium in which however thoughts and actions or rather their functions are reversed. Our new-fangled capitalists think only in terms of money and these terms, like a heavy iron chain, clamp around their minds, allowing no alien thought to penetrate them. But their actions (or speculations) are as infinite as our former thoughts and can be measured only by a cosmic yardstick.

My actions are limited to the upkeep of my body and to my computer's keyboard. Of course I also turn the pages of the books lying on the floor and even remove other books from my shelves; I seldom put them back to restore the order I had been so devoted to before setting off on a round-the-Hereafter cruise. You cannot live in two worlds, can you? Not at the same time. Even at the outset of my Dantean journey I was keen on order both within my work and in everyday life. I imposed a structure on my commentary, skipping no canto on my way through the *Inferno* that offered me a structure for which I would have been looking in vain either indoors or outdoors. But a sustained narrative is out of reach in our times unless you stick to a spectacular story where people are killed in every chapter; unless your characters are so funny and clumsy that even an idiot feels superior to them and therefore can assert himself. Of course you may write a scientific essay on the *Commedia*, analysing this or that element of this unprecedented, finished Tower of Babel, but you are bound to fail if, driven by your pride and desire to contemplate God, you attempt to build your own post-modern tower in the design of which a hotchpotch of styles and epochs is put on display. My personal tower looks like a zigzag, or rather it acquires a wayward form as it soars into the sky and then descends to earth and runs parallel to it for a while. And sometimes I am under the impression I have just littered these two years with debris that utterly lack the beauty and dignity of ruins.

I declare that which I cannot deny, namely, that within infinite space either there may be an infinity of worlds similar to our own; or that this universe may have extended its capacity in order to contain many bodies such as those we name stars; or again that whether these worlds be similar or dissimilar to one another, it may with no less reason be well that one, than that another should exist. For the existence of one is no less reasonable than that of another; and the existence of many no less so than of one or of the other; and the existence of an infinity of them no less so than the existence of a large number.

Giordano Bruno. Within infinite space there must be an infinity of worlds and words: the former are either made up of the latter or contain them. So my book may touch upon whatever comes into my finite head from the infinite universe, from those worlds which are similar or dissimilar to one another. And it does not really matter how many worlds or words surround us because even my discarded paragraphs can be found in the infinite universe which does not care about the quality of whatever has been thrust into it. A few days ago I re-read one of the initial chapters of this commentary and came across the following passage:

I could envisage such a journey in Dante's company; after all, I need a poet and a philosopher to lead me through the intricacies of the Hereafter. Vladimir Sinyavsky wrote a book entitled *The Walks with Pushkin* in which he says that one might walk with Pushkin now and then. I would hate to sound disrespectful when talking about such a possibility in regard to Dante, all the more so since I do not intend to *walk* with him: it is an initiatory journey I have in mind. Volodya is in the land of the living and therefore cannot guide me through the realms he does not know geographically. But I can talk to him on the way, much as Virgil talks to Statius in the *Purgatorio*, except that we shall talk on the phone.

Keenly alive to how poorly the common reader is equipped for such a journey, I was tempted to reveal the identity of Statius so as not to alienate all those pedestrians moving beyond my windows. But I dropped the idea: apart from being reader-*un*friendly, this sample of my prose was not up to my standards so that I just removed it from the main text, inserting it amidst the notes. Why not let it stand in the infinite world? Publius Papinius Statius, was the most eminent poet of the Silver Age of Latin literature, but the role Dante assigned to him exceeds by far his artistic status: he keeps us company in thirteen cantos. Inversely Volodya's status towers over the number of pages on which he makes his appearance.

At the time I thought we might meet and talk far more often. I hoped we might make this journey together, discussing our post-modern era and the way we deal with the problems that have arisen in the wake of the collapse of the Eastern bloc. Our personal tower of Babel has also been reduced to the debris that I endeavour to use as building blocks in order to create a semblance of the Virgil-Dante relationship. The worlds we are living in are both similar and dissimilar like two sentences in which the same words express two different ideas.

How could one keep control over all this debris? Let me use two lumps of rubble as building blocks.

"Se 'l mondo si rivolse al cristianesmo,"
  diss' io, "sanza miracoli, quest' uno
  è tal, che li altri non sono il centesmo"
'If the world turned to Christianity without miracles,' I said, 'that one is such that the rest are not the hundredth part…"

Here is the second building block:

E poi che, per la sete del martiro,
  ne la presenza del Soldan superba
  predicò Cristo e li altri che 'l seguiro,
e per trovare a conversione acerba
  troppo la gente
And when, in thirst for martyrdom, he, in the proud presence of the Sultan, had preached Christ and them that followed him, and, finding the people too unripe for conversion…

Could I put these two building blocks together? Wouldn't they make Dante's tower collapse in a cloud of dust? Obviously our poet contradicts himself, doesn't he? Was he also under the influence of our post-modern chaos? Or did he just prophesy it with exceptional subtlety? Did he also prophesy the infinite universe? Two dissimilar worlds: the former is wholly Christian, the latter is not. Let us compare two sentences: "The car was buried in the debris which the landslide had swept down the hill" and "A group of children were throwing snowballs at the car". How many cars would be buried under the debris of Dante's tower? In my book the discrepancy between one part and another is far bigger and can be likened to these two sentences: "The storm tore down trees, damaged houses and littered the village with debris" and "The child was killed by flying debris after the bomb exploded."
"The former is wholly Christian, the latter is not." Is it better to say "wholly Christian" or "entirely Christian"? "Wholly" sounds like "holy"—the word that seems to match Christianity more than the neutral adverb "entirely". But Dante might have used this adverb in preference to "holy" on account of its Latin roots and mainly to emphasise the despicable conduct of the Church officials.
The infinite world I have to cope with allows me to jot down whatever crosses my mind—or my body, for that matter. Nine days ago I wrote a poem which is quite irrelevant in the context of my present study:

Another expression of my moods. Do I
Have any? Am I moody?
I'm moodless most of the time.
Let others have their moods. I hope I won't see
Either moods or their owners. Do you own
A mood when you're in one
Of your moods?
Which one? How many
Moods do you have? I can't have
Anything, not even moods.

Another world. But the state I am in right now is not dissimilar to what Dante experienced in the *Paradiso*: neither Time nor Space affects me any longer.

Dentro a l'ampiezza di questo reame
  casüal punto non puote aver sito,
  se non come tristizia o sete o fame:
ché per etterna legge è stabilito

quantunque vedi, sì che giustamente
ci si risponde da l'anello al dito
Within the amplitude of this realm a casual point can have no place, any more than can sorrow, or thirst, or hunger; for whatever you see is established by eternal law, so that the correspondence is exact between the ring and finger.
(*Paradiso*, Canto XXXII)

"Not a particle of chance can find a place here in the rose," writes Singleton. Any mood is just a casual point unless it grows permanent and reflects the beatitude or the utter despair of the person on whom such a state of mind and body is inflicted from above. "Mind, heart, thought, feeling." "A frame of mind or state of feelings." "The way you feel at a particular time." But what do you feel in a place or in a canto where there is no time at all? No mood pervades your senses or your mind. You are moodless. In the last cantos of the *Paradiso* Dante finds himself beyond Time and Space. Or does he *lose* himself? In a way he does: he is deprived of his moods. And what about bliss? Is it a mood? "Perfect happiness." "Two weeks lying on a beach is my idea of pure bliss." "It's bliss to be able to lie back and just forget all about your worries." "For a couple of months, weekends were bliss." "The bliss of complete understanding can only come to the equally endowed." Dante was neither lying on a beach nor lying back to forget all about his worries. He did forget his worries as he contemplated the Celestial Rose offered to him at the end of the *Paradiso*; but what he experienced was not a mood. What is a mood? A mood is the moon, isn't it?

When more of a mood can be seen every night
It is waxing and when
Less can be seen every night it is
Waning.

In Mandelstam's *Conversation about Dante* there are a few ideas I still ponder on: "A quotation is not an excerpt. A quotation is a cicada." In Russian it sounds like "a mood is the moon": "*Tsitata est' tsikada*."

Its natural state is that of unceasing sound. Having once seized hold of the air, it will not let it go. Erudition is far from being equivalent to a keyboard of references for the latter comprises the very essence of education.
By this I mean that a composition is formed not as a result of accumulated particulars, but due to the fact that one detail after another is torn away from the object, leaves it, darts out, or is chipped away from the system to go out into a new functional space or dimension, but each time at a strictly regulated moment and under circumstances which are sufficiently ripe and unique.

The last paragraph is made up of three different building blocks. "By this I mean that a composition is formed not as a result of accumulated particulars—" My commentary *is* an assortment of particulars. "…one detail after another is torn away from the object, leaves it, darts out, or is chipped away from the system to go out into a new functional space or dimension…" That seems to be an adequate

comment on my commentary. "…but each time at a strictly regulated moment and under circumstances which are sufficiently ripe and unique." The last building block concerns only the *Commedia*: the components of my book are subjects neither to Time nor Space.

I lost a part of my life because I realised you would never join me up in the mountains, however high I may drive or climb inspired by the *Commedia*, however often I may listen to Canto XXV of the *Paradiso* where Dante is questioned on the subject of Hope. Should I read about Hope in other books I have got in my library? It is not for nothing that I have been buying them over the last thirty years. What are books for if they bring us neither hope nor consolation?

Another discarded paragraph. Is it a building block or a demolition ball? Is it subject to Space and Time?

The stories I told in this chapter do not fit into Dante's life and masterpiece except if you look at the ensemble from *our* point of view. The modern reader might be intrigued by the woman with whom St Francis falls in love all the more irremediably since she is as ugly as death. Sexual perversions have been stock-in-trade of our life for many years thanks to Marquis de Sade's meritorious efforts; young men fall for old women even if the latter have nothing to offer them but their ugliness. Why should the modern reader go beyond the verses I quoted above, beyond the lady to whom "none willingly unlocks the door"? What lies in store for the reader in the infinite universe of the poem?

"Questa, privata del primo marito,
millecent' anni e più dispetta e scura
fino a costui si stette sanza invito"
"She, bereft of her first husband, for eleven hundred years and more, despised and obscure, remained unwooed till he came…"

The old woman is too old and nothing short of a horror movie can account for her intrusion into Dante's narrative. Is she a vampire, one of the living dead? And who was her first husband? Did she divorce him? Did he forsake her? Was she beautiful when *he* married her? Or did he have to drink vodka to endure her presence? Why did he have to endure her presence? Was she very rich at the time? Is her first husband in the land of the living? Is he also a vampire?

And then the final blow is stricken:

"Ma perch' io non proceda troppo chiuso,
Francesco e Povertà per questi amanti
prendi oramai nel mio parlar diffuso."
"But, lest I should proceed too darkly, take now Francis and Poverty for these lovers in all that I have said."

How do Dante's characters tell their stories? (It is better to change the subject, isn't it?)

La bocca sollevò dal fiero pasto
  quel peccator, forbendola a' capelli
  del capo ch'elli avea di retro guasto.
Poi cominciò: "Tu vuo' ch'io rinovelli
  disperato dolor che 'l cor mi preme
  già pur pensando, pria ch'io ne favelli."
From his savage repast the sinner raised his mouth, wiping it on the hair of the head he had spoiled behind, then began, "You will have me renew desperate grief, which even to think of wrings my heart before I speak of it."

In Chapter 20 I speak about Ugolino who gnaws the head of his enemy. And then he raises his mouth to tell the story of his ordeal. My friend told me those anecdotes in the relaxed atmosphere of our walks around the Sparrow Mountains which are unknown to the modern reader unless he or she lives in Moscow. Modern writers should think in terms of the global village, shouldn't they? In this day and age you cannot write about a normal village unless its inhabitants behave like cave men and women. Or is so-called magical realism out of fashion? (The inhabitants of St Petersburg used to call Moscow a "big village".) How would my friend recount his own story in a horror movie or in the *Commedia*?

Lying on the floor of his flat, he looked like a corpse and his behaviour was that of an ordinary corpse: he neither answered the phone nor spent the greater part of the day in his bathroom. On the night of his death he called his sister, asking her to come and help him. "You're always ill," she said. "I'm not your nurse."

"I'm dying," he said.

"You're always dying, aren't you?"

"I've never been dying like this before."

"There's is always a first time."

"But we can't die twice, can we?"

She did not say to him that Dante's characters would die many times in the course of the tortures inflicted on them by serpents and other ministers of Hell. Anyway there are no ordinary corpses either in the *Commedia* or in horror movies. His sister hung up and paid him a visit only seven days later: she had forgotten something in his flat, on his chest of drawers. She found his body on the floor, his hand still grasping the receiver. As she leaned over his ordinary-looking corpse he raised his head and bit her neck. His teeth sent blood spurting from her neck, her belly and her hips. Then he raised his mouth, wiped it on her bosom and began: "I was dying alone in my flat. I rang my sister up but she said she had always hated me and was happy I was dying at last. 'You've died so many times already. I hope this is the very last time,' she said. I was crying bitter tears and she burst into laughter. 'I'll come in seven days' time to see your corpse,' she said. Well, she kept her promise and I'm eating her now because I'm hungry, very hungry. Besides, I want to revenge myself on my sister and on humanity. No one has brought me food during these seven days. And the dead can't go shopping, can they? Don't forget that I died seven days ago. Or did I just pretend to die? Never mind. Back to my story. I've got

no children, either legitimate or illegitimate. So there are no children in this flat which is not a kindergarten. And I don't belong to any paedophile ring. There are no children in my flat. Nothing to eat. Ugolino, Ugolino! What did you complain about? Your four sons shared your ordeal in that tower, didn't they? What's more, they implored you to eat them. Why didn't you graciously accede to their request? Why did you turn a deaf ear to their entreaty? Or *did* you eat them?"

On the fourth day of his imprisonment Ugolino saw his son throw himself at his feet, saying, "Father, why do you not help me?" A second entreaty. (The first was quoted in Canto VI of this commentary.)

"Quivi morì; e come tu mi vedi,
  vid' io casear li tre ad uno ad uno
  tra 'l quinto dì e 'l sesto; ond' io mi diedi,
già cieco, a brancolar sovra ciascuno,
  e due dì li chiamai, poi che fur morti.
  Poscia, più che 'l dolor, poté 'l digiuno."

"There he died; and even as you see me, I saw the three fall, one by one, between the fifth day and the sixth; whence I betook me, already blind, to groping over each, and for two days I called them after they were dead. Then fasting did more than grief had done."

"An observation in the commentary of Guido da Pisa," writes Hollander, "offers evidence that the number of days in the narrative (seven) is significant…' And lest it seem impossible that one could have lived six days without food, heed Macrobius on the *Dream of Scipio*. He says that the life of a man cannot last beyond seven days without food.' If Dante, with his so carefully calculated seven days to starvation is aware of that bit of medical lore, Ugolino died at the limit of human endurance without nourishment. Had he ingested the flesh of his children, he would have lived longer. Further, when the corpses were exhibited outside the tower, after their removal, the scandal of the teeth-torn flesh would have made the rounds."

Why should I take part in the centuries-long debate over the fate of Ugolino's children or their corpses? Whether he ate them or not is none of my concern because there are no children in my flat. And I am not likely to starve to death for three years to come, although I do not play concerts any more, devoting all my time to this homage to Dante. So I am not worried about the absence of children in my flat, in my Ivory Tower. What I *am* worried about is the way my friend died in his apartment. He might have been saved through the timely intervention of a doctor conveyed to the dying by those cars that defy traffic jams. Neither he nor my former teacher could crawl as far as their phones to inform the outside world of their forthcoming deaths. (My friend's sister would have flown to his rescue had he rung her up.)

Quivi perdei la vista e la parola;
  nel nome di Maria fini', e quivi
  caddi, e rimase la mia carne sola.

There I lost my sight and speech. I ended on the name of Mary, and there I fell, and my flesh remained alone.

(The *Purgatorio*, Canto V)

The wayfarers meet a band of spirits who died by violence and repented only at the last moment. Buonconte da Montefeltro tells how his body was carried down a stream into the Arno through the malignity of a devil who had in vain contended for his soul. "For we must believe," writes St Bonaventura, "that when the soul leaves the body, the good and the evil spirits stand by, one or more, and then a true sentence is passed; if the soul is judged to be good, he is led away to Heaven in the company of good angel, or else to Purgatory, from which, after he has been cleansed, he will be led out by the same escort...; if, however, the soul is judged to be evil, he will be led by the devil into Hell." I must concentrate on the name of Mary instead of reaching for the phone in a fruitless attempt to save my life. Once on the floor of my flat I will pray until I lose my speech, my thoughts, my sight, my life. Let my body remain unburied, providing my soul is escorted to Purgatory by the good angel. Let the evil spirits fasten their jaws on my body and tear it to pieces.
A body lying near a telephone is one of my themes which somehow echo Dante's repetitions, those leitmotivs of the *Commedia*. The tailor we encounter in Canto XXXII of the *Paradiso* awaits us in the *Inferno* where he holds a needle:

e sì ver' noi aguzzavan le ciglia
come 'l vecchio sartor fa ne la cruna.
…and they knit their brows at us as the old tailor does at the eye of his needle.

There are also bees, frogs and arrows. They are almost as numerous as the prostrate bodies I visualise as I think of my own death. "There lies a knight slain under his shield." An anonymous sixteenth-century poem. Three ravens muse about the possibility of breakfasting on the corpse they spotted in the field. The knight's hounds seem to protect him from other knights and vultures; so do his hawks that are even more skilled at dealing with vultures. The ravens relinquish the idea of appeasing their appetite at the expense of the knight defended by his faithful servants, but do not fly away as if waiting for a denouement: no corpse can lie in a field for years and years. Even a corpse needs a coup de grâce.

"Down there comes a fallow doe,
As great with young as she might go.

She lift up his bloody head,
And kissed his wounds that were so red.

She got him up upon her back,
And carried him to earthen lake.

She buried him before the prime;

She was dead herself ere evensong time."

"God send every gentleman
Such hawks, such hounds, and such a leman."

The story is told by one of the ravens. Another raven comments on the story in the last stanza. Do I have to count on the animal kingdom? Should I settle down in the country where such a burial is not out of the question? In the woods where I take my daily stroll there are no fallow does. And the joggers I meet during my strolls run too fast and are too concentrated on their feet to notice a corpse lying across their path. They would jump over it as if it were a log. Or they might say to themselves, "A man is sleeping like a log. Why should I wake him? A man or woman. Or was it just a log?" Country life is not always as peaceful as city-dwellers think, but at least you can chance upon a fallow doe there. And how to protect myself from vultures? Should I buy a few hawks and dogs? How long would I need to train them? *How* to train them? Do I have to lie in a field and make a show of being dead? And what if they fail to protect me from greedy animals and humans?

I have every right to visualise my death and burial, my life in the Hereafter; but tampering with my friend's destiny is a breach of ethics, isn't it? I am bound by a writer's code of ethics, am I not? What about Dante's friends? What did he feel when inflicting upon them his tortures in the *Inferno*? In Chapter 8 of this commentary I touched upon Brunetto Latini whom Dante held in great esteem. Yet, at the end of Canto XV, he makes him run so fast that he would have been awarded first prize had he competed in the field at Verona. But there are neither competitions nor prizes in Hell. Brunetto Latini runs for his life because he lingered too long in Dante's company, eager to talk to his friend and spiritual follower. Dante made the most of this encounter, and he might have shown more respect for his model—instead of mocking him viciously—had he stuck to the code of ethics. At least I did not make my friend run for his life: he was lying peacefully by his phone. As to his sister, I never liked her.

Mandelstam's comment on the encounter with Brunetto Latini is rather odd: "The way Dante understands it, the teacher is younger than the pupil, for he 'runs faster'…The metaphor's rejuvenating power brings the educated old man, Brunetto Latini, back to us in the guise of a youthful victor at a Veronese track meet." Is there a fountain of youth in the Seventh Circle where Brunetto whiles his eternity away, exposed to the fiery rain? Is it better to be young in this circle? Is it better to be young in Hell? Is it better to be young in the Hereafter?

CHAPTER 26

E 'l mio buon duca, che già li er' al petto,
dove le due nature son consorti,
rispuose: "Ben è vivo, e sì soletto
mostrar li mi convien la valle buia:
necessità 'l ci 'nduce, e non diletto."
And my good leader, who was now at his breast, where the two natures are consorted, replied, "Indeed he is alive, and thus alone have I to show him the dark valley: necessity brings him to it, and not sport."
(The *Inferno*, Canto XII)

Why not remove these verses from the *Commedia* and ponder on them as if they were written in English, in the twentieth century? How do people swear when they are eager to persuade others they tell the truth? A man touches his heart, but his hand is usually bigger than his heart so that, during this symbolic gesture, it covers a substantial part of his breast where his natures have their seats. How many natures does a man detect inside his body? Their number often depends on the acuteness of his intuition and on his erudition. For instance, an admirer of Goethe's might answer, "There are two natures or souls in my breast"—under the influence of the following verses from *Faust*:

Zwei Seelen wohnen, ach! in meiner Brust,
Die eine will sich von der anderen trennen

Should I separate music from literature under the influence of the above verses? Do they struggle with each other in my breast or elsewhere? In my case music is reduced to piano-playing. At the age of fifteen I enrolled for the composition course but soon realised I was incapable of writing anything except a few oddly-sounding melodies accompanied by a chord or two. As a performing artist, I follow a well-trodden path from which I should not deviate for fear of losing it altogether. In my childhood I often played a solitary game that I could win only if I placed my feet—or rather my shoes—exactly where my predecessor, whoever he might have been, had left the imprints of *his* shoes. (The imprints of woman's shoes were too small for this game.) Needless to say, I indulged in this pastime when there was a thick layer of snow revealing the routes of the pedestrians who had got up earlier than me: I played the game only in the morning. I often fell down as I tried to coincide with *les pas sur la neige*, to borrow the title of Debussy's prelude. (I have already touched upon this prelude in my writings; I have already followed in its footsteps.) Do my fingers imitate the game I played in my childhood? A music score looks like a snow-covered field where many people have walked from one point to another, the number of points denoting the polyphonic aspect of the piece in question. There are three-voiced fields, four-voiced fields, five-voiced fields. Even a two-voiced field cannot be excluded from this catalogue: one of the fugues from *Das Wohltemperierte Klavier* has only two voices.

Last month I received a letter from an Austrian musician to whom I had sent my recording of Beethoven's last sonatas. "The last three sonatas of Beethoven: I am not capable of expressing my impressions in English, not even in German," he writes. "Your wonderful tempi, the immense concentration, your seriosity of playing. These monuments are an unbelievable pleasure to hear. Thank you for this wonderful gift!" Will anyone ever thank me for this commentary?

Even at the age of fifteen I knew that creators were far superior to interpreters, to performing artists. That is why I enrolled for the composition course, hoping I could become a great composer or just a composer: I wished to create something, to leave the imprints of my shoes on the virgin snow. Better still, I wished to create the snow, a brand-new type of snow, and spread it over an infinite space where I could walk, run and romp. As a composer, I turned out to be far inferior to my fellow students and I renounced my ambitions so as to concentrate on piano-playing—the domain where my capacities seemed to be above suspicion. What should I do now? Could the piano be my guide, my bird, my Virgil, my Beatrice?

Zwei Seelen wohnen, ach! In meiner Brust,
Die eine will sich von der andern trennen:
Die eine hält, in derber Liebeslust,
Sich an die Welt mit klammerneden Organen;
Die andre hebt gewaltsam sich vom Dust
Zu den Gefilden hoher Ahnen.

Theodore Martin translates this excerpt as follows:

Two souls, alas! Within my bosom throne;
One from the other wildly longs to sever.
One, with a passionate love that never tires,
Cleaves as with cramps of steel to things of earth,
The other upwards through earth's mists aspires
To kindred regions of a loftier worth

In the French translations I have got the last verse is rendered more exactly: "sublime forefathers" or "high mansions of our forefathers". Or "foremothers", taking into account Goethe's attachment to mothers and women in general. ("*Et s'envole vers le royaume des sublimes aïeux*." Or in Nerval's translation: "…*vers les hautes demeures de nos aïeux*.") Let us analyse the two natures of this excerpt from *Faust* in the light of these translations; in the light of my life.

One of my souls displays a down-to-earth disposition—a truant disposition, as it were—and does not care about the infinity suggested by the other souls, by an upward élan carrying me "through earth's mists" to Paradise or whatever substitute I can find for it. This down-to-earth soul—a contradiction in terms—is symbolised by my piano-playing. My piano-playing follows a pattern which may be likened to *les pas sur la neige*: you are not likely to find any *pas sur la neige* in heavenly regions. I play

whatever has been printed in a score as if walking through a landscape created by God or Darwin. The up-to-heaven soul aspires to break through any imposed pattern and set up its own kingdom where no footprints coincide with each other; this soul follows its own route unknown to other souls and feet. Once again we encounter the problem discussed in Koyré's book *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*: Where to live? What does the up-to-heaven soul finally reach? What is the ultimate end of its journey? The closed world where our forefathers lived with God and His emissaries. In that world Beatrice was not multiplied by insatiable desires and unstable outlooks: she was the only woman worthy of being loved and praised. In that world people could live with Mozart because St Thomas harmonised their thoughts to the point of making them sound like the *Jupiter Symphony*. To Goethe an upward movement was associated with the return of forefathers.

How does the down-to-earth soul behave? It is the closed soul: neither God nor His emissaries are allowed to enter it. This soul is fond of games and the number of games it can play in our liberal, enterprising world is infinite. It follows in the footsteps of others, rejoicing at the variety of these footsteps, at their limitless prospects. Actually it either follows in the footsteps of others or anticipates their footsteps: foresight is of vital importance to those who buy and sell stocks and shares. Let us single hopscotch out from the infinite number of games accessible to the closed soul. The number of squares around which it can jump on one leg is also infinite so that it is not necessary to throw a stone: in the infinite universe all squares are of equal value. Actually we might call this second soul a "one-legged soul". I would even call it "invalid" if some people did not find this word offensive.

Quando per dilettanze o ver per doglie,
  che alcuna virtù nostra comprenda,
  l'anima bene ad essa si raccoglie,
par ch'a nulla potenza più intenda;
  e questo è contra quello error che crede
  ch'un'anima sovr' altra in noi s'accenda.
When through impression of pleasure, or of pain, which some one of our faculties receives, the soul is wholly centred thereon, it seems that it gives heed to no other of its powers; and this is contrary to that error which holds that one soul above another is kindled within us…
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto IV)

Can't two souls be centred upon one phenomenon exactly like two men looking at the same woman? Enraptured by her beauty, they are burning with the same desire which would result in the same act if the woman gave them carte blanche to do with her body whatever they wish. There must be a "pre-established harmony" between the changes in one soul and those in the other; after all, that is how Leibnitz's monads interact. Would it be easier to live if I had only one soul or no soul at all? Would my mind alone answer all these questions I constantly I ask myself? My body might help it out, if not too exhausted by sleepless nights and irregular, haphazard meals.

Should I play the piano? Should I re-read and re-write the *Commedia*? Should I update the *Commedia*?

E 'l mio buon duca, che già li er' al petto,
  dove le due nature son consorti
And my good leader, who was now at his breast, where the two natures are consorted…

What would my piano-interpretation of these verses sound like? Down a steep slope of shattered rock (caused by the earthquake at the Crucifixion), guarded by the Minotaur, the poets clamber to the Seventh Circle and find at the bottom of the cliff a River of Blood (Phlegethon) which flows round the circle. Boiling in its stream are those who have been violent against others. Centaurs trot about the bank and shoot the seekers of fresh air.

Noi ci appressammo a quelle fiere isnelle:
  Chirón prese uno strale, e con la cocca
  fece la barba in dietro a le mascelle.
Quando s'ebbe scoperta la gran bocca,
  disse a' compagni: "Siete voi accorti
  che quel di retro move ciò ch'el tocca?
Così non soglion far li piè d'i morti."
  E 'l moi buon duca, che già li er' al petto,
  dove le due nature son consorti
We drew near to those fleet beasts; and Chiron took an arrow and, with the notch of it, brushed back his beard upon his jaws: and when he had uncovered his great mouth, he said to his companions, "Have you observed that the one behind moves what he touches? The feet of the dead are not wont to do so." And my good leader, who was now at his breast, where the two natures are consorted…
(The *Inferno*, Canto XII)

"This phrase," writes Singleton, "suggests that Virgil's head is level with Chiron's breast as he stands before him. It also serves again to focus on the dual nature of the centaur, beast and man."
Piano-playing is a mixture of text and commentary, and I followed both rather scrupulously as I first quoted the excerpt from Canto XII of the *Inferno* and then Singleton's comment on it. I just added "writes Singleton", which roughly corresponds to the amount of freedom allowed to a pianist or any other performing artist. Another feature of music-making comes to the fore in this chapter: I repeated the verses where the centaur's dual nature is made explicit three times. Repetition is an important feature of music-making; rehearsals and concert tours are nothing but a number of repetitions. (It comes out smoother in French: "*Les répétitions ne sont que des répétitions*.")
As a creative artist, I live with the *Commedia* all the more intensely since its scope is large enough to encompass even the life of today's Russia. So I can include in my commentary yet another "irrelevant" paragraph:

The so-called "New Russians" murdered a lot of people. They sought an end to the socialist system that had ground them down and made their country one of the poorest in the world. So they began shooting people to put an end to poverty and distress. Often an end brings about another end.

Isn't this a nice comment on the following excerpt from Canto XVI of the *Paradiso*?

"L'oltracotata schiatta che s'indraca
  dietro a chi fugge, e a chi mostra 'l dente
  o ver la borsa, com' agnel si placa,
già venìa sù, ma di picciola gente"
"The insolent breed that plays the dragon behind him that flees, and to whoever shows his teeth—or else his purse—becomes mild as a lamb, was already on the rise, but of humble stock…"

And Dante's text is an appropriate comment on mine: most of these New Russians are of humble stock. And whoever shows his gun—or a suitcase crammed with dollars—cuts them down to the size of a kitten. I already touched upon these upstarts in my commentary: today's Russia is one of its themes which reflects Dante's preoccupation with his native city and the New Florentines. In this case, repetition is not a mere repetition and consequently has nothing to do with the way a pianist learns a Chopin étude. Once I spent almost two hours under the window beyond which Sviatoslav Richter was practising the first étude from Opus 10. He did nothing but repeat it over and over again, altering neither the tempo nor the nuances. For many years the Soviet authorities would not let him play abroad for fear he might request political asylum. But he had no intention of living outside Russia. Why? Was he infatuated with birch trees and those dinners which start around 7 p.m. and last till dawn? Or was he affected by Cacciaguida's prophecy?

Tu lascerai ogne cosa diletta
  Più caramente; e quest è quello strale
  Che l'arco de lo essilio pria saetta.
Tu proverai sì come sa di sale
  Lo pane altrui, e come è duro calle
  Lo scendere e 'l salir per l'altrui scale.
You shall leave everything beloved most dearly; and this is the arrow which the bow of exile shoots first. You shall come to know how salt is the taste of another's bread, and how hard the path to descend and mount by another man's stairs.

The second tercet still haunts me so much that I recall it whenever I go to my cellar to fetch a bottle of wine. The stairs I mount and descend are partly mine because I own the flat where I have been living for twenty-four years now. Yet they are not my stairs; they will never be my stairs.

And the first tercet reminds me of you. So many things remind me of you that I fear you might be as omnipresent as Dante's poem. Even the young lady I was in love with during the last sixth months of my Moscow life reminds me of you; yet she was a blonde. It is as if I had left Russia once again—forever, this time. In the love letter I wrote to an Italian teenager almost twenty years ago I said that Paris looked like Brussels without her. She answered three months later, "I have my own loves." I must have touched upon this unfortunate episode in another book of mine, but I have neither time nor wish to make a global search for my failure to come to terms with a beautiful Italian girl. (A "local search" is sufficient to find my failures, dozens of them.) Why let this love of mine become another

theme, another momentous repetition, another perspective of defeats? We met three times in Munich. She was no longer a teenager; she was twenty-one. Somebody told me on that occasion, "Women can understand you only at the age of twenty-five."

"Will they stop understanding me at twenty-six?" I asked. Obviously my interlocutor meant that not until the age of twenty-five can a woman appreciate the amazing maze of my brain, as Nabokov might have put it.

Moscow is just a village without you, a big village. It is no longer a city where I lived and enjoyed my youth, writing poems and playing the piano with enthusiasm as if to prove I could comment on Haydn and Beethoven as generously as I comment on Dante right now. Is this another wayward comment on the *Inferno*?

Noi leggiavamo un giorno per diletto
di Lancialotto come amor lo strinse;
soli eravamo e sanza alcun sospetto.
Per più fiate li occhi ci sospinse
quella lettura, e scolorocci il viso;
ma solo un punto fu quel che ci vinse.
Quando leggemmo il disïato riso
esser basciato da cotanto amante,
questi, che mai da me non fia diviso,
la bocca mi basciò tutto tremante.
One day, for pastime, we read of Lancelot, how love constrained him; we were alone, suspecting nothing. Several times that reading urged our eyes to meet and took the colour from our faces, but one moment alone it was that overcame us. When we read how the longed-for smile was kissed by so great a lover, this one, who never shall be parted from me, kissed my mouth all trembling.
(The *Inferno*, Canto V)

Paolo and Francesca again. Despite my age we looked like them in that theatre where a Japanese stage director put on his version of *Electra* with lots of wheelchairs criss-crossing the stage. At some point a man sitting beside you stood up and made for the exit, but you did not move, your body still pressed against mine. And that moment overcame us, didn't it? Actually the moment lasted for more than half-an-hour. *Ma solo un punto fu quel che ci vinse*. I wish I could make that moment into another theme of mine, but it is just a repetition—a recapitulation, as musicians put it. Am I at the end of my commentary? Nobody will guide me out of the dark wood where I am wandering for hours and hours, a pair of earphones adorning my head. Should I leave the wood?

He whose conquest is not conquered again, into whose conquest no one in this world enters, by what track can you lead him, the Awakened, the Omniscient, the trackless?
He whom no desire with its snares and poisons can lead astray, by what track can you lead him, the Awakened, the Omniscient, the trackless?
Even the gods envy those who are awakened and not forgetful, who are given to meditation, who are wise, and who delight in the repose of retirement (from the world).
(*Dhammapada*, Chapter XIV)

Do I delight in the repose of retirement from the world? Not any more. At the end of a beauty contest they traditionally read the winners out in reverse order. That is how I read the *Commedia*: after all, every tercet participates in a beauty contest. *Paradiso*, *Purgatorio* and then *Inferno*. Let me comment on these three paragraphs in reverse order. I do not delight in the repose of retirement from the world any more. I am sure the gods do not envy me: being withdrawn from the world does not *always* invite the envy of the gods. I am neither awakened nor asleep.

Many desires and whatever they contain—snares, poisons—can lead me so far astray that I *ought* to be guided lest I find myself in some beast's intestines from which not even Jonas could have extricated himself.

There have been no conquests in my life except a sterile victory at the Queen Elisabeth Competition in 1972. What did I conquer? A gold medal that I gave to a friend of mine before leaving the Soviet Union. The medal is lost. What remains of the conquest? This commentary?

You could lead me by any track unless the world where I live—my world—is hopelessly trackless. Or I am trackless myself? Is there no track in me at all? Is it a blessing in disguise? Am I the Awakened, the Omniscient? Is it better to be the Awakened than a sleeping beauty? Every line is a track, every verse.

They asked me to take part in some competition as a member of the jury. I answered, "Sorry. I have no time. Young pianists play so badly that only a very patient teacher can put up with such impertinence. And I am not even a teacher. Besides, I bear no grudge against Bach, Mozart and Schubert. And there are so many poems I have not written yet." There are so many tracks in my life, but their number is not infinite. How to become trackless? Should I erase all my poems from the hard disc? Some of them have been published in English and in Russian.

What have I conquered so far? A few women, a few words I use in different contexts. Have I conquered myself? What is there to conquer? My self is so unessential that it is not worth my while tampering with it.

I wish I could end this chapter immediately. But I am not allowed to finish it before I fill a certain number of pages which corresponds to the number of pages I wrote previously: this commentary must reflect the structure of the *Commedia*. For the same reason I am not allowed to finish it with Chapter 26.

This commentary is getting out of hand. No structure, the infinite universe, No theatre, its structure, or Kabuki theatre, to follow a path, I cannot even follow the path, a series of essays on the notes I have taken, I burn the candle at both ends, I burn the midnight oil. How would I sell Dante? The characters in Hell are real. Our readers do not like sad stories. They never think about death. The *Inferno* is just a horror story, a script for a horror movie. Peter Greenaway filmed several cantos from the *Inferno* with Gielgud as a narrator. You cannot publish just Hell because it makes sense only alongside Paradise.

An excerpt from my notes. There are so many excerpts in this commentary that I wonder if it is not an excerpt itself, a page from a huge manuscript. *Manuscrit trouvé à Versailles.*

Am I already writing a coda to this commentary? "A piece of music that ends a longer piece of music and which is usually separate from the basic structure." Isn't my commentary a piece of music? "The coda is often more technically difficult than the rest of the piece." My coda is not more difficult than what I have written so far because the love of Paolo and Francesca can be expressed in a few words, either in Italian or in English. Or by the Russian word "*lubov'*" (love) which has connotations of "*krov'*" (blood) and "*brov'*" (eyebrow). A beautiful woman is often described as "*tchernobrovaya*" (dark-eyebrowed).

The commentary must become a dance. In the *Paradiso* they dance like Zarathustra; they turn like dervishes. None of those saints seems to have studied Plotinus who declares that in such proximity to God the soul does not rotate round itself for fear of deviating from its essence. Everywhere it stands fast as though it had become 'rest itself'. The origin of Hell. Florence is Hell. My characters are tortured psychologically. Dante's physical tortures. The torture inflicted on Master Adams is far more sophisticated. What would I feel in the *Inferno*, in any of its circles? Wouldn't my psychological suffering seem ridiculous when compared with physical pain? But Adams' confession has a fine touch. It stands out only because of the physical suffering undergone by the sinner. Would I feel my misery more acutely if I suffered from toothache or earache? Would I feel your absence more acutely if the feeling of loss were accompanied by a real pain? I am the only character in my works. And I am real. Aren't all other characters real too because I am real? Swedenborg's hell is quite different from the one we journey through in the *Commedia* where appearances are not deceptive, where we may jump to conclusions at will.

Heaven and Hell in his doctrine are not places, although the souls of the dead who inhabit and, in a way, create them perceive them as being situated in space. Heaven is forbidden to no one; Hell, imposed on no one. The doors, so to speak, are open. Those who have died do not know they are dead. For an indefinite period of time, they project an illusory image of their usual surroundings and friends. At the end of that period, strangers approach and quickly join them; the righteous choose the angels. For the blessed, the diabolical sphere is a region of swamps, caves, burning huts, ruins, brothels and taverns. The damned are faceless or have faces that are mutilated and atrocious, but they think of themselves as beautiful. The exercise of power and mutual hatred is their happiness…Hell is the other face of Heaven. This exact opposite is necessary for the balance of Creation. The Lord rules over it as he does over the heavens. The balance of the two spheres is necessary for free will, which must unceasingly choose between good, which emanates from Heaven, and evil, which emanates from Hell. Every day, every moment, man is shaping his eternal damnation or his salvation. We will be what we are.
(Borges, *Emanuel Swedenborg, Mystical Works*, translated by Eliot Weinberger)

The *Inferno* is an underground replica of the Gulag where both the prisoners and their guardians can go by appearances, taking whatever they see or feel at its face value. Of course a gulf separates Dante's sinners and the victims of the Soviet regime, who were accused of the crimes they had not committed;

and this gulf is as big as the space lying between the *Inferno* and the *Paradiso*. But no gulf separates Swedenborg's hell from his paradise because you can travel from one to another as the fancy takes you: both gates are open. The same happens in Bernard Shaw's play where Don Juan decides to move to Heaven despite the protestations of the Commander for whom the thought of staying up there for eternity is unbearable. But in Shaw's hell appearances are not deceptive either, because Lucifer enjoys life and appreciates beauty not in words only; he is a genuine hedonist and, judging from his participation in the general talk, is rather open-minded in contrast to his Dantean counterpart who is open-*mouthed*.

So if Dante made his journey through Swedenborg's version of the Hereafter, he would just take a lift instead of going up hill and down dale for several days, constantly menaced by pitchforks and fire or by the harsh light of the *Paradiso*. But why take the trouble to make an otherworldly journey instead of staying in Ravenna where life resembles both Hell and Paradise? Swamps, burning huts, brothels, taverns and the light of Heaven. Only the faces of the damned are not mutilated and atrocious. (Some of them are.) It is not difficult to describe a mutilated face, is it?

Why does Shaw's protagonist prefer Paradise to Hell despite the Devil's sharpened sense of beauty and the hedonistic atmosphere reigning in the bowels of the earth? Because he thinks that the life force attains its ultimate end in the human brain which strives to understand, to decipher and shed light upon whatever comes under its scrutiny. And there is more light in Paradise where the blessed indulge in the contemplation of Platonic or their own ideas without doing a disservice to their eyesight. Wasn't the aim of German idealism akin to Don Juan's aspirations? The human spirit striving to understand itself. This grand narrative is out of fashion, according to François Lyotard and his followers. Don Juan and Dante may remain within Lucifer's dominion; good wine and nightclubs are not out of fashion. Here is another series of my notes:

I hate the prominent people who complain about their solitude. And outdoors they wear dark glasses and wigs. "I've no gift for happiness, the only gift I don't have," says Alain Delon. The possession of all other gifts does not make him happy. How do these stars manage to be lonely? Dalida committed suicide because she was lonely. Couldn't she go outdoors without a wig? Or did she think nobody understood her? *Everybody* understood her, any pedestrian understood her. Why didn't she talk to those pedestrians? She phoned her only friend who was not at home, if I remember rightly. Her only friend, the only person who understood her. In *her* opinion. What did she hide from us behind her songs and beauty? To type the *Commedia* out several times. Like a pianist. I can type fast or slowly. Is that what I must do to get rid of my chaos, of my infinite universe? Typing fast or slowly, in silence or listening to an appropriate piece of music. What piece of music would match the poem? An Obrecht mass? A Mozart mass? Beethoven's *Ninth* perhaps. Going from Hell to Paradise, from the Big Bang to the spirit that understands itself. Would Beethoven help me write this commentary? Would he help me type the *Commedia* out? Times New Roman, Arial. Single spacing, double spacing, triple spacing. Pianists have *some* room for manoeuvre. The commentary must reflect the dance of flames in the *Paradiso*.

Poi che 'l tripudio e l'altra festa grande,
  sì del cantare e si del fiammeggiarsi

luce con luce gaudïose e blande,
insieme a punto e a voler quetarsi,
pur come li occhi ch'al piacer che i move
conviene insieme chiudere e levarsi
del cor de l'una de le luci nove
si mosse voce, che l'ago a la stella
parer mi fece in volgermi al suo dove
When the dance and all the great festival of both song and flames, light with light, gladsome and benign, stopped together at one instant and with one consent (even as the eyes which, at the pleasure that moves them, must needs be closed and lifted in accord), from the heart of one of the new lights there came a voice which made me seem as the needle to the star in turning me to where it was…

Do my notes reflect the conduct of the blessed in the *Paradiso*? They succeed each other, spinning like tops or executing a waltz amidst their fellow souls. What next? "What nest?" I typed out. A telltale slip of the fingers. I need a nest, don't I?

Come l'augello, intra l'amate fronde,
posato al nido de' suoi dolci nati
la notte che le cose ci nasconde,
che, per veder li aspetti disïati
e per trovar lo cibo onde li pasca,
in che gravi labor li sono aggrati,
previene il tempo in su aperta frasca,
e con ardente affetto il sole aspetta,
fiso guardando pur che l'alba nasca;
così la donna mïa stava eretta
e attenta, rivolta inver' la plaga
sotto la quale il sol mostra men fretta
As the bird, among the beloved leaves, having sat on the nest of her sweet brood through the night which hides things from us, who, in order to look upon their longed-for aspect and to find the food wherewith to feed them, wherein her heavy toils are pleasing to her, foreruns the time, upon the open bough, and with glowing love awaits the sun, fixedly gazing for the dawn to break; so was my lady standing, erect and eager, turned towards the region beneath which the sun shows less haste.
(The *Paradiso*, Canto XXIII)

Notes on Beatrice:

My search for Beatrice. Is there a special service on the Internet? If not, I shall quote a few tercets from the *Commedia*. Better to quote the *Vita Nuova*: she was less self-righteous in her youth. A self-righteous prig. Why should I look for her? Dante's recipe must work. Has it stood the test of time? Must she know St Thomas? Did the young lady I met the other day know St Thomas? For a while she worked at my bank. She might have guided me through Versailles or my flat: I do not know how to be happy in my flat. I cannot even sleep in my own bed peacefully. She might have taught me how to sleep. What a pity she does not work in my bank any more. I saw her only twice. The first time she was alone, sitting there to explain why the bank was closed. Dante would have seduced her on the spot. How? By reciting a few verses from the *Commedia*. Anyway I am already older than Dante: he died last year when I was fifty-six. Too old for her. Democritus blinds himself to avoid being seduced by a woman whom he could not make love to. That is not the point. I am just too old. Would have been a breach of ethics, wouldn't it? She was an ideal Beatrice, but I did not fall in love with her. Why should I fall in love with my Beatrice? Was Dante really in love with Beatrice? He was in love with

his heroine. I am also in love with my heroine. She is not Beatrice. The danger anyone runs when looking for a goddess. Transformation into a stag. Actaeon. The dogs you trained attack you. The people you educated turn their backs on you.

Democritus' act needs no comment, but the death of Actaeon should be explained to the general reader. Actaeon was a hunter and conducted his last hunt until the sun was in between East and West. In the region where the hunt took place there was a valley overgrown with pitchpine and cypress trees, in the depths of which lay a wonderful cave dedicated to Diana. It was not merely dedicated to her: the goddess herself, when she was tired of hunting in the woods, used to bathe her fastidious limbs in the pure water. A nymph was shooting a movie about Diana. On television they often show how porn movies are made, but very few people are allowed to *attend* the shooting. The grandson of Cadmus attended the shooting of a movie that was destined for the gods, for their private cinema. The nymphs, discovered in their nakedness, beat their breasts at the sight of a man, and filled the entire grove with their sudden outcry. Crowding round Diana, they sheltered her with their own bodies, but the goddess was taller than they, head and shoulders above them all: she was the most renowned top model on Olympus. Deprived of her arrows, which would have killed Actaeon and all the members of his family, she just scooped a handful of water and threw it in his face, making the horns of a mature stag sprout on his brow. She covered his body with dappled skin and planted fear in his heart. As he fled from Diana's grotto his hounds caught sight of him and presently he expired, their jaws fastened on his body.

Today Beatrice is a computer. So is Virgil.

"I was just standing on a writing desk,
  when a lady called me—so fair
  that I implored her to command me.
Her eyes were as resplendent as my screen—
  they were but two screens, incidentally—
  and she addressed me thus, in an angelic voice,
'O courteous American spirit,
  whose fame resounds in the world
  and shall last as long as history,
my boyfriend finds his way so impeded
  in the dark wood by the joggers
  that he has turned his back in fright.
I'm horrified at the plight of his soul.
  He turns his back on the world
  and therefore on his own destiny.
From what I've heard of him in Heaven,
  I fear he might already have
  gone astray to such an extent
that no computer is prepared
  to help him. But I count
  on your greatness of heart.
Go now, and with your fair speech
  and colourful images, assist him

so that I may rest in peace.
I am Beatrice who sends you;
love turned me on
and typed my words out.
I come from a place to which
everybody longs to return—
the Garden of Virtuality.
When I stand again before my Lord,
my screens will sing your praise,
my dear fellow member.'"

Another series of notes:

Dante invites one to talk about oneself. Trigorin had the slain seagull stuffed for him. He does not recall it in the last act. I do recall my slain seagulls. Nina: When I think of my vocation then I'm not afraid of life any more. I am still afraid of life even when I re-read my old works and find them beautiful. Nina talks about creative artists being happy. Of course I am much happier as a writer than as a pianist. But could I call this "happiness"? If piled up, these fragments of happiness would not look like a Tower of Strength. And it is strength that I need. I help neither myself nor others. No gift for happiness. No gifts at all. I wrote to Ford, Carter and Reagan. Now I should write to God. Sartre was wrong: Hell is not others. Hell is a commentary on Hell, Purgatory and Paradise. Antiphon thought that one should neither think nor act in terms of marriage, money and fame. To sculpt oneself (Plotin). To quote W. K. C. Guthrie's account of the Stobaeus extracts. Fr. 49 is on marriage. "If a wife proves unsuitable, divorce is tiresome and makes enemies of friends, but keeping her is painful. A good wife brings joy, but pain lurks rounds the corner. It is bad enough to have to look after one's own health, daily needs and good name, but care is doubled when there are two. Children bring nothing but worry, and soon take the spring out of your step and the bloom from your cheeks." *The Seagull*, Act One. "There were oak trees and now there are stumps." They speak about the great actors of the past. No more giants, no more oak trees. "But an ordinary actor is much higher." I am not interested in ordinary actors, in ordinary writers, in ordinary conductors. When one thinks of contemporary conductors and compares their fees with their performances, one is likely to throw a tantrum. Our wretched epoch has managed to deprive us of the pleasure that Plato might have put on his list of pleasures, had he been given an opportunity to listen to a great orchestra under a great conductor's baton. What indeed could equal the pleasure of listening *live* to Furtwängler, Mengelberg, Klemperer and Toscanini? Those who sow the seeds of discord are punished in Canto XXVIII. But didn't we live in a better world when there *was* discord in it embodied by the US and the USSR? If given a free hand, I would write only poems. To comment on the verse "*necessità 'l ci 'nduce, e non diletto*" (necessity brings him to it, and not sport). Dante is *obliged* to travel through the Hereafter. I am not. Or is it an inner necessity, an inner command? No one has come to me so far; I am still in the dark wood. I must land up in Paradise in the end. After this journey I cannot find myself in another no-God's land, in another cul de sac. Is that done *automatically*? You write a thousand pages on the *Commedia* and the light of your halogen lamp becomes so intense that you shut your eyes. To quote Jung's *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*. "And though this desire opens bar and bolt to the most dangerous possibilities, we cannot help seeing it as a courageous enterprise and giving it some measure of sympathy. It is no reckless adventure, but an effort inspired by deep spiritual distress to bring meaning once more into life on the basis of fresh and unprejudiced experience. Caution has its place, no doubt, but we cannot refuse our support to a serious venture which calls the whole of the personality into the field of action. If we oppose it, we are trying to suppress what is best in man—his daring and his aspiration…What would have happened if Paul had allowed himself to be talked out of his journey to Damascus?" *Lord Jim*. Nowadays dying for honour is out of the question. Jim looks and sounds foolish. Dante and the magical realists are poles apart. Their novels. Life viewed by a half-idiot. The whole idiot is better. *The Diary of a Madman*. Should I write an attractive story within this commentary? Dante combines both: the discursive method and the narrative. No unnecessary digressions, no spokes in my Dantean carriage. The

necessity of the ultimate end. Here is my life in scientific terms, in a nutshell: "Any mass concentrated into a mathematical point will distort space-time so much that space closes up around the mass and pinches it off from the rest of the Universe." After all, there is the definitive woman beyond whom nobody stands. The closed world. Auden thinks that Dante always has Beatrice in mind. Can I abolish Space and Time by moving from Paradise to Hell? I am living now from death to birth. I would not have written anything had I not caught a glimpse of Paradise. The punishments in the *Purgatorio* are weaker than in the *Inferno*. From a literary point of view, the *Purgatorio* must come before the *Inferno*. Lonely people listen to voices in their heads.

I should not go on like that. Why not impose the former structure on this farrago of notes which, if played on the piano, would sound like one of those musical opuses I composed at the age of sixteen?

"…ché sempre l'omo in cui pensier rampolla
  sovra pensier, da sé dilunga il segno,
  perché la foga l'un de l'altro insolla."
"…for always the man in whom thought wells up on thought sets back his mark, for the one thought weakens the force of the other."
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto V)

At the outset of my commentary I followed Dante's implacable order; that formal structure enabled me to make my way out of the devils' reach and elude the burning sand. This is Chapter 26. Shall I comment on Canto XXVI from the *Purgatorio*? Virgil, Dante and Statius are at the Seventh Circle, that of the Lustful. As they proceed along the circle the three poets go in single file, keeping to the outer edge. To the astonishment of the spirits, Dante's shadow makes the flames seem redder. One of the spirits, Guido Guinicelli, is greeted with reverence by Dante as his "father" in poetry. But Guinicelli deprecates his praise and points to the shade of Arnaud Daniel, the Provençal poet, as a better craftsman in verse, surpassing his rival Giraut de Borneuil of Limoges.

"O frate," disse, "questi ch'io ti cerno
  col dito," e additò un spirto innanzi,
  "fu miglior fabbro del parlar materno.
Versi d'amore e prose di romanzi
  soverchiò tutti; e lacia dir li stolti
  che quel di Lemosì credon ch'avanzi.
A voce più ch'al ver drizzan li volti,
  e così ferman sua oppinïone
  prima ch'arte o ragion per lor s'ascolti."
"O brother," he said, "he there whom I point out to you"—and he pointed to a spirit ahead—"was a better craftsman of the mother tongue: verses of love and tales of romance he surpassed them all—and let the fools talk who think that he of Limoges excels. They give heed to rumour rather than to truth, and thus settle their opinion before listening to art or reason."

"And like as he who is blind with the eyes of sense must ever judge of evil or good according to others," Dante writes in the *Convivio*, "so he who is blind of the light of discernment must ever follow in his judgement after mere report, true or false. The blind ones…who are almost without number,

with their hands upon the shoulders of these liars, have fallen into the ditch of the false opinion from which they know not how to escape. To the habit of this light of discernment the populace are specially blinded." I know a man who acquires only the recordings released by Deutsche Grammophon without even bothering to look at the names of the artists printed on the yellow sleeves. In a way, he behaves like a bull attracted and infuriated by a secondary quality of an object—the red colour—taking no notice of its primary qualities. I wonder if this music lover is endowed with a particular variety of *audition colorée* which differs radically from the Scriabinian marriage of colours and sounds. What is the difference between *audition colorée*, *audition architectural* and *audition nominative*? A man buys only the recordings released by Deutsche Grammophon; a woman goes to Carnegie Hall almost every week because she is convinced that only great artists perform there; a teenager cares only about names, about renowned pianists, violinists, conductors and singers. Is there any difference between them? They have fallen into the ditch; they are blind and deaf; but they are not mute.

Seven years ago I was invited to play at the closing ceremony of the Schubert Competition in Dortmund. After the concert I met a producer from Cologne who was well-known for his films on great musicians of the past. When I returned to Versailles, I sent him the following letter:

It was a pleasure to talk to you at that dinner in Dortmund. I hope you didn't mind my being sharply critical of contemporary music making. I have no intention of running my colleagues down. But, given my musical education and some particular traits of Soviet life, my standards are very high and past-oriented. And, like many Russians, I still want to save the world—a hopeless task, I'm quite aware of that. Anyway, "hope springs eternal in the human breast". Or "hope dies last", as the Russians say laconically.

I should like to discuss with you the idea I've had in mind for quite a while. Indeed, for a year or so, I've been dreaming about a film devoted and dedicated to Gilels who was my last teacher at the Moscow Conservatoire. Last summer, during my tour in Japan, I spoke about this project to a lady whose hobby is finding sponsors for Russian film-makers. She promised to help me.

To reflect Gilels' art, I propose to centre the film on music, avoiding so-called human touches as much as possible. Of course his flat and other relevant places can and must be shown, but not to the detriment of his piano playing. At some points I would even suggest a blackout in order to allow the television viewers to concentrate on his sound, on his magical use of the pedal. (Actually I listened to him and Michelangeli with my eyes closed.) Nowadays these two aspects of piano playing are outrageously neglected by both pianists and concertgoers. In short, I should like to make a film about Gilels, about the piano and about music in general, without being too technical and boring. I propose to talk throughout the film for the simple reason that nobody else knows so much about Gilels as I do. But of course I intend to get in touch with a few people who might shed light on various aspects of his life.

I would be extremely grateful if you could become my guide in this venture. At this critical point—a turning point, hopefully—musicians and music lovers need to be reminded of the pianists whose concerts were rituals—quite on a par with religious ceremonies.

Eight years ago one of my Belgian friends spent her holiday in Florence where she met a young pianist whose physique and performance she liked to the extent of inviting him to her place near Brussels. She talked to him about the Queen Elisabeth Competition and five years later, acting upon her maternal

advice, he took part in it. He played like a young pianist—all the notes plus two or three emotions—and got the fourth prize. Last month I received a cassette from Belgium, which included a film about this pianist who was born in a village near Naples and now sat alternately on his paternal divan and in my friend's armchair. The film was entitled *From One World to Another*. "How did you come up with the project?" asked a journalist. (The right question would be "Why?")

"It's a matter of chance," answered the film director. "My friend knew his friend. That's how it usually works."

Why did he make a film about a young unpromising pianist? Why are there no films about Gilels and Michelangeli? Why do the Japanese and the Germans refuse to sponsor my project? The people who remember Gilels as a young artist will be dead in a few years. They might be dead already.

"Anyway the film has already been shown in eighteen countries—in Europe, in America, in Asia," my Belgian friend pointed out. "Do you know how the director came up with the idea? Someone called him from Moscow to ask if he had a film about a young musician."

Why are they so fond of youngsters? Do they feel rejuvenated when listening to a teenage pianist? *Audition therapétique*. *Audition cosmétique*. And what about *audition cosmique*?

The same goes for literature. Nominative reading, therapeutic reading, cosmetic reading. And what about cosmic reading, cosmic writing?

"Ché se la voce tua sarà molesta
  nel primo gusto, vital nodrimento
  lascerà poi, quando sarà digesta."
"For if at first taste your voice be grievous, yet shall it leave thereafter vital nourishment when digested."
(The *Paradiso*, Canto XVII)

"Cacciaguida does not recommend that Dante enjoy the invectives against his unrighteous enemies," writes Esolen. "He may, but that is not the point. One of the purposes in telling a harsh truth is that those who feel its harshness may repent. Such criticism is medicinal. Dante's words echo what Lady Philosophy says to Boethius: 'You will find what I have yet to say bitter to the taste, but, once you have digested it, it will seem sweet' (*Cons*. *Phil*. 3 pr. 1). If, however, Dante fails to speak, he may find himself as one of the very hirelings he condemns, who 'fear to speak freely of what is right, and, in the words of the Truth, do not exercise the zeal of shepherds caring for the flock,' leaving them prey for the wolves (Gregory the Great, *Past*. *Care* 2. 4)."

I still want to save the world.

CHAPTER 27

The same happens in other arts, but concerts are more spectacular: their space-and-time immediacy demonstrates people's deafness with an overwhelming force that no authentic music lover can resist. Recently my Augsburg friend burst into tears during such a show of impertinence; and yet she was just watching a broadcast of the concert in her room. "It's such an insult to music, to composers, to the Moscow Conservatoire," she said. "Why doesn't God chasten this violinist? They're deaf, all of them."

"Concertgoers are deaf but not blind," I answered.

"We should forget those performers. You don't envy them, do you?"

This is not an epistolary novel but, driven by necessity, I must include yet another letter in it.

I am sorry to bother you. I realise that you must be snowed under with work and all sorts of manuscripts sent to you by authors who aspire to literary recognition. I, in turn, am writing to you because you are the only contemporary writer for whom I have genuine respect. So I would greatly appreciate it if you could find the time to read all or part of my enclosed novel and give me your considered opinion.

This writer has been honoured many times, but I do not envy him because he is a good writer. (Nor do I envy a nonentity upon whom the deaf heap their praises.)

"Fu il sangue mio d'invidia sì rïarso,
  che se veduto avesse uom farsi lieto,
  visto m'avresti di livore sparso.
Di mia semente cotal paglia mieto;
  o gente umana, perché poni 'l core
  là 'v' è mestier di consorte divieto?"

"My blood was so inflamed with envy that if I had seen a man become glad you would have seen me suffused with lividness. Of my sowing I reap such straw: O human race, why do you set your hearts where there must be exclusion of partnership?"
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto XIV)

Aquinas, referring to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, defines envy as a kind of *tristitia*:

In this way sorrow can be about another's good. But this happens in two ways: first, when a man is sorry about another's good, in so far as it threatens to be an occasion of harm to himself, as when a man grieves for his enemy's prosperity, for fear lest he may do him some harm: such like sorrow is not envy, but rather an effect of fear…Secondly, another's good may be reckoned as being one's own evil, in so far as it conduces to the lessening of one's own good name or excellence. It is in this way that envy grieves for another's good: and consequently men are envious of those goods in which a good name consists, and about which men like to be honoured and esteemed…Fourthly, we grieve over a man's good, in so far as his good surpasses ours; this is envy properly speaking, and is always sinful…because to do so is to grieve over what should make us rejoice, viz. over our neighbour's good. (*Summa theologiae*)

The first variety of envy may be applied to performing artists who must display their skills within a closed world: the number of concert halls, theatres and opera houses is not infinite. So if A. is invited to give a concert in Munich, B. will have to stay at home; and C. will starve to death. The second variety may also be applied to performing artists whose names attract or repel both managers and concertgoers. The fourth variety also concerns performing and creative artists, but it does not concern *myself*: I would not mind going into partnership with the writer to whom I sent my most tragic novel. A symbolic partnership no doubt: the knights of the writing desk.

Yesterday, during my customary walk in the woods, I listened to the *Purgatorio* for which I have a soft spot because I have always lived there, taking it either for Hell or Paradise. I experience the same nostalgia as I watch a film where a Moscow skyscraper I lived in is shown from both outside and inside.

Dolce color d'orïental zaffiro,
  che s'accoglieva nel sereno aspetto
  del mezzo, puro infino al primo giro,
a li occhi miei riccominciò diletto,
  tosto ch'io usci' fuor de l'aura morta
  che m'avea contristati li occhi e 'l petto.
Sweet hue of oriental sapphire which was gathering in the serene face of the sky, pure even to the first circle, to my eyes restored delight, as soon as I issued forth from the dead air that had afflicted my eyes and breast.
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto I)

But the film I watch whenever in the grip of nostalgia displays no fanciful colours as if to match my black-and white dreams. I often see my house in the distance as I walk amidst complete strangers who speak a language I have never heard. For a while I cannot get closer to my house and, ignorant of the language spoken around me, I do not dare ask anybody the right way to my former apartment where my friends must already wonder what has happened to their host. My body comes to a standstill and suddenly the house begins to grow as it sails towards me through the ocean.

Noi eravam lunghesso mare ancora,
  come gente che pensa a suo cammino,
  che va col cuore e col corpo dimora.
Ed ecco, qual, sorpreso dal mattino,
  per li grossi vapor Marte rosseggia
  giù nel ponente sovra 'l suol marino,
cotal m'apparve, s'io ancor lo veggia,
  un lume per lo mar venir sì ratto,
  che 'l muover suo nessun volar pareggia.
Dal qual com' io un poco ebbi ritratto
  l'occhio per domandar lo duca moi,
  rividil più lucente e maggior fatto.
We were alongside the ocean yet, like folk who ponder on their road, who go in heart and linger in body; and lo, as when, suffused by dawn, Mars glows ruddy through the thick vapours low in the west

over the ocean floor, so to me appeared—may I see it again!—a light coming over the sea so swiftly that no flight is equal to its motion; from which when I had taken my eyes for a little in order to question my leader, I again saw it grown brighter and bigger.
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto II)

I also see a light, but it is a white light I see in my dreams. Mars, low on the western stretch of the ocean, sheds white light through the thick vapours.

Poi d'ogne lato ad esso m'appario
  un non sapeva che bianco, e di sotto
  a poco a poco un altro a lui uscìo.
Then on each side of it appeared to me a something white, and from beneath it, little by little, came forth another whiteness.
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto II)

My house also has two wings, two white wings. I wish I could dream of an angel and not of my house. But isn't an angel a sort of dwelling place? Everyone's home, everyone's castle. Didn't Virgil and Dante feel at home as they watched the angel move closer and closer to where they stood?
I feel at home in the *Purgatorio* which symbolises the birth of hope, its eternal recurrence. What colour is hope? Is it white? Sweet colour of oriental sapphire. What matters is not its colour—a secondary quality—but its primary quality, its quiddity. Let it be black! The darkest hour is just before the dawn. Even in the blackest hour there is a hope because hope is at its whitest in the blackest hour. Hume says that the sun may not rise in the morning, but it always does, doesn't it? And Mars sheds white light through the thick vapours.
At the end of Canto I there is another image of hope:

Venimmo poi in sul lito diserto,
  che mai non vide navicar sue acque
  omo, che di tornar sia poscia esperto.
Quivi mi cinse sì com' altrui piacque:
  oh maraviglia! ché qual elli scelse
  l'umile pianta, cotal si rinacque
subitamente là onde l'avelse.
Then we came on to the desert shore, that never saw any man navigate its waters who afterwards had experience of return. There, even as pleased another, he girded me. O marvel! that such as he plucked the humble plant, even such did it instantly spring up again, there whence he had uprooted it.

Cato, the Guardian of Purgatory, says to Virgil that he should wash Dante's face with dew and gird him with a reed that "expresses the beginning of an inner renewal, through which the poet, holding to the way of humility, opens himself to a new life," writes Pasquazi. If compared with the golden bough from the *Aeneid*, which has the same capacity of reproduction, the reed of *Purgatorio* fame brings out the cardinal Christian virtue.

Humility cannot be conquered, because it is reinvigorated by its wounds, strengthened by its infirmities, enriched by poverty; it flourishes on violence (done to it) and revives through death.
(Iacopo Passavanti, *Trattato dell'umilità*)

The same goes for hope and for life itself. Hope cannot be conquered, neither can life. "Here life speaks again," as Tyutchev put it. My life has been silent for many years, but now it is speaking again through the *Commedia* and through a recipe my Augsburg colleague sent me by fax. (A remedy for high blood pressure.) I am supposed to chop up a lot of garlic and put it into pure alcohol. "Don't do it yourself—it's too tedious and takes too much time." Is that how life speaks to me? Life is reinvigorated by its wounds and strengthened by its infirmities. How often have I flourished on violence done to me? I never write so well as during hectic periods that most people curse and attempt to shun at all costs. Does this mean that I shall write even better after death, in the Hereafter? Do they write in the Hereafter? Has Virgil finished the *Aeneid* at last? Whiteness upon whiteness. The light at the end of the tunnel. But there is no tunnel, is there? It is just another variation on the theme of light. I am not sure it is the black sun, another appearance of the black sun. It is just dark light or the thick vapours through which white light will break at dawn. And dawn has already broken so many nightmares, such depths of angst, that we may count on the next dawn, on the sun. There lurks in a shady tree a bough, golden in leaf and pliant of stem. Every tree has a golden bow. And every tree is a tree of life.

"Va dunque, e fa che tu costui ricinghe
  d'un giunco schietto e che li lavi 'l viso,
  sì ch'ogne sucidume quindi stinghe;
ché non si converria, l'occhio sorpriso
  d'alcuna nebbia, andar dinanzi al primo
  ministro, ch'è di quei di paradiso."
"Go, then, and see that you bathe his face so that you remove all defilement from it, for with eye dimmed by any mist it would not be fitting to go before the first minister of those of Paradise."

Didn't my Augsburg colleague bathe my face last night? We talked on the phone for almost an hour and my high blood pressure was not the only subject we duscussed. Last week I went to see my doctor because the medicine she had prescribed was making things worse, in my opinion: I could no longer fight the headaches off. She said I had to stick it out till the end.
"Till the end of what?" I asked.
"I told you it might take three months," she answered. "You should get used to this medicine."
Three months. Just another tercet. Next day I felt slightly better and worked for five hours without interruption. Life was speaking again, a particle of life; an important particle of life. Now I am feeling much better. Once again I have come back home.

Quando noi fummo là 've la rugiada

Pugna col sole, per essere in parte
Dove, ad orezza, poco si dirada,
ambo le mani in su l'erbetta sparte
soavemente 'l moi maestro pose:
ond' io, che fui accorto di sua arte,
porsi ver' lui le guance lagrimose;
ivi mi fece tutto discoverto
quel color che l'inferno mi nascose.
When we came there where the dew strives with the sun, for being in a place where, in the breeze, it is little dispersed, my master gently laid both hands outspread on the grass. I therefore, aware of his purpose, reached towards him my tear-stained cheeks, and on them he wholly disclosed that colour of mine which Hell had hidden.

My headaches are gone. Who has restored the colour of my life? God?

Very few people like strolling along the sun-baked streets of Moscow, especially if there are fires in the suburbs. (I still have no idea what actually burns in the suburbs of Moscow. A midsummer nightmare.) But many people spend their entire holidays lying on sun-drenched beaches. I like beaches only until 10 a.m. and after 5 p.m. I wish I could spend my holidays in a place where, protected by a breeze, the dew might hold its own against the sun.

The opening cantos of the *Purgatorio*. An ideal place for a holiday. Washing out the vestiges of toil and trouble, of inner and outer afflictions.

Paris is a place for lazy strolling, with its street life and culture and cafés. In spite of my love for Paris I had rather laze my time away on a lakeshore or by a river, provided there are enough trees to protect me from the sun. And once this commentary is over I would not mind spending a fortnight in the shade of the boulder where Dante spotted his old friend Belaqua. (Beckett befriended him in the thirties.) Taking notice of Dante's weariness, Virgil tells him they should persevere until climbing uphill becomes easy and almost delightful.

E com' elli ebbe sua parola detta,
una voce di presso sonò: "Forse
che di sedere in pria avrai distretta!"
Al suon di lei ciascun di noi si torse,
e vedemmo a mancina un gran petrone,
del qual né io né ei prima s'accorse.
Là ci traemmo; e ivi eran persone
che si stavano a l'ombra dietro al sasso
come l'uom per negghienza a star si porte.
E un di lor, che mi sembiava lasso,
sedeva e abbracciava le ginocchia,
tenendo 'l viso giù tra esse basso.
And when he had spoken these words, there sounded a voice close by, "Perhaps before then you'll need to sit!" At the sound of it each of us turned, and we saw on our left a great boulder which neither he nor I had noticed before. We went over to it, and there were persons lounging in the shade behind the rock, even as men who settle themselves to rest for laziness; and one of them, who seemed to me weary, was sitting and clasping his knees, holding his face low down between them.
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto IV)

I might be tempted to write yet another chapter on the *Commedia* when sitting in the shade behind that rock. Or should I just re-read it without bothering to note down my impressions, my ideas? Or should I read something else: Beckett's *More Pricks and Kicks*, for example?

How pleasant it is to quote the *Purgatorio*. It is as if I was writing a diary—a pastime I have never been fond of because, frankly speaking, I find all diaries boring. Even Kafka's diary is boring in comparison with his magnificent stories. But the *Purgatorio* would be an exception to the rule if it were a diary.

I woke up around 5 a.m., leaving my nightmare behind. Some nightmares, however, stick it out until the end of your life; you cannot get rid of them by going on a trip. Every day is a sort of trip, isn't it? A journey through either Hell or Purgatory or Paradise. Sometimes you can travel from Hell to Paradise in the space of one day. Why do I note down my idle thoughts? They are idle, aren't they? Are they as idle as Belaqua sitting behind the rock in Canto IV? I wish they would sit clasping their knees, their heads pressed down between them. Between their knees I mean. Do thoughts have knees? They might have heads, for all I know. Well, let them hold their heads low: that might take them down a peg or two. I have no desire to hear my thoughts. Let me just note down the events I witness or take part in. Is that what a diary is supposed to reflect? Of course some thoughts may be reflected in it too. And what about events? My life is uneventful. No, it is not true. I saw my house in my dream. A pleasant event. Why do I call this dream of mine a nightmare? Because I could not get inside my house, for all my efforts. Actually I did get inside it, but it was not my house I was wandering about. All those stairs, all those escalators. Finally I got to the top and saw Paradise from up there. I realised I could not walk on air. It was not a nightmare, just an unhappy state of affairs. This morning I took a bath as usual. "My wife takes a shower, I take a bath," said Laurence Olivier in a film I saw recently. I took a bath and watched a film: *Roman Holiday*. Audrey Hepburn might have become my Beatrice had I met her at the right place back in the sixties. Would Dante have fallen for her on the banks of the Arno, back in the thirteenth century? I phoned Volodya who told me the weather was fine. It was snowing. No point in skiing along the boulevards: the air is polluted in Moscow. And I need a breath of fresh air. Why not stay for a while on the seashore, on a lakeshore, by a river? Why not go fishing? In my childhood I used to go fishing quite often. My father was my guide. Once I caught two trouts in the Carpathians—my greatest achievement.

Is this a real dairy? I do not know how to write a diary, but anyway my idle thoughts correspond to what Dante depicts in the opening cantos of the *Purgatorio*. My idle memories, my leisure hours. The sun rises. In Canto II Dante recognises his old friend Casella who sings a song, an old song. Last summer Volodya showed me his old poems some of which I had recited during a poetry reading: on that occasion we had recited our friends' poems, not our own. Later on, in Brussels, I translated one of Volodya's poems into French. "*Je suis né jardinier*."

I was born a gardener.
How furious I grew
When I finally learnt
I was born a gardener.
I don't like spring flowers,
I don't like autumnal flowers.
I'm fed up with all flowers
Except lilies of the valley
And pine trees, pine trees.

When re-reading all these poems I felt what Dante and the spirits must have felt as they listened to Casella's song. A mug of beer in his hand, Volodya looked at me as I turned the pages of his manuscript, fighting back the tears.

Except lilies of the valley,
Those white dots
That bathe in the dew
Between Heaven and Earth.

We all live in Purgatory where we enjoy ourselves and suffer as we wait for our final destination, for the ultimate end assigned to us by the Almighty or just by destiny. Evil spirits and angels might accompany us throughout our life, now and then interfering with our projects and trains of thought. At the moment of our death they take us either to Hell or to Heaven; some of us may remain in Purgatory and in this case everything seems familiar. Nothing changes for a while, as Swedenborg believed: our friends come and salute us, our daily routine follows its course. And then somebody says, "I'm afraid you've drawn the short straw," and imperceptibly our surroundings grow unfamiliar. We cannot find the house where we used to live, and if we do find it our flat does not welcome us; our bed has disappeared, so have our books. "You expect me to find your books at the drop of a hat," says a man to whom you complain about the disorder.

"But I can't even sleep in my room," you say.

"You expect me to find your bed at the drop of a hat," says the man. "Anyway you've lived in an upside-down world after she left you, in which nothing seems to make sense."

"Who are you talking about?"

"That's right—no woman has ever left you. You give them one of those irresistible smiles and they agree to whatever you say. Anyway it doesn't matter now. You're not allowed to come with me yet. I'm afraid you've drawn the short straw. But this isn't the shortest straw on the market—you're not in Hell."

Casella wonders why Dante travels through Purgatory before his term of life has been run. "But you, why do you go?" he asks. (*Ma tu perché vai*?)

"Casella mio, per tornar altra volta
  là dov' io son, fo io questo vïaggio,"
  diss' io; "ma a te com' è tanta ora tolta?"
Ed elli a me: "Nessum m'è fatto oltraggio,
  se quei che leva quando e cui li piace,
  più volte m'ha negato esto passagio;
ché di giusto voler lo suo si face:
  veramente da tre mesi elli ha tolto
  chi ha voluto intrar, con tutta pace."
"My Casella, to return here once again where I am I make this journey," I said, but how has so much time been taken from you?"
And he to me, "No wrong is done me if he who takes up whom and when he will has denied me this passage many times, for of a just will his own is made. Truly for three months now he has taken with all peace whoever would embark."
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto II)

"Casella has evidently been dead some time," writes Hollander, "…and Dante wonders why he has been so long between death and his first step towards salvation, arrival in purgatory. Beginning with Poletto (1894) and Moore… commentators have seen a connection here with Charon's unwillingness to take certain of the waiting shades across Acheron (they all are eager to be taken) and in fact picking and choosing among the waiting throng (*Aen*. VI, 315-316). We might continue the thought: In Dante's poem Charon takes all bound for hell at once; only those bound for purgatory need to be winnowed by the transporting angel, with some having to stay longer in the world, near Ostia, thus mirroring a sort of prepurgation that the poet has invented, offstage, as it were."

So you have to wait for some time, but at least you know what you have to wait for: eternal salvation is the ultimate end of your journey. But before undertaking this journey you must spend some time in a sort of waiting room which vaguely resembles your house, your former flat. There is no bed in your room so that you sleep on the floor, on one of the carpets you purchased in Cappadocia. And there are no books in your study unless it is not your own study you visit now and again to find out if there are some books in it. What might you learn from these books? Is it not too late to learn anything? But you are curious to know what Purgatory is and how one is supposed to behave within its frontiers. You know that Purgatory must be bounded by Hell and Paradise. So it is not infinite, is it? And what about Hell and Paradise? Are *they* infinite? Why should you be interested in Hell? As to Paradise, you will know everything about it in due course.

What *do* we know about Purgatory? For years I have had Jacques Le Goff's book *The Birth of Purgatory* in my library, from which I learnt that the first inkling of this intermediary realm had originated in the vision attributed to one Perpétue. In a dream he saw his late friend reach for water that was too far from his hand, let alone from his mouth. And then Perpétue had a second dream in which his friend emptied a goblet of water and to his astonishment found it was full of water again. So he began to play with the goblet. You may recover your bed some day: its absence in your room is just one of the trials and tribulations you will have to go through in the course of your stay in Purgatory. St

Augustine tackles the problem of ghosts, saying their visits are part of the heavenly routine: with the permission of angels, they inform dreamers about the unburied. He also admits the *feu purgatoire* (I have a French edition of the book) in which souls are cleansed and otherwise prepared for the journey to Paradise. The vision of Drythelm is told in graphic detail. On the verge of death—his relatives thought he *was* dead—Drythelm had a vision he recounted after his return to the land of the living. He saw a creature dressed in white, who guided him to a deep and infinitely long valley around which fire, wind, hail and snow engaged in infernal frolics. "No, you're not in Hell," said his companion. The whole area was in pitch darkness, so he could see only a white spot—his guide. The balls of dark flames would jump out of big wells and fall into them once more. Inside those balls he made out the sparks of human souls.

Io stava sovra 'l ponte a veder surto,
  sì che s'io non avessi un ronchion preso,
  caduto sarei giù sanz' esser urto.
E 'l duca, che mi vide tanto atteso,
  disse: "Dentro dai fuochi son li spirti;
  catun si fascia di quel ch'elli è inceso."
I was standing on the bridge, having risen up to see, so that if I had not laid hold of a rock I should have fallen below without a push; and my leader, who saw me so intent, said, "Within the fires are the spirits: each swathes himself with that which burns him."
  (The *Inferno*, Canto XXVI)

What is it after all? you ask yourself. This area looks exactly like Hell: it is no longer the waiting room. It is a waiting valley or a waiting well. What is the difference between this well and Hell? Luckily for you, there are no books in your library. Even the *Commedia* is not available in Purgatory's ante-room. So it is up to you to create your own Purgatory. "Is there in the toil of Purgatory more certainty of glory than on the path?" says St Bonaventura. (The path refers to our journey on earth.) "There is more certainty of glory in Purgatory than on the path but less than in motherland." *Patria* comes from St Paul's Epistle to Hebrews, XI, 14: "For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country." What country do they seek? Their ultimate or (and) primary home? Their motherland? "*Ceux qui parlent ainsi font voir clairement qu'ils sont à la recherche d'une patrie*." Where are we likely to find it? In front of us, behind us? Isn't this *patria* (*patrie*) our motherland? What *is* my motherland? What does it come down to? Why should it come down? Another wordplay, nothing more. Why should it be located in the deep, infinitely long valley? The valley of death. All these flames Dante saw in the Eighth Circle reflect the way my native city is illuminated now: every building of importance is a ball of flame. But the Moscow I rediscover in an old film is dearer to my heart because I lived there in the fifties when the film was made. Actually I wonder if I was not at home when they shot the sequence displaying my house in all its splendour; I lived on the twelfth floor.

Poi pinse l'uscio a la porta sacrata,
  dicendo: "Intrate; ma facciovi accorti
  che di fuor torna chi 'n dietro si guata."
Then he pushed open the door of the sacred portal, saying, "Enter; but I bid you know that he who looks back returns outside again."
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto IX)

I turn back all the time; and I return outside again. But I have no idea what is inside and outside: the route I follow may lie in between this world and the Hereafter, in between Hell and Paradise. Am I outside my *patria* or inside it? Am I at home? In what sense? In the literal sense, in a figurative sense? How many senses are there in the world? Is this world closed? Is it an infinite universe?

Tonight I shall attend the preview of an exhibition called *The Russian Amazons*; I hope some of them will show up to greet their admirers. I have already written a few pages this morning and therefore can devote a few hours to what they call relaxation. Yoga is not my favourite relaxation, but there are other "offstage" pleasures at my disposal. At midnight I shall celebrate the Old New Year (*stary novy god*). The Russians are good at finding pretexts to drink vodka or champagne or both; they celebrate Christmas twice and "welcome" two new years. A New Year, a New Happiness, they say. Another expression of hope.

"Poscia ch'io ebbi rotta la persona
  di due punte mortali, io mi rendei,
  piangendo, a quei che volontier perdona.
Orribil furon li peccati miei;
  ma la bontà infinita ha sì gran braccia,
  che prende ciò che si rivolge a lei."
"After I had my body pierced by two mortal stabs I gave myself weeping to Him who pardons willingly; horrible were my sins, but the Infinite Goodness has such wide arms that It receives all who turn to It."
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto III)

Will the Infinite Goodness receive *me*? Whenever I read or hear anything along these lines I ask myself if I have any share in this beatitude that seems to manifest itself offstage—in relation to where I am.

I have just come back from the preview of the exhibition which is *not* called *The Russian Amazons*; at least there were no amazons at the gallery. But my friend's daughter *was* there and I spoke to her about Moscow and Paris, about the Russians who are used to being beaten up, as she put it. I laughed and said I had not been ill-treated either by my parents—my father was in no way akin to Kafka's father—nor by the Soviet regime. "You know, when Sartre said the French had never been so free as during the Occupation, everybody applauded. When I speak of the freedom we enjoyed in the sixties my guests say they must get up very early." She laughed in her turn. She was aware that freedom of spirit, which is not listed in the American Constitution, as far as I know, was not impinged upon in the Soviet Union: this kind of freedom is reinvigorated by its wounds and strengthened by its infirmities.

Everyone at the gallery clinked glasses and drank to a happy New Year. Another expression of hope. Doesn't the poet turn back every time he remembers Florence? Another expression of hope.

Poi fummo dentro al soglio de la porta
  che 'l mal amor de l'anime disusa,
  perché fa parer dritta la via torta,
sonando la senti' esser richiusa;
  e s'io avesse li occhi vòlti ad essa,
  qual fora stata al fallo degna scusa?
When we were within the threshold of the gate which the souls' wrong love disuses, making the crooked way seem straight, I heard by its resounding that it was closed again; and if I had turned my eyes to it, what would have been a fitting excuse for my fault?

"The opening verses of the canto tell us that Dante is obeying the angel's warning (IX.132) not to look back," writes Hollander, "…and that the gate of purgatory makes such noise because it is so infrequently opened, since most human beings prefer to pretend that their crooked way is straight and spend eternity in hell as a result." This time Dante does not turn back as he listens to the noise made by the gate that does not admit too many people to Purgatory. Isn't it overpopulated already, given that we all are living in it?

Is human life a circular ruin? We go alongside a series of palaces and huts and then return to the first palace or the first hut to find it is just a ruin with a garden where a few broken trees serve as landmarks. What kind of landmarks are they? A glance, a word. These are not historical landmarks. What shall we call them? Private landmarks? Why should we call them at all? Memory is a circular ruin. And what about our crooked ways which prevent us from entering the gate of Purgatory as often as necessary? How often *should* we enter it? Should the number of tickets to Purgatory correspond to the number of our sins, of our transgressions? Do we always have to wash away our sins in Purgatory?

I am an enemy of straight lines because I do not think life is a *simple* journey during which you cannot get out of your car and walk for a few hours around the woods you have never seen either in your dreams or on a map. Life is an obstinate remembrance of our former lives, of a knowledge we have lost on the way to the present, to the armchair we are sitting in. Let me turn back. Let me stay for a while in Canto X, listening to the noise made by the gate of Purgatory which has not been oiled for millennia. Let me go back to Canto VIII, to the opening lines of Canto VIII.

Era già l'ora che volge il disio
  ai navicanti e 'ntenerisce il core
  lo di c'han detto ai dolci amici addio;
e che lo novo peregrin d'amore
  punge, se ode squilla di lontano
  che paia il giorno pianger che si more
It was now the hour that turns back the longing of seafaring folk and melts their heart the day they have bidden sweet friends farewell, and that pierces the new pilgrim with love if he hears from afar a bell that seems to mourn the dying day…

These nostalgic lines sound like a bell tolling for a day that is no more. What would we become without our memory? But I should not forget the straight line I have followed since the beginning of my work on the *Commedia*. Is it a straight line, a crooked way, a circular ruin? Have I sinned against the *Commedia*? I should not ask too many questions: we are no longer living in the times when Heidegger sang praises to the permanent interrogation of destiny, of one's self, of history. All the questions Dante asked in the course of his journey were answered by Virgil and Beatrice. Today a great many questions are unanswerable. The *Commedia* is a question that cannot be answered in the infinite universe. The very notion of truth is so outmoded that, with a few exceptions, even our politicians have become more prudent in this respect.

Have I turned back once again? Our first meeting. You stood by your mother's side as I emerged from "the mouth of the Metro", according to a French expression. It is your mouth I noticed first, your voluptuous mouth. "Women of the East do not enter restaurants unaccompanied," your mother said on the phone; so we entered *my* restaurant together. (At the time it was my friend's restaurant—my restaurant to some extent.) We drank a bottle of champagne I had brought and you looked astounded when I suggested we should drink another bottle of the same champagne elsewhere. "At my friend's, for instance," I said nonchalantly. "Don't look back," says the angel.

How to forget you? A straight line might be an answer to *this* question; or Jung's curve.

From the middle of life onward, only he remains vitally alive who is ready to die with life. For in the secret hour of life's midday the parabola is reversed, death is born. The second half of life does not signify ascent, unfolding, increase, exuberance, but death, since the end is its goal. The negation of life's fulfilment is synonymous with the refusal to accept its ending. Both mean not wanting to live; not wanting to live is identical with not wanting to die. Waxing and waning make one curve.

Another expression of the ultimate end. I am writing this commentary in the second half of my life and I have to ascend to Paradise, otherwise my work makes no sense. The parabola should *not* be reversed: I look back in order to go forward. I look at your face, at your eyes, at your mouth, otherwise I cannot go forward. The order of my life depends on you, on the house I lived in, on my angel.

CHAPTER 28

Do I want to live? Do I want to die? These are not the questions I ask myself. There are other questions, other preoccupations. Waxing and waning meet at one luminous point. I do not refuse to accept the happy or unhappy ending; life is not a game and consequently has no ending, no *Endspiel*. People go forward and seldom look back because they think the whole of their life is ahead of them and so there is nothing behind except a few photographs, a few tombs they visit once in a while. The body of my work grows as I write this commentary which is synonymous with ascent, unfolding, increase and exuberance. I thought I would descend from Paradise to Hell, but the number of pages I have written is another tower of Babel, and I have to climb this tower to check and correct my text, putting finishing touches to it.

Our desires are everlasting, and to see an image of perfection is not the same thing as to be perfect ourselves, which until we all are, possession, even the possession of Beatrice, must lack perfection. This is what all the talk of "the ideal" comes to; the ideal can never satisfy us until we are ideal. He who pursues any hope of satisfaction without his own conditioning perfection is bound, sooner or later, straight for the *Inferno*.
(Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice*)

Neither do I have my Beatrice nor am I perfect; even if I find her somewhere I am not likely to live up to her standards or to my own standards which, within the context of this book, are identical to Dante's. And my private *mons Domini* really looks like another tower of Babel the construction of which I would finish this afternoon if I did not have to write thirty-three chapters.

Tonight I went out and spent a few hours in the company of the people with whom I had never yet talked about my *Commedia*. I sat next to a man who told me he had been working for two years on a project he had come to hate because "sooner or later you reach saturation point", he declared.

"How long have you been working on this project?" I asked.

"Two years," he said. "Two years of saturation bombing."

"What kind of project is it?" I asked.

"Do you want me to bombard you with the data you know nothing about? How lucky you are! Oh God, let me not go mad!"

"I'm also afraid of losing my wits," I told him. "Actually I wouldn't mind going mad once the commentary is over."

"Why not finish it tomorrow?" he asked.

"Tolstoy might have finished *War and Peace* before the epilogue, before Natasha's marriage. I have to write thirty-three chapters to reflect the *Commedia*'s structure. And these chapters can't be two pages long."

A woman was talking about the dreams in the *Chanson de Roland* and other medieval romances and epics. "But I'm happy I needn't tackle the dreams described in the *Commedia*," she said. "I don't like writing long books."

"There are lots of visions in the *Purgatorio*," I pointed out.

"Do *you* have visions?" she asked.

"I'm not religious enough to be granted a vision," I said. "Do you think I should take drugs?"

"Not necessarily," she answered. "People suffering from schizophrenia sometimes report having visions."

Ivi mi parve in una visïone
  estatica di sùbito esser tratto,
  e vedere in un tempio più persone;
e una donna, in su l'entrar, con atto
  dolce di madre dicer: "Figliuol mio,
  perché hai tu così verso noi fatto?
Ecco, dolenti, lo tuo padre e io
  ti cercavamo." E come qui si tacque,
  ciò che pareva prima, dispario.

There I seemed suddenly to be caught up in an ecstatic vision and to see persons in a temple, and a woman about to enter, with the tender attitude of a mother, saying "My son, why have you done so to us? Behold your father and I sought you, sorrowing"; and as she was silent, that which first appeared was there no more.

(The *Purgatorio*, Canto XV)

On the third terrace Dante has three visions in a row, the first ending at the end of my quotation. The vice of wrath is purged by the virtue that opposes it: gentleness or *mansuetudo*. This first example is taken from the life of Mary who, upon her return from Jerusalem, went in search of the child Jesus and found him among the teachers in the temple. How could *I* be granted such a vision? But I have other visions which, though incomparably more prosaic and down-to-earth, can rival Dante's in their vividness. For instance, I am not sure that tonight I had dinner with all those charming people for whom I even played two pieces very softly so as not to irritate the neighbours. Did the piano pieces I played symbolise in any way the virtue that opposes the vice of wrath? Could my pianissimo-dominated mini-concert appease a wrathful woman? Just the opposite occurred. A woman burst into tears for no reason at all: no one had been talking to her for almost half an hour. Isolated from the other guests, she sat by the window and seemed so engrossed in her meditation that even a handsome scientist in his forties whose looks and ways had already conquered two women that evening did not attempt to woo the solitary lady. At the end of the second piece she was sobbing and in hysterics. "We should avenge these poor victims," she shouted several times. The hostess did all she could to calm her down and even sprinkled some water on her face as if the tears streaming down her cheeks had needed a physical support. I am at a loss to understand of whom the solitary lady was speaking as she cried her eyes out: she said nothing about her grief in front of the guests. (She might have let the hostess on

her secret after our departure.) Shall I elucidate her behaviour by means of the following verses from Canto XV?

Indi m'apparve un'altra con quell' acque
  giù per le gote che 'l dolor distilla
  quando di gran dispetto in altrui nacque,
e dir: "Se tu se' sire de la villa
  del cui nome ne' dèi fu tanta lite,
  e onde ogne scienza disfavilla,
vendica te di quelle braccia ardite
  ch'abbracciar nostra figlia, o Pisistràto."
Then there appeared to me another woman, with those waters streaming down her cheeks that grief distils when it arises from great resentment against another, and she was saying, "If you are lord of the city for whose name was so great strife among the gods, and whence all knowledge sparkles, avenge you of those daring arms which embraced our daughter, O Pisistratus!"

"How can anyone distinguish the particular cause of those tears? Evidently, Dante here wants to indicate all the expression depicted on the face of Pisistratus' wife, even though literally his words refer only to the tears (Poron)." "Like the first of these three exemplary scenes, this one also begins with the portrait of a mother. Where the parents of Jesus are united in benevolence, those of the daughter of Pisistratus are divided; this mother…leaves the performance of a loving forgiveness to her husband (Hollander)."

  E 'l segnor mi parea, benigno e mite,
risponder lei con viso temperato:
  "Che farem noi a chi mal ne disira,
  se quei che ci ama è per noi condannato?"
And her lord seemed to me kindly and gently to answer her, with placid mien, "What shall we do to one who desires ill to us, if he who loves us is condemned by us?"

"Your understanding of the *Commedia* is imperfect," said one of the guests. "You'll see only a part of Dante's third vision. Your version is truncated."

"Do you think my life should *coincide* with the *Commedia*?" I asked.

"As long as you're different from it you won't understand it perfectly."

"Anyway I think that whatever has occurred in my life can be explained through it," I said apologetically.

"That's not enough," said the man. "Of course everything may be found in the *Commedia*, even your miserable life. But you should really coincide with the text. I hope next time I'll be able to *read* you."

"May I become an English translation of it?" I asked.

"No, you should become the original," he said. "Don't you remember St Francis' vision of Christ? Do you agree that the *Commedia* is rather a vision than a book? I can see a wondrous glow it has already

left in your heart. But its imprint in your soul can't be compared with St Francis' stigmata. You should imprint the *Commedia* on your body."

I had another vision last night. I was writing this commentary in tercets and these tercets wore plain clothes as if they were disguised policemen or angels. The policemen belonged to the *Inferno*, the angels walked around the *Paradiso*; and I was in the *Purgatorio*. They all looked at me as if waiting for my speech; I had no idea why I should make a speech and what occasion might have prompted it. "There's no call for a speech," I told everybody. But those policemen and angels took no notice of my remark. They stood in ternary groups and waited for me to say something important. Then I saw a number of tridents all around me and realised I was already at the end of the *Paradiso* where Neptune wonders at the shadow of the Argo. "Have you forgotten your cue?" an angel asked me as he left its group and flew in my direction. "You're back to Canto XV of the *Purgatorio*."

"I know. The third vision. But why don't I see anybody being stoned to death?"

"You can't be granted this vision. Just recite the text, a part of it."

E lui vedea chinarsi, per la morte
  che l'aggravava già, inver' la terra,
  ma de li occhi facea sempre al ciel porte,
orando a l'alto Sire, in tanta guerra,
  che perdonasse a'suoi persecutori,
  con quello aspetto che pietà diserra.

And him I saw sink to the ground, for already death was heavy upon him, but of his eyes he ever made gates unto heaven, praying to the high Lord in such torture, with that look which unlocks pity, that He would forgive his persecutors.

"The third ecstatic vision," writes Singleton, "is of the stoning of St Stephen, protomartyr, who was slain outside the gates of Jerusalem by the Jews on a charge of blasphemy."

"It's a stone into my garden," says a Frenchman or a Russian when insulted ambiguously: a stone is thrown into his or her garden to perturb its quietude and hit its owner on the head. "It's a stone into my garden," I said to one of my Moscow colleagues, alluding to our mutual friend's inconsiderate remark.

"Your life looks like a Buddhist garden, doesn't it?" he said.

"Yes. My life is a stone-and-sand garden in Kyoto."

"Do you think our world also looks like a Buddhist garden?" he asked. "You've thrown so many stones into it."

"Lo mondo è ben così tutto diserto
  d'ogne virtute, come tu mi sone,
  e di malizia gravido e coverto;
ma priego che m'addite la cagione,
  sì ch'i' la veggia e ch'i' la mostri altrui;
  ché nel cielo uno, e un qua giù la pone."

"The world is indeed as utterly deserted by every virtue as you declare to me, and pregnant and overspread with iniquity, but I beg you to point out to me the cause, so that I may see it and show it to men, for one places it in the heavens and another here below."
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto XVI)

"Why don't you write your commentary in French?" asked a woman I met last night. *C'est une pierre dans mon jardin*.
"What could justify our indigence, our decadence, our degeneracy? What could vindicate the desert we're living in? The books on the *Commedia*. Nine translations have been published in English over the last thirty years. And the commentaries are priceless. The *Commedia* was misunderstood in the nineteenth century—Schopenhauer and Nietzsche despised Dante's visions. Why do our contemporaries read the *Commedia*? Some of them *are* interested in it."
I have lost count of my visions. I wake up around five in the morning, work on my commentary and fall asleep once again; sometimes I fall asleep in front of my computer. Do I work on the *Commedia* in my sleep? Have I already become Dante's text so that whatever I do is a part of it? My time is measured by the tercets I quote. The tercets above are my past. My future, too, hangs on Canto XVI, on the tercets I shall type out presently. In Dante's masterpiece the latter follow the former; there is no interstice between them. Why have I inserted so many words between "*pone*" and "*alto*"? Do I still have to make a speech? My speech is the *Commedia*; so is my body. Why does it continue to move? The *Commedia* is motionless, isn't it? But don't I turn its pages? No one can read it without turning its pages or gliding along them as they appear on a computer screen.

Alto sospir, che duolo strinse in "uhi!"
  mise fuor prima; e poi cominciò: "Frate,
  lo mondo è cieco, e tu vien ben da lui.
Voi che vivete ogne cagion recate
  pur suso al cielo, pur come se tutto
  movesse seco di necessitate.
Se così fosse, in voi fora distrutto
  libero arbitrio, e non fora giustizia
  per ben letizia, e per male aver lutto."
He first heaved a deep sigh which grief wrung into "Ah me!" then began, "Brother, the world is blind, and truly you come from it! You who are living refer every cause upward to the heavens alone, as if they of necessity moved all things with them. If this were so, free will would be destroyed in you, and there would be no justice in happiness for good or grief for evil."

And I refer every cause of my present life to the *Commedia* on which I draw whenever in need of guidance, of thoughts, of faith in God. Has it destroyed my free will already? I would be lost without the *Commedia* and it is better to be just a page of it than to live with no identity of my own in the midst of humans. My passport is a collection of data from which I cannot learn anything about the steps I should take to survive in the world where only the fittest are allowed to prosper. And what am I fit for? Keeping a diary makes no sense: every page of it would be just a page from the *Purgatorio*.

"Lo cielo i vostri movimenti inizia;
non dico tutti, ma, posto ch'i' 'l dica,
lume v'è dato a bene e a malizia,
e libero voler; che, se fatica
ne le prime battaglie col ciel dura,
poi vince tutto, se ben si notrica."
"The heavens initiate your movements: I do not say all of them, but supposing I did say so, a light is given you to know good and evil, and free will, which if it endure fatigue in its first battles with the heavens, afterwards, if it is well nurtured, it conquers completely."

I still have enough room for manœuvre. Instead of reading between the lines I will *write* between them, letting myself be nurtured by their beauty and wisdom. Last night I really feared I might go mad like all those people who claim they are Napoleons or Christs. It is even worse to believe you are a book. Keeping a diary might be a way of asserting myself, but I have no reason to create a life running parallel to the *Purgatorio* where I have got stuck. Why not embark on memoirs, partly turning my attention to the days when my life, my body and soul were free from the *Commedia* and its influence?
From the terrace where Marco talks about the heavens and free will Dante cannot see his beloved: fourteen cantos separate them. The young pianist I met twenty-one years ago was beautiful enough to parade by Beatrice's side around the streets of Florence, but she will not have this honour in Paradise. A friend of mine said, "I met a Yugoslavian girl last night. It took me half an hour to overcome her resistance—she's not really a whore. Do you want her phone number?" I called her and we had dinner near the Place des Vosges. I invited her to my place only at the end of our third rendezvous during which she realised at last that red wine might be far better than rosé de Provence. We went to Fauchon's, which was at its peak in the early eighties, and I bought everything we needed for our candlelit dinner. When we finished a third bottle of champagne I apologised and went to my "television hall", as my Munich friend dubbed it—a rather small room where I am working now; she followed me, anxious to reduce the size of my dining room where a long table separated us. She stood at my side, but I neither embraced nor kissed her. I was loath to treat her body like that of a girl to whom my friend had made love a few days before. So I opened another bottle of champagne. We drank it in the living room where only a small Turkish carpet separated us. I was looking at this carpet as if to increase the distance between us or to render it material at least; we both kept silent. "Don't you want to make love to me?" she asked.
"No," I answered.
"Why have you invited me then?"
"We hardly know each other," I said.
"Why do you wish to know me? What for?"
"You'll sleep in front of the television set."

Next morning I told her I would give her piano lessons every week. "After all, I taught for a while at the Moscow Conservatoire." I suggested we should live together in my flat. "Do you want to try?" I asked.

"Why not?" she answered with a smile. Another invitation. I turned it down because I thought we had years and years ahead of us. I drove her back to Paris and called her a few days later to invite her for an entire weekend. "I must practise," she answered.

"You'll practise on my piano," I reassured her.

"It's too long," she said. "A weekend."

I told her a Russian joke and hung up, vowing never to call her again. I did call her again and we decided to meet the following day. But in the morning she called me and left a message on my answerphone. "I can't come. I'll call you at 2 p.m." She called me at 5 p.m. As I waited for her call I read Tsvetaeva's *The Poem of the End*—on the floor, near one of my two telephones. Now and then I would crawl or roll from one telephone to the other.

"It's all over," I said upon hearing her voice. "I might have given you lessons. Well, if you don't care about your career, I can't help you. I wouldn't help you anyway, even if you did care about your career—it's too late. And I'm not sure you'll ever find such a benevolent and professional teacher. You'll bite your elbows, as we say in Russia. You deserve neither my love nor my wrath. Fare thee well!"

I am not sure my free will has come into its own by means of this story which in a way does justice to the spirit dominant in the *Vita Nuova* and the *Commedia*: a long-distance love, a short-distance love, great spiritual expectations. In Canto I of the *Purgatorio*, "Virgil invokes Cato's aid—by the lady who descended from heaven and by Cato's own wife Marcia, who still remembers him with love. Cato answers that 'now she lives beyond the evil stream, she cannot move me any more, by that law which was made when I came forth from thence'. Presumably he was brought out from Limbo when Purgatory, as Purgatory, was established; that is, at the Resurrection; it was then that the law which removed Cato from Marcia was made, for Marcia was not to him a means of grace as the lady from heaven was to her lover. It is a harsh symbolism humanly, and yet august; what matters in all love is that which moves to heaven. This rejection of all else, it must be admitted, is cruel and yet, for that poem, convincing" (Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice*).

I feigned not to notice her desire to embrace and kiss me in the television hall. In our times love does not prevent people from kissing and having a sexual relationship so that I might have kissed her then and there—in the television hall—deferring the main part of the ritual until bedtime. I might have accomplished the entire ritual in the morning when we agreed to live together: she was in no hurry. She said "too long" a few days later because she had realised by then I was quite slow on the uptake. Actually she must have thought I could not fulfil my gentleman's duty; or she mistook me for a tease. In France only women are accused of causing sexual excitement and interest in people with whom

they do not intend to have sex: you can say "*allumeuse*" but not "*allumeur*". Did I expect her to elevate my soul and even my body to a higher plane of regard? She was rather beautiful and my obstinate refusal to comply with her sexual impulses must have deeply offended her.

I am not likely to distance myself from the *Commedia* by focusing on my abortive attempt to come to terms with a young lady whose beauty not only enflamed my senses but actually made me espouse the ideals of medieval poets. Besides, the style in which I told the story was not playful enough to offset the solemnity of Dante's attitude to Beatrice. Of course the lovers are not reunited yet: only one woman is touched upon in Canto XVI—Gaia. She was the daughter of Gherardo da Camino by his second wife, Chiara della Torre of Milan. "The early commentators are uncertain whether or not the mention of Gaia is meant to be to her praise or blame," writes Hollander. "Jacopo della Lana (1324) and Benvenuto say she was well known as a loose woman. However, Benvenuto's self-proclaimed student, John of Serravalle (1416), who generally supports his *maestro*'s opinions, has only good to speak of her (and even claims that she wrote vernacular poetry)." To which category of women did Gaia belong? Could she be seduced in half an hour or was she a means of grace? And what about Beatrice? Would Dante have embraced her in my television hall?

I have not always been so respectful of female purity and would often skip a few stages when wooing an object of my desire. Yet I am not very keen on brothels: inside them my Proustian ritual would be abolished altogether. I went to a brothel only once—almost twenty years ago. During my first concert tour in Japan I decided to savour the thrills offered to foreign visitors by geishas or their modern counterparts. I had no time to go to Sapporo renowned among businessmen for its baths, and spending a night in the company of a geisha in Kyoto turned out to be far more difficult than I had naively presumed. An unfavourable configuration of celestial bodies reduced my delights to a seventy-minute tête-à-tête. A young man assigned to guide me through the garden of Japanese civilisation and to render me assistance, charming away my cares and fears, magnanimously accepted to play the role of an interpreter in the back streets of Yokohama where the arrow-like arms of male bath-keepers stood out against discreetly illuminated doors. To give weight to this invitation-ideogram they would utter some No-sounding sentences which my interpreter invariably translated, "Beautiful, beautiful, very beautiful." Had I not been acquainted with his comparatively large English vocabulary I might have concluded that these were the only words he had learnt. Financial negotiations, on the other hand, were conducted with lively displays of fingers: the bath-keepers considered it improper not to deal directly with the patron whenever money was involved.

All the doors were temptingly left ajar; once in a while, a sail-like movement of a kimono could be seen in the crack—a faceless, footless flourish of yellowish colours.

While the East created a sophisticated and impersonal *ars erotica*, modern Western culture developed a *scientia sexualis* more intent on personalised control than sexual pleasure. The only problem that held my enthusiasm in check was the impossibility of choosing my partner. She was to be imposed

upon me in accordance with my description of my likes and dislikes in the matters of female beauty. Those descriptions were, moreover, dependent on the restraints of the local market, blond vamps being absolutely unavailable. I was also aware of the shortage of tall women. So I merely asked for a beautiful, beautiful, very beautiful eighteen-year-old brunette and no sooner had my interpreter finished his translation than I heard the bath-keeper say something vaguely resembling the English verb "to have". We had made a tour of the Japanese baths and finally came back to the second one: its foggy perspective, revealed by a crack, seemed to promise all I had been hoping for. The bath-keeper went in to make sure the beautiful brunette was not busy and shortly afterwards re-appeared beaming with delight. "Have, have, have," he repeated, whereupon my guide and interpreter told me that everything had been arranged for my pleasure. "Everything," he added shaking my hand. "Everything is just dandy," I said to him and headed for the door.

I was shown into a reception room where I clumsily dropped onto one of the cushions. My legs got in the way, but reassuringly I told myself that it was not worthwhile making myself comfortable. In the meantime the absence of my shoes which I had left in the entrance hall caused a somewhat anticipatory "nude" feeling.

She went down on her knees, gave me a gracious bow and I followed her up the stairs. The reception room emptied once more. On our way towards Paradise we ran into another temporary, fortuitous couple, and only when I made out the features and the figure of the descending girl did I fully appreciate the qualities of my companion. She was not beautiful in every sense of the word, and yet her physique did not put into question the honesty of the bath-keeper. So, instead of dragging my feet and glancing around with a look of annoyance, I rushed up the stairs four at a time and reached the landing before her.

She stopped dead and, gaping at me as if I was ET or King-Kong, produced a few sounds which, in my opinion, had nothing in common with the Japanese language. From that moment on she grew even more inaccessible to my language than the other Japanese girls I had come across during my stay. Her face was impenetrable. And her body? I asked myself.

Japanese prostitutes have a particular inferiority complex. They deduce our sexual capacities from our build and height, hence the expression they use when talking about European and American visitors: "Big white men of the West." My alacrity elevating me to the rank of super monster must have frightened her out of her skin. She jerked herself free when, by caressing at once her breast and her shoulder blades, I attempted to demonstrate I was at least a many-sided monster. I threw a tantrum but, loath to bawl her out in a foreign language, I made a show of going downstairs to inform the boss of her inconsiderate conduct. She caught my meaning and stroked my hair. Silently we proceeded to our destination.

The "body-à-body" thrills were of course preceded by the "body-à-water" ceremony. She washed me with such meticulousness that one might presume I had been shunning all contact with water for

several years. I did not tell her about my customary morning bath and my aversion to dirtiness in any shape or form not only because of her ignorance of the four languages I know, but also because of her determination to defer our "big-à-little" union as long as possible. Willy-nilly I submitted myself to her wishy-washy, soapy massage. To my great disappointment she seemed to make no distinction between the parts of my body, handling my back like a sensitive membrane. For reasons best known to herself she lavished her tenderness on my nose that she soaped and splashed three times. My doubts about her knowledge of anatomy were dissipated only at the end of the watery ordeal: she licked off the soap's last suds from the tender spot of my intromittent organ, and as she did so I gave a start and all but collapsed on her arched back. Perhaps their prudence with regard to the savage men of the West is not ill-founded.

I do not deny that, in the first half of my "bathing", I was slightly disappointed and even annoyed at her showing no consideration for my virility. But I put a curb on my anger: I neither slapped her face nor asked the bath-keeper to throw her out. And my patience was rewarded. She invited me in; she spoke for at least three minutes. What did she impart to me in her native language? "I know how to show a guy a pretty darn good time when I get my motor running—you know? I like to get into high gear and really make tracks."

Well, in the early stage of our "soul-à-soul" ritual, my Japanese girl did not even get into low gear in spite of her beautiful and meaningful monologue. Was her "motor" running at all? Mine was. I did everything—everything! I completely took over. Gradually I warmed her up. I hate being ordered about, but some of her orders, which could vie in elegance and purity with Utamaro's paintings, were executed on the spot. Besides, by taking an active part in the ritual, she abolished the unpleasant doll-client relationship so characteristic of brothels all over the world. It looked and felt as if I was something more than a client to her—a delusion no doubt, given how matter-of-fact she became once more as our meeting drew to a close. To all outward and inward appearances, her motor stalled and then conked out altogether. I had then to work minor miracles to elicit from her a dozen exclamations and verbal commentaries. They were as clear as day.

The more she cooled off towards me the greater my passion grew. At some point I realised I was in love with her. Carelessly she disentangled herself from the net of my love, making me espouse Onan's sinful cause. She got on her feet and minced out. I picked up a towel and, having wiped away the sticky consequences of her untimely exit, walked towards the bath. No sooner had I plunged my right leg in it than she re-appeared, re-approached and held up to my face an alarm clock, intimating that the time I had purchased was over. I said in English I did not love her any more and covered the alarm clock with the towel. I said in French I was no longer a child and could have my bath unaided. I said in German I had no wish to be escorted downstairs. She nodded and, pointing to one of my beauty spots, said something in Japanese. I said in Russian I had no Japanese. She pointed to another beauty spot and burst into laughter.

She escorted me downstairs. She knelt down once again. I said "good-bye" in Japanese and went out.

CHAPTER 29

When a number of things are ordered to a single end, one of them must guide or direct, and the others be guided or directed…For if we consider a single person, we shall see that what happens in the individual is this: while all the faculties are directed towards happiness, it is the intellectual faculty which guides and directs all the others; otherwise happiness is unattainable. If we consider a household, whose purpose is to prepare its members to live the good life, there must be one person who guides and directs, who is called the "*pater familias*" or his representative, in line with Aristotle's observation that "every household is governed by the eldest", and his role, as Homer says, is to guide everyone and impose rules on the others. Hence the proverbial curse: "May you have an equal in your house"...Now it is agreed that the whole of mankind is ordered to one goal…There must therefore be one person who directs and rules mankind, and he is properly called "Monarch" or "Emperor". And thus it is apparent that the well-being of the world requires that there be a monarchy or empire.
(Dante, *De monarchia*)

A wave of nostalgia must have hit the world in the twentieth century, otherwise one would be hard put to explain the advent of tyrants such as Stalin and Hitler. Unable to bear the burden of the infinite universe, we are still looking for the closed world where we might reach an ultimate end without losing our way in the midst of unknown galaxies. The global village we have created can hardly "actualise the full intellectual potential of humanity, primarily through thought and secondarily through action", as Dante writes in *De monarchia*; but it is a sort of therapy for our agoraphobia. There is no way out of our closed world and even on the moon we are bound to come across the American flag. Our virtual emperor ought to be intent on fulfilling the intellectual potential of humankind *primarily* through thought: an overdose of pragmatism may kill not only music and literature but also pure mathematics.

The popularity of the *Commedia* may be due in part to our longing for the closed world, for God, for the Paradise we have lost irrevocably. "He's got no tsar in the head," a Russian might say about a man who does not know what to do and where to direct his steps. Nor does he know whether some steps should be taken or not. How many steps should be taken? In what direction? What *kind* of steps should he take? Or should he just *go* somewhere, taking no notice of allegories, figures of speech and symbols? In his epistle to Can Grande, Dante wrote that the subject of his *Commedia* is, literally, the state of souls after death and, allegorically, man whose merits and faults lead to divine punishment or reward.

‘Let us take everything at its face value,’ the lost one says to himself. ‘I don't need a tsar because I'm living in a democracy now. I should just decide what to do and how to do it. Let's take a few steps first. And let's see where I'll find myself after taking these steps. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine. Where am I? At one of my doors. Should I open it? Another step? I'll just push it open—no steps will be taken. I've pushed the door open. What do I see? What I've seen for over twenty years. What else should I do?’

The *Commedia* is an emperor I need. It is a sort of purgatory from which you can go upward and downward—to St Thomas and Virgil, to Freud and Lacan.

Weakness of the soul is when the soul is hindered from fulfilling its proper action on account of a disorder in its parts. Now as the parts of the body are said to be out of order when they fail to comply with the order of nature, so too the parts of the soul are said to be inordinate when they are not subject to the order of reason, for reason is the ruling power of the soul's parts. Accordingly, when the concupiscible or irascible power is so affected by any passion contrary to the order of reason that an impediment arises...to the due action of man, it is said to be a sin of weakness.
(Thomas Aquinas, the *Summa theologiae*)

What is the proper action of my soul? Should I just walk to the front door and push it open? Some parts of my body fail to comply with the order of nature: I have an awful pain in my back and my calves. I have to go down on my knees to pick up a book or a sheet of paper, and I often remain in this posture for a long time. How long have I stood on my knees? I could not go on with my commentary if I stood on my knees round the clock.
I am trying to recall what happened to me thirty years ago when I was not yet influenced by the *Commedia*—not to such a point. Now my flat is empty: the women to whom I give my phone number do not call me.

Ricorditi, lettor, se mai ne l'alpe
  ti colse nebbia per la qual vedessi
  non altrimenti che per pelle talpe,
come, quando i vapori umidi e spessi
  a diradar cominciansi, la spera
  del sol debilemente entra per essi;
e fia la tua imagine leggera
  in giugnere a veder com' io rividi
  lo sole in pria, che già nel corcar era.
Recall, reader, if ever in the mountains a mist has caught you, through which you could not see except as moles do through the skin, how, when the moist dense vapours begin to dissipate, the sphere of the sun enters feebly through them, and your fancy will quickly come to see how, at first, I saw the sun again, which was now at its setting.
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto XVII)

I am trying to recall the sixties when we thought the Soviet Union had been cut off from the West after the Second World War. The American Exhibition I touched upon earlier was already half-forgotten and a few foreign artists who were intrepid enough to venture into our communist paradise could not dissipate the moist dense vapours that went by the name of the "Iron Curtain". In the late fifties I saw Mario del Monaco on television, but I mostly remember the applause disrupting his performance. In 1964 I saw Laurence Olivier in John Dexter's production of *Othello* and only my loyalty to Dante prevents me from quoting his part in full and writing a huge commentary on the way he played it. La Scala came the same year and my father phoned his cousin to explain that he could get no tickets for

the Bolshoi where she worked as a doctor. "Could you please take my son to one of the operas? You need an assistant, don't you?" Sitting next to her, I heard *Il trovatore* with Gulietta Simionato, and on September 22nd Karajan conducted *La Bohème*. One of my friends heard and saw the opera with his grandmother whose entry ticket escaped being torn. Carrying this ticket in his wallet, my father went to the Bolshoi and asked the director to give him a ticket for the second performance of *La Bohème*. "I had an angina attack the day before yesterday," he said.

Indi, a udire e a veder giocondo,
  giunse lo spirto al suo principio cose,
  ch'io non lo 'ntesi, sì parlò profondo;
né per elezïon mi si nascose,
  ma per necessità, ché 'l suo concetto
  al segno d'i mortal si soprapuose.
Then, a joy to hearing and to sight, the spirit added to his first words things I did not comprehend, so deep was his speech; nor did he conceal himself from me by choice, but of necessity, for his conception was set above the mark of mortals.
(The *Paradiso*, Canto XV)

"A fairy tale, a fairy tale," I told a young lady on the phone, the tears trickling down my nose, my cheeks. Making his way through the orchestra, Karajan finally reached the music stand on which there was nothing but his baton; he saluted the audience, his hands lying on the banister. A fairy tale, a fairy tale. At first I understood his speech—in the first act, in the second act. Then I grew too weary to understand anything: even if I had decided to speak to myself I would not have understood my own words and thoughts. He added to the first half of the opera a few things I did not comprehend, so deep was his speech. And *La Bohème* is not really deep except that it speaks of death and whatever is linked to death: Paradise, Purgatory, Hell, my commentary. Necessity was the key word—or the keynote—of the performance: it had to take place on September 24th 1964. Above the mark of mortals. I was a member of the audience. Karajan had to conduct *La Bohème* forty years ago at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow; I had to begin this commentary two years ago.

The panegyric I have delivered on Karajan's performance may seem strange in the light of what I usually say about him, especially when comparing his style of music making with that of his great predecessors such as Furtwängler, Toscanini, Mengelberg and Bruno Walter. But what I experienced that night in Moscow was nothing short of a revelation which might have depended more on the conjunction of the stars than on Karajan's skill. If we read the above quotation from the *Paradiso* out of context we cannot help wondering how the scene began; we yearn to hear the spirit's first words. Here they are:

"O sanguis meus, o superinfusa
  gratia Dei, sicut tibi cui
  bis unquam celi ianüa reclusa?"

To those who do not know Latin the meaning of this utterance will remain concealed. (I have already quoted this tercet and its translation in Chapter 8.) In a great work of art concealment and revelation play with each other; that night at the Bolshoi I took part in their divine game. "A fairy tale," I said. "And all fairy tales are associated in my mind with the Christmas Tree in *The Nutcracker*. A lot happens during Masha's journey to the top of it, to Paradise. All fairy tales are lying scattered along the way. The Christmas tree Karajan offered us was higher than the one I saw many times in Grigorovich's production of *The Nutcracker*; its roots were much longer."

"Trapassate oltre sanza farvi presso:
  legno è più sù che fu morso da Eva,
  e questa pianta si levò da esso."
Sì tra le frasche non so chi diceva;
  per che Virgilio e Stazio e io, ristretti,
  oltre andavam dal lato che si leva."
"Pass farther onward, without drawing near. A tree is higher up that was eaten of by Eve, and this plant was raised from it." Thus among the branches I know not who spoke; wherefore Virgil and Statius and I, drawing close together, went onward along the side that rises.
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto XXIV)

In Doré's engraving this tree looks like one of the trees mentioned by Isaac Myer (*Qabbalah*):

Another similarity to statements in the same Zoharic book is the sacred tree of the Akkadians and Chaldeans, which suggests to our thoughts, the Tree of the Sephiroth; which was frequently portrayed by the Kabbalists, as an ordinarily formed tree. It also suggests the Ygg-drasil of Norse mythology, the world-tree, whose roots were in the death-world and whose branches rise into Asgard, the heaven of the gods. With the Babylonians, the sacred-tree was the "tree of life", the world-tree; the roots were in the abysmal deep, its seat was the earth, which stood midway between the deep and Zikum, *i. e.*, the primordial heavens above. Zikum rested upon its overspreading branches. Within it was the holy house of Davkina, *i. e.*, the Great Mother, and of Tammuz, the sun god, her son.

Botticelli turns this tree upside down so that it looks exactly like the tree portrayed in Canto XXII of the *Purgatorio*. In Chapter 6 I quoted the relevant tercets, omitting the report on how the upside-down tree is nourished.

Dal lato onde 'l cammin nostro era chiuso,
  cadea de l'alta roccia un liquor chiaro
  e si spandeva per le foglie suso.
On the side where our way was bounded there fell from the high rock a clear water which spread itself over the leaves above.

"This tree is nourished from above, through its leaves," writes Hollander, "not from below, through its root system. Since it is an evergreen, and indeed a mystical representation of a supernatural tree, it does not require nourishment at all. The water that moistens its branches may thus be symbolic of the

water of Life that came to fulfil the function of the Tree of Life in Jesus, who restored to humankind the immortality lost in Eden."

Singleton affirms that both trees grow upside down. Is that how my commentary grows? From Paradise to Hell. The Tree of Life grows from above downwards, permanently illumined by the sun. The roots of the Tree of Happiness sink into the last heaven and its branches spread above and below the earth. Australian sorcerers had a magic tree at their disposal; they would plant it upside down. After smearing its roots with human blood, they would burn it. The act of creation descends on earth. "*Und gebaut von oben herab*," as Hölderlin puts it.

And the Tree of Death?

"Come, See! At the time the child of man goes in the night on his bed, he must take upon himself the Yoke of the Upper Kingdom with a perfect heart, and before he (sleeps), must commit to Him the custody of his *Nephesh* (animal) soul; because the whole world (then) tastes the taste of death. Then the Tree of Death rests on the world. And all the *Ru' hin* spirits, of the children of man go out and are given under it (*i.e*., the rule of the Tree of Death) but because they have committed the soul to Him, they all return to their places."
(Isaac Myer, *Qabbalah*)

Have I committed my soul to Him? The Tree of Death rests on the world. I come and sit down under it, hoping to protect myself from the murderous rays of the sun. But the shade created by the Tree envelops my body like a shroud, and its poisonous fruit burns my bowels even if I do not pluck it from the Tree. I eat the forbidden fruit without touching it, without putting it into my mouth. It tastes of death. How do I know this is the taste of death? I must have already tasted it. All knowledge is remembrance. Why can't I have a memory lapse at the right moment?

My last memory lapse was rather spectacular. I was attempting to explain my notion of freedom to a middle-aged lady. "Freedom of choice is much more important than freedom of speech because we've got to know what to speak about. The same goes for freedom of thought. What's the point of having three thoughts in your mind? Why not have nine thoughts, ninety-nine thoughts? And how can we get all these thoughts? By reading, mostly. So we need a huge library to be able to choose ninety-nine thoughts from the thousands of thoughts printed in books. If we do not have such a library our choice is limited. So is our freedom. In the sixties pop artists were known all over the world. Even in the Soviet Union we knew them because art books were obtainable at so-called *bouquiniste* departments. They sold second-hand books in Moscow, strange as it may seem. Warhol and Lichtenstein were household names. But nobody knew Hörst Janssen. And very few people knew—What's his name?"

At the very outset of my speech I realised that the name of this painter had slipped my mind. But it was too late: I could not have interrupted my exposure for want of one name, however significant. I was aware that his name was identical to that of a famous philosopher. Actually their Christian names were identical too. I recalled the title of the book written by the philosopher: *The Advancement of*

Learning. "I read the book several times," I told the lady. "Some passages are really wonderful. He wrote about hope, about immortality."

"Who are you talking about?" asked the lady.

"Alexander was in the habit of giving sumptuous presents. Alexander the Great. Even to his servants he would give lots of presents. Once, after another bout of generosity, he was asked what he'd reserved for himself. 'Hope,' he answered. 'And hope is the portion of all that resolve upon great enterprises,' said the philosopher."

"What philosopher?" asked the lady.

"He liked Velàsquez and popes. I mean, the painter. Pope Innocent X. Irish painter of English origin. Sorry, my monologue sounds like the game '*questions pour un champion*'.

"Francis Bacon," she said.

Here is Francis Bacon's meditation on immortality:

> It is not possible to have the true pictures or statues of Cyrus, Alexander, Caesar; no, nor of the kings or great personages of much later years; for the originals cannot last, and the copies cannot but leese of the life and truth. But the images of men's wits and knowledges remain in books, exempted from the wrong of time, and capable of perpetual renovation. Neither are they fitly to be called images, because they generate still, and cast their seeds in the minds of others, provoking and causing infinite actions and opinions in succeeding ages.

"That's right. Francis Bacon. Many art lovers might have chosen *him* if they'd seen his pictures in the books sold at *bouquiniste* departments. Have you seen many pictures of his in museums?"

"Perhaps he didn't paint much," the lady said.

"I think he did, but his paintings have been relegated to remote corners. And Lichtenstein has pride of place. Wasn't it boring to paint blow-ups of all those strip cartoons? It *is* boring to look at them. Why didn't he use his imagination? Devoting a lifetime to one trick. And they call it style. Of course no one forbids you to see Bacon or Klee, but you have to take a lift and reach an upper floor. And some individuals suffer from claustrophobia whenever cooped up in a lift. And others are too tired after visiting the ground floor invaded by huge American pictures and sculptures. An ideological invasion, isn't it? Another propaganda weapon."

"Didn't you suffer from propaganda and claustrophobia in the USSR?" asked the lady.

"The Soviet Union wasn't a free country, was it? There's no denying that you could find wonderful painters in the States—in the fifties, in the sixties. But why impose them *artificially* upon the rest of the world? They would have prevailed through the sheer power of their art. Anyway I love the States and wouldn't mind living there—in a university town, amidst my peers."

Today I received a fax from Austria. "I wish you a Happy New Year! Which begins with unhappy news I have for you. Since Mr S. was not able to find concerts, I must let you know that there will be no concerts in Spain for the pencilled period 05. We are very sorry and will keep on trying."

"E quel che più ti graverà le spalle,
  sarà la compagnia malvagia e scempia
  con la qual tu cadrai in questa valle;
che tutta ingrata, tutta matta ed empia
  si farà contr' a te; ma, poco appresso,
  ella, non tu, n'avrà rossa la tempia."
"And that which shall most weigh your shoulders down will be the evil and senseless company with which you shall fall into this vale; which shall then become all ungrateful, all mad and malevolent against you, but, soon after, their brows, not yours, shall redden for it."
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto XVII)

I am not sure their brows will redden for it. Actually Mr S. is one of the very few exceptions to the rule holding sway in the vale. "'*in questa vale*': Vale of tears, of hardship and suffering, which your exile will be for you" (Singleton). Had I stayed in Russia I would also have felt like an expatriate.

"Ben veggio, padre mio, sì come sprona
  le tempo verso me, per colpo darmi
  tal, ch'è più grave a chi più s'abbandona;
per che di provedenza à buon ch'io m'armi,
  sì che, se loco m'è tolto più caro,
  io non perdessi li altri per miei carmi."
"I see well, my father, how time spurs towards me to give me such a blow as is heaviest to whosoever is most heedless; wherefore it is good that I arm myself with foresight, so that if the dearest place be taken from me, I lose not all the rest by reason of my songs."

"'*sì come sprona…darmi*': The metaphor suggests that time 'spurs towards' Dante, like some charging warrior on horseback, with lance lowered to deal him a terrible blow" (Singleton). I recall the end of my Moscow life; the decision was taken and I waited for Time to reach me at last. I had no idea whether it would deal me a terrible blow or embrace me heartily like a father, like a teacher whom I could trust without reserve. But Time is a deity of such impenetrable reserve that not even philosophers are capable of unveiling its mysteries. In 1877 Mme Blavatsky produced her principal work, the two-volume *Iris Unveiled*, which soon became the textbook for the Theosophists. She strove to fuse Vedantic thought and Egyptian serpent worship with alchemy and nineteenth-century science. But how to unveil Time? Neither alchemy nor Egyptian serpent worship can assist us in such an enterprise.

One of my friends told me I was in danger of being murdered with a poison-tipped umbrella—a common practice in those times. "Don't take the underground, especially on rainy days," he advised. "Try to avoid crowds in general. And I'd wear gloves outdoors, if I were you."

"What for? Do you think they might poison the trees in my garden?"

"No. But they might smear some poison on your front door—on the knob, on the handle. Don't travel too much. On a train you'd better choose an empty compartment. Better still—buy four tickets, six tickets, and lock yourself in! And be careful when crossing a street."

"A car accident? But I'm so insignificant. Why should the KGB murder a second-rate pianist?"

"Out of vengeance, out of cruelty. Or just to kill time," he said.

"Or for the fun of it," I suggested. "They must have other, more important things to do at the Soviet Embassy."

"It *is* important to murder a political refugee," he said.

To some extent I was armed with foresight: I knew that on June 11th 1974 I would leave the Soviet Union forever, unless deprived of the visa at the last moment. But the rest of my future—the main part of it—was hidden so carefully I got the impression I was walking along the third terrace of the *Purgatorio*—in the area inhabited by the penitent wrathful.

Buio d'inferno e di notte privata
  d'ogne pianeto, sotto pover cielo,
  quant' esser può di nuvol tenebrata,
non fece al viso mio sì grosso velo
  come quel fummo ch'ivi ci coperse,
  né a sentir di così aspro pelo,
 che l'occhio stare aperto non sofferse;
  onde la scorta mia saputa e fida
  mi s'accostò e l'omero m'offerse.

Gloom of hell, or night bereft of every planet under a barren sky obscured by clouds as much as it can be, never made a veil to my sight so thick nor of stuff so harsh to the sense, as that smoke which covered us there, so that it did not let the eye stay open; wherefore my wise and trusty escort drew to my side and offered me his shoulder.

"The wrathful are being denied objects of sight because they were blinded by their anger for their enemies" (Hollander). I *was* blinded by my anger for my enemies: Soviet officials, informers, boorish shop assistants, bare stalls. My last Moscow Beatrice—the twenty-four-year-old lady I loved *prior* to my departure—did all she could to calm me down and keep me out of harm's way. Once we went to the biggest Moscow shop in search of a drinkable tea. "In our paradise on earth one's not even allowed to have a cup of decent tea," I said out loud as I saw a half-bare counter: only Georgian and Krasnadar teas were available. I was about to repeat the same remark at the top of my voice, but Beatrice interfered and dragged me away.

I might have stayed in Russia had my wrath not blinded me so implacably that I never attended premières of Shostakovich's symphonies and quartets, regarding them as yet another offshoot of Soviet ideology. "You can't escape from it," I repeated over and over again.

"I'm against our way of life and show my disapproval," said a writer I was introduced to in the course of a rough-and-ready dinner party.

"How? Where? In your clandestine works? Just a conditioned reflex. You're a negative product of our ideology."

I paid no visits to our underground painters; some of them were truly remarkable and, contrary to the widespread opinion, did not just ape their Western colleagues after consulting the art books acquired at *bouquiniste* departments.

Blinded by my wrath and an irresistible urge to leave the Soviet Union, I did not see the future which would have scared me out of my wits—in a literal sense—had I been privileged to catch a glimpse of it; I would have gone mad. This future has unveiled itself so entirely, reaching the point of no-return, that prophets are no longer indispensable except in the domain of business. Or am I blinded by my wrath once again, having found a new target, a new scapegoat? Was Dante blinded by *his* wrath? Wasn't this sin as predominant in his life as pride? While searching for an appropriate example of his wrathful behaviour—they are legion—I lighted upon the following text:

> And the human race when most free is best disposed. This will be clear if the principle of freedom be understood. Wherefore be it known that the first principle of our freedom is freedom of choice, which many have on their lips but few in their understanding…Therefore I say that judgement is the link between apprehension and appetite. For first a thing is apprehended, then when apprehended it is judged to be good or bad, and finally he who has so judged it pursues or shuns it. If, then, the judgement altogether sets the appetite in motion, and is in no measure anticipated by it, it is free. But if the judgement is moved by the appetite, which to some extent anticipates it, it cannot be free, for it does not move of itself, but is drawn captive by another. And hence it is that brutes cannot have free judgement because their judgements are always anticipated by appetite…When we see this we may further understand that this freedom (or this principle of all our freedom) is the greatest gift conferred by God on human nature; for through it we have our felicity here as men, through it we have our felicity elsewhere as deities.

I found this excerpt from *De monarchia* in *The Portable Dante* which contains only a few excerpts from the work. I have got the complete text in Russian, but I seldom read Russian translations of Western classics. So I am ashamed to admit I read this text only nine minutes ago and immediately decided to quote it, struck by the similarity between Dante's view on the subject and mine. The appetite he speaks about reveals itself in different ways. A man invests in the painting of a famous artist because he hopes to sell it a few years later, making a big profit. His judgement is moved by the appetite for money. A woman goes to a concert given by a famous artist because she intends to touch upon the fact at a forthcoming cocktail party. Her judgement is moved by the appetite for social status. Neither the man nor the woman understands anything in the domain of art, but they know that the business of our world is business and not music, literature or painting. Both go to bookshops only after perusing a best-seller list: once a year the man *must* talk about literature to his colleagues.

"You, who transgress divine and human law, whom a dire rapaciousness hath found ready to be drawn into every crime—doth not the dread of the second death pursue you?" This is an excerpt from the letter Dante dispatched to his fellow citizens when he realised that Florence was heading the resistance against Emperor Henry VII. But I should not give my accusatory looks too often for fear of reprisals from publishers, conductors, concert managers and other self-satisfied people. Dante had nothing to

lose as he wrote his wrathful epistle: he had lost Florence already. Doesn't he say in Canto XVII of the *Paradiso*:

"sì che, se loco m'è tolto più caro,
io non perdessi li altri per miei carmi."
"…so that if the dearest place be taken from me, I lose not all the rest by reason of my songs."

"*carmi*: Verses" (Singleton). Dante's poem was to be read by the whole of Italy and he feared his violent attacks might deprive him of a new residence, the dearest place (Florence) being taken from him. I do not think they will banish me from Versailles even if my novels and this commentary appear in printed form; but I am sure not to have any more concerts on which I depend for my livelihood. So I shall be forced to sell this flat and a few pieces of furniture I bought in the early nineties when I played around thirty concerts a year. Once I was invited to a wine tasting organised by an Austrian conductor who had married a Russian woman. As soon as I entered their house she told me, "I knew your parents." The conductor spoke Russian to me and consequently I sang the praises of Furtwängler and Mengelberg in my mother tongue.

"And what about contemporary conductors?" he asked. "Do you think they can't hold a candle to them?"

"Of course they can't," I said. After a categorical remark any *formule de politesse* may sound like a mockery so I did not add "present company excepted" despite his angry looks and a portentous glimmer in his eyes. Petrus 1985 was the last bottle we drank that night; when I finally emptied my glass he said, "We're all nonentities." These were his last words. His wife came to my concert which took place three days afterwards and told me backstage, "You must play with my husband."

"Oh, with pleasure," I said.

Three years later she rang me up to say they would be in Paris next week. "I'm sure my husband will be happy to talk to you."

"Would you come to my place?" I asked. "My wines are less spectacular than yours, but I hope—"

"Of course we'll come," she said.

I have not heard from them since that phone call.

Three years ago I met an Australian novelist about whom I had read in *The Times* one sunny afternoon. "Are you also a writer?" she asked. "I'd love to read your books."

"I'll bring you one of my manuscripts," I said. "None of my novels has been published in English."

I brought her one of my manuscripts; she brought me her book about which I had read in *The Times*. A highly complimentary review. She had a cup of hot chocolate; I had a cup of hot chocolate. I drove her back and read a few pages of her book in a restaurant where I used to drink Salon—my favourite champagne. I never opened her book again.

Three weeks later I gave her a call to find out what she thought of my book. "Haven't finished it yet. Strange English. Did you translate it from the French?"

Three months later she gave me a call to say she was moving to another flat. "I'll leave your manuscript at a nearby café." I noted down the address of the café.

"Actually I could come and pick it up," I said.

"Why should you waste your time? I'll leave it at the café. The owner is a good friend of mine."

For many years I have been invited regularly to a festival in Germany. Last time I played an all-Brahms programme. The director of the festival was in transports of delight. "You should come next year," he said.

"I adore your festival," I answered. "Do you think I could perform my theatrical play alongside the recital? I wrote a play on Schumann's *Kreisleriana*, which would go ideally with an all-Schumann programme. Here's the play. If you could spare half-an-hour—"

"Of course I'll read it," he said. "After all, we've known each other for twenty years."

I have not heard from him since that discussion. "Whether Dante rejoiced in his exile is not clear," writes Esolen, "but it is certain that no single event in his life has gained for him such glory. Indeed, were it nor for the unjust banishment from his native land, and the seizing of his goods by a political enemy, and the foolish pride of those men banished with him—were it not, in short, for the hard look at human evil that Dante was forced to take—we might not have the *Comedy*." Had I stayed in Russia I would have written a commentary on human evil. My exile gained me no glory: I was not *banished* from my native land. But my goods *were* seized by my political, moral, aesthetical and artistic enemies—by Soviet officials. My wonderful Bechstein saw the light of day in 1913; a Soviet general had it brought to Russia by one of those trains filled with the spoils of the Second World War. In 1975, one year after my defection, I met my teacher from the Conservatoire, who was in Brussels on a mission: he had to talk me into going back to the Soviet Union. "Your flat is sealed," he said.

"If I come back I'll have to make a statement, I suppose. And I'll be sent to a provincial town. Or to prison."

"No. Your flat is waiting for you," he said. "And you'll go on teaching at the Conservatoire."

"Compulsory confinement in mental hospitals," I went on, unmindful of his reassuring remark. "Isn't that the grimmest of sanctions against Soviet apostates?"

This, then, is what has been indicated to me by the letters of your nephew and mine, and many other friends, as to the decree recently passed in Florence concerning the pardon of the exiles: that if I will consent to pay a certain sum of money, and be willing to bear the brand of oblation, I may be absolved and may return at once…Is this the glorious recall whereby Dante Alighieri is summoned back to his fatherland after suffering well-nigh fifteen years of exile? Is this the reward of innocence manifest to all the world, of unbroken sweat and toil in study? Far be it from the familiar of philosophy, this abject self-abasement of a soul of clay! To allow himself to be presented at the altar, as a prisoner, after the fashion of some Ciolo or other infamous wretch.
(*Epistle IX*)

("The brand of oblation": this ceremony consisted in presenting the repentant as an offering to St John. Ciolo has not been identified. Actually *I* might have become Ciolo had I returned to the Soviet Union in 1975.)

We drank two bottles of vodka and I said I would never find another Beatrice, however long I live on this earth.

"Who's Beatrice?" he asked.

"The woman I left behind. My last Russian love, my last Russian beauty."

"You can't love two women," he said.

"You mean, at once?"

"In your lifetime," he said.

He convinced me to pay a visit to the Soviet Consulate where I talked to three officials. They asked me if I was ready to take the next flight to Moscow. I asked them if I could go to Cambridge in order to study English language and literature.

"From Moscow?" they asked.

"From Moscow," I answered.

"You'll have to become a member of the Writers' Union first," they told me.

"If I stay in the West I can go to Cambridge at any time," I said.

I did not return to Russia; nor did I go to Cambridge. I met my teacher eighteen years later at the Conservatoire canteen. "Would you have dinner with us?" he said. "You know my wife, don't you? Status quo. Fidelity is primordial, isn't it?"

Actually he set off on a Dantean journey when he realised he had lived in Hell for more than thirty years. He left his wife and moved into his student's flat where he spent almost nine years. And then he returned to Hell. Status quo.

Just a few notes:

The will appeals to memory which provides enough material for conception. A self-contained world. My world is self-contained too.
Did he have an opportunity to catch a glimpse of the Trinity he writes about so eloquently?
Florence is closed. He does not want to turn back.
Live performances are important. I walked past Karajan in Chatelet. He sat like a frightened child, hunched up in a corner. It was in 1982. A fairy tale? Hardly. He was no longer God's emissary. A youth needs a cultural shock, a message from above.
All these mythologies make sense only if you fight like ancient heroes; only if you re-write the *Commedia*.
I cried in front of Dante's tomb in Ravenna.
A marriage is the means of unifying. Is that what those women want? Unity?
The reality of the *Commedia* has faded over the centuries. Is it a mask now?
To speak about Feldman, quoting him. He was fond of Turkish carpets. The *Commedia* is an infinite number of Cappadocia carpets displayed in one hall. Tercets and Feldman's repetitions.

I spent four years at the Music College. The happiest years of my life. We played cards during lessons. Once a friend of mine picked up a book and hit me on the head because he had an important rendezvous and could not stay with us until the end of the lecture. The teacher asked him to leave the classroom. A palpable hit, wasn't it?

O insensata cura de' mortali,
  quanto son difettivi silogismi
  quei che it fanno in basso batter l'ali!
Chi dietro a *iura* e chi ad amforismi
  sen giva, e chi seguendo sacerdozio,
  e chi regnar per forza o per sofismi,
e chi rubare e chi civil negozio,
  chi nel diletto de la carne involto
  s'affaticava e chi si dava a l'ozio,
quando, da tutte queste cose sciolto,
  con Bëatrice m'era suso in cielo
  cotanto glorïosamente accolto.
O insensate care of mortals! how false are the reasonings that make you beat your wings in downward flight. One was following after the laws, another after the *Aphorisms*, one was pursuing priesthood, and one dominion by force or craft, and another plunder, and another civil business, one was moiling, caught in the pleasure of the flesh, and another was giving himself to idleness, the while, free from all these things, I was high in heaven with Beatrice, thus gloriously received.
(The *Paradiso*, Canto XI)

"*amforismi* = *aforismi*, i. e., the study of medicine, so referred to because the Aphorisms of Hippocrates served as a textbook of medicine" (Singleton).

I did not study medicine. I played the piano, wrote poems, fell in love with my Beatrices and flew high in my heaven which was rather down-to-earth, I'm afraid. But I was happy in those days, wasn't I?

CHAPTER 30

"Giù per lo mondo sanza fine amaro,
  e per lo monte de cui bel cacume
  li occhi de la mia donna mi levaro,
e poscia per lo ciel, di lume in lume,
  ho io appreso quel che s'io ridico,
  a molti fia sapor di forte agrume;
e s'io al vero son timido amico,
  temo di perder viver tra coloro
  che questo tempo chiameranno antico."
Down in the world endlessly bitter, and upon the mountain from whose fair summit my lady's eyes uplifted me, and after, through the heavens from light to light, I have learned that which, if I tell again, will have for many a savour of great bitterness; and if I am a timid friend to the truth, I fear to lose life among those who shall call this time ancient."
(The *Paradiso*, Canto XVII)

Last night I talked to Volodya. I said I had at last understood the difference between us. And I began to talk about something else. He interrupted me, burning with curiosity, "What's the difference between us?"

"Why are you so impatient to know what separates us?" I asked. "We should rather seek a luminous point where our minds may come to terms with each other."

"Let us start from the dark point," he said.

"From Hell? Do you know the French expression '*lire utile*'? Well, you read 'useful', if you see what I mean."

"I don't," he said.

"Here's another split between us—you don't understand my words."

"I wouldn't call it a split," he said. "But never mind. So you think I read useful books."

"Yes. You read history books, sacred books. I mostly read useless books: novels, long and short stories, poems. I'm sure you've never read any of Hardy's novels. You've never even touched them with your fingers."

"I know his drawings," he said. "Novels are so huge."

"Of course it's easier to look at drawings. Was Hardy really a painter? Anyway novels and poems aren't as useless as you think. For Plato sight and the sense of hearing were far more important than the sense of smell, for instance. For hedonists smells are important. Novels and poems are smells. Shouldn't we read between the lines of life? And you read only its lines. And write only lines yourself. When you compose a piece of music you know exactly who will perform it. You don't compose in the void, do you? And I write my commentary in the void. It's absolutely useless."

"It *is* useful," he answered. "If it weren't for this commentary, you'd never read St Thomas Aquinas, would you?"

This commentary is useless. At least I do not fear to lose my future readers, my eternity. Nobody will read me in the thirtieth century when this time will be called ancient or dark. Are my books unknown because people cannot read in the dark?

Since the wretchedness to which vice leads is opposed to the happiness to which virtue leads, whatever pertains to wretchedness must be understood as being the opposite of all that we have said about happiness. We pointed out above that man's ultimate happiness, as regards his intellect, consists in the unobstructed vision of God. And as regards man's affective life, happiness consists in the immovable repose of his will in the first Good. Therefore man's extreme unhappiness will consist in the fact that his intellect is completely shut off from the divine light, and that his affections are stubbornly turned against God's goodness. And this is the chief suffering of the damned. It is known as the punishment of loss.
(Thomas Aquinas, *The Compendium of Theology*, translated by Cyril Vollaert, S. J.)

As regards man's affective life, unhappiness consists in the immovable repose of his will in the first Evil. But my will is restless and never stays in one place for long. How do they portray a restless man in films? He moves about impatiently, lighting a cigarette with fumbling fingers and then stubbing it out. That is what I would do if I was in the habit of smoking. My will, on the other hand, might look exactly like this actor: it is not afraid of lung cancer.
What happens when my will lights a cigarette? Do I see light in those moments? Do I take an important decision? Do I write a beautiful sentence? And what happens when my will stubs the cigarette out?
Whatever my will does with its cigarette, my affections are not stubbornly turned against God's goodness. And even if they are slightly turned against it they are certainly not stubborn: at any moment they are prepared to turn *towards* God. But if you undergo the punishment of loss you are not *allowed* to turn towards God's goodness, if I am not mistaken; otherwise the punishment would lose its meaning. It would become the punishment of *double* loss. Why am I writing such nonsense? Is it because my will has just stubbed the cigarette out? But is this piece of nonsense really different from what I have written before? What difference does it make what *kind* of nonsense I write?
Suppose you were deprived of your favourite dish for your bad conduct. You could say to your father, "I'm sorry. I'll be a good boy from now on. Please forgive me. Have pity on me!" Wouldn't your father forgive you? Wouldn't he revoke the punishment of loss?

It is, I think, true to say that in proportion as one becomes better acquainted (but how poorly!) with the whole imagination of the *Commedia*, so the pains of the *Purgatorio* become more sharp than the pains of the *Inferno*. Those certainly have the awful quality of no-quality. The hypocrites in their cloaks of lead who walk forever round one of the moats of Malebolge have the sullen awfulness of "forever", but the proud under their burdens on the first terrace of the mountain have an age-long contrast with joy, because joy is already somehow mingled with them. It is the joy which, even to the imagination, makes sharp the agony.
(Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice*)

"I'm the happiest man in the world," I said to my Scottish friend. "I'm also the most miserable man in the world. I almost weep for joy when writing on the *Commedia*, but I'm so exhausted that no amount of skiing will ever put me back on my feet again."

"No harm in trying," she said. "I'd take three weeks off right now, if I were you."

"I've decided to finish the book on February 9th. One of his numbers, isn't it? One should deal with Dante on his own terms."

The nearer I get to Paradise the sharper my anguish grows because something might happen and interrupt my work before all the loose ends are neatly tied up. My commentary must be a faithful reflection of the closed world where every star is fixed to the vault of heaven. I fear to cross a road, to walk in the woods, to drive my car along a slippery road or even on a sunny day when presumably nothing can spoil the pleasure of a peaceful journey from Versailles to Bougival. "How many pages have you written already?" asked Volodya.

"Around seven hundred," I said.

"And I can't even write two hundred pages," he sighed.

What if my inspiration lets me down? Have I ever been inspired? At least I have been able to write seven hundred pages on the subject that demands far more elaborate treatment.

Just as the sinners depend upon Christ for the vestigial resemblance that permits them their doleful existence, so the *Inferno* itself depends upon the *Paradiso*, the axiological centre of the work, for the representation of the values it will distort, travesty and adumbrate *in malo*. Thus, it is perhaps somewhat paradoxical that the true centre of the poem's being is so much less vivid, imagistically dense and sensuously particular than the *Inferno*, whose being is ontologically inferior. But this, too, serves as a further indictment of literature, because all the whirlwind action, the terror and the grotesquerie are finally a shorthand for the fallen and mundane. Indeed they are a shorthand for all the eye enraptured by God instantly dismisses. In the *Paradiso*, on the other hand, the *figurae* fulfil themselves and achieve the ultimate meanings and yield to the *res* they adumbrated, as Hell is finally exposed, despite all its pomps and fascinations, as a dim and insubstantial reflection of the locus of all good and truth, and in terms of the narrative, as an empty sign. Thus, as has become apparent, no single episode in Hell is finally complete until it is fulfilled by the revelation of the good it adumbrated in contrariety and yields thereby its otherwise esoteric meaning.
(James Thomas Chiampi, *Shadowy Prefaces; Conversion and Writing in the "Divine Comedy"*)

My comments on the *Paradiso* are too fragmentary to expose Hell as a dim and insubstantial reflection of the locus of all good and truth. My Hell is not insubstantial and, deprived of action and grotesquerie, embodies in a way the majesty of Dante's upper spheres. But at least this part of my commentary must contain thirty-three chapters, making up by its structure for what it lacks in content. I entitled it *Paradise* and whatever subjects I treat in it are placed under the sign of its title; and this sign is laden with meaning because Paradise is not an empty sign.

I fear that words can forsake me all of a sudden. But I have a lot of notes I can quote in full to fill up the number of pages required to reach the end of Chapter 33. Actually I may quote *anything* and my library is big enough to enable me to write a hundred volumes on the *Commedia*.

O divina virtù, se mi ti presti
  tanto che l'ombra del beato regno
  segnata nel mio capo io manifest,
vedra'mi al piè del tuo diletto legno
  venire, e coronarmi de le foglie
  che la materia e tu mi farai degno.
O divine Power, if you do so lend yourself to me that I may show forth the image of the blessed realm which is imprinted in my mind, you shall see me come to your beloved tree and crown me with those leaves of which the matter and you shall make me worthy.
(The *Paradiso*, Canto I)

This long invocation "becomes…a prayer addressed to Apollo as the supreme Deity" (Singleton). The matter which, along with Apollo, must make our poet worthy of the crown is Paradise; the tercet proves that great literature might depend on "good sentiments", contrary to what André Gide believed. ("*C'est avec les bons sentiments qu'on fait la mauvaise littérature*.") Moreover, one word might shed new light on a literary text, especially if this word appears in the title. Didn't I turn towards God's goodness on the day when I conceived the idea of writing this commentary? When I started on the part entitled *Paradise* my book became a prayer. Whatever I write in this part is a prayer. Whatever I write in this part is a comment on the *Paradiso*. If I quote the *Inferno* I comment on the *Paradiso*. If I speak of my departure from Russia I comment on the *Paradiso*.

I have spoken of it so many times that I do not recall which episodes I have told to pour my soul out and get closer to Russia, to my friends, if only by means of words. Until the very last moment I was not sure I would be allowed to leave the country because there were no virtual hostages, so to speak: my parents had died already and I was the only child. But, contrary to what everyone believed in both the West and my native country, the KGB agents were neither omniscient nor quick-witted. Anyway they could be outwitted rather easily, providing you played their game, the rules of which were based on the conduct of an ordinary Soviet citizen. For instance, in March 1974 I bought a huge refrigerator and our concierge saw two workmen carry it towards our lift. "I bought a refrigerator," I pointed out to make sure she would report this event to her headquarters.

"Very useful," she said. "My husband likes cold beer."

The ballerina Makarova—a famous Soviet defector—purchased a car to persuade the KGB officials she would stay in Petersburg forever. Though modest in comparison with her decoy, my refrigerator stood me in good stead: when questioned by her superiors, the concierge aired her astonishment, "You don't buy a fridge for three months, do you? A huge, expensive fridge."

And my last Beatrice? Perhaps she *was* my last Beatrice and my love for you, my Georgian Lady, is nothing more than an idiom of my despair. My first and last Beatrice. I have already spoken of her death, but now it is her life I must dwell upon for a while; actually I would not mind writing a hundred books about her. I had three tape recorders in my Moscow flat, and I used them all to record a piece of music I had composed for her voice. One day she stole the tapes and owned up to her theft only when

the door of the lift was almost closed. The lift went down. Impatient and furious, I rushed down the stairs in my slippers. Our gigantic staircase. I ought to have counted the number of steps plunging in zigzags to the front door. Another journey downward. She was trying to stop a taxi on the quayside.

S'io potessi ritrar come assonnaro
  li occhi spietati udendo di Siringa,
  li occhi a cui pur vegghiar costò sì caro;
come pinto che con essempro pinga,
  disegnerei com' io m'addormentai;
  ma qual vuol sia che l'assonnar ben finga.
If I could portray how the pitiless eyes sank to slumber, hearing of Syrinx, the eyes whose long vigil cost so dear, like a painter who paints from a model I would picture how I fell asleep; but whoso would, let him be one that can depict slumber well.
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto XXXII)

"Dante is willing to live dangerously. What other medieval poet, in a serious moment of a serious poem, would turn to Ovid and to self-conscious literary humour in a moment like this?..He compares himself to Argus of the hundred eyes (Dante of the hundred cantos?), watching over Io at Juno's behest so that Jove cannot get at his bovine girlfriend, set to drowsiness and slumber (disastrously for him) by Mercury's tale of Syrinx and Pan. At what point does Argus fall asleep? Just when Mercury's tale reports on the musical sound that issues from the reeds that were Syrinx, who had escaped Pan's lustful pursuit and vanished. Music and a disappearance are features of Dante's scene, as well."
Don't *I* live dangerously when I write about Dante's slumber to describe a scene which was its polar opposite in terms of emotions and actions involved? Violent scenes are not my forte; those who are fond of conjugal disputes may imagine my discomfiture with the aid of Bergman's films devoted to the subject. But drowsiness is not out of place in this part of my commentary because during the last days of my Russian life I could not sleep at all.
I continued to note down my feelings and thoughts in the notebook I regarded as my diary. "Human beings cannot extinguish their brains whenever the same pattern of thoughts persists in them for a considerable stretch of time. What do I yearn for? Why am I walking through the wilderness as far as the hall from which so tantalising a light seems to radiate? Am I looking for the Law with a capital L.? Am I looking for Paradise?" I tore the last pages from the notebook and put them in one of my suitcases. I burnt the rest.
A few days before my departure I met two friends of mine and drank three bottles of vodka with them. That night I slept on the floor. Next morning I wrote this poem in prose:

I found my bed at last. Actually I did not *find* it. My bed just dropped from nowhere, out of the grey, missing my head by a few inches. It fell down at my feet and implored my pardon. The prodigal bed. I forgave it. I told it of course that I would not tolerate such escapades in the future, but I forgave it. I am a tender-hearted, lenient person.

I also wrote this poem:

May she remember my caresses.
There are no other men,
Not even in the Other World.
May she practise our ecstasies
And her fainting fits daily, hourly—
Round the clock.
May she remember
Her kisses and glances,
Her practical jokes.

I will always find a room for us,
In Paradise and dark forests.
In those beds of ours
My soul will burn
To a cinder.

Music and a disappearance. I listened to many LPs, fearing I would not have so many recordings in my Western ivory tower, at least for some time. I listened to Schubert's *Quartet in G Major*, Opus 161; I listened to Brahms' *Quintet for Clarinet and Strings*, Opus 115.

Io non lo 'ntesi, né qui non si canta
  l'inno che quella gente allor cantaro,
  né la nota soffersi tutta quanta.
I did not understand the hymn, and it is not sung here, which that company then sang, nor did I bear to hear the music to the end.
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto XXXII)

"Dante falls asleep, perhaps overcome by the sweetness of the song. This sweet sleep may symbolise the peace and happiness that is possible after the atonement by Christ's sacrifice and reconciliation with God" (Singleton).
I also listened to Mozart's *Requiem*. In my youth I dreamt of becoming a conductor and that dream was somehow inseparable from the desire to perform Mozart's *Requiem* in its most authentic and therefore abridged version ending with *Lacrimosa*, which would have corresponded to the end of Mozart's creative activity or, in other words, to his death. Indeed the composition of the *Requiem* was unexpectedly rounded off by a heartrending, pathetic, sublime, divine sequence of upward-moving chords that seem to indicate the last élan of Mozart's soul or at least the direction of this élan. At the request of an unknown person he undertook a journey from Hell to Paradise, guided only by his anguish, hope and inspiration. In the course of the last *sequenza* he must have covered a distance comparable to the flight depicted in the *Paradiso*. But did Mozart reach Paradise?

In one of my essays I point out that Brahms' late pieces have more in common with silence than sound. This observation, which might have been inspired by Chinese philosophy or Japanese poetry, comes in fact from my experience as a musician.

Even at the end of his life Beethoven remained faithful to the variety of musical Paradise that Haydn had founded: indeed, some movements from his last sonatas and quartets come close to illustrating the poetical term "Music of the Spheres". The same could not be said of a single movement from Schubert's late pieces. Would I have recorded his last sonatas better in the Hereafter? Much better? I wonder what kind of studio they have got in the Garden of Eden. Are there any pianos in Hell? Do those pianos have plastic keys instead of ivory ones?

Nine years ago I recorded the whole of Bach's *Das Wohltemperierte Klavier* which must be approached in fear and trembling, with infinite passion and respect—the only match for the infinity of the composer's imagination. (By "respect" I do not mean "non-involvement" and "non-interference". Actually non-involvement is a widespread form of disrespect and disloyalty.) Instead of compact discs, a number of gigantic slabs might be used to record it. When playing the last fugue at La Chaux-de-Fonds I got the feeling that I had put my whole life into this recording. Even my future is enclosed within it somehow.

On the eve of my departure I put a lot of music scores into my suitcases and I still use them whenever, driven by another nostalgic urge, I take up the pieces I played in my youth.

Three friends of mine helped me during the last period of my Moscow life: Vladimir Martynov, Vadim Feodorovtsev and Alexander Nemchina. I made Vadim's acquaintance at the age of fourteen; we studied together at the Music College. His grandmother offered me that ticket for *La Bohème*. He told his wife about my forthcoming adventure. Alexander was Volodya's friend and I met him two or three years later during a concert at the Tchaikovsky Hall. It is Alexander who warned me about umbrellas and other arms used against traitors by the KGB. He died in 1990.

Quali ne la tristizia di Ligurgo
si fer due figli a riveder la madre,
tal mi fec' io, ma non a tanto insurgo,
quand' io odo nomar sé stesso il padre
mio e de li altri miei miglior che mai
rime d'amor usar dolci e leggiadre;
e sanza udire e dir pensoso andai
lunga fiata rimirando lui,
né, per lo foco, in là più m'appressai.

As in the sorrow of Lycurgus two sons became on beholding their mother again, so I became, but I do not rise to such heights, when I hear name himself the father of me and of others my betters who ever used sweet and gracious rhymes of love; and without hearing or speaking, I went pondering, gazing a long time at him; nor did I draw nearer to him, because of the fire.
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto XXVI)

On the seventh terrace Dante meets Guido Guinizzelli who does not identify himself at once.

In a striking example of *abbreviatio*, Dante boils down a lengthy scene in Statius's *Thebaid*…to two lines. The story to which he refers runs roughly as follows. Hypsipyle was daughter of the king of Lemnos, whom she saved from death when the women of the island determined to kill all the males on it. She was subsequently seduced and abandoned by Jason (*Inf*. XVIII.88-95), by whom she had twin sons, Thoas and Euneus. When the Lemnian women discover that their king is still alive, Hypsipyle flees, and after a misadventure with pirates ends up in the service of the king of Nemea, Lycurgus. While caring for Archemorus, the king's son, she was approached by the seven exiled warriors marching against Thebes in civil war. Since they were thirsty, she agreed to show them to water (the fountain of Langia—see *Purg*. XXII.112), but left the baby behind long enough for him to be killed by a snake. Lycurgus would have killed her but for the chance arrival of her twin sons. Once they have quelled the attempt on their mother's life, they embrace her eagerly, more eagerly than Dante will move to embrace Guido, because he fears the flames.
(Robert Hollander, *Purgatorio*)

As a figure of style, *abbreviatio* is out of fashion: nobody is eager to read long commentaries. In a way, the *Commedia* is an *abbreviatio* of any commentary on it; in the case of my present work, it is a *striking* example of *abbreviatio*. What could I do in this domain of literary art? How to abridge our trip to the airport and my last Beatrice's behaviour? Only an *abbreviatio* would not sound like another commentary on it.

Like Imogen looking along
The imaginary perspective
Of Posthumus' disappearance

Well, it is a *short* commentary on her behaviour, in which I am alluding to Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*. Cymbeline is the King of Britain. Imogen, daughter to Cymbeline by a former Queen, falls in love with Posthumus, but her father opposes their love: he does not want his daughter to marry beneath her station. Posthumus is banished. Pisanio, who is the servant to Posthumus, sees him off and tells Imogen about his departure. His account is too succinct and Imogen tells him how *she* would have watched her lover sailing off; hence the *imaginary* perspective of his disappearance. Here are the relevant verses:

I would have broke mine eye-strings, crack'd them, but
To look upon him, till the diminution
Of space had pointed him sharp as my needle:
Nay, followed him, till he had melted from
The smallness of a gnat, to air: and then
Have turn'd mine eye, and wept.

Later on my Beatrice told me she had remained at the airport for another two hours. Watching the planes take off, trying to guess which one I was sitting in.
But I have not departed yet. Why am I in such a hurry to leave my motherland?

My friends would visit me to take my valuable books and LPs away. (I was reluctant to let *all* my possessions fall into the KGB officers' hands.) They also took one small tape recorder: getting the huge ones out of my house might have exposed them to danger, considering that our concierge was on the lookout for such manoeuvres. Besides, even at home they would have been obliged to hide them; it might have been dangerous to use those machines in the presence of their friends.

"I'd be happy to bring all these things back, as we did in January," said Volodya.

"This time you won't bring them back."

In January, Volodya and Vadim took away three suitcases filled with books and LPs, but had to return them to their shelves because my Beatrice had got wind of our plot and threatened to say everything to her mother.

"Do you think I should hack the piano into pieces?"

"Once in Brussels you must burn your boats," said Volodya.

"And don't forget to burn your aeroplanes," said Alexander.

"Do you really want me to stay abroad?" I asked.

"Do you remember one of my January visits?" said Vadim. "She was in the bathroom. She knew what was going on. For some reason I entered the bathroom without knocking. How many bottles of champagne had we drunk that night? She screamed—because of you, of your departure. She couldn't care less about my intrusion."

"She won't scream this time," I said.

She did not scream. Nor did she say anything *relevant* during those last days. Everything must have seemed irrelevant to her with the exception of my journey to Petersburg: I had to visit my favourite city before my departure. Volodya accompanied me. I stood on the quays of the Neva so long that Volodya began to look at his watch in spite of his inborn politeness. The Russian Museum was closed. An empty sign? A momentous sign? The sign?

What do signs mean?
They appear and disappear;
Other signs replace them. Often
No sign can be seen
In the area. So what? Life goes
On and other quays are trodden
Lightly by so many people.

For the first time I visited the Kremlin only during this hectic, adventurous period in my life: my hatred for the Soviet Union was so colossal that it had expanded far beyond the Russian Revolution. For more than an hour I stood in front of the icon entitled *The Wrathful Eye*. But do icons bear titles? They just look at you. The wrathful eye was looking at me and I heard its voice, His voice: "What do you think are you doing?"

In the company of Vadim's friend I visited a few monasteries in the suburbs of Moscow. "I adore Fra Angelico," my companion said. "And I hope I'll go to Florence in the years to come. I hope I'll see his frescoes and paintings. But if I settled abroad I'd never see this beauty again. Even the smallest hope would be out of the question."

Stones fall because they yearn to be where most stones are to be found; fire rises on account of its essence driving it upward—to its native country, so to speak. All motion is analogous with the canter of horses eager to return to their stables. If removed from its own natural place, a thing (or a human) has a natural tendency to return to it, says Aristotle. Florence was Dante's natural place; so was Paradise, otherwise he would not have ascended to it. I was about to depart from my natural place like a stone that a child picks up with a view to hitting a star.

Volodya promised to go with me to Vladimir and Suzdal, but on the D-day he had a stomach upset. Or he had no stomach for the journey; he almost upset the apple cart. So it is Vadim who kept me company. At the very outset of our journey he warned me he had to be back in Moscow around 6 p.m. La Scala was in Russia again and he had a ticket for *Aida* or *Tosca*. We took a train to Vladimir and then drove over to a church situated in between Vladimir and Suzdal: Church of the Intercession of the Virgin-on-Nerl. "It's much more beautiful when there's water all around it," he said. "You should come and visit it in the spring."

"You want me to stay, don't you? Do you think I should stay in the Soviet Union forever? I've got only one concert abroad next year—in Budapest of all places. I must be on the black list again. From now on they'll allow me to travel only within the Eastern bloc."

"Look at the church," he said.

The taxi driver said he would not take us to Suzdal. "Anyway you'll have no time to visit the town if you've got to be back to Moscow in the evening," he said.

During my first visit to Paris I bought a few books on Russia. In one of them I found the following item of news:

The only city in the USSR without asphalt or telephone poles—Suzdal, the first tourist centre in our country. Tourism will be the main occupation of the museum-city. And in order to preserve the charm of Suzdal, it has been decided to replace asphalt with cobblestones, and conceal electric wires underground. Suzdal is a few dozen kilometres from the ancient Russian City of Vladimir. In this fairytale city are many architectural monuments, representing eight centuries of Russian history. Thirty-four churches in Suzdal could tell much to lovers of old things. The project for the reconstruction of Suzdal is all worked out. The building of several new hotels and of a tourist complex has been pre-arranged (one hotel, for instance, will be in the Monastery of the Saviour and St Euthymius). In one of the ancient cathedrals will be a concert hall. The "Old Mill" restaurant will stand near cafés, set up in carved wooden cottages. Here are bagel-shops, and kvass-shops, and beer-halls. On the territory of the monastery will be rows of shops. And every tourist can bring back a souvenir of Suzdal, Russian metal craft, woodcarving, needlework. The tourist centre will be set up within four years.

"Even as a tourist I won't be permitted to return to Russia," I said to myself in 1974. Next April I shall stay there for three weeks before taking a flight to Tokyo where I am to conduct an all-Tchaikovsky programme. I visited Suzdal in 1993 and was rather disappointed because the proverbial Russian mud reminded me of Gogol's *britzka*. It was just a provincial Gogolian town with a few churches that were not as beautiful as I had expected.

In the book I purchased in Paris there is the following comment on the item of news I quoted above: "For a churchless person this news is interesting and pleasant. What's wrong with it? That way at least they'll keep up the ancient buildings, eh? And increase the romantic air. A city without asphalt or telephone poles…How sad that the late Feodor Dostoevsky cannot get up from his grave, go as a 'tourist' to Suzdal and then describe his impressions in *The Writer's Diary*—he who said that without Christ, man is capable of going to incredible lengths…"

We had enough time to walk around Vladimir where I saw Rublev's frescoes on which the same book comments as follows: "One can only guess at the richness that must have marked the interior of the cathedral church of Vladimir-Suzdal Russia. The chronicle tells of elegant decoration, precious vessels and magnificent services…Only a fragment remains of the original frescoes of 1161, showing two peacocks and plant ornament…A precious part of the remaining frescoes was done in 1408 by Andrey Rublev, sent from Moscow with his co-workers. Unfortunately these frescoes bear little resemblance to their former beauty; they suffered much damage and repair over the centuries, and in places even the painted layer was broken away." The book is entitled *Architecture of Russia*. It was published by The Russian Orthodox Youth Committee. It was printed in Japan.

And what about my Beatrice? She did not keep me company on those journeys. What did *she* do during that hectic period? I know what she did after my departure. She asked our mutual friend to ring me up from Munich.

"She might come to the West," he said. "I can't tell you how and when. You understand me, don't you?"

"Are you speaking from a hotel?"

"Yes," he answered.

"Do you think all telephones in Munich are tapped?" I asked. He hung up. "Do you think our KGB friends can hear us?" I shouted. "Can you hear me? Can you hear what I'm saying? I hope she'll join me in the West. I hope we'll be happy ever after."

"Guardaci ben! Ben son, ben son Beatrice.
Come degnasti d'accedere al monte?
non sapei tu che qui è l'uom felice?"
"Look at me well: indeed I am, indeed I am Beatrice! How did you deign to climb the mountain? Did you not know that here man is happy?"
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto XXX)

Another friend of mine rang me up to say she was waiting for my call. I called her immediately and we spoke for three hours, disregarding the KGB. (And blow the expense!) "I'm sorry I don't call you, but my relatives—" she said.

"The hostages?" I said.

"They're not hostages. They're the only people I can count on except you. Why don't you come back to Moscow?"

"Because I'm living in Paradise," I answered.

"Do come back," she implored.

"I'm living in Paradise," I answered.

I did not live in Paradise because I could not hear her voice as often as I wished. Now I do not hear her voice at all. I ought to have recorded our phone conversations. I ought to have recorded all our meetings.

My last Russian night. Our supper. (She was not among the guests. She came uninvited around 6 a.m.) How did I spend the last day of my Moscow life? I had to update my "characteristic"—the document I had to show my superiors before leaving my motherland. I ought to have done it much earlier but I did not believe they would let me go on this tour: all the odds were against it. "When will you update your characteristic?" asked the woman who was in charge of my journey to the West. How many times did she ask me this question? I went to three offices; my characteristic was signed by three officials. (A "characteristic" used to describe your activities, your mental disposition and your attitude towards the Communist Party.) The last man I spoke to during this Dantean odyssey said I could not expect his superiors to sign anything within three hours. I said I would not get a visa without the characteristic.

"I'm not Hercules," he said.

"We can't know who we are," I answered.

Three hours later I got my characteristic duly signed by a top official. "I'm very grateful," I said.

"Could you do me a favour?" he asked.

"Of course," I answered. I thought he needed a cassette recorder or a portable TV set.

"I've got three children. Could you bring them a dozen packets of chewing gum?"

I returned to my flat. My friends joined me an hour later. How many glasses of vodka did we gulp down that night?

CHAPTER 31

"Sì tosto come in su la soglia fui
  di mia seconda etade e mutai vita,
  questi si tolse a me, e diessi altrui.
Quando di carne a spirto era salita,
  e bellezza e virtù cresciuta m'era,
  fu' io a lui men cara e men gradita;
e volse i passi suoi per via non vera,
  imagini di ben seguendo false,
  che nulla promession rendono intera."
"So soon as I was on the threshold of my second age and had changed life, this one took himself from me and gave himself to others. When from flesh to spirit I had ascended, and beauty and virtue were increased in me, I was less dear and less pleasing to him and he turned his steps along a way not true, following false images of good, which pay no promise in full."
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto XXX)

Our last night. What can be done on a last night, on a last day?

The last day is the day
Which ends a series of days.

What's a departure?
Another day.
What's a journey?
Another day or
A few days leading
To Baden Baden,
To Montreux.

The last day is the day
Which starts a series of days.

My mother told me before her death, "You'll never visit our tomb." I did not find my parents' tomb in 1991 when, for three or four hours, I scoured the cemetery where they had been buried before my departure. "My father and mother love cemeteries," I thought. I was speaking to myself in the present tense as if hoping to raise my parents from the dead through a linguistic trick. "They love the quiet of the underworld. But you can experience this supernatural calm on earth, on the surface of the earth. No point in dying!"

I did not find their tomb. I might have touched it. I might have lain down on it. I might have slept on it. My parents might have been waiting for my body. There was nobody at the cemetery. And I needed to talk about my father and mother. To whom? To a man or a woman, to a dog or a horse. In Russian, in English, in French—in any language.

The rain set in and I headed for the road on which there were no tombs, no tombstones. Not yet. "Will they enlarge the cemetery in the near future?" I asked myself as I stopped and glanced back, unmindful of the rain.

I continued to ask myself superfluous questions until they attuned themselves to the monotony of the rain.

Where did they bury you, my Beatrice? You were not alone in your flat during your agony, were you? Your nurse must have been by your bedside. Your husband, your sister. I do not know them. Why should the reader know them? Here is a poem I wrote before your death:

I've written a lot of words
About you. What's the point?
You don't read them.
You'll never read them.
And you hang up whenever
I call you on the phone.

So I don't call you any more,
But I still hear your voice.
Is it your ghost?
Why not?

Why should your ghost
Begrudge me my cruelty?
She knows.

She reads and re-reads
My poems and my thoughts
And my memory.

My memory.
I consult it
Only intermittently,
Like a dictionary
Or a timetable.

But human memory
Is an open book:
You can't close it.

And what about Alexander? I returned to Moscow on December 30th 1989. I came back to Russia—back in the USSR. I did not call him. The hotel room they put me in featured an upright piano the keyboard of which I did not touch. I played one recital in Moscow and went to Petersburg where my genes had bloomed for more than two centuries.

I played another recital in Moscow. Alexander called at 9 a.m.; I was fast asleep. "What are you doing in Moscow?" he asked.

"I'm playing a recital today. A *matinée*, you know. Will you come?"

"I'm ill," he said. "I can't leave my bed."

"Wouldn't you open the door if I told you I'd come?" I asked.

"Don't come," he said.

He called me once more at 10 p.m. "Could you come now?" he asked.

"We've plenty of time," I answered. "We'll talk and meet when I return to Moscow. And I'll return very often indeed. Of course I prefer Petersburg, but Moscow is my native city after all. My parents were born in Petersburg, you know."

No fire separated me from his body. No water separated me from his mind. I did not come. Why? I had no time, I suppose. Do I have enough time now? For what?

He died three months later. His sister found his body prostrate in the corridor leading to the only telephone he had in his apartment. He always said, "*mon appartement*" because he had been born in Paris where his father had worked at the Soviet Embassy for nine years.

I have no sister.

"Per questo visitai l'uscio d'i morti,
  e a colui che l'ha qua sù condotto,
  li preghi miei, piangendo, furon porti.
Alto fato di Dio sarebbe rotto,
  se Letè si passasse e tal vivanda
  fosse gustata sanza alcuno scotto
di pentimento che lagrime spanda."
"For this I visited the gate of the dead, and to him who has conducted him up hither my prayers were offered with tears. The high decree of God would be broken if Lethe were passed and such viands were tasted without some scot of penitence that may pour forth tears."
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto XXX)

Our last day. My friends came around 11 p.m. Our supper.

"Let's talk about the weather," said Alexander.

"The weather doesn't exist any more," I said. "Actually I can't see anything—my glasses have fogged up."

"Don't hide your tears," said Vadim. "We understand."

"Do you? I don't understand anything myself."

"Why should you?" asked Volodya.

"Did you bring your poems?" I asked him.

"I did."

"What about you?" I turned to Alexander.

"I brought *some* of my poems," he said.

"Would you record them for me?"

"A historic recording," said Vadim.

"No, don't record them," I said. "Just recite them. For the last time."

They recited their poems. I recited some of *my* poems.

"Why do you think our ancestors were driven away from Paradise?" I asked Volodya.

"They disobeyed God and were punished by God," he answered.

"Perhaps they yielded to the temptation of Time," I said. "They may have become bored within the frontiers of Eternity. I'm also yielding to the temptation of Time or Space. It's boring to live in the same flat, in the same country. Space is the Serpent, isn't it? We're always reaching for the forbidden fruit."

"Speak for yourself," said Alexander.

"I'd have put those naughty youngsters in the corner for twenty minutes," I said. "Well, for an hour at most."

"Adam and Eve?" asked Vadim.

"But there's no time in the Garden of Eden, is there?" I said.

"You'll have to leave in five hours," said Alexander, looking at his watch.

"And I'll have to leave in half-an-hour," said Volodya.

"Is there any corner in the Garden of Eden? Must be spherical."

Vago già di cercar dentro e dintorno
  la divina foresta spessa e viva,
  ch'a li occhi temperava il novo giorno,
sanza più aspettar, lasciai la riva,
  prendendo la campagna lento lento
  su per lo suol che d'ogne parte auliva.
Eager now to search within and round about the divine forest green and dense, which tempered the new day to my eyes, without waiting longer I left the bank, taking the level ground very slowly over the soil that everywhere gives forth fragrance.
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto XXVIII)

A river, a forest. The Garden of Eden is the dark wood where Dante found himself at the outset of his journey. It is daytime now. He did not make the river out in the dark. What else did we talk about during our last meeting?

Half-an-hour later Volodya departed, carrying a huge suitcase he had filled with my art books. "What's in your suitcase?" asked the concierge.

"Didn't you see me carry the same suitcase a few hours ago? It's *my* suitcase," he answered.

"It must have been empty when you came in," said the concierge.

"It was filled with the same books," said Volodya.

"Did you read so many books in a few hours?" asked the concierge, looking at the books.

"We just leafed through them," answered Volodya.

"I saw you carry the same suitcase last night," said the concierge.

"We read a lot," said Volodya. "And we like reading together."

Alexander stayed for another hour. "I wish you a happy *vita nuova*," he said as we headed for the lift.

"My neighbours may overhear us," I whispered.

"I'd kiss them good-bye if I were you."

I never saw him again.

Beatrice came to Paris in 1988 and I found her message on my answerphone as I came back from Munich. The next day I phoned her at 9 a.m., but she had already gone out. On the brink of death she must have become very ugly, very ugly indeed. Would I have recognised her in the last month of her life? I did recognise her when we finally met on the outskirts of Paris; she was even more beautiful than in days of yore.

There is notoriously no great agreement upon aesthetic matters; and such agreement as there is, is based upon similarity of origin, nature, and circumstance among men, a similarity which, where it exists, tends to bring about identity in all judgements and feelings. It is unmeaning to say that what is beautiful to one man *ought* to be beautiful to another. If their senses are the same, their associations and dispositions similar, then the same thing will certainly be beautiful to both. If their natures are different, the form which to one will be entrancing will be to another even invisible, because his classifications and discriminations in perception will be different, and he may see a hideous detached fragment or a shapeless aggregate of things, in what to another is a perfect whole…
(George Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty*)

She *was* beautiful in October 1988 when I picked her up on the outskirts of Paris where I could not find my car for a while. Her friend closed the door and we took the lift to the ground floor, almost to the front door. I opened the front door and she walked out. So did I. But I could not find my car for a while. "Where did I park it?" I asked her.

"If you don't find it at once I'll go back to my friend's," she shouted.

She was beautiful. Three years later I was invited to play a concert in Moscow. I called her several times and finally she accepted my invitation to dinner. I was waiting for her in the company of Vadim and a clarinet player with whom I was to perform Brahms' *Trio in E Minor*, Opus 114. "She's not beautiful," he said. And yet we had rehearsed Brahms' *Trio* for three hours before meeting my Beatrice. We had both studied at the Moscow Conservatoire. Similarity of origin, nature and circumstance. Our associations and dispositions were almost identical. Besides, he is very polite and would not have insulted me had he found her physique "above average"—inverted commas are not out of place. (Whatever he said must be mitigated by inverted commas.)

Io mi rivolsi a dal mio destro lato
  per vedere in Beatrice il mio dovere,
  o per parlare o per atto, segnato;
e vidi le sue luci tanto mere,
  tanto gioconde, che la sua sembianza

vinceva li altri e l'ultimo solere.
I turned to my right side, to see in Beatrice my duty, signified either by speech or by gesture, and I saw her eyes so clear, so joyful, that her aspect surpassed all it had been at other times, even the last.
(The *Paradiso*, Canto XVIII)

Beatrice was perfect, wasn't she? Did her beauty depend on the education of those who had the privilege of eyeing her in the streets of Florence? Dante's descriptions are the law that should not be questioned. Beatrice is the law.

"Non dei più ammirar, se bene stimo,
lo tuo salir, se non come d'un rivo
se d'alto monte scende guiso ad imo."
"You should not wonder more at your rising, if I deem aright, than at a stream that falls from a mountain top to the base."
(The *Paradiso*, Canto I)

We had dinner in a restaurant near the Champs Elysées. It was raining. She asked me to kiss her. I was watching an old film based on our love story: we had already kissed in the rain, in Moscow. Our first kiss. She had also *asked* me to kiss her.

"Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth," she said. Now who is this "she"? The bride. But why bride? Because she is the soul thirsting for God. In order to clarify for you the characteristics of the bride, I shall deal briefly with the diverse loves between persons. Fear motivates a slave's attitude towards his master, gain that of the wage-earner to his employer, the pupil is attentive to his teacher, the son is respectful to his father. But the one who asks for a kiss, she is a lover. Among all the natural endowments of man love holds first place, especially when it is directed to God, who is the source whence it comes. No sweeter names can be found to embody that sweet interflow of affections between the Word and the soul, than bridegroom and bride. Between these all things are equally shared, there are no selfish reservations, nothing that causes division. They share the same inheritance, the same table, the same home, the same marriage-bed, they are flesh of each other's flesh.
(St Bernard of Clairvaux, from *Commentary on the Song of Songs*)

"Legends can't be re-written," I thought. Why am I re-writing the *Commedia*? "Everyone considers himself *a priori* (i. e., according to his original feeling) free," writes Schopenhauer, "even in his particular actions, in the sense that in every given case any action is possible to him, and only *a posteriori*, from experience and reflection thereon, does he recognise that his conduct follows with absolute necessity from the coincidence of the character with the motives." We were doomed to meet in Paris and spoil everything.
In one of the shops we went to somebody said, "Your wife is so beautiful." But her beauty was not divine, was it? The *Commedia* is not divine either. It is just a comedy, isn't it? A Venetian publisher bestowed the epithet "*divina*" on this timeless masterpiece. "*Timeless*" is the *mot juste*, isn't it?

Upon awakening I consulted my watch. 9.27. Broad daylight. I called one of my Parisian friends to ask her if I was dreaming. "I no longer see the difference between dreams and reality," I said. "Why is there so much light? I'm not in Paradise, am I? It's usually dark at 6 p.m. Why is there so much light?"
"Because it's 9. 30 a.m.", she said.
"How long have I slept?" I asked her.
"You called me around 6 p.m.," she said.
Is my life a timeless masterpiece?
Once at home we drank a bottle of champagne. She was not at home. Like a cat she explored every nook and cranny of my flat. But she was doomed never to live with me in Versailles or anywhere else. For a while we lived together in my Moscow flat. Many times she packed her things to make a show of leaving me forever. Once I carried her suitcases outdoors and put them on the pavement. That was the end of it. But the last day is the first day. So I took her to Versailles and asked her to imitate her participation in a fashion show that had taken place somewhere on the Baltic Sea. Once more she walked around my flat in a bathing suit. Actually she was stark naked, but her movements did not differ from what I had seen in my Moscow flat. An old film, an old Beatrice. We did not attempt to journey through Paradise and her smile was just an old smile.

"S'io ti fiammeggio nel caldo d'amore
di là dal modo che 'n terra si vede,
sì che del viso tuo vinco il valore,
non ti maravigliar, ché ciò procede
da perfetto veder, che, come apprende,
così nel bene appreso move il piede."
"If I flame on you in the warmth of love beyond the measure that is seen on earth and so vanquish the power of your eyes, do not marvel, for it comes from perfect vision which, according as it apprehends, so does it move its foot to the apprehended good."
(The *Paradiso*, Canto V)

Old films are wonderful, aren't they? I was watching an old film, a silent film, a black-and-white film. Nothing is wrong with old films. Too late. How beautiful she was!

Beauty is always divine whatever
They say about beauty. What *do* they
Say about it? Beauty
Can uplift you or drag you down.
You journey through Hell because
An old flame of yours believes
You need it. What do I need? A few hours
Of sleep.

Tonight I made short shrift of the *gâteau au chocolat* I had bought this afternoon. I have put on ten pounds in the last month. The more I write the more I eat.

Li due poeti a l'alber s'appressaro;
  e una voce per entro le fronde
  gridò; "Di questo cibo avrete caro."
Poi disse: "Più pensava Maria onde
  fosser le nozze orrevoli e intere,
  ch'a la sua bocca, ch'or per voi risponde.
E le Romane antiche, per lor bere,
  contente furon d'acqua; e Daniello
  dispregiò cibo e acquistò savere.
The two poets approached the tree, and a voice from within the leaves cried, "Of this food you shall have want." Then it said, "Mary thought more how the wedding-feast might be honourable and complete, than of her own mouth, which now answers for you; and the Roman women of old were content with water for their drink; and Daniel despised food and gained wisdom.
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto XXII)

"Roman matrons of the old days," writes Hollander, "probably in Dante's mind those associated with republican Rome, before the excesses that characterised the reign of the Caesars, are paired with Daniel who, in Daniel 1:8, is presented as being uninterested in the food of the king's table or in wine."

"I love you and we should live together," she said. "But I must take care of a young man, the only son of my nephew who died in a car accident."

"How old is he?" I asked.

"Sixteen. He's a half-wit, you know. I mean, he's an idiot like Prince Myshkin."

"How do you nurse him?" I asked.

"I don't *nurse* him. I teach him the alphabet. Actually he can read Pushkin."

Something is wrong with my memory. Everything is wrong with my memory. I could not recall how to spell the word "son". I looked it up in my French-English dictionary. "*Fils*." Sun, song. The weather forecast said it would be dry with a few sunny spells. We talked about the weather during our last Moscow supper.

Even if I lose my memory altogether I will go on writing this commentary. All I have to do is open the *Paradiso* and copy a few tercets. Dante learnt his otherworldly journey by heart. I need not learn it by heart.

She talked about her nephew's son to a few Russians whom I had asked to come and describe *la vie parisienne*. "The French are cold and selfish," said a young woman whose husband was a wealthy stockbroker.

"Societies are either *Gemeinschaft* or *Gesellschaft*," I said. "Ferdinand Tönnles is the author of this theory. But he didn't know that in Russia both types would be reconciled. A *Gemeinschaft* society favours close, personal relationships. You rely on your friends for food, clothes and medicine. This sort of community is typical of pre-industrial society. A *Gesellschaft* society dissolve close family associations. Social ties arise from an elaborate division of labour in which the work-place is more

important than the extended family. Tönnles dwells on the loss of community and the rise of impersonality."

"You're right," said my friend. "In the Soviet Union both are important—the work-place and the extended family."

"So you think I should live and die in Moscow?" asked Beatrice.

How many days did she stay in Versailles? Five or six. Not nine, not nine. "Not mine" I am tempted to say. Shall I look up the word "mine" in the Oxford Dictionary?

We talked about her next trip to France but left the date up in the air.

"Non sai tu che tu se' in cielo?
  e non sai tu che 'l cielo è tutto santo,
  e ciò che ci si fa vien da buon zelo?
Come t'avrebbe trasmutato il canto,
  e io ridendo, mo pensar lo puoi,
  poscia che 'l grido t'ha mosso cotanto;
nel qual, se 'nteso avessi i prieghi suoi,
  già ti sarebbe nota la vendetta
  che tu vedrai innanzi che tu muoi."

"Do you know that you are in heaven, do you not know that heaven is all holy, and that whatever is done here comes of righteous zeal? How the song, and I by smiling, would have transmuted you, you can now conceive, since this cry has so much moved you; wherein, had you understood their prayers, already would be known to you the vengeance which you shall see before you die."
(The *Paradiso*, Canto XXII)

I can afford to lose my memory: I rely on the *Commedia* to inform the world about my life and my feelings. Is the *Commedia* responsible for my memory lapses? Does it make me lose my memory on purpose? Why? To enjoy a monopoly of my past, present and future? Does the *Commedia* disconnect my memory? Part by part? How? Why hasn't it disconnected *my* Beatrice yet? There must be a reason for it. Is it less jealous of a dead woman? Does it hope I shall never fall in love with a real woman if I keep my attention fixed on the dead?

I drove her back. "Don't wait! Don't wait!" she cried.

"Why do we have to part once more?" I asked. "Can't you tell your friend you'll stay with me from now on?"

"I can't tell her anything," she said. "She knows my husband."

"Can't you tell anything to your husband?"

"I'll divorce him. Why talk about it now?" She was standing in front of my car as if waiting for me to run her over.

"Where will you stay in Moscow?"

"I won't live in his flat. Why should I lie to him? I'll come next summer."

Lie to him, lie with him, lie on him. "I wish you a Happy New Year," I said.

"Don't wait!" she cried.

"Why don't you want me to see you go in?" I asked.

I drove away. Three months later I called her to say our love did not need anything. "Our love can live without us," I said.

"Are you chasing me away?" she asked.

"Let's leave our love in peace," I said.

It is love that opens the gate of Paradise. In love we anticipate the final union with God. Those who are close to God love beautiful faces. They love beautiful faces and whatever is beautiful. (An *abbreviatio* of Sufis' teaching.)

Next year we took the same flight to Moscow. I did not know she was on the plane: she had a first class ticket. We saw each other only at the Moscow airport. She was beautiful. We talked as we waited for our luggage to come. She was holding two small bottles of French wine she had been given on the plane. She dropped one of the bottles. "You always bring me unhappiness," she said. It is such a common phrase in Russian. Everyone says it. Is that why the Russians are so unhappy?

In 1991 we met for the last time. The clarinet player did not find her beautiful. I did. My thoughts could not betray her. She was fatally ill. The incurable disease must have ravaged her once-beautiful face; I did not notice it. We had dinner together. She promised to join me at the hotel. "But first I have to go home."

"Missing your husband?" I asked.

"He's away," she answered.

I returned to the hotel. A splitting headache. "Don't come," I said out loud. She must have heard me.

Several times we talked on the phone. I heard her voice. When did we speak last? I do not remember.

And then a friend of mine told me about her death. "I already wrote a poem about her death," I said.

Nightmares, nightmares. I used to think they were virtual worlds, those visions and discussions, the moving tumours of my brain. Nightmares. I undress and lie down on the floor. "Relax," says a voice on television. "Just relax. Sunbathing is good for your health, but don't overdo it. Have you bought one of our special creams? The crème de la crème?" A Russian singer by the name of Galich was murdered when trying to repair his television set. Many think he was murdered by the KGB. They did not murder me, did they?

Just as it is a condition of happiness that the will should find rest therein, so is it a condition of punishment that what is inflicted should go against the will. Now since what is not known can neither be restful nor repugnant to the will, Augustine says (*Commentary on Genesis* II) that the angels could not be perfectly happy in their first state before their confirmation, or unhappy before their fall, since they had no foreknowledge of what would happen to them. For perfect and true happiness requires that one should be certain of being happy forever, else the will would not rest.

Similarly since the everlastingness of damnation is a necessary condition of the punishment of the damned, it would not be truly penal unless it went against the will, and this would be impossible if they were ignorant of the everlastingness of their damnation. Hence it belongs to the unhappy state of the damned that they should know that they cannot by any means escape from damnation and obtain happiness.

(Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*)

Everything goes against my will. Am I being punished? For what? For my cruelty to her, for many other sins. I was even cruel to my cat. Standing under the oak tree in my garden, I would toss him upwards to relish the adroitness with which he usually made himself comfortable on the lowest branch: no acrobat could rival his elegance. His paw was operated on and for more than a week he was unable to walk. Had he injured his paw while performing those spectacular stunts?

I cannot be happy forever and my will is restless. Do I *know* I cannot escape from damnation and obtain happiness? And what if I manage to escape from damnation but fail to obtain happiness? If you are not damned you have every reason to be happy, I suppose. How can I be certain of being happy forever?

They simply did not notice me. That is why I am still alive. The KGB agents thought I was unworthy of Hell. The worst punishment that may befall you is rejection, said Luria. If utterly rejected, you are even forbidden to live in Hell.

"Tu se' sì presso a l'ultima salute,"
cominciò Bëatrice, "che tu dei
aver le luci tue chiare e acute;
e però, prima che tu più t'ineli,
rimira in giù, e vedi quanto mondo
sotto li piedi già esser ti fei;
sì che 'l tuo cor, quantunque può, giocondo
s'appresenti a la turba trïunfante
che lieta vien per questo etera tondo."

"You are so near to the final blessedness," Beatrice began, "that you must have your eyes clear and keen. And therefore, before you enter farther into it, look back downward and behold how great a world I have already set beneath your feet, in order that your heart may present itself, joyous to its utmost, to the triumphant throng which comes glad through this round ether."

(The *Paradiso*, Canto XXII)

CHAPTER 32

Around midnight I lost my balance and hurt a finger as I wove my way towards the computer: too many books are strewn over the floor. Luckily for me I have no concerts now. Immediately the finger began to swell up. Using only two fingers, I was typing away into the early hours of the morning just to get the previous chapter finished.

According to Cordovero, in every man there is something from his fellow creatures so that his sins may harm them. How many people have I already destroyed? Luckily for humankind I do not go out very often. And what about my phone conversations? Long-distance destruction. Could one be saved over the phone? Long-distance salvation.

The *Commedia* was not written in black and white. Of course the *Inferno* is black and the *Paradiso* white, but there are other colours in the *Purgatorio*. My life has grown more colourful over the last week.

e vidi le fiammelle andar davante,
  lasciando dietro a sé l'aere dipinto,
  e di tratti pennelli avean sembiante;
sì che lì sopra rimanea distinto
  di sette liste, tutte in quei colori
  onde fa l'arco il Sole e Delia il cinto.
…and I saw the flames advance, leaving the air behind them painted, and they looked like moving paint brushes, so that overhead it remained streaked with seven bands in all those colours whereof the sun makes his bow, and Delia her girdle.
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto XXIX)

"*Delia*: Surname of Diana, goddess of the Moon, who was born on the island of Delos; hence the moon" (Singleton).

Tre donne in giro da la destra rota
  venian danzando; l'una tanto rossa
  ch'a pena fora dentro al foco nota;
l'altr' era come se le carni e l'ossa
  fossero state di smeraldo fatte;
  la terza parca neve testé mossa;
e or parëan de la bianca tratte,
  or da la rossa; e dal canto di questa
  l'altre toglien l'andare e tarde e ratte.
Three ladies came dancing in a round at the right wheel, one of them so ruddy that she would hardly have been noted in the fire; another was as if her flesh and bones had been of emerald; the third seemed newfallen snow; and they seemed to be led, now by the white, now by the red, and from this one's song the others took their movement fast and slow.
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto XXIX)

"This part of the allegory escapes no one: the three ladies represent the three theological virtues, charity (red), hope (green), and faith (white)" (Hollander). On May 1st you buy a bunch of lilies of the valley and you have hope and faith at home, in your mind, in your soul, in your body. Colours are important, aren't they? How have I lived all these years without colours?

I wish I could write a poem about colours.
But colours speak for themselves. Just look
At the apples in the nearest shop.
Look at your life. Why refuse
To look at it? You feel it, smell it, but seldom
You look at it. There's nothing to look at
Save a few colours of which
The sun makes his bow and Delia her girdle.

In three days' time I shall go out and meet an old lady who must be immune to my sins. I did not think I would leave my flat before I finish this commentary. But I shall leave my flat; I shall leave my old life as well. Let me just *quote* the following paragraph from *Summa theologiae*:

Detestation of the Divine goodness is a necessary condition of blasphemy. Now those who are in hell retain their wicked will which is turned away from God's justice, since they love the things for which they are punished, would wish to use them if they could, and hate the punishments inflicted on them for those same sins. They regret indeed the sins which they have committed, not because they hate them, but because they have been punished for them. Accordingly this detestation of the Divine justice is, in them, the interior blasphemy of the heart and we may well believe that after the resurrection they will blaspheme God with the tongue, even as the saints will praise Him with the voices.

I will not blaspheme God with the tongue. And I do not love the things for which I am punished. Am I punished? It is just life, as they say. And they are also punished. I regret the sins I have committed. I hate them. I will praise God after the resurrection. What am I to do before the resurrection?

What will I do in the Hereafter?
I'll walk in the woods and write my commentary
On Creation. Aren't I writing it now? I may
Write it differently. Other words and
Rules. I forget them
In this life of mine. I may recall *something*
After my death.

Upon awakening I switched my computer on. The screen was black. I waited for a minute and switched it off. I waited for another minute and switched it on again. The screen was black. Just a few days to go. Why did it let me down? Then I pushed a button at the bottom of the screen, several times. I saw a tiny light in the centre of the button, a luminous point on which all my hopes and aspirations began to converge. And suddenly the screen lit up, displaying all the hues the sun takes for his bow and Delia for her girdle.

It is enough to push a button, once,
Several times. Sooner or later
You'll see colours.

A rainbow is a bridge you can cross,
Provided you see it.

It is raining this afternoon.

Is there only one button, the right button? Is there only one rainbow?

So another text says, "The difference of things of one nature is due to the investing agency of outward works; when the difference of gods, men, etc., is destroyed, it has no longer any investing power." The text then adds a further explanation, "when the knowledge which gives rise to manifold difference is completely destroyed, who then will produce difference that has no real existence?" The manifold difference is the distinction of gods, men, animals, and inanimate things: compare the saying of Saunaka: "this fourfold distinction is founded on false knowledge." The Self has knowledge for its essential nature; when Nescience called work—which is the cause of the manifold distinctions of gods, men, etc.—has been completely destroyed through meditation on the highest Brahman, who then will bring about the distinction of gods, etc., from the highest Self—a distinction which in the absence of a cause cannot truly exist.
(*Vedânta-Sûtras with Râmanuja's Commentary*)

So many texts, so many thoughts, so many rainbows. But the *Commedia* is unique.

Why should I comment on a commentary?

Come le nostre plante, quando casca
  giù la gran luce mischiata con quella
  che raggia dietro a la celeste lasca,
turgide fansi, e poi si rinovella
  di suo color ciascuna, pria che 'l sole
  giunga li suoi corsier sotto altra stella;
men che di rose e più che di vïole
  colore aprendo, s'innovò la pianta,
  che prima avea le ramora sì sole.
As our plants, when the great light falls downward mingled with that which shines behind the celestial Carp, begin to swell, and then renew themselves, each in its own colour, before the sun yokes his coursers under other stars; so, disclosing a hue less than of roses and more than of violets, the tree was renewed that first had its branches so bare.
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto XXXII)

"The rays referred to are those of the sun when it moves from Pisces into Aries, i. e., at the first buds of springtime, and before the sun moves on and into Taurus. Our natural season of blossoming is

compared, in this simile, to the miraculous and instantaneous flowering of the tree that had so long been dead, the colour of its blossoms reminiscent of Christ's blood" (Hollander). The Tree of Life.

"*quando casca…lasca*: Grandgent explains that 'when the sun's light descends "mingled with that" of Aries,—the constellation which follows Pisces, the "heavenly Carp,"—it is spring.' Here '*lasca*' is used for fish in general, to indicate the constellation Pisces" (Singleton).

Texts within texts. Comments within comments. "*Lasca*" means "caress" in Russian. My thoughts caress me now.

And here is a comment on Singleton's comment:

Since the Fishes stand for mother and son, the mythological tragedy of the son's early death and resurrection is already implicit in them. Being the twelfth sign of the Zodiac, Pisces denotes the end of the astrological year and also a new beginning. This characteristic coincides with the claim of Christianity to be the beginning and end of all things, and with its eschatological expectation of the end of the world and the coming of God's kingdom. *Thus the astrological characteristics of the fish contain essential components of the Christian myth; first, the cross; second, the moral conflict and its splitting into the figures of Christ and Antichrist; third, the motif of the son of a virgin; fourth, the classical mother-son tragedy; fifth, the danger at birth; and sixth, the saviour and bringer of healing.*
(Jung, *Aion*, translated by R. F. C. Hull)

One of my notes says I should quote my short story entitled *The Disciplinarian*. I have no idea why I wished to quote this story. Here it is:

How to discipline your mind?
You should enjoin it not to pester you with the thoughts you are not supposed to have. These thoughts distract you from action or from salvation; or they simply prevent you from having other, more appropriate and efficient thoughts.
Does your mind obey your orders? Not always, I am sorry to say. More often than not it takes advantage of your being asleep to smuggle the forbidden thoughts into your consciousness in the shape of dreams and nightmares. Upon awakening you find these thoughts in your consciousness and begin to turn them over in your mind. And your mind does not mind at all! On the contrary, it seems to enjoy the situation. It twirls the forbidden thoughts and they eddy slowly through Time; and you spend a few hours in your bed, daydreaming.
Or you wallow in vice and sin—in sensual and insane pleasures—for a few days and nights. Or you go and kill somebody. And your mind does not mind at all. On the contrary, it attempts to silence your conscience. It reasons your conscience into oblivion and non-existence.
Your mind intervenes between yourself and your conscience that conducts an inquiry into your crimes and sins. It disobeys your commands and persists in misleading your conscience: it removes the corpse from where it had found its eternal peace and does other vanishing tricks, thereby bringing about lapses of memory. And you forget what you have done while your mind dances on the tombs of your victims.
What *have* you done? You should persuade your mind to reconstruct the murder or another deadly sin you have committed in minute detail so as to supply your conscience and its derivative—repentance—with the so-called *prima materia* out of which your own suicide might issue. Your memory is located *within* your mind, is it not? It is not the other way round, is it?

And what about your conscience? Is it located within your memory that often pricks and goads your conscience into activity? Or does it dwell outside your mind, out of your sight—in the land of repentance?
Have you ever been to this land? Corpses and insults are scattered around it. And flowers are cruel there. And bushes bleed eternally. And wounds yawn like chasms.
And cries for help are dangling from trees in the shape of fruit. And the fruit squeals as you put it in your mouth.
And the lake of betrayals is located in the middle of an amusement park.
"Why should you repent and hang yourself? Suicide is a sin," says your mind. "These thoughts and images distract you from action and salvation."
And you wake up and jump out of bed. You have a bath and breakfast. You dress and go to your office.
A few corpses dangle from the trees along the boulevards. You pray for the victims of repentance or crimes, step into a puddle, curse the bad weather and enter your office.

I must have written this story nine years ago. I do not have to go to my office every day because I have got no office. I mean, I neither own an office nor work at an office. What does this story have to do with my life, with this commentary?

There's only one story. I can't help
Telling it. I might keep silent.
But silence tells the same story.

There is another story I wished to quote:

1.
It was regarded as a chore, sheer drudgery, by most of the population so that people shirked it and winced at the very idea of becoming involved in it. The people had no wish to mention it. And when a grown-up individual had to do so for the sake of argument, he did it in passing, always referring to it as "it", as if by avoiding its name one might avoid it altogether.
Soon no one could recall its name. The word itself disappeared from conversations and dictionaries. The job was executed to satisfy the required conditions, but no one knew what kind of job it was.
"It's just a job," people said. "It's a chore, drudgery. It's 'it'. That's 'it'. That's that." And they shook their heads.

2.
Soon the job itself disappeared, leaving a gap in the affairs of the world. And the gap widened as the job and its concomitant circumstances receded further and further into the past. And something was swallowed by this gap which resembled at present an open mouth.
The people called this mouth the "black hole" and began to throw into it whatever seemed useless and redundant. They did not notice at first that the mouth swallowed only what was destined to be swallowed.

3.
The people roamed underground in search of a "white hole" through which they hoped to enter their former lives. They took to composing poems and novels in which the "white hole" was described meticulously and with great gusto. "Ulysses found the white hole," said one of the writers who, accordingly, set out to re-write *Ulysses*.
The "black hole" was enlarged and dubbed the "motorway of God".

Was I entranced by the "motorway of God"? Actually it is a winding path in a dark forest. And you are likely to break your fingers along this path. "Dante leaves us with another of his little mysteries," writes Hollander. "What was the 'hymn' that he heard sung but could not understand, except to know that it is not sung on earth?" There are lots of mysteries in the *Commedia*. It is not a contemporary novel where everything is as clear as day. (The *Commedia* is as clear as Russian mud.)

Reference was made to the sense of mystery which envelops the whole text of the *Gandavyûha* as one of it striking characteristics…The fundamental insight of the *Gandavyûha* is known as Interpenetration. It is, philosophically speaking, a thought somewhat similar to the Hegelian conception of concrete-universals. Each individual reality, besides being itself, reflects in it something of the universal, and at the same time it is itself because of other individuals. A system of perfect relationship exists among individual existences and also between individuals and universals, between particular objects and general ideas. This perfect network of mutual relations has received at the hand of the Mahâyâna philosopher the technical name of Interpenetration.
When the Empress Tsê-t'ien of T'ang felt it difficult to grasp the meaning of Interpenetration, Fa-tsang, the great master of the Avatamsaka school of Buddhism illustrated it in the following way. He had first a candle lighted, and then had mirrors placed encircling it on all sides. The central light reflected itself in every one of the mirrors, and every one of these reflected lights was reflected again in every mirror, so that there was a perfect interplay of lights, that is, of concrete-universals. This is said to have enlightened the mind of the Empress.
(D. T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism, third series*)

"Tre specchi prenderai; e i due rimovi
  da te d'un modo, e l'altro, più rimosso,
  tr'ambo li primi li occhi tuoi ritrovi.
Rivolto ad essi, fa che dopo il dosso
  ti stea un lume che i tre specchi accenda
  e torni a te da tutti ripercosso.
Ben che nel quanto tanto non si stenda
  la vista più lontana, lì vedrai
  come convien ch'igualmente risplenda."
"You shall take three mirrors, and set two of them equally remote from you, and let the other, even more remote, meet your eyes between the first two. Turning towards them, cause a light to be placed behind your back which may shine in the three mirrors and return to you reflected from all three. Although the more distant image may not reach you so great in quantity, you will there see it must needs be of equal brightness with the others."
(The *Paradiso*, Canto II)

Everything moves and ascends. Whatever you do is ascension. Even your descents are ascensions in disguise. Inwardly they are ascensions. Kabbalath is journey-oriented. Your thought should be modelled on your steps, on your journey up. Every new stage of your journey requires a new seal. By means of this seal the wayfarer seals himself so as not to be drawn into the fire, into the whirlwind and thunderstorm which are around God. Marc-Alain Ouaknin quotes Gershom Scholem in his book

Mysteries of the Kabbalath. Do not ask your way, otherwise you will never lose your way. Thus spoke the Kabbalists.

A Chinese person might say,
"If you don't lose your way, you'll never
Find yourself." So
You must lose something
Now and then; what's more, you must
Lose yourself.

Apart from one human being
There's nothing in the world.
He's everything. (He's also she.)
A journey makes sense only if you
Discover something on the way.
Time is a lost-and-found office.

Oh Bëatrice, dolce guida e cara!
  Ella mi disse: "Quel che ti sobranza
  è virtù da cui nulla si ripara.
Quivi è la sapïenza e la possanza
  ch'aprì le strade tra 'l cielo e la terra,
  onde fu già sì lunga disïanza."
O Beatrice, sweet guide and dear! She said to me, "That which overcomes you is power against which naught defends itself. Therein are the wisdom and the power that opened the roads between Heaven and earth, for which of old there was such long desire."
(The *Paradiso*, Canto XXIII)

The attempts to prove that God exists would perhaps seem superfluous to some, namely those who assert that it is self-evident that God exists, so much so that the contrary cannot be thought. In this case it cannot be demonstrated that God exists. Their position seems to follow from these considerations.
Those things are said to be self-evident which are known as soon as their terms are understood. For example, when it is known what a whole is and what a part is, it is immediately known that every whole is greater than its part. But to say that God exists is like that. For by the term "God" we understand something than which nothing greater can be thought. This is formed in the mind of one who bears and understands the term "God", and thus that God exists must be at least in his mind. But it cannot be in his mind alone, since what is in the mind and in reality is greater than that which is in the mind alone. But that nothing is greater than God is shown by the word itself. It follows then that God exists is self-evident, manifest from the very meaning of the term.
Again, it can be thought that there is something that cannot be thought not to exist. And this is manifestly greater than that which can be thought not to be. Thus, something could be thought to be greater than God, if he could be thought not to be, which is against the very meaning of the term. It follows that it is self-evident that God exists.
Again, those propositions are most known in which a thing is predicated of itself, such as, "Man is man," or of which the predicate enters into the definition of the subject, such as, "Man is animal." But in God, in a way beyond all other things, as will be shown below, his existence is his essence. It is as if the same answer were given to the questions "What is he?" and "Is he?" Therefore when it is said that God exists, either the predicate is the same as the subject or it is included in the definition of the subject. And thus to say that God exists is self-evident.

Moreover, things known naturally are known in themselves, for they are not known by an inquiry of reason. But that God exists is naturally known, since man's desire naturally tends to God as to his ultimate end, as will be shown below. Therefore it is self-evident that God exists.
Again, that by which all other things are known must be known of itself. But so it is with God, for just as the light of the sun is the principle of every visual perfection, so the divine light is the principle of all intelligible knowledge, since in him especially is to be found the first intelligible light. Therefore that God exist must be self-evident.
(Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, translated by Ralph McInerny)

Kierkegaard was strict on the subject: the existence
Of God
Should not be proven.
Faith alone can save the world; or
Dostoevsky's beauty. If you believe in God you need no
Proof. And beauty is Paradise—
A road between Heaven and Earth, a rainbow.

It is not necessary that God be known to exist immediately upon knowing that the name God means that than which nothing greater can be thought, since many of the ancients held that this world is God. Nor from the meanings of the name God that Damascene gives does anything of this kind follow. Even if everyone granted that the name God means that than which nothing greater can be thought, it is not necessary that that than which nothing greater can be thought should exist in reality. The things and the meaning of the name must be given in the same way. From the fact that the mind conceives what is meant by the name God, it follows only that God is in the intellect. It is not necessary that that than which nothing greater can be thought exist anywhere but in the intellect; it does not follow that in reality there exists that than which nothing greater can be thought. There is nothing absurd in denying that God exists. Nor is it absurd to hold that there can be something greater than whatever be given, in thought or reality, unless one already concedes that that than which nothing greater can be thought exists in reality.
Nor is it necessary, as the second argument proposes, that something greater than God can be thought if he can be thought not to exist. For he can be thought not to exist, not from any imperfection or uncertainty of his existence, since his existence is in itself most manifest, but because of the weakness of our intellect, which cannot intuit him in himself but can know him only from his effects and thus is led to knowledge of his existence by reasoning.
Thus the third argument too is refuted, for just as it is self-evident to us that the whole is greater than its part, so to those seeing the divine essence it is of itself most known that God exists because his essence is his existence. But because we cannot see his essence, we come to know of his existence from his effects and not in itself.
And the response to the fourth argument is also evident. For a man naturally knows God in the way he naturally desires him, but he naturally desires God insofar as he naturally desires happiness, which is a kind of likeness of the divine goodness. For this, it is not necessary that God himself be naturally known to men, but a likeness of him. For it is from his likeness, discovered in his effects, that we come to knowledge of God through reasoning.
The response to the fifth argument is also easily seen. For God is indeed that by which all things are known, not that other things are known only if he is known, as happens in the case of self-evident principles, but because all knowledge is caused in us by him.
(Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*)

Why did Dante let Virgil enter the *Purgatorio*, the realm of hope? Hope is Paradise. Did he want to tease or torture him? Virgil was *sent* to Dante and his journey did not depend on his young colleague's inspiration.

The verse of the Evangelist ends thus: "And the Virgin's name was Mary." Let us say a few words upon this name also. The word Mary means "Star of the Sea", which seems to have a wonderful fitness to the Virgin Mother. For she is fitly compared to a star; for just as a star sends forth its ray without injury to itself, so the Virgin, remaining a virgin, brought forth her Son. The ray does not diminish the clearness of the star, nor the Son of the Virgin her virginity. She is even that noble star risen out of Jacob, whose ray enlightens the whole world, whose splendour both shines in the Heavens and penetrates into Hell: and as it traverses the lands, it causes minds to glow with virtues more than bodies with heat, while vices it burns up and consumes. She, I say, is that beautiful and admirable star, raised of necessity above this great and spacious sea of life, shining with virtues and affording an illustrious example. Whosoever thou art who knowest thyself to be tossed about among the storms and tempests of this troubled world rather than to be walking peacefully upon the shore, turn not thine eyes away from the shining of this star if thou wouldst not be overwhelmed with the tempest. If the winds of temptation arise, if you are driving upon the rocks of tribulation, look to the star, invoke Mary. If you are tossed upon the waves of pride, of ambition, of envy, or rivalry, look to the star, invoke Mary. If wrath, avarice, temptations of the flesh assail the frail skiff of your mind, look to Mary. If you are troubled by the greatness of your crimes, confessed by the foulness of your conscience, and desperate with the horror of judgement, you feel yourself drawn into the depth of sorrow and into the abyss of despair; in dangers, in difficulties, in perplexities, invoke and think of Mary.
(St Bernard of Clairvaux, from a *Sermon on the Virgin Mary*)

Once in Switzerland I saw the stars:
I don't look up very
Often.

Nor do I look down.

Every song is a star,
Every woman Mary.

You burn my eyes,
My sins.

You haven't burnt my poem.

Casella is singing and all, Dante, Virgil, the holy and human souls, are listening in joy; there is a kind of lingering. The imagination has been suspended while the poets moved on the island, but now it lingers, it delays merely on the beauty. All the fair false schools that rear themselves on the notion that Beauty is Truth—uninvestigated Beauty and undiscovered Truth—are rebuked in that delay, a kind (even here!) of that delay which was Francesca.
(Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice*)

I spoke of Casella many times, didn't I? I also sang in my room, in my Purgatory. And I heard myself.

And I lingered.

Will I ever sing again? What's a song? Is it
Just a song, a few sounds—
The music Nietzsche wished to hear

In prose? Is it a poem,
Not a novel?
This poem perhaps. No,
This poem doesn't sing. Why should it? Let me just
Utter a few words
Or let me sing another song, a hymn
Unknown on earth. Let me
Listen to such a hymn. Why should I
Write it?
It's already been written.

Having shown that there is a first being that we call God, we must investigate his characteristics.
The way of remotion [or negation] is chiefly to be used in the consideration of the divine substance since the divine substance exceeds by its immensity every form that our intellect can attain, and thus we cannot apprehend it by knowing what it is. But we have knowledge of a sort of it by knowing what it is not. We come closer to knowledge of it insofar as we are able with our intellect to remove more things from it. We know anything more perfectly when we grasp more fully its differences from others, for each thing has its proper existence distinct from that of all other things. Hence in things whose definitions we know, we first place a thing in a genus, by which we know generally what it is, and afterwards add differences by which it is distinguished from other things, and thus complete knowledge of the substance of the thing is achieved.
But because in considering the divine substance we cannot grasp what it is as a genus nor its distinction from other things by affirmative differences, we must grasp it by negative differences. For just as a positive difference contracts a thing, we approach nearer to the complete designation of the thing insofar as more distinctions are made. So too when we say that God is not an accident, he is thereby distinguished from all accidents, and then if we add that he is not a body, we distinguish him also from some substances, and thus by such negations he is distinguished in an orderly way from everything that is other than himself. His substance will be properly thought of when it is known to be distinct from everything, but this will not be perfect knowledge, because what he is in himself will not be known.
(Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*)

CHAPTER 33

"E se tu ricordar non te ne puoi,"
  sorridendo rispuose, "or ti rammenta
  come bevesti di Letè ancoi;
e sa dal fummo foco s'argomenta,
  cotesta oblivïon chiaro conchiude
  colpa ne la tua voglia altrove attenta.
Veramente oramai saranno nude
  le mie parole, quanto converrassi
  quelle scovrire a la tua vista rude."
"And if you cannot remember it," smiling she replied, "bethink you now how you have drunk of Lethe this very day; and if from smoke fire is argued, this forgetfulness clearly proves fault in your will elsewhere intent. But henceforth my words shall be as simple as may be needful to make them plain to your rude sight."
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto XXXIII)

Flowers, flowers. Why should I write about them? They exist, don't they? They exist without me. They do not need me. Nothing needs me. Or everything needs me. Who knows? There is one answer to all questions. There is one journey.

I am sitting in my room. I am not sitting in my room. I am alone. I am not alone. This is not a figure of speech. It is a figure of Beatrice.

Volodya said I should not finish this commentary. "Don't *write* it. Leave a few blank pages at the end."

"Three pages?" I asked.

"Nine," he answered.

It should be said therefore that the beautiful and good are indeed the same in subject, since they are founded on the same thing, namely, form, and because of this the good is praised as beauty is. But they differ in notion. For good properly looks to appetite, for the good is that which all things desire. And so it has the note of end, for appetite is like a movement towards the thing. But beauty looks to the cognitive power, for things are called beautiful which when seen please. Hence beauty consists of fitting proportion, for sense takes pleasure in things duly proportioned, as in things similar to itself, for sense is a kind of reason, as is every knowing power. And since knowledge comes about through assimilation, and similitude looks to form, the beautiful properly pertains to the notion of formal causality.
(Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*)

This is a white page, a white screen. I should cover it with words. He did. He had many *white* pages in front of him. Faith. Colours are important, aren't they? Let us get rid of words. We might keep some of them: "Pink, blue and orange colours merged in the evening sky." He did not get rid of words.

"Leva la testa e fa che t'assicuri:
  ché ciò che vien qua sù del mortal mondo,
  convien ch'ai nostri raggi si maturi."
"Lift up your head and see that you reassure yourself, for that which comes up here from the mortal world must be ripened in our beams."

(The *Paradiso*, Canto XXV)

He did get rid of words in the end.

Happiness is a good of man, but of this there are three kinds: external goods, goods of the body and goods of the soul. But happiness does not consist of external goods, nor in goods of the body, as has been shown above; therefore, it consists of goods of the soul.
Moreover, we love the one for the sake of whom we desire some good more than we love that good, just as we love the friend for whom we seek money more than the money. But everyone loves the good for himself. Therefore he loves himself more than all other goods. But happiness is especially loved, which is evident from this that all other things are loved and desired for its sake. Therefore happiness consists of some good of man himself, but not in goods of the body; therefore, in goods of the soul.
Moreover, perfection is something of the thing perfected. But happiness is a perfection of man, therefore happiness is something of man. But it is not something of body, as has been shown. Therefore happiness is something of soul and thus consists of goods of the soul.
(Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*)

One, two, three. Numbers are more reliable than words.

La donna mia, che mi vedëa in cura
  forte sospeso, disse: "Da quel punto
  depende il cielo e tutta la natura.
Mira qel cerchio che più li è congiunto;
  e sappi che 'l suo muovere è sì tosto
  per l'affocato amore ond' elli è punto."
My lady, who saw me eager and in great suspense, said, "On that point the heavens and all nature are dependent. Look on that circle which is most conjoined to it, and know that its motion is so swift because of the burning love whereby it is spurred."
(The *Paradiso*, Canto XXVIII)

Any creature's ultimate end lies in assimilation to God. But man is assimilated to God more by practical intellect, which is the cause of the things understood, than by speculative intellect, whose knowledge is drawn from things. Therefore man's happiness lies in the activity of practical intellect rather than in that of speculative intellect.
Moreover, happiness is the perfect good of man. But practical intellect is ordered to the good more than speculative intellect, which is ordered to the true. Hence we are called good thanks to the perfection of practical intellect, not that of speculative intellect, thanks to which we are called knowing or understanding. Therefore man's happiness lies rather in the act of practical than of speculative intellect.
Moreover, happiness is a good of man himself. But speculative intellect is occupied rather with things beyond man, whereas practical intellect is occupied with what pertains to man himself, such as his activities and passions. Therefore man's happiness lies rather in the activity of practical than of speculative intellect.
(Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*)

I woke up at 7. 29 a.m.

"Quel dolce pome che per tanti rami

cercando va la cura de' mortali,
oggi porrà in pace le tue fami."
Virgilio inverso me queste cotali
parole usò; e mai non furo strenne
che fosser di piacere a queste iguali.
Tanto voler sopra voler mi venne
de l'esser sù, ch'ad ogne passo poi
al volo mi sentia crescer le penne.

"That sweet fruit which the care of mortals goes seeking on so many branches, this day shall give your hungerings peace." Such were Virgil's words to me, and never were there gifts that could be equal in pleasure to these. Such wish upon wish came to me to be above, that at every step thereafter I felt my feathers growing for the flight.
(The *Purgatorio*, Canto XXVII)

The last day, the last day. What to do with the rest of my life? In a few hours I shall call my friends, all of them. And then I shall go to bed and sleep until doomsday.

Adoro te devolte, latens Deitas,
quae sub bis figuris vere latitas.
Tibi se cor meum totum subicit,
quia te contemplans totum deficit.

Visus, gustus, tactus in the fallitur;
sed auditu solo tuto creditur.
Credo quicquid dixit Dei Filius:
nil boc Veritatis verbo verius.

"*Boc*" sounds like "*Bog*"—God in Russian. I wish I could write in another language. But all languages speak only of God, don't they? There is only one word in the world. What the difference between the world and this word? Just one letter—L. What does this letter contain? What does it bring to the world? This letter makes the world slightly bigger than the word. This letter does not belong to the word. Does our suffering originate in this letter? Is it the Devil? The difference between the *Commedia* and my book may consist in one letter only. Which letter is it? Do I live in the letter L? Is my room situated in the word or in the letter L? Am I estranged from the word? Am I rejected by the word? I will not get rid of the word. But does my will have a say in the matter?

It should be said that, as has been established, two things are required for happiness, one that is the essence of happiness, another that is as an accident of it, namely the pleasure joined to it. Therefore, I say that, with respect to what happiness essentially is, it is impossible that it consists in an act of will. For it is manifest from the foregoing that happiness is the achievement of the ultimate end. The attainment of the end does not consist in the act of will itself. For the will is borne towards the end, which is absent when it desires it, present when it rests in and takes pleasure in it. But it is obvious that the desire for the end is not the achievement of the end but a movement towards the end. But pleasure

comes to the will because the end is present, but not conversely: a thing is not made present because the will delights in it.
Therefore it is necessary that there be something other than the act of will by which the end comes to be present to the one willing. And this appears clearly in sensible ends. For if one got money by an act of will, straight off the desirer would get money by willing to have it. But at the beginning it is absent, and he gets it when he grasps it with his hand or some such thing, and then he delights in the money had. So too it happens with the intelligible good, for from the beginning we will to attain the intelligible end and we achieve it by making it present to us by an act of intellect, and then the delighted will rests in the end attained. Therefore the essence of happiness consists in act of intellect, but the pleasure following on happiness pertains to will, as Augustine says in *Confessions* 10.25 that happiness is joy in the truth, because that joy is the consummation of happiness.

The word is a white page. But with the passing of the years a white page is bound to grow yellowish. What does this mean? *Page blanche*. I shall always say it in French. My page will always be white. The joy of the white page. The truth of the white page. The white page shall not reject me.

The true is the good of intellect, as the Philosopher says in Ethics 6.2. Hence, anything is called true with reference to intellect. Words are referred to the intellect as signs and to things as that of which concepts are likenesses. But we should note that some things are referred to intellect in two ways. In one way, as measure to the measured, and in this way natural things are referred to the human speculative intellect. So the intellect is called true insofar as it is conformed to the thing, and false insofar as it is discordant from the thing. The natural thing is not called true with reference to our intellect, as some ancient natural philosophers held, thinking the truth of things to lie only in this, that they were seen, on that basis contradictories would be simultaneously true, because there are different opinions about contradictories. Some things are called true or false with reference to our intellect, not essentially or formally, but causally, insofar as they are apt to cause a true or false estimate of themselves. In this way gold is called true or false. But things are compared to intellect in another way, as measured to their measure, as is clear in practical intellect, which is the cause of things. Hence the work of the artisan is called true insofar as it attains to the notion of art and false insofar as it fails to.
(Thomas Aquinas, *How Words Mean. Exposition of* On Interpretation)

The work of the artisan. I did it. I am not likely to die within three hours. I will not go out. I will stay in my room. What can happen to me here? Could I trip over my books and fall on the television set, crushing my brain into a fine powder? I cannot sit in front of my computer for three hours. I must leave it now and then. All right. I will not budge from where I am sitting. The books I need are within my reach. Could I fall from my chair when reaching for these books? Could my heart stop beating on its own initiative? My heart does not know I am about to finish the work of my life. My heart might think I am about to finish my life. And it might overtake me on the path of my life. It might end the journey before I finish the book. Let me live for another three hours, I beg of you! I know, I have often maltreated you. Let bygones be bygones! Let me hold out for another three hours. Help me!

Anything contrary to a natural inclination is a sin, because it is contrary to a law of nature. Now everything has a natural inclination to accomplish an action commensurate with its power, as is evident in all natural things, animate or inanimate. Now just as presumption makes a man exceed what

is proportionate to his power, by striving to do more than he can, so pusillanimity makes a man fall short of what is proportionate to his power.
(Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*)

I am presumptuous. *Mea culpa*. In the domain of art one must not be pusillanimous.

Just a few words. Or the word. But the word has been uttered. All I have to do is listen to the sound of the word, to its echo. Let me listen to it. How long will it resound in my room, in my life? Let me listen to it. All depends on how I listen to it.

Dante sees before him the Earthly Paradise, which crowns the Mount, and sets out to explore "the divine forest". The grass is full of flowers and birds sing on the boughs. He is stopped by the stream of Lethe and on the farther side of it perceives a lady gathering flowers and singing. She is Matelda (as we learn from Canto XXXIII), a lady generally identified with a Countess of Tuscany (1046-1115), supporter of Pope Gregory VII, but here representing the active life and the guide of Dante towards Beatrice (the contemplative life). Dante asks her to explain how it is that wind blows and water runs at a height where, according to Statius, there is no disturbance and no rain. She satisfies his curiosity and tells him how the water is supernaturally constant and replenished, pouring from a fountain which on one side is called Lethe and has the property of obliterating the memory of sin, and on the other Eünoè, which restores the memory of good deeds. Here, she adds, was the abode of man in his state of innocency.

"O luce, o gloria de la gente umana,
  che acqua è questa che qui si dispiega
  da un principio e sé da sé lontana?"
Per cotal priego detto mi fu: "priega
  Matelda che 'l ti dica." E qui rispuose,
  come fa chi da colpa si dislega,
la bella donna: "Questo e altre cose
  dette li son per me; e son sicura
  che l'acqua di Letè non gliel nascose."
E Bëatrice: "Forse maggior cura,
  che spesse volte la memoria priva,
  fatt' ha la mente sua ne li occhi oscura.
Ma vedi Eünoè che là diriva:
  menalo ad esso, e come tu se' usa,
  la tramortita sua virtù ravviva."
Come anima gentil, che non fa scusa,
  ma fa sua voglia de la voglia altrui
  tosto che è per segno fuor dischiusa;
così, poi che da essa preso fui,
  la bella donna mossesi, e a Stazio
  donnescamente disse: "Vien con lui."
S'io avessi, lettor, più lungo spazio
  da scrivere, i' pur cantere' in parte
  lo doce ber che mai non m'avria sazio;
ma perché piene son tutte le carte
  ordite a questa cantica seconda,

non mi lascia più ir lo fren de l'arte.
Io ritornai da la santissima onda
rifatto sì come piante novelle
rinovellate di novella fronda,
puro e disposto a salire a le stelle.

"O light, O glory of the human race, what water is this that pours here from one source and from itself withdraws itself?" To my question she replied, "Ask Matelda to tell you." And here the beautiful lady answered, as one freeing herself from blame, "This and other things I have told him, and I am certain that Lethe's water did not hide it from him."

And Beatrice, "Perhaps some greater care, which often robs the memory, has darkened the eyes of his mind. But see Eunoe that flows forth there: bring him thereto, and, as you are wont, revive his weakened faculties."

As a gentle spirit that makes no excuse, but makes its will of another's will, as soon as that is disclosed by outward sign, so the fair lady, after I was taken by her, moved on, and with womanly grace said to Statius, "Come with him."

If, reader, I had greater space for writing, I would yet partly sing the sweet draught which never would have sated me; but since all the pages ordained for this second canticle are filled, the curb of art lets me go no further. I came forth from the most holy waves, renovated even as new trees renewed with new foliage, pure and ready to rise to the stars.

(The *Purgatorio*, Canto XXX)