

**VALERY ALEFF**

**THE FLYING DUTCHMAN**

## **PART ONE**

## THE CURSE

But for the legend immortalised by Wagner, nobody would have recalled the Flying Dutchman because, in the first place, there was nothing to recall except a strange rumour according to which a man was flying in the air mostly at midnight—at the hour when soldiers on guard could see him almost as clearly as once they saw the spirit of Hamlet's father. Whenever off duty, soldiers make up for their 'silent hours' by talking about spirits and the way the latter move around, dressed like kings, tramps or fops. No wonder that the Flying Dutchman became a household name in past centuries. Only recently was he replaced by flying saucers that inflamed human feelings with the advent of aeroplanes, none of which actually resembled a saucer. It is true that some aeroplanes looked like the Flying Dutchman whose prostrate body was often seen in the midnight sky, his arms outspread, his feet turning this way and that to regulate the itinerary of the flight. But in those times people thought about the Flying Dutchman no more; at least they had already deprived him of his gift for successfully coping with the force of gravity. Those who still recalled him were convinced that he was just a captain under whose command an insolent, though almost invisible, crew guided a ship through the waters, now and then dropping anchor within a stone's throw of a city where a number of maidens were dreaming about their future husbands. And only one of them was supposed to dream about an immortal wanderer who, unlike any human being, did not enjoy his capacity for surviving a most destructive cataclysm, hoping that death would sooner or later put an end to his aimless life.

A philosopher might point out that every life is aimless unless one devotes it to studying philosophy about which the greater part of humankind knows nothing or next to nothing. The Flying Dutchman studied philosophy and would have boasted about his friendship with Spinoza, had he ever felt like boasting about anything. So nothing remains of his conversations with Spinoza except the fact that many people took him for the Wandering Jew whenever he stood by the philosopher's side. They *were* astonished at seeing him fly overhead after a fruitful, drawn-out discussion, but hastily they concluded that the Wandering Jew did not have to spend his endless life on earth which, in the long run, might have grown tired of him. 'So he flies above the earth, under the canopy of heaven,' they said to each other, nodding at Spinoza who had been left alone in the streets of Amsterdam where he meditated upon eternity. Occasionally the Flying Dutchman interfered with such meditations to tarnish the immaculate clarity of the philosopher's reasoning.

'Your extensive parts died a long time ago,' said Spinoza.

'And what about my legs and arms? Aren't they my extensive parts? They're not inside my body, are they?' And the Flying Dutchman executed a Russian sailor's dance during which the performer's legs and arms are used with such panache that no doubt may remain as to their existence.

'You're a spirit, I presume. But you must have understood how your extensive parts are related to those of other people and to nature in general. The relationship you thus established with the outside world is eternal so you continue to wander around Amsterdam.'

‘This is just a flying visit,’ the Dutchman pointed out.

‘Things are real in relation to a particular time and place, but when our mind conceives them from the standpoint of eternity we realise they’re necessary. In this and other respects you’re necessary—through your damnation humanity is bound to catch a glimpse of eternity and thereby establish a relationship with it. Only eternity and necessity lead us to God.’

‘Incidentally, I’ve never been able to understand how *her* extensive parts are related to mine—even during our lovemaking.’

‘Do you still make love to her?’ inquired Spinoza, dying to find out whether the Dutchman’s beloved was also eternal, if only in parts.

‘Of course not. But I dream of her almost every night. And my dreams are so tangible I can’t help feeling I have always held her in my arms.’

‘You killed her, didn’t you?’ asked Spinoza.

Judging from Spinoza’s supposition, the version of the Dutchman’s legend recounted in the famous film *Pandora* was already known in the seventeenth century. Stung and outraged by his wife’s infidelity, a Dutchman kills her and is consequently brought before a severe judge who loses no time in sending the prisoner to the gallows. In his final speech the latter curses everybody right down to God and proclaims he would find no woman faithful and fair even if allowed to sail to the ‘edge of doomsday’. (Traditionally sailors view time in terms of an ocean traversed by a ship.) ‘I thought she was the Madonna!’ he shouts. The argument is trite and would have attracted nobody’s attention, but for a peculiar fate allotted to the prisoner who leaves the prison cell unharmed. Very few people would regard such a fate as a punishment: only those who are sick in body or mind are impatient to bid this world farewell.

Why didn’t the Dutchman turn his life into an endless cruise, enjoying the sights of unknown cities and centuries, seducing fair and unfaithful women, forgetting about the Madonna and the Immaculate Conception? Why should a man care about his wife’s unfaithfulness in the boundless Kingdom of Eternity?

But, prior to the fateful night, the Almighty was not likely to grant him permission to sail as far as the ‘edge of doomsday’—the privilege reserved for the blasphemous, for those who challenge the divine order of the universe. And now he was doomed to make the wrong decision which, luckily for him, could not have been put into action: he was not allowed to kill himself. A dagger he picked up in desperation dropped from his hand instead of piercing his heart which was anxious to receive a mortal wound, weary as it was of beating inside an excommunicated body. As he looked at the dagger lying by a rickety chest of drawers he was trying to channel his thoughts towards a more efficient act of suicide. Slowly the ancient Romans and their habits emerged from the ocean of his unconscious. He went to his bathroom—or to what passed for such in the seventeenth century—and, having grasped a razor, slit his wrists as if to check the colour of his blood. ‘Is my blood red as usual? Hasn’t it become water? Am I not a part of the ocean around which I’ll wander endlessly?’ He did not ask himself these

questions which might have adjourned the game of life and death he was playing with such obstinacy and to no purpose: he was bound to lose.

His blood was leaving his veins so eagerly that for a moment he thought his life would end then and there without exposing him to the torture of immortality. Already his legs were covered with his blood that continued to flow as if its purpose was to bathe his entire body lying in a tub of sorts. Yet he had no intention of taking a bloodbath or any bath for that matter; tears filled his eyes so that, inadvertently, he added a few quasi-transparent drops to the ocean of blood where he floated in the hope of drowning. Indeed, having failed to kill himself like a Roman, like a romantic poet, he decided to drown in his own blood which had almost reached the ceiling of the bathroom. It is no easy task to drown if you know how to swim and the Flying Dutchman, in addition to his flying exploits, was an excellent swimmer, a potential Olympic champion.

For a while he swam in his own blood that continued to take leave of his veins, inundating the house he had rented for the purpose of committing a *private* suicide; he was loath to demonstrate his aversion to life in public. One by one, he rejected all kinds of suicide linked to public places: jumping from a roof, throwing oneself under the wheels of a carriage, looking for a murderer in the dead of night.

The Dutchman's blood began to ooze from his house that looked like a huge animal suffering from a mortal wound. 'Murder!' shouted a passer-by, whereupon the immortal man realised he was in danger of exposure. After a few unsuccessful dives he opened a window and found himself outdoors where a dozen onlookers greeted him with screams and swoons.

Contrary to scholarly opinion, the immortality decried by Swift and Borges was not at the root of the many suicides the Dutchman is justly renowned for: he heard a voice that belatedly informed him of his wife's innocence and purity. Apparently she was kind with others on account of her gentle nature, echoing the poem where Browning describes the jealousy of a duke who murdered his wife for the smiles and other signs of attention she had showered on his guests. Upon hearing the information conveyed by the voice the Dutchman shouted, 'I killed an innocent creature! I killed the Madonna! I'm cursed! I might have been happy with her eternally! I would have sailed with her to the edge of doomsday! Only death can deliver me from my torments! Why should I wait until doomsday? Where's my dagger? Ah, a power greater than my own is holding my arm! Well, I may try and slit my wrists with a penknife!'

The Dutchman's naked body was covered with blood from head to foot. 'The king is naked!' shouted someone.

'He's not a king, is he? Looks like a blood sausage,' said another onlooker.

'He must have killed his wife,' said yet another onlooker.

The Flying Dutchman was arrested, but once again the door of his prison cell flew open and, taking his cue from the door, the prisoner flew away, doing justice to his nickname and the rumours that had given rise to his renown. Like a bird of prey he moved in the air, looking down as if to choose

a victim destined to appease his hunger during a forthcoming meal. In the afternoon he spotted a few women among whom he might have found his future wife had he been bent on founding another family and committing another murder. ‘One murder is enough,’ he said to himself several times in a row. ‘And no woman can be faithful for a long stretch of time,’ he added after a pause. ‘In their kingdom time is an elastic concept.’

‘You’d need a companion for eternity,’ said the voice which had previously let him on the secret of his wife’s chastity.

‘No woman can be faithful eternally,’ answered the Flying Dutchman.

‘What about a dead woman?’ asked the voice. ‘There are no betrayals in the Hereafter.’

‘Do you mean my wife will be faithful to me until doomsday?’

‘Forget about your wife—you’ll never meet her again.’

‘Because I’m not allowed to commit suicide?’

‘Even if you do manage to kill yourself, you won’t meet your wife.’

‘Do I have to murder another woman?’ asked the Dutchman, his voice trembling with emotion.

‘It’s not necessary,’ answered the voice. ‘She must sacrifice her life for you. And stop flying like a bird of prey. Are you worried about your reputation? Your legend is already afoot—several people have seen you in the air. Actually you’re supposed to haunt the waters around the Cape of Good Hope. Didn’t you gamble your salvation on a rash pledge to round the Cape during a storm?’

‘I didn’t. I just killed my wife and cursed the Almighty.’

‘Sorry. There are so many Flying Dutchmen around. You’re just one of them. Or you’re them, all of them—in the Kingdom of Eternity one enjoys many lives at once. Anyway you shouldn’t fly. Why not join your crew? Your subordinates are prepared to sail with you to the edge of doomsday.’

So the Flying Dutchman flew towards his ship which waited for him like a faithful wife or just a woman whose attachment to a man she loves is so unconditional she swears to sacrifice her life for him. Having concluded his flight, he landed on the deck where two sailors saluted him, their faces glowing with excitement. Soon other sailors turned up and in the evening the whole ship was swarming with people dressed like astronauts. ‘What does it mean?’ asked the Dutchman, pointing to one of the uniforms.

‘Aren’t we supposed to fly to the moon, sir?’ answered the sailor to whom the Dutchman had pointed with his cane. (For some reason he was grasping a cane.)

‘No. We’ll haunt the waters around the Cape of Good Hope. What’s this cane for?’ The question was addressed to the voice with which the Dutchman had talked during his flight.

‘It’s a walking stick—to prevent you from flying,’ answered the voice.

‘I don’t like symbols,’ said the Dutchman. He threw the cane overboard and retired to his cabin.

During a sea voyage you may commit suicide by jumping from a mast, provided the mast is high enough to enable you to cross the border of the Hereafter without spending a few months in a hospital. The ship on which the Flying Dutchman was about to begin his endless voyage had two

masts the heights of which seemed to allow one to cross as many borders as necessary and reach at last the abode of peace, wherever it might be located: even hell is better than the life of some individuals. The Dutchman was of their number, and as he sank into an armchair his thoughts concentrated on the top of his favourite mast where a tiny flag revealed the origin of the ship and her master. Meanwhile the crew had grown invisible; nobody was to obtrude upon the privacy of the captain's suicide, upon the tragic outcome of his wretched existence. Reverting to the halcyon days of his youth—he used to climb this mast faster than other sailors—he made his upward journey in no time and enthusiastically flung his body in the direction of the deck, counting on the force of gravity which, however, let him down. Unmindful of the voice's prescription, for a while he flew in circles over the top of the mast and a pair of lovers necking on the shore distinctly heard another blasphemy addressed to God Who, unlike those lovers, understood it: the Almighty and His ministers have an impressive command of the Dutch language.

What exactly did the prisoner say during the trial? He did his best to remember his own words which came back to him reluctantly, as if anxious to spare his sensitive psyche. 'A man might have an immortal life and wander *eternally* over all the oceans of the world—' Did he say eternally or just a hundred years? 'Why didn't I say fifty years, ten years, one year? Why did I speak of an immortal life? A man might wander over all the oceans of the world for the space of five years—'

'A man might wander over all the oceans of the world for the space of five years—' he shouted.

'No need to shout,' said the voice.

'Did I say *eternally*? Why did my words come true? Why did you hear *these* words of mine? I've uttered so many words since my babyhood. To no avail. No one ever hears my words. Why did you single out this remark?'

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of April the Flying Dutchman embarked upon his eternal adventure.

## HOW TO COPE WITH IMMORTALITY

Lying in his bed, the immortal man allowed a few astronomical numbers to dance in his brain, counting the years he was to spend on earth in search of a faithful maiden. He lulled himself to sleep and, upon awakening, heard his stomach rumble with hunger—a hopeful symptom. ‘Why not go on hunger strike?’ he asked himself. ‘Thirst strike is even more effective, I suppose.’

He neither ate nor drank for many days, but eventually gave up this form of protest in favour of a sumptuous meal which had been cooked by an invisible chef brought to his ship from France. At that point the Dutchman realised he could enjoy himself even in the Kingdom of Eternity despite the absence of faithful wives and fair teenagers who were unavailable on his ship maltreating the waters around the Cape of Good Hope. For a hundred years he continued to indulge his passion for dainty dishes in his cabin and also on the deck where a beautiful garden bade him welcome as soon as he ventured outdoors. ‘Do I need the earth?’ he asked himself. ‘I’ve got everything here.’

But he was still on earth where he had killed his wife and made a few unsuccessful attempts to commit suicide in order to throw off the yoke of immortality. ‘Didn’t Spinoza tell me that immortality wasn’t synonymous with eternity?’ he asked himself. ‘Immortality concerns the human soul, doesn’t it? It’s born before us and goes on living after our death. But eternity is here and now. I feel it, I experience it, I experiment with it. How to get rid of it? I’ve got no soul.’

At dinner he had a few truffle-impregnated dishes and fell asleep, hoping he would never open his eyes again. He did open his eyes and saw his cabin and the only book his library offered him: *Praise of Folly*. After removing the book from a shelf he put it on his writing desk where he had previously deposited three missives to the Almighty Whose answer he had not received, the post being more sluggish than humans. Did the book have anything to do with the answer he was waiting for with such impatience? In spite of this supposition he was reluctant to open the book where he was likely to find many thoughts for which there was no room in his head on account of his own thoughts: they did not *cross* his mind any more, staying there as if paralysed or dead. ‘Another symptom of eternity,’ he thought as he shook his head in a vain endeavour to remove his thoughts from it. ‘Easier said than done,’ he said. ‘I can easily remove a book from a shelf, but my thoughts are different. They remain on their shelves as if glued to them. Why add another book to these books of mine?’

Yet he finally opened *Praise of Folly* and read the following excerpt: ‘Now suppose someone could look down on the life of a man from a great height, as the poets say Jove does, how many disasters would he see in store for it! Man’s birth is painful and sordid, his upbringing wearisome, his childhood fraught with dangers, and his youth hard-won with toil. Old age is a burden and death a harsh necessity: armies of disease close their ranks around him, misfortunes lie in wait.’ Only by opening a book at random can one light upon such a relevant description. The Dutchman was looking at himself from a great height: a man in his early forties, an armchair, a book. ‘And however long I may look at this man, he’ll always sit in this armchair,’ he thought. Nothing enlivens your existence in

the Kingdom of Eternity, for all your efforts to introduce a different nuance into your daily routine, your monotonous, humdrum repetition of the same moment. Only death can differentiate one moment from another because even a voluntary repetition of the same pleasure (or pain) is bound to disappear. This ultimate vacuum endows any copy, however accurate, with a melancholy touch. After all, the captain's garden was very much like his armchair around which no armies could ever close their ranks: even diseases were unknown on his ghostly ship. Of course the captain's childhood *was* fraught with dangers of all kinds. (More and more often he called himself 'captain' as if to shun the fate of the Flying Dutchman: there are a great many innocent, *mortal* captains on earth.) And dangers continued to pursue him even in his maturity, otherwise he would not have murdered his wife, nor cursed the Almighty. 'My own impulsiveness is the greatest danger to which I may expose myself,' he used to murmur. Now even this danger has forsaken him—like all other dangers except that of immortality. Actually it was no longer a danger, a threat, a sword of Damocles hanging over his head; the sword was already in his heart.

No misfortunes were lying in wait for him because they did not have a ghost of a chance of damaging either his body or his mind: this ghost was not permitted to give up the ghost. 'Not every ghost is immortal,' he reflected, unconsciously touching the book—a ghost of Erasmus. 'A ghost may die if a man succeeds in pacifying him. A long time ago I read a book entitled *How to Placate a Ghost*. But I'm not furious, am I? That night I was mad with my wife. Now I'm just mad. Even words begin to repeat themselves. I should resist this baleful repetition by using as many synonyms as possible. Not to repeat "furious". I already thought about it, didn't I? Not to repeat "ghost". I'm real, am I not?'

Many scholars still wonder why the Flying Dutchman did not choose to be bored to death, which would have been another self-slaughter doomed to fail as pathetically as all the others. But, under some conditions, a figure of speech may turn out far more powerful than a dagger or a jump from a twentieth century skyscraper. At that point the Flying Dutchman was already weary of his abortive suicides; in a way, he was bored to death by them and therefore preferred to live in a world where his everlasting life was not questioned so brutally. *Praise of Folly* was the only book he could consult during his unrelenting voyage around the Cape of Good Hope which he had come to hate as intensely as his wife; only, he was not permitted to murder the cape, giving vent to his grievances. What would have happened had he chanced upon this sentence in some tabloid newspaper? 'The leader of the religious sect and thirty of his followers killed themselves in a suicide pact last week.' He might have re-written the sentence, dipping his quill into an old-fashioned inkwell. 'The Flying Dutchman and his beloved killed themselves in a suicide pact hundred years ago.'

He thought about love whenever there was room for another thought in his brain which was wholly usurped by immortality and the ways one can deal with it. How do immortals come into being? Human life may be arrested at the wrong moment when one is too old to enjoy everlasting life whose prerogatives are so alluring that many people devote their leisure hours exclusively to the

contemplation of a fabulous garden where they might sing and dance to their hearts' content. Such a garden was born on the deck of the Flying Dutchman's ship without his consent—a child born out of wedlock. Though bearing no resemblance to the Garden of Eden, it was a garden in its own right and the prisoner liked walking around it or lying in the shade of the 'Tree of Knowledge'. (He was still a prisoner, wasn't he? A prisoner of eternity.)

The Flying Dutchman was immortalised at the age when beauty does not yield its grounds to maturity but lives in harmony with it to the detriment of decay which, deprived of its assets such as wrinkles and memory lapses, dares not take root in a fresh, juvenile body.

In that garden he thought about love more often than in his cabin: gardens are well-disposed to lovers who might exchange their views, vows and kisses as they walk amidst flowers, taking no notice of nature and its beauty. He dreamt of a woman who was to replace his wife in the history of humankind and die with him at short notice. 'We wouldn't be allowed to spend too much time together, would we?' he said out loud. Occasionally he talked to his virtual beloved. 'Do you love me?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Are you prepared to sacrifice your life for me?'

'Yes, I am.'

'Have you ever asked yourself why you should sacrifice your life for me?'

'Never. We met only yesterday.'

From what he heard in the dead of night the Dutchman concluded that he was allowed to live as a mortal among his fellow creatures after seven years of sailing round the Cape. Actually the voice said nothing to the effect of his being able to redeem himself on condition that a woman should be ready to die for him; nor did it drop the slightest hint about this life amidst mortal men, which incidentally might offer him an opportunity to find such a woman. But since the Dutchman was now in the habit of talking to himself after dinner and even during his walks in the garden he might have heard the words he had conveniently attributed to God Himself. So after fifty years of sailing round the Cape he decided to send his ship to Europe and the invisible crew obeyed his command without a murmur or any other noise: as usual they performed their duty silently and efficiently. It is noteworthy that, whenever the captain felt like it, he could materialise this or that member of his crew and even talk to him for a while about his predicament or *Praise of Folly*. After a decade of such talks, however, he grew tired of airing his grievances and literary opinions, letting his crew merge with the seascape. 'I can't kill Eternity by talking to these people,' he said to himself, making sure that nobody heard him. 'I shouldn't offend them. What if I grow weary of silence, of my own voice? I'll keep their voices and ears for a rainy day.'

Once again he opened *Praise of Folly* and began to read it—the ritual he had performed so many times he knew the book by heart and could recite any passage from it, if asked to do so by *another* human being. 'Why should I ask myself to recite anything from it?' he asked himself.

‘Straining my memory wouldn’t kill Eternity. Did I open this book at random? Let the words I’ll alight upon predict my future.’

And he read the following words, ‘But to return to my subject. Take those wild men sprung from rocks and trees—what power brought them together into a civilised society if not flattery?’ What future could he read into these words among which only ‘a civilised society’ and a reunion with it might appeal to his senses lying dormant in the seclusion of his uninterrupted sea voyage? In her memoirs his cousin stubbornly affirms that even in his childhood he was longing to fly away. ‘I used to call him “flying Dutchman”,’ she writes as if deliberately overlooking the fact that everyone calls him ‘flying Dutchman’. ‘Even in his cradle he always reached for the sky,’ she rounds off.

According to other memoirs—they are legion—he was a sociable child and even at that stage of life when some individuals withdraw into themselves to write poems or meditate upon human existence he was fond of his fellow students and often played stupid games with them so as not to be left alone. One of these games was called ‘Immortality’. Participants were supposed to work out how they would live if sentenced to everlasting life by the Almighty or a terrestrial judge invested with supernatural powers. ‘I’d sail around the world in search of an ideal woman,’ said the Flying Dutchman. He lost, ridiculed by other players, but this unexpected defeat did not estrange him from the society to which he now aspired to return at all cost. What put him right off mankind, however, was his wife’s conduct, her exuberant generosity that elicited such a violent response on his part; otherwise he would have remained an honourable member of his club to the very end, playing the games inscribed in the club charter.

His hand grasped the dagger: like any mortal woman, his wife was not immune to death. ‘Her actual death is the best proof of it,’ the Dutchman said to himself as the dagger dropped from his fingers. No longer was he allowed to kill either his wife or himself.

But once upon a time he proved to God rather brilliantly that he was able to make use of His greatest gift to humanity—free will. He meditated upon the notion of free will rather often now and time seemed to fly in those moments instead of hanging over him or lying on his carpet. How often did he trip over this motionless time? ‘No, time doesn’t fly. Neither do I,’ he would say to himself, his eyes glistening with tears. And for weeks on end he would lie on the carpet as if to imitate time which had no need of additional imitators: to some extent, everything imitates time by means of decay, of entropy. ‘But I for one don’t imitate time,’ he thought, ‘except when I lie on my carpet or hang in mid-air.’ Oddly enough, he was allowed to hang in mid-air on condition that he did not attempt to fly.

In the meantime the ship was heading for Europe where no one awaited her despite the popularity of the legend featuring both the Dutchman and his ship. The former was impatient and often shouted, ‘Faster! Faster!’ so the ship overtook many other ships on her way to a maiden who might save the immortal man by sacrificing her life for him. ‘We can’t fly,’ said a member of the crew when the captain grew too insistent and even ran along the deck as if to show how fast the ship was to move towards its goal.

‘Why not?’ answered the captain. He returned to his cabin and began to draw a pair of wings that could be fastened to the ship, enabling her to fly as far as Barcelona or Marseilles. ‘God didn’t forbid *her* to fly,’ he said out loud, putting a finishing touch to his work. He showed the drawing to a Jack-of-all-trades who said he would finish the wings by the end of the month, provided he had enough material at his disposal. ‘You can fell the Tree of Knowledge,’ said the captain.

‘Don’t we need it?’ asked the Jack-of-all-trades. ‘Do you think I’ll be able to make these wings without it?’

‘Do you have to borrow the know-how to get the job done right?’ asked the captain.

‘I’m afraid I don’t know the first thing about wings,’ answered Jack.

Nevertheless a pair of wings was lying in the garden—on the spot where the Tree of Knowledge had formerly stood—by the end of the month. ‘They’re too big for me,’ thought the captain as he enjoined his crew to fasten them to the sides of his ship. Soon the wings were hanging above the water; upon making them out in a fog, anybody would have said, ‘This is a flying ship.’ But no one saw either the captain or the wings and the weather was fine: they were already far from the Cape of Good Hope. ‘How to activate the wings?’ asked the captain.

‘I’m afraid I don’t know the first thing about wings,’ answered Jack.

‘Let’s fasten some ropes to them,’ said the captain.

‘Do you count on us to pull these ropes?’ said a few voices in unison.

‘Is this a revolt?’ asked the captain. ‘Does a revolt mean anything in the Kingdom of Eternity? What *can* you change in the Kingdom of Eternity?’

Next day the wings began to move up and down, but the ship was faithful to the waters. ‘Why doesn’t she fly?’ asked the captain.

‘Because our ship isn’t a bird,’ said a few voices in unison.

‘But she’s the Flying Dutchman,’ answered the captain.

The ship remained faithful to the waters throughout the voyage to Europe and the captain could not help comparing her behaviour with that of his wife. His ship did not talk to anybody, nor did she smile. ‘I’ll never destroy my ship,’ he said.

## THE DUTCHMAN'S FAILURES

Was he handsome? In the film *Pandora* his part is played by James Mason who would not have accepted the offer had the Flying Dutchman been as ugly as his own sin. But there are crimes which beautify their perpetrators; killing one's wife out of jealousy is of their number. In the light of these considerations the Flying Dutchman appears very handsome indeed and, according to cinemagoers, James Mason lived up to his model's notoriety in this domain.

Once on terra firma, the Dutchman began to look for his saviour whose whereabouts no one could know with certainty: that altruist woman might have settled in Barcelona, in Marseilles and even in his native city to which, however, he did not wish to return for fear of coming across his wife's ghost. No one recalls in what harbour his ship dropped anchor, for he did not care about the scene of his search, and his crew had no say in the matter, being just an instrument of his will, of his whims.

There were a few women in the harbour and in the restaurant where he had his first terrestrial meal, but most of them were accompanied by robust men and he had no wish to fight a duel on the day of his arrival. Besides, the interminable voyage during which he could use his sword only against himself took the edge off his art of fencing. And judging from the result of his fight with himself, he could no longer rely on this weapon when confronting his rivals who were to be found in the company of beautiful women. 'But do I have to court only *beautiful* women?' he asked himself. 'Is a beautiful woman capable of giving her life for a noble cause?' He put this question to a man sitting opposite him in a coach.

'Beautiful ladies are few and far between,' said the man. 'We'd better *preserve* their lives.'

'Did you ever have an urge to kill a beautiful lady?' asked the Dutchman.

'No point in killing ugly ones,' agreed the man.

'They're always faithful, aren't they?' said the Dutchman.

'No one wants them,' said the man. 'But I wouldn't kill a beautiful lady either.'

'Even if she *was* unfaithful to you?'

'I'd kill my rival,' said the man.

'I'm out of practice,' sighed the Dutchman.

He resolved to get off at the first opportunity, but as they passed through the gates of an unfamiliar city and stopped in front of a huge house he saw a woman walking towards the coach. The door opened and she got in, looking neither at the Dutchman nor at his travelling companion whose sensuous smile was lost on her. She was rather beautiful and the Dutchman would have told her the story of his life, but for the presence of the man with whom he had exchanged a few words about beauty, ugliness and murders. 'Would I murder *her*?' he asked himself irrelevantly, his hand grasping his sword. 'Just to keep my hand in,' he added out loud. The lady glanced at him or rather at his hand, opened her handbag and took out a pair of knitting needles. Upon seeing them at close range the man with whom the Dutchman was loath to resume the discussion knocked on the ceiling, got off and

disappeared round the nearest corner. ‘Does his wife pay too much attention to knitting?’ wondered the Dutchman. He had an itch to address the lady sitting opposite him, but did not know how to start the dialogue on which he counted a lot: his life or rather his death largely depended on it. Of course he might have said a few words about the weather or about the beauty of the landscape they had already cut in two—once again the coach was exploring the countryside—but such an opening seemed so trite he relinquished the idea and leaned back. Of course he might have flexed his muscles so that the lady could admire them: such rippling muscles were idolised in the twentieth century. But he was not yet living in the twentieth century and hoped he would never reach it. In short, there were many buts about his enterprise—many buts, many repetitions—and he was quite aware of it, notwithstanding his tendency to overlook unpleasant aspects of life.

So he was in search of a different remark to strike up a conversation with the lady whose needles were working on a shawl or a scarf. ‘Can I help you, Madam?’ he said. Without slowing the rhythm of her work the lady cast a glance at him, her black eyes displaying surprise and scorn. ‘I don’t know how to knit, but at least I could hold something, couldn’t I?’ The lady was looking at her fingers again, although she had no need to look at them: obviously she was capable of knitting blindfolded. Given a free hand, the Dutchman’s imagination pictured a few rituals during which the blindfolded woman underwent sexual tortures inflicted for the only purpose of tormenting her helpless body. He tied her hands to different bedposts; he flogged her and kissed her breasts, his teeth imprinting their passion on her immaculate skin.

‘I could hold everything,’ said the Dutchman. ‘I could hold your soul in my hands. That’s what they prosaically call “moral support”, I presume. I would be an ideal husband if I were married. I’m not, unfortunately. Or it’s fortunate rather, isn’t it? If I were married I wouldn’t be able to marry *you*. Would you please stop knitting for a moment? It’s as if you were weaving my destiny. You know, those old women who weave the destiny of mankind. Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you. You’re young, very young. But I’m not old either, am I? Rather good-looking, I’m told. Why don’t you admire my black eyes? They’re as black as yours, aren’t they? We have a lot in common, haven’t we? I’m slightly taller than you are. Husbands should always be taller than their wives. You must be 1 meter 67. Anyway it’s not important, is it? What really counts is your life—your life and mine. You’re not in love with me yet, are you? You don’t even look at me. Of course I’m quite aware that some women are shy and avoid looking at the men they’re in love with. They wish to hide their passion of which they’re ashamed for no reason at all. Why should one be ashamed of love? Isn’t love the most precious feeling one can experience on earth, on the sea and in heaven? And don’t forget that love can save a man’s life. Love is omnipotent, in other words. Love can murder a man or a woman. And some people are yearning for death. My wife might have yearned for death, as far as I know. What do you think? Well, let us speak of my wife later on—when we come to know each other more intimately. Actually we don’t have to talk about her at all. There are so many topics for conversation, aren’t there? Why should we concentrate on my poor little wife? She was 1 meter 57.’

The Knitting Lady continued to weave the Dutchman's destiny—or at least a part of it—without taking any notice of her victim. He seemed to have finished his first attempt at seducing her in spite of the irresistible urge he felt to proceed with his interminable monologue: after all, he could afford to talk forever, supported or unsupported by other people. So he brushed his hair back and, unabashed, resumed his speech:

'You're not likely to fall in love with me, are you? Even if we live together five hundred years. But you don't have to, you know. Many people live together because they're friendly to each other. Or because they find it convenient. They don't even have to be friends, come to think of it. I'm sure, however, that we'll become friends very soon, by the end of this journey. This journey isn't endless, is it? A woman can sacrifice her life for a friend, can't she? I'll tell you where I come from and what happened to me more than fifty years ago. Are you interested in legends and their heroes? Do you read books? My legend must have been recorded many times. Would you like to become a part of this legend? There are two kinds of immortality—one is actual, the other spiritual. I've nothing against the second variety. What's your opinion on the matter? Spiritual immortality hurts nobody because it concerns mainly works of art and legends, myths. Do you have to cling to life with such obstinacy? What can it offer you? Money, children, masked balls? You don't need children, do you? "Man's birth is painful and sordid," said Erasmus—I'm from Holland, you know.'

The Dutchman recounted a few innocent episodes from his childhood and passed on to his youth, determined not to withhold any piece of information, however painful and compromising. The Knitting Lady lay her unfinished shawl aside and opened her handbag. 'I was about to tell you my dreams,' he said. 'I'm sure you'd love my high-flying dreams. All right, I'll skip my youth and the murder of my wife. Let me just tell you my dreams!' The Knitting Lady shut her handbag once more and stepped out of the coach that had pulled up in the middle of a square. The Flying Dutchman followed her for a while along the streets of yet another unfamiliar city, but then thought better of it and entered a tavern where he ordered a bottle of claret. He emptied three glasses and thought about the failure of his will, which was all the more intolerable since he was not used to his will's failures. 'Shall I kill my will?' he asked himself. He was reminded of this episode when, in the nineteenth century, he read Schopenhauer's masterpiece *The World as Will and Representation*. But the German philosopher enlarged upon putting an end to the will-to-live of which the Dutchman had got rid a long time before. What remained in his body was the will-to-die and also the will-to-power; it is the latter variety of human will that suffered an ignominious defeat during those sun-bathed hours.

Once again he recalled the whole story when reading Nietzsche's posthumous works in the twentieth century. 'The "ego" subdues and kills: it operates like an organic cell: it is a robber and violent. It wants to regenerate itself—pregnancy. It wants to give birth to its god and see all mankind at his feet.' One woman at his feet would have been quite enough for his end and to this goddess he was prepared to give birth at any time: in the twentieth century he was still alive and kicking. But the

first half of the excerpt made him shudder; once again he was prey to the pangs of a guilty consciousness.

It is a pity that in the eighteenth century he was unable to read another excerpt from *The Will to Power*: it would have spared him many defeats that punctuated his ‘posthumous’ stays in Europe. ‘The absolute necessity of a total liberation from ends: otherwise we should not be permitted to try to sacrifice ourselves and let ourselves go. Only the innocence of becoming gives us the *greatest courage and the greatest freedom!*’ What he really needed was to disregard his ends, to relegate them to another legend, to force them on another Flying Dutchman. Didn’t the voice tell him there were many of them around? A woman had to fall in love with him through her own will, unaware of his desire to trick her into the immortality of sorts that he attributed to artists and their creations. The innocence of becoming—that is what he needed so badly. Letting himself grow out of himself, becoming what he truly was. And what *was* he actually? The Flying Dutchman or someone else—the Sailing Englishman, for instance? He had plenty of time to become one, acquiring a British passport and dusting off the language of Shakespeare.

But at the moment he had other fish to fry: many women heard his confessions in the streets of bizarre-looking cities and in meadows where he wooed peasant girls whose purity he never doubted. ‘A pure girl would believe me if I said that her heavenly Father was waiting for her soul.’ Alas, their earthly fathers awaited them too; they were far less gullible than their progeny.

## THE USELESS TALKS

During his stay in Europe the Dutchman also talked to a dozen men who, though unable to rid him of his burdensome life, were prepared to instruct him in the art of living—not a superfluous piece of knowledge, considering that only this art might enable him to seduce an appropriate woman and persuade her to die with him. But their discussions were not exclusively centred on the art of living, deviating towards the subjects related to the art of dying: philosophy, music. What we learn from philosophical works helps us get used to the fear of death, turning it into a sort of serene resignation; only few of them concern *la joie de vivre* and bodily pleasures that idealists find inconsistent with the mind and its high-flying dreams.

The Dutchman had to cope with the problem diametrically opposed to that of dying: he was suffering from the dread of eternal life and no treatise, however exhaustive, could extricate him from the ‘mud of immortality’, as he came to call his predicament. ‘I’m squelching through the mud,’ he would say to himself, looking at his shoes. And whenever he studied the beauty of his body in a mirror he would comment with a grin, ‘My body is caked with mud.’ In a moment of despair he might say, ‘I’m wallowing in the mud like a pig.’ And no philosopher—not even Diogenes the Cynic—wallowed in the mud with which the Dutchman was covered from head to foot. Diogenes used to compare himself to a dog, but dogs do not wallow in the same mud either: all of them are bound to die sooner or later.

The Dutchman’s metaphor was all the more incongruous since he was fond of his daily ablutions, which often lasted two hours, and immaculate clothes. He often wore a snow-white suit on which no stain, however minuscule and innocuous, could be detected. No wonder many women were deeply impressed by the Dutchman’s general appearance; but for his clumsy outspokenness—one of Diogenes’ principles—he might already have found the ‘woman of his death’. Even during a discussion attended by men only he was rather outspoken and often irritated everyone beyond measure. ‘Life is useless,’ he might declare, brandishing his fist.

‘Are you threatening God?’ asked a bearded man.

‘Women are unfaithful and knowledge is useless. It’s as useless as life. Philosophers say that life is a gradual acquisition of knowledge. Well, both are useless. I know everything. So what? Does it help me?’

‘If you knew everything you’d become immortal,’ said an alchemist.

‘I *am* immortal!’ shouted the Dutchman.

‘Do you know what I did yesterday?’ asked the alchemist.

‘I don’t.’

‘So you’re not omniscient,’ said the alchemist.

‘I’m immortal because I killed my wife.’

‘No, you just shook her left hand, didn’t you? Your left-handed handshake foretold a sinister union. The left is the dark unconscious side which suggests an incestuous marriage. Incest, the union of like with like, symbolises marriage with one’s being, the Self, individuation. In your right hand you both held branches with four flowers, the four elements. Your coitus occurred in water, in the unconscious. You returned to the beginning—the *massa confusa* or “unleashed chaos”—and at that moment the Lapis was conceived.’

The above excerpt from the Dutchman’s diary aroused the curiosity of many a scholar who kept wondering when this esoteric discussion had taken place. Some of them were inclined to put it right after the unfortunate attempt to seduce the Knitting Lady, arguing that the Dutchman was less aggressive during his subsequent visits to Europe. Others pointed out that he could not have boasted about his omniscience in those days. ‘Let us not forget that during his repetitive voyage round the Cape he had only one book in his library,’ they would declare, triumphantly brandishing *Praise of Folly*. ‘Besides, nobody spoke of the unconscious in the eighteenth century. The alchemist must have been acquainted with Jung’s works on the subject.’

What renders the task of scholars even more arduous is the negligence with which the Dutchman noted down his observations and told his stories: none of the entries in his diary is dated. Nor can the language he uses throw any light on the chronology of the episodes which, having been scrawled on separate sheets of paper and put in a huge lacquer box, seem to pay an additional homage to chaos. The greater part of his diary was written in Dutch, but at the beginning of the twentieth century—around 1910—he switched to English and, instead of leaving the Dutch part of his diary in peace, translated it into the ‘language of Walter Pater’, as he put it. What is more, he destroyed the original version of his tribulations: scholars are unable to collate the two documents in order to find out what exactly he altered or adjoined in the course of the translation.

On another sheet of paper he obviously refers to the process outlined by the alchemist. ‘Will she be risen from the dead under the influence of the Soul descending from heaven as a restorative force? (A parallel to Christ’s Second Coming.) I must forget her: no number of souls will ever animate her skeleton. The Queen I shall make love to in water is my *future* wife, not my *former* one. The immersion is a night-sea journey or dissolution which should lead us to a dark initial state, to death. The Ocean is a uterus where I was reborn many times. This time I shall find death in it.’

The Dutchman carrying a branch with four flowers is depicted on many paintings stored away in the museums he visited during his wanderings through the cities where no woman desired to shake his left hand. In these paintings he often proffers his hand when there is nobody around—as if he were loath to touch human skin or even a glove enclosing a woman’s fingers, palm and wrist. ‘Your left-handed handshake foretold a sinister union,’ he repeated as he looked at the maidens walking past him in the cities about which he did not care: architecture was not his forte. ‘Aren’t you fond of sinister unions?’ he would ask them under the stars which looked upon him like human souls.

The following dialogue might also have taken place during his first posthumous stay in Europe:

‘When I murdered my wife, my parents hit the roof.’

‘Why talk about the dead?’

‘I’m dead too.’

‘Are you?’

‘I’m immortal.’

‘Are you?’

‘It means I’m dead.’

‘Does it?’

‘I’m famous, you know. My career has been on the up and up since I murdered my wife and became the Flying Dutchman.’

‘Can you fly?’

A born storyteller, the Dutchman could not resist the temptation to turn his life into a playground for his own fantasy that could not deal successfully with two details only: his immortality and the murder of his wife. In other words, his fantasy could not undo the past *completely*, letting his wife follow in the footsteps of his grandmother who died at the age of eighty-five or making *him* die right after the murder.

When speaking of his murder, he unconsciously hoped they would imprison him and once again pronounce the death sentence, this time irrevocably; but no one seemed to mind either his wife or the way she left this world and so he continued to sit in taverns and walk the streets of unfamiliar towns. With the passing of the years he gradually dropped his wife and concentrated his efforts on immortality which never loosened its grip on him. ‘Are you afraid of death?’ he would ask. The answers he received varied to such an extent that he was often under the impression of living on several planets at once:

‘Death comes when it comes. Why think about it?’

‘How to bid farewell to this marvellous world? So many people will survive me! I wish I could kill them all. Why should anyone live on earth when I’m gone?’

‘Every night we die. Death is not different from sleep.’

‘Poor families lack the wherewithal to pay doctors and buy medicine. We should help the poor instead of talking about our own death.’

‘I think only about the foreseeable future.’

‘Anyway I’m driving myself into the ground—my boss makes me work till 9 p.m.’

‘Read Dickens and you won’t fear death. His latest novel is a real page-turner.’

‘We are planning to have children in the not-too-distant future.’

The Flying Dutchman took no notice of the answers which displayed a carefree disposition in the face of this threat, especially if children were counted upon to ward it off. (We live in our children!) At least in one domain he felt far superior to ordinary human beings whose lives are always ‘on the down and down’: a newly born English writer was keen to play with idioms. Whenever he met

those who seemed not to take death seriously he would smile and say, 'Let's wait and see what you'll feel on your deathbed. You're already lying on it as a matter of fact. Do you want me to tuck you in?' But often he added after a while, his face losing its frivolous expression, 'I envy you. How happy you are!'

## GOOD NEWS FOR HUMANITY

In June 1913 a huge article bearing this title appeared in a London newspaper:

‘Dear human beings! I have lived amongst you for so many centuries that I would call you my brothers and sisters if I were not slightly different from you. And this difference puts an impassable barrier between your destinies and mine. Actually your destinies can be reduced to one destiny only: your life is not plural, so to speak. Your destiny is death, the inevitable coming of void and oblivion, which you seem to reject with all your heart. It is true that some of you brave the sinister outcome of human life and enjoy themselves in spite of the perpetual threat; and this threat is plural, as you know. Human life is surrounded by threats of all kinds and yet it does not look like a besieged city because these threats are inside the walls and not in the countryside somewhere. What is the use of putting a bold face on things? You walk with bullets in your heart and everyone’s body looks like that of St Sebastian.

‘My destiny, on the other hand, is deprived of arrows, bullets and poisons. I may drink arsenic all day long, getting drunk on it. But death will not come even if I spend my life blowing my brains out: my brains are not likely to leave my head. My brains have led the life of a recluse since I murdered my wife. Of course they had stayed inside my head even before this murder on which I shall not dwell in this article for the simple reason that it does not fit in with the problem I propose to tackle. Anyway I have not spoken of my murder for many years now and therefore cannot recall its nuances in spite of my eternal memory. As I was saying, my brains never go on outings as if quite satisfied with the life they lead inside my head. I wonder why they do not suffer as much as my soul. Are they really separated from it? Doesn’t my soul rub shoulders with my brains, cooped up as it is inside the *same* body? My soul aspires to get outside and fly heavenward where it may find solace at last in the midst of the stars or in the lap of God. Or is it already in heaven? It might have left my body a long time ago—in the prison from which I escaped with the aid of supernatural forces. Will it ever descend and heal me, my saviour, my Jesus Christ? Strangely enough, I am waiting for my soul which may or may not return to me. You have never found yourselves in such a predicament, have you? How happy you are!

‘You cannot imagine how tedious it is to live forever. Every day looks exactly like all other days; today is yesterday and vice versa. Every feeling is bound to repeat itself sooner or later. But, contrary to what Nietzsche would have done, I don’t say “yes” to this eternal recurrence. As a matter of fact I say “no” to it rather often and I listen to this “no” as it reverberates throughout the universe. Do all words sound alike in Eternity? My “no” may sound like “yes” and vice versa. Anyway, no one hears me as if I were living in another dimension, precluded from getting in touch with my fellow creatures. Are you my fellow creatures? I have got two arms and two legs; I have got one head and two ears. But I am immortal and you are not—that makes all the difference.

‘Space is also homogeneous in the Kingdom of Eternity: there are no landmarks anywhere. One city looks exactly like another and all cities look like trees or bushes. Or flowers, or ditches. And all feelings are as like as two peas. Love is one pea, indifference another. What is the difference between them? You fall in love and your beloved grows older. However much you love her, she is bound to die. And you go on living after her death, after her funeral. At first you are moved to tears and go to the cemetery every other day to deposit flowers on her tomb. Then you go there once in a while and your flowers wither before you take the trouble to replace them. Eventually you stop going there altogether; you forget your beloved who has been reduced to a skeleton in her coffin. But you are still as sound as a bell, for all the years you have spent alone in your house. So you decide to marry again and the bells of your church salute your new-found happiness as you leave it in the company of your wife, your suit covered with the flowers that your friends are flinging at you. Notwithstanding their joy, you soon get bored of your second wife because she reminds you of the one you buried many years ago. You do not wait for her irrevocable disappearance to forget her and turn your house into a coffin where she is doomed to rot until her death.

‘Suppose your wife is as immortal as you are. In this case you are bound to murder each other now and then to let off steam. Of course you are aware that no amount of bullets will destroy immortality within your beloved’s body, but you just cannot help yourself. Every time she survives your bullets or poisons you say to yourself, “I should have thought it was obvious.” Yet you go on killing her. And she goes on killing you—with the same result. You are in the pink. You break even and that gives full satisfaction to both of you. You say to her, “I wish I’d never laid eyes on you.” She says to you, “I wish I’d never laid eyes on you.” All immortals look and sound alike.

‘Only death can make us appreciate the value of life. (You should always try to avoid the use of cliché, but in the Kingdom of Eternity you are not likely to succeed.) Ordinary human beings get bored because they know their lives are short and there are so many things around them. Even if they are not bored, they talk themselves into being bored in order to savour other pleasures, to court other women. Immortals get bored on account of the repetitious nature of their existence. No danger lurks in the dark when they take walks in their gardens. The long arm of the law is too short to reach them. Prison warders threaten to go on strike when an immortal is given a long prison sentence: in his presence they feel how fragile and old they are. Anyway, however long, a prison sentence is too short for him. It is as short as a match. I wish I could be sent to prison *in earnest*, but that depends neither on my virtual crimes nor on judges: I cannot experience a prison cell like a mortal who counts the hours lying between this cell and freedom. I never count hours or rather I have lost count of them. I never wait for anybody or anything because everything will happen in the long run. Except my death, except my death, except my death.

‘You can say, “My mother will skin me alive.” And your mother *will* skin you alive if your crime deserves such a punishment. You may die in the process, mind you. My mother will never skin me alive, although she might have done so in my childhood or in my youth. Now she is dead, but even

if she were alive she would not be able to skin me alive. And if she did I would still be alive and kicking. And I would feel no pain: *real* pain leads to suffering and death. Life without pain is not worth living, I can assure you. And there are no pleasures without pain. I have never experienced the pains and pleasures of parenthood; and yet in the eighteenth century I had several daughters and sons. My wife was shattered by our daughter's death—the pain of her loss was with her for many years. I did not feel anything either during her agony or upon visiting her tomb. I wish I had been buried with her.

'Many artists are terrified at the prospect of losing their inspiration that depends on their overall fragility. I am always inspired; I am never inspired. In the nineteenth century I embarked upon several novels, but I did not finish them. What is the point in finishing something which is bound to be finished on condition that you burn the candle at both ends? A mortal knows, however, that he may not finish his work despite the number of candles he burns at both ends: he is not sure he will wake up the next morning. Burning with desire to finish his work, he is likely to surpass himself as he probes into the secrets of nature and reaches for the core of the human mind. But I leave the mind in peace. What if I do reach its core? What am I to learn from it? Don't I know my mind inside out? Not "out", unfortunately—only inside. I have no wish to write an immortal work, for I am immortal myself. I *am* an immortal work. I can go and exhibit myself in any library, in any picture gallery. Would you like to read me? I may come and sit on your lap; I may lie on a shelf in your library, waiting for you to remove me. No, I will not *wait* for you: I never wait for anything or anybody.

'But you can write or paint immortal works: you know you are mortal. You also know that works are more important than men. At least *I* know that. I, for one, know that Shakespeare's works are far more important than my humble self, however long I may live and enjoy reading them. And if some day—in the unforeseeable future—human beings forget Shakespeare, I will remind them of his plays and sonnets. Is that the only purpose I have got in life?

'An immortal cannot say, "My overriding aim in life is to be a good husband and father": having an aim makes no sense in *his* life. Suppose you raise your gun, take aim and fire, all in one smooth movement. (I still care about my personal beauty, about my physique and gestures.) Suppose you miss. So what? In the Kingdom of Eternity you are bound to hit the target sooner or later, even if they blindfold you. A purpose loses its significance if you are doomed to achieve it. Last night a woman told me that her life seemed aimless after her children had departed. But her children may come back, restoring her life to its original condition. In other words, her life may grow meaningful once again. Let my children come and go until they die somewhere, preferably far from my bedroom—I shall pay no attention to their comings and goings. To what *do* I pay attention? To English grammar perhaps.

'Could I work a few jokes into my story? Alas, jokes do not count in the life of an immortal. I have already laughed my fill and there are no new jokes in the world. Nor do I ever cry: the number of tears I have got in my possession is not infinite. I have witnessed so many dramas that nothing moves

me any more. Hamlet does not die twice in Shakespeare's play. If he did, I would laugh, taking his death for a new joke. No, I would not laugh—not if he died six times in the course of the same play. I would merely say to him, "You're completely over the top" or "You've gone right down in my estimation". "Up" and "down" are interchangeable, aren't they?

'Do you realise how happy you are in spite of death? What is more, you must be happy *because* of death—because of the delights it gives rise to. You can experience the pains and pleasures of parenthood; you can be shattered by your daughter's death. And don't feel miserable if your doctor tells you, "The symptoms of the disease you might have caught include abdominal pain and vomiting." Enjoy your life as long as you live! It is better to enjoy life for a short period of time than not to enjoy it at all—eternally. It is better to triumph and suffer than to drag your immortality around like a suitcase filled with excrement. It is better to let your enemies drag your name through the mire than to have neither enemies nor a name. "The Flying Dutchman" is not a name, is it? No one recalls my real name. Even I have forgotten it.'

## THE FIRST LOVE

The Dutchman had no opportunity to read his own article during his initial visits to Europe, otherwise he would never have undertaken anything; he would have courted no women, let alone begot children. But his life was in no way comparable to his diary written on separate sheets of paper and thrown pell-mell into a huge box: he could not fish its episodes out and occasionally read about the future. Though living in the Kingdom of Eternity, he was subordinate to Time, to an observer-independent order of events. So in the eighteenth century he still hoped he might find a woman whose love would enable him to placate the Almighty and cross the threshold of the Hereafter without further ado. In those days he still had an aim in life and even his gait was purposeful as if he were going to a spot where someone awaited him. Once on the spot he gazed around and, having found nobody, would resume his walk in order to reach another solitary spot, another unfamiliar cul-de-sac devoid of magnanimous women.

Hope is more obstinate than fortune and often disregards reality in favour of dreams that promise their own fulfilment, making one's heart beat faster than time. The Flying Dutchman eventually came across a woman who did not avert her gaze as he traversed the cityscape she was staring at, struck by its beauty. She was not struck by *his* beauty, but his outlandish appearance aroused no unpleasant feelings in her breast and that was no small victory on the part of a man whose fortunes had undergone a drastic change for the worse after the death of his wife. What was more, she turned her head to follow his progress through the square on which she stood, a tourist guide in her hands; he ended up noticing her glance and came to a halt. (The tourist guide is a later addition: there was no such thing in the eighteenth century.) After much hesitation he made a few steps forward and asked her: 'Are you a tourist?'

'In a way,' she answered. 'Why do you ask?'

'Because I'm also a tourist. Actually I'm a traveller, a solitary traveller. I've lost all my travelling companions.'

'Do you like this city?' she asked.

'This country is overrun with foreigners. I'm one of them.'

'Where do you come from?'

Contrary to what might have been expected, he did not tell her the story of his life, of his murder. He just invited her to dinner.

It was too late to make her fall in love with him at first sight: she had already cast many glances at him since their encounter on that square. How many? He lost count of them and focused his thoughts on the forthcoming conversation that was crucial to the progress of their relationship. 'We don't have much time,' he thought. 'Wines don't mature quickly, but we shouldn't follow their example, should we?' It is strange how often immortals complain about the lack of time, for all their hatred of eternity.

She smiled and opened her handbag. 'Are you going to knit?' he asked.

'No.' After perusing the contents of her handbag she closed it and expectantly shifted her gaze to his eyes.

"What else do women desire in this life but to give maximum pleasure to men?" he quoted. "Isn't this the purpose of all their attention to their persons, all that make-up, bathing, hair-dressing and all those ointments and perfumes, as well as so many arts of arranging, painting and disguising face, eyes and skin?" She burst into laughter. 'What were you looking for in your handbag? A powder puff?'

'No.' She continued to laugh.

'Men are no better,' he said. "There's nothing which men won't permit women, and for no other return than pleasure, but it's their folly which makes women delight them. No one will deny the truth of this who considers the nonsense a man talks with a woman and the silly things he does whenever he wants to enjoy the pleasure she gives."

She reduced her laughter to a benevolent smile without interfering with his discourse.

'Am I talking nonsense?' he asked.

'Not at all.'

'Did you fall in love with me at first sight? You know, on that square?'

'Let's not talk about love,' she said.

'Do you mean we must *do* something?' He jumped to his feet.

'Are you in a hurry?' she asked.

'I'm not really in touch with what young women are interested in. To tell the truth, I'm out of touch with what's been happening over the last sixty years. I'm out of touch in every sense of the term.'

'Are you?' She covered his left hand with her right hand.

'No—it's the other way round,' he said. 'I mean, you must use your *left* hand. Our left-handed handshake indicates a sinister union.'

'Does it?' she asked, grasping his left hand.

'It does, it does. I hope it does.'

For a while they did not say anything. A violin was playing in the distance. The melody penetrated his heart as if to wound it forever. How could he remain in the land of the living after hearing such a melody, such an expression of love?

'Only music might kill me,' he said.

'Do you really wish to die?' she asked.

'Why not? Life is aimless without love.'

Once again music invaded, permeated and saturated their silence. It did not talk nonsense as if trying to distance itself from whatever the Dutchman and his companion might have said in the course of their dinner. What *did* it talk about?

Her hand began to caress his forearm which was only a part of his body. But that was enough for the moment and he did nothing to spread this caress over his entire being. 'Let it follow its course,' he told himself. He was happy.

His immortality estranged him from his species to such an extent that he had forgotten how to speak to a woman sitting opposite him at a table or walking by his side in the streets. And yet he used to be a womaniser in those days when his life was confined to our common dimension where delights and suffering have their meaning on account of death, of its daily interference in human life. In the eighteenth century, however, he was completely at sea with the creatures he saw in towns and meadows as if they were no longer his *fellow* creatures. 'My heart was burning,' he wrote in his diary. A figure of speech? The page devoted to this remote adventure is entitled *My First Love*. And what about his late wife? Would he have killed his wife had he not loved her? Or was it merely a question of pride and honour?

In his childhood he had already singled her out from the girls with whom he played on the beaches where he usually built his castles or ran along the waterside in search of ships. She was the only person allowed to live in those castles and sail with him on the ships he saw in the distance: even his father did not enjoy such a favour. And he offered her the pebbles he would pick up during his wanderings; at the age of nine, she owned quite a collection of them.

At the age of thirteen he wrote her a love letter in which he mapped out their future so touchingly she shed a few tears while reading it. He said they would have only two children—a boy and a girl—because he intended to devote his entire life to *their* happiness. 'I wish to love you and nobody else,' he wrote. 'Children might get in the way.' Of course he spoke about ships and the Cape of Good Hope he was longing to round in her company. 'I shall prove to you that I am a good captain and that I am not afraid of storms.'

They played many games which bespoke his tenderness and loving care. One of them was called 'my little elephant'. Bending forward, he waited for her to jump on his back where she was supposed to remain half an hour at least. Actually he wondered why she had not called him 'my little horse': he did his best to *gallop* around, his burden laughing on his back. This game was common among his friends who, however, did not allow *girls* to ride on them, pointing out that females would never become horse riders. 'What about Amazons?' he asked.

Well-versed in literature, he often performed love stories in his private theatre to which only she was admitted as both an actress and a spectator. She played the part of Isolda who sailed with him to his palace where he awaited her. He was at once in his palace and on the ship, playing two parts: King Mark and Tristan. 'It's better this way,' he explained. 'I seduce you and you fall in love with me. But marriage isn't romantic, is it? On the other hand, I *must* marry you, otherwise somebody else may become your husband. And I'd never allow it. So I'll be your lover *and* your husband. We'll meet at night in my garden and kiss near a brook. Can you hear its murmur?'

'Won't you mind my betrayals?' she asked.

‘Your betrayals?’ he was outraged. ‘You’ll always be faithful to me.’

‘At night I’ll betray you with my lover,’ she said.

‘Who is your lover?’ He put his hands round her neck.

She screamed and wrenched herself from his clutches. For a while they ran around the garden, jumping over flowers and tripping over roots. ‘*You* are my lover,’ she said at last. ‘Aren’t you playing Tristan?’

‘I’m not *playing* his part. I *am* Tristan.’

Now he was the Flying Dutchman; at least he played this part in the theatre of God, rehearsing a love scene almost a century after his wife’s untimely death. Indeed everything looked and sounded like a rehearsal during that dinner in the restaurant which would have sunk into oblivion, but for his immortal presence. On the memorial plaque these words are inscribed: ‘Here the Flying Dutchman had dinner with a woman who might have saved him.’

## THE COURTSHIP

They might have gone to a hotel and drunk another bottle of wine before yielding to their temptations, but he did not trust hotels and their owners. He was afraid they would spy on his love labours, their eyes glued to the keyhole, their fingers performing a ritual dance around the Freudian parts of their bodies. He decided to rent a house on the outskirts of the city where they had happened to meet one rainy afternoon. Sensitive to his clumsy ways, she agreed to postpone her journey and spend a month in his company, disregarding his incessant search for words and gestures: she knew what the definitive version of their play was like and how it should be performed. And she performed it as best she could; he endeavoured to catch up with her.

They did not hire a servant, whose intrusions might have spoiled their performance. She played several parts simultaneously: cook, charwoman, faithful wife, capricious mistress. Now and then she was to betray him, spending a few hours in the arms of his rival—himself. ‘One life isn’t enough to enjoy all your qualities,’ he said to her. ‘I need two lives at least. Two lives, two bodies, two hearts.’

One day he spoke to her about his immortality in the following terms:

‘I am part of a legend.’

‘Are you Tristan?’ she asked.

‘I’m immortal.’

‘All legends are immortal. You’re supposed to kiss me.’

‘Other women will play your part in the future. Aren’t you jealous?’

‘I’ll never let you go.’

‘Do you want other women to fondle me?’

‘Tristan was *faithful* to Isolda,’ she objected.

‘I’ll always be faithful to you, but you’re bound to die.’

‘Aren’t *you*?’ she asked.

It was too early to speak to her about his immortality which was not a part he played in some theatre or other: he could remove neither his mask nor his identity. Anyway there was no backstage room where he might have removed them. They spoke of love and their future. ‘We’ll never live in the same house,’ he said to her. ‘I’m a sailor and I’ll always obey the call of duty. I’ll sail around the Cape of Good Hope until my death. You’re not eager to share my cabin, are you?’

‘Why not?’ she asked.

‘Don’t you want to finish your journey around Europe?’

‘I might go to Africa as well.’

‘Are you ready to go as far as death?’ he asked.

‘We are bound to die, aren’t we?’

‘Not *all* of us,’ he said, his index finger pointing to a volume of Shakespeare’s plays he had recently acquired.

‘Are you a writer?’ she asked.

Why didn’t he say he was the Flying Dutchman? Why didn’t he come into the open? In the twentieth century his legend alone enabled him to find a woman prepared to die with him on the spot—in his cabin; the film *Pandora* tells the story of her sacrifice in graphic detail. (At least one of his doppelgängers died that night.) But even in the nineteenth century his image inspired terror: Wagner’s opera eloquently testifies to this phenomenon. The heroine sings in front of his portrait to the horror of the maidens who pity her, anticipating the outcome of the story.

‘Do you believe in God?’ he asked her at the wrong moment: they were relaxing in bed after depriving potential Peeping Toms of yet another proof of their mutual carnal attachment.

‘Everybody believes in God,’ she answered.

‘During my last visit to Europe I bought some books that analyse the reign of reason. I wonder if reason is compatible with faith.’

‘Do you want to reason me out of my faith?’ she asked.

‘I know God exists,’ he said. ‘So I don’t *believe* in Him. You can’t believe in something you’re holding in your hand.’

‘You can’t hold *Him* in your hand, can you?’

‘Well, you can’t believe in a man standing by your side. You can believe in his gifts or in his future, but you can’t believe in his presence—he’s standing by your side.’

‘Is God standing by your side?’ she asked.

‘This is beside the point,’ he answered.

‘The point is you don’t believe in Him,’ she said.

‘That’s why He doesn’t exist, in a way.’ He rubbed his forehead. ‘If you don’t believe in God, He doesn’t exist—for *you*. And God’s existence depends on our faith in Him. The human God doesn’t exist *objectively*.’

‘I do believe in Him,’ she said.

‘But He doesn’t exist objectively, does He?’ Slowly the Dutchman shook his head. ‘You believe in Him today. You’ll forget Him tomorrow. God will die tomorrow.’

‘I won’t forget Him tomorrow.’

‘Let’s wait and see.’

The courtship to which the Dutchman had already devoted three weeks consisted of three parts: to make the woman fall in love with him; to make her forget God, paving the way to her suicide; to make her commit suicide for the sake of the Flying Dutchman whose reality only a few people were ready to acknowledge. The first objective was achieved in the space of several hours, if not at the moment of their meeting on that square: she was seduced by his clumsiness and outlandish thoughts. But her faith was rooted in her upbringing and to eradicate it he had to bring her up again, following his own methods. He went so far as to draw the curtains in their room to prevent her from seeing the crosses carried down the street by the monks from a nearby monastery. Besides, he rightly conjectured

that seeing the sky or indeed a clump of trees in their garden would restore her lost faith in the twinkling of an eye. He confined her field of vision to their room where, in addition to himself, she could contemplate a few books he had recently bought and also a few objects from his cabin. Even the newly-acquired books bore the stamp of his personality which did not remind her of God or anything divine: let us not forget that he was no longer a *human* creature.

For a week he did not speak to her of God and his attitude towards him, and given that she saw God nowhere—unless everything in the universe is God’s creation—she began to forget Him. The walls of the house were impenetrable and even light, which always reminds us of God, did not filter into their abode where they indulged in diabolical games such as cards and ‘naval battles’. His ship often sank during the latter game and he would heave a sigh of relief whenever this happened: his defeats were dearer to him than any victory. In those moments he did not realise that, even if his ship *had* sunk somewhere, he would have stayed afloat, clutching at a straw or assisted by an obliging dolphin. And he would not have managed to kill the saviour, for all his vigour and resoluteness.

Determined to make his fate espouse the cause of death—they were not yet on intimate terms—he would lose one battle after another, looking triumphantly at his opponent who did not understand his moods: they did not correspond to what *she* would have felt had she lost all these battles. ‘You’re in a suicidal mood, aren’t you?’ she asked.

‘It’s so pleasant to commit suicide.’

‘Why haven’t you done it so far?’

‘Because I can’t kill myself.’

‘You do believe in God, in eternal punishment.’ She was jubilant.

‘Nobody can kill me.’

‘I’ve destroyed your ship so many times,’ she said.

‘Do it once again,’ he entreated.

But they did not resume their game that afternoon. Instead, he drew the curtains apart and life entered their house modestly, like a young lady allowed to attend a ball for the first time. They looked at the world that did not hide itself, offering its beauty to whoever cared to glance at it.

They left their house and walked for a while among the people going to the market where so many things were bought and sold that even Galileo could not have counted them. Their motion was uniform because they loved each other and no law of physics was influential enough to break their union and substitute death for the life they enjoyed with such innocence. The Dutchman forgot his predicament and once again reverted to his childhood when he had been unaware of immortality and murders. ‘I don’t know this object,’ he said, picking up a pebble. ‘Life is an endless discovery.’

Back at home, they stripped their clothes off and danced in the quiet of their room—she danced the role with such élan—thinking about their future happiness; even the Dutchman thought about it. He plunged into the sea of her caresses where he lost himself once again. ‘I’m the Sinking Dutchman,’

he told her, anxious to express his feelings. 'Let us descend into the unconscious. Let us die and melt into a being with two heads—the hermaphrodite.'

They spent three years in that house which was already accustomed to their dances and kisses. She knew the story of his life in graphic detail and was ready to die with him whenever he felt like dying. Once again he was fed up with time and space: she did not have to wait for his funereal mood. But he was reluctant to accept her sacrifice, for she could not renounce her faith in God and relished every moment of her earthly existence in spite of his moodiness.

One day he walked out of the house and did not come back.

## THE SECOND COMING

He was often mistaken for Jesus Christ and there was nothing he could do about it. His biographers affirm that he was loath to do anything about it: playing this prestigious part pleased him enormously. He hoped his former fellow creatures might crucify him in the long run, unable as they were to endure his majestic presence and the pressure of history.

‘Have no fear—I’m not Judas,’ said a middle-aged man, planting a kiss on the Dutchman’s mouth.

Passers-by often went on their knees as he walked towards them, his arms making gestures that nobody could decipher. Women kissed the lapels of his coat and even his shoes that he never polished for fear of losing his antediluvian appearance. ‘Take me with you,’ one of them implored him. ‘I want you to be my son’s father.’

‘Don’t you suffer in this world?’ he asked her. ‘Do you think your son won’t suffer?’

‘Not if he’s *your* son,’ she answered.

‘Don’t you think *I* am suffering?’ he asked.

One afternoon he stripped off his clothes in the middle of a square. Yearning for keepsakes and relics, the crowd began to cut his coat into pieces, a kitchen knife floating in the air as a multitude of fingers grasped it rapaciously. Once the coat was gone they concentrated their efforts on his suit which resisted them for almost half an hour, now and then letting the knife through. As the last piece of clothing disappeared into their pockets they saw the Dutchman’s naked body embellished with a score of bleeding wounds. He stood in the middle of the square in all his glory, his glance riveted on his torturers or saviours. Actually they were neither: he felt no pain and death was as usual out of his reach.

‘He’s St Sebastian,’ said a man.

‘And the arrows?’ asked another man.

‘I’ve got plenty at home. Shall I bring them?’

‘He’ll catch his death of cold,’ said a woman.

‘Let him stay naked,’ said another woman. ‘He’s so beautiful with these wounds.’

They put someone’s coat on him and once again he became Jesus Christ to whom they might pray in a moment of need and whose coat was available as a material for relics. Automatically they began to cut this new garment into pieces, hoping it was already impregnated with his odour, with his life. Once the coat was gone too, they contemplated his naked body and the network of new wounds from which his blood was dripping onto the pavement. Some of them would kneel down and lick the blood, spitting out whatever did not belong to it: the mud, stones. Others dared apply their lips to his wounds and sucked his blood so greedily one might conclude they had been thirsty for centuries. They fought for the most juicy wounds and went so far as to pierce his *naked* body which, however, could not serve as a material for keepsakes—everyone was aware of that.

‘You’ve drunk too much already,’ said a woman to a man.

‘But I’m not drunk, am I?’ He burst out laughing. ‘Anyway his body isn’t subject to quotas on blood and skin, is it?’

So they continued to lacerate his body, drinking from the freshly produced wounds and even pocketing some minuscule slices of his skin. The more they drank the larger quantities of blood he seemed to offer so that, unsatisfied with what they could consume on the spot, they sent their children for empty bottles into which he magnanimously poured his blood until midnight. Only then the crowd left him in peace and he returned home after snatching a coat from a drunkard lying on the pavement. ‘Did they take you for Jesus Christ?’ asked his son, touching his wounds without curiosity.

‘As usual,’ he answered.

‘There are more wounds today,’ his son pointed out. ‘Will they be healed by tomorrow morning?’

‘As usual,’ he answered.

‘And how much blood have you lost?’

‘You know that I can’t lose blood.’

‘What *can* you lose?’

‘My only son,’ he said, stroking his son’s cheek.

A month later his wife gave birth to a second son, but he hardly took any notice of him as he rocked the immature mammal to sleep, surveyed by a nurse who never missed an opportunity to reproach him for his indifference. ‘It’s *your* baby after all,’ she said once, casting a glance at his wife who had just fallen asleep.

‘I know,’ he said. ‘All my wives have been faithful to me.’

‘Are you Blue Beard?’ asked the nurse.

‘I am Blue Beard, the Flying Dutchman, Jesus Christ. Call me what you will.’

He took no notice of his wife either. He knew he had married her during one of his visits to Europe, but she was so much like other women that he began to wonder if he were not married to all of them. And the septuagenarians he stumbled upon in the streets might prove to be his children: he had lived long enough to beget the entire population of the earth. No one mistook him for Adam, however; he continued to impersonate Jesus Christ to the astonishment of those who had relinquished the hope of witnessing the Second Coming. Prophets no longer announced, ‘The Second Coming is at hand,’ because they saw Jesus Christ and were even in a position to touch his wounds during one of the rituals that enabled the faithful to secure a valuable relic. And whenever he boarded his ship to spend another term away from Europe, America or Africa, they maintained he was *walking* on the waters, his head encircled with a halo.

On his return to terra firma he read a gospel composed by one of his admirers, from which he learnt that he had cured hundreds of people and performed two or three miracles ‘worthy of His name’. ‘The crowd,’ wrote the evangelist, ‘waited for Him on the main square to touch His clothes or,

weather permitting, His body on which a few scars—the reminder of the tortures inflicted upon Him in days of yore—could be seen. The sick crawled on all fours towards Him and touched whatever they could: His overcoat, His suit, His shirt, His underwear. And when there was nothing more to touch except His own body they touched His wounds and were cured on the spot. Some of them stood up at once, but others, incapable of believing they *had* been cured, continued to crawl around him, touching His wounds and drinking His blood. “You’re cured,” He said to them. “You don’t need my blood any more.” But they did not believe Him and went on sucking as if they were babes whose very lives depended on their mothers’ milk. At midnight He always left the square like a bird: His body flew away, feebly outlined against the starry sky. In those moments some onlookers affirmed He was the Flying Dutchman. “He should be crucified,” they shouted, “for He had come under false pretences.” Contaminated by His blood, they were able to fly over the city in search of Him. Such was their thirst for vengeance.’

Out of curiosity, the Dutchman would pick the book up to find out what they thought of his identity. ““We are assured that He is Jesus Christ, the son of Joseph the carpenter, born of Mary. He declares Himself the Son of God, and a king. He attempts the dissolution of the Sabbath and the laws of our fathers.””

Every time the Dutchman opened the book he found it had grown older as if moving down the ages towards the *real* Jesus, towards His childhood. ‘The son of Anna the scribe was standing there with Joseph, and took a bough of a willow tree, and scattered the waters which Jesus had gathered into lakes. But the boy Jesus seeing what he had done, became angry, and said to him, Thou fool, what harm did the lake do thee, that thou shouldest scatter the water? Behold, now thou shalt wither as a tree, and shalt not bring forth either leaves, or branches, or fruit. And immediately he became withered all over. Then Jesus went away home. But the parents of the boy who was withered, lamenting the misfortune of his youth, took and carried him to Joseph, accusing him, and said, Why dost thou keep a son who is guilty of such actions? Then Jesus at the request of all who were present did heal him, leaving only some small member to continue withered, that they might take warning.’

And on the next page: ‘Another time Jesus went forth into the street, and a boy running by, rushed upon his shoulder; at which Jesus being angry, said to him, Thou shalt go no farther. And he instantly fell down dead.’

At the peak of the Cold War a few scientists realised that if they put their heads together they might send the Flying Dutchman back to the year zero to make him undo the history of humankind. ‘Jesus was too benevolent to cure us of our diseases,’ said one of them. ‘A fatal disease ravages our soul, not our body. The core of our being is rotten and we must do something about it. Our new Jesus will do away with many people and customs. There’s no other way.’

There are several rules to be observed in the course of time travel. You are not supposed to go back and kill yourself as an infant because your soul (and body) would disappear in the twinkling of an eye, which is out of the question. (Don’t contradict the laws of logic!) Nor can you alter the history

of mankind: the Second World War will never vanish into thin air. (Thin air does not exist in the Kingdom of Eternity.) But you can write an account of Jesus' life and put it on a pavement in Jerusalem—for everybody to read. (In 30 AD, for instance.) 'And the people stood beholding. And the rulers also with them derided *him*, saying, He saved others: let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God.' This account does not contradict what actually happened in 33 AD: the people who took part in the tragedy followed the script to the letter.

'Do you *have* to be crucified?' asked a scientist.

'I don't know,' he answered. 'I haven't been crucified so far. I'm sure I'll be crucified in the future, though. I'm bound to experience everything.'

'There are consistent time travel stories and inconsistent ones,' said the scientist. 'Consistent stories don't contradict history—the events we read about remain in history books. We'd like you to be part of an *inconsistent* story.'

The scientists explained to him that time travel was on their agenda because Gödel's rotating universe allowed such a feat. According to them, from the perspective of any observer, all the matter in the universe was rotating and not expanding.

'Curvature allows the lightcones to tip with respect to each other.'

'Could you spare me the details? I used to like Galileo and Newton. But I'm fed up with gravity and curvatures. Just send me to the past or the future. I don't mind.'

They did their best to send him to the year when Jesus Christ was born. But he was *not* born, contrary to their expectations: he stood in their laboratory instead of coming out from the womb of the Virgin. They ended up asking a young woman to embrace him during the experiments to ensure the logical transference of the present into the biblical past. She embraced and kissed him, touching every part of his body with her lips. 'You're my baby, my only child,' she repeated. 'I wish I could bear you in my womb.'

'Why don't you?' he asked. 'I'd like to be born into another world. Or should I stay in your womb forever?'

The scientists accused him of being so different from Jesus Christ that no experiment, however sophisticated, could project him back to the beginning of our era when the need to save humankind induced the Almighty to send His Son to earth. For a while they nurtured a hope of making the Dutchman travel as far as his own birthday, to the days when he was innocent enough to perform Jesus' part without shocking the audience. 'We'll just exchange the babies,' said a scientist, alluding to the procedure common in medieval Europe where such substitutions were made by gypsies and midwives. 'Two newly-born males look alike, don't they?' he went on. 'After all, Jesus was a normal baby, judging from the pictures showing his body in the Madonna's arms.'

'There was an aura of sanctity about Him,' said another scientist, looking at the guinea pig, alias the Flying Dutchman.

'Jesus wasn't as benevolent as you think,' he objected. 'Don't you know he killed a child?'

## DID THE DUTCHMAN MURDER HIS WIFE?

Did the Dutchman kill anybody in his childhood? After all, such a murder might have become a 'repressed' episode from his past: he was already acquainted with Freud's theories and notions. Nor was he absolutely sure he had committed the murder of which he was accused in the Hollywood version of the legend featuring the Flying Dutchman and his ghastly ship.

On a beach he created a few lakes and asked a child to destroy them. 'Can't you scatter the waters I've gathered into lakes?' he asked offering him a bough of a willow tree. The child destroyed the lakes, but the Dutchman felt no urge to kill him despite the influence of the text he had copied in his notebook, anxious to show it to the scientists. He asked another child to brush against his shoulder and, feeling no urge to kill *him*, shouted, 'Push me!' The child pushed him. 'Slap my face!' The child executed the order. 'Thou shalt go no farther,' he said, looking at the child who burst into tears and called out to his mother. 'Did I lose the power to kill?' the Dutchman wondered on his way to the laboratory where the scientists awaited him with impatience.

All men are mortal; Socrates is a man. Socrates is mortal. The first of Aristotle's syllogisms does not fit the Dutchman's destiny unless we assume he was not wholly a man, coming round to the scientists' opinion. 'You're human only in part,' they said. 'The rest might be of celestial origin, for all we know. Our Saviour.'

'I couldn't murder these children,' he said, holding out the notebook. 'I'm more benevolent than Jesus Christ. I didn't kill my wife either.'

Again he was paying attention to the women some of whom sauntered around the streets alone as if to emphasise their willingness to help him. He accosted one of them and asked if she could be unfaithful to him that night, in his own bed. Of course she said she could not be unfaithful to someone she was not acquainted with and he introduced himself rather pompously, telling her a few stories linked to his mysterious name. He added he would reward her handsomely for the trouble she was prepared to take on his account. 'I haven't promised anything yet,' she said with a smile.

'But you're listening to my stories, aren't you? So few people ever bother to lend an attentive ear to what I say.'

'How shall we do it?' she asked.

'We'll play it by ear,' he answered.

An hour later he found a man who promised to play the part of a lover 'for the fun of it', gallantly refusing the money offered by the Dutchman. Soon they reached the house where the scene of the crime was to be set: the Dutchman still regarded a wife's betrayal as a crime that deserved an exemplary punishment. But how could he punish her that night, deprived of his faithful dagger which, unlike many women, had never been unfaithful to him? Alas, he lost his mythical dagger during the Russian campaign in which he took part in the hope that Napoleon's ambitions and the Russian barbarity would triumph over his immortality. Looking at his hands, he realised he might at last fulfil

one of his oldest dreams: to strangle 'Desdemona' in the bed where she had made love to 'Cassio' in his absence. (With the passing of the years he had come to identify with many of Shakespeare's heroes—out of boredom.) But he was afraid that the murder-instinct he harboured somewhere would not live up to its reputation, having lost its fighting spirit a long time ago. 'If necessary,' he thought, 'I'll go in and watch their bodies at close range. I'm sure the sight of their love's labours would fill me with indignation and arouse my wrath.'

He handed a bunch of keys over to his rival and explained how to use them. Then he started to walk around the house where the man and the woman had already stripped their clothes off after a dozen passionate kisses. He began to count their kisses and soon lost count of them, choosing to concentrate mainly on their intertwined bodies that were performing a ritual dance in his bed; she danced the role with such élan. 'My bed,' he repeated several times as he spied on his murder-instinct, on the ritual dance of wrath in his chest. Actually there was no dance to speak of: something did budge inside him, but he had no idea what it was and how to direct this tiny motion which lost its momentum as soon as he decided to transfer it to his hands. 'I must *see* them,' he said out loud, heading for the front door. The door was locked and he had no key to open it. He grasped the knocker and his impatience began to resound through the house, paying short visits to the remotest nooks and crannies. One might even have mistaken this music for a manifestation of wrath, a declaration of war; but the Flying Dutchman knew he was just weary and longing to spend a few hours in his bed where two unfamiliar bodies continued to perform their dance. Sinfully engrossed in it, they took no notice of the knocking and of the shouts which endeavoured to inform them about his sorry plight. 'I've locked myself out,' he cried at the top of his voice. 'Can you hear me? I've got no key. How dare you make love in my bed? Get out of it at once! I'll pay you as much as you wish. Why should I spend my time walking around my own house? Do you think I've enough time to spare? Eternity is long. Is that what you think? But why should you make love in *my* Kingdom of Eternity? Take *your* time and do with it whatever you can. Don't take your time! Get out of my Kingdom!'

Half an hour later the door flew open and the woman whose services he had hired appeared in the doorway, her dress answering the caress of the draught. 'Is it all over?' he asked.

'Not yet. What do you want?'

'I want you to get out immediately.'

'We might do it in your presence,' she suggested, rubbing her breasts and other sensitive parts of her body.

'Yes, do it in my presence. Let us see if I'll kill you or not.'

Lying spread-eagled on the connubial bed, the lover was waiting for the Dutchman's makeshift wife, his eyes closed. 'Should I marry her?' the Dutchman thought. 'Why murder a woman I've known for two hours only? Besides, I'm not even in love with her.'

With indifferent gaze he watched them strike a few spectacular postures for his benefit as they made the best of his hospitality and generosity. The springs of his bed seemed to chant a hymn to their

art of lovemaking which he could not help admiring as an inveterate womaniser and bon-vivant. Instead of killing them he replaced the man after a while, thinking he should add a few finishing touches to the motion picture he had profited from at close range. A connoisseur in his own right, the man applauded the way the Dutchman was polishing his work; the woman grew silent and motionless as if fearing to disturb her new lover by any manifestation of the pleasure she experienced. But when her former lover replaced the Dutchman by her side, on her body, she started moaning from pleasure or from pain: neither of her present lovers was an expert in moans. The Dutchman thought she *might* be weary after all the paces he had put her through with the aid of a man who seemed now to belabour her with a stick, his head nodding in approval of his action. ‘We’d better stop,’ said the Dutchman. ‘Anyway I don’t feel like strangling you.’

He married the woman and got her to betray him with another man whose insolence infuriated him to such an extent that he felt an urge to punish *him*, all the while sparing his wife: she was obedient and even attractive. A tall blonde woman, she reminded him of a few photographs he had come across in the magazines destined to provide the male population of the globe with the excitement they might lack in everyday life. And he often handled her like a photograph on which one might put another photograph or a book or a paperweight or a pineapple. ‘I wish I could limit my intrusions into her life to her surface,’ he thought now and then as he watched yet another lover probe the depths of her abyss. ‘Why do they fail to prompt me into action? She must do it on her own.’

So he asked her to fall in love with a handsome young man and betray her husband without letting him in on her secret. ‘I should be left in the dark about your intentions and the deed,’ he said. Intentionally he spent every night at his club and returned home only before sunrise, allowing his wife to betray him as often as she pleased. ‘Let them pile up,’ he thought. ‘And I suffer from nausea at the very thought of it. Shall I find a concomitant image? A photograph won’t do—it’s too innocuous. And some old photographs are more beautiful than reality. A sink. In my bachelor days the sink was always full of piles of dirty crockery. My honour is at stake. No, this doesn’t work either. I must have chucked my honour overboard a long time ago. Have my genes altered so much over the last centuries? I did *not* commit the crime attributed to the Flying Dutchman by poets.’

For all his thoughts and images, he did not manage to awaken in his bosom the instinct that might have enabled him to kill his wife and eventually a child. ‘I’m not Jesus Christ,’ he said to the scientists who took no notice of his hasty conclusions. ‘It’s hardly surprising our Dutchman is so stressed at the moment,’ said one of them. ‘He’s in the middle of divorcing Christina.’

## EVERLASTING LIFE

‘Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.’

The Flying Dutchman studied the Scriptures in search of relevant verses where he hoped to find a solution to the problem that had been haunting him from time immemorial: everlasting life and its drawbacks. St John lavished upon him many descriptions of how marvellous everlasting life was in comparison with our short visit to the vale of tears. Actually he did not vouchsafe a single *description* of this life, obviously convinced it was gorgeous and needed no recommendation: doomed to die, the representatives of the human race could not but seize the opportunity offered to them by Jesus Christ in Whom, however, they were supposed to believe. ‘And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day.’ Of course the evangelist (and Christ) spoke about the Hereafter where life *might* be different from what we experience on earth, but the Dutchman knew that *any* eternity was evil and could on no account make anyone happy. How was one to cope with an infinite series of days and nights? And what does it matter *where* all this happens: in the vale of tears or on the mountain of joys? The misery of everlasting life was self-evident to him; yet he did take the trouble to supply a few descriptions of the gruesome monotony lying in store for those who preferred immortality to death.

‘Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.’ In his diary he embroidered at length upon these verses where his own destiny seemed to be adumbrated. It was as if the Last Judgement had already put an end to human history, sending him on a non-stop journey around the earth. ‘The resurrection of damnation’—that is what it really looked like: the prison cell, the open door, the half-visible crew. But others were too real to corroborate this hypothesis; to all outward appearances they existed *prior* to the Last Judgement that concerned only his everlasting life. Was this life so different from what the elect were to enjoy on their mountain, amidst the stars? Wasn’t he received like royalty in the best restaurants of France, Belgium and Switzerland? Didn’t he partake of the oldest wines available in Europe and the United States? What else could archangels have at their disposal? Wasn’t his last mistress as beautiful as a pagan goddess? (For some reason he thought that Aphrodite was far more beautiful than any biblical character.)

Contrary to what many of his biographers presumed, he was not sentenced to ‘sea-imprisonment’, as he used to put it himself. Only at the outset of his everlasting life did he spend the greater part of a century exploring the waters around the Cape of Good Hope or just sailing from one ocean to another. In the nineteenth century, having realised that nothing and nobody excluded him from the pleasures associated only with terra firma, he settled in a few cities at once, where he enjoyed himself as best he could, entertaining artists and politicians, beautiful women and their husbands or

lovers. According to the initial verdict, he was not to leave his ship for seven years; after this period he was allowed to wander for six months around Europe or any other continent to which his crew might convey him. In the course of the eighteenth century, however, the Almighty mitigated the effects of His judgement, allowing him to join Napoleon's army in 1811—the year of the comet. The French Emperor was about to invade Russia, taking the road which was to lead him further and further from the Adriatic Sea and, generally speaking, from the waters where the Dutchman could make use of his ship and crew. But at the time the immortal man no longer thought of his whereabouts with apprehension: the Almighty did not mind his staying on land as long as he pleased.

'But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.' His comments on this text abound in references to his voyages, to the 'ocean springing up into everlasting life', as he noted down in blue ink. He also transcribed the following excerpt from *Elenchos* by Hippolytus—an alchemical treatise of renown: 'But when this wave is raised from the water by the wind and made pregnant in its nature, and has received within itself the reproductive power of the feminine, it retains the light scattered from on high together with the fragrance of the spirit, and that is Nous given shape in various forms. This light is a perfect God who is brought down from the unbegotten light on high and from the spirit into man's nature as into a temple, by the power of nature and the movement of the wind. It is engendered from the water and commingled and mixed with the bodies as if it were the salt of all created things—'

All the same he was worried about the threat that so-called everlasting life posed to humanity whose representatives—especially bigots and churchmen—did not realise how deceptive the allure of an infinite series was in the vale of tears *and* in heaven. Of course in the Hereafter one would be spared the succession of days and nights, but, on the whole, the Dutchman did not mind this succession, darkness bringing proverbial repose after the toil and trouble associated with the sun and its substitutes. 'I'm against time as such,' he said to himself, tampering with his wristwatch. 'Eternity is full of time. The sink is always full of piles of dirty crockery.' Leaving his thoughts to their own devices, he suddenly recalled the flying saucers he had once spotted in the twilight when on his way home from a funfair. After all, the universe was also a sink cluttered with piles of dirty crockery that one was unable to wash: the saucers flew around and nobody so far had succeeded in catching them. 'Did you come to us in one of these contraptions?' asked a passer-by.

'I'm the Flying *Dutchman*,' he answered wrathfully.

'Can't the Flying Dutchman sit inside a flying saucer?'

'I don't need a saucer to fly around.'

'What *do* you need?'

'Myself,' said the Dutchman. He was aware that he had lost his identity in the sink of time. He was neither Jesus Christ nor himself. In a way, he was a saucer lying near the bottom of the sink and nobody was powerful enough to remove all the other saucers to find out who he really was instead of

repeating, ‘The Flying Dutchman, the Flying Dutchman.’ Nor could anybody answer the question, ‘Who is the Flying Dutchman?’ Eternity turned out to be another version of amnesia and for the life of him the Dutchman could not appreciate such a memory lapse: it was quite different from what a human is granted every Freudian night, providing he does not suffer from insomnia. So why make fuss of eternal life and its benefits?

‘Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me.’ No longer did he search for his death in the Scriptures; and yet the suffering on the Cross continued to appeal to him so hauntingly he often looked at his hands in the hope of finding stigmata on them. ‘What counts is not the duration of your thoughts but their quality, their intensity,’ a priest told him, anxious to satisfy his curiosity.

‘The more I identify with Him the greater is my yearning for death. “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me hath everlasting death. I am that bread of death.” Sounds better than “bread of *life*”, don’t you think?’

‘Why listen to the sounds that have no meaning?’ The priest spoke very softly as if to refrain from sounds altogether.

‘I’m so fond of silence,’ the Dutchman agreed. ‘But everybody *speaks* of eternal life. Let us be silent about it, as silent as the grave. Even criminals have the right to remain silent, don’t they?’

He did not remain silent as he voiced his aversion to eternal life in any shape or form, trying to convince the strangers he encountered that in St John’s Gospel at least the word ‘life’ signified ‘death’. “‘This is the bread which cometh down from heaven,’” he quoted, “‘that a man may eat thereof, and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.’” Shouldn’t we replace “life” by “death”? “This is the bread which cometh down from heaven that a man may eat thereof, and *not* live.” Sounds wonderful, doesn’t it? “I am the *dying* bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall *die* forever.” Remarkable, isn’t it? “And the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the *death* of the world.” Aren’t you hungry? Please partake of my flesh, of my eternal body. There are no bugs in it—eternity shuns them. My flesh is fresh. Sounds wonderful, doesn’t it? “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no *death* in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal *death*; and I will *lull him to sleep* at the last day.” At the last *night*, to tell the truth. “For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.” Why don’t you eat me? Why don’t you drink me? I know you’re not cannibals, but I’m not human either. I’m different from you. I’m a bird, I’m a fish, I’m a cocktail, I’m Bloody Jesus. I’m not a human, am I? Do you really take me for your fellow creature? I’m only half-human—the rest of my substance belongs to heaven. “He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him.” Don’t you want to dwell in me? I’m already living in you, dying inside your body. Are you so fond of your *immortal* soul? It is likely to

migrate from one body to another—from your body to that of a beast, for example. Do you want to live inside a crocodile? Isn't it better to die *before* the metamorphosis, *outside* it?

He implored them to eat him and drink his blood as if hoping to die inside their bodies, in their stomachs. What would have happened had they tried to devour him? Suppose you ate a morsel of Mr Smith. What would remain of him? Mr Smith minus the morsel you ate because you were hungry. But Mr Smith would be Mr Smith in spite of this regrettable loss. A morsel of human flesh cannot alter one's identity, can it? Here is another excerpt from the Dutchman's diary:

'During Napoleon's occupation of Moscow Mr Ivanov lost a morsel of his flesh consumed by a hungry seamstress. Her husband also partook of his flesh. They continued to devour him until only one leg of his remained on their dinner table. But this leg *was* Mr Ivanov. It was *his* leg and his identity lodged in it. Even one leg of mine is the Flying Dutchman; even one toe of mine is the Flying Dutchman. Even if they devour me—all my muscles and sinews—I shall not die. Everything has already happened to me. My life is one word I repeat over and over again. Let us be generous: my life is a book which may coincide with the Book of Life. I wish it could coincide with the Book of Death. Has my life been reduced to the word "life"?'

## THE INVASION OF RUSSIA

At some point Napoleon realised he would vanquish the Russians only with the aid of an *immortal* army in the ranks of which a number of Flying Dutchmen could distinguish themselves, braving bullets, swords and stones: the barbarians were likely to use stones instead of traditional weapons. He met the Flying Dutchman during his sojourn in Deauville and suggested they should work together '*pour la noble cause*'. 'What a pity you've got only three sons,' he said. 'Are they also immortal?'

'Let's wait and see,' said the Flying Dutchman.

'At least we can count on your crew,' Napoleon said. 'I'm told they're invisible.'

'Most of the time they are,' agreed the Dutchman. 'But I'm not sure they'll obey me on land, outside the ship.'

'I'll have four wheels fixed to her,' said Napoleon. 'She'll travel with us. How many canons have you got?'

The ship accompanied the army as far as Borodino where she was destroyed by the Russian artillery: she was not immortal after all. The crew might have survived the destruction, but no one saw its members either in Moscow or during the retreat of Napoleon's army that suffered great losses on the way to Paris. Among the corpses left behind on the snow there were half-transparent individuals—even their clothes were half-transparent; according to Russian partisans, some of them belonged to the Dutchman's crew. Without the ship they were of no use either to Napoleon or to the Dutchman himself who had joined the army in the hope of perishing from a bullet or in a house abandoned to the cruelty of flames. Moscow was burning and the Dutchman stood in a palace where the fire disported itself with utmost brutality. But he was spared by it: whatever he undertook to kill himself was undone by his destiny which seemed to have been written at the moment of the Big Bang or even earlier—in ineffable singularity or primordial chaos. Indeed he was immortal in both directions: forward and backward. All around him there were only infinite lines along which he was doomed to walk or sail or ride on a horse or drive in a car.

In Borodino he exposed himself to Russian fire and was hit by several bullets that seemed to enjoy themselves in his body without inflicting any injury upon it. As a souvenir, they remained inside him until the end of the twentieth century when he had them removed at the American Hospital in Neuilly where Napoleon might have been taken care of, had he been allowed to die in France two centuries after his actual death. The Dutchman even endured the impact of a cannonball on which he travelled for a while, emulating Baron von Münchhausen of whose adventures he knew nothing at the time: in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries he read mostly philosophers and poets. Carried away by his old instincts, he hung on it for a few seconds and then let it go, relying on the distance between his body and the earth: 'I've never had an opportunity to fall from such a height,' he told himself.

'He's been a bit dizzy and confused since the accident. Do you think it's mild concussion?' said an officer to a doctor.

‘I think he’ll survive,’ said the doctor.

Unfortunately the doctor was right: in spite of himself the Dutchman prevailed over that attempt on his life, considering it unworthy of his diary where not a word can be found as to the details of the accident. He writes, on the other hand, about his talks with the Russians who believed in God and everlasting life whose drawbacks they had no opportunity to experience. ‘We’ll never die,’ they said to him.

‘I’ll never die either,’ he told them.

‘Do you believe in God?’ they asked.

‘I don’t have to believe in God.’

‘You can’t savour everlasting life without believing in God,’ said a Russian intellectual.

‘I can. Incidentally, it doesn’t taste like caviar.’

‘What does it have to do with caviar?’ asked the Russian intellectual.

‘You think it’s caviar, don’t you?’

‘I don’t.’

‘You think it’s delicious, don’t you?’

‘It’s *magnificent*,’ said the Russian intellectual.

‘It was the first chocolate I’d tasted for over a year, so I savoured every mouthful,’ said the Dutchman, sipping his coffee.

Unlike peasants and partisans the Moscow elite displayed a benevolent disposition towards Napoleon’s army and would offer French officers chocolate and even *foie gras* whenever there was *something* in their cellars. Of course they knew that sooner or later everything would be burnt to ashes in the fire destined to destroy the capital of Russia and the enemy whose presence on Russian soil was tolerated only because the New Testament enjoined the common reader to turn the other cheek as often as necessary. At some point, however, the other cheek had become so red the Russians decided to pursue the French army and kill whoever *might* be killed: they knew there was an immortal man among the French officers. He would trudge along the snowy track to the top of a hill and go down again to join the army in which he believed no longer: it had not offered him death. ‘You must be exhausted after trudging all that way with your backpack,’ a French officer said to him.

‘I *am* exhausted,’ he answered. ‘Why didn’t they burn me?’

He spoke to the Tsar about his predicament and the way he could redeem himself without undermining the regime regarded by some intellectuals as tyrannical. ‘I’ve nothing against your Majesty,’ he said.

‘So you have no urge to assassinate me?’ asked the Tsar.

‘Don’t you sentence your subjects to death for nothing, for one word? Suppose I told you this word.’

The Tsar acceded to his request and for a while his body imitated a pendulum as it swung to and fro in one of Moscow’s courtyards where they used to hang revolutionaries and ordinary citizens.

Whenever someone sought to remove the noose from his neck he would say, 'Please let me hang till tomorrow.' At first people gathered around his corpse and even touched it to make sure its owner was still alive, but soon everybody grew accustomed to the sight and children stopped flinging stones at his head. No one evinced any desire to torture him; frustrated and weary, he finally liberated himself from the gallows.

'If the famine continues,' said Napoleon, 'there's real danger of mass starvation.' His soldiers began to eat their own horses, but the Dutchman was not hungry despite the scarcity of food about which everybody complained: the number of horses diminished alarmingly. 'I eat only for pleasure,' he explained.

'Do you lose weight if you don't eat?' asked an officer.

'I never lose anything except my patience,' he answered.

In the twentieth century this capacity to live on an empty stomach stood him in good stead whenever he was sent to prison: the authorities believed he was permanently on hunger strike while he merely shunned the food allotted to convicts.

The Russian authorities *would* have ignored any manifestation of his anger, but nobody thought he had gone on hunger strike: the entire army was in the same dire straits. Besides, he might not have rejected the *delicious* food he availed himself of in France and Switzerland—the countries he began to recognise and recall on account of their cuisine. He recalled Russia for different reasons and, oddly enough, hunger and burning houses did not figure among his memories; at least they did not stick out. During his subsequent travels through Europe he thought about peasants and their words which Tolstoy immortalised later on in *War and Peace* where Platon Karataev gives lessons to Pierre Bezukhov. The Dutchman also took a few lessons from peasants one of whom told him to live normally, as if nothing had ever happened. 'You mean I should forget the murder I committed?'

'Forget everything,' the peasant answered. 'Nothing has ever happened. Life starts anew every minute. And this minute has no idea what other minutes do. Perhaps they don't do anything. And if they do, what does it matter? This minute is all that counts. And you share this minute with everybody. We are all immortal during this minute—as long as it lasts.'

'What about those who die during this minute?' he asked.

'Let them die. They've already lived *their* minute. Everyone has his own minute on this earth.'

'But you said we all shared the same minute, didn't you?' The Dutchman was waiting for an answer.

'We share the same *life*,' the peasant explained.

'The same *eternity*? Spinoza would have spoken of *substance*.'

'Can't you see this blade of grass?' asked the peasant. 'Can't you touch it? No one prevents you from touching it.'

'God or Nature,' said the Dutchman. 'Let's touch it.'

'Don't we have the same life?' asked the peasant.

‘You don’t have my immortality.’

‘Immortality is just a minute, nothing else. And we are moving through this minute right now.’

Out of kindness, a Russian nobleman undertook to translate the peasant’s remarks into French; he was not interested in the discussion that went on until dawn.

One episode particularly struck the Dutchman’s imagination. One morning shouts of ‘hurrah’ awoke him and he sprang to his feet to find out what had happened. He saw a red staircase on which the Empress appeared in her crown and purple, accompanied by the Grand Duke, the Danish crown prince and members of the Imperial Family. She walked under a canopy carried by sixteen high-ranking persons. The train of the purple was carried by four chamberlains and supported at the shoulders by two masters of the hunt. Presently the Dutchman caught sight of another canopy carried by thirty-two field officers. They brought it to the lower steps of the red staircase where thirty-two generals took it from them. This canopy was held up on sixteen posts and, placed on its gilded cornice, four imperial crowns proclaimed the might of Russian soldiers. The Dutchman counted as many as sixteen bouquets of ostrich feathers in black, yellow and white.

Given the war-time privations and depravations, the pageantry on which the Dutchman gazed with amazement was downright surrealistic, and even the military parade he attended in November 1941—Hitler’s army was at the gates of Moscow, not far from Red Square—paled into insignificance beside it. Dressed in the Imperial purple, with the sceptre in his right hand and the orb in his left, the Emperor sat down on the throne. Then he placed the sceptre and orb on cushions; the Empress came and knelt before her august spouse on a velvet cushion fringed with gold plait.

Napoleon showed up on one of the balconies overlooking Red Square, took in the festive panorama at a glance and retired into his bedroom where he resumed his battle with space. ‘Here’s Moscow,’ he said whenever he stood by the door. Then he would take a few steps, reach his bed and lie down on it. ‘Here’s Paris and I’ll never leave it again, whatever they order me to do.’ But, driven by an irrepressible desire, he would make for the door once again. ‘This part of the room looks like the capital of Asia, doesn’t it?’ he said to one of his officers. ‘And doesn’t my bed look like Paris?’

‘Paris is wherever *you* are,’ said Murat.

‘Of course it is. The whole of France is where I am, the entire world. Do they intend to intimidate me with their banquets? Food is of no importance, provided you don’t die of starvation in some provincial city. The Flying Dutchman can go without food for years, for centuries. In no respect am I inferior to him, to this murderer. Am I not immortal myself? Remove these dishes from my chest of drawers—I’m not hungry.’

During his sojourns in Russia the Dutchman knew he was not in Paris on account of the people he encountered: they neither looked nor sounded like the French with the exception of a few noblemen who stood in sharp contrast to the main population of their motherland, to merchants and peasants. These drank vodka as they talked about wars, peace and God on Whom they relied for their happiness all the while excluding their own participation in the process. They never said, ‘Once we get these few

problems straightened out, we should be all right.’ Actually they never used the word ‘problem’—not only because, in the nineteenth century, it was not used as widely as after the Second World War. They just said, ‘Well, things are looking up, thank God.’ Yet no one—not even the talker—could detect any sign of improvement. And they consoled the Dutchman by promising him that God was sure to take from his life whatever, in His infinite mercy, He had bestowed upon it. ‘Don’t be afraid of immortality,’ they said. ‘With the help of God you’ll get over it’—as if it were nothing more than a bout of flu or another temporary illness. In their company he felt like cursing God once again—for His *infinite* mercy.

Often he was obliged to seek the help of the nobleman without whom he would not have understood a word of what some people were saying. Perhaps it *was* better not to understand those words which infuriated him beyond measure, goading him to curse the Almighty and thereby aggravate his plight. Yet he took a liking to the Russians: unconsciously he wished to gauge the size of his distress by finding out what could have been worse than ‘the present state of affairs. And there *is* something worse,’ he reflected as he looked around.

## A FRIEND, A MISTRESS

The Dutchman was badly in need of another crime, of another attempt at his own life that was reluctant to let him go; but he hardly needed a friend. However, the Russian prince—an interpreter of sorts in whose company he played cards and other games—made a few striking suggestions as they talked about life, death and women. (‘Why not murder a little girl? Why not *rape* her into the bargain? “Lolita”. Or just “Olita”—ten-year old. Or “Ita”—nine-year old. “Beatrice.”’) His inborn cruelty and acquired negligence seemed irreplaceable not only within Russian borders, but even in Paris where they renewed their friendship soon after Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo. Unlike Russian peasants, he seldom if ever spoke of God to Whom, however, he prayed with amazing regularity. ‘Prayers will never harm anyone,’ he used to say as if to justify his extraordinary zeal.

‘Do you never implore the Almighty to destroy your enemies?’ the Dutchman asked.

‘I always take care of my enemies myself—single-handed,’ the prince pointed out. ‘The same goes for my friends.’

But most of the time they talked about women and philosophy. The prince wondered if the Dutchman’s manhood had in any way suffered under the influence of time. ‘No,’ said the Dutchman. ‘Actually I’m a better man now. I used to appreciate only their legs—from behind. Today I appreciate their legs from every angle imaginable. And, believe me, I’ve got a fertile imagination, especially after drinking a bottle of red Burgundy. I crawl on all fours and hang from chandeliers.’

‘Do you appreciate only their legs?’ asked the prince.

‘Of course not. The scope of my inquiries into female beauty has widened tremendously over the last forty years. At some point, I must confess, I lost all interest in women—without losing my verve, mind you! And then I re-discovered their buttocks and breasts.’

‘Your everlasting life hasn’t been wasted on you,’ said the prince.

‘A hundred years are necessary to relish one single body to the utmost—from every angle, in all movements. The point is no body remains the same throughout a hundred years.’

‘Except *your* body,’ said the prince. ‘I still don’t understand why you complain about your immortality.’

‘Because I know that a beautiful body may remain beautiful forever, provided its owner makes her mind up and behaves as outrageously as I did many years ago. But the women I fall in love with are afraid of God and hell. They’re reluctant to comply with my wishes. Only immortality is more intolerable and painful than *fleeting* beauty.’

The Dutchman explained that his example testified decisively to the *eternal* nature of beauty, which human beings renounced because, in their opinion, this kind of eternity—the Faustian eternity—might lead to their irrevocable exclusion from the number of the elect. In *his* opinion, however, beauty was far more important than the salvation of the soul. ‘If there were several immortals around me I wouldn’t feel so lonely, so utterly forsaken,’ he would say, gazing around. ‘All

the bodies I love literally disintegrate under my fingers. Quevedo says that death is never in the future or in the past.'

'Leibniz also wrote something to this effect,' the prince pointed out.

'According to him, I wasn't damned because I'd defied the Almighty. It's my permanent disposition he's worried about. He thinks I hate God.'

'Don't you?'

'Do I really hate God round the clock? Even in my sleep? Leibniz speaks about the amplitude of one's soul, comparing it to a pendulum. Is my soul's amplitude filled with my hatred of God?'

The Dutchman recalled his soul as his body swung on the gallows in the courtyard where children and passers-by, upon realising he was still alive, endeavoured to stone him to death. 'Here's the utmost amplitude of my soul,' he said to himself. 'Is it filled with my hatred for God?' He thought about several women during his sojourn in that courtyard, and surely during those spells of lucidity he did not hate God or His angels: there was no room for them in his soul, in his consciousness. 'I wish Olga could see me now. Don't I look touching and pitiful? Her maternal instinct would come to the fore.'

In the nineteenth century he was very fond of women whose bodies he came to adore so frantically that even his life-sentence seemed no longer unjust—an insurmountable obstacle to happiness. But soon he found that only *eternal* expression of beauty appealed to every fibre of his body and no other body, however irresistible, was to keep pace with his own vigour and bloom. What he actually demanded of his companions was not 'to keep pace' with him but, on the contrary, to slow down, eventually coming to a standstill: a feat beyond their ken. He was doomed to attend the spectacle of their decay without ever losing an ounce of his own freshness. Living with one woman for years and years has one indisputable advantage: you grow old together and consequently your own decrepitude does not seem unique—in a class of its own. It is a part of general decrepitude, of death that living creatures carry on them like a purse. (Did Leibniz say that?) The women with whom the Dutchman shared his leisure hours—he had only leisure hours at his disposal—would curse him upon looking at his fresh-as-a-daisy body; alas, this curse was not powerful enough to propel them into his dimension the number of which he did not know. (It was not the *fourth* dimension.) But he did know that neither space nor time had any dominion over it. 'Why don't you curse *Him*?' he asked. 'He's also immortal, isn't He?'

'But I can't see His body,' one of them pointed out.

'Would you curse Him if He *were* within your field of vision?'

Not all of those women believed in God as fervently as their upbringing and background might have suggested; but none of them ever evinced any desire to curse Him, to spit on His image and trample upon it with shouts of triumph. It was useless to ask a Russian woman to spit on an icon. During Napoleon's stay in Moscow, he fell in love with an enchanting countess. 'Olga, Olga, Olga!'

She might have felt pity for him in the courtyard where he imitated Leibniz's pendulum for almost three weeks, but at the time she was staying with her cousin in St Petersburg and could not pay him a visit, however short. Her husband had lost his mortal life at Borodino and tears still welled in her eyes whenever the battle was mentioned within her hearing.

They met during a ball given in the Dutchman's honour several months before the Russian campaign; everybody knew he was Napoleon's adviser, but for once Russian curiosity prevailed over Russian patriotism. 'After all, he's the Flying *Dutchman*,' they said, glancing at his attire. 'I wouldn't talk to him if he were the Flying *Frenchman*. Would you? Actually the French don't fly, I'm told. They're insects, aren't they?' 'Some insects do fly, Countess.'

They talked for a while and even executed a dance in spite of her husband's presence, as if they had been aware he would shortly perish on the 'field of honour'. After the battle during which the Dutchman performed a few miracles they met once more—on the road leading away from Moscow. 'Don't leave,' he implored. 'We'll be happy in one of your wooden palaces.'

They were happy for a while: he has no recollection of how long their bliss lasted. But it lasted long enough to make him spot the signs of decay on her body and even in her character—an impassable barrier between his immortality and the shortness of her existence. 'Why don't you drink vodka?' the countess would ask, forcing him to drink. 'The Russians drink vodka and grow old. Let's order a bottle of vodka. Don't you have vodka in your restaurants?' They were sitting on the Champs Elysées. 'Stop drinking wine. Red wine is *good* for your health and vodka is *bad* for your health. From now on you'll drink only vodka! And you'll grow old like everybody, like the Russians.'

Leaning on his arm, she would come home and fall into a drunken stupor in one of the corridors; no effort on his part could make her reach their bed where he often counted on her deteriorated body to convey him to the Kingdom of Love which was better than his Kingdom of Eternity. Was he really in love with her? Did he love her as she was: mortal, miserable, decrepit? With the passing of the years he grew estranged from her because she did not correspond to his childish idea of everlasting beauty. Did he ever realise that only *fleeting* beauty was precious?

A photograph is never beautiful unless it grows old like everything around it: human bodies, furniture, fruit. Old brownish photographs are far more beautiful than recent ones, aren't they?

The prince told him he was much more aroused by the flaws he would discover when manipulating a female body than by its qualities, however impressive. 'I don't like symmetry,' he said, 'because it's cold, distant. Legs shouldn't resemble straight lines drawn on a piece of paper.'

'I'm not talking about flaws and curves,' said the Dutchman. 'Do wrinkles also arouse you?'

'Doesn't Leibniz speak of folds?' said the prince. 'There are many folds in the human soul. Why should they remain hidden? I like reading the souls of my mistresses.'

Olga's face displayed so many wrinkles the Dutchman realised she would not accompany him as far as the twentieth century which was thirty years away—too far away for her beautiful legs. Actually, they lost their beauty during that fateful year when cellulite intensified its attacks and finally

invaded the greater part of her body. ‘Why is it mainly women that suffer from cellulite?’ wondered the Dutchman, looking at *his* naked body in a mirror. He already knew that cellulite-produced fat could not be removed merely by giving up pastries of which Olga was fond in spite of diabetes and the doctor’s recommendations. ‘I’ve always had a sweet tooth,’ she would say, implying that her age was in no way responsible for her appetite.

‘You can eat as much as you want.’

‘Why do you say that? You don’t love me any more. You don’t mind my being ugly and old.’

‘It’s too late to curse the Almighty,’ he said, thinking of how old people might fare in the Kingdom of Eternity.

‘I’m prepared to do it,’ she said with defiance. ‘Eternal damnation is better than cellulite.’

She cursed God for hours on end; after every bout of hysteria she looked at herself in a mirror to find out if He had rejuvenated her in recompense for her blasphemous ardour. The Dutchman could not bring himself to pity her; yet he was aware that pity might give rise to tenderness which is inseparable from the contemplation of human infirmities. It is a particular kind of tenderness known only within the bounds of time, of the perishable world: immortals never experience it in their dimension. Was the Dutchman irrevocably deprived of this feeling? Anyway he asked her not to curse the Almighty in his presence: he was weary of curses. Besides, no curse is efficient without a crime, without a prelude to any separation from God. But what murder could she commit at her age? ‘I might poison somebody,’ she said, her eyes sparkling in the sunlight. He had no doubt that the sun was the only source of the fire burning in her breast at which she pointed from time to time as if to prove the veracity of her words.

‘Such a murder is too distant and cold,’ the Dutchman said. ‘It’s not cruel enough unless you sit with your victim at the same dinner table, staring at her all the time.’

‘I’d rather poison a *man*,’ Olga announced. But she ended up coming round to the Dutchman’s point of view: such a murder would not work even if accompanied by a blasphemous gesture. So she borrowed a kitchen knife from their cook and began to train herself by piercing cushions.

‘Why not kill your next of kin?’ said the Dutchman.

‘I’d never have killed my husband,’ she said. ‘It’s a pity I can’t kill *you*.’

She mouthed the usual platitudes about his invulnerability but he decided to bear with her, ‘come hell or high water’. (The overuse and misuse of this expression in his diary can be easily explained.) Anyway her mortality had almost done its duty both inside and outside her body. She died at Christmastide and was buried in the suburbs of Geneva.

## THE DAMNED ARE USEFUL

The talks with the prince inspired a few entries in the Dutchman's diary, where he had a go at the problem of damnation which Leibniz—the prince's favourite philosopher—tackled most efficiently. In his youth the Dutchman had no penchant for philosophy and philosophising; yet his father's library offered him an impressive assortment of books he might have drawn upon when seeking to probe into the enigmas of life. His meeting with Spinoza was instrumental in bringing him closer not only to these enigmas but to philosophy itself: whenever on shore, he never failed to purchase books on philosophical subjects. And he would devote several hours a day to meditation that had nothing to do with the technique advocated by yogi.

One day the prince astounded him during their customary exchange of views on the subject of damnation. 'Do you know that the damned are useful?' he said. 'If it weren't for their wickedness, no progress of the soul could be envisaged in this life.'

'Do you think our soul goes from one state to another?' asked the Flying Dutchman. 'Isn't it as immortal as I am? It's status quo as far as I am concerned.'

'You told me about your flights in the seventeenth century. Our soul flies as well, passing from one star to another.'

Again they broached the subject of the soul and its amplitude which, according to Leibniz, can be increased on condition that you wish to *progress* from one state to another, moving higher and higher towards the stars. There is no point in repeating the same state of affairs indefinitely—even if you are immortal. But the damned are loath to progress, to go upwards: they hate the Almighty and stick to this hatred which corresponds to the smallest amplitude of the soul. 'My hatred of God is great,' writes the Flying Dutchman. 'Why is the amplitude of my hatred so small? Can't I *improve* my hatred of God? I think I hate Him much more in this century compared with what I experienced in the course of my voyages around the Cape of Good Hope. Haven't I made progress during this stretch of time? Or do they call it "regress"? Anyway, I am sure that in the next century I shall hate him even more, increasing the amplitude of my hatred. Is my hatred synonymous with my soul? What about all those women I have been in love with during the same stretch of time? Perhaps my love lodges in my body, leaving my soul in peace or rather in war, if I may say so: it constantly wages war with God. Should I express my gratitude instead? Do I have to *thank* Him for my everlasting life? Apparently even the damned are free to choose between this and that, between hatred and love. They invariably choose hatred because they are damned. Or is it the other way round? The prince says that what counts is one's last thought. Judas' last thought was jam-packed with hatred towards Jesus Christ and His Father. But where is *my* last thought? Why am I not given an opportunity to have a last thought? I might express my gratitude to God when on the point of dying. Suppose this is my last thought. All right. I thank Thee my Lord. I cannot thank Thee enough for the gifts Thou hast showered upon me ever since I was born. I was born thanks to Thee and I have never regretted it. And thanks to Thy

magnanimity I am dying now. Thanks to Thy compassion I have been allowed to leave this world at last. Shall I wait now? I may die in a few minutes. The point is I am likely to engender other thoughts during *this* stretch of time.'

The prince told him that the damned were useful because their evil nature allowed other people to progress on the way to the salvation of their souls. 'There's a balance in the world,' he explained. 'A good action is counterbalanced by a bad one and vice versa. The same goes for people themselves and even their thoughts. A pious thought is echoed by a blasphemous one. Don't you inwardly blaspheme during my prayers?'

'But for my generous assistance,' wrote the Dutchman, 'he would never have prayed, I suppose. Now he is dead and I wonder why my thoughts do not grow more pious. There is room for improvement now because he is dead. No, it does not work so simply. When a godly person dies, his counterpart springs into existence somewhere. Is that how it works? And a damned individual is damned once again, at the same instant. The damned are damned non-stop. We have no time to appropriate the space left vacant by the corpse. As a matter of fact, those vacant spaces are never vacant; they are always occupied by the elect. In Paris you cannot rent a flat on the Place de Furstenberg for the same reason: either it remains in the family or you have to queue for a hundred years. I could rent a flat on the Place de Furstenberg around 2090. What for? By that time I shall not be able to tell one place from another, one country from another. For more than three centuries my life has been modelled upon the movement of a pendulum: now I know where I am, now I do not. The same goes for women, as the prince used to say. Now I love them, now I pay no attention to their physiques, to their souls. I wish I could rent a flat on the other side of life. Some maintain it is the dark side of Creation. What do I care whether it is dark or luminous? I would queue for my niche in the Hereafter—three hundred years, if necessary. Will my crime be forgiven and forgotten around 2090?'

The prince was rather explicit about the adamant nature of Belsebuth—the king of the damned—who refused point blank to save his own soul by ceasing to hate the Almighty. 'Why should I relinquish my only pleasure?' he said. 'Without this hatred my life has no meaning.'

'My life has no meaning either—in spite of my hatred,' said the Dutchman.

'A saint was allowed to save Belsebuth's soul,' said the prince. 'He prayed to God on behalf of the Devil and God agreed to forget his crimes.'

'I wouldn't accept to be forgiven,' said the Dutchman. 'No one has the right to forgive and forget.'

'So the saint paid him a visit and said, "God no longer bears any grudge against you." "No strings attached?" asked Belsebuth. "God just suggests you shouldn't hate Him any more. Mind you, He doesn't require your love."'

'It's a question of light, isn't it?' The Dutchman struck a match and lit a candle. 'Now there's some light in my soul. I look at this flame and my eyes transmit it to my soul because they're

connected with it. I don't shut my eyes. And I see no hatred in this light, do you? Aren't we invited to a ball tonight? My soul will be luminous in that palace.'

After the mazurka the Dutchman touched upon the amplitude of the soul as he gazed around the ballroom illumined with nine chandeliers. 'Do you think my soul is incapable of extending its amplitude in such a hall?' he asked.

'There's a lot of hatred in here,' said the prince.

'When I dance,' wrote the Dutchman, 'my soul keeps me company: it does not remain motionless. And every movement heralds a metamorphosis, doesn't it? It *is* a metamorphosis, a sign of progression. One state is replaced by another. The prince says that my contemplation of light is not an efficacious treatment because it slows down the progression of the disease without curing the patient. But why don't I give up the ghost? I ask. If light—or anything, for that matter—cannot cure me, I am bound to die. What kind of malady is it anyway? It seems to confer everlasting life upon the patient. The prince maintains that the disease of the soul has nothing to do with tuberculosis. "One doesn't die from it," he says. But should one *live* on account of it? The word "disease" must mean something even in the context of a meaningless life. Unfortunately the prince did not live long enough to read Carnap who said in 1934, "Philosophy is to be replaced by the logic of science and the logic of science is the logical syntax of the language of science." According to him, the only legitimate form of philosophical enquiry is logical analysis. Of course the prince might have said that Carnap's bid to reduce all language began to flounder almost as soon as he endeavoured to work out its consequences. But whatever he *would* have said, the word "disease" is not associated with everlasting life. If a disease is not fatal it can be cured. If I am cured, however, I shall give up the ghost. And if my disease is incurable I am likely to live forever, come hell or high water. Is that logical? Should I take into consideration "the context principle"? Frege says that it is only in the context of a statement that we know the meanings of the words which compose it. Take the sentence "I am ill". This sentence is uttered by various people at various times and the meaning they seek to convey depends upon the circumstances in which the words "I am ill" are used. A cancer patient might say, "I am ill." A victim of unrequited love might put his hand on his heart and say, "I am ill." And some of those star-crossed lovers die of their imaginary disease.'

## MONEY

The Dutchman wrote whatever came into his head—even his biographers cannot make head nor tail of it—as long as he had enough money either in the strongroom of his ship or in his bank account. Actually he mistrusted banks because he knew from experience that, sooner or later, they were likely to be robbed. In the initial period of his eternal life he relied on his crew to get him as much money as he needed: in the seventeenth century pirates were not yet a thing of the past. When an unfamiliar vessel glided into his field of vision he put two fingers into his mouth and, upon hearing his long strident whistle, the sailors would resume their military operations.

During the Russian campaign the ship was destroyed and the crew, making the most of this accident, vanished into thin air to the amazement of the Dutchman who believed they were supposed to stick together until doomsday. Luckily for him, Olga was not in the habit of blaming her lover for his incapacity to make his living. Besides, she was aware that an ordinary citizen might lose his livelihood in the aftermath of a war. Of course he told her about the loss of the ship – without going into detail, however: she was in the dark as to the way he had earned his livelihood *before* the Russian campaign. Actually she might have found all those stories rather amusing if not romantic—his long whistle, pirates, swords and guns—but he was reluctant to run any risk, especially at the outset of their relationship.

She inherited a large fortune from her husband; nor did her own family belong to the impoverished part of the Russian aristocracy. In the course of their romance, which lasted for several decades, the Dutchman could devote a lot of time to writing down his philosophical reflections: he did not need to put a mask on and rob a few banks to sustain himself and his mistress. And planning a bank robbery takes a lot of time even if you are impervious to bullets and other emissaries of death.

The first robbery he carried out besmeared the record of the Chicago police which failed to deal properly with a representative of immortal species. Unversed in the art of robbery, he did not even bother to put on a mask; actually his identity, if any, was a mask in its own right. But he did not forget to purchase a gun and even threatened to use it if ‘you disobey my orders’. As he uttered these unequivocal words he pointed his gun at the employees who raised their arms and presently lowered them to give him a dozen wads of banknotes. He put the wads in a bag and heard a siren. In his turn, a police officer pointed his gun at him, shouting, ‘Drop this bag or I’ll shoot!’

‘I don’t mind,’ said the Dutchman.

‘You don’t mind my killing you?’ shouted the officer.

‘Go ahead,’ said the Dutchman. The officer fired. ‘Do you think you missed?’ The Dutchman beamed with delight at the officer’s amazement.

‘I never miss,’ said the officer.

‘Not at this range,’ said the Dutchman, taking a few steps in the direction of his opponent.

‘I never miss,’ repeated the officer, firing again and again. ‘You’re wearing a bullet-proof vest,’ he said at last.

‘I’m not,’ said the Dutchman. Gently he put the bag down and started to unbutton his shirt.

‘What do you think you’re doing?’ asked the officer, but the Dutchman did not say a word until the upper half of his body appeared in all its splendour before the officer’s very eyes.

‘Try again,’ he said. Taken aback by the Dutchman’s partial nudity, the officer hesitated and did not discharge his gun immediately. ‘Are you so much impressed by the beauty of my torso? Do you want me to take off my trousers as well?’ The Dutchman flung his shirt over a counter and took his trousers off.

A few shots resounded through the bank. The Dutchman picked up the bag and, leaving the trousers on the floor, strutted out. Two colleagues of the wonder-struck policeman did not even attempt to use their guns, letting the Dutchman proceed down the alley at a leisurely pace. He might have got away with it, but for the interference of a woman who pointed at his stark naked body and shouted, ‘Arrest him!’

‘Walking naked around the city is an offence,’ said a police officer who happened to be strolling nearby.

Imprisoned for his double crime, the Dutchman was freed through the same force which had opened the door of his cell three centuries before. ‘It’s easier to play the money markets,’ he said to himself, recalling how he had lost everything in the Great Depression. ‘What’s the use of inheriting a large fortune?’ And Olga’s face with all its wrinkles slowly *emerged* from the past: he could not help comparing his memory—alongside other phenomena—to the sea in the depth of which were lying his late friends and mistresses. ‘Submarine O surfaced 10 miles off the coast.’ Only recently did his scholars realise he was talking about Olga who, for some reason, had surfaced 10 miles off the coast. Did he wish to imply he had not been expecting this memory to turn up at that particular moment? Or was it the way he expressed a *distant* memory? ‘Submarine X surfaced 80 miles off the coast.’ Was it an episode related to the eighteenth century? And what does X signify? The number of X’s augmented every year; the scholars began to suspect they stood for the people whose names the Dutchman had forgotten. What *did* he remember? Their faces, their jokes, their paradoxes? The name of the Russian prince to whom he talked about Leibniz and other philosophers never appears in the diary. ‘Submarine P surfaced 30 miles off the coast.’

His second robbery was highly auspicious in both aesthetic and financial terms: he got more money than he had bargained for. This time he wore a mask representing a wolf as if in the hope of being taken for a sea-wolf—another instance of his obsession with the sea. ‘Don’t you see who I am?’ he asked, making for the nearest cashier who raised his arms and began to cry. ‘Don’t cry! Just give me all the money you’ve got.’ Using another bag—the old one having been confiscated by a prison guard—the Dutchman hid the money and rushed out, heading for a car inside which there sat a blue-eyed brunette. Like a pair of youngsters, they spent the whole evening at a funfair, eating candyfloss

and riding donkeys on a roundabout. In a shooting gallery the Dutchman demonstrated his inability to kill anybody except a wolf that the owner, taking pity on him, removed from the stand and put on the counter in close proximity to the double-barrelled shotgun. 'I wish they'd killed me like that,' said the Dutchman firing a shot. 'Everything will come true in the long run! Suppose the death of this wolf is my own death, an image of it. Or its metaphor, if you like. They often say, "It seemed to materialise out of nowhere." Well, it shouldn't materialise out of *nowhere*. I'm keen on materialisation, you know. A metaphor coming true, an idiom. "This coffee is you death." I drink the coffee in question and die on the spot. Beautiful, isn't it? And there's no poison in the coffee, mind you. I die because it's a metaphor of my death. A metaphor coming into existence. Money doesn't grow on trees. Suppose it does grow on trees. Not only on Christmas trees but also on ordinary ones: on birches and oaks. *L'argent ne tombe pas du ciel*. Just imagine money falling from the sky. Wouldn't you wait a million years for such a miracle to happen? Let's materialise this idiom tonight and I'll never steal again.'

They returned home and the Dutchman propped a ladder against a wall in the living room. Holding the bag with the money, he climbed up this ladder, opened the bag and fished a handful of banknotes from it. He began to scatter these banknotes around the room while his mistress undressed and crouched on the floor, 'taking the shower', as she put it. The banknotes fell on her but did not cover her body from head to foot, for all his efforts.

## ETERNAL RECURRENCE

Time is either open or closed. A prisoner is bound to come back to the spot where he stood some time ago as he paces up and down his cell; but if the door of the cell bursts open he walks out and may never return to this cell, foregoing the pleasure of eternal recurrence. If time is closed we are bound to meet our late friends and relatives, provided we live long enough to chance upon an episode from our distant past. The Dutchman could rely on his immortality to re-marry his wife and probably kill her once again: eternal recurrence might force him to repeat the same action in spite of his current mood.

Another hypothesis tells us that time can branch out, allowing us to perform contradictory acts *simultaneously* as if they were independent of each other. You may kill your rival and spare his life, a glass of champagne in your hand. ‘Let us drink to your health,’ you tell him as he throws your revolver out of the window. You may also become your own rival, although having an additional number of sex acts with the same woman makes no sense in the world where so many representatives of female species are highly-sexed or even sex-starved.

‘Why didn’t I become my virtuous wife’s lover? I might have killed myself three centuries ago. No immortality, no guilty conscience. Would I have killed myself out of jealousy? Hardly. This murder must be committed by someone else, by a jealous husband whose wife I shall court to whip him up into a rage. Only a similar act can put an end to my life. A false repetition. Does Nietzsche advocate cyclical time? He advocates both cyclical and linear time: his future is *selective*, according to Gilles Deleuze. It does not repeat itself automatically. You discard your laziness, your half-intentions, your half-decisions. You assert yourself, consolidating your future and your past. Only your exploits are allowed to survive, to repeat themselves. How could *I* assert myself? By dying at the hand of a jealous husband, by outwitting the Almighty Who prevents me from committing suicide. No bullet is as powerful as jealousy. I am asserting myself in this paraphrase of eternal recurrence. A daring exploit, a gallant exploit.’

He found a man who was belligerent enough to kill his rival in the heat of the moment. After a long waltz the Dutchman kissed his wife on a balcony and the man punched him in the stomach so ferociously that he doubled up, lost his balance, broke the railing and plummeted down. The scene took place on the eleventh floor; the people clustered around the prostrate body but did not call an ambulance. ‘The dead don’t need ambulances, do they?’ said a middle-aged man.

‘The dead don’t need anything,’ said another middle-aged man.

‘I feel like a cup of hot chocolate,’ said the Dutchman as he rose to his feet and flicked a tiny scrap of paper from his shoulder. ‘Is that what your supermen do in movies?’

‘Are you Superman?’ asked a teenager.

A woman screamed and fainted, her body drooping in the arms of yet another middle-aged man. ‘Usually women faint at the sight of blood,’ said the Dutchman. ‘But I haven’t lost a drop of blood,

have I? I lose my blood only when they try to kill me with a machine gun. Where are all those bullets, I wonder? Not in my body—they X-rayed my chest last week. Do the bullets melt inside my body?’

Awe-struck and rooted to the spot, the crowd listened to his monologue without asking for additional details. Only the teenager interrupted him now and then to clarify this or that point. ‘The bullets might have bounced off your chest,’ he surmised. ‘It must be dangerous to walk in your company. Do you help people like Superman?’

‘No. My immortality is wholly useless, I’m afraid.’

On the day when the incident took place—March 23, 1933—Adolf Hitler came to power.

As might have been presumed, the Flying Dutchman participated in several wars, hoping to find death or at least a desire to live: upon witnessing so many massacres one is likely to become an immortality addict. He found nothing except the feeling of disgust which would have increased enormously had he been on equal footing with all those soldiers and officers whose cruelty was only on a par with their stupidity. Of course he knew that a number of poets and philosophers fought amidst those mammals to whose species he belonged no more, but he was at a loss to understand why they marched against their so-called enemies instead of staying at home. ‘They are not even on the point of mutiny,’ he wrote to one of his mistresses. ‘I would rather commit suicide than get involved in such a shameful enterprise. They can commit suicide, can’t they? What is more, some of them have volunteered.’ He did not realise that his point of view, though justifiable to some extent, was dictated to him by his immunity to death, by his inability to receive the slightest wound. According to Schopenhauer, it is our knowledge of death along with the spectacle of the misery and suffering offered by wars that gives the strongest impulse to philosophical reflection. Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, which the Dutchman read in the late thirties, might have become a mere treatise on the nature of logic had not its author been posted to a fighting unit on the Russian Front (March 1916.) Goaded by the terrifying spectacle of the war, Wittgenstein worked into the *Tractatus* his reflections on ethics, aesthetics, the soul and the meaning of life. But life has no meaning for an immortal man.

For him the notion of war boiled down to a succession of bullets and cannonballs that moved from one side to another with unbearable noise. In the First World War a vertical movement was added to this logical picture: aeroplanes dropping bombs on cities and troops. ‘I hear a sound and see a body fall,’ he writes in his diary. ‘Then several bodies fall and cover the earth, but other bodies continue to run and shout “Hurrah!” Their hymn to victory is interrupted by a hymn to death performed by a cannonball or a bomb. Aeroplanes are gigantic birds whose excrements may kill dozens of people and raze a skyscraper. Why did they build this skyscraper, I wonder? Didn’t they know it would be destroyed sooner or later? Why was this man conceived? Didn’t his parents know he would go to war and die like a hero? Didn’t they know he would be buried as the Unknown Soldier? A man stretches his hand out and other men run somewhere. Do they rush because every one of them wishes to get the best seat for a strip show? Only a few tickets are available and they run for their lives so as not to miss the show. A logical picture, isn’t it? But there is no logic in war. They run towards

their own death. Even I never do it. I prefer walking towards my death with dignity. Is that why I am still alive?’

Hitler posed as the champion of Europe against the scourge of Bolshevism and insisted he was a man of peace who wished only to suppress the inequalities of the Versailles Treaty. In January 1935 a plebiscite in the Saarland returned that territory to Germany. In March of the same year Hitler announced the introduction of conscription. In November 1937 he outlined his plans of future conquest—beginning with Austria and Czechoslovakia—to a secret meeting of his military leaders. With a war in the offing, the Dutchman resolved to settle down in Switzerland, away from the unbearable noise he knew only too well. ‘Submarine T surfaced 2 miles off the coast. He asked me if I was prepared to help people in the footsteps of Superman. But how could I help them? By catching bombs? By shielding philosophers from bullets? Anyway, Wittgenstein is unlikely to take part in this war. And how to save the Jews? Why am I not allowed to split my immortality into a myriad of years and distribute them among all the victims of Hitler’s insanity? His past, present and future victims. Some of them have died already. Another war, another instance of eternal recurrence. Bullets, bombs, running people. Why do all wars look alike in spite of technological progress? Because it is hatred that flies from one side to another and drops from the sky. And hatred does not change under the influence of technological progress. I know what I am talking about: I am a hatred connoisseur after all. Is it better to hate God or humans? Which is worse? I have never seen God, although I may feel His power when falling from the roof of a skyscraper and rising to my feet almost at once to the amazement of onlookers. Is it easier to hate someone you know by hearsay or a person standing before your very eyes? If you receive a letter saying you cannot do this and that you may feel hatred towards the person who wrote it, even if you are not acquainted with this person. A soldier to whom his general gives an order may also feel hatred towards this general. He stands in the flesh before the soldier who hates every hair on his body, his every sinew, his every blood vessel. He wishes those vessels could explode to let the general’s blood out. He longs to bathe in his blood and even to drink it, washing down a slice of the general’s body. And churchgoers drink Christ’s blood and eat His body out of love and veneration.’

Once again the Dutchman faced an insoluble problem on which, he felt it consciously and unconsciously, his life partly depended. Indeed he might augment his hatred towards humans, thereby losing a certain amount of energy he needed to curse the Almighty on a daily basis. With Hitler’s rise to power he realised that he might hate a human even more than the Almighty. The documentaries he watched in cinemas displayed for his benefit Adolf Hitler’s body, his way of gesticulating during his speeches and even his voice imitated so wonderfully by Charlie Chaplin. He read *Mein Kampf*—the Bible of the Nazis—only in 1939 and realised he would have hated its author with the same intensity had he never watched him on various screens in New York, Paris and Moscow. Did he hate God as much as Adolf Hitler? Was there no difference between *Mein Kampf* and the Bible?

On the other hand, God created the world and Hitler was part of it alongside all those emperors who sent soldiers from left to right and from right to left. He was far worse than other warmongers on account of his racial theories and their application—a shift in eternal recurrence—but nobody could deny that he belonged to the abominable world from which the Dutchman was forbidden to extricate himself. And this world was created and *sustained* by God without Whom, according to the adepts of different religions, everything would have disappeared in the twinkling of an eye. Why didn't He make Hitler disappear as soon as the latter finished *Mein Kampf*? Is the notion of free will so precious as to make the universe tolerate such a monster in its bosom? 'Many Germans try to assure us they knew nothing of Hitler's concentration camps,' the Dutchman wrote in his diary. 'Some of them are lying through their teeth. But God *must* have known about these camps from the very start. Did He prefer to bestow free will upon humanity? It is better to rot in prison. I hate God on account of free will. Why did He open the door of my prison cell?'

Be that as it may, the Dutchman hated Adolf Hitler with such unflagging energy and enthusiasm that he cursed God only twice a day, contrary to his ritual. The more he hated Hitler the less he abhorred the Almighty and His edicts: even in *his* soul the quantity of hatred was limited.

Hitler was now ready to advance towards the ultimate objective of *Lebensraum* in the East. Confronted by an uncompromising Poland, he strengthened the alliance with Italy (the 'Pact of Steel,' May 1939) and negotiated a non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union, signed on August 24<sup>th</sup>—just within the deadline set for an attack on Poland before the winter. He still disclaimed any quarrel with Britain, but to no avail; the invasion of Poland (September 1<sup>st</sup>) was followed two days later by a British and French declaration of war.

## MACHINES

In 1940 the Dutchman moved to Switzerland. When Hitler invaded the Soviet Union he decided to travel as far as Moscow to increase the quantity of hatred and pity in his soul whose amplitude seemed to suffer from inhibition. He first visited Russia with the French army in 1812 and then returned to her several times. He attended Nicholas II's coronation and also Gurdjieff's lectures in St Petersburg, now bearing the name of Petrograd, where he witnessed the Russian Revolution and its atrocities. Gurdjieff said that man was no better than a machine which functioned under the pressure of circumstances. 'Everything just happens', he used to say, meaning that a human could not interfere on his own behalf. At the end of June 1941 a lot of machines were moving from left to right, from West to East; and there were other machines inside those machines. And there were machines behind the lines where Hitler and his cronies gave orders and drew circles on maps.

Of course, in everyday life people also model their actions upon machines as they walk up and down, enter their offices, write, count, play the money markets, eat sandwiches and drink orange juice. And they model machines upon their actions: no one can really distinguish between machines and humans. Descartes says that animals are machines in disguise, but humans are even more mechanical than animals. A cat may turn down a dainty morsel for reasons better known to itself; a human takes whatever is given to him and may decline a 100-dollar banknote only because he expects you to pay him twice as much.

'I beg to differ,' said an old professor with whom the immortal freak shared a compartment; they both journeyed from Geneva to Munich. 'If offered a chocolate, I always refuse because I've got diabetes.'

'But you wouldn't refuse a spoonful of caviar, even after a hearty dinner. And a millionaire wouldn't refuse another million dollars.'

'Do you think a cat would turn its nose up at caviar after a hearty meal?' asked the professor.

'Animals never eat more than what is necessary for their survival.'

'I do agree,' said the professor, 'that a shipping tycoon wouldn't refuse 100 million dollars because money as such means a lot to him. He may not put those millions to use, mind you, but the very presence of money makes him happy. As for animals, my dog acts exactly like this tycoon. He stores away food for the rainy day that never comes. My charwoman often stumbles across his pantries.'

Nevertheless the Dutchman made no secret of his preference for cats, dogs, horses and other representatives of the animal kingdom. 'Even wolves,' he said, 'are better than humans because you can live with them. They don't attack you when they're full.'

'Refusing a dainty morsel?' said the professor.

‘Humans attack you when they’re full, rich and protected. They attack you because they’re ambitious. A man denies that he has any political ambitions. Shortly afterwards you learn he’s standing for parliament.’

At the German border the Dutchman showed his passport to a customs officer; this time he travelled under the name of John Adams, an American journalist. ‘What’s the purpose of your visit?’ asked the officer. His English accent was unbearable.

‘I’m going to write about the war,’ the Dutchman said.

‘We fight,’ said the officer. ‘We don’t write.’

‘I’ll write for you.’

‘Nobody should write for us.’

All of a sudden the Dutchman grew so weary he took his passport, picked up his suitcase and got off the train which soon resumed its journey to Munich. For a while he walked along the tracks, looking at their monotony and thinking about the impediments he would have been forced to overcome had he ventured into Germany, Poland and Russia. Lifting his head, he noticed that the sun was near the horizon and the sky bade him welcome as if recalling that twilight was the Flying Dutchman’s favourite moment of the day. ‘Is God giving me a sign?’ he wondered. ‘The sky wouldn’t invite me without His permission.’ He spread his arms and took off.

He flew over the border, heading for Linderhof where he intended to spend the night: he was a great admirer of Louis II of Bavaria. ‘His servants would have recognised me, but there are no more servants. And what about that ready-laid table? Does anybody raise it from the basement by means of a trap door and a double helical gearing? Louis showed me how it worked. I didn’t save him either.’

He told the story to some of his American friends who did not know much about Louis II. ‘Wasn’t he mad?’ asked one of them.

‘I learnt about his death from the servants,’ said the Dutchman. ‘He was imprisoned in a castle, but one afternoon the front door flew open and he escaped in company with his doctor who did all he could to prevent him from taking his life. For Louis an open door signified death by drowning.’

Illumined by the moon, Linderhof beckoned to him from afar and continued to seduce him as he landed in the park. The front door flew open and he visited the castle whose layout he could not recall. What he did recall was the performance of Wagner’s *Die Walküre* he had heard at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées under Furtwängler’s baton in 1937. The year of the World Fair in Paris. A string of pavilions stood below Trocadero, by the Seine. Bruno Walter conducted Mozart’s *Requiem* and Bruckner’s *Te Deum*. Oddly enough, those orchestras neither looked nor sounded like machines. They were far more human than humans.

In February 1938, Hitler invited the Austrian chancellor, Kurt von Schuschnigg, to Berchtesgaden and forced him to sign an agreement giving the Austrian Nazis virtually a free hand. When Schuschnigg attempted to repudiate the agreement and announced a plebiscite on the question of an *Anschluss* with Germany, Hitler immediately ordered the occupation of Austria by German

troops. The enthusiastic reception that Hitler himself received decided him to settle the future of Austria by outright annexation. Bruno Walter left Europe where he would have perished in one of the death camps.

‘It was the end,’ wrote the Dutchman. ‘Future generations will not understand what I am writing about in Louis’ bedroom. They will know neither Wagner nor Louis II of Bavaria without whom *Die Walküre* and *Tristan und Isolde* would not have been composed. Humans are nothing but machines ensconced in the machines they have created. After the première of *Tristan und Isolde*, Louis II stopped his train and took a stroll in the meadows, in the woods, getting away from the machine inside which he had been imprisoned. His duty was a machine too. He was supposed to sit on the train and wait until this machine pulled into a station. He was supposed to sit on the throne, but he had several bodies. Gurdjieff said there were four bodies at our disposal. So Louis’ third or fourth body enjoined him to leave the train and the throne.’

From time to time the Dutchman’s writings grew so erratic that even he could not understand what he had written several years before. What counts in the above entry is the end of the Belle Époque to which the Second World War put an end. Everything looked and sounded like a vicious circle: an end succeeded an end, putting an end to itself. Mozart’s *Requiem* conducted by Bruno Walter was an end in itself. It was also the end of the Belle Époque, a metaphor for the end. And it also put an end to a stretch of time, to a way of living, to aspirations and sufferings. And it heralded the sufferings to come.

What *could* he experience during the night he spent in Linderhof, in one of Louis’ castles? A whirlwind of sensations and the sadness that only music is in a position to express satisfactorily without, however, *speaking* of it. ‘Don’t say anything about the Second World War—it’s a sore point with him because his relatives died in Auschwitz.’ Music does not speak of Auschwitz; unlike Hitler and his generals it draws no circles on maps. You could listen to it and that is enough.

‘Why didn’t I die in Paris where I listened to Mozart’s *Requiem* conducted by Bruno Walter?’ he wrote in his diary. ‘Why didn’t I die when listening to Furtwängler’s recording of *Tristan und Isolde*?’

If the Dutchman had been writing a novel he would have finished it now: he did not mind killing a novel. ‘Every novelist,’ he wrote, ‘identifies not only with his characters but with whatever he writes. By leaving his work unfinished he commits suicide. I am too lazy to write a novel. Anyway, the novel is dead; the novel is not immortal. But what about this entry? Is it immortal? I might leave it unfinished. Well, it is unfinished. I cannot remember what I wanted to write about. This paragraph is unfinished and I am this paragraph. Full stop, period. I should say neither “full stop” nor “period”: this entry is *unfinished*, isn’t it? Well, I say neither “full stop” nor “period”. I don’t say anything. Nor do I write anything. This entry is unfinished. This entry is dying. This entry is dead and I am this entry...I have waited for three hours. I am not dead. This entry has been dead for three hours. What is wrong? Am I not this entry? Let me identify with a sentence. It is easier, isn’t it? You cannot know exactly if

an entry is finished or not. An entry may express a half-thought, a half-memory. But if a sentence is unfinished, it is unfinished. For example: "I opened the door and—" Let me identify with this unfinished sentence. "I opened the door and—" I am this sentence. What is beyond the door? Nothing. The Hereafter, Hell, Paradise. Death. Why am I still alive?"

The Dutchman felt that a part of Europe, a part of human culture and history would be destroyed forever: from then onward, humanity was to stroll amidst ruins, picking up here a statuette, there a slab of marble. 'A few words will be chiselled on those slabs of marble, a few unfinished sentences about which some scholars might talk for ages in their endeavour to make sense of what their forefathers conveyed to the future. The moon will shed its light on those strolling figures; I am doomed to join them in their aimless search.'

Many people got the same feeling after the First World War as they saw empires turn to dust and revolutionaries usurp the vacant thrones where Louis II and Catherine the Great had sat in olden times. Accustomed to ups and downs, the Dutchman was less categorical and even wrote that life would return to normal in two or three years. 'Why not just wait until the dust has settled?' he said to a Russian nobleman who, having fled from the Bolsheviki, was driving him around Paris.

'What's normality?' asked the nobleman. 'Is it normal that I'm obliged to hold the wheel of this taxi? The Bolsheviki stirred the emotions of the rabble and installed their machine guns in my ballroom. They're dust—no question about it. But will this dust ever settle?'

'The dust always settles, sooner or later,' said the Dutchman.

The red dust was to dim the sunlight and cause respiratory diseases until the last decade of the twentieth century; but in Paris the Roaring Twenties took over and once again the Dutchman acquired a taste for life. Now he was losing it irrevocably as he turned and tossed in Louis' bed, unable to get a wink of sleep. At dawn he left the castle and flew for a while over the wood where no mythical animal was on the prowl: unicorns had forsaken it forever. Then he saw a railway track leading nowhere, not even to the horizon. Did it stretch as far as the end of the earth? And after this end there was another end, another circle—eternal recurrence. 'Will the fourth body help me now?' he wondered as he cast his mind back to 1916 when he attended Gurdjieff's lectures in Russia. His body imitated the spatial movement of his mind and at twilight of the same day he was flying over Soviet territory.

## **PART TWO**

## BODIES

The fourth body was enlarged upon during the lectures that Gurdjieff gave in St Petersburg where the Russian Revolution was already under way. ‘The physical body,’ he said, ‘is such a complex and vast organisation that, under favourable circumstances, a new independent body takes root inside it. The consciousness it is bound to manifest governs not only itself but also the physical body. A third body can grow within the second one, modelling its approach to life upon the other bodies—it gives rise to a sort of brain which begins to govern all other bodies. The same ritual happens again, provided the stars have everything under their control and no ill-starred enterprise is allowed to come into its own, destroying the order of nature. So a man is initially endowed with four bodies unless he does his best to reject them, leaving the physical body in charge.’

Gurdjieff never used such ornate language, judging from the account of those meetings supplied by Ouspensky, his most eminent disciple; but, in a way, the Dutchman was *flying* over those lectures, adding colours and nuances to the path along which Gurdjieff led his listeners. They saw only the path, for that is what they needed in order to reach the goal their teacher had in mind: whatever grew outside it might only distract their attention. The Dutchman saw a lot of trees and flowers that flanked the path on both sides as if to make it look like a beautiful garden where one could spend a few hours before resuming one’s search for the Grail. And everyone, according to Gurdjieff, must have their personal Grail and search for it throughout their life. But not everyone is in a position to spend years and years wandering around this garden and counting upon eternity to let them resume their search sooner or later, whenever they please.

Inside his substance the Flying Rebel could grow as many bodies as he found consistent with his eternal life; but probably nothing was really consistent with his moods that oriented him towards death and not in the direction of the Grail about which he did not care, to tell the truth: he was already immortal. At the moment of his miraculous escape from prison, dating back to his disagreement with the woman who shared his bedroom as a legal wife, he acquired the astral body thanks to which he could communicate with the dead. He cared neither about the dead nor about the quick; his astral body was rotting inside him. His mental body communicated with Leibniz and Spinoza, alleviating his boredom and allowing him to speak to those who were up to his standards in the world where nothing tied up with his utopian visions. As to the fourth body upon which he meditated in his interior monologue, it was not different from his other bodies: they had eventually merged into one immortal substance, into a garden where he strolled for centuries on end. The fourth body could not save him; no body could save him. No soul could save him.

As he flew over the Soviet Union he saw many bodies lying on the grass and in the fields that were not accustomed to human flesh: the earth receives us in its *bosom*. But its bosom was far away from the bodies lying on it and no one had an urge to bury those bodies as if they had been excommunicated and denied any Christian ritual.

He headed for Moscow where the first decisive battle was to take place in a war which paid no attention to space and time in virtue of its name: ‘*Blitz Krieg*’, the war *equivalent* to space and time. It is *now* and *here* like a thunderbolt. Many machines were moving from West to East and, needless to say, he was incapable of distinguishing between tanks and humans, between cannons and soldiers whose feet he could not see from where he was flying. Geared towards helping the Russians to avoid Hitler’s dictatorship, he decided to land in the suburbs of Moscow where the German army was waiting for Stalin to surrender. He did not ask himself if there was any difference between Hitler and Stalin, between the two machines prepared to crush the world to death; he just wished to contribute to the notion in which he believed no longer—the triumph of justice. For once his feelings took precedence over his thoughts.

On November 7<sup>th</sup> Stalin made a speech on Red Square, followed by a military parade which echoed Hitler’s displays of power—the key-image of documentaries shown all over the world. Surrounded by carnal bodies, the Dutchman stood near a shop window, watching armoured vehicles and other engines of war cover the distance between the Cathedral of St Basil the Blessed and what looked like a castle from a fairy tale—one of Louis’ castles. Hitler’s army was a few kilometres away and its presence in everyone’s mind seemed to mirror Gurdjieff’s notion of a ‘mental body’. ‘Another distorting mirror,’ thought the Dutchman. ‘Of course Gurdjieff meant something else. A kind of spiritual elevation, wasn’t it? Your body becomes an instrument with which your mind is supposed to play to its heart’s content. I can play with my body because it is impervious to the cruelty of my whims, but all these soldiers may die tomorrow. Even their mental bodies wouldn’t protect them from bullets and bombs. The space of death has widened over the last twenty years, hasn’t it? They all need the fifth body to cope with life.’

The war made a lot of progress during the early forties when the Dutchman realised his bodies had been discarded in favour of his soul that felt pity for all the victims of Hitler’s lunacy. His bodies could not protect anyone, but his soul embraced and kissed all those who suffered in concentration camps, doomed to die and engrave a death sentence on the monument to human history. “‘You are dead,’ they say to us,” wrote the Dutchman. ‘Even I am dead. After all, immortality is another form of death.’

‘Stalin *would* kill you, if you allowed him,’ said one of his Russian friends.

‘Even Stalin couldn’t kill me,’ he answered.

‘No harm in trying.’ And his friend spoke to him about the gulag.

Three years later a documentary showed him the bodies maltreated in Hitler’s death camps. ‘Is “maltreated” an appropriate word?’ he wrote in his diary. ‘Human lunacy is just one body inside which there is no mind, no spirit, no soul. Nor do I find any other body inside those bodies. There is only one body lying in a grave. This is the first body. It contradicts and excludes the second body, whatever its name. Is it a “natural” body or an “astral” body? Is it a “horse”? Well, this horse is dead, isn’t it? I seem to recall how Nietzsche’s brain expired. A man was beating a horse in the streets;

Nietzsche interfered and collapsed. I also grew mad during that war. But eternal life cures madness, doesn't it? It cures everything.'

Oddly enough, there is only a brief account of what he experienced during the Second World War: his diary is full of irrelevant details and seldom goes straight to the point. He talks of a child lying beside her mother's corpse; he carried the child to the nearest village where she perished during a bombardment. Another child perished in another village. A woman was lying on the grass as if to take rest from her labours; she was so beautiful that he was tempted to strip her clothes off and contemplate her body from every angle, from the sky. She would not have resisted his caresses. Why did he leave her body intact? It is her first body that he desired; it is his first body that desired her, his 'carnal' body. His 'mental' body also desired her. Even his fourth body desired her, his fifth and sixth bodies. Why didn't he rape her first body?

'I wish I had violated all her bodies,' he writes on his way to Berlin. 'I adored her first body, but other bodies lodged in it too, didn't they? Her first body would not have been as magnificent as it was without her second body. Needless to say, her third body also took part in the ritual described by Gurdjieff. He spoke of a retort filled with various metallic powders. These powders are not connected with each other, but if the retort is shaken they move from top to bottom and vice versa. All her bodies mixed together; so did mine. I might have violated one of her bodies at least.'

Many women remained on the grass without enjoying the warmth of his immortal body that continued its progress from one death to another, from one ruin to another ruin.

## INFAMY

Over and over again he returned to the images he saw in the documentaries where human bodies lay unprotected, exposed to the eyes of those who could not help them. Auschwitz. ‘What to do after this?’ he wrote. ‘I am not supposed to do anything, I suppose. I suppose I might repeat the same word to emphasise the tragedy I witness by means of this apparatus. There is only one word—Auschwitz. Even I should die after that. There is no other solution. Let me die with them. Too late. Let me die while watching this documentary. Well, let me die *after* watching it.’

He did not go to Auschwitz or other death camps because he knew nothing of their existence. Many people say, ‘I didn’t know what was going on.’ The Dutchman did *not* know anything about them: he was paralysed during the war. All his bodies were paralysed. If asked to compose a long sentence, he would have written ‘Bodies’ or ‘Paralysed’. But nobody asked him anything; nobody asked him to write. So he wrote very seldom as if to prove that even his own bodies did not require anything.

He pinned his hopes on the atomic bomb that exploded many times after the Second World War as if bent on creating an eternal military conflict. One of those bombs exploded right above his head, but all his bodies survived the shock as if to demonstrate their independence of external influences. Did there remain anything inside him? Did he ever write about *internal* influences after the Second World War? Did he ever mention *infernal* influences?

‘The earth is a death camp,’ he wrote. ‘The earth is a life camp. What is the difference? There is no difference between life and death, between one camp and another. Whatever we encounter is a prison from which we escape now and then. The door of our cell opens of its own accord and we go out; we fly over the earth. What is the earth? Just another body, another body of ours. I hate this body.’

He knew that Hitler’s crimes were a turning point in human history after which the pendulum he could always rely upon to restore his taste for life was bound to stop and remain paralysed forever. In a way, time was no longer available to any human, for only history and hope endow it with meaning. Animals continued to enjoy their lives, but they realised that humans were no longer their masters: they belonged to the same species. Often they even felt superior to humans and at such moments the Dutchman read contempt in their eyes; and only at such moments he knew he was partly human and so partly responsible for what had happened. He wandered why there were no zoos for humans, where they could be kept for the sake of extra-terrestrial tourists who might have admired their cruelty and nonsensical conduct. ‘I wish the Almighty would confine them to cages forever—no unexpected paroles,’ he said to a dog whose glance did not seem to condemn him outright. ‘Why are you looking at me like that? Are you asking yourself whether I’m a human or not? Dogs used to bark at me. Now they bark at humans. I wish they would eat their masters.’

By September 1941 the German forces reached the outskirts of Leningrad, severing its links with the rest of the country. The siege was to last 872 days, to January 27<sup>th</sup>, 1944. The city was under

intense bombardment throughout; food rations were drastically curtailed; essential supplies of coal, oil and wood dwindled and ran out; services halted; scurvy made its appearance; and hunger began to conquer those who, in the long run, were to triumph over the Germans. Haunted by his desire to help, the Dutchman spoke to an emaciated woman over whose body he stumbled on Palace Square where she passively waited for death to come. 'I'm immortal,' he told her, 'so you can't harm me, whatever you do.'

'I can't do anything,' she said.

'Would you refuse to eat a cat?' he asked.

'All the cats have already been eaten,' she answered.

'At first I wished to cut my eternal life into pieces and offer them to whoever was suffering from Hitler's dictatorship. But we are not allowed to handle time so easily. Luckily for you, space is far more malleable. And my body is just a bit of space, nothing more. So is your body. Let me offer you a part of my space.' She understood him at last and shook her head as she touched his face in token of gratitude. 'Don't tell me you'd rather die than eat human flesh—I can't bear stock responses,' he went on impulsively. 'This prejudice against cannibalism would cease overnight if all humans realised they're animals.'

In vain did he pull out all the stops as he tried to talk the dying woman into eating a slice of his flesh. It is all the more surprising that a Nazi journalist used this episode as a pretext for launching a verbal attack on Russian barbarism. According to him, the Dutchman took a knife from his pocket and sliced off a piece of his belly. The woman shook her head, but her mouth opened invitingly and he dropped the slice into it. 'May I have some more?' she said after a while.

'She did not live far from the spot where she had resolved to await death—the danger he was about to ward off by means of his succulent flesh,' wrote the journalist. 'At last she was able to rise to her feet and they began to walk along the bank of the Neva in the direction of her empty flat: she had already sold all her belongings to get a few morsels of food. On the way, they had to step over the bodies of her fellow citizens to whom the Dutchman would have given his thighs or arms, but for his companion's interference. "They must be dead," she pointed out. "What's the use of feeding the dead? My children are starving. Don't you feel duty-bound to feed them first? My little ones."

'Every day the Dutchman visited the woman who ended up sharing his body with her relatives and neighbours; only a skeleton would return home after such a meal. During a few hours of sleep the infinite body would recover its strength and space for the benefit of those lacking food as a result of our blockade. In summertime the Dutchman often lay down in the middle of Palace Square and passers-by partook of his body, leaving only a carcass at the foot of the Alexander Column.'

This false account gave rise to another article published in a Western newspaper during the Cold War. 'The Russians are very much like birds of prey,' wrote a Portuguese journalist. 'Plagued by food shortages, they often devour the corpses of their relatives and friends, killing two birds with one stone: they waste money neither on burials nor on food which is unobtainable anyway. But of course they

prefer fresh meat: the Dutchman's generosity is widely appreciated. He regularly travels to Moscow where his body can be seen in shops and on boulevards. The Soviet authorities forbid him to hand out slices of his body—for ideological reasons. After all, he is a Western phenomenon and therefore is liable to poison the minds and bodies of Soviet citizens. Besides, the latter might misinterpret his blatant violation of human laws, thinking that in the West we are accustomed to having free meals. Meat galore! They might also think that all Westerners are immortal.'

The Dutchman always denied these rumours, saying, 'I'm not sure that it's in the best of possible taste to tell jokes about people trapped in a city during a war. By the way, it was in Leningrad that I had a most interesting discussion on the subject of food.'

In February 1942 he offered his body to a man who turned out to be a former disciple of Gurdjieff's. 'Do you know that there are accumulators in the human machine?' the man asked him.

'I attended Gurdjieff's lectures,' said the Dutchman. 'Actually I learnt Russian mostly for the sake of those lectures.'

'There are two small accumulators and a large accumulator that feeds the small ones. They're all connected, don't you see? The energy contained in the small accumulators is sufficient for ordinary life. But to work on yourself you need the large accumulator. Where does it get its energy? From the small accumulators. A kind of *perpetuum mobile*. Why should I care about food? The connection with the large accumulator can be effected only through the emotions. Do you think I lack emotions? This war is a great purveyor of emotions, isn't it? The more we suffer the wider the range of our emotions. Misery is a good teacher, almost as good as Gurdjieff himself. It's the best food we can get on this globe of ours.'

They also spoke of eternal recurrence and the way Gurdjieff used to explain its importance to his pupils. He believed that this notion might distract some individuals, lulling them into a false sense of security: if everything is bound to return again and again they need not hurry. Why indeed execute a job instead of postponing it until tomorrow? Isn't Friday identical to Thursday? 'Actually you must get off the beaten tracks,' said the former disciple of Gurdjieff's. 'And a war provides such an opportunity. What does it matter if you die?'

'I'm not likely to die—that's the point,' said the Dutchman. The man reminded him of the people he had talked to during Napoleon's stay in Moscow—another instance of eternal recurrence.

'Do you keep a diary?' asked the man point-blank.

'Yes. But I seldom write now. I feel like repeating the same word.'

'Which word?'

'I don't know. "Abomination", "repugnance".'

'What about "infamy"? ' asked the man.

Many years later the Dutchman saw Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* on which he commented as follows: 'At one point the protagonist's wife stumbles upon the new novel her husband is supposed to finish in the quiet of a huge hotel in the mountains. The novel contains only one sentence, "All work

and no play makes Jack a dull boy.” Over and over again this sentence crops up on the pages which succeed each other with no build-up of suspense, no ingenious, gory plot. What happens in the hotel, however, abundantly makes up for this deficiency: the plot is *outside* of the novel, as it were. As usual they give a reply which is too wordy and doesn’t answer the question. “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy”—10 words. Those humans are incapable of getting straight to the point. That man was right—“infamy” is the keyword. And there are no other keys.’

## LOST OPPORTUNITIES

The Dutchman's life was no longer under his control and at some moments he even got the feeling God had no control over it either. Every day he would spin off new bodies and souls that God took no trouble to mix together as if assigning this honourable task to their owner. But the latter drifted with the tide, modelling his so-called existence upon Gurdjieff's assertion 'Everything just happens'. What did happen in the late forties, in the fifties, in the sixties? In March 1948 the Western powers united their zones of Germany into a single economic unit and the Soviet representative withdrew from the Allied Control Council. In June 1948, a new currency reform was introduced in what became West Germany, including West Berlin. In protest, The Soviet Union launched a land blockade of the Western sectors of the city on June 24<sup>th</sup>, 1948. A great airlift thwarted this attempt to cut the city off from vital supplies, Western Allied planes hauling food, coal and other necessities. On June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1953, some 50,000 workers rebelled in East Berlin, but the uprising, which spread throughout the German Democratic Republic, was crushed by Russian intervention. 'Do they call it history?' wondered the Dutchman.

The Russians continued to crush uprisings within the Eastern block and even outside it—in those parts of the world where the evil flowers of communism began to come into bloom. On August 13<sup>th</sup>, 1961, West Berlin was physically separated from East Berlin by the erection of a nine-foot wall topped with barbed wire. But the West did not respond by throwing a dozen atomic bombs on the territory of the Soviet Union and the Berlin Wall turned into a playground for graffiti aficionados.

The Cuban Crisis offered a glimmer of hope, however: the Dutchman was convinced that the world would be blown to pieces at last. With unflagging interest he watched the Soviet ship getting closer and closer to the line beyond which time was bound to stop. 'And the death of time,' he wrote, 'might do irreparable damage to eternity—to *my* eternity at least. I was punished as a human and, for all my efforts and hopes, my link with humanity has not been severed completely. The Berlin Wall is not impassable, is it? If granted permission, you can travel from one part of the city to another. Likewise I often travel beyond the wall I erected between humans and myself; they also pay me visits. I was punished in relation to *them*, to their laws and their judgement: God might have forgiven my sins. It is humans who maintain that one should not blaspheme against God, let alone curse Him. But God does not care, I suppose. At least Spinoza's God does not. Had I lived alone on the moon He would not have punished me. On earth, however, there are regulations that should be observed and carried out to the letter, come hell or high water. On the moon no one follows the letter of the law, for there are neither laws nor letters to be followed. And there is no one into the bargain, no creature to speak of. But even God respects human laws if only as a supreme lawgiver. Of course on the moon an astronaut would have to cope with natural laws, reducing the amplitude of his jumps to a series of quasi-terrestrial steps. How to cope with human laws? How to reduce *their* amplitude?'

The Soviet ship made a U-turn, anxious to avoid the inevitable confrontation, and the Dutchman cursed humanity once more: he was in the habit of cursing humanity. Alas, after his initial curse that prompted God into action everybody turned a deaf ear to his personal uprisings against the order of the world. In the late fifties he attended a performance of *Rigoletto* at the Metropolitan Opera. ‘The hunchback’s daughter would have survived *my* curse,’ he muttered to himself. ‘The might of a curse is another blessing I’m deprived of.’

Once, during his customary walk in Central Park, he noticed that his shadow had grown considerably: he was followed by a man in plain clothes. He made no attempt to give him the slip because he knew that sooner or later this new companion would die and leave his shadow in peace. For three days they walked together as if spying on each other; and yet the Dutchman was aware he had not seen the man before. He might have been a private detective hired for the purpose of finding out if the Dutchman met someone’s wife on the sly—away from her husband’s vigilant glance. ‘Or do they take me for a Russian spy? Why did the KGB never approach me, I wonder? A spy who can fly. I might have agreed in the thirties.’

In the twenty-first century he saw a film about the Cambridge spies and once again said to himself he might have agreed to work for the Soviet Union had his services been required. In England where so many aristocrats overtly admired Hitler and his handling of the German crisis the atmosphere was propitious for the growth of pro-Soviet sentiment. Besides, some young intellectuals were eager to obliterate Victorian ideals and no such feat was conceivable within the vicious circles into which they had been born. And they were appalled at hearing some people say that whatever happened to the Jews under Hitler’s regime concerned only the Germans. ‘At the time there was no such thing as crimes against humanity,’ said one of them after the war.

There were no crimes against humanity; yet such crimes were committed on a very large scale in Germany and the Soviet Union. At least communist ideas were superior to those propounded in *Mein Kampf*.

‘Do you think I’m a Russian spy?’ asked the Dutchman as he came to a standstill and turned round. ‘I’m too lazy for the job—for any job as a matter of fact.’

‘So you know why I’ve been following you,’ said the man as he sat down on a bench, his eyes inviting the Dutchman to join him.

‘Are you a private detective?’ The Dutchman did not accept the invitation.

‘I’d like to offer you a job. I hope you like the moon. All ghosts like the moon.’

‘Do I look like a ghost?’ asked the Dutchman.

‘You *are* a ghost, aren’t you? Luckily for us, you’re not invisible, though. I saw your photographs in our magazines. Didn’t they shoot a documentary about you?’

‘Are you from Hollywood?’

‘I wish I were,’ said the man with a frown. ‘In my youth I dreamed of becoming a movie star. It’s too late now. But it’s never too late for you, is it? Have you ever said “too late” in your life?’

‘It’s too late to assassinate Stalin.’ The Dutchman sat down and kicked a pebble.

‘I won’t suggest anything of the kind,’ said the man. ‘Anyway you’re not likely to kill anybody on the moon. I hear you’re fed up with humanity. Why not withdraw from it? Our country is planning a journey to the moon.’

For a while the man talked about this journey, asking the Dutchman to take part in it for the sake of television. Indeed no other creature could stay on the moon for a month, emitting signals from it to entertain American citizens and the rest of the civilised world. ‘The Moon is as dead as you are,’ the man declared. ‘And it’s alive at the same time.’

‘Do you think it’s dead because no one lives on it? I could live without humans.’

‘That’s what I’m asking you to do,’ said the man. ‘Live without humans for a month, for a year! Some day we’ll come and fetch you. Aren’t you looking for a secluded spot where no one would interfere with your meditations? The moon is bigger than Central Park.’

The Dutchman visualised the moon and the way he might live on it like a hermit left to his own devices. Making the most of his ability to fly, he could turn its lenient law of gravity to advantage by taking a further step in the conquest of the universe and land on Mars, on Venus, on Jupiter. Why not travel around the solar system instead of rotting away on the planet whose population had betrayed itself? On the moon he might be happy, playing hopscotch all day long and watching the earth from afar, from the vantage point of eternity. ‘The acoustics of the cosmos must be wonderful,’ he reflected. ‘From that vantage point I might listen to the harmony of human history. Won’t this eternal crisis resolve itself in space?’

‘You’re an American citizen,’ said the man, pursuing his argument. ‘Two astronauts will keep you company on the journey. They’ll fly back to earth with a few pebbles for our museums.’ In his turn, the man kicked a pebble. ‘You’ll stay and film your life on the moon because that’s what people want. It’s not all fun and games being an earthling—you must be aware of that. We need new images and the Moon is full of them. While flying around it, you’ll shoot documentaries for our studios. You can fly, can’t you?’

The Dutchman sprang to his feet and drew a few circles above the bench, flying level with the treetops. Again he realised the extent to which he was linked to humans whose senses ensured his participation in the collective unconscious where myths and symbols were stored. ‘If no one saw me I wouldn’t be the Flying Dutchman,’ he said to himself, landing on the stretch of grass behind the bench on which the CIA agent was sitting.

‘But I don’t really know if I’m the Flying Dutchman or somebody else. Or something else.’

‘An identity crisis?’

‘Doesn’t humanity go through the same crisis? Do you recognise humanity?’

‘I haven’t lived long enough to lose sight of it,’ said the man.

Back at home the Dutchman continued to think about the moon, and his relationship with his former fellow creatures came to the fore as he pictured to himself his life in utter isolation: there is no

Central Park on the moon. His personal history was linked to that of men and women walking under his windows, sitting opposite him in restaurants. He murdered his wife who was a human being and often sat opposite him in their dining room; his ship sailed around the Cape and ignored the craters of the Moon, ‘which might be the Craters of Good Despair, for all I know,’ he wrote in his diary. Even his crew remained on earth: none of its members had ever been approached either by the CIA or NASA.

He wrote a letter to the man with whom he had talked in Central Park. ‘I thank you for your offer that I cannot accept. Your journey is an illusion. Everything is an illusion after the Second World War. You are just going through the motions. Let us keep the same word for the sake of argument. Once your plan has been put in motion it is not so easy to stop. And I don’t ask you to stop—the free world should triumph over dictatorial regimes. But I cannot bring myself to participate in a film that does not belong to history or humanity. Believe it or not, I still belong to humanity in a way. Don’t you know that the history of humanity is over and done with? Whatever happens after it does not exist. Nothing can exist after Auschwitz. Adorno said that nothing could be written after Auschwitz—no poems, no symphonies. I think that nothing can be *undertaken* after Auschwitz. Your journey to the Moon is nonsensical—as nonsensical as my life. I am neither a ghost nor an illusion. Let me remain what I am.’

## THE FEMMES FATALES

He kept his diary as if he could not survive – or rather die – without his thoughts and whatever might happen to him in the world where nothing was to happen to him as long as he was immortal: only our ineluctable demise painstakingly and patiently writes our biography. He understood this state of affairs only too well, given his yearning for the Hereafter and the efforts he made to destroy his body from the outside once and for all. And then he realised it might be destroyed from the inside by a woman one always call fatale for some obscure reason; and yet such women do not necessarily deprive one of both one's body and soul.

Here is an excerpt from his notebooks – alias his diary – that sheds some light on the problem:

I dream about femmes fatales, about Carmen and her twin sisters who fling flowers at their potential lovers all over the world. I wish these flowers could land on my heart now and then. Two gypsies are strumming guitars in a corner of the tavern. Carmen is seated on a table, glancing at the officers who form a circle around her. Suddenly she stands up and bursts into song:

*La danse au chant se mariait,  
d'abord indécise et timide,  
plus vive ensuite et plus rapide,  
cela montait, montait, montait, montait!*

Singing and dancing. Gypsy girls dance on tables, don't they? Amidst bottles and knives. And in a corner of my dream there is another woman, another femme fatale. The flower on my heart, the knife in my heart. Tender is the night. Tender is the knife. She walks through the night—softly, softly. And she invites me to a dance. Inaudibly. She does not say anything, nor does she signal me to follow her into a ballroom. Yet I dance with her, in the night. She does not bite me. Her kisses are modest, almost timid. Timid is the night. She may not allow me to undress her and even my caresses are censored sometimes. She destroys me, softly, tenderly. 'What you need is some tender loving care,' she seems to insinuate. She says nothing. Our relationship is a moving, tender love-story. Everyone is moved and touched around us. 'How beautiful she is. And she loves you so much,' my friends repeat day and night. And she is so tender-hearted that everyone tells her their problems. And I also tell her my problems. And she understands me. She understands me perfectly. And she caresses me. And consoles me. And destroys me.

As his drawn-out nervous breakdown progressed he made fewer entries in his diary, but any entry he did make dealt with the possibility of destroying his body from the inside – by means of his nervous

disorders, his sensibility and psyche. As everyone knows, he was impervious to poisons and their aftermaths on account of which so many human beings die in their beds in the dead of night when neither their relatives nor doctors can hear them: the doomed have no strength either to scream or dial a phone number. And neither their doctors nor relatives are eager to pay them a visit.

Why not let oneself be destroyed by a woman? What is there to be destroyed in the first place? In my case? Not much. Failures, loneliness. The slow poison of love-destruction. It is slow, isn't it? And voluptuous. A pleasure *par excellence*—being destroyed by a woman you love, inch by inch. The measure of life, the measure of death. I might feel my own body, for the first time. Doesn't love-poison or femme-fatale-poison make us feel our own body as it penetrates its muscle tissue, lung tissue, brain tissue? Moving from one sinew to another.

A friend of mine lived with such a woman. For a while. He has a strong, tyrannical instinct for self-preservation. (I don't need it, do I?) Unconsciously he worked out a plan, a stratagem, a strange stratagem. His instinct for self-preservation must have done that. He sold his apartment. One day the buyer brought him three envelopes: a part of the sum was to be paid in cash. My friend was about to leave for London. The woman he lived with was also about to depart. She was going to Switzerland. He put the envelopes in her duffel bag. 'I put something in your bag,' he shouted. She was in the adjacent room. 'I'll call you from London to say what you should do with it.' 'With what?' 'I'll call you from London,' he repeated. He did, on the following day. 'Could you please take the money to the bank?' he told her. 'What money?' 'Those envelopes in your bag. You know, the huge bag. Three envelopes. Did you open your bag? Did you sort your things out?' 'I did, but I found nothing. I mean there were no envelopes in the bag.' She explained that she had checked the bag in. The money might have been stolen by a custom officer, a luggage handler. But was it? Was it? They met a few days later. He questioned her closely, she got angry. She became Carmen for a few minutes. Whenever they talked about it she would disclose an unknown facet of her character. She had turned out to be vulgar and quarrelsome. He continued to question her. Her vulgarity was his remedy. Her vulgarity, her greediness, her lies. A lot of remedies, enough to cure any love-cancer. He told me the story with a satisfied smile as if he had won a million pounds à la roulette. His instinct for self-preservation was smiling broadly and boldly. 'How could you put such a large amount of money into a bag?' I asked. 'Why didn't you tell her what was in those envelopes to make sure she wouldn't check it in?' Caring neither for the money nor the truth, he smiled the smile of a man who knew victory was within reach.

Why not let oneself be destroyed by a woman? The poisonous flow of my blood, of *her* blood—all along my veins, our veins. One substance, one soul, one heart. Poets speak about the lovers who exchange their hearts at will, to their hearts' content. My heart is your heart. You are inside

my body. How can one accomplish such a transcendental feat? Your blood in my veins, love-poison. Is death the only love potion available to humans?

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare speaks about love-juice—a juice used as a philtre.

Here is yet another excerpt from the immortal diary where the Dutchman unveils for our sake a few whirlwind romances whose whirls and winds involve a dozen women somehow unified through their poisons and betrayals:

She said as we stood in the middle of the street, trying to catch a taxi, 'We should spend New Year's Eve together. It's the most intimate day of the year.' And I called her on December 30. 'Yesterday I went to bed with a high temperature,' she told me.

'I'll call you tomorrow,' I said.

I called her again on December 31. She was not at home. I talked to her mother who told me that her daughter had gone to their country house. 'How far is it?' I asked.

'Two hours' drive from here,' her mother answered. She did not seem inclined to give me the address.

I drove for 120 minutes and turned left. I began to circle around our city, hoping to chance upon her somewhere. I saw many houses in the course of my ride. I saw many women, many, many women. And I cried in the woods, not far from a lake.

I was aware I would not find her, but I had to scour the countryside for my unfaithful mistress, forcing my destiny to abandon one of its experiments. My sentimental journeys. Every dream is a sentimental journey, so is every hope and love. Maria was my sentimental journey. Walking towards her, riding in her direction. Always in a train, looking out of the window. She was a landscape gliding by, a lake in which I could not dip my fingers.

I called her on January 1. She was not in. I called her on January 2. She answered the phone and told me she had not been to the country.

'I was at home,' she said, 'but my mother thought I should stay at home.' Her explanation sounded so absurd I asked her to repeat it. 'My mother thought I should stay at home so she didn't let me speak to you on the telephone. My uncle was here, my mother's brother. I hadn't seen him for ages and he'd never have forgiven me—'

'So you stayed at home, did you?'

'I was reading a book.'

I did not ask her what book she had been engrossed in. Under cross-examination she might have admitted, however, that her evidence had been mostly lies. But there was only circumstantial evidence against her and I let the matter drop.

She often gave evidence in my court, admitting her misdemeanours or pinning the guilt on to one of her friends.

‘There is a fundamental incompatibility between you and Tatiana. You fail to achieve any compatibility of planning aims.’

Memories, memories. Poems and memories. And memoirs.

She paid me a visit 76 hours later and said she was exhausted. Her tone was confidential somehow and she stressed the necessity of absolute secrecy. ‘Don’t tell my mother I’m exhausted,’ she said. ‘She might lock me in for a month.’

‘But I’m not going to meet your mother,’ I said.

‘You are. She’s coming in a few minutes.’

Her mother came 95 minutes later. She was so unlike her daughter that for a moment I thought she was somebody else’s mother or a lonely woman perhaps—an old maid who had no children at all, not even a daughter born out of wedlock. She informed me that her husband was not very pleased with his daughter’s conduct. ‘My husband is a man of high principles,’ she said, raising her eyebrows.

‘But your daughter spent—’

‘Tatiana was at home, as she told you on the telephone. Why didn’t you believe my daughter and her mother? Do you have no respect for us? My daughter, I daresay, enjoys a great deal of respect and goodwill at the office. And my husband is particularly respected for his integrity. My daughter is so beautiful that many young men court her at the office and outside it. Boris asked for her hand in marriage. So did Robert. Do you know that Robert’s father is a former minister?’ I am even unable to forget her mother.

Now she betrays me with angels and archangels, with dead souls. I wonder who’s kissing her now. Much ado about an unfaithful woman. *Trop d'histoires à propos d'un cadavre.*

Yet another femme fatale:

Once she promised to come back around midnight, and the next day she explained her absence by means of another multiplication table. She began to count the number of champagne bottles that had been emptied during the dinner. ‘And you know what happens when I drink a lot,’ she said.

Once she said it was all over and went out. Two hours and nineteen minutes later, when I was fairly drunk and on the verge of tears, she phoned to find out if I was drunk. She was also curious to know if I had sobbed my heart out.

She might become a ghost in a medieval castle, making its occupants drop books and candles with blood-curdling screams. And all that in order to seduce a handsome young man, a distant

cousin of the present owner. She was always half-a-ghost, it seems to me, for I never heard her moving about my room. As if she had already been buried by the time of our first meeting.

Yet another one:

She would burst into a spontaneous dance as if animated by my unconscious. And by my desire. She danced by my bedroom window, draping herself with the curtains now and then, only to exhibit her nakedness more effectively a few moments afterwards. She might brush against me as she was tracing a labyrinthine figure on the carpet, similar to the one glorified by Henry James in his famous short story. An invitation to a dance? Certainly not. She would not have tolerated my participation in her ritual. She wanted to be admired and adulated from afar, like a ghost. She used to transgress the rules of our ritual, forcing me to share my voyeuristic pleasures with her friends and some friends of her friends – as often as necessary to make me sick of her vagaries and theatricals. A crowd of males would follow in her footsteps, waiting for an opportunity to rip her clothes off.

Thanks to the Dutchman's inborn graphomania, we attend one of those *soirées dansantes*:

'Do you want me to dance for you?' she asked.

'Of course,' answered a male choir.

'Of course,' said the hostess. 'After dinner.'

'Now or never,' said Mary. She rose from her chair and promptly stepped on it. A moment later I saw her standing amid the bottles and glasses. A burst of applause greeted her exploit.

'I'm hungry,' I said. 'I'm longing to partake of the mythical *ris de veau*.' I bowed in the direction of the hostess.

'How rude of you,' said Mary. Her elongated fingers touched the upper button of her dress.

'How rude of you,' echoed the male choir.

Two young ladies rose from their chairs and for a moment I thought they would join my Mary on the dinner table. They silently left the room.

'How rude of them,' said Mary, undoing the last button of her dress. A multitude of male fingers had already removed all the plates, glasses and bottles from the dinner table.

'Can't we postpone the entertainment?' I suggested, rising from the chair and putting my hand on a knife.

'Sit down,' said Mary. 'You never watch me in an upright position. I'm not used to it.' She put her foot on a knife and her arms formed a semi-circle above her head. Her dress was hanging loosely from her shoulders. 'Could anyone help me?'

A few males sprang up and rushed towards her.

‘If I may boast a little...I know your dress by heart,’ I said. ‘Allow me...for the sake of elegance and adroitness...’

‘I think I’d better do it myself,’ said Mary. ‘Kindly take your hands off my body. But after dinner I’ll give everybody a shred of my underwear on condition that—’

She broke off. Three young ladies rose and left the room. I sat down and picked up my glass which had not been put away by the zealous voyeurs. As I held it to my lips I unexpectedly caught her glance. Mary was staring at me in disbelief.

‘Don’t you mind?’ she asked.

‘What am I supposed to do?’ I asked.

‘You might kill me. You might leave the room.’

‘I adore your dances and wouldn’t miss your performance for anything in the world. By the way, do you need a pair of scissors?’

‘What for?’

‘To cut your underwear into shreds. Souvenirs, keepsakes.’

*THE DANCE OF THE SEVEN VEILS*

His words had no impact on those who happened to cross his path during his wanderings around Europe, Asia and America. Sometimes he would tear his notebooks to shreds as if to make up for God's failure to destroy the earth once and for all.

But actions speak louder than words and he still took notice of old sayings which might have guided him along a path leading somewhere: he did not mind swapping his numerous paths for a road to success. Actually these old sayings might have guided him towards the goal he caught a glimpse of as he read an article on a paedophile ring in a Belgian newspaper.

'These obnoxious individuals,' wrote a journalist, 'forget that every woman is the Virgin Mary and therefore represents the purest ideal in the human mind, in human history. Our little girls are virtual mothers of Christ. You might say that Jesus Christ was born already and so does not need to be born again. But I tell you that He has to be born continually in your heart and your soul. And He must be born in a woman's body, if only symbolically. So our daughters' wombs are appropriate receptacles for Christ's embryo. Whenever a paedophile rapes and kills our daughters, he inflicts the same torture on Jesus Christ Whom they might have treasured in their wombs. In a way, he rapes Jesus Christ Himself. And he kills Him once more. Is there a crime comparable to this crime? Our punishment should match it.'

How to sever your links with humanity once and for all? You should rape and kill a child. But little girls did not appeal to the Dutchman at the time he read this text, indifferent as he was to whatever he could have come across. He would meet many little girls as he walked past the schools where they stayed for a while to manifest their joy upon leaving them: nothing shines more brilliantly than the face of a little girl on her way home, especially if her teachers are crushing bores or tyrants. (Nothing shines more brilliantly in the *human* world.) His photographs often featured bevvies of girls in the streets where they disported themselves, paying no attention to paedophiles who watched them closely.

He photographed them out of laziness: they just happened to cross his path whenever he ventured outdoors or rather into human life that interested him no more. But he had to go out now and then; he had to go in as well so as not to stay nowhere. He did not mind staying nowhere, but God wanted him to behave properly and he complied with God's wishes because he could not do otherwise. There were a lot of 'buts' in his life, a lot of 'ands'; there were no 'ends' in his life.

He continued to walk along the streets of New York and Paris where paedophiles and Lolitas seemed to dance a series of pas de deux. He could choose one of them to enliven his leisure hours and even his eternity, but he was loath to touch any human, however unspoilt and fresh: any *physical* link with humanity was liable to scare him out of his wits.

One day, not far from the Versailles château, he saw a girl he might have singled out from a throng of schoolgirls whose feet executed a sort of tap dance as they went home after learning what

life on earth was like in comparison with that on Mars or Venus. She reminded him of a painting he had seen many times in Petersburg—*Madonna Litta* by Leonardo da Vinci. He did single her out and could not, as he made for his flat, discard her image in favour of other images his mind was encumbered with: Hitler's death camps, Stalin's trials. The next day he repeated his former itinerary—the path leading to a lycée from which *Madonna Litta* was to emerge sooner or later; he did not have to wait for her eternally, although he might have done it. Was he already prepared to wait for her eternally and then bring her to the edge of doomsday?

Again she was walking in front of him as if showing the way he had been supposed to discover a long time ago on his own. But he could not do anything on his own and even little girls were in many respects wiser than his old, venerable self which had never let him down in spite of his pendulum and moods. Where was his *Lolita* leading him? 'She is *Madonna Litta*, not *Lolita*,' he wrote in his diary. 'There are *Littas* and *Lolitas*. One should not confuse them. Both are rare in this day and age: little girls are so vulgar. A *Lolita* might display a certain amount of vulgarity in the presence of her admirer, provided his libido is attuned to coarse gestures and unpolished speech. Immaculate and distinguished, a *Litta* repels every atom of vulgarity to the point of disappointing a sex maniac. Oddly enough, my *Litta* is pursued by one of those maniacs who might violate and kill her body tomorrow or next week.'

Sure enough, one day the Dutchman realised that his shadow had grown bigger once more as if another CIA agent were following in his footsteps, eager to suggest a journey to the moon or to the Soviet Union. But the CIA was not as fond of the moon as it used to be: there are not many poets among the CIA officials. The Dutchman crossed the street and his shadow grew much shorter: the paedophile continued to follow *Litta*, displaying no concern for mythical characters. 'I wish he was homosexual,' thought the Dutchman as he relegated his abhorrence of humans to another dimension, to another path.

The man walked behind his *Lolita* with such effrontery that the Dutchman began to wonder if the entire male population of Versailles had not been in the habit of raping little girls on a regular basis. Nobody seemed to mind this pursuit that finally brought the Dutchman to the royal park where the paedophile was determined to enjoy the body of his victim to the utmost—judging from his purposeful step. Besides, he had a video-recorder at his disposal: the forthcoming rapture was to enliven his leisure hours for years to come. But before going to the park, *Litta* and her paramour ate at a McDonald's where their precarious union grew into a fertile relationship as they enjoyed their respective Big Macs and milk shakes. 'How easy it is to accost a little girl on a boulevard—anywhere,' wrote the Dutchman. 'He walked by her side and she did not mind the presence of this vulgar individual. At least she did not slap his face; nor did she run away. For all his advances, she was my *Litta* and I saved her from a fatal outburst of his libido. My *Litta* and libido are incompatible.'

The paedophile did not limit his advances to a talk on a bench where he embraced and kissed Lolita for the first time; they continued their walk in spite of the late hour. ‘Does she have parents?’ wondered the Dutchman. ‘Why don’t they call the police?’

At last the paedophile found a secluded spot which was as isolated from humanity as the moon, as one of its craters. ‘Would you dance for me?’ he said to the girl who began to execute a solo from *Swan Lake*, obeying his orders and the movement of his camera. Indeed she paid more attention to his camera than to her dance which was getting out of hand and out of foot, as it were; she was no longer the White Swan or even the Black Swan had never danced with such impudence.

‘Swans don’t wear clothes,’ said the paedophile to his Lolita.

‘Why don’t you take your time?’ She was fingering the upper button of her blouse.

‘Why doesn’t she take my eternity?’ thought the Dutchman as he recalled a Japanese girl he had seen in Kyoto. In Japan Lolitas *seduce* middle-aged men to earn some money for their families which never call the police and rather encourage such relationships, hoping to prosper thanks to the compliance and understanding of their children. ‘But I’m not in Japan, am I?’ thought the Dutchman who was accustomed to losing his identity and whereabouts. ‘Or is this another manifestation of what they call “the global village”?’

‘I’ve already taken my time,’ said the paedophile.

‘Do you want me to dance before I die?’ asked the girl.

‘You mean the White Swan dies at the end.’

‘I’m sure you won’t kill me – we may meet tomorrow. Your recorder doesn’t capture everything, does it?’

The paedophile enjoined her to perform the *Dance of the Seven Veils* for him—Salome undressing before Herod. ‘Let’s forget about Tchaikovsky,’ said the paedophile. ‘Anyway I prefer Richard Strauss.’

The Dutchman was bound to out-Herod Herod as he watched *both* the girl and the paedophile proceed with the ritual they carried out so perfectly one could wonder if the whole thing had not been filmed and projected on a screen installed somewhere in the park. Throwing her clothes and underclothes in the air—not in the direction of the paedophile, a fine touch—the girl undressed, taking her time and that of the paedophile who continued to film her, unaware of the Dutchman’s voyeurism. ‘You are the Black Swan now,’ said the paedophile, ‘and I hope you’ll never be the White Swan again.’

He applied his lips to her body as many times as was necessary to make himself intoxicated with its perfume that the Dutchman could detect from where he stood: he was particularly sensitive to perfumes. The paedophile’s fingers proved to be even more agile than his lips as he began to explore the nooks and crannies of her body. She was leaning against a tree as if, in search of moral support, she had found only a representative of flora: even animals seemed to have forsaken her. Oddly enough, she was enjoying every moment of the ritual to which the paedophile was introducing her

with the utmost care and meticulousness. Crawling on all fours beside her feet, he licked her toes that she wiggled playfully in expectation of his tender mouth.

‘Do you want to join us?’ said the paedophile as he eventually spotted the Dutchman who, devoured by curiosity, could not help betraying his presence.

‘I wish I could,’ he answered.

‘Would you mind filming us at close range?’

The Dutchman picked up the recorder and focused it on Litta’s thighs, on the paedophile’s lips. ‘Are you going to kill her?’ he asked. ‘Is that how you usually proceed? First you rape Lolitas and then you kill them for fear of being caught and given a life sentence.’

‘I just caress them,’ said the paedophile, ‘and they like it. Voyeurs like it as well. I often perform my ritual in the presence of a third party. I’m a voyeur too, you know. I watch other people enjoy my ritual. Aren’t you enjoying it?’

‘I thought you’d kill her,’ said the Dutchman.

‘Don’t be vulgar,’ said the paedophile. ‘Her breasts are like two rosebuds. That’s the word I’ll say on my deathbed. Rosebud. Thinking of her breasts. Touch them ever so gently and you’ll understand what I’m talking about.’

‘She’s a Madonna. Leave her in peace.’

But the paedophile disobeyed the Dutchman’s order; after all, he was not a member of his crew. Besides, his ritual was not over yet and, to the Dutchman’s astonishment, it featured no flogging, no imitations of *The Kama Sutra*. She danced, taking off her dress that he had brought in an attaché case, and he sometimes joined her for a waltz. Of course he kissed her breasts and other succulent parts of her body that he might have devoured, had he been addicted to cannibalism. But he was just an extraordinary paedophile who neither killed nor raped Lolitas, limiting his delights to what they call ‘*mamours*’ in French. You just add one letter to the word ‘*amour*’ and the object of your passion goes home unharmed as if you had taken it to a funfair.

‘Now you can replace me if you feel like it,’ said the paedophile, putting his clothes on. ‘What a pity you didn’t join us. Are you afraid of deflowering your Madonna? She has already been deflowered, mind you. That’s why I prefer to “flower” her body, so to speak. My kisses *are* flowers in their own right. Why not add a few rosebuds to her body, to her soul?’

‘Leave her in peace,’ said the Dutchman.

The paedophile left and he remained in the company of his Madonna.

## A JEWEL BOX

The park was already closed, but one could get out on condition that one was prepared to jump into a moat and climb up on the other side where someone—a guardian of sorts—might open a gate, letting an absentminded visitor indulge in his or her frolics elsewhere. But the Dutchman resolved to spend the night at the spot where his Madonna had preserved her virginity thanks to a particular perversity of her assailant whose desire had been confined to the *surface* of her body and soul. He was not superficial, contrary to what his colleagues might have concluded; he was just in a class of his own and did not mind being ridiculed by onlookers or so-called victims.

‘Are your parents waiting for you?’ he asked.

‘My parents live in Tours,’ she answered. ‘They’re divorced, actually. My father married on the rebound and my mother wants to settle in New York. I’m staying with my aunt.’

‘When does she expect you back?’

‘I don’t think she wants me to come back. Anyway I often visit my friends in Rocquencourt.’

‘You’re not cold, are you?’

‘I’m rather hot,’ she answered.

‘In May the weather is often hot in Versailles,’ he acquiesced.

They were lying on the grass that did not seem to mind their presence as if reconciled to the visitors whose love for the eighteenth century knew no bounds. She put her hand on his face and even attempted to stroke it, but he nipped her initiative in the bud—in the rosebud, as the paedophile might have defined it—and she left him alone. Did he need to be left alone once again? He asked himself no questions that night because the only answer he had been searching for was lying by his side—the Madonna. What did he care if she was in a position to save the world! She was saving *him* and that was enough. At least she helped him get rid of his apathy, of those paths he had been following with no aim in mind, with no travelling companion. Now he was lying in the park and that was his path. Yet he remained motionless: you need not *walk* along your path. ‘Are you aware of your destiny?’ he asked. ‘Are you aware that you’re the Madonna?’

She laughed and said, ‘I know I’m rather beautiful. Don’t you think I’m beautiful?’

‘You look like Madonna Litta. You *are* Madonna Litta. Don’t tell me your name. You’re Litta.’

‘I’m not,’ she said.

‘Don’t you ever tell me your name,’ he repeated.

He looked at the moon and thought about the journey he had been offered by a CIA man. ‘He even asked me how I earned a living,’ he recalled. ‘And I told him I didn’t rob banks any longer. Just playing the money markets. They were willing to pay a handsome sum for my services. I might have died on the moon. What else is there to do on our satellite? To die in one of its craters. My destiny is linked to the earth where I cannot die. Don’t I sail around the earth? Don’t I commit my crimes on the earth? I’ve done everything on the earth. I’ve done nothing on the moon where I might have become a

mortal creature again. A lost opportunity. But I'm happy I didn't embark on that journey. I'm happy now.'

Presently he let a dream take over; and yet he knew that reality was more magnificent than any dream. Only at the peak of human history could a man find a woman capable of making amends for whatever was lying in store for his fellow creatures. And that period of time returned as if obeying the doctrine of eternal recurrence. 'This doctrine is a member of my crew,' thought the Dutchman as he sank into the arms of Morpheus: his search for the past put him to sleep.

The next morning he awoke in the company of his Madonna who had not forsaken him during the night. 'She'll never forsake me,' he thought. 'This is an endless night or an endless day.' But the day was not endless and during that day he had to bring her to his chalet in Switzerland where nobody would ever find her. 'Give a call to your aunt,' he said. She obeyed his order and they boarded a train at Lyon Station. In Lausanne he bought her whatever she needed for her endless stay in his harem and after a sumptuous dinner at Girardet's they resumed their journey in a hired car.

Once back home—she regarded his chalet as her home for some time—they drank two bottles of champagne and fell asleep, relegating the demands of their respective libidos to a relaxed future. But the future was not relaxed; it was rather strained, given the Dutchman's propensity for sacred books and apocrypha. The next morning he read her the following excerpt from St Bernard's *Sermon 7*:

"'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.'

'Why don't you kiss me?' she asked.

'Heidegger said that only God could help us. I must return to God.'

'Why don't we share the same bed?' she asked.

'We'll share the same table, the same home.'

'What do I care about your *table*!'

'I'll take you to St Petersburg in due course. You'll see your *real* self. *Madonna Litta*.'

But St Petersburg was rather far in terms of time and space. Litta resigned herself to a landscape she enjoyed at first, for any landscape was better than her teachers and aunt. And she fell in love with the mountains that might have reminded her of the texts recited by the Dutchman—her new teacher—

had she paid any attention to them: she did not care about heaven, angels and Jesus Christ. What distinguished her new teacher from the ones she abhorred was his mysterious looks and the way he treated her: like a jewel she had been placed in a casket. Every day he removed the jewel from the casket and contemplated its beauty as he held it in his fingers, looking for the most advantageous interplay of light and shadow. Actually he would never have done such a thing, even if she had been a toy—a doll or just a tennis ball; he would never have touched her. You cannot remove a jewel from a box if you are loath to touch it, and he was still allergic to humans. He touched her neither in Versailles nor in his chalet where he intended to keep her until doomsday.

‘Do you know that you’re immortal?’

‘You’re so mysterious,’ she said.

‘The Madonna is immortal. That’s why you’re the Madonna. Twenty centuries is a long life. You’re still alive, aren’t you? The same looks, the same spirit.’

His chalet was a jewel box from which he had no intention of removing her as long as the pendulum was immobile and did not carry him to another extreme. Only cows, or rather their bells, intruded upon their privacy that he did not ever attempt to put to advantage: he had lost all interest in sex and was obliged, moreover, to safeguard his Madonna’s purity. These considerations occupied the greater part of his thoughts as he cooked her a dainty meal or looked at her sleeping body. In those moments the Sleeping Beauty prevailed over the image of the Madonna he had in his mind for the simple reason that he had never seen a sleeping Madonna. Of course the death of the Madonna *had* been treated by painters from time to time and a sleeping body is not very much different from that of a dead man or woman. But he was duty-bound to keep her alive; the association was not likely to crop up within his train of thought.

‘In the outside world,’ he told her again and again, ‘there are many criminals who murder little girls after maltreating their bodies, their immaculate skins. Don’t you mind falling into the hands of such individuals?’

‘But he didn’t murder me,’ she said. ‘And he wasn’t my first lover. All of them were kind to me.’

‘Many lovers. And you’re just fifteen, aren’t you? Is it because humanity lives faster nowadays? But it doesn’t live faster, I can assure you.’

‘Well, I’m living pretty fast,’ she said.

‘Didn’t the Madonna live fast? So many things happened to her during a short stretch of time. And Jesus Christ was thirty-three when he died on the Cross. None of our contemporaries is able to accomplish so much in the space of a hundred years. Anyway time is much slower now, isn’t it? It’s about to come to a standstill. And then time will flow back, towards your *real* life.’

For a while her curiosity about the outside world was easily satisfied within the bounds of what he could offer her on the spot: extensive walks in the neighbourhood. And then she asked him to buy a television set because she could not really enjoy herself without it. He immediately pointed out that

television was almost as dangerous as those individuals who molested little girls in the woods, but she was adamant and even threatened to run away from him—'from this prison', as she put it. For the first time he locked her in the attic as he made preparations for his departure that was inevitable anyway: he had to give the hired car back and buy a sports car in view of their future journeys through Europe. Enraptured by speed in all shapes and forms, she was bound to fall in love with a Porsche or a Ferrari; and it was safer and healthier to fall in love with a car.

He spent almost a whole day in the outside world that bore him no grudge for his unfaithfulness: prodigal sons are always welcome, especially if they happen to be rich clients. He gave his car back, bought a Ferrari and a television set where so many poisonous images had already been stored. He knew that the recent past was no different from the near future and his Madonna, for all her immortality, was unlikely to see a desert instead of the world. In his opinion, the world was to become a desert—not as a result of atomic explosions, though. 'They're growing obese,' he wrote in his diary. 'They sit before their TV sets, eating popcorn. And they fall down, unable to keep their bodies in an upright position. They cannot die in their chairs and armchairs; they are to die on the floor. The more you eat the heavier you become. Their thoughts are also heavy; they are also dying on the floor or rather at the bottom of their brains. The longer you watch television the heavier your thoughts. No one will ever lift their thoughts, let alone give some spiritual uplift to their souls.'

She was asleep upon his return to the attic where he had imprisoned her; as she opened her eyes he distinctly saw a testimony of her distress. 'I'll never lock you up again,' he told her. 'Perhaps in a hundred years.'

As might have been presumed, his new crime was quickly atoned for by the car inside which she played for half an hour, pushing the buttons and grasping the steering wheel. At first the television set elicited no enthusiasm on her part: after all, she had already played with many machines like that. But this messenger from the outside world soon got its revenge and the Dutchman resolved to take part in the pernicious ritual, making comments upon images and words. To his astonishment, he soon realised that Litta did not connect the information she received to the outside word, solely attributing it to the ingenuity of the machine itself. It was as if all those images and words had originated *inside* the screen that was a sophisticated version of the human mind.

'Do you know that this murder really took place?' he asked her once. 'It's the news you're watching. These events really happen, in real life.'

'The news is just another movie, a boring one,' she said, unperturbed.

In his chalet the Dutchman intended to protect a would-be victim from the onslaught of modern technology and mentality, but she rebelled and he complied with her wishes that mirrored the preoccupations of other little girls. After all, she was already fifteen and had every right to choose between reality and unreality or to confuse them *deliberately*: she must have known that Superman and Superwoman were figments of somebody's imagination. Yet she claimed that Superwoman was as

real as any other woman and far more real than the Madonna about whom the Dutchman talked only occasionally, afraid as he was of boring the maiden he had lighted upon in Versailles.

For all the qualities bestowed upon her—beauty, an unmistakable likeness to *Madonna Litta*—his *prisonnière* did not live in purity; for some reason, this way of life was not granted to her. Once again the injustice of God seemed to vindicate the Dutchman's crimes and curses that still resounded in the heavenly regions, judging from his incapacity to decay like an ordinary human. An ugly, vulgar teenager may remain a virgin throughout her life, but no one will have the urge to compare her to Mary: artists never depict the latter as an ugly teenager. Moreover, the spinster is unlikely to grow haughty about her virginity unless she endeavours to pass herself off as a bathing beauty. But Litta seemed to pride herself on that kind of impurity which allows all and sundry to mishandle a beautiful body without having any qualms about it: neither she nor her libidinous admirers questioned their own conduct. Like a Dostoevsky character she might have said to the Dutchman in response to his inquiry, 'It costs me so little and gives them such pleasure.'

Nor did she lay any claim to her superiority in matters of depravity; she carried out the rituals imposed upon her with nonchalance and her playfulness was utterly divorced from diabolical ambitions. She was neither a little devil nor a budding Madonna. 'I wish you could be a devil in disguise instead of being lukewarm,' thought the Dutchman as he recalled another of Dostoevsky's favourite themes, stemming from the Apocalypse: 'And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write: These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God: I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou were cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.'

Whatever she did was as unreal as the movies she watched on television.

## A SAINT

After the outbreak of the Second World War and the genocide it brought in its wake, humankind went bankrupt, to use its own terminology. So the Dutchman was forced to look elsewhere to gain a foothold in the world where he prospered in terms of health and longevity. The animal kingdom offered no alternative; neither did flowers, plants and trees, which does not mean he was not fond of nature. To tell the truth, he preferred flora and fauna to humans, but that was not enough, and he ended up casting his avid glance at the books he had stored in his various libraries. These books displayed for his sake the images of the past when some ideals were meaningful and provided a support for the human psyche that is apt to go on a spree whenever lacking a trustful guide.

These books spoke to him about God and even showed him some images conducive to his peace of mind: Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary whose beauty, purity and humility needed no comment, providing you looked at the right picture. One of the pictures he looked at constantly was *Madonna Litta*. He had already seen it in St Petersburg and the pleasure he experienced now was partly linked to his journeys to Russia and the snow crunching under his shoes. Needless to say, this painting was far superior to whatever was shown on television: only very private channels screen documentaries about the Hermitage or other museums.

Anyway, the Dutchman belonged to that category of people whom the Apocalypse praises, though indirectly: he was either cold or hot. He cursed the Almighty and fell in love with the Madonna. And through the Madonna he came to know the Almighty better, which was not necessarily instrumental in saving his soul: according to some theologians, we can only *feel* the Almighty. ‘Of course we cannot *know* Him,’ he wrote in his notebook. ‘Only negative knowledge is available. God is neither this nor that. Old ideas. I trust Him because I have to trust *somebody* in this world and in the Hereafter. Humans have lost all their yardsticks and can no longer measure anything or be relied upon in the domain of ethics and even aesthetics.’

His private Madonna was neither cold nor hot; like God she was neither this nor that. Nevertheless, she was *something*—a beautiful teenager with ordinary tastes and interests. She liked watching TV and did not prevent some individuals from tampering with her body. She would never have said, ‘You shouldn’t tamper with electric wiring.’ She would not have said anything. She cared neither about electric wiring or those who might tamper with it. She did not care if *she* was this electric wiring. (She was.) She did not mind being just a loose thread: a cotton thread, a nylon thread. She did not mind being a ball of wool in the hands of some spinster. ‘How many balls of wool would you need to knit that sweater?’ she might have asked her.

She was neither tender nor vulgar. She wore the Madonna’s face like a mask she had put on in expectation of a ball or another ritual in the course of which she might have been required to impersonate all sorts of swans and also the Madonna—that of Fra Angelico, for instance; some

paedophiles are keen on the Madonna. ‘Actually you don’t know what a paedophile means,’ she said. ‘Those men are fond of *children* and I’m not a child any more.’

‘You’re not—you’re the Madonna. But the Madonna is a symbol and is often represented by other humans or birds. Actually the White Swan you seem to be fond of is one of her symbols. I admired your performance in Versailles. Let us exclude from our version of Tchaikovsky’s masterpiece the Black Swan—for the time being. Could you dance for me now?’

She began to execute *her* version of *Swan Lake* and the Dutchman watched her lithe body from his armchair which for a while precluded his participation in the ballet. Then he stood up and approached her on tiptoe like the Evil Genius by whom she had been imprisoned. He was walking around her body to see it from every angle as she drew her arabesques on the floor and in the air of the living room. Like Fred Astaire he climbed on a wall and turned the ceiling into his bed from which he contemplated her purity as long as his desire for it burnt in his heart. Next day he opened the Bible and read a few excerpts from The Gospel According to St Luke—after requesting her to dance for him: ‘And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary.’

‘Why don’t you get closer to me? I can hardly hear you. And the White Swan is joined by the Prince who makes love to her—I took dancing lessons in Versailles.’

‘The Prince is with the Black Swan at the moment. Can’t you express your despair through this dance of yours? You’re in the depth of despair over his absence. A mood of despair seems to have settled on this house. And now the angel Gabriel pays you a visit. You stop dancing and listen to what he has to say. What *does* he have to say? “And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, *thou that art highly* favoured, the Lord *is* with thee: blessed *art* thou among women. And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be.” You’re troubled, aren’t you?’

‘I am,’ she said, resigned to playing the main part in his comedy.

‘How to express your state of mind? Let us see what distinguished painters have to say on the subject.’ He showed her several books where the subject was treated by Fra Angelico, Bellini, Botticelli and other Renaissance masters. ‘Now you know what to do,’ he said.

She struck a few poses suggested by the pictures he had shown her. ‘Do you like it?’ she asked.

‘Are you surprised? Are you baffled? Are you mute with deference? Or is it your libido that comes to the fore? Gabriel is a beautiful angel after all. Are you meek? Are you doubtful? Are you joyful? Well, let us express these feelings. Now you’re surprised. Don’t outspread your fingers! All right. Now you’re mute with deference. Do you know what “deference” means? Let us study the following sentence, “He treats his mother with as much deference as if she were the Queen.” Let us alter it for the sake of the argument. “He treats his father with as much deference as if he were the

King.” Or the angel Gabriel. Do you understand this word now? Let me see your interpretation of this word.’

She struck yet another pose. ‘Do you call it “deference”? Looks more like “preference” to me—you just *prefer* this pose to others, at the moment. You should *believe* in it. You should believe in God. By the way, I bought you a doll in Lausanne. Could you hold it in your arms to imitate other pictures I’m about to show you? *Madonna and Child*.’ She looked at those pictures and imitated them as best she could. ‘Let’s go to St Petersburg—the original is better. *Madonna Litta*.’

‘I don’t want to see your Madonna. I want a man and you’re not a man. Who are you? Gabriel? Jesus Christ?’

‘They did their best to send me to the day of His birth. They didn’t succeed.’

‘So you’re not Jesus Christ. Why call me the Madonna? You’re not my son, you’re not my lover. Are you impotent?’

She began to seduce him by leaving the bathroom stark naked. ‘Where’s my bathrobe?’ she would say, her gaze wandering from one wall to another as if her bathrobe were a painting, a portrait of sorts. And then she would put his underwear on, asking if it suited her.

‘Everything suits you,’ he answered invariably.

‘All your clothes would suit me. *You* suit me as a matter of fact.’

‘I’m not a piece of clothing,’ he answered.

‘What *are* you? I think you’re a saint. You can’t have murdered a woman.’

She sat by his side even when there was not enough room for such intimacy; she put her legs on his legs. ‘Can’t you see I’m reading a book?’ he would complain.

‘Are you reading about the Madonna?’

‘About resentment. Nietzsche wrote about it abundantly. Actually I’m resentful of anybody’s attempt to interfere in my work.’

‘Are you working?’

‘I’m always working. Gurdjieff called it a “work”.’

‘I’m bored to death,’ she announced.

‘You won’t die,’ he said.

Twice a week, on her own initiative, she executed the *Dance of the Seven Veils*, reducing the number of veils to three or even one if, in her professional opinion, there was a call for such a drastic reduction; but he remained unmoved in spite of his intact virility. And she danced Tchaikovsky’s ballet every night.

After those sterile attempts she would talk to him of other people whose number, in the long run, came to be reduced to one man only.

‘I need a man,’ she shouted, reducing all his efforts to zero.

‘Gurdjieff said that continence was beneficial for most disciples.’

‘I’m not his disciple. Anyway there were no women among them. Did he know *anything* about women?’

The Dutchman had no alternative but to comply with her request because he would have given anything in the world for the pleasure of living by her side, year after year. On that occasion he had to give up his own principles which did not allow him to soil the image of the Madonna by the intrusion of ‘sex maniacs’—that is how he called at present her potential and real lovers, taking heed of her judicious remark about paedophiles and *their* range of interests.

But of course the ritual was to unfold itself under his control, in his presence, which ‘will preclude any manifestation of indecency’, as he put it in his diary. Indeed there are gestures and words incompatible with old pictures on whose beauty he founded his admiration for a teenager he had come across during one of his strolls in Versailles. These men—he was aware that their number would grow continually—were not supposed to talk to her about recent movies or computers which had already made their appearance on the market. But they could not keep silent all the time because this ritual—keeping silent in public—was not easy to perform, according to Gurdjieff.

Again he left her behind as he scrambled into his Ferrari, started the engine and reached the outside world; this time he did not lock her up. Didn’t he promise her a ‘man’? She was not likely to brush such a promise aside.

His search for the providential man was a feat in itself: there are few idle men in Switzerland except tourists and immigrants. An American tourist refused to make love to a girl of whom he knew nothing. ‘What does she look like?’ he asked.

‘Do you know Leonardo’s painting exhibited in the Hermitage?’

‘What painting?’

‘*Madonna Litta.*’

‘What about *her*?’

The Dutchman went to a nearby library and purchased a book on Leonardo da Vinci; but the American did not wait for ‘her photograph’ and disappeared in spite of a handsome reward he was to receive at the end of his exertions. Another tourist pointed out he was not interested in paintings. ‘She’s not a painting,’ said the Dutchman.

‘Why then do you show me this book?’

The Dutchman went to another shop, purchased a camera, returned home and asked Litta to show her profile.

‘Nobody needs my profile,’ she said, stripping her bathrobe off. ‘Or would you rather photograph me in the bath? Have you seen Jane Mansfield?’

He photographed her profile and drove back to Lausanne. ‘She looks like the Madonna,’ said one of the tourists.

‘Have you seen *Madonna Litta*?’ asked the Dutchman, his eyes glowing.

‘What do you want me to do with the Madonna?’

Next day he found a man who agreed to come with him and make love to his daughter who was unversed in the science of love. ‘You see, she’s on the verge of a nervous breakdown. She would die if you didn’t accept my offer.’

The man accepted the offer and they drove towards the chalet, the Ferrari pulling up only once when the Dutchman told the man he wanted him to learn the following sentence by heart: ‘There is something still more admirable in Mary: namely, her maternity joined with virginity.’

‘Why should I learn it?’

‘Because she’s the Virgin Mary.’

‘You said she was your daughter.’

‘Perhaps I’m her son,’ said the Dutchman.

Goaded on by a handsome reward, the man decided not to ask too many questions and kept silent during the second half of the journey as he tried to learn this sentence by heart.

Litta was delighted upon seeing her new paramour and even performed the *Dance of the Coffee Cup* as she offered him a cup of coffee that he declined, thinking about his reward and her beauty. ‘Let’s get down to brass tacks,’ he said. ‘Oh, I’m sorry. There is something still more admirable in Mary: namely, her maternity joined with virginity.’

She smiled and offered her body to his appetite that could be compared to what a gourmet experiences in luxury restaurants: he likes the meal but does not devour it. In other words, he is not hungry when he goes to one of *his* restaurants; he longs to taste something and not to ward off a threat of starvation. But at that point Litta might have preferred a gourmand—a man prepared to *devour* whatever is offered to him; she might have preferred an ogre.

‘Why don’t you let yourself go?’ she asked her paramour.

‘There is something still more admirable in Mary: namely, her maternity joined with virginity,’ he answered.

‘You’re not *him*, are you?’

‘There is something still more admirable in Mary: namely, her maternity joined with virginity.’

‘Why do so many people talk of the Madonna?’ she asked. ‘Is she better than me?’

## A CUL-DE-SAC

It was useless to talk to her about her wayward conduct, for she was a normal human being whose appetites did not include the notion of 'Immaculate Conception'. 'History is just a number of books one may not read,' she would say, looking at him defiantly. Anyway, books evince no desires and are often kept on the same shelf for years without manifesting their displeasure or otherwise proving they are creatures of flesh and blood. Their flesh, if any, is dead and blood has never enlivened their veins, contrary to what the Dutchman was exposed to in his youth: a flow of rich boiling blood. But in the long run his immortality drained the blood in his veins that were weary of letting it out whenever he was wounded or shot dead. Actually he was always shot *alive*, as everybody knows, and that was more than his blood and veins could bear: why flow out and form rivulets on the floor if your owner continues to live?

The Dutchman was often compared to a book which may be opened—when somebody feels like it—and shut again without producing any disturbance among the letters composing it. Unless one tears a page off, the book remains motionless and emotionless; and nobody any longer had an urge to tear the Dutchman to shreds. Of course the book may be transferred from one writing desk to another so that it moves while a reader holds it in his or her hands. But its contents remain motionless as if despising any change, however alluring.

Whenever he drove in a car or flew over an ocean, the Dutchman moved in the same fashion, his contents unperturbed and almost paralysed. Even food underwent no metamorphosis in his stomach and intestines unless one regards disappearance as a metamorphosis: it would just disappear within his digestive system. 'Where could I wash my hands?' is a well-known euphemism which, in the Dutchman's case, was to be taken literally: he did nothing else on his visits to lavatories all over the world.

You may put one book on another without fearing they would engage in sexual intercourse, rearranging the patterns of their respective paragraphs. Nor are they likely to moan, groan and otherwise destroy the silence requested inside a public library where an old librarian is often seen with his index finger across his mouth. Had a beautiful woman found herself atop the Dutchman's body she would have been treated like a book in every respect but one: he would never have *read* her. 'If the winds of temptation arise, if you are driving upon the rocks of tribulation, look to the star, invoke Mary,' says St Bernard. The Dutchman looked *at* Mary and this contemplation might have played a modest part in his metamorphosis: one *may* regard the disappearance of sexual longings as a metamorphosis unless one prefers to use other words such as 'decay' and 'death'. But let us not forget that death was not to be found in his body's thesaurus. Actually this disappearance, which might be called 'impotence', occurred prior to his encounter with the Madonna-like maiden; after all, he paid only slight attention to the female bodies lying on the paths of the war. Needless to say, German and Russian soldiers did not follow his example.

‘Why do you need all these men?’ he asked Litta one afternoon.

‘Because I’m a woman.’

‘Look at yourself in this mirror. How can you betray your own eyes, the oval of your face, your profile? My wife looked like the Madonna, otherwise I wouldn’t have killed her.’

‘You expected her to behave like one of those paintings of yours, didn’t you? But she was a woman.’

‘I wasn’t interested in paintings at the time. Why do you betray me and yourself?’

‘It’s you who bring all these men to your house,’ she retorted.

Their conversations were tedious and led only to a cul-de-sac where they seemed to live for years on end. He often dreamt of that cul-de-sac to which his car was driving him: he had no control over his car. ‘Why can’t I turn the steering wheel?’ he wondered. ‘What is it for? Turning this way and that is a steering wheel’s *raison d’être*, I presume. Do I presume too much? Should it remain motionless, however desperately I grasp it? And what about the brake pedal? Is it an accelerator? Why do I have two accelerators in my car? Because it’s a Ferrari?’

‘Step on it!’ shouted Litta.

‘But we are heading for a cul-de-sac,’ he said.

‘Step on it! The faster we drive the sooner I’ll get away from your house.’

‘Do you wish to spend your life in a cul-de-sac?’

‘Why not? Anything is better than your house.’

They reached the cul-de-sac and for once the brake pedal proved to be as reliable as a book lying on one’s writing desk. He immediately changed gear in the hope of backing out of the cul-de-sac that was surrounded by walls.

The spot where their journey had come to an end was not a cul-de-sac but rather an enclosed space looking like a church with a vault and an organ. A priest began to read out his sermon from a pulpit. ‘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.’

‘I’m no longer troubled by the greatness of my crimes,’ said the Dutchman to the priest.

‘And who is this little girl, pray? Isn’t it a great crime to keep her under lock and key in your own house?’

‘But I don’t touch her. I just read out St Bernard’s homilies.’

‘You’ll stay in this church until you marry her,’ said the priest. ‘She’s destined to conceive from someone else, though. You’ll never touch her in spite of your marital status.’

The Dutchman told this recurrent dream to Litta who confirmed she would rather spend the rest of her life in a cul-de-sac than prolong her stay in his hospitable house. ‘But would you spend the rest of your life in a church?’ asked the Dutchman. ‘You’ll hear only sermons and religious music. No

jazz, no rock stars. Shall we listen to an old King Crimson recording? Or would you rather go back to your aunt's inhospitable flat?'

He knew that something had to be done and the Ferrari, however unreliable within the context of his dream, was the only means of escape from the humdrum routine of their life. But before embarking on a long trip across Europe he resolved to try another remedy to which he had often resorted in his youth—writing poetry. Indeed this was his only form of emotional outlet prior to his love affair with the unfortunate creature he murdered in a fit of rage. 'What about writing a poem?' he said to Litta. 'The happiest pastime you can avail yourself of. It's a pity I can't write any more. What would I write about? For centuries I was in the throes of a midlife crisis, but that's all over.'

'Can't you write about love?' she asked him. 'Do poets ever write about something they don't feel? Or write about the Virgin Mary. You feel *her*, don't you? Write about anything—just leave me alone!'

She did write a poem, however, in the hope of hurting him with the very tool he had found to supply an innocent outlet for her emotions. Yielding to an outburst of masochism, he translated her clumsy poem into the language of his diary:

*Poor me, poor Ann!  
How shall I go out?  
Where could I go?  
Back to my aunt's?  
His car is slow,  
So are his wits.  
'I've a few titbits  
For my Madonna.'  
The way he talks,  
The way he behaves.  
How many days  
Have I spent in tears?  
Will no one ever  
Find this poem  
On a seashore?*

'Do you wish to put this poem in a bottle?' he asked.

'Can't we throw it into the sea?' She was in deadly earnest.

'The sea is far away from this area. But we'll reach it sooner or later.'

It was then that began their extensive travels all over Europe. She was waiting for Big Males and he could content himself with Big Meals. And they often ate Big Macs as they resigned

themselves to a succession of cities and landscapes that promised nothing, absolutely nothing. The Virgin Mary was out of fashion—at least as a creature of flesh and blood. Nobody recalled the Flying Dutchman and his characteristics; no longer was anybody interested in his immortality or immorality. Nor was *he* interested in his immortality as he took care of a teenager whose life was to end in the middle of the twenty-first century.

He showed her a few capitals of Europe where he would pontificate on ancient houses, vestiges of Renaissance and Baroque architecture—to the detriment of modern buildings that function as ‘machines for living in’, to borrow Le Corbusier’s terminology. ‘This architect,’ he told her, ‘removed every stylistic reminiscence from the vocabulary of form, reducing all buildings to the basic geometrical shapes of rectangle, plane surface, cube and cylinder. Machines living in machines. These buildings are actually machines to *die* in. I should try and spend a few years in one of them. Repetition of a simple shape, uniformity of design, industrial looking materials, dominance over the surrounding environment. Those god-like creators of a brave new world maintained that their Utopia could be achieved on an international scale, with no thought for stifling regional traditions. But the cathedral over there gathers around itself the area in which birth and death, disaster and benediction, achievement and failure, endurance and dissolution acquire the shape of destiny for human beings. Only within such an area does humanity come to terms with its history and fulfil its vocation. This church is even older than I am. Don’t you prefer old houses, immortal people? And this palace is much younger than I am.’

In Munich they attended a performance of *The Flying Dutchman* which offered him an opportunity to shed light on some episodes from his youth: he already had the knack of creating his own past. He also commented on the libretto, especially on Act II where Senta—a beautiful maiden—sings about her love for a portrait. ‘So one *can* be in love with a painted man or woman,’ he said. ‘She was prepared for the appearance of the real Dutchman. I was prepared for your appearance. I’ll never let you make love to other men. From now on you’ll be faithful to me.’

He was in a cheerful mood, but at some point his shadow grew bigger once again. Another CIA agent? Another paedophile? Another doppelgänger? Another potential lover? In vain did he drive her from one city to another in the hope of reducing his shadow to its normal size. A psychiatrist advised him to shed some of his insecurity inhibitions and even tried to help him as best he could. But what the Dutchman really wanted to shed was these shadows which plagued their walks and also their visits to theatres. ‘It’s an issue we’ll have to confront at some point, no matter how unpleasant it is,’ he told her.

In Milan they had dinner in a restaurant where a young coxcomb joined them without obtruding upon their privacy: he was sitting at a nearby table. The Dutchman suggested he should join them and the coxcomb obeyed his order as soon as a waiter brought an additional chair. ‘Do you wish to marry my daughter?’ asked the Dutchman.

‘Of course.’

‘Do *you* wish to marry him?’ The Dutchman addressed his ‘daughter’.

‘Why not?’ she answered.

“...all and each / Would draw from her alike the approving speech,” quoted the Dutchman.

‘Well, I’m against it. I don’t know who you are. A pianist in a night club, a gigolo? You might be the Flying Dutchman, for all I know. Are you the Flying Dutchman?’

‘Who is the Flying Dutchman?’ asked the coxcomb.

‘Aren’t you acquainted with Wagner’s opera? Do you ever go to the theatre?’

‘From time to time.’

‘And you’re not acquainted with the Flying Dutchman. Well, you *are* acquainted with the Flying Dutchman.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Never mind. You’re not worthy of my daughter.’

During this dialogue the Dutchman was worried about Litta’s reaction, but she did not come into the open and he continued in the same vein, shedding his insecurity inhibitions.

‘Did you read Spinoza’s works?’ he asked.

‘I did,’ answered the coxcomb.

‘But did you *meet* him?’

‘Of course I didn’t.’

‘And what about Gurdjieff? Are you acquainted with *him*?’

‘Not personally.’

‘They don’t deserve you,’ he told her as they left the restaurant and proceeded to the car. ‘You’re a symbol of what doesn’t exist any more and humanity isn’t worthy of you. Humanity doesn’t even deserve a symbol. Anyway, I know how to get rid of all these shadows once and for all.’

They returned to Switzerland and he began to prepare the ground for his next murder.

## IMPOTENCE

Even a saint could not live eternally without committing one murder at least. For an immortal man everything is as easy as a stroke of pen and the Dutchman wrote a great deal, noting down even his irrelevant thoughts. Under the circumstances a murder was a *relevant* thought doomed in due course to outgrow itself and become an action, another mortal sin. 'Last night I resolved to kill the President of the United States,' he wrote at some point. At which point? Did he assassinate John Fitzgerald Kennedy?

He was to kill the Madonna because humanity deserves neither the Virgin Mary nor her Son Whom he would not have spared had the scientists managed to send him back in Time. 'I hope the machine will arrive before His birth,' he wrote in his diary as if the project were still on the agenda. Or does this entry date back to the early sixties? 'I had better commit my murder before Gabriel breaks the news to her, otherwise I will have a double murder on my conscience. I was told a story about a woman driving in New York. She drove in a lane intended for cars crammed with people; and she was alone in her car. A policeman stopped the car and gave her a ticket. A few days later she wrote to the police to point out she had not been alone. "I was pregnant at the time I was driving in this lane," she wrote. She was fined again because two people are not allowed to sit on the same seat when taking a ride in a car. Is it blasphemous to recall this story in connection with the Virgin Mary and her Son?'

'You must hate this house,' he said to Litta.

'No. I feel at home here after all this travelling.'

'You must be bored to death,' he insisted.

'I'm not. I hope we'll travel again, but I don't mind staying here.'

'Forever?' he asked provocatively. 'Can you dance *The Dying Swan*?'

She nodded and spread her wings.

'Why don't you put your white dress on? Your long evening dress. Or would it interfere with your dance?' Submissively she put the dress on.

The dying swan died at last and she said calmly, 'Are you going to kill me? You're not a paedophile, are you? Only *they* kill girls.'

'You're not a girl any longer. How old are you now? Seventeen, eighteen? What is your date of birth?'

'You told me one should cry on one's birthday. So I decided not to cry. Anyway I'm as immortal as you are. Immortality is contagious, isn't it?'

'It's not a venereal disease. Besides, I've never made love to you.'

'You haven't even kissed me yet,' she pointed out.

'I'll kiss you tonight.'

‘Or do you think my death will cure you of your impotence? But it’s the other way round—I should strangle you. You must have seen the Japanese movie *The Empire of the Senses*. Her boyfriend got the erection of his life when she strangled him.’

‘Of his life? Of his death?’

‘You don’t have to cure yourself—you’re *not* impotent. I’ll never betray you, I’ll never leave you. Let’s stay in this house forever. You promised to kiss me, didn’t you?’

He did not kiss her, for he suddenly felt he *could* bring himself to kiss her, to touch her lips with his lips; he did not mind. He did not mind anything and the word ‘indifferent’ she had uttered once when speaking of her attitude towards the Virgin Mary had once more become the keyword of his old immortal self, the pendulum abruptly swinging back to the other extreme. Doesn’t Schopenhauer speak about this inevitable outcome of any pursuit? Every desire is dogged by indifference; a fulfilled desire is synonymous with indifference. In a way, every desire leads a dog’s life.

He was indifferent to what was going on and even asked himself if something *was* going on at that ungodly hour. Anyway, nothing could go wrong or right and his ritual no longer made any sense. How often had he said ‘no longer’ about this and that, about human ideals and symbols, about humanity itself, about God? But ‘no longer’ lasted so long he had finally grown indifferent to it. And ‘long’ also lasted very long—forever. And he no longer wished to get rid of it. *Madonna Litta* was just a sheet of paper lying in his brain amidst other sheets of paper that were neither superior nor inferior to it. What did it matter *where* she was lying: at the top of a pile, at the bottom of it? ‘High’ and ‘low’ were synonymous and differed from each other only in space, not in time. But even space was now monotonous, point A having merged with point B. All points lived together now, in one point: A, B, C, D, E, F. They had become tangled up. ‘The floor of the forest was covered with tangled undergrowth,’ he wrote in his diary.

‘You can live, you can die—do whatever you wish,’ he said.

‘May I kiss you?’ she asked.

‘By all means. I’ve got nothing to lose and nothing to gain. And there’s nothing in between these two options—no free will, no enslaved will.’

She kissed him on the right cheek and he felt that someone had kissed him on the right cheek ever so lightly. But was there any difference between a soft kiss and a hard one, between a kiss and a slap? He tendered the other cheek. She kissed it and he experienced the same anonymous sensation. Was it a sensation or something else—an impression, an emotion? Was there anything to write home about or just to experience then and there? Where? He was sitting in his so-called courtroom, but no trial was going on because the performance had been cancelled. By whom? By God? By himself? By Jesus Christ? Didn’t He say that her time was accomplished? And what was the reason for the cancellation? Bad weather? Somebody’s illness? But there was nobody around except somebody who had kissed or slapped him on both cheeks. Was it somebody? Was it a mosquito? Some varieties of the *anopheles* mosquito transmit malaria to humans. There was no mosquito net in his bedroom. Anyway

he was afraid neither of malaria nor of any other illness—nor of immortality, for that matter. Aren't they synonymous? There are only synonyms in human vocabulary. Even God's vocabulary contains only tautologies.

Slowly she began to unbutton his shirt as if his body were still that of a middle-aged man who might have died more than three centuries ago had he not committed a hideous crime. 'My body must have grown transparent,' he told her. 'Do you need a transparent thing?'

'I love you,' she said. 'And I could sacrifice my life for your sake if you asked me.'

'I don't ask you anything, nor do I answer you. Words have also grown transparent. They don't groan any more. They neither caress nor kiss. You're just a word.'

She took his shirt off and covered his chest with her soft kisses, moving downward. 'Another journey,' he thought. 'Another cul-de-sac.'

He fell asleep and saw the same dream where his car was driving him in the direction of a cul-de-sac—against his will. But he no longer had a will of his own and no alien will inhabited his body or mind. So he touched neither the brake pedal nor the accelerator. 'Neither...nor' resounded in his brain that looked like a naked writing desk. 'My brain is also stark naked,' he thought. 'Only two words remain in it: <neither...nor>.' Again the car pulled up in a cul-de-sac that immediately turned into a church with a vault and an organ. 'What's this church for?' wondered the Dutchman. 'I needn't other words in my brain.' A priest began to read out his sermon from the pulpit:

'Mary said that Jesus had come to her and warned her that her time was accomplished. "I will hide thy body in the earth, no man shall find it until the day when I raise it incorruptible. A great church shall be built over it."'

## A HAPPENING

He had no idea what she had done with his body on that fateful or blissful night which would have become an endless night, had he never come to his senses. But he did come to his senses or whatever passed for such and made no effort to recall either the previous night or any other night or day: 'either...or' was a synonym of 'neither...nor'. 'Something might have happened to me in the past,' he wrote, 'but whatever did happen to me was like those happenings I saw in New York and elsewhere. People were coming and going, eating something, talking about something. In a way, they were transparent: I could see all sorts of things through them. I could see my own boredom or a man standing opposite me. I could see myself. At the time I *could* see myself. Why did they call them happenings? Of course Gurdjieff says that everything happens. But those happenings did *not* happen. From now on my life will be like a happening.'

He ate and drank without eating and drinking; he was undressed and kissed. Something might have been done to his body during those periods of non-existence—or non-happening, as he came to define them in his diary. He was still writing down his impressions or non-impressions as a result of the momentum he had gained in the course of his indefatigable life. 'Did I gain the momentum or lose it?' he wrote. 'Anyway a momentum is just a moment. I'm losing it now. Once you push it, it keeps going under its own momentum. I was pushed, I suppose—at the end of the trial or when the door of my prison cell flew open. So I keep going under my own momentum. Is it *my* momentum? "The spacecraft will fly round the Earth to gain momentum for its trip to Jupiter," they told me. "Or to *lose* momentum. Why go to Jupiter? I would just become one of its satellites. Everything seems to "become" or "grow" and nothing actually moves. How strange! Is it really strange? Nothing is either strange or common. Neither...nor.'

Of course he did something during those days of non-acting and non-feeling; he would dress and undress, go to the bathroom, go out of the bathroom and even brush his teeth. Or did somebody take him to the bathroom and out of it? Did somebody shave him during that period?

'Decisions are often made on the basis of incorrect information,' he wrote. 'And what is correct information? Neither...nor. Would anyone help me? But who is anyone? And help is just another form of non-assistance, non-alignment or non-aggression. It is just another non-alcoholic beer.'

They resumed their journey through Europe because he had nothing to lose or gain. And the momentum gained by his car meant nothing to him, for he remained motionless even on German motorways where speed is not limited. Sometimes he pressed the accelerator, sometimes he did not. The brake pedal functioned in the same way. 'There's only one way,' he said to his mistress.

Once they had an accident and she spent two months in a hospital where they seemed to look after her. And he seemed to look her up now and then. Sometimes it was 'now', sometimes it was 'then'. And whenever he looked her up during the 'then'-period he did not know whether he really looked her up. Or did he look her *down*, by any chance? She was lying in a bed, her eyes riveted on

him, but he took notice neither of her eyes nor of her bed and usually left without saying a word. What word could he have said to her? 'Neither' or 'nor'?

On the day she was discharged from the hospital he brought her some flowers. 'I brought you some flowers,' he said.

'Thank you very much.'

'I brought you no flowers,' he said.

'You're here—that's what counts.'

'I didn't bring myself either,' he said.

They drove away, zooming along the motorways they were not acquainted with. 'Why should you be acquainted with a motorway?' he said to her. 'A motorway is not a human. And even a human being shouldn't be befriended. Shall we head for another cul-de-sac?'

They headed for another cul-de-sac; and they spent some time in it. 'What are you waiting for?' she asked.

'I'm waiting for a church to be built,' he answered. 'The church I saw in my dreams or elsewhere.'

'What do you need this church for?'

'For nothing,' he answered. 'For "neither", for "nor". We should go to Japan and attend a no-performance. Or is it a neither-performance? An either-performance? I can't remember.'

'Why didn't you kill me that night for my betrayals?' she asked. 'I was ready for it. Does it make any difference? Life and death.'

'Indifference is contagious,' he repeated.

They flew to St Petersburg where he showed her *Madonna Litta* and other pictures hanging on walls and in the air where so many things took place without really taking place, space or time. *Madonna Litta* was as transparent as the air on which she had been painted many centuries ago; she was older than the Dutchman and younger. 'She must have been eighteen when he painted her,' he said. 'How old are you now?'

'I don't remember,' she answered.

'Perhaps it's your birthday tomorrow.'

There was nothing unknown on earth or elsewhere: even on the moon he knew every crater by heart. Did he experience something new in the company of Litta whose figure silhouetted against the sky whenever he deigned to look at her? Was *she* unknown at least? Wasn't he surprised by her metamorphosis, by the love she bore him now? His body might have been tampered with during the nights they spent together in the hotels where they would reserve one room with a double bed and one bathroom. She was keen to soap and wash his body which must have kept the same genes for more than three centuries. 'More than three centuries,' she would repeat with gusto as if these words were akin to his body, as if she could make love to these words. And she often made love to these words in his absence, after his departure.

He seldom left her now because he did not have to go shopping or search for males who might have eloped with her, had there been any lapse of judgement on his part. Luckily for him (and for her), he was a good judge of character and never extended a welcome to the wrong person.

‘Let’s go to Boston,’ he said. ‘I want you to study at Harvard University.’

‘I’m studying *you*. Isn’t that enough? It’s no easy task to encompass more than three centuries.’

‘You should think of your own life.’

‘My life is you, my life is yours.’ She might have kissed him at that point.

‘Your life is your own,’ he said bluntly.

They did not go to Boston, for he suffered a relapse of indifference—the only malady he was exposed to. So they returned to Switzerland and, without paying a customary visit to Girardet’s restaurant, drove home where nobody and nothing awaited them: he was not fond of domestic animals. When they arrived at last he did not feel at home: only Jupiter could have become his home if he had agreed to undertake such a journey many years later. Now he thought neither of the earth nor of Jupiter and even his travelling companion, who was his satellite, did not touch his genes or nerves. She touched his body all the time, but he did not respond to her caresses or whatever passed for such, and she smiled as if to vindicate his sin of omission.

‘Let’s just talk about anything,’ he said to her, a glass of cognac in his hand. ‘Do you know what “anything” is?’

‘It must be something,’ she answered playfully. She was playful and Litta at the same time. A double whammy.

‘Let’s take “something” and “nothing”. “Anything” is in between. I wish we could talk about “nothing”. But how to talk about “nothing”? Silence is the only answer to “nothing”. Does “nothing” need an answer, I wonder?’

‘Everything needs an answer,’ she said.

‘I had a friend, a musician. He created a chamber orchestra. And he travelled with this orchestra all over the world. He was weary of this orchestra, but he continued to play with it. “I must take care of my musicians,” he told me. “They’re not invited if I don’t play with them.” You *are* invited, aren’t you? Anybody would invite you.’

‘Do you want to kill me?’ she asked.

‘I did *not* kill you.’

‘Do you want to get rid of me? It’s a murder.’

## CORDELIA

They were cooped up in the same house that showed no sign of displeasure in spite of their impertinent occupancy. But the Dutchman was not a house; at least he was not his own house and thereby could not react in the same manner. He could not react at all because he was estranged from whatever happened in his life that continued to pester him. He would have shown many signs of displeasure had he not been a gentleman—a representative of olden times when people were far more ceremonious than their modern counterparts or fellow creatures. One of his modern counterparts might have said to the girl, ‘You’d better make yourself scarce.’ He might also have used a four-letter word. The Dutchman just told her, ‘It’s easy to be starry-eyed about a place you’ve never been to.’

‘What place are you talking about?’ she asked.

‘I’m talking about the stars.’

They were talking at cross-purposes and he was all the more frustrated since he had no desire to speak at all. To speak, to talk—these verbs were synonyms. All words were synonyms and he was reluctant to use them: they were out of use, out of his mind and body, out of his life, out of time. But they were not out of eternity and he listened to them as long as they resounded either in his house or in his brain. Her love also resounded in his brain and perhaps in his body to which he did not listen, anxious to avoid any contact with her love.

She often cried when leaning over his body; he might have felt her tears dropping on his skin, had he concentrated either on her tears or on his skin. But ‘neither...nor’ was his motto and he hearkened to it instead of relishing the love of a woman who might have saved him from life, had he asked her to do it. Would have...might have...had I. These grammatical structures annoyed him all the more since he had no wish to get annoyed. All the more...all the less. “More” and “less” were synonyms, but he continued to use them as if they were opposites; as if they contradicted each other.

‘Why do you pay so much attention to my body? Don’t you have your own body to take care of? Do aerobics! Go to beauty parlours! You’re beautiful—no doubt about that. But every beauty has to nourish her beauty, otherwise it might die of starvation. I can go without food. You can’t, as far as I know.’

She continued to lavish her gifts on his body that was weary of itself and needed no one to emphasise this weariness. Of course it was just a word, nothing more: his body was a word, his weariness was a word. But if you repeat one word over and over again it is bound to jar on your nerves, especially if your nerves are older than the hills. Out of weariness he began to play with words; and words played with him. And once again words defeated him soundly.

After a year of games and defeats he once again locked her up in the attic and drove away, determined never to come back—‘in spite of everything’, he said to himself. And he went on talking to himself, ‘What if someone breaks the door down? She might already have been sexually abused. I

should have asked Loge to surround her with a ring of magic fire. How is she? When my cat is hungry, she starts clawing at my legs. My cat. When did she die? Nobody dies.'

Of course he realised she would die of starvation if he persisted in his attitude, so he spent only a few hours away from the chalet, keeping at bay his guilty conscience that finally defeated him: it was only a word after all. He bought some caviar and returned to the attic where she awaited him with such impatience that he felt it, for all his indifference to tears.

Another year elapsed in the chalet and elsewhere; even on Jupiter the same year accomplished its vicious circle without a hitch. She did not watch TV any longer as if its images might distract her love from its purpose, from his body and *mind* to which she now paid a lot of attention. 'Tell me a story,' she would ask him.

'A story about the Flying Dutchman? You're *living* this story.'

'Could you tell me about your childhood?'

'I loved games, I always won. Only words could defeat me.'

'Tell me a *real* story,' she implored.

And he told her a real story:

Children are exempt from the tyranny of natural laws, for they do not view the world in terms of limits and frontiers.

A small boy plucks the moon from the sky and puts it in his pocket. He has no idea how far the moon is from the Earth so he just reaches out his hand and touches the moon. Nor does he know how big the moon is in comparison with the palm of his hand. So he grasps the moon and rolls it on the palm of his hand until, bored yet satisfied, he puts it in his pocket. And he may not empty his pockets for a few days, depriving lovers or those who yearn to become lovers of their precious, inspiring symbol.

And poets put away their quills; and *The Moonlight Sonata*, *Pierrot Lunaire* and other lunar masterpieces disappear from shops and concert halls; and werewolves hide in the bowels of the earth, depriving horror stories of the 'real touch' which, thanks to talkative victims and witnesses, assures astronomical sale figures and thus reassures both publishers and writers.

'What's that?' asks the boy's mother, pointing to the glimmer.

'The moon,' answers the child.

'What do you need the moon for? Return it to the sky immediately! Remember, you can't put anything in your pockets without asking for permission first!'

'May I have the sun for my birthday?'

'You may not!' shouts the mother.

Children must not be allowed to play with astral bodies; nor should they interfere with space, shifting houses and monuments around, for the Eiffel Tower belongs to Parisians, not to Muscovites.

We must not let them pore over history books, for they do not view Time in terms of the past and the future—only in terms of the present, of the everlasting present. Julius Caesar and Napoleon visit them in their rooms and sleep with them in their beds. And those heroes of the past often fight with them in the streets, interfering with the traffic and the itineraries of pedestrians, invading Egypt, Russia and many other countries which, thanks to the New World Order, now pursue their peaceful goals without troubling their neighbours.

Besides, our children might fall in love with Cleopatra and discover female attractions long before their bodies become mature enough for sensual conquests; long before we pave the way for their future sexual liaisons.

We must keep our children under lock and key. The windows of their rooms must be walled up. No books, no strip cartoons. They must not speak either, for they might utter forgotten or forbidden words—the words of the past, the words of the future, the words of destruction, the words of confusion, the words of doom that can be uttered only on doomsday.

They might chuck an atomic bomb on our peaceful continent—by uttering a wrong word, by switching on the lights. That is a matter of faith! That is a matter of ignorance!

They must live in the darkness until their brains grow mature enough for the outside world, for human history. And then they will read our books and go out into our world and glance at our sun without being tempted to remove it from the firmament. They will not open the gates of our cities to Roman or Russian soldiers. They will not betray our secrets to the Martians and other visitors from the future. They will work and go shopping and buy us birthday presents. And they will get married and beget our grandchildren for whom we have already built a great many dark houses.

‘I’m your wife and your daughter,’ she told him, once the story was over.

‘I know nothing about it,’ he said.

‘You know, you know! You wouldn’t have come back. Just another murder—what does it mean to your conscience, guilty or otherwise? You came back because you’d realised you were in love with me. Let’s call it fatherly love—I don’t care. What does it matter *how* you love me? What does it matter how *much* you love me? A little bit, that’s enough. Love can’t be measured.’

‘Yes, it’s infinite,’ he said. ‘And in the Kingdom of Infinity a tear is equal to an ocean. I don’t love you. I might fall in love with you if I were capable of it. Eugene Onegin said something along these lines to Tatiana.’

‘But he did fall in love with her in the end, didn’t he?’

‘There’s no end in my novel, in my story. It’s a never-ending story.’

‘Let’s finish it together. I’m ready to die with you.’

‘You should marry and beget children. Let humanity live forever. Plants and stones are alive, aren’t they? Do they have a history? Let humanity live like sand on a seashore.’

Another year elapsed and he resolved to leave her in earnest. ‘For good, for bad,’ he wrote in his diary. This time he did not lock her up. Oddly enough, she let him go as if her heart were immune to premonitions. Of course he told her he would come back pretty soon. She must have believed him. ‘There’s enough food in the refrigerator,’ he thought. ‘My guilty conscience is not guilty.’

‘Premonition’ is just a word, whether it is sudden or otherwise. Besides, the Dutchman had no need of premonitions. A woman might have a premonition and rush out of her kitchen before an explosion wrecks it, but the Dutchman remained anywhere as long as he wished. The point is he did not wish anything; his problem, if any, was rather linked to the lack of wishes among which no biographer would ever find ‘the gift of the sixth sense’. Why then did he recall the following lines from *King Lear*?

I know when one is dead, and when one lives;  
She’s dead as earth.

Not only did he recall these lines—he actually recited them out loud, with dramatic art, as he pulled up at a petrol station. Did he have a sudden premonition? He did not make a U-turn at once because he was not used to premonitions and had no idea how to deal with them. Does one have to listen to one’s premonition? How does it sound? Like King Lear’s monologue? Like a piece of music? ‘If I had to listen to something,’ he thought, ‘I’d rather hear Schubert’s *Death and the Maiden*.’ Another sign of a premonition? Another slip of the mind? Schubert composed a great many lieder and fifteen quartets. Why did the Dutchman choose a piece bearing such an ominous title?

Instead of driving back he played with words for a while. ‘A bad omen, a bad old man.’ These words defeated him—he was *not* an old man after all—and the Ferrari resumed its journey without his participation. Indeed his thoughts were fixed on the chalet where his Cordelia was dying in accordance with his premonition, with that voice talking to him about her death. Why was *she* listening to the voice? ‘Don’t listen to it. This voice talks rubbish, I can assure you. Don’t kill yourself. I’m not worthy of you. I’m not worthy of your death. Why offer such a gift to a madman? Cordelia, Cordelia! stay a little. Ha! Ha! Ha ha!

He made a U-turn.

## NO LONGER

Upon his return he found her body in the library. Or was it just another title, Agatha Christie's novel? *The Body in the Library*. The body is that of a young blonde, dressed in cheap finery. The body he saw in *his* library wore her white dress—the one he had asked her to put on several years before. Or did this body belong to Cordelia or rather to Shakespeare? Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life? Even his Ferrari had life.

He cradled her body in his arms. Presently he put it on a divan and knelt down before it. No, no, no, no!

Didn't we sing like birds in a cage? I ask your forgiveness. Too late? I'll always ask your forgiveness and time will go backward at last. Time can't always go forward, can it? Sooner or later it will return home. It's bound to return to us. So we'll live and sing and I'll tell you stories. I'm a good storyteller. I'll vanquish words at last, at long last. What story did I wish to tell you as I drove back home? A story about a Samurai warrior. Would you listen to it? No, you'd better sleep. I'll sing you a lullaby—it's past your bedtime already.

He talked to her, to others, to himself. He struck up an acquaintance with those distant voices. Or were they within striking distance?

He undressed her carefully and kissed her breasts. What had she died of? Poison? There were no wounds on her body. No blood soiled its immaculate purity. He shrouded her in the heavenly garment and let her sleep in peace. In the dead of night he returned to her again, knelt down and sang her a lullaby:

No, no, no, no.

Never, never, never, never, never.

Neither...nor. Either...or.

No longer, no longer.

No longer fear death.

No longer fear life.

And some voices joined him to bid her farewell. Suddenly he found himself in the midst of those disembodied voices. They had bodies at present and their bodies moved to and fro, up and down the street. What street was it? What city? What had he done with her body? He recalled only his stories, the yarns he was spinning for her. 'Do you want me to tell you a story?' he asked a pedestrian.

'I'm in a hurry,' answered the pedestrian.

'Well, there's another pedestrian in this street, in this country. I'll tell him or her my story.'

A woman froze in her tracks and he told her his story:

Faust said to the instant: *‘Verweile doch! du bist so schön!’* and the instant froze in its tracks. The instant was floating through his house and had no intention of lingering by the fireplace or anywhere else—not even outdoors—when Faust recalled his cue and demanded the instant to stop immediately. The instant stopped by the fireplace and glanced around.

It was an ordinary house and the instant would never have stayed there for more than an instant if its owner had not made use of an old literary incantation to trick it into coming to a standstill—until doomsday, presumably.

The instant glanced around and found nothing of interest in the house to which it was now chained for millennia. There was a writing desk and on it a cardboard pentagram and a pair of scissors. There was also a photograph on the writing desk—the photograph of a young lady looking upward. There was a divan alongside the opposite wall. A child slept on the divan. The instant watched the dreams of the child for the space of a year; the dreams were banal and the instant shifted its gaze to the owner of the house.

Faust was banal too. He had changed somewhat in the course of the twentieth century, but his main shortcomings still irritated his disciples and led local virgins astray. He had no reason to arrest the flow of time: he was not happy in love and his scientific achievements, if any, were ephemeral, volatile and could neither be prolonged nor stabilised by the eternity of an instant. Yet he uttered the fateful line and an ordinary, commonplace instant flooded his room and even overflowed into the street—into the city where he had settled after the destruction of the Berlin Wall and the abolition of the Iron Curtain.

Faust looked out of the window and realised that the traffic had also come to a standstill; a number of cars and lorries stood now beneath his balcony and the fumes continued to billow from their exhaust pipes. Soon a black cloud penetrated his house and gradually commingled with the instant, whereupon the latter became smudgy and ugly. ‘It’s not beautiful,’ thought Faust, shaking his head.

He picked up the photograph of Margaret and glanced at the face of his eternal beloved—the symbol of femininity and purity. He could not recall whether Margaret had ever been beautiful, naïve and pure. Now she looked like a dirty, sloppy, sleepy whore.

Faust bent over his child—their child—and saw that he was fast asleep.

A woman loomed out of his child’s dream. She raised a knife above her son’s head and then lowered it—slowly, slowly. The movement lasted for millennia. The child was screaming in his sleep. The child was sobbing in his sleep. His mother almost touched his temple with the point of her knife. There was one inch left—another millennium.

The child continued to scream and sob. Gradually the instant shrank, compressed into one instant and floated out.

And Margaret killed her child.

He jumped into a river and swam against the current. After a while he let the current manipulate his body as best it could and a month later found himself in another country. And then he lost himself once more, determined never to find himself or anybody else—either on earth or on Venus. But somebody found him and he jumped from the roof of a skyscraper in the hope of flying to the moon. His body plummeted down. ‘Never mind,’ he said. ‘I’m already estranged from my body. Isn’t it a stranger, an alien? Only my stories count—your stories, my dear girl.’

And he told her another story, making sure that nobody else could hear him:

A leaf was falling from the sky. Astronomers mistook it for a meteor at first, but shortly afterwards they realised it was a gigantic yet ordinary leaf which could neither harm the earth nor kill its inhabitants called ‘earthlings’ by the Martians.

‘Have the Martians dropped a hydrogen bomb on our planet?’ worried the military as the news of the leaf spread through the continents. And they built a cannon to counter the imaginary attack of the Martians.

‘It’s a leaf,’ said the astronomers reassuringly.

‘There are no trees in outer space,’ answered the military.

‘And what about the Tree of Life?’ said a modest librarian.

‘We grieve for all those who lost their lives and extend profound sympathy to the relatives—’ said prophets and gravediggers.

The leaf continued to move in the nocturnal sky. It did not seem to fall earthward, contrary to the predictions of pessimists; it swung like a pendulum, dancing amidst constellations and comets.

Soon it became visible in the diurnal sky as well. It was an ordinary leaf. Nobody doubted the astronomers’ theory any more.

Nobody doubted now that the leaf was getting closer and closer to the earth; some women hastened to acquire large, extra-strong Chinese umbrellas. They walked around the streets, now and then peeking at the leaf from under the silky domes that bobbed up and down above their heads.

The leaf was dancing amidst the clouds now. Many contemplated this dance from their balconies and terraces. Many danced themselves, carried away by the rhythm of the leaf. Some maintained that the leaf danced a waltz, others favoured the Argentinean hypothesis: the leaf was dancing a tango.

‘The last tango in the universe,’ said cinema-goers.

‘It’s the autumn of the universe,’ said poets and meteorologists. ‘One leaf landed on Mars, another on Saturn.’

Sure enough, everything became yellow overnight: buildings, pavements, clouds, running water, lakes, woods, stars, mushrooms...

‘Did Van Gogh repaint the world last night?’ asked painters and Japanese multi-millionaires.

‘Don’t eat mushrooms,’ said nutritionists. ‘They’re all poisonous.’

‘Leave your houses and drive down to the country,’ said architects. ‘Our cities will sink down like soufflés.’

‘We can’t drive in these yellow cars.’

‘We can’t walk on these yellow feet.’

The people were sinking down. Some collapsed at home, others in the streets. A few Chinese umbrellas could be seen here and there.

The people were lying about the earth which had become a huge yellow bed. They were not asleep. They were merely dozing. They heard the breathing of the earth—her spasmodic, wheezing breathing. ‘The earth must have caught her death of cold,’ they thought. They still were able to think and draw conclusions from what they heard. They were prone to hasty conclusions. ‘Or is it asthma?’ they wondered.

They did not know for sure what disease the earth was suffering from. But they knew the earth was dangerously ill. The earth was lying on her deathbed, as it were—on three agonising, yellow whales. And they knew that death awaited them somewhere—in the realm of the yellow hour. But they could not work out what the white hour was.

And then the snow began to fall. It was falling from the sky—slowly, slowly. It was dancing amidst the clouds, in the mists of time.

## ONCE AGAIN

And then the pendulum swung back. What else can a pendulum do in the Kingdom of Time? In the long run the Dutchman forgot his dear girl and even the stories he had been writing for her because there were no stories in the world without history. A drifter and a swimmer had both feet on the ground again, living in New York where the past is forgotten sooner than in any other city and King Lear recovers his wits as he turns real estate agent.

The Dutchman was an American citizen and his admirers would have dubbed him 'the Flying American' had he become a cult figure, a portrait hanging in a fan club. Alas, his portrait hung only in Wagner's opera which was regularly performed all over the world as if to remind opera-goers that he was still alive and kicking. He *was* alive, but his existence had dwindled to such a point that he was indistinguishable from the other grains of sand which covered the seashore he had mentioned when talking to his dear girl one night: 'Let humanity live like sand on a seashore.'

So he lived on a seashore without a ship, without a crew, without the Cape of Good Hope. 'Hoping', 'in the hope of'—his diary did justice to the word 'hope' in all its shapes and forms. His diary did justice to everything, but his attachment to it grew less pronounced in the city where everything grows. He noted down only clichés such as, 'There is no justice in the world when people can be made to suffer like that.' He was a self-appointed judge of the world and his failure to put things in order might have been at the root of his nervous breakdowns.

Luckily for him, there were lots of psychoanalysts in New York, and he lavishly availed himself of their assistance which grew more and more obtrusive as his fears gained ground. But he stood with his feet on the same ground; he was able to kick his fears and defeats rather often to pave the way for his peace of mind and pleasures.

So he partly forsook his diary where only a few quotations can be found—the vestiges of the post-Litta era. No longer did he write stories to entertain her or himself, or a recalcitrant pedestrian; nor was his inspiration adequate for depicting his impressions or the events of everyday life—of eternal life, to be exact. He just transcribed what he had come across in other diaries: every book is a diary.

Naturally this loses all meaning in endless space (for motion in absolute space does not differ from rest), and, as directly through striving and aimless flight, it thus becomes the expression of that nothingness, that lack of an ultimate purpose or object, which at the close of this book we shall have to attribute to the striving of the will in all its phenomena.

The excerpt is from Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*. The Dutchman might have replaced the 'will-to-live' by the 'apathy-to-live', but he was too apathetic to do so.

He was no longer afraid of touching humanity, if only spiritually; he had friends who helped him cope with time, space and other inconveniences one is likely to encounter in this world. He talked to them about his redundancy, about his loss of identity.

‘Are you acquainted with Quine’s “Web of Belief”?’ asked one of them. ‘All our beliefs are connected and Quine calls this the “Web of Belief”. Quine thinks that the web only touches experience on the outside, but it’s the web as a whole that is measured against experience.’

‘Do you mean I’m part of this web?’ said the Dutchman.

‘A major change will occur if our core beliefs are challenged—the existence of the Flying Dutchman, among other things.’

‘Are you afraid I might destroy your “Web of Belief”?’ asked the Flying American. ‘And what about our belief in God? Is it a web, a cobweb or a web site?’

‘Anyway you should remain the Flying Dutchman until doomsday,’ his friend pointed out.

‘Why? Because humanity wouldn’t be the same without me? Let it be different. I’m prepared to sacrifice myself for the sake of humanity.’

‘Too late. You ought to have done it in the seventeenth century.’

‘Let it be,’ said the Dutchman.

In 2005 he was invited to the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow where *the Flying Dutchman* had been put on by Peter Konwitschny. In Act Two, instead of spinning by the fireplace, young women do aerobics and thereby transfer the scene to this day and age. Senta contemplates the Dutchman’s picture hanging on a wall. Suddenly she snatches it from the hook and the lights dim as the young women scatter around the room in a state of shock; olden times invade the peace of their health-oriented pastime. ‘They turn the wheels of their immobile bicycles and think they’ll grow immortal,’ thought the Dutchman. ‘And they’re terrified when a real, awesome immortality looms ahead of them. There are other wheels in the world: the wheel of destiny, the wheel of karma, the wheel within the wheels. Their wheels are the vicious circles of health. What do they aspire to achieve? Do they want to live as long as possible? For the sake of what do they aspire to live until doomsday? What do they intend to do with their lives? Do they want them to grow like their bodies? Ah, those obese lives of theirs! They outgrow themselves. And suddenly an old hero makes his appearance, a legend, the truth of the past. And they run helter-skelter out of their gyms to hide themselves. They’re afraid of the truth. They’re afraid of death in life. With Schopenhauerian ferocity Senta deals a fatal blow at their optimism. They paint a rosy picture of human life. She brandishes *my* picture like a sword. Konwitschny puts the matter in a nutshell. Wagner’s maidens used spinning wheels. Now they keep their bodies in top form by riding immobile bicycles. Wheels are spinning in both cases, but what was formerly done with hands is now assigned to legs—to soles instead of fingers.’

In the Bolshoi production Senta destroys the world of aerobics by making a barrel of gunpowder explode in the middle of the stage. ‘Senta! Senta!’ they shout. ‘What do you want to do? Why do you want to do it? Stay with us. Enjoy life and health foods. Or popcorn. Just stay with us. Why follow this

crazy Dutchman? Okay, you're fond of this legend. Let's watch *Pandora*. But why should you be *inside* the screen? You can't eat a banana sundae inside it. And outside you get the best of both worlds.'

Many years later an American friend told him they might go to Carnegie Hall. 'What for?' asked the Dutchman.

'Any concert at Carnegie Hall is an event,' his friend told him.

'Not any longer. I was there when Tchaikovsky inaugurated this hall.'

'The conductor is famous,' his friend assured him.

'They're all famous. The audiences applaud automatically. And they play automatically—orchestras, pianists, violinists. Machines, aren't they? Everybody's satisfied. Machines are always satisfied, aren't they? Until they get broken. But nothing could break this world of ours. Even youngsters are asleep. People like Sartre used to wake them. Nobody could wake them now, not even Jesus Christ. They're fast asleep and you sing them lullabies. They think that nothing will ever change our society so they adjust to it. Adjustment is given us from above, to paraphrase Pushkin. Your pendulum doesn't swing back and forth all the time. Your pendulum is asleep. And your novelists write about alchemists instead of writing *like* alchemists.'

'Let's go to the concert,' his friend rounded off.

Bruckner's *Te Deum*. The Dutchman heard it in France where Bruno Walter performed it at the World Fair. But there was Mozart's *Requiem* in the same programme and, given the circumstances, the Dutchman paid more attention to the *Requiem* that prophesied the end of the world. The *Te Deum* seemed inappropriate in view of the things to come: death camps, Shoah. But how beautifully they played and sang it—as if it were the truth. It was a lie, even under Bruno Walter's baton. A string of lies. A chord of lies. A hoard of lies.

'I heard the *Te Deum* by Bruno Walter in 1937.'

'Modern conductors are better because they're *modern* conductors,' his friend informed him. 'Besides, we use ancient instruments now. No more maudlin, tear-jerking vibrato. What counts is authenticity, you know.'

'Don't you think I *know* something about how music was played in olden times?' said the Dutchman. 'Are you acquainted with Pushkin's *Mozart and Salieri*?'

'I'm not.'

'Salieri must have heard Bruno Walter's performance of the *Requiem*. The World Fair. Paris, 1937. Anachronisms are my stock-in-trade, you know. Chronology loses all meaning in the Kingdom of Eternity. Salieri listens to the *Requiem*, his eyes riveted on the cup into which he poured a few drops of "Izora's last gift"—a mighty poison. Mozart empties the cup and departs. He died on the eve of the Second World War. The end of the Belle Époque. The end of the world.'

At the opening bars he realised he would have to endure a torture to which many music lovers submitted zealously without ever putting into question the quality of what they heard as victims of this or that *abonnement*.

*Te Deum laudamus,  
te Dominum confitemur.  
Te aeternum Patrem  
omnis terra veneratur.  
Tibi omnes Angeli,  
tibi caeli et universae potestates,  
tibi Cherubim et Seraphim  
incessabili voce proclamant:  
Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus Dominus Deus Sabaoth.*

He did not hear the words.

We praise thee, O God;  
we acknowledge thee to be the Lord.  
All the earth doth worship thee,  
the Father everlasting.  
To thee all Angels cry aloud,  
the Heavens and all the Powers within.  
To thee Cherubim and Seraphim  
continually do cry:  
Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth.

His everlasting life. He heard the music. The conductor and his ‘crew’ had already murdered the piece. Yet it was alive, eternal. He listened to Bruckner’s *Te Deum*. What else could he have done?

He was crying.

*Pleni sunt caeli et terra  
majestatis gloriae tuae.  
Te gloriosus Apostolorum chorus,  
te Prophetarum laudabilis numerus,  
te Martyrum candidatus laudat exercitus.  
Te per orbem terrarum  
Sancta confitetur Ecclesia:*

*Patrem immensae majestatis;  
venerandum tuum verum et unicum Filium;  
sanctum quoque Paraclitum Spiritum.*

## THE DIARY

(excerpts)

Every time someone pushes me in a crowded street or square I am surprised because a human being cannot touch me. And this conviction does not stem from my awareness of the invulnerability bestowed on me by God in the hour of doom that I call 'my Last Judgement'. I live in a glass cage that I do not feel. I do not even feel its sides as I extend my arm or raise my foot high in the air. But the glass is there, precluding my contact with the world.

I was shocked when realising I could touch a human being with impunity: no lightning, no thunderbolt accompanied this intentional touch. Of course I felt a sort of electric discharge as the palm of my hand encountered the skin of a woman dining opposite me in that cosy restaurant; I quickly withdrew my hand as if afraid it might burn to cinders.

Can you visualise a boat in calm seas travelling at a constant rate in a straight line? As a seaman, I spend most of the time on my ship which used to contend with storms and tornadoes. Now it is gliding across a placid sea. The weather is always fine and no cloud harbingers an aggressive wind, let alone a storm during which so many ships capsize and sink, their captains standing on their decks until the very last moment. Galileo pointed out that nature does not care whether you are doing your scientific experiments on a boat going uniformly at 5 mph, 10 mph or not going at all. You get the same phenomena, the same results. You get the same thoughts. Sometimes we sail faster—my crew always obey my commands. My thoughts do not change. Moreover, they are not different from the thoughts I have on land, in the countries I visit during my wanderings. So now I have no idea where I am. Indeed, if the motion of your ship is perfectly uniform and you are in a cabin with no windows, you will not be able to tell whether the ship is moving or not. The motion of my ship is perfectly uniform—I do not call upon my crew's services any longer. What is the use? And I have drawn the curtains in my cabin. Anyway there is nothing to look at except the same placid sea making love either to the sunlight or to the moonlight. Why should I spy on their ecstasies?

I summoned my crew and examined every member of it, asking them to undress and ripple their muscles so I could judge if they were fit for the next voyage. 'And now imagine that a woman is standing in front of you, a beautiful woman you desire to possess.' An hour later I dismissed the crew, unimpressed by their exhibition; yet I realised that my wife might have viewed their physiques from a different angle. She *might* have fallen in love with one of them.

She has grown flabby and floppy. Most of the time she wears a floppy garden hat; her breasts are flabby and pendulous as if she had given birth to an impressive series of twins.

Man has no permanent and unchangeable 'I' that he could trust in a moment of need or when enjoying himself: he may *not* enjoy himself, contrary to his daydreams. One personality of his maps out future happiness, another cancels everything because it wants to enjoy itself *differently*; it suffers when subjected to the whims of another 'I'. Another 'I' looks down on its colleagues all the while muttering to itself, 'Why don't they leave the field clear for *my* projects?' Many personalities are not even acquainted with each other; yet they compose one individual who goes shopping or parades on Red Square at the right moment.

I had no idea where I would take her to dissociate myself from the prison in which she had been put, according to her own words. Wasn't my car another prison, a moving one? There is no difference between an ordinary prison and a prison on wheels if your warder is still by your side and has no intention of letting you out. Of course we might take a walk along the lakeshore or even in a big city where strangers are always on the lookout for beautiful teenagers, whether accompanied or not. I have no alternative but to run the risk: the notion of the spiteful Madonna is a contradiction in terms. And it is difficult to live under the same roof with a contradiction in terms.

Somebody is supposed to love me. A woman might sacrifice something for me. What? Her purity? I do not need her purity. Does God need her purity? Does she herself need her purity? Nobody needs her purity, but I might be saved through her body or soul. Why? What could she sacrifice for me? Is it really a sacrifice? Why not live in my chalet or elsewhere in search of real life, of real death? I would let her sleep with any man—they do not count. What counts is the time we should kill every day, every hour. Litta is nothing but a stretch of time.

Given the solemnity of this murder, I decided not to catch my victim unawares, imitating the title of Agatha Christie's novel *The Murder is Announced*. To fulfil my old dream, I envisaged the possibility of reciting a few lines from the last act of *Othello*. Soon, however, I relinquished the idea, anxious to avoid a mixed metaphor: Litta could not be the Madonna and Desdemona at the same time. Yet Othello's advice seemed to concern her much more than Desdemona whose sex life was uneventful.

The Kingdom of Art has been destroyed. No more kings, just a number of civil servants.

They said: nobody shall be the best among us; and if someone is outstanding, then let him be so elsewhere, and among others...The mob does not care, not even about the things they stumble upon; nor can they grasp a lesson—though they think they do...The mob fill their bellies like the beasts.

Heraclitus

The mob fill their *minds* like the beasts. Only a flying man can look at those people from a vantage point and think otherwise.

#### THE CAPE OF GOOD HOPE

Someone else's mind  
Is known insofar  
As it's mediated by language  
Or action.

Such mediation is equally open  
To zombies, if the zombie is  
Programmed accordingly.

It *is* programmed accordingly:  
Everything is spick and span  
In this day and age.

Therefore you can't prove  
The thing in front of you  
Is a zombie. Nor can you say  
It's an intelligent human.

I had a clear view of two oceans  
From my vantage point.

*Prevention of suicide.* There is a justice according to which we take a man's life, but no justice according to which we take his death: that is nothing but cruelty.

Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too-Human*

If an eighty-thousand-year old man were conceivable, his character would in fact be absolutely variable, so that out of him, little by little, an abundance of different individuals would develop. The brevity of human life misleads us to many an erroneous assertion about the qualities of the man.

Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too-Human*

Some scientists and philosophers have taken the view that science as a whole has experienced a Golden Age that will eventually draw to a close. Truly new discoveries will become harder and harder to make; minor variations will become tempting targets; deeper understanding will require greater and

greater efforts of the imagination to achieve; and a wider grasp of the structure of systems of huge complexity will require more and more powerful computers. The seam of gold that is useful science may one day be mined out, leaving only a few nuggets to be uncovered here and there by ever-increasing effort. Of course, we may not realise that the mine is exhausted; no banner will appear in the sky to tell us that further fundamental advances will require a huge leap for Mankind, rather than a gradual shuffle. The demise of science may come not with a bang but a whimper. The financial cost of unearthing new knowledge may ultimately place too great a drain on scarce human resources. No potential benefit will outweigh the costs of investigation.

John D. Barrow, *Impossibility*

Not only for my sake should the world be blown to pieces. Their apocalypse is virtual for the moment: I am not tempted to write it with a capital A. Only after death might humanity recover from its impotence.

Brain power finally runs out of puff. The human brain may have reached the limits of intelligence, with the laws of physics preventing us from becoming any smarter, studies suggest.

The research into the brain's structure and energy demands could mean that millions of years of human evolution, dominated by increases in brainpower, have hit a plateau.

If so, modern humans are not, as many assume, a staging post to a 'higher' species. Instead we are the cognitive peak of human evolution.

*The Sunday Times*

These students are not likely to change because they do not erect barricades to harass the authorities and shake the world where they are living and dying. Preoccupied with ideas of social regeneration, Wagner took an active part in the Dresden uprising of 1949—at the age of thirty-six. At the end of his life, however, he grew conservative and would have fought on the other side of the barricades had there been any uprising in the days when he embarked upon his *Parsifal*. These old youngsters fight nowhere, neither on this side nor on the other side. They just sit in their counting houses; or eat bread and honey.

Side-changing was a common practice in old Japan.

Ta-ki-ma was a famous Samurai warrior idolised by children and adults alike.

A war between Ka-ki-mo and Ta-ki-ko broke out in the late autumn of 1758. Ta-ki-ma said farewell to his wife, his relatives, his wife's relatives and their children. He had no children of his own and so was all the more sensitive to the adulation he perceived on the faces of his relatives' children. Whenever at home, away from battlefields and war cries, he basked in their adulation and played I-go with them.

Ta-ki-ma left his home and went on foot to a famous landscape near which the two armies camped out in preparation for a blood-and-thunder battle.

Upon reaching the landscape Ta-ki-ma knelt down in front of a brook and scooped some water out of it so as to quench his thirst. Having quenched his desire, he looked around and spotted a beautiful cherry tree. 'Cherry blossom,' he said to himself melancholically and recited a famous haiku by Bashô. He sprang to his feet and approached the cherry tree with the intention of touching it. He carried out his intention and, as he did so unhurriedly and with infinite tenderness, he noticed a beautiful stone lying across the brook. He walked over to the stone and touched it, admiring its relief and conservative design. He even gave it a caress, whereupon he recalled his relatives' children and their eyes glowing with the radiance of adulation.

Presently he heard war cries and the jangling of swords. He climbed a mountain and saw the two armies in a nearby field. 'Hokusai is mixing colours for painting,' he said to himself as he looked at the suits of armour mingling down below. He descended from the mountain and joined the warriors.

Ta-ki-ma fought in the Ka-ki-mo army from 6 a.m. till 1 p.m. Then he had a frugal lunch and an afternoon nap during which he dreamt about his wife playing *tamisen* and singing his favourite song. At 3 p.m. he got up and fought in the Ta-ki-ko army till sunset. He had a huge dinner washed down with plenty of sake and slept for six hours.

On the following morning he got up at 5 a.m., took a bath with the other warriors and partook of a frugal breakfast. He fought in the Ka-ki-mo army from 6 a.m. till 1 p.m. and fell asleep, once his lunch was over. He dreamt neither about his wife nor about his relatives' children. He dreamt about the forthcoming battle.

Three days later he speeded up the process of side-changing. He fought only two hours in each army. But, as usual, he had an afternoon nap during which he did not dream at all.

Three days later he speeded things up again. He fought only one hour in each army. Most of the day he spent running from one commander-in-chief to the other, his sword flapping about his legs. He had no time for an afternoon nap.

Three days later he did nothing but run from one commander-in-chief to the other: he had no time for fighting or eating.

Three days later he no longer had enough time to run. At 5 a.m. he got up and planted himself in the middle of the field, his sword above his head. At 6 a.m. he began fighting with himself. He had no time for anything else. He fought with himself from 6 a.m. till midnight. Then he stopped for a moment, his sword touching his neck.

'Surrender is unthinkable,' he said to himself resolutely. 'I'll fight until I die.' And he continued to fight.

He fought with himself for three days and three nights. He died at daybreak, his soul racked with pain, his body adorned with wounds.

A monument stands now in the middle of the field. Ta-ki-ma is represented on his knees, his sword sticking out of his stomach. 'He vanquished himself,' runs the inscription.

In old Japan adults idolised losers.

